John Sherwood Illsley

Scholars & Gentlemen

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For Sue

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He that thinks reasonably must think morally.
Samuel Johnson (1765)

What we call the world, which is so completely contingent both as a whole and in its parts, cannot possibly be the impression of something which has arisen by the necessity of reason ..... it contains a preponderant mass of unreason.
Freidrich von Schelling (1842-3)

Something Wicked

At the end of College Road, where it joined the Porth Aethwy Road and the muddle of bookshops, pubs and hairdressers which clustered round the College like the commissariat of some medieval castle, was the Belle Vue, a warren of small rooms and snugs, oak panelled with smoky beams and buttoned leather benches. It was run by two eccentric old ladies who catered to the college trade in general, and to the History Department in particular, by keeping polished tankards for senior members of the university staff with whom they would have liked to have gone to bed had they been fifty years younger. For the rest there were glass beer mugs which the old ladies coaxed off high shelves by prodding and pushing them with a hooked walking stick until they fell off and were dexterously caught by wizened hands. Occasionally they dropped the catch and the glass would shatter on the slate paved floor behind the bar. No one had ever discovered why they did this, unless it was intended as some kind of entertainment for the clients, like barmen who do juggling tricks with cocktail shakers.

Marcus Ross not been around long enough to qualify for a tankard. He pushed open the studded oak door, entered the lounge bar and instantly regretted it. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Owen Seaton, slumped, as usual, in a corner with the *Guardian*. Seaton fancied himself as a bit of a dandy. His stocky frame was clothed in a black leather jacket over a salmon pink corduroy shirt with a fashionably large collar, open necked to reveal a heavy gold chain resting on a pad of chest hair so thick that it could be mistaken for fur, and fastened at the cuffs by gold cuff links in the form of hammers and sickles. White bell bottom jeans, tight at the hips and thighs and fastened with a large cowboy type belt, encased his muscular legs. Serpentine black eyes flickered from behind round, steel rimmed spectacles whose incipient menace was enhanced by a severe crew cut which ran counter to the current male fashion for long, and sometimes very long, hair hanging loose in cavalier curls. Seaton made his own concession to tonsorial fashion by offsetting his shaved pate with large mutton chop sideburns. In the summer he sometimes replaced his Trotsky spectacles with a pair of aviator style sunglasses, arguing that not everything that came out of America was absolutely bad, but, since the sun rarely shines in Wales, today was a Trotsky day. For Seaton style was more important than principles, and anyway the Soviets were not good at clothes. His mouth was small and thin lipped and barely concealed two prominent rabbit teeth shrouded by a fashionable Jason King moustache and underpinned by a belligerently jutting jaw.

Seaton showed no immediate sign of noticing Marcus's suddenly hesitant entrance, but Marcus knew that he had been spotted and that there was no going back. After his fraught consultation with Jenny Saville this was the last thing he needed. Seaton could be relied on to poison the soundest pint. On the other hand Marcus had been brought up to be polite to the point of deference, even to those he had come to despise. It would be rude to withdraw now, so he advanced into

the lounge bar, trying not to look at Seaton and dreading that etiquette would force him to sit with him. Seaton, however had already risen from his table and got to the bar before Marcus could escape to the snug.

"Let me buy you a drink you feudal bastard." He leered at Marcus and Marcus winced. Of all his colleagues Seaton was the one he disliked most. He was the statutory departmental Marxist. Ceaselessly active as an entryist in the local Labour party, constantly manoeuvring for selection for a safe Labour seat, so far without success, constantly despatching long rambling letters to the local newspapers about police brutality and the need for a compassionate and caring society. He was, at the same time, self important, pompous, alternately charming and viciously sarcastic, and, above all, he was incorrigibly lazy, especially where he was involved in any real duties or obligations towards others. He would promise the moon but rarely deliver. He neglected to attend his own lectures, or to hold the tutorials for which he was, admittedly, modestly paid, or perform the other pedagogic and pastoral duties normally expected of academic staff. Nor did he open letters or respond to correspondence either in College, or at home. In College it accumulated on his desk, where the porters deposited it, until it reached a critical mass at which point he would sweep it contemptuously into a large plastic bin bag and put it out into the corridor for the cleaners. At home it would simply be opened and ignored, unless it was something vital to Seaton's interests. Vital interests did not include his electricity and telephone which were, in consequence, constantly being cut off, to the despair of his long suffering wife Rhiannon, who accepted it because Seaton had persuaded her that she was making minor personal sacrifices for a great and noble cause, as Krupskaya had done for her husband Lenin. It also saved her from receiving irate phone calls from female students who had been led to expect more from Seaton than he intended to supply.

And Seaton was inexplicably popular with students, except for those he was supposed to be teaching who regularly congregated for hours in the corridor outside his room waiting in vain for him to arrive for tutorials. He enjoyed especially intimate relations with nubile but immature young women who were impressed by his ferocious intellect, and with older women and staff wives who were impressed by his other principal attribute. Amongst the Welsh students he was known as Drwg Seaton, meaning naughty, and by some of the Welsh girls as Seaton Drwg Mawr, meaning big naughty. Seaton was a charlatan in a profession which had more than its fair share of frauds and impostors. In common with many sixties socialist intellectuals he regarded with contempt mere menials, like college porters, cleaners, secretaries, telephonists, boilermen, gardeners and library clerks and all the others without whom most academic institutions would cease to operate. Except, that is, until he wanted them to vote for him. But, above all, Seaton was a survivor and, in spite of his un-Welsh name, he was a local boy, a Cymry made good, who got a scholarship to Jesus College Oxford and graduated with, it was said, a brilliant first and the promise of an outstanding research career which had never actually materialised in a certifiable form. He had, however, completed a doctorate at St Dynion's, written

in Welsh, on the History of the Cuban Revolution, which was subsequently published as a book, and he somehow manage to produce, on average, and apparently without effort, one article a year on some aspect of Cuban Marxism which appeared in obscure Welsh language historical journals. His arcane but fashionable research interest qualified him for occasional vacation trips to Cuba and America to collect academic and other material, subsidised by the College and, according to rumour, by the Cuban government. On the strength of this regular but opaque publication record together with his family connections he had been given a Senior Lectureship at the age of thirty five, at a time when promotion was normally restricted to those who were so senior that they were all but dead. He was protected at St Dynion's by the Crachach, the local Welsh political and intellectual elite, which manipulated the warring English professors in the College Senate from the lofty remoteness of the College Council and the Masonic Lodge in Kyffin Road, and he enjoyed the unquestioning patronage of his politician uncle, Lord Tybach Mawr, who in turn manipulated the Crachach.

Seaton hated most people, including, actually, himself, but he especially hated Marcus. This was partly because he saw Marcus as a wishy-washy liberal who lacked the guts to go to the barricades, but mainly because a misfortune of birth, compounded by an accident of blind fate had made Marcus a wealthy man and, therefore, according to Seaton, a ravening monster feeding on the downtrodden of society. Dr Owen the Drwg Seaton was an incipient psychopath whose profound academic duplicity was more than matched by his taste for extreme political violence and predatory sexuality.

Since there was no alternative which would not involve being openly rude, and because Seaton had long ago identified Marcus's instinctive politeness as his Achilles heel, Marcus agreed to accept Seaton's unexpected hospitality.

"Dear boy," hissed Seaton ingratiatingly, his Welsh sibilance subsumed behind a received English accent, "what would you like to drink," Then, with a more sinister timbre to his voice, "what's your poison? I've had some good news today. The drinks are on me."

"Oh," said Marcus, "er, that's very kind. I'll have a pint of Guinness."

"Pint of Guinness, sweety." Seaton mentally undressed the young female student who was standing in behind the bar for the old ladies, who never seemed to get out of bed before three o'clock, "and another Campari and soda," he added.

Marcus struggled for something to say. It was beginning to rain outside, but that was nothing new and talking about the weather would invite derision. The English always began conversations by talking about the weather. He decided to wait for the inevitable goad. It soon came.

"How are your stinking estates you feudal pig ? Still whipping the peasants are you? Keeping them at starvation level. Got the Black Death in Yorkshire I shouldn't wonder. I don't know why you do this fuckin job." Then, straight into his standard assault. "Don't you have any fuckin conscience? There's some poor bastard research students out there would give their back teeth for your

position. Why don't you go back to Yorkshire and give the poor scholars a chance?"

It was all delivered in a jocular tone as though Seaton was ribbing Marcus, as good friends enjoyed the freedom to insult each other in the days before political correctness put a stop to tolerant good humour. He clapped him on the back so that Marcus spilt part of the pint he had just picked up from the bar, and, grabbing his Campari and soda, suddenly vanished back to his corner. Marcus turned to follow him but was arrested by the anxious face of the young woman who had just served him. She opened her hand and turned it palm up, extending it silently towards Marcus. Marcus looked at Seaton, who had disappeared behind the *Guardian*, sighed and put the necessary money into the girl's hand.

"Keep the change," he said, and went to join Seaton.

"You know, I don't have any peasants," his tone was diffident. He hated conflict and it was always better not to argue with Seaton. "Actually, I doubt if there are any real peasants left in England. My estate is highly mechanised and very efficiently run and I pay my men good wages." In his mind's eye he saw the golden glow of the Yorkshire sandstone and the red pantiles of his village, basking in the setting sun. He could be there, instead of in this slate grey blue green rain lashed wasteland. At home, amongst people who knew him and cared for him and couldn't understand why he would prefer this strange intellectual life in an unacknowledged country for the primordial certainties of the English countryside.

"Anyway," he continued, lamely, "I don't need to be there all the time. I have an excellent estate manager. There's nothing for me to do. This is," he paused, "more demanding and I want a career which is not dependant on wealth and privilege."

"Oh, fuck off," Seaton scoffed, "what a load of old cobblers. You've chucked all your peasants off your lands and replaced them with machines. You're just a bloody parasite. You've just admitted it. You've never done an honest day's work in your life." He grinned, oozing with false affability.

Marcus thought this was rich coming from Seaton and wondered why he put up with it.

"I'm glad I've run into you," he lied, "I've just seen Jenny Saville. She's very anxious about her exams."

"Jenny who?" Seaton feigned ignorance.

"Jenny Saville. She's doing your Special Subject."

"Oh..her...smelly Jenny. So what?"

"She's worried sick. I think she wants to talk to you."

"I'm not her moral tutor. She should talk to her moral tutor."

"I'm her moral tutor. And I think she'd like to talk to you."

"She's got to find me then, hasn't she."

Seaton smiled at him, revealing his Bugs Bunny teeth. Marcus was never quite sure whether Seaton was serious or not. It was impossible to believe that he would not be concerned about a student in distress. On the other hand he

suspected that beneath the jocular exterior Seaton meant it and that his victims were intended to die laughing. Then again, Seaton could be very charming, especially with students. He was, after all the lecturer who attracted the most rumours. He could also be good company, the life and soul of any party, when the other half of his schizophrenic brain wanted to be.

"Sod Jenny Saville. She's old enough to look after herself. I'm not a bloody social worker," Seaton threw his head back and bayed with laughter. "Anyway, I've had some good news. I've been accepted for the Bethel constituency so I shall be *hors de combat* for a while, and hopefully out of this twll after the next election. Roll on the revolution. We'll hang the fuckin Tories from the lamposts, eh !! How about buying me a drink now?" He knocked back his Campari in one gulp.

Marcus's jaw dropped. But then, this was Seaton. Marcus got up and went back to the bar.

"Another Campari and soda," he said to girl.

"Sod that," Seaton shouted "how about a double brandy?"

Marcus nodded to the barmaid. The girl put a brandy glass up to the Courvoisier optic.

"Not that piss," Seaton sneered, "I want the bloody Prunier."

The girl looked puzzled. "Prunier Sir?"

"Yes, the bloody Prunier you stupid cow. Under the bar."

The girl looked as though she was about to burst into tears. Marcus smiled at her. "Just ignore it," he whispered, "get him the drink he wants."

The girl nodded. "Mr Ross," she whispered back, "I don't understand why you even talk to him. He's always so bloody rude."

Marcus, recoiled, surprised that the girl knew who he was. But then again, he spent much of his time lecturing to large classes, and especially to first years, not all of whom had their tutorials with him. They knew him, even if he did not know them. He shrugged again and grimaced. Marcus found Seaton's compulsive swearing deeply offensive, but for Seaton it was an essential demonstration of his solidarity with the working classes for whom profanity was an affirmation of their class identity. Or so he believed.

"He's a colleague, I suppose."

The girl nodded and handed him the brandy, which cost Marcus the best part of a pound. He struggled to put the unfamiliar decimalised change together, then rejoined Seaton.

"I thought you didn't believe in capital punishment Owen. Didn't you demonstrate against it when there was a threat to bring back hanging?" Marcus instantly regretted opening Pandora's box. Today was clearly his day for saying the wrong thing, but with Seaton, like Jenny Saville, one could never say the right thing.

Seaton closed his fingers round the brandy to warm it. He put the glass up to his nose and savoured the bouquet. Odd, Marcus thought, he has the eyes of a snake and the mouth of a rabbit. Then he noticed that Seaton's thin tongue

flitted in and out between his half open lips, for all the world like the tongue of an adder, scenting the air for prey. More snake than rabbit.

"Ah, you see, that's different. Dear boy, the poor criminal is really a victim of society and socialism is nothing if it is not about compassion for the victims of an evil social system."

"Especially for the victims of socialist societies," muttered Marcus, who was beginning to get angry. He had been on this battlefield many times before but had never won because political faith, like religious faith, is impervious to reason. "Like the millions who died to make the Russian Revolution such a dazzling monument of conservative reaction," he added sarcastically. Big mistake. He was going to fall into Seaton's trap. He knew what was coming but did not care because he did not believe.

"Yes, but, you see, you can't have a revolution without bloodshed," said Seaton earnestly, talking to him as though he was a student, patronising and avuncular. "A revolution has to be seen to have taken place. Suffering is essential. The oppressors must be seen to pay with their lives and those who die in the cause must be seen to be martyrs. Otherwise those who survive will never truly appreciate the sacrifices that have been made for their freedom, and they will never properly understand that only total obedience to the party can protect them from such suffering in the future. As Lenin said about Felix Djerjinsky, the Revolution needs such men to do the things that need to be done. Now you, dear boy, are really an oppressor, an enemy of society. And because you're also a feudal bastard you're an ancient enemy of society. Which means you're going to be amongst the first against the wall."

"Sod this for a game of soldiers," Marcus growled, tired of this familiar theme and well aware, as Seaton was not, because he was a modern historian who despised the Middle Ages, that feudalism was a fiction devised by nineteenth century lawyers to describe a society which they did not fully understand. "I recall Heinrich Himmler saying something very similar about the SS," he said, more loudly. Seaton looked pained. Such a comparison was unthinkable.

"Well, I don't think you can bring the fuckin Nazis into this. Their aims were totally different," said Seaton sharply, "Anyway, don't worry. What better cause is there than to die for the liberation of the people. I'll make sure they liquidate you as painlessly as possible." Seaton slapped Marcus on the back again. At least he had fought back a bit. "You're a good lad really, we'll make a comrade of you yet," he said.

Marcus choked into his beer, which again cascaded down the front of his immaculate tweed jacket.

"How delightful. That's just the kind of crap dialogue that I need for my next novel." A new voice, calm and authoritative.

"Who fuckin cares?" said Seaton, suddenly on guard against a more formidable opponent, "who reads your fuckin novels. I'll tell you. No one because no one in their right mind will ever publish one."

Marcus looked up, dabbing the froth and beer from his jacket. The newcomer was James Sinclair, who was the nearest he had to a trustworthy friend at St Dynion's. Sinclair was tall and tweedy, cynical and conservative with a small c, an A.J.P. Taylor bow tie, a pipe and a slightly receding hairline. The very model of a stereotypical sixties historian. About six years older than Marcus, but he shared his Cambridge background, though from cosmopolitan Kings rather than gormless Gallus, which was good at rugby and rowing but not much else. Marcus had been sent there by his headmaster, who rightly thought it was a good place for bucolic gentlemen but had totally misread Marcus who was certainly a gentleman, in every sense, but was not at all bucolic. Sinclair was also a modern historian, a specialist in late eighteenth century Europe, an expert purveyor of departmental gossip and deflator of Seaton, about whom he knew far more than Seaton would have liked. So Seaton steered clear of him.

"Still slaughtering the innocents are you Owen?" Sinclair was well aware of the customary drift of Seaton's conversation, especially where the vulnerable Marcus was concerned.

"I can't imagine what you mean by that." Seaton took off his Trotsky specs and polished them with a spotless paisley handkerchief. He was disgruntled at having his prey snatched from him.

"I was just having a quiet drink with my friend Marcus to celebrate my selection to stand for the Bethel constituency."

"Oh," said Sinclair, easing himself into the leather chair next to Marcus. He sipped from the pint which he had been buying at the bar whilst listening to Seaton lining Marcus up for the kill. "Bethel," Sinclair paused, "Beth-el. The House of God. The place where God came to earth. Good chapel people in Bethel. Hardly a suitable constituency for an atheist Marxist. And don't the locals think Bethel will go to the Plaid at the next election, which is two year away anyway?"

Seaton went red in the face. "Fuck that, " he snapped. "I can play the God card if I have to. The truth is that Heath's in deep shit. You saw what the Miners and the Power Workers did in February. They brought the country to a fuckin standstill. They can do it again when the time is right. The Unions are going to have him, and sooner than you think. Who cares about the Plaid. Fuckin amateurs. The big game is in Westminster. You'll see. The voters will be so pissed off with the Unions they'll vote Labour because they think Labour can control them. And they'll be wrong. You'll see. Wilson is weak and Callaghan is a Union man and in the end it's the Unions that will call the tune. Then we will have a genuinely Socialist state in this country. And heads will roll." Seaton put an imperative emphasis on the word will.

Sinclair smiled. For once he suspected that Seaton was right, and Seaton's attitude also confirmed his belief that the political Welsh hated each other almost as much as they hated the English. Sinclair understood very well what was going on, but Marcus had not really come to terms with Welsh politics. He came from the North East of England and before arriving in St Dynion's he knew virtually nothing of Wales, except for the standard English stereotypes

which, in any case, applied more to the Anglicised Taffies than to the mysterious natives of the North. He had begun to appreciate that the North Walians broadly divided into an apathetic and largely working class majority who might, or might not, speak Welsh, or a curiously incoherent mixture of both languages, but watched Coronation Street and supported Liverpool or Manchester United. On the other side was the middle class nationalist Cymry who put ap in front of their surnames to identify themselves as the only true Welsh, and had dedicated their lives to leading the Welsh masses out of the darkness of English oppression behind the heavenly light of the Welsh language. The fact that the Welsh still used their own language came as a sort of shock to Marcus, though he had been vaguely aware that the language existed. Being a liberal and tolerant Englishman it had seemed reasonable to him that they should use their language and maintain their culture, even if it didn't seem very sensible to put fallen bricks back into the Tower of Babel. The fact that the language was also being used as an instrument of political manipulation and covert ethnic discrimination was something else, more alarming and sinister, and he shared some of Seaton's misgivings about it. Seaton, after all, was a local boy, spoke Welsh as his first language, and might have been expected to be sympathetic to the language movement, but he had been beyond the mountains and seen the great world. On the other hand, Seaton had a vested interest in undermining the old order and in this respect the Welsh Nationalist movement had its uses.

"I've got some news too," James said. "The Chair has been filled. We have a new professor."

Marcus, for whom the life of the University was still an all consuming passion, was instantly rivetted. The Department had been without a head since the death of the amiable but ineffectual Charles Lock, and the Finance Office had saved two years professorial salary by delaying a replacement for him. In the interim the department slumbered under a benevolent interregnum. A new professor was a matter of interest to everyone. Even Seaton, who naturally hated professors, pricked up his ears.

"Who is it then," he asked, "some capitalist toe rag no doubt. Is he Welsh?"

"Actually, he's an American," said James grinning. The new professor was not really American, although he had lived in North America for some time, but Sinclair knew how Seaton would react.

Seaton choked into his Prunier. "Fuckin American. You're joking. Who is this shit? Is he against the war? That's the only test."

James shrugged. "One Kevin Rawlings. Did his first degree at Oxford. Oriel I think. Then went to Harvard for his doctorate, then to New York State." James took a battered pipe, then thought better of it and returned it to his pocket. "Must be about your age Owen. You might even be contemporaries."

Seaton's face lit up with sudden recognition.

"Oh, yes" he said. "I remember him. He loaned me his undergraduate history notes. He was in the Oxford Fabian Society. *A good man lost to the Fabians.* But he married the daughter of one of the Masters. Magdalen I think. He's OK.

Ein Mensch. And actually he's not American. He is Welsh, from the South, Newport, Tonypandy? Somewhere like that. Not a Gog anyway. He's bound to be against the war. No sane Welshman could support Nixon." Gog was short for Gogledd, meaning North and was the collective slang word used to describe the Northern tribes.

Marcus and James exchanged alarmed glances. Anyone who was a friend, or even an associate of Seaton, was unlikely to be good news.

"How did you hear about this?" Marcus asked.

"Well, you can be certain that the Department will be the last to know. Actually Alwyn who cleans the bog outside the Council Chamber heard one of the appointing panel congratulating Rawlings at the urinals, as you might say."

"Is it true?" Marcus asked.

"Yup. I rang the Dean's office and they confirmed it. I've spent the last hour in the library trying to find out something about him. It's a bit tricky in there at the moment since the Nats stole the catalogue cards. Anyway, I've looked at the *International Academic Who's Who*. He hasn't done much really. Two books on early Trade Unionists. Biographies really. Pretty boring stuff. And he has a truly execrable prose style. I found a review of one of his books in the *TRHS*. Pretty devastating. If I had review like that I'd blow my brains out."

"Ah yeah. A good lad. " said Seaton, smiling secretively. "Yes indeed things will start to look up now." He detached himself from the chair, swigging down the last of the Prunier in one gulp, and joined a ferociously hirsute student encased in a black leather motorcycle jacket embellished with little silver medallions of Trotsky and Stalin, together with numerous large red stars. Lindsey Patterson, chairman of the student Socialist Society, Soc. Soc. for short, through whom Seaton covertly organised his occasional revolutionary confrontations with the handful of girl typists and aged clerks who constituted the fascist bureaucracy which ran the College. By English standards Soc. Soc. was small beer and no match for the Welsh student activists who really did have a just cause and would stop at nothing to achieve it, as their barbaric assaults on the library more than proved.

"Thank God," said Marcus. "I just came in here for my bloody lunch. Which I haven't had yet."

"Don't let him get to you. He's all hot air and bombast"

"I get sick and tired of him going on at me about my estate. I can't help being born rich, any more than most people can help being born poor. It doesn't make me a worse person. I can't do anything about it. It is a burden really. I have all sorts of duties and responsibilities expected of me. Sometimes it's actually quite hard to cope with them. And I am genuinely trying to have an independent career on my own merit."

"Stop being so nice. Stand up to him. You know how he reacts to me. He will crumble. There's no substance there." James paused, then winked at Marcus.

"Tell me more about Rawlings," Marcus asked, relieved to be rid of Seaton.

"Not much to tell. Professors come here by choice because they are ambitious and desperate for a chair. The rest of us are here because this is where the academic conveyor belt dumped us off, and unless you get out of here within the next three years you'll be stuck here too. St Dynion's is an academic Sargasso Sea full of rotting hulks. Anyway, you know the game. Professors are not appointed for their ability to teach students or run departments but because they have avoided their teaching and administrative duties and hidden away in libraries in order to churn out publications. Then they get a chair and lo and behold they have to run departments, get on with people and sometimes to teach, which they are rarely very good at. And once they're in a position of power they always appoint new professors in their own image. Self verifying predictions, if you ask me. So we always get the worst possible people to lord it over us. Bit like politicians. By the way, how's your thesis?"

Marcus looked up, startled. "Oh Christ. I'm supposed to pick it up from the bindery at two o'clock." He looked at his watch. Amazingly it was half past one.

"I've got to go. I've got a seminar at three and I haven't checked my notes."

"Calm down," said James, "no hurry. So, it's virtually in the bag. I've never heard of anyone failing a doctorate, providing it has your supervisor's approval. Which I'm sure it has. For a start there's too much time and money involved. Anyway it's just a kind of apprentice exercise so no one expects it to be perfect. Mine went through on the nod."

Marcus looked startled again, as though someone had walked on his grave and then he realised that he had just said something vaguely similar to Jenny Saville without understanding why she had bridled at it.

"Yes," he said, "I see how it is. You know. Rationally. But one can't help being worried. Oxbridge people have a reputation for being eccentric and unpredictable. And there is malice, you know. Oxbridge academics are very malicious and my supervisor is very eminent. I know he wouldn't allow the thesis to go forward if he wasn't satisfied with it. His reputation is at stake too. But he will have enemies, especially since he's just become Master of Walsingham. I may be naive, but I'm not that naive."

"Don't worry. Christ, there are people in the Science Faculty here who are getting Doctorates and some of them can scarcely write their names."

"Science is different. And anyway it is very important. Without it I'm very unlikely to escape from St Dynion's to somewhere which behaves like a university." Once again the echoes of Jenny's distress rang in his ears. In the end they wanted the same things.

"Any idea who the internal examiner might be?" James asked

"Dunno. Cambridge is short of medievalists at the moment. Francis Clifford at Sneyd is the obvious choice, but I did his Special Subject as an undergraduate and he's now a personal friend so it probably wouldn't be ethical for him to accept it. I wouldn't in his position. So I don't know. External could be anyone but probably someone from Oxford. No doubt I'll hear shortly."

“Well, don't worry,” said James. “You’ll sail through. I’m sure of it. And eventually you will get away from here to where you want to be. My only hope of escape is if I manage to write a best seller. And that really is pretty remote. I can't even get a bloody novel published.” He paused to finish his beer.“I’m a bit worried about Rawlings,” James resumed his gossip, “I reckon he may shake things up around here, and not necessarily for the better. We’ve all got used to a quiet life but it won’t last for ever. Sooner or later those who pay the piper are going to make us dance to their tune. I’m worried about that review. Reading between the lines it really rather suggests that Rawlings may be a bit of a fraud. It's mostly biography you know. And biographies are the easiest form of history to write. Especially when they've already been written. But I suspect he’s really more interested in power and politics. And I can tell you one thing. Whatever virtues Rawlings may have, humility is not one of them. He must have a hell of an opinion of himself to apply for a chair at the age of thirty five. Even to a *twll* like this!” Twll was a useful Welsh word which Sinclair had long ago adopted for his own purposes. In general it just meant hole, but with the right intonation it could convey an altogether more salacious meaning which was regularly invoked by Welsh rugby clubs when toasting uncomprehending English teams.

Marcus nodded. The Belle Vue had filled up and emptied around them, and he was still without his lunch which would now have to be abandoned. James suddenly leaned over, whispering in his ear.

“Don’t look now. Your favourite pupil has just come in and she’s making eyes at the back of your head.”

Marcus turned round and found himself looking into a pair of gorgeous large dark brown eyes set in a delicately symmetrical olive skinned Mediterranean face framed by cascading waves of thick, shoulder length glossy hair so dark that it was almost black until the light caught it and highlighted the subtlest of auburn tints. Sophie Davenport, the beautiful Sophie Davenport, who had sewn little bells into the flairs of her jeans which jingled down the concrete corridor when she came early for her tutorials in Marcus’s squalid office and talked to him excitedly about what she'd been doing that week. About her numerous boyfriends, and sailing, which was her other passion, and the invincible little black dress, which was her secret weapon in the art of seduction, and so many other, often very intimate things, like the inconvenience of periods, the liberating benefits of the Pill, her unbelievably frantic and extremely inventive sex life, what a bore it was to have to shave one's legs, and her startlingly authentic dreams of her former lives in past times.

Marcus found it difficult to reply to this uninhibited chatter in any meaningful way, but Sophie was lodging herself in his subconscious, and, when the time came, her subliminal preparation would pay off. Marcus would already know all her secrets and would accept her in spite of them. The insatiable curiosity which was his ruling passion would do the rest. The truth was that Sophie did not need a little black dress to seduce boys, and Marcus was far too naive to realise that the mythical dress was meant for him. Sophie, however, was wise and patient. She respected Marcus's professional integrity, which

prevented him for having a relationship with an undergraduate, and she did not want to lure him too soon into a sexual encounter which might jeopardise his career. But time was running out. In a couple of months she would take her finals and leave St Dynion's. She would have to make some kind of move or all could be lost, but she dared not take an initiative whilst Marcus was still her tutor. Marcus, for his part, looked forward to seeing her. He felt curiously comfortable in her company, as though she had always been his secret friend, and she didn't seem threatening to him, as most other girls did. She was gentle, and perceptive, and somehow calming. She always seemed to know when he was worrying, and he was usually worrying about something, and she would speak softly to him and reassure him. So, when he heard the tiny bells jingling down the corridor to his room, his heart gave a little leap of anticipation. Sophie was a bright light in a dull life.

For once Sophie was without Drew Parkin, the mysterious old Etonian, who seemed to be her constant companion, though he was not her boyfriend. Drew Parkin, with his tattered sports jacket with the lining hanging out behind, faded Levis, with torn out knees, held together around the waist by a silk old Etonian tie, a torn army shirt and dirty suede Chukka boots. An eccentric dresser at a time when dedicated followers of fashion were wearing ridiculously wide flaired velvet trousers and flowery ruffed shirts. Etonians were rare in this academic backwater and Parkin, like most students at St Dynion's, was only there because he had failed to get into anywhere else, though, in his case, it was more because he had preferred to go to Ascot for the racing rather than turn up to take his A levels. He had made more than enough on the horses to finance six weeks in an Oxford crammer which had provided him with sufficient grades to fall into St Dunnies, as some malicious students called it, or almost anywhere else if he had so wished. But he had come to St Dynions anyway, bringing with him an awesomely beautiful Persian girl who really was his girlfriend but was not a student.

Sophie waved at Marcus, that curious stationary wave, just opening and closing the hand, which was currently fashionable amongst the young as a cool form of greeting. Marcus went bright red, smiled awkwardly at her, then turned back to James.

"I told you not to look," he said.

"Yes" said Marcus ruefully, "she's quite an eyeful isn't she."

"I wouldn't mind getting my hands on those tits," James muttered, then, "she looks like a cross between Katherine Ross and Jacqueline Bisset with a bit of Diana Rigg attitude thrown in for good measure, and I reckon she fancies you. And I bet you secretly fancy her. Why don't you take her out? It's about time you had a girlfriend. The swinging sixties are behind us. Who knows what's coming next."

Marcus shifted uncomfortably. He was not exactly experienced at sex. At a dangerously early age he had accidentally stumbled on Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* whilst researching a fifth form essay on Renaissance Florence. Browne, of course, had nothing to with Florence and had been put back in the

wrong place and on the wrong shelf by a careless sixth former reluctantly performing lunchtime library duties. Browne's baleful misogyny had struck a chord with an impressionable and insecure teenager, so, at an age when most boys were wondering what to do with their dicks, and many had already found out, Marcus was under the spell of a seventeenth century moralist who believed that copulation was the most foolish thing that a wise man would do in his entire life and preferred instead to emulate the reproductive processes of trees. Since Marcus desperately wanted to be a wise man avoiding copulation seemed like a very good idea, and that meant avoiding girls which was relatively easy for him to do, given his timid nature. Unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on one's point of view, girls did not seem to want to avoid him. Marcus was not, of course, totally immune to his hormones or to his natural curiosity, and opportunities for reluctant investigative research had presented themselves from time to time, usually in jodhpurs or at hunt balls, but he had never succeeded in mastering the minute hook eyes which stood between him and revelation. So, apart from these inconclusive fumbles, he had never had any kind of relationship with a girl because the feisty girls he met in the county set soon lost patience with him. He once thought that he was there with Hilary Outhwaite and had actually got his fingers beyond her nipples and into her knickers, at which point she had slapped his face and he had excused himself and left her fuming with frustration. Hilary went off and married Julian Stackpole, whose parents were extremely wealthy stockbrokers, and Marcus went to Cambridge where he found *The Allegory of Love* in Heffers and, having allowed himself to be enlightened by C.S. Lewis on the virtues of chaste adoration, went on to let the swinging sixties swing over his head, worshipping instead the unapproachable goddesses who stalked the dark corridors of the University Library. So far he had also missed out on the even more hedonistic seventies, although he was soon to discover just how hedonistic they were. They stood up and prepared to leave the pub. Marcus smiled at Sophie Davenport whose returned smile, gentle as it always was, did not conceal her disappointment.

"See you in an hour, for the Origins" Marcus said to her, glancing at his watch.

"Good lecture," Sophie replied hopefully. She smiled that seductive smile again, hoping that Marcus would stay and talk to her. Marcus nodded and smiled back, tongue tied and lost for words.

"Did they really kill him by magic?" Sophie asked, "that peasant I mean. Richard le Sowe."

"The court thought so," Marcus struggled for words, "but I don't know. It was a superstitious age. Do you think people can be killed by magic?"

"Perhaps," Sophie said quietly. Her forehead puckered into a slight frown, "but you would have to believe that it was possible."

"I don't know," Marcus replied, "I'm sorry Sophie, I have to go. Work. You know."

As they went out through the pub door Marcus felt an acute sensation of regret and longing. He glanced back. Sophie was still looking wistfully in his

direction, willing him to stay and talk to her, but Marcus was subconsciously blocking her and did not hear her unspoken thoughts. Behind her, Seaton and Lyndsey Patterson were leaning with their backs against the bar admiring her tiny bottom and watching quizzically. Sophie smiled again at Marcus and their eyes met briefly. Seaton registered that fleeting eye contact between tutor and student. He raised his eyes from Sophie's petite behind and looked directly at Marcus. The slightest hint of a sneer curled up the corners of his thin lips. Then he turned back to the bar and whispered something to Patterson. Patterson laughed a coarse sardonic laugh.

Marcus and James left the pub, crossed over to the pavement, and made their way back towards the College.

"Well. I, er, well," Marcus resumed the desultory conversation left over from the pub. In spite of his natural instinct to put a wall around his emotions he was aware that he felt a subtle and inexplicable attraction to Sophie Davenport. "I still haven't had any bloody lunch. For a start she's always with those beautiful young men from the Drama Department. Not to mention Drew Parkin. I wouldn't stand a chance against them. Then, it's against the rules to go out with one of my own students. I don't want to get fired for GMT."

"Actually," James chuckled, "academics are nothing if not pedants. It's Gross and Persistent Moral Turpitude. The Persistent bit is important. It either means that you screw one student many times, or many students one at a time. Or more than one at the same time, if you get the chance. I reckon you'd have to do it stark naked on the lawn outside the Principal's office at twelve noon on Wednesday before anyone here would give a monkeys. Mind you it might not be wise. The Principal may be gaga, but the Crachach certainly isn't and they are all good Chapel goers. Listen, she's a great girl. She'll graduate this year and then she'll be out of it. So go for it. Talking of stark naked and the Crachach, did you see the Drama Society's production of *Hair* ?"

"No, I was working on my thesis."

"As always. Well I was there on the first night. There wasn't a second night because the Crachach got the Principal to close it down. The Drama Society stuck to the original. Including the nude scenes. And guess who was there prancing about in the nude. I tell you what, she's got one hell of a body."

"Yes," said Marcus despondently, "she told me about that. I admit, I do find her very attractive. It's very odd. I keep having this feeling of déjà vu with her. As though I've met her before. Somewhere else. Very strange. But, you know how promiscuous these girls are. She talks to me about her love affairs without a hint of embarrassment. You wouldn't believe how many boyfriends she's had. Or what she's done with them. She seems to treat me as some kind of intimate confidante. I get it all. Unbelievable. She has no shame. And she has some very, very strange dreams. Besides, she'll be gone soon. Anyway, as you know, I'm sort of going out with Caroline Howarth. I thought I might take her up to Yorkshire during the Easter break."

"She talks to you about her love affairs? You're an idiot Marcus. She's in love with you. And you're in love with her. You just won't acknowledge it. And

as for Caroline Howarth! For someone who's as terrified of women as you are that really is living dangerously," said James, who thought he knew all about Caroline Howarth but wasn't going to tell Marcus, "the blonde iceberg from Theology. You can do better than that. And you're never going to find a virgin these days. Unless you go poking around Jenny Saville."

"Yuck. No, Caroline suits my mood, and I can talk to her about medieval theology. I'm old fashioned. I don't believe in love at first sight. And I don't think people should sleep together before they get married, or, at least, until they're quite sure they intend to get married. And anyway, Caroline reminds me of my mother."

"Reminds you of your mother? Really, Marcus!" James struggled to conceal the despair in his voice, "don't be daft. For God's sake this is 1972. Nobody gives a damn. You get in there if you can. With Sophie I mean. Don't take things so bloody seriously. Sophie Davenport is a lovely girl, in every way. Kind, gentle, affectionate, clever, and bloody sexy. She will do you a power of good. Get your thesis off to Cambridge and then get her knickers off and have a good shag. It ain't all about brains you know!"

"There's still the oral," Marcus droned.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever, if it turns you on, "James was laughing at him. Not as Seaton laughed but as a concerned friend.

"And then I've got to publish," Marcus was stubbornly oblivious to James's innuendo, "I have to get away from this place. It is so depressing. Given a choice I would never have come here."

"No one in their right mind would come here, given a choice. But going where the jobs are is the curse of the middle classes, especially academics. You're lucky not to be in Toronto."

"Actually, Toronto would be very good. There's an excellent Medieval Faculty there. Bertie Wilkinson is there."

James shook his head. How could one get through to this ridiculously serious young man?

"James," Marcus said sadly, "you know I can't go out with an undergraduate who is about to take exams for me. It wouldn't be right. And you wouldn't do it either. Would you."

"No," James replied in a voice tinged with deep regret, "that's very true. I'd like to, but I have a wife, which puts a damper on most things. You're right, of course. It's not ethical. But when she's finished her exams don't hesitate. Seize the day Marcus. Seize the day. Life is not a rehearsal. You only get one chance. And Sophie Davenport is too good to miss. As for Caroline Howarth. Just watch yourself. She's bad news."

They had reached the bottom of the stairs at the side of the Old Building. Marcus would turn left past the Gym to get back to his room. He wasn't quite sure where James was going, since this would not be his normal route back to his room in the New Arts Building. Indeed, James seemed to have gone significantly out of his way to accompany Marcus this far. They paused by the double doors leading into the ground floor of the Old Building.

"About Jenny Saville," Marcus changed tack. "I saw her earlier. I think she's cracking up."

"Oh yes," James frowned. "She's doing my Eighteenth Century Europe General Course. Quite bright, but she's chosen to do Seaton's Cuban Special and you know that Seaton does his best to avoid students who are foolish enough to take his courses. She's got big problems. Very insecure. Also there's a family problem. Her father's some kind of small businessman, chain of grocery shops I think. Self made man. He doesn't think she should be at university. Plenty of jobs for her in his business. She says she doesn't get the full grant because of his income and he won't give her any money because he doesn't think she should be here. So she's struggling. She calls him her bastard father."

"Yes, well you seem to know more about her than I do. She's not doing any courses with me. I'm just her Moral Tutor and I'm afraid I'm not very good with her," Marcus admitted. "She was in my room for nearly an hour this morning. I just can't seem to get through to her. I try to be sympathetic but I really don't know what to say. I'm just a bloke, after all, and I end up blurting out something stupid and she goes off in a huff. This morning she was complaining about not being able to see Owen Seaton, she's worried sick about her exams. And she goes on and on about that bloody flasher exposing himself to her in College Park, and the girls in her Hall of Residence laughing at her, and she's always got her period, and she can't concentrate, and she's going to fail and she has to have a First because she wants to do research. She doesn't stand a snowball's chance in hell of getting a First, but I can't tell her that. Today I very stupidly told her that exams are best treated as a kind of intellectual game and she'd have to face much worse things in real life. She stormed out of my room swearing. It's strange Sophie Davenport radiates life and love and light. With Jenny it's just...darkness. She can really be very depressing."

"Yes," James stroked his chin, "well that probably wasn't the right thing to say to her. Anyway don't let Jenny get to you either. She's alright, she'll survive. I just wish she didn't smell so bad. My room stinks after she's been to my tutorials." James glanced at his watch, "my God, I'm late. I'm late. Got to go. Stop worrying about Jenny and give some constructive thought to getting your hands on Sophie Davenport's tits!!" James disappeared into the maze of the Old Building like the White Rabbit scuttling into an alternative universe.

Marcus had been as unlucky in the lottery of room allocation as he was in almost everything else in his academic life. The History Department did not exist as a physical entity because the academic hierarchy at St Dynion's was enshrined in its very architecture. The professors, aloof and unapproachable, were housed at the top, in comfortable wood panelled rooms along what had come to be known as Professors' Corridor, in the eves of the old building. There they had fireplaces, which were never used because there were radiators as well, and a shared balcony with magnificent views of the mountains visible beyond the decayed city of St Dynion's which straggled down the bottom of the valley

between the Old College on the higher ground and Edward the First's great castle, which dominated the sea front. More senior staff, below the exalted professors, had rooms in various converted terraced houses around the main building, but many of these would have been condemned as unfit for habitation if the Health and Safety Executive had existed in its present form. One lecturer had nearly been killed when a more than normally violent gale had removed the entire bay window from his second floor room, sucking out ten years of irreplaceable research notes and the first draft of a uniquely boring book. Another building in the same terrace was still empty and blackened after a suicidally depressed Psychology lecturer had set fire to it by flicking his still burning cheroot into his waste paper bin before storming out of his room and driving his second-hand Hillman Imp off the end of the harbour wall in a doomed attempt to drown himself. Doomed because the tide had been out and the little car merely embedded itself nose first in the black mud discharged into the bay from the town sewage works. The forlorn lecturer had stumbled back to the shore covered in a shroud of iridescent slime only to die later in hospital as a result of ingesting a lethal cocktail of toxic pollutants. It was very hard to succeed at anything in such a hostile environment.

Others, like James Sinclair, had rooms in the New Arts Building, an equally monstrous exercise in sixties brutalist architecture appended to the mock Gothic Old Building, but these were built to University Grants Committee specifications and ambiguously classified as staff retiring rooms, which meant that they were technically unable to accommodate the large tutorial groups for which they were actually required. And at the bottom of the heap were the few junior staff, the festering foot soldiers of academe, who inhabited prefabricated asbestos huts and other barrack like buildings put up during the war, partially heated by ancient and erratic radiators on which malicious students and bored staff tapped out dissonant rhythms, wittingly, or unwittingly, disturbing the tutorials in adjacent rooms which were usually painfully audible to their neighbours anyway. As a result few of the occupants of the huts actually used their rooms unless they absolutely had to. Marcus's room was at the end of the central corridor, on the left, with windows facing out onto an untended bank of rock and dank ferns, and next to the single toilet whose every nuanced sound reverberated through the fibreboard walls whenever it was used. It was a gloomy and miserable bolthole

It was too late now to get the thesis from the bindery. Marcus got out the papers for the forthcoming seminar and skimmed through them. His room was well stocked with books, more books in fact than the College would provide bookshelves for. He did not dare ask for additional bookshelves because a colleague who had asked for a phone in his room had come back one day to find that a phone had been fitted, but all of his bookcases had been taken away and the books tipped in a heap in the middle of the floor. So Marcus had bought his own bookcases from the second hand furniture shop in Kyffin Square. Most of his books had been bought in the last three years since he had inherited his uncle's estate at Carston, and the income it provided. This had been a very

necessary expense since the College library left a great deal to be desired. Marcus had been brought up from the age of ten by his bachelor uncle and his housekeeper, ever since his own parents had been killed in a plane crash. His closest friends had been the sons of his uncle's shooting companion, Colonel Fawcett, who owned the neighbouring estate. The Fawcetts had provided him with the family denied to him by his austere and parsimonious uncle who had sent him to the excellent local Grammar School rather than to Eton or Harrow because, he said, it was cheaper. His uncle was actually wise enough to know that the Grammar School, of which he was a Governor, was far better than most public schools and that it would force Marcus to grow up with the clever sons of coalminers and farmers, as well as the sons of the professional middle classes who were bright enough to get through the eleven plus. The Fawcett boys had failed to leap that hurdle and had ended up in minor local fee paying schools which had not done them much intellectual good but had given them charm and confidence, some of which had rubbed off on Marcus. Together with the intellectual power drawn out of him by the very clever and disciplined grammar school teachers he was well prepared for Cambridge, even for the hooray Henries and roistering rowers who infested Gallus College. He also went abroad on holiday in France with the Fawcetts, which opened his eyes to the great world, and he went shooting and riding with them, which prepared him for his other destiny. They had even tried to get him laid, at which they themselves were experts, but apart from his abrupt and abortive excursion into Hilary Outhwaite's knickers, where he had found nothing because he did not know what he was looking for, they had failed.

From the moment that Marcus went to university everything changed. He embarked upon an ocean of learning in which he lost himself without a moment's regret. He became totally absorbed in the life of the academic community. In another age he would have been a natural monk rather than country gentleman. It had not occurred to him, deep in his books in the labyrinths of the Cambridge University Library, that he was his uncle's heir and that complex legal mechanisms had already been set in place to ensure that the estate would continue down the male line. Only when his uncle died suddenly, just as Marcus was about to take up his post at St Dynion's University College, was he brought face to face with the career apparently marked out for him by his genes, which was to be a country gentleman. He chose instead to be an academic and left the management of his estates to his uncle's more than capable manager who had run them impeccably for the last three years.

The Origins of Parliament Seminar went off without incident. The beautiful Sophie arrived early, as usual. She had changed from the jeans she had worn in the morning and looked as demure as one can be in a minuscule denim skirt, thigh length suede boots and a black polo necked sleeveless skinny ribbed sweater which did little to conceal the firm contours of her renowned boobs. She sat comfortably in the armchair, which no one else dared to occupy because they could see what Marcus could not and did not want to cramp Sophie's style. She

crossed her legs and smiled at him and flicked the dark fronds of hair back from her large dark eyes, but there was no mention of the little black dress or the errant boyfriends or interesting sexual positions. Sophie was in an academic mood today, so the group talked at length about the concept of the King's Two Bodies, the separation of the King as a mortal person and the Crown as the immortal symbol of the collective powers of kingship which took its first constitutional form in the Statute of York in 1322 and provided the pretext for the deposition and subsequent murder of Edward the Second. It was almost the end of term and this course, like most others, was also drawing to a close. Next term the students would have a few revision tutorials, but they were now on the countdown to the exams, and were expected to work mostly on their own. The Medieval Parliament Special Subject had been a demanding course for everyone and everyone was tired now, and anxious for the Easter break

Marcus tried not to look at Sophie, but his eyes kept being drawn back to her. He tried to visualise her in the doomed production of *Hair*, but as soon as a shocking image floated into his mind he switched it off and refocused his intellect on the task in hand. Sophie, conscious of his gaze, and of his thoughts, merely looked down at her notes, smiled inwardly to herself and projected other, equally lurid, images into Marcus's febrile but stubbornly resistant consciousness. She wondered sometimes if Drew was right about Marcus, but she could not find out for herself without touching him and that seemed to be unbelievably difficult to achieve. In the nearly three years that she had known Marcus she had never even found an opportunity to touch his hand, let alone to kiss him. Compared with the succession of boys who dribbled and wet themselves if she even looked at them Marcus was a very tough nut to crack. But when he did crack it would be sudden and complete and he would be hers forever. For the moment she concentrated on trying to filter the truth subconsciously into his impossibly barricaded heart. It was better that he should know and accept her as she really was and discover later what she would be. The seminar droned on, almost anaesthetised by the exotic scent of Aquamanda worn by some of the girls, and the even more exotic Hai Karate deodorant, which the male students used as an alternative to bathing.

At four thirty Marcus ended the seminar early and sprinted to the bindery, before it closed, in order to collect his thesis.

The thesis was bound in Cambridge blue rather than the muddy green used for St Dynion's theses, and the titles were embossed in gold. *The North Yorkshire Gentry in the Parliaments of Edward the Ist.* He ran his finger down the golden lettering. Below the title was his own name, M.A. Ross. The A was not for Antony, but for Alexander, his father's name and part of his Scottish patrimony, though, to be truthful, the family had been out of Scotland for at least three centuries and Marcus never thought of himself as even remotely Scottish. Indeed he had never thought of himself as having any nationality at all, other than Yorkshireman, until he had come to Wales, where he was incessantly reminded that he was an English imperialist whose ancestors were personally responsible for the judicial murder of Dafydd ap Gryffudd in 1283. Other words

were used to describe the English in Wales which Marcus found deeply insulting, but he responded by reminding them of William Wallace and drawing on his (very) remote Scottish ancestry to argue that he was actually a Scottish Colonist in England. This seemed to cause some form of ethnic paralysis amongst the Cymry in the Senior Common Room who thereafter left him alone on the grounds that he might be a fellow Celt and thus a victim rather than an oppressor. In fact this was beneficial, in a way, since conversations with the Cymry were always conducted as though tiptoeing across a landscape of eggshells and could degenerate very quickly into acid allegations about what Edward the First's Flemish mercenaries did with Welsh babies. Strange, he thought, how people who consider themselves to be oppressed always seem to have phenomenal but fundamentally impaired memories. History, after all, is about the pursuit of the truth, and the truth was that the Welsh gentry welcomed Edward because he offered them privileges and patronage which could not be matched by the Welsh princes. The Cymry would reply that history is generally written by the oppressors, which included the treacherous Welsh aristocracy.

There were six copies of the thesis, the top one being much heavier than the others because it was typed on heavier paper whereas the others were carbon copies. The heavy copy was the one which would eventually go into the Cambridge University Library. He weighed it in his hands. So much weight. It was heavy, substantial, over four hundred pages long, closely argued and supported by the usual *apparatus criticus* of footnotes, maps and appendices. It was a labour of love, the consummation of six years of patient and dedicated research. Cambridge normally expected theses to be finished within four years, but he had been obliged to ask for two years extension because the volume of teaching and preparation expected of him at St Dynion's had made it virtually impossible for him to complete his research and satisfy his contractual obligations to his new and totally unsympathetic employer. Nevertheless, it was finished. The doctorate would give Marcus a genuine title and status which he would have achieved entirely by his own efforts, only marginally dependent on the wealth and privileges handed down to him by his assiduous ancestors. It was the sum of all his reasoning life to date, and the foundation on which all his future hopes and aspirations rested.

He took the copies of the thesis back to his room, and during the next two weeks, he worked carefully through it, checking for any last minute errors which might have escaped earlier proof reading of drafts. When he was satisfied with it he parcelled up the top copy and two of the carbon copies, and, with some trepidation, despatched them by registered post to the Syndicate of Research Studies in Cambridge. In his anxiety to get the thesis off he failed to notice that it had been sent on Saturday the first of April.

On his way back from the Post Office Marcus passed a crocodile of eight or nine Down's Syndrome children, adolescents really, walking slowly in the opposite direction along the pavement on the other side of College Road, shepherded by two plump and jolly looking girls who were probably volunteer carers from the Students' Union Community Action Society. Marcus looked up

at them as they passed by him on the other side and then averted his eyes as people so often do when faced with physical abnormality. Poor kids, he thought, how sad. Images of that pullulating mass of squirming students who populated his lectures flickered into his mind. With all their smelly faults they were amongst the best of their generation, at a time when less than ten percent of their age group went to university. How sad. These poor botched children of a careless God who could never aspire to even the smallest part of the fabulous unrepeatable world of hedonistic youth in which his students wallowed without a second thought. How sad.

Head down and thoughtful he nearly walked into one of the pollarded trees which lined the wide pavements on either side of the road. Behind the trees were terraces of substantial Victorian houses, once rather fine, but now decayed and occupied by seamy student flats and sinister tendrils of the disembodied Psychology Department. Fifty yards further on he experienced an irresistible compulsion to turn round and look at the retreating crocodile. As he turned to look at them they stopped with parade ground precision and looked back at him. Their faces were devoid of expression, lumpen, slack jawed and mongol eyed. But their silent minds reached out to Marcus and whispered to him, as though recognising a kindred soul and acknowledging its rare perfection with awe and reverence. They were not sad, or unhappy with their lot. They knew that they were different and they saw a different world through different eyes. But when they tried to explain what they saw the kind people who cared for them told them that God loved them so much that he had made them very special. So they loved the guilty light that shared their waking dreams, and called it God, and cherished it in their uncomprehending minds. Now they had met a mind like theirs, unconscious of itself or of the light, but perfect, and, unlike them, in a perfect brain and body. They turned and resumed their shambling progress. Flaccid bags of skin and bone and scrambled DNA. As they walked, in pairs and hand in hand, they chattered silently amongst themselves about the wonderful mind that had just spoken to them without realising that it could, and what it had shown them of the incomprehensible life that it led. Marcus shook his head, aware that something strange had just happened but unable to perceive exactly what it was.

Once the thesis had been entrusted to the vicissitudes of a strike ridden Royal Mail, and the even tenderer mercies of the Syndicate, a blank hiatus entered Marcus's life. All that remained was the waiting. He felt for a moment that black pit in his stomach which, he dimly acknowledged, he shared with Jenny Saville and most other students tremulously waiting to be examined. He spent the next three weeks in the library working on the few remaining seminars he needed for the short summer term. And then, the weekend before the Trinity, or as it was called in this benighted place, the Summer, term started, he took Caroline Howarth up to Yorkshire, leaving on the Friday afternoon and returning on Sunday, having endured revelatory ordeals of flesh and fire.

Intimations of Mortality

The trip to Yorkshire was rather less than successful, even in terms of its own limited objectives. Caroline Howarth was a second year Theology postgraduate who was working on a doctoral thesis on the epistemology of William of Occam in relation to knowledge of God. This was a subject which overlapped with history and Marcus had a vague interest in Occam as a component in his teaching. He had first met Caroline at an interdepartmental seminar and was attracted to her for all the wrong reasons. That is to say, he was impressed by her cold and detached analytical mind and her clarity of thought. A casual observer might have said that they were well matched, if Marcus was looking for a mate. Marcus had not noticed that she was tall and elegant, with endless legs, slim hips and perfectly formed fashion model breasts. Her fine blonde hair was tightly combed back from a high forehead and gathered into a single thick plait, usually tied with a large starched white lace bow. Her long face and deeply set blue eyes were vaguely Scandinavian, radiant with enigmatic promises, and familiar to Marcus from his interest in the films of Ingmar Bergman. Her shining hair and blue eyes contrasted with her skin which was a natural and uniform golden brown, almost the same olive brown as Sophie Davenport's Mediterranean skin, as though she was perpetually sunburnt. It was an asset which Caroline used to stunning effect by generally dressing herself in virginal white clothes which made her look as though she was about to attend an endless succession of weddings and set her apart from the kooky, flowery Biba dresses, glam rock flairs and tacky Hot Pants worn by many of the undergraduate female students. On the surface Caroline was sleek, cool and clever. Underneath she was a voracious sexual predator. The Ice Maiden, as James Sinclair called her, was not for the average beer soaked male student who she could freeze out with a glance. She entertained rich boys for fun, but preferred clever men for company. Whatever else he might be, Marcus was a clever man, or so she thought, and also rich, and therefore worth her attention, irrespective of Drew and Sophie's interests, of which she was intimately aware.

The casual observer was right in one sense. Caroline had the bearing, background and sophistication which, though different in origin from Marcus's, would make her his social equal. Marcus knew this but it did not really register with him. So far as he could tell she was a model of discretion and decorum, yet at the same time mysterious and unfulfilled. Caroline had all of these attributes, but they were mostly a protective camouflage for another more complex and generous persona which Marcus had not yet seen. Just as new lovers are so eager to please that they rarely present their true faces to each other, so Caroline and Marcus shrouded themselves in a carapace of cold rationality to which they were both falsely attracted but which concealed an ultimate affinity more strange than Marcus could ever imagine. Because he was pathologically inexperienced with women Marcus had set Caroline on a pedestal, fancifully acting out in his mind the deadly charades of medieval courtly love. She became

a romantic ideal, chaste, pure and unattainable, to be worshipped with undisclosed love, at a distance, and with cold intellectual passion. Caroline, who was genuinely attracted to Marcus but reluctant to come into conflict with Sophie, encouraged this Platonic relationship, at least for the time being, and had agreed to the weekend in Yorkshire out of curiosity rather than any expectation of the kind of dirty weekend she enjoyed with her doctoral supervisor, the Reverend Dr. Gwylim "Shagger" Williams, whenever his wife fled from the miserable Gogs to see her relatives in Cardiff. However, she did intend to conduct a sexual reconnaissance on Sophie's behalf because Sophie was convinced that Marcus was a virgin and did not know how he would react when he found out that all her chatter about her enthusiastic sex life was actually true. It would be easier to reveal the remaining skeletons in her cupboard if Marcus had some skeletons of his own. If Sophie was right, which seemed highly improbable given his age and sixties youth, Caroline might use this opportunity to provide Marcus with a little sexual experience. Either way, Caroline could report back to Sophie on what to expect and they could have a girlie laugh about it. Marcus would not be the first eligible man they had targeted to share, and, apart from anything else, Caroline quite wanted to get herself off Marcus's pedestal and into his bed. She could always do a deal with Sophie later, though Sophie had been uncharacteristically upset when Caroline had told her about the forthcoming Yorkshire trip and in her own heart Caroline knew that Sophie's initial crush on Marcus had turned into genuine love for him.

Although he was wealthy, at least in broad Yorkshire acres, Marcus continued to live a life which was relatively simple, if not actually Spartan. He had a cold and gloomy flat in Plas Rhianda, a strange, château like building on the opposite side of the estuary from St Dynion's, unconsciously endorsing his natural inclination to live in grand houses entered through musty corbelled halls decorated with fading tapestries and the heads of animals bagged by long dead hunters. The sitting room/study part of his flat had once been the china gallery of this nineteenth century folly and the curved walls were still studded with the little plaster ledges on which plates had been displayed. The rest consisted of a rather dreary bedroom equipped with a wardrobe, a chest of drawers and a modern divan type single bed, an ill equipped kitchen with a Baby Belling two ring oven and a kettle, and a very damp bathroom with an Ascot gas heater. Apart from his books, and a rather good Acoustical Quad hi-fi, with records, mostly of Mozart, Bach and Monteverdi, the authentic music of the spheres, but leavened with the occasional jazz LP and the obligatory Joan Baez and Bob Dylan albums, Marcus had very few material goods, no more than one might expect from any student of the sixties, or a conventional impoverished junior lecturer on a salary of £2,600 a year. His wardrobe was restricted, to say the least. There were sufficient shirts to get him through two weeks before visiting the laundry, mostly agricultural checks but with the occasional coloured shirt, just to show that he wasn't completely out of kilter with the popinjay seventies. There was a duffel coat, a rather grubby Barbour waxed jacket, a couple of tweedy sports jackets, three pairs of dun coloured cavalry twill trousers, some

jeans and slacks, a pair of baggy, khaki coloured shorts, an expensive Henry Poole interview suit, a khaki cotton jacket which looked at first like a fashionable safari jacket but on closer inspection revealed itself to be a second world war RAF desert jacket which Marcus had taken a fancy to on a stall in Northallerton market. Some college ties and cravats, which he rarely wore, a paisley cravat which an aunt had given him and which he never wore, and a psychedelic kipper tie which he occasionally wore to lectures, to the silent amusement of his fashion conscious students. That was it, really, except for his one serious indulgence, which was a Porsche 911S costing more than most provincial academics had paid for their houses. He had paid for it not directly out of the income of his estates, but through the sale of his uncle's elderly Rolls Royce Silver Cloud, which Marcus considered to be ridiculously ostentatious as well as being a flabby pain to drive. The Porsche was the only real passion in his life, other than scholarship. He loved the strength and purposefulness of the car, although, unlike the estate Land Rovers, the Porsche really had only one purpose, and that was not to transport livestock. He loved the precision of the engineering, the elegance and economy of the design, the breathtaking kick in the back from the acceleration, and the superb, though demanding, road holding. He believed himself to be by nature a meticulous and careful person. His scholarship, he thought, was a model of precision and attention to fine detail, and the Porsche seemed to exactly mirror his conception of himself. Above all, he felt safe in it. It was the shell into which he retreated when things got tough.

Caroline also had a taste for fast cars and was impressed by the Porsche, which was one of the minor reasons why she indulged Marcus. She was even more impressed by Carston Hall, in so far as the sophisticated young are impressed by anything remotely domestic. They arrived as the sun was setting on the Friday evening when the warm light portrayed the approach to the Hall at its romantic best. The Hall itself was a small eighteenth century emparked Palladian villa, with an elegant classical portico and mile long carriage drive lined with chestnut trees, interspersed with stumpy conical conifer bushes. Marcus tended not to stay at Carston very often. Not because he did not love the place, but because the times when he would have been free to stay during the university vacations had been commandeered by the demands to finish his thesis and prepare his copious teaching materials. These imperatives were most efficiently met by spending his vacations in Cambridge where he had access to first class libraries, the possibility of day trips to London to check references in the Public Records Office in Chancery Lane, and the congenial company which he so missed at St Dynion's. When he did stay at Carston he had at his disposal a marble tiled entrance hall which had doubled as small ballroom, in the days when the estate had held balls, a very large first floor drawing room, a large study, a gunroom, ten largish bedrooms, most of which had ensuite bathrooms or at least a handbasin, a number of smaller bedrooms, and an indeterminate number of servants' rooms which were no longer used because there were no longer any resident servants. There was a large but somewhat rustic kitchen dominated by the customary Aga around which most of the life of the Hall had

contracted as the masters increasingly occupied the place of their forgotten servants, and a large formal downstairs dining room which was rarely used. At the front of the house was a gravelled parking area and then an extensive lawn, delimited at its edges by neatly trimmed six foot conifers, and, directly in front of the Hall, by a ha-ha beyond which was a landscaped triangle of parkland with the tree lined drive on the right hand side, and rough woods on the left. In the apex of the triangle was the village cricket pitch. On the East side of the house was a conservatory, which had once been an orangery, covering a substantial heated indoor swimming pool built by his uncle in a fit of uncharacteristic extravagance but justified in his penurious mind by the hope that swimming in warm water would be good for his arthritis. Behind the Hall was a large terrace and formal lawn enclosed by a high yew hedge and divided by a wide central path at the end of which stood a Kouros, presiding silently over the gentle nature of the house. All of this was kept clean and in good order by Janet, the wife of his estate manager Dennis Mowbray, who did essentially the same things for his estates, and a gardener known only as Fangdale who had been there in one incarnation or another for as long as the estate had existed. Marcus was, as Seaton had observed, an absentee landlord, but he liked to think that he would be a benign landlord and that the estate would be run for the benefit of all. At the moment it was true in so far as he took little of the income from the estate for his own use, preferring instead to literally plough it back into the land and its people.

They were both tired after the long journey. The Porsche was fun, but it was not quiet, and, after a light dinner left for them by Janet, Caroline complained of a headache which had made her tetchy, and asked if she could retire early. Marcus, concerned, offered her aspirin, which she declined, showed her to her room, and then went back to the study to look at the estate papers, which Dennis had left for him. The next day Marcus led a revived Caroline on a tour of the Hall, introduced her to Janet and Dennis Mowbray and took her into the village for lunch at the *Blackwell Ox*. Caroline's response to the Hall soon manifested itself in a relaxation of her previously slightly aloof attitude to Marcus. She realised that Sophie was onto something and that Marcus might be a prize worth catching, even if she would ultimately have to share him. She had, however, no long term intention of poaching him from Sophie, and there was no real competition between them. They had agreed that in the end Marcus was meant for Sophie. But this was the beginning, not the end, and Sophie had also reluctantly agreed that whoever got to him first would pass him on in due course. Sophie's recent disastrous entanglement with the two beautiful boys from the Drama Department did not put her in a strong position to argue about who had first rights on Marcus. So far as Caroline was concerned it was all a game anyway because she was already bound in love to two people, neither of whom she could ever marry, so Marcus was just entertainment. And she could compare notes with Sophie later, when both of them had enjoyed this quiet and earnest young man and decided what to do with him. What else was women's liberation for if not to enjoy the privileges previously reserved to men? She

therefore stopped playing the chivalric game in order to show a more active interest. She smiled at him more often, listened attentively, brushed against him from time to time, and eventually took his hand, as they walked round the formal gardens. To her surprise this first physical contact gave her a sudden frisson, like the tingle from the static on a live television screen. Drew had been right, and Caroline had already succeeded where Sophie had conspicuously failed. Marcus was one of them. He would have to be brought into Drew's circle and that changed the rules of the game. The sun shone on the golden sandstone of the Hall making it glow as though it was alive. It was all quite Austinesque. Caroline gazed at him appreciatively, and agreed with everything he said, which unsettled Marcus because it undermined the principles of courtly romance, depending, as it did, on the total superiority and haughty inaccessibility of the longed for but unattainable lady.

In the evening, after a roast beef and Yorkshire pudding dinner prepared for them by Janet, they sat in separate chairs in the drawing room and discussed Occam's theory of divine power and whether it really was possible for mortals to have any certain knowledge of God if the consequence of such knowledge would in some way limit divine omnipotence. Caroline had in mind to discuss something else, so when Marcus showed her to her bedroom at ten thirty, ridiculously early, she looked slightly peeved. But she closed the door in a resigned way, apparently accepting that this was not going to be a dirty weekend after all. The first night in a bedroom on her own was acceptable, especially as she had a headache. But she had spent the day sending out all the necessary come hither signals. Marcus should have fallen for her by now. Obviously he was a silly prat who was going to take time to reel in and might not be worth it in the end. Sophie had said that he was probably a virgin. Caroline didn't think that was very likely, but she was beginning to wonder. In fact, she decided he definitely wasn't worth much more of her time and, if she didn't score tonight, she would leave him to Sophie. He was, after all, a bit of a young fogey, and she knew plenty of other young men with large houses and expensive sports cars. On the whole, she preferred older men who, she had discovered, took time to get going but could often keep it up a lot longer than the boys she did one night stands with when she was feeling indiscriminately randy. And even if they were less athletic than men of her own age, their approach to sex was often more subtle and sensuous, which usually meant more orgasms for Caroline. Besides, older men were usually also richer. At least, the ones she allowed into her knickers were mostly rich, except Shagger Williams, of course, but he had other assets, which, she had come to realise, were more cherished by her than she had at first appreciated. Then there was Drew Parkin and his friends, with whom she had a very special relationship which she could not renounce but which conflicted with her love for the old priest. And there was Sophie, who was very special. Maybe Marcus fitted into their complicated love life. Maybe not. But Sophie thought so and Caroline had also detected a more subtle attraction to him, which needed to be tested, and that meant sex. Even if Marcus was just another naive young man she had not come all this way just to return without

being shagged, so she would make a more determined full frontal assault on him later, when his defences were likely to be down. No man had ever resisted a full frontal from Caroline.

Marcus walked down thickly carpeted corridors to his own room, the room he had occupied since he had been ten. Like his flat there were few possessions in it. A single bed with a patchwork quilt, some paintings on the walls, reproductions mainly of the elder Breughel's rustic scenes. Books, of course, and the clothes that he kept here for use when he was at home, which included a pair of stripy flannel pyjamas into which he changed, then padded barefoot into the ensuite bathroom to relieve himself and brush his teeth. He looked at himself in the mirror. The self we see in a mirror is never the way that others see us. Marcus reflected briefly on his nondescript face, neither handsome nor ugly, his mousy blonde hair, with its vestigial wave, brushed back over the right hand side of his face. Grey eyes, slightly tired and puffy, high cheekbones and a short, straight, nose, wide mouth with full but not fleshy lips and a slightly receding chin. Delicate features really, for a gentleman farmer, but probably acceptable for an academic. He had never considered how he might look to others. It was important only to be neat and tidy, presentable, and properly dressed. Marcus believed that people should not be judged on how they looked but on what they were, a belief which put him well outside the dominant trends in contemporary British popular culture for the foreseeable future.

About midnight, at the witching hour, Caroline made her move. She was, she suddenly realised, totally unused to having to seduce a man. Like Sophie she'd never actually had to seduce anyone, let alone a virgin. She had only to make the right noises, wiggle her tits, and men rolled onto their backs in front of her and waved their dicks in the air. All she had to do was climb on, if she wanted to. Or walk away if she did not. It was always Caroline who was in control. She cautiously opened Marcus's bedroom door and was surprised to find him sitting up in bed reading a book by the light of a bedside lamp. He looked up, startled. She had hoped that he might be expecting her, or, better still, that he might have taken the initiative and come to her room. She winced at the sight of the stripy flannel pyjamas and he gasped at the artfully untied negligee which briefly and casually swung open as she walked towards his bed, to reveal the neatly trimmed dark triangle between her legs and two perfectly rounded firm breasts with nipples and aureoles so pale that they were almost indistinguishable from her golden skin. She sat on the edge of the bed and looked at him with those luminous blue Nordic eyes. She assessed instantly the look of horror which flickered across Marcus's face. This was not going to be easy and it probably would not be worth it because he would be so excited that he would come too quickly. She remembered briefly the succession of unknown golden boys who had fumbled their way into her only to expend themselves before they had time to savour what she was offering. What was the point, she thought, of having a massive dick if it went off as soon as she looked at it, forgetting that she was also inclined to go off the minute they entered her. And she recalled also the craggy face of Shagger Williams, the wiry old goat, naked except for his clerical

dog collar, who could screw her for what seemed like hours, making her writhe and squeal with multiple ecstasy until she begged him to stop. The only other people who gave her such pleasure were Drew and his mystical little commune at Penhesgyn, and they had more to offer in the way of sexual enlightenment than any individual could even imagine.

Marcus put the book down on the edge of the quilt.

"What are you reading," she said gently.

Marcus shrugged. "Bautier," he said. "*Economic Development of Medieval Europe*. It's quite good. Lots of pictures." He pursed his lips and made a kind of puffing sound. His heart was pounding with apprehension. His eyes flicked round the room trying not to look at the goddess plummeting off her pedestal, but they were drawn back inexorably to the golden breasts poised nonchalantly in from of him. His mind suddenly focussed on his penis which was responding in the way that Caroline intended, and he tried hopelessly to quell the white heat raging in the dungeon of his loins, where reason had bolted it behind iron doors to protect himself from the unknown cruelties of the carnal world. But reason is easily seduced by passion and can soon melt in the furnaces of the flesh.

Caroline sat on the edge of the bed and leaned towards him. Her hair, fragrantly perfumed with Chanel No5, wafted softly across his face. Her lips came closer to his lips, and closer. She took his reluctant left hand and placed it on her breast. Her other hand began to unbutton his pyjama jacket. He felt it slide gently down his chest, round his nipples, and he flinched, his flesh recoiling from her touch. She paused, surprised at his reaction. Then her fingers pressed downwards towards his stomach and the Roman Candle which was fizzing furiously in his insecurely fastened flannel pyjama pants. If she touched it the iron gates would evaporate into sheets of flame and all would be lost. She fumbled with the buttons of his pyjama jacket, sensed his flinching hesitation and paused again. This was new territory for her, and it was obviously new territory for him. *Maybe Sophie was right. Maybe he was a virgin. How could he be a virgin? He must*, she paused for a mental calculation, *he must be at least twenty five, maybe twenty six. If he went to Cambridge at eighteen. Three years undergraduate, three years postgraduate, nearly three years at St Dynion's. My God. Twenty seven, at least. He's only four years older than me. Still, he can't have lived through the swinging sixties and into the groovy seventies and still be a virgin. No way. Either that or he's gay.*

"Don't you want to fuck me?" she whispered, gently, nuzzling her face into the side of his neck and caressing his chest. "Most men want to fuck me," then, with growing insistence but still gently sibilant, "If you're shy, don't worry I can help you get it up. I'm very good at it."

Getting it up was the least of Marcus's problems. He shook his head. Carillons of alarm bells reverberated round his brain. How could she be so good it at without having done it before? What did she mean? Comprehension began to dawn on him. He slid away from her questing hand, detached his own hand from the seductive breast, and squirmed down into the bed, pulling the quilt up over his chest.

"I hardly know you," he protested, "I've never even kissed you. How can I know whether I am truly in love with you or not." There was, he suddenly realised, a universe of difference between the chaste ideals of chivalric love and the carnal variety. He understood with perfect clarity what he had always known from the wisdom of books. Camelot had been poisoned by the desires of the flesh. Ideal love must be reserved only for God. For the rest, it was the curse of the Fall.

Caroline did not suffer fools gladly and had a short temper when she did not get what she wanted. Nor did she waste time on lost causes. Enough of this *Roman de la Rose* nonsense. "What are you talking about?" she snapped, "it's sex, just sex. Nothing to do with love. It's something we do for pleasure. It's fun." She leaned back and allowed the negligee to slip off her shoulders, then stood up, naked, hands behind her head splaying out a fan of platinum blonde hair which rolled in languorous waves almost to the small of her arched back. She stood with her long, slim, legs slightly apart, and on tiptoe so that her muscular athletic body was stretched out, revealing everything at its statuesque best. Even Marcus could see that she really was physically perfect, but he had already decided that she had fallen irrevocably from her pedestal and was no longer an immaculate maiden.

"If you want it, it's yours," she said coolly. She slid her hands slowly over her breasts, palms pressing on her flesh and fingers outstretched, lingering on her nipples, then down her flat belly and into that dark and carefully trimmed triangle, fingers combing inwards into her thick pubic hair. It was the worst possible thing she could have done, and she instantly realised it. Shagger Williams, of course, loved her lasciviousness and would have been there with his deliciously probing tongue before you could say cunnilingus. But Marcus recoiled in horror.

"I think we need to get to know each other better," Marcus gabbled, trying not to reveal in his expression the pain of the ramrod, which was now throbbing between his legs.

"That's exactly what I'm suggesting, idiot," came the cool reply. She picked up the negligee.

"I mean," said Marcus, "I don't think that people should sleep together on the first occasion. It takes time, time to fall in love."

"It's not love, you idiot," Caroline snapped. "I don't love you. I don't want to love you. I just want to fuck you!" She turned her beautifully sculptured buttocks on him and strode to the door which she slammed ferociously, then ran naked down the corridor back to her own room where she threw herself on her bed. Her ego got the better of her calculating self control. She had never, ever, been rejected by any man. How could any man resist her? She pounded her pillow with her fists, wept a little with frustration, but then she thought, *Maybe he's gay. Or perhaps Sophie was right, perhaps he is a virgin. Maybe I miscalculated. Maybe I should feel a little sorry for him. Just a little sorry. Not very much.* She rolled over onto her back and slid her index finger onto her clitoris. Very quickly the blue eyes went dreamy and the transitory pain of

rejection was washed away in waves of subtle ecstasy. Sex, she had long ago discovered, was a kind of universal analgesic which cured most ills, and it was so easy for her that it was second nature. If Sophie wanted this man she would have to seduce him herself, but she wasn't going to admit to Sophie that she had failed to score with him. In her way Sophie was as naive as Marcus, though a lot more experienced at sex, and she did have a genuine thing for him, and not just because Drew had told her that she and Marcus were destined for each other. But even Sophie might find this one too hard to crack. This clever young man had built himself a formidable intellectual fortress against any form of emotional involvement. It would not be easy. Caroline had her own agenda where Sophie was concerned. She would make the game more interesting by telling Sophie that she hadn't scored because Marcus was gay, but the less Sophie knew about this incident the better. At least for the time being. And it would be better if Marcus did not know anything at all about her complex relationship with Sophie.

At about two o'clock in the morning Caroline was woken by the sound of soft footsteps in the corridor. Her heart missed a beat. Marcus must have changed his mind. He was coming for her after all. The footsteps stopped at the door and advanced no further. Caroline waited expectantly, but nothing happened. She considered whether she should get out of the bed and open the door to her timid suitor but decided against it. If Marcus did not have the courage to open the door she would not open it for him. She waited for the footsteps to retreat, but there no further sound in the darkened room except for a faint rustle of air which caressed her expectant flesh like the cool breath of an ethereal lover. Eventually she fell asleep again, her brow furrowed with disappointment, and dreamed strange dreams of old men and angels who spoke to her of love and death. In the morning she had forgotten the footsteps, but her contempt for Marcus had mysteriously evaporated into acceptance of another destiny.

What Caroline did not know was that Marcus, alone in his room, was desperately trying to subdue his white hot willy. He hurtled out of his bed and into the bathroom where he used his toothbrush glass to throw cold water onto his blazing navel. When that failed he turned on the cold shower and dowsed himself under it, realising too late that he was still wearing his now sodden flannelette pyjamas. He tore them off, ripping away those buttons which Caroline had not undone. He shivered naked under the stream of icy water, but nothing happened. In despair he turned the shower to warm and for the first time in his life took his dick in his hand and began to manipulate it, sliding his right hand feverishly up and down the shaft and over the glans. Unlike Caroline, who came if a feather touched her clit, it seemed to take hours before anything happened, which he might have considered odd if he had known what to expect, and the orgasmic sensation when he eventually came was so intense that it left him panting and groaning breathlessly. Like most normal young men he had suffered the squirmy embarrassment of wet dreams, waking up and desperately squeezing his dick whilst searching for something to ejaculate into which would

not leave telltale stains on the bedclothes. But this was something else. Every muscle in his body seemed to be simultaneously wound up like the tightest spring and stretched out to its limits. And when the detonation came it was a tearing, exploding, mind blowing, champagne cork popping sensation, followed by an ineffable feeling of relief from deliciously excruciating tension. His penis began to subside, the glans sore and bleeding slightly from too much frantic friction without adequate lubrication. Girls were supposed to bleed when they lost their virginity. Had he lost his virginity? Did this count?

He dried himself with a towel and then collapsed naked on his bed and slowly pulled the sheets and counterpane back over his body. He had never slept naked before, and would rarely sleep clothed again. The cool sheets on his body felt strangely sensuous, curiously liberating as though he had cast off a redundant skin. He ran his hands over his chest, felt his own nipples and then cautiously slid his fingers into his navel, feeling for the first time his sexual organ, now limp but still oozing sticky fluid. Of course he had touched his penis before, every day of his life, to pee with. But now it felt different, no longer just a mechanism for evacuating bodily waste but an instrument of, well, pleasure. Pleasure. He had enjoyed that new sensation. He wanted it again, but it had been drilled into him that masturbation was wrong and Marcus had always done as he was told. His mind began to resume its customary analytical routines. He began to wonder whether he had made the right decision in rejecting Caroline, and then thought better of it. She was not for him. Better to wait for the right person, whoever that might be.

Quite apart from the intellectual realisation that chivalric love was a dead end strategy, this learning experience also revealed an asset which he did not recognise at the time, and which he neither understood, nor fully appreciated. Later he would begin to understand that although Caroline had not succeeded in enthralling him she had given Marcus the key to a door that he would be less fearful to reopen in the future, when the opportunity arose. Being Marcus the opportunity would have to come to him, for he was far too timid to go out and look for it. For the moment, though, he was filled with disgust and apprehension, and, also, anxiety about how he was going to get Caroline back to Wales. Five hours travelling alone with, he assumed, an irate spurned female companion did not bear thinking about, even in a Porsche. Eventually the mind stopped churning possibilities and he fell asleep, to dream fitfully of drowning in a roaring sea where great nipple crested waves of flesh bore down on him and sucked him into dark and crimson lined whirlpools from which there was no escape.

The following morning began better than Marcus had expected. He got out of bed and caught a glimpse of himself in the full length mirror on the door of his wardrobe. His naked body was, he thought, quite presentable. Although not sporty he was still pretty slim and the equipment hanging nonchalantly between his legs seemed acceptably large. In the fifth form at school he had once been invited to join the seven club on the basis of what he had revealed in the changing rooms but he had politely declined the offer, dismissing the club in his

mind as a bunch of wankers. He shaved without dressing, something he had never done before, and then cleared up the debris in the bathroom, swabbing down the stains on the tiles around the bath and collecting the torn off buttons. He debated on what to do with the sodden pyjamas, which would normally be left in the linen basket for Janet to launder, and decided to put them straight into the washing machine in the kitchen where, he hoped, their condition would go unnoticed. Being a man it did not occur to him that the residual fluids from last night had already stained his sheets and that when Janet came to make his bed she would assume, with a smile of relief, that the timid bachelor had, at last, made it with his stunning new blonde girlfriend. How romantic. Dressed, and curiously confident, he went down to the kitchen, put the kettle on and started to cut bread for toast. Caroline, who had been sitting in her room reading Sophie's copy of *The Story of O*, heard him walk down the corridor, closed her book and followed after a discreet interval. She sat demurely at the kitchen table, said nothing about last night, and tucked into the cornflakes and toast.

Marcus was relieved. He saw her now in a different light, and in an odd way he actually wanted her. After all, he could see now that she was very beautiful, and she had offered herself to him. But it was too late, he could not go back, though it would have been nice to discover what it would have been like to caress those perfect breasts and thrust himself between those slim thighs. He shut the thought off instantly as he felt a newly familiar stiffening between his own thighs. To his intense relief the stiffening went away. There was conversation at the table, but it was random and desultory. Caroline was not encouraging him and was really just anxious to get back to St Dynion's, to her flat in the attic of Shagger Williams' Victorian house in the terrace overlooking Ynys Faelog. Marcus left her in the kitchen whilst he went for a brief conversation with Dennis Mowbray in his study. Then he put the bags into the front of the Porsche and they set off on the long road back to Wales.

Conversation in the car ebbed and flowed, but mostly ebbed and in the end there was an uneasy silence, as though they had exhausted all that could be said without venturing into dangerous territory. They left Carston behind, stopped at Thirsk to refuel, before heading off down the A1 and then cutting across south of Leeds to connect with the Eastern end of the unfinished M62. Caroline remained silent, glancing out of the windows at the increasingly industrialised countryside of urban Yorkshire. Marcus, sensing the potential tension between them, concentrated his attention on the controls of the Porsche. He thought about how Caroline had appeared to him last night and then dismissed her from his thoughts. He would have dismissed her even more quickly if he had known that she was actually daydreaming about being spreadeagled between two marble pillars, manacled, naked and writhing in ecstatic pain, as she was subtly beaten with a schoolmaster's cane by an equally naked and gnarled old man wearing a clerical dog collar and a massive erection. Marcus engaged the cold, clear mind which cloaked his shy and indecisive soul and focussed it on the governance of the superb car which he manipulated like a Lippizaner. He did not drive fast, but he drove with great flair and precision, using the power and

responsiveness to compensate for the restrictions placed upon it by the statutory speed limits which, of course, he observed without question.

The long and tedious stretch of road which wound through the industrial outskirts of Leeds towards the northern end of the motorway was congealed with heavy lorries which forced all of the traffic to proceed at a choking crawl. Spray and drizzle gushed out from their huge wheels, obscuring the road ahead and preventing any overtaking, even with the rocket like acceleration of the Porsche. Marcus made no effort to overtake, unless a safe opportunity arose. He knew that once he joined the eastern end of the motorway he would easily sail past almost everything. Just outside Heckmondwike a Jaguar XJ6, attempting to overtake in a lunatic position, drew alongside the Porsche and then, faced with an oncoming lorry, attempted to cut in on Marcus, forcing him to brake sharply to create a gap into which the Jaguar could squeeze just before the oncoming lorry would plough into it. As the Jaguar slid in front of the Porsche a brassy haired and heavily bejewelled woman in the passenger seat made the two finger sign at Marcus and hurled silent obscenities at him from a twisted mouth. Marcus shrugged. The woman was now looking back at him through the rear window of the Jaguar, still waving her fingers, dripping with rings and seemingly still swearing. Marcus was not surprised. In his experience Jaguars were spiv's cars generally inhabited by estate agents, bookies and gangsters who did not know how to behave and were best ignored, politely, of course. No response was necessary. Two miles further along the road the Jaguar suddenly swung left, without signalling, into a roadside cafe. Marcus found it incomprehensible that anyone should gamble with his own and others lives simply to jockey for position in a stream of traffic, and then throw away any advantage gained by stopping for morning coffee. To take such risks when genuinely hurrying was bad enough. To take such risks when not in a hurry was suicidal egomania. Marcus shook his head in sorrow and glanced at Caroline, who looked slightly alarmed but said nothing.

As he drove Marcus became more and more involved in the sheer technique of driving, merging into a Centaur like symbiosis between man and car. Had he known what he was capable of he might have been a racing driver, but the thought had never occurred to him for he had always despised competitive sports and did not consider himself to be particularly good at anything so physical. Nevertheless every sense, every perception, was keyed into the car, and to the place of the car in its natural environment, and all thoughts of Caroline receded further and further into the peripheries of his consciousness. Caroline for her part, had woken up from being ravished by a goat, and alternated between glancing at the bleak landscape, made bleaker now by a hesitant drizzle which had made the roads slightly slick so that Marcus was even more involved in keeping the Porsche travelling in a straight line, and glancing covertly at Marcus to see if he was paying any attention to her. She wondered if he really was gay. Compared with the liberation of militant women and the tacit acceptance of Lesbianism, Gay men still seemed to be cautious to reveal themselves Actually, from where she sat Marcus looked not unattractive,

vaguely handsome in a nondescript way, but absorbed, quick and intelligent and obviously totally in love with his car. Maybe she should have tried a bit harder but, what the hell, one boy is much the same as another.

The beginning of the motorway came as a blessed relief. Marcus moved at once into the outer lane of the slip road, accelerated up to seventy and slipped the Porsche into fifth gear. Holding the car at the legal maximum he swept past the trundling lorries and on down the outside lane until he had passed the bottleneck of slower vehicles that had just debouched onto the motorway. Once clear of the bulk of the traffic he took up a steady position in the centre lane, moving out occasionally to pass little knots of slow moving traffic. He began to relax slightly, though not too much. The motorway was wet, and the Porsche belonged to an age when the whole point of a sports car was that it required real skill to drive it successfully. To drive it badly was to court disaster. Marcus savoured the knife edge balance and the exhilaration of that controlled rush past slower vehicles.

Caroline fumbled in her bag and produced a packet of cigarettes, lit one, and then, almost as an afterthought, offered one to Marcus.

"Thanks," he said, "but I don't smoke." He had never seen Caroline smoke and was surprised because it did not fit in with his admittedly highly flawed view of her. Caroline indulged not because she actually enjoyed smoking but because she considered it to be sophisticated and therefore part of her image. She must have known that Marcus didn't smoke and so he was slightly annoyed that she was so insensitive to his habits. He retaliated by opening the fresh air vents and switching on the car radio. Mick Jagger blasted out *Sympathy for the Devil*. Marcus tried another station but there did not seem to be anything but pop, except for some dark dirge on Radio Three, which Marcus still insisted on calling the Third programme. He turned the radio off. The music of the Porsche's flat four was enough for anyone. Caroline seemed to be soothed by the cigarette. She started to talk about something that she thought Marcus would warm to.

"Didn't Steve McQueen drive one of these?" she said, "in that boring film about motor racing. In France. You remember. I know you saw it because I saw you at the cinema with James Sinclair. You know," she was emphatic now, "*Le Mans*."

Marcus remembered. He enjoyed films and often went with James Sinclair because he didn't like to go on his own, and James was only too keen for any excuse to escape from his wife. Recently he had also been with Drew Parkin to some interesting foreign films put on by the university Film Society. Like James, Parkin also seemed to have rather taken Marcus under his wing, as though he sensed his loneliness. Of course, one never knew whether undergraduates were just seeking some advantage. Merely being seen socially in the company of students might lead other students to accusations of favouritism, but Parkin did not care what other people thought about him and sought no common advantage from his friendship with Marcus. Marcus knew that he should not get too close to students, but he enjoyed Parkin's company

and found his erudite and perceptive mind some compensation for what he missed from Cambridge. In return for Parkin's generous company, Marcus sometimes invited him back to Plas Rhianda for coffee or a drink after the film, and there were long and interesting conversations about everything under the sun.

"Ah yes," he said, "he had a dark blue one, and he drove a Porsche in the race itself. Did you really think it was a boring film?" he added a touch of reproach. The flat four burbled along at seventy. "I thought it was rather good. I've actually been to Le Mans and it is very much like that."

Caroline shook her head, her worst suspicions confirmed. "No, I thought it was boring. All those cars just whizzing round and round, and the noise, and those horrible crashes. And that ridiculous pseudo love story. Ugh." She pulled a face, but Marcus didn't see it because he was concentrating on the road ahead.

"I thought the crashes were brilliantly staged," he said, "not because of any morbid interest, but because the film captured very well the change in the perception of time. Everything was slowed down, though in fact it was happening at great speed. It's as though there is some other perception of time, which we experience only under extreme conditions. It's as though we are allowed an insight into a more cosmic timescale, quite distinct from our own normal subjective time. Did you notice that when the accidents actually happened there was almost total silence as well, but again, we know that the noise must be tremendous." He paused for breath. Caroline nodded. The intellectual interest awoke and she responded to the academic imperative for detached and objective explanation. This was interesting. Not as interesting as being ravaged by Shagger Williams, but interesting nonetheless.

"I wonder if time is really something external," she said, "or whether our brains simply perceive events in a certain way but under stress our perception of external events is speeded up so that the events themselves appear to be slowed down. Perhaps that would give us more time to make life or death decisions in a crisis situation. Have you ever been in a car crash?"

"Well," said Marcus, "nothing as bad as the crashes in the film. But just after I passed my driving test I skidded off the road in a snow storm. I was in a Land Rover and I lost it on a corner. I just slid off the road, went between a telegraph pole and a concrete bench, through a hedge and into a ploughed field. There was no damage to speak of. I never thought of being hurt, though I suppose if I'd hit either the post or the seat I could have been killed. Land Rovers are pretty tough really, but there's not much padding inside to protect the driver. I know of someone who was killed when the Land Rover he was a passenger in ran into something quite slowly, but fast enough for him to fly forward off his seat and crack his head open on the windscreen wiper motor. And there was definitely that strange slowing down of time whilst the accident was taking place. It seemed to take forever, and yet it was all over in seconds. It was very vivid, but unreal, like a dream. You're right. It could be a chemical adjustment in the brain. But I'm sure that there is an external form of time. After all, the universe is in

a state of entropy and decay must follow the arrow of time. It's just how we perceive it."

He paused, but did not resume the discussion. Caroline seemed to have lost interest and was gazing out of the side window again. Marcus fumbled under the seat and found a cassette which he slid into the player. Bach flooded into the car like a shoal of geometric icebergs. Pure, cold, mathematical and crystalline hard. Caroline said nothing, but stubbed out the half smoked cigarette, which she didn't enjoy anyway, and allowed herself to bathe in the logical clarity of the music of the spheres. Marcus returned to the driving. Thought quickened into action.

About two hundred yards ahead of him was a longish knot of traffic travelling at about fifty in the centre lane up a long incline. They were all bunched together, too close for comfort. Marcus checked his mirror, changed down into fourth in case he needed to accelerate, flicked the indicator and eased out into the fast lane. Just as he was coming up beside the tail car in the centre lane he checked his mirror again and saw a large car bearing down on him fast. Its lights were flashing insistently. Marcus decelerated slightly and fell back into the centre lane behind the back marker. The big car flashed past. It was the Jaguar XJ6 which had cut in on him earlier. The same brassy woman sneered at him superciliously, and Marcus had a brief glimpse of the driver. A stocky short body, narrow weaselish face, hair Brylcreamed flat, and a little black pointed moustache. His fingers were also gaudy with rings. *Scrap dealer* thought Marcus, alive to the nuances of sumptuary indiscretion which are the curse of the English class system. Then the Jaguar was past. They hadn't spent long on coffee. Marcus was doing just over fifty as he fell back into the centre lane, so the Jaguar must have been doing ninety, maybe nearer a ton. Marcus moved back into the fast lane and began to accelerate, staying within the legal limit, and not attempting to pursue the Jag, though the temptation to do so was very strong. As he drew into the fast lane at the back of the long queue of crawling vehicles Marcus saw the Jag ahead of him, almost at the front of the queue. And in front of the Jag a dirty white Mini was moving out of the queue and into the fast lane. Its indicators were going, and it was pulling out to pass the slow petrol tanker that headed the centre lane convoy. The driver had obviously not looked in the mirror, but even at this distance Marcus could see that the rear window of the Mini was misted up, so the driver would not have had a good view of what was behind anyway. Marcus started to brake gently. His reflexes tightened up and a little knot formed in the pit of his stomach. His mind suddenly became acutely aware of every detail of the scene in front of him. He glanced at Caroline. Her eyes were closed and she seemed to be totally absorbed in the Bach. He returned his attention to the Mini which was still pulling out, apparently oblivious of the Jaguar bearing down on it and showing no sign of slowing down. He thought he heard the blare of a horn, then the nearside front wing of the Jaguar just nicked the offside wing of the Mini. There was no sound, no scream of tearing metal, only the divine Bach, and the throb of the Porsche engine. Marcus changed down into third and began cadence

braking. The road was wet and slick and he was now trapped between the crash barrier on his right, the slow moving traffic on his left, and the events about to unfold in the fast lane. The Jaguar had passed the Mini now and appeared to be accelerating away through the plume of diesel smoke and spray belching out from the side of the petrol tanker leading the queue. In the back of his mind Marcus registered the familiar red and yellow of the Shell livery. There didn't seem to be any traffic in the inside lane. Why hadn't the lorry moved over to let the faster traffic through? In another instant the Jaguar had disappeared into the spray, still travelling fast in the outer lane.

"Bastard," said Marcus under his breath. Caroline looked up, startled. The Mini had been knocked round, rotating so that it was now sliding backwards towards the central crash barrier, right in front of Marcus. By the time it hit the crash barrier it was facing towards him. He had a brief image of a youngish man, panic stricken, trying to regain control of the car and a blonde girl in the passenger seat, throwing her arms up in front of her face. Then the passenger side of the Mini hit the crash barrier. Time dilated. In a dream Marcus watched as pieces flew off the Mini. As it struck the barrier the whole shape of the little car seemed to distort. The front and rear windows popped out and burst into a fountain of shimmering fragments. There was an awful surreal beauty to it. He saw slivers of metal, wheel trims, wing mirrors, the petrol filler cap, all exploding away from the car like some gigantic firework. Then the Mini waltzed back across the fast lane and slammed into an Austin 1300 which was the next but one car in the queue. The impact was sufficient to roll the Mini over. It slid sideways onto its roof. A bundle of rags catapulted out of the smashed rear window and disappeared under the wheels of the Commer van behind the Austin on the inside lane. Marcus realised with horror that it had been a baby, thrown out of its carrycot on the back seat.

The leading cars were all braking violently now, sliding about and careering into each other. Marcus, still in the fast lane, was almost at a walking pace and approaching the expanding epicentre of the accident. Suddenly everything in front of him started to shunt slowly down the carriageway propelled by lorries ploughing into cars further back in the queue. The Mini had momentarily come to rest, upside down against the side of the Austin. Marcus could see the occupants hanging in their seat belts, apparently squirming to release themselves. The driver of the Austin was simply sitting, staring open mouthed at the chaos in front of him. Marcus rolled closer. He could see that the occupants of the Mini were seriously injured. The girl passenger was streaming with blood from a massive wound in the side of her neck which turned her dangling blonde hair into a crimson river. The man was convulsing. Petrol was sluicing out of the Mini's open tank and into the car through the smashed rear window. Petrol. Marcus could smell it through the air vents. He put the Porsche into second gear and watched the pool of petrol fan out across the road under the Austin and the Hillman Hunter behind it. The Shell tanker which had been in front of the Mini had come to a halt a hundred yards further up the road. The tarmac to the left of the Porsche exploded into a sheet of flame and in the

twinkling of an eye the Mini had vanished. Marcus let in the clutch and floored the accelerator. As the Porsche screamed forward Marcus battled with the sliding rear end. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the driver of the Austin struggling to open his door, but it was jammed shut by the wreck of a Mini. Then it disappeared as its own tank went up. Marcus held the sliding Porsche through the widening fringe of fire and emerged onto the open road. In his mirror he saw the flames fold upwards in the backdraft from the accelerating sports car to form two gigantic roaring wings which almost instantly collapsed back onto the vehicles he had left behind.

In seconds he passed the tanker which had been leading the queue. It was stationary now. The driver was struggling to get out of his cab, his face stricken with grief and horror. Further back in the queue, beyond the circle of fire, people were leaving their cars and running for the embankment as the fire worked its way backwards. Ahead of Marcus, more than half a mile along the now deserted motorway was the Jaguar. At first it seemed to have escaped unscathed. Marcus hesitated for a fraction of a second then floored the accelerator again. He was determined to catch the Jaguar, or at least get its number. He felt oddly exhilarated. The speed of events had stimulated his mind to a high peak of lucidity and decisiveness. Then, as he closed on the Jag, he saw that it was sliding sideways. He began to slow down, watching with enthralled fascination.

He could just make out the brassy woman punching the driver. Somehow she had hit the electric window button so that her passenger window was winding down . The driver was trying to fend off her blows whilst struggling to control the skid caused by his violent braking. Then he lost it and the car began to roll. Marcus braked the Porsche to a crawl. He watched the woman's head loll out of the open passenger window then disappear out of sight as the car rolled over onto its roof.

Newton is a great leveller Marcus thought, inconsequentially. The car bounced back onto its wheels and began a second leisurely roll. Now Marcus could see that the roof pillars had collapsed, squashing down the upper edges of the passenger door, neatly and effectively decapitating the woman. Nausea gushed into Marcus's throat. He swallowed it down.

"Oh my God," he murmured, "Christ," then, under his breath, "where's the head?"

The head was cannon-balling down the carriageway, ghastly, macabre, still shining brassily, earrings dangling, mouth open, bright red lips, eyes wide open with surprise, rolling and bouncing into the grassy edge of the central reservation.

Marcus suddenly remembered Caroline, but only for an instant. His attention returned at once to the scene ahead of him. At the apex of its second roll the boot of the Jaguar had opened scattering suitcases which burst apart releasing bundles of flapping clothes. Suits, dresses, underwear, nightclothes, all twisting and writhing grotesquely in the wind, as though still occupied by the departing spirits of their newly dead owners. The Jaguar had now almost completed its

waltz and was rolling backwards on its wheels to come to rest against the embankment at the side of the motorway. Marcus could see an emergency telephone box about fifty yards beyond it. He guided the Porsche with agonizing care through the billowing tormented clothes, desperately try to avoid running over them for fear of inflicting some second death on their ghostly occupants. A gold lamé halter dress flapped over the bonnet of the Porsche and wrapped itself round the windscreen wiper on the passenger side. He parked next to the telephone box and switched off the engine.

His ears rang with a silence so profound that it seemed to echo the silence of the Universe, as though they had passed through some breach in the continuum of space and time into a world not meant for man. Then Bach, then Caroline shrieking hysterically, and starting to hyperventilate. He unbuckled his seat belt, turned round in his seat and slapped her face. Caroline subsided into stifled sobs. Her breathing gradually became more regular. Marcus was surprised at himself. He was not normally so decisive but the inexorable logic of the accident was revealing unexpected reserves of action in a character which had long been forced into a mould of passive academic detachment.

He sat still for a minute, then bent under the dashboard and unclipped the little fire extinguisher. He was not shocked or horrified by what he had seen. Not yet, anyway. It had all seemed so detached, so crystal clear, yet so totally unreal. It was as though the windscreen of the Porsche had become a cinema screen onto which had been projected a slow motion sequence of appallingly convincing events which his mind intuitively recognized as unreal. He was a vicarious participant in a nightmare which had never happened and in a minute he would wake up and the normal world would reassert itself. He opened the door of the Porsche and stepped out. The illusion of the unreal was instantly shattered. Outside it was cold and wet. The shock of hard cthonic reality sleeted through him and chilled him to the bone. He looked around. Everything stood out in gritty detail. Drizzle snittered over Saddleworth moor. He could almost see the individual drops of water, the glistening oil streaked carriageway of the motorway, individual stalks of grass waving sullenly in the rain, hard faceted quartz veined rocks in the embankment. He felt for the first time that other Worsdworthian universe where huge and mighty forms that do not live like living men moved ponderously through the mind, so slowly that they could be perceived only in sublime moments when the garments with which men made their world safe were stripped away and the majesty of nature was revealed. He began to shake and grabbed hold of the car to steady himself. Caroline was sitting stock still in the passenger seat, staring straight ahead and still breathing in short sharp gulps.

The Jaguar was at rest behind him, crushed, destroyed, its mechanical heart extinguished by greater forces. Only a slight hiss of steam escaping from the radiator marked its dying breath. Behind the Jaguar, half a mile or more back up the westbound carriageway of the motorway, Marcus could see sheets of flame raging furiously from the still burning cars. Gusts of oily black smoke wafted down towards him bringing the smell and taste of burning rubber and

plastic, the acrid tang of scorching metal and other gross smells which his mind refused to acknowledge. And people screaming. Animal screams of loss and terror that rent the soul. He felt his stomach rising again and fought it down. He would not panic, not now. This was an unexpected test of his strength of character and, coming so soon after the test he had failed last night, it would not do to capitulate to shock. He walked purposefully back towards the Jaguar, clutching the useless fire extinguisher as though his life depended on it. He knew that he would find nothing living in the car. He could scarcely even see into it. The roof was pressed right down, virtually sealing off the passenger compartment. A hand, hairy, bloodstained and loaded with rings, stuck limply out of the slit where the windscreen had once been. *How fragile we are*, thought Marcus. *How easily broken.* He walked gingerly round to the passenger side, but there was little to see. Only some splashes of blood swirling down the side of the door and scraps of torn flesh, bone and cartilage protruding from the remains of the window panel. The bodies of both the driver and the passenger were entombed in the crushed cabin of the car. There was nothing to see and nothing he could do. Marcus expected to feel sickness and revulsion. But nothing came. He still felt detached, observant, fired with academic curiosity and a sense of rational wonder at the interplay of the uncomprehending Newtonian forces which had gripped and crushed these fragile bodies. It was, he realised, not something he should feel proud of. But behind the cold and rational mind lurked a black and terror stricken chasm of doubt, the unwelcome revelation of the utter worthlessness of life in the face of an inhuman universe governed by implacable forces. The realisation dawned on him that he must in future live his own life to the full and seize every opportunity it offered, no matter what the risk.

He walked back towards the Porsche and the telephone box, and rang the emergency services. Caroline was more subdued now. She too affected a cold and calculating intelligence that seemed to be able to distance itself from horror, but not yet. He looked at her through the windscreen of the car. She was sitting hunched up, still staring straight ahead. Her hands were clasped tightly in front of her. Black streaks of mascara streamed down her face, fanning out over her cheeks. He walked round the Porsche to see if it had been singed by the dash through the fire, removing on the way the lamé dress from the windscreen wiper, and a pair of tights which had wrapped themselves round the Porsche's bumpers. He went back to the wrecked Jaguar, picked up one of the open suitcases, put the dress and tights back into it, and closed it. An airline baggage label with the name and address of the owners and their destination was looped through the handle. Mr and Mrs Hugill of Batley were no longer on their way to Benidorm. He got back into the driver's seat and closed the door. After he had switched off the cassette player relative silence returned.

"Are you alright?" he asked, realising at once the utter fatuousness of the remark. Caroline continued to hunch herself in the seat, no longer sobbing, but shivering and occasionally moaning to herself. No goddess, he thought, could be so moved by such violence. Marcus reached over into the slot behind the

seats and produced an emergency first aid kit which included a small bottle of brandy and a little aluminium tumbler. He poured a small tot and offered it to Caroline. After some hesitation she drank it.

Eventually the emergency services arrived. Police, ambulances and fire engines. Brisk and efficient men, apparently unmoved by the battlefield devastation around them, put out the fires and tended to the people huddled on the embankment. Marcus was asked for a statement and recounted to an apparently jocular policeman his view of what had happened.

"You weren't racing the Jaguar were you sir?" the policeman asked.

Marcus shook his head. "Of course not."

"Very lucky," said the policeman. "Anyway," he added, "we can't prosecute corpses can we?"

An ambulance man came and looked at Caroline. He gave her a mild sedative and asked her if she wanted to go to hospital to be treated for shock. She shook her head. The medic returned to the main scene of carnage. Caroline opened her handbag and took out her make up, using the mirror in the passenger sun visor to rebuild the image which had been so cataclysmically shattered.

"Tha took a big risk sir," said a police sergeant, "driving through them flames. Very dangerous. Tha might have gone up an all." The soft West Riding accent was soothing, comforting.

Marcus shook his head gently. "I wanted to catch up with the Jaguar, at least to get his number. It was the fault of the Mini for pulling out without looking. But the Jaguar was going very fast and he made no effort to slow down. Then he must have braked so hard that he got into an uncontrollable skid."

The sergeant looked at him curiously. "Tha's a cool customer, sir, that tha is. Normal folks be so freaked by things like this they cannot remember out. Tha mun have an odd mind." He lingered on the word odd.

In his mirror Marcus saw an ambulance man and policeman, both wearing high visibility orange jackets, walking slowly and reluctantly towards the central reservation. Marcus watched the policeman stop, bend down, pick up that hideous brassy ball and drop it into a black bin bag held open by the ambulance man. Then he put the sack down, gently, gently, ever so gently, doubled up, clutched his stomach and vomited. The ambulance man put his arm round his colleague's shoulder.

"Aye," said the sergeant with sudden vehemence. "Pigs we are. Fascist bastards they call us. Them scruffy students. How would you like to do what that lad's just done? Som'un has to clear up mess. And we're only human, like everyone else. Maybes more so. Happen sometimes I have terrible nightmares." His voice faded away.

Marcus nodded, and smiled at him weakly. In his mind he had just calculated that the entire accident had taken place over the space of slightly more than a minute. Maybe a minute and a half, from the moment the Jaguar had struck the Mini to the moment when it rolled silently up against the embankment. Twelve people were dead, incinerated, snuffed out, decapitated, crushed to jelly, and many more injured. And nearly twenty cars and vans burnt out. Those ninety

seconds had been spun out to an eternity and were lodged with brilliant clarity in his memory. He felt almost privileged, as though he had been allowed some occult insight into another scale of values, a perception of the titanic forces which rule the planets, crushing careless men underfoot like so many ants. Those ninety second were a jewel of perception, unsettling and corroding the calm and ordered world he had built for himself.

Eventually they were allowed to resume their journey. At the western end of the M62 they found a Wimpey Bar where they reluctantly half ate a late and greasy lunch. Caroline had more or less composed herself. Like Marcus she had been going over the events of those ninety seconds in her mind, and like him she remembered every fine detail. There was a terrible frisson to it. Almost like sex. She would never want to see such a thing again, but she was strangely moved by it and subtly changed as though it had unlocked something strange and rare buried in the depths of her psyche. Back in the Porsche for the last and most boring leg of the journey along the North Wales Coast, dragging through the endless bottlenecks, she became more talkative.

"Marcus, do you think that you might have caused that to happen?" she said, completely out of the blue. Marcus looked at her, astonished and incredulous.

"What on earth do you mean?"

"You thought about an accident about to happen and it happened." She paused, then said, ruefully, "I suppose I sort of helped you."

"I don't understand," Marcus replied, "how could I cause such a thing? It was an accident. Someone else's stupidity. I could not have done anything to prevent it. It was just stupidity and impatience."

"No, no," she paused and then, "it's you who doesn't understand. It's an interesting problem in ethics. You could have prevented the accident. You could have stopped the Jaguar overtaking you. If you had continued to pull out as you intended he would have had to slow down behind you. Down to the legal limit until you had both passed all the slow traffic. Then he would never have been in the same place at the same time as the Mini. It's an interesting problem." She paused again, as she thought of something else. "And, you know, even the observer is part of the event observed. You can't escape that you know."

"I don't think this is the place for Heisenberg. That's a *non sequitur*. You're just trying to be clever for the sake of being clever." Marcus was genuinely annoyed. How wise he had been not to succumb to her last night. "Suppose I had pulled out in front of the Jag. He might have hit me. Or the Mini might have pulled out without warning in front of me. Christ woman, twelve people have lost their lives, and you want to talk about philosophy?"

"Why not?" she persisted, "It's a good example. Who is to blame? Not legally of course, but ethically. Your decisions changed the course of events. What we're talking about is two possible outcomes. Firstly the normal outcome which would have been the likely outcome if you had committed yourself to overtaking the line of traffic. And then the alternate outcome which happened because you failed to act, or changed your mind. And there's another thing.

There's this theory, you know, that there are alternate parallel universes where our lives take different courses because of different decisions we make. In another universe we could be dead as well."

Marcus looked sideways at her. He'd heard this discussed in Cambridge by his physicists friends but had never taken it seriously. But there was something wrong here. How could they so quickly transform the realities of such an appalling event into a mere idea, without human force or feeling? Then again, he had spent his adult life studying the lives of dead people, dispassionately and without moral judgement. That was part of what history was about; listening to the dead. Scholarship had trained them both to be detached observers and Caroline, true to form, was taking refuge in reason. Were they now so lacking in compassion and empathy that they could not relate to the pain of the real world? Caroline sensed his anger and backed off. He drove on in silence. Things that he had always taken for granted were unravelling with alarming speed.

The silence continued, all the tedious way from Holywell to Llandudno. Then Caroline summed up the courage to speak again, this time with more humility.

"Did you feel it?" she asked.

"Feel what?" Marcus replied.

"That darkness that was there," Caroline said quietly, "after we stopped. That other.....oh....I can't describe it. That sense of something else, not human. Like a ghost, or ghosts."

"I thought," Marcus replied, already drawn into Caroline's spell, "I thought for an instant that I stood outside time and I saw those forces that move the Earth. Newtonian forces. The binding forces of the universe."

"Death," said Caroline, "what we felt was the Angel of Death. It flew over us. We are lucky to be alive."

Marcus shook his head. This was not the coldly rational Caroline who had earlier debated the ethical responsibility of preventing drivers going too fast. The uneasy silence resumed.

It was very late afternoon before they arrived back at St Dynion's. Marcus did not bother to call at the college but drove straight through the town, over the Telford bridge to Porth Aethwy where he dropped Caroline at her chic attic flat. He opened the passenger door for her to slide elegantly out, took her small suitcase from the boot at the front of the car and offered to carry it to her flat. The offer was declined. Caroline, now as cool and composed as ever, looked at him with sorrow in her eyes and put her hands on his shoulders.

"Marcus," she said quietly, "thank you for keeping us alive. If you had not responded so quickly I don't think we would have survived that."

Even Marcus was able to detect the shift in Caroline's personality, no longer quite so confident. No longer so cold or so intellectually dispassionate. Whatever had happened to Marcus had happened to Caroline as well. Neither of them was the same person who had set out for Yorkshire two days earlier. He

opened his mouth to say something characteristically banal, but Caroline put her long index finger on his lips, and looked deep into his grey eyes.

"Marcus. Listen to me," her voice was soft and sympathetic, "I'm very sorry for what happened last night. It was very wrong of me, and demeaning for both of us. You are worth much better than that and I'm really truly sorry. I have a temper you know, and sometimes I'm not very patient. Please forgive me. One day I will make it right for you." Marcus smiled. Caroline was suddenly less intimidating, and she seemed to be about to hold out a promise for the future. Once again he opened his mouth to speak but again Caroline put her forbidding finger there.

"Marcus. Listen to me," she repeated. "I think it would be better that you and I should not see each other for a while. I've been intending to do some research in the Hereford Cathedral Library, so, this might be a good time to do it. One day you and I will be lovers. I promise you that. But not in the way you expect. Listen to me. What happened to you last night will happen to you again. Someone who understands love much better than I do will offer herself to you and she will want to make love to you. Not now, but it will be soon. You must not turn her away as you did me. Do you understand?"

Marcus shook his head.

"Marcus. You are very lucky. Those that I love can never be wholly mine. I will always have to share them," she continued, "for you it will be different but only if you let your heart rule your head. Marcus, believe me. Girls understand these things better than men. And you especially do not understand. Do not confuse sex and love. They are not the same thing. What I offered to you was just sex. It didn't mean anything. Remember John Donne; *love's mysteries in souls do grow*. Our souls Marcus, our souls. Our bodies are just the book, nothing more. Agape, not Eros. Karma, not Kama. She will offer you love and that means everything. You must accept her as she is and do whatever she asks of you. Then you will understand." She took her hands off his shoulders and cupped them on either side of his face, leaned forward and kissed him gently on the lips, then turned, picked up her bag, and walked away rapidly, before he had time to see the tears streaming down her cheeks.

Marcus drove the short distance to his own flat in Plas Rhianda, rapt in contemplation of Caroline's gnomic advice and still savouring his first heady taste of a woman's lips. He didn't bother with an evening meal. Instead he sat quietly in his armchair mulling over the events of the short weekend. His non-existent relationship with Caroline appeared to have come to an end before it had even started, though he could not get the image of that naked golden brown body out of his mind. And every time he thought of it his loins stirred. He realised now that the very fact that he had put her on a pedestal in order to play out some myth of medieval romance was absurd, and a serious defect in his own falsely assumed personality. It was ridiculous to think that she could be perfect. In the end she was just a frail human, but real, just as the world of the car crash had a reality concealed from us by our expectation of how the world should be, rather than how it actually was. *Rolled round in Earth's diurnal course, with*

rocks and stones and trees. Wordsworth's other world with its ambiguities of coexisting life and death came back to him again, together with his confidence in the immortality of the soul. *The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star, hath elsewhere its setting, and cometh from afar.* These thoughts and recollections flowed inexplicably unbidden into Marcus's mind, as though to reassure him that those who had died in the crash were not lost. He shook his head. These were maudlin thoughts and best dismissed. He was also angry with himself for not seeing Caroline as she really was, but what she really was had become a new mystery. His rational mind told him that leopards do not change their spots. But what if the leopard's spots are just a camouflage to deceive more dangerous predators? His whole world, so neat and orderly, had somehow become confused and disjointed. A tide over which he had no control was dragging him from his secure mud berth into the mainstream of a more dangerous life.

Unknown to him the real Caroline was lying in the arms of the Reverend Doctor Williams and sobbing so uncontrollably that her whole beautiful body heaved and shook with grief. Her forbidden lover gently stroked her hair and, in his own fallen way, tried to pray for her, and for himself.

Later Marcus undressed and for a second time lay naked between the comforting flannelette sheets of his bed. He stared at the ceiling, running and rerunning his memory of the crash and of Caroline as though projecting images from his memory onto a blank screen. Each frame, each successive image flashed before him. And the more he watched these lucid and coherent images the more he cowered before their utter lack of human reason and their blind obedience to the utterly rational laws of Newtonian physics. Agape, not Eros? What had Caroline meant?

Marcus went into college on the Monday morning to greet the new term feeling rather less than bright eyed and bushy tailed. There was clearly some delayed shock from the motorway pile up, and Caroline still preyed on his thoughts if not his flesh. As usual there was a heap of mail waiting for him on his desk. He riffled through it very quickly looking for the Cambridge postmark which might bring some news of the progress of his thesis. The next month at St Dynion's would be devoted to undergraduate examinations, marking, and examiners meetings which would absorb most of his time. If the oral came up in the middle of this he might have to ask for it be postponed since the interests of his students would always come before his own ambitions. As usual he was being unnecessarily anxious. The thesis had only just been despatched. The most he could expect from Cambridge was an acknowledgement of receipt. Oxbridge Dons would spend the next month doing exactly the same things that he would be doing. Only after the undergraduates had been hatched, batched and despatched would they get round to dealing with higher degrees. It was unlikely that the thesis had even been forwarded to its examiners, whoever they might be. There were few medievalists in the Cambridge History Faculty at this time who had the necessary specialisms to do the job, apart from Francis Clifford, and his supervisor at Walsingham College, neither of whom could be an examiner for him anyway. And who would the external examiner be? Someone from Oxford, since Cambridge did not acknowledge the credentials of provincial universities, even though they were largely staffed by Oxbridge graduates.

There was no letter from Cambridge. Most of his mail, today, as most days, consisted of publishers' handouts promoting new and forthcoming books, internal college papers, Faculty Minutes and the like. The volume of superfluous paper which crossed his desk was alarming and increasing, but, unlike Owen Seaton, the conscientious Marcus felt obliged to open and read everything that came his way before consigning most of it to the waste bin. In addition to the obvious official mail, which Marcus put aside for consideration in the future, there was one small white envelope with the ostentatiously florid St Dynion's crest embossed on the flap, and two scruffy scraps of folded notepaper hastily addressed to him in a neat and methodical hand. He opened the first note. It was from Jenny Saville.

Called again to see you after lunch but you weren't there. I can't stand this any more. They're all laughing at me. I have to do something. I have to get away. Why weren't you in your room? There was no date on the letter. Marcus flipped open the other scrap of notepaper. This was obviously earlier. *Dear Mr Ross. I called to see you this morning about my exams. I still can't sleep. I'm getting frantic. It's horrible in Hall. I'm frantic. My mind is a complete blank. I can't remember anything. They're all laughing at me. I'll call again after lunch. Please be in to see me then. Jenny.*

Marcus replaced both the notes on the pile of correspondence on his desk and sat back in his chair. He had better contact Jenny as soon as. It was true that he had been in his room only briefly on Friday, and after lunch he had gone to Yorkshire with Caroline. He assumed Jenny's notes were delivered on Friday. But it was the vacation. He had no obligation to be available for students during the vacation, though many final year students stayed up in College to revise for their exams, and because he was usually in his room, or at least somewhere in the College, when other staff had vanished, he didn't mind talking to them. He slit open the flap on the white envelope. It was from James Sinclair, dated Sunday, so it must have been left in his pigeon post, collected by the porters and delivered to his room this morning.

Dear Marcus, for Christ's sake please ring me as soon as you get back. Jenny Saville has killed herself.

Marcus felt his heart freeze. He stared in horror at James's letter. He had last seen Jenny on the previous Wednesday, as arranged. She was still highly agitated. But there had been no swearing and he had thought that she seemed rather better. More in control and growing in confidence. He reached for his phone and dialled James's number. It was early in the morning for most staff but James started work early to avoid the domestic tension in what passed for his home.

"James Sinclair."

"James," Marcus's heart was pounding. "It's Marcus. What's happened?"

"Christ, I'm glad you're back. She jumped off the Tower late on Saturday."

Marcus shuddered . The memory of the motorway crashed flooded back over him. Had it really been only yesterday? It seemed like a lifetime ago, like something unreal, read in a novel or seen in a film.

"Why?" he whispered tremulously, "I saw her last Wednesday. She seemed OK. What happened?"

"Well," James paused, "so far as I can tell, and it's early days, two things. Firstly she had some kind of encounter with Dr Medusa on Friday morning. Can't have been a tutorial because it was the vacation last week. I think Jenny went to see her about a reference she wanted to follow up from one of Medusa's lectures. According to Sophie Davenport Medusa was very rude to her and told her she wouldn't talk to students during the vacation and to come back next week.

Dr Medusa, that dry, shrivelled, undead spinster, bride of unbridled scholarship, who placated her own demons by sacrificing innocent students to them. Dr Medusa, the rigorous super academic, purveyor of boring articles of conspicuous scholarship on the interpretation of obscure points of Stuart constitutional law. Dr Medusa, the scourge of youth and life. Of course, Medusa was not her real name, but it was what she was called behind her back, as students always had cutting nicknames for staff they disliked. Dr Medusa was in reality Dr Dulcima Dowson, which was, if anything, almost as bad as being

called a Gorgon. Marcus had not been at St Dynion's long enough to collect a nickname because students tend to see junior staff as not that much different from themselves, in cultural attitudes, if not in intellect. So, to his face, Marcus was usually addressed as Mr Ross, but in the coffee bars and bedsits where students gossiped about their tutors he was just Marcus Ross, the kind one who was always in his room and always marked their essays and returned them within two days, with copious notes of advice, even if they had been handed in three weeks late.

"That bitch," Marcus snapped, then, curious, "Sophie Davenport? How was Sophie involved?"

"Well, that's the second point. Apparently, after seeing Medusa Jenny went to the Belle Vue. Must have been round about lunchtime. Seaton was there."

Marcus felt his heart sink. Seaton made a point of being especially sarcastic to Marcus's students in the interests, he claimed, of social justice and to redress reactionary influences, but Jenny Saville was one of his own, and was clearly acting on Marcus's advice to find her errant Special Subject tutor.

"Apparently Seaton was the only historian in the bar. She told him that she was worried about her exams and asked him for advice on revision. Seaton said much the same thing as Medusa and then told her that she didn't deserve a degree anyway because her father was a capitalist shop keeper. She had hysterics. There was a real scene. Jenny said she'd had enough of lunatic academics and that she couldn't stand it any more." James paused. "Then Seaton told her that if she didn't like it she could go and jump off the Tower. He even told her how to get there. It seems she left the pub screaming. Seaton thought it was a huge joke. They found her on Saturday, in the evening, about ten thirty."

"That bastard," Marcus shouted, then, quietly, "what about Sophie Davenport?"

"Oh, yes, Sophie. Apparently Sophie was in the Belle Vue and heard it all. When Jenny ran out screaming Sophie ran after her, grabbed her and tried to calm her down. They went to Capones Coffee bar and when Jenny had calmed down she told Sophie about Medusa. When she thought Jenny had got over it she told her to go and see you when you got back because you would be sure to listen. Apparently Jenny couldn't wait."

"And I wasn't there," Marcus felt the tears welling in his eyes and trickling down his cheeks. His voice trembled. "What about that bastard Seaton? What did he say? Doesn't he have a conscience?"

"Only a Social Conscience," said James. "After they left Capones and Jenny went to look for you Sophie went back into the Belle Vue and yelled at Seaton. He told her to fuck off. I met Sophie in the High Street on Saturday afternoon and she was furious. She told me everything that had happened. Then I saw Seaton in the Belle Vue on Sunday and tackled him myself. He just denied that he had said any such thing. Well, he would wouldn't he? I've been trying to

contact Medusa to get her side of the story, but she's disappeared. She usually does at the beginning of term."

"Was she killed instantly?"

"Yeah, I think so. It's a long way down."

"Is there anything I can do?" Marcus said slowly, still fighting back the tears.

"No, not now. They wanted you on Sunday morning to find out where her parents live, but since you weren't around and they couldn't find the History secretary, they had to open up the Academic Office. Mr Sligh was called in specially to open up the files. I understand that he was very angry at being asked to work on Sunday. Chapel, apparently. Her parents are coming up tomorrow to collect her things. The body is in the hospital mortuary. That's about it."

"I feel very guilty," said Marcus despondently.

"Don't be. I'm sure you did everything you could. Nobody could have known that she would kill herself. But these things happen. Think about all those neurotic young men in Cambridge gassing themselves in their rooms. It's just the way things are. Cheer up. How was Yorkshire, and the cool Caroline?"

"Don't even ask. I'll see you soon." Marcus put the phone down. He felt profoundly depressed. He tried to think of Jenny as a real person, calling back into his mind's eye that bedraggled confused persona, her black duffel coat reeking with the stench of rancid chip fat and stale cigarette smoke, her soul paralysed by malign sexual frustration. But however he tried he could not visualise her as alive. She was now nothing more than a fading memory, like the car crash, an aberration without moral force or content. Just another life wasted almost before it had started, tossed aside by the negligent forces of chaos.

Then the analytical mind which had yesterday stood back from that apocalyptic car crash clicked into gear. Whatever James had said Jenny could not have jumped from the Tower. During his first term at St Dynions Marcus had systematically explored the labyrinth of lavatorially tiled corridors and echoing stairwells stacked up in multidimensional layers within the old college building as it sprawled down the side of the valley until it debouched onto a walled terrace overlooking the city cowering beneath it. And at one corner of the monolith was the Tower. Marcus had been curious about the Tower ever since James Sinclair had flippantly suggested that it housed the German scientists captured after the war and brought to St Dynions along with two tons of ersatz acorn coffee unwittingly bought from a black market entrepreneur by a gullible College Bursar. The coffee was still, James asserted, being served in the Senior Common Room which was why he always drank the tea.

Eventually Marcus had found the small smelly lift opposite the gents toilets on the terrace floor and, entering with some trepidation, had been taken as far as the lift could go, mysteriously passing one floor for which there was no corresponding button on the control panel. Marcus had staggered out, almost asphyxiated, into a gloomy, dingy room stacked high with festering books and old examination papers which the College was required to keep for five years

before they could be destroyed. There were windows here, but they were set unreachably high up in the walls and they were small, leaded, encrusted with dirt and obviously unopenable. Nor was it possible to get out onto the crenellated roof of the Tower because the metal hatch which gave access to the roof was securely bolted and locked with a substantial padlock. The architects who had designed the Tower had foreseen that some deranged scholar might use it to escape from the terrors of learning. So even if Jenny had found her way to that room she would not have been able to jump out of it, and all the other rooms in the Tower appeared to be very securely locked. Marcus continued to wonder what mysteries they concealed. The architects of this chaotic building had not, however, considered the long balcony in front of the Professors' rooms on the fifth floor to be a risk to students even though it was easily accessible through a door in the Reading Room, at the opposite end of the Professors' Corridor from the Senior Common Room. That was where Jenny must have jumped from.

Apart from the lift there seemed to be no way out of the room, but on closer inspection he had found a small door with a Yale lock. The latch was on the inside, facing him, and evidently intended to keep people out, a needless precaution since the room was so easily reached by the lift. He had undone the latch and opened the door to reveal a small spiral staircase disappearing downwards into darkness. Rather than brave the ponderous lift Marcus chose the stairs, closing the door behind him before realising that he had just locked himself into a black hole from which there might not be an obvious exit. He felt his way gingerly down the dark stairwell until he fetched up at a door with a Yale catch on the inside. He twisted the catch, pushed the door and stepped out with a gasp of relief into the brightly lit Council Chamber corridor, the domain of the Principal and the College's Governing Body; wide and vaulted, and not lined with green tiles, but with stuccoed walls and a marble floor. Here there were indifferent paintings of slate quarries by a gloomy local artist, stained glass windows, and, at intervals along the corridor, busts of eminent academics, displays of porcelain figurines and china tea sets, delicate crystal vases donated to the College by long dead benefactors, and glass cases enclosing tarnished silver presentation bowls, one of which had acquired a neatly typed card which read *Presented to the Academic Staff of St Dynion's University College for their Outstanding Record of Ignorance and Incompetence*. The card was yellowed with age and had clearly never been noticed by the ignorant and incompetent people who ran the College or by the Principal, whose office door was directly opposite. Marcus had never found out what was really in the rest of the locked rooms in the mysterious Tower.

He shivered, as though the departing soul of Jenny Saville had briefly intersected with his own suppressed anxieties. He expected life to be calm, rational and essentially uneventful but the crack which the crash on the motorway had sprung in the ivory tower of his mind had widened perceptibly.

For an instant he stood outside himself and saw himself not as an ivory tower but as a massive granite building stuffed full of musty, mouldy papers and thick choking dust. A distant weeping voice whispered *end it now*. *They're laughing at you.* Then the vision vanished.

He sighed and settled down to more checking of his thesis, memorising everything which might prove to be controversial in the oral examination. He laid out the relevant papers and notes carefully, neatly organising his pens and pencils, and set about his task with as much enthusiasm as he could muster. He sifted through his work, page by page and footnote by footnote. He discovered small errors which he annotated in pencil or amended as necessary, and began to construct a card index of key points on which he might be probed by the examiners. At lunchtime he met James in the cafeteria in the Students' Union and had a dismal discussion with him about Jenny's death at which James acknowledged that he had assumed that Jenny had jumped from the Tower because that was what Seaton had told her to do. Perhaps Seaton had known that she would not be able to jump from the Tower but had not expected her to find somewhere else to jump from. And he asked James again what was kept in the locked room which did not have a button on the lift control panel. James pulled a face, then grinned.

"That's where the secret files are kept," he said, archly.

"I though it might be dead Germans," Marcus laughed.

"Oh, no," James chuckled, "that was just a joke."

After lunch Marcus returned again to his room. He could have worked at home, since he had no teaching scheduled until the Special Subject revision seminar on Thursday morning, but he preferred the room, nasty as it was, because most of his working books were here and all his research notes, and it was relatively easy to get to the library if he needed anything else. Also he considered it very necessary in the run up to exams to be as accessible as possible to students who might need support or advice. After the events of the past weekend this altruistic impulse was even stronger than it had been before, to the extent that he had put up a notice on his door saying that he was available for consultation at any time, and making available his telephone number at Rhianda. Students came and went, but about four o'clock there was a familiar peel of tiny bells coming down the corridor followed by a discreet knock on his door.

"Come in Sophie," said Marcus.

Sophie Davenport came into his room and Marcus's heart beat faster. Sophie was her usual casually fashionable self, this time in deep purple crushed velvet flairs which gripped tightly round her tiny bottom and slender thighs. The row of small bells, sewn into the seams of her jeans, just above her ankles, jingled as she walked. Marcus knew these bells so well. And above the trousers she was wearing a white blouse with big puffy sleeves, knotted together just below those splendid breasts to reveal her bare and sunburnt midriff and seductive cleavage,

and, above that, a wide, deep purple velvet choker. Marcus gestured to her to sit down and she slid gracefully into the armchair. Marcus came round from behind his desk and sat across the room from her on one of the hard plastic chairs.

"I just came to let you know that I've handed in my dissertation. And to thank you for all the help you gave me with it."

Marcus nodded. The dissertation was not for him. Sophie had unwisely chosen to do a dissertation on Kerensky for Owen Seaton, but Seaton could never be found, except when he held court in the Belle Vue, so Sophie had worked on the dissertation virtually unsupervised until Marcus found out. He knew enough about modern history to give her some pointers, and had helped her with the proper notation for academic footnotes and the technicalities of dissertation presentation with which he was all too immediately familiar from his own thesis.

"Well done," he said, "that must be a relief."

Sophie nodded back at him, dark hair cascading over her forehead.

"I wish I hadn't done it now," she said, "but the Russian Revolution topic course I did with him in my second year was really interesting. He may be a bastard but he can be a very stimulating lecturer when he bothers to turn up. And technically he is my Moral Tutor, though I've never actually seen him in that capacity. Anyway I haven't put all my eggs in one basket. I've tried to do a bit from each period, you know, a little bit of Tudor, a little bit of Modern, and a lot of Medieval." She smiled, "but the Medieval has been the best." She wriggled a little in the chair, making the bells jingle, and sighed, then.

"You're sad," she said. Her voice was soft and gentle, but slightly clipped with a Joan Greenwood or Fenella Fielding huskiness. She spoke standard received English, without any obvious accent but there was an old fashioned precision of diction which betrayed a personality which was not merely girlie. The almost classical Mediterranean face, already surprisingly sunburnt at the beginning of summer, was not quite as delicate as it seemed at first sight. Those huge brown eyes were sharp, not languid, the nose was small and straight, but the voluptuous mouth was set in a firm jaw. In his mind's eye Marcus recalled those point to point county girls at home in Yorkshire, with their tight bottomed jodhpurs, sexy hacking jackets and velvet riding hats, driving their ponies over impossible jumps with unflinching determination and complete absence of fear. Sophie was out of the same stable, but subtly different.

"Why are you so sad? Is it because of Jenny Saville?"

"I didn't know that you were friendly with Jenny," he said.

"I wasn't friendly with her. I knew her. Everyone knew her. How could one not notice someone who smelled like a bag lady? And she was in my second year Tudor history with Medusa." Sophie paused and put her hand to her mouth, "Oops, sorry. I mean Dr Dowson. That bastard Seaton was utterly beastly to her. She needed help. That's all."

"I heard about that from James Sinclair. That was very kind of you. I'm

upset I suppose, because I was not here when she needed me. Perhaps if…"

Suddenly Sophie was not in the armchair but standing beside him cradling his head against her breasts. "Don't.…" she paused, "don't be sad. There was nothing you could have done. I went to see her on Saturday in that dreadful hall. She was just sitting on the edge of her bed with her arms clasped round her knees, rocking backwards and forwards and moaning. She wouldn't listen to me. Wouldn't even acknowledge that I was there." She relaxed her grip on his head. The brief contact with his flesh had told her all that she needed to know. "I'm sorry," she said, returning to her chair, "I shouldn't have done that."

"No, no," Marcus tried to stop his heart racing. He desperately wanted Sophie to go on hugging him. All the pain and anxiety had suddenly drained away. He felt very safe with Sophie and wanted always to be with her, as a child longs for its forgotten mother.

"Anyway," Sophie continued, "I didn't give up. I went to see the Warden of University Hall. But she's just like Medusa. Hard faced bitch. I told her what was happening to Jenny. I know what this rocking thing means. She really was disturbed. She needed psychiatric help. Dr Speight just said girls are like that around exam times. She was more worried about some girl who'd gone into the linen room and slashed her arms with a kitchen knife and put blood all over the fresh linen. She was very annoyed and wouldn't even bother to go and see Jenny. I couldn't get through to her." She paused again, and this time Marcus detected the quaver in the voice and the tears forming in her gorgeous eyes. "I didn't know what else I could do. I couldn't get through to her. She blocked me out," she said forlornly. "I'm sorry," she whispered, "I didn't mean to hug you. Please forgive me, you just looked so sad."

"I forgive you." Marcus more than forgave her and wished recklessly that it would happen again. "You did far more than could be expected of you. After all, you have your own examinations to worry about."

"Oh," said Sophie cheerfully, "I'm not worried about my examinations. I've worked hard, and played hard and I've enjoyed myself. And I'm bright enough to get an upper second. Exams don't worry me. I've always come out OK. Not brilliant, but OK. That's all I need. Well, actually, I don't even need a degree for what I'm going to do with my life. I just came here to grow up, and to learn about …" She paused again, then abandoned what she was about to say. "I wanted to ask you about something else. I know that you're not my Moral Tutor, but I wouldn't dream of talking to Dr Seaton about this, even assuming he would listen to me. You don't have to listen if you don't want to. It's very personal and it's not very moral."

Marcus folded his hands in his lap. For some inexplicable reason his heart was racing again. "Go ahead," he said apprehensively.

Sophie composed herself, tossed her head to clear the dark waves of hair which had once again drifted across her eyes and re-crossed her legs, causing the bells to jingle again.

"It's about my boyfriends."

Marcus's heart sank. James had been wrong. There really was a boyfriend. She was not available. Was she playing games with him? Like Caroline? Who had Caroline meant, if not Sophie? But how could Caroline know about Sophie? Not a boyfriend. Boyfriends. What did she mean? It was hard enough trying to come to terms with this mystical attraction he felt for her. It was not just that she was so beautiful, bright and sexy; there was something else. He felt dimly that star crossed energy which brings lovers together for reasons which they rarely understand. Well maybe it was better if she was not available. She was very sexy, and clearly very experienced. A girl who happily appeared naked before an audience in a student play? How many boyfriends could she have had? What would she think when she discovered that he was still a virgin? How could he hope to keep up with her? Better just to be her friend. He nodded solemnly to her to continue.

Sophie read the disappointment in Marcus's open face and, seeing it, was both reassured and warned off what she had been about to say. *He's like an open book,* she thought sympathetically. *Just turn the pages and you can read everything. I don't even need to look into his mind.* "Well, perhaps……" she paused again, "perhaps it doesn't matter." A wave of melancholy swept over her. Why was it so difficult with him, when it had been so easy with others?

Marcus felt the despair sleeting through his newly opened heart and because he could not explain it he slammed the doors shut again. Sophie sensed the almost imperceptible change in his feelings. She looked down at her knees. Marcus was astonished to see that tears were streaming silently down her cheeks and dripping onto her blouse. He could not understand what was happening. Why was it that girls would suddenly burst into tears for no apparent reason?

"Do you love him?" he asked tentatively. Sophie flinched inwardly at the coldness in his voice.

"No, of course not. It's just sex, you know. We just do it for fun." Marcus had heard this before, from Caroline, only three days ago. It was as though he was trapped in a time loop. Sophie continued. "Like those special King Kong parties that Drew has. They're great, and you learn so much. But…..it's just sex," Sophie paused, perhaps she should try again. "I do love someone, really, really love someone....but he's....he's….unavailable. He doesn't see me. And I don't know how to tell him. I don't know what to do."

Marcus ignored the obvious and focussed on the rational. "But if you are just making love for fun…," he hoped that no one was listening in the corridor outside his room. He corrected himself. "I mean, is it right just to have sex for fun, without any commitment? How will you know when you really do love someone?"

"Because," Sophie's voice was almost a whisper, "it's just kind of exercise sex. A rational thing. It's like going to the gym. You feel better after it and through practice you learn how to do it better. It's like the College. You expect

to graduate from it and real life will be different. These are the days of wine and roses. *Gaudeamus* and all that. We do it because we're young, and we're here, and we have the pill and we can, and because most of our generation can't, because they're at home with mum and dad and working in Woolies. But I know that in the end it's just taking, not giving. I am just taking my pleasure from them. Using them as they are using me. But I don't love them, I don't even have to know them very well. Love is different. Love is in the soul. It's not a rational thing. A relationship based just on sex would never last because once the first fires of lust have gone out then there's often nothing left. Love is what is left when all the illusions we have about each other are stripped away and our souls stand naked in front of each other, yet we still choose to stay together. I believe that there are people who are destined for each other. However different they might be on the outside, they are the same on the inside, two sides of the same coin. I know that I will always want to be with the person that I love. What makes him happy will make me happy. What makes him sad will make me sad. And I will always forgive him, and he will always forgive me. And when I make love to him it will be with my heart and my soul and my body. I will give myself to him, and he to me. And everything....," she smiled her beautiful warm smile, adorable little vertically dimpled creases forming at the corners of her mouth, "and everything will be….." Her voice trailed away at the end with a hint of sadness, as though she also knew in her heart that it was an impossible dream. The tears continued to roll silently downwards, but there was no snivelling or sobbing, just tears.

Marcus had heard most of this before too, and recognised her paraphrase of the Prophet Mohammed's description of his love for Fatima, which was, he agreed, probably the most succinct definition of love available to man. Where had she got that from? The Persian girl, Jaz, maybe? Sophie had not really answered his question, perhaps because there was no intelligible answer to it. He didn't really believe in this *Mills and Boon* stuff about the mystical union of two souls. The rational part of his mind tended to think that it was more likely to be a mutual compatibility of pheromones and brain chemistry, but the outcome was the same, whatever the cause, and he could not deny this strange feeling that he had always known Sophie and was inexorably drawn to her. Yet, in this world, he hardly knew her, and did not recognise that he had any feelings towards her, either of courtly love, or any other kind of love. What she had said about her sex life seemed to make Caroline's behaviour more intelligible. She and Sophie were products of the same culture, but Sophie's view of it was much more… romantic. Perhaps just as unachievable as his own blinkered pursuit of chaste courtly love, but something to aim for, anyway. Was this just how young women behaved now? Liberated, and free to take men casually, and without commitment, as men had always taken women casually, until they met that special one, if they ever did? Why not? Sophie was right. Hers was a unique generation which had the power and the freedom to do these things, but only for

those few youthful years, when anything was possible, and only for a tiny minority of the tiny minority of those who enjoyed the freedoms of a university or the license of wealth. After that would come work, marriage, domesticity, and..... pain.

Sophie had produced a handkerchief and was drying her eyes. There was no streaky mascara, indeed there was no makeup at all. Her skin was flawless, naturally slightly dark, and painlessly sunburnt.

Marcus did not know what to say or do, but Sophie had already read his mind and was ahead of him.

"Why were you crying?" Marcus asked, "is there anything I can do?"

"It's just…. something. It's OK….. it's OK. It can wait," she said in her gentle but decisive voice, "I can handle it. You should not feel guilty about Jenny. It was her Karma. That's all. I have my own Karma, and I was crying for that. I just have to wait. It's hard sometimes." She stood up and prepared to leave. The little bells at her ankles jingled cheerfully. Marcus stood up as well and crossed the room to open the door for her. Sophie brushed past him, allowing the gentle weight of her breast to press against his arm. She kissed him lightly on the cheek, and was gone. He listened, agonised, as her purposeful jingling footsteps receded down the long corridor of the hut. Then he went back to his books, but part of his concentration was lost forever.

The next day, Tuesday, two days after the car crash, Jenny Saville's parents turned up in Marcus's room. They were not what he had expected. The mother, in her forties, was pretty, and smartly dressed in an expensive black suit, with a white blouse and pearls. The father was big man, florid, and pudding faced, like Jenny, but also impeccably dressed in a dark suit and black tie. They shook hands. The father looked round the room with a slight air of distaste. Marcus was not what he had expected either.

"I thought," he said with a noticeable Lancashire accent, "that Dons all had nice oak panelled rooms with leather armchairs and so on." He smiled at Marcus in a rather pitying way. Marcus could think of places that had Dons and rooms like those described by Mr Saville. But here only the Principal had a room comparable with the average tutor's room in an old Oxbridge College. The nearest approximation after that would be the rooms on the Professor's corridor, but even his own undergraduate room at Gallus had been grander than them. This room in the hut was in another, and altogether more banal, universe.

"We, er..," Mrs Saville struggled for words and fought back tears, "we just wanted to thank you for everything you did for Jenny. She did tell us how kind you had been to her….and… we're very grateful."

"I wish," said Marcus, then started to regret what he was about to say, and changed tack, "I wish I could have been more helpful to her."

"I'm sure you did your best," said Mr Saville, in a slightly unconvinced voice. "I don't understand what happened to her when she came here. She was

a lovely child. Never any trouble. And then she came here and she changed completely. She didn't have to come here you know. She could have worked for me and wanted for nothing."

"Dad," said Mrs Saville quietly, taking his hand and squeezing it. "I'm sure Professor Ross was not to blame. It was Jenny. Jenny was ill."

"I'm only a mister," said Marcus, "just a junior lecturer. You know, young people change when they get away from the certainties of home. Sometimes they create a new identity for themselves and sometimes the identity they choose is not very attractive."

"Why did she always look like a tramp?" the father asked. "Every month I paid a lot of money into her account. She never took it out. She could have had clothes, a car, anything. I'm a millionaire for Christ's sake. I've worked bloody hard to get there. And all for her. For my family. What could she want for? She had this stupid idea that there was something virtuous about poverty and degradation. If she'd wanted that she should have become a nun. At least she'd have done some good in the world."

"I think," Marcus proceeded cautiously, "I think she wanted to prove that she could succeed without help from you. And she did have some odd notion about poverty being a challenge." He did not dare to say anything about Jenny's evident sexual and intellectual frustration. Here was somebody who had been torn apart by the conflict between the flesh and spirit. Maybe making herself as unattractive as possible was Jenny's way of insulating herself from the flagrant sexual circus that surrounded her, as Marcus had defended himself from the same fears with the cold armour of reason.

"Well, maybe, but that's no excuse for debasing herself the way she did. I'm grateful to you, because I think you did try to help her. But, no disrespect, she should have had someone older, more experienced. A woman tutor, maybe. Someone here is to blame. If one of my employees is injured because I've been negligent I can end up in court. And I've been there, I can tell you, I've been there. So I am going to make a formal complaint to the Principal about this." His voice was harsh now and quivering, not with rage, but because he was fighting back tears. "Do you know that the Warden of the Hall she lived in told me, told me," Mr Saville was not used to being told, "told me that I had to get her stuff out of her room by the end of the week. I ask you. What kind of person is that?" Marcus knew only too well what kind of person that was.

He is a decent man, Marcus thought. It was Jenny who had let him down by turning against him. Marcus had lost his parents when he was ten and had never gone through a period of adolescent rebellion because he had no one to rebel against. His parents were gone and could not be blamed for anything, except for being dead, and his uncle had looked after him in an austere but careful way, which did not invite adolescent tantrums. He had always felt immensely grateful to his uncle. Why didn't Jenny feel grateful? How many girls at St Dynion's had millionaires for fathers? What had turned her against the world? Then he

thought of Caroline and Sophie and all the other sleek and glossy girls who probably also had rich parents and who knew how to grip life by the horns and dance nonchalantly over its bucking back, always landing on their feet. How difficult it would be for an ugly duckling like Jenny to live amongst such people. Jenny's father was right. She should have stayed at home and gone into his business. She would have had money, and status, and executive power, and people would have respected her, and someone would have loved her and married her, probably for all the wrong reasons. Then again, there were many poor girls, plain girls, fat girls, thin girls, ugly girls, who got on alright in the College. Had boyfriends. Got screwed. Went to parties and danced all night, and came out of the academic sausage machine more or less undamaged, and usually enhanced by life, if not by learning. In the end it was a matter of personality. Looks are not everything. Out of the corner of his eye Marcus saw Mrs Saville squeeze her husband's hand again. Mr Saville had loved his daughter, doted on her. He was not the ogre Jenny had portrayed to Marcus. He shook his head.

"I'm so sorry," he said, "I don't know what to say to you. We are all very upset about Jenny." He felt the tears well up again in his own eyes. Not for Jenny, but for this sad bewildered couple, who had everything they wanted and had lost everything they loved. They all stood up. There was nothing more to say. It was time to go. Mr Saville unexpectedly threw his arms round Marcus and hugged him, gently patting his back as though he was a baby. Marcus tentatively reciprocated, then drew away, to shake hands with Mrs Saville. Then they were gone, leaving his life as abruptly as they had entered it.

Riotous Assemblies

The exams began three weeks later, starting with the degree examinations, some of which were also taken by second year students as a kind of dummy run, and ending with the first year papers, which no one seemed to take very seriously. Marcus was not immediately involved in examining because the history papers were scattered over the whole exam timetable and his four major papers were not scheduled until well into the programme. During this period of grace he continued to pick at his thesis, although he had by now detected all of the very few minor typographic errors, which were unlikely to be a significant factor in the examination anyway.

Once the history examining actually started all thoughts of the thesis were temporarily shelved. Undergraduate examinations had to be marked at great speed and then despatched to the external examiners in other universities for second marking. In addition to marking he was also required to invigilate the exams themselves, usually in the Beverley Roberts Hall, and this was the most boring of all the duties expected of him. It meant three hours on his feet, aimlessly patrolling the aisles of sweating examinees, handing out extra paper, administering sympathy, and trying to prevent cheating. In theory conventional cheating was not really feasible, since the exams were supposed to reveal qualities of perception and originality rather than the kind of mere factual knowledge which could be scribbled on the cuff or concealed in the toilets adjacent to the hall. But in practice many examiners preferred candidates to regurgitate catalogues of facts since errors and omissions of fact were easier to detect than evidence of fine judgment or originality. Thus many students cheated themselves by swotting up a multitude of facts, without really understanding what they meant, and were in turn cheated by examiners who never bothered to explain to the students what was actually expected of them, and then penalised them for not doing it.

Invigilation, then, was generally a bore, but it did have its compensations, or so James Sinclair thought. For example one could always curl up inside one's mind and think deep thoughts about impossible plots whilst pacing the exam room floor. And there were other distractions, like the girls who became so absorbed in their exams that they witlessly unbuttoned their blouses, or hitched up their skirts over their thighs. Legends abounded, not just in St Dynion's, about the mythical girl who stripped naked during a biology examination, watched by breathless young invigilators who forbore to awake her from her intense concentration on the mysteries of the organism. Marcus's chief memory of invigilation, however, came from his own undergraduate days when one of his friends had been so shocked by the ferocity of an examination paper that he had gone into a cataleptic fit, gripping the seat of his chair and locking his legs round the chair legs with such force that he had to be carried out of the exam room, chair and all, never to be seen again.

Marcus completed two invigilations without incident, not even a blouse button loosened to temper the boredom. His final invigilation was for the second of his two Special Subject papers on the Origins of the English Parliament which would be the last of the exclusively final year examinations. He set off for this event at about 1.30, having first gone to the Senior Common Room for what passed for a lunch in that culinary desert. He followed his usual route along the gloomy Professors' Corridor and then through those two sets of double doors which led to the Council Chamber corridor, with its marbled floors and antique busts and cups. The doors to the corridor were closed and as he looked through the circular window he could see that the corridor was filled with students who were mostly sitting silently on the floor outside the Council Chamber itself. Many were holding up banners with messages in Welsh which he did not understand. Two male students with agricultural physiques and very large moustaches, were standing just inside the door, and when Marcus tried to open it they refused to let him in. One of the students opened the door a little and said something to him in Welsh. Marcus shook his head. In the distance he could hear a hubbub echoing round the grand flight of stairs at the other end of the corridor, which would have taken him down to the ground floor and the doors leading into the Foyer of BR Hall. The noise was puzzling, because the Welsh student demonstrators were very quiet, and looked a little apprehensive.

"What's happening?" he asked.

"Saes bastard," said the student, who was too big to argue with. A girl, who Marcus recognised as a second year Welsh History student, got up from the floor and came to the door.

"Mr Ross," she said more sympathetically, "sorry about this. Ignore him. He's a yokel from Ysbyty Ifan. We're holding a demonstration for a Welsh Medium Hall of Residence, and, if you don't mind, it would better if you went by the other stairs."

"And fucking well go back to England, mochyn saes" said the agricultural student. Marcus shrugged. It was no big deal. Students demonstrations were an everyday occurrence, really, a bit like strikes, and an accepted part of traditional student life. By the normal standards of the Language Society, this appeared to be pretty peaceable. He retraced his steps slightly, went down two flights of stairs and, after carefully negotiating the randomly locked double doors, entered the ground floor corridor exactly below the Council Chamber corridor, which was the main thoroughfare into the Old Building, and would take him directly into the Foyer of the BR Hall, where the examination papers would be set out for the students to pick up on their way into the examination room. As he turned into the corridor Marcus ran into the babble of students waiting to be allowed into the exams. The babble was, in fact, a full scale uproar. The corridor was packed with students clutching pencil cases, rulers, bottles of ink, packets of Polo Mints, Rowntrees fruit gums and Mars Bars to sustain themselves through the coming ordeal. They were also clutching the little blue slips which would

be collected by the presiding clerks who would count them to make sure everyone was there who was supposed to be there. Marcus glanced at his watch. It was 1.45. The students would be allowed in at 1.55. At the opposite end of the corridor he could see, over the heads of the students, another set of double doors which would be locked and guarded by porters until the moment that the students were allowed in. Then they would file in to collect their papers from the trestle tables in the Foyer and make their way into the BR Hall, handing their exam slips to the clerks stationed on either side of the only unlocked doors into the Hall. Marcus could see the face of a porter peering through the circular windows in the doors at the students milling about in the corridor, some of whom were yelling abuse at group of eight figures wearing ex German army Parka jackets and khaki balaclava helmets pulled down over their faces who were blockading the doors into the exam room. He found his own group of six Special Subject students clustered together in one of the shallow alcoves formed by the windows which looked out of the corridor onto the terraced inner quadrangle. Sophie was amongst them.

"What's going on?" he asked. Three of the students spoke at once, then stopped and looked at Sophie who was evidently given priority in speaking to Marcus.

"They're not going to let us into the exam room," she said sharply, then, "we can do without this crap."

Marcus was surprised by her vehemence. There was real anger here, which he had not seen before.

"They're saying that the Students Union has organised a boycott of exams," Sophie continued, "talk to them please Marcus. I've worked hard. I don't want to lose my degree because of these baboons." She had always called him Mr Ross. This was the first time that she had ever called him by his Christian name.

"We never went to Union meetings," said one of the other students. Marcus noticed that they had been joined by Drew Parkin, who had suddenly and unnecessarily appeared, since he was not taking an exam today, and was standing next to Sophie. He took her hand and squeezed it, then released it. Sophie turned to him and smiled, then turned back to Marcus. Marcus's heart flipped a beat. Was Parkin the unrequited love? Where was Jaz, the Persian girlfriend? Drew nodded at him but said nothing. "They said they wouldn't interfere with exams," the student continued, "so we didn't go to the meetings. Apparently they had a snap meeting without warning late last night, talked it out for five hours, then took a vote at three o'clock this morning when everyone else had left. You know, they voted out the quorum rules, so it's just those bastards from Soc. Soc. And now they're here."

"You're sure it's not just a demonstration," Marcus asked, trying to reassure them, "and they'll let you in when the clock goes."

"Oh, no," Sophie growled, "It's a picket line. They're not going to let us in. Please talk to them Marcus, maybe they'll listen to you." Parkin nodded in agreement, but still said nothing.

"What are they demonstrating for?" Marcus could see a banner draped over the door which read ***Smash Academic Gerontocracy.*** "Is that what it's about? That's not something that can be resolved without sacking three quarters of the academic staff!"

"No," Parkin spoke for the first time, "They want to know where the Secret Files are."

"Ah, Secret Files. God's gift to lunatics." Marcus sighed, frowned and gave a Gallic shrug of exasperation. He pushed his way through the examinees towards the anonymous khaki phalanx in front of the doors. The students at the front of the queue were yelling at the Soc. Soc. demonstrators. This was the noise that Marcus had heard whilst talking to the Welsh students in the Council Chamber Corridor above. Two separate demonstrations in the same place at the same time? Sooner or later they were bound to come to blows. Marcus pushed through the front row of students and confronted the demonstrators. He could clearly see the porters on the other side of the doors, and the tables neatly laid out with the exam papers. The porters were waiting for the signal to open the doors from the assistant registrar in charge of the exams who was standing with his clerks beside one of the pillars in the foyer.

"Let me through," Marcus said quietly, to whoever was going to listen.

"Fuck off, Ross, capitalist pig," The voice was vaguely familiar, but the identity was concealed behind the all enveloping Balaclava.

"You're the second person to say that to me in the last five minutes. Be reasonable. These students have worked hard for their exams. They have the right to take them in peace."

"Fuck off. They're just bourgeois lackeys. And fuckin reason is the instrument of bourgeois oppression. We won't be free until we are freed from the bonds of reason," the balaclava paused, "and anyway, we decide who has rights. Power to the People." He shouted the last two words as though invoking divine approbation.

"I see," said Marcus, surprised at his own composure, "this is scientific socialism in action."

"Yeah, that's it,"

"Well, I'm a fully paid up running dog so let me through please."

Much to his surprise the balaclava clad thug stepped back and allowed Marcus to cross the line. The porters opened the door for him and he stepped into the comparative calm of the Foyer. Jack Fairford, the assistant registrar, greeted Marcus like a long lost brother. Fairford was a decent man, a product of Rydal, and a St Dynion's history graduate. Marcus met him from time to time in the Victoria Arms in Porthaethwy which was Fairford's local, and they would sit and gossip about the way the College was run now, and what it had

been like in the fifties, when Fairford had been a student there under the benignly authoritarian regime of Professor Todd. It was Fairford who had first alerted Marcus to the mysterious Crachach, which dominated the College Council, and through it imposed its subtle will on the Professors who thought they ruled the Senate.

"Marcus, " he said, "this is a disaster. What are we going to do?"

Marcus looked around the Foyer. The three sets of double doors which led out of the Foyer onto the steps in the new quadrangle outside were firmly locked and the trestle tables, on which the waiting exam papers were laid out, were lined up in front of them. Through the circular windows he could see Soc.Soc. pickets linking arms across the steps outside. More khaki clad figures were walking in circles around the quadrangle waving banners demanding the release of the secret files. Behind him was the entrance to BR Hall, where the desks were set out in neat rows awaiting their victims. An idea occurred to him.

"What about the Welsh students outside the Council Chamber?" he asked.

"They've been there since nine o'clock. They've got a Senate finance committee trapped in the Chamber." Fairford pulled a face. "But so far they have been very well behaved. They're just sitting there and occasionally singing hymns in Welsh."

Marcus looked around the Foyer again. He was suddenly aware that there were no other academics here, only Fairford, the two female clerks standing by the entrance to the exam hall, and the porters guarding the communicating doors on either side of the foyer.

"Who's the senior invigilator?" he asked.

Fairford pulled another face. "Owen Seaton. But there's no sign of him. Surprise, surprise. Parker from Chemistry turned up but he wouldn't cross the Soc.Soc. picket line and went away as soon as they swore at him."

"Listen," said Marcus, looking at his watch. Time was ticking down, they should be in by now. "Listen, I think I can get the students into the exam room. Once they're in, lock all the doors and don't let anyone else in unless they've got a blue slip. You know as well as I do that if we have to call off this exam we will have to go through the whole palaver of resetting new papers. It's not fair on the students."

"What are you going to do?" asked Fairford.

"You don't want to know," said Marcus. Just make sure that the examinees are locked in once they're all in BR." Fairford nodded.

Marcus went back to the porters and the double doors on the other side of which the khaki communists were still posturing.

"If I can get them to go away," he said to the senior porter, "open these doors, let the examinees in, and then lock the doors behind them. We're already five minutes over time, so any stragglers should have arrived by now. It's going to be a mad dash. Now, let me back out again."

The porter opened the door and Marcus rejoined the confrontation in the corridor. A Balaclava looked at him suspiciously. Marcus was not quite sure whether it was the one he had spoken to earlier. They all looked the same.

"I thought you were supposed to fuck off," the faceless one threatened. The voice sounded slightly different, coarser, and with a faint Birmingham or Black Country accent. Marcus did not recognise it.

"I've got some information for you," Marcus spoke quietly. "I know where the secret files are." It was impossible to tell what was going on behind the mask, but the body language changed from hostility to interest. The demonstrator standing next to the Brummy looked intently at Marcus through the slits in his balaclava, but said nothing.

"Tell me more," the Brummy voice continued.

"There are two locked rooms in the Tower. In order to get to them you will have to go up these stair," he gestured at the broad baronial staircase on his right which led up to the Council Chamber corridor. "Then at the other end of the corridor there's an oak panelled door next to the lift. That's the way in. Both rooms are locked, but you can get to the top one via the lift." Marcus omitted to mention that there were similar access doors on the ground floor, and the Brummy did not make the connection for himself.

"There are fucking Welos up there," the Brummy balaclava grunted, "they want their own fucking ghetto, and fucking courses in Welsh. Fucking racists."

"It's their country," said Marcus, ever the tolerant Englishman. Balaclava turned to his colleague.

"Did you fucking hear that?" he said. The khaki puffballs nodded less than enthusiastically. "Go and get the comrades from outside. Get some sticks and jemmies from my van."

Another comrade looked for a way to the outside of the building, but they were all barred except for the corridor full of outraged students. "Fucking go," said the proto commissar. The foot soldier reluctantly pushed his way through the mob in the corridor.

"Now," said Marcus, "let these people into their exams."

To his amazement the balaclavas stepped back. Marcus gestured to the porters to open the doors and the students in the corridor surged forwards. He sensed Sophie as she brushed past him with the rest of students, then they were all in the foyer collecting their papers and filing into the exam hall, handing in their blue attendance slips to the clerks on the door. The corridor was empty, except for Parkin, and the Soc.Soc. demonstrators standing beside Marcus and looking up at the staircase towards the Council Chamber. In the sudden silence left by the departed examinees Marcus heard the singular harmony and sublime beauty of the Welsh lullaby Suo Gân, wafting down from the students singing in the corridor above. Marcus suddenly had a pang of regret. He did not wish the Welsh students ill, though their attacks on the library evoked no sympathy amongst those who loved learning. But they at least had an understanding of

what they were demonstrating for, which was more than could be said of the Soc. Soc members who were merely sociopaths in search of any convenient excuse for violence. What might happen next could be very ugly. Parkin looked towards Marcus, and their eyes met. He too had heard the ethereal music and knew what was coming. He raised his right hand in a salute, then turned on his heel, walked down the corridor, and disappeared through the short passageway into the New Quadrangle. As he rounded the corner a khaki horde swept past him and marched menacingly towards their colleagues standing beside Marcus. Marcus stepped back sharply through the doors and the porters locked them behind him.

Inside the BR Hall the last of the students were taking their places at their desks. Today's examinees were all third year history students, and this was their very last examination. In total there were about sixty of them, the whole of this history final year, and though they had seemed like a multitude in the corridor, now that they were dispersed in this great hall they appeared to be very few. Marcus looked for Sophie and eventually saw her sitting near the back. All of them were looking intently at their exam papers and waiting for the signal to start. Marcus spoke briefly to Jack Fairford who agreed to stay on to help invigilate and authorised Marcus to extend the exam to compensate for starting late. Marcus stood on the stage, waited till the clocks in the Hall showed 2.15, and then projected his lecturing voice.

"You may start the examination now. Because of the delay in starting, the examination will end at 5.30. We will give you fifteen minutes of extra time to compensate for the disturbance." He was supposed to announce it in Welsh as well, but the rubric on the crib sheet conveniently provided for English only invigilators did not include the right Welsh phrases for this contingency. The exam settled into sepulchral silence, punctuated only by the rustle of Polo mints being unwrapped, and the occasional cough. About five minutes after the exam started there was a distant sound of shouting and breaking glass. The examinees looked up briefly, then returned to their papers. Ten minutes later police sirens ululated down College Road and swept through the pilaster columns under the New Arts building into the new quadrangle, closely followed by the sound of an ambulance bell. There was more distant shouting. The examinees ignored it.

As Marcus had turned his back on the demonstrators in the lower corridor Owen the Drwg Seaton squinted out of his balaclava mask and looked at Lindsey Patterson. Ross was smarter and cooler than the Drwg had thought and it was unfortunate that Patterson had spoken to him first because Patterson was stupid enough to believe that there really were secret files and violent enough to go looking for them. What had seemed like an interesting, if anonymous, afternoon supporting his student comrades had now taken a potentially dangerous turn. He considered suggesting caution to Patterson, but then thought better of it. This could be a welcome opportunity to thump someone, and anyway he had no love for the young Welsh nationalists who he considered to

be little better than a Welsh version of the Hitler Youth. He followed Patterson up the baronial staircase and as they turned right at the top it was obvious that the Soc.Soc. troops would not be allowed to get to the other end of the corridor without a fight. The Language Society demonstrators were on their feet, with their placards lowered so that the poles to which they were pinned pointed outwards like lances. Owen watched as Patterson pulled a bicycle chain out of the deep pocket in his Parka. The fingers on both of his hands were loaded with thick chunky rings, not, Owen knew, for decoration but as knuckle dusters. Patterson had come prepared. And so had his friends. Baseball bats and short staves of two by two were retrieved from trouser legs. Knuckle dusters and coshes were deployed with relish. The two sides taunted each other briefly, yelling oaths in Welsh and English. Then they were at each other's throats. Within seconds the Council Corridor was a pandemonic shambles. The pillars supporting the busts of eminent academics went flying and bronze heads rolled down the marble floors, to be picked up and hurled at the enemy. The head of Sir Iolo ap Dafydd *BA., MA., M.Litt., D.Phil., D.Litt., F.R.A.I., F.R.G.S., R.S.S.,* Emeritus Professor of Anthropology at the University of Oxford, donated to St Dynion's by his widow in 1895 because she thought a bit of him should be in the Wales that he had left at the age of seventeen, never to return, bounced off the balaclava wrapped skull of the scrofulous Bill Farquar, and catapulted through a stained glass window into the quadrangle gardens outside, leaving Farquar scratching his bloody balaclava and wondering why the lights were going out. There were a lot of girls amongst the Welsh students some of whom were knocked down and trampled under foot, whilst others tore screaming into the invading barbarians. Seaton saw Patterson sink a ringed fist into the face of a small and pretty girl, who screamed, then clutched at her cheek which was ripped open and pouring blood. She would be scarred for the rest of her life. A giant Welsh boy, bearded and whiskered like a Walrus grabbed a Soc.Soc. soldier in a neck lock and hurled him across the corridor into a glass cabinet which shattered, discharging a silver salver onto the floor where it was picked up by a girl and bashed over another balaclava'd head. Everywhere glass cabinets shattered as wrestling bodies crashed into them. Out of the corner of his eye Seaton saw one of the two doors into the Council Chamber open by a crack and a grey haired head pop out, survey the mayhem, and then pop back in again. He heard bolts shooting on the inside of the doors. Undisguised Soc.Soc. members were pouring up the stairs from the quadrangle outside and pounding at the Principal's door, which was also locked. As it happened there was no one in there anyway. His secretary, knowing of the impending Language Society demonstration, had not bothered to come to work today. The Principal was with his panicking colleagues in the Council Chamber next door, ordering them to barricade themselves in with anything that could be piled behind the already securely bolted doors. As Soc. Soc. fought its way to within yards of the lift shaft the glass display cabinets with their porcelain treasures were smashed

to smithereens. Priceless antique milk jugs in the shape of pink porcelain cows were hurled at the enemy by the enemy. Ornate Crown Derby tea services were trampled under foot or smashed over heads. Then they attacked the door to the spiral staircase with blood stained jemmies, splintering the fine decorative oak panels.

In the distance Seaton heard a police siren. The Drwg had been in much more lethal student demos in London and Paris. But the police were coming and this was a confined place where it might be hard to escape arrest. Time, he decided, to leave. He retreated down the grand staircase to the lower corridor and sprinted along it towards the double doors at the end, evading porters who tried to grab him. He was still wearing his scruffy German Parka and balaclava. They would have to go. Through the double doors and then in leaps and bounds down the stairs, glissading past the lavatorially tiled stairwells to the Terrace floor, where he knew there were real lavatories. On the stairs he passed knots of startled students making their way towards the Junior Common Room on the Mezzanine floor. They parted like the Red Sea to let him through. He crashed breathless into the gents' lavatories. A vaguely familiar and elderly academic, pissing at the urinal, looked up, saw the balaclava clad terrorist lunging towards him and ran out of the toilets with his penis hanging out of his trousers. At the bottom of the stairs he collided with two girls who were coming down. "Pervert," they yelled at him in unison, before running back up the stairs cackling with hysterical laughter. Professor Cholmonderly, Head of Politics, and a leading authority on the IRA, turned round and ran screaming through the double doors onto the Terrace. At the ornate wrought iron gates into Penrallt Road he felt an excruciating pain in his chest. He grabbed at the gates for support, held himself upright for a few seconds and then keeled over onto the pavement.

Seaton let himself into a cubicle, locked the door and collapsed onto the toilet seat. *Bloody Ross*, he thought. *Had he planned this? Had he known that the Cymdeithias people were demonstrating upstairs? Bastard. He was going to pay for this.* He peeled off the balaclava and the Parka, checking to make sure that there was nothing incriminating in the pockets, and hung it on the bronze hook on the back of the toilet door. When he was confident that there was no one else outside he smoothed down the shirt immaculately pressed by his oppressed wife, adjusted the oversized collar and straightened the kipper tie, put his aviator spectacles on because the sun was shining, then strolled out, pretending, just in case anyone was watching, to check that his fly was properly zipped up. There were some students standing by the outer door, looking through the gates at people bending over a crumpled form lying on the edge of the pavement. Another bloody drunk, St Dynion's was getting to be as bad as its sister college at Bangor. Dr Owen Seaton marched confidently out of the building, down the hill past the Students' Union and across the road to the

venerable Glanrafon pub, just before its rather flexible closing time, where he downed several large brandies. Not Pruniers, of course.

In the BR Hall calm and order prevailed. Serious finalists completed their last paper to the best of their abilities. Marcus and Jack Fairford, and a junior lecturer in French, shanghaied out of the New Arts building to make up the statutory three invigilators, patrolled up and down the aisles distributing additional answer books, then, towards the end, treasury tags to hold the books together. The patrolling was a mindless but mesmeric exercise and, no matter how hard he tried to resist, Marcus kept finding himself unconsciously pacing the aisle which would lead eventually to where Sophie was sitting. Then he would wake up and change direction before he reached her. Sophie was aware of this, but her mind was totally focussed on her answer book and the mysterious selection of documents on the Medieval English Parliament which Marcus expected her to analyse and evaluate. Eventually, at about five twenty she had finished and checked and rechecked as best she could. She folded up the exam paper and carefully wrote her name and university number on the front of each answer book, then leaned back in her chair and surveyed the room. Other students were doing the same thing. No one could leave now, until the exam had finished, though some had left just before five o'clock when Marcus had announced in his rather high and hesitant voice that there was thirty minutes left and no one could now leave the room. She could see Marcus at the front of the hall leaning with his bottom against the edge of the stage, underneath and to one side of the master clock which would signal the end of the examination. He repeatedly looked at the clock, and then at his watch, and then back to clock. Sophie smiled to herself. He was so nervous, so anxious do things right, so earnest, and she loved him so much that it hurt as it had never hurt before.

"There is five minutes left to the end of the exam," he said. Sophie smiled again. His voice was hesitant, but it was gentle and authoritative. She wondered what had happened outside. She had heard the distant commotion and the police cars and ambulances, then silence. She looked again at Marcus, and wondered what he would be like in bed. Would he have the patience to please her? Or would he be like all the other boys. In and out in a flash, leaving her nothing to show for her generosity except a wet patch on her sheets. It had been better not to tell him about the tangled relationship with the two boys who had so recently shared her bed. She'd occasionally tried threesomes with two girls and a boy, but it rarely worked because the boys always came before she did, and, if she wasn't first, there would be a long and frustrating wait for her turn. Drew was the only man she had ever been with who could keep it going long enough to satisfy two women in succession before he came himself. The chance to have two boys to herself seemed at first sight like an interesting experiment, and for a while this *Jules et Jim* liaison had worked well enough, except that Big Mo had complained about the noise they made. If she didn't come with the first, she usually came with the second, and afterwards she would lie on her back with her

arms round these two beautiful bodies with their tight round bottoms, and their dozy faces pressed into her breasts like two overgrown babies. She gave a little giggle. Then put her hand over her mouth when the girl next to her, who was still writing furiously, turned round and glowered. But in the end it had come to blows and trying to ditch two boys who both thought they owned her had been difficult. She realised now that Marcus would have been appalled to hear this story and would certainly not have been able to advise her on how to resolve it. Last week she had decided that it was time to clear the decks for Marcus and had resolved it herself by kicking both of them out and telling Mo not to let them back in. And they had gone away quite peaceably. There were, after all, plenty of other available girls, though few as beautiful or accommodating as Sophie. Although she had prepared the ground by chattering to him about her love life she would one day have to tell Marcus the truth about her torrid sexual adventures, before somebody else did, and he would be more likely to accept it if he too had enjoyed the sexual experiences that she had come to take for granted. She could tell from his body language that he was inexperienced and uncomfortable with women. She knew that Drew thought so too, and he was determined to release Marcus from his ethical bondage. Her mind drifted further away. Bondage. She'd never tried bondage. Wonder what it would be like to be tied up and shagged? Perhaps she would come quicker if she was tied up. No, she loved to hold and caress men and to be held and caressed by them. Couldn't do that if tied up. She'd ask Drew anyway. Drew knew about these things. Drew knew about everything. And she'd read *The Story of O.* Who hadn't? Well, Marcus probably. Marcus's voice intruded sharply on her reverie.

"Time is up. Stop writing now. Make sure each of your answer books has your name, university number and course title on the front pages. Bring your books to the front and put them in the appropriate boxes."

There was a sudden exhalation, as though the whole class had breathed a vast sigh of relief. They rose and filed towards the front, carefully placed their answer books in the racks provided for each course, and then ran whooping out of the Hall. The three sets of double doors in the foyer were unlocked and open now, and the trestle tables moved away, so there was an unrestricted exit from the building. There were friends waiting outside, other history students, and girlfriends and boyfriends to be hugged and kissed, champagne to be drunk, even strawberries and cream, and ritual cucumber sandwiches. The dream time with all its joy and pain, boredom and exhilaration, was almost over. The days of wine and roses were about to end. The crooked spiral of real life was about to begin.

Marcus was standing by the rack when Sophie put her answer books into it. The other Origins of Parliament people gathered round. They all hugged each other.

"Was it OK?" said Marcus. They nodded. Yes, they thought so, a very fair paper. They'd done their best with it.

"We're going to the cinema tonight," Sophie said to Marcus, "to see *Cabaret.*"

"All of you?" Marcus looked round the tired but exultant group of young people.

"I don't know about them," said Sophie, "me and Drew. Will you come with us? It's the last night it's on. Mo's seen it and says it's good. I really want to see it. Please come with us."

"I have to mark your papers," said Marcus sadly.

"They can wait till tomorrow," Sophie looked at him almost plaintively, "we all need a break and a little celebration. You too. Please come with us. Seven o'clock outside the Plaza. Drinks and pies at Big Mo's afterwards." She gripped his right hand and squeezed it, then let it go, just as he had seen Parkin squeeze her hand. It was a firm grip, gentle, warm and reassuring. And it confirmed what Sophie had felt when she had hugged him to her breasts. Drew and Caroline were right. Marcus was one of them.

Marcus capitulated almost without a second thought. "OK, I'll be there." He knew that he should mark the papers, but Sophie was right, he could make time, and there were only six papers anyway. His colleagues certainly wouldn't start marking their papers until tomorrow. Next week there would be a deluge of first year papers which would take up all his time. Anyway, he was curious to find out about Sophie's boyfriend. Perhaps he would be there. And what about Parkin? Why was he always hanging around Sophie? And who, or what, was Big Mo? If he had been better equipped to recognise his feelings Marcus would have realised that he was jealous, but, at the moment, all he recognised was uncertainty and confusion. Sophie skipped out of the Hall, arm in arm with another of the girls from the Origins of Parliament and the pair of them did an effortlessly synchronised *pas de deux* across the Foyer, tangoed out onto the sun-drenched quadrangle steps and sashayed down College Road to the Belle Vue where the old Ladies, who had done this since the dawn of time, had pitchers of free beer ready for all those beautiful young people from the History Department who had been such good customers for the last three years.

Marcus became aware that James Sinclair was standing beside him. Sinclair had this curious and sometimes alarming habit of appearing silently from nowhere, as though materialising from some parallel universe from which he was observing the antics of his colleagues with god like detachment. There were other history staff in the Hall as well, come to collect their Special Subject Papers for marking. Marcus could see the menacing skeletal shape of Dr Medusa, John Ellerby the senior medievalist, dapper and taciturn, Daniel Ekwall the aloof American historian, Professor Wynne Watkins, head of Welsh History, strange potato face and stocky body with trousers cut with the crotch hung just above the knees so that he appeared to have an extremely long body and

extremely short legs which made him look like Toulouse Lautrec. Dr Rhys ap Caradoc, the junior archaeologist, black bearded and furtive, with protruding teeth and shifty eyes behind bulbous black rimmed spectacles. Technically he was a medievalist too, since he specialised in medieval archaeology, but he didn't speak to Marcus, and had been to Gwyn Davies, the acting head of department, several times to demand that Marcus be compelled to learn Welsh or resign from his post. Gwyn Davies, who was an old fashioned Welshman, had sent him packing with a non-committal rebuke. Then there was Anthony Bishop, ex L.S.E., the florid, snappily dressed modernist, all blazers, striped ties, gold cuff links and Old Spice. A couple of years older than Marcus, but they got on together well enough. Walter Pritchard, Bishop's modernist opposite number in Welsh History, tall, dark and lugubrious, with the mandatory Celtic moustache, who Bishop had nicknamed the leichenachfolge because he looked like an undertaker's assistant. Ralph Locksley, the bearded senior archaeologist, and the garrulous, gangling David Lander, Medusa's counterpart in early modern Europe. The only ones missing were Seaton, and Gwyn Davies who was at a committee meeting which had overrun.

"You heard about Prof Cholmonderly?" James asked. "Probably not, since you've been stuck in here all afternoon. And there's been a bloody riot upstairs. Literally a bloody riot. The place has been wrecked. All the college porcelain has been smashed, there are twenty kids in hospital, one of them is concussed and has gone blind, there's a girl whose face has been torn apart. One of ours, well, a Welsh and Welsh History Joint student, and God knows how many with lacerations and broken ribs. Lyndsey Patterson is in police custody with a couple of his thugs, apparently he beat the shit out of a young copper, so he won't be back for a while. The Principal's had another fit and is on his way back to Denbigh as we speak."

"I heard the riot. What happened to Prof. Cholmonderly?"

"He's had a heart attack. Dropped dead in Penrallt, just outside the gates. Funny thing. Apparently his dick was hanging out and stiff as a post. Angel lust."

"Angel lust? What do you mean?"

"That's what the medics call it. Apparently it can happen after heart attacks. If the victim is upright when the heart stops the blood flows to the lowest level in the body engorging the penis on the way. Happens with hangings too. Watch your back!!" James nudged Marcus who was abstractedly wondering how on earth James knew about things like that. A squat figure in a striped blazer who looked like a cross between Tweedledum and the Frog Footman was bearing down on Marcus from the other end of the Hall. Gareth Sligh, Senior Academic Registrar, was a dangerous person. Since the Principal was constantly in and out of the mental hospital in Denbigh, and the Registrar was permanently drunk, it was Sligh who really ran the College, in a devious triumvirate with Jack Agate, Professor of Applied Toxicology, and a shadowy figure known only as the

Bursar who controlled the purse strings of the College but was rarely seen and was reputed to spend most of his time in a luxurious villa in Benidorm, managing a shady financial empire by fax and telephone. Sligh, like the Bursar, was also a senior member of the local Masonic Lodge, Honorary Secretary of the Golf Club, and one of the principal intermediaries between the Crachach and the College authorities.

"I understand you were invigilating," snapped Sligh, looking straight at Marcus. Marcus nodded. "What is your name?"

"Marcus Ross, I'm in the History Department."

"Well, you would be wouldn't you. Why else would you be here?" He gestured at the Hall, then, slowly, "Oh, you. I've heard of you. You were the Moral tutor for that girl who threw herself off the Tower." Sligh paused and looked at Marcus suspiciously, frog eyes bulging. "Now, what do you know about this business upstairs? I've been told that you sent the Soc.Soc. pickets upstairs so you could get your own students into the examinations. Is that correct? Did you encourage them to confront the Welsh students? The Students' Union assured me that they would just picket till the start of the exams, then they'd let people in. I'm watching you Mr Ross. I want some answers."

"That's not how it appeared," Marcus adopted his customary caution, "but it's true that I was concerned only to get the history students into the exam room so that they could finish their exams in peace. I just asked the Soc. Soc. people to leave." Marcus was not going to admit to the secret files manoeuvre.

"That's not what I've been told," Sligh hissed. Sligh had come into university administration via the North East Wales Canal Board, where he had been a junior clerk until he met a professor of Sociology in a pub in Llangollen and was casually encouraged by him to apply for a vacant clerical post at St Dynion's. Once established as an administrative assistant Sligh demonstrated infallible political skill. He joined the Golf Club through which he was eventually invited to become a Mason. With the help of the Lodge he accelerated rapidly up the College administrative hierarchy, halting at Senior Academic Registrar only because no one had yet found a way of getting rid of his drunken superior. Sligh routinely carried in his back pocket a prepared letter of resignation in the hope that he could one day dupe the Registrar into signing it, but, so far, the opportunity had not arisen. His position as Academic Registrar entitled him to sit on the Senate as an administrator, but he had also secured an independent right to a seat on the Senate by getting himself appointed as Warden of the most prestigious of the men's halls. From there he could dispense patronage to academic staff by offering them tutorships in Hall which were much sought after by junior staff because they included a flat at a nominal rent. Sligh, however, did not like the underpaid young academics who would have benefited most from subsidised flats, until they found their feet, so the tutorships were largely filled with androgynous middle aged bachelors who were wedded to their laboratories, and gays from the French and Drama departments who had

become virtual sitting tenants because they showed no inclination to get married and set up homes. Sligh's empire did not stop in the university. Through his contacts in the Crachach, of which he was now an accepted member, and with the help of Owen Seaton and the local Labour party, he was elected onto the City Council, and via the City Council he got himself appointed as the local authority representative on the College Council, which gave him potential strategic powers over the Senate. Sligh was man who wore many hats and changed them when necessary without compunction. At this very minute he was considering the possible political repercussions of the Battle of the Council Chamber Corridor, and preparing to put his Labour hat back in the wardrobe in favour of a Plaid hat, which might help him into a seat on the Plaid dominated County Council. If he could shift the blame for the riot onto the English students, or, better still, the English staff, the affair could prove to be advantageous to his ambitions. He would ensure that the Welsh students would get their Welsh Language Hall of residence and their gratitude would enhance his standing with the Plaid.

"Well, Mr Ross. You've caused a real mess. The beautiful Council Corridor has been wrecked, all the porcelain has been smashed, there are students in hospital, and no one can find the head of Sir Iolo ap Dafydd! That is outrageous, and a great loss to the College"

"You can't blame me for that," Marcus gasped, trying to figure out how the disappearance of the bronze bust of an Oxford academic who had never set foot in St Dynion's could be a loss to the College. "I had no way of knowing that they would fight."

"Come off it Mr Ross, Cymdeithias and Soc. Soc. face to face? What else could you expect. I'm watching you Mr Ross, and I'm going to find out what you said to them that got them to confront Cymdeithias. We can manage students. They just need careful handling. I personally authorised these demonstration on the understanding that the exams would be allowed to proceed. If you had not interfered there would have been no trouble."

"Well, I don't believe that. My third year students were not going to be allowed to take their exams. And even if they had been allowed in, what about the stress they suffered just before an exam?" Marcus was angry now, "it's not fair. They are in the majority. Why should a bunch of hooligans blight their lives?"

Sligh gave Marcus a withering look. "That's as maybe. I believe the demonstrators would have kept their word. You're a historian. You must know that the apathetic majority in politics is always wrong. They have to be led and it is the activists who have the will and commitment to lead. They set the pace. I personally know Lindsey Patterson. I deal with him all the time on Student Affairs. He's not the sort of person who resorts to violence without strong provocation. I'm watching you, Mr Ross. And I haven't forgotten that business with your moral pupil, Miss Saville or whatever her name was. I've spoken to

her parents and they're not pleased with the way she was treated. Remember Mr Ross, I'm watching you."

Sligh turned towards James Sinclair, who had remained silent throughout this, but was listening intently. "At least one good thing has happened today," Sligh continued, addressing himself to James, "we've finally found out that Professor Cholmonderly was the College Park flasher. Poor bastard's dead. Died of a heart attack whilst actually flashing in Penrallt, in broad daylight. I ask you. Absolutely disgraceful, disgraceful. The College is well rid of him." He turned back to Marcus and scowled at him. "I'm watching you," he snarled.

The Gypsy

It was a rush for Marcus to get to the cinema. By the time he got out of the confrontation with Mr Sligh it was nearly six o'clock. As usual there was no time for a proper meal so he popped into the Belle Vue and grabbed a rather stale sausage sandwich left over from lunchtime before walking down the hill towards the railway station and the cinema, which was just beyond it, arriving a little before seven. There was no sign of Sophie but after a couple of minutes Drew Parkin's Ford Capri appeared and parked outside the electrical shop on the opposite side of the road from the cinema. Sophie's face lit up with delight when she saw Marcus. She had not really expected him to be there, and she waved at him enthusiastically, then grabbed Parkin's hand and dragged him over the road. She'd changed her functional exam clothes and was wearing brilliant white flaired jeans and a white cheesecloth baby doll shirt embroidered round the neck with red flowers. Waves of her thick dark hair, brushed back without a parting, cascaded over her shoulders and some way down her back. Parkin was in his usual scruffy jeans and a rather better than usual T shirt decorated with the face of a very fierce looking gorilla.

I didn't think you'd come," Sophie said excitedly, her face bright as a button, the tiredness and strain of the exams already banished from her eyes. She grabbed his hand and pulled both of them towards the cinema. Marcus bought the tickets, then Sophie sat between them, holding Parkin's hand on her left, and Marcus's hand on her right. Marcus did not dare demur since she was so obviously and radiantly happy to be with him, and, he assumed, with Parkin. Cabaret was startlingly good and much closer to Isherwood's original, which Marcus had read, of course, than to the Broadway musical on which it was supposedly based. The Fosse dance routines were excellent, Joel Grey was outstanding. Michael York did his bit and Liza Minelli, well, Marcus wasn't sure about Liza Minelli. Sally Bowles seemed unsettling close to home, as much a child of the liberated seventies as of the decadent thirties.

Afterwards they went back to Sophie's flat, which, to Marcus's surprise, was behind the black door between the Chemists and the Electrical shop in front of which Drew had parked his car. There was a narrow and rather dingy staircase up to the first floor, above the Electrical Shop, where they were ushered into a surprisingly tidy living room occupied by a Junoesque lady with a large, dark, gypsy face surmounted by a massive Afro hairdo and a generous body enveloped in a delicately embroidered Kaftan.

"Let's see your tits Mo," said Parkin, laughing.

"Fuck off, Drew. Sexist Sod." Mo scowled at him, then she hitched up the kaftan and for an instant flashed a pair of vast unsupported breasts, wiggled them lasciviously, then dropped the kaftan. This was only the second time that Marcus had encountered naked breasts at close range and he was so mesmerised by their extraordinary size that he had not noticed that Mo was not wearing

knickers either.

"That knocked you out didn't it," laughed Mo, "I'm big Mo. I'm not fat, I'm just big. You must be Marcus." She held out her hand and grasped Marcus's extended hand. Her grip was firm, almost vice like, "pleased to meet you Marcus. This is Babs. We share the flat with Sophie."

Babs was as thin as Mo was large. Thin as a rake with vestigial pointed breasts and a narrow Twiggy face, but not as delicate as Twiggy, and a bottle blonde page boy haircut which did not do her any favours either. Babs was more conventionally dressed in denim dungarees strapped over an orange T shirt. She was carrying a tray with two bottles of Hungarian Bull's Blood wine, five glasses, a box of Twiglets and an incongruous pile of small pork pies and packets of crisps, for the promise of which the hungry Marcus was much relieved.

"Pleased to meet you, I'm sure," said Babs, putting the wine down on the circular glass coffee table in front of an empty fireplace. Marcus looked around the room. In most respects it was a typical student flat, except that it was surprisingly clean and tidy. There were posters on the wall from the Tutankhamun exhibition, the female tennis player scratching her naked bottom, the mandatory poster of Che Guevara, and an equally mandatory Tretchikov Green Lady. There were also bookcases on either side of the fireplace filled to overflowing with novels, mostly science fiction and bodice rippers of one kind or another. Another bookcase on the wall adjoining the fireplace was filled with a few chemistry books, a lot of sociology textbooks and fair number of feminist books, including The Female Eunuch. The first thing an academic will do when entering a new room will be to look at the books on the bookshelf, and they will tell him almost everything he needs to know about their owners.

"Which of you is which?" Marcus asked, looking at Mo and Babs, but pointing at the academic bookcase.

"Oh," said Mo, "she's the chemist. Can't you tell? Four books !!! And I'm doing an M.A. in Criminology. Did my first degree in Sociology." Babs and Mo both had Northern accents, but Lancastrian, Marcus knew, not Yorkshire. St Dynion's recruited a high proportion of its students from the North West. From Lancashire, Cumbria and Cheshire. And from the big cities, especially Manchester and Liverpool, which gave it a strange mix of middle class English girls from places like Chester or Altrincham and gauche proletarian boys with strange haircuts and impenetrable accents. And then, of course, there were the Welsh, who were a small minority of the overall student population, and the Cymry who were an even smaller minority. Marcus, like most upper class Englishmen, was finely tuned to the linguistic nuances of the class system. These two were not cut from the same cloth as Sophie, and certainly not from the same cloth as Parkin. Whatever else he might be Parkin was not a snob. He looked at Sophie.

"Where are your books Sophie?" he asked.

"In my room, come and see. Don't worry," she said sensing his hesitation, "I'm not going to jump on you." And before he had time to respond she had grabbed his hand again and pulled him out of the room and up the next flight of stairs. Sophie's room was also neat and tidy, unusual in Marcus's limited experience of students' rooms, and she had surprisingly few possessions. There was a small wardrobe, but the doors were closed, so he could not see her clothes. A single bed, immaculately made, almost in military style, a small radio, a dressing table with a mirror and brushes and combs, a poster sized Becken photograph of the classic 23 metre yacht White Heather heeling under sail, and a long, thin and very erotic poster of a naked girl with elaborate coloured patterns painted over the whole of her body. Sophie blushed a little when she saw Marcus looking at it.

"The Art Director's Nude," she said. "Well, I rather like it. These are my books." She gestured at a fairly large bookcase mostly filled with easily recognisable but well chosen history books. Marcus squatted down to look more closely at Sophie's choice of books. They were nearly all academic, a good collection for an undergraduate. Then there was also a shelf of books on yachts, sailing, navigation and the maintenance of boats, and another shelf of rather risqué novels and a number of sex manuals with odd names like The Joy of Sex and the Kama Sutra and My Life and Loves – The Diaries of Frank Harris and Delta of Venus. These meant nothing to Marcus, and, although he was now curious to look at them, he held back for fear of embarrassment. Sophie watched quietly, noting everything. "You can borrow them if you want," she whispered, bending over Marcus so that her hair brushed over the side of his face, "perhaps you need to know about these things?" The exams were finished, and Sophie had moved her game on a little. But she was still very cautious because she knew that tiny mistakes could have catastrophic consequences. Nevertheless, in her anxiety to please, she was about to make a potentially fatal error of judgment.

"Have you ever read this one?" Sophie pulled a fat, blue covered book out of the fiction section of the bookcase. Marcus shook his head. He had not had time to read novels since he had come to St Dynion's. "Dune. You'd like it Marcus. It's all about the galaxy in the remote future when all the planets have been colonised by man. But it's really medieval Europe. Planets ruled by feudal Dukes and Barons, at war with each other but owing nominal allegiance to a distant Emperor. And priests and priestesses of strange religions who have telepathic powers. Humans evolved and genetically modified to perform different roles in different environments. Human Mentats instead of computers. Telepathy. Time travel. Things like that. And Merchant Guilds, like the medieval Venetians and Genoese, who control travel between the stars which is done by manipulating space itself with their minds enhanced by a drug called spice. And a desert planet which is where the spice comes from. And the spice has mystical religious properties. And there's a revolutionary religion which

comes out of the desert planet where giant worms live who make the spice on which everything depends. Bit like the alum trade with medieval Genoa. And it's a beautiful love story. The hero has supernatural powers he doesn't know about, and two women who love him and have to share him. And it's written almost like a history book. It's marvellous. Would you like to borrow it?" Sophie's face shone with eager enthusiasm.

Marcus took the proffered book and flicked through it. On the inside cover was a dedication. To Sophie, with love from Drew. Imagination makes us what we are. Sophie mentally whacked herself on the shins with a hockey stick when she felt the disappointment flood through Marcus. She moved rapidly to try to recover the situation.

"Drew gave it to me for Christmas last year. He's very impressed by it. He reads lots of science fiction. He thinks science fiction writers can predict the future because the future speaks to them."

Marcus put Dune back in its alphabetical place.

"Perhaps, when I have time," said Marcus, cautiously standing up so as not to bump into Sophie. "I suppose sometimes we forget how much we are shaped by what we read. Anyway, it's all very tidy."

Sophie nodded and heaved a silent sigh of relief, then rapidly changed the subject. "Yes, I learned to be tidy from my dad. I've spent a lot of my life on boats, and things have to be stowed. So you learn to travel light and put things away. Dad was in the navy, and he taught me to make my bed navy fashion. I know, it's strange; not what you expected." Her eyes twinkled at him. She took his arm and led him back down the stairs to the sitting room. There was one sofa, and two easy chairs. Drew Parkin was sitting in one of the easy chairs and Mo was sitting in the other with Babs sitting on her lap with one arm around Mo's neck and the other holding a large glass of wine which they appeared to be sharing. Sophie shepherded Marcus onto the sofa and sat beside him, curling up her legs under her bottom and leaning slightly against him. There was a period of silence as they tried the wine. Marcus looked around the room.

"You've got a lot of books, Mo," Marcus said, to get the temporarily stalled conversation going.

"Yes," said Mo, "and they haven't cost us a penny. I just go and browse in Smiths or Booklands, you know, when I feel like a read."

"How do you mean," Marcus asked, "they haven't cost a penny?"

"Well," Mo said in a matter of fact voice, "I've got this special long coat with great big inside pockets. So I just, you know, help myself. If I fancy something."

"You steal them?" said Marcus, horrified.

"Well, yes, I suppose so. That's one way of putting it. Theft is a relative concept. I prefer to think that I'm liberating them from people who are trying to profit from them. If I don't like them I take them back. I call it academic research myself. I'm learning about the criminal mind."

"Yeah," Babs piped, "we've got lots of nice things here that we wouldn't have if we didn't steal them. Got a lovely kettle yesterday from downstairs. Well, he is the bloody landlord. But I forgot to steal the guarantee. Mo made me go back to get it."

Mo detected that Marcus was unsettled by these revelations and rapidly deflected the chat in another direction.

"We have a game," she said, "which we play with new friends. You have to tell us who you think we most look like, from the world of stage and screen. And if you tell me I look like Hattie Jacques you will die a terrible death!!" They all turned and looked at Marcus. "Drew first," added Mo.

Marcus pondered Parkin's louche face. "Somewhere between Mick Jagger and Alan Alda," he said. Mo scowled at him. "OK, let's say more… Alan Alda." Parkin, grinned. Marcus was not the first to make that comparison. Mo pointed at Babs. No problem here. "Twiggy," said Marcus.

"I can live with that," Babs murmured. Mo smiled. "Bit tall for Twiggy, and Twiggy doesn't have a face like a potato, but it'll do. Now, look at Sophie. Who does Sophie look like?"

Marcus turned and looked at Sophie who was very close to him. She looked straight back through his eyes and into his soul, piercing the cloak of cold rationality with which he had surrounded himself through to the frightened child huddled inside. Marcus felt an extraordinary shock, as though some ethereal bolt of energy had coursed through him. He knew with sudden and absolute certainty that he would always be with Sophie, but he did not know how or why. "I think," he whispered, almost unable to speak, "I think… Sophie looks like Katherine Ross, or Jacqueline Bisset. Katherine Ross, when she was twenty." Sophie smiled at him and kissed his cheek. "Not bad," she whispered, "My middle name is Katharine, and I like the Ross bit."

"That's alright," said Mo, "Katherine Ross is OK. But I think Jacqueline Bisset has a gentler face. More like Sophie. Sophie has such a gentle face. But Jacqueline Bisset has grey eyes. I think. Now, what about me? Be careful, this could be your last breath. Men have died between my boobs!!!"

Marcus took his time. Finding Titianesque ladies in the cinema was not as easy as finding a Katherine Ross or Jacqueline Bisset. He thought, eventually, of the massively voluptuous Saraghina, the gypsy woman, dancing the rhumba on the beach in Fellini's Eight and a Half, but he could not remember the name of the actress. Eventually he made a decision.

"La Saraghina," he said.

"Bravo," said Drew, "the sardine lady. Edra Gale. Spot on Marcus. Mo to a Tee." The others looked at him blankly.

"She was in What's New Pussycat too. As Peter's Seller's wife. Ann Fassbender," Drew added, "remember?"

"Oh," said Babs querulously, "that was Edra Gale?"

Mo let out a shriek, and the rest of them fell about laughing. When Mo had

stopped convulsing with laughter Marcus asked, “what about me? Who do I look like?”

“Very easy,” said Mo, “very English. Simon Ward, or Michael York.” Babs and Sophie nodded in agreement.

“Lance bloody Percival,” muttered Parkin. “Look at this,” he took out of his pocket what Marcus at first thought to be a block of chocolate. “Pocket calculator,” Parkin continued, “cost me nearly $400 in New York. Now I find that there’s an English one made by a company called Sinclair Radionics for eighty quid, but it doesn’t always work and its got the wrong kind of screen, light emitting diodes instead of liquid crystal. In five years time they’ll be half that price, and in twenty years time they’ll be giving them away with the groceries.” He offered the machine to Marcus who looked at it curiously. It had a keyboard with numbers and a few mathematical operators; adding, subtraction, division and multiplication, and a small electronic display. The maker’s name, Hewlett Packard, and a model name, HP35, were printed above the display. Marcus handed it back to Parkin..

“What’s the significance of this thing, Drew? Just showing off? As usual,” Sophie asked since she’d seen the calculator before, but could not afford to own one herself. Parkin slipped the calculator back into his pocket. “The gizmo that runs this thing, a chip it’s called, is made by a new company called Intel. It’s right at the beginning. But the chips will get bigger and better and people will have computers sitting on their desks which will be more powerful than the college mainframe. And, in case you don't know, the college mainframe occupies an entire building. I know, because I've been there to play with it. They've got a very good Star Trek game. One day there will be a big market for computer games. Anyway, the demand for chips will be exponential. I’ve bought some shares in Intel. If you have any money you would be wise to invest in Intel too,” he added, looking at Marcus meaningfully. “The future does not belong to us,” he added, paraphrasing the song from Cabaret, “the future belongs to them. But don’t buy any shares in Sinclair Radionics. Trust me. I’m an expert in these matters.”

“I didn’t know you were interested in this type of thing,” Marcus said.

“Well, remember, I am doing a joint degree with economics and I intend to be a millionaire by the time I’m thirty,” Parkin said with supreme confidence, “sooner if possible. There is a change coming, probably by the end of the decade. The next but one election. After that there will be lots of opportunities to make a fortune, but only if I’m ready for it. And that means that I have to make sufficient money in the next ten years to be able to capitalise on the eighties, when they come. And that means buying shares now that are going to go up fast. Given the present crap state of the English economy the only things making serious money right now are pop music and computers. So that's where I'm going.”

“Anyone want a spliff?” said Babs, hospitably unrolling a small plastic bag

and a packet of Rizlas.

"You know we don't do that shit," Drew snapped.

Babs looked hurt, "everybody does it," she replied resentfully, "no harm in it."

"Yeah, well, you're a chemist. You know perfectly well that drugs change the chemistry of the brain, probably irreversibly. Our brains are too precious to be fucked about with. So we don't do it."

"Suit yourself," Babs muttered, rolling one joint for herself.

"How can you be so sure," Mo returned to the original debate, "look at the state of the bloody country now. Strikes almost everyday, the pound going up and down like a yo-yo, decimal bloody currency, EEC yuck, outrageous inflation, IRA blowing things up here, Arabs blowing up airliners everywhere else. Bastard Americans blowing the Vietnamese to kingdom come. It don't look good to me. The world seems to me to be going to hell in a handcart." She poured out another glass of wine and handed the bottle to Parkin, who filled his own glass, then discovered there was scarcely any left for Marcus and Sophie. He grunted and went to the kitchen to return with a bottle of Mouton Cadet.

"People say that history is a waste of time, but the truth is that the key to the future really does lie in the past," Parkin said.

"Bollocks," muttered the lugubrious Babs, "lie is the right word. History's dead and gone and best forgotten. Boring kings and queens. And we were saving that!!" She gestured angrily at the wine bottle.

"I'll get you another one. I'll get you a bloody crate if it make you happy." There was, apparently, very little love lost between Babs and Parkin. "No," he continued, "you don't understand. I've learned two things from Marcus's lectures, and, to be honest, I don't think I need to learn anything else. Historians are a bit like necromancers. They try to foresee the future by talking to the dead." He paused for a slurp of wine. "Listen. In the first year Marcus lectured to us on the Wars of the Roses. He said that English history was all about the ebb and flow of power between the centre and the localities."

"Ah yes," said Marcus, focussing on Drew's first point, "centrifugal and centripetal distribution of power. Or, to make it easier, weak kings versus over mighty barons followed by strong kings who take power away from the barons. Power flows backwards and forwards. It gets more complicated in the fourteenth century because of the growth of parliament and the rise of the gentry. It's not my idea, you know, I got it from Bertie Wilkinson's books. But it's a good working hypothesis."

"Where's all this crap getting us to? I think it's more important to know all the facts about Vietnam than the sodding Wars of the Roses," retorted Babs the militant chemist.

"Well, maybe," Drew replied, "but that's the second thing I've learned. How can we know all the facts about Vietnam when we're stuck in the middle of it? The present is only really intelligible in retrospect. So, the past must be used as

a template for the future. Not to tell us what will happen, but to provide a model for investigation from which possible futures can be abstracted. Take the Vietnam War. For us it's a confused contemporary event happening in real time. We don't have the benefit of hindsight to explain it. But if you think of the Vietnam war as essentially a civil war then history provides examples of the basic characteristics shared by most civil wars. So, the Wars of the Roses gives us a template. We know pretty well what happened and why, and what the outcome was. We can superimpose this template on the Vietnam war and see how far what we know about that war corresponds with, or deviates from, the historical civil war template. Then we can extrapolate possible outcomes and suggest ways to deal with them."

"I still don't see how that relates to our politics," Babs said sulkily, making no effort to conceal her dislike of Drew.

"It's simple really," Parkin replied, "think of democratic politics as a swinging pendulum. Most of the time it's stable, but from time to time it swings too far outside the centre, either to centralised power or to overmighty subjects. In the fifteenth century it was the great barons. Today the overmighty subjects are the Trades Unions. Right now the pendulum is swinging. We have a weak and effete Tory Government faced with over mighty subjects. Now we have the ballot box rather than the battlefield, but that doesn't mean that there isn't a battlefield. The extremes are always going to be at each other's throats but it's the uncommitted who actually swing the pendulum. My guess is that the Heath government will fall at the next election. There will be a Labour government, but they will not be able to rein in the unions. On the contrary, the unions will think they own the government and act accordingly. By the time of the next election, which will be around the end of the decade, electors will be so fed up with chaos, strikes and general mayhem that they will vote in a radical right wing government which will promise to take tough action to put things right. And such a government will be very good for business, because it will deregulate it, reduce taxes, and let the capitalist wolves loose on the apathetic masses. And there will be politicians who will cosy up to the wolves in order to fill their own pockets. There'll be another decade or so, maybe more, before that government is seen to be too corrupt to hold power. Then the pendulum will swing back towards the centre. The next government will be something different. Neither Labour nor Tory but a mixture of both. My predictions run out at that point. Thesis, antithesis, synthesis. Anyway. I have around twenty years to make my fortune. And I've already started."

"Well, that's pretty bloody profound. You really are a capitalist pig, aren't you Drew, No wonder you live in a bloody hall." said Mo, crinkling up her cherubic face. I forgive you though, because you're so generous. But Babs is right. What about Vietnam? That's the big issue. And how come you never got drafted? You're a draft dodger aren't you! Well, that's something in your favour." Mo was laughing. Marcus decided not to tell Mo that he too lived in

hall, but he was curious about Parkin's hall, which he had heard about but had never been invited to visit.

"The Americans will start to withdraw from Vietnam early next year," Drew replied, with absolute confidence, "and my mother may be American, but my father is English. I have dual nationality and I don't live in America. So, technically, I'm not eligible for the draft. And even if I was they wouldn't dare draft the son of a British diplomat."

"Where are these Tories going to come from?" Marcus asked, always serious, but also aware that Sophie's head had fallen onto his shoulder and that she appeared to be going to sleep, "don't you think that there's a real risk of a Marxist takeover? The extreme Left is very strong at the moment. The Seatons of this world have really got the bit between their teeth. They really think it's going to happen."

"I doubt it. The English working classes are far too conservative for that kind of thing. They might sleepwalk into an elective dictatorship though. That's entirely possible." Drew scratched his chin thoughtfully. "As for the Tories. There are a some economic gurus; Keith Joseph, Milton Friedman, Friedrich Hayek, the philosopher, and there's a whole new generation of bright young Oxbridge Tories who have swallowed the free market ideology hook line and sinker. It's an object lesson in the power of academic thinkers to affect real politics. Ironic really, since the Tories are not generally known as the thinking party. In the end it'll never work, because there's a limit to how wide you can make the gap between rich and poor before you really do have a revolution, unless, of course, you provide sufficient bread and circuses to keep the masses happy. Actually, that has always been the secret weapon of the ruling class. The proles can usually be bought off with cheap alcohol, sex, celebrity and sport. Football is the opium of the people. Look at the adulation given to people like Twiggy or George Best. They're the first of a new breed of working class heroes who will mesmerise the masses and keep them quiet. The tabloid newspapers will give them what they want. Tit and bum and gossip. Anyway, the Tories talk about something they call the trickle down effect. But I'm not convinced. The rich will just get richer. Still, it will last long enough to destroy union power in its present form and break up the nationalised industries into joint stock companies. A lot of people will get rich very quickly, and some people, including me, will get to be very rich indeed. The important thing is to be quick and flexible and to adapt to changing circumstances. It's the first principle of survival in jungle economics."

"Don't you have any conscience about this? I mean, you're deliberately going to exploit people. I mean, I'm a socialist, you know I am, and as a sociologist I can see what's wrong with the unions. But we still need the unions to protect working people against people like you," Mo stopped. Babs had also gone to sleep and had started to snore. Mo picked up Bab's right hand, unclenched her thumb and stuck into her mouth. Babs stopped snoring, and

buried herself deeper between Mo's breasts. Mo's older than they are, Marcus thought, a mature postgraduate student, maybe older than me. And she's a lesbian. Mo looked at him curiously, then looked at Drew Parkin and raised her eyebrows as though sharing an unvoiced thought. Parkin nodded, then returned to his theme.

"I won't exploit ordinary people. On the contrary, I will try to give them what they most want. The age of the responsible citizen is over. The age of the irresponsible consumer is dawning. Irresponsible consumers will be very profitable. But I also believe that the strong have an obligation to protect the weak. And the strong must always have good intentions and think no evil. Anyway, enough of this. What about you Marcus, what are you plans for life?"

Sophie's head slipped off Marcus's shoulder and she woke up with a start.

"I don't really know," he replied. "I'd like to get away from St Dynion's, but I need my doctorate and some publications for that. Apart from that, I don't know."

"Take my advice," said Parkin, "get out now. Find something else. Invest in Intel. Invest in me. I'll make you very rich. The universities are going to be bled dry for the next ten years, but, if my prediction is correct, it will be nothing compared with what the Tories will do if they come back with free market policies. And remember, saloon bar Tories hate clever people. They will take their revenge on the universities for allowing left wing student unrest to get out of hand by making them compete against each other for money. It's called Management Accounting. If that happens academics will be cutting each other's throats for real, instead of stabbing each other in the back with quills. There'll be an academic bloodbath. You're a kinda pure person, Mr Ross. You won't like that." Marcus was staggered at Parkin's prescience and self confidence.

"How do you know all this? How can you be so bloody sure?" But it was true, Marcus thought. The Tories always attacked the universities as the source of loony left wing ideas, and the Labour party always regarded universities as an undeserving privileged elite. Academics could never win. It really was a Cinderella profession. The hardest of all to enter, and the least rewarded.

"Nothing's for certain. But, you know, my dad's a diplomat, and my ma's American. They have parties for the great and the good. I meet a lotta people. I've got an uncle who's an economics prof at Princeton, and another who's a fellow of All Souls. And I listen to what they say. And I have Jaz." Parkin was not smug or patronising. He just knew where he was and where he was going.

"His Papa's rich, and his Ma's good lookin," Mo crooned.

"And how are you going to make all this money?" there was a hint of sarcasm in Marcus's voice which Drew ignored.

"Initially from computing, pop groups, records and record shops because that's the only area that's doing well at present. Later I'll go into property, hospitality, hotels, and transport, especially the holiday industry. But that's just feeder money. Once I have sufficient capital I will go into pharmaceuticals and

medical technology. My aim is to make enough to be able to fund university departments to do research into genetics, high energy particle physics and astrophysics."

"Astrophysics? Why?" Marcus looked at Drew incredulously.

"I have a question," Drew replied enigmatically, "about God."

It all came tumbling out. Marcus realised that Parkin meant it, and that he had thought it all through. Secretly he admired him. Few students thought about their future lives as much as Parkin had done and few had his energy and determination. Certainly not Marcus himself. The conversation meandered on, often intense, sometimes languid. Mo made sarcastic interjections from time to time, but Parkin could not be stopped. There was a lot of discussion of the growth of violence in society, which both he and Mo agreed would get worse. They talked about the film they had just seen and especially about that riveting song in the beer garden which embodied both the irresistible appeal of Nazism and its barely concealed menace. Marcus wondered whether this generation of young people also believed that the future belonged to them.

"Most young people believe that," said Mo, "that's what makes them so dangerous, especially when they discover the truth. Young people are hot wired to believe almost anything. Fortunately most of them confine themselves to believing in football and pop music. If they took to believing in God or politics we'd be up to our fannies in corpses. Look at what happened this afternoon."

Mo had already heard from Parkin about the afternoon's riot in College, the battle of the Council Chamber Corridor, and wanted to hear what Marcus thought about it. Marcus did not elaborate on his role but Sophie insisted on describing at length how cool he had been in handling the Soc.Soc. believers. Parkin was curiously quiet, though he had seen what had happened, but had not heard about the secret files manoeuvre, and Marcus did not intend to tell him. It was getting very late. Several bottles of wine had been drunk and everyone was very mellow. Marcus plucked up sufficient courage to ask Parkin where his Persian girlfriend was. Jaz, it seemed was in London with her courtier family who had come to England as part of a diplomatic mission to prepare for the impending state visit of the Shah. Jaz was not a student. Parkin had met her at a party and had been instantly attracted to her.

"They fell in love at first sight," Sophie sighed, "and she came all the way up here with Drew and has stayed with him ever since, in spite of everything." She did not elaborate on what she meant by everything. Marcus loosed a little the bonds of caution.

"What about you and Sophie?" he asked, looking at Drew.

"I love Sophie, too," Parkin replied, "everyone loves Sophie. How could anyone not love Sophie?" He gave Marcus a searching look. "I love Mo as well. These are my friends, my very, very close friends and I love all of my close friends dearly, and I care for them and I will provide for them. You too." He put his head back and yawned.

Marcus looked covertly at his watch. It was after two o'clock. He suddenly felt very tired. Sophie caught the glance. Drew also looked at his watch and then at Sophie, as though some secret threshold had just been crossed. Time to get back, Marcus thought. Trudge up the hill to College and collect his car. He should have driven down to the cinema, but he didn't like to leave the Porsche in tricky car parks like the one at the back of the Plaza because of the risk of someone scratching it. Then he realised that he had drunk the best part of a bottle and a half of red wine, plus a Scotch that Mo had produced from somewhere. Driving was not a good idea. Parkin, who had drunk more than Marcus, was well over the limit. Both of them had to get back across the bridge where the police regularly waited for late night drunks. Neither of them was going anywhere. Marcus contemplated an uncomfortable night in the armchair in his room in the hut.

"You can stay here, if you want," Sophie whispered. Marcus, slightly fuddled and very tired, could think of no reason to say no. He felt very safe with Sophie, though, in the back of his mind he worried about whether it would be right to stay in the house of a student whose examination papers he would have to mark the next day.

"Don't worry," Sophie continued, "you won't have to sleep on the sofa. Drew is going to sleep on the sofa, aren't you Drew," she said emphatically. Drew pulled a face, and put up his hands. "You can sleep with me in my bed. Don't worry, I'll keep my clothes on. Seriously. There's nothing to worry about. I won't...you know...do anything. You don't mind, do you Mo?"

Mo nodded, but there was apprehension in her acceptance. She was used to Sophie's noisy boys. But this wasn't just another boy. She had seen how Sophie looked at him, and felt in her heart the love that Sophie had for him. This was different. It might be more bearable if only Sophie wasn't so tantalisingly beautiful, so uninhibited, and so out of reach. She picked up the still sleeping Babs and carried her gently out of the sitting room and into their bedroom next to the kitchen. She came back with a blanket which she handed to Drew, who pulled another face. "You're not sleeping with us, Drew," Mo said, "not tonight. No two ladies for you!!! And you know that Babs takes it seriously. She doesn't like you." She smiled wistfully at Sophie. "Be very careful," she said, speaking to Sophie, but looking at Marcus. *People can get hurt*, she thought. Sophie's face went blank for instant. *What do you mean?* she thought back. *Never mind,* Mo replied silently, *remember what I told you. Just be careful. This is not the right time. You have to wait.*

Marcus followed Sophie back up the stairs to her room and closed the door behind them.

"I'd like to just wash my face, you know. Brush my teeth." Marcus said, in a tired voice.

"Okay. Bathroom's next door. Use my toothbrush. It's the blue one."

The bathroom was as spotlessly tidy as the rest of the house. It didn't make

sense. Young people did not live like this. But then again, most young people did not share a house with Big Mo. The only discordant note was a wetsuit hanging over the bath. Marcus had a pee, brushed his teeth with Sophie's toothbrush and washed his face. When he returned to Sophie's room he knocked tentatively on the door, in case Sophie was doing anything that might cause mutual embarrassment. When he went into the room he was astonished to find that she had already changed into a full length sleeveless empire line night dress in thin white linen embroidered at the bust with two brilliant blue peacocks. Sophie normally slept in the nude, and had no nightclothes. The nightdress was actually a dress she had once bought in a tourist shop in the flea market in Athens and had never worn because it didn't look right under the cold British sun. It would be enough to keep Marcus safe and affirm his confidence in her. She too popped out to the bathroom. Marcus sat on the edge of the bed, wondering what to do next. He had never a shared a bed with a woman before. Indeed he had never shared a bed with anyone before, apart from his mother when he was a child. He wondered what to take off, and started with his shoes and socks. Because it was what passed for summer in Wales, and it was indeed a warm evening, he was wearing a sleeveless shirt under the tweed jacket which he had already discarded in the sitting room, and a pair of lightweight polyester trousers. When Sophie returned from the bathroom Marcus stood up so that Sophie could roll back the neatly made bed and slide herself into it. There didn't seem to be much room.

"You can take off your trousers, if you want to, and sleep in your shirt and knickers. " Sophie's voice was gentle and persuasive, but her heart was racing and she was holding her breath. She desperately wanted to make passionate love to him, but knew that she must not. Not tonight anyway. She knew that he would not dare to take the initiative and any initiative from her at this stage could be fatal. It must be done so slowly, and not before he was freed from the constraints of his conscience. Marcus hesitated. Then, to Sophie's intense satisfaction, he began to unbuckle his belt. The trousers came off, and he slid into the bed beside her, pulling up the coverlet after him. There really wasn't much room for two in a single bed, not for sleeping anyway. Getting three bodies into it had been quite a problem and ultimately too uncomfortable to be tolerated.

"Do you sleep on your back, or your side?" Sophie asked.

Marcus could feel the warmth and gentle pressure of her body. He was also aware of the engorging sensation between his legs.

"Both," he said, then, "on my front." That way he might be able to avoid temptation.

"Okay, roll over on your front." He obeyed. He felt sure that Sophie had slept with many men, and nothing of this was new to her. But it didn't seem to matter. The warm body cupped itself against his back. Breasts, navel and legs nuzzled up against him. Sophie's hand flopped over his shoulders, he felt her

mouth and nose against the back of his neck. Then she pretended to go to sleep, and after a while, when she sensed that Marcus, tired, and more than slightly drunk, had taken his cue from her and was genuinely asleep, she raised herself gently on one elbow and looked at his sleeping profile. She could wait for his body, bodies were nothing special, it was the bright light in his soul that she loved, and his gentle kindness. Then she kissed the back of his neck, held him a little more tightly and went to sleep herself.

Marcus awoke with a start to find Sophie sitting on the edge of the bed clutching two cups of coffee which she put down on the bedside table. Her dark hair flowed forward until it almost drowned her face. She pushed it away and slid back into bed beside Marcus.

"Did you sleep alright?" she asked.

Marcus nodded. "I had… strange dreams."

"I know, it's because you're in a strange place. When I go with my dad on the boats I often get the strangest dreams. Not like anything I ever dream here. Strange beds and places affect you differently. What did you dream about?"

"Can't remember really. You know how dreams are. You were in it, and Drew and other people, I don't know who they were. And..." he stopped, skipping over someone who was best left unnamed. "We were all sort of praying. Naked. In a circle. It was.... sexy....erotic. But I don't remember exactly what happened. And my gardener was there, just watching us. Why would he be in a dream? "

"That's dreams for you," Sophie replied cheerfully, "messages from the other side. I have lots of dreams. About my past lives." She knew exactly who had been in Marcus's dream, except for the gardener. The gardener was a mystery dredged up from Marcus's own subconscious.

Marcus tested his coffee. It was too hot to drink.

"Past lives?" he asked.

"Yes, we've both had lives together in the past. We just don't remember, 'cept in dreams."

Marcus shook his head but didn't question her. Sophie smiled at his disbelief. It didn't matter whether he believed or not. He would believe. Eventually. There was a long silence as they cautiously sipped the coffee.

"What did you mean?" he asked eventually, "what you said last night, about Drew and Jaz, and Jaz staying with him in spite of everything?" Marcus was extremely curious about the relationship between Sophie, Parkin and Jaz.

Sophie looked contemplatively at her coffee and pondered what to tell him, then, remembering Pamina's advice to Papageno in the Magic Flute, opted for the truth, or, at least, some of what she thought was the truth. "Drew's a bit of a hippy you know and a bit of a guru. I suppose we're his little flock. It's the zeitgeist. We're all hooked on this free love thing. He thinks we will all be happier if we share each other's bodies, and everything else. Not all the time, you know, we have our own partners, most of the time. But sometimes, when

we're all together, in the altogether, it's nice just to share ourselves. You know. It doesn't mean anything, except…..it's as though none of us has any secrets from each other and so we all feel very close. Like, it's not just our bodies we share. It's our minds as well. Our consciousness. Our souls. Anyway, Jaz comes from a very rich background. Her parents like Drew but...there's a religious thing....in the way. And I think she found Penhesgyn a bit....strange....at first. And she didn't like the rain all the time. But she loves the sex. The Kong parties were her idea." She paused to assess the impact of what she was saying on the impressionable Marcus. He did not appear to be disturbed by it. He was more malleable than she had expected and, best of all, he was curious.

"You've slept with Drew?" Marcus was surprised at his own audacity, but he no longer felt jealous, not of Drew, nor of any of the other men that he knew must have lain beside this warm and generous body. Was that Drew's secret? These young people seemed to have no jealousy, no conception of possession, except in common, no sense of shame or of fear. It didn't seem to match up with Drew's capitalist aspirations. Unless.....Drew was just using them all.

"Of course." It was safe now. What had been risky last night was no longer a threat. The dream had woven its irresistible magic. Marcus was now inescapably hooked by his innate curiosity. She had to wait only a little longer before he could be landed. "I love Drew. But Drew is meant for Jaz, not for me. I have my own destiny. One day he will marry her, when it is the ordained time." The ordained time would come in 1979 when Jaz's gilded family would be dragged out of their ornate palaces and hacked to pieces by the merciless followers of the merciful God who had providently consigned Jaz to Drew's care. The ever prescient Drew, already well past his first million, ensured that Jaz was far from Iran when the revolution swept away the Shah and his courtiers and, when she had finished crying for her lost family, he married her.

"So, you would be in favour of open marriages?" Marcus probed.

"No, of course not. I told you my philosophy of sex. Remember? I mean it. I don't know whether I care about marriage, that's just a formality, but when I settle down it will be with the man who is meant for me, and I will always be with him and we will share ourselves willingly, together. This life will end soon. This is for now. I've had my fun here, sown my wild oats, and Drew has helped me to learn about myself, so I'm very grateful to him. And he knows I'm ready to grow up and change direction. Very soon. And he's helping me with that too..."

Marcus decided not to pursue this line. He wasn't sure how Sophie could reconcile what seemed to be wanton promiscuity with trust and fidelity, nor could he tell how much of what Sophie said came from Sophie herself. Her curious faith in a hotchpotch of romantic and mystical ideas was hard for him to accept, and the sceptical historian in him asked whether the testimony he was reading in Sophie was the real Sophie, or something created by Parkin.

"What does your dad do? Is he a sailor?" Marcus was beginning to enjoy this

new experience. He had to admit that there was a luscious warm intimacy, lying here in bed with this beautiful nubile woman beside him. Sophie rolled over onto her side and propped herself on her arm. She was relieved to have got past that hurdle. Marcus did not seem to have been fazed by her revelations. She sensed that the dream she had given him had made him curious about the life that she had led with Drew and their friends, and she was hopeful that he could be brought to share in it before the wine ran out and the roses withered. And time really was running out. Term was nearly over. She would stay until her results came out, and then she must go to join her father in Gibraltar, en route to Greece, and would not know where she would be for most of the summer. Marcus must be unlocked within the next few weeks, but their opportunities to free him from himself in the time available would be very limited. She could not make any further move until after the degree results were released when he would no longer be bound by his laudable but unrealistic commitment to the ethical obligations of his profession. Then she would have to act quickly and decisively but, in the end, Marcus would have to make the crucial decision for himself. Apart from dreams she was not going to use her powers to beguile him beyond what any normal girl would use.

Sophie looked thoughtful, "You asked me a personal question about Drew. You're quite good at coming straight to the point aren't you." She paused, about to take another risk, but there was something that she too needed to know. "You asked about me and Drew. What about you and the blonde girl I've seen you with? The research student from Theology. Caroline. Have you slept with her?"

Marcus recoiled. Sophie met his eyes and read the panic in them. He was trying to figure out how she could possibly know about Caroline. "No..no..never. She was just a friend. How do you know about Caroline?"

Sophie's heart sang. She knew that he could not lie, and therefore there was nothing to fear from Caroline. And she also knew that if he had resisted Caroline he must still be a very frightened virgin because she did not believe Caroline's jocular allegation that Marcus was gay. She shrugged and smiled, "St Dynion's is a very small place. Everyone knows everyone else, especially if you have shared interests. She's in my yoga class. And I've seen you talking to her from time to time." She did not think it wise to say that Caroline was also part of Drew's circle and that Caroline was almost as close to her heart as Marcus.

"My dad," she moved rapidly to another topic, "Yes. He delivers yachts. Well, he's trying to start a brokerage, and he's got an agency for Hallberg Rassy. Very good yachts, amongst the best you can buy. So I spend my vacations sailing round Europe in luxury yachts. Mostly they get delivered from Sweden to Gibraltar as deck cargo on freighters. Then we deliver them to wherever the owners want them in the Med. Have you ever been on a yacht?" Sophie hesitated, then continued, "yachts are very cosy. I'm sure you'd like yachts. I love the sea. I always have. It's in the blood. Come and sail with me. I've got a dinghy at the college sailing club. It's not a yacht, of course, but even

dinghy sailing is lots of fun."

Marcus had never set foot on a yacht, and knew nothing of them, but the idea of going anywhere with Sophie sounded more and more attractive.

"Maybe, after the results, when you're no longer in Stat. Pup. What about your mum, does she come with you, or does she stay at home?"

Sophie's face saddened. "Mum's dead," she said, "she died when I was ten, in a car accident. In Corfu." She paused, "and we don't have a home. Not really. There's an office in Gibraltar, with a little apartment over it where my Dad lives when he's not sailing. In theory he's got land in Corfu from my mothers's dowry, but the Colonels are making it difficult for foreigners to own land in Greece. He wants to start a business in Greece, 'cos that's where the best cruising is going to be. So, mostly we just live on the boats and in hotels. That's why I don't have anything much. It's important to travel light." She gestured at her rather Spartan room. "What's Stat Pup?"

"Statu Pupillari. It means that you are a student in the care of the university, and not supposed to be sharing a bed with a tutor!! And I am probably committing an act of gross and persistent moral turpitude." He laughed. "Actually, you've finished your exams, so you're no longer in Stat Pup. At the moment you are in limbo but after the results come out you will be a Graduand. Which means that you are on your way to graduating. And this is the first time I've ever shared a bed with a lady, and it hasn't been gross, it's not persistent, and, so far as I know, in spite of my dream, there has not been any turpitude."

Sophie started to laugh. "I'm very good at turpitude. And I'd like it to become persistent."

"I'm sorry about your mother," Marcus said, returning rapidly to an earlier revelation. "My parents were both killed when I was ten too. We have something in common."

"We have a lot in common, more than you know," she paused and then, with some reluctance, "but now it's after nine o'clock. You must get up and put on your trousers and socks and shoes and go and mark our exam papers. I'll make you some toast. And then, when I'm a graduand, I will sail you to a magical place." Sophie sensed that she had only to extend her hand and touch his face and he would fall into her arms forever. But she had listened to Mo's reluctant advice and knew that she must wait until Marcus himself recognised that he was in love with her and had willingly put aside all his fears so that he could commit himself to her.

Marcus obeyed. After a quiet breakfast Sophie came downstairs to the front door with him, first retrieving his jacket from the sitting room where Parkin was still sleeping, face down and flat out on the sofa. As Marcus stood on the doorstep Sophie turned him towards her, gripped his lapels, and, standing on tip toe, because in bare feet she was slightly shorter than Marcus, she kissed him very chastely and gently, not on his cheek, but on his lips. "That's a promise not a bribe," she said, "but, I think it would be better if we didn't see each other

again until the exams are all marked. Don't you?”

Marcus, startled and suddenly very weak at the knees, did not notice the passing Volkswagen 1500 Variant estate car which Owen Seaton drove because British car workers were incapable of making cars that worked.

The Hungry Judges

Marcus collected the Special Subject examination papers from the filing cabinet in his room and took them back to his flat so that he could mark them without interruption. The following day the marked papers went back into college and were entrusted to Lucy Towler, the formidably tweedy departmental secretary who could lay junior lecturers out with a look and regularly flattened the most pompous of professors with a verbal kick in the groin. No one messed with Lucy Towler, and, in the end, it was really she who ran the Department. The whole marking process was a race against postage dates, in which lives and future careers were hastily evaluated, aptitudes pigeon holed, and hopes and aspirations consigned to the judgment of a pantheon of motley gods. Once marked internally the exam scripts were despatched post haste to external examiners in other universities, where the whole process of marking began again, usually at a break neck pace and sometimes two weeks later on the train bringing the externals to St Dynion's for the Final Examiners Meeting.

Marcus's Special Subject students had done well enough. There was one first class paper, and Sophie had secured her expected upper second in the two special subject papers and the two medieval courses she had taken with him, but Marcus did not know how she had got on in her other papers and apart from casually meeting her in the street, he had not seen her to talk to at any length since that special night. Sometimes he began to wonder if she regretted kissing him and was now avoiding him. Nevertheless he found that she was never far from his thoughts, especially when he lay naked and alone in his bed in Plas Rhianda wishing that she was with him and knowing in his heart that he had already committed himself to her, but did not dare to tell her.

The purpose of the Final Examiners Meeting was simply to decide on the classification of the degree to be awarded to each final year student, and to resolve any disagreements or differences between the internal and external examiners. Disagreements were generally rare. External examiners were expected to mark to the same standards that they would apply in their own universities and, contrary to popular belief, there was a remarkable uniformity of academic standards between universities, even if they appeared to be wildly different in character and perceived quality. Most students fell easily into broadly recognised levels of ability and there was usually a consensus about what class of degree they should take. Occasionally, however, there were external examiners who believed that it was their duty to challenge the internal marks as a matter of principle. They were usually motivated by two considerations. Firstly they wished to appear both important and conscientious. Secondly they wished to assert their own intellectual superiority by knocking down the marks of the internal examiners. In such circumstances undergraduates might become canon fodder in battles of egos. The external examiner assigned to mark the medieval papers was an associate of Dr Medusa, one Dr Duncan

Kelpy from the very prestigious University of Oban, and Dr Kelpy considered himself to be a considerable cut above the people at this tin pot Welsh college. He was Scottish, of course, and stereotypically dour, with sandy hair, a small Germanic moustache and bad teeth. This was the first year of Kelpy's three year stint externalling at St Dynion's and he intended to be combative, notwithstanding his limp and lifeless handshake and dull and utterly humourless conversation. He was dreary, tetchy and unimaginative, forever picking on tiny errors of fact. In a way he was a mirror image of Seaton, but a fanatic of another kind. He liked to consider himself a profound scholar, and was certainly widely published, though largely unread, at least by undergraduates who couldn't get past his turgid literary style. The Kelpys of the academic world were rather more common than the Seatons and, in their way, more dangerous because they played the academic career game and were often successful in getting to the top of their profession, where they then wielded a baleful power over the lives of others.

The External Examiners meeting convened in the Senior Common Room Reading Room, the same room through which Jenny Saville had passed on her way to her death. Her exam results would not figure in these discussions, though there was a row of reasonable course-work marks against her name in the final year mark records, carefully compiled in longhand by Lucy Towler from the essay marks occasionally returned to her by tutors. The room had been rearranged with a number of small oblong tables put end to end, with one larger table set at right angles to form a T. This top table was in front of the south facing window through which streamed the unaccustomed afternoon sun, blinding those sitting further down the table and casting the faces of the senior academics arrayed across it into deep shadow. In the centre of the top table was Dr Gwyn Davies, the acting head of department, with Dr John Ellerby, on his right, as examination secretary. The five externals, one for each period, plus one for archaeology and one for Welsh History, were positioned on either side of the top table, and the lesser ranks of staff lined the sides of tables, with the junior staff, including Marcus, at the bottom end, well away from the seats of power. Others sat in chairs against the walls, behind and beside the central tables. Seaton always appeared for Examiners meetings, on his best behaviour, and had inserted himself approximately half way down the table, at the interface between the great at the head of the T, and the good at the foot.

Everyone was given a large photocopied grid on which the names of the degree candidates were arranged in alphabetical order. Against each name was a row of Greek letters written in Lucy Towler's spidery hand, enhanced by pluses and minuses and crowded into columns which were too narrow to accommodate all the marks and their suffixes. Because not all of the students took the same courses and exam papers the marks sprawled over something like eighteen columns, comprising all the courses on offer in the department in that year. As result of this the grid was extraordinarily difficult to read. At the

extremities it became almost impossible to construe any meaningful relationship between marks, names and papers. Moreover there were many blanks where the externals had not yet returned the marks. These would have to be filled by hand during the course of the meeting, and the marks themselves were often expanded beyond the basic marking scale by the introduction of qualifying subsidiary marks such as β++?+, or α?-. The possibilities for error were manifold, but in spite of this most students did end up with the degrees they deserved, though often more by luck than by good judgment.

Marcus riffled through the marks for his students. This was the first time that he had seen them consolidated into a mark sheet, and so far as he could see they were more or less what he expected, except that Dr Kelpy had moved all his European and British History course marks down the equivalent of one + point, but had not yet returned any marks for the Origins of Parliament Special Subject, the last papers to be sent to him, so he could not see what the final mark for Sophie and the other candidates in that course would be. Dr. Kelpy always reduced the internal marks before he even started marking the papers because he believed that all internal markers deliberately over marked in order to boost the performance of their students in the hope that some of the inflated marks would get past the external. He did it himself for his own students, but his job here was to cut them back to size. So he always began by taking a plus off each internal mark, and adjusted the final mark up or down after marking the paper. Marcus was a severe but fair marker and did not inflate marks.

The meeting came to order. Dr Gwyn Davies stood up, adjusted his glasses, and addressed the meeting in a suitably sombre tone.

“Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues, I’m sure you will all be pleased to welcome our external examiners. Professor ap Thomas for Welsh History, Professor Morton for Modern History, Dr Carter for Early Modern, Dr Sidmouth for Archaeology, and may we especially welcome Dr Duncan Kelpy from Oban, who is our new external for Medieval history. Dr Kelpy did something to his face which looked a little like a condescending smile.

“First of all,” Dr Davies continued, “I would ask you all to stand for a moment in memory of our student Miss Jenny Saville who died under tragic circumstances at the beginning of this term.”

Everyone stood and remained solemnly silent for one minute. And then the meeting began.

“We will follow, “said Dr Davies, “ the customary practices of previous years. I will read out the names and marks and we will allocate the class of degree according to the overall preponderance of marks. In order to secure a class a candidate must have a preponderance of marks within or above that class, and the other marks must not fall more than one class below. If anyone disagrees, or if there is any special case, we will stop and discuss it. May I remind you that the decisions we make here are final and absolute decisions. There is no form of appeal and they cannot be changed.”

Kelpy interjected. “Aye, excuse me Dr Davies.” His voice was both querulous and combative at the same time. “I’d just like to have a copy of your marking equivalents, in case there are any discrepancies between my marking scale and yours. Am I to understand that Beta Plus is the bottom of the upper second category, and Beta Alpha is the top of the second class? I’d just like that to be clarified. Unfortunately I was not sent a copy of your marking scale. No doubt some problem with the post.”

Dr Davies looked flustered, “er…. Yes, that is correct. I’m sorry Dr Kelpy. We do normally send copies of our marking scale with the papers. There must have been some misunderstanding. But I’m sure that they are very similar.” He fiddled with his glasses and looked embarrassed, then shuffled through the thick folder of dog eared papers in front of him and eventually produced a mark sheet which he passed to Kelpy.

“Aye,” said Kelpy, satisfied at having scored his first point in the battle, “thank you.” The marking scales were, of course, identical, as Kelpy well knew.

Davies paused, and then took off his spectacles to replace them with a pair of pince-nez. Marcus liked Dr Davies. He was an anachronism and a rarity in a profession which was increasingly at the mercy of careerist young men for whom scholarship was merely a means to power and influence, rather than an end in itself. Dr Davies was the son of a local coal miner who had made his way as a respected scholar amongst a generation of academics able to devote themselves to scholarship without financial sacrifice because of their upper middle class backgrounds. Marcus liked to think that he belonged in spirit to this nobler and purer generation of academics, if only because he too loved his work for its own sake. But in truth Marcus was himself a relic of that earlier generation of wealthy gentlemen scholars. Davies began to read along the first line.

“Mr Michael Allard. Reasonable run of marks here. The internal marks are β, β, β-, β=, β, β, β+, β+ and these are confirmed by the externals. May I just remind you that the last two marks are the dissertation marks. The dissertation is equivalent to two conventional papers. Also, we give precedence to the external marks, unless there is a dispute.” He paused and looked round the table. “This looks to me like a clear lower second. Only two marks above the line. Are we agreed?” No one dissented. Davies continued, droning through the alphabet. After a few lines it became increasingly difficult to follow the marks across the grid. Marcus tried to focus on them, but it was very hot in the room, which was crowded, and many of the figures clustered round the table were gradually being shrouded in the billowing cigarette and pipe smoke which was one of the curses of departmental meetings. In the end Marcus was just a junior lecturer and it was unlikely that his opinion would be sought, or listened to if it was. Seaton, sitting at the cusp, was lolling back indolently in his chair ostentatiously ignoring the proceedings of the meeting and puffing out rings of smoke from Black Russian cigarettes savoured through a long ivory cigarette holder. James

Sinclair was staring at the ceiling, lost, perhaps, in the plot of his next novel. Dr Dowson, aka Dr Medusa, was staring admiringly at the worthy Scot, her cold hard mouth set in a tight line. Dr Ellerby, the senior medievalist and Marcus's immediate boss, was puffing out his cheeks and waving his mark grid in front of his face to try to disperse the clouds of cigarette smoke wafting over him and ostentatiously stubbing out his own half burned cigarette in a futile signal to his thoughtless colleagues who were gradually dissolving into wraithes shrouded in drifting smoke and flickering sunlight. It was unreal, dreamlike. Marcus looked up at the ceiling and saw at once what was attracting James Sinclair's attention. The sunlight streaming in through the windows was being reflected upwards and distorted by the smoke so that the ceiling was rippling with light. It was like being underwater, looking up at the sunlight on the surface whilst drowning in the choking stench of pipes and cigarettes below. The interminable drone continued. Then Marcus snapped out of his reverie.

"Sophia Katerina Davenport," Dr Davies intoned. "Now, we have a problem here. The internal marks suggest a competent upper second. That is β++, β++, β=, β-, β++, βα. The external marks, however, suggest a lower second, with β+, β+, β-, β. Down on the two Medieval papers. Up slightly on the Modern and Early Modern courses. However we don't have any external marks for the Special Subject which was," he peered over his pince-nez, trying to relate the marks to the headings at the top of the column, "The Origins of the English Parliament. Dr Kelpy, do you have any marks for this candidate?"

Dr Kelpy cleared his throat, riffled through his papers and looked important. He had a neat and carefully annotated book of comments on each examinee and Sophie was the first of Marcus's Special Subject candidates in alphabetical order. Marcus waited for Kelpy's verdict.

"The candidates for this paper gave me a lot of difficulty," Kelpy said, "whoever is teaching this course is teaching students a very unorthodox view of the functions of the medieval English parliament. I have therefore been obliged to make some major changes in the marks. In this case my mark is β= for the first paper, and β- for the second paper." Marcus drew in a choked breath. Kelpy had brought Sophie's marks down by a whole class, from mid to top upper second to mid to top lower second.

Dr Davies looked flustered again. "This means that Miss Davenport will go down to a lower second." Marcus put his hand up and Davies invited him to speak.

"What exactly do you mean by an unorthodox view?" he asked, looking directly at Kelpy.

Dr Kelpy surveyed Marcus, noted that he was very young and well below the salt, and gave him a scornful look.

"Mr Ross teaches this course," Davies interjected.

"I see," said Kelpy, "well, I dinna feel that I need to justify myself to junior staff. But there is no doubt in my mind that Maitland and Richardson and Sayles

established beyond any reasonable doubt that the principal purpose and function of parliament was the dispensation of justice, through the hearing of petitions and trying of legal cases referred from the lower courts. This student is arguing that the functions of the medieval parliament were political, administrative and representative. Indeed she goes so far as to say that parliament was whatever the king wanted it to be. She even uses the word protean. In addition her answers show an excessive dependence on social and economic explanations of the growth of parliament at the expense of the legal causes accurately identified by Richardson and Sayles." He stopped and surveyed the faces shimmering behind the billowing smoke screen.

Owen Seaton was yawning and waving his hand in front of his mouth in a gesture of extreme boredom.

"Mr Ross," Dr Davies asked, "do you have any view on this matter?"

"The views of Richardson and Sayles are no longer regarded as definitive in this field," Marcus retorted, with some annoyance, "Cam, Miller, Wilkinson and others have shown that the early parliaments were primarily concerned with politics and taxation. We know that the writs of summons to the barons and the knights of the shires and the burgesses all speak of the function of parliament as being for the great business of the king and kingdom, which means politics and taxation. We also know that on three separate occasions, in 1280, 1293 and 1305, Edward the First set up panels of receivers and triers of petitions with the express purpose of keeping the hearing of petitions and the dispensation of justice out of parliament *so that,* and I quote, in 1280*, the king and his council can, without the burden of other business, attend to the weighty business of his realm and of his foreign lands.* That is politics and taxation. So far as the social and economic background to parliament is concerned, my own research has amply demonstrated the interaction of social and economic change with the development of the constitution. This candidate," Marcus concluded, "has accurately identified and summarised current research on this matter."

Dr Kelpy was clearly rattled by this revelation.

"Have you published your research?" he asked.

Marcus shook his head, "Not yet," he replied.

"Well, Mister Ross," he snarled, with searing emphasis on the mister, "research unpublished is research not done. And in my university junior staff are expected to show due respect and decorum to their seniors. I do not expect to have my academic judgment questioned by some whippersnapper who doesn'a even possess a doctorate. And in any case, even if these arguments are valid, which I dispute, it is quite clear that Miss Davenport has simply lifted them from the work of others. She has shown no originality. And she has not given sufficient precedence to the view of Richardson and Sayles. Therefore I stand by my marks. However I am prepared to admit that this candidate argues her case very well and clearly understands the argument that she is advancing. She is very good with a broad sword, but not with a rapier, and an upper second

class mark requires skill with a rapier. On this basis, and in the interests of resolving this case, I am prepared to raise the marks to β- and β. But if the basic premise of her argument is worthless then the argument itself is worthless and therefore it does not justify an upper second class mark."

Medusa stepped in to support her hero. "I know this candidate," she said, "she is a candidate of very mediocre abilities," Kelpy nodded approvingly, "she falls very far short of the standards we would expect of a professional historian."

"Ninety nine point nine percent of our students never set out to be professional historians," Marcus said quietly, "it's absurd to expect all of these candidates to match up to the standards that we set for ourselves."

Gwyn Davies continued to look agitated, "gentlemen," he said, "can we find some way to settle this dispute?"

"There is no dispute," muttered Kelpy irritably, "this young man, what's his name, Ross. Are you Scottish?" he glowered at Marcus, "this young man is clearly very inexperienced at examining, and he has been misleading his students by encouraging them to pursue very unorthodox historical opinions. I'm not prepared to make any further changes to my marks. We are here to teach them to get things right. No to fill up exam papers with irrelevant twaddle." More enthusiastic nodding from Medusa.

"Only in your opinion, " Marcus said acidly, "and in the last resort it is only a matter of opinion. There is no such thing as a correct answer, only a best probable answer based on the evidence and historical opinion available. Miss Davenport has satisfied that objective."

Gwyn Davies looked despairingly at Dr Ellerby. "Dr Ellerby, you're a medievalist. What's your opinion on this?"

Ellerby shrugged. He had already decided that he didn't like Dr Kelpy, not least because Kelpy had performed the same brutal surgery on the marks of his own students. "Not my field I'm afraid. Constitutional history is not fashionable at present, too hard I think. Marcus may have a point, because it is his specialism. But it has always been a rule here to abide by the decisions of the externals. In this case, though, I would be tempted to give Miss Davenport the benefit of the doubt. I remember her from the first year introduction to medieval history course and she struck me then as being a conscientious and very perceptive student. Certainly potential upper second class material. And if you look at her essay record most of the marks are in the upper second range, though she obviously has less aptitude in the courses she took with Dr Seaton and Dr Dowson. That's often the case. She is primarily a medievalist and, in my view, a competent one."

Gwyn Davies breathed an audible sigh of relief, as though some awful responsibility had been lifted from him. "We could vote on this," he said, hopefully, "can we have a show of hands please, in favour of an upper second."

A majority of hands rose around the table. Marcus too breathed a sigh of relief. His heart stopped racing.

Owen Seaton turned to the copiously moustachioed Walter Pritchard, who was sitting next to him and whispered something to him in Welsh sufficiently loudly for Gwyn Davies to hear. His head jerked up and he looked sharply at Marcus.

"What was that?" Davies asked, "what did you say?"

"Mae'r yma yn marcio ychwanegiod. Mae on cael rhyw gydai." Seaton repeated his phrase in Welsh, now audible to the whole room. The Welsh staff stared open mouthed at Marcus.

"I dinna wish to impugn a noble Celtic language," said Kelpy, "but I think we must speak in English, odious though it may be to Celtic peoples."

Seaton shrugged his shoulders, "I just said… these are bonus marks. He's sleeping with her." There was a horrified gasp from the chorus round the table.

"What the hell do you mean by that?" Marcus snapped, going cold with rage.

"I mean," said Seaton lazily, "it's well known that you are in a relationship with Miss Davenport. Nothing wrong with that. Good luck to you. But it might affect the objectivity of your marking."

"That is not true," Marcus said quietly, "I am not having a relationship with Miss Davenport." But in his heart he knew that there was a relationship, undeclared but inexorable.

"Well, you're often with her in the pub, and that American weirdo. And what was she doing when I saw you a couple of weeks ago, standing on the doorstep of her flat in her nightdress with her tongue down your throat?"

Marcus said nothing. It was true, and not true. Seaton used neither a rapier nor a broadsword, but was an expert with the misericord, that little knife that medieval knights inserted through the visor of their prostrated enemies to deliver the death stroke.

Dr Davies slammed an ashtray down on the table, his face red and distraught.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, this is no place for such talk." Dr Davies was puffing, shortness of breath exacerbated by the pall of cigarette smoke. "This is disgraceful and brings the department into disrepute. I will talk to you after the meeting Mr Ross. Now, I'm afraid that we will have to discount Mr Ross's marks and accept the external marks and that means that Miss Davenport will take a lower second."

"I think you've missed something," said Owen Seaton, smirking at Marcus. He paused, relishing the coup de grace, "Look at the run of Miss Davenport's marks. There are two missing. Four if you count the missing external marks."

The entire department and all the external examiners started counting across the spidery sprawl of marks on the grid.

"There are no marks for her dissertation," said Dr Davies. "No marks for her dissertation. Who was supposed to mark her dissertation?" He was wheezing and grimacing now, and holding his left arm as though in pain. There was total

silence in the court. The external examiners were paralysed with astonishment. More desperate silence, punctuated only by the furious shuffling of papers as Gwyn Davies struggled to find an answer to his own question. He looked in despair at Dr Ellerby, who shook his head. A cloud crossed the sun, turning the shimmering cigarette smoke into a louring shroud.

"Her dissertation was on the fall of the Kerensky Government, and it was submitted to Dr Seaton," Marcus replied eventually, once it was apparent that Seaton was not going to admit to being the putative dissertation supervisor.

"Well, it never came to me. I've never seen it." muttered Seaton.

"Yes it did. Miss Davenport came to see me on the first day of term and she told me that she had just handed in her dissertation for you."

"I never received it," Seaton hissed back, "indeed I only ever saw Miss Davenport twice on this matter. I assumed that she had given up and chosen another topic with another supervisor." This at least was likely. Seaton could not be bothered with dissertations and had long ago discovered that the way to avoid doing an unwelcome job was to do it badly, then the dissatisfied customers would take their business to some other sucker, leaving him in peace.

"No," Marcus retorted, "because you were never there when she came to see you."

"And Miss Davenport told you that she had handed the dissertation in? To whom?" Seaton was still smirking.

"She just said she'd handed it in," Marcus admitted, rather lamely, not knowing exactly how or where Sophie had actually delivered her work.

"And you believed her?" Seaton was laughing at him, "Students have been known to lie. Especially when they fail to get their dissertations in on time. It's the oldest trick in the book."

"I've read the dissertation. It's not my field, but it was well written and well supported by convincing research. I would have said that it should have gained a good upper second mark; β+ or β++. In any case, she had nothing to gain by claiming that she'd handed in the dissertation when she hadn't. Not in on time means fail. She's not stupid. She knew that. If she'd wanted an extension for a later submission date she would have applied for it."

"Bollocks," Seaton moved in for the kill. "This girl is a habitual liar. She's lied to you, and now you're covering up for her because you're screwing her."

Gwyn Davies was now clutching his arm in a tight grip. "Gentleman, he wheezed, "this is outrageous. Please, please, stop it. Stop it now. Please desist, both of you." He turned in despair to Dr Ellerby, the examination secretary, "if these marks are missing, what will it mean to Miss Davenport's overall classification?" Before Dr Ellerby could answer Seaton gave the misericord a final push into jugular.

"This girl," he hissed with all the venom he could muster, "is going around telling people that I told poor Jenny Saville to jump off the Tower. That is an absolute and evil falsehood. Do you seriously think that I could possibly say

such a thing to such a distraught student, or any student for that matter? And, of course, we know that poor Jenny could not have jumped from the Tower. She jumped from out there. This story about the Tower is a pack of lies." He pointed at the door by the window, which led out onto the balcony.

Gwyn Davies stood up. His face was ashen and his bald head was covered with beads of sweat. "Please excuse me. I'm going to have to leave," he croaked, "I don't feel well. Dr Ellerby will take over the chairmanship of the meeting." He left the chair, staggered round the table, still clutching his arm, and disappeared from their lives.

Dr Ellerby took immediate and decisive charge. "This stops now," he shouted, looking at Seaton, who he would not trust as far as he could throw him, and Marcus, who was an unknown quantity. "I don't know what the problem is with you two, but it does not belong in here. This is a serious matter. We are judging the lives and careers of our students. Now, for whatever reason, there are no marks for Miss Davenport's dissertation and no marks means a fail in that paper. However, in fairness to Miss Davenport, I would ask you, Dr Seaton, to go back to your room and check that you have not mislaid her dissertation. We will take a break. There is tea and coffee in flasks, and biscuits on the table in the alcove." The conclave rose gingerly and made its way towards the refreshments, chattering excitedly about the unprecedented and outrageous behaviour of their colleagues.

Seaton left the room and sprinted back to his office in the New Arts Building. Once there, he gathered up the great pile of unopened envelopes on his desk and floor and stuffed them into a black bin bag which he then carried along the corridor and dumped in the cleaner's utility room, along with the other bags of academic rubbish destined for the tip. Then he nonchalantly ambled back to the examiners meeting, noting, as he passed a window, that there was an ambulance in the quadrangle.

In the Senior Common Room Reading Room Marcus had been backed into an alcove by James Sinclair.

"Do you think she's lied to you?" he asked

Marcus shook his head. "No, I've seen the bloody dissertation. She definitely finished it. And she told me she had handed it in. She's got no reason to lie. I don't believe that she is a liar."

"I don't think so either," James sighed, "but she's had it as far as the degree is concerned. They've already accepted Kelpy's marks. You know the rules and you know what's going to happen. I bet that bastard lost her dissertation. Threw it away with his unopened mail most likely. They should hand them in to the secretary. That way there'd be some independent record that they've been submitted."

Tony Bishop sidled up to Marcus and whispered in his ear, "you old dog, are you really screwing her. Lucky old you."

Marcus shook his head. “No,” he said, “I’m not, and after this I doubt if I ever will. She isn’t going to be very happy with me is she? I’ve let her down.”

Sinclair put his hand on Marcus’s shoulder. “This is not your fault,” he said, “Seaton’s out to get you for some reason, and he’s doing it through Sophie because he thinks she means something to you.”

“She does mean something to me,” Marcus whispered, his voice trembling and tears forming in his eyes. “She means everything to me, and now I’m going to lose her.” James squeezed his shoulder.

“Things have a way of working out,” he said, “the plot can change.”

“I don’t understand,” Marcus said very quietly. “You would think that academics, of all people, would be able to sit around a table and reach a logical and just decision in a case like this. We’re supposed to be reasonable and moral.”

“Ha,” said James, “don’t believe a word of it. You’ve never sat on the Faculty Board and watched a bunch of ignorant and egotistical professors baying at each other because they’ve had their grants cut. Christ, if these people were running a business they’d be bankrupt in hours. Faculty Board is the best possible example of the utter fatuity of an academic education. The very problem solving skills we claim to teach our students we are incapable of applying to our own lives.” James paused and wiped his brow with a large spotted handkerchief. “I tell you something Marcus, and you,” looking at Tony Bishop. “It pays to keep your mouth shut. Seaton has got it in for you and he has powerful friends in the Crachach. Remember, you may have been born with a silver spoon in your mouth but he was born with massive Welsh lovespoon which will get him off almost any hook.”

Seaton had slithered unobtrusively back into the room and was talking earnestly to Dr Ellerby. In the smoke shrouded babble Marcus heard a familiar harsh voice saying “of course, I have no sympathy with students who don’t get their dissertations in on time. This is absolutely a test of strength of character. This girl is clearly not up to it.” “Aye,” said Kelpy, agreeing with Medusa, “this wee lassy is a mite naughty.” Medusa loved Kelpy’s Scottish burr. So scholarly and distinguished. She would make sure that she sat next to him tonight at the Examiners Dinner.

Dr. Ellerby called the meeting back to order.

“Dr Seaton tells me that he has no record of receiving Miss Davenport’s dissertation. Therefore we must assume that it was never submitted and that Miss Davenport has attempted to deceive us. I think that in future we must take care to record the receipt of dissertations. In my opinion they should be given to the secretary. So far as Miss Davenport is concerned non presentation of a complete paper constitutes an absolute failure and according to our rules the classification is brought down by one whole class. I think that under these circumstances we must also accept Dr Kelpy’s marks. This means that Miss Davenport’s recorded marks now suggest a mid range Lower Second. If we

reduce that by one class she will come out with a Third. I think that we should now vote on that. All those in favour." Most of those round the table raised their hand. "Those against." Marcus, James Sinclair and Tony Bishop put up their hands for a lost cause.

The rest of the meeting passed Marcus by in a crimson haze. He was furious with the appalling injustice that had been done to Sophie. He could not understand why the still smirking Seaton was prepared to go to such brutal lengths just to hurt him. For what? Marcus could not comprehend how he could be so hated for no apparent reason. Seaton, however, was a passionate servant of the tyranny of concepts. It was enough that Marcus was different, and therefore wrong. Nor did Marcus know what he could possibly say to Sophie. The proceedings of Examiners Meetings were supposed to be confidential so he would be bound by professional etiquette to say nothing to her of what had happened, and he could think of no way, other than the truth, to try to console her. At the moment that he was about to fall properly in love for the first and last time it was all going to be snatched away from him. The meeting droned on until the last student was despatched. Many of his Special Subject students had been savaged by Kelpy, but most had sufficient supporting marks in other courses to be given the degree classification they deserved. Sophie alone of the bright students was cast into the third class limbo of the idle and the ignorant.

After the official mark sheets were signed the classified degree results were transcribed onto a final sheet which was then taken down the echoing Professors' Corridor and pinned on the notice board outside the presently vacant room of the Professor of History, where butterfly stomached students clustered to discover their fate. Marcus had always enjoyed the ritual of accompanying the marks and congratulating his students on their results, good or bad, and he desperately wanted to see Sophie, but Dr Ellerby cornered him before he could get out of the Senior Common Room Reading Room.

"This is a serious matter," he said, looking Marcus straight in the eye, "Dr Kelpy will include this business with Miss Davenport in his official report. It's not done to argue with external examiners, even if they are wrong. And it's also very likely that there will be some disciplinary action against you for apparently bringing the university into disrepute because of your alleged relationship with Miss Davenport. You know that your probationary contract should be renewed this summer, but because we are awaiting a new professor it may not be renewed until next session. Given what has happened you should prepare yourself for the possibility that the contract will not be renewed."

Marcus felt that cold hand grip his heart. "I have not done anything that I should be ashamed of. What about Seaton?" then, "what am I supposed to tell Miss Davenport?"

"Dr Seaton is a Senior Lecturer and he has tenure," said Ellerby sadly, "I'm afraid that the most he can expect is a slap on the wrist. But the new professor may take the view that he acted properly in disclosing your relationship with

Miss Davenport, which was clearly very ill advised. Students must always be kept at arm's length. One other thing," he paused to light a cigarette, "the proceedings of this meeting are confidential. You are absolutely forbidden to say anything about what happened here to Miss Davenport, or to any other student. You understand?"

Marcus frowned and nodded. He was well aware of the rules.

"I'm very sorry about this," Ellerby continued, "I hope it all works out for you. Perhaps you should tell Miss Davenport that she has been very unlucky. These things happen."

Marcus, released, left the room and went down the Professors' Corridor to the open area outside the vacant room of the once and future History Professor. There were still a few students, graduands now, looking at the list and commenting on the results, but there was no sign of Sophie. Marcus also looked at the list. Sophie's name was near the bottom, with the rag tag collection of layabouts who aspired only to scrape through their degrees. She did not belong with them. Tears welled again in his eyes. He wandered disconsolately down the tiled stairs, and back to the hut, clutching his mark sheets. Everybody else had gone to the pub, and would later go to the Examiners Dinner. Marcus had already decided not to go. As he opened the door into the hut he could see Sophie and Drew Parkin waiting outside his door at the other end of the corridor. His heart sank. Sophie's face was distraught and wet with tears and Parkin looked at him with unaccustomed suspicion. Marcus opened the door and ushered them into the room. Sophie avoided the armchair and sat next to Parkin on one of the plastic chairs, one hand clutching Parkin's hand, the other clenched round a handkerchief.

"What happened?" Parkin said, all warmth and humour gone from a voice which had become as cold and authoritative as anything Marcus had heard in the examiner's meeting.

"I can't tell you," Marcus said, sadly, "I can only say that we had a new external examiner who was extremely hostile. Sophie has been very unlucky."

"Why didn't you stand up to him?" Parkin's hostility was unconcealed.

"I did. But the externals take precedence. I'm only a junior lecturer you know, but I made a fuss and I think I may have put my own career in jeopardy." He sensed the despair in his own voice and so did Sophie. She looked up.

"I don't blame you," she said quietly, "I know you did your best. But I really, really thought that I'd done enough. I worked really hard. You know I worked so hard. The degree doesn't matter to me, but I so wanted you to be proud of me and I wanted to be a little like you. What can you think of me now?"

"Sophie, dear Sophie." Marcus knelt in front of Sophie and took both her hands into his like a medieval knight plighting his troth to his lady, "I'm so sorry that this has happened to you Sophie. You have been the victim of an appalling injustice. It's all my fault and I can't tell you why it has happened.

Someone has used you in order to get at me." He clasped her hands tightly, and looked straight into her eyes. He could not tell her what had happened, but he could provide her with sufficient tangential information for her to work it out for herself. "You must tell me the truth, how did you deliver your dissertation to Dr Seaton?"

Sophie's face creased up in puzzlement. "His door was open and there was no one in his room. So I just left it on his desk with all his other mail. It was in a big envelope, with his name on it and everything. I don't understand. Is it important?" then, after a pause, "don't you trust me?"

"Of course I trust you, but I can't tell you anything about what happened. One day I will tell you, when you and I are free of this." Sophie looked down at him, startled. "What I can tell you," Marcus stammered, "is that I understand now what you have been trying to tell me, and I understand that I must be with you. I know that you love me, and that I…." Sophie stroked his hands, it was always so hard for men to say, "….I know that I love you and I want to be with you."

"That bastard," Parkin exclaimed, missing the significance of what was happening in front of him, "he didn't mark it did he!! I'll break the bastard's neck!!"

"I understand," she said gently, "and so does Drew." She looked meaningfully at Parkin, who was visibly seething with rage, then back to Marcus. "Forget it Drew. It doesn't matter about the degree. People are more important than bits of paper. I do love you Marcus. I've always loved you. Always, in all our lives. Please take me away from here ….just, let's go somewhere, anywhere, away from here, just for now. I don't want our new life together to begin here. This is a cursed place."

Parkin's face flitted in an instant from rage to joy. He knew at once that Marcus was saved and that very soon the gentle and honourable person he had seen in him would be released from its solitary devotion to chaste reason and united with the soul and body he was meant for. Then, through Sophie, the whole man would be reborn and the Circle would be complete.

"Come back to Penhesgyn Hall," Parkin offered, "plenty of rooms there."

"No, no, not Penhesgyn, Drew, not now." Sophie was emphatic, "I want to be on my own with Marcus. Penhesgyn belongs to another life. I want to be with Marcus." She stood up, still holding Marcus's hands and raising him up with her until their faces came level. She put her arms round his neck, pulled him gently towards her and kissed him on the lips. Marcus had never properly kissed a woman, only that earlier promissory kiss ... and .... the sensation was electrifying. He felt the stranglehold of reason dissolving in a paroxysm of joy. This was the point of peripeteia, the turning point in his life. Warmth and love flowed through him as Sophie gave her soul to him. Then she released him and turned to Parkin, who leaned his lanky frame downwards and she kissed him with the same passion that she had just shown to Marcus, but gently taking back

from him most of what she had given during the last two years, whilst she had waited for Marcus.

"Thank you Drew," Sophie said, turning back and taking Marcus's hand, "thank you for everything you have taught me, and for all the good times we have had together. We will always be together, all of us. Now, and forever."

Parkin nodded. "It is your karma," he said, "what I always wanted for you. I had not expected it to happen this way. But it is for the best."

He turned and left the room. Sophie wrapped her arms round Marcus and kissed him again, a soft, warm gentle kiss which seemed to last forever. The horrors of the afternoon's meeting evaporated to another universe, lost and forgotten in this union of souls. He led her gently out of his room, and up the dank steps to the Porsche parked behind the Beverley Roberts Hall. He had not noticed the manila envelope with the Cambridge postmark which the porters had delivered to his desk with the afternoon mail. Nor did he see Parkin return to his unlocked room to read the mark sheets which Marcus, in his joy, had also left open on his desk.

Sophie sat quietly in the Porsche with her hands folded in her lap. Things had moved faster than she had expected and had been catalysed by events which had been totally beyond her control. The outcome had been what she had always willed but it had come through their shared pain at her catastrophic degree result which was not what she had hoped for. Ice closed round her heart when she thought that Marcus might not have trusted her. Trust was essential. Sophie had never in her life lied or deceived, but she had been obliged to conceal, which went against her open nature. Now, ironically, the malice of Seaton had brought her and Marcus together sooner than she had expected, and that was all that really mattered. She had no conception of what had gone wrong with her degree, and if asked to assess the quality of her exam papers she would have predicted almost exactly the marks that Marcus had awarded her, and also those awarded by Medusa and Seaton, where she knew she was weak. She was also very confident that the work she had done on her dissertation should have been of upper second class quality. Sophie knew herself very well. Her intellectual powers were closer to Marcus's than she realised, for Marcus, who did not yet know himself, had not been a first class graduate, and his devotion to scholarship, whilst sincere, was not as accomplished as he liked to believed. Sexually she was light years ahead of him but, in spite of her experience with boys, she knew the limits of her own sexuality and she was apprehensive about the coupling with Marcus which must come in the very near future. Emotionally she was wiser than Marcus and more perceptive, but she had a weakness for mysticism which she sensed that he found puzzling. She did not believe in God, or in the conventional church moralities which would have condemned her to the fiery pit for what she had done with her body, but she did believe that there was some unifying force which linked souls and bound them together for eternity. She believed that she had already loved Marcus in some other existence and that they must always be together, in this life and lives past and future. They were not two souls. They were the same soul in two bodies, male and female together as one. When she gave her body to Marcus it would be the first time that she had given herself to the man that she genuinely loved. That would be as new for her as it would be for Marcus. Even with Drew, who she loved almost as much as she loved Marcus, she always knew that she was merely learning how to make love at the hands of a master technician, but not how to give love and receive it back. Drew was a soul brother but not a soul mate. As for all those premature boys and one night stands, too many to even remember, she did it more to make them happy than to pleasure herself. Few had succeeded in staying with her to orgasm, and few had stayed with her for very long afterwards because they too were on voyages of sexual discovery where girls were just ports in an unexplored country, to be entered, enjoyed, then sailed from for the next port.

She looked up at Marcus and stroked the back of his neck with her right hand. Marcus smiled, but kept his eyes on the road. He did not know where they were going. He was just driving. Out of St Dynion's on the A55 towards Chester. It was now nearly six and the road was unusually clear. At this rate they would soon be in Chester. Sophie had hardly spoken. They had not stopped, either at her flat or his, to get clothes and toiletries or even just to think. Just drive. Sophie had no real interest in cars and knew very little about them. She recognised that the Porsche was an expensive and unusual car, but it meant nothing to her. She had no idea what university lecturers earned, or how much they would have to earn in order to buy a car like this. Sophie was really only interested in what people were, not who they were, and she realised that although she knew almost everything about the essential Marcus, the soul within the body, she knew very little of the world in which Marcus lived. This car was not the place to talk of these things. She wanted only to be naked with him in some vast bed, and then they could talk and love and love and talk until the end of time, or at least, she remembered with a pang, until she must leave to be with her father in Gibraltar, which would be very soon. How, she wondered, was she going to break that news to the expectant Marcus. Marcus, however, had a more immediate problem. They were now on the outskirts of Chester.

"Sophie," he asked, "where are we going? What do you want to do?"

"Darling Marcus, can we to go to a hotel? I said that when I was a graduand I would sail you to a magical place." She was laughing, little gentle chimes, the face no longer sad and drawn by the afternoon's disappointments, "it's time to cast off from your old life and sail with me to our *new found land*. *As souls unbodied, bodies unclothed must be, To taste whole joys.* Let's go to a hotel."

Marcus navigated his way into Chester and parked in the new multi story car park behind the Grosvenor Hotel. At reception he booked a room with a double bed and, almost without thinking about it, completed the registration form as Mr and Mrs Ross, putting Carston Hall as his address, rather than St Dynion's. Sophie squeezed his hand when she saw what he had written. Sophie was used to hotels. After her mother had died Sophie had never really had a home. Her father had sold the family house and used the capital to help finance his yacht brokerage. After that most of her adult life had been spent shuttling between boarding school, university and boats. And when she and her father were not on boats they stayed in cheap and tacky Mediterranean hotels with broken beds and dodgy plumbing. This hotel was different. Although Sophie had breeding and was ostensibly a middle class lady she had never had much money. All her fees had been paid with scholarships which she had won for herself, and her father had been able give her only enough subsistence money for essentials so Sophie had learned to do her best with what she had. The glossy girl behind the opulent reception desk looked at them in a slightly superior way, and became even more superior when they admitted that they had no luggage. She demanded that Marcus pay in advance. Marcus produced an American Express Card and signed

for what seemed to Sophie like an awful lot of money. Then the glossy girl handed him a key and pointed to the staircase. Sophie clung tightly to his hand. She felt as though she was a little girl again, going home, to wherever home might be, safe, holding the warm secure hand of this perfect stranger whose heart she knew so well.

The room was sumptuous and dimly lit. There was a large double bed with a substantial ottoman at its foot, two expensive easy chairs, a dressing table, built in wardrobes and an en-suite bathroom. Sophie did not waste time on exploring what could be discovered later. There was a more urgent landfall to be made. She flung her arms round Marcus's neck and kissed him with such searing passion that he could hardly breath. Her tongue ran round the edges of his lips causing him to tremble, then plunged into his mouth, curling round his tongue, then out again. He cautiously inserted his tongue into her mouth and the same dazzling sensations coursed through him. He felt the pressure of her breasts against his chest, hard nipples pressed against him. His heart was racing. He felt his dick doing it's own thing, stiff and urgent. He buried his face in the side of her neck.

"Sophie, Sophie," he murmured, "I'm so ….frightened. Tell me what I must do."

Sophie stood back slightly and looked at him solemnly. Her dark and gentle eyes radiated reassurance. "Just… follow me, do what I do." She slipped his jacket off and began to unbutton his shirt, then stopped and looked at him expectantly. Marcus, his hands trembling and his dick screaming to get out of his trousers, began to unbutton Sophie's sleeveless broderie anglaise blouse. Button by fumbling button, and with each button more of her full lacy bra and deep cleavage became visible until the blouse slid off her shoulders and dropped to the floor. Marcus stopped, his hands poised above the overflowing cups. Sophie knew, of course, what was going through his mind and before he could begin to struggle with the hooks she put one expert hand behind her back and the brassier slipped away. Her breasts tumbled out, full, firm and rounded, with dark nipples and aureoles and a flawless golden brown tan, the product of a week at Easter, topless on a Mediterranean yacht. Excluding Mo's brief flash this was only the second time that Marcus had come face to face with the naked female body. The embers of memory in his brain reminded him of Caroline's smaller more athletic breasts, but the image faded as soon as it came. Sophie was magnificent, soft and voluptuous, better than any man could hope for, better than anything he had ever imagined. She took his hands, kissed the palms gently, then placed them on her breasts. He did not flinch. Her skin was smooth, soft, welcoming, yielding. He caressed the weight and roundness of her breasts, allowed his fingers to circle her nipples. She pulled his head down and manoeuvred his mouth towards her. Marcus put the nipple into his mouth, then, not knowing why, ran his tongue around it. He felt Sophie shudder and give a little mew of pleasure. He transferred his mouth to the other nipple and repeated

the trick with the same results. Sophie's body responded to his touch, wriggling slightly and arching, as though she was undergoing a little electric shock. He learns quickly, she thought with joy. She stood back again and finished undoing his shirt, slipping it over his shoulders. His chest was smooth, hairless, good, she didn't much like hairy chests. She kissed his nipples and ran her tongue round them, but, like most men, he hardly reacted. Women's nipples, she believed, were directly wired to the clitoris, the sensations in them were already half way to an orgasm. For men, she thought, it was different. Poor things, everything was focussed into that ramrod which she could feel pressing against her through his trousers. She knelt down and untied his shoes and took them off, followed by his socks, then stood up and undid his belt, allowing his trousers to slide downwards. She straightened up and let him undo the catch on her wispy cotton miniskirt leaving it to fall to the floor beside the trousers and reveal her tiny white knickers. She kicked off her boat shoes and stood on tiptoe on her dainty crimson toenailed feet to kiss him again, pressing the whole of her body into him so tightly that she could feel his breathless heart racing. Marcus, she knew, was dazed and totally malleable. She slid her hands gently down his back, savouring the softness of his skin, and on down, inside the Y fronts so that she could feel the tight buttocks. Marcus, still only just in control of himself, took her cue and gently caressed her back, sliding his hands slowly down until they too rested on her bottom inside her knickers. Then both pairs of hands pushed the last scraps of clothing away and for first time they stepped back and took stock of each other. Marcus drank in the breasts, the neat waist, slim hips and the tangle of sleek dark hair and was speechless with awe. Sophie had seen many male bodies, and knew that they were all much the same, some larger, some smaller, some longer, some thinner. Marcus was a bit better than average, well over six inches, but quite thick, and circumcised, and rock hard. That was nice, she thought, but in the end these things didn't matter very much. It was the person that mattered. It was the soul that she loved as much as the body. She led him to the big high double bed and standing beside it with her back to it she embraced him again, rubbing her breasts against him and kissing him relentlessly. Then, pulling him with her, she collapsed slowly backwards onto the bed, still kissing him, and, as they fell backwards, she slid one hand down and grasped his penis. She gave a little shudder of delight at the feel of it and knowing that she was already running wet, she slipped it effortlessly into her vagina before Marcus had time to work out what was happening. Marcus felt his body slide into Sophie's and gave a gasp of astonishment. Then he was on top of her and she was smiling up at him, the fascinating breasts suddenly redistributing themselves into a new and equally seductive topology. She slid her body further up the bed, pulling Marcus with her by clenching his penis with the muscles in her vagina, an Eastern trick that she had learned from Jaz.

"Slowly," she stretched up her arms and her hands caressed his face, "slowly…slowly." She moved her hips backwards and forwards and Marcus

reciprocated, sliding in and out, very slowly. She stopped moving. “Kiss my breasts,” she whimpered, “again.” Marcus leaned forward and twisted his body sideways so that he could reach her nipples. He ran his tongue round them and felt again the little shiver going through her body. She tasted warm, she tasted of the sun, of youth and life and guiltless pleasure, and she was crying, tears of joy trickling down her cheeks. “Kiss me again,” she pulled his mouth down onto hers and their tongues intertwined until she released him. Marcus was now half kneeling and half crouching in the classical missionary position, not lying flat on her, but supporting himself on his hands so that he could survey the whole of her adorable body, and if he looked down he could see his penis sliding slowly in and out of that cheerful black tangle, and her hips moving upwards to meet him with each thrust. Everything was forgotten, that other cruel world of words and ideas. Everything that mattered in the universe was here and now between their united bodies. Sophie moved her hips a little faster stimulating him to speed up too. Apart from this glorious slippery, slithering sensation of being embedded in the body of this beautiful loving woman Marcus could not yet feel any response from the tip of his cock of the kind that he had felt on that horrendous occasion when he had jerked himself off. He discovered that if he slid a little further out so that he was almost completely free of her, and then back, there was some sensation in his knob. He began to alternate this with deeper longer thrusts and this seemed to produce little cries and moans of pleasure from Sophie. She lay back with her arms and hands outstretched on either side of her head openly abandoning herself to him. He knew what to do. He had always known what to do. She surrendered to this tender feeling of unity as control of her body slipped away from her. This was something rare for her, experienced before only with Drew and the occasional boy with more stamina than most. Sophie knew that it was not easy for her to climax, which partly explained her frantic sex life. Marcus was much the same size as Drew and seemed to be taking as long as Drew to come. Longer. They seemed to have been going for hours. For someone who had never done it before in this life Marcus was remarkably good. Like Drew, he could keep it going and he was rapidly learning how to vary the depth and speed of his stroke to maximise her pleasure and delay his own. She must stop comparing him with Drew. Sophie heard herself beginning to moan more loudly, in the distance, as though it was someone else. They had both been her teachers, Drew for her body and Marcus for her mind, but it was Marcus she truly loved. She tried to focus on Marcus’s face but he seemed to be concentrating on keeping his rhythm synchronised with hers. She started to pant, the rational part of her brain, which had struggled so hard to guide Marcus through this exquisite ordeal, capitulated to him and to her own lust. Her body began to writhe underneath him and Marcus suddenly stopped, fearful that he was hurting her.

“No..no..no. don’t stop,” she moaned, “don’t stop.” Marcus started thrusting again. She thrust back faster. Faster. Slippery sensuous sweat poured off their

bodies. Sophie's head went back, her mouth open and her eyes dreamy blank. Little electric shocks tingled through her, starting with her toes and radiating upwards until her whole body was pulsing in unquenchable spasms. Then the universe exploded in waves of iridescent light. She screamed and gasped for breath, hugging him and pounding her little fists onto his back. She came, and couldn't stop coming, wave after wave of breathless spasms. But Marcus didn't come. Marcus went on thrusting. He looked at the writhing, squirming, mewling Sophie beneath him, now apparently totally out of control, breasts wobbling like demented nipple topped jellies, mouth open, eyes wide open but vacant and far away, as though in a waking dream, and he wondered whether he should stop. He could feel his swinging balls banging against her bottom. His heart raced. All the rationality of his cold brain had succumbed long ago to the imperatives of sex. He could not begin to describe the sensations and pleasure that he felt. This total surrender to the primal force of life. He put his head back, gritted his teeth and groaned with exquisite pain. And then came that bursting explosion, beyond rational description, beyond the world of words, beyond imagination, accessible only to two lovers fused into one pulsating body. Sophie felt him surge into her and gave one last stifled gasp of unspeakable satisfaction before Marcus collapsed, panting, his face buried in her neck.

After a while Marcus levered himself up. Sophie's sweat slicked breasts stuck to his chest then came away with a banal squelching sound. She awoke from her reverie. She started to laugh, then hugged Marcus, then squealed.

"You're coming out," still laughing and squealing, "where are the paper hankies? Too late!"

Marcus felt himself flop out of her.

"Oh, gosh," Sophie laughed, "we're going to make a terrible mess. Quick, roll over on your back."

Marcus obeyed. Sophie sat up and looked for paper handkerchiefs, not knowing what to expect. The kind of hotels she was used to staying in did not provide paper hankies. They didn't usually provide toilet rolls or sink plugs or shower curtains either. There was a box on the dressing table which might be hankies, too far away. She sighed, then leapt out of the bed and sprinted to the bathroom. Marcus, concerned that he had hurt her in some way, but fascinated by the jiggling rounded bottom and the just visible swelling of those intoxicating breasts, called after her. But Sophie was still laughing. He heard paper being ripped off a toilet roll, then a tap running. Then two taps running. Then Sophie strolled back into the bedroom, her face radiant with bliss, with a wedge of toilet paper in her hand. She climbed back onto the bed and knelt beside him.

"What goes up has to come down," she murmured, "it's a messy business, you've got to have a sense of humour." She wiped delicately round his flaccid penis, mopping up the damp remains, then bent down and took it into her mouth, rolling her tongue round the tip and savouring its delicate softness and

residual flavours. It had always amazed her how this thing could go from rock hard to marshmallow soft almost in the blink of an eye. Marcus reacted with a sudden shock, then accepted that what she was doing was sublimely intimate. This was the way that things were, and the way they would be, everything new, everything a discovery, everything a gift. He looked at her triangle of silky black curls and wondered how he could return her gift. Do as I do, she had said, but Sophie raised herself up and put her mouth against his ear.

"Concordia res parvae crescunt, but not now," she whispered well aware that men loved to have their cocks sucked but had misgivings about returning the favour because they feared that it was somehow unclean down there, "in a little while, when you're ready." She gave a little girlie giggle which precipitated her breasts into mesmerising undulations.

"Clever girl," Marcus, replied, "now I know who put the lust in Sallust."

"Hmm.... but… we've left a nasty patch on the bedspread," she giggled, "this is a very posh hotel. I hope we won't get into trouble." Marcus started to laugh too. She collapsed on top of him and kissed him passionately, then rolled onto her side, propping herself up on her elbow so that she could look at him. She said nothing about what they had just done together, and he did not dare to ask, in case he had not measured up to whatever she had expected. But she was clearly bubbling with happiness, so it could not have been too bad, and now that he knew that he could do it he would get better with practice. He wondered, idly, how long it would be before he would be able to get another erection.

"Maybe twenty minutes, half an hour. Better to wait a bit. There's no hurry," Sophie kissed him again.

"How did you know that was what I was thinking? That's the second time in two minutes,"

"I just know," Sophie smiled, not admitting that she did not need to read his mind to know what most boys thought about erections and cunnilingus.

"Sophie, darling Sophie, You left the taps running," Marcus exclaimed.

"It's okay. There's a huge bath, and soaps, and smellies and shampoo, and lovely big towels and bath robes and everything. I've never been in such a hotel. We're going to have bath. Come on." It was all new for Sophie too, a first glimpse of a world which she knew existed because Drew lived in it and talked about it, but she had never thought to experience it herself, and though she revelled in this luxury it was not what she was used to nor what she expected.

The bath was indeed huge, with taps in the middle, so that they could lounge comfortably facing each other. Sophie had never shared a bath before. This was a first for her too. She knelt facing Marcus in the warm water and, having worked up a lather with the generously provided Imperial Leather, began to soap his body, sliding her hands slowly and sensuously over every inch of his skin, under his armpits and between his legs. When she had finished she passed the soap to Marcus who did the same to her, his senses overloaded by the smooth slippery, shiny, yielding body in front of him. He leaned forward and

hugged her to him so that he could soap her back, and shivered with joy as her boobs slithered against his chest and stomach. Sophie had never felt anything like this before. These beloved gentle hands, stroking, kneading, probing. Every little sense, every nerve ending tingled with ecstasy. Her whole body was singing with delight. She pushed Marcus gently backwards so that he was lying down in the bath and slithered herself slowly along his torso, sliding her nipples over his skin, letting the soft weight of her breast caress him, covering his mouth and face with wet kisses. Marcus rolled her over so that she was underneath and kissed her passionately, ignoring the soapy water. Then they both sat up and reclined with their backs against the ends of the bath and their legs intertwined in the middle. He could not take his eyes of this gorgeous sensuous body, breasts surfacing from the bathwater as she moved and wriggled, eyes flashing, cascades of dark hair, damp at the ends floating around her exquisite face, hands gesturing as she chattered about everything under the sun. He could not believe that it was happening to him, fearing that it was a dream from which he would too soon awake. Her skin was uniformly tanned, without tell tale white strap marks betraying a bikini line. Marcus wondered whether it was her natural skin colour and asked how she got such a wonderful tan.

"It's my skin," she replied, "my mum was Greek. That's why dad wants to go to Corfu. Her family is there, and that's where she died, in a car crash. You know how Greeks drive. So we kind of have roots. But dad won't stay there 'cos he doesn't like the Colonels. Anyway I suppose I've a got a Mediterranean skin and I tan very easily and don't burn. Dad's dark too. He could pass for a Greek. Just a week at Easter was enough, on a boat 'cos you know the sea reflects and you can burn easily." She stroked his skin. "Your skin is blonder, you would have to be careful." Then she looked at him with a coy expression, "of course, I don't wear anything on the boat, except in port. Dad doesn't mind. He has this thing about not being ashamed of our bodies, so I kind of take it for granted. He says I remind him of mum, like she was when they were young." Sophie suddenly started to cry, soft gentle sobs. Marcus leaned forward and stroked her face, leaving a trail of soap suds across her cheeks. "Sorry," she said, "I cry easily. Soppy Sophie my dad calls me. It doesn't mean I'm not strong. I just… cry.. sometimes. Not for myself, 'cos I never really knew mum, but for my dad. He's never found anyone else. I wish he had because he's so lonely. And I'm crying because I'll soon have to go back to keep him company and help him deliver yachts, and I won't be with you."

Marcus kissed the wet soapy adorable face then leaned back in the bath, holding her hands in his.

"Soapy Sophie," he chuckled, flicking suds at her.

It had not occurred to him to discuss with her what they might do next. She didn't seem to know much about his other life in Yorkshire. Sooner or later he would have to tell her. Would she be happy to be the wife of a gentleman

farmer, or would she prefer to be married to an academic? Either option was possible. My God, he was already thinking of marrying her. How could he be so sure? He wondered if she had similar thoughts, but, if she did, she had not picked up on what he was thinking. Then the import of her last words came home to him and his face fell. No sooner had they come together than she was going to go away. Sophie did pick up on that.

"Don't worry, dearest, it will only be for the summer, then I will be back with you. And maybe you can come and join us for a bit, on a yacht. That would be fun. A lot better than flogging a dinghy up and down in the rain here. I've told my dad all about you and I know he wants to meet you."

"How could you talk to your dad about me?" Marcus puzzled, "we've only just discovered each other."

"We've always been together," she paused, knowing that Marcus struggled with her mysticism, "I fell in love with you the moment I saw you. In the first week of my first year. The very first lecture you gave at St Dunnies, when you were so nervous, and I knew that we were meant for each other. I just…knew… Karma. And I knew that once you'd seen me, I mean really seen me, looked into my eyes, you would know that I loved you and you would love me. Can't explain it. There is no rational explanation. It's just meant to be."

"How did you know that I would fall in love with you? It might never have happened."

"Then I would have loved you from afar and lived in hope like a medieval troubadour but it was bound to happen because we are destined for each other. And it's the women who love and the men who are loved. Remember Byron, *man's love is of man's life a thing apart,' 'tis woman's whole existence.* It's true you know."

"And what about Drew, and the other boyfriends, I know that you are so much more experienced than me. How did you feel about them?"

Sophie thought for a while. She could not lie, a lot of what had happened was simply because she was a curious and lustful girl who enjoyed sex for its own sake, even if it had rarely brought her the satisfaction that it had so resoundingly done today. "I do like sex," she admitted, "I love the warmth and cuddliness of it, but everything I did was just preparing myself for you. I wanted you to enjoy me to the full. I wanted to give you everything, and I wanted to be really, really good at it. And I also wanted to be able to stand beside you intellectually, to have a good brain and be a brilliant shag. I've let you down with the brain I'm afraid." She looked crestfallen. Marcus saw the tears well up again in her eyes, but this time she managed to keep them back. This was the first time that she had mentioned the exams. Had it really been today? Was it only hours since he had sat in that smoke filled hell listening to Seaton the Drwg disembowelling his deepest beliefs? Not just for Sophie, but for his naive faith in the integrity of academia.

"You didn't let me down sweetheart, you were let down and I wasn't able to prevent it. I don't know what I can do to put it right. But I know the truth, even if I can't tell you about it now, and you should not be ashamed of your degree result. We are the same, you and I. And all that matters is that now we are together."

Sophie nodded, "and I feel a bit guilty," she added, "not that I have had such an active sex life, but that you have never enjoyed the freedom and spontaneity that I have enjoyed. It would be nice, in a way, if you could go to one of Drew's parties and just see what it's like to have sex with other women. Then we would really be equal."

"Wouldn't you be jealous?"

"Not of that, because I know it would be a passing thing. Like going to a seminar to learn how to improve your technique. Not that your technique is bad, you're brilliant, a natural, like me, and you learn so quickly. But, I just feel we'd be more..the same.. I suppose, if you had some of the experiences I've had. You've never had other women. You should have that experience, sow your wild oats, and come back to me and tell me what it was like. Then you'll be even closer to me because you won't be curious about what it might be like with someone else." She paused, " and you'll realise I'm the best because I love you and they won't. But you can't go to Drew's parties, not those parties anyway, because if it ever got out that you'd been seen there you would probably lose your job, or maybe even be blackmailed, if the wrong person found out. And apart from that, how could you go into the library and run into students you've had sex with?" She giggled, visualising a panic stricken Marcus under a heap of naked girls, then later being obliged to acknowledge them in College because he was so polite.

The bathwater was going cold. Sophie turned on the hot tap until it warmed up. "Isn't this lovely," she said, "so cosy, so intimate, no secrets." She flicked soap suds at him and wriggled her little foot into his crotch.

"What happens at these parties?"

"Sex, I suppose. People take their clothes off and talk and screw. It's surprising how frank people become when they're naked, nothing concealed. And the sex is not an orgy, it's kind of balletic or gymnastic, yes, gymnastic, beautiful to watch, beautiful bodies doing beautiful things to each other. It's not sordid at all. There's not much drink and no drugs. Drew won't allow drugs. Just… interaction. Often we just take our clothes off and sit around and talk. I often talk to Mo and Babs like that, even though they're lesbians. They know I'm not really like that so they don't try anything on with me.....though....I have...," she paused and thought better of what she was about to say, "but they like looking at me, so I'm pleasing them, and we talk about all kinds of things. Your friend Caroline goes sometimes to Drew's parties. But she just goes for the sex and to show off how good she is at it. She's.." Sophie paused, as though searching for the right words and not finding them, or perhaps searching for

ways of avoiding them, "on the surface she's a cold person, but underneath, she's different. Not what she seems. I…..know Caroline….I know her very well. I was very worried when I saw you with her, 'cos I thought she was just playing with you and she's very confident. If she really came at you you'd find it hard to resist. But it's sad really. I feel a bit sorry for her. She's really in love with an old man, her thesis supervisor, but she can't have him because he's ages older than her and he's married and he's a vicar and anyway, she loves… someone else…as well. Impossible. But she's very good at sex, in a sporty athletic show off sort of way. I once saw her do something amazing with Drew. I've never been able to do it 'cos I don't come quickly enough." Sophie knew that Marcus was curious, and they had been in the bath more than half an hour. Sophie's toes were sending her unsubtle message from Marcus's cock.

"Go on," said Marcus, aware that his dick was on the move, "what did they do?"

Sophie hesitated, but it was an opportunity to demonstrate to him that she really did not belong to Drew, so she continued. "You can do a scissors, you know," she took both hands out of the water forming a scissors with her fingers and sliding the two open fingers on each hand together. The X position it's called in the textbooks." Marcus got her drift immediately. "It's easy," she said, "to do it lying down, we can try it in a minute if you like, it's very good for slow sex and you can talk and look at each other. But they did it standing up. Caroline with her shoulders on the floor with her hands supporting her hips, and Drew standing over her, holding her up by her ankles with his arms above his head, and screwing down into her. And the thing of it is, she comes if you look at her, you know," Sophie paused, "well, you wouldn't know, but she's a prem, like lots of the boys, but it's unusual in a woman. She comes too soon and goes on coming and she makes a lot of noise, though I think she puts that on a bit, because she can hang in with Drew almost as long as me, if she wants to. I thought I came too late, until just now, and I try not to make too much noise. If you make too much noise men think you're faking it," she added thoughtfully, remembering Mo's complaints when things in Sophie's room had got a bit out of hand, "and she was screaming her head off, and Drew didn't stop, and he's like you, he goes on forever. In the end he just leaned forward, let go of her ankles and she collapsed in a howling heap. Amazing. Come on, let's do it," she yelled with sudden urgency, leaping up and cascading water onto him from her divine body.

She grabbed his hands and they both stood up. Water and suds streamed off her breasts. She wrapped him quickly in a towel and dried him like a baby and then dried herself. Marcus knelt down in front of her and buried his face in her pubic hair. It took a while to find the way in, then he ran his tongue gently up and down the soft open flesh, this beautiful gaping wound, until he found the clitoris. Sophie shuddered and gripped his head. He flicked his tongue round her, exulting in each successive spasm and moan and savouring the taste of her.

He had no idea that it would be so mind blowingly marvellous. No idea. No knowledge of what he could do to her. It was like discovering how to play a musical instrument; each subtle stroke, each delicate fingering, producing a new sensation in her. He clutched her buttocks tightly and pressed his face further into her, but Sophie was gasping and her knees were buckling, her feet struggling for grip on the wet tiled floor. She had never come this quickly before. She wanted him to stop and get inside her so that she could hold him tightly and come with him. She pulled Marcus up by his hair and when he was upright she leapt on to him, holding tightly onto his neck, clenching her heels behind his buttocks and sliding herself on to him. Marcus grabbed her again under her buttocks and held her to him, then staggered back into the bedroom bouncing her up and down as he went, to a coda of squeals and moans.

"How do we do it?" he gasped.

"You have to be very careful, you could hurt yourself. You'll have to lean forward otherwise you could rupture your cock. It's not easy. Hold on to me and grab my ankles when I'm in position. It won't last, it's not a good position for screwing. It's a kind of warming up look at me what I can do position. Hang on to my bum. I'm going to bring one leg down, then take my hands and lower me down."

Sophie leaned backwards, bending Marcus over with her, unclasped one leg from behind his buttocks and slid it between his legs, then gradually inverted herself until her shoulders touched the thick carpet and she could support herself by resting her hips on her hands, the weight taken by her elbows. The other leg then unwound itself and stretched upwards towards Marcus's shoulders. He grabbed her ankle, and then twisted round so that he could grab the ankle of her other leg as it stretched up towards him. In order to keep himself inside her he had to lean forward quite a long way and brace himself with one leg, otherwise there was an excruciating pain in the base of his dick. She was right. It was very difficult to thrust downwards. Sophie was laughing up at him, her inverted breasts falling towards her face. She was laughing and gurgling at the same time.

"See," she laughed, "it's difficult. I know I won't come in this position for a very long time, longer than you can hold me. Caroline could only do it because she's a prem and Drew's so tall. See, I'm not perfect after all. But I'd rather not come too soon. Where's the fun in that? It's a curse for Caroline. Much better to come together, if you can. Worth a try though. It's fun experimenting isn't it. There's lot's of things we can do. Let yourself down gently."

Marcus bent his knees and collapsed on top of her, his dick sliding out and sticking up uselessly. Sophie wrapped her arms round him and kissed him, then rolled him over so that she was sitting astride him with his dick mysteriously back inside her.

"This is better," she murmured, leaning forward and kissing him again, wet hair smothering his face, breasts dangling in front of him. She sat upright and smiled her devastating smile.

"Let's do the basic things first. We've got plenty of time for experimenting later. You'll like this. You don't have to do anything if you don't want to." She began to slide herself up and down onto him, then stopped at the top of the stroke with the tip of his penis just inside her vagina. Marcus felt her muscles squeeze him, squeeze and release, squeeze and release. It was excruciatingly, unbearably sensual. He felt himself losing control and writhing towards climax but Sophie, watching his face because she dared not read his mind, stopped just before the crucial moment and squatted gently back on to him.

"I can make you writhe and squirm too. Jaz taught me how to do that," she laughed, "apparently Persian men like it." She sat still for a few minutes until she sensed that Marcus was ready to start again, then thrust up and down. Marcus tried to reciprocate but found it difficult until she reached behind him and pulled his ankles up until his legs were folded akimbo with the soles of his feet pressed together behind her bottom, from which position he found he could thrust back. Sophie leaned backwards and put one hand behind her back so that she could fondle his balls and massage the base of his dick, then forward again, leaning over him, swinging her breasts into his face and brushing her hair over him. To her great surprise she realised that she was once again coming earlier than she expected and when she came Marcus came with her, so that they collapsed simultaneously in a panting, giggling heap.

Marcus woke up first, or so he thought, lying on his side with Sophie's bottom cupped into him, one arm under her neck his hand resting on her breast, the other draped over her waist, his hand just touching her pubes. He could remember making love twice more, once entering her from behind, croupade she had called it with a mock pompous voice, then, with a giggle by its more common name of doggy fashion, and once sitting cross legged facing each other, with her bottom sitting in his lap and her little feet with their deep crimson painted toenails, tucked behind his buttocks. Then they had crawled between the cool Egyptian cotton sheets and fallen asleep, utterly exhausted, and deliriously happy. He moved slightly away from Sophie allowing her to roll onto her back. She sighed, and murmured something in her sleep. Marcus slid his hand very gently between her thighs and cupped it over that curly tangled mound with its mysterious slit, which seemed to open spontaneously for him, allowing his fingers to slide into its warm wetness. Sophie sighed again, but did not wake. He lay there for a long time, resting on one elbow, gently caressing her with his finger and gazing with rapturous wonder at the serene sleeping face, beautifully proportioned and not quite typically Mediterranean, framed in sleek dark wavy hair, flashed with auburn, dark straight eyebrows, long dark eyelashes, small straight nose, high cheek bones and strong square jaw. His heart ached with joy. How had he come to deserve this? What gods had smiled

on him so generously? Sophie opened her eyes and everything smiled back at him. She pulled him down to her and hugged and kissed him. Then, to Sophie's intense relief, he took the initiative she had been waiting for whilst she had pretended to be asleep, sliding effortlessly into her, slowly and without urgency, and climaxing much later not in a frantic explosion but in a long tender melting together of the two bodies.

"We're going to have to go back to the real world," Marcus said sadly. Sophie nodded. He was beginning to be able to read her now, as she had always read him, as though they were starting to feel and act together as one person. He saw the flash of sadness in her eyes and the tears welling up and trickling down her cheeks. She hugged him to herself so tightly that he could barely breath.

"This is our real world," Sophie sighed, stroking his chest, "this has been so wonderful. And so long as we can be together like this, then new lands have no fears."

The first step into another world was a large breakfast in the sumptuous dining room of the hotel, which, they both realised, was the first food they had eaten since lunchtime the previous day. Afterwards they checked out and wandered aimlessly round Chester, holding hands and hugging each other from time to time. They both knew Chester anyway because it was the first outpost of civilisation beyond St. Dynion's and the first port of call for staff and students wanting a day out in decent shops and restaurants. Marcus wanted to buy Sophie something, clothes or jewellery, to remember this day, but Sophie did not need anything to remind her, the memory was wedded into her whole existence and would never be forgotten. But she did consent to let Marcus buy her a little plaited leather bracelet, costing only pennies, from a market stall. She tied it around her left wrist and never again untied it.

On the way back to St Dynion's Marcus told her about his thesis, about which he was becoming increasingly worried because it was now more than two months since he had sent it off and he had still heard nothing from Cambridge, and about his other life in Yorkshire, which did not take her totally by surprise because Caroline had told her about the mansion at Carston, though not what had happened there. Marcus was learning that Sophie was remarkably resilient and could move easily between different worlds, and Sophie knew that now that she had her rock she would be content with him wherever he might be. She knew that there would disagreements and traumas to come, as there are between all couples, but they would always go to bed and she would hold him in her arms and kiss him, and everything would be forgiven and forgotten because she would always love him and he would always love to be loved.

"Drew told me that academics don't earn very much," she mused, "and he said that to have a car like this you must have some other source of income. But I never knew, how could I know? I don't mind. It will be fun." She thought it would be nice to have money, but it didn't really matter. All that mattered was being with Marcus. She was already thinking that she might be able to save

enough money from the small wage her father paid her to fly back to England for a couple of weeks in late August and then bring Marcus back with her to stay on a boat in the Med. That would be fun too.

Back in St Dynion's they stopped at Sophie's flat where they were met by a very anxious Mo.

"We were worried," Mo said, "Drew told us about the degree. He's very angry. I'm so sorry Sophie. It should never have happened. Where did you go?"

Sophie looked at Mo and said nothing, but squeezed Marcus's hand. Mo knew at once what had happened and her heart sank. She flung her arms round both of them and hugged them into those massive breasts.

"Who says lesbians are miserable bitches," she said, "I love you both to bits and I want you to be so happy. This will cheer Drew up too." But Sophie looked into her eyes and her soul told a different story.

Marcus followed Sophie to her room and watched her strip off her clothes without a flicker of embarrassment, as though she had been undressing in front of him all her life. She changed into new knickers and bra and her plum coloured velvet jeans with the bells, and a matching maroon buttoned shirt, because she liked Marcus to unbutton her, which is what he did as soon as they collapsed on his bed at Plas Rhianda.

Table Talk

While Marcus and Sophie were exploring each other in Chester James Sinclair was sitting down with his ill favoured wife at the Examiners Dinner in the frowzy ambience of the Blue Room in the College Refectory. The building itself was an architectural behemoth from the sixties, the food was little better, and the company was a waking nightmare even more dire than the faded op art curtains and wallpapers which enshrouded it. The place names on the long dining table were traditionally arranged in chronological order with the medievalists at one end of the table, the early modernists in the middle and the modernists at the other end on the principle that the externals should find themselves in the company of historically compatible colleagues with whom they might be assumed to have something in common. Except, that is, for the archaeologists and the Welsh historians who had tables all to themselves. To his horror James found himself in the transition era between medieval and early modern, sitting next to John Ellerby, because the awful Medusa had rearranged Ellerby's judicious seating plan in order to put herself and Dr Kelpy at the end of the table so that she could command his almost undivided attention. As a result Dr Ellerby's fragrant twin set and pearls wife now sat opposite James and next to James's wife Sandra, who glowered malevolently at John Ellerby and shook her newly permed bottle blonde ringlets at James with all the venom of a genuine Gorgon. The early modern places allocated to Dr Gwyn Davies and his wife, next to James and Sandra on either side of the table were also empty, effectively isolating the middle ages from the rest of history. And at the very end of the table, adjacent to Medusa and Kelpy, there was another single vacant place which should have been filled by Marcus. James wondered where Marcus was. He had gone to his room in the hut after they had all got out of the pub, but nobody was there. It was painfully obvious that he was deeply upset about Sophie and so was James. She had been shamefully treated, but there was no way of explaining the missing dissertation and no one was going believe a silly girl student, women's lib or no women's lib.

"I bet its bloody prawn cocktail, steak and chips and black forest gateau again," snarled Sandra Sinclair, "I don't know why I come to these effing dinners."

James ignored her and turned to speak to Ellerby's wife across the table from him.

"Are you going anywhere nice on holiday this summer?" he asked. Mrs Ellerby launched into a discussion of the relative merits of Gozo or Juan les Pins. Owen Seaton appeared, late as usual, but resplendent in a plum coloured corduroy suit with massive flairs, a very frilly shirt, and a multicoloured kipper tie. He was also flushed, slightly dishevelled and obviously fortified against the coming ordeal by numerous brandies. There was no sign of his wife, who never came to Departmental functions anyway, even though a place was laid for her

with her husband at the Welsh table, because Seaton had not bothered to open the formal invitation to the dinner, let alone reply to it. Seaton looked for somewhere else to sit, dismissing the place where Dr Ellerby had attempted to quarantine him in the company of Rhys ap Caradoc and his belligerent owl spectacled wife who had taught herself Welsh and now refused to speak English, Professor Wynne Watkins whose wife never said anything, either in Welsh or English, and Walter Pritchard, who didn't have a wife and had nothing to say anyway. He ignored the two empty places which should have been occupied by Dr Gwyn Davies and his wife, and opted instead for the vacant chair intended for Marcus at the very end of the main table. James, realising that he was trapped with a shoal of sharks, decided to try to keep his mouth shut. Seaton leered at Sandra Sinclair who leered back. She'd always rather fancied Seaton who, she thought, was a lot more interesting than her husband and probably a lot better in the sack.

"Where's fuckin Ross?" he asked, peering round for his victim. Mrs Ellerby looked shocked and Dr Ellerby scowled at Seaton, who ignored him. "Bet he's shagging that Davenport woman," Seaton smirked. Mrs Ellerby was even more shocked. "And where's Gwyn Davies?" he concluded.

"Bloody academics," Sandra snapped, "all the bloody same. Can't keep their hands off the totty."

"Gwyn Davies is in intensive care in the C & A." Ellerby's voice was cold and angry, "he's had a very serious heart attack and a stroke. He won't be coming back for a long time, if ever."

Seaton raised his eyebrows, gave a Gallic shrug, puffed out his cheeks and then exhaled brandy fumes across the table. He'd heard about the death of Professor Cholmonderley and put two and two together about their encounter in the toilet on the day of the riot. Now Gwyn Davies. Apparently he had a lethal effect on elderly academics. Well, smashing academic gerontocracy was a righteous cause in which casualties were an acceptable price for progress. They would not be the first to drown in the wake of his ego, or the last.

"Tough…. still, he obviously can't cope with the stress. Better for him to get out now. But…. if that little shit had kept his mouth shut he might be here now. OH CHRIST!!! Not prawn bloody cocktail again. He's better off out of this."

Prawn cocktails were served. Sandra Sinclair turned up her nose and glowered again at her useless husband. James had long ago given up even trying to have a relationship with her. He found it hard to remember why he had married her in the first place. He couldn't remember being in love with her, though perhaps he had not known what love was and so did not recognise what it wasn't. He did remember standing in a cold and draughty church in rural Gloucestershire and asking himself what the hell he was doing there, but he was too polite to back out, especially in view of the efforts her parents had made to provide a lavish wedding. Like many young men he had drifted into marriage with more or less the first girl that came along, without ever considering the

possible consequences until it was too late. Too late came about six months into the marriage when he realised that the shy and apparently demure trainee geography teacher who had offered herself to him with all the enthusiasm of a bag of wet cement was a bad tempered and bloody minded termagant who blamed him for everything that went wrong, and especially for bringing her to this god awful place in the back of beyond where she could not get a teaching job appropriate to her qualifications because she couldn't speak Welsh. James retreated into the Augustan certainties of the eighteenth century, wrote unpublished novels in which he could create imaginary worlds where revenge and reward could be bestowed with divine omnipotence, and reluctantly kept his hands off the nubile young women who surrounded him.

The prawn cocktails were devoured and removed. Three bottles of Mouton Cadet arrived, raised to something considerably in excess of room temperature by the expedient of standing them in a bowl of boiling water.

Dr Kelpy, enthralled with himself and his obvious intellectual superiority over these cultural pygmies, took one look at the bottles.

"Aye," he grimaced, "we've been having this stuff on our high table for the last three weeks. Aye, and I'm heartily sick of it."

Dr Ellerby, who had his own personal grudges against Kelpy, made an odd strangled noise and his normally cheerful face suffused with anger. By some triumph of the will he restrained himself from striking Kelpy, and poured for himself a liberal glassful, momentarily forgetting Mrs Ellerby, who looked slightly hurt. Chicken a la crème arrived, confounding Sandra Sinclair who treated it with the same contempt she would have reserved for steak and chips. Dr Kelpy attacked the chicken with gusto, pursuing it through a minefield of semi cooked frozen peas suspended in a rapidly congealing sea of white sauce until it escaped in terror off the edge of his plate and scuttled across the grubby tablecloth. Kelpy speared the fragment of fugitive chicken with his fork and retrieved it back onto the plate, and thence into his mouth, as though nothing had happened.

"How are things at the University of Oban?" Seaton asked in his usual insulting tone.

"Very fine, thank you," Kelpy replied, "'tis a fine place to work."

"Bit out in the sticks, though," Seaton continued, determined to needle Kelpy in default of his usual whipping boy who was at this instant sliding his tongue round Sophie's divine nipples.

"No more than this place," Kelpy replied, gesturing expansively with his fork and spattering the adjacent diners with bits of chicken casserole.

"Of course," Ellerby choked, "the Scottish BA is really only equivalent to our A levels, is it not mister Kelpy?" He emphasised the mister.

"Dr Kelpy," Kelpy replied affably, No, I wouldna say that. The Scottish degree is really a Masters degree. Four years, you know. It has a different

quality altogether. We like to think that our graduates leave Oban with some genuine knowledge of history."

James expected Ellerby to explode, but he had evidently given up in disgust. Medusa said nothing, but her bright black button eyes flashed in defence of the combative Scot.

James winked at Ellerby, who grinned and nodded towards Seaton who was munching disconsolately at his leathery chicken and was apparently detached from the ebb and flow of communal malice. He was definitely not on form tonight. James unwisely decided to help him along.

"What do you think about the present Government, Dr. Kelpy?" he asked, watching Seaton's ears prick up.

"It seems fair to me," Kelpy replied, "though I didna vote conservative to have my taxes handed out to lazy good for nothing strikers. I'd be more impressed if they stopped paying out benefits to layabouts. If they want to strike, let them pay out of their own pockets. And as for all this money they're spending on nursery schools and social services. There's times when I think Heath is a closet socialist."

Seaton rose to the bait James had just thrown him.

"So, Dr. Kelpy," there was no concealment of the sarcasm in his voice, "don't you think that this is the most reactionary government since Genghis Khan. Load of fascist bastards. Should be shot, every one of them."

However formidable Dr. Kelpy might be in the cut and thrust of academic debate his social persona was one of unshakeably smug affability. "One could hardly call Genghis Khan a conservative, could one?" he smirked back.

Seaton ignored this flabby barb, "The consumer society is just a sham, bread and circuses, bread and circuses. They think they can bribe the working classes with tit and bum and football and cheap beer. Well, the working classes don't stay fooled forever."

"It's all nonsense, you know," Kelpy continued. "this redistribution of income concept is just another socialist myth. Suppose you have a company which employs 500 people and the owner pays himself a salary of say £10,000 per annum. Now, if you expropriated his salary and redistributed it amongst his workers each would be better off by £20 a year, or about fifty new pence a week. That's not going to make a difference is it?"

"Bollocks," Seaton muttered. "You probably think the working class all live on unkempt housing estates with second hand Jaguars outside the front doors." Kelpy did not reply. An uneasy silence settled on the table. Mrs Ellerby tried to resume her conversation with James about her forthcoming holiday.

"Where do you go, for your holidays?" she asked him. Before James could reply Sandra Sinclair sneered at her.

"He never takes me anywhere."

James had no desire to take Sandra anywhere. As a student he had travelled overland to Greece with some friends in an aged Volkswagen Camper Van.

They had gone via Corfu, and Patras, round the Peloponnese to Epidavros, and Mykenae, and then via Methone to the Saronic Islands, to Aegina and Poros and back by ferry to incomparable Athens. It had been a magical summer, and at the end of it they had sold the Volkswagen to a young archaeologist excavating at the fourth century Athenian silver mines at Lavrion, and come back to Cambridge by train. He's loved it so much that he'd taken Sandra to Poros for their honeymoon, but she did nothing but complain about the barking Greeks, the noise, the heat, the greasy food and not being able to put toilet paper down the loo. So he'd never been back. He would love to be able to go back, with someone like Sophie Davenport, so full of the joy and wonder of life, but there didn't seem to be much chance of that.

"He never effing takes me anywhere," she repeated, with more emphasis. Mrs Ellerby winced. Was this really a dinner party with the intellectual elite of Great Britain? These ghastly people? Why did they swear all the time? Decent people don't swear. Once a year she had to do this. For the rest there was her garden and her husband, who had been good to her, and did take her on holiday every year to the sun.

"This Mr..er..Ross," Kelpy enquired, "is he Scottish? And why isn't he here?"

"Don't know," James said cautiously in answer to both questions, "maybe remotely."

"Don't know where he is, or don't know if he's Scottish?" Kelpy raised his eyebrows.

"He's a fuckin aristo," Seaton sneered. More Mouton Cadet had arrived from the bain-marie. The History Department did not stint itself at these functions, the only time in the year when it came together socially. Seaton had cornered one of the bottles for himself.

"What do you mean? Aristo?" Mrs Ellerby was curious, inspite of Seaton's habitual profanity. Her knowledge of Marcus Ross did no extend beyond having been introduced to him at the last two Examiners Dinners. "Does he have a title?"

"No fuckin title. Just plain Mister fuckin Ross!!! Just a landed gent. In Yorkshire. Rich bastard. Bloody wine, what have they done to it? And why is it red, with chicken? Where's the Blue fuckin Nun?" Seaton tipped more wine into his glass and peered owlishly at the label.

"If he's got money why in God's name does he stay here? If I was rich I'd leave this shit hole tomorrow," Sandra smiled at Seaton. He's a bit of alright, she thought, I could fancy him. She scowled again at her husband. At least Owen knew how to get drunk. Mrs Ellerby put her hands over her ears. James had long ago given up being embarrassed by Sandra.

"What about this girl," Kelpy continued, "Miss Portman? Is he really having an affair with her?" Medusa cocked her bird like head on one side as though better to listen.

"Bloody stupid if he isn't," Seaton muttered, "but he is bloody stupid. She's got tits like Raquel Welch and the rest to match."

"She's a nice person," said James, "kind, and thoughtful and she cares about other people."

"Oh yeah," Seaton slouched back in his chair, "and you fuckin listen to her when she goes around telling a pack of lies about me."

"No strength of character, you know, these young girls. Only interested in one thing," Medusa made her usual profoundly learned contribution to the conversation.

"Who is this?" Sandra's voice had risen to a ragged edge of angry urgency, "What do you know about this bloody woman? Who is she?"

"Someone I talk to in the Belle Vue, one of Marcus's students," James replied.

"I don't think we should continue with this conversation," Dr Ellerby interjected, "this is *sub judice*. There may be disciplinary proceedings against Mr Ross. So we really shouldn't talk about it."

"I don't care about *sub judice*." Sandra was insistent, "what is my husband doing socialising with tarts in the Belle Vue?"

"It's part of my job to talk to students." James tried to defend himself. He could see Seaton smirking. Now it begins he thought, he's found a weakness.

"You were fucking well chatting her up weren't you, I know what you get up to, you bastard." Sandra started to snivel. She turned and looked beguiling at Seaton. Half finished plates of chicken a la crème were whisked away and replaced by bowls of tired strawberries and a jug of cream. The ebb and flow of venom abated for a minute or two until the gossipy Welsh waitresses were out of range.

"Owen, was he chatting her up?" Sandra demanded in her most pathetic voice.

Seaton did his classic Gallic shrug, honed from years of holidays on French campsites. "I wouldn't know," he said in a tone of voice which implied that he did know but wasn't going to say.

"I'm fucking going. Don't you bother to come home tonight you bastard," Sandra snapped at her husband, her face suffused with drunken rage. She stood up, throwing the cheap plastic chair backwards onto the floor, and flounced out of the dining room, teetering precariously on perilous platform boots. The dining hall fell suddenly silent as those at the other end of table tried to determine what had happened.

James experienced the same sense of peripeteai that Marcus had felt when he had kissed Sophie for the first time that afternoon, but for James it brought not joy but pain. Sandra had made scenes like this before, many times, and he had simply faced them out. But the slide towards divorce comes not with a flood but with an incremental drip of small grievances into a reservoir of resentment which eventually reaches its limit and bursts out in a torrent of pain. This time

James knew that he had come to the end. He would not even attempt to go home tonight. He was thirty four and had been unhappily married for nearly ten years. Enough was enough.

Mrs Ellerby looked at the frazzled strawberries and cream, then at James, and then at Owen Seaton who had collapsed head first into his strawberry bowl. She looked appealingly at her husband.

"I think we'd better go," she said quietly. Dr Ellerby nodded. James followed them out at a discreet distance, and trudged up the hill to the New Arts Building where he persuaded the night porter to let him into his office so that he could sleep in his armchair.

The smug and unflappable Dr Kelpy helped himself to the abandoned bowls of strawberries, then turned to Medusa and whispered in her ear.

"Verra interesting colleagues you have Dulcima. I look forward to coming back next year to see how they are faring."

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Whilst the denizens of St Dynion's were dining on each other, vast intellects, cold and unsympathetic, in a university at the heart of the academic galaxy, were also considering the future of Marcus Ross. Sir Darius Charles Mortmain, Regius Professor of Modern European History at the University of Oxford and Master of Gaveston College, was entertaining, *inter alia*, his protégé Dr Roger Vipont, junior fellow in Medieval History at Kegan College, also in the University of Oxford, to dinner on the Gaveston High Table. Sir Darius, known amongst his circle, for a variety of reasons, as DC, was the academic equivalent of a medieval monarch, distributing fiefdoms to his acolytes and placing them in positions of relative importance in universities around the world, from whence they repaid his patronage by defending his interests against all comers, and ensuring, in time, that only those approved by Sir Darius were eligible for academic posts in their client universities and departments. Sir Darius was a powerful and dangerous man and Dr Vipont, himself a Gaveston man, was his grateful vassal.

Gaveston College had one of the best kitchens in Oxford, but because it was not term time the main Hall was virtually empty, except for a few postgraduates dining disconsolately at a single table, and a handful of the resident bachelor fellows who regularly dined at High Table. Dr Vipont sat in a privileged position opposite the Master, with his back to the empty refectory where he had dined so often as an undergraduate. He'd been rather disappointed that DC had not thought sufficiently highly of him to have offered him a junior fellowship at Gaveston. Kegan was a new and rather poor college, penuriously endowed by the millionaire manufacturer of strange plastic tartan car coats who was desperate for a peerage. Its kitchens were indifferent and its rooms were antiseptically modern. He much preferred the medieval ambience of his old

college. The refectory was particularly fine, with its black panelled ceiling decorated with gold framed paintings of the coats of arms of its founder and many noble benefactors.

The Master's vulpine attention was currently focussed on the adolescent, shock haired physicist sitting next to Dr Vipont who was holding forth with unfettered enthusiasm on the effects of high energy electron bombardment on the nuclii of hydrogen atoms, a subject which was clearly close to DC's heart. Eventually fruit appeared. The Master chose a banana which he laid carefully on the plate provided, and proceeded to dissect with the miniature silver knife and fork provided for the purpose. The banana was one of the Master's favourite tests for potential fellows. Anyone who ate the banana without the knife and fork was unlikely to be elected. It was essential to have fellows who were civilised and clubable. Gaveston College was not, after all, a zoo. Eventually, banana consumed, the Master curtailed his excursion into high energy physics.

"Well…most interesting Dr Fardleman," the Master paused to find some apposite termination to the discussion, "atoms and systems into ruin hurled, eh?" he opined. Fardleman, who was as unfamiliar with the poetry of Alexander Pope as the Master was with Ernest Rutherford, looked puzzled but nodded in agreement. "Well.. good luck with your atom smashing," the Master concluded and turned his attention to the vassal Vipont.

"Dear boy," he asked, "how is the book?" He was fat, bald and florid with a massive face and sharp piggy eyes with which he impaled his acolytes.

"Well, it's out next month, all being well," Vipont replied, "at least so I'm told by the publishers." Vipont was just thirty, only three years older than Marcus, but sleek and cunning, bright eyes and a foxy face, long pointed nose, ginger wavy hair, pale freckled skin.

"Roger Mortimer will be a hard act to follow. What's your next project going to be? Another biography perhaps? Had you thought about looking at Andrew Harclay? Should be plenty of stuff there. I've always thought the fourteenth century so interesting. So much disorder."

Vipont shook his head. For a modern historian the Master had a remarkably intimate grasp of medieval English history. "I've got some ideas. But at the moment I'm examining a doctoral thesis. First one I've had, actually. It's quite interesting. Some good stuff on local communities and parliamentary elections. But it's mostly in the thirteenth century. Edward the First. Bit of a jump really from great men to little men. But I thought I might move into that area. It's very hard to get information because these really are little people, knights and so on who don't leave much in the way of records of their own, compared with barons, that is. He's really had to work hard to find sufficient material to flesh it out. But it's interesting stuff."

DC nodded. "I've never understood this interest in little people. History is about great men. It's a grubby business burrowing in the PRO for odd scraps which never add up to anything. How does this thesis do it?"

"Well, what he's trying to do is find out how the knights who were returned as members of Edward First's parliaments differed from other knights in the local community. It's picking up from a footnote in Powicke suggesting that we should know more about these people. So, he's taken all of the knights known to have been returned to parliament for the North Riding of Yorkshire in the reign of Edward First, and he's set up a comparative sample, fairly comprehensive, of Yorkshire knights listed on the Great Parliamentary Roll of Arms. You know. The one Edward had compiled in 1307. He also includes Assessors and Collectors of Taxation. And he's worked his way through them, everything that he can find. It's a prosopographical study. The sort of thing that Namier did for eighteenth century parliaments. Bit boring in places, but very worthy."

"So, not original in methodology. Does it work?" the Master looked quizzical, "I've never cared much for prosopography. Lots of silly little biographies of unimportant people."

"It's okay," Vipont replied, "there are some errors, of course. And it's very much geared towards government records for evidence, but then that's probably all there is for these kinds of people. The conclusions are what you'd expect, but he's the first person I know after Gaillard Lapsley to have given substance to the various theories about who these people were. There's no attempt to look at the baronial sources of the kind I used for Roger Mortimer but then barons are so much better documented. Local knights, especially in Yorkshire, don't leave much of a mark on historical records, unless the king had an interest in them, and their own estate records rarely survive. It is quite interesting. I was thinking I might have a look at these thirteenth century communities myself."

The Master fell silent, sipping at the brandy which a rosy cheeked college servant had brought to him without asking, whilst everyone else was offered the Port. Vipont, he thought, was essentially rather boring.

"Who is the supervisor?" he asked, eventually.

"Bob Vavassour."

"Oh," the Master recoiled slightly, lethal piggy eyes focussing more closely on Vipont, "it's a Cambridge thesis." It was a statement, not a question. The Master sipped again at his brandy, warming it by cupping his hand round the base of the glass.

"Generally speaking," the Master advised, "I always used to send Cambridge theses back for rewriting the first time round. Just to remind them of where they stand in the scheme of things."

"I'd have to have some grounds for sending it back. But I haven't looked at it in detail yet. It's just arrived. It must have been caught in the postal strike. Either that or they took a long time to process it in Cambridge." Vipont was not sure what the Master was suggesting.

"What about retaining fees? Common in the fourteenth century?" The Master was sure of his ground. Vipont was clearly not on the ball, which was why he was at Kegan and not at Gaveston .

"But not in the thirteenth. There are some baronial indentures. The earliest known direct military indenture is in 1287. There's no evidence that I'm aware of that barons were regularly paying retaining fees to civilian county knights in the thirteenth century. Why should they?"

"The fact that there is no evidence does not mean that it did not happen. Failure to look for such evidence could be construed as a significant technical weakness." The Master had played this game many times and knew all the gambits.

Vipont nodded. He had eventually grasped the Master's drift. The Master continued to ponder.

"Didn't Vavassour just become Master of Walsingham?" he asked, knowing the answer.

Vipont nodded again. "I believe so."

"It was very unfortunate that Giles Beauchamp did not succeed in his application for that post." The Master looked pained, as though Walsingham College had dealt him a personal insult. "Who is the internal examiner?"

"I don't know," Vipont replied, "they haven't told me yet."

"Cambridge is short of mediaevalists at the moment. I'll make some enquiries. How do you like Kegan?"

"I'm grateful to have a fellowship," Vipont said carefully, "but of course I always hope to move on to a more prestigious college."

"There's a full fellowship coming up at St Onans soon, you might consider applying," the Master mused. "Anyway, think carefully about this thesis. Especially if you are minded to move into the same area."

"I will give it my full attention," Vipont agreed, and, since it was the first time that he had ever examined a doctoral thesis, he intended to give it more than his full attention.

"How is your…friend?" the Master asked, moving briefly to a different topic.

"He's fine, he's away at the moment, but I expect him home next week."

"Very good. You must bring him round for sherry one day." The Master shifted his attention to the Geologist sitting two places down from Vipont and asked him how his work was progressing. Vipont's audience was at an end. The spectacled adolescent physicist, who had been eavesdropping on this conversation, could make no sense of it and concluded that historians all spoke in vacuous ellipses impenetrable to ordinary folk like himself. He diverted his attention back to consideration of the mathematical implications of set theory for his own research, especially the role of the empty set denoted by the Greek letter φ, which might, he speculated, contain historians, but then, of course, if

it contained historians it would no longer be an empty set and the whole purpose of an empty set was to be empty.

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In another university, which liked to consider Oxford as 'the other place', Major Julian Armiger stood again in the dust and smoke of battle screaming "Raus, Raus, Raus" at the cordite smirched boys creeping out of the foxhole with their hands clenched over their heads, their grey uniforms torn and stained with their own blood and the blood of their comrades. They stank of sweat and fear and urine and vomit and everything else that went with the horror of it all. A Feldwebel, older, knowing that it was all over, anxious for the young men in his care, and believing that the English were compassionate to professional soldiers, shouted Kamerad, Kamerad, as he had shouted it a thousand, thousand times in Armiger's recurrent nightmares. Armiger heard the drone of yet another wave of approaching American Mitchells and waited for the crump of their bombs falling on what was left of one of the greatest and finest monastic buildings of the middle ages. One of the most sublime monuments to an Order of peace and brotherhood and honourable behaviour between men. He watched the sanctified stone erupt in plumes of fire and smoke. Entire walls collapsed, sliding down the mountain side and cascading back into the rocks and stones and broken trees from which they had once been built with such loving devotion by the servants of the servants of God. Then the smoke cleared, whipped away by the afternoon wind. The defiant German artillery started up again, followed by the crump of mortars and crackling machine guns. The parachute regiments were still dug into the ruins of Monte Cassino and were seemingly indestructible. They would fight to the very end.

"Bastards," he screamed, "Bastards," and unloaded the magazine of his Sten gun into the line of defeated men surrendering in front of him. He heard the sergeant behind him yelling at him to stop, then he too opened up with his Sten, well aware that survivors would tell tales. The line of boys collapsed screaming into a forlorn heap, some already dead, some dying, some on their knees pleading for life. The last one, blonde, blue eyed, classical German face, stood stock still with his hands on his head and looked reproachfully into Armiger's eyes. "I never expected this of you," he sighed in perfect Oxbridge English. Armiger, out of ammunition for the Sten, shot him in the face with his pistol, blowing away the back of his head in a spray of blood, bone and brain. He had seen this face many times, and occasionally he had seen himself as the young German had seen him at the instant of his death. His own face distorted with rage and hatred, his teeth clenched, his eyes homicidal, the hand with the pistol pointing straight at himself, a mirror image of everything he believed he was fighting against. This young German, probably much the same age, drafted out

of some university at the start of his life and plunged into a maelstrom of death. A student of English literature forced to fight the people he most admired and now about to die at the hands of one them. A boy, just like him, as he had been wrenched out of Cambridge and torn from everything he loved. Sometimes, in the deepest of his nightmares he felt himself inside the mind of the German, naked in his bed in his digs in Dresden, feeling his curious boy's hands shyly exploring the body of the young girl who loved him so much and who would also die undiscovered, incinerated to a crisp whilst hiding from death with her mum and dad and aunt Freya and her little dog Putzi, in the crypt of a small church which was irretrievably buried under the rubble of the great buildings collapsing in flames around it. A mortar exploded. Too close. It was the sound of Marcus Ross's thesis falling off his knee onto the wooden floor.

Armiger awoke with a start. He picked up Marcus's thesis. Boring. He hated these spoilt young men who sailed through their youth without pain and expected to walk into an academic career without effort. They had never had to fight, never seen everything they most cared about blasted to kingdom come. He vaguely remembered Cross as an undergraduate, and recalled that he had not got a First, and was therefore not worthy of serious consideration. He was teaching in some God forsaken college in the back of beyond, which was where he belonged and where he would stay.

Armiger had come back from the war and resumed his studies, taking a First and being awarded a full Fellowship on the strength of that alone, together with his war service, and the great shortage of suitable candidates for fellowships after so much death. His brief military career had stamped an indelible bloody mark on him, and although he enjoyed the monastic security of his bachelor life at Gallus, he felt sometimes that he did not really belong there. He had come from a long line of soldiers, the first of his family not to make a career of the army. The instinct to fight was very strong in him, but he had resisted it because he had discovered that he enjoyed killing too much and he rightly feared that he would not be able to control himself. So he had taken the Fellowship and done very little with it. There was one short book on the Benedictine Order and a few articles on notable Italian monks. He had no higher degree of any kind other than the Cambridge MA. which could be bought two years after graduation. His generation did not need doctorates. Doctorates were for scientists only. Now he resented these clever and ambitious young men who pursued their doctorates in the hope that they somehow validated them as authentic scholars. This thesis was simply tedious. Modern, analytical, statistical, unintelligible. Boring. He was not familiar with the subject matter or the period, but that was of no concern. Armiger had a reputation amongst undergraduates for being silent and intellectually lethal. His devastating marking of essays and exams was legendary and his courses on monasticism were so excruciatingly ascetic that few students ever enrolled for them, leaving him free to sit in his room and contemplate the past, both his own, and all the other bodies piled up in the

charnel house of history. His highest praise for the worthiest of students was; you'll do. Cross would not do. He had never done. He threw the thesis across the room, breaking its badly bound spine, and poured himself another whiskey. He had been twenty three at the time of the Battle of Monte Cassino. Now he was fifty one. He had prostate cancer and recurrent nightmares about long dead Germans who he soon expected to join in hell. He was not interested in the Yorkshire knights who went to the Parliaments of Edward the First, or in the fate of a nobody who was not called Cross.

Curiouser and Curiouser

Marcus eventually surfaced from two days of exploratory passion with Sophie feeling very tired and slightly sore. There was, he thought, no pleasure to equal the thrill of waking up in the morning beside this warm and responsive body. It required a real effort of will to tear themselves away from each other's arms, but both of them knew that they had an eternity to enjoy, and that the mundane things of life must eventually be attended to. So he had dropped Sophie off at her flat, kissed her goodbye, until lunchtime, and made his way to his miserable room in the hut to resume the life of his mind, shared now, as he was constantly reminded whenever he thought of Sophie, which was all the time, by the life of his body. In spite of his tiredness he felt calm and balanced, as though mind and body were now in harmony, the one no longer fearful of the other. Sir Thomas Browne might well be right in asserting that copulation was the most foolish thing that a wise man did in his entire life, but copulation was part of a complementary world with its own rules and infinite pleasures to enhance the pleasures of the mind alone. The white heat which he had kept caged within his heart was now joyfully diffused throughout his body, leaving only one unopened gateway in the deepest dungeon of his emotions behind which there raged another and altogether more destructive fire.

He worked his way through the pile of letters on his desk until he came to the letter from Cambridge. It was simply an acknowledgement of receipt of his doctoral thesis, but it was dated Thursday the first of June and it was now Thursday the twenty second of June. The thesis had been despatched on the first of April. There was an additional note to the effect that the internal examiner would contact him in due course to arrange the viva voce examination, but there was no indication of who the internal, or external, examiners might be, or why it had taken so long to respond. Marcus was nonplussed and could only think that the letter had been delayed by one of the now frequent strikes at local sorting offices. No reply was required, and there had been no sign of a letter from the internal examiner, so he would simply have to wait. It did seem to be taking a very long time and pangs of the old anxieties returned to plague him. He fiddled around for a while filing bits of paper, trying to concentrate on planning his work for the summer vacation, but thinking constantly of Sophie until, around eleven o'clock there was a tap on his door. His heart leapt up. It could only be Sophie, come back early to be with him, but it was actually James Sinclair looking for coffee and sympathy.

"You were missed," James exclaimed, "at the dinner. Did you go off with Sophie?"

Marcus smiled at him and nodded. James sipped tentatively at the Nescafe Continental instant coffee which Marcus provided as an antidote to the ersatz coffee offered in the morbid Senior Common Room, closed now for the summer

vacation on the reasonable assumption that St Dynion's finest scholars had gone into their customary period of aestivation.

"Was it good?" James probed.

"Let's say…you were right about Sophie. I should have listened to you."

"Well…given what happened at the meeting you might just as well be hanged for a sheep as for a goat. Did you tell her what happened?"

"No, not in so many words. But I think Drew Parkin has already worked it out. Sophie doesn't seem to care too much. She's hardly talked about it. She seems to be much more excited about us."

"So…." James said morosely, "you've found the love of your life. Well, my life is going to hell in a bucket."

Marcus frowned. "What do you mean? What's happened?"

"The dinner was a disaster. I was with that wretched Kelpy and Medusa, and Dr Ellerby and his wife, and Seaton joined us instead of sitting with his enemies on the Welsh table. And he manoeuvred the conversation round to the business with Sophie and put it into Sandra's head that I was having some kind of relationship with her. Sandra stormed out and now she's been to see the solicitor and she's going to divorce me for alleged adultery. I slept in my office on Monday night. I'm back in the house now, but I'm in the spare room and she's yelling at me all the time to get out. I'm going to have to find digs somewhere."

"Bloody hell James! I don't understand. How could you be having a relationship with Sophie?"

"I'm not having a relationship with Sophie. Of course not. You're the one who's having a relationship with Sophie and by God I envy you. All I said at the dinner was that she was a nice person. Sandra wanted to know who Sophie was and how I knew her. Apparently talking to a girl student in the Belle Vue is enough to constitute grounds for a divorce. It could have been anyone. She's as mad as a hatter and nasty with it." James paused to sip again at the coffee which was reaching a drinkable temperature. "Actually, I don't care. My marriage has been going wrong for years. I'm thirty four. Sandra is the only woman I've ever shagged and it was never very good and she's made my life miserable for yonks. I think I should seize the opportunity and be rid of her. It's going to cost. I'll lose half the house. She's a mean minded bitch and she'll try to get everything she can out of me but if she sues for divorce on the grounds of adultery I won't contest it. Even if it isn't true."

Marcus expressed visible alarm. "Sophie isn't going to be dragged into this? I mean; she won't be cited in divorce proceedings will she? I don't know about these things, but can't you counter contest on the grounds of unreasonable behaviour?"

"I don't know. I don't know whether I can afford legal fees and all that. Unlike you I'm just on a normal academic salary and I don't have much in the way of savings. I might just have to make the best of a bad job." James looked despondent and there was just a hint of envy in his voice, "In one way I'm

pleased it's all come to a head. At least I'm young enough to make a fresh start. I'll just try not to make the same mistake again. At least there are no children to complicate things. But I may have to pay maintenance. You should watch out. With women things may not always be what they seem. They put it all out to catch you and then things change. Sandra thought she was getting a hotshot Cambridge don and she ended up in this place."

"I don't have any doubts about Sophie," Marcus said defensively, "I think she's right. We are meant for each other."

"Maybe. I hope so, for your sake. You have a lot more to lose than me." James paused, then looked crestfallen. "Sorry," he added, "I don't mean to put a downer on things for you. I would trust Sophie too, and I don't think that you have anything to fear. Not on that score, anyway."

Marcus was not sure whether he was reassured. It was true; a divorce would divide his estate. He had always been especially fearful of gold digging women. But Sophie had not seemed to know anything of Marcus's wealthy background and did not seem to be bothered by it when she found out. In the end it was always going to be a risk. In the first flush of love and lust these things don't matter, but as time reveals the person behind the body doubts might begin to nag, and cold reason reassert itself. Marcus put these thoughts from his mind. He and Sophie were one and indivisible.

"Well then, are you going to tell me what happened? Where did you go?"

"We went to Chester and stayed the night in the Grosvenor. Then came back here and we've been at my flat in Rhianda until this morning."

"The Grosvenor? There's posh. Was it good?" James repeated his earlier question. Marcus was reluctant to answer. It was their secret. Not for James.

"It was very good," he replied eventually, "very good indeed."

"You certainly look a lot more relaxed. Lucky you. I don't even know what a good shag might be. It's years since I've even touched a woman's body. Sandra and I sleep in separate beds. She isn't interested in sex. Never has been really. If the sex is good everything else should be okay, all things being equal. It was never good for me. I often used to lie awake wondering what it would be like to be with a woman who was enthusiastic about screwing, and ended up having to go to the bathroom to jerk myself off, which is never fun. Lucky you," he added, even more mournfully, not knowing that his equally frustrated wife also lay in bed cursing her useless wanking husband and dreaming of being tied up and shagged with extreme violence by some hunky gorilla.

Marcus reeled at this intimate revelation. He'd never much liked Sandra, who always seemed to be in a bad temper, but it had never occurred to him to question other people's marriages. James slipped back into his troubles and poured out his heart about everything that had gone wrong with his marriage, all those half formed dreams and aspirations which had withered away under the corrosive onslaught of rancorous domesticity. Perhaps Sophie is right, Marcus thought, perhaps we are meant for only one person, and if we never meet the

right person and end up with someone else we may be doomed. Or maybe it's just a matter of tolerance, of give and take, love and forgiveness. James could not understand what he had done wrong or why Sandra had come to hate him so much. He had tried to be a dutiful husband. He had tried very hard to get away from St Dynion's to an English university so that Sandra could get a suitable teaching job, but St Dynion's really was an academic Sargasso sea filled with rotting hulks. Merely being there was an automatic disqualification for a job in English universities which regarded Wales with contempt. Escape was impossible. Everything he tried to do was met with a rebuff or worse. His situation was irretrievable. Marcus listened patiently, but had no advice to offer because he had no experience of such things, and from time to time his mind wandered off and buried itself in Sophie's comforting breasts.

In due course Sophie and her discreetly covered breasts appeared in his room ready to go for lunch, not at the Belle Vue, but somewhere out of town and less public. She was startled to see James Sinclair and even more startled when Marcus asked him to tell her what had happened at the Examiners Dinner.

"I can't believe this," she said, "what a bitch. How could she think that? For Christ's sake, all I ever did was talk to you. It's Seaton isn't it? He just cannot resist stirring. What are you going to do? You can stay in my flat if you want. I can stay with Marcus at Rhianda. I'm leaving soon anyway. But I'm sure the landlord would take you on. Course it's a girlie flat and you'd have to share with Mo and Babs who will be there all summer 'cos Mo's a postgrad." Sophie paused and her face clouded over for an instant, "but then," she continued, "if you stay in my flat people might think it's true. And Mo and Babs are lesbians you know, well, Babs is, Mo is a bit AC DC really, and we're all in the habit of wandering around without any clothes on. Oh dear. Maybe it isn't a good idea after all."

James, like most historians, had a good understanding of Machiavellian opportunism and naturally assumed that others were as potentially devious as he was himself. Sophie's offer of her flat was not the best solution to his problems but he could see an advantage in allowing Sandra to believe that there might be some substance to her mistaken conviction that he was having a relationship with Sophie, thus affording her the opportunity to make a fool of herself in the divorce proceedings. And he had not missed the body language between Sandra and Seaton at the dinner and suspected that Sandra fancied Seaton. God knows why. But Seaton was notorious for shagging students and staff wives alike and getting away with it. He was not known as donkey dick for nothing. Rumours that he was staying at Sophie's flat could easily be fed to Seaton in the Belle Vue and he felt sure that Seaton would not hesitate to screw Sandra if he got half the chance, just for the hell of it. He might then be able to counter sue Sandra for divorce on the grounds of her own adultery. It was clearly a time for Chinese whispers. He'd have to be sure to catch them at it. He looked straight at Sophie. She seemed so disingenuous, so open and anxious to

help, but he had begun to wonder what actually went on behind that enchanting intelligent face and whether she was as up front as she appeared to be. He knew that Sophie and Caroline Howarth, if not actually bosom friends, were part of Drew Parkin's following and he had heard rumours about what went on at Penhesgyn Hall, rather wishing that he himself could be a part of that sexually liberated clique. However obtuse Marcus may have been it was obvious to James that Sophie had been pursuing him for some time, and James had encouraged Marcus to respond in the reasonable belief that a little innocent sex would do him good. Now he was not so sure. He suspected that Sophie was just a pawn in some obscure game crafted by the inscrutable Drew Parkin. Well, maybe not. Maybe they were all just having a good time while they were young. Either way Marcus was evidently getting his oats and, if he was about to become one of Guru Parkin's acolytes, he might soon be sharing his oats with more than one mare. After ten withered years with Sandra, James rather fancied a little sexual liberation for himself, before it was too late, and Sophie might just offer an entry into that mysterious circle.

"That's very kind, Sophie," he said, noting the flicker of alarm cross Marcus's face. "Perhaps I will take you up on that offer." Sophie, he noted, also looked slightly alarmed, as though she had not expected him to accept.

"Okay," she agreed, "I'll move my stuff out. I'll be going soon anyway. Poor Marcus is so sad." She gave Marcus a hug. "But I've decided to stay on a little longer for graduation day. I wasn't going to go to graduation. Dad can't be there anyway and if I'd got the degree I had expected to get it wouldn't have mattered. But now I think I need to go, otherwise people will say I didn't go because I was ashamed of getting a Third. I am ashamed of myself because I know I should have done better, so I need to go for my own self esteem. Thing is I filled in the form saying I wasn't going. Who do I see about changing?"

"Jack Fairford," James and Marcus said simultaneously, "in the Academic Office."

"I know him," Sophie said. "I'll go and see him after lunch. Then," she looked at Marcus, "maybe we can go back to my flat and tell Mo, and pack up my things and move them to Rhianda for the time being. It'll be a bit cramped, but we'll be together every night won't we." Marcus smiled in agreement.

"Do you fancy lunch at the Belle Vue?" James suggested, seizing the day by its balls, "I'll treat you. You deserve it."

Sophie looked at Marcus. It was not what they had intended but it seemed churlish to decline the offer, and anyway Sophie was feeling very sorry for James who was clearly having a hard time with his dreadful wife. To James's delight Sophie walked between them down College Road with her arms linked through theirs. Standing beside Sophie at the bar James put his arm round her slender waist and gave her the gentlest squeeze. Sophie looked up at him, surprised. She didn't mind men giving her the occasional hug or a welcoming kiss, but James had never done it before and it seemed out of place. Owen

Seaton, sitting in his usual corner surveying the world from behind the *Guardian*, noticed it too, but could not remember what he had said to Sandra Sinclair at the fateful dinner. Never mind. If Sinclair was playing away from home his scrawny wife might be worth a phone call. He scowled at bloody Ross who had crawled out of the woodwork again from wherever he'd been hiding. Obviously he had been wrong about him and the Davenport girl. Or maybe they were having a threesome. There had been a story that she had been shacked up with two boys from the Drama Society. Maybe she had a taste for sandwiches. He wouldn't mind fuckin her. Wonder if she liked being tied up? He returned to the *Guardian,* to the relief of his dick which was beginning to get ideas about Sophie, or any available tart. He preferred shagging staff wives. Students usually had better bodies but they rarely knew how to use them, and they generally expected him to marry them afterwards. Staff wives just got divorced, which they would probably have done anyway to relieve the boredom of life at St Dynion's. He had not forgotten that business with the two girls who'd gone to the Registrar after he'd photographed them with a Polaroid fondling each other's tits whilst perched naked on his office desk. That had taken a bit of explaining away and he'd come near to losing his credit with his politically influential uncle who had more than once saved him from the Chapel fired wrath of the Crachach. Still, the challenge was the thing.

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"What's going on?" said Sophie lying on her back on Marcus's bed at Rhianda whilst Marcus kissed cream coated strawberries into her mouth, then deliberately dribbled the cream onto her nipples and delicately licked round them.

"What do you mean?"

"With Dr Sinclair? He put his arm round me."

"I think he's just grateful to you. For the offer of the room."

"No…something's going on. It's not what it seems."

"I think….," Marcus pondered, "I think he's not had much of a sex life. Maybe he just wanted to touch you to remind himself."

"Maybe…," Sophie looked doubtful. "Don't think Mo will be very pleased at having a man in the house."

"Probably he won't be there for long."

"Maybe I should have talked to Drew. He might have offered him a room at Penhesgyn. Most of the students living there will have gone down by now. Trouble is you only get to go to Penhesgyn by invitation. You've got to be a player, so to speak. And I don't think Drew would want a member of staff living there. I know he wouldn't."

"Why not?"

"Because," Sophie grabbed the bowl of strawberries and rolled herself on top of him, straddling him and sliding herself on to him. Marcus was getting used to this, but it always amazed him when it happened, not least because Sophie seemed to discover his erections before he was even aware of them himself. "Because," Sophie continued, "they have a lot of fun without their clothes on. Just like us. I think you and I should go to Penhesgyn before I go to join dad." She dipped a strawberry into the cream, held it between her lips and leaned forward engulfing his face in the darkness of her hair, crushing the strawberry between her teeth and his, then kissing him fiercely. "I think," she panted after bouncing up and down on him for nearly thirty minutes, "I think I must go to graduation to confront my shame. And we must go to Penhesgyn and confront our jealousy."

"Jealousy," Marcus was confused, "what do you mean. Jealousy?"

"Jealousy," Sophie squealed as they both came together, "Oh God, it's so good with you. I want it always to be like this….but....it can be even better." She collapsed onto his chest and buried her face in his neck. After a while she continued. "You need to know what it's like to screw another a woman. It's important to me. I need to know whether I will be jealous of you and you of me. And….we need to be free of jealousy."

"Jealousy? Why should I be jealous?"

"Jealousy is our greatest enemy," Sophie struggled to explain the inexplicable, "if we can give our bodies to others without jealousy we can free our minds and unlock our souls."

Marcus shook his head in resignation. "It's madness Sophie," he exclaimed, "we know we love each other. Why do we need to do this?"

"Because…" Sophie's voice was sad, almost regretful, "I've been living this life and I still have an itch for it and I would like to be free of it, but I can't be. And I need you to come into it with me and enjoy it with me. You will enjoy it. It's very erotic. More than you could ever imagine. I want you to try it, just so you know what it is. It will change you. You will be even better for it. You can't begin to imagine."

Marcus felt himself sliding uncontrollably into the unknown. He could not understand Sophie's reasoning but he knew that it was wrong. Indeed what she said was so inconsistent and contradictory that it defied reason. He had not expected this and was reluctant to give in to it. He felt more and more that he was being manipulated in some way. And yet, and yet, he had not seen or done those things, and his intellect was as curious as his body was willing. If Sophie didn't mind, why should he?

"Please Marcus," Sophie was pleading, tears falling on her cheeks, "please help me with this. I know it's very soon. I know we're still discovering each other, but we have something else to discover which is very important for both of us. Something I can't explain to you. You must experience it to understand

it. And we're running out of time. I'm going to have to go soon, and I don't think Drew and the others are going to be here next year."

"You just want to screw Drew," Marcus exclaimed, "you're bored with me already!"

"No, no, you don't understand." Sophie was sobbing now, her shoulders heaving, "I do love you, and Drew loves Jaz. He's devoted to her but if I asked him to screw me he would, and Jaz would share it and be happy for him that he was enjoying it with me. I want to be happy for you to enjoy another woman. This is the only way I know for us to purge ourselves of doubt and jealousy. I just want you to have a little of the sexual pleasures that I have had and enjoyed so much. Otherwise it is always going to be in the back of your mind and there will always be a doubt." Sophie was struggling desperately to find an argument which would win Marcus over.

"Surely lovers should trust each other."

"Of course we should. But you, of all people, should know that we can't escape the past. And I have such a past. You have no idea. If I had not led this promiscuous life with Drew and his friends I would not need to do this. I would be just another inexperienced girl hoping to marry an equally inexperienced boy and we'd find out about each other together, and probably disappoint each other because neither of us would know what we were doing. But I've done it all. Everything. Boys. Girls. Everything. I may not have a first class mind...but at sex.... I'm the ultimate professor. And I can't go back on it, and it seems that I can't turn my back on it either. So I have to take you into it with me, and hope that we come out the other side stronger and wiser. I know we will."

"How will this happen?" Marcus was still reluctant.

"Soon, before I leave, there will be a party at Penhesgyn. Just a little one. Not a Kong Party. Just a few people, so you won't be frightened. Maybe Mo, not Babs. Babs isn't…." Sophie paused, about to say the wrong thing, "Babs is a committed lesbian. She doesn't like men. And Jaz and Drew and…..," she paused, more tears streamed down her cheeks, "and Caroline, probably. And maybe Adrian, who's a friend of Drew's from London, and two girls, Puck and Tinkerbell who live at Penhesgyn. They're fun."

"Caroline? Caroline Howarth?"

"Yes, Caroline Howarth."

"Why Caroline?" Marcus was becoming intensely suspicious.

"Because Caroline is one of……part of Drew's little family, as I am, and I….. know about Caroline. I told you before. But you know that I think she's sad. It would be nice if she could find someone else, instead of that old vicar. She's caught in the middle and I would so like her to be as happy as we are. Please say we can go."

Marcus was astonished at himself, but if Caroline had opened the door to his sexuality, Sophie had inspired in him a frantic desire to explore it with a reckless imperative which overrode all reason. He had gone from virgin to

voluptuary in fourteen days. The genie was well and truly out of the bottle. It must be some kind of record. He was enthralled by Sophie and in thrall to her, and, even after all these revelations, he still looked on her cream and tear stained face with rapture. He nodded.

"It seems to me that this has already been set up. And I don't like that. But…if you really wish it we will go. But I'm not happy about it. And apart from anything else, I'm already threatened with disciplinary action because I'm alleged to be having an affair with you. This goes way beyond that. How do I know I can trust these people to be discreet? I'm putting myself at Parkin's mercy."

"What do you mean, disciplinary action?" Sophie sat up in the bed and stared at him with a look of total horror.

"Seaton told the examining board that he'd seen you kissing me outside your flat. And it's true. Why do you think they would not accept my marks for you against those of the external?"

"Oh my God!" Sophie shouted. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Dr Ellerby told me not to tell you anything about what happened at the examiners meeting."

"I'm sorry sweetheart," Sophie sobbed, "so sorry. I had no idea. And I'm just making things worse. Forget about the party. Everything will be alright."

"We'll see," said Marcus. His curiosity was getting the better of his caution. "I don't like to disappoint you. And anyway I'm beginning to wonder whether I should stay here. It really is a dreadful place to be a history lecturer. So, maybe it won't matter if I go to your party because if there is any kind of trouble for me as a result of it I will simply resign from St Dynion's and wait for a job at another university. Once I have my doctorate and a few publications I should be okay." Marcus was amazed at himself. The idea that he might leave St Dynion's had just popped into his head from nowhere.

Sophie was now very puzzled. She knew very well that her arguments for going to the party did not make a lot of sense, and Marcus would never understand her real reasons for wanting him there. But Marcus now seemed to be changing tack and trying to go to windward with equally specious arguments. "And what will happen at this little party?" Marcus continued, his curiosity expanding exponentially, "I suppose we all take our clothes off?"

"You can't give up your job. Not for me."

"For you I will do almost anything providing you don't lie to me. Now, you will go to the ball, and I will play ball. Tell me what will happen." His voice was measured and authoritative, as it was when he was lecturing. Sophie felt a frisson of apprehension. Up to this point she had been the dominant force in the relationship. Now the balance was shifting. She would have to follow Marcus. She relaxed a little. The situation could be defused. They were, after all, lying naked in each other's arms, which was Drew's hippy prescription for harmony. She followed through on his question.

"It's easier that way, and you know how relaxing it is." Sophie floundered for the right response. "And there'll be something to drink, and some food. And probably some music, so you can dance if you want to." She began to warm to the theme, "dancing in the nude is very sexy you know. And people will, you know, do what young people do at most parties, usually on sofas and in their parent's beds. We just do it together. Sex is sex. You can just do it quietly. Or you can make a show of it. Sometimes, if someone has thought of something new, a new technique or position, they demonstrate it. Then we can all try it. You know about it now. It's not the same as love. It just about technique. But mostly it's just nice to sit around holding each other and talking, or just holding each other and dreaming."

"And what's a Kong Party?"

"Ah, that's different. These little parties we have quite often, just informally between friends when we feel like it, or someone needs comforting with our love. It's almost like a little family really. Kong parties are business. Drew usually has one here around the beginning of the spring and summer terms. I've only been to a few. There are a lot more people, and they pay to come to the party and there's a lot of sex but it's more like theatre, or a floor show. Yes, a floor show. A spectacle. And Drew makes a lot of money out of it. He and Adrian organise them in London too, for young professionals, lawyers, bankers and city people who are still hippies at heart. That's where the real money comes from. And that's where Drew gets his inside information from."

"So..Parkin is making money out of sex parties. How enterprising. Why Kong?"

"Drew is nothing if not enterprising. You would be amazed at what else he's into. Do you know that he's bought an entire oil tanker full of Iranian oil and it's just sitting in Piraeus doing nothing. He says that within the next two years oil prices will go through the roof. He thinks OPEC is going to do something. I don't always understand what he's getting at. But he says he's going to make a huge profit. They're Kong parties because of King Kong. There are people in Gorilla suits. Don't ask. I'll tell you one day."

Students, Marcus reflected, do not buy oil tankers. And he was right. Sophie had misunderstood a casual conversation in which Drew had tried to explain that Jaz's father had bought the tanker and the oil and put it into Drew's name so that his youngest daughter would be provided for if anything happened to her family or their interests in Iran. It was a wise move. In August 1973 the Iranian Parliament took control of the Iranian Oil Fields and Jaz's father lost his privileged position in the private Iranian Oil Industry, but not before the tanker and the oil had disappeared off the books. In October 1973 the Egyptians and Syrians unsuccessfully attacked Israel and the OPEC countries retaliated by quadrupling the price of oil to the West. The tanker and its cargo were subsequently sold for more than four times its original value, half of the proceeds going into a Swiss bank account for Jaz and the other half split

between one of her brothers and Drew, who was already on his way to his first million.

"And you're screwing people you don't know?" In the end Marcus was more interested in the sex than the oil.

Sophie nodded. She didn't want to go down this route. "It's different. It's all anonymous. Most people wear masks, if they're worried about being recognised. And there are rules. It's the girls who choose. Girls can say no. The men can't. But I don't like it so much. I never went with anyone I didn't know. But then, you don't really know who the Gorillas are. Except for Drew. You can always tell when it's Drew because he always wears his old Etonian tie. A Gorilla with an Old Etonian Tie. Still you only have to go once with a gorilla, unless you want more, and if you run fast enough you can avoid them altogether. And if you don't run at all it means you aren't playing. So they leave you alone. Strict rules. I usually ran. But they rarely caught me. I liked to tease them. I used to climb up the ropes and hide in the rafters. They couldn't climb the ropes in their monkey suits," she laughed, "silly monkeys. Our little family gatherings are much nicer. Just a few friends with no inhibitions who all love and care for each other. And because they love me they will also love you. You'll see."

"I don't like it," said Marcus emphatically, "and I definitely will not go to a Kong party." He paused, considering this morning's conversation. "I know someone who might like it though. If it really is anonymous."

"Dr Sinclair?" Sophie had read his thoughts again, "yes, I think so too. But he's staff."

"Oh..I'm sure he could justify it. Probably on the grounds that he's collecting material for a novel. Strange irony. He was constantly going on at me about you because he thought I fancied you and you fancied me. And now we're talking about fixing him up with someone."

"I think Dr Sinclair will find someone for himself. I think all he wants at the moment is a good shag. Next time I see Drew."

"What's this about Drew leaving? He's done exceptionally well this year. He's on course for a double first. Why would he leave?"

"I don't know. I just think he's going to leave. It's a premonition. We're all growing up and it's time to leave these games behind. Puck and Tinkerbell are graduating and going to London with Adrian. Babs is gay and has never belonged with us. Caroline and Mo will be all that's left and they will both finish their degrees next year. Adrian is in London anyway. Only comes up here to see Drew for business. Our sweet little commune is going to break up. Tell me what happened between you and Caroline in Yorkshire."

The question came straight out of the blue and took the wind completely out of Marcus.

"How do you know about Caroline and me? How do you know she went to Yorkshire?" he gasped.

"I told you. Caroline is a part of Drew's circle. Plus I do yoga and…other things…with her. How do you think we keep our amazing bodies. We're friends… sort of. And she talks sometimes, especially when she's upset. It's how we all help each other. She said she'd been to Yorkshire with you but she wouldn't tell me what happened, which means that something happened."

It was true. Marcus had not set eyes on Caroline since they had come back from Yorkshire and had almost forgotten about her. She seemed to have belonged to a different universe and had already passed into the coffin of time.

"I've hardly heard from Caroline since she went to Hereford," Sophie whispered, "but Caroline doesn't fail with men, and she would have told me if she's scored with you. She wouldn't tell me anything and she blocked me out. Please Marcus, please tell me what did happen."

Marcus recounted the whole story of Caroline's full frontal assault on him, his retreat under the bed clothes, and his desperate attempts to put out the fire she had ignited in his loins.

Sophie was laughing so much that she started to cry, then she started to cry in earnest. Real tears and real shuddering sobs.

Marcus held her very tightly and stroked her soft hair.

"What's the matter?"

"If she had got into bed with you she would have possessed you, and you would have been infatuated by her. None of this would ever have happened. We would never have been together in this way. You would have taken your Goddess down from her pedestal and she would have cast her spell on you, and I would have lost you and the only other person I could ever love as much as I love you." Eventually the sobs subsided. "Sometimes Caroline frightens me," she said quietly, "you were attracted to her once, and you could be again. She's cleverer than me. She's doing a doctorate. She speaks to you in a language you understand. And she's very, very, good at sex."

"Well, she wasn't very good at seducing me," said Marcus, "she made a complete fool of herself, and me. Anyway how could I fancy Caroline when I have you?" But he was thinking about Sophie's relationship with Parkin who was obviously her alternative love. All of this was far too complicated. Where was reason in this reiteration of confused fears and emotions?

"You have to lay this ghost," Sophie said in a determined voice, "I mean, you really have to lay it. Literally. If there is a party and Caroline is there she will ask you to make love to her. She must, it's part of the game. And you must do it. And you may have to choose, and you may break my heart. I've got myself into this mess and somehow I've got to get both of us out of it. I need to know."

"I'm not going to choose who I love just because of sexual performance. You said yourself. That is not what love is about. I love you, all of you, body and mind, the whole person. I don't care about Caroline. Caroline is history." Marcus paused. Something new had occurred to him. He could not understand

why they had to do anything except love each other. His confidence in Sophie was shaken, but he was beginning to see a pattern in her mystical demands. She was talking about two different kinds of love, collective and individual, spiritual and carnal, and because of the frailty of human nature they were now in conflict in her gentle spirit. He remembered what Caroline had said the last time that he had seen her; agape not eros, and now he knew what she had meant though he could not see how they could be reconciled. But his own cold mind, which had recently been taking second place to his heart, was fascinated by his new sexual skills and he was curious to try them out on other subjects. The awful revelation burst on him that Sophie was right. He did want to screw other women. Not for love but out of curiosity, and because he was now confident that he could. Exactly the reasoning which had propelled Sophie into her own sexual Odyssey with Drew Parkin and his like minded friends. Sophie was his mirror image. They were both travelling on the same road. They had just started at opposite ends. He from the mind and she from the body, and in a few days they would either pass each other in the middle and vanish into the distance, or they would stop, and start again together on a new road. How ironic that the rational mind, which had previously bolted the door on his sexuality, was now spurring him into passions which he would once have considered abhorrent. Even more ironic that it had been Caroline who had let this lustful genie out of its bottle and now, it seemed, it was Caroline who must put it back again.

"Sophie, tell me truthfully. If Caroline and I had become lovers would she have wanted me to go to one of Drew's parties and have sex with you?

"I think so. I think we would all want to draw you in, for you to be one of us, because actually you are one of us." Though she had not lied to Marcus Sophie was now coming perilously close to revealing the truth, "Drew sensed it the minute he met you, and so did I. And if Caroline had slept with you she would have known for certain." Sophie searched desperately for a rational explanation of something that she knew Marcus would consider to be totally irrational. "Think about it. None of us has a proper family of our own. All of us have lost our parents, from death, divorce and indifference. Both your parents are dead, my mum is dead so I have only my Dad, Drew's parents are in America, he rarely sees them, Mo doesn't talk to hers, Caroline's parents are divorced and Caroline has her own income from her maternal grandparents, not much, but to enough pay for her car and her classy clothes, Puck and Tinkerbell the same, all of us packed off to boarding school at the earliest possible moment, to get us out of the way. Jaz, well Jaz is totally on her own. Not even in her own country. All they have from their parents is money to cushion them. No love, 'cept for me and my Dad, who I love to bits. So we are our own family and we care for each other and share our bodies because it makes us feel better. It's not wrong, and I'm not ashamed of it. There's a great comfort in sitting with you arms around your naked friends and feeling the warm life of their bodies. And besides, there is something else. Something indescribable. Something not of this world. I can't

tell you. You will find out for yourself if you make love to Caroline. If it makes it easier, think of it as a kind of revenge for what she did to you in Yorkshire. And I will have to watch and bear it. I used to love Drew's little parties. Now I'm as frightened as you are. But we have to do it."

Later that night, and in the nights which remained to them before the unannounced party, they made love in as many ways as their imaginations could contrive, but there was something subtly different about it. Something had been lost. Sophie sensed it and her heart bled a little because she did not know how to get it back.

Independence Day

Graduation Day would take place on the auspicious 4th of July, a Tuesday, in the Chinese year of the Rat. On Friday the 30th of June Drew Parkin appeared in Marcus's office bringing Jaz with him. Jaz was stunningly beautiful, not unlike Sophie but darker skinned, petite and immaculately dressed in a minimalist black Roy Halston halter dress, and calf length black lace up boots with very high heels to offset her diminutive stature. Her face was delicate, small boned, framed by shimmering jet black hair cut in a Jackie Onassis style. Her black, shining doe eyes were sparingly made up but enhanced at the corners with eyeliner which made her look like some ancient Egyptian goddess. She sat quietly beside Drew, holding his hand very tightly, as though she feared that she would fall if she let go of him. By the side of the tall and gangling Drew she seemed tiny, and she said nothing. Marcus had never heard her speak, and would not have known the sound of her voice. She never spoke. But she smiled at Marcus and the warmth of her smile dazzled him. She turned to Drew, squeezed his hand even harder, looked at him expectantly, then turned back to Marcus. Parkin was smarter too. No scruffy shirt hanging out of torn jeans, but neatly pressed beige American Chinos sent to him by his mother, who had briefly remembered having a son somewhere in England, and a restrained white short sleeved shirt, no frills or furbelows, no old Etonian tie. Sophie had been right. Drew was changing. The world was turning.

"You know why I'm here," the voice was gentle and reassuring.

Marcus nodded. There was something compelling, almost hypnotic, about Drew Parkin. It was easy to see how he could dominate by his mere presence. His eyes were grey blue, like Marcus's, but unlike Marcus's they were both languid and penetrating at the same time. They were the eyes of a poker player who could disarm an opponent and give nothing away before taking everything on the table.

"We're coming to see Sophie graduate, so we'll see you there, and you will meet the friends that you didn't know you had. Then come to Penhesgyn around 8.30. Sophie will show you how to get there. Don't worry. It will be alright. You will be with the people who love you most in the whole world, even if you don't know it yet. We will never harm you." He sensed Marcus's apprehension. "You have nothing to fear. It is just friends who care for you. Marcus…believe me. It will be alright. You and I share the same angel who watches over us. Over all of us. You have just forgotten it." His voice was calm, measured, reassuring, hypnotic.

Marcus shook his head. Religion and mysticism were a problem for him, long ago banished by reason and logic. Yet he distantly remembered, as child tucked up in his cot, his mother singing to him the children's prayer from Hansel and Gretel, and he had gone to sleep confident of the fourteen angels

watching over him. And if he awoke in the dark he had always felt a formless presence in his room. A benign presence which did not frighten him, and he would feel safe and fall asleep again secure in the belief that the presence was there and that he was not all alone in the dark. Little by little, as he got older, the presence faded, folding its invisible shining wings over him and reluctantly releasing him into the darkness of the world of men. Later, as an orphaned teenager, alone in his bed in his uncle's house at Carston, he would sometimes awake from a deep dream to hear his mother calling his name, her voice urgent and crystal clear. And he would wake with a start and find no one there and fight back his tears.

"Now you do remember, don't you," Drew murmured. Marcus nodded again. Tears were forming in his eyes. What was the strange power that this boy had over him, and over Sophie, and Caroline and Mo and the others he was yet to meet? Was it just hippy mysticism, or was there something else about Drew? Something that could not be explained by reason. How was it that he was so prescient, and Sophie too, who had this knack of reading his mind and seeing what was coming?

Wordsworth once more floated unbidden into Marcus's consciousness. *The Youth, who daily farther from the east must travel, still is Nature's priest, and by the vision splendid is on his way attended. At length the man perceives it die away, and fade into the light of common day.*

"It never left me," Drew replied to Marcus's unvoiced question, causing him yet more confusion, "and that is why I must bring you back to it. It's not about sex. It's about love. Agape, not Eros. And you don't have very much time, either of you." A deep sadness flashed across Drew's face. He opened the door, gently ushering Jaz into the corridor.

"I will see thee at Penhesgyn," he grinned at Marcus, and was gone.

Marcus rocked back in his chair. Tears were streaming down his face for no reason. No reason, he thought. Was this why Sophie cried so much? He found a handkerchief and dried his eyes. He knew now that he would have to go to Penhesgyn and confront whatever it was that Drew was offering. This was not what Sophie was talking about. This was something completely different. Either Parkin was a charlatan who had formed some quack cult as a way of duping impressionable young girls into his bed, or he was something else, something much more mysterious.

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Graduation day came, hallowed by time and tradition. Both quadrangles were decorated, and there was a tent in the outer quadrangle with drinks and cucumber sandwiches, and strawberries and cream. But first there was the ceremony. Marcus escorted Sophie to the robing room to collect her rented academic gown and cap. Marcus had bought his own Cambridge MA gown and

when they got back to his office he showed Sophie how to wear her gown, and how to fasten the little loop on the halter of her hood round a button in her very plain white blouse. She perched the mortar board on her thick hair and slid two hair pins into it to hold it in place. Marcus reminded her that she would have to take the pins out in order to doff her cap to the Principal. Sophie would remember. When they'd finishing dressing each other and adjusting their hoods so that there were no creases, they stood facing each other, holding both hands, and taking in for the first time the drab uniform of their intellectual lives, shrouding the bodies with which they were now so familiar.

"You look very good," Marcus said.

Sophie smiled, demure in her blouse and black midi skirt and dark tights. She had even put on a little of Caroline's makeup. A little eyeliner and shadow, which made her beautiful eyes look even bigger.

"You too," she kissed him, "we'd better go. I have to be in my place by 2.30."

They made their way through the old building to the Beverley Roberts Hall where Sophie joined the queue of graduands waiting to be ushered into their exact places. Marcus joined his colleagues in the corridor outside the foyer, where only a month ago Sophie and the other students had been held at bay by the Soc. Soc. bullies. Very few academics turned out for graduation. It was all in Welsh and very boring, and they thought that they had better things to do with their time. Marcus was the only member of the History Department present, apart from Dr Ellerby who would be presenting the History graduands to the Principal for their degrees. Ellerby nodded appreciatively at Marcus, pleased that he had bothered to turn out. Jack Fairford, who would lead the procession by carrying the Mace, was busy organising the handful of gowned academics and having a surreal encounter with the elderly Professor Farrington, head of English, who was wearing a hood and cap but no gown. Marcus knew of the notoriously eccentric Farrington but schoolboys read textbooks not authors so he had never made the connection between this Farrington and the Farrington who had written the superb book on Wordsorthian imagery which he had read long ago as part of his A level English course at his austere Grammar School.

"You haven't got your gown," said Fairford diplomatically.

"Nonsense," snapped Farrington, "how could I possibly forget my gown?" He looked at Marcus, "young man, whoever you. You have a Cambridge hood so I assume you have a brain. I am the world's leading authority on William Wordsworth. Am I wearing my gown? This idiot says I'm not wearing my gown." He shook his fist at Fairford, who looked at Marcus with an expression of total exasperation.

"Whenever we meet in this spot," Fairford whispered to Marcus, "we always seem to have problems. For God's sake tell him."

"I think that a wise emperor would check for small boys," Marcus said, addressing the remark into thin air somewhere between Farrington and Fairford.

Professor Farrington looked down. "Oh…..Shit," he exclaimed.

"You've got five minutes Professor," Fairford said, "then I will have to start the procession."

Farrington looked at Marcus. There was a price to be paid for telling the truth.

"Young, whoever you are, would you mind getting my gown for me. You will find it behind the door of my room. The room is not locked."

Marcus debated whether to refuse, and decided not to. Farrington was clearly as mad as a hatter and in need of care. He sprinted up the stairs, along the infamous Council Chamber Corridor and found Farrington's room half way down the adjacent Professors' Corridor. Farrington's gown was not hanging behind the door, but there was a chalky MA gown thrown over a chair. Marcus grabbed it and sprinted back to the procession assembly point in the lower corridor. Marcus helped Farrington to put his gown on and adjusted his hood for him.

"Bit chalky," said Farrington, suddenly alarmingly normal, "still, a great professor should be a great teacher and have chalk on his coat, don't you think, young, whoever you are."

Marcus smiled at him, agreed and found himself paired with the chalky professor as the pathetic band of twenty or so conscientious academics who made up the meagre procession moved off at a leisurely pace.

"Professor Farrington, my name's Marcus Ross. I'm in the History Department," Marcus volunteered by way of breaking the ice.

"Well…thank you Dr Ross." the professor replied, "Glad to see historians turn out for their students. Not many of my staff here," Farrington said rather regretfully. "Only me, in fact. They can't be bothered you know. Don't care about students. Research, research, research. That's all they care about. I've done my research. Made my name long ago. Now I think students are more interesting, and more important. Don't you think so? I learn so much from my students. They are amazing."

Marcus smiled again. "Mr," he said, "Mr Ross. Of course, but we need both." He was surprised to find his initial reaction to Farrington confounded. Farrington was like Gwyn Davies, another of the good old men, who had entranced generations of students by turning up ten minutes late for his lectures, fighting his way out of an Army Greatcoat and a Laocoön scarf, and then delivering rivetting discourses on the imagery of the Romantic poets without reference to notes of any kind. Professor Farrington was one of those rare scholars who gave a genuine creative insight into literature instead of brutally deconstructing it.

They were halfway down the central aisle in the Beverley Roberts Hall now, parents standing on their right, rows of gowned graduands standing on their

left. They climbed the short flight of steps onto the stage, doffing their caps at the Principal and taking their places standing in front of their seats, looking down the hall at a kaleidoscope of plumed parents and their gowned graduand offspring about to be ejected, as Tom Lehrer so aptly said, onto the razor blade of life.

Graduation days were the only times that Marcus, or most other staff for that matter, ever saw the Principal. A lot of the time he was in Denbigh having nervous breakdowns, and he never socialised with staff below the rank of professor, so for most he was a mystery. In the flesh he was a short stocky man with a square face and a nautical beard which concealed a personality as mad as a box of frogs. This was not entirely surprising since, as a young man, he had managed to give himself the bends whilst scuba diving in a quarry at Nantlle and had never been the same since. No one knew quite how he had come to be Principal, for these decisions were taken by a very select few and vetted by the Crachach over dinner at the Golf Club, but he had once written a prize winning book on Plant Genetics which received an unlikely review in the *Times Literary Supplement*. This, together with the chairmanship of a few strategic government committees, seemed to be all that was required to attract the attention of the Great and the Good, who casually advanced him to the most senior position in the university on the reasonable grounds that no one gave a hoot about who should be Principal of an obscure Welsh college.

The Principal said a short prayer in Welsh. He welcomed the English parents in English and the Welsh parents in Welsh then everyone sat down and the tedious process of awarding degrees began. The Principal made another statement in Welsh, repeated *ad nauseam* for each department and form of degree, which asserted that he was authorised by the university to confer degrees. A praelector from each Department read out the names of graduands in alphabetical order. The graduands in that group would all stand, then each would march gingerly up the stairs, shake hands with the Principal and receive through him the mystical force of graduate enlightenment, together with a round of applause from the assembled parents and most of the students. They then returned to the other end of their row and shuffled along until the row had been completed.

Cymraeg came first. Then English, called by Professor Farrington. Then French, then German, then Greek, then History. Then; “Sofia Katerina Davenport. Degree with Honours Third Class,” Dr Ellerby declaimed. He peered curiously at Sophie as she walked briskly up the steps. So this was the infamous Sophie Davenport. He knew her of course, because she had studied with him in her first year, and he had rather liked her. She had a gentle and generous personality, plus other attributes which made it very easy to see why young Marcus Ross might be captivated by her. She bowed and doffed her cap to the Principal who responded by bowing and doffing his cap to her. Sophie took the proffered hand to shake and looked straight into the Principal’s lifeless

eyes. The Principal recoiled slightly from her, as though she had violated his madness. Marcus sensed the same frisson and felt the hairs tingle on the back of his neck. Something was about to happen. From his position on the stage he could see Drew Parkin who had somehow procured a seat amongst the parents, and next to him was Caroline Howarth in one of her white linen suits, and Jaz. They were all standing up, clapping very loudly, hands above their head and chanting SO..phie, SO..phie, SO..phie. Even Jaz, who never spoke, seemed to be mouthing Sophie's name. Elsewhere, on the right of the hall facing him, two girl graduands in the Social Sciences Faculty block were also standing up, clapping loudly, stamping and shouting SO..phie, SO...phie, SO..phie. Marcus looked at the mass of Historians standing in front of him and saw two more girls and a boy from his Parliament Special Subject group start shouting SO...phie, SO..phie and stamping. Others followed until fifty or more History graduands, almost the whole year, were stamping and clapping rhythmically and chanting SO...phie, SO..phie. Students from the other departments sat still, nonplussed, but the parents, thinking that this was an arcane university ritual reserved for someone very special indeed, also stood up and clapped and stamped until Sophie's name reverberated round the great hall, causing the Principal to put his hands over his ears and Dr Ellerby to look more and more distressed.

Sophie smiled her happiest smile at Marcus. There were tears again. Like Niobe, always tears, but tears of joy. Marcus leapt up and joined the clapping and chanting. Other staff on the stage with him, mystified but caught up in the mass euphoria, followed Marcus, standing and clapping as loudly as they could without knowing why. Only Dr Ellerby and the Principal remained unmoved. Sophie looked again into the Principal's blank bearded face and saw nothing there, just incomprehension and fear. He looked away from her towards Dr. Ellerby, who shook his head in despair, knowing that a wrong had been seen to have been done. Sophie stepped back, bowed to the Principal and doffed her cap again, just as Jack Fairford had coached her to do. Then she turned away from him. Down the steps. Keep calm. Turn right. Turn left. Down the side aisle, back to her row where she stood silently, her hands clasped in front of her, her head bowed. The chanting, clapping and stamping stopped as suddenly as it had started. Sophie replaced the hair pins holding her cap in place and breathed a sigh of relief. It was all over. Just tonight to get through now.

Professor Farrington turned to Marcus. "What the hell was that about?" he whispered.

"Injustice," Marcus replied succinctly.

"Ah…she should have taken a much better degree. Something went wrong," said Professor Farrington perceptively. "It's always very hard when these things happen. She must be very popular. Your students certainly know how to send a message. Good for them," he paused, "what a beautiful girl. I wish I was your age," he added regretfully, then, recognition dawning, "I remember her, she was in *Hair*. She is a very beautiful girl indeed, isn't she."

Marcus looked at him. Professor Farrington was dabbing at his eyes with a handkerchief. “I wish I was your age….in this age,” he repeated. “Hay fever,” he added, tucking his hanky into the pocket of his patched tweed jacket.

The degree awarding process continued as students from each department made their way to the stage to make their obeisance to the Principal. Marcus noted especially the two girls who had been chanting for Sophie. They turned out to be Economists. Andrea Parker and Janice Wardel. Both petite, one blonde with long wavy pre-Raphaelite hair and one brunette with a page boy cut, both with fine boned, sharp, intelligent, elfin faces, small breasts and slender hips. Both also had Upper Seconds and as they turned away from the Principal they each grinned directly at Marcus and clenched and unclenched their right hands to him in that funny little wave which Sophie had also used, so long ago in the Belle Vue. But there was no special clapping for them and they took their degrees and returned to their seats without incident.

When it ended the academics processed back out of the Hall lead by Jack Fairford with the Mace, and the Principal walking just behind him. Marcus found himself on the lawn in the outer quad watching the graduates and their parents flooding out of the Hall, blinking into the unaccustomed sunlight. He waited for Sophie and Drew and Jaz, and Caroline. Funny, he no longer thought of him as Parkin. Just Drew. How had he got seats with the parents? Of course, Sophie was entitled to tickets for three seats, two parents and a sibling, additional siblings by special dispensation. That was how they had done it. Cameras were everywhere. People were posing. Groups stood around talking. Champagne bottles were popping. The Marquee was serving strawberries and cream. Rather better than those dished up at the examiners dinner. James Sinclair and Tony Bishop appeared, though they had not attended the actual ceremony, spoke briefly to Marcus, then wandered off to talk to their own students and their parents. Eventually Sophie came out of the Hall, rapidly followed by Drew, Jaz and Caroline, and the two Economists, Andrea and Janice. Marcus joined them and was himself joined by Mo wearing a smart pin striped trouser suit specially liberated from Marks & Sparks for the occasion. Mo would return it next week, going into the dressing room in the suit, coming out in her roughest kaftan and replacing the suit on the rack that she had taken it from. She had also got rid of her Afro hairdo and gone back to her natural luxuriously long and thick black hair, now combed back and held in place with an Alice band. Sophie hugged Marcus and kissed him slowly and gently.

“Thank you, “ she said, “for everything.” She turned to Caroline, flung her arms round her and hugged her tightly. Then Jaz, then Mo, and then the two petite girls, then Drew, who grinned at her from under a straw boater ribboned with his Old Etonian tie.

“Where’s Babs?” Sophie asked.

“We had a row,” said Mo disconsolately, “she's gone home.”

Drew looked at Mo with an expression of concern. Sophie turned back to Marcus.

"This is Tinkerbell," she said. The blonde Janice Wardel put her arms round Marcus's neck and pulled his face down so that she could kiss him. "And this is Puck." Andrea, the page boy brunette, did the same. Marcus wondered how they would look at the party tonight, and what they might do.

Mo gave Marcus one of her bear hugs and a cursory peck and Marcus had to bend quite low for Jaz to reach him even in the highest of heels. Caroline stood in front of him, put her white gloved hands gently on his shoulders and kissed him, not on the cheek, as the others had done, but on the lips.

"Hello Marcus," she said, "remember me?"

She was different, Marcus thought. Softer, warmer, less overwhelming. But before he could answer he was intercepted by Drew.

"Marcus, can you take a photograph of us all please. No, no, wait a minute." Drew grabbed Tony Bishop who had wandered back into the group. "Dr Bishop, will you take a photograph of us please. All of us." He handed Tony Bishop a Leica and marshalled himself, Marcus and the girls into a semicircle with Marcus and Sophie beside each other at the centre.

"Bloody hell," Tony exclaimed, "what do I do with this?"

"Just point it at us and focus like this," Drew demonstrated, "and when you're ready press the button."

"It's not like my Instamatic," Tony grumbled. He focussed the camera and took the shot.

"Another one," Drew exclaimed, "hold hands people."

Marcus slipped his hand into Sophie's and she to Jaz and on until both wings of the little semicircle were joined. As the last hand connected Marcus felt a jolt like a small electric shock and a sudden feeling of intense euphoria. At first he thought Parkin was playing some kind of prank with a toy shock machine, but there was no sign of anything, and no one else seemed to have noticed. Hands separated and the semicircle broke up into smaller groups which wandered off to talk to other friends. Marcus found himself alone in the throng with Sophie and Caroline. To his surprise there was no overt hostility between them, not, at least, in the body language.

"You are coming tonight?" Caroline asked quietly, addressing the question to both of them, "it is, after all, specially for you, both of you. And it will be the last one. The last one here anyway."

Sophie nodded, but now there was the slightest hint of apprehension on her face. To the total astonishment of Marcus, Caroline took Sophie's face between her two gloved hands, bent down, because she was taller than Sophie, and kissed her on the lips with a sublime tenderness which no man could ever match. Sophie responded, closing her eyes and resting her hands on Caroline's hips. The kiss seemed to last for ages. So long that Marcus looked furtively around to see if any of the swirling champagne swilling crowd were watching.

But nobody was. The two girls were lost in some other world and the nonplussed Marcus wondered how he had ever become involved with these totally unpredictable people.

"Don't worry. It's not what it seems," the ever reassuring Drew had come back to the little group and was standing just behind Marcus with Dr Ellerby, who took one look at the two embracing girls and turned away. Everything he had heard about Sophie Davenport was clearly true. If Marcus was with her he was obviously in far beyond his depth. Well, that was just one of his problems. Dr Ellerby had a more immediate grievance.

"How did you do that?" he snapped accusingly at Marcus.

"Do what?"

"Get those students to demonstrate in there. Staff should not be inciting students to demonstrate. The Principal is freaked out. He's already on his way back to Denbigh."

"It wasn't Marcus, it was me," Drew smiled benignly at Dr Ellerby, "it's easy. If you can get five or six people stimulating a crowd, the rest will usually follow. It wasn't difficult to find six people who think that Sophie was cheated out of her proper degree. The whole of the third year thinks so. And I know that she was because I've seen…." He stopped short, realising that he was about to land Marcus in even deeper trouble. Fortunately Dr Ellerby failed to make the necessary extrapolation.

"And you would all be right," admitted Dr Ellerby, "but this kind of behaviour brings the University into disrepute and it causes difficulties for the Department. You may be in trouble," he turned and looked sadly at Marcus, "and you, Marcus, you are certainly in trouble. The bad news is that there is going to be a disciplinary hearing, but not until next term when the new professor is here. It's going to be hard for you to defend yourself because it's obviously true that you are in a relationship of some kind with Miss Davenport, though….." he glanced over his shoulder at Caroline and Sophie who were now facing each other, each holding the other's hands as though about to dance, and talking very intently, "I wonder if you are still in a relationship with her. You should be very careful." He raised his champagne glass to them in a mock toast and resumed his circulation with the throng.

"You're going to have to leave you know," Drew said, "I told you. You're wasting your time here."

"Never mind me, what's all this about you leaving? You know how good you are. You should get a First, easily. Why leave now?"

Drew shrugged, "And Sophie should have had a good Upper Second. This place is corrupt. And it has no soul. No Soul. You understand," he paused. Caroline and Sophie were still talking, "I've learned everything I need to know from here, and I'm confident about my own future. I don't need this. I'm more concerned about you and Sophie and Caroline. We have to restore harmony and balance so that we can grow and advance, and I want us all to be together in the

spirit and in the flesh in the future. It will not be easy, especially if you stay here."

Marcus still did not go along with this gobbledygook, though he was beginning to wonder if there really was more to life than what was encompassed in his rationalist philosophy.

"Sophie has put me into this situation. If she is hurt by whatever happens tonight she has only herself to blame," he said rather sharply, and then regretted his tone.

"I don't know what Sophie has told you about our little circle, but she is often confused about why we are the way we are, and she's very anxious about what may happen tonight. But there's nothing to fear. Just do what she wants you to do, and if she is hurt you must take her hurt upon yourself. It may not be easy for her. And it may be equally uncomfortable for you. But this is how we purge ourselves of doubt and jealousy. You think this is just hippy mysticism? Tonight you will discover who you really are and whether you really love Sophie, and how much you are loved."

Marcus shook his head. He had never asked himself whether he really loved Sophie. He said so to her, of course, when she asked, as women always do. But what did it mean? He had not been with her long enough, and, like most men, he was not sure what love was, especially in a relationship as sudden and as complicated as this one was turning out to be. How could watching each other being screwed by someone else possibly be a proof of love? It was absurd and he would treat it as such. Tonight would be an opportunity to pleasure himself with these crazy women and try out his new found carnal skills. And if Sophie didn't like it? Well, there were plenty of nubile girls in his world.

"Take it seriously, Marcus," Drew said solemnly, "it's not just your life. And I will never forgive you if you hurt Sophie."

"We'll see," he said, suddenly noticing that Jaz was standing invisibly beside Drew, silent, inscrutable but concerned, bare brown shoulders in a strapless Yves Saint Laurent dress legitimately bought at great expense in Paris for a Royal Garden Party during the Shah's state visit, at which she had been presented to the Queen. She listens and understands everything, Marcus thought, but she never speaks, never even says hello or goodbye. Just smiles and smiles. Does she even talk to Drew? What will she be like tonight? What is her role in this hippy farrago?

Mo, who generally made up for Jaz's silence, had rejoined the group and the others were drifting back, forming a circle round Drew.

"Tonight then, peace and love man," Drew said to Sophie and Marcus in a voice which was almost sardonic. Sophie took Marcus's hand and held it very tightly, so tightly that it almost hurt. Marcus watched them walk away, Drew with one arm around Caroline's waist and the other round Jaz's tiny shoulders. Mo had disappeared to wherever Mo's disappear to, and Puck and a jingling

Tinkerbell were skipping excitedly round Drew and his little group like two gambolling lambs.

"Let's go home," said Sophie, "let's go home and have a bath together. This has been a super day so far. I'm really, really happy. I'm glad I decided to come to graduation after all. Only, I wish my dad had been able to be here. And tonight will be just as good. You'll see. Let's go home."

She dwelt affectionately on the word home as though Marcus's dismal flat in Rhianda really was her home. Marcus wondered what she would make of Carston Hall. He would have to go to Carston soon just for business, perhaps continuing on North after he'd dropped Sophie off at Manchester airport on Thursday. But he didn't dare stay away from college too long whilst he was still waiting for the summons to his doctoral *viva*. Why was it taking so long? Already three months. Doctorates at St Dynion's were examined and awarded within less than two months, with no fuss and no one had ever failed.

"What were you talking to Caroline about?"

"Girl things. She understands. It's going to be alright."

James Sinclair, talking to his own graduates and their parents whilst perched on a retaining wall at the side of the steps leading up to the Beverley Roberts Hall, had a grandstand view of the families milling around on the quadrangle lawn in front of him. He had not talked to Marcus who seemed to be totally preoccupied by Drew Parkin and his entourage, but James had become more and more fascinated by the dynamic around this little group, culminating in the startling image of Sophie Davenport being kissed with evident passion by the white witch Caroline Howarth, apparently ignored by Marcus who was talking furiously with Parkin and John Ellerby. James had no idea what was going on and worried that Marcus had got himself into something which was eventually going to cause him extreme pain. There was nothing he could do to extricate Marcus from whatever was happening nor, in a way, he did want to. There was material here which would be worth annotating for future use, and, apart from that, he still had a yen to join this select and enigmatic group for purely carnal reasons. Moving into Sophie's flat had been a mistake though, and he would have to move out soon because the lugubrious Babs had taken umbrage at his presence and had gone home for the vacation after a blazing row with Mo who she accused of being a designer Lesbian. James rather liked Mo. She was very bright, for a Sociologist, and had a droll sense of humour, especially about crime, which she seemed to find quite profitable. But he did not want to be in the flat on his own with her in case she tempted him to do something which he might regret. In any case his solicitor had told him that Sandra had no right to throw him out and had provided him with a letter threatening a court order if he was not readmitted to his own house. He still intended to manoeuvre his wife into bed with Owen Seaton and contrive to catch them at it, and it might be easier to do that if Sandra and Seaton were separately led to believe that he would be out of the house overnight, for some reason or other yet to be devised.

In the meantime he would sleep in the spare bedroom, avoid Sandra, and take his meals in the Student's Union cafeteria, which ran a basic food service throughout the summer vacation for the benefit of the numerous Science Faculty staff and postgraduates who never seemed to stop working.

He watched Marcus and Sophie walking hand in hand, gowns and hood billowing behind them. Back into the old college buildings, presumably to return her gown to the robing room. The rest of Parkin's circle made their way out of the quadrangle and disappeared under the pilasters supporting the new building. Who were those two smallish girls skipping childishly round Drew and his Persian Princess and the awesome Caroline, throwing their Mortar Boards into the air and shrieking with laughter? He'd never seen them before, but he hoped to see them again.

The Square of Three

Penhesgyn Hall was not what Marcus had expected. It was in the middle of nowhere at the end of an unmade road which caused him acute concern about the underside of the low slung Porsche. In a hollow at the end of the track was not a mansion like Carston or Madingley, which Marcus associated with the word Hall, but a large single story clapboard building with a wide central section on either side of which were substantial wings forming a symmetrical ground plan in the shape of the letter H. The pitched roofs were covered in galvanised sheeting, the walls were painted a scabrous peeling white and the windows, in the central section, were curtained off against the eyes of curious local rustics. It looked like exactly what it was, a derelict second world war isolation hospital, which Drew had bought for a song, along with twenty acres of land, with an interest only mortgage arranged by his city friend Adrian, which was more than paid for by the rents from students who did not want to live in undergraduate halls or digs where they would not be allowed to share their rooms with their lovers. Drew had spent a little money doing the hall up, providing communal ablutions, showers, and toilets and revitalised central heating. There was a big kitchen, and twelve rooms, each with double beds and washbasins. The central section, which had been the assembly hall and foyer of the old hospital was kept free as a communal area, a place for eating together, parties, and social intercourse of all kinds, for those invited to stay at Penhesgyn were carefully vetted by Drew and were expected to conform to his extremely liberal views on sex and nudity. Almost anything went, except drugs to which Drew was vehemently hostile on the grounds that they did irreparable damage to the brain. Penhesgyn Hall was actually quite cosy, especially for those with a libidinous disposition. It reminded Marcus of another university he had once visited, which had begun life in the fifties with most of its students very happily housed in ex army huts, much like Penhesgyn. But now it was quiet because most of the residents who were not part of Drew's little inner circle, which was all that was gathered here tonight, had gone home for the vacation.

Marcus parked the Porsche on the gravelled area in front of the hall. There were four other cars there already. Drew's Ford Capri, a very battered Citroen 2CV with a large smiley face on the door, which Marcus knew must belong to Mo, an oldish red Mini Cooper and a rather more recent box shaped Alfa Romeo saloon. Sophie pushed open the door and they stepped into what had once been the reception area of the hospital. It was very dark inside but Marcus could make out doors on either side leading to the wing blocks, and double doors in front of them into what would have been the first ward. The vestibule was in deep shadow because of the heavy curtains over the windows and out of the shadows appeared two naked girls, who Marcus recognised, after blinking in astonishment, as Tinkerbell and Puck. They ran up to Sophie and skipped

round her in a kind of Indian war dance, yelling SO..phie, SO..phie, echoing the recriminatory chant of the students at the degree ceremony. There was a ripple of laughter from behind the double doors. Puck pulled the bow on the halter of Sophie's floaty summer dress and it slipped off. Sophie had come prepared and was wearing nothing underneath, except the braided leather bracelet on her wrist, which Marcus had bought in Chester and which she never took off. The three girls embraced each other, like the Three Graces Marcus thought, looking lustfully at the smooth flanks and sensuous curves of their bodies. He felt himself responding but the thought that he was about to indulge in an orgy now seemed more daunting, and somehow not appropriate. They turned towards him, Tinkerbell with her narrow Pre-Raphaelite face and hair, small perfectly rounded breasts and boyish hips, Puck had a slightly fuller figure, rounder but still sharp face, small full lipped mouth, and the same small slim hips and tiny bottom. Beside them even the snake hipped Sophie seemed almost voluptuous.

"Let's take your clothes," Puck said. She removed his watch and put it into the pocket of his trousers.

"Here you are free from the tyranny of time," she murmured then knelt down and removed his shoes and socks whilst Tinkerbell undid his belt and slipped him out of his trousers, before he even had time to think about it. Then Sophie lovingly undid each button on his shirt and slid his underpants off to reveal just how excited he was by these inviting bodies.

The girls ignored it, no giggles, comments or appreciations. But each of them stretched up on tiptoe and kissed him very lightly on the lips, pressing themselves gently against his chest. As each of them touched him he had the strangest sensation that he done all of this before, that he knew them intimately, not from this life, but from some other time and place. He had always felt this with Sophie, as though he had always known her, and he had assumed that this was how lovers felt towards each other. But Tinkerbell and Puck he had met only this afternoon, and had never even seen before, though, he supposed, they might well have been in the Belle Vue with Drew and Sophie. He just hadn't noticed them. Now he could not take his eyes off them.

"Welcome home, old friend," Tinkerbell whispered in his ear. Puck on his other side, whispered the same phrase: "welcome home, old friend." Then Tinkerbell took one hand and Puck the other, and they led him through the double doors into the larger room behind the reception area. It was very dark, lit only by a low wattage bulb in a large, low hung, aluminium shade which threw a circle of dim light onto the floor in the centre of the room. Around the edges of the circle were distributed nine substantial cushions, behind each of which was a low oriental fretwork table with a jug and glasses, and a small candle flickering in a ceramic holder. In the centre of the circle of light were sprawled five more naked bodies. Caroline, lying on her stomach, propped up on her elbows, with her chin resting in her hands, breasts dangling loosely, her hair, released from her braided plait, flowing in a platinum torrent over her

shoulders and most of the way down her back. She was laughing and talking to Mo, who was lying on her back, vast and undulating like some mysterious uncharted sea, not fat, but large boned and massively breasted. Jaz, kneeling beside Drew, more beautiful naked than clothed, brown, tiny by the side of Mo, perfectly formed, as delicately ephemeral as a desert flower. Drew, a naked man, not erect, and another naked man whom Marcus did not recognise, the only person in the room not known to him. Marcus was not unused to collective nudity. He had, after all, attended a traditional school where naked small boys were whipped through icy showers after gym by sadistic games masters applying stinging plimsolls to raw behinds. The experience had given him a deep contempt for the sweaty ugliness of athletic sport but he had got used to being naked with Sophie and the sweaty beauty of sex, and he was instantly fascinated by the newly apparent variety in the forms and shapes of the women before him. Men, he thought, were all much the same, and intrinsically unattractive, but still, it seemed odd to see Drew naked, and who was the other man?

"Welcome home, old friend," said Drew, embracing Marcus with a warm hug, as the girls had done, "don't worry, and don't be frightened. You will soon get used to being naked with your friends. This is Adrian Glover."

Adrian stood up and crossed the room to meet Marcus. He was about the same height as Marcus, but younger, slimmer, muscular and well toned, fashionably long blonde hair, foppishly curled like some latter day cavalier or designer hippy, a regular English public school face, square jawed and firm featured, a captain of cricket, a city gent, a banker, a gentleman, but not a scholar. Marcus held out his hand which Adrian accepted with a crushing grip, but there was no embrace, and no sensation of *deja vu*, as there had been with the others.

"Welcome home, old friend," Adrian said, releasing his grip and standing back from Marcus to look at him. Then he turned to Sophie and embraced her. Sophie lifted her face to him and kissed him with the enthusiasm that Marcus had thought was reserved for him alone. Marcus felt a knife blow in his heart. The others stood and embraced him also, each in turn, Caroline pressing her golden brown breasts against him and murmuring, "I never thought that I would ever see you like this, welcome home old friend."

Was this the Valkyrie who had born down on him so ferociously at Carston? It did not seem so. From each in turn came the same embracing warmth, the same incantation, the same sense of coming home, belonging here with these people who must be special to him, and him to them. With Drew's embrace the sensation of *deja vu* was much stronger, and with Jaz, for whose welcoming kiss he had to bend right down, the sensation of the past roared through him in an overwhelming blast. And, in spite of this erotic intimate pressing of flesh, the caress of nipples, the soft pressure of breasts, the brush of navels and pubes, Marcus felt no sense of unlicensed sexuality, though he continued to remain

erect, and noticed that both of the other men were now also engorged.

They sat down, cross legged, forming a circle, with Marcus facing Drew, Sophie on his left, Caroline on his right, then Mo, then Jaz, Drew, Puck, Adrian, Tinkerbell and back to Sophie. Marcus took stock of the room. He no longer felt frightened. Whatever was going to happen it was not going to be some writhing mass of obscenely copulating bodies. He looked around him. The room was quite bare, almost as naked as its occupants. The floor was partially covered with a large Persian rug laid on top of what appeared to be big vinyl mats of the kind used in gyms to cushion falls. There were tables, just visible in the gloom at the edges of the floor, and there was no ceiling so the rafters and trusses supporting the roof were open to view. From one of them hung two ropes about an arms length apart, and from another hung a fairly substantial swing, but these were outside the main circle of light, and their purpose was not immediately obvious to Marcus. He looked at the girls who sat serenely around him. They were not, he realised, totally naked. Tinkerbell had a little bangle of tiny bells around one ankle, like the bells that Sophie wore on her jeans. Puck had a gold Grecian key bracelet clamped around her upper arm. Jaz had a deep blue choker with a single dangling turquoise pendant. Caroline also had a choker, made of rows of pearls, and Mo was wearing a woven fabric belt around her waist with tassels which fell into the dense forest of her pubes. He could see no corresponding adornments on the two men.

"Well met my friends," said Drew, "we are here to welcome Marcus into our circle, and to celebrate his joining with Sophie and with us. This is a cause of great joy to all of us, and it makes us much stronger than we were. We are now complete. This is the sacred Circle of the Square of Three; Ying and Yang, Heaven and Earth together. Three male. Six female. Nine bodies. One Soul. A triangle and a square and a circle. All in one." He paused. No one said anything. Drew continued. "This will be the last time that we shall meet in this place, but there will be other times and other places when we will be together. All of us, one way or the other, are going to leave St Dynion's."

Marcus wondered whether to object that he had no intention of leaving, but before he could respond, Drew continued.

"You will leave, Marcus. But I don't know how it will happen, or when. And Sophie will always be with you. We shall all be with you, always." He paused again, "I will come back here in October, when term starts, to wind up loose ends and to hold a Kong Party. This will be the normal commercial party, but there will be some differences, for reasons we will discuss later. Of course you can all come if you want to. They serve a purpose, as we know, and the more of us who can take part, the more likely we are to find others." He looked down at his penis which was still firmly erect. "Ridiculous thing," he grinned, suddenly lightening the portentous atmosphere, "Sir Thomas Browne was quite right, but it has its uses and many of them are pleasurable. So we must do what we have to do now, and then we can play." The Drew drawl, with its echoes of

the American East Coast was, as always, calm and reassuring. A Guru, a Mystic, or a snake oil man with taste for the ladies? Marcus had still to decide, though he realised that it didn't matter what he thought. The rest of them believed unquestioningly in Drew.

The circle snapped to attention. Adrian and the girls sat bolt upright, their backs slightly arched, heads slightly bowed, arms outstretched and hands resting, palms upwards, on their knees, in the classic position of Buddhist prayer. Marcus looked at Drew. *So this*, thought Marcus, *is what it is. Oriental mysticism as an excuse for shagging.*

"Don't think that, Marcus," Drew said so quietly that Marcus thought his voice had come straight into his head, "I know you don't want to believe, but you will. You can shag as much as you want to, later. But first you must play up and play the game and learn why you are so keen to shag. Now, clear your mind, breathe through your nose, concentrate on your breathing, let everything flow away until your mind is empty. Do not concentrate on anything except your breathing If you feel your mind wandering, concentrate on the flow of air coming into your nostrils. Allow the anger, the frustration, all the pains and emotions to drain away, especially jealousy. Jealousy is our greatest enemy. Think yourself into the emptiness of infinite space. Not darkness but light. Go always towards the light. Always. Keep your eyes shut, always shut. You cannot see what you need to see with your eyes open. And listen to the silence of your soul. Silence is the greatest revelation. Remember this Marcus. And when you begin to fall into the emptiness, do not try to save yourself. Trust that we are here and we will catch you."

Marcus, shocked yet again by Drew's apparent ability to read his mind, decided to play the game. There was, after all, no other game to play, short of getting up and walking out, which would hurt Sophie. This was not the orgy he had expected. He rested his hands obediently on his knees, palms upright, fingers partially extended, like the others, and closed his eyes. The room went very silent except for the gentle susurration of their languid breathing and the slightest murmur of a summer breeze around the corrugated roof above them. Marcus focussed on his breathing, and whenever some extraneous thought came into his head he pushed it away and returned to the hypnotic sensation of his breath passing through his nostrils, investing him with life, and floating out again. Time passed. Aeons passed. All thought and reason and logic evaporated from his mind. His mind slid away from him, floating off into infinity. His last recollection was of a warm current of air folding around him, cupping him in its hand. He thought of the Angel in his childhood bedroom, but that too slipped away, and he began to fall into a tunnel of utter darkness which eventually dissolved into light. Just light. White light, slightly tinged with palest electric blue. Nothing else.

He opened his eyes. The others were sitting stationary as statues, eyes closed, hands outstretched, heads bowed. Their bodies were so beautiful,

shimmering with a corona of the faintest, palest blue, each connected by a thin tendril of light which spiralled above their heads and plaited itself into infinity. How it loved their bodies, these beautiful fragile creatures. These breathing, living entities, warm and pulsing with life, lusting for life, feeling, seeing, hearing, touching, loving, tactile, alive in the world of matter, as it hoped to be. *Close your eyes Marcus. You cannot see with your eyes open*. Drew's distant voice echoed in his mind. Drew's eyes had been closed. How had he known? Marcus closed his eyes again and concentrated on his breathing. Presently he slipped back down the tunnel into that pale blue white inner light. For a long time nothing happened then he felt himself beginning to fall, tumbling gently through this empty space, devoid of fear, or anger or any other emotion, calm as death. Tumbling. Tumbling. Dying, without fear. His left hand was gripped suddenly by Sophie, his right hand by Caroline. He stopped falling and felt other hands connect around the circle. The sudden shock that he had felt when they had posed for the photograph in the Quad came back to him, but stronger, much, much stronger. Not an electric bolt but a rising surge of irresistible and undefined energy which seared through his consciousness, like a key turning in a lock and opening all of his secret doors. And suddenly they were all in his head. The essence of each one, what they were, what they had always been and always would be. And there was something else there. The other. The familiar angel that had watched over them since the beginning of time.

Caroline, so clever, methodical and focussed, cold, subtle, passionate, angry, frustrated, committed, absolutely reliable, deeply in love with one of us who was not one of us and guilty about it, fearful of the suffering that she knew was soon to come, consumed by inexhaustible lust and unrelenting love for us all, and especially for…..for Sophie? Caroline was the one who was nearest to rationalising what had happened to us. Tinkerbell, intellectually agile, filled with formulae and numbers, childish, resolute, courageous, mischievous, always laughing, in love with Puck but playing with Adrian. Puck, the mirror image of Tinkerbell, two adolescent girls huddled together, hugging each other for warmth and comfort under the rough sheets of their beds in the cold cruel boarding school where they had been imprisoned by their uncaring parents. Then, staying together against the world, going from the same school to the same university, studying together for the same degrees. Desperate to love and be loved, until they had met Drew and Adrian and Sophie and Caroline and Mo, who loved them as they wished to be loved. Mo, the only real sixties hippy here, older, wiser, slower, infinitely sad, anguished and enraged by the generous body which so few wanted to love, so grateful for the loving bodies which these old friends offered to her, and so full of love for all of them, but alone, taken for granted by them, but not really one of them, suicidally in love with....No!! Not possible!! Marcus recoiled from the deathly darkness in Mo's soul. Her shadow receded from his mind to replaced by ....Adrian, smart, streetwise, uncomplicated, good with numbers and money, sleek and promiscuous, a big

swinging dick, but loyal to his friends, courageous and strong of will, strong as iron, in love with Puck and Tinkerbell, but unable to love, and emotionally shallow, a flickering candle in a circle of golden suns. And Drew. And Drew. Brilliant, erratic, highly intelligent, inscrutably complicated, perceptive, subtle, ruthless, dangerous, manipulative, prescient, caring and compassionate, astute gambler addicted to risk, devoted to them all, responsible for them all, protecting them all, sheltering them all, willing to sacrifice himself for them all. The blue light burned so strongly in him. And Drew was so passionately in love. In love with them all and with what they were, but in love with Jaz beyond belief. And Jaz. Jaz was Drew, Drew was Jaz. Nothing but the most brilliant light, the most apocalyptic and concentrated love that flowed through them all like a thousand suns. Nothing else. No anger, no fear, no jealousy, no other human feelings or emotions, no evil, no good. Just Love. It was Jaz, Jaz was the centre of this circle. Not Drew. It all sprang from Jaz. The child of the desert. The child of empty places where spirits still walk unseen. And there was something else. Jaz did not speak because she could not speak. Jaz was a mute. Jaz was a soul beyond words.

And Sophie, dearest Sophie. Soppy Sophie. Soapy Sophie. Sobbing Sophie. Sailing Sophie, bravely wrestling great yachts through roaring seas. Sophie who was clever but didn't always understand, Sophie who sometimes got things wrong, Sophie who always tried her hardest to please everyone, Sophie gentle and yielding, vulnerable and unlucky, Sophie who loved them all with all her heart and all her body, as they loved her. Sophie who loved Marcus with such depth and pain that he wept for her. And Marcus. Marcus. Marcus was Sophie, everything that was Sophie was Marcus, the same person, not as clever as he thought he was, not the cold blooded creature he had created to shield himself from the hard world. Marcus, gentle and committed, vulnerable, unlucky, and overwhelmingly in love with Sophie, but determined to play his part in what must come next. And above all of this there was the something that bound them all together, that common energy, not properly understood by any of them, but always there. And beneath that, raging in each of them, unswerving loyalty and unbridled lust for each other, an irresistible compulsion to sink their bodies into each other and make of themselves one flesh and one spirit and to share themselves with others in the forlorn hope that they might find the parts of themselves that were lost. But all that they could hope to find was already here. They were one person. One consciousness except for.....

And then they were gone. Marcus woke with a shock, gasping as though he had been held under water until almost the last breath of life had gone. Sophie was supporting him on one side, Caroline on the other. Both of them stroking his back and pressing their faces against his and kissing him tenderly. Then they moved away from him. Now he was kneeling, kneeling with his knees together, and Caroline was kneeling in front of him with her legs open revealing everything that she had shown him in Carston, but he no longer saw the perfect

breasts and the neatly trimmed pubes, he saw only Caroline. And behind her his beloved Sophie, with her back to him, kneeling in the same way in front of Drew, the dusty soles of her dainty little feet just visible under her tiny rounded bottom. On the other side of the closed circle Tinkerbell knelt in the same way in front of Adrian.

"Sophie is the one you love," Caroline's voice was quiet and hypnotic, "but look at me. Look at me." Marcus obediently looked into the golden brown face framed in its cascades of shimmering blonde hair. "Listen to me Marcus. You're very lucky," she said, "very lucky that Sophie is able to bring you here. Very lucky that Sophie loves you so much. The man I love cannot come here. The man I love is one of us but he does not know it. He feels what we feel but he would be horrified if he knew that I did this. He would think me a child of Satan. I love him so much but I will soon have to forsake him. You understand now why we are different? And why we all need each other?" Marcus nodded. His heart understood, but his mind was baffled.

"You and I are going to make love. Very slowly please, because I have a problem with climaxing too quickly and I want to come at exactly the same time as Sophie, who has the opposite problem. Don't try to thrust. You won't be able to move much. Let me set the pace. You will know when it is time to let yourself go." She paused. "If you don't want to do this, say so now." Marcus shook his head. All thoughts of orgies had long gone out of his mind. This was more like a ritual act of initiation into a penetrable mystery.

"I'm ready," he said. Caroline raised herself and moved toward him on her knees until he felt the soft cool kiss of her breasts against his chest and the sudden blissful shock of her vagina sliding over him. She put her arms round his neck and kissed him as passionately and expertly as Sophie had ever done. Over her shoulder he could see Sophie pressing her hands against the side of Drew's face and kissing him with the same passion. He felt no jealousy, no pain, only joy for Sophie and overwhelming curiosity. The three uncoupled girls remained cross legged, watching, but doing nothing. No prayers, no bells, no incantations, no hippy nonsense, apart from the sandalwood incense given off from the joss sticks burning in little sand boxes around the room.

"Put your hands under my bottom and support me," Caroline murmured, "until you're fully into me. Then hold hands with the people next to you." Marcus slid his hands under the firm warmth of those divine muscles. He had done this often with Sophie, and knew now why she had taught him how to do it. Caroline leaned slowly backwards until her shoulders were on the floor, her back arched, her long legs clenched behind Marcus's buttocks. Sophie and Tinkerbell were leaning backwards in exactly the same way to form the three spokes in a wheel of flesh. As their heads came to rest behind each other in the centre of the circle, the girls flicked out their hair so that it flowed out and mingled together in a carpet of silver gold, chestnut flecked black and wavy blonde. They were all unbearably, heartbreakingly beautiful. Sophie tilted her

upside down face, and smiled at Marcus a smile of such warmth and encouragement that tears started in his eyes. Caroline grinned at him, and then looked upside down at Drew, who was already inside Sophie. The girls raised their arms behind their heads and stretched them backwards until they could grasp each other's wrists. As their hands gripped the outstretched wrists a pulse of energy shot through Marcus, causing him to gasp.

"Don't worry," Drew warned, "this is how it is." Marcus could see Sophie moving her hips slowly over Drew, but Caroline was doing nothing. Then Marcus realised that not only could he see what Sophie was doing, but he could also feel it. He was inside Sophie's consciousness, feeling what Sophie felt, feeling the arch of her back, the subtle weight and subcutaneous rise and fall of her breasts, the hardness of her nipples, the delicious slithering hardness sliding in and out of her clenching vagina, the movement of her pelvis swinging to meet Drew, the tight clenched grasp of Tinkerbell and Caroline's hands on her wrists, the slimness of Caroline's wrist in Sophie's hand, the tension and slight pain of the arching of her back, the strange tingling sensations beginning in her toes and creeping slowly up her legs and her arms. He sensed that Caroline and Tinkerbell felt it too. Caroline began to move her hips, sliding up and down him very gently, and he began to feel in her the same sensations that he felt through Sophie, her firm, supple, muscular body merging with Sophie's yielding flesh. And through Caroline he felt Drew, thrusting more purposefully into Sophie who was becoming more excited, the delicious tingling diffusing through her body. Sophie gave a little moan of pleasure and Marcus moaned with her. Caroline was moving faster. She too was tingling, her body sending what was left of her conscious brain urgent messages to slow down. She retained enough control to respond, allowing Sophie to catch up. Marcus lost track of how long they had been doing this. It began to seem like ages but time was of no consequence. The watchers disappeared into a haze. Caroline was pushing very hard now, and screaming incoherent shouts and moans, echoed by Sophie and Tinkerbell. Their tremendous synchronised lust surged through Marcus and enveloped him in flames. Every blazing sensation that they felt was channelled into him, merging into one mind blowing sensation pulsing down every synapse and neuron in their bodies and coursing through the outstretched hands into the unity of the circle. Marcus found himself bursting towards his own volcanic climax and felt the same sensations in Drew and the girls. Through eyes closed against the precious pain Marcus saw himself through Drew's eyes, teeth clenched, head thrown back, face twisted in total concentration before that final instant when all control was lost. And simultaneously he saw himself through Sophie's back cast eyes, aching with love for him, before they too dissolved into the dreamy vacuity of their collective orgasm. All three girls were screaming with ecstasy, writhing and hanging on to each other's wrists so hard that Marcus and Drew groaned with the delirious pain of it. Then everything exploded into a sunburst of blinding white heat fusing each body into one molten unity, flesh

and spirit moulded into one. Eight bodies as one. Eight minds as one, standing on the cusp between matter and energy, transformed into particles of superluminary light enfolding and unfolding in a multi dimensional symphony conducted by the universe itself. And as instantly as it had come the divine revelation flowed away, leaving that all enveloping blanket of oneness and sublime calm that he had so often experienced with Sophie, but never as strongly as this. He fell forward and collapsed panting onto Caroline who released her hold on Sophie and clutched Marcus to her with as much strength as she had left, until Puck and Mo and Jaz knelt beside them, prising them apart and wiping the sweat and semen from their exhausted bodies with warm, damp, sandalwood scented towels.

"My God," Drew gasped, " we have never got that far before. Jesus Christ Marcus, what have you given us?"

"Now you know," Caroline began, curling herself into the crook of Marcus's arm and smiling lovingly at the wet cheeked Sophie, blissfully curled asleep in the crook of his other arm, one hand on his chest like a child, the other round his neck, one leg drawn up across his navel. "Now you know why you must stay with us. We need you. You are very rare. You give us a unique power to see beyond ourselves and feel the ultimate reality of the universe."

"I understand that," Marcus replied, "but I don't understand what it is."

"Neither do we," said Caroline, "but we are scholars and we can speculate. First of all you know that the ancient Greeks believed that if the ego was put aside the soul could stand outside the body and achieve a higher state of being. They called this phenomenon *ekstasis,* ecstasy, and it happens in moments of extreme passion or sublime revelation when the soul temporarily leaves the body. In Buddhism, for example, it is the achievement of Nirvana. It's a concept that can be found in most of the philosophers and theologians of the Axial Age, you know, that period in the first millennium BC when the basic principles of philosophy, monotheistic theology and empirical science were first explored. Confucianism, Daoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism in the East. Monotheistic Judaism, and, eventually, Christianity and scientific rationalism in the West. It was a pivotal period in world history and we still live in the shadow of Axial beliefs. But the greatest Axial thinkers considered organised religion to be largely irrelevant. What mattered for them was the principle of compassionate empathy as the key to goodness and salvation. The ability to feel what other people feel and to do no harm to life. Do as you would be done by, and so on. The Western religions soon perverted this simple message by institutionalising it into creeds and churches. We don't believe in the soul, of course, but if you substitute our consciousness for our soul then what we just did was a release and sharing of our consciousness. We became one consciousness and..." Caroline paused to gather breath but before she could resume her discourse Drew jumped in.

"There's more to it than that," Drew was reclining on his elbow at Marcus's feet, Jaz pressed silently against him, her back to Marcus, her silent face lying on his chest, his hand stroking her shining hair with the utmost tenderness. "Caroline's coming at this from a theological position. But it has cosmic implications which are much more interesting. Listen. The stars and galaxies and the things we can see and measure in the universe constitute only four percent of its mass. There's a new theory I heard debated last year at Princeton by a guy called Ostriker. They think that ninety six percent of the mass of the universe is made of matter or energy which we cannot detect with our current instrumentation. Dark matter. I also went to a lecture in Oxford by this guy from Birkbeck, David Bohm. Another physicist. He has this holistic theory of Implicate and Explicate order which connects everything with everything else. He argues that the so called elementary particles of matter are quantum particles which actually embody a kind of memory of everything in the universe. Like any part of a hologram embodies the whole image it presents, or like apparently random cuts made in a piece of folded paper which emerge as a complex pattern when the paper is unfolded. The initial cuts into the folds are the Implicate order which determines the Explicate pattern of the unfolded paper where individual cuts may be widely separated in space. It helps to explain superluminal signalling where two interacting sub atomic particles can respond to each other even when they are light years apart, which means that they are communicating at speeds faster than the speed of light. He argues that there is a deeper dimension of reality which underpins the Explicate order of the manifest universe and exists in discrete quanta in a continuous energy field. And behind this is a cosmic intelligence, the Implicate Order, which provides the data on which the explicate world is predicated. And the whole thing is a closed loop. In other words, the universe itself is conscious and learning about itself and because we are made out of Explicate matter which embodies the holographic image of all of the universe our consciousness is a part of the consciousness of that universe. All we need to do is find out how to tap into it. Well, anyway, that's what Bohm thinks. It's a neat bit of ontology but his views are contentious." Drew sat back and surveyed his captive audience. Caroline pulled a wry face.

"*Quite half what we see cannot possibly be, and the rest is extremely unlikely*," she said in a sardonic voice, "you really need to think carefully about this," she added, "nobody has actually produced any objective proof."

"Yeah, yeah. I have thought carefully," Drew replied, after the implications of the Implicate Order had sunk in to the consciousness of his acolytes, "and I agree that nothing is certain. But, as you said, we can speculate and I think that Bohm is on the right track. But I have my own theory. I think that there is this energy in the universe. Very weak. So weak that it has virtually no mass, force or power, but it is infinite and everywhere and it is conscious and intelligent, but powerless and timeless, neither alive nor dead, because life and death are

biological phenomena. Imagine that you had a mind, incorporeal, pure energy, but no body, so you could not feel, or see, or hear or touch or experience anything in the gross material world. And from before the beginning of time it exists in darkness, aware only of itself. Can you imagine that? A mind without a body and without senses. Totally alone. Can you imagine the terror and the pain that we would feel. Only it does not know terror and pain because it has never experienced them, except through us. Blind, deaf, dumb, without feeling or sensation. It knows nothing, except that it exists and that it thinks. And then the universe evolves. Space twists and deforms and gives birth to time, and time gives birth to light and death. Matter coalesces into stars and planets. Galaxies form. Electrons spin. Molecules evolve. Electrical energy in the form of the lightning which accompanies great geological events stimulates dead matter into biological life. The great struggle of evolution begins. And suddenly it is not alone. It finds that it can share the sensory perceptions of these primitive creatures. Somehow it can feel the material world through them." Drew paused and drank from glass of wine poured from the jug on the little table behind him. The candles flickered as the faintest currents of air wafted around them. The symposium resumed its discourse.

"It has little or no control over this but as the biological organisms develop beyond the most primitive stage and start to have more complex neural systems and eventually eyes, and other sensory organs, it is able to see the material world and experience it through these organisms. And it can influence them, but only in the most infinitesimal ways. By a massive effort of will it can focus its infinitely weak energy to change the orbit of an electron. It could change minutely the molecular structure of DNA. Only it doesn't know what DNA is. It has to wait millenia until we discover DNA and it acquires the knowledge from us. So it has to rely on natural selection through random mutation. There are many mistakes, like the Dinosaurs perhaps, but, eventually, it finds intelligent, creative, sentient creatures, like us, who are able to study their environment and manipulate it, rather than be manipulated by it. And through us it can vicariously experience the material world and learn how it works and try to change it in ways beneficial to both. And perhaps in the end it will find some way to merge with those sentient creatures and enter the world of matter as part of them.

"We are the biological machines," said Mo, "it is the ghost in the machine."

"We are the eyes and ears of the universe," said Drew excitedly, "and it is evolving with us, developing, learning from us, remembering and ….it is the ultimate scholar. Pure mind pursuing knowledge for its own sake."

"What are you saying?" Marcus interrupted, "are you saying that there is something inside my head, looking through my eyes, seeing what I see? That's pretty bloody creepy."

"Not quite. We don't know for sure and I don't share Drew's enthusiasm for the Cosmic Consciousness idea, though there is a theological parallel in the

work of Friedrich Schelling in the early nineteenth century," Caroline pushed back into the debate, "Drew reads too much science fiction. This is just a working hypothesis. You understand. We're desperate not to fall back on religion or mysticism. We are different and there has to be a rational explanation. So..."

There was squeal from the other side of the circle. Puck and Tinkerbell were leaping on and off Adrian's rigid dick in turns, competing to see who would come first and if both could come before he did.

"They're still children, they love the sex, but they don't understand the mystery….especially Adrian. So....let's consider that the human brain is a fusion of biological and electromagnetic energy and that what goes on in our brains, our thoughts and feelings, is broadcast as energy in some way. We know that this happens with us. After all, we already have machines which can detect brain waves. We know that the brain generates and broadcasts electromagnetic energy. Let's suppose that this cosmic energy, Mo's ghost, can detect and interpret our broadcast energy. Store it, keep it. Maybe it keeps our entire personalities. And that's why we recognise each other, because we've been together before, in the cosmic memory bank of Bohm's Implicate Order. Sophie sometimes dreams of her former lives. Perhaps she is just remembering events recorded in the memory bank. Perhaps we are all old souls, like Mrs Moore in *Passage to India*. The fact that we all feel that we have always known each other and, indeed, that we actually are each other, like you and Sophie and me, suggests that there is something special about us, and this may mean that from time to time certain human minds acquire personalities from outside, in addition to our transient native personalities which are a consequence of birth and environment. Sometimes it manifests itself as mental illness. Schizophrenia and multiple personalities. Remember Legion, in the Bible. That kind of thing. But I think that's just a malfunction."

"It would go mad," Marcus laughed, "think of all the garbage we churn out in our lives."

"Perhaps, but, as I said, I don't believe that it is conscious. I think it is just a natural phenomenon, like a vast tape recorder recording lives rather than sounds. I can accept the energy theory because physicists believe that such energies exist, even if they are just mathematical theories. But I don't believe that it is sentient in itself though it may have become sentient through us. We're using it rather than it using us. Drew is hot for certainties but I don't know. I'm the resident sceptic and I'm reluctant to go too far with Drew on this. But there is definitely something which needs to be explained." Caroline stopped, and gently stroked Sophie's sleeping face, "Sophie is so lucky," she murmured, "and I'm so lucky that you will share yourself with us. She didn't have to, you know. She could have kept you to herself. It was very hard for her. Maybe all sentient creatures transmit brain waves as a matter of course," she resumed, "but we are strange. We have some kind of crude telepathy. Our minds are wired up slightly

differently so that we are more aware of this energy and feel through it the links between us. And you are the key."

"I disagree," said Mo, "I think that many humans have this faculty. But only when they are children, before the rational ego kicks out fantasy. How many children do you know who have invisible friends who sit beside them at mealtimes? Bloody pain in the bum they are."

"The angel," said Marcus, "the angel who watched over me when I slept as a child. I always knew it was there. And then it left me, when I became a teenager."

"No, it never left you, you just lost contact with it, when you started to think for yourself. I told you. Remember Wordsworth. He felt it too. In *Intimations.*" Drew nodded affirmatively at Marcus.

"Are we talking about God?" Marcus asked, "this is too awesome to contemplate."

"No, I don't think so. I'm a theologian after all," Caroline paused, " Gods are made in the image of men. They serve the needs of primitive societies. They provide order and moral imperatives and group solidarity enforced by fear of the unknown. In extreme situations belief in a god gives a society unity and strength of purpose which helps it to survive. It legitimises the unthinkable. Maybe that's part of Darwinian selection too. Societies that have strong gods are more likely to survive. And then the age of reason comes and gods are replaced by ideologies, and then by science. Usually with great bloodshed in the process." She paused again to collect her thoughts. "Nevertheless, there have always been individuals who have been aware of the ghost in the machine but our brains are not yet wired up in such a way that we can communicate with it directly. Perhaps we could not cope with meeting it directly, like a buffer overload on a computer. Our minds are too small. It would burn us out, or maybe it is better that we don't know for certain that it exists. Perhaps we perceive it through the subconscious, in dreams. Like St Cecilia it appears in visions to some musicians, and unconsciously to many others. Mathematicians, physicists, artists, poets, authors, creative minds, are all inspired by the sublime. The ancient Greeks may have been closer than they thought with the idea of Muses, sources of subconscious inspiration articulating the sublime into the world of men. Wordsworth and the romantics understood it, in that sense. But they saw it as a perception of the otherness of Nature from which the adult is alienated. You and I felt that very strongly at the time of that appalling car crash."

"Yeah," Drew butted in again and Caroline gave way to him with another wry grin, "geniuses may just be people whose brains are wired up in such a way that they can hear the thoughts of the universe and translate them into the world of men. *Idiots savants* the same, maybe, just… the wiring's gone wrong. But it especially loves mathematicians and physicists because they tell it the most about the physical world. And every step they take brings it closer to communicating with our conscious minds, and it is with them at every step,

urging them on. And it speaks to us most eloquently through music and mathematics because they are a universal language. I think that it is not any cleverer than us. It is evolving with us. Learning from us. Trying to help us. It wants to know.. everything. Experience… everything. And it's still a child. Perhaps that's why children are more likely to be aware of it when it comes to play with them. "

Marcus looked around his new old friends. How strange, how bizarre, to be lying here with a naked girl curled in each arm, two naked girls and a naked man at his feet, a threesome hammering away in the background, and talking about the most profound and daunting ideas he had ever encountered. And how remote from the knights of medieval Yorkshire.

"James Sinclair often says that he doesn't always know where the stories for his novels come from. He says he often starts with the intention of writing something and finds that he has created something completely different. Sometimes things that he never even knew that he knew. If you see what I mean."

"Dr Sinclair writes novels?" Drew queried sharply, "I didn't know that."

"Yes," Marcus replied, "but he never seems to get them published. He just writes for fun I think. Or maybe to escape from his wife. Never mind James. What about us," Marcus asked, "why us?"

Caroline shook her head, "we don't know. We know only that we form a group, and that we can recognise each other. We are attracted to each other and bound to each other in some way, and some of us are uniquely matched with each other in some way, like you and Sophie and me, and Drew and Jaz. But I wasn't sure that you were one of us. Just touching is not always enough. Sex is the surest test because it is the most intimate. If I had screwed you as I intended when we went to Yorkshire I would have found out, and what Sophie feared most might have happened, except that Sophie was wrong in her fear. Drew knew the minute he shook hands with you, when he came for interview. But then Drew is exceptionally sensitive. And it comes to him through Jaz who is very special. It was Jaz who found Drew, at that party, in London. In Jaz the light burns very bright. It is Jaz who inspires us all. And Sophie knew, without understanding, the first time she met you, without even touching you. A marriage of true minds. She just thought it was love at first sight. Romantic child. But she couldn't work out how to get close to you, because you were a tutor and bound by professional ethics, and she wouldn't use her powers to influence you. You know that we won't use our powers without the consent of others, but sometimes it's impossible not to hear other people's thoughts. We try to block them out, but it's hard. Sometimes they just slip past our blocks. Instead Drew did everything he could to bring you both together with your consent. By coming here tonight you consented to joining us. You are one of us. In your heart you know it."

“You’re going to tell me about the sex,” said Marcus, suddenly finding that he too could dimly foresee what they were about to say.

“You see, you can do it now,” Caroline smiled at him. “You always could, you just didn't know how to. The *ekstatic* sexual shock you have just experienced has unlocked your latent ability. And no, I called it telepathy, but it's not really telepathy,” said Caroline, jumping ahead of Marcus again, “I think our minds just connect through the cosmic energy. Like a kind of celestial telephone exchange. And it doesn’t go very far ahead, one or two images at most. It's generally stronger in women than men, because most women are natural empaths, which is a first step towards telepathy. Drew is quite good at it. Sophie’s very good, even at a distance, and Drew is very good at perceiving patterns in processes and events, which allows him to predict what is likely to happen. That’s why he is going to be so rich and look after the rest of us. You don't have strong telepathy but you do seem to have an energy which we don't have. Like, being with you boosts all our powers. That's why you are part of us and we need you. What we just did was stronger than it has ever been before. It was amazing. You have almost completed the circle and I think it has changed us in some way. I feel different but I can't work it out. I don't know about the rest of you.”

“Me too,” said Drew, “ Something new definitely happened. Amazing.”

“Yes,” Caroline continued, “I think so. Something new. Marcus empowers us. We’re all stronger when we’re with him. As for the sex? How else is DNA transmitted? And our sense of a wider shared consciousness is at its strongest when we make love. You've already sensed it with Sophie, but up to now she has deliberately held her consciousness back from you for fear of frightening you. The next time you make love to her, or to me or to any of us, we won’t hold our souls back. It will be as it just was. Literally mind blowing.”

“That's why we like shagging so much,” said Mo, almost regretfully, “well most people like shagging, but you need somebody to shag. I haven’t been so lucky with people to shag me, and gay sex doesn’t seem to work at all. It’s hard for me. I want women, but I need men. Which is why I’m hoping that one of you will shag me rotten before the night is out.”

“It’s true,” said Caroline, “that we are all full of lust, almost to the point that we can’t control it. I don't know why that should be. It's as though we are impelled to sex. Sophie's had a hell of time with it because so many boys took advantage of her and she is so generous of spirit that she couldn’t say no. And we're all looking for people like us, which makes us seem promiscuous. And there does seem to be a problem with gays, though, to be honest, we’ve never tried it with gay men, for the obvious reason that they aren’t attracted to women, and women seem to be the lock into which the key must fit before the door is opened. In the end it’s all about reproduction, and gays don’t reproduce. It's an evolutionary *cul de sac*. But we really do want to shag each other all the time and it’s a lot of fun, as you now know. You’ve only been with Sophie, and with

me. Believe me, screwing someone who does not share our feelings is a very poor second. How long do you and Sophie last? Twenty minutes, half an hour, an hour, more?" Marcus nodded, he had just assumed that what they did was normal for young people, "Well, the average human male can last five to six minutes at the most, from penetration to ejaculation. Great for me when I'm with normal boys, because they're always in a hurry and I can come as soon as they do. And if I thrash about and make a lot of noise they feel really good. But if you shag someone who is the same as us, you will know at once because both of you will feel that unique spiritual oneness. We become each other. Also we have lots more physical control of ourselves so that it can last a lot longer, even for me. Adrian is amazing. He can do it for hours and never come, unless he wants to. But," her voice dropped to a whisper, "that's all he has. He enjoys the sex but he doesn't feel the love and he doesn't hear our thoughts. He wasn't there was he. Just now. You felt the rest of us, but not Adrian. It flows through him, but he doesn't feel it. That's why the circle is still incomplete. For the rest of us the reality of sex is all in the mind anyway. But you feel it most intensely when you do it the way we did it just now, all of us together. Once you've done it like that you're never going to give it up." Caroline leaned across Marcus and patted Sophie's cheek gently until she woke up, sensuously arching her back, stretching her legs along Marcus, rubbing her eyes, and smiling benignly at all of them. "You and I are going to watch," Caroline said to her.

"Anyway," said Drew, picking up where Caroline had left off, "as Caroline said, if we screw lots of people on spec, as it were, every now and again we hope to find someone like us. Screwing is the quickest and most reliable way of finding out. That's why we have these commercial King Kong sex parties. On one level it's just a rather orderly orgy. On another level we are testing and learning. But… it seems that we are very rare. And if anyone asks any questions we're just a bunch of sex mad hippies with crazy ideas. But, as you can see, we're not really hippies at all."

"The bottom line," Drew added, "is that we really are different. I think it's part of a process of natural selection for telepathic powers, both for us, and for 'it', whatever 'it' is, and that means that at some stage we must have children by each other, and we will have to work out how to do it so that we all share in their nurture and maximise the potential of the gene pool. I think that the mind blowing communal sex is the carrot we are being offered to advance our genetic evolution. At the moment we're probably too busy enjoying it, but, sooner or later the girls are going to have to stop taking the pill and start having babies."

"Have you found many others?" Marcus was curious. Drew shook his head.

"None," he said, regretfully, "it seems we are very rare, though there are lots of people with mild telepathic potential, especially women. But mostly it's subconscious and not strong enough to cross the threshold from unconsciously broadcasting messages to consciously transmitting them. That's why we are different. We can consciously transmit and receive. But we're not very good at

it. It isn't reliable, it doesn't last long and we're not always in control of it. If apes are proto humans, and man is the paragon of animals, we are proto angels. But we are at the beginning of our evolution and we have a long way to go. So you can expect some odd things to happen. Maybe it will get better with practice. Our children should be much better than us."

"I felt," Marcus said, "I felt that whatever was there loved us so much, but it loved especially our carnality. I thought, for an instant, I felt it looking at you all through my eyes and it was so happy, how else can one describe it, so sublimely happy. It loves us to touch and feel and enjoy each other because it cannot feel life for itself. And the more of us there are the more it feels through us and the more it gives to us. It loves sex because it loves life."

"It spoke to you?" Drew exclaimed and looked pointedly at Caroline who shrugged and pulled a face.

"Not spoke, exactly, I just felt its thoughts. Or maybe it was just our collective thoughts. Whatever. It was just thinking how beautiful we were and how much it cared for us and it was so happy. Happy as we are happy. And, just for an instant I seemed to stand outside time. Outside matter and energy. It was very strange. And you were all there with me. All but one. As though we had all merged into something else."

"That's never happened before," Drew shook his head thoughtfully and looked again at Caroline, "we've all felt the stepping outside ourselves sensation, but it has never spoken to us. That's something new."

"I don't dispute that there is something there," Caroline replied defensively, "we've all felt the presence of the angel. I just don't believe that it is some alien intelligence with plans for humanity. As Marcus says, it might just be us. A projection of our own imaginations. I really don't know."

"Well, I intend to find out what it is, if it take the rest of my life and all my wealth. Let's try again, " Drew replied, then looked down at Jaz, who was fondling his penis back into life, anxious to take her turn in the square circle. "I think you and I are going to do it again. Me with Mo, and you with Jaz. And Adrian with Puck. Marcus went through the whole process again, this time with Jaz bent back over his thighs, her little wrist gripped by Mo's vast hand, using just her pelvic and vaginal muscles on the tip of his penis to bring him infinitely slowly to orgasm. The sensations which flowed through her and Mo were so blastingly intense that Mo roared and howled, Puck squealed with delight, and the boys bayed like wolves. Once again their collective imagination accelerated beyond the speed of light and stood for an instant on the edge of another form of reality. And Jaz, who did not make a sound, apart from a murmur so tiny that it bellowed in the silence of the universe, smiled a smile so serene that it set the galaxy alight. Afterwards Mo scowled balefully at Marcus and ignored him.

Mixed Messages

Marcus woke up and mentally pinched himself. He had no idea what time it was, though one of the curtains in the room had been pulled back slightly and thin, rain spattered sunlight was drifting in, dimly illuminating the flotsam of last night's fornication. He was clearly still in the middle of the wettest of adolescent wet dreams. They were lying on their sides, Sophie's bottom was cupped into his navel, dormant flesh pressed to dormant flesh, his right arm around her waist, his hand resting on her stomach. Behind him he could feel Caroline's slightly prickly pubes, her breasts nestled against his back and her right arm flopped over him. Mo, Adrian, Tinkerbell and Puck were lying together in a loose somnolent heap, but there was no sign of Drew and Jaz. He pinched himself again. Sooner or later he would have to wake up. He vaguely remembered the epilogue of last night's revelations. Making unbelievably perfect love to Sophie, better than anything they had experienced in the weeks before last night. Then watching Adrian and Drew making a foursome with Tinkerbell and Puck who had shrieked and screamed with hysterical delight, and then Caroline and Mo locking themselves into a gentle embrace, fingers and tongues exploring mouths and lips then sliding delicately round nipples and clits. Mo moaning with delight and then inexplicably bursting into tears and Caroline talking very softly to her. Then he had gone to sleep clutching Sophie to him.

He sat up and looked around. Caroline was beginning to waken too, but the others were dead to the world. The little hexagonal fretwork tables which had been positioned around the peripheries of the circle had been reassembled into one large table in the centre, and were charged with an assortment of fruits, orange juice in a large jug, cups and glasses, some cereals and cereal bowls, and sticky cake, sugary biscuits and hot croissants. Jaz appeared, wearing a dark blue sari, followed by Drew, in shorts, with a large cafetiere of delicious coffee, the aroma of which had an almost immediate effect on the sleeping bodies.

"What happens now?" Marcus asked, testing the coffee and looking around the bodies reclining at the low tables, like Greeks or Romans in an especially erotic Alma Tadema painting.

"We go about our normal business," Drew replied, "I'm going to Iran with Jaz, Sophie's going to Greece as you know, but she'll be back from time to time, or you can go and join her. Have a holiday, you deserve one." Sophie grinned enthusiastically. Drew continued; "Tinkerbell and Puck are going back to London with Adrian and then they're all going to St Tropez for a holiday. If you feel lonely Caroline and Mo will still be in St Dynion's. Remember Marcus, we share everything. I mean everything. And we'll meet again when we can. There is the Kong party I'm planning for October. But I've been thinking that it might be better if you don't come to it." There was a ripple of disappointment around the table. "I know, we do have a good time. But I've got something in

mind for October. Unfinished business, you might say. I think you all know what I mean."

Marcus shook his head and Sophie look questioningly at Drew.

"Well, perhaps better if you two don't know. Until it's over. Don't worry about it."

Sophie and Marcus returned to Rhianda, collapsed into his single bed and slept until they were sufficiently restored to make love again, as often as they could, until the next day when Marcus packed her little rucksack into the front of the Porsche and drove her to Manchester Airport to catch her flight. Sophie was blissfully happy and tearfully sad. What had seemed lost in Marcus's love making was more than restored and she had accepted that Caroline would look after him when she was not there, as she and Caroline would look after each other whenever Marcus was not there. But she was leaving Marcus, which she didn't want to do. She clung to him with ferocious tenacity before sprinting to Departures at the very last minute. Tears washed down her face. She kissed him with a passion beyond anything she had ever felt before.

"Don't forget," she murmured, her mouth pressed against his ear, "if you're lonely, go to Caroline. I won't mind. I know now what must be. I will be thinking of you always. Every night, at ten o'clock, I will meditate, and maybe if you do the same we can be with each other. Let's try. And if you are with Caroline I will know and share it with you and we will all be with each other. I'll come back as soon as I can. And I'll send you cards and try to telephone. But Greek telephones aren't very good, so don't be surprised if we get cut off. And I'll try to come back in late August, and then you can come back to Greece with me, if you can. And I love you so much. So, never stop thinking of me. And I shall never stop loving you. Good luck with your thesis," she added, almost as an afterthought.

When Marcus eventually went back to his dismal room in the hut at St Dynion's dank reality steeped in upon him. The sceptical scholar had no intention of going to Caroline without Sophie being there as well, though he now lusted after that available golden brown body, which had once so frightened him, almost as much as he lusted after Sophie. Resisting it required an effort of will as great as that which he had first deployed against Caroline when she had thrown herself at him at Carston. He sat behind his desk trying to rationalise the events of that strange evening of abandonment at Penhesgyn. As remorseless time ticked the memory further and further away from him he found it hard to imagine that it had ever happened, especially since Sophie was not here to remind him. The rational mind resumed its destructive mission. Transcendental or spiritual experiences could be explained away by invoking psychological concepts of auto suggestion or collective hypnosis. Meditation was known to produce mystical experiences in susceptible people, which was why the sixties hippies were so into it and attempted to augment it by taking mind changing drugs. Maybe Drew had found some way of harnessing this

psychological desire to connect with others in order to draw naive women into his power so he could enjoy a harem. But none of these women was naive. They were all young, clever, modern women, not easily taken in, least of all Caroline who clearly understood how sects and religions manipulated minds to solicit converts. Maybe Drew had drugged them all. That seemed unlikely, given his contempt for drugs, but the sex itself was an intoxicating drug to which he could easily become addicted, just as the others were. If it was real, then the implications were mind blowing. If it was not real, then it was one hell of a good way to enjoy sex, assuming that one had a taste for group sex. Then, again, he wanted to be with Sophie, not share her with others or be shared with her by Caroline or Jaz. But then, the sharing had been so marvellous. He had felt so safe and secure with them. They were not careless swingers pursuing sex with strangers, though the Kong parties sounded very close to that. Nor were they really hippies, except maybe Mo, and in any case, there was no need to invoke hippy mysticism to justify group sex. They could just do it, as many others were doing it in the liberated seventies. But here there was a total devotion to each other, a kind of invocatory ritual that carried the acts of sex between them beyond carnality into a collectively shared spiritual experience. And the telepathy, weak as it was, could not be denied. Drew's very rational explanation of the weak energy in the universe was convincing and consistent with what little he knew of current physics and cosmology from the bright and articulate physicists whose company he had so enjoyed in Cambridge and so missed here. But, like Caroline, he found it hard to accept that pure energy could also be a sentient intelligence. That was a step too far. A mystery which required an unacceptable act of faith. On reflection it seemed to him more like what he thought an out of body experience might be. Looking down on himself and the others at the point of his death. He had no rational explanation for it.

That night he sat on his bed at around ten o'clock and tried to meditate. He successfully cleared his mind as he had been taught, but nothing came into it and because there was no one to catch him if he fell, he forced himself to leave the trance. There was nothing there. Except that on the verge of sleep he sensed briefly a subliminal presence in the room. It was the same benign presence that he had felt as a child and it allowed him to fall asleep confident that Sophie was safe and with her father. He tried to contact her by meditation for several nights without success until it dawned on him that Greek summer time was two hours ahead of British summer time. Ten o'clock in Greece was eight o'clock in England. He tried again, this time at eight o'clock, and instead of pulling back from the emptiness he allowed himself to fall, ignoring the danger that he might never get back. But he did not fall far. Something that was the essence of Sophie wound through him like a silver mist. He felt her love engulf him and his heart went out to her, and then she was gone. The following day the phone in his office rang and her beloved voice crackled through the ether.

"Darling," she said, "I felt you last night, were you thinking of me?"

"Yes," Marcus replied, "I'm sorry. I forgot about the time difference."

"Never mind sweetheart, now we know it works. We'll try again, tonight. But tomorrow we're leaving. I'm at a periptero in Piraeus. It's very noisy and there are people waiting to use the phone. I can hardly hear you. We're taking a yacht to Crete, so .....Maybe not until….." the phone went dead and did not ring back.

He tried meditating again at eight o'clock and felt once more that ephemeral breath of Sophie's consciousness in his own mind, but it did not seem to be able to communicate, and the only sensation that came to him was a faint scent of Chanel. After that there were no more contacts for several days until Sophie rang from Heraklion.

"Did you ask Caroline?" she said after telling Marcus about her crossing to Crete.

"Ask Caroline?"

"Yes. Ask her about…" the phone went dead again. Sophie never seemed to be able to ring back. Marcus desperately wanted to talk to her at length. To tell her how much he missed her. How much he loved her. But somehow telephone communication with Greece was fraught with fractures. In the end a postcard came of a Satyr, a priapic god with an enormous phallus. Sophie had not lost her sense of humour, but she had the decorum to send the card to Rhianda rather than to his college address, where it would have passed through the hands of sniggering porters. The back of the card was covered with kisses and suggestive endearments, and a little scribble instructing him to ask Caroline whether there was more chance of getting through if the two of them were to meditate together. Marcus was very reluctant to contact Caroline. Not because he feared her any more, quite the opposite, but because he feared that the process of meditation would involve more sexual contact than he felt fair to Sophie. Nevertheless, so great was his desire to be with Sophie, even if only in spirit, that in the end he relented and he and Caroline sat facing each other, cross legged and naked, on the carpet in his sitting room, holding hands and falling into the whiteness at exactly eight o'clock. Marcus felt Caroline's cool mind merge with his, as he had before at Penhesgyn, then, for the briefest of instants, both of them had a terrifying sensation of falling into an impenetrable darkness flecked by the falling fire of a dying sun wound in a vast crimson shroud. A thought whispered *I love you both so much*, *love each other with me*. Then it was gone and Marcus and Caroline snapped back into their own world, shaking with fear at what they had seen and falling breathless into each other's consoling bodies.

"I've got to go away," said Caroline, fastening the catches of her unnecessary bra in front of her stomach, then slipping it round her back, pushing her arms through it and wriggling it up over her breasts. "I've got to go to a conference in Cambridge, and I'm staying there to do some research in the University Library. They've got some stuff there I want to look at."

"Obviously it works," Marcus said, not listening to Caroline.

"Something certainly happened. Poor Marcus, you so want to be with her don't you. It hurts doesn't it. It hurts me too, when I'm away from the Reverend Williams and from Drew and all of you. It's a blessing and a curse that we must share the collective pain of our love. It won't be long. But I have to go away. I'll be back around the middle of August, by which time Sophie may be back herself. I'm sure she'll phone when she can. Meditation doesn't seem to be the most reliable form of communication. I've done it often enough with the others but I've never felt anything like that before. I don't know what it was. It frightened me. I wish Drew was here."

"Me too," said Marcus regretfully, "but there was something there, wasn't there?"

Caroline smiled encouragingly at him. "I thought I felt Sophie, just for an instant," she said, placing her hands on either side of Marcus's face and kissing him, as an incestuous sister might kiss a brother.

"I had a card from Isfahan," she added, "Drew and Jaz are okay. They send their love. We'll all be together again soon. Go and see Mo if you are feeling low while I'm away. Mo's always good for a laugh. Don't know whether she'll screw you though."

Marcus had no intention of being screwed by Mo, though he had come to respect her and appreciate that she was, in her way, just as striking as the others, bonny rather than beautiful and, as she herself said, not fat but big. Everything was in proportion, except her boobs, which really were rather large. Instead he went into his office every day and sat by his phone waiting for it to bring his beloved's voice to him, and hoping for a letter from Cambridge, though the thesis seemed to have dwindled in significance compared with his passion for Sophie and the metaphysical revelations which now invaded his unlocked mind. In the evenings he sat alone in Rhianda, his mind cleared of all thought, his eyes closed and intent, and occasionally he felt the presence of Sophie, the warmth of her breath on his cheek, the little tinkle of the bells on her jeans, the touch of her hair wafting across his face, and he felt simultaneously sublimely happy and desperately sad. From time to time she got through on the phone, when she could get to one that worked. But phone conversations seemed somehow dead and soulless. He had always found it difficult to talk casually on the phone, so Sophie chattered about this and that until they were inevitably cut off, or she ran out of drachmas.

James Sinclair came into his room occasionally, usually to moan about his termagant wife who was determined to divorce him but unable to find any immediate pretext since his alleged relationship with Sophie Davenport could not be substantiated in the cold light of the law, and it was not possible to accuse James of unreasonable behaviour because the unreasonable behaviour was all on her side. He'd moved out of Mo's place and back into his house, but it was not easy and every morning and evening he had to run a gauntlet of

abuse, mostly relating to the size of his willy and his inability to use it. Sandra bitterly resented him being in the house in the evenings and often went out to avoid him but he had not idea where she went. Sooner or later he would have to manufacture an initiative and a plan was forming in his mind which he decided not to disclose to Marcus for the time being.

On the 27th of July Marcus received a phone call from the Porter's Lodge.

"Mr Ross," said the disembodied but nonetheless fully uniformed and authoritative Welsh voice of the Head Porter. "Mr Ross, I don't want to bother you, as I'm sure you're very busy," there was a certain irony in the voice, since the Porters did not believe that academics were ever busy, "Thing is, we've got this here letter addressed to a Mr Cross in the Department of History isn't it. Now we don't have a Mr Cross in the Department of History do we?" Marcus wished he would get to the point. "There's a Doctor Cross in Chemistry. But not in History. Now…this here letter has a Cambridge postmark and we reckon there's only you and Doctor Sinclair in History that's from Cambridge. And see, Doctor Sinclair is Doctor isn't it. So we think maybe this letter is for you. Shocking writing too. Address is almost impossible to read. It's got St Dunstan's College. Not Welsh see. Wonder it arrived at all."

"Okay," gasped Marcus, his heart suddenly pounding, "I'll be right over to get it."

"Oh, I shouldn't worry Mr Ross. We've had it for more than a week now. There's another letter here for you, in the afternoon post. If you like I'll send one of the lads over with them both."

"No, no, I'll come for it myself. I'll be there in a minute."

Marcus sprinted out of the hut and up the stairs in the Old Building three at a time, colliding twice with double doors randomly locked on the wrong side, and arrived bruised and breathless at the Porters' Office and Mail Room.

"Ah, Mr Ross. That was quick sir. I didn't know dons could move so fast." The Head Porter was an enormous, craggy, barrel chested man who had been a colour sergeant in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers during the war and ran his little empire at St Dynion's with an iron fist in an iron glove. He was so impressive to look at that even the most blasé academics cringed with fear when he addressed them as Sir in a tone of voice which left no one in any doubt about who Sir really was. Ordinary undergraduates were simply terrified of him and behaved with exemplary manners whenever he was in sight of them. Marcus had met many similar men in porters lodges in Cambridge and he always treated them with the respect they truly deserved. Most of the porters were ex servicemen who had returned to their ancestral jobs in the colleges when the war ended. They constituted a little island of common sense in the shifting sea of folly, treachery and abject lunacy on which the academic staff plied their dubious trade.

"Your letters, Mr Ross," the Head Porter said, handing Marcus two envelopes. "We would have delivered them you know. No need to rush around like that Sir. You might have injured yourself."

"Yes, thanks," Marcus snatched the letters as they were proffered to him.

"Is everything alright Sir," the Head Porter asked, sensing Marcus's extreme anxiety.

Marcus was too distracted by the letters to take much notice. "Yes, yes, fine," he muttered vaguely, "fine, thanks."

Both of the letters were hand written. One, on a crisp and expensive vellum envelope, was addressed in a flowing copperplate hand, strong and regular, which he recognised at once as that of Colonel Fawcett in Yorkshire. The other was written with the calligraphy of a drunken spider, incomplete, inaccurate and almost illegible. It was addressed to Mr M Cross MA., St Dunstans University College, Wales. But on the back of the envelope was the Gallus College crest with its distinctive crossed axes, the arms of the ennobled Tudor executioner who was the original patron of the College. His heart sank. This could not be the long awaited summons to the *viva* since he knew very well that there was no one in Gallus who was qualified to examine his work. He walked slowly out of the Mail Room, neglecting in his disappointment and anxiety to say goodbye to the group of big cheerful men behind the desk who were watching him with concerned faces. The porters, however, were well accustomed to the vagaries of academics, and generally treated their casual rudeness as mere eccentricity, the price they paid for being too clever by half.

Out in the corridor Marcus slit open the Gallus envelope with his fingernail. The notepaper was also headed with the College crest, but the scrawled message was appalling written, worse than anything he had ever encountered in a student essay. He summoned up all of his palaeographic skills and eventually began to make some kind of sense of it.

Dear Cross, it read, *I have been asked by the Syndicate of Research Studies to arrange a viva voce examination in connection with your Ph.D. candidature. I have discussed suitable dates with the external examiner, Dr Roger* something*, of Kegan College, in the University of Oxford, and he has agreed that the most convenient day will be Thursday, August the third, and, failing that, Thursday, August the tenth. The place will be my rooms in Gallus College. The time will be 10.30. am. Yours sincerely……* The signature was totally illegible.

Marcus was perplexed. Gallus was his own college, though he had never felt much affection for it, and he knew very well that there were only two history dons there. One was an eighteenth century specialist and the other was the cantankerous Julian Armiger, who was reputed to be a specialist in early Italian monasticism but had never produced anything of any significance other than a slim book published in the fifties, and now superseded by more accomplished researchers in the field, and a few articles on some obscure ninth century Italian abbots. None of this was in any way connected with Marcus's own area of

research. Nevertheless there was no doubt who the letter was intended for, even if it was wrongly addressed and illegibly signed. It occurred to him that in the three years since he had left Cambridge the dons at Gallus might have elected another medievalist. He decided to check and in the Reference section of the Library he found the current Cambridge University Calendar where he could look up the list of Gallus's Fellows. Nothing had changed since he had left, not in History anyway. His heart sank. If it was really Armiger who had sent the letter he did not know what to expect. Armiger's field, in so far as he had one at all, was as remote from Marcus as was the seventeenth century. He decided that it must be Armiger, though it did not make any kind of sense for the Syndicate to appoint him as an examiner for a late thirteenth century thesis. Whilst he was in the library he looked at Kegan college in the equivalent Oxford Calendar and found someone called Roger Vipont, whose name was vaguely familiar as a specialist in fourteenth century baronial politics with a forthcoming book based on his own thesis on Roger Mortimer and the development of retaining in the reign of Edward the Second. Chronologically closer to Marcus, but still not a specialist in knights and gentry.

Marcus had never been taught by Armiger. Indeed he had gone out of his timid way to avoid him since Armiger was well known as a ferocious teacher who seemed to consider his experiences of a bad war at Monte Cassino as a justification for wreaking intellectual vengeance on innocent undergraduates. Armiger was a thoroughgoing sod who had sustained himself for years as an academic enigma by saying very little to anyone and projecting his monstrous persona as a scourge of undergraduates, most of whom were so terrified of him that they never dared to challenge him or even as much as whisper in his tutorials, assuming that they were brave enough to attempt his arcane courses in the first place.

"What the hell does he know about thirteenth century parliaments," Marcus exclaimed to himself, causing a reader at the next desk to look up at him disapprovingly. He slammed the Calendars shut. Under the circumstances he had no option but to assume that Armiger had sent the letter. He made his way slowly back to his room. If Armiger really was to be his internal examiner there was a genuine cause for anxiety. Marcus had never liked Gallus, mainly because of its rather brutally sporty clientele, but Armiger was one of those dons who was very keen on the esprit of College life, which he seemed to compare with the army. Those who did not take an enthusiastic part in competitive sports were not considered to be full members of the club. Marcus had spent most of his time avoiding the hearties, preferring to be with his friends in other, more companionable, colleges. When he began his doctorate he had moved out to Madingley Hall on the outskirts of Cambridge which was let out to postgraduates during term time when it was not being used by the Extra Mural Board, to which it belonged. Madingley was a Tudor Mansion which reminded Marcus of his home in Carston, in ethos if not in architecture. He made many

friends at Madingley, including interesting postgrads from all over the world, as well as from Cambridge. Nevertheless Marcus knew that success in Cambridge depended more on who you knew and who talked about you at High Tables, than on how good you were at your subject, and the timid Marcus had not been good at knowing important people or cultivating them. He had encountered Armiger only twice as an undergraduate and on both occasions Armiger had seized on Marcus's shyness and intimidated him without mercy, reducing him to tongue tied impotence. Perhaps by now Armiger would have forgotten who he was, and anyway he was a lot more confident of himself, especially after his recent couplings with Sophie and her friends, which, in addition to extreme sexual enlightenment, seemed to have unlocked a previously unperceived dimension of his personality.

"Oh dear," he muttered to himself, "oh dear."

On impulse he reached for his telephone and dialled the College operator.

"Could you get me Professor Robert Vavassour, please, at Walsingham College Cambridge." He replaced the receiver. The operator would ring him back when the call was connected. Junior academics at St Dynion's were not trusted to make unsupervised outgoing calls to long distance numbers.

Vavassour was Marcus's doctoral supervisor. Unlike many senior academics he had risen by genuine merit and application from humble origins to the height of his profession and had also survived the war as a distinguished and decorated bomber pilot. He was generally acknowledged to be one of the greatest medievalists of his generation, apparently universally liked and respected. Marcus idolised Professor Vavassour and considered it a great privilege to have been able to study under his direction. The telephone trilled.

"Walsingham College."

"Could you connect me to the Master please?"

"Yes, who is calling please?"

Marcus gave his name, the phone clicked and a rich baritone voice with the faintest trace of a Somerset accent came on the line.

"Marcus," boomed the distant voice, "how nice to hear from you. How are things in the land of rain and religion?"

"Er..very well, thank you," said Marcus diffidently, "er how are you? Actually, I ..er..was ringing you to let you know that the Syndicate had fixed up my *viva* and the internal examiner is Julian Armiger. The external is someone from Oxford called Vipont."

"Armiger?" Vavassour queried, "odd choice for your thesis. I don't think you need to worry about him though. He's probably all that's available. There's a real dearth of medievalists here at the moment."

"He frightens the wits out of me," Marcus replied timorously.

"Buck up Marcus. It's all an act. He doesn't have much substance. Vipont I know about. He's got a book coming out on Roger Mortimer. He's interested in retaining. Not really relevant to what you've been doing. But he'll probably

have a competent overview. Very young though. Bet this is the first time he's examined a doctorate. When is the *viva*?"

"Well, it should have been the third of August, but the letter was wrongly addressed and I've only just received it, so it would be rather short notice to accept that date. It will have to be on the alternate which is the tenth of August. Do you know, Armiger couldn't even get my name right."

There was a long silence at the other end of the line, so long that Marcus wondered whether Vavassour was still connected. Then:

"That's a pity," said Vavassour, "I've got to go to America on the eighth and I'll be away until the fifteenth. Otherwise you could have stayed here. Still I suppose you can stay in Gallus. It's the vac after all. Give me a ring after the fifteenth and let me know how you got on. Don't worry about the *viva*. It's just a formality. We don't fail doctorates. I would not have let you proceed if I had thought you were going to fail."

"Er..yes," Marcus replied, still disconcerted. He cast around for something else to say. "er.. how are you liking the Mastership?"

"Yes..it's very pleasant here, though, in spite of its name, this is a new College and it doesn't have the traditions of the old ones." Vavassour paused, "well, thanks for ringing Marcus. I'm pleased that everything is moving along nicely. I have to ring off now, I'm afraid. Good luck on the tenth. Bye."

"Er..goodbye," Marcus replied but the phone was already dead. He shrugged, then remembered the other letter. He delved into his pocket and slit open the crisp vellum. It was a simple, clearly written letter in beautiful copperplate inviting him to attend a grouse shoot at Hagg House on August the twelfth. *Nothing special* , the letter read, *just a few friends walking the birds up, lunch at Hagg House, and a drink and sausage and mash afterwards at the manor.*

Although Marcus had never cared very much for shooting he decided to accept the invitation. He would go straight up to Carston from Cambridge after the *viva*. It would make a pleasant change to get out and walk on the moors and he didn't have to actually kill anything. Fortunately for the grouse Marcus was not a good shot, even when he was trying. Now that the end was in sight with the thesis he could reward himself with a little rest. SOPHIE. Hells Bells. SOPHIE. He panicked. What was he going to do about Sophie. He couldn't contact her. He must hope that she would ring and be able to stay on the phone long enough for him to let her know what he was doing. There wasn't much time.

He took out some college notepaper and wrote first to Colonel Fawcett, thanking him for the invitation and confirming that he would be there on the twelfth after the viva for his doctorate. Then he held the letter from Armiger to the light to see if that made the signature more legible. It looked like Armiger. Little salty tears prickled in the corners of his eyes. He wished Sophie or Caroline were here. He didn't like this kind of uncertainty. Eventually, and with

great trepidation, he decided to ring Armiger. After the customary route through the College operators at both ends a voice like a medieval mace spat out:

"Armiger."

"Er..er..Mr Armiger. This is Marcus Ross. I've just received your er letter about my *viva*. It's been delayed. The letter I mean, has been delayed. Anyway. It's..er.. too late to come on the..er.. third. But I can come on the tenth. Will that be alright?"

"Yes," the voice snapped and the phone was put down.

Marcus's head was reeling. The triple uncertainty of the late and wrongly addressed letter, and the illegible signature upset him considerably. He expected things to be just right. Confusion of this kind introduced further tensions and anxieties into the forthcoming ordeal. Now that the academic juggernaut was visibly bearing down on him the events of the evening of Graduation Day and the beliefs of his new old friends seemed even more impossibly dreamlike.

He typed a clear note to Armiger confirming that he would be there on the tenth, and hoped that Armiger would have time to contact Vipont in Oxford. Then he asked for another phone call to Cambridge to book a room in the *University Arms.*

"That's three phone calls to Cambridge, isn't it," said the operator, "are you sure you need to make this call Mr Ross. I'm not supposed to put unnecessary long distance calls through, see." Contrary to popular belief North Walians never said look you, but isn't it, and see, and no yeah, were common currency.

Jesus bloody Christ, thought Marcus, his head in his hand, "yes," he said sharply.

"Alright," the operator responded equally sharply, "no need to swear. Just doing my job, see."

"What are you talking about?" Marcus exclaimed, "I just said yes."

"You took the lord's name in vain," the female operator was getting annoyed, "I'm chapel, see. I don't like it. You shouldn't take our Lord's name in vain. It's not right."

"I don't think so," said Marcus, "but if I did I'm sorry. Just, please get the Cambridge number for me. I need to book a room."

The call was connected without any more fuss and the room booked.

No sooner had he put the phone down on the *University Arms* than it rang again, and this time, thank God, it was Sophie and for once it was remarkably clear, though with a curious echo, as though her voice was reverberating in a marble hall.

"Hello darling," she said, "isn't it good. I'm in a hotel with a proper phone. And Dad says I can talk to you as long as I like. Well not too long… 'cos..you know. It does cost."

Marcus poured his heart out to her, telling her everything that had happened and all his anxieties about the *viva*, and about his plans to go to Carston afterwards. He remembered to give her his Carston number and hoped that she

had written it down. Sophie listened patiently and was as gentle and reassuring as always. She too had new news.

"Sweetheart," she said, "Dad's bought a yacht for us to use as a base, our very own yacht. And he's got a girlfriend. And we're all going to have a bit of a holiday… for a few weeks. Can you come to Greece on the twentieth of August? I've checked and there's a Swiss Air scheduled flight to Athens via Zurich, leaves Manchester at 1500 hours. Sorry, three o'clock, it's a boaty thing. It gets in about eight thirty, Greek time. I'll meet you at the airport. We'll have a super time. Please say you'll come."

Marcus hesitated. Organising a trip to Greece was another anxiety, not least because he had never flown before, and a whole new range of potential disasters opened up in front of him but were almost instantly banished. He desperately wanted to be with Sophie. He confirmed that he would be there, come hell or high water.

"About three weeks ago," she said, more thoughtfully, "I sensed that I felt you with Caroline. I was sitting on the foredeck meditating. And there was the most gorgeous sunset. Like the sun falling into the sea. And the headsail was out and we were on a gentle beam reach. Straight into the sun and everything was so beautiful, all bathed in this gorgeous crimson orange light, the sky, the sea, the sails, everything, and I so much wanted you to see it. And I felt you with Caroline, but you were frightened about something, and then I felt you holding each other and I felt so happy for you and so wanted to be with you. Where's Caroline?"

"She's gone to Cambridge, to do some research."

"Will she be there when you're there?"

"I don't know."

"If you can, try meditating with her again, there was something stronger when you were with her…oh, but I don't know where I shall be or what I shall be doing. Try anyway, just in case. I definitely felt something. Isn't it fascinating? Oooh…Dad wants me to go. I love you so much. I'll ring you again, at your home number. And I'll write. Just in case….the phones don't work. Tell you what to bring. See you soon. Love you forever."

Marcus hugged himself, and went to look for James Sinclair, who was nowhere to be found, so he went instead to the travel agent in the High Street and booked a seat one way to Athens for the 1500 hours on the 20$^{h}{}_{t}$ of August.

Oral Examinations

The oral examination, when it came, proved to be something of an anti climax. Marcus drove up to Cambridge, arriving on the evening of the ninth, parked the Porsche in the garage behind the University Arms, and checked in at reception. After dumping his overnight bag and having a quick wash and brush up, he spurned the hotel dinner and went out instead in search of a nostalgic meal in one of the restaurants he had haunted as a student. But Cambridge had changed in the three years since he had left. At least, the restaurants which had seemed so interesting and exciting now seemed alien and decayed. The Gardenia in Rose Crescent was full and at the Friar in Benet Street he was stopped short by the sound of someone in the kitchen who had the most appalling hacking cough. Slightly disconcerted he made his way back to the Market Place, down Sydney Street and into King Street to find the Corner House, known to generations of Gallus College students as Maria's.

Maria's had not changed. There were still the old tables covered with check patterned oilcloth covers, and the same rickety chairs, and the food was much the same. Kebabs and schnitzels, processed peas and thick greasy chips, the curious fusion of Northern and Mediterranean cooking which seemed to be unique to Cypriot Cambridge and, as he was soon to discover, bore little relationship to authentic Greek cooking. Marcus had chicken Kebabs, which came with rice and chips, and a dollop of processed peas for good measure. He even treated himself to a glass of Domestica which tasted very strange. As he tucked into the kebabs Marcus cast about in his mind for old friends to visit. There were a couple of physicists he knew from his Madingley days who now had research fellowships and worked at the Cavendish. Perhaps they would be around. Then there was Francis Clifford, who had been his third year special subject supervisor at Sneyd College where he had gone to avoid Armiger. It was Clifford who had started him off on parliamentary knights and pointed him in the direction of Professor Vavassour. Clifford had a large house just off the Girton road. He might call and see him on the way back to Carston, after his viva. There didn't seem to be anyone else who sprang to mind. Except, of course, that Caroline was here, somewhere. He had omitted to ask her where she would be staying and she had forgotten to tell him.

Whatever deficiencies the Corner House might have in its Anglo Greek fusion cooking, it did offer a full range of genuine Greek desserts, and thick sweet Greek coffee, for which Marcus had developed a taste during his years in Cambridge. He ordered a baklava and a metrio and continued to ruminate over who might be around that he could visit, but the more he thought about it the more he realised that this was no longer the Cambridge that he had known. The friends he had once enjoyed here had moved on, like him, and, actually, he was now a stranger in a newly strange land. Outside his reverie he became aware that a girl was standing at the end of his table, her long delicate fingers resting

on the back of an empty chair. She was startlingly beautiful, a slender athletic body, power dressed into a dark blue, pin striped suit, a long jacket with fashionably huge shoulders and lapels, unbuttoned over an immaculate white lace blouse with a scooped neckline revealing the contours of firm and tanned breasts. Long slender legs in discreetly flared trousers, matching the coat. The sophisticated Scandinavian face was grave and sad, bright blonde hair brushed back into a thickly braided plait tied with a large dark blue bow.

"Yes," she said, responding to his unvoiced thought, "it is me."

"Caroline?" Marcus stood up and without a second thought flung his arms round her and hugged as tightly as she hugged him back. She sat down opposite him.

"How did you know I was here?"

"I don't know. I knew that you might come to Cambridge for your thesis so I was hoping that I might see you. We should have fixed something up in advance shouldn't we. Then, on the last day of July, I think, I was sitting in the University Library daydreaming about you and Sophie, and the tenth of August just came into my mind. You know how these things happen to us. I reckoned that you would come here the day before the oral so I just let myself wander, in a sort of trance, and it led me here." She hesitated, then little tears began to trickle down her cheeks. This could not be the Amazonian Caroline who ate men for breakfast.

"What's the matter? What's happened?"

"Marcus," she replied sadly, "I'm really feeling down. This is such an intimidating place. I feel as though these buildings are going to fall on me and crush me. And the library is so vast. I get lost in it. And I've felt so lonely. I'm in miserable digs in Jesus Lane, sharing a house with a bunch of awful American summer exchange students and a dragon of a landlady. It's very noisy. I'm so pleased to see you. I desperately want to sleep with someone I love, and to cap it all now that you're here I've got my sodding period so we can't….you know. But…can we go back to your hotel. I know you're in a hotel. You must be. At least we can lie together and you can hug me, and I can do things to you if you want me to."

How different, Marcus thought, from that violently aborted sexual encounter at Carston Hall."

"Yes," Caroline sighed, "but that's all in the past. Now there is no conflict in my mind. We are in a different relationship and we're different people. Sophie has changed everything. Three months ago I would just have found someone for a one night stand. Now I have to be with someone I love. So complicated. It's so hard to grasp."

"Me too, I wish that didn't happen." Marcus frowned.

"It is our gift and our curse," Caroline whispered, "and since you've come into our group it's getting stronger. And now I love you as much as I love Gwilym."

They went back to the University Arms, Caroline holding on to him very tightly, her arm through his, like a married couple. Marcus's imperative to honesty impelled him to upgrade his booking from a single room to a more expensive double, though all the rooms were in fact double. The male receptionist looked at his booking records, then looked back at Marcus and Caroline with a puzzled expression.

"Er..Mr Ross. You did book a double room. You specifically asked for a double bed. There's no need to upgrade."

Marcus was equally puzzled. He did not remember booking a room with a double bed, and had no reason at the time to do so. Maybe in his excitement and frustration with the stroppy college telephone operator he had just booked a room without specifying what he wanted, and the hotel had assumed that he wanted a double. It was, after all, to their financial advantage.

His room was much like the room he had shared with Sophie at the Grosvenor, though nowhere near as plush. Caroline took off her jacket and put it carefully on a hanger in the wardrobe, then stood in front of Marcus and looked at him expectantly, exactly as Sophie had done. He felt Sophie's voice in his head and looked at his watch. It was just after eight. He obeyed the smiling silent voice and undressed the strangely passive and subdued Caroline, stopping short at her knickers for fear of what he might find. Caroline smiled wanly, and slipped off her briefs, revealing everything and nothing, except a little bit of string hanging from her trimmed pubes. She undressed him and, to his amazement, he found that he was not excited. He just wanted to comfort her. How different from their first sexual encounter. They lay silently in the bed for a long time, Marcus on his back, Caroline curled up on the right hand side of his body, as she had done before at Penhesgyn and later at Rhianda when Sophie had terrified them with the sunset. He stroked her hair, but could not run his fingers through it as he could with Sophie because it was so tightly brushed back and plaited.

"You love her hair, don't you," Caroline murmured, "so do I. Sophie is so lucky."

"You've said that to me before, "Marcus replied, "why do you think that? You are as beautiful as Sophie, just different. Why is Sophie so lucky?"

"Ah, Marcus. You do not see Sophie as a woman sees her. Sophie is what every man dreams a woman should be and what every woman fears. Clever but not too clever. She makes mistakes, she cries, which makes her vulnerable, and men find that attractive and forgive her. She doesn't threaten; she doesn't need to threaten. She's beautiful, yes, and loving and so affectionate, brilliant at sex, and she will be a devoted wife and mother when that time comes. She never argues with you. She never loses her temper, and she always gets what she wants. She gives herself to you and she wants you to have everything that a man could possibly want, everything, you understand, everything in your wildest sexiest dreams. And she knows what your dreams are because she is your

dream. She wants to share everything she has with you and she expects you to share yourself with her without question because the sharing of our love is our best defence against jealousy. She will do anything for you. Even die for you, if she had to. Sophie is perfect. Women like Sophie should not exist. She is made for you and made by you. In a rational world I ought to hate her. You've seen me in my other face. You know what I can be like and I'm not like Sophie. I have a temper. I get angry if I don't get what I want. I'm impatient, and I'm very clever and intellectual. I frighten men, sometimes deliberately. The normal men that want me only want my body. They don't like clever women. Only Gwilym, Drew and the family understand. And I'm in love with someone who isn't part of the family, and I can never have him, and soon I will have to give him up. Now Sophie has brought another man into the family, and I want to share Sophie's love."

"I don't understand. Sophie was terrified of you. She was terrified that you would take me from her. Why would she give me to you like this? Why does she tolerate this?" He traced his fingers gently over Caroline's slender flank. "She knows this is happening. I can feel it."

"No, Marcus, you don't understand. She did not give you to me. Quite the opposite. In her mind she has given me to you. I can refuse her, and you too. But I choose not to." Her quiet and determined emphasis stopped Marcus in his tracks.

"Marcus. Listen to me. Understand. I've had many men, more than I can remember, and some women. With women it's so restful, I can't explain it to a man. But there are only two real loves in my life. One is the Reverend Williams, who I cannot have, and the other is Sophie, who loves you, but she also loves me. Do you understand now? I love Sophie as passionately as you do. I have kissed every inch of her body, as you have. I have made love to her, as you have. I adore her and I do not want to lose her. I wasn't trying to take you from Sophie. I was trying to take Sophie from you, against the will of the family. But Sophie always wants everyone to be happy and she doesn't want to break up the family and neither do I because it's everything to us. So, now she wants me to be happy with her and with you as well. Remember that conversation in the Quad on graduation day. She found it very difficult to see you make love to me at Penhesgyn but she knew that it would unite us and bring you into the family. She thought it would make you happy to have both of us and both of us would be happy to love you and care for you. And she was right. Because you are mostly just like Sophie. What I love in Sophie I can feel and love in you. And you are so rare Marcus. So rare. Only you, and Drew and Gwilym, of all the men I've ever slept with. So we have to share each other, like Tinkerbell and Puck share each other with Adrian. And there is this other thing. Drew's juju, this 'cosmic energy', which I can't explain, but it's too powerful and pleasurable to be denied. And it's become much stronger since you appeared on the scene. We are meant to be together. The three of us. It's as though we are

just three sides of the same person. Body, soul, and spirit. The Gnostic Trinity."

"Caroline, that is one of the most contorted arguments I have ever heard." Marcus's voice was incredulous, "how can you love more than one person? And I'm not sure that I like the idea of being bargained over. And why me? Why should I be so lucky? I'm so…..ordinary. Do you really believe in this theory of cosmic consciousness? Is this.. mysterious energy… really playing games with our minds? And what, in God's name, is the Gnostic Trinity?"

"I don't know. It's a good working hypothesis and after all it's not exactly a new idea. The idea of a conscious eternal spirit goes back at least to Zoroastrianism which is the first known monotheism and it's fundamental to Buddhism. We're just trying to interpret it as a natural phenomenon rather than a metaphysical one. Maybe we want to believe it because it makes us feel justified in our extreme immorality. Faith needs miracles which defy reason, and we're being given little miracles, which we are struggling to explain by reason alone. There does seem to be something very strange about us, and the more we are together the stranger it gets, and the more out of kilter with our normal reality. Gnostic Trinity? The very early Christians of the Gnostic Gospels believed that men represented the body and women the soul, brought together by the Spirit, which was God. They even had a female equivalent of Jesus. The Goddess Sophia; the fallen woman who was saved. But such ideas could not survive in a primitive patriarchal society. So now we have God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. I prefer the Gnostic version. You know, I was brought up as a strict Anglican. That's why I read theology. I thought one day there would be women priests and I would be one of the first of them. Then my parent's got divorced and all that went down the tubes. I'm the exact opposite of what I had meant to be. I'm an atheistic bisexual nymphomaniac, or I was until very recently, and so was Sophie. But now I'm happiest when I'm with this little family and especially with Sophie…and now with you. And I'm in love with a vicar who is an adulterer, and Sophie, and you. And it doesn't make any sense. And I don't know what's happening to me."

Sobs and tears trickled down Marcus's chest. He caressed her hair and face as gently as he could. "I never cry. Sophie cries. I never cry." Caroline continued, pathetically, "And Sophie can accept all this. She doesn't question it. But you and I are scholars. We ask awkward questions and we create complicated explanations for things we don't understand. And it hurts. Who really understands what love is, let alone cosmic consciousness!!"

"Well, you've made love so complicated it's almost impossible to understand. Why do you love the vicar so much? Do you really think it's not just Sophie and me? That we are meant to be a threesome? How can we live with that?" The rational part of Marcus's mind was screaming at him that these women were as mad as March Hares and twice as randy, but his rational mind was increasing consigned to the dungeons where he had once imprisoned his emotions. Lustful curiosity now ruled his life. If these two women wanted to

share him without conflict, he would be just as mad to refuse. Caroline sniffed. Marcus passed her a paper hanky from the bedside table.

"More questions. Always questions with you. In that respect you're not at all like Sophie. And I don't know the answers," she said rather petulantly, then, returning to cool analytical mode, "I don't have any problems about being in a threesome. I've done it before, but not like this, for sex yes, but not for love, and it can be bloody frustrating sometimes. And it won't be all the time. Only when we all want it. Many religions, including the Abrahamaic ones, have a relaxed attitude about polygamy. So it's not really an ethical problem either. And cosmic energy? Ask any devout Christian and they will tell you that they believe in the immanence of God in the Holy Spirit. For Muslims everything is willed by God. All the monotheistic religions of the Axial Age propose some form of eternal spiritual life as a reward for good behaviour in this life. Cosmic energy is no different and a lot more rational."

She hesitated, revealing the doubt in her mind. "As for the Reverend Williams, who knows why women fall in love with particular men? At first I just wanted to see what it was like to be shagged by an enthusiastic old man. And it was very good, much better than with boys, and he was very kind to me, and thoughtful and considerate, and suddenly I was in love with him. But then, when I met Drew, I discovered that the old man was just like us. When I make love to him it's like making love to you, or to Drew. He is one of us, full of psychic lust. But he is a man of God, fallen maybe, but he still believes in his religion. For him the otherness that we call the cosmic consciousness really is God. It is his calling and he can't reconcile it with the lust which we all feel for each other. He would never, ever, admit to being what we are or join us in our family. And anyway, you've taken the last place. You've squared the circle. We are meant to be a triad. Three of three. Together, but separate. Like with like. You and me and Sophie, Adrian and the two kids, and Drew, Jaz and Mo, poor Mo. She doesn't really fit in. And neither does Adrian. Drew is content with Jaz. He doesn't really want Mo. Anyway it's easy enough for men to love more than one woman. Why shouldn't women have the same privilege?"

Caroline paused and began to cry again. " I'm sorry Marcus, these are my problems. You must be worried about your thesis. You've got a big ordeal tomorrow. I'm going to have to face this when I finish my thesis. I'm keeping you awake. Only I'm so happy that I'm here with you. But…I'm so tired. I haven't been sleeping. I've been having the most terrible nightmares. I keep dreaming that I'm drowning. It's horrible. I wish we could have a nice quiet shag. It would relax both of us. It's such a comfort. Even just lying here with you is such a comfort."

She began to caress his stomach and continued downwards. "Are you sure you don't want me to…?" Marcus shook his head but his dick had other ideas so Caroline persisted, using all of her meticulous expertise. And because she could feel everything that Marcus felt she played him and teased him, sliding

her lips and tongue around him with infinite subtlety, bringing him to the edge of orgasm then backing off, so that he was squirming with pain and pleasure, begging her to finish. And when she too could stand it no longer, she did finish.

"I'm always astonished," she said, rolling onto her back exhausted, "that the male orgasm is so violent. It doesn't come in breaking waves as it does for women. It's like slowly squeezing a huge balloon into a tiny space and then bursting it with a giant hammer. So much pain and so much pleasure. Amazing."

"You felt it?" Marcus groaned.

"Everything, clear as a bell." She rolled back onto his chest and kissed him with lightning bolt passion. "You are amazing. Normal sex is fantastic. Psychic sex is something else. Out of this world, you might say. If that's the big bang I can understand why the ancient Greeks called the galaxy the Milky Way."

"Perhaps," the pedantic Marcus replied, "but actually the ancient Greeks thought that the Milky Way was the breast milk of the goddess Hera."

"I knew that," Caroline laughed, and cuddled up to him.

Far away, in the land of the Ancient Greeks, in the forecastle of a yacht moored stern first to a quay in Mikrolimano, sleepy Sophie sprawled on her back on the big triangular double berth, her knees drawn up a little, her legs apart, her arms stretched out behind her head, hands open, like Danae, abandoning herself to Zeus, dreaming of Marcus, and of the ecstasy of her golden gift to him.

In the morning Caroline took herself back to her digs in Jesus Lane, agreeing to meet Marcus at Gallus later, after the *viva*. In the remaining time before the *viva* Marcus sat in his room preparing himself for the coming ordeal. Butterflies danced a fandango in his stomach. His Savile Row interview suit, impeccably cut and hung, felt sticky and prickly. It pinched at his knees and elbows and his shirt and tie seemed to be about to throttle him. Every ten minutes he felt an irresistible urge to go to the lavatory, usually to no avail. At ten o'clock he checked out of the hotel, threw his overnight bag into the front of the Porsche and prepared to drive out of the hotel garage. At the last instant he realised that he had left his briefcase, with his copy of the thesis in it, beside the hotel reception counter. He leapt out of the Porsche and sprinted back into the hotel. The briefcase was where he had left it. He returned to his car, his heart pounding and his shirt soaked in cold sweat.

It was only a short distance from the University Arms to Gallus, less than ten minutes. He could have walked it easily, but there was no point since he was going more or less straight up to Yorkshire after the ordeal and Gallus was not short of car parking space at a time when Cambridge was becoming choked with traffic. Gallus was one of the few Cambridge colleges to stand completely in its own grounds, surrounded by playing fields, and composed of a series of

courts and quadrangles built at various stages over the last four hundred years around a central core of twelfth century cloisters. It had once been a monastery, until it was dissolved by Henry VIIIth and given by him to one of his executioners who endowed it as a college for the very necessary salvation of his soul. Ever since then the fellows had managed to maintain an uneasy balance between monastic indolence and muscular Christianity, fortified by violent sports and suicidal rowing. He had never felt comfortable at Gallus and would have much preferred one of the more outward looking colleges like Kings or Johns. Marcus parked the Porsche and looked at his watch. It was twenty past ten. He reached over the back of the seat for his briefcase. Two people, probably maths students up for the long vacation term, were playing with a Frisbee on the open lawns. It was damp and miserable. A cool drizzle blew intermittently over the grass. The Frisbee players were not, apparently, disconcerted by this, though both were soaking wet. The plastic disk spun backwards and forwards between them with unerring accuracy. They were very good.

Marcus looked at his watch again. It was time to go. The butterflies resumed their frantic dance in his stomach. He had forgotten what it was like to take exams and he felt considerable sympathy for the undergraduates at St Dynion's on whom he had just imposed a similar ordeal. He got out of the Porsche and slipped into his MA gown. Armiger's rooms were on the first floor of the block adjoining the car park, so there was not far to walk. The staircase was bleak and devoid of decoration, like the brick walled corridors down which condemned men are often led to their execution. He stopped at Armiger's door. His legs were trembling and he had an acute sensation of incipient nausea. At precisely ten thirty he knocked at the door. There was a long pause, then a voice like a rock crusher ordered him to enter. As soon as he was in the room Marcus began to feel better. Once out of the trench it was do or die. Armiger was as he remembered him. A blimpish British army officer's face. A long, severe, weather beaten face, a ferocious glare, a clipped military moustache. This was a face that had killed and been killed on a thousand battlefields across a thousand short lives, now armoured in tweeds and cavalry twills, and highly polished brown brogue shoes. His handshake was crushing and delivered a shock which Marcus recognised but could not connect to. Armiger was a soul from a different and fundamentally hostile universe in which there could be no meeting of minds. Vipont was younger. A lot younger. Sandy hair, slightly receding chin, long narrow face and pointed nose, freckled and slightly effeminate. A moist limp handshake. Smart, expensive suit. Sleek, but nervous. Marcus sensed Vipont's insecurity and began to feel more relaxed.

"Now, Cross," Armiger growled, "would you like some coffee?"

Marcus thought it might be unwise to correct him. Armiger was not the kind of man who cared to be found in error. He accepted the coffee gratefully. Vipont was looking at Armiger in an odd way but when his gaze turned back to Marcus it was curious and questioning. *He's gay* Marcus thought. *No, I'm not* Marcus

thought back, responding to Vipont's unvoiced query. Vipont looked surprised, his face creased with a puzzled expression. Marcus was gestured to a small upright chair, facing Armiger and Vipont over the coffee table. They resumed their original positions, sinking back into thickly padded leather wing chairs. As he drank his coffee Marcus became aware of a clattering noise caused by Vipont whose hand was shaking so violently that his coffee cup was almost bouncing up and down in its saucer.

Good God Marcus thought, *he's even more nervous than I am*. The butterflies in his stomach turned over and went quietly to sleep. Vipont, aware that Marcus had noticed the shaking cup, hastily returned it on the coffee table. There was some polite small talk, about the weather, about what life was like at St Dynion's, about the new architecture in Cambridge. Eventually Armiger, who was deliberately spinning out the agony of waiting, put down his cup, and the oral began.

"Dr Vipont has a number of questions he wants to put to you," he said shortly and nodded at Vipont. Vipont cleared his throat. Marcus wondered what Sophie was doing. Sophie had remembered that it was the tenth and was thinking of him.

"This is a very impressive piece of work," Vipont said, "and there is really only one major point I wish to raise with Mr Ross." He paused and cleared his throat.

"I didn't really think that retaining was significant in this period," Marcus replied.

"I haven't asked the question yet," said Vipont.

"No, but that was what you were going to ask me."

Vipont looked baffled. "Yes," he said, "how did you know?"

"Really," continued Marcus, ignoring Vipont's subsidiary question, " my main concern in my thesis was to try to define the ruling class in the Yorkshire county courts and to show how this group differed from other knights living in the county in the reign of Edward the First. In particular, of course, I wanted to discover why one small group apparently dominated the county court and represented the county in Edward's parliaments. That was my main objective. Retaining is more characteristic of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Though, as you know, there is some evidence that it was developing for military purposes in the thirteenth century, especially in the Welsh Marches."

Armiger was lighting a pipe and looking out of the window. The rain had stopped and the sun was staggering out from behind the clouds.

"That scarcely answers the question," Vipont replied. "You concentrate on the social and economic factors in the struggle for local power but you do not consider the possible role of local barons. Evidence of retaining might have helped you to better explain how local barons influenced parliamentary elections."

"Yes, I agree. But the political factors were examined by Lapsley in a study

on the East Anglian gentry and he concluded that there was no evidence of political links between gentry and magnates at this time. And I have not found any either. Anyway McFarlane proved pretty conclusively that even when retaining was at its height during the Wars of the Roses in the fifteenth century, local barons were unable to exercise any real influence over the gentry. They were even less likely to have exercised such influence in the thirteenth century when retaining was in its infancy. The whole point of my thesis is that at this time the gentry were uniquely independent of baronial influence. That's what made them so important to the king, both for political support in parliament and because they controlled local government on the king's behalf. The American historian A.B. White calls it self government at the king's command, which is very apposite."

"So really, your thesis is inspired by Lapsley, and this…American," Armiger sneered.

Vipont began to look slightly peevish and interrupted before Marcus had time to rebut Armiger's allegation.

"But, you made no effort to investigate retaining or other sources of income which might have come to the gentry as bribes, stipends, or fief rentes, that kind of thing?" he said.

"No. Where would you look? The local documentation for these people is fragmentary and mostly non-existent. There are virtually no consistent local estates records for this period. These people exist primarily in central government records, which, I agree, does affect the view we have of them. And even if money was being given to them by barons in return for some kind of local influence it's not likely that it would appear in their accounts, if they existed. However we look at this we are always going to have a one sided view, but it is better to have a view which comes from a broadly comparable series of sources, rather than odd snippets here and there."

"You could have looked at the Duchy of Lancaster records," Vipont said, "there's a lot of interesting material there."

"Yes, but for the fourteenth century. In fact, I do mention retaining in my thesis," Marcus retorted, "for example two of my gentry were closely associated with the de Ver Earls of Oxford, and served in their retinues. But they were actually bannerets and very different, both socially and economically, from the gentry who ran the county court. They were more like professional soldiers, or soldiers of fortune, or very rich gentry aspiring to live like barons. Only professional soldiers willingly sought military service at this time. Most of the gentry went out of their way to avoid turning out for Edward's musters, and, as you know, the general summons to twenty pound landholders to fight in Flanders caused a constitutional crisis. I don't think there is any evidence of significant retaining at this time, and even if there was, the income they might derive from it would not make a significant difference to their social and economic stratification, which is the key to their role in parliament."

Vipont was determined to stick with the retaining issues since he had not found anything else with which to tax Marcus.

"It might have constituted an additional factor in their income?"

"I've just said, I don't think so." Marcus was getting tired of going round in circles, "Even if there were a few who were taking money from local barons, the majority must have been living on the incomes from their lands, which can be determined to some extent from disputes over land recorded in Final Concords, and from Inquisitions Post Mortem where they held some, or all, of their land in chief from the king, and some received stipends from the king, which are evidence of their relationship with central government. As I pointed out in the thesis nearly all of the principal knights in local government were, in fact, minor tenants in chief of the king."

Vipont began to look seriously pained.

"There is another matter," he was falling back on his second string, "your county knights seem to be very well behaved. A recent study of the Lincolnshire assize rolls shows that the Lincolnshire knights often had significant criminal records. Don't you think it rather odd that your knights were so law abiding? Especially in Yorkshire."

"Well, I read the Yorkshire assize rolls and the evidence I found is that, with one or two exceptions, and one genuinely notorious villain, the majority were law abiding. In any case, if they controlled the courts they would have a vested interest in concealing their crimes. Only the unsuccessful would be discovered."

"But illegal activities might have augmented their incomes as well as retaining fees?"

"How can we know with any accuracy about potential income which would probably have been concealed because it was illegal?" Marcus was beginning to get annoyed. "Did you compare your retained knights with a control group of non retained knights to see how they differed?"

Vipont looked alarmed. Examinees were not expected to interrogate the examiner. Marcus looked more closely at Vipont. He knew intuitively that Vipont had never examined a thesis before and was floundering. Vavassour had been right. Vipont was rattled, and Armiger didn't care.

"We aren't here to examine my work, Mr Ross," he snapped, and then looked slightly crumpled. The rest of the examination lapsed into a discussion of minor points which had interested Vipont. The social and economic status implied by the valuation of medieval horses and armour before battles, which Marcus had found in the Marshalsea Horse Rolls, and which no one had looked at before. Changes in military strategy. The role of securities or mainpernors in the election of parliamentary candidates. The role of local communities in relation to local government, and the actual method of parliamentary election for which Marcus had produced a very plausible account of a previously little understood process.

Marcus was astonished at the ineptitude of the examiners. The hours of work

he had put into checking his thesis had all been for nothing. There were potential flaws in his work, especially in relation to statistical sampling, which had either been overlooked or ignored. Neither Armiger nor Vipont seemed to have any interest whatsoever in the technical aspects of his thesis. Vipont could talk only about retaining and Armiger, typically, did not talk at all, and gave neither Vipont nor Marcus any support. The four questions he did ask revealed his almost total ignorance of current research on late thirteenth century history in general, and of Marcus's thesis in particular. At one point he accused Marcus of copying Lewis Namier's study of the eighteenth century parliaments, which Marcus angrily rebutted. Marcus began to wonder whether Armiger had even read his thesis, though he'd done something to it because the spine of the copy he was holding on his knee was broken and pages had come loose.

Vipont continued to twitter away in the background about retaining and the Duchy of Lancaster archives. The whole encounter became more and more dreamlike, comparable with the recent smoke shrouded examiners meeting at St Dynion's where Sophie's modest academic aspirations had been condemned to death. It was hard to believe that the examination of a very substantial and extensive piece of academic research, submitted for one of the highest degrees in one of the best universities in the world, could be treated with such ignorance and triviality. Marcus, his mind abstracted, gazed round Armiger's bookcase lined room. At first sight it was enormously impressive, the womb walls of a great scholar from which cutting edge scholarship might be born. But a closer inspection revealed that the books were coated in thick dust and had not been removed from the shelves for years. An even closer inspection revealed that they were not really history books at all, but a long series of bound parish magazines, topographies, ancient Wisdens, and railway timetables going back to the nineteenth century, row upon row of bound waste paper. It was all an enormous confidence trick. A tomb of learning rather than a womb.

After about two hours of inconsequential discussion, with no serous points raised, and no meaningful criticism of the thesis advanced, Armiger called the oral to a halt.

"That seems to be very satisfactory," he said, in a gruffly definitive way, looking sideways at Vipont for whom he seemed to have an intense dislike. He put his hands on the arms of the wing chair and shifted his weight slightly. He was obviously bored stiff with the whole business.

Marcus was astonished. He had no experience of doctoral oral examinations himself, but had supposed that they would be a lot more substantial and demanding than this. He was completely disconcerted, his normally clear mind wrenched out of focus by so much that was unexpected. Armiger was obviously getting ready to throw him out.

"Er…was that alright? Do I get the result now?" Marcus asked, tentatively. He knew that at St Dynion's doctoral candidates were usually told that they had been successful and assumed that the same would happen here. He hoped for

friendly handshakes and warm congratulations and perhaps a trip to a pub for lunch.

"No," snapped Armiger. "The Syndicate of Research Studies will inform you in due course."

Marcus's heart skipped a beat and the butterflies awoke in his stomach. There was a short embarrassed silence, then Armiger stood up and offered Marcus his crushing hand, followed by Vipont's limp and sweaty handshake.

"How long did it take you to do this?" Vipont asked, in a palpably insincere gesture of friendliness. Ross was very evidently a hostile hetero with a creepy tendency to double guess people.

"About six years, on and off. Three years here in Cambridge, but when I went to St Dynion's I had to write something in the order of sixty lectures from scratch, and I have had to prepare new courses every year since then. So it's been an uphill struggle to finish. I've had to apply for two extensions to the time limit."

"Quite a heavy work load. Of course, in Oxford I only give eight lectures each year. Quite a substantial piece of work. But, let's face it, these gentry are not very important are they."

"Well, I think so," said Marcus, aggrieved, "I've spent six years of my life studying them."

He left the room and made his way down the echoing stairs. That clinched it. A very substantial piece of work. Everything must be okay. But why the unnecessary barb at the end? Why had it been so…shambolic? He paused at the archway at the bottom of the stairs and took off his gown. It had stopped raining. He could see Caroline standing by his car and smiling at him. She did that little open handed wave thing that Sophie did. As Marcus walked towards her he began to feel shaky. Everything was strung up. His heart and mind were racing. Had he really worked so hard for six years just to be treated to this? And four months after submitting the thesis in April, and still he didn't know the result? He had expected the oral to be challenging but it had been nothing of the kind.

"Well, Dr Ross. How did it go?"

"No," said Marcus, "not yet. They didn't tell me whether I passed or not."

"Oh, Marcus, I'm so sorry. I thought you'd know," said Caroline consolingly, "I thought they told you straight away. They do at St Dynion's. Come here." She held his face between her hands and gave him a long and gentle kiss which tasted of Sophie.

"I know they do." Marcus replied, once released from her embrace, and suddenly more at ease, "not here apparently. Tell you what. I think you do a better oral than they do."

Caroline laughed a deep and very sexy laugh. She didn't laugh as much as Sophie. Everything was more serious for her. Just like Marcus. They got into the Porsche and Marcus instantly felt more secure. Here everything was familiar

and solid. The steering wheel, the precise gearchange, the seats, the neat instruments on the dash. It was a micro world. Consistent, logical and totally reliable. He felt very safe in here, insulated from the madhouse outside.

"Let's go and have lunch," he smiled at Caroline, "We'll go to the *Three Horseshoes* at Madingley and I'll show you where I used to live. Probably we can have a walk round the gardens. You know I'm going sailing with Sophie?"

"Yes, I had a card. She wanted me to go too. But I'm too busy. I must finish my research. And anyway, I think Sophie would rather have you to herself. You'll like Sophie's dad. He's a hoot. I wish I was coming with you. I really do."

Marcus put the car into gear, feeling with almost sensual satisfaction the positive snick of the gear lever in its gate.

Armiger watched them from his window. Another silly rich young man, with a very expensive German sports car, being kissed by a long legged blonde Brunhilda in a dark suit who looked as though she'd stepped straight out of a Nazi propaganda film. Bastards.

The Glorious Twelfth

After the torrid events of the last two months Carston came as a welcome relief to Marcus. Colonel Fawcett rang him on the eleventh, advising him to be at the rendezvous for the shoot before nine the following morning. Marcus dutifully rose at seven and prepared breakfast for himself. As the bacon and eggs sizzled he reflected on how much more energetic these Northern people were compared with his indolent academic colleagues. Whenever he came back to Carston Hall he found that he had to readjust to a pace and quality of life which was totally different from that of his life at St Dynion's, and a million light years away from his recent life with 'the Circle'. Sophie and Caroline and the whole pseudo hippy game receded in his mind. Here the principal objective was to pack as much activity as possible into every day whereas at St Dynion's he was always amazed at how little he seemed to have achieved, even at the end of a working day which usually extended from before breakfast well into the late evening, and often late into the night. Whenever he looked at his academic life from the standpoint of Carston much of it seemed tedious and pointless, boring and unrewarding. Even in little things his life style was totally different. At college he would never consider cooking himself a breakfast. Coffee, cereal and toast was as much as he would normally eat. Here he was now labouring joyfully over a frying pan full of eggs, bacon, tomatoes and even a sausage, though he drew the line at the black pudding which Janet had thoughtfully left in the fridge for him. It seemed the most natural thing in the world, the right way to start the day in this environment, where calories would be burnt off by energetic walking. Maybe, he reflected, it was because he considered himself to be on holiday.

By eight he had finished his breakfast and washed up after himself. He peered out of the kitchen window. The sun was shining but even in August it could be cold on the moors. He went back to his bedroom and found his other tough waxed Barbour shooting jacket. Then he returned to his study. In one corner of the study was a very solid door which Marcus had to unlock with a key taken from his desk. Behind the door was his uncle's Gun Room, windowless, and virtually thief proof. Two walls of this room were lined with glass fronted gun racks, the third and fourth walls were decorated with paintings and lithographs of game birds and animals, but no stuffed bodies or other taxidermic trophies. Against the third wall was a small work bench with a vice, a rack of cleaning rods and a miniature chest of drawers in which were kept the various tools, oils and other implements needed to clean the guns. The glass fronted racks were stacked, in turn, on top of heavy oak cabinets in which were locked the more expensive guns. Marcus went to the first of the glass cabinets and looked at the row of eight twelve bores which were kept for rough shooting round the estate. Mostly they were old Webleys and Greeners, with a couple of cheap Polish guns and an Italian under and over. It was a long time since

Carston Hall had seen enough house guests to muster a shoot, and most of these guns had not been used for years. The second cabinet contained a range of more eccentric and specialised shoguns. Twenty bores, for the ladies, and a five shot pump action .410 which the young Marcus had used to shoot rats in the barns of the estate. There were a couple of Winchester pump action twelve bores, a Martini and Henry single action, a Greener, and a brace of long barrelled single shot duck guns. The third rack, against the second wall held the sporting rifles. Most of these, like the shotguns, were ordinary .22s, both pump and bolt action. There was a heavy BSA Martini Henry match rifle with an assortment of specialised sights and a beautiful and virtually unused semi automatic Savage, with a telescope, which had been a present to Marcus from his uncle on his eighteenth birthday, just before he went to university. At the far end of the rifle rack were two pairs of heavy calibre rifles for deer stalking, which nobody ever used because there were no deer at Carston, and one big game rifle, which didn't get much use either. All of this armoury was kept in good order, oiled and polished by Dennis, who came in when he was bored with Janet's chattering, and sat quietly with his pipe, cleaning each gun in turn on the off chance that they might one day be needed.

Marcus did not bother with the rifle cabinets, since there was no greater crime than to shoot grouse with a rifle, although to do so would require considerable skill. Instead he took down one of the Webley double barrelled guns and weighed it for balance. Dissatisfied he returned it to the rack, crossed to the bench, and took a small bunch of keys from the little tool chest. These keys opened the lower cabinets to reveal a number of leather bound and monogrammed cases. He pulled out the first case that came to hand and opened it, releasing the distinctive smell of leather and gun oil. Inside was a brace of shotguns, broken down into stocks and barrels. These were Holland and Holland. Very expensive. He fitted one gun together, balanced it in his hand, and brought it experimentally up to his shoulder. It had been made for his uncle who was a much stouter man than Marcus. Nevertheless it handled beautifully. He opened another case which contained his father's Purdeys. These had wonderfully engraved stocks. Exquisitely chased miniatures of hunting scenes. An eighteenth century gentleman in a high top hat, aiming a fowling piece at a cock pheasant, released from time by art, like Keats' nightingale, *not born for death, immortal bird*. The huntsman would never fire, the bird would never fall. Keats too had listened to the Muses and had understood them very well. There was an extraordinary satisfaction in just handling these guns. They induced in Marcus the same feeling of security and well being which he experienced when driving the Porsche. It had nothing to do with their deadly purpose, or even their Freudian undertones. It was the intricacy and precision of their workmanship, the sense of completeness and perfection in themselves. He glanced at his watch. Time was advancing. He replaced the Purdeys regretfully. They were too beautiful to be soiled by use. In these gaudy days there were people who

believed that they were inappropriately dressed if they did not appear at a shoot with Purdeys, or something equally expensive. But they did not shoot any better for it. Marcus was not such a person and did not want to appear ostentatious. He locked the drawers and took down one of the Webleys.

Instead of using the Porsche, which would certainly ground itself on the cart tracks for which it was not intended, Marcus took the Land Rover Station Wagon, and arrived at the rendezvous just before nine. There were already a number of estate cars and Land Rovers parked beside the track leading up to Hagg House Moor. He saw Colonel Fawcett leaning against a very new looking Range Rover talking to a group of around seven men, all carrying shotguns. Dogs, mainly labradors and a few spaniels, sniffed around excitedly. He parked the Land Rover and walked up the track to meet the Colonel who greeted him effusively, pumping his hand until it was almost sore. He introduced Marcus to the men standing around, though in fact Marcus knew most of them. Local businessmen, farmers, a solicitor, a country doctor. They all shook his hand and slapped him on the back, greeting him cheerfully, like a long lost friend welcomed home to his own people.

"Nice car," said Marcus, gesturing at the Range Rover.

"Bloody heap of junk" Fawcett growled, "I've had it two months and it's already falling apart. God know what's happening to this country. Nothing works anymore. So, we're waiting for my goddam sons who are bloody late as usual. Bloody layabouts."

At first sight Fawcett had the same homicidal face as Julian Armiger, the face of the eternal warrior, but, unlike Armiger, he had not exulted in it. Fawcett was a handsome man. Tall, straight but not stiff, military bearing, with Clarke Gable features, the same clipped moustache, so popular with that wartime generation, and the same square leathery poker face, full of depth and character. Fawcett was no intellectual but he was highly intelligent, quick thinking and decisive, humane, perceptive and well read. Curiously well endowed with so many of the qualities which academics are supposed to prize and so conspicuously fail to achieve. His eyes crinkled up at the corners and sparkled with humour and he grinned at Marcus with evident pleasure that he had presented himself for the shoot.

"Glad you're here Marcus."

Marcus broke open the Webley and realised with a start that he had not brought any cartridges.

"I'm awfully sorry," he said, "I came out in a hurry and I don't seem to have any cartridges." The men roared with laughter and clapped him again on the back.

"Good old Marcus," said Fawcett, his grin widening, "ever the absent minded professor, eh. Never mind. I've got plenty. Long or short?"

Marcus looked at the gun blankly. It was a long time since he had last been shooting, and he had forgotten the chamber length of this particular gun, if he had ever known it in the first place.

"Don't give him any Roddy, he'll only shoot himself," laughed one of the farmers.

"More likely to shoot me," said Fawcett, also laughing. "here you are professor, try this."

Marcus slipped the proffered cartridge into the breach, which it fitted exactly. Fawcett nodded.

"How many do you want," he asked, "given that you can't hit a barn door with both eyes open." More bellows of friendly laughter. The men hid behind Fawcett and peeped out at Marcus, grimacing at him fearfully. Marcus didn't mind. He knew he was a rotten shot, and so did they. Their humour was innocent and without malice. That was the way they were. How different from his colleagues, whose humour was always hung with barbed innuendo. He thought suddenly of Caroline and of her Chanel No 5. How remote and alien it all seemed, impossible to believe that such an alternative universe could exist at all and yet, for an instant, her scent was here, wafting across his subconscious mind.

"Half a dozen will be fine. I'm not planning to hit anything. I'm here for the walk and the company as much as the shooting. If I get six shots I shall be quite happy."

"I'm sure the grouse will be delighted," Fawcett said, handing him nine cartridges. "Always a man of moderation Marcus. Well, it's a fine quality. We could all do with a little more moderation and tolerance, what. And we laugh at you. But we all respect you for your learning. You know that. Well, anyway lads, we're just walking them up today. I never did hold with shooting over butts. That's for fat arsed city slickers who are too bloody lazy to walk the birds up themselves. Any damn fool can stand behind a butt and blaze away at birds driven in front of his nose. Needs a damn sight more skill to get the gun up and shoot when the bird takes you by surprise and flies away from you…..where are those bloody boys?" He stopped for moment and looked back down the track, then resumed the briefing.

"You've all done this before, many times so you know the basic route. We walk up the eastern ridge parallel with Ledge Beck and then round to Hagg House Farm. We'll stop there for lunch. Mary's got pies and soup in the back of the car," he gestured with his thumb at the Range Rover. "She'll go up the track and wait for us at the farm. After lunch we'll go round Slape Wath Moor, then double back along the Western ridge, and back to the cars here."

Marcus peered at the Range Rover and noticed that Mrs Fawcett was sitting in the driving seat, plump, big bosomed and bonny, curly dark hair tinged with grey, cheerful smile. Marcus went round the side of the car. She wound the window down.

"Hello Marcus," it's nice to see you once in a while. You should come up here more often you know. We miss you," she said.

Marcus grinned, "well, I've been very busy just recently, but I hope to get up here more in the future. You must think me awfully rude. I really didn't see you sitting in the car. I'm so sorry."

"It's okay. Don't worry," she smiled, "looks as though it's going to be nice. Got yourself a girlfriend yet?" she asked, pointedly, "it's time you settled down and got married."

This was a familiar injunction. Marcus grinned at her. Mrs Fawcett suddenly looked alarmed, reading his face as expertly as Sophie or Caroline.

"You have, haven't you. You have. I can tell. Marcus I want to hear all about it. You can tell me later, at lunch time." Since his experiences with Sophie Marcus too had become much more intuitive about the feelings of others. Mrs Fawcett smiled at him with an appearance of enthusiasm but there was a hint of regret in her voice and disappointment in her thoughts which puzzled Marcus since the Fawcetts had been pestering him to get married for most of his adult life. Marcus wondered what on earth he could tell her. The life he was now leading in St Dynion's had no place here. They would not even begin to understand. Shagging was okay, with willing fillies, but troilism, group sex, crazy hippy rituals, cosmic energy. What the hell was he going to say? In this reality, with these genuine old friends, it was utterly, utterly barmy. She was right, the sky was clearing, the sun was shining. Marcus took off his Barbour.

"May I leave this with you please? I don't think I'm going to need it." He handed the Barbour through the Ranger Rover window.

"Where the hell are those bloody boys," Fawcett barked, "I'll flay them alive."

Another Land Rover was bouncing down the track towards them.

"I think they're here," said Marcus superfluously.

Two tall, blonde, ruddy faced men, mirror images of their handsome father, tumbled out of the Land Rover.

"About bloody time. Where the hell have you been. You know how I hate to keep people waiting. Where's Douglas?" the father yelled, referring to the youngest of his three sons.

"He was at the Shipyard Club in Whitby last night," said Andrew, the eldest son, "probably shagging some bird. Hello Marcus, where have you been all my life?"

Marcus got a bear hug from Andrew, followed by another one from his younger brother Stephen.

"You really ought to come up here more often," Andrew said. "why don't you give up that crazy job of yours and come back to Carston. It would be just like old times."

"Why aren't you married yet? You never know, this could be your lucky day," Stephen winked knowingly at Marcus. Marcus was overwhelmed by their

pleasure in seeing him. Such greetings were rare in the academic world where sincerity was often accompanied by a knife slipped unseen into the trusting back. Tears started in Marcus's eyes. He had almost forgotten the simple affection of these old friendships. Colonel Fawcett's sons were like brothers to him, and he felt guilty at so neglecting them. In their company Marcus felt secure and at home. These were people he had known all his life, who accepted him without question as one of their own, the family which stood in for the parents he had never really known. In their company Marcus realised how very little he actually knew about his academic colleagues, and what he did know tended to be a kind of one sided caricature of an individual obsessed with an idée fixe, like Seaton obsessed with politics, Medusa, obsessed with spurious scholarship, even James Sinclair, so dedicated to cynical tolerance that he was in danger of becoming totally bland. Was Sinclair really his friend? He could scarcely recall his face. It was as though they no longer existed. As though the worlds of St Dynion's and of Cambridge were simply an idea, a vague dream, an eccentric and solipsistic projection of Marcus's overworked imagination. By the side of such common sense people his academic colleagues dissolved into wraithes trapped forever in their overweening vices, like the doomed spirits in Dante's Inferno. And Drew Parkin, and Caroline and Sophie. Did they really exist? The scent of Chanel wafted over him once more, just to remind him that they did.

"Come on, time to get going," the Colonel commanded, breaking into Marcus's reverie. "Marcus, please come along with me. I wanted to have a little chat with you. You can talk to the boys later."

Marcus obeyed, it was an order, not an invitation. The line of guns began to spread out across the moor, until there was a hundred yards or so between each gun, with the exception of Marcus who walked along beside the Colonel, in the centre of the line. Once the shoot was well commenced and Colonel Fawcett was satisfied that everyone was in the correct position he turned his attention to Marcus.

"I'm glad to be able to have a chat with you," he said, "I could have written, of course, but I prefer to do business face to face and this is as good a place as any. I know you don't much care for shooting these days, and, to tell the truth, as I get older I care less and less for the killing part of it. I like the walking though, and the air on the moors, and the sense of freedom up here. Look at the views. Nowadays I feel a pang of regret whenever I pot a bird. So much life is taken needlessly these days."

Marcus agreed. They walked on in silence for a while, taking in the beauty of the day. There was plenty of time to talk. The shoot was very basic and consisted essentially of the two sides of the valley formed by Ledge Beck, with Hagg House nestled in the gill at the end of the valley. The Eastern ridge, along which they were now ambling, was mostly moor. The western ridge was a mixture of scrub woodland and partial cultivation, which, in the middle ages,

would have been known as an assart. The sun was bright now, and Marcus was regretting wearing his sweater. He took it off and tied the arms round his waist. The view over the moors was as magnificent as always.

"There are really two things I wanted to talk to you about," Colonel Fawcett said, eventually. "I suppose, in a way, they're connected. Well, firstly I've been talking to your estate manage Dennis Mowbray about how we might best manage the future of both estates. Of course Dennis can't do anything without your consent, so really we've just been chatting about changes in farming and about the possible impact of the European Community, you know the Common Agricultural Policy, when it comes into force next year. As you know, in the past we've made economies by sharing equipment and it's always worked out well for us. I wondered if you would consider a more formal integration of the estates, possibly by creating a limited company so that we can manage the whole thing as one unit. It would have a lot of advantages, not least when it comes to arable subsidies. The boys are keen. It flatters their egos. They'd be able to call themselves directors instead of dogsbodies. We all get on together. Anyway, have a little think about it. There's no hurry, and if you decide against, I shan't mind."

"Seems like a good idea," Marcus replied.

"The other thing," the Colonel resumed, "is really about your career, in the university. I know it's rather presumptuous of me, but your uncle did ask me to keep an eye out for your interests. I mean," he seemed embarrassed, "I mean, well, the thing is there does seem to be a lot of trouble in the universities. You know, student riots and things like that. We see it on the television. It seems to me there's something seriously wrong somewhere. I hope you don't mind me talking like this." There was sudden minor explosion almost under Marcus's feet and two grouse got up and clattered into the distance. Before Marcus had even considered raising his gun Fawcett had already fired both barrels and the dogs were out after the falling birds.

"Probably just as well you don't shoot seriously," the Colonel laughed, "you'd have to do better than that. Funny thing, as I said, I don't really want to shoot these days, but the reflexes are deeply ingrained. It's almost automatic." The dogs brought the birds back and Fawcett stuffed them into his game bag. Other guns began to fire, further down the line.

"Andrew's got one," said the Colonel, "good shot," he yelled. Andrew waved back nonchalantly. "See," said the Colonel, "it's in the blood. Probably in your blood as well. We are what we are and what we have always been. It's in the blood."

Marcus looked at him curiously. He was getting used to gnomic assertions from his new found old friends at St Dynion's, but did not expect them from this quarter.

"The hunting instinct, I mean," the Colonel added, "for better or for worse. It's bred into us."

The clean air and the smell of the heather and bracken was almost intoxicating. Marcus looked around him with delight, soaking in the sheer joy of living.

"Anyway," the Colonel resumed his earlier train of conversation, "if you should decide at any stage to give up your university career, you could do a lot of good here. Together with Dennis Mowbray. We would be one of the biggest estates this side of the Faversham holdings."

"I was at school with Dennis you know," Marcus said, "he's a couple of years older than me. His father worked for my uncle before him."

"At Guisborough. I never understood why your uncle didn't send you to a proper school. I don't care what all these trendy educationalists say. A good public school is the making of good man. It gives you strength of character. Though, I have to say, it didn't do my lot much good intellectually. You are still my cleverest son."

"Oh, I think he thought that if I was going to live my life with farming people it would be good for me to go to school with their sons. Those of them who managed to pass the eleven plus anyway. Actually, it was a bloody good school, and a good deal older and more traditional than most public schools, and academically better than many of them. Paradoxically it started me off on this academic career, which wasn't what my uncle intended at all and it probably would not have happened if he's sent me to Harrow or somewhere like that."

The Colonel grunted, he was not impressed by this argument.

"Of course," Marcus continued, "Dennis wasn't like me at school. He's very bright, but not at all academic and he cared more about farming than books. He spent half his time at school mending windows and looking after the grounds. But absolutely dependable."

"Aye, well, that's certainly true. Mowbray is a first rate estate manager. If we do amalgamate the estates he will be on the Board of Directors. He's too good to lose."

"I'm in favour of your scheme," Marcus said. The Colonel now gave him a curious look.

"You haven't really had time to consider it. Don't do anything hasty".

"Oddly enough I've been thinking along the same lines myself, but I didn't know whether you would be interested. I don't see myself taking an active role in running the estate in the immediate future. So it would make sense to form a company and turn it over to professionals like you and Dennis. My only requirement would be that the proper legal contracts are drafted and Dennis is made managing director, or some similar title. You understand, I can't give up my academic career just yet. I've put so much time and effort into it. You know, it takes nearly nine years to become a full lecturer, counting undergraduate and graduate work, and three year's probation. It's a long apprenticeship, and I don't really want to turn my back on it just yet." Marcus paused, "besides, I'm very happy with my job, though I don't like St Dynion's very much. But hopefully

I won't be there much longer. If I could get myself to York or Durham I would probably be able to take a more active role in Carston too."

"Nice to hear someone who likes their work. Even if they do pay you in brass farthings. Must be hard for people who don't have your resources."

"Yes, I think so. I wonder sometimes why they do it. Their enthusiasm for scholarship is being exploited, really. But there are other advantages. And as for student riots and so on. You shouldn't believe what you see on the television. It's only a small minority. Most students are conscientious and committed. They're okay. I must admit, I'm less happy about academics. When I started this career it was because I believed that learning and teaching helped people to think clearly and rationally, and that this would make them morally better people. And if that were so you'd expect the dons to be the most moral and altruistic of people. But they're not. They're just as devious and corrupt as the rest of society. Some of them are terrible monomaniacs."

The Colonel's head was cocked on one side. He was listening carefully.

"You're in doubt, aren't you," he said, his forehead wrinkled quizzically. Marcus stopped for a minute and surveyed the rolling moor. The Colonel stood silently behind him. For an instant Marcus felt the ground lurch under him as though he was on the deck of a tossing boat, looking with hand shaded eyes at a barren, bleached coastline dotted with red earthed terraces of olive groves and hillsides scattered with bright white houses baking under an unforgiving sun. Then it was gone and he saw only the purple orange waves of the heather and green bracken sea, rippling away into the remote distance. It was very peaceful, even in spite of the guns firing further down the line. How odd that they fitted so perfectly into this environment, man the hunter, primeval, at his closest to nature. A gun cracked on Marcus's left and out of the corner of his eye he saw a grouse hurtling down the line towards him. Without any conscious thought on his part he brought the gun up, squeezed the trigger and felt the butt thump into his shoulder. The bird tumbled out of the sky, its summer lost forever.

"Good shot," said the Colonel, "there's life in the old dog yet."

Marcus felt a pang of remorse. He had just taken away something that he could not give back.

He broke the gun, ejected the cartridge case and inserted a replacement."Oddly enough," Marcus resumed his discourse, "academics can be very violent people. Not in their actions, usually, but in their beliefs. There are people who will sit around and talk about eliminating the rich and the middle classes as the first step in creating a just society. And they mean eliminate in the same way that Hitler and Stalin meant eliminate. But they don't see revolution as something involving violent death and appalling suffering. We're supposed to be the most critical of people. Paid by the state to ask serious questions and think the unthinkable. Yet for them it's just an idea. Someone else pulls the trigger. Sorry, I'm boring you."

"No, no," said the Colonel, "it's interesting to hear you talk. I mean, we never hear this kind of point of view."

"Well, actually, I was thinking more about the actual practice of scholarship. There are a lot of academics who are very violent towards their colleagues, and sometime towards students too. Mentally violent, of course, but vicious and cruel nevertheless, in their writing and their conversation. And very ambitious. Not just to be a good scholar, but for power. Not for money of course because the money is peanuts by our standards."

"It was never like this when I was a student," said the Colonel, "but that was along time ago. Scholars were gentlemen then."

"Precisely. But gentlemen scholars are dying out. There's a new generation coming. Now it's a career profession and they're all out for the power and such money as comes with it. It's a rat race, just like everything else, and, of course, in any rat race it's always the biggest rats that win. Can you imagine; ivory towers overrun with rats. I'm very lucky really. I don't need the money, so I can concentrate on scholarship and on the students."

"Well, rats have a habit of biting, so watch out. Take your gun back with you! You used to be good at killing rats. You used to sit for hours waiting for them. You were a good shot with a rifle or a .410. A patient hunter, not a rough shooter like this. You are in doubt though?"

"Yes, I suppose I am," said Marcus reluctantly. "There is another thing. I think academics become very detached from reality. And they become indifferent to humanity. Things are merely interesting. I saw an appalling car crash on the M62 last April and it didn't affect me. Most people would have been sick with the horror. I was just interested, curious, detached. I realised then that there was something wrong, and it's been nagging at the back of my mind ever since."

Colonel Fawcett looked at Marcus very sharply, "think seriously about giving it up. I've always suspected that academics are slightly mad. You have to be to hide yourself away from the world so much."

"I do enjoy the teaching. Most undergraduates are not academically minded, though I suppose we try to do our best to make them academically minded. No, most of them are just good, honest, sane and level headed young people who know that the university is just a short period in lives which will be devoted to working in the real world. It really is a great privilege to be able to spend one's life talking to and perhaps influencing the brightest minds of each generation."

"What you were saying about academics being violent reminds me very much of someone I knew during the war. He was in my regiment and I absolutely detested him. He was a major, and a real bastard. A martinet of the worst kind. Now, he was an intellectual. He was one of those who left Cambridge to join up. As I did at Oxford. Of course, I stayed on in the army after the war so I never went back, and I never graduated. I regret it sometimes." Fawcett and Marcus stopped to scramble over a wall, breaking their guns open

as they did so. “Anyway he was totally bloody fearless and unbelievable lucky. He led a charmed life. He could walk through a hail of bullets and come out unscathed. And he hated the Germans. He really hated them. Not like the ordinary soldiers who had the good sense to know that the average German soldier was pretty much like the average Tommy. No, he had this passionate abstract hatred of Germans and everything German. And he killed a lot of them. A lot. And some of them were not fighting him when he killed them. Thing is, we had to kill the enemy, of course. But he enjoyed killing, for its own sake. And that is sick in a soldier.”

“What was he called?” Marcus asked, sensing an unexpected coincidence.

“Can't remember. He was transferred out of my unit because of his insubordination. I heard he got killed eventually, by one of his own men. But he was a cold blooded bastard. Anyway, how did the *viva* go?” the Colonel asked, “do I have to call you Doctor?”

Marcus grimaced, “I don't know. I'm not sure. It seemed an anticlimax and they didn't tell me the result. I have to wait. But I think it will be alright. My supervisor is very confident.”

“Hmm,” the Colonel replied enigmatically, “think about what I said. We need you here, you know.”

They walked on in silence, shooting occasionally, but not hitting anything. Lunch at Hagg House was a splendidly primitive affair consisting of a trestle table with bowls and plates, and a variety of pork pies, burnt sausages, fresh rolls, and a great cauldron into which the slap dash Mrs Fawcett had emptied an assortment of cans of soup, heated over a roaring log fire. And there was lots of beer, foaming in big jugs. Marcus tucked in with the best of them. He felt more happy and contented than he had felt for years. It was, he thought, wrongly, a result of having completed the thesis and despatching the incubus which had fed on him for so many years. The last great examination was over. Life could begin.

Hagg House was a semi derelict farmhouse used, for the time being, as a sort of makeshift shooting lodge and occasional summer cottage. There wasn’t much in the way of furniture, but because it was now very hot most of the shooters, including Marcus, had collected their soup and pies from the makeshift kitchen and were standing around outside in their shirtsleeves chattering to each other, or to the wives and girlfriends who had come along to help Mrs Fawcett with the catering and cleaning up.

“Tell me about the girlfriend,” Mrs Fawcett asked, smiling quizzically at Marcus, “are you planning to get married? Don't rush into anything Marcus. You ought to play the field a bit.”

Marcus struggled for an answer. He did not think of Sophie as his girlfriend. Somehow the word girlfriend implied ownership, mutual possession. He thought of Sophie only as Sophie. The idea that he might possess her, or she him, somehow seemed alien to the context in which they had come together.

And what about Caroline? Did he have two girlfriends? The idea of marriage, of a lifetime together, had not really occurred to him. Had it occurred to them? It was as though their complex relationship existed in some other, abstract, universe where all things were possible and the normal conventions of human society did not apply. Before he could answer Mrs Fawcett two very strong hands came up behind him and clamped themselves over his eyes. He felt the now familiar sensation of soft breasts pressing against his back through the thin fabric of his shirt. A husky voice whispered in his ear.

"It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife. Guess who?"

"Well, it's certainly not Jane Austen," Marcus exclaimed. He did not dare to move for fear of spilling the bowl of soup, which occupied both of his hands. Then he was released and could turn round, and, as he did so, Mrs Fawcett deftly relieved him of the bowl of soup. A girl with a classic bluff pony club face and a lion's mane of tawny blonde hair flung her arms round him and kissed him on the lips with more enthusiasm than was proper for someone he had not seen for over eight years. Marcus struggled to respond to the kiss as politely as possible. It was the first time he had been kissed by any woman outside Drew's circle. The sensation of sharing was unexpectedly familiar but it did not feel exactly as it had felt with Sophie and Caroline. This, he thought, must be what it's like with someone who is not one of us.

"Remember me?" said Hilary Outhwaite.

"Of course," Marcus replied, "Hilary……Outhwaite. Sorry Hilary.... Stackpole. How are you Hilary?"

"I've been better."

"Hilary's husband died last year," Mrs Fawcett interjected, "terrible business."

Marcus vaguely remembered being ambushed by Hilary Outhwaite in a hay loft after a Young Farmers' barn dance and compelled to try to unhook her bra, but getting no further because she had slapped his face when curiosity urged his hand into her knickers. This was surprising because that was why she had got him into the barn in the first place. Hilary, for her part, had not expected Marcus to interpret a feint as a rejection and back off. If she had meant it seriously the slap would have been seriously painful. Most of the boys she had taken into hay lofts took the mild slap as a come on, grabbed her wrists, tried to pin her down and wrestled her to get her knickers off, which is what she hoped and expected that Marcus would do. Boys, after all, must be made to fight for it a bit, and the teenage Hilary had always enjoyed a good wrestle in the straw. But Marcus was different. Marcus did not fight for sex. Indeed, Marcus did not seem to know what sex was. So she had put him out of her mind and married Julian Stackpole, who did like a good wrestle, preferably, as she later discovered, with more than one opponent.

“I'm very sorry to hear that,” Marcus replied, suddenly feeling sympathetic for someone he had not seen for years, and had almost forgotten. She had come to his attention recently only because Dennis Mowbray had mentioned letting one of the Hall stables to her.

“Marcus was just going to tell me about his new girlfriend,” Mrs Fawcett said, looking pointedly at Hilary. Marcus felt the disappointment flood through both of them. Mrs Fawcett was marriage broking and had been wrong footed.

“Not much to tell, really,” said Marcus, reluctant to talk about Sophie and surprisingly concerned not to add to Hilary’s disappointment. How strange, he thought, that people should hope for so much from him without him ever knowing about it. “What happened to your husband?”

Hilary shook her head. “Brain haemorrhage. But don't feel bloody sorry for me. I'm bloody well rid of him. It was a miserable bloody marriage. He was shagging somebody else. Par for the course round here. Still, I'll get part of his estate, once it goes through probate. His parents are bloody well fighting it, but even if they win I'll still get more than if I'd divorced him. Sod him. I’d rather hear about your girlfriend. What’s she called?”

Marcus thought that this was rather callous but concluded that Hilary must have her reasons. He tried to read her mind but his fumbling inexperience with his new skills was blocked by an opaque miasma which told him nothing, so he gave up. Hilary was not likely to be a significant factor in his life.

“She’s called Sophie,” he replied in answer to the question.

“And what’s she like? Is she here? Is it that amazing German girl who came here with you in April?”

Marcus was surprised that Caroline’s brief visit had been so erroneously noted so far afield. But then he had taken her into the *Blackwell Ox,* which was tantamount to shouting from the rooftops. The whole village would certainly know, and what it didn’t know imaginative gossip would soon supply.

“No,” Marcus laughed, knowing that the truth would not be credible but unable to lie convincingly, “that’s my other girlfriend. Sophie is brunette, long dark hair, olive skin, Mediterranean type. Bit like Katherine Ross. That type of face, anyway. And no she’s not here. She’s in Athens. I’m joining her in a few days.”

“Ooh…..is she Greek?” Mrs Fawcett cooed, “ Sophie’s a Greek name, isn’t it? Other girlfriend? Marcus. What do you mean….other girlfriend?”

“Half Greek, her mother was Greek. Sofia means ….wisdom...and love.” Marcus ignored the second half of the question, but what he had said had registered with Hilary who sensed that all might not be lost. Two girlfriends meant that Marcus was cheating and therefore not committed. University had obviously changed him in more ways than one.

“Greek. How exotic. Never been to Greece. Bet she’s ever so slim, with long legs and big boobs and great big eyes and no bottom.” Hilary was getting sadder and sadder. She also had big boobs, more or less a design feature of Yorkshire

women, but she also had big hips, muscular arms, legs which, though long and in proportion, were sturdy rather than slender and a face which was conventionally pretty, in a Thelwellian jolly hockey sticks sort of a way, but lacked the vivacity of Sophie or the elegance of Caroline. Hilary was built for the world in which she lived.

Marcus smiled gently at her, but said nothing. He felt a great sorrow for her, and he felt her sorrow, deeper far than her disappointment. Something truly terrible had happened to Hilary, something that she could not even admit to herself. He put his arms round her and gave her a hug, then released her.

"Thank you Marcus," she sniffed. "I needed that. Do you really love her?"

"I really love her," Marcus surprised himself. Hilary nodded disconsolately.

"I had…sort of hoped…you know…that you might still be…available."

"We're not very subtle are we," Mrs Fawcett added, looking unhappily at Hilary.

"No," Marcus replied, "not very subtle. But it's okay. I'm not the only fish in the sea, you know. There will be someone else for you. And if what you say is true you will soon be a single woman in possession of a good fortune. Just make sure you get the right man next time."

"Marcus," Hilary asked, "Marcus, do you think I could come and talk to you about that. I've always been attracted to the wrong men. You're an educated man. You've been in the wide world. You know more than us bumpkins. I'd like your advice on...well.. everything really." Marcus feared the worst. Hilary was clearly setting herself up for a second attempt, but he agreed, somewhat reluctantly. The two women wandered off, Mrs Fawcett with her arm consolingly round Hilary's shoulders.

On the second leg of the shoot Marcus walked on his own, and though he did not succeed in hitting anything, either consciously or unconsciously, he did manage to use up his remaining cartridges. But Sophie's hot sun was snuggling into his heart, and the moors no longer seemed so attractive.

Sophie's promised letter to Marcus got lost in the Greek postal system, but she eventually succeeded in getting through to Carston Hall on the phone, two days before Marcus was due to leave for Athens and just before he would have begun to panic seriously.

"Sweetheart," she gabbled into a crackly line, "there's a postal strike here so in case you didn't get my letter, everything's okay. Miss you so much. Can't wait to see you. I'll meet you at the airport. Don't bring too many clothes. You won't need them. Get everything into your hand luggage then you won't have to wait for hours at the carousel and we'll be together even sooner. All you need is some shorts, swimming trunks, and a couple of T shirts. Travel in something light. Wear some decent walking shoes 'cos lots of things to see. You can buy shoes here, for the boat. Bring some soap…and decent tea. Terrible phone. Got to go. Love you darling, darling, darling," click, and she was gone before Marcus could begin to reply.

He inspected his wardrobe and his chest of drawers and found very little that would meet with Sophie's approval, except for a good pair of walking shoes, some rather baggy shorts which he had not worn for years and a pair of moth eaten swimming trunks which he had bought when his uncle had built the indoor pool but had never used because his uncle expected him to be a manly Spartan and swim in the nude. However, he did have a pair of light weight summer slacks and a couple of short sleeved shirts and a blazer, which would do for the journey. He decided to travel extremely light and buy whatever else was needed in Athens. Only two days to go and he would be safe in Sophie's arms, running his fingers through her beautiful hair, burying his face in her ever welcoming breasts.

The evening before he was due to leave it rained torrentially. Marcus sat quietly in the study in a comfortable wing chair reading an ancient Michelin guide to Greece which he had found buried in the geography section of his uncle's library, and listening to the rain lashing against the windows. He didn't think that either his uncle or his parents had ever been to Greece, but perhaps they had dreamed of going there because there were a number of books on Greek life and culture. About eight o'clock, just as Marcus was about to meditate in the hope of contacting Sophie, the front door bell rang. Marcus made his way down the grand staircase, crossed the marble floored hall, and opened the front door. Hilary Outhwaite was standing under the portico dressed in a long Barbour coat and Wellingtons, holding up a bottle of Bollinger in one hand and a box of Durex in the other. Her hair was wet from the rain, and her eyes were red from crying. She pushed past him into the hall, trailing the scent of gin and tonic and cigarette smoked hair behind her. Marcus recoiled but she thrust the Bollinger and the Durex at him and began to unbutton her coat. Marcus put the champagne and the Durex down on a hall table then extended

his hand, palm open and upwards in a gesture that could only mean stop. *Oh no* he thought, *not again*.

"This is not a good idea," he said as gently as he could. Hilary continued to unbutton the Barbour. As Marcus had feared she was not wearing anything underneath.

"I just want to talk, you said we could talk," she said, dropping the Barbour on the floor and kicking off the Wellingtons. Marcus shrugged.

"This doesn't look like talking," he replied, conscious that taking one's clothes off and talking was Sophie's solution to most problems.

"Well, you said you had another girlfriend and that means you're having a bit on the side. So there's no reason why you can't have another bit on the side. Don't you fancy me? Come on Marcus, be a sport. Let's do it. For old time's sake." She put her hands on her hips and pointed her ample breasts at him.

"No, it's not that I don't fancy you," Marcus replied, "but I love Sophie. I'm not going to have sex with someone I don't love." He wondered what Sophie would make of this situation and had a sneaking feeling that she might have said go for it. He then had the even sneakier sensation that Sophie might actually be aware of what he was doing, especially where sex was concerned, and that was a very powerful reason for loyalty to her. Hilary burst into floods of tears.

"I hate men," she screamed, her face contorted with rage and frustration, "you're all sodding bastards. I hope you all rot in hell." She snatched the Bollinger back and smashed it onto the marble floor. "You can keep the fucking Durex," she yelled, "I don't need them anyway. I can't have children. I'm sterile. Bastard men. Bastards. All of them." She paused briefly for more sobs, then added lamely "I just wanted you to know you could have me." She turned round and slammed sobbing out of the front door into the driving rain. Marcus stood still, frozen with shock. Minutes later the front door reopened and the naked Hilary crept back in, and sheepishly picked up her Barbour and her Wellingtons.

"I'm sorry Marcus," she sobbed, "you're a good man. I didn't mean to hurt you. I just wanted someone to hold me and love me a little bit. I thought I would be safe with you." As she turned away from him Marcus noticed a number of thin white scars etched across her back and buttocks. She threw on the Barbour and Wellingtons and went back into the sluicing rain.

"Hilary," he half shouted, "wait, I will talk to you." But she was gone.

After he had cleared up the broken glass and swabbed the champagne from the marble floor he went back to his wing chair and sat quietly for a long time, until his heart had stopped thumping.

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Marcus had never flown before and the whole experience of the airport and the sensations of flying were daunting and alarming, especially as dusk fell. But

when the plane banked over the great white city he saw the floodlit Acropolis and his heart leapt up. The past was alive here. This was the cradle of western civilisation, the place where it had all started. The plane flew out towards Aegina, then banked again and began its final approach over Glyfada. Sophie was down there somewhere, waiting for him, he could feel her presence much more strongly now, reaching out to him. It seemed to take ages for the plane to taxi to its parking area, then the doors opened and Marcus filed out with the other passengers into a blast of unbelievably hot night air and a cornucopia of vivid sounds and smells. Into a bus from the plane to Arrivals. Through Arrivals and Passport Control. Many dark and unsmiling young men in uniforms cradling sub machine guns, watching. His passport was stamped. Where next? Not the baggage carousel. Only his little knapsack full of Knights Castile and Earl Grey tea and very little else. Nothing to declare. Out into the scruffy arrivals area. Chaos. So many people. So much noise. People pushing and jostling. People with hand written notices held over their heads. People with boxes. People with trolleys. Women with babies in push chairs. Bedlam. Then Sophie. Sophie, jumping up and down and waving her arms over her head in excitement, like a demented cheerleader, and shouting "Marcus, Marcus, over here. Marcus." And then he was in her arms and once again he was a whole person, covered in wet kisses, hugged so tightly to her that it almost hurt, one spirit one flesh, one person. Nothing else mattered. Sophie, in a little red shirt knotted tightly over her breasts to reveal her brown midriff, little blue flounced miniskirt which hardly covered her bottom. Long brown legs, tanned to perfection, boat shoes, hair piled up and held in place with a cheap plastic clip in the shape of a large red butterfly. Beautiful, beautiful Sophie. She took his hand and led him out of the building. It was just as noisy outside. Horns blared, taxis, cars, buses, people everywhere all shouting in incomprehensible barking Greek. Aircraft roared overhead. Marcus was dazed. If Carston was in another world from St Dynion's, this was in another universe.

"We'll take the bus," Sophie shouted. In the bus it was marginally quieter. Sophie snuggled up to him. "Dad's been paying me and I've saved enough for us to stay three nights in a hotel in Athens, then we go to the boat. Dad wanted us to have some time to ourselves and you want to look round Athens and we have lots of shagging to make up for, don't we. Marcus, αγάπη μου!" She kissed him passionately. The bus seemed to be hurtling through traffic one minute and then screeching to a halt the next. Someone in the bus yelled "συντριβή αυτοκινήτων καταστροφή" and all the passengers moved across to peer out of the windows. "car crash," said Sophie, "look." A battered Renault Dauphine was on its roof in the central reservation, dazed passengers crawling out whilst horn shrieking cars whizzed past on the other carriageway. Some older women on the bus crossed themselves and appeared to pray. Then the bus careered forward again to the next set of traffic lights where every driver appeared to have one hand permanently pressed to his horn, the other hand gesticulating

through an open window. Marcus was relieved when the bus deposited them next to Syntagma Square, right in the centre, but the minute they got out of the bus they stepped back into the same bedlam.

"Don't worry," Sophie was reading him, as always, "it's just all new. Remember, the Greeks invented chaos. It's a Greek word. You'll get used to it. Driving's a national sport here. The hotel's just round the corner. It'll be quieter there. Not like the Grosvenor I'm afraid. It's all I could afford."

The hotel was called the *Attica Palace*, just off Syntagma, one of those strange Tardis like Greek hotels with a tiny lobby and reception in a ground floor corridor, but spreading out on the first and subsequent floors, bridging the shops below. At reception Marcus reluctantly handed over his passport, assured by Sophie that it would be returned in the morning. There was a small lift to the second floor where Marcus briefly glimpsed a bar, and then they went down a dingy corridor and into a smallish room. Marcus took in the two single beds pushed together, one with Sophie's little knapsack on it, the walls that needed painting, framed prints of the Parthenon and Delphi, the single easy chair, the rickety built in wardrobe and tiny ensuite toilet and shower room. It was clean, but basic. There were two bottles of wine and a couple of glasses on the little dressing table, together with some peaches which Sophie had bought earlier, when she had checked into the hotel at lunchtime. She closed the door behind her and the noise almost abated. Marcus shook his head. His ears were ringing. She stood in front of him, as she always did, took his face between her hands and kissed him slowly and gently. The little red shirt was tied with a bow beneath her breasts. Marcus pulled gently on the loose ends and the shirt fell away. There was no bra. Sophie didn't need a bra. He kissed her neck and throat and she arched her back giving a little mewling sigh of utter abandonment, then he worked his way down her body, kissing every beloved part, breasts, nipples, navel, unzipping and slipping off the tiny skirt and the even tinier knickers, burying his face into those other lips nestled in her slick and silky hair, savouring again the taste of her, down the insides of her thighs, down to her lovely tiny feet, then back up her legs and buttocks and her back and her neck, and round to her waiting lips. Then she did the same to him, removing his blazer, slowly and teasingly unbuttoning his shirt, undressing him and kissing and caressing him at the same time and when they were both naked he slid into her and made love to her so slowly and gently that it seemed to last for hours, ending not in a frenzied orgasm but in that blissful fusing together of body and soul which seemed so unique to them. Afterwards Sophie lay in his arms and they talked about what they had been doing in each other's absence. Marcus told her about the oral examination and about Caroline in Cambridge.

"You didn't tell me," he said, "about you and Caroline."

Sophie smiled her most disarming smile, "I didn't want you to be lonely while we were apart," she said, "and Caroline is one of us. I know now that she is not a threat to us. An asset, really. Loving her is like loving me and I love her

almost as much as I love you, and she loves you, in her way. But it's a different love and it's not binding. Caroline can come and go in our lives, and we'll enjoy whatever she gives us, and help her if she needs help, and she'll come to us if we need her." She paused for moment, "Did you enjoy her?" she laughed.

"We only did it once," Marcus replied, "when you frightened us with the sunset. That was very strange. And in Cambridge she had her period, so she .. you know."

Marcus recounted exactly what had happened and Sophie laughed, and then cried a little because Caroline had been so unhappy. She hated people to be unhappy. He told her about Hilary Outhwaite. Sophie was very curious.

"What should I have done?" he asked.

"It sounds as though she is very unhappy. It sounds as though something very bad has happened to her," Sophie replied thoughtfully, "I wouldn't have minded, if it had made her happy, and you happy. Sex is therapeutic you know. It's important to help people if we can. Love and kindness can heal so many wounds. But I think your friend must have been a little drunk, and not really knowing what she was doing. It would have been wrong to take advantage of her, and….it might have given her an unrequited hope. But… I'd like to meet her, one day. Maybe I could talk to her..and maybe help her."

"I know," said Marcus, "but I only want to be with you. I love you so much. I don't want to complicate things any more."

Sophie caressed his face and kissed him. Marcus felt his stomach rumbling. Sophie looked alarmed.

"You haven't had anything to eat?"

"Well, there was something on the plane. But I'm not sure what it was."

"Ah…poor Marcus. It's eleven o'clock here and your stomach thinks it's nine o'clock. Lets go and get something to eat."

"Will anywhere be open?"

"Will anywhere be closed? This is Greece, remember."

They dressed quickly and went back into the unrelenting cacophony of night time Athens. Sophie hung onto to him tightly for fear of losing him in the crowds, until she found a quiet little taverna in a back street in the Plaka. Marcus looked blankly at the menu, which was in Greek, with random translations into broken English. In the end he opted for kebabs, because he knew what they were from Cypriot meals at Marias, which they in no way resembled. Sophie, who was less hungry, just had some kolokithia and a village salad. As the kebabs settled his stomach Marcus began to catch up with himself and take stock. He looked around curiously at the other diners and the people walking past in the street. Some obviously tourists, but most were Greeks. Darkly handsome men in slacks and short sleeved shirts, slim dark skinned women in elegant skimpy dresses and impossibly high heels, delicate Mediterranean faces and dark flashing eyes, wrists, throats and waists dripping with bright jewellery. Most of them had glossy dark hair like Sophie's, but there

was a surprising number of olive skinned blondes, quite like Caroline. He looked at them, and then looked at Sophie. Sophie was at home here. She belonged here. She was like them, but subtly not like them. Sophie was a cultural amphibian, capable of existing effortlessly in many worlds, where Marcus struggled to make sense of only one. Nevertheless he began to relax. The adventure was starting to appeal to him. He felt very safe here with Sophie. He liked the vibrancy and colour of this world. The manic energy and noise became less overwhelming. He smiled at Sophie and reached for her hand over the table. Instantly a gypsy woman appeared with flowers. Sophie barked something in Greek and the woman moved on to the next table where a Germanic voice bought a flower in broken English for his blonde companion, who looked not unlike Caroline.

"I was going to buy you a flower," said Marcus, surprised at Sophie's uncharacteristic behaviour, "isn't it bad luck to turn away a gypsy?"

"Maybe. But they're a nuisance," Sophie replied, "sorry, that's the Greek bit of me. Not very sympathetic to fake beggars. They're for the tourists." She looked at the empty plates, "let's go back to the hotel and have a shower and go to bed. I've got some wine." She held her hand up and made a strange scribbling gesture with her forefinger which was picked up instantly by the waiter.

"Εήά μπουκάλι ήέρο, μέγάλο κάί του λογ ςάς πάράκάλο"she said to the boy.

"I didn't know you spoke Greek," Marcus said, though he should not have been surprised.

"Only a little, my mother started to teach me, but….you know. I can get by. It's only café Greek really."

The waiter came back with the bill and a large bottle of still water. Marcus paid without making a significant impact on the fifty pounds worth of drachmas that he had been allowed to bring out of Britain. But he would have to change a traveller's cheque in the morning. He'd noticed that a surprising number of the shops and restaurants they had passed on the way to their taverna accepted American Express, so paying for things was not going to be a problem. Sophie picked up the big bottle of water and they made their way back to the *Attica Palace*. The shower was cold and primitive, and the water very hard so they used the soap that Marcus had brought with him. And when they finished soaping and washing and towelling each other they made love again; the same languorous gentle lovemaking that they had come to prefer. Not the ecstatic thrashing of frantic lust, but gentle kissing and harmonious tonguing followed by delicate penetration for what seemed like hours, thrusting slowly, feeling the muscles in her vagina teasing and caressing him, her hips syncopated in adagio with his, then moving to new positions from their now well practised repertoire, sensuously stroking and kissing each other until Sophie glissandoed into a quiet orgasm and Marcus released himself into her with a kiss and a sigh as their

bodies and souls melted together and they hugged each other into the innocent sleep of sated lovers.

In the morning Athens was different. A golden sun, unlike anything Marcus had ever seen in Britain, but the same sun nevertheless, glowed around the Parliament buildings which dominated Syntagma. From the little balcony of the hotel room he could see the narrow streets below already packed with people and scooters and mopeds, and shoals of cars and grey Mercedes taxis hurtling suicidally round the square pursued by predatory trucks and buses. On the corners of the square there were soldiers and men in uniform cradling machine pistols. Marcus reminded himself that this was still a military dictatorship and felt a brief sour taste in his heart. They skipped the hotel breakfast which Sophie rightly knew would not be worth having, and went instead to one of the cafes under the awnings in the centre of Syntagma, where Marcus bought an expensive but very good breakfast of hot croissants, yoghurt and honey, fruit, fresh orange and superb coffee for both of them. Then to the American Express office where Marcus exchanged some of his cheques, and down Ermou to the Flea Market and the tourist shops where Sophie chose for Marcus some shorts and rather sexy black swimming trunks which, she said, would double up as underwear on the boat, several large white floppy T shirts, a big floppy white hat, and a pair of boat shoes. For the next two days they visited as many of the interesting places in Athens as they could. Marcus was captivated by the Acropolis. The idea of standing where Plato and Aristotle had stood filled him with awe. The Archaeological Museum was outstanding. The Plaka fascinating. Then coffee and croissants in a posh café in Kolonaki before climbing up the endless steps to Lycabetos, and back down on the funicular. Marcus began to feel more and more relaxed, settling into the unfamiliar clothes and lifestyle as though he had always lived like this. There was something irresistibly uninhibiting about Greece. Under Sophie's instruction he began to familiarise himself with Greek food which he found to be far removed from the strangely bowdlerised Cypriot dishes of the Cambridge restaurants and far more varied and tasty than he had ever imagined. Sophie skipped along beside him, holding his hand or hanging onto his arm, tugging occasionally at his T shirt like an excited child pointing out things of interest. And at night they lay together naked on top of the sheets in the hot noisy hotel room and made love as often as they could, and hugged each other and cried together because they were so deliriously happy.

On the morning of the third day in Athens they checked out of the *Attica Palace,* walked to Monastiraki and took the decrepit Metro to Piraeus, getting off at Neo Faliron and walking the last kilometre or so to Mikrolimano. It was much quieter here. The little harbour with its crescent of waterfront tavernas opened out below them as they walked down the hill towards it. Small brightly coloured fishing boats with huge lamps hanging off the stern were moored bow first to the quay immediately in front of the tavernas. It was beautiful.

"They're very expensive," Sophie said, pointing at the awnings, "we can't afford to eat there."

"Well, I can," Marcus replied, "and tonight we'll all go there."

"We'll have gone by then," Sophie said, "look, that's the *Elpida*." She pointed at one of the larger yachts moored stern first at the end of crescent. Marcus knew nothing about yachts. From where they were he could see what appeared to be a quite large white vessel with a single mast and a central cockpit covered by a canopy. As they got closer he could see a bearded man in shorts standing on the harbour edge at the stern of the yacht. He waved. Sophie jumped up and down and waved back furiously.

"Daddy," she said, turning to Marcus. Up to now she had always called her father dad because she thought it was cool to be common. But here, in his company, he was daddy, the little girl's beloved and only parent. She walked faster, pulling Marcus along behind until they were almost running. It was too hot for this, Marcus thought. Sophie hurled herself at her father and flung her arms around his neck, then introduced Marcus. Lieutenant Commander Davenport had been a regular naval officer, and at first sight he had the regulation beard and bearing of his class and rank. His black hair was now greying, long and receding, tied back in a pony-tail like a born again hippy, and apart from his faded and torn denim shorts which were clearly the remains of what had once been jeans, he was wearing only a red bandanna round his neck and the apparently obligatory boat shoes on his feet. He was dark like Sophie, and very sunburned, but his face was thinner and only the straight and steady set of his eyes and eyebrows and his resolute square jaw were shared with his daughter who must have taken most of her features from her dead mother. His handshake was vice-like and he looked straight into Marcus's startled eyes with a gaze so penetrating that Marcus had difficulty returning it. Evidently Marcus's gaze and grip were firm enough to be deemed acceptable, though it was a long time before the Commander let go.

"I'm jolly pleased to meet you, I've heard all about you," he said, eventually, "every damn day! And I'm very glad that you are here because Sophie has been wandering around in a dream for the last two weeks, not to mention doing her naked meditation thing and leaving damp patches all over my nice new vinyl upholstery. Ouch," he yelled as Sophie's right foot connected with his shin.

"Sophie, that hurt," he exclaimed reproachfully, before giving her another hug. "Let's go aboard. Come on Marcus. What do you know about yachts?"

"Nothing, really," said Marcus struggling not to address the Commander as sir.

"Well, actually, this is not really a proper yacht. This is what is known as a motor sailer because she has bigger engine and she can keep going in bad seas or when there is no wind. Less fun, but better in the Aegean where you can fry in ordinary yachts because the sun is so hot. She's a good boat and actually sails pretty well too. Also she's a bilge keeler. She has two keels, so she draws less

water than a conventional yacht of this size, so we can get in closer into shallow bays. It's a good compromise." The Commander continued to explain what needed to be known by beginners. He seemed nervous and excited, and anxious to impress Marcus.

Once they were on board, the yacht seemed smaller. There was a double cabin in the stern, entered by a hatch and companionway at the rear of the substantial cockpit, which was closer to the stern than Marcus had at first thought. Under the cabin top at the forward end of the cockpit was a steering position with a conventional ship's steering wheel, a compass and an array of instruments and radios which meant nothing to Marcus. Forward of the partially enclosed cockpit was another short companionway leading down into a largish saloon with a U shaped dining area which could be converted into a double berth, and opposite was a well equipped galley. Further forward was a door leading to the minute toilet and shower enclosure. In the bow, beyond yet another door, was a triangular double berth. Sophie threw her knapsack onto it.

"This is where we sleep," she said to Marcus, squeezing his hand. Her father did not seem to question the fact that they would be sleeping together, indeed he seemed to take it for granted. Perhaps Sophie shared her secrets with him. But what could any conventional parent think of her recent life of reckless and inventive promiscuity? Perhaps he was genuinely glad to see Marcus and hopeful that Sophie would at last settle down. But Commander Davenport had never been a conventional parent and had long ago learned how to cope with Sophie's wayward behaviour by condoning what he could not forbid and encouraging Sophie to get through her voracious sexual learning curve as rapidly and painlessly as possible.

Marcus became aware that another person had boarded the yacht and was introduced to a Greek lady in her late thirties who at first sight looked like an older version of Sophie but she had a more oval face and a less luxurious body. This was the Commander's new lady friend Elpida, after whom the yacht had been named. She kissed Sophie on each cheek, and was kissed back in the same way. Marcus followed Sophie's example when he was introduced. Elpida seemed to have only limited English and so sat quietly in the cockpit whilst the others chattered, but every now and then the Commander would turn to her and summarise in Greek what they had been talking about. Sophie was excited in a way that Marcus had never seen before, telling her father what they had been doing in Athens, but talking so fast that she stumbled over her words, and gesticulating with her hands, and flashing her eyes, sometimes slipping into Greek, then back into English. This was another Sophie, so different from the sad girl who had sat in his room with Drew Parkin, trying to understand the injustice of her degree result. Did that world really exist? He wondered where Drew was now.

Eventually the Commander looked at his watch.

"Time to go, I think. Are you ready Marcus, for the big adventure? They say every journey on a small boat is an adventure. You go with Sophie to the bow, that's the pointy end, and pull in the anchor chain when I tell you. Elpida and I will do the stern warps. Do exactly as you're told, and you'll be okay."

"Er…I don't want to seem rude," Marcus said tentatively, "but what should I call you? Do I call you Commander, or Mr Davenport, or Sir, or what do you prefer?"

"Call me Chris," said the Commander, "no one calls me Commander any more, and certainly not sir, thank God. Anyway I'm not really a Commander, just Lieutenant Commander. But people call me Commander. I suppose people call you professor," He grinned at Marcus. "Off you go, help Sophie."

Marcus followed Sophie up to the bow. He heard a brief whistling noise, then the diesel engine thudded into thumping life. There was a delay whilst Chris and Elpida went to the stern to pull in the boarding plank and cast off, then Chris was back in the cockpit giving a thumbs up to Sophie.

"Here we go," she said, "he'll move forward slowly to take the weight off the chain. We've got to get it in as fast as possible."

The chain came up with Marcus pulling and Sophie tailing it down the hawsepipe and back into its locker. The anchor appeared and was stowed on the foredeck, and they were under way. Marcus stood in the bow with Sophie, watching the bright colours of the harbour and its little boats slide past. Once they were well out to sea and there was little to look at Sophie suggested that Marcus should go back to the cockpit and talk to her father whilst she stayed in the bow to sunbathe.

"This is what I have in mind," said Chris, "today we'll just go as far as Cape Sounion. There's a little beach there with a nice taverna. We're doing about six knots under power. There's no wind at the moment, but it should get up around two o'clock. Oh….look at her. She cannot keep her clothes on." Marcus looked forward towards the bow. Sophie had removed her T shirt and was leaning back against the pulpit.

"She was like this as a child," Chris continued, "forever running around naked. Caused me no end of embarrassment. You watch. It'll be the shorts next." And sure enough it was. Sophie was standing up straight in the bow looking back at her father and Marcus in the wheelhouse, her face wreathed in a mischievous grin. She put her thumbs into the tops of her skinny black bikini bottom, which she wore instead of knickers, wiggled her hips, and began to push the bikini down, but her father waved his finger at her and she stopped.

"Good girl. Mind you," said Chris, "there's no privacy on a boat this size, so we don't bother too much about clothes. You'll get used to it. Isn't she beautiful, so like her mother. I know that you love her as much I loved her mother and I know that you'll look after her. It's time she settled down, she's sown all her wild oats, and more. Thank God. You probably know by now. She has always told me everything, and some things I couldn't believe possible. But

I don't mind because she has always been totally honest, and you shouldn't mind either. I shouldn't say this to a professional historian but think always of the future, our past is gone and is best forgotten. The future is what matters. Her amazing sex life hasn't harmed her, thank God. She knows better than most girls of her age what is right for her, and if she has chosen you it is because you are the right and only one of all the ones she's tried." It all tumbled out, as though he was as nervous of Marcus as Marcus was of him. He paused for breath, "Anyway, we'll get to Sounion late this afternoon. At this speed it's about five hours steaming. But if the wind gets up we'll sail. Then my idea is to go to Serifos and Sifnos. That'll be a couple of weeks, maybe three. Then I've arranged a charter with someone on Paros in late September, so you and Sophie will have to go back to Piraeus on the ferry from Sifnos and she can fly back with you. I hope that's alright with you. I know academics have very long holidays, so I was confident that you could spend at least three weeks with us."

"That's fine," said Marcus, "actually it's an illusion about academic holidays," he added pedantically, "It's not like school teaching. I'm supposed to be working even when the students aren't there. I'm entitled to twenty eight days like most employees. But I haven't had a proper holiday since I started work, so I don't think any one will notice if I'm away for a month." *Nobody notices my colleagues*, Marcus thought, suddenly reminded of St Dynion's, *who are not there most of the time*.

"That's great. You'll enjoy this one then. We'll have great time. I'm so glad Sophie's with you. She's given me lots of worries you know. I used to lie in my bunk fretting that she'd get herself pregnant and end up living with some hippy toe rag. And I've had to rely on her a lot. And I felt really guilty about not getting to her degree ceremony, but she changed her mind and she couldn't contact me because I was at sea. I heard what happened though. Amazing. Anyway, I can't expect her to skivvy for me all the time. And anyway I've got Elpida to help me now. But I must ask you if you will pay for her airline ticket. I'm awfully sorry. It must seem crazy to you. Here I am with this big yacht and no money and I feel really guilty. But I understand that it is not such a problem for you. Sophie doesn't care about money. She's used to doing without, and she doesn't spend it much when she has it. She will never be a burden to you and she's with you because she loves you, not because you have money. I'm not saying anything about getting married, or anything like that. You must decide what's best for you and Sophie, and also for Caroline. Caroline is important to Sophie too. They nearly came to blows over you, you know." Chris seemed desperate to display his daughter in the best possible light, almost as though he was selling her to Marcus. But it was just nerves. All he really wanted was the best for the Sophie, and he wanted to be sure that this unknown young man could cope with Sophie's past. And in his heart, like most fathers, he was weeping at losing her to another man who could love and enjoy her in a way that would always be denied to him.

"You know about Caroline?" Marcus was overwhelmed by the Commander's gabbling frankness and amazed that Sophie had even told him about Caroline.

"Of course, she tells me everything. She's totally honest, you know. But it's her business. Not for me to comment."

"And you're struggling, aren't you?" Marcus blurted out.

"Ah…." Chris replied, "I see now why she is with you. You have the same gift. You can read my mind too. I never could come to terms with that. She ran rings round me when she was young, because she always knew what was coming. Her mother was the same. Runs in her Greek family. Not me though. I'm baffled by it. Yes, I am struggling. It's difficult setting up a business here and every penny has to go on the business. Up to now I've given everything I could to get Sophie through a good school and go to university and I've given up almost everything for her. We've had to scrimp and save to get by. But now she's finished her education and she's with you, and it's time for me to regain my life and build up my business and marry Elpida. We'll get by. I'm tired of doing yacht deliveries. I'm going to run Yachmaster courses for Brits on the *Elpida*, so they can have a holiday and learn to sail at the same time. Maybe one day I'll have a little flotilla. Be my own admiral. The Colonels won't be here much longer, then Greece will move forward and there will be all kinds of opportunities for tourism."

Elpida, sitting quietly in the cockpit behind them, looked up at the sound of her name, and smiled at them, then returned to her book.

"I understand," Marcus replied, "I do love Sophie, more than I can say, and I share her love for Caroline. I will do my best for both of them." The garrulous Chris was an extraordinarily tolerant parent, accepting intimate revelations which would have sent most fathers incandescent with rage. It was very clear why Sophie was the way she was.

"Good," said Chris, "I know you will. Now, the wind is getting up. We'll get the sails up. Go and get Sophie. She knows what to do."

Marcus obeyed. He faced Sophie across the boom, unlacing the sail cover. He had seen her naked almost everywhere but never in the open air, in the bright sunlight. It was as though he was discovering the lissom beauty of her body all over again. She leaned across the boom and kissed him and as she did so the boat changed direction, turning into the rising wind. Marcus nearly lost his footing and grabbed at the mast.

"One hand for the boat, one hand for yourself," Sophie shouted, "come round the mast and help me pull up the sail. Put the rope round the winch. I'll pull, you tail the rope, just pull it round. Keep it as tight as you can. This is called sweating up a sail."

Marcus watched the flawless near naked brown body stand on tiptoe, arms stretched out above her head, hands grasped round the halyard, looking up at the mast track, hair thrown back, breasts taut, then hauling down on the halyard.

She was unbelievably erotic. He felt the life stirring in his shorts and looked embarrassed. Sophie read his face and his thoughts and started to laugh. The sail slid up the mast, flapping into the wind. Sophie tightened the winch with its handle and cleated off the halyard, then retrieved her T shirt and shorts from under the anchor, put them back on, and gestured Marcus back towards the cockpit to join her father and Elpida under the wheelhouse roof where they were partially shaded from the sun.

"Genoa," Chris shouted. Marcus watched Sophie undo two ropes on the starboard side of the boat, and another rope on the port side.

"Roller reefing, " said Sophie, "very posh. Cost a lot of money. Watch." She began to pay out the thinner line whilst pulling the thicker one round a winch. Marcus was fascinated. The forward sail was unfurling itself, flapping into the wind like the mainsail. Chris turned the boat to starboard and the sails began to fill.

"This is the mainsheet," said Sophie, "this controls the main sail. Right now the wind is on our port beam, so we're going on a beam reach." She began to let some of the mainsheet out, until the mainsail was positioned about forty five degrees off the centre line of the boat. "And these," pointing at the ropes round the two winches on either side of the cockpit coaming, "are the jib sheets. They control the head sail. You're going to have to learn how to use these when we start tacking" She pulled the starboard jib sheet in until the sail was set to her satisfaction and then looped the tail around its cleat. Chris turned the engine off. The boat heeled slightly to starboard and a magical silence enveloped it. Marcus was totally enthralled. There was nothing now but the sound of the wind in the sails, and the hiss and slap of the little waves on the hull. He knew from that moment that this was something that he would always share with Sophie. One day they would have their own yacht. Whatever Sophie wanted. Sophie grabbed his arm and pressed herself against him.

"Isn't it super," she said, "I love it when the engine goes off. It's so peaceful. I love the sea. I've always loved it. I belong to the people of the sea. The children of Poseidon." A puzzled expression crossed her face as though she had remembered something that she would rather forget. Marcus looked at her quizzically. Sophie shook her head.

"It's nothing. Just...like.... I just walked on my own grave. You know."

"This is easy sailing," said Chris, "the wind is nearly always from the North in the afternoon, and we're sailing almost exactly due east, so we don't have to tack. It isn't always like this. We'll teach you about that later. Let's have a beer."

They reached Sounion in the early evening, tacked into the little bay beneath the Temple of Poseidon and dropped anchor. An enthusiastic Marcus was learning fast about sailing and succumbing to the same spell that it cast over Sophie and her father. They sat quietly in the cockpit for a while, watching the sun falling towards the sea in the west and the golden glow on the pillars on the

Temple of Poseidon on the promontory above them changing through crimson to fiery red then dying into twilight which faded in turn into the silver shadows of the rising moon. Then they rowed ashore in the little rubber dinghy and ate in the only taverna on the beach. It was very quiet, so different to Athens. No cars, no horns, no motorbikes or exhaustless scooters. Only the sea lapping on the beach and the subdued chatter of the few other diners. They talked about where they were going and about Chris's plans, and what Sophie was going to do when she got back to England, but Sophie had no plans, except to be with Marcus.

A very small and solemn child appeared, so small that it had to reach up to push a basket of freshly baked bread onto the table. Then an older boy, with knives and forks and glasses, and a father with a little notebook into which he scribbled Chris's order. The food was excellent, grilled fish ladholemono, village salad, tomato salad, fried courgettes, patates, stuffed sweet peppers, yighandes, giant butter beans in a garlicky tomato sauce which Sophie prevented the eager Marcus from more than tasting, because, she giggled, she didn't want to be kept awake all night by a farting man. And afterwards there was fresh fruit, slices of melon, and peaches and watermelon. This was a different Greece, rural, maritime and timeless, and as they progressed into the Cyclades, past Kea towards Serifos and Sifnos, the beachside tavernas became more and more authentic, until Athens with all its vibrant chaos and its choking nefros was forgotten.

Marcus also got used to sleeping in the forecastle. It was always a delight to lie next to Sophie's gentle body and feel her heart against his chest, his fingers in her hair, her hand cradling his cheek. The cramped berth in the forecastle ensured that their bodies were always intimately pressed against each other as they slept and it was very easy for Marcus to become aroused. It was also very hot, so they slept without sheets, with the hatch above them open and the roller blind fly screen pulled closed against the mosquitoes. And when they made love they did so as quietly as possible, which was their habit anyway, because Chris and Elpida in the after cabin were making love with considerable noise and enthusiasm. Sophie was happy for her father, and liked Elpida who, she thought, looked a little like the photos she had seen of her mother. Elpida, for her part, could not quite come to terms with the tendency of these Northerners to take all their clothes off at the least opportunity, including Marcus who had gleefully lost any lingering inhibitions he may have had about nudity. They were almost as bad as the Germans, who were notorious for stripping off on Greek beaches and then being arrested by bored Chorofilaki egged on by the local priest. It was, she thought, a consequence of living in cold places, so exposure to the sun made them all a little mad. Elpida was reluctantly prepared to go topless when the boat was well out to sea, far from the eyes of passing ferries and their curious passengers, but she drew the Orthodox line, and kept her bikini bottom on when everyone else was letting everything hang out. In her heart she

remembered ancient Greece and its habits of gymna, and she wondered sometimes whether these crazy Northerners were more truly Greek in spirit than she was.

Six days later they were in Vathi Bay on Sifnos, as Chris had intended. It was sheltered, beautiful, and as yet unspoilt by tourism. There was a little seaside village, with a brilliant white church and narrow winding streets, a couple of tavernas, a shop which sold almost everything that a sane person could possibly want, and there was a virtually empty beach occupied by occasional day trippers, and a strange naked Norwegian hermit who slept under a makeshift awning of woven reeds, with a begging bowl into which a surprising number of trippers dropped coins. In the morning a boy would come with a loaf of fresh bread, some olives and cheese, and a bottle of water, and take some money out of the begging bowl in payment. At dusk the very naked and very hairy man would leave his hide and walk cautiously into the sea, and after a while walk out again, looking around furtively as he did so. Elpida, watching him from the boat, made rude remarks in Greek, which Chris and Sophie laughed at but refused to translate for Marcus. Work it out for yourself, Sophie said.

From Vathi one could take a bus to Apollonia which was the island's principal town, but was really just a collection of idyllic villages which cascaded into each other down the side of a shallow hill. There were some touristy shops and mini markets and a couple of hotels, one of which, Sophie pointed out, was called the Sofia, and a handful of cafes and tavernas grouped around the central square. Apollonia was charming and unspoilt and had good restaurants. Marcus suggested that they should come back the next day and take a room in the Sofia Hotel in order to have a good shower and clean up, which was not entirely possible in the cramped space on the boat, and a meal at a restaurant rather than a taverna. All agreed, including Elpida who tutted again at the shameless Brits leaping in and out of the shower, but then at last threw away her own modesty and joined them, giggling furiously whilst Chris scrubbed her with Marcus's Knights Castile and a scratchy new sponge bought in the mini market. After dinner in Apollonia, a cleaner Chris and Elpida got the last bus back to Vathi and the boat, and Marcus and Sophie spent the night together in the Spartan luxury of the hotel, making the most of its shower and flushing toilet, though the toilet paper still had to be put into a little bin.

During the days which passed on the boat Sophie took steps to restrict Marcus's new desire to take his clothes off at every opportunity and made him wear his T shirt and floppy hat when the sun was at its hottest. And when they did sunbathe she fussed over coating him with oceans of Ambre Solaire, and then allowed him to massage the oil into her own smooth skin, giggling at the effect that it had on Marcus's manhood. Sophie had long ago learned about the perils of sunburn and although she adored the sun on every inch of her skin she

took great care to protect herself from burning, so nudity, much to Elpida's relief, was usually restricted to mornings and late afternoons.

"Priest see – you go prison. You are not like," she said, wagging her finger at Sophie, "Greek prison. Not nice."

Notwithstanding Elpida's reservations, Sophie's father occasionally left Sophie and Marcus ashore on a tiny secluded and deserted beach backed by a steep and thorn encrusted escarpment which made it unapproachable by road or path. He then took the yacht further down the coast to another cove so that he could make love to Elpida in the freedom of the open air and without the marginally inhibiting presence of his daughter and her lover, who he confidently expected to do the same thing on their beach.

"Marcus," Sophie slapped the recumbent naked bottom, "get your trunks on. There's another boat."

Marcus turned over to find Sophie struggling into her bikini as fast as she could. Some considerable distance out to sea a very large motor yacht was dropping anchor. He grabbed his trunks and pulled them on, then sat up and looked at the motor yacht which seemed so large that it almost blotted out the skyline.

"Bloody hell," he said, "that's big."

"Benetti," said Sophie, "or something like that. How vulgar. Well over a hundred feet. Too big to get in close. Serious money. Greek flag. Must be rich Greeks. Very rich Greeks."

They watched a flurry of activity on the deck of the huge motor yacht. A launch was craned over the side on a davit and lowered into the water. It then made its way slowly towards the other end of the small beach where it disembarked two crewmen in white uniforms, a stocky young man, with a spoilt but authoritative face, dark skinned with curly dark hair and a mane of black body hair extending across his shoulders and in a thick line down his back to the cleft of his buttocks where it spread out into a triangle. The girl was skinny and leggy, wearing a black one piece swimsuit with a triangular halter top which left her back and midriff bare, cut high on her thighs and thonged at the back so that her tiny bottom was also virtually bare. It was the next best thing to wearing nothing. The illusion of extreme sophistication was betrayed by her pallid white skin which meant that she had only just arrived in Greece from a colder world. Her face was sharp and fashionable, framed by long dark auburn hair. She looked vaguely familiar to Sophie, the paradigm of the anonymous girls whose immaculate faces appear on cans of hair spray, or adverts for exotic perfumes in magazines like *Cosmopolitan*. The crewmen unloaded two sets of flippers, two snorkels and masks, two harpoon guns, a picnic rug, a parasol, a large blue plastic coolbox, two large towels and a life jacket. The young man looked disapprovingly at Sophie and Marcus and said something to the older of the two crewmen. He plodded across the beach and stood in front of Marcus who sat up and looked back quizzically at the dark skinned, goatee bearded face.

“Speak English?” he said to Marcus in a heavily accented voice. Marcus nodded. “My boss wishes know how you here. No road here. You are from some boat, yes?” Marcus nodded again. The insignia on the man's white T shirt said *Trinitas III,* which Marcus assumed to be the name of the motor boat. “Your boat come back soon?” Marcus shook his head.

“My employer offers take you next beach until leave. Maybe one hour. You go?”

“No thanks,” Marcus replied, knowing that the next beach was uncomfortable shingle, “we like it here.”

“Είστέ ελληνική?” the crewman looked questioningly at Sophie. The red skinned Marcus was obviously not Greek, but the girl?

“Ναι είμαι.” Sophie replied affirmatively.

“Εντάξει. Είναι ανόητος. Τον αγνοήστε,” The crewman laughed. He knew that the request to move was unreasonable, but he was paid to pander to the whims of the insanely rich and did not argue. He walked slowly back to the landing party and shook his head. The boss shrugged dismissively, then turned and looked balefully at Sophie and Marcus. Sophie smiled and gave him a little wave. The man ignored her and barked in Greek at the crewmen who climbed back into the launch and returned at speed to the anchored yacht.

“Oooh,” Sophie whispered, “that wasn't very nice. We've spoilt his day.”

“What did he say?”

“He told them to fuck off, or words to that effect. In Greek of course. The crewman told me he was an idiot.”

Sophie put her sunglasses on, propped herself up on her elbow and watched the newcomers unroll the picnic rug. Fragments of conversation in broken English wafted over to them.

“The girl isn't Greek,” Sophie said, “but not English either. Maybe German. They're talking in English because it's the only language they have in common. Her English is excellent. He's not so good.”

“We shouldn't eavesdrop on other people's conversations.” Marcus replied, but like Sophie he was fascinated by the relationship which was about to unravel at the other end of the beach. The man stood looking out to sea at the distant motor yacht, then he bent down and picked up a set of flippers and a snorkel and handed them to the girl, who shook her head. Instead she put on the life jacket and prepared to enter the water. She looked very frightened. The man put on the flippers and snorkel, picked up one of the harpoon guns and walked beside her into the sea. Sophie noted a large diver's knife ostentatiously strapped to his right calf. The beach shelved rapidly so that the girl was quickly and unexpectedly out of her depth. Sophie saw her body tense up and she gave a little anxious giggly shriek as her feet lost contact with the sand and the life jacket began to support her.

“Christos,” she cried, “hilfe, hilfe, help me!!” The voice was urgent and frightened.

“She's desperate to please him,” Sophie continue, *sotto voce,* “but she can't swim, and she's very frightened. And she didn't tell him that she can't swim. And he was looking forward to an afternoon snorkelling with her, and probably he was going to shag her.... if we hadn't been here.”

“What about the people on the boat,”Marcus said, “surely they can see what's happening on the beach?”

“I doubt if he cares. The crew don't exist. They are servants, not people. Aristotle Onassis was forever being found in *flagrante* with women. He didn't care either. It was good for his macho image. This is going to end in tears. You'll see.”

The girl had turned onto her front and was trying to make swimming motions, but small waves lapped into her face causing her to grimace with fear. She pulled herself upright again, finding the bottom with her feet, and panting in distress. Christos looked at her contemptuously, launched himself into the next wave and flippered powerfully out to sea, leaving the girl looking even more frightened and confused. She watched the retreating body, then looked back towards the beach at Marcus and Sophie as though seeking reassurance that she was not being left to drown.

“Come on,” said Sophie, “let's go in and keep her company.” Marcus followed her into the water and they swam for a little while, then allowed themselves to float casually closer to the girl. She kept lifting her feet from the bottom, but as soon as the life jacket took her weight she panicked and put her feet down again. Sophie was moving closer, intending to talk to the girl and to try to help her overcome her fear, but before she could get near enough to speak Christos reappeared, surging out from under the water between Sophie and the girl like a malevolent shark. The expression on his sulky spoilt face left Sophie in no doubt that she was not welcome. He walked out of the sea, followed by the disconsolate girl. Sophie and Marcus swam up and down the beach for a while, then returned to their own rug and resumed their covert observation.

Christos and the girl reclined on the rug. The coolbox was opened and food wrapped in silver foil was taken out, which they ate in silence. A bottle of wine appeared, and wine glasses. When they had finished eating Christos lay back on the rug with his arms behind his head. After a long delay the girl knelt hesitantly over him and brushed her long hair over his face and chest. She tried to kiss him, but he ignored her. She rubbed herself along his chest and kissed his nipples and throat and ran her tongue round his unresponsive lips. There was no reaction. She sat up and looked hesitantly down the beach at Sophie and Marcus. Sophie put her hand behind her back and undid her bikini top. The girl looked away, thought for a few minutes, and then undid the halter of her minimal one piece swimming costume and rolled down the top. She had a model's figure, slender as a lathe, with pubescent breasts which she clearly did not know how to use. A variety of benign thoughts went through Sophie's mind. She looked at Marcus, who was also watching the pantomime at the other end

of the beach, and, to Marcus's intense relief, decided not to give the girl any more lessons by example. The girl, however, had succeeded in arousing the sulking Christos who rolled over abruptly, pulled the diver's knife from its sheath, cut away the bottom of her swimming costume, wrenched it off, pulled his erect dick out of his shorts, pushed the girl onto her back and screwed her vigorously and painfully for a couple of minutes. Then it was all over. He stood up, pulled his shorts back around his waist, glowered defiantly at Marcus and Sophie, made a priapic gesture with his right arm, then grabbed the remains of the girl's costume, wrapped it in a big stone and hurled it out into the sea. The startled girl ran into the water after it, then floundered, fell over, screamed and crawled back spluttering through the surf on all fours. Christos was laughing at her contemptuously. She was ridiculous in his eyes and, what was worse, she had made him look foolish in the presence of the others on the beach. He did not entertain girls who were anything less than perfect. There was a brief hysterical spat in a mutually incomprehensible duel of Greek and German, then she sat cross legged on the beach with her back to her indifferent companion who reclined, unconcerned, with his hands clasped behind his head and an authentic New York Yankees baseball cap pulled over his eyes.

Silence lapped once more across the stillness of the idyllic beach. Sophie kicked off her bikini bottom, rolled over onto her stomach, rested her head on her folded arms and went to sleep. Marcus, still in his trunks, lay on his back and watched a lone bird, a hawk of some kind, which was circling over the edge of the beach, targeting something in the thick, thorny maquis which covered the steep escarpment behind them. Occasionally he looked out to sea, but the skyline was dominated by the vast motor yacht. There was little sign of activity on it, though there was occasionally movement on the bridge where the bearded crewman who had spoken to them appeared from time to time to check on the couple on the beach. Sunlight flashed on the lenses of his binoculars which occasionally strayed from the rich idiot and his pallid German plaything to the lithe naked brownness of the Greek girl and her English companion. Marcus wondered whether it was privately owned by the young man on the beach, or his family, or whether it had been chartered. He sat up and looked tenderly at the half awake Sophie. He still could not believe how lucky he was to be loved by such a woman. He stroked his hand gently down Sophie's naked back. She rolled over and smiled up at him through dreamy half closed eyes.

“I'm too hot,” she said, “let's go for a swim. Ever made love in the sea? I never have. Let's try it. Lose your trunks,” Marcus obeyed and they waded into the sea, covertly watched by the envious Christos. Afterwards they swam for a while, then floated languorously on their backs.

At the other end of the beach Christos was standing up, holding a towel between both his hands and waving it above his head at the motor yacht. Almost immediately the yacht erupted into activity. The launch was manned and despatched towards the beach. The girl, suddenly very conscious of her

nakedness in the presence of the approaching crewmen, reached for the other towel and wrapped it around herself, loosely knotting it across her chest to cover her shame. The launch approached the beach cautiously. There was now a little onshore wind and rising surf. A kedge anchor was dropped astern and the launch edged its bow gently onto the beach. Christos spoke briefly in Greek to the two crewmen who responded with coarse laughter. One of them jumped out and held the stem of the boat whilst the other gathered up all of the bits and pieces which had been brought to the failed picnic and threw them unceremoniously into the launch. Then all three men were back in the launch which was pulled quickly away from the beach with the kedge anchor before the girl realised what was happening. She ran after it, clutching her towel to herself with one hand and reaching out for the boat with the other. As she stumbled into the deeper water the launch briefly halted its retreat from the beach. Christos leaned over and held out his hand to the girl, smiling encouragingly at her. The girl let go of the towel and reached up towards her erstwhile lover who reached down to her, grabbed the towel and whipped it away. She yelped with surprise and embarrassment and the yelp modulated into a cry of fear as she realised that she was almost out of her depth. Christos and the younger crewman were laughing at her. The older, bearded, man looked annoyed but resumed the hauling in of the kedge and when it was aboard Christos took the wheel and engaged the clutch. The launch continued astern until it had enough sea room to turn, then Christos swung the wheel and opened the throttle. The sudden wake from the accelerating boat knocked the girl backwards off her feet. She screamed as her head went under the water but before she had time to drown the wash had thrown her back into the shallows and once again she crawled out of the surf on all fours, salt tears washed away by salt spray.

"Bloody hell," Marcus exclaimed, "did you see that? Bloody hell, he's left her behind. God's teeth. Left her behind on a deserted beach with no clothes. Poor kid."

"No exactly deserted," Sophie replied, "what a bastard. She must be scared out of her wits."

The girl was indeed scared out her wits. She started running backwards and forwards up and down her end of the beach like a lost child, waving her arms and screaming. Marcus and Sophie watched the launch reach the motor yacht. Christos loped up the boarding steps, followed by the crew, after they had attached the slings from the davit to the strong points on the launch. Then the launch was winched back into its cradle. The anchor chain rattled up and the *Trinitas III* gathered way. The girl stood frozen on the edge of the beach her arms stretched outwards and downwards, her mouth open in shocked disbelief, her hands, palms open, facing out to the sea in a gesture which was part supplication and part astonished despair. As the *Trinitas III* disappeared round the headland she sank slowly onto her knees and began to sob.

Sophie swam rapidly down the beach and ran out of the water towards the stricken girl. Marcus, who was not such a strong swimmer made for their end of the beach to recover his trunks, then changed his mind and ran down the sand to Sophie and the girl.

"Helfen Sie mir, helfen Sie mir. Er hat mich gelassen. Er ist ein Monster, ein Teufel, ein Unhold," the girl wailed, "Ich wünsche meine Mutter. Ich möchte nach Hause gehen. Ich werde erschrecken." The girl clutched Sophie's arm and looked at her imploringly, "Sprechen sie Deutsches?" she sobbed.

"Kein sind, wir englisch," Sophie replied with the little German that she knew. The girl sighed and began to sob again.

"English," she murmured, "English people are good people. Kind people. I speak well English. What shall I do? Please to help me."

Sophie put her arms round the girl and hugged her. She really was very young and very beautiful in a glossy model way, with fine features and striking emerald green eyes, and the body of pubescent child. The girl looked up at Marcus who was now kneeling down beside them. She tried to bury herself in Sophie's breasts, then realised that it was pointless and that she had nothing to hide that Marcus had not already seen.

"What is your name?" Sophie asked, when the girl's sobs had died away.

"I am Sonja," she said, "I am from Cologne. I am a model." She paused, then, "no I am not Sonja. Sonja is the name I want to be. I am named Angela Ellmers." She spoke excellent English with that precise diction typical of educated Germans who consider it a matter of national pride to speak English better than the English.

"Okay. Sonja is a nice name. We'll call you Sonja, 'cos that is who you want to be. I'm Sophie. This is Marcus. How old are you Sonja?"

"I am eighteen, just eighteen. No. I am seventeen years. Nearly eighteen. Eighteen in August." Sophie did a quick calculation. Sonja had just had her seventeenth birthday. "What shall I do. He has left me with nothing. No clothes. I am naked. Everything is on the ship. My passport. He has my passport. And my money. How shall I get home? Mein Gott. Ich bin verloren. Wissen sie nicht wo ich bin."

Sophie shook her head, not understanding the German, then the image of Sonja's question flashed unexpectedly into her mind. Sophie's brow wrinkled slightly. She leaned forward and cupped one side of Sonja's face with her hand. Sonja turned her face into the open hand and kissed it in gratitude. Sophie smiled at her. The girl was sensitive, but she didn't know it. Maybe Mo was right. Maybe their gift was more common than they wanted to believe. It was, after all, so much more exciting to think of oneself as something special.

"This is the island of Sifnos," Sophie said soothingly, "Don't be frightened. We can look after you and take you back to the port at Kamares for a ferry back to Athens. I don't know what else we can do. My father might know," she paused to think of a suitable stratagem, "our boat should come in a couple of

hours or so. And we can find you some clothes and give you money. But I don't know how to get your passport back. And you can't leave Greece without it."

"Police?" said Marcus helpfully.

"Maybe. Come and sit with us. We have some food, and some wine. And a towel if you want to cover up."

Sonja stood up and walked with them to the other end of the beach, holding Sophie's hand very tightly, like the lost child that she was. Sophie handed her a towel. She looked at it, and then at Marcus, and then back to Sophie.

"I will be like you," she said, "until your boat is coming. You are very kind." She sat down beside them. Sophie offered her some of the salad, feta, and olive bread they had brought with them, and then a swig from a bottle of Boutari which they passed round because Sophie had forgotten to bring any glasses.

"I don't think that we have any nasty diseases," Sophie said, confidently handing the bottle back to Sonja, after she and Marcus had taken their turn at it, "so, you should be okay."

Sonja began to relax a little. It was nice sitting on the beach with these kind people. She forgot that nobody was wearing a stitch of clothing. It seemed perfectly natural. Well, she was German after all. She began to talk, slowly at first, then chattering excitedly. She had been spotted by a scout in a local modelling competition and offered the chance go to swinging London on a photo shoot for a German fashion magazine. She had met the charming and generous Christos at a fashion party in Hampstead, fallen head over heels in what she thought was love. Lost her virginity on a waterbed in a Hyde Park Penthouse. Accompanied her demon lover to Athens. First Class on Olympic Airways. And thence, via the family mansion on Aegina, to the family yacht and the beach on Sifnos, where she had omitted to tell him that she could not swim until it was too late to escape. She was too young to know any better.

"Why did he do this to me?" she asked, still astonished at her first encounter with malice in a world which she had childishly trusted to be unfailingly good, "how could he be so cruel? How shameful it is. To leave me here with nothing. Not even clothes. Suppose that you had not been here. What should I have done?" She began to cry again.

"I think," Sophie said, "that you do not know Greek men, especially men like that. You would be just a decoration for him. Foreign girls are fair game. He would never dare to treat a Greek girl like that. And you let him down. You didn't tell him you couldn't swim. So you spoilt his afternoon outing. He expects his women to be perfect pieces of jewellery. It might not have mattered if we had not been here. But you made him look foolish in the presence of strangers. He is a spoilt child and you were just this week's toy. And when he tires of his toys he throws them out of his pram. You are well rid of him. Oh....the demon returns."

Sophie pointed. The *Trinitas III* had reappeared. They watched the fast launch curl away from the side of the motor yacht and roar towards the beach. Sophie handed Sonja a towel but remained defiantly naked herself.

"Don't go back," she said, "trust me. Don't go back."

"But...my passport? My things?," Sonja replied.

There was, however, no question of going back. The launch cruised rapidly along the shore, throttled back as it came abeam of the *déjeunee sur la plage*, and halted just long enough for a crewman to hurl a suitcase into the surf. They ogled Sophie who shouted obscenities at them in Greek. Then it roared away. Marcus leapt up, ran into the surf and retrieved the suitcase before it had time to sink. After recovering the launch the *Trinitas III* moved away for good. Sonja opened the soggy suitcase and rummaged around until she found the leather wallet which contained her passport and her money. The bearded crewman on the *Trinitas* had taken pity on her and stuffed all her meagre belongings into the case. She breathed a sigh of relief. The clothes were soaked, but she found another swimsuit which she took out but did not put on. She smiled sheepishly at Sophie.

"I like to be like you," she repeated. They sat quietly on the beach and talked. Sophie and Marcus learned all about her father who was a civil servant and her mother who was a teacher, and her school, and how she had always wanted to be a model, but her parents wanted her to go to university and how sheltered her life had been until she had gone to London and then to Greece, and how brown Sophie was, and how lovely her body was, and how she wished she could be brown and have breasts like Sophie. Eventually, just before dusk, the *Elpida* returned, with Sophie's father looking slightly the worse for wear and garrulously apologetic for being later than expected, and Elpida confiding in Greek to Sophie that her father was a very virile man and very good for his age. Chris Davenport accepted Sonja with his customary good grace, long learned from having to cope with the waifs and strays that Sophie had habitually brought home for succour since she had been a child. So they took her on board and the *Elpida* stayed the night at anchor in the little bay. They sat in the cockpit drinking wine long into the balmy velvet darkness and Chris made Sonja laugh until she cried with his silly jokes and coarse wardroom stories. When they eventually turned in Sonja slept on the dinette berth in the cosy saloon, which smelled of wood and varnish and lamp oil and occasional acrid wafts of diesel, so different to the gold tapped ensuite stateroom in the gaudy *Trinitas III.* She was so grateful to these kind people, and especially to the dark Aphrodite who had rescued her with such gentleness. Sonja would always remember them, but she would also always remember Christos Malakakis and she would harden her heart and ruthlessly expedite Sophie's advice never to let herself be used by rich men but to wait instead for the man who would love her for herself. Sonja's seductive beauty would condemn her to wait for a very long time.

“Marcus,” Sophie said dreamily, as they lay in each other's arms in their forecastle berth, “when you're very rich, you won't ever behave like that will you?”

“I'm never going to be that rich,” Marcus replied.

“Oh yes you are,” said Sophie, “richer by far. Drew will see to that. But it doesn't matter because we're already the richest people in the world, because we have each other.”

The next day the *Elpida* motored round the coast of Sifnos to Kamares where Sonja caught the *Milos Express* back to Piraeus, but not before she had exchanged addresses with her rescuers and promised to keep in touch with them. As so often happens in such tangential relationships contact drained away. From long letters, to shorter letters, to postcards from Bora Bora or Moustique, to Christmas cards, and eventually to nothing. But Sophie never forgot Sonja, not least because, for the next ten years, Sonja's elegant green eyed, auburn crowned face stared out coolly from the pages of every glossy fashion magazine, and the tabloids faithfully chronicled her marriages to a succession of rich young men who she cynically seduced, married, and then financially disembowelled, until, years later, she found the gentle man who did not love her for her money or her looks. Then she remembered the beautiful dark haired English lady and her quiet and gentle lover who had been so kind to her so long ago.

What was left of the holiday continued in a blur of sex and sea and sailing and at the end of it Chris Davenport knew Marcus extremely well, and totally approved of Sophie's choice. Sophie was wise beyond her years. Marcus was not the most exciting or the bravest man in the world. But he was a good man, and kind, and he loved Sophie and all of Sophie's many eccentricities. And that was all that mattered. About a week before they were due to return to Britain Marcus was woken very early in the morning by Sophie gripping his arm tightly and sobbing against his chest; not her regular tears of joy, for which her father should have named her Niobe, but real shuddering face crunching sobs of grief and anguish.

“Sophie,” he said, “Sophie, darling, sweetheart. What’s the matter?”

“I had a nightmare,” she sobbed, “the gypsy. Something terrible has happened. Marcus, hold me very tight. Hold me very tight. I’m falling. It’s dark. I can hear the darkness. There’s no light at the end. Marcus. We have to go back to St Dynion’s. Now.”

Mortal Flesh

James Sinclair stared in disbelief at the screaming front page of today's *Guardian*. Eleven Israeli athletes shot dead, massacred by Palestinian terrorists at the Olympic games in Munich. Unbelievable. At the Olympics of all places, dedicated to peace between nations. Photos of the lost young people stared back at him. Young people. He had devoted his life to young people just like these. Not athletes, of course, but young minds equally full of hope and idealism. He'd cared for them, and nurtured them, as best he could, trying to help them to discover themselves. All he ever wanted was for them to have long, fulfilling and, above all, happy lives. He shuddered. Humanity had already forgotten the lessons of the Second World War and was resuming its inexorable descent into terminal barbarism. Yet the people who had done this appalling deed were young people too. How could they care so little for life? How could they so easily take what they could never give back? What was so important that it could justify this bestiality? But James was a professional historian. He knew only too well how little provocation was needed to justify the extermination of millions. An imperceptible twist in the DNA, an accident of ancient history, manic devotion to arcane interpretations of the babble of silent Gods, the charismatic maniac in the village next door; that was all that was needed to release the darkness in the soul and clang closed the gas tight doors on the death of races.

Rain lashed at his office window. He wondered what had happened to Marcus who had been away now for more than a month. He had heard nothing from him since he had left for Cambridge for his doctoral *viva* except for a post card of the Tower of the Winds in Athens, with a brief note from Marcus on the back saying that the *viva* had been okay and Greece was fabulous. Around the edge of the card were scrawled kisses and smiley faces from Sophie. He wondered where they were now. Marcus's absence had already been noted by the newly arrived and extremely unpleasant professor of History, though in truth he was not required to be on site for another two weeks, before term started in October. James missed Marcus. It was not that Marcus was particularly interesting, in fact he was rather dull, but he was kind and reliable and would listen, and, in spite of himself, he seemed to attract interesting people around him, not least Drew Parkin and his harem of nubile women, though James no longer expected sexual satisfaction from that source. Marcus had bagged Sophie, who was the best of them, he didn't much care for the ice maiden Caroline, and the other two, whoever they were, had graduated and left, so he was not sure what benefit he might derive from inviting himself into Parkin's group other than Big Mo, who did have attractions, albeit of a rather gross sort. Marcus had even said something about Parkin possibly leaving St Dynion's without completing his degree, so his chances of getting his hands on a woman

by that route appeared to have dried up and no other opportunity had so far presented itself.

James had also given up trying to work out how he could manoeuvre Seaton into his wife's bed. It was a stupid idea anyway, born out of rage and a desire for revenge in pursuit of a bad plot line. There was no obvious sign that Seaton had any interest in Sandra, not that he saw either of them very often. He tried to get out of his house before Sandra got up, and return after she had gone to bed, which meant he spent a lot of time in his office, and he'd given up going to the Belle Vue because he didn't want a confrontation with Seaton himself. It would be nice to be in Greece now, sitting in a café in Athens sipping an ouzo. Or better still, on an island. Bugger the Colonels. Greece was Greece. He imagined Marcus and Sophie on their little boat, bobbing along and holding hands into the sunset. Lucky Marcus. Futile dreams. No point in having a holiday in Greece on his own.

Because he'd been spending so much time in his office James had actually shifted rather a lot of research, and he'd also had time to work on his latest novel, which he was more confident about publishing. It was about universities of course, one should write about what one knows about his agent had once said, and there was enough incendiary malice at St Dynion's to ignite a bonfire of calamities, not to mention the universal obsession with sex, which somehow continued to pass him by. James had no ambition to be a great literary figure, but he would like to make himself independent of his meagre university salary so he could put two fingers up to the truly appalling Professor Kevin Rawlings, should the need arise. He got out of his chair and crossed to his filing cabinet, which was locked. He felt in his pocket for the key then realised that he had changed his jacket. The key was in the jacket he had left at home. Some home. He debated whether or not to go and get it. If he wanted to complete the task he had set for himself for this afternoon he would need to get into the filing cabinet. He would go home and get the key. Apart from anything else it would waste an hour of time which he did not feel like filling at his desk. The Daughters of Night, however, had other plans for James Sinclair. Peripeteia was once again waiting to ambush him in the rain.

James and Sandra had lived in marital strife in a detached dormer bungalow at the end of a soulless *cul de sac* on a jerry built estate in Porth Aethwy. As he turned the corner he saw a familiar white Volkswagen Variant parked in his driveway. *Cheeky sod* he thought. Plotting was not going to be necessary. Drwg Seaton was already there. He backed his Maxi out of the *cul de sac* and parked in front of the row of shops, further down the main road into the estate. Then he went quietly on foot, pulling up his anorak hood against the torrential wind driven rain, until he reached the shelter of his house and could let himself in by the back door. He tiptoed through the unkempt kitchen and stood at the bottom of the stairs. The shredded remains of a cheap cotton dress, black bra and black knickers were scattered up the staircase. Seaton obviously liked to peel his fruit

on the run. James went back into the sitting room and rummaged around quietly in the drawers of a Welsh dresser until he found the family Instamatic camera with its built in flash gun. Thus armed against adversity he crept as silently as he could up the staircase and stood outside his wife's bedroom door. Muffled thumping noises and heavy breathing filtered through the cheap varnished fibreboard. James looked at his watch. It was twenty to eleven in the morning. Seaton was an early riser where sex was concerned. He switched on the Instamatic and waited for the flash to indicate ready, then put it into his most accessible pocket, pressed gently on the door handle and sidled quietly into the room.

Sandra was lying naked on the bed, on her back, trussed up like a Christmas turkey. Her hands were tied behind her with a pink silk dressing gown belt, looped round her crossed ankles and hog tied to her wrists, pulling her feet under her bottom and forcing her legs and knees apart so that everything was totally accessible to Seaton's investigating tongue. Sandra was making moaning gurgling noises through the chiffon scarf stuffed into her mouth. She could see James standing behind the kneeling Seaton and was trying ineffectually to attract the Drwg's attention. Seaton, however, was intent on giving himself a good time, unaware that Sandra's husband was standing behind him. Sandra, totally immobilised, except for her neck, was nodding furiously and trying to scream through the gag. Eventually Seaton got the message, turned round, saw James and froze for an instant. This was the first time he had actually been interrupted *in flagrante* by a husband. James, for his part, had suffered a Modesty Blaise type stinger. The rumours about Seaton's sexual endowment had been fully justified. James, like most men, had never seen another man's full erection in the flesh, until now. Drwg Seaton was huge, or so it seemed to James, who had assumed that his own dick was normal, and was completely overawed by the creature in front of him, which looked for all the world like the priapic Satyr on the postcard which Sophie had sent to Marcus from Athens, now coyly displayed on Marcus's bookcase. The rest of the naked Seaton was equally Satyric. He was slightly shorter in height than James but was brawny in frame, broad chest, muscular arms and legs and plump rounded bottom. And that enormous cock couched in a thicket of dense brown pubic hair which was part of a more extensive forest of hair which covered nearly all of his body, from just below his throat to just above his ankles. He looked for all the world like a shrunken, lizard headed, gorilla. Seaton stared malevolently at James, then grinned at him engagingly. Seaton had always enjoyed threesomes of any combination, and never missed an opportunity, especially if it might defuse an awkward situation.

"Wanna join in boyo?" he said amiably, snake tongue flicking round his lips, "get your kit off. You can have her when I've finished."

"You're hurting her," James shouted, "let her go."

Seaton leant over and removed Sandra's gag.

"Fuck off you wanker," Sandra yelled, "if you'd done it to me like this we might still be together. This is the best bloody shag I've ever had. No thanks to you. You useless dickless wanker."

"See," said Seaton, sticking the gag firmly back into Sandra's mouth, "she likes it like this. It's your own fault. She's a good shag, you wife. Your problem is you don't know how to please a lady. Now either get your kit off and wait, or go off and wank somewhere while I fuck your wife."

"You bloody shit," James shouted, incandescent with rage and forgetting about the camera, "you bastard. Do you think you can just go around wrecking people's lives and not give a shit. You bastard."

He lunged at Seaton, but Seaton was a veteran of many student demos, including the Grosvenor Square riots in 1968 and the much more serious rioting in the Derry Bogside in 1969, where he had stood shoulder to shoulder with the oppressed of Ireland and hurled petrol bombs and bricks at the police. Violence came to him as naturally as breathing and he loved it almost as much as sex. He leapt back off the bed, evading James who fell prostrate between Sandra's trussed up legs with his face pushed nose first into her very wet fanny. Sandra made more gurgling noises as she tried to scream. James rolled backwards, recovered his balance and made another lunge at Seaton. Seaton straightened himself up, danced sideways, and hit James once in the face with his right fist. James staggered backwards and collapsed against the door with blood streaming out of the cut above his left eye. He put his hand to his eye, felt the blood, looked at it, then looked in astonishment at Seaton, who was standing over him, looking down and smiling. From floor level Seaton's tree trunk lance and its associated foliage was even more intimidating.

"Why not?" said Seaton, "nobody's stopped me yet. And you certainly won't. Now get up."

James staggered to his feet, all the fight gone out of him. Seaton was welcome to this bitch. They were welcome to each other. Seaton stood in front of James and grinned at him again with effortlessly amiable malice. James relaxed his guard for instant. Seaton grabbed him by the balls and squeezed them so hard that James screamed and doubled up with pain.

"You haven't got much have you. Now fuckin piss off. The lady doesn't want you," Seaton sneered.

James staggered cautiously out of the bedroom, his hand between his legs, never taking his eyes off Seaton, but the Drwg had already turned his back on him and was thrusting violently into Sandra whilst exposing his furry naked bottom to James in a gesture of simian derision. James staggered down the stairs, still clutching at his eye, which was already swelling and bleeding profusely. At the bottom of the stairs he stopped and tried to gather his thoughts. Seaton was unbelievable, but he wasn't going to get away with it. Not this time. He took the camera out of his pocket and looked at it. The flash ready light was still glowing and the camera did not appear to be damaged. He bit on the bullet,

opened the front door and then slammed it shut as loudly as he could. Then he went into the kitchen and quietly opened the back door, waited for quite a while until the thumping and banging coming through the thin ceiling from the bedroom above became more frenzied, then back up the stairs with utmost stealth. He opened the bedroom door and caught Seaton at the moment of orgasm, sideways on, with Sandra's gagged head hanging over the edge of the divan. It could not have been better framed by a professional pornographer. The flash went off. Seaton gave a scream of rage and exultation as he shot himself into Sandra, then he leapt off her, sucking a fountain of semen back out with him. James ran down the stairs faster than he had ever run in his life. Seaton was already out of the bedroom after him. James raced through the kitchen and out of the open kitchen door, then cowered out of sight against the outside wall beside it. The enraged, naked, and still engorged man bounded after him through the open door and onto the rain sodden back lawn before he could stop himself, then slipped on the wet grass and crashed into the flimsy trellis at the edge of the lawn, cursing violently in Welsh as he went. James stepped smartly back into the house, slammed the back door shut, turned the key in the mortise lock and surveyed Seaton's plight through the small window panes in the door. Torrential Welsh rain sluiced down on the prostrate Seaton but he was already on his knees and beginning to pick himself up, and before James had time to think Seaton had grabbed a terracotta planter and was running back up the small lawn with the planter poised to hurl through the back door window. James was showered with broken glass and eye to eye with Seaton's manic face thrust through the hole in the back door yelling obscenities which were unprintable either in Welsh or in English.

James yanked the key out of the mortise lock and hurled it across the kitchen, then fled to the front hallway and out into his drive, allowing the Yale latch on the front door to lock behind him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a mass of rain sodden fur hurtling round the alley at the side of the house. James put his head down and ran for his life. Seaton pursued him down the *cul de sac* and was beginning to catch up when he remembered that he was stark naked, still fully erect, and had just squelched his toes into a pile of dog shit. Once out of the *cul de sac* he would be on a major road amongst shops, cars and buses, and such pedestrians as braved the rain. Even the Drwg did not have enough bottle for that. He went back to James's house and hammered furiously on the front door, watched from behind a twitched curtain by an elderly lady who was not used to seeing naked men banging on doors on polite estates, and, after briefly debating whether she should offer the man a cup of tea, decided instead to call the police. Upstairs the hog tied Sandra had partially fallen off the bed and was hanging upside down with her shoulders on the floor, her chin pressed into her chest, trying to get the chiffon out of her throat, and was not in a position to open either door for anyone. Seaton returned to the back of the house and reached gingerly through the broken glass in the back door, feeling for the

key to the mortise lock, which James had prudently removed. He was still debating how to get back into the house without cutting himself to pieces when the police arrived.

James collapsed into the Maxi, which initially refused to start but eventually struggled into life. He drove away from Port Aethwy as quickly as traffic would allow, then parked in a lay-by on the Caernarfonshire side of the bridge and tried to catch his breath. The camera was still in his pocket, though it now occurred to him that he didn't know what he was going to do with the picture, assuming it came out. And where could he take it be processed? The prim girls at the photo counter in Boots might object to Seaton's naked bum. He could give it to his solicitor, and let him deal with it. Evidence of adultery didn't come any more graphic. Blood trickled down into his eye, temporarily blinding him. His clothes were sopping wet, and the only replacements were in his bedroom in the soiled and menacing house behind him. At first he was exultant. For once he'd got away with it and pulled one over on Seaton. He didn't care about Sandra, silly bitch. Then he began to wonder what he was going to do next. He had no friends he could call on in this state, except Marcus, who was not here anyway, and possibly the affable Tony Bishop who was also away, in London, working in the British Museum. Apart from anything else it was bloody embarrassing. It was astonishing that one could work so long in a place and still not have a friend one could turn to in a crisis. Only Marcus. And maybe Marcus's friend Mo, who he had shared a flat with for a brief time. Mo had been okay. Lesbian, but okay. Kind and sympathetic, if a bit coarse, and not at all hostile to men. It was a long shot but he could not think of any other refuge and maybe Sophie's old room was still unoccupied. He started the car again, eventually, and pulled out of the lay-by, cautiously noting the two police cars which raced past him in the other direction, towards the bridge, with their lights flashing and sirens sounding. Back up the road into St Dynion's. He parked in the street in front of the electrical shop below Mo's flat. The rain had abated a little, but continued as a thin drizzle.

James rang the door bell and heard footsteps running down the stairs. It was going to be okay. The door opened and he was faced not with the crudely amiable Mo, but with Caroline Howarth, the white witch, and this time she really was white, white as a sheet, her face blotched with tears and streaked with mascara.

"Oh God," she sobbed, "I thought it was the ambulance. You're Dr Sinclair aren't you. Marcus's friend. Come in please, come and look at Mo, please."

She turned and ran back up the stairs. James followed her, dabbing at his still bleeding eye with a damp handkerchief. He followed Caroline into Mo's bedroom. Mo was lying on the bed, naked, on her front, her head twisted slightly to one side, her eyes closed, a little dribble of white fluid congealed at the corner of her mouth where she'd been slightly sick. James knew at once that she was dead.

"She's dead," said Caroline, "she's dead isn't she? Mo..dear Mo. She's dead. I've rung for the ambulance. But she's dead, isn't she."

James felt the side of Mo's neck. The skin was cold and there was no pulse. She'd been dead for some time. Beside the bed was an empty vodka bottle and a little pile of empty codeine packets. Mo looked much smaller than he remembered her.

"Yes, I'm afraid so," James was as shocked as Caroline. Caroline threw her arms round him and clung to him, shaking with shock. James, unsure how to react, paused then clasped Caroline to his sopping wet anorak and tried to soothe her. Blood from his eyebrow brushed onto her hair.

"I just came to see her," Caroline sobbed, "I wanted to ask her if I could stay here. I have to leave my lovely flat. But she didn't answer the door bell. I've got a key, we all had keys in case we had to crash here for any reason. Mo always let us stay. I found her like this. I've only just got here."

Seaton and Sandra became irrelevant. He hugged Caroline and stroked his hand up and down her back as though soothing a baby, though he had never soothed a baby in his life. In the distance he heard a siren, then it was outside. The ambulance men looked once at Mo and shook their heads. This was a university town. They'd seen it all before. The Europeans took pills or jumped off tall buildings, the African students swallowed Paraquat. Arabs hanged themselves. The Japanese made a terrible mess. Americans killed someone else. Nothing new. God knows why they did it. What was so important about learning that people killed themselves for it?

"We have to call the police," one of them said, "just routine. You'd better sit down. They usually take a while to get anywhere."

They sat together on the shabby sofa. Caroline composed herself and stopped sobbing. James offered her his wet hanky to wipe her face, but it was soaked in blood. Caroline, less distracted, noticed his eye for the first time.

"What happened to you?"

"I got thumped by Owen Seaton. He was screwing my wife."

Caroline took his hand, her grip was warm and firm and comforting. She looked at James more closely, took the handkerchief and dabbed at the cut eyebrow.

"Would you like us to look at that?" said one of the ambulance men. He produced some cotton wool and cleaned the congealing blood away from the cut. "It's not so bad," he said, "but you're going to have a real shiner." He stuck a thin piece of elastoplast over the cotton wool to stem the blood. James began to have a seriously thumping headache.

The police seemed to take hours to arrive but eventually the doorbell rang again. Caroline went down and let them in, a uniformed constable and an older detective in plain clothes. They looked at Mo and shook their heads.

"Big girl," said one of them, "pretty face, big face, but pretty. Bonny face. Striking. Looks a bit like a fat Liz Taylor. I wonder why she did it?"

Caroline started to cry again. The detective sat down in the chair opposite them, took out his pad and asked for their names.

"Dr James Sinclair?" he repeated interrogatively, after James had given his name. James nodded, puzzled. The detective paused, looked very intently at James, then turned to Caroline.

"One thing at a time," he said, "you found the body, Miss…Howarth?" he said sympathetically. Caroline nodded, "what's her name?"

"We always called her Mo, but her real name was Margery Crawshaw."

"Do you know where she's from? Parents? Next of kin?"

"She came from Burnley, I think. She was estranged from her parents. I don't know her home address. She never talked about home. You will have to ask the university authorities. The Registry will have it." Caroline's long delicate fingers twisted at James's blood soaked handkerchief.

"We'll do that. And you Sir?"

"I came to see Mo. I seem to have got here just after Miss Howarth."

"How did you get in?"

"I have a key," said Caroline, "we were friends. I often used to stay here. I let Dr Sinclair in."

The policeman nodded. He again looked closely at James, then at the blood in Caroline's hair.

"What happened to you, Sir? Have you been in a fight?"

James nodded. "My wife's lover hit me," he said. The policeman's eyebrows raised.

"Where was this?"

"Porth Aethwy."

"We've just arrested someone in Porth Aethwy. That's why we were slow getting here. Why did you come here?" The tone of his voice had changed.

"I stayed here for a while after I first separated from my wife. A room here became vacant. Then I moved back into my own house. After the fight, this was the only place I could think to come to. Mo was very kind and generous. I thought she would look at my eye, and maybe there would still be an empty room."

"But, you were not in a relationship with Miss Crawshaw?"

"No, really, I hardly even knew her. She was a friend of a friend, who left the room vacant. That's all."

The policeman pointed at the blood in Caroline's hair. "And… how did the blood get into your hair?"

"Dr Sinclair held me because I was upset. There's nothing suspicious. I hadn't realised it was there, actually. It must have dripped onto me while I was crying."

"I don't think there's anything suspicious here either," said the detective gently, "I think Miss Crawshaw took her own life. There'll be a post mortem of course, and a Coroner's Inquest. We'll need to take statements from you, but

you can come into the station tomorrow if you wish." He turned back to James. "I am interested in your domestic, though. Do you want to lay a charge?"

James thought for a while, then shook his head. What good would it serve?

"Well, would you like to tell me who hit you, even if there is no charge. Just for the record. He has hurt you after all. It might happen again."

"The man's name is Owen Seaton," Caroline snapped, before James could decline to answer, "he's a bastard."

The policeman's face lit up like a roman candle.

"You both know this man?"

Caroline and James both nodded.

"He's a colleague," said James.

"He's a total shit," said Caroline.

"And, may I ask, are you two in a relationship?"

"No," said Caroline, "we know each other vaguely, through the university, and we have some friends in common. You know. Overlapping circles. Dr Sinclair is a friend of a friend of mine. But we hardly know each other. This is the most time I've ever spent in the company of Dr Sinclair, other than standing near to him in the pub."

"Hmmm…This wouldn't be the Dr Owen Seaton who writes letters to the local papers about police brutality would it?"

James and Caroline said nothing.

"Or the Dr Owen Seaton, sometimes known as Drwg, who stands at the back of student riots and feeds them champagne bottles full of petrol to throw at brutal coppers?" The detective's voice was sour with cynical sarcasm. He knew perfectly well who Owen Seaton was, and had a secret file on him as thick as ten short planks.

"I don't see where this is going," said James, "both of us are very upset, for different reasons. We'd like to go, if you've finished with us."

"And this wouldn't be the Dr Owen Seaton, nephew of Lord Tybach, who is the prospective Labour candidate for the Bethel constituency?"

James nodded, "I suppose so," he said quietly.

"No suppose about it," the policeman continued, "but we would very much like you to make a complaint against Dr Seaton. And it just happens that we have Dr Seaton in a cell at Porth Aethwy," he paused, considering what to do next, then decided to take the bull by the horns. "You had better prepare yourself for a shock Dr Sinclair. You have a wife called Sandra?" James nodded. "I'm sorry to break it to you in this way. There is a dead woman at your house. We believe her to be your wife. I'm afraid we are going to need to talk a little more."

"My God," James exclaimed, "Sandra. Dead. How? Dead? She was fine when I left. He was screwing her. She was enjoying it. I think. I took a photo of them doing it to show my solicitor, for the divorce. That's why there was fight. He chased me out of the house. My house." He took the camera out of his

pocket and handed it to the policeman. Caroline was holding his other hand again. Then James broke down into sobbing tears of his own and everything poured out. How he had found them, what they were doing, the fight, the photograph, the desperate escape. The policeman noted it all down.

"I have to ask you this," the detective continued, "are you sure that your wife was a willing participant? Is there any possibility that she was coerced or acting against her will?

"Raped, you mean," James replied, "no, definitely not, she was enjoying it. He took the gag out of her mouth and she was taunting me. Then he put the gag back. He was very rough with her. But she was enjoying it. I never knew....she was ...like that. You knew, didn't you. Who I was. Why didn't you say anything before?"

"I wanted to see what sort of person you are. Play my cards close, you know. Strange creatures, women. Sometimes they like it rough. Still, I don't think there is any foul play," the detective said soothingly, "it's as pointless as this, in a way," he gestured at the ambulance men who were struggling to manoeuvre Mo's large and blanket covered body down the stairs on a stretcher. "I think it's simple enough. I believe your wife was indulging in some exotic sexual practice with Dr Seaton. Bondage can be very dangerous. I've seen a case like this before. She died because she half fell off the bed upside down with her chin bent against her throat. She must have tried to inhale through her mouth, and the chiffon scarf got stuck in her throat and choked her. It would have been very quick. Probably happened while Dr Seaton was chasing you. I very much doubt if we could charge Dr Seaton with anything other than public nudity, and that's not likely to get to court. Dr Seaton has friends in very high places, if you know what I mean. If you were to make a complaint of grievous bodily harm against him we might stand more chance. But the most he's likely to get is being bound over to keep the peace. So probably not worth the aggro. I'd like to keep the film though. You won't be needing the photo now, will you." He opened the camera, extracted the Instamatic cartridge, put it into his pocket and handed the empty camera back to James before he had time to protest.

"Does this mean we can go?" James asked, now in cold shock. Caroline was still holding his hand, and looking at him with a face etched with horror.

"For the time being. We'd like you both to come to the station to make statements about Miss Crawshaw, and you, Dr Sinclair, we'd like you to make a formal statement about what happened at your house this morning and we'll need you to identify the body of your wife. What you have told me tallies with Dr Seaton's account, and also with the lady who rang us, who saw you arrive, and saw you leave the house pursued by Dr Seaton. So for the time being you can go. I think you are both in shock and you need time to recover. There will definitely be a coroner's inquest for Mrs Sinclair, and probably for Miss Crawshaw. The coroner will get in touch with you about that." He paused, "we

will need to stay here for a while. And we'll need to talk to the landlord. I assume it's Elwyn in the shop downstairs. The locks need to be changed."

Caroline nodded.

"Okay, you can go."

Caroline and James stood up and made their way down the echoing staircase. At the bottom Caroline turned to James.

"I have nowhere to go," she said, starting to sob again, "this is a nightmare. Mo dead. Your wife dead. I've been chucked out of my flat by the vicar's wife because…. My God….what are we going to do? I wish Marcus and Sophie were here. My whole life's falling apart."

"I don't know," said James, "I really don't know. You could come back to my house. But I don't want to go back there. I suppose they've taken her away. To the mortuary or something. Oh my God. Poor Sandra. We weren't happy, but she didn't deserve to be dead. Nobody deserves to be dead. Seaton is like a plague. He leaves nothing but death and destruction behind him and he bloody well gets away with it."

"What about Penhesgyn," said Caroline, "Penhesgyn, there are always rooms at Penhesgyn. Drew and Jaz are away too …oh …. I wish Marcus and Sophie were here. We could hold each other. I need them so much. Penhesgyn. There's a research student who stays during the vac. A real hippy, not pseuds like us. He looks after it for Drew. He knows me. He'd let us in."

"I have to say, Caroline," James observed, "that I find it very hard to think of you as even a pseudo hippy."

Caroline took a tiny lace handkerchief out of the pocket of her immaculate long Aquascutum rain coat and dabbed at her eyes. "Well, you hardly know me, so don't be fooled by appearances. Things are rarely what they seem. I went through my hippy phase as a teenager and I never much liked Kaftans. I'm too vain. They do nothing for my figure. These days being a hippy is a state of mind. The true hippy ideal died with Sharon Tate. No more beads and Kaftans and peace and love. All that's left is sex, narcissism and cod theology. We all like the sex and Drew Parkin is obsessed with the cod theology, which I go along with just to humour him, but real hippies still wear flowers in their hearts, if not in their hair, and the only one of us who wears flowers in her heart is Sophie. Dearest Sophie. And Mo. Mo, who was once a proper hippy."

Caroline started to cry again. Without thinking James put his arm around her and she leant her face gratefully onto his shoulder and sobbed silently into it, ice melting into scalding tears.

There was a slight noise at the top of the stairs. The two policemen were standing on the landing, listening to the conversation in the hall.

"Not gone yet?" the constable said.

"We have nowhere to go to," said Caroline, looking up, startled, "I came here hoping to stay with Mo. So did Dr Sinclair, it seems. But we can't stay

here, and we can't go to his house. We're going to try a mutual friend who has rooms to let."

"At Penhesgyn Hall?" said the detective, coming down the stairs. His face was less sympathetic than it had been earlier but Caroline sensed envy rather than suspicion.

Caroline looked surprised, "you know Penhesgyn?"

"Plas Puteindra more like. Of course. We're the police. We know everything. Hippies at Penhesgyn. Not real ones though. As you said, pseuds, just playing at being hippies. Nice people. Drew Parkin and his friends. They have a lot of fun. If you know what I mean. Harmless fun," he added with emphasis. "We've checked it out a couple of times. They're as clean as a cat's arse. Pardon Miss Howarth. No drugs, no booze, not to excess anyway, but lots of sex. Lots and lots of shagging. Wish I could live like that. No inhibitions. You university people are a mystery to me. You go at it like rabbits. I have to go home to my wife." The detective paused to light a cigarette. "Sorry, Dr Sinclair, that was a bit tactless. And what about those parties. What do they call them? Kong Parties. The ones with the fellas in gorilla suits with their stiffies sticking out. And those girls, tied onto those dangling ropes and letting the gorillas screw them. Amazing! Just like in King Kong. I suppose that's why they call them Kong Parties. Hadn't thought of that...."

"Stop it," screamed Caroline, stamping her foot, "stop it, stop it."

"What about you Miss Howarth, do you go to those parties?"

"How do you know," Caroline said sullenly, "how do you know about Drew's parties?"

"I went there under cover once. Just to see if any drugs were being traded. I know, I know. Personal invitation only. Mr Parkin is very careful, and very honest. Real gentleman, for an American. But we got in anyway. Easy really. Hippies. So trusting. They leave windows open. Big risk, with all the villains around these days. And once we were in we just took our duds off, put on our masks, and mingled. Dark inside you see, and people wearing masks. One naked body looks much like another by candlelight. You go by feel really, don't you, if you know what I mean. I got the impression that a lot of the people there didn't know each other anyway. Maybe didn't want to know each other. I had a WPC with me, to check out the women. Real cracker. She really got stuck in. Bloody hell. She had to leave the force in the end because of it. The blokes in the locker room wouldn't leave her alone once they found out what she'd been doing. Sad really, she was a nice girl and a good copper. She's working in Woolworths now. That's the class system for you. One law for the educated rich and another for the rest of us. We never found any drugs though. And no other laws were being broken. If they want to cavort around in the nude in private and shag each other rotten good luck to them. Wish I could live like that. Did you ever go to those parties Miss Howarth?"

Caroline was shrieking hysterically and beginning to hyperventilate. The detective slapped her face. Caroline snapped back into cold composure.

"Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, I went to them. We all went to them."

"Miss Crawshaw went to them too?"

"Yes, yes, yes. Miss Crawshaw went too. Now please let us go. We didn't ever do anything wrong. It was just sex, for fun, and exercise, like going to the gym, and because we believed in something."

"What about you, Dr Sinclair, did you go?"

James shook his head vehemently, but held on to Caroline who was trembling uncontrollably. He could not believe what he was hearing. The rumours about Drew Parkin were true as well.

"Do you think Miss Crashaw's death had anything to do with these parties?"

"I don't know," Caroline looked at the ground and shuffled her feet.

"Perhaps she was ashamed of herself," said the detective, "perhaps she felt guilty"

"No," Caroline snapped, "not guilty. Why should she feel guilty? She'd done nothing wrong." Caroline had forgotten about Mo's shoplifting activities. "Maybe she was lonely. Just…lonely…and we didn't see it in her. She was older than us. We always went to her when we felt down, and she always comforted us and wiped our little bottoms and sent us away happy. We never asked her if she was happy with her life. With us. We of all people, we shouldn't have had to ask. We should have seen it in her soul."

"What do you mean?"

"Forget it," said Caroline, "I can't explain it to you. You'd never understand." She burst into tears again. The detective relented and gestured to them to leave.

James's drenched Maxi finally and definitively refused to start. He got into Caroline's red Mini Cooper and was driven in tear soaked silence to the mythical Penhesgyn Hall, which he had never been to before, and was as surprised as Marcus had been when it materialised mysteriously out of the cloaking rain like a latter-day Brigadoon. They got out and walked into the lobby. At first the place had the empty soulless feeling of a deserted house, but there was music playing quietly in the main hall, where Marcus had first shared himself with Caroline and the others. The hall was dark, lit only by a few candles on the floor and an Anglepoise lamp under which a naked man with very long hair was stretched out on cushions reading a book on particle physics. There was a girl, also naked, casually propelling herself backwards and forwards on a swing with her feet, crooning quietly to herself. James noted the swing and the two ropes hanging from one of the roof trusses. *It's all true*, he thought, *and Marcus came here with Sophie*.

"Yes," sighed Caroline, "it's all true, and Sophie and I made love to Marcus right here. With Drew, and Jaz, and Mo and the others." She started to cry again. James put his arm round her. How on earth had she known what he was

thinking? And Marcus, with Caroline… and Sophie? James stopped thinking about any of it. He could not even begin to get this into a novel. No one would ever believe it possible.

"Caroline," said the naked man, "what's going down babe. You look real heavy. I'm getting real bad vibes."

"Mo's dead," sobbed Caroline, "Mo's killed herself and it's our fault…and this is Dr Sinclair, Marcus's colleague, and his wife's just died too. And Robbie all we want is a room and a bed. I'll sort it out with Drew when he gets back."

"Mo," said Robbie, rising from his mat to greet them, "Mo…dead?" The hippy argot was dropped and replaced with BBC English. "What do you mean.....dead?" Caroline was wrong. Robbie was as much a pseudo hippy as the rest of them. The girl on the swing came over to Robbie and held his hand but said nothing. She looked sorrowfully at Caroline, her eyes filling with tears.

"She's taken an overdose," said James. "Caroline found her. But we don't want to talk about it just yet. Really. Caroline is very, very upset. Look at her. If you can find beds for us, we'd be very grateful. I need to get out of these wet clothes and we really do need to lie down. Really."

"Yeah, yeah, of course. Follow me." Robbie understood, "poor Mo. Jesus. I'll see if I can find you some dry clothes. Though, as you see, we don't always bother with clothes here. Anyway, there are some track suits somewhere. They would do. Drew's got a little laundry here you know, with a clothes dryer. Leave your clothes outside the door. I'll get them dry, and I'll find the track suits and leave them outside for you. There's some food in the kitchen, if you're hungry."

Robbie wrapped a sarong around himself, and led them into a corridor parallel to the hall.

"Two rooms here," he said, "the guys have left their stuff, so…. it's a bit of a mess. You might have to make up the beds. I'll leave you to it. You can tell me about Mo later, when you've had a snooze. Jesus. Poor Mo."

Caroline opened the door and looked into the first room. The double bed was made up. James started towards the second room but Caroline grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

"Please," she cried, "please stay with me. I need to be hugged and cuddled and so do you. We're both on our own. You've lost your wife, and I've lost two people I love. One dead. One lost. I need to be with someone. All my friends are away. I've no one to sleep with. Please stay with me. I'm very frightened."

Just as Marcus's experience of Penhesgyn had not been what he had expected, so too, James found himself unexpectedly in bed with the Ice Maiden, who was not an Ice Maiden at all, but a beautiful, vulnerable and extremely distressed young woman who lay naked in the crook of his arm against his naked chest and cried herself to sleep. When she woke up it was late afternoon, and James was still lying on his back, dozing fitfully, but not sleeping. He was trying to remember what his life had been like with Sandra. Trying to remember

her face as it had been when they were young and still thought that they were in love. But all that came was a vision of an apoplectic streaky bottle blond doll mask with a chiffon scarf stuffed into its mouth, upside down, choking to death in impotent terror. Caroline felt the pain of the last image of Sandra in James's mind, and to comfort him aroused him gently and gave herself to him, as slowly as she could, and silently, as an affirmation of life and love. James was not one of them. Aspirant novelist or not, the muses did not speak to him, nor did he share that mysterious spiritual bond, which made them all one with each other in the act of sex. But she sensed his relief and gratitude at the enveloping warmth of her body and she felt that he recognised the gift she made to him by reassuring him that he could still make love to a loving woman. And she too was grateful for his protective arms around her and the reciprocal warmth of his living body. Then he fell asleep and did not dream, whilst Caroline thought of Sophie and Marcus and dreamed that they were all together again, dreaming in each others arms.

Post Mortem

The cavernous Arts Senior Common Room at St Dynion's was divided into zones, each consisting of half a dozen easy chairs grouped round a rectangular coffee table. Each zone was the domain of an academic department, except for History, which normally gathered round the large circular table in the gable alcove, next to the only window in the room through which it was actually possible to see out. In addition to the zones there was an upholstered bench running round all three available walls of the substantial attic room to accommodate any overspill of unseated staff. Marcus gently lowered himself into the spindly sixties easy chair and instantly regretted it. The tired webbing supporting the seat cushion collapsed under his minimal weight and he found himself sinking slowly towards the floor. He rapidly put his tea cup down, levered himself out and gingerly tried one of the four remaining empty chairs grouped round the coffee table. The next chair seemed to support his weight. Marcus felt it was secure enough for him to recover his cup of tea. He'd decided to give up on the College's ersatz coffee after drinking so much superb coffee in Greece.

"You realise," said James "that we are sitting in the French Department's chairs."

A small skinny man with a face like a wedge of old cheese encrusted with an enthusiastic mould of straggly white hair stained yellow by decades of smoke from the Gitaine hanging perpetually from the corner of his mouth, was approaching the two historians. When he saw that the chairs were occupied by strangers he became completely disorientated and began to walk around the virtually empty Common Room in random circles, looking for his colleagues, and struggling to balance a coffee cup, its saucer, and a half burnt Gitaine, using only one pair of hands, both of which shook spasmodically from a lifetime of overdosing on Absinth.

"Professor Pritchard," said James, as if in explanation, "Head of French. Interesting old boy, but quite gaga. The Professor of German is even madder. Mad as a hatter. Something about Modern Languages."

James still had a black eye, and the cut in his eyebrow had not fully healed. This was the first time Marcus had seen James since he had returned from Greece, rather sooner that he had expected because of Sophie's distress at what they had assumed was the Munich Massacre, though how she had known about it was a cosmic mystery. On the way back into St Dynion's they had gone straight to Mo's and found nobody there. The locks had been changed and the landlord had gone on a late holiday in Spain to get away from suicidal students, so there was no one to provide an explanation. The same story was repeated at Caroline's old flat where they received a very peremptory dismissal from the Rev. Williams' extremely irate wife. Of the Reverend Dr. Gwilym Williams there was nothing to be seen because he had booked himself into an Anglican

monastery for two months of retreat and spiritual flagellation in the hope of redeeming his soul from the sins of the flesh and the pain of his wife's verbal rolling pin. Caroline, being Caroline, had been to Rhianda and to Marcus's office and left careful notes saying that she was staying at Penhesgyn. James had remained on at Penhesgyn for two days, until he plucked up enough courage to go back to his house, but Caroline moved out of the bed she had shared with him on that first night, and into Drew's still vacant suite, which had a very large bed indeed, as Marcus discovered when they eventually met up with her. The account of Mo's death precipitated Sophie into floods of tears which kept Marcus and Caroline awake for a whole night whilst they took it in turns to hug and comfort her. Marcus had become used to soppy Sophie bursting into tears at a moment's notice but this was something different. It unsettled him because he did not like to see her so unhappy and did not know how to help her, other than consoling her as best he could. Eventually Sophie calmed down and Marcus left her in bed with Caroline and went back to work. Now, for the first time, he heard James's account of what had happened.

"What about Seaton?" said Marcus at length, his sunburnt face solemn with concern at James's plight. Caroline had told him about Sandra's death but had not gone into detail.

"Dunno, he hasn't been seen since. Lying low I imagine. I went to the police station to make my statement, but they didn't tell me anything."

"The bastard is going to get away with it, isn't he."

"Probably," James agreed, "His uncle was, after all, a High Court Judge until he became Minister for Wales in the Atlee government. And he is Chairman of the College Council."

Marcus shrugged and pulled a face. Seaton could rot in hell for all he cared.

How are Sophie and...Caroline coping?"James enquired.

"I think Caroline has more or less got over it. She keeps her feelings hidden to a large extent. Sophie's taken it badly. I didn't realise she was so close to Mo."

"They're very young, really" said James sadly, "they don't expect their friends to die. Neither do we for that matter. But nobody dies when you are that age. Young people are immortal.....until they grow old."

James went silent for a while and sipped at his tea. He wanted to tell Marcus something, but did not know how to present it, given what he now knew about Marcus's relationship with Sophie and his consequent friendship with Caroline. Two more members of the French Department approached them, glowered, and then wandered off to join their professor who was standing looking lost at the big round table in the gabled alcove at the other end of the Common Room, a zone which was usually the exclusive preserve of the historians, evident today by their almost total absence.

“I have to tell you,” he blurted out eventually, “Caroline made love to me that night. She insisted on me sleeping with her, but she cried herself to sleep and when she woke up.....”

“That doesn't surprise me,” said Marcus, wise now to the ways of his women, “sometime they seem to treat sex as a sort of medicine to be given when you're hurt or sad. She probably thought it would help you in some way. And she probably needed comfort herself.”

James nodded, “she isn't what I thought she was. I always thought she was very.... cold blooded and calculating. But she was really very gentle with me. Really. I've never had sex like that before. In fact, I realise now that I've never really had sex before. It was beautiful, and I felt so much better after it. It somehow gave me my confidence back. Mind you, it was a one off. She moved out of the room the next day.”

Marcus smiled encouragingly, but said nothing. James sighed inwardly with relief. Marcus was not annoyed. These girls were strange, he thought. And Marcus was different. More confident, almost smug. Marcus smiled at him again, as though he was reading his thoughts. He continued to mull over the events of the past week.

“This business with Sandra has really freaked me out,” he said, “the cold blooded academic bit of me keeps saying I'm well rid of her. And I was quite excited at the idea of getting divorced and being free and starting again. I hadn't expected anything like this though, and I certainly didn't want her dead. She didn't deserve to die like that. I can't get that image of her trussed up on the bed out of my mind. I feel it was my fault, in a way. If I hadn't gone there and confronted Seaton she would probably still be alive. The funeral's on Thursday. Would you be able to come, do you think? I could do with some support. I doubt if there will be many people there, and I suspect her parents won't talk to me. Her father was a bank manager. Miserable sod. He didn't think much of academics. He once asked me when I was going to get a proper job. They thought Sandra was marrying beneath them. They never heard her foul mouth. She came straight out of the gutter.”

“Yes,” Marcus replied, “I'll be there. And I don't think you should blame yourself. As Drew Parkin would say, it was her karma. I don't think we have much control over these things. They just happen.”

“You're very brown,” James said, gratefully withdrawing from grief, “Greece must have been okay.”

“It was absolutely super, fantastic... until Sophie had her nightmare. Then she couldn't wait to get back here. It took us three days to get back from Sifnos. You, know, finding a ferry and flight and everything. We had to stay a night in Piraeus. And when we got back she went straight to Mo's. I think somehow she knew that something had happened to Mo. I thought it was the Olympics because the papers were full of it. But I think she knew that Mo had died. God knows how. It worries me sometimes.”

“Mo had been dead in that flat for two days you know. It would fit. Is she alright now?”

“Yeah, I think so. I left her this morning curled up with Caroline. They were both sleeping like babies. They looked beautiful, actually. So...innocent, like little children.” No, Marcus recalled his last vision of the two sleeping bodies erotically wound around each other in Drew's gorilla sized bed, they didn't look like little children at all.

“Do you think Sophie's fey?” James asked.

“Fey?”

“You know, clairvoyant. Psychic, whatever.”

“Maybe,” Marcus replied non-committally, “You think it's very strange, me sleeping with two women at the same time. You don't approve do you.”

“You're sleeping with both of them? Now, I mean, at Penhesgyn, together?” James was incredulous, it had not occurred to him that Marcus was sleeping with Caroline as well, although she had said as much when they had arrived at Penhegsyn. “I've always thought sex was something very special between two people. A private thing. No, I suppose I don't approve, but still, I sort of envy you. You're enjoying what many men only dream of, so make the most of it, it can't last. But for me; I would rather have one woman to love who loved me and me alone. Mind you, on present performance I haven't even been able to cope with one woman, let alone two.”

“It's not about sex,” said Marcus sharply, suddenly feeling the need to defend himself and the girls, “it's about love, they are different things you know. Caroline did not give you sex, she gave you love. Remember that!” He declined to tell James that Caroline snored if she slept on her back and that Sophie sometimes talked in her sleep in an archaic Greek dialect which even an accomplished Greek linguist would not recognise because it had not been spoken since the Fall of Troy more than three millenia ago.

Two more members of the French Department appeared, plonked themselves defiantly in the remaining chairs, ignoring the one which was broken, and scowled at the two interloping historians. The French Department was obviously back at work.

“What about Cambridge?” James asked, rapidly changing the subject to avoid potential eavesdroppers. Marcus understood.

“Okay. Strange, actually. The whole thing was very soft, almost as though they couldn't be bothered with it, or didn't know how to examine it. It was very obvious that Vipont had never examined a doctoral thesis before, and Armiger didn't seem to care a button. I'm still worried about it. I just got a bad feeling.”

“Listen,” said James, “I'm sure it will be okay. If they were going to send it back or fail it, which never happens, they would surely have given you a real grilling. Sounds like a formality to me.”

“Then why haven't I heard anything from Cambridge? Even in this tin pot apology for a university we can examine, mark, award and confer degrees to

some sixty or so students in the space of what, six weeks, about that. Cambridge have already taken nearly six months on one miserable thesis. Damn it, I submitted on the first of April. It's now nearly the end of September. Term will start in a week. And look at this place," Marcus gestured at the empty room, "where is everyone?"

"Writing books," said James, "doing research, pushing back the frontiers of ignorance."

"Of course," Marcus replied, "how silly of me."

"Incidentally our new professor has arrived. And he's noticed that you are not here. Though he can't pick on you since nobody else is here either."

"Oh, bugger. What's he like?"

"He's a miserable sod. Too bloody tall. Ambition favours the tall. And reptilian, like bloody Seaton, except I bet he doesn't drink, and he's already put his foot in it with Gwyn Davies."

"Gwyn Davies? I'd forgotten about Gwyn Davies. Has he recovered from the stroke? That's something else that will be laid at my door."

James noticed that the two French lecturers had stopped talking to each other and were listening to the conversation at the other end of the coffee table, whilst pretending to read the *Guardian* and *Paris Match*. James gestured with his head, tilting it briefly towards the door.

"Time to go," said Marcus, standing up. James followed him, but instead of splitting up for their respective offices they both went back to Marcus's room in the hut where Marcus made two mugs of palatable instant coffee.

"What happened with Gwyn Davies then?" Marcus asked

"Well, he's still paralysed down one side and he can't speak properly. He's at home, though, which is something. Anyway our dear new Professor Kevin Rawlings took it upon himself to ring up Mrs Davies. But instead of offering sympathy and concern he demanded to know when Gwyn would be back at work because there are a lot of jobs waiting to be done. Fflur Davies is very upset about it. She rang John Ellerby straight away, but John is very diplomatic, especially where his own career is concerned and he won't do anything."

"I'll bet she's upset. The old guard value politeness above everything else. I like Gwyn Davies. He's a good man. Humble and honest. They don't make academics like that any more."

"Well, present company excepted," James replied.

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As promised they all went to the funeral of Sandra Sinclair at the local crematorium. It was as depressing as funerals always are, and, as James had predicted, there was hardly anyone else there. Sandra had a younger sister, who did speak to James and seemed to be tearfully sympathetic, but her parents stayed aloof and sat as far away from him as they could. Sophie and Caroline

stood on either side of Marcus, each holding his hand, Caroline silent and stony faced, Sophie crying a little at the solemnity of the service. She had only ever been to one funeral before this, but that had been in Greece and was indelibly etched into her memory because the whole village had been there and all of them seemed to have held her tightly and given her sweets and little gifts and lots of cuddles to ease the pain. At the back of the Crematorium, initially unseen by the mourners, was the detective who had dealt with James and Caroline on that fateful day. A bored priest rushed through the funeral service. They tried to sing *Abide with Me*, mumbled through *I will lift up my eyes to the hills*, and successfully completed the *Lord's Prayer*. The priest mouthed a few platitudes about the brevity of human life and prayed for comfort for her friends and family who had been so tragically deprived of her kind and generous company, but was unable to think of anything else to say about someone he had never met. Then the coffin mysteriously transported itself through a slot between two curtains which swished together behind it, and what was left of Sandra Sinclair was consigned to ashes. Compared with the passion of her mother's funeral, at which her beloved but embarrassingly daft father had displayed an unexpected nobility of spirit, standing by the grave, praying with her Greek uncles, his hands clasped together and his face stricken with grief, Sophie thought this to be an insufficient end to what had obviously been a wasted life, and shed more tears for the unlucky Sandra, who she had never met and would not have liked if she had.

Outside, after Sandra was despatched to wherever the Fates had destined her to go, the detective spoke to James and Caroline, only this time he introduced himself as Detective Inspector Mike Roberts, and shook hands with all of them.

"There will be an inquest," he said to James, "but the fact that they released the body means that they are satisfied that this was an accidental death. I don't think you will even be called as a witnesses. Your statements are very clear, as I would expect from such clever people and they are consistent with our own findings. They should be sufficient. The Coroner does not like to add to the suffering of relatives, if he doesn't have to."

"What about Mo, Margery?" Caroline asked, "we've heard nothing about Mo, and we can't find out anything about her. There's been nothing in the local papers. Nothing. We even tried ringing the hospital but they wouldn't tell us anything because we aren't family. "

Mr Roberts shook his head. "The same thing. The body was released to her parents. Apparently they had it taken back to Burnley. I assume that she has been buried there by now, or cremated. I don't know. I'm very sorry. And I'm sorry that I was so hard on you at the time. Ours is not an easy job you know, and sometimes it gets to you and you say things you shouldn't. Two wasted young lives. They were both the same age. Did you know that? Both thirty three years old. I felt very guilty afterwards. I shouldn't have said the things I said.

Young people should enjoy their lives, however strange they may seem to people like me. Don't cry Miss," he added, looking at Sophie's tear streaked face, "beautiful ladies like you shouldn't cry." Sophie gave a pale smile and dried the tears with the handkerchief which she had brought with her in anticipation.

"It's as though Mo never existed," Sophie sighed, "just....gone."

"And Dr Seaton?" James asked.

"Ha.....what did you expect? No crime was committed. So there is nothing to answer for since you won't make a complaint about the assault. It certainly helps to have Lord Tybach as your uncle. Still, he will not escape completely. There are more ways than one of skinning a cat. If you know what I mean. He was the last person to see your wife alive, and he will certainly have to attend the inquest and give evidence. It won't be easy for him. The press is likely to notice. If you know what I mean."

"Well, we'll see. Thank you very much for coming," James said quietly, shaking the detective's proffered hand. "I appreciate it."

"What are you going to do now?" Marcus asked James as they walked back to their cars.

"Right now?" James replied, "I'm going away for a few days, before term starts. I don't know where. I'm just want to get away. I'd like to go to Greece, but it's too late now. Term starts next week. And anyway I wouldn't want to go on my own."

"It's only Freshers Week, there's still a little time." Marcus replied, "Would you like to use my house at Carston? There are nice gardens. You can walk on the moors. There's a heated indoor swimming pool. Lots of places to visit. Northallerton is a nice Yorkshire market town. There's York itself, or somewhere like Whitby. You could have a good break. It's no trouble. All I have to do is ring the housekeeper and she'll get a room ready for you. There's a very good pub in the village. Does good food too. You could go tomorrow and come back on Monday. What do you think?

"It's lovely," said Caroline, gently taking James's arm, "do go. It's a different world from this dreadful place."

"I've never been there," Sophie complained, pulling a face at Caroline, "Marcus, you must take us as soon as you have time for a break."

James thought for a few minutes. "Yes," he said, "that would be nice. I'd like that. Thank you Marcus. Now, let's go and have a drink. Not in St Dynion's. Let's go to the *Pen y Gwryd* and mingle with the mountaineers and pretend we're hard men."

They climbed into James's Austin Maxi, which refused to start.

"It's only two bloody years old," James swore, "it's a load of junk."

"And another thing Marcus," said Sophie, as they all struggled to get into Caroline's Mini, "if we're going to live together as man and wives it would be nice if you could get a car with more than two seats."

Caroline laughed, “I love my Mini,” she said.

“I didn't mean your car,” Sophie replied, “I meant Marcus's sports car. It looks lovely, but it's not very practical is it.”

“I have another suggestion,” Marcus laughed, “James can take the Porsche to Carston and come back with one of the estate Land Rovers. There's a short wheelbase Land Rover Station Wagon which I use when I'm there, six seats, plenty big enough to accommodate my beautiful ladies. I'll ring Dennis tonight and fix it up. I'd better check with the insurance. You haven't had any accidents recently have you?”

“The bloody Maxi doesn't start often enough for it have an accident, but I'm not sure whether I dare drive a Porsche.” James replied.

“Don't worry,” said Marcus, “it's a pussy-cat. Just don't press too hard on the right hand pedal.”

“Wow,” said Sophie, “a Land Rover. Really? Cool. Can I drive it Marcus?”

“Of course you can drive it,” Marcus laughed, “but it's a bit of Hippo. You have to press really hard on the right hand pedal to get it to move at all.”

They all laughed. The funeral had drained the slough of despond, and new life was already sprouting from its fecund mud.

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Back in Drew's big bedroom at Penhesgyn Sophie unhooked her bra and looked quizzically at Caroline.

“Have you noticed,” she said, “how some women undress from the top down, and some undress from the bottom up.”

Caroline looked back at her blankly, “What do you mean?” she said, slipping out of her black trousers and starting to pull down her knickers.

“Well, look at us,” Sophie faced Caroline with her hands on the waistband of her black skirt and stuck out her bare brown chest.

Caroline looked down at her long naked legs and the black roll neck sweater which was all that she was still wearing above her waist.

“I see what you mean,” she said.

“And watch him,”said Sophie, grinning, “I bet you any money that when he takes his shirt off he just grabs the collar and pulls it over his head. There it goes. I told you.”

“I'm not putting money on that,” Caroline retorted, “we've both seen him do it before. All men do it. They don't know any better. It's much better if we undress him ourselves. Marcus. Marcus, wake up!”

Marcus looked up from his reverie, folding his shirt neatly and putting it on a chair.

“Marcus, which of us looks best? Like this,” Sophie laughed.

The two girls stood beside each other, hands on hips, one naked below the waist and one naked above.

“You both look beautiful,” said Marcus, “and I love both of you.”

“And Marcus, this is how you should take your shirt off.” Caroline crossed her arms in front of her, gripped the bottom of her sweater and removed it in one smooth effortless motion.

Marcus shook his head, “I've never been able to do that.”

Sophie unhooked Caroline's bra and slipped out of her black skirt.

“Sophie, what are you wearing.... Sophie?” Caroline demanded, “that's my suspender belt. I'm the only one who wears a suspender belt. I'm the sophisticated one. You're the girlie.”

“Girlies wear suspender belts too. Anyway I just wanted to cheer myself up,” said Sophie, “I thought, if I wear this at the funeral it will remind me that I'm still alive. Besides, I couldn't find the black tights I bought for graduation day, and why are we taking our knickers off?”

“Because,” said Caroline, “that's what we do best. And anyway I feel better after the funeral. It's as though a weight has been lifted from us. I think it was a farewell for Mo too, in a way. It's released us from our grief. And now I feel like having a blinding good shag. ”

“Me too,” said Sophie cheerfully, “I put your things on in the hope that afterwards we would do what we are going to do. And it will be fun again. It hasn't been fun recently. I've been crying too much.”

“Life goes on,” Caroline said, “and for us life is.....Marcus. Pay attention.” She looked at Marcus who was distractedly taking off his shoes and socks and removing his trousers and underpants, preparatory to having a shower.

“Marcus...listen to me. Pay attention. Which of us do you love best?” Caroline pouted.

“I love both of you,” Marcus repeated, “I love Sophie's body, and your mind.”

“Oh,” Caroline shrieked, “He doesn't love my body!!”

“Oh,” Sophie mimicked, “he doesn't love my mind!!”

“Boo hoo..Marcus,” they both giggled. Marcus, naked now, looked nonplussed.

“I didn't mean it like that,” he said, “ I really do love both of you. How could I not love both of you?” Marcus looked crestfallen, guilty at having implied a preference, but there was a preference and Marcus could not deny it to himself. Caroline understood but it did not concern her. She was free to come and go as she pleased, but Sophie had bound herself to Marcus, and he to her. That was their choice.

“He's in another world,” Caroline said, “and he's still worrying about you being unhappy. Listen,” she whispered something into Sophie's ear. Sophie's expressive mouth widened into a huge grin. She hugged Caroline. Before Marcus had time to think what was happening they had grabbed him and hurled him, unresisting, onto the big bed where they held him down, each sitting astride a thigh, pinning down his arms with their hands, then falling forward

onto his chest and brushing their soft and scented hair across his face. He felt their tongues delicately caress his ears and their nipples pressed against his chest. His body responded with unfailing predictability.

"Marcus," they both whispered simultaneously, "we want to have your babies."

They both leaned back expectantly and watched with glee as a panoply of emotions flashed across Marcus's face, starting with terror, astonishment, horror, contemplation, acceptance and, finally, anticipation. Marcus smiled weakly at them and nodded. He would do anything they wanted. He was theirs, and they were his, sufficient unto themselves.

"But not yet," said Caroline, paraphrasing St Augustine, and pushing Sophie to one side so that she could get onto Marcus's dick first. Sophie leapt back squealing and giggling and wrestled Caroline off Marcus, plonking herself onto him and thrusting vigorously whilst still grappling with Caroline.

"Stop it," Marcus said, "you're going to hurt me."

The two girls stopped obediently and looked at him expectantly.

"What is your will, oh great master," they said simultaneously, "your wish is our command." They fell about giggling again, clutching at each other for support. *They're happy* Marcus thought, *at last, they're happy again. And if they are happy I am happy.*

"Yes," Sophie replied, "we're happy, everything is going to be alright. Now, how do you want us?" she added, making a pre-emptive grab at his cock.

"You know what to do."

The girls leapt enthusiastically to their positions, Sophie pinning Marcus's shoulders between her calves and thighs and presenting herself to his mouth, then arching her back and supporting herself with her hands on Caroline's thighs. Caroline slid herself onto Marcus and slipped her arms round Sophie so that she could caress her breasts. Marcus was as trapped as he would have been if they had tied him up, and the sensation were exquisite, but he retained sufficient control to play both girls to the limit and when at last they sensed each other falling towards their mutual orgasm he let himself go and the girls collapsed on top of him in a post orgasmic cuddle of panting flesh.

"Who's been sleeping in my bed?" said a very familiar American voice. Drew Parkin leaned in a studied John Wayne posture against the jamb of the open door and surveyed the beautifully sculpted bodies wrapped around each other so intimately that they seemed like one perfect embodiment of pure sensual carnality. "And Sophie, in a suspender belt and black stockings. Whatever next? What ho Marcus, you've come a long way in a short time. And Caroline as cool and beautiful as ever. Hello, my oldest and bestest friends."

Caroline saw and sensed the expression of delight and despair which flashed across Sophie's face and mind. Delight at seeing an old friend, despair at the thought that Drew would have to be told about Mo and they would all have to go over the whole thing again because Drew would want details and answers.

Drew sat on the edge of the bed. He too had read the subliminal conflict of emotions in Sophie's expression. There was a time, not long ago, when he would have taken his clothes off and joined them, and the two girls would have responded with unrestrained lust. But he sensed no invitation to do so now. They were with Marcus. Well that was okay. He had his beloved Jaz, even if she was still in New York, but it meant that things had changed in his absence, and probably for the better. They were growing up, sort of.

"Something's happened," he said, his American accent more noticeable than it had been in the past, "is anyone going to tell me?"

Caroline slid her long legs off the bed and stood up. She grasped Drew's arm and led him forcefully out of the bedroom. As they left Drew saw Sophie bury her face into Marcus's chest and Marcus put his arm round her, holding her tight.

In the corridor Drew asked again, "what's happened, isn't Sophie pleased to see me?"

"Yes, of course she is, we all are. But you're right, something had happened. And Sophie will be upset because we will, I will, have to tell you about it, all over again, just when we thought we were free of it."

Caroline shepherded him into the main hall which was mercifully empty and silent. They sat on the cushions, the naked goddess facing the very smartly suited Drew, and Caroline told him everything that had happened, including Detective Inspector Roberts' account of his undercover visit to Penhesgyn. At the end of the story Drew looked at Caroline's tear streaked face and felt his own hot tears on his cheeks.

"I suppose it was her Karma," Drew said, thoughtfully.

"No Drew, don't give me that hippy crap," Caroline snapped, "that won't do. You don't properly understand what Karma is and blaming everything on Gods or some vague idea of predestination is an intellectual cop out. Occam was right. We can't know the will of God. If it exists at all divine power must be absolute and therefore unpredictable. But we do have moral autonomy. We have reason and conscience. We chose to live like this. So we have to deal with the consequences ourselves. No Karma. Only cause and effect."

"Okay, okay," Drew replied amiably, holding his hands out in supplication, "I don't want to fight you Caroline. Let's just try and work through it as we've always dealt with problems in the past."

Caroline nodded assent.

"Okay, first. Do you think that Mo was upset about anything?"

"Yes," said Caroline, "looking back on it, ever since Sophie got together with Marcus she was morose and tearful. That's not like Mo. She didn't speak to Marcus at Degree Day, and when I made love to her later that evening she was crying. I only did it because no one was paying any attention to her. And that's an admission in itself. Sophie was having a fabulous time with Marcus and was so happy, and Mo looked so sad. I thought it was the least I could do. And

I tried to get her to tell me what was wrong, but she wouldn't. And she blocked me out of her mind. With hindsight it's obvious."

Drew and Caroline looked at each other, two minds thinking exactly the same thought.

"Sophie must not know," Drew said.

"Sophie is no fool, and she's very sensitive to the feelings of others. I think she has already worked it out for herself. I think that's why she's been so miserable since she got back from Greece. I thought it was just her period or something. But it wasn't. I think she feels it was her fault. Today has been the first day she got her old self back, after a funeral, would you believe. Funny how life asserts itself so lustfully in the presence of death. Just before you turned up we had marvellous sex, fantastic. Marcus is brilliant. And so are we."

"Whose funeral? Mo's?"

"No," Caroline replied, "James Sinclair's wife. Seaton killed her. I'll tell you about it later."

"Oh shit! Poor James. So many deaths. I hope they nail that bastard Seaton."

Caroline shook her head, "I don't know. It seems to have been an accident. James is waiting for the inquest."

"Okay, okay. We'll talk about it later. But about Mo. Was Sophie sleeping regularly with her ?" Drew was not going to be diverted.

"Well she lived in the same flat, so it's entirely likely that she slept with her, when nothing else was available. There we go again. Mo was never our first choice. But we've all slept with each other pretty often haven't we. And anyway Sophie and I used to sleep with Mo just out of interest, to find out how women make love to each other, for ourselves really. Mo just seemed to enjoy it for it's own sake. And, after all, Sophie more often than not had boys in her room. Mo can't have liked that very much, but she must have put up with it just to keep Sophie there. Probably she never told Sophie. Perhaps she put Sophie on a pedestal as Marcus did to me. Perhaps Sophie was everything that Mo always wanted to be. Undeclared and unrequited love. Marcus was probably the last straw."

"Okay, so Mo kills herself because she was in love with Sophie and Sophie had chosen Marcus. Second question. Do you think Sophie knew at the time? And since we all know she is the most sensitive of us, surely she would have known how Mo felt about her?

"No, not necessarily, so far as Sophie was concerned it would just be casual, even instructional, sex. If Mo put a lot of passion into it, just more fun, she wouldn't think it meant anything. You know how it is. We enjoy it with passion, but not necessarily with love, and we don't think it entitles people to think that they own each other, unless real love is involved. That changes the rules of the game. It's all been a game for us. It's time to grow up. Anyway, so far as we knew, Mo was ostensibly hitched up with the awful Babs and Babs certainly didn't like us." Caroline shrugged, "but, it's got to stop. In future we should only

have sex with people we really know and really love. You understand. And so far as we are concerned that means Marcus is with Sophie and I am with both of them, and because I love you too you can shag me if you want to, when I feel like it, which is not now. You have Jaz and Jaz has always been first for you. And we had better stop going around shagging people we hardly know just to cheer them up. It's very kind of us, and generous, but most people think sex implies love and commitment and when they find that it doesn't they get upset." Caroline thought about her recent therapeutic sex with James Sinclair, who, to be fair, had been both grateful and understanding.

"Jaz is enough for me," Drew agreed, "and I will marry her once I can get her goddam parents to agree to it. But for you? Threesomes rarely work you know. Adrian is already having problems. Tinkerbell wants him to marry her. Where does that leave Puck? What if Sophie wants to marry Marcus? What happens to you?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it. At the moment it's very good, we are complementary to each other and there's no friction. Marcus is very fair and very generous, and very kind and he loves both of us equally well and he goes with the flow. And we love him the same way."

"Well, if you're all still together in thirty years I'll send you a magnum of champagne. Hey...What about the vicar?"

"He had an attack of conscience and told his wife. I had to leave. It's over. It's okay, it's okay," Caroline waved her hands in a dismissive gesture, "better really. It leaves me free to be with those two. That's why we're all in your room."

"That's too bad Caroline. But it wasn't going anywhere was it. You're better off with Sophie and Marcus, whatever the long term risks. Marcus is a good and honourable man. He will look after both of you for as long as you want. And he will let you go, if you want to leave, though it will probably hurt him. As for the room. That's okay, you might as well stay here until whenever. I'm not coming back and I don't expect Marcus to be in St Dynion's much longer either. I've got a flat and office in London. You can contact me there. And I'm not going to hold any more Kong parties," Drew said, partially changing the topic, "we never found anyone like us with them anyway. It was good while it lasted. But maybe we are all there is. I was going to try to set up that bastard Seaton by inviting him to a Kong Party and getting photos of him screwing someone, plant drugs on him, maybe, but I guess it's not necessary now. Seaton will self destruct without our help. Still I'd like that we should all try to meet at least once every quarter, not necessarily for sex, you know, but just to sit round and talk and meditate in the buff like we used to. Gymnastic symposia. Just us. And I'm still interested in this cosmic energy idea. I wanna talk to you about that. Anyway I'm only here for a day. I wanted to tie up loose ends. And I have a business proposition for Marcus."

“Well,” Caroline did not want to talk about cosmic energy, “you know how I feel about cosmic energy. But, to tell you the truth, I'm less sceptical than I was. Some very odd things have been happening between the three of us, especially while Sophie was in Greece. Sophie had a premonition of Mo's death...I think.....maybe Sophie is....” Caroline stopped.

The double doors into the hall swung open, letting a brief shaft of light into the gloom. Marcus and Sophie came towards them holding hands. Drew stood up and Sophie ran to him, threw her arms round his neck and kissed him. Drew closed his hands on her back but, mindful of Caroline's watchful eyes, resisted the temptation to cup his hands round her small firm bottom, as he would have done in the past. No normal man can embrace a naked Sophie without inevitable consequences so Drew released her before his dick had time to think about it. They all sat down again, forming a circle, cross legged in the meditation position, but not meditating. Drew found himself in the unusual situation of being the only one who was actually clothed, but it no longer seemed to matter.

Sophie looked round the circle and held out her hands to those next to her. The circle was completed but there was no evident frisson of energy. No sudden psychic insight. No obvious sharing of consciousness. They sat in silence, with their eyes closed and their minds open.

“I don't feel guilty any more,” Sophie said at last, “I didn't know how Mo felt about me, though I did suspect. I only slept with her because she was one of us and lonely and it was comfy and cuddly and it seemed to make her happy. I thought we were all equally in love with each other. I never felt anything special for her. I never saw into her heart. She kept it closed. How was I to know? What could I have done? I have always been with Marcus, even before I was with him, and with Caroline. She knew that. She should have accepted it.”

“I don't think we shall ever know why she did it,” said Caroline quietly, “but I think that we are all guilty. Look at us. We're all beautiful people, even Marcus has his moments. Can you imagine what it must be like for a woman who feels trapped in a body which she has come to hate? How hard it must be. Mo had an attractive personality, but she was not a physically attractive person. Not like us. We are everything that Mo must have wanted to be. Every moment with us must have been a reproach to her, and she must have kept it all bottled up. Maybe in the end it was too much.”

Marcus said nothing. For once he thought that Caroline had got it wrong. Most women had anxieties about their looks and their figures, but most coped with it and got on with their lives and married ordinary men and had ordinary lives and ordinary deaths. He reflected on the darkness he had seen in Mo's soul at that other circle, when he had first been initiated into their mysteries. The light that so loved them was not the only intelligent force in the universe. Its immortal enemy was alive in Mo, and waiting for its moment, as it was for all of them. Caroline was nobly trying to deflect guilt away from Sophie and onto

the group, but Marcus had seen into Mo's mind and knew that she was in love with Sophie. There was no other explanation.

"Come on guys," said Drew, "We'll talk about this later. Let's just hold hands, and think about Mo and remember her as she used to be, and say our last goodbye to her. And then let's get on with our lives. We are sorry that we did not help her as we should have done. But now we must let her go. Life must go on. Mo has just gone back to where we all came from. We will see her again. One day."

They sat in silent contemplation, final tears trickling down their cheeks. But there was no communion, no sharing of souls. The light that had burned brightly against Mo's darkness was pallid without it. The Circle was no longer complete.

Thesis - Antithesis

After they come back from a late dinner at the Sea Horse, the only half decent restaurant in the area, the two girls went to bed and Marcus and Drew sat in the little kitchen of Drew's flat and discussed their collective futures at great length and in great detail. Marcus eventually agreed to Drew's suggestions and, very late, they both joined the sleeping girls, Drew slipping silently into the great bed beside Caroline, Marcus on the other side next to Sophie. It was, after all, Drew's bed, and it would not be the first time that Sophie and Caroline had shared it with him.

In the morning Marcus and Sophie left early to take the Porsche into College and hand it over to James Sinclair who set off, with some trepidation, for his weekend in Yorkshire. Sophie went into town to shop, and Marcus went to his office in the hut. Caroline, still in bed at Penhesgyn, woke up to find herself next to Drew, lying propped up on his elbow smiling gently at her. She rolled over onto her back, rubbed the sleep out of her eyes then stretched out her long legs, clasped her hands behind her head, and smiled sweetly back at him.

At around eleven o'clock, just as he was contemplating making a cup of coffee, Marcus had a telephone call from John Ellerby inviting him to meet the new professor. The sky was already clouding over; dark menacing clouds which presaged a storm. Marcus reflected that Sophie had gone off without a coat. When Dr Ellerby and Marcus entered the room Professor Rawlings was sitting behind a large desk in the corner of the room next to the window. For some inexplicable reason the Buildings Office had removed all the light bulbs after the previous professor had died so Professor Rawlings was sitting in deep and impenetrable shadow which conveniently concealed his lugubrious features. It was immediately obvious that he did not want to be bothered with them, and held medievalists in very low esteem. He asked first how their research was going, a standard opening gambit, then made laboured small talk about how they had spent their vacations. Then the conversation petered out. Rawlings sat in the shadow and appeared to ignore them. John Ellerby attempted to lighten the atmosphere by talking about the professor of Marine Geology who had put a canister of radioactive isotopes into a Land Rover parked in the car park at the back of the Marine Geology building, gone back to his office for some papers he had forgotten and had then gone out to the other car park at the front of the building where he could not find the Land Rover. He returned to his office and contacted the police to inform them that a Land Rover containing dangerous radioactive isotopes had been stolen from Marine Geology. Then back out to the car park at the rear of the building, into the Land Rover, and away, only to be stopped on the bridge and arrested by unusually conscientious traffic police.

Marcus thought the story very funny, and so did the girls when he told it to them later that day. But Rawlings was not amused and did not believe it. Professors, he said, do not make mistakes like that. Dr Ellerby should be careful

not to bring the professoriate into disrepute. Rawlings was the epitome of everything that Marcus was coming to despise in academics. Another raging egotist who inspired neither trust, nor confidence, nor respect. The future at St Dynion's, never a happy prospect at the best of times, was beginning to look distinctly bleak. Rawlings, they were about to discover, was a master of the Parthian shaft, saving the killing blow until the instant that the victims thought they had escaped. As they stood up to leave Rawlings looked at Marcus.

"Mr...Ross," he said.

Marcus turned back from the door.

"I understand that you are to attend a disciplinary hearing in the near future."

Marcus had forgotten about this.

"Yes," he said tentatively, " I believe so. It hasn't been arranged yet."

"I have received the papers on this matter, and I want you to know that I do not approve of staff having any form of relationship with their students. If you are in such a relationship I suggest you end it at once. You are still on probation. Your contract can be terminated."

"I am not," said Marcus tersely, "in a relationship with one of my students, nor was I at the time the complaint was made," which was, strictly speaking, true, since Sophie was no longer a student.

"That remains to be established," Rawlings replied, "Now, on another matter. I would like you to give the first term lecture component for Dr Seaton's first year course on Europe from Napoleon to Bismark."

Marcus was thunderstruck.

"But why? I'm a medievalist. Dr. Seaton can give his own lectures," Marcus protested. Dr Ellerby looked pained.

"Dr Seaton has applied for and has been awarded a sabbatical year with immediate effect. He is also in receipt of a substantial research grant from the College to support sixth months of field work in Cuba and he will be leaving for Cuba very shortly. Dr Seaton will be out of the Department for a year, and his teaching will have to be covered by junior staff.

"But, I'm a medievalist," Marcus protested again, "I haven't done any modern history since I was an undergraduate."

"Then this is a good opportunity for you to widen the scope of your historical knowledge. It is only a first year introductory course, after all. You will, of course, also continue to fulfil your obligations in your medieval history courses." Rawlings looked at Marcus with undisguised contempt.

"It's always been our practice to teach only in our specialisms. That's why we are specialists," Dr Ellerby was as a shocked as Marcus.

"Dr Ellerby, my primary role in this Department is to raise its very poor research profile. As your new line manager I have a duty and obligation to ensure that the human resources in the Department are deployed as cost effectively as possible for both research and teaching and to ensure that managements targets are met. In future teaching will be consumer led. There

will be a minimum recruitment target for all courses. If your course does not meet this target it will be cancelled and you will be redeployed to assist in courses which are oversubscribed. This means that junior staff will be required to undertake substantial lecturing duties outside their specialisms in order to release senior staff to concentrate on research. Any fool can teach undergraduates. Research is what matters."

Rawlings paused before moving on to the next poisoned arrow in his quiver.

"My primary priority is to facilitate staff research. I intend to establish annual targets for research output. At least one article in a prestigious learned journal per year, or evidence of substantial progress on a book. Mr Ross, you've already been here three years. You should have published something by now. As I understand it you have not even completed your doctorate yet."

"I have just had the oral," Marcus replied, "I'm still waiting for the result, and I've had a considerable teaching load.."

"Really," sneered Rawlings, "I'm surprised they didn't tell you at the oral. That's the usual practice. And I do not believe that medieval history is so popular with students that it can have been a burden to you. Therefore I expect a publication from you very soon."

Marcus followed Dr Ellerby out of the room without saying another word. As they got to the end of the Professors' Corridor Dr Ellerby stopped, fumbled in his pocket, produced a packet of cigarettes and proceeded to try to light up. Ellerby was shaking like a leaf and could hardly hold his hand steady enough to focus the match flame on the tip of his cigarette.

"He's a bastard," he said, once the cigarette was lit, "he's a bastard. And he's going to kill off medieval history."

During the weeks that followed Marcus encountered Professor Rawlings from time to time, in corridors or walking down College Road. Sometimes Rawlings simply refused to recognise him, walking past him without a word. Sometimes he treated Marcus to a caustic or patronising aside and walked on without waiting for an answer. Initially Marcus tried to excuse his rudeness on the grounds that he might be shy and insecure, but it soon became evident that Rawlings was merely very unpleasant. His unattractive personality was not offset in any way, either by an outstanding physical appearance, or by evidence of great intellectual brilliance. Most new heads of department could reasonably expect a year's honeymoon before the knives started to be sharpened and the Chinese whispers propagated. Any professor who set out from the beginning to alienate virtually all of his staff, except Dr Medusa, who thought the sun shone out of his backside, could only be extremely stupid. In the cold light of day Rawlings was tall and skinny with extraordinarily protuberant shoulder blades, which made him look as though he had forgotten to take the coat hanger out of his deceptively trendy green velvet jacket. His face was long and angular, the sort of face that had once thundered fire and brimstone from Methodist pulpits, with a thin sneering mouth, khaki coloured hair Brylcreamed down onto his

head like a coiled cow pat, and a pair of rimless rectangular spectacles behind which darted glittery reptilian eyes. He was also completely devoid of humour, except when he tried to deliver cleverly contrived epithets, usually at the expense of someone else. This rarely happened because the august Professor did not demean himself by speaking to his staff, not even to the senior lecturers who expected to be consulted. He preferred instead to communicate through the medium of his new secretary, the venerable Miss Towler having successfully asked for a transfer within two weeks of his arrival, and usually demanded that the member of staff concerned ring back so that they could be made to wait while the secretary put them through to him. He had a nasty habit of speaking on the phone, and then sending a vicious little Parthian note the next day, castigating the victim in terms which he would never dare to use in a direct confrontation, and allowing himself the luxury of the last word without any prospect that the victim could reply. Marcus tried to avoid him, which was not too difficult.

"He sits up all night," James said, over tea one afternoon, "trying to think of nasty things to say to his staff."

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The Saturday after Marcus's first encounter with the new professor James Sinclair ambled out of the front doors of Carston Hall to find the gravelled area in front of the Hall alive with barking hounds and large horses ridden by blonde men with ruddy faces, and haughty looking women wearing tightly fitting hacking jackets, and even tighter jodhpurs. Some of the hounds, James noticed, were tied together in pairs. He joined the quietly affable Dennis Mowbray who was standing on the steps of Hall watching the milling dogs and puffing on his pipe.

"What's happening," James asked.

Dennis puffed thoughtfully on his pipe, then took it out of his mouth. "It's t' local hunt," he replied in his controlled Yorkshire burr, "t' hounds are kept here, and some of t'horses, in' t stables at back of t'Hall."

"Why are the dogs tied together?" James enquired. More puffing from Dennis.

"Aye. Well they're going cubbing. So there's a young dog tied to an ould dog. T'ould dog teaches young un. But they're mostly trained by now. Hunting season starts next month."

A large dapple grey horse and its rider detached themselves from the throng and walked slowly over to Dennis and James. James stepped back nervously as the horse came within biting distance.

"Don't worry," said a husky cut glass voice, "he won't bite. Well, he probably won't bite. Hi Dennis."

Dennis saluted the lady with his pipe, “fine day for it,” he said and mumbled a name which James did not catch because the horse had shaken its head and snorted at him.

“Excuse me,” the woman said apologetically, looking down at James, “I thought you were Marcus. I could swear I saw his car go through the village yesterday.”

“No, er no, 'fraid not. I'm one of Marcus's colleagues. I'm just staying here for a couple of nights. Sort of weekend break. I brought the car back for him. He needs a Land Rover, which I'm going to take back for him on Monday. My name's James Sinclair, by the way.”

“Ah, I see,” the woman said, sounding rather disappointed and not condescending to give James her name. James looked up at her more closely. The riding uniform made it difficult to tell her age, but he reckoned she must be in her late twenties, much the same age as Marcus. She was not unattractive. Her rather bluff county face had aspects of the English rose, but there was a toughness about it which suggested both pain and determination and her eyes had that languid hooded sexiness which promised the kind of bedroom delights which were never far from James’s mind. Her hair was concealed under her velvet cap and a net snood, but what he could see in the net appeared to be a dark streaky blonde. From the acute angle of James's lowly viewpoint her body seemed to more than fill the tight tweed hacking jacket, and the jodhpurs revealed shapely thighs flowing into an acceptably rounded English bottom.

“Will he be coming home soon?” she asked.

“I doubt it. Term starts next Monday. We're all going to be pretty busy for quite a while.”

“Ah, well. Never mind. It would have been nice to have seen him. Hope you have a nice break. Gotta go.” She pulled on the left rein and turned the horse back to rejoin her comrades who talked amongst themselves for a while and then set off down the drive at a very lazy canter, the dogs running excitedly in front of them. Dennis watched them until they were out of sight, then led James round to the stables at the back of the Hall to collect the Land Rover Station Wagon which he intended to take to Whitby for the day. Marcus had told him to use the Porsche, but the Porsche had been more than a little bit scary. A Land Rover was likely to be more predictable. He would go to York on Sunday, and back to the madhouse on Monday.

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At the madhouse, term was about to start, and Marcus found himself desperately writing lectures on a subject which he remembered only vaguely from his own undergraduate courses at Cambridge. Ironically, Sophie had taken Seaton's Nineteenth Century European course in her first year and had kept meticulous notes of his lectures, which were actually quite good because Seaton

had stolen them from a much more conscientious fellow student at Oxford, and had subsequently used them as a quick and dirty method of generating what purported to be his own lecture course at St Dynion's. Sophie had also done some additional reading, carefully annotated and appended to her lecture notes, using the study skills techniques which Marcus, alone amongst his colleagues, had taught to all his students. Her notes were, in fact, so good that Marcus was able to convert them back into acceptable lectures with only minimal additional reading. Thus he found himself unwittingly delivering lectures on Napoleonic Europe almost identical in form and content to those given over fifteen years earlier by the brilliant but odious Professor Darius Mortmain, then a Fellow, but now Master, of Gaveston College in the University of Oxford, to a class which had included the young Professor Rawlings, and should have included the truant Owen Seaton who preferred to spend his afternoons in his digs above the *Waterloo* testing his cannon on Swedish au pair girls.

James returned refreshed from Yorkshire, and plunged straight into the hurly burley of the start of term. There were new students to be seen and advised, old students to welcome back, lecture notes to be dusted off, coffee meetings with returning colleagues, long discussions with Marcus, and then the formal Departmental Meeting which reassembled the entire staff of the History Department, with the exceptions of Dr Owen Seaton, to discuss, at great length, almost anything, relevant or irrelevant, pertaining to the business of the newly opened academic year. Departmental Meetings were traditionally conducted according to Parkinson's Rules and always expanded to fill the time available, whether necessary or not, starting at nine and continuing until curtailed around one by collective hunger. So, at nine o'clock on the Friday at the end of Freshers Week, they all filed into the Seminar Room used for committee meetings and sat quietly chatting and waiting for their new leader to appear. Professor Rawlings kept them waiting, and, when he did at last appear, he informed them that he was introducing a Top Down Management Policy for which Departmental Meetings would not be necessary. He would in future handle all Departmental decisions on his own initiative and deal with members of staff on an individual basis where appropriate. In practice this meant that the Department would be subjected to a blizzard of terse memos demanding information or issuing instructions to be responded to ASAP. He reacted to the audible murmur of discontent from the Senior Lecturers by assuring them that he had the interests of his staff very much at heart, and that in matters of personnel management within the Department he saw his role as being that of a Facilitator who would take all necessary steps to ensure that each member of staff was fully empowered to carry out his, or her, duties to the highest standards. He then dismissed the meeting an hour before the Senior Common Room would open for morning coffee. Professor Rawlings had been to Management Training Seminars in his previous post in an American university and was approximately fifteen years ahead of his time in the introduction of

supermarket management techniques into British universities. But, as Dr Medusa confided to Dr Rhys ap Caradoc on the way back to their rooms, Professor Rawlings was clearly a man with considerable strength of character who was just what the Department needed to get it back to the highest standards of scholarship.

Once term had begun in earnest the underlying routines of academic life re-established themselves and gradually meshed in with the peculiar and evolving domestic arrangements at Penhesgyn. Marcus resumed his medieval teaching, with student enrolment for his courses just above the targets set by Rawlings, and he managed to keep about two weeks ahead of schedule with Seaton's lectures, largely through the help of Sophie who preferred to have him in bed rather than staying up half the night writing lectures, and so spent much of her day drafting lectures from her notes and then going through them with Marcus in the evenings. When Sophie was not writing lectures she was enthusiastically cooking and cleaning, helped, sometimes, by Caroline, and by Marcus who showed an unexpected aptitude for cooking. James was a frequent visitor, and often ate with them, though he was disappointed to find that the casual nudity of the other inhabitants at Penhesgyn was gradually being abandoned as the central heating struggled to cope with the colder weather and everyone huddled under their blankets. James had decided to sell his house which he found to be too full of painful memories. He had not even dared to enter Sandra's room and eventually asked Marcus and Sophie if they would go in and clear Sandra's things out for him. So Marcus and Sophie spent a Saturday afternoon going through Sandra's tacky clothes, and boring underwear, and tawdry jewellery, and all the other things that had made up her ephemeral life, carefully putting them into bin bags for charity shops or the dustbin. And Sophie, predictably, ended up in tears, not for Sandra, but for the banality of Sandra's life, which was the life endured by so many women. James moved out of the house, put his furniture into store, and took over the tenancy of Marcus's flat in Plas Rhianda until his house was sold.

Mid October came and Marcus had still heard nothing from Cambridge, nor was there any summons to attend a disciplinary hearing. It was now more than two months since the oral and well over sixth months since the thesis had been submitted. Eventually pressure from Sophie and Caroline overcame Marcus's timidity and on the 20th of October he summoned up the courage to ring the Syndicate of Research Studies only to be told that the Syndicate would not be meeting until the following Monday and he was advised to ring again on the 26th. Thursday the 26th came and Marcus sat by his phone until about nine thirty, his heart pounding madly. He had delayed ringing earlier partly because he still feared committing himself to the result and partly because he knew from past experience that the office of the Syndicate would not open properly until well after nine. Eventually he brought himself to call the Syndicate's number. His voice was so strained that on the first attempt he gave the College Operator

the wrong number, and had to start again from the beginning. When he eventually got through to the Syndicate the phone was answered by a laconic female secretary. He faltered for a moment, not quite sure what to say. It seemed to him incredible that whilst he had become so ultra confident with carnality, the intellect in which he had once placed so much trust was now vulnerable to the darkest of anxieties.

"I er..er..I'm ringing about my Ph.D. candidature. I was told last week that the result would be available today."

"Yes," said a distant female voice, "what is your name please?"

Marcus gasped for breath and tried to remember his name.

"My name," he mumbled, "er, Marcus Ross, Gallus College."

"One moment please," the phone went dead.

There was a long delay, nearly five minutes. Then the woman returned to the phone.

"Mr Ross, Mr Snagge would like to talk to you, but he hasn't come into the office yet. If you give me your number Mr Snagge will ring you back when he comes in."

Marcus's heart sank. He gave the secretary his number and rang off. He slumped into his chair, a sick sensation in his stomach. Why couldn't they just tell him?

During the rest of the morning he received a multitude of calls, from other tutors, from the academic office, and one from Sophie who wanted to know what had happened. Each time the phone rang his heart stopped, and he reached for the receiver, dry mouthed with fear.

The call from Cambridge did not come until after lunch. Mr Snagge was the Secretary of the Syndicate of Research Studies. He was an affable bachelor with a leisurely and totally disinterested attitude to his job. Since he never met research students, except at the occasional formal dinner, they meant no more to him than names on the Syndicate's list of candidates. Their hopes and fears, their anxiety and impatience, had no meaning for him at all. He did not even conceive of them as real people. They were just academic fodder grinding through the mills of scholarship. But Mr Snagge did know both the proper names and the nicknames of each of the two hundred or so teddy bears which adorned every shelf and wall in his neat little flat in Paradise Street.

"Mr Ross?" he asked. Marcus's heart was pounding again, his stomach twisted in on itself.

"Yes," Marcus replied breathlessly, "Marcus Ross here."

"Ah..." there was a long pause, "Mr Ross. Good afternoon Mr Ross." Snagge's mincing voice was slow, measured, infinitely remote. "About your Ph.D. candidature Mr Ross." Another long pause, "I'm afraid I have some rather bad new for you."

"Bad news," Marcus whispered, unable to believe his ears. The telephone was an unreal thing, a choking emissary from the icy nightmare of blind

irrationality which had lurked at the back of his consciousness since that day on the motorway. He shivered with apprehension.

"Are you there Mr Ross?" Snagge asked, without emotion or interest.

"Yes, yes," Marcus croaked, the breath almost squeezed out of his lungs by the bands which were tightening round his chest.

"The Syndicate has considered the examiners' reports on your thesis, and has decided to refer your thesis back to you for revision."

"Oh no,"Marcus croaked, "no, no." He was drowning now in a bottomless pit of cold despair. Something must be seriously wrong. How could it be referred back. It was unthinkable. To have to go through the whole process again.

"You may either accept the degree of M.Litt," Snagge continued, a slight measure of irritation in his even tone, as though Marcus had sinned against the bureaucracy by creating complications and interrupting the standard patter reserved for these occasions, "or you may rewrite your dissertation to the satisfaction of the Syndicate, taking into account the criticisms raised by the examiners, and within a time limit which will be prescribed by the Syndicate if you should decide to rewrite."

"Oh, my God," Marcus interjected, "this can't be possible, my supervisor was satisfied with my thesis. And they did not raise any serious questions at the oral."

Snagge was not diverted from his course. "If you decide to rewrite," he continued at his even pace, "you will, of course, be allowed to see extracts from the examiners' reports. These will be sent to your supervisor. I shall write to you in due course to explain the rules and procedures which must be followed. That is all that I can tell you at the moment."

Marcus was speechless. He sat rigid, holding the receiver in front of him and staring at it unbelievingly. After a while Snagge replaced his receiver and the phone went dead. Marcus continued to stare at the phone then slowly replaced it on its cradle. He sat frozen in his chair, stricken with horror. Perhaps there was some mistake. It was inconceivable that so much effort could be thrown away. Perhaps the call had been a dream. Perhaps he had misunderstood. Wild thoughts surged through his head. In his mind he had already failed. He could not now stay at St Dynion's. The shame was too great. How could he continue to work with people who took doctorates for granted? How could he watch his students go on to gain doctorates when he himself had failed? He would be condemned to live in an environment where each humiliating day would remind him of his failure. His cherished hopes collapsed around him in tiny fragments. He struggled desperately to find some remnant of reason to which he could cling. There was a timid knock on the door which opened without waiting for a response and a student popped his head round.

"Mr Ross.." he began.

“Go away, please,” Marcus snapped in anguish. The student looked at him, surprised, then nodded and backed out, closing the door quietly behind him.

Marcus's mind continued to race down every possible avenue. Perhaps the thesis was being referred back for minor corrections. The minor errors to which he had drawn Armiger's attention at the end of the oral. He grabbed at this tiny hope. This must surely be the explanation. The only logical explanation. Now he was back again in a state of total doubt. Twenty minutes earlier he had hoped that the matter would at last be settled. Now he would have to wait again. Why did he have wait so long? If they had told him at the oral, or just after, he would have had the whole summer to make the necessary corrections. He would have to wait for Snagge's letter. Pray God it would arrive soon. He tried to compose himself. Wait for the letter from the Syndicate then talk to Bob Vavassour and make whatever corrections were required. It might not be so bad after all.

When he had calmed himself down Marcus went to see James. James was shocked and sympathetic. He too could not believe that it was possible and tried to reassure Marcus that could only be a matter of minor adjustments. His own Cambridge doctorate had gone through on the nod. That was the usual way, but sometimes candidates did have to make minor adjustments to satisfy some picky examiner. It would probably turn out to be something very minor.

“It's been going on for so long now,” Marcus complained, almost in tears. “over six years of really hard work, and the last three years have been such a struggle, with all the teaching I've had to do. Then all that waiting. Months. And now this. And there's still nothing to look forward to but more waiting. It's too much.”

“Cheer up,” said James hopefully, “you've got your girls. You can expect a lot of comfort tonight I should think.” James's mind was never far from the sex that he was not enjoying, “why don't you ring your supervisor?” he added, more constructively, “after all, he's in Cambridge. Maybe he knows something about it. Maybe he can ask some questions at the Syndicate to find out what's happened. I've always thought it odd that the Supervisor does not sit in on the oral as they do here, and in most provincial universities. It's inconceivable that the Syndicate would refer your thesis back to you without first consulting your Supervisor.”

“Yes, yes,” said Marcus excitedly, “I was going to wait until I heard from the Syndicate. But yes, I'll ring him now.” He rushed out of James's room and back to the hut. The stroppy operator once again asked him if he really needed to make a second call to Cambridge. Marcus took her head off, and the call was put through to Walsingham College. Vavassour did not know the result of the Marcus's thesis and had not been consulted by Syndicate. He was as surprised as Marcus.

“This has never happened to me before,” he said, his normally rich baritone voice curiously cold and distorted.

Oh, God Marcus thought, *he's angry with me for letting him down. None of his other students has ever failed a doctorate. Christ, what a mess.*

"You'd better get hold of the examiners' reports," said Vavassour, "then we can see what's gone wrong."

"Mr Snagge said he was going to write to me and that the reports would be sent to you."

"Yes, I think that is the procedure, but since this has never happened to me before I am not sure myself." The edge remained in his voice.

"Would you be able to find out what has happened," Marcus asked diffidently, "unofficially."

"I, er, don't think it would be advisable for me to make too much fuss at this stage," the hard edge was becoming more pronounced, "I will make some discreet enquiries. But I can't promise anything." There was a definite hedging quality to Vavassour's voice. Marcus wondered frantically whether he was entirely trustworthy, then dismissed the idea as absurd.

"I'll let you know if I hear anything," Vavassour said, and rang off abruptly.

Marcus was still totally at a loss. Sudden horror began to subside into numb despair. He stumbled through his afternoon lecture, misreading his notes, stammering and mumbling incoherently. After a while the students stopped taking notes and sat quite still, looking at him curiously. He battled on, but contrived to finish the lecture early then returned to his office and sat back in his chair, staring blankly at the ceiling. Around five Caroline would come from the library and they would go back to Penhesgyn together. In the interim he struggled to come to terms with his predicament. In addition to the shock of possible failure he began to feel humiliated and ashamed.

The rejection of his thesis, if it came to that, would not cost him his job. There were, after all, many older academics, who did not have doctorates and the award of the lectureship to Marcus had not been conditional on obtaining one himself. But he had failed to clear the bar at the first jump. In his mind he had failed, and lost something for which he had worked very hard indeed. And there were other considerations. To most ordinary people failing examinations was just one of the regrettable facts of life. Everyone failed examinations at some stage, and in the broad scheme of things it didn't usually matter very much. Marcus's predicament might seem unfortunate but it was not in any way tragic. Just one of those things. Marcus, however, belonged to a profession dedicated to excellence in which passing exams with top marks was expected as a matter of course. One could take a Third class degree in law and still practise at the Bar, even become a Home Secretary. One could take a Third class degree in Medicine and still be unleashed on patients, but Academia is the hardest of all professions to enter, nothing less than a First or a very top Two One will even qualify for consideration. How could Marcus examine others with confidence if he could not himself pass the most exacting of examinations? The rejection of his thesis must inevitably undermine his authority and expose him

to attacks from malicious colleagues like Seaton or Medusa. And if rewriting proved to be impossible and he was obliged to accept the M.Litt. his chances of ever escaping from St Dynion's for a better university would be lost forever because he would be competing with candidates who would have their doctorates, and potential employers who would know that the M.Litt signified a failed doctorate. Even within St Dynion's he could put aside any hope of promotion. And how was the awful Professor Rawlings going to react to this situation? Sooner or later he was going to have to tell him.

At five o'clock Caroline appeared and knew at once that something was wrong. Marcus's face was drawn and haggard and when he stood up to greet her with a hug, as he always did, he fell instead into her arms and burst into tears. It distressed her deeply, but at the same time she felt her love for Marcus enhanced by it. Marcus was like Sophie, a gentle vulnerable person who had genuine feelings and had trusted her enough to reveal them to her. She hugged him, and little by little he told her what had happened. Later, in bed with Sophie, they talked patiently to the bewildered Marcus, held him tightly and caressed him and did their best to restore his confidence in himself.

It was nearly two weeks before Snagge's promised letter arrived and it merely repeated verbatim what he had said on the phone, except that it pointed out that, if he chose to rewrite, the revised version would not necessarily be re-examined by the original examiners and he would be required to observe the overall word limit applied to all Cambridge dissertations. Although the letter only confirmed the disappointment and misery which had begun with Snagge's original call it compounded Marcus's growing despair which the two girls desperately struggled to contain. The continued strain of waiting began to have a serious effect on his teaching. He became quieter and more withdrawn, and less friendly to the students whose company he had once enjoyed so much. He stopped going to the Senior Common Room altogether because he felt ashamed and humiliated at the prospect of being obliged to tell other colleagues what had happened. Although he had told no one but James and the girls about the thesis, he still felt that everyone must know about it, staff and students alike, and that all were whispering about him. He found it difficult to look people in the face, fearing that they were either pitying him, or condemning him, when in truth they knew nothing. It seemed to him that the whole world had become a monstrous whisper of accusation. He began to keep away from people, avoiding his colleagues, and staying in his room at all times, except when lecturing. Lectures themselves became waking nightmares, facing eighty or ninety students, each of whom, he believed, knew about his shame and failure. He could sense them whispering to each other, giggling, or sitting in their neat rows, staring at him curiously as though he was some strange animal mouthing meaninglessly at them from the lectern. He began to think of failure as a visible excrescence, something which both attracted and nauseated people. In a supermarket he found himself shouting insanely at an entirely innocent shop

assistant until Sophie grabbed him by the arm and pushed him forcefully out of the shop. Sometimes, to the extreme consternation of Sophie and Caroline, he lay in bed at night grinding his teeth, thinking thoughts of extreme violence and hatred, withering his persecutors and flaying them into bloody fragments. At other times he slept fitfully, and, when he did manage to sleep properly, he would sometimes awake sweating from dark and grisly nightmares.

Eventually the two girls had suffered enough. Marcus woke shouting from a dark dream of Jenny Saville hurling herself off the balcony to find the girls sitting on either side of him holding his hands. Sophie's gentle face was sad and tearful. Caroline's was grim.

“Dearest Marcus,” Sophie said quietly, “please come back to us. We love you so much. You're making yourself ill. If you go on like this you will have a nervous breakdown. Please come back to us Marcus. Remember the Grosvenor, remember how you saved me from despair when I had my degree results. Don't give in to this darling. It isn't worth it.”

“Marcus,” Caroline was more direct, “listen to me, listen. You're making a fool of yourself, and Sophie's right, if you go on like this you will become ill. We aren't going to lose you Marcus. I shouldn't say this because I could be in the same situation when I submit my doctorate next year. You're jumping the gun, as you so often do. Your thesis has not been failed. It is merely being sent back for revision. Until you get the reports you must stay calm and snap out of this depression. You're jumping to conclusions without evidence. The last thing that any historian should do. And if you can't rewrite the thesis, then write it off. Take the M.Litt. and publish your research to vindicate yourself. You can easily say that you refused to rewrite the thesis as a matter of principle because you believed the examiners to be wrong. And remember this Marcus, even if you have to abandon the doctorate, you are still a very lucky man. You have a lectureship, which is not an easy thing to come by, even at St Dynion’s. I doubt that I shall ever have an academic career, much as I would like one. You are also a rich man with status and position in another society to which you can return. Think what it would be like for you if you were just a junior lecturer with nothing to fall back on. And you have us. You have two beautiful women who adore you and will do anything for you. Do not let us down Marcus. Sophie is right. You must come back to us, and we will help you through this, whatever the outcome. But it must end.”

And end it did when the reports finally arrived, two weeks later, in an envelope bearing the crest of Walsingham College and accompanied by a short note from Professor Vavassour. *Dear Marcus,* it read, *Herewith the examiners' reports on your doctoral dissertation. I make no comment on them at this stage, except to say that I am sorry to present you with such depressing reading. Technically I am not permitted to allow you to see the full reports but under the circumstances I think you are entitled to see them in full and form your own opinion. I must remind you that these reports should be treated as highly*

confidential and should be used only for your own guidance. There is one other point. I have heard that the examiners felt that you were unwilling to fully develop or discuss at the oral certain points of issue in your dissertation. It was also suggested that you had taken too long to complete and submit the dissertation. There is, as you know, a four year time limit and extensions to this may be counted against you. This information is, of course, unattributable. All best wishes. Bob Vavassour.

Marcus unfolded the reports. The long delays between the stages in the demolition of his thesis had induced in him a fatalistic resignation to the inevitable. He was already growing accustomed to the idea of being a failure, and much of the emotional tension which had plagued him earlier was now defused, to the great relief of Caroline and Sophie who were beginning to despair, and had been increasingly in each others arms rather than sharing themselves with the irascible Marcus. Marcus approached the reports with something of his old clear and logical mind. It was the unremitting uncertainty that had so distressed him. Now he could at least see what had gone wrong, and perhaps take steps to put it right. It was, however, immediately obvious that the thesis had not been returned for minor corrections. The reports ran to several pages of badly typed text, and at first they appeared to be quite detailed, but as he read them Marcus realised that his thesis had been subtly and deliberately destroyed and his despair and depression began to congeal into a coldly blazing rage.

The first report was simply marked Report of Examiner A. There was no name on it, but it was long and fairly detailed and Marcus guessed that it was the work of Roger Vipont, if only because of the frequent recurrence of the terms R*etaining* and *Duchy of Lancaster* which echoed Vipont's litany at the oral. The second report, that of Examiner B, who must be Armiger, was short and brutal. It consisted of four abrupt sentences. The first of these raised a trivial point, the second and third reiterated in a bowdlerised form some of the comments of Examiner A, and the fourth delivered the *coup de grace*, declaring Marcus's work to be *unoriginal both in conception and in execution*. It was a travesty of an examiner's report. Armiger had clearly given Marcus's thesis no serious consideration whatsoever and had dismissed it out of hand without offering any substantial justification for doing so. It was very hard to understand how such a report could have been accepted by the academic members of the Syndicate of Research Studies. He returned to Vipont's report which was superficially better argued and more consistent than that of Armiger, certainly sufficiently persuasive to convince the non-experts at the Syndicate. A closer inspection revealed a vacuous repetition of the same theme. The report was roughly divided into three sections. The first gave an account of the thesis, drawing attention to certain very minor errors and omissions which Marcus would have been the first to admit, but also offering considerable praise both for the findings of the thesis, its intellectual originality, and for the considerable and

meticulous effort which had gone into collecting and assembling the raw research. Scattered through this section were insistent references to the question of Retaining. The second section reiterated the critical parts of the first section, again with emphasis on the importance of Retaining as a source of income for the Yorkshire knights, and the third section boiled all the criticisms down to the problem of Retaining.

As he read and reread the report Marcus realised that Vipont was desperately searching for some excuse to reject a thesis with which he could find no substantial fault. Thus, failing to find any overwhelming errors of commission, he had placed all of his critical emphasis on alleged errors of omission. Towards the end of his report Vipont laid all his cards on the table. *It might be argued* he had written, *that this thesis should be judged solely on the basis of what it does contain, much of which is of considerable merit and offers a genuinely innovative insight in the previously poorly defined lives of these humble local gentry. But in this case the omission of any investigation of Retaining as a source of income must constitute a serious defect in the candidate's research. It is therefore recommended that this thesis be referred back to the candidate for substantial rewriting and revision to show evidence of investigation of the role of Retaining in determining the political allegiance and financial rewards available to the gentry.*

Despite his rage Marcus was surprised to find that he could read this report with reasonable equanimity. He was, of course, very angry indeed. But on the other hand he was satisfied that his work was being rejected not for any failing in effort or technique but simply because of the eccentricity or sheer malice of the examiners and the incompetence of the Syndicate of Research Studies which had accepted their verdict without question. On the other hand Vipont had very cleverly created a Catch 22 situation in which he avoided failing the thesis outright by demanding conditions for revision which were impossible to meet. Finding evidence of retaining amongst the subjects of Marcus's study would be like looking for an invisible needle in an enormous haystack. Like God and Secret Files, the non existence of something that probably did not exist was impossible to prove. Rewriting was not an option.

In view of the scale of the injustice which was being practised on him, and because he had already decided what he was going to do, Marcus ignored the Syndicate's strictures on confidentiality and took the reports to show to James Sinclair.

James read the reports in silence. Marcus watched his face set, noted the growing hardness about his mouth and the furrows deepening on his forehead. Eventually he looked up, his face miserable and disappointed.

“That looks pretty final,” he said, “they're virtually asking you to rewrite the thesis from scratch, and from a completely different point of view. They’ve stitched you up Marcus. And the report of Examiner B is scandalous. It's not my field, but I'd say that Examiner B didn't know the first thing about your thesis,

and didn't care about it. For some reason he just wanted to fail it, largely on the back of Examiner A. Shit, how bloody disgusting. One examiner plagiarising another. This really is the end. I'm so sorry. What can say?"

Marcus looked glum, "That's it, I'm afraid. I'm reconciled to losing the whole thing. Armiger's report is outrageous. What kind of bastard casually throws away six years of someone's life on such a flimsy pretext?"

"Oh brave new world that hath such bastards in it." James muttered. "What about this business of retaining? Is it really crucial? Couldn't you do the research and resubmit?"

"No, that's the clever bit. The evidence doesn't exist. Retaining is what replaced the old feudal bond, but it doesn't really start in earnest until the fourteenth century. Essentially it means the buying of allegiance where a lord, usually a baron, pays a fee of money to someone in return for his support and loyalty. It works both ways. Once the agreement is concluded the lord supports his retainer at a baronial level and the retainer supports the lord at a local level, but unlike the feudal bond, no land changes hands. It's sometimes known as Bastard Feudalism because it's just an informal cash nexus, often not even written down, just verbal and not even really binding. If you weren't satisfied with your lord you just upped sticks and found another one. Therefore there is often no evidence, even in the fifteenth century when it was rife. It was one of the factors which caused the Wars of the Roses."

"Yes, even I remember that. K.B. McFarlane, and all that stuff. Used to be a big wheel in Oxford. Made lots of enemies. Still, could you rewrite?"

"Well, it seems to me that there are three things to consider. Firstly, there is a matter of principle."

"Ha," said James, "academics are the very last people on earth to stand out for principles."

"Well, I think it's important. It seems to me quite wrong that a doctorate should be obtained only by pandering to the whims of an examiner who is clearly hostile and protecting his own interests. That seems to me to be the worst kind of intellectual obscurantism."

"I wouldn't worry about that. It happens all the time in the sciences. They write, if you can call it that, their tuppenny ha'penny doctorates, for specific examiners. They never fail. And two month's later someone in America writes a research paper proving that they were wrong. But they still keep their doctorates."

"That's not much consolation to me," Marcus said sadly, "the second point is that they're asking me to look for something which probably isn't there. Suppose I go and do all of the research that Vipont suggests and still find nothing, which is very likely indeed. What do I do then? If Vipont can reject this thesis on such flimsy grounds, what's to stop him coming back and accusing me of not having done the research because I haven't found anything. Or, suppose I do find evidence of retaining. It won't change the fundamental

conclusions of the thesis which are to do with the origins of parliament. But in order to incorporate new findings I would have to cut out other relevant material to keep within the word limit. And then, thirdly, suppose I do all this and resubmit. I might get a completely new set of examiners. Suppose I get someone else, with a different bee in his bonnet, who rejects my thesis again for omitting whatever I might have to cut out to satisfy Vipont. I can't win. Look, Vipont's report is a load of rubbish. It's shot full of factual and logical errors. It's badly written, and it's blatantly biased in favour of his own interests. But that report was read, accepted and acted upon by some committee of supposedly responsible moderators in the Syndicate for Research Studies. One can't have any confidence in a committee like that. You don't even have to be a medievalist to see that it's all wrong." Marcus ran out of breath, and looked sullenly at James, panting and red faced. "Oh, hell," he continued in desperation, "It's just been going on too bloody long. I'm not putting up with any more of it. What's the bloody point?"

"Steady on," said James, "calm down. Think. What are you going to do?"

"I'll have to accept the sodding M.Litt. It probably means that I will have to stay at St Dynion's, but, if I'm going to be a failure, St Dynion's is as good a place as any to be a failure in. I can concentrate on teaching. I enjoy that."

"You could always publish your thesis," James said gently, "that might redress the balance a bit. If your work is really good you'll get the recognition anyway. Publications outweigh doctorates in the long run."

"I tell you what I'd like to do," Marcus snapped, "I'd like to take one of my shotguns and blow their bloody heads off."

"That's not a good idea," said James soothingly, "and you know it, and its unworthy of you. But there is an alternative. The pen is mightier than the sword. What you need to do is make them feel guilty. Why don't you write a novel about this. After all, the last sixth months of your life have been pretty outrageous, what with those sex mad girls, and Penhesgyn, and Seaton's antics, and the thesis. It would therapeutic, even if you didn't set out to have it published. Work out your anger on paper. Murder them in your mind. Do them to a ghastly and violent end. Killing them in your mind would be as satisfying to an intellectual like you as killing them in real life. Think how you would feel if someone hated you so much that they wrote a novel about you and murdered you in it."

Marcus pondered this option. It would never have occurred to him in a month of Sundays. "It's certainly a thought," he said, eventually, "I've always wanted to write a novel," he paused, "who doesn't? But I don't think that I have the technical skill."

"Oh, you don't need much skill. Have you ever read a modern novel? Look at some of the rubbish that gets published and makes vast sums of money for very indifferent talents. Though not for me, sad to say. I must be an extremely indifferent talent. Listen, no one has ever written a convincing novel about the

realities of university life. I mean, The *Masters* is not about any university which you or I would recognise as being real and *Lucky Jim* is just packed full of amiable eccentrics, the standard stereotype of *Salad Days* academia. Tom Sharp is on target but usually goes over the top. Have a look at Malcolm Bradbury. He's pretty close to reality. Tell it like it is. Malicious egomaniac loonies who wreck lives and careers."

"I suppose I could have a go," Marcus mused, "but not just yet. Revenge is best studied and delivered at arm's length."

"There you are then," James was pleased to have diverted Marcus's desperate anger, "write about what you know about. Write about the things that have happened to you. Plenty of sex and violence. You know. Make it juicy. You won't even need to invent the sex," he added wistfully, remembering Caroline's firm lithe body.

"Why do you think that Vipont offered me a rewrite?" Marcus returned to his torment, "His criticisms appear so damning that he could have failed my thesis outright and got away with it. Armiger would not have hesitated. Why offer the option?"

James sighed, "ah, just cowardice and perfidy," he said, "academics are constitutionally incapable of taking decisions. They'll sit around for hours talking about doing something, but action comes to them about as naturally as flying does to pigs. They don't like taking decisions. By offering you the choice of an impossible rewrite or accepting an M.Litt they force you to take the final decision. They have effectively asked you to fail yourself, knowing that they have left you no viable alternative. That way they can absolve themselves of all responsibility for your fate. And the sentence of execution is carried out by some blind bureaucrat who does the dirty work for them. Like the Cheka used to get its victims to sign their own death warrants."

"Why me though?" Marcus complained, "I can understand that Armiger is a nutter who might have had some grudge because I didn't take much interest in Gallus when I was there. I mean, he's known to be like that. But why Vipont? What have I ever done to him? I'd never even met him before the oral."

"Well, as you said, he's young. He's a fellow of an Oxford college, unlike us! He's just published his first book. He probably thinks he's God's gift to scholarship. There is kudos to be made from knocking down other academics, and their students. Maybe he doesn't like your supervisor, what's his name, Vavassour. Maybe he's in the pocket of someone else who doesn't like your supervisor, for reasons which you know nothing about. It's common enough in Oxbridge. They're still feudal institutions and both are riddled with lethal jealousies. Research students are just pawns to be played off and sacrificed in high table games. Makes you sick doesn't it. Our best universities. The glory and the wonder of the world. They are sleep walking to a catastrophe, once the politicians get their hand on them. Which is bound to happen, sooner or later. You've seen Professor Rawlings. He's just the first of a new breed. The age of

genteel eccentricity is almost over. The age of Darwinian Managerialism is staring us in the face and the enemy is already inside the gates. Anyway, cheer up Marcus. At least you know where you stand. You can make a new start. You can escape, you have plenty of options. Think what it would be like if you were not rich. What if you were just an ordinary junior lecturer on a junior lecturer's salary and nothing else? Your life really would be in ruins. What are you going to do next?"

"I'm going to collect Caroline from the library. Go back to Penhesgyn, and shag those girls until they scream for mercy."

"*Amor Vincit*. Good for you," said James, gloomily wishing he had someone to shag, and thinking idly about the big boobed horsewoman at Carston Hall.

Marcus did not, however, celebrate his sudden decisiveness with an orgy. Apart from anything else he did not want to drag Caroline away from her own research to which she was now applying herself with steely determination. Unlike the naively ambitious Marcus she had not committed herself to trying to wring blood out of a quarry of obdurate stones and had chosen instead to work on a doctoral topic which had easily accessible and mostly printed sources from which she could hope to complete her primary research and write up within the three years limit of her grant. Marcus, by contrast, had chosen a topic for which useful evidence was so ephemeral that he had been obliged to devote the full three years of his research studentship to ploughing through mountains of unproductive original sources in the Public Record Office before he could even begin to write his thesis. The fact that he was now being accused of not having read an even larger mountain of even less productive sources to satisfy the whim of an arrogant and unscrupulous examiner was thus doubly galling. If he had been sensible Marcus would have used his private income to fund another year in Cambridge to write up his findings. Instead he had applied for, and accepted, the lecturing post at St Dynion's, the outrageous demands of which had taken priority over his research and crippled it. Caroline was not going to make the same mistake and, in order to meet the deadline she had set for herself, she was increasingly working late, either in the college library, or in Drew's little study, which she shared with Marcus, and was not always available for sex with either of her bed mates who were often asleep by the time she got into bed. In part this was also a reaction to Marcus's recent depression, which the impatient Caroline had found increasingly hard to tolerate, preferring instead to leave him to the tenderer mercies of Sophie who was much better at resisting the temptation to tell Marcus to snap out of it and get his act together.

Instead of giving in to his gonads Marcus went back to his office in the dank hut and began a careful analysis of the examiner's reports. The report of Examiner B he set aside, because nothing useful could be said about it. But he worked systematically through Vipont's report and discovered that the great majority of Vipont's criticisms of his thesis could be refuted either on factual or on logical grounds, or else reduced to mere matters of opinion for which there was no substantial evidence, either way. Indeed Vipont's crucial argument about the importance of Retaining was itself nothing more than an opinion advanced without any substantial historical evidence. Marcus made notes on Vipont's report then wrote a long and detailed critique which he sent to the Syndicate of Research Studies, pointing out the many errors in Vipont's arguments, and asking the Syndicate to reconsider its decision. He did not for one minute expect that the letter would have any effect, for he knew from experience that bureaucracies in general never reverse decisions, even if they were proved to be wrong, and university bureaucracies were particularly notorious in this respect.

He had, in any case, quite reconciled himself to accepting the M.Litt., though he maintained just a little hope that the Syndicate might show either wisdom or justice. In fact, unknown to Marcus, there was to be a major row in the Cambridge History Faculty when various eminent history Fellows read his thesis at Vavassour's request and demanded to know why it had been referred back. But Marcus did not hear about this until much later, and ructions in the History Faculty had little impact on the immutable decisions of the Syndicate of Research Studies.

Marcus, in spite of his naivety and idealism, was basically a tough and resilient person, especially when faced with certainties. Now that the thesis had come to a definitive end he was able to write it off and put the experience behind him. In one sense the shock of having to accept the loss of the doctorate had jolted him out of the rut of academic research, and released his undoubted creativity into broader areas of interest which became increasingly attractive the more he thought about them. The career he had hoped for as a scholar was, he believed, lost forever. His academic confidence, which had never been strong, had been completely destroyed and he did not feel able to regain it. But he was a good teacher and there was ample room there for a worthwhile and rewarding life helping others to achieve their full intellectual potential, though he could not expect any form or recognition or promotion for an activity which most career academics treated with contempt. He would probably have to stay at St Dynion's because the stigma of the M.Litt., which was generally awarded only to those who had failed to make the doctoral grade, would disqualify him for most university jobs, though probably not for jobs lower down the higher education hierarchy. He also wrote to Professor Vavassour, advising him of his opinion of the examiners' reports, and informing him of his decision not to attempt a rewrite on the terms demanded by Vipont.

Towards the end of November Marcus received three letters, all with Cambridge postmarks. One was from the Syndicate of Research Studies which acknowledged receipt of his critique of his examiners' reports and enquired sarcastically whether he had bothered to consult his supervisor about rewriting. Professor Vavassour's letter was equally unhelpful. He passed no judgement on either of the examiners' reports, or on Marcus's criticism of them, but suggested that there was very little that Marcus could do to satisfy the terms laid down for rewriting, which implied that Vavassour shared Marcus's view that retaining was not a relevant issue. Marcus decided not to waste any more time on a lost cause. He wrote back to Vavassour thanking him for his advice and informing him that he would accept the M.Litt. A similar letter was sent to the Syndicate of Research Studies and Marcus turned his back on Cambridge. The third letter was from Francis Clifford who had been his undergraduate Special Subject supervisor at Cambridge and had been present at the History Faculty Board when it had debated Marcus's predicament. It was a furious letter, sympathising with Marcus and informing him of two other cases where doctoral theses had

been thrown out on equally flimsy grounds. In one case the draconian Professor Bosewitch had failed a thesis because he objected to the punctuation of the footnotes. The other had been highly praised at the oral but inexplicably rejected by the Syndicate without any kind of explanation. It was, Clifford admitted, cold comfort to know that one was not the only victim. Clifford had read Marcus's thesis and so had Margaret Scrivenor, another, and very eminent medievalist, though not in Marcus's field, and both had agreed that it was no better or worse than many others which had gone through the examination process without any serious question. There had been a brief but heated row in the History Faculty and questions asked about what was going on in the Syndicate of Research Studies, but nothing had come of it. Marcus folded this letter thoughtfully and put it carefully into his filing cabinet. The letters from Vavassour and the Syndicate he tore up and threw into his waste basket. He would not suffer these devious people any more. Unlike Sophie, he decided not to go to the degree ceremony, electing instead to take the degree in Absentia. He did not see it as cowardice, but rather as a futile gesture of contempt, which Cambridge was very unlikely to notice. Sophie and Caroline were a little disappointed at this because they thought it would be fun to go to a Cambridge degree ceremony, not to mention a good excuse for dressing up. Marcus was obdurate, but agreed that they would spend Christmas at Carston and try to get Drew and Jaz and the others there as well.

These things done, and a possible future mapped out in his mind, Marcus collected Caroline as usual at five o'clock and they went home to discuss his plans with Sophie. Caroline, relieved that Marcus was coming out of his depression, and feeling more than normally randy, awarded herself an evening off in order to shag the miraculously recovered Marcus until he screamed for mercy, much to the delight of Sophie who had been worried sick about Marcus's mental health and was over the moon at having him back in the land of the loving. Post coital discussion about their collective future was more complicated. The implications of living together as a threesome had not really been considered in the first flush of their collective passion and when they stopped to think about it they realised that it was not going to be easy. Whilst the laid back atmosphere at Penhesgyn had its advantages it was more than a bit ramshackled, and having to share with the other extremely liberated tenants, whilst sometimes highly entertaining, was less attractive to them than it had once been. The most pressing and significant problem, however, was how to manage Caroline's future since she was determined to have an academic career which, once she had finished her own doctorate, was likely to take her away from St Dynion's, as Marcus had left Carston and Cambridge in order to start on his own career. Sophie had no such ambition and wished only to be with Marcus, wherever he might be. At some stage Caroline would have to choose and the choice, when it came, was going to be painful for all of them. In the meantime Sophie's soft lips and curling tongue had coaxed Marcus into another

erection so further discussion of the future was put on hold, and, when they had finished with him, Marcus was so exhausted that he was unable to think about anything but sleep.

These missives from Cambridge were not the only letters which came to plague Marcus and his friends. Three weeks before the end of the Michaelmas term James Sinclair received an unexpected letter in an ominous manilla envelope with an official government postmark which summoned him to attend a Coroner's Court in Bangor on Wednesday the 6th of December in respect of the death of his wife. Marcus received an equally brutal, but not unexpected, summons to attend a college disciplinary tribunal on the 12th of December, three days before the end of term, with an invitation to bring along a legal representative, AUT official, or a friend. They agreed to support each other and so, on the appointed day, Marcus, Caroline and Sophie sat in the public gallery in the Coroners Court in Bangor and listened to dessicated lawyers unravelling the circumstances leading up to the death of Sandra Maureen Sinclair. The court was old and decayed, and from the public gallery it was almost impossible to hear what was being said because of the gale outside reverberating through the ill fitting skylights in the domed roof above the court area. Four witnesses were called, but only three had responded. The pathologist and the policeman both gave long, detailed, and graphic accounts of the reasons for Sandra Sinclair's death during which Sophie's grip on Marcus's hand got tighter and tighter. After the report of the pathologist and Detective Inspector Roberts, Owen Seaton was called to give evidence. He did not appear. The fourth witness was James. He took the stand and swore the oath.

"As you know," the Coroner said, "the purpose of this court is to determine how your wife died and not to assign any blame or liability. That decision lies with the police. Now the last person to see your wife alive was Dr Owen Seaton with whom, it appears, she was indulging in the practice of sexual bondage. First of all, as I understand it, Dr Seaton is a colleague of yours but as we have seen, he is not present at this court. Do you have any knowledge of his whereabouts?"

"I believe that he is in Cuba, on a sabbatical year."

"Cuba?" the Coroner's voice was raised questioningly.

"Yes, he is a specialist in modern Cuban History. I understand that he had received a grant to do field work in Cuba for six months."

"I see. Well he should be here and his absence is inconvenient. However the facts in this case seem to be fairly clear cut. We do have a statement from Dr Seaton which generally tallies with your statement. We also have photographs of Mrs Sinclair taken by the police at the time of her death which show that she had partially fallen off the bed and the pathologist has explained how the shock of falling would have caused her to inhale sharply through her mouth causing her to partially swallow the chiffon material with which she had been gagged and which she could not remove because she had been tied up in such a way that

she could not move at all. I believe that it is called hog tying. I understand that gags are commonly used in bondage activities as a means of heightening sexual response. We also have a photograph taken by you, Dr Sinclair, which shows Dr Seaton in the process of coitus with your wife. In particularly it shows that her head was hanging backwards over the edge of the bed, and the gag is clearly visible in her mouth. The pathologist has explained how the flow of blood to her head in this position would probably have caused her to lose consciousness at the time of orgasm, after which she apparently slid off the bed, twisting her neck on the floor and involuntarily swallowing on the gag. My second question relates to your statement that your wife was a willing participant in the activities leading up to her death." The Coroner paused, he was a young man, earnest and determined. "I have summoned you here because I want to be absolutely certain about this, and to be sure that you are also absolutely certain. I realise that this may be painful for you. And I must tell you that this line of questioning is not entirely proper to the remit of a Coroner's inquest which should be concerned only with the cause of death and not with the reasons for that death. So I will not hold you to account if you do not wish to reply. Please take your time but please think very carefully about your answer. I know what you said in your statement, but I will ask you again. Was your wife, in your opinion, a genuinely willing participant in this act of bondage?"

It dawned on James that he was in a position to do serious harm to Seaton. If he were to lie and say that Sandra was not a willing participant Seaton might well be charged with manslaughter and could end up in prison. The temptation to lie in the interests of inflicting justice on Owen Seaton was a very attractive proposition indeed. James wavered. He looked at the troika in the public gallery for inspiration. Marcus was sitting with his head in hands. Caroline appeared cold and inscrutable. Sophie was looking straight at him, her face anxious and perplexed. Music of celestial purity floated into his mind. He recognised it as Pamina exhorting Papageno to tell the truth in Mozart's Magic Flute. *I must tell the truth* James found himself thinking. Sophie's face relaxed and something approaching a smile of approval played around her lips. *I will tell the truth,* James thought again. In the intricately woven threads of blind causality it was a decision which was to have potentially fatal consequences.

James hesitated for just a moment. "The first time I interrupted them I thought Dr Seaton was hurting her, but he took the gag out of her mouth and she subjected me to a stream of abuse. The exact words are reported in my statement. I took it to be very clear that she was a willing participant and that she was enjoying it. Dr Seaton then replaced the gag and I attacked him."

"You attacked him?"

"Yes, I lost my temper. I tried to drag him off her. He hit me and cut open my eye."

"And after that?"

"I left the room, went downstairs and found the camera, waited, then went back and photographed them at the crucial moment."

"Why did you do this?"

"I thought it might be useful when I petitioned to divorce my wife."

"So, relations between you were strained?"

"Yes, I would say so."

"Did you know that she was having a relationship with Dr Seaton?"

"No, though I half suspected it."

"Do you think this was the first time that your wife and Dr Seaton had indulged in these bondage games?"

"I really don't know. But judging from the way she spoke to me on that day, I would say that it was not the first time. I think she had discovered a taste for it."

"Did she ever ask you to do anything like this when you had intercourse with her?"

"No, we rarely had intercourse. In recent years not at all. Latterly I slept in a separate room."

"I see. And, after you took the photograph, according to your statement, Dr Seaton chased you out of the house, but you contrived to get back inside and lock him out in the garden. Why didn't you then go upstairs and release your wife and call the police?"

"I was very angry and very frightened and I no longer thought that she was my responsibility. To be honest it didn't occur to me. And there was no time to call the police. Dr Seaton was manic and was smashing his way back into the house. I thought my life was in danger and that the only way to survive was to get out of the house and back into the shopping area where there were people."

The Coroner nodded. "Not very satisfactory," he said, "but in the heat of the moment it is understandable. Thank you Dr Sinclair. Sorry to have put you through that. You may stand down."

James returned to his seat, flabbergasted and unsure what to expect next. But in fact the Coroner was satisfied and in the end the court returned a verdict of Death by Misadventure, though censuring both James and Owen Seaton for failing to take proper note of Sandra's predicament. They filed out of the Court and stood in the rain outside, all of them shocked and sad.

"Let's go back to Penhesgyn," Sophie said, taking James's hand to comfort him, "let's meditate. Have you ever meditated James? It will help you come to terms with all of this."

But before they had time to cross the road they were accosted by two men, one of whom photographed James holding Sophie's hand whilst the other flashed a press card and demanded Sophie's name and an interview with James. James refused on both counts, but they were followed back to the car park by the reporter, who did not give up until they were all safely inside Marcus's Land Rover, congratulating themselves on not having given anything away to the

press. The following day a tabloid ran a front page story under the banner headline *'Dirty Dynion's Dons in Bondage Bust Up!!!*' and showing a photograph of the cuckolded Dr James Sinclair with his sexy new girlfriend, after attending a court hearing into the suspicious death of his wife Sandra during an exotic bondage session with her demon lover Dr Owen Seaton who had fled to Cuba to avoid arrest. Dr Seaton, the article noted, had been a vigorous campaigner for civil rights and was currently the prospective Labour candidate for the parliamentary constituency of Bethel.

"But not," James commented to Marcus when he saw the article, "for very much longer."

Two days later James was summoned to the presence of the ineffable Professor Rawlings. Rawlings was sitting securely behind his big desk, now illuminated by replaced light bulbs. He looked almost affable, but that was always an illusion.

"What's the meaning of this?" Rawlings demanded, holding up a copy of the *News of the World.*

"It's none of your business," James replied.

"Of course it's my business. I'm your line manager. Remember? Who's this woman?"

"None of your business," James repeated.

Rawlings toyed with a little black box on his desk. It was about half the size of a matchbox. There were two tiny lights, green at one end and red at the other. In the middle was a button.

"It's my decision maker," said Rawlings, "I press the button and one or the other of the lights comes on. Green means Yes. Red means No. I find it very useful. Now who is this woman?"

"I'm afraid that this concerns my private life. I am under no obligation to tell you. Mind your own business."

"You think I can't sack you don't you. Because you have tenure. Well you're wrong. You can be sacked for bringing the university into disrepute. Appearing in a sex scandal case reported in a tabloid newspaper could be deemed to be bringing the university into disrepute. Or I can stop your salary at the efficiency bar. Your research record is not particularly satisfactory. That would be grounds enough. Now, I have been told by Dr Ellerby that this woman is a Sophie Davenport who was a student here. What is your relationship with Miss Davenport?"

James recognised the awful symmetry of this situation. It was his alleged relationship with Sophie that had initiated the final conflict with his wife and deposited her into the unsavoury hands of Seaton and her subsequent untimely death. Now it seemed a similar misunderstanding was about to cost him his job.

"There is no relationship."

"Then why is she holding your hand?"

"I was upset, I think that she was trying to comfort me. That's all."

“Why were you upset?” Rawlings was sneering at him. It clearly amused him to torment those whom he considered to be underlings.

“For God's sake, man,” James exploded, “I'd just sat through a gruesome coroner's inquest into the death of my wife. Of course I was upset. She was upset. We were all upset.”

“All? Who is all? Was anyone else there from the Department?”

“Yes, Marcus Ross.”

“Oh yes, Mr Ross. Your friend.” The contempt in Rawlings' voice was unconcealed, “and anybody else?”

“Not from this Department.”

“Who else?”

“Caroline Howarth was there.”

“And who is Caroline Howarth?”

“I'm getting tired of this,” James sighed, “she's a postgraduate student in the Theology Department. She’s a friend of Marcus Ross. And she’s my friend too. She came to support me.”

“Thank you,” said Rawlings silkily whilst scribbling briefly onto a desktop jotter, “you may go now.”

“What about Seaton?” James demanded, “what's going to happen to him.”

“That is none of your business,” Rawlings replied, “now please leave. I have an important decision to make.” He picked up his little black box and pressed the button so that both lights started to flash.

James left without another word before the black box made its decision. But he was quaking with rage, as most were after an audience with God's own historian.

Marcus took careful note of James's experiences with Rawlings and prepared himself for his own ordeal. The night before Marcus's hearing James was invited to Penhesgyn for dinner, and afterwards was persuaded to take off his clothes and join the little circle sitting cross legged on Drew's bed. Initially he felt uncomfortable, fearing that sitting next to these two divinely naked creatures would be bound to arouse him, which it did. But they ignored his embarrassment and after a while his erection subsided and their nudity was forgotten. First they meditated, which James had never done like this before. The sensation was restful and calming, though, in his view, overrated. Afterwards they discussed in detail what they would do if tomorrow's hearing went the way they expected. Caroline was the most anxious since she thought that she was tied to St Dynion’s because of her research grant, whereas Marcus and Sophie could leave if necessary. James had some constructive suggestions for Caroline relating to the residency rules for third year postgraduates which might allow her to complete her doctorate without staying at St Dynion’s. Caroline, it now transpired, had also had an oblique and inconclusive but vaguely menacing interview with the Head of Theology about her presence at the Coroner's Court and her relationship with the Reverend Dr. Gwilym

Williams. How he knew she had been there was not clear, but it was not difficult to hazard a guess. James was also beginning to think about what he might do if Rawlings carried out his threat and tried to sack him. He could contest it in court, or course, and he would probably be supported by the Association of University Teachers. But that remained to be seen. They did not discuss the appalling unfairness of the situation they found themselves in. It now seemed to be taken for granted that the university system, and possibly the universe itself, was fundamentally unfair, so the only wise course of action was to stick together and tough it out. And later, all his inhibitions now suspended, James once again found himself being gently made love to by Caroline, with Sophie and Marcus doing the same thing beside them. He had never watched other people making love, except for that nightmare with Seaton and Sandra, which could hardly be described as love making, but what he saw them doing was beautiful, and immensely erotic, and so stimulating to James that Caroline had to lock her legs behind his thighs in order to control his enthusiastic thrusting. Afterwards James lay with his head on her breast and thought how wonderful it would be to be in love with Caroline, but as he struggled to convert his thoughts into words Caroline put a soft finger on his lips.

"Just enjoy it for now," she said, "you are meant for someone else. And so am I."

James accepted his fate and wondered what she meant.

The next day, almost at the end of term, Marcus and James stood in the marble corridor outside the Council Chamber. The corridor still bore the scars of the riot. A few of the busts and bronzes had been replaced on their pedestals. The china cabinets and their wrecked contents had been entirely removed and one of the stained glass windows had been boarded over. They were summoned into the Council Chamber by the frog faced Mr Sligh and ushered into plush, high backed chairs at one end of a table which was nearly sixty feet in length. At the other end of the table, almost out of earshot, if not out of sight, were an assortment of faces, some of whom Marcus recognised. The others were unknown to him. At the head of the table, apparently presiding over the proceedings, was a creature of great age with a long scrawny neck and a face like an ostrich, surmounted by a single comb of white hair. He wore two pairs of glasses, one taped on top of the other to compensate for a missing lens in the bottom pair, and what appeared to be huge earphones attached by thick wires to large black boxes and batteries stuffed into pockets in a waistcoat apparently designed to accommodate this antediluvian technology. There were two other smoothly pin striped individuals on either side of the ostrich creature, who Marcus did not recognise, and who were clearly not academics. The remaining faces were familiar from College committees. They included Professor Otto von Bumbulum, the head of German, who James, in an earlier conversation, had described as mad as a hatter. Von Bumbulum consisted of two substantial spheres of pink flesh to which tree trunk legs and arms had been attached as an

apparent afterthought. The upper and smaller sphere was pierced with black bean eyes and a thin mouth underpinned by a white goatee beard which made him look like a cross between the Michelin Man and Colonel Sanders. Next to him was Jack Agate, the Professor of Applied Toxicology, tall, dark, cadaverous and dripping tweedy menace. Beside him was what appeared to be a senile seventeen year old, with a round fully bearded face, twitching eyes, and tightly curled hair. Professor Maldwyn ap Mochyn, head of Physics, who was extremely young, and ignorant of almost everything in the real world, but expert in unravelling cosmic problems in space and time. Professor ap Mochyn's sublunary ignorance did not stop him from having opinions on everything under the sun, especially the usefulness of his colleagues in the Arts Faculty. Marcus had been friendly with mathematicians and physicists at Cambridge and had found them to divide into three basic categories, normal, eccentric, and barking mad. Ap Mochyn fell into the latter category. And then there was Professor Kevin Rawlings, representing the interests of his Department. Smug, confident, and out for blood.

The ostrich creature at the head of the table adjusted its various hearing aids until they stopped whistling then made some twittering noises in what appeared to be Welsh. Marcus and James and the rest of the tribunal looked nonplussed.

"I think he wants to know if you speak Welsh," James whispered.

"Ignore him," said Professor Agate in a voice loaded with menace, "he's gaga."

One of the unidentified men sitting next to the Ostrich scowled at Agate and muttered something in Welsh. The Ostrich fumbled with the wires in his waistcoat and, after a cacophony of hissing and popping, switched himself off and took no further part in the proceedings. Agate gestured towards the secretarial Sligh.

"Mr Ross," Sligh said, "as you know I've been watching you and we have summoned you here today to answer to a number of disciplinary charges. We will deal with each of them in turn. First of all, there is the matter of the death of the student Jennifer Saville. Now, a complaint has been made that you were not available to counsel this student on the day before she committed suicide. Would you like to explain why not."

"Who made this complaint?" Marcus asked. He had already decided on the likely outcome of this meeting and intended to take the fight to them. Sligh, however, was not going to respond.

"I'm not at liberty to tell you that," Sligh answered.

"But, not her parents?" Marcus queried. Sligh refused to respond. Marcus shrugged.

"It was just before the beginning of term. I'd seen her several times during the vacation. I had no reason to think that she was going to take her own life. I had been working very hard on my research through the vacation and so I decided to take a break and go home for a long weekend before term started."

“So, you weren't there when she needed you?” Professor ap Mochyn stated the obvious.

“No, obviously not. Where were you during the last week of the vacation Professor ap Mochyn?”

Ap Mochyn recoiled, “we ask the questions,” he snapped in a thick Holyhead accent, “anyway, I was in Dublin at a Pan Celtic Mathematical Conference.”

“Not available to see your moral students then,” Marcus responded sweetly.

Ap Mochyn's face went bright red and he began to splutter, “I'm a Professor,” he mumbled, “a Professor. I don't have to see students.”

“Stop this, before it starts,” said one of the nameless dark suited men sitting next to the Ostrich, “this man has nothing to answer to on this score. You cannot expect a member of the academic staff to be available to students at all times, especially during the vacations. There should be a professional counselling service.” He spoke English with a very precise and minimal Welsh accent which Marcus recognised as the Welsh equivalent of BBC English. This was an upper middle class Welshman who was not a member of the academic staff and must therefore belong to the Crachach.

“I'm sorry,” Marcus said, “I'm afraid I don't know who you are.”

“This is Mr Alwyn Jeffreys,” Professor Agate spat out the name with sardonic emphasis on the Mr, “and he represents the lay members of the College Council.” He glowered across the table at Mr Jeffreys.

“That's right,” said Mr Jeffreys, “and the learned Professor might also have told you that I am a barrister and my colleague,” he pointed at the other smartly suited man on the left of the Ostrich, who now appeared to be asleep, or possibly dead, “is Dafydd Pritchard, who is a local solicitor. We are here to ensure that you are fairly treated.”

“I'm very grateful for that,” said Marcus, aware of the scarcely disguised hostility between Agate and Jeffreys. There was, it seemed, some other battle going on in this arena, though whether it would work to his advantage remained to be seen.

“The second matter,” Sligh picked up the thread, “is the much more serious question of your role in causing a student riot in the corridor outside this room.”

“We understand,” Agate continued, “that you told the Socialist Society demonstrators that they could find ‘secret’ files in the Tower. As a result they came upstairs and confronted the Cymdeithias demonstrators with extreme violence. We have this on very good authority.”

“Whose authority?” Marcus resumed his tactic of aggressive defence, again without a response.

“Are you denying that you said this?” ap Mochyn intervened.

“No,” said Marcus, “I did say that there were files in the Tower. But who told you that I said that? I have not told anyone else except Dr Sinclair, here, who I would trust with my life. So whoever told you must have been one of the demonstrators. I have a right to know.”

James nodded in confirmation, and out of the corner of his eye Marcus saw Jeffreys nod as well.

Professor Agate looked at him with shifty malevolence but declined to answer.

“Why did you do it?” Mr Jeffreys came back like a bad penny. Agate wriggled uncomfortably in his seat.

“The whole of the third year history class was being prevented from taking their final examination paper. I just wanted to get them into the examination room. It was just a ruse to get the Soc. Soc. people away from the door.”

“It was a clever move. I think I might well have done the same in your position,” said Jeffreys, “but did you expect that there would be such a violent conflict?”

“I thought it was possible, but I hoped that reason would prevail.”

“Reason? Prevail? In a university?” Jeffreys replied caustically, “you must be very naive.”

“You're a bloody idiot,” said ap Mochyn, “of course they were going to fight. And some decent Welsh students were seriously hurt because of you.”

“I don't accept that,” Marcus replied, “they both chose to fight. They didn't have to. These are intelligent young people. They should know better than to resort to violence. Violence is irrational.”

“Nevertheless,” said ap Mochyn, “considerable damage was done. Someone must be responsible.”

“It seems to me,” Jeffreys pushed in again, “that Mr Ross acted idealistically in what he thought were the best interests of his students. Whilst demonstrations are an accepted feature of student life they are by definition unpredictable and Mr Ross cannot be held responsible for the actions of hotheads. Mr Ross should not be expected to carry all the blame. He acted with initiative and for laudable motives. There may have been a lapse of good judgement but his intentions were entirely legitimate, if a little naive, whereas those of the demonstrators were not.” Mr Jeffreys paused and looked contemptuously at the lunatics arrayed around the table. Why, he wondered were they so determined to have this man’s head. “And, by the way,” he added, “I assume that there are no secret files.”

Nobody said anything. The Ostrich seemed to be sliding further and further down into his chair. Agate continued to look uncomfortable. Ap Mochyn fumed, and the German Professor puffed on a large meerschaum pipe and beamed amiably at his colleagues, apparently unaware of the immanent malice swirling around the table. Rawlings was still staring at James and Marcus, trying to think of some way to nail them both. He could not understand why this outsider was taking the side of two young men who were clearly undesirable elements in a modern university.

Mr Sligh also looked round the table, a querulous expression on his frog face. Marcus began to think that the whole thing was a farce. James grinned at him.

"You have nothing more to say on this matter?" Sligh asked the tribunal. Nobody replied. "Then we will move on to the third and fourth complaints which are related." He cleared his throat and shuffled the papers in the file on the table in front of him.

"These complaints arise from a report submitted by an external examiner, one Dr Duncan Kelpy from the University of Oban. Dr Kelpy complains that Mr Ross argued with him in an examiners meeting making him look foolish. Dr Kelpy also complains that Mr Ross unfairly marked up the papers of a girl student with whom he was having an affair."

"What do you have to say about that then Mister Ross?" Rawlings beamed triumphantly, like Professor Agate, placing heavy emphasis on the Mister.

"Yes," Marcus agreed, "I argued with Dr Kelpy because he was not up to speed with current research on the topic he was examining. It seemed unfair to me that a good student should be marked down because of the external's ignorance or incompetence. I'm sure you would agree that we must mark exams as fairly as possible."

"Of course we do," Professor Agate hissed, "but we do not challenge the opinions of more experienced senior academics. And anyway if you were in a sexual relationship with this student you could not possibly mark her papers fairly."

"Marking exam papers is a technical skill. It's a matter of discipline and professional integrity. And in any case the dispute with Dr Kelpy was not about my relationship with Miss Davenport but about Dr Kelpy's poor understanding of current research on the Medieval English Parliament as expressed in Miss Davenport's papers."

Mr Ross, do you consider yourself to be an expert specialist on the subject of Medieval Constitutional history?" Jeffreys asked.

Marcus nodded, "it would be immodest of me to claim so much. But I am more of a specialist in this field than Dr Kelpy."

"And were you in a relationship with this student at the time that you marked the exams?"

Marcus hesitated, then said "I was not in a relationship with her at that time."

"But you wanted to be?" Jeffreys asked.

"Yes."

"And are you in a relationship with her now?"

"Yes."

Rawlings looked surprised. "Wait a minute. I thought it was Dr Sinclair who was having an affair with Miss Davenport."

"You should have read your briefing papers more carefully, shouldn't you." Marcus responded with acid satisfaction. Rawlings glowered at him.

“And did your feelings for Miss Davenport affect the way you marked her exam papers?” Jeffreys ignored Rawlings and stuck faithfully to his own brief.

“No, I mark papers entirely on the basis of the candidate's factual knowledge, their critical understanding of the subject, their awareness of the evidence and argument on which historical judgements are formed, and the literary quality of their writing. Nothing more. I don't deny that I wanted her to do well. I want all my students to do as well as they can. But not by cheating. If anything I would err the other way and be a little harder on them.”

There was a very long pause during which the tribunal members looked shiftily at anything but Marcus.

“What is the purpose of this meeting?” Jeffreys demanded eventually, looking accusingly at Professor Agate.

“We are here to find out the truth,” Agate replied.

“You wouldn't recognise the truth if it stood up and bit you,” said Jeffreys, “this young man has nothing to answer to. This is just more frivolous academic malice. Mr Ross, will you and your colleague leave the room please. Wait outside. We'll call you back when we are ready.”

Professor Agate's face was livid with rage that this impudent lawyer had upstaged him and taken control of the hearing. Marcus and James withdrew and stood in the marble corridor listening to the muffled sound of people shouting at each other. The Council Chamber had been designed not to be overheard by eavesdroppers and anyway some of the shouting was in Welsh so they could not make out what was being said, except that a very familiar name was shouted several times. James looked at Marcus and pursed his lips. “Seaton,” he said, “what's Seaton got to do with this?” Eventually the noise subsided and Sligh summoned them back into the Chamber. The assembled judges looked the same as when they had first entered the room. Even the ostrich had perked up. Nothing betrayed the ferocity of the row which had just taken place except that the mysterious Mr Jeffreys seemed to be very annoyed and red in the face.

“Mr Ross,” Professor Agate led, “we've given these matters some serious consideration and we have concluded by a majority decision that you did play a significant part in provoking a riot and that you are guilty of having an illicit relationship with a student which may have affected the fairness of your exam marking. Professor Rawlings has also raised the matter of your poor publication record. Taking this into account together with the accusations made against you we have decided not to confirm your tenure at this point. You will remain on probation for another year subject to your continued good behaviour and your salary will be frozen at its current level until we see evidence of significant research output. Do you have anything to say?”

Marcus was not surprised. He thought for a moment.

“You never asked me about research,” he began, “when I first entered this profession, I believed that it was a great privilege to be able to teach and perhaps influence the best young minds of each generation. To be able to pursue

my own research as well was a bonus, but my main concern was to teach young people. I remembered how badly I had been taught at Cambridge, with exceptions, and I wanted to do better than that. I also thought that I would be in the company of scholars and gentlemen who would show humility and modesty in the conduct of their learning and follow the highest ethical standards. I believed that men and women who devoted their lives to reason and logic and the pursuit of truth would be people of the highest moral quality. I have been cruelly disappointed. What I have found is not modesty and humility, or respect for reason and truth, but raging egos, determined to be cock of the midden no matter what the cost. And once there wilfully to exercise casual and arbitrary power over the lives of others. You are all where you are because you have abused your position by rewarding yourself for doing what you like doing best, which is research, closely followed by sitting on useless committees. Academic success in your world is judged by the distance you can put between yourselves and your students. It's a scandal and an outrage. And it's made worse because you unload all the tedious teaching and administrative jobs onto junior staff and postgraduates, then penalise them for not doing research. You're like medieval clergy, sitting pretty in the Deanery and paying some poor vicar a miserable stipend to look after the smelly peasants. It's only a matter of time before you start awarding yourself research grants to buy yourselves out of teaching altogether. Isn't research supposed to inform teaching? How can this be if the researchers are wilfully avoiding teaching? The truth is that research is a private benefit which ruthless ambitious academics have turned into a career opportunity. Teaching is a public obligation which you treat with contempt. The most patronising thing you can say of an academic is that he is a good teacher. I see now, very clearly, that this is a profession which favours the ambitious at the expense of the conscientious. You have deformed your profession and betrayed the ideals of innocent young people. I will have no more of it."

Mr Jeffreys clapped his hands together slowly and quietly. Marcus never, in his wildest dreams, imagined that he would find common cause with a lawyer, a member of the least ethical of all the professions, and a Welsh lawyer at that.

"That may be," said Rawlings, "but your primary obligation here is to do research. Any fool can teach undergraduates. Research is what we are about. It is how we measure ourselves. Undergraduates can look after themselves. Play the game and follow the rules and you too can enjoy our status and privileges."

Marcus looked coldly at him, then took an envelope out of his pocket and flicked it down the table towards Sligh.

"It's not a game," he said, remember Jenny Saville's rage when he had said something similar to her, "it was my whole life. Not any more. In there you will find a letter of resignation from my post and a cheque for £1300 which I estimate to be my gross salary for the remainder of this academic year. You can use it to hire a replacement."

“You can't just resign,” Rawlings spluttered, “you have lecture courses to complete. Your students will suffer. You have obligations to fulfil to your students. You must give at least three months notice.”

“I am half way through a general lecture course on medieval British history. At your request I've just managed to complete Dr Seaton's first year lectures for this term. If I can work up a lecture course from scratch on a subject well away from my own expertise I'm sure you can find someone to write lectures on the second half of my course. Even you could do it. As you say, any fool can teach undergraduates. You can even have my lecture notes, all neatly typed up. As for my Topic and Special Subject courses, they are seminar based reading courses and can be chaired by one of the other medievalists or even a research student.”

“But you must give three month's notice,” Rawlings repeated, “you can't just walk out. And where does a junior lecturer find £1300 to throw away? £1300 is a lot of money.”

Marcus laughed.

“I did this job for love not for money. I never expected to get rich doing it but I did expect...” Marcus paused again, temporarily lost for words, “I did expect honesty and integrity. Mr Jeffreys is right. I was very naive. It just happens that I am also very rich. I can do this at no significant cost to myself, except for the death of all my dreams, but I pity those who are foolish enough to put their trust in people like you who exploit their idealism so cynically. Unlike me, they may not be able to escape. I wanted more than anything to show that I could have a career independent of my wealth. It seems it is not possible. So if I cannot be a scholar I can at least try to be a gentleman.”

“The College can take you to court,” said Sligh helpfully, “for breach of contract.”

“See you in court then,” said Marcus standing up unbidden, and preparing to leave.

“If you need a barrister,” said Mr Jeffreys, “give me a call. It would be a pleasure to take your side against these bastards. I would even do it for free. And, Mr Ross, do not blame the Welsh. It is your academic colleagues who did this to you. Not the Welsh. Every culture has its lunatics, but we are a decent and just people and we value the truth. Cherish your dreams Mr Ross.”

“Thank you,” Marcus said, “I'll bear that in mind, but I doubt if it will come to court. These bastards are cowards at heart. They won't go to court.”

And they didn't. Marcus left St Dynion’s at the end of the week, taking a highly excited Sophie and a rather reluctant Caroline with him. He would return on his own the following week, just before Christmas, with a Transit van from the estate, to retrieve their books and belongings, leaving the girls to get the house ready for an unusual Christmas party. James suddenly found himself on his own but not without friends who now loved him almost as much as they loved each other and who were determined to rescue him as soon as an opportunity arose.

The Pool of Tears

Hilary Stackpole, nee Outhwaite, parked her Green MGB GT on the gravel at the front of Carston Hall and made her way to the front door. Apart from regular visits to her horse in the stables and occasional coffees in the kitchen with Janet Mowbray, she had not been back to the Hall itself since that drunken encounter with Marcus and was returning now only because Dennis Mowbray had told her that Marcus was back in permanent residence with his girlfriend. She also knew that Marcus had returned to Wales with a Transit van to collect his belongings but, according to Janet Mowbray, he had left his girl friend behind to get the Hall ready for Christmas. Hilary had other plans for Marcus and intended to confront the Greek lady with the truth. Well, not exactly the truth. So, at around two thirty in the afternoon, she stood, trembling slightly, in front of the double front door and pulled on the ring which connected through a complex interlacing of wires, rods and pulleys to a row of bells in the kitchen and the hall. There was a long delay and then the door was opened by a breathtakingly beautiful girl with thick, dark chestnut black hair cascading in waves down to her bare brown shoulders. Her hair was wet and she was wearing a sarong which had moulded itself to a wet and perfect body, still tanned from the now distant summer, barely concealing firm breasts with erect nipples that pointed outwards and upwards. The fine boned and gentle face was flawlessly symmetrical, with vaguely Mediterranean features but a square English jaw, and straight and steady brown eyes, a large mouth and luscious lips. Sophie sailed to windward of Hilary leaving her suddenly becalmed and breathless.

"I've er.." Hilary mumbled.

"You're Hilary," Sophie said, gently pre-empting her, "I'm Sophie and you've come to tell me something I already know. Doesn't matter We'll talk about it later. Come in. We're swimming. Come and have a swim. There's a lovely pool. Come on."

Hilary struggled to find words but could not think what to say.

"I thought," she said eventually as she followed Sophie's wet footprints back across the marble hall and down the corridor to the large swimming pool in the converted orangery at the side of the house, "I thought Marcus was away."

"Marcus is away. Come on. Don't be shy."

"I haven't got a costume," said Hilary lamely.

"Neither have I," Sophie replied slipping out of the sarong. Hilary's heart sank. She could never compete with a creature like this. She followed the snake hips and tiny bottom into the conservatory. It was well past summer but this girl was still tanned in places where modest girls were not usually tanned at all. It was almost tropically hot around the pool, even in late December. The radiant gas heaters suspended over the pile of cushions in the tiled lounging area at one end of the pool were turned right up. The pool was larger than she remembered. Long enough to be able to swim in properly, and it was heated. Marcus's uncle

might have been as mean as Scrooge, but he had not stinted himself in his fight against his arthritis. And there was someone else in the pool. Blonde hair fanned out almost to the small of the back of another slim female body powering determinedly up and down. Hilary half turned to leave.

"No, no," said Sophie grasping her arm, "come and swim. We can be friends. Don't be frightened. If you care for Marcus then we care for you. Take your clothes off and join us. Surely you've been skinny dipping before. We're all girls. Nothing to fear."

Hilary had been skinny dipping often enough in Benidorm and Juan les Pins and used to be provocatively unashamed of her body. But this was different. Who were these people? This one had stepped straight out of a *Cosmopolitan* fashion shoot. And who was the other one? Almost a mirror image but blonde, and tall and athletic, with an exquisitely long neck and the same short body, slim hips, and long legs. It must be the German girl. They were too perfect. Such women did not belong in the real world. Hilary had many flaws but she was not a coward and she was not going to let them get the better of her. She hesitated, then shed her ubiquitous Barbour and the thick sweater underneath, and began to unbutton her blouse. Sophie smiled at her encouragingly. The smile was full of warmth and reassurance and spoke directly to Hilary's heart. She shrugged her shoulders, kicked off her shoes, stepped out of her jeans, and continued until she was as naked as they were. In her determination to outface them she momentarily forgot about the scars on her back and bottom, then, suddenly remembering, flinched with the pain of embarrassment. There was no way to conceal her disfigurement. The Sophie girl was looking at her quizzically but still smiling invitingly, and not, Hilary thought with surprise, judging her. There was something mysterious and hypnotic about this girl, almost spooky, but not frightening. The opposite of frightening. She felt herself being pulled into those dark seductive eyes. Hilary shuddered at her mental image of her own pallid skin, broad hips, sagging boobs, thick thighs and beer bottle legs, and those terrible scars.

What Sophie saw was a woman not as flawlessly perfect as she was, but with a good body, everything in proportion, big breasts which a man could happily bury his face in, broader hipped hour glass figure, flat stomached and shorter, but still slim, with more muscular thighs and legs than she and Caroline. She had a robust English rose face, sexy, half closed Garbo eyes, and a lion's mane of dark hair tawny streaked with blonde. Hilary was a very attractive woman. Most men would be very proud to have her walk beside them. But those scars. Fine white lines, almost imperceptible until one noticed them, and another more obvious scar on her right buttock, consisting of concentric white rings, less than half an inch across. Recollections of a bad book she had once read came back to her. Someone had done this to Hilary. Sophie dived into the pool and Hilary followed her, unwittingly baptising herself to be reborn into a world which she could not have imagined possible and which would eventually cleanse her of all

of her grief. She swam furiously after the girls, trying to catch them, but they easily outpaced her without even seeming to compete.

When they eventually got out of the pool Hilary clutched a towel to cover herself and watched fearfully as the two hatefully beautiful women towelled each other dry, then dropped the towels to the floor and in one graceful fluid movement reclined onto them. They looked up at her expectantly. Hilary lowered herself onto her knees, still clutching her towel. These girls were shameless in their flawless nudity. She knew they were deliberately flaunting themselves and laughing at her ugly, lumpy, mutilated body.

“You're the German girl,” she said eventually, looking at Caroline who was combing out her long blonde hair. It was such long hair. Fine but so long. Almost all the way the way down her back. Like Lady Godiva, or Alice in Wonderland. And her face, small boned like the other one. And even with wet hair sleeked back tight against her skull, the face was startlingly beautiful, but from another angle it was powerful and severe, more Ursula Andress than Britt Eklund. The bone structure was delicate, the intense ice blue eyes were deep set, the lips were as full and the mouth as voluptuous as that of her dark haired friend. They were identical opposites.

“Not German,” Caroline smiled, “not Swedish either. I'm Caroline. I'm Marcus's other girlfriend.”

“You were going to tell me,” said Sophie, “that you came here and seduced Marcus and made passionate love to him. You know that isn't true. And then you were going to tell me that Marcus had another girlfriend. Caroline is the other girlfriend.”

Hilary bridled at this, but it was true. She said nothing but looked back at them defiantly. She was not going to be humiliated by these arrogant girls. She was older than them and had suffered more than they could imagine. Caroline had finished combing out her fine hair and was now kneeling beside Sophie gently teasing the tangles out of her thick dark waves. They're bloody lesbians, Hilary thought. I can deal with this. I'm better than them.

“Never mind that,” Sophie continued, “that's all in the past. You knew Marcus when you were children. Tell us about Marcus when he was a child.”

Hilary shook her head, trying to think of something to say. It was true that she had spent part of her early childhood hanging around the Hall and helping Dennis Mowbray's mother, who had been the housekeeper. She went there partly in the hope of meeting the mysterious little boy who lived there, but mainly because she loved the Hall itself. She did see Marcus there from time to time, and sometimes they had played hide seek in the rooms and corridors. But she remembered Marcus mostly as a sad little school boy who ran around the boys' playground at their shared village primary school with his arms stretched out like wings, making aeroplane noises and pretending to be a Spitfire, or painting funny ink squiggles on his eyebrows so that he looked like Dan Dare, the pilot of the future, lurking behind trees with a ray gun water pistol which he

squirted at unsuspecting aliens, usually girls. Marcus had always been a dreamer. Even then Hilary had preferred grown up boys who played rough games, bullied boys like Marcus, and sneaked up behind her when she obligingly did hand stands so that they could try to look down the inside of her baggy gym shorts only to find their curiosity thwarted by her knickers.

"Well, I can't, not really," she shrugged, "what is there to tell? I used to come up here a lot, but I only rarely saw Marcus here. We were at primary school together though, in the village. It was the fifties. There were separate playgrounds for boys and girls. Sometimes adventurous boys sneaked into the girls' playground and offered to show us theirs if we'd show them ours. Marcus wasn't one of them. He wasn't interested in little girls, and anyway I liked the sporty boys who ran races and fought each other over me. Marcus wasn't like that. He liked playing at being an aeroplane or spaceman or something. And he was too clever in class. Always first to put his hand up to answer questions. But he was tongue tied and shy with girls, and with boys too actually. He never talked to girls. Then I got my first pony and for a while I wasn't interested in boys, until, you know, puberty. Then I was very interested."

Sophie grinned, wide mouth, beautiful even teeth, soft kissable lips, "and after that?" she asked.

"Well, after primary school I hardly saw him. I was sent off to board at the Quaker school in Ayton. And most of the other boys and girls I was with went to public, or at least fee paying schools, mostly because they were too dim to get through the eleven plus, like me. But Marcus's parents were dead by then, and his miserable bloody uncle wouldn't pay for him to go to public school. Instead he passed the eleven plus and went to the Grammar School in Guisborough. And in the holidays he got teased by the others because he was at Grammar School, though the truth was that the Grammar school was a bloody sight older than most public schools and bloody good academically. But he was very...gauche...boring...and so bloody serious. So he stayed with his boring Grammar School friends and didn't mix much with the county set and the Young Cons which was where I was going to have fun, you know. He sometimes felt obliged to go to the Young Farmers dances and things. I think his uncle made him go. Sort of noblesse oblige kind of thing. His uncle was the local lord of the manor after all. Those were the only times I ever got anywhere near Marcus, actually touching him, I mean. But he was a rotten dancer. Pretty mediocre at everything he should have been good at, really. Couldn't ride to the hunt, couldn't shoot, and never even looked at fishing rods. Just books. Then in 1963, in the late summer, just before he went to Cambridge, I had a try at him. I was eighteen and already well into the sixties sex thing. I was shagging for England. You know. But with Marcus I wasn't trying very hard. I just thought it was time someone shagged him, and the Fawcett boys were egging me on, but....I like a bit of a fight, you know. I used to like to make them wrestle me for it. I sort of liked being semi raped, if you know what I mean. Well, I used to.

Not any more. So I used to slap boy's faces once they got my bra off, and then I'd make them wrestle me for it." Hilary shrugged and looked very unhappy. "But not Marcus, he just apologized to me and got up and walked out of the barn. I was mortified. I thought, what a stupid little shit. Fancy not wanting to shag me. He must be mad. He must be gay. Then he went to university and I hardly saw him again. Just occasionally in the *Blackwell Ox* during the vacations when he was with the Fawcett boys. Even then he was always the odd man out. He still is, it seems."

Caroline was smiling at her now, sharing an equally bitter sweet recollection of Marcus's weaknesses.

"I love Sophie's hair," the blonde girl said, "it's so thick. You've got lovely thick hair too. Would you like me to comb it out for you?" Hilary put her hand up in defiance and let the towel drop onto her thighs, momentarily revealing her breasts, until she grabbed it back to cover herself.

"I'm not going to grope you," Caroline said softly, "just comb your hair."

Once again Hilary found herself agreeing to something that, as a sixteen year old, she would have seen as harmless relaxation, sitting on her teenage bed in or out of her underwear, with her best friend, brushing each other's hair and comparing the size of their boobs, bottoms and all the other pubescent things, and talking about horses and boyfriends, and which of the Magnificent Seven would be the best shag. Caroline knelt behind her and began to comb her hair very slowly, gently unravelling the tangles with her fingers. Hilary sensed the warm closeness of her body. Every now and again Caroline raised herself slightly to reach forward and Hilary felt her hard nipples brushing briefly against her bare shoulders. She pulled the protective towel tighter around her torso.

"So, one night in August, you came to the Hall in the evening. And you were drunk, and under your coat you were naked, and you threw yourself at Marcus. Why did you do that?"

The blonde's voice was more authoritative than the other girl's. She was obviously the masculine partner in the relationship. Hilary was not going to give in to them, but actually the gentle combing out of her hair was soothing and the occasional pressure of Caroline's breasts against her back was vaguely erotic. Hilary began to feel simultaneously sexually aroused and more and more relaxed.

"I don't know. It was stupid. After the barn I had always thought that he was gay. But of course, you couldn't be openly gay in those days. It was illegal. Then, last April, I heard that he'd been here with a girl and I thought, maybe I should have another go. Maybe he isn't gay. I thought, maybe I could seduce him away from you. And," Hilary's voice began to falter, "my own life wasn't going well. My husband's family are contesting the will. They never liked me. I desperately wanted someone to make love to me....just for warmth and comfort....but...I'm frightened of men now and ...I've got these scars....and I

thought.....Marcus...would...” she started to cry. Caroline put her hand on Hilary's shoulder. Hilary flinched as though she had felt an electric shock, then brushed away the comforting hand. Caroline hesitated, then the tone of her voice changed to something softer and more intimate.

“You know,” Caroline said, moving round to face Hilary so that she could look straight into her eyes, “the first time I came here I wanted to shag Marcus, just like you did in that barn. For much the same reason. I couldn't imagine how he had been a student in the sixties and stayed a virgin. It didn't seem possible, and even now I still find it hard to believe. Anyway I did exactly the same thing that you did. I came at him full frontal. Sexy negligee, Chanel No 5, war paint, the whole thing. It works with most men. Didn't work with Marcus. Marcus is different. Marcus had to be seduced with subtlety, and Sophie is better at that than I am. Sophie is a hopeless romantic. You and I are more alike. We both go at things head on. Sophie goes round things.”

“You were....competing...to see who could seduce Marcus first? What happened?” Hilary asked, confused but curious to know how Marcus could have resisted this beautiful creature.

“Not exactly competing. Sort of more like checking him out. So I could tell Sophie what to expect. He was always meant for Sophie but, you know, we had an understanding, about men. We shared them, if they were any good. Anyway, he hid under the bed clothes,” Caroline laughed. Hilary began to laugh as well.

“Well....did you...you know...in the end?” Hilary asked.

“No, I was as mad as hell. Men don't reject me. I flounced out in a real temper,” Caroline replied, “and I thought that he must be gay. Just like you did.”

“And then,” Sophie interjected gleefully, “after Caroline flounced out Marcus had this massive erection and he couldn't get it to go away. So he had to jerk himself off. And it was the first time he ever even jerked himself off. He really was a total virgin. He isn't now,” she added with a note of deep satisfaction, “he's amazing now. And Caroline was so angry that she went and rubbed herself off too. So the two of them were in separate bedrooms wanking away when they could have been shagging. I thought it was hilarious. And it served Caroline right,” she added as an afterthought.

The three women suddenly collapsed into wild shrieks of laughter, which subsided eventually into knowing giggles.

“How do you know about all this?” Hilary asked, unwittingly allowing the towel to slip off one breast.

“Marcus told us,” Sophie said, more seriously, “and Caroline told me. Eventually. There are no secrets between us. But it doesn't matter Hilary. The fact is that you came here with the intention of hurting us. You thought you could put doubt into my mind about Marcus. That really wasn't a nice thing to do and it won't work like that with us. But I understand why you wanted to do it. So let's just forgive and forget and be new friends. There is a much more serious problem for you. Something terrible has happened to you and you won't

admit it to anyone, but you still want to be loved and you don't know how start again. Once you were like us, randy as rabbits. Now you're terrified of men, but you still want a man to love you. Talk to us. It will help you. We have a little ritual that helps. Hold our hands."

Sophie and Caroline shifted their positions so that they were kneeling on either side of Hilary, their knees together, touching Hilary's knees to form a kind of three pointed star. Hilary pulled the towel back so that both breasts were covered again and clutched it tightly.

"You're bloody lesbians," she bridled again, though with less certainty this time, after all, lesbians don't usually compete to seduce men, "I'm not touching you."

"We're not lesbians," Caroline said gently, "we love each other, but we're not lesbians. And we're not going to hurt you. Hold our hands and close your eyes and breath slowly and empty your mind. You will feel yourself beginning to fall. Don't worry, we will catch you. Just accept it. We want to help you."

Hilary wanted to resist, but an inexplicable compulsion to cooperate was beyond resistance. She took their proffered hands reluctantly, allowing the towel to fall away onto her thighs. Their hands grasped hers and held her tightly and she felt a curious sensation of prickly static discharge, as though she had touched a television screen. She closed her eyes and slowed down her breathing. She had once tried yoga. What they were doing was not unfamiliar to her. She allowed her mind to go blank and eventually she began to float away. Time passed. At the peripheries of her consciousness she dimly sensed gossamer filigrees of opalescent aquamarine light, wafting into her mind like an ethereal unfolding flower, curling round her consciousness then fading into her. She began to fall. Slowly at first, then faster, into a familiar darkening vortex. The faint residual light followed her. She recognised this place. She had been here before and, remembering it, she became frightened, twisting and turning in space, trying to stop the accelerating fall, beginning to scream silently in the darkest shadows of her mind. Strong hands grasped her and pulled her forcefully back from the abyss. She opened her eyes.

The two girls were staring at her with their mouths open and expressions of total horror on their faces. Tears were trickling down Sophie's stricken cheeks. Caroline's face had turned to stone. Hilary found herself almost drowning in the waves of compassion which flooded into her consciousness. She no longer feared them. They knew everything. She saw Caroline look quizzically at Sophie and felt Sophie's responding mental nod. Mo had been right. They were not alone. Hilary was just one of many.

"What do you mean," Hilary choked on her words, "what do you mean? I'm like you?"

"It's just...." Sophie began, then hesitated.

"We share something," Caroline intervened, "we need to find out about it."

"Who are you people," she stammered, "how can you do this?"

“We don't really know,” said Caroline in her matter of fact way, “it's a kind of gift. Some people call it the third eye but, really, it's just a kind of empathy. Most women have it but they've forgotten how to use it. It's very rare in men. They only use half of their brains, you know. God only knows what goes on in the other half. We've only ever met two men who have it, and Marcus is one of them. It's very strong in him, as it is in you, but like you he doesn't know how to use it properly. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. Anyway, now we know roughly what happened but you have to tell us in words. This is going to hurt you a lot but once you have done it you will be free. Tell us what happened. Let everything go, cry if you want to. Hold onto us if you want to. Just let everything come out.”

Hilary rocked back onto her heels, still clutching the towel. She didn't like the idea of someone reading her mind but the past was already unravelling and she could not now resist letting it run its course into the future.

“It goes back to that incident in the barn when I sort of made a play for Marcus,” she said, reluctantly, “ten years ago I suppose, just before he went to Cambridge. I told you what happened. He got my bra off, but that's as far as he went. I lost patience with him. I thought maybe he was gay.” She paused. “I wasn't in love with him, though I could easily have become in love with him. What's love after all,” she said bitterly, “just a habit we grow into with someone we think we like.” Sophie looked solemn and shook her head. Hilary continued, “but I was in love with the Hall. I've always loved this place. I always wanted to live here. But the only way into this Hall was Marcus, and Marcus didn't want me. Then he went away and never really came back. I was angry in a way because I really wanted to live here and be the lady of the manor, you know. Stupid, really, I left it far too late. But in a way I was frightened of Marcus because he was so different. Anyway, shortly after Marcus left I met my husband at a friend's wedding and he had a Hall of his own, not unlike this, but without land, just a big house and garden, and he was quite a bit older than me, and very experienced and very good looking and charming, so I let him shag me. I rarely said no. This was the early sixties, remember, sixty three to be precise. But the pill was only just to say available then, and there were a lot of medical doubts about it, so I didn't take it. And I didn't insist on making him use a condom. I suppose I let myself get pregnant and he did the right thing and married me, which he would probably have done anyway because I was a very good shag.”

“Did you love him?” Sophie asked.

“I thought I did, at the time. But I was only eighteen and bloody stupid. I'd never really had a proper relationship with anyone because I was so keen on seeing how many men I could shag, usually in barns or the back seats of cars. I had boyfriends, of course, but I never really fell for anyone or stayed with anyone for very long. I was a real two timing tart. All that money my parents spent on my education and all I came out with was miserable 'A' levels and a

white hot fanny. I definitely wasn't a Quaker lady. I thought being shagged mindless was the same as being loved. But it was alright with Julian. He was bloody good in bed, and had lots of money and he looked good. Anyway I thought so. Then I went hunting when I shouldn't have done and got thrown and, well, I lost the baby, and now I'll never have children. But once I recovered I realised that I could have lots of sex without having to worry about johnnies or pills. So I thought, never mind babies, they're just a bloody nuisance. I'm a really liberated woman. I can do what I like with my body. I'll have a bloody good time. I'll have affairs. And there was a good social group to have affairs with. Not church going county people like I was used to here, but professionals, accountants and estate agents and lawyers. More interesting than the huntin, shootin, fishin lot I'd grown up with, and just as randy as me. And it was the right time for it. Everyone was doing it. You know. Putting the car keys into a hat after dinner parties, four in a bed, all that stuff. Julian was as keen on it as me. He positively encouraged me. And I was given lots of money to spend. I had a nice MG sports car. Clothes. Good horse, you know. It was okay. Anyway, we lived near Helmsley, and we used to go to the Mucky Duck a lot, you know."

Caroline and Sophie both shook their heads.

"No, I suppose you're not from round here. It's pub, it's really called the *Black Swan,* but we used to call it the Mucky Duck. Anyway Julian had a couple of regular mates in the pub and most Saturday nights they came back to the house and we had more drinks and coffee. You know. Then one night, a couple of years after I lost the baby, we all got drunk, but not too drunk to have wilting willies, and we played strip poker, and one thing led to another, and we all ended up without our clothes, and Julian wanted to, you know, shag me, with them watching and then they wanted to shag me too. And Julian let them."

"Were you happy with this?" Sophie asked, very mindful of her own libidinous past.

"At first it was okay. I thought that I was a liberated woman and could play the same games as men. And I could be in control because it was my body. So, Saturday nights became gang bang nights. And it was sort of enjoyable in a way. I quite looked forward to it. And Julian was screwing me like a polecat most other nights. I was getting a lot of great sex. They were, you know, big muscular young men, with good bodies and I was very young and very, very randy. It was really, well, you probably know, anything went. I could take them one after another and I had the most amazing orgasms. But they were never satisfied. All the time they were experimenting. They started bringing other girls back from the pub and I was expected to...well you know. Then, eventually, they got round to bondage. They started tying my wrists and ankles to the bed posts so I couldn't move. And that was alright for a laugh. Then they weren't content with taking me in turns. They all wanted to be in me at the same time. You know, you can imagine."

Sophie nodded, she didn't need to imagine it.

“And I didn't like that very much. I didn't like sweaty drunken dicks in my mouth or up my bum. So they started to hurt me. They started tying me up in other ways, really tight, so I couldn't move at all, so they could do what they liked with me. And even that was alright, sort of. But then they started using canes and whips and it began to hurt more than it aroused. And when I cried and writhed about with the pain they thought I was enjoying it. But it didn't happen very often, so I put up with it.”

Hilary began to cry. Sophie took her hand and cradled it between her hands, stroking it gently.

“Then, last year, Julian read this bloody dreadful book and he wanted to mark me and make me a sex slave and loan me out to his friends and I was supposed to do anything they asked. But I wouldn't do that. That was too far. I wasn't in control any more. I was just a sack of flesh to be passed around and beaten and squirted into. And he got very angry and started slapping me around. So I stopped going to the pub. And then, one Saturday, they all came back from the pub totally pissed, and Julian wanted to brand me. And I refused again and..,”

Hilary's shoulders began to shake with sobs and she collapsed into Sophie's enfolding arms, her chin on Sophie's shoulder, her face puffy red with tears and twisted with grief..

“And I said no.... and they just tore my clothes off and tied me up by the wrists and they hung me from a pulley in the kitchen ceiling, which used to be used for hanging up bacon legs, you know, there's one in the kitchen here. And then he beat me with a riding crop. Really, really hard. And that hurt, really, really hurt. And then, and then....he....burned me and it hurt, it hurt so much, and now I'm scarred, and I'm not beautiful any more. No one will ever want me. And they went on beating me. They took it in turns. It gave them real hard ons, even if they were pissed out of their minds, and then they'd take me off the rope and they did anything they wanted to me. They even gagged me so I couldn't scream. It went on for months and little by little I accepted it. He totally broke me. Then I just let them do whatever they wanted, and I coped with it by kind of switching myself off. You know, going limp, going into a trance, like we just did, so I hardly felt the pain. And then, one evening, we were on our own in the kitchen. And something annoyed him and he hung me up and cut my clothes off with a kitchen knife and started to beat me so hard I was screaming with the pain. I thought I was going to die. He used to hang me so my toes just touched the floor, so I couldn't take the weight off my arms by standing on tiptoe. I couldn't do anything. Then I think I lost consciousness. I think I started to die. It was like being at the top of a endless ski slope and suddenly you start to slide down, and you can't stop yourself. You try, but you can't. And you know that you're going to die. And it gets darker and darker, and you can't stop. You're sliding. Faster and faster, and it's getting darker and darker. Then black.

Nothing. Only this strange luminous black silence. You can hear it. So deep, and dark and soft as velvet. Then tiny dots of intense blue white light. Like stars. Like what we just did. And you drift towards one of them. Then I woke up, and when I opened my eyes again he was on the floor unconscious."

Hilary stopped and hung on to Sophie as though her life depended on it. Sophie could feel Hilary's heart pounding furiously against her own.

She paused again. Sophie felt the pounding heart relaxing into a gentler rhythm.

"Can you imagine that? I was hung up naked, like a carcass in an abattoir, and the only person who could release me was on the floor and I watched him die. He was twitching and groaning for hours, right in front of me and I just hung there. I didn't even scream. I thought, sod him, let him die. There was nothing I could do to save him. Served the bastard right. I was hanging there nearly all night. Then I began to lose consciousness and that whole slide into death started again. This time I thought I'd really had it. I thrashed about. But the darkness came. And the next thing I knew I was lying on the floor. The rope around my wrists had somehow come undone and released me. I couldn't believe it because he always tied everything so tight, just so it hurt me. Anyway I took the rope down and put it away and cleared up what was left of my clothes. Then I went upstairs and had a long bath and went to bed. Of course, I didn't sleep. I lay in bed like a child, all tensed up, with my fist in my mouth. Staring into the darkness. It was horrible. Horrible. I felt different too. As though something had snapped in my head. I can't explain it. In the morning I called the ambulance. But he was dead. Brain haemorrhage. I just said he must have come home late and I found him collapsed in the kitchen the next morning. Everyone was very sympathetic. I didn't want anyone to know what had really happened. Because of the shame...you know."

"And now I'm on my own. I'm game, you know, I've always been game. I'm not a coward. I've tried to pick up my old life, you know, I've got my horse and I still go hunting, and I've still got my lovely car, but I always have this morbid bloody feeling that people know what really happened and that they're laughing at me. And I feel guilty. But there was nothing I could do. He brought it on himself. And I'm drinking too much. And then, when Marcus was here in August, I thought Marcus is different and clever and kind and he'll help me. And maybe I'd live here one day after all, and be happy. But he didn't. And I made a fool of myself with him. And they hurt me so much. And it still hurts."

She sobbed and groaned and clung tightly to Sophie who hugged her, stroking her hair and trying to soothe her. Caroline sat quite still, her face expressionless. Hilary was simultaneously sobbing and panting as fiery demons clawed their way out of her tortured consciousness. Sophie gently stroked her fingers down her back, lingering over each indelible wheal until she found the crude triple ringed scar on her left buttock which had been made with the red hot base of a twelve bore cartridge case jammed into the end of a fire iron and

stuck into the Aga before being applied to Hilary's soft skin. Sophie's gentle heart choked on the pain and her tears mingled with Hilary's and trickled into Hilary's sobbing mouth. She had dreamed once of being burned to death, and still remembered a pain so excruciating that she had woken screaming with terror. She sat quite still, holding Hilary until the sobbing abated and Hilary began to compose herself. Then she released Sophie and sat back, looking at the two goddesses in bewilderment. How had these total strangers got her to tell them everything in such horrendous detail? She was totally ruined now and might as well capitulate to them. They could have her body, if they wanted it. After all what sane man would want it?

"How long had this been going on?" Caroline asked gently.

"I don't know. I suppose it started a couple of years after I lost the baby. I was quite depressed for a while. The sex seemed like a good sort of medicine. Something to look forward to. I suppose it went on for five or six years. It was only last year that the sex slave thing started. That's when it got really nasty."

"Six years? And you did nothing about it?" Caroline's voice was raised with shock and anger, "for God's sake! You've been subject to multiple rape and grievous bodily harm. You could have gone to the police."

"No, I've told no one but you what actually happened, not my lawyer, not even my parents. I just told them Julian hit me. I'm so ashamed. I daren't even go to the doctor for fear he asks me how I got the scars. I don't want people to know. Financially I'm okay. I'm okay. I've got some money of my own and the cottage belongs to my parents, so they're letting me live there. And when his estate has gone through probate I should be relatively wealthy. His house was in a family trust and can't be passed on to me, but he had a lot of money and investments and some of that should come to me eventually. My lawyer says his parents can't stop it. I'm alive and now you have made me feel even more alive. You've taken away the darkness. I can cope with all that stuff. It's the scars I hate, and the memory of the pain, I keep remembering the pain. Sometimes I have nightmares and wake screaming with it. I used to love my body and want it to be loved. I used to lie in bed sometimes and run my hands over everything and think how lovely it all felt and how men loved to feel it. But now I've lost all my confidence. I used to be so bloody confident....about everything."

"Did your husband and his friends come from this village?" Caroline asked.

"No, he was from York. My friends round here are the local county set, you know, the Fawcetts and the hunting crowd. They've been good to me really. Funny really, I used be pretty bloody wild when I was a teenager. I've been shagged by all of the Fawcett boys and pretty well every other chinless wonder in the area, except Marcus of course who isn't chinless, though he is a wonder. You must think I'm pretty bloody loose. I used to be the village bicycle really. Looking back it's amazing that I didn't get pregnant sooner. I was pretty bloody careless. Anyway Julian and his mates were middle class professionals. Lawyers and accountants. The two groups don't really overlap very much. Not round

here. Except that I think his mates are whispering that I was a slag who put it about and that he died of shock because he found me with someone else. And they're trying to shift the blame onto me because they know I would never dare tell anyone what really happened. I sometimes wonder if they might try to kill me. So I can't tell. When I stop to think I know I'm being paranoid. But ....I want someone to love me... even just to shag me... but I'm so frightened now....you know... of making the same mistake again."

"Then you should not worry about people laughing at you," Sophie replied, "they don't know and they need never know, and they aren't laughing at you. Stay with your old friends. And your new friends. Stay with us. Enjoy your life. You're free. You can start again. You are a very attractive woman. There are kind and gentle men like Marcus who would be very happy to be with you. Look at the person, not the face or the body. You'll get your confidence back, I promise you."

"What about my scars? How can I ever undress in front of a man again? He would reject me straight away. I couldn't bear that."

"The sort of man you have always been attracted to will always let you down. The sort of man you need will not look just at your body," Caroline said, "he will look at all of you and love you for what you are. You understand? You're only, what, twenty eight, twenty nine, same age as Marcus. Your life has barely begun. You're only four years older than me. But still you think I'm much younger than you, just a girl. I tell you truthfully, you're a very desirable woman and you've got a very strong personality. If we really were lesbians we'd certainly have the hots for you. And you have something else which you don't yet recognise."

"Will you tell Marcus?" Hilary asked anxiously, unable to understand how this mere girl could be so wise.

"Probably not, we'll just say we had a nice chat. But there are no secrets between Marcus and us." Caroline said. "If Marcus asks us, we will have to tell him. Because of what we are it's almost impossible for us to hide secrets from each other, though you have managed to hide something from us. You haven't told us the whole story because you refuse to recognise the whole story, but we aren't going to ask any more questions and there is no reason why he should ask such a specific question. So don't worry. It won't go any further. Even if he did know Marcus wouldn't say anything. Marcus is a very moral person. And he does as he's told, at least by us. And anyway, he's easily diverted."

"And you should not blame him," Sophie added, "Marcus is full of love and kindness, but he doesn't know how to express it. Most of the time he's just confused about his emotions. He's confused about everything really. When you threw yourself at him that night in August he would have been reminded of what Caroline did to him, and he would have been terrified."

"No," Hilary sniffed, "he wasn't frightened, "he just said he loved somebody else and he wasn't going to betray them. Which of you is it that he really loves?"

“He loves both of us,” said Sophie, still holding Hilary's hand, but putting her other hand over Caroline's.

“No,” said Caroline, “he loves Sophie. He loves me too, but not in the same way. He is the love of Sophie's life. I've had to give up the love of my life. But I can love Marcus too. Almost as much as Sophie does. And I have a career to follow too, which will take me away eventually, though I will always come back to Sophie and Marcus, whenever I can. You are lucky in a way, you have not yet met the love of your life. You have that to look forward to.”

Hilary was surprised to find that she felt much better, both about herself, and about these strange girls who she no longer saw as competitors. She could not compete with them, they were too perfect, but the jealousy and intended malice which had brought her to the Hall had evaporated. It was not a genuine part of her character anyway, just a petulant childish reaction. She felt comfortable with them. She picked up the towel from where it had fallen across her knees and wiped the tears and mascara stains from her face, then put the towel to one side and sat on it, as they had done. She no longer felt embarrassed about her nudity or mortified at the scars on her back and buttocks. She was grateful to them. They had released her from her bondage and reopened the windows in her heart. She knew that she would never be able to love Marcus as Sophie loved him, but she could love him as Caroline did, as a friend and that would be enough. Sophie was smiling at her.

“Better?” Sophie said encouragingly.

Hilary nodded and gave a wan smile, “I think I should go,” she said, looking at the pile of clothes by the pool.

“No, no,” Sophie said, “stay for a bit longer. We can talk. I'll go and make some tea.”

Hilary marvelled at the absurd banality of it. This beautiful shameless body slipping off naked to the kitchen to make tea. It was ridiculous. What if Janet Mowbray came into the kitchen? They must have told her to keep out. She wondered what to say to Caroline who seemed to be so much more formidable than Sophie. She looked appreciatively at Caroline's sleek body. Caroline was indubitably a natural blonde with masses of that fine blonde hair which is so often found on Nordic people. Her skin was golden brown, as though she spent her entire life naked in the sun, but her pubes were mousey brown and neatly trimmed.

“I thought that real blondes always had blonde pubes,” she blurted out awkwardly, glad to have found something that was not perfect.

Caroline laughed, “not me, apparently. I wish I did. I sometime think I'd like to wax them off altogether. Don't know what Marcus would say. I've tried shaving them off. But it's awfully prickly when they grow back. He complained once that I was scratching him.”

It dawned on Hilary for the first time that Caroline was not just a friend of Marcus and Sophie.

“You sleep with him?” Hilary was astonished.

“Well, yes, of course.”

“But I thought..... And what about...isn't she?”

“Sophie too, both of us. In the same bed, at the same time, sometimes with each other but usually with Marcus.” Caroline laughed again, “I know. It's not easy to accept. It works for us. At the moment. But I don't think it would work for most women. We're very odd, really. It may not last. Sophie will always be with Marcus, but my career might get in the way. My career is very important to me.”

Hilary found this revelation perplexing and decided not pursue it any further.

“Where did you both go to school?” she asked, anxious to move to more neutral ground.

“Actually, we both went to Summerhill. Why else do you think we can’t keep our clothes on? I was three years ahead of Sophie, but even then we knew there was an affinity between us. She followed me to St Dynion’s and now I’ve followed her to Carston. Her dad is bit of an idiot and loses money on boats and crazy business schemes, but she loves him to bits and she's terribly loyal. Her mother's dead. My parents are divorced. I don't see them.”

“Ah yes, I’ve heard about Summerhill. Progressive school isn’t it. Pretty wild place, I’ve heard. But you obviously got a good education there. And what is your career? Are you a model or something like that? You're so beautiful you must be a model, or an actress, or something very glam.”

Caroline collapsed into squeals of laughter, “no,” she laughed, “I'm an academic like Marcus. I'm doing a doctorate in theology, well, more philosophy than theology. I did my first degree in theology.”

Hilary wilted, neutral territory had suddenly taken a perilous path. It was okay to be beautiful and it was okay to be bright. But in Hilary's world for a woman to be bright and beautiful was very dangerous. Most of the men she had known would run a mile to avoid clever women. Nevertheless she persevered. If she was going to be friends with this clever girl she needed to try to understand her world.

“What are you studying?”

“I'm looking at how religions claim to know about their gods. It's epistemology really. You know, the theory of knowledge. I'm particularly interested in the work of a medieval English scholar called William of Occam who believed that it is impossible to know anything meaningful about God. That's how I first met Marcus.”

“What about Sophie?” said Hilary, anxious to deflect the direction of a conversation in which she was already out of her depth, “she's gorgeous too, surely she must be a model.”

“Sophie?” there was wicked twinkle in Caroline's eyes, “Sophie was one of Marcus's students. She's a medievalist, like him. Actually, through no fault of

her own, she's totally screwed up his entire career, which is a pity really because he's very good at his job, though he's had some really bad luck recently with his research. But, it seems she's done him a good turn. He's better off without it. They're a bunch of bastards at St Dynion's. Bloody tin pot apology for a university. God only knows why I went there. Well, there must have been a reason, it's just that I can't remember what it was. Perhaps they were nice to me at the interview. Still, if I hadn't gone there I'd never have met Shagger Williams," Caroline's voice fell, Hilary caught the suppressed sob which lay behind it, then Caroline continued, "or Marcus or Sophie or Drew, or...Jaz. Jaz. I'd forgotten about Jaz. Jaz really is the handmaiden of God. Maybe we were all meant to be at St Dynion's. Drew believes in all that hippy karma stuff and I've always ridiculed him for it. But now I'm beginning to wonder. There is a fearful symmetry about what has happened to us and I'm beginning to think you might be a part of it too. Still I'm going to leave St Dynion's as well. I was having an affair with my supervisor, and, well, it's all come to end. They don't want me in the Department so I'm being allowed to complete my research using the library at Durham. I'll get a bedsit in Durham and live here at the weekends. After that I don't know. Depends on where I can get a lectureship."

Caroline had moved into territory and people who were outside Hilary's parochial knowledge and a love life so complex that it defied imagination. To her intense relief Sophie returned with a tray, three mugs of coffee and a jug of milk.

"Sorry," she said, "there were too many types of tea. I couldn't make my mind up which one everyone would like. And anyway I couldn't find a strainer for the teapot. So, it's instant coffee. And I found some choccy biscuits." She knelt down carefully and put the tray on the floor. Hilary started to laugh, almost, but not quite, hysterically. The girls looked at her in alarm.

"It's okay," Hilary said, "it's just so bloody bizarre. Here we are sitting around in the bloody altogether drinking coffee and talking about, what was it? Epistemelology and shaving our pubes. I've never done anything like this before. It's really strange."

"Do you like it?" Sophie asked, "we do it a lot."

"Well, yes, actually. You feel sort of free. It's like we were kids again. You're seeing people as they really are. You know, kind of warts and all. Not that either of you have any warts or anything remotely resembling warts, not even a freckle. It's not fair really. You're both too bloody perfect. Never mind." Hilary backtracked away from another potential solecism, "and somehow it's easier to talk freely. Once you get used to it. I admit I came here intending to cause trouble but it's all changed and now I'm eternally grateful to you and I really like talking to you. I don't understand your relationship with Marcus. But, that doesn't matter any more either. Tell me about Marcus. What's happening? Are you all going to be living here? How's the village gossip going to cope with a *ménage trois* in the Hall, I wonder?"

“I think it might be better if the village didn't know about that just yet,” Caroline suggested. Hilary nodded.

“I won't say anything,” she replied, “but actually houses like this often have house guests who stay for years. The locals just assume that the Quality are different and they don't ask questions. I've met people from great houses who admitted that they sometimes didn't have a clue who was living in their houses. And they didn't really care. Be discreet and no one will notice.”

“Yes, perhaps that's true. I hope so,” said Caroline tentatively. “Anyway Marcus has been having a lot of bad luck so he's resigned from his job and yes, he's coming back here. He's just gone to St Dynion’s to collect our stuff. Then some friends of ours are coming from London for Christmas and we shall have a little symposium. You can come if you like. In fact I think you should definitely come.”

“Oh, I don't know,” Hilary said mournfully, “what's a symposium?”

“Well,” Sophie was laughing again, “it can be a very boring academic conference. But for the ancient Greeks it was an opportunity to sit around, get drunk and take their clothes of, talk about everything under the sun and have a laugh. What we're doing now is a kind of a mini symposium. I'm half Greek, ” she added proudly, putting her hands on her hips and sticking out her magnificent chest, “plus we do our meditation thing, to put us in the right mood. Do come, you will like it.”

“I can't take my clothes off in front of strangers,” said Hilary reluctantly, “my scars will disgust them. What would I say?”

“You mustn't be ashamed of your body,” Sophie insisted, “just tell the truth, but not all of it. Just say you had a bastard of a husband who abused you. But he's dead now. Serves him right. Anyway, look at you. You're happy enough naked with us. You just said so. It's not so bad, is it? Think of your scars as part of your beauty. Something that makes you special. You can say my bastard husband did this to me. But I got over it and I'm proud of my scars 'cos I've defeated them. And always believe that you’re a beautiful woman, 'cos it’s true. Women can be ridiculously kind to totally undeserving men, but they're often totally bitchy to each other. We aren't bitchy. Caroline was telling the truth. We always tell the truth. You are beautiful. Think of it as your first steps into a new world of liberation. Please come and be with us at Christmas. You'll see Marcus, and there will be other people who are very nice. Nothing terrible will happen to you. It will be just like this, but a few more people. Just talking. No sex, unless you want it, certainly no violence. You have nothing to lose, and maybe a lot to gain. It will help you to get your confidence back. Don't be frightened.”

“How many people?” Hilary asked diffidently, but already feeling herself falling under the spell of curiosity.

“Not sure, depends on whether Puck and Tinkerbell come. Eight, probably, plus you.” Sophie was counting names on her fingers, “put it this way. There are a lot more bedrooms here than there will be people needing them.”

“Couples?” Hilary seemed reassured.

“Yes, couples, 'cept for us, and Adrian and his girls, if they both come,” Sophie said, “but I suppose you could think of Caroline and me as being opposite sides of the same coin, so one person really, with Marcus as the other, all in the same bed. And there will be one man on his own. Like Marcus. You'll recognise him as soon as you see him.”

“I've already seen him,” Hilary exclaimed, suddenly astonished by the image which flitted through her mind, “I know who you mean. He was here. In October.”

Sophie was smiling again, her eyes shining, her hands clapped together in front of her open face. Hilary sensed a great joy and anticipation in her. Sophie was looking forward to Marcus returning. She hated every minute that they were apart, and she was overjoyed that Hilary was to join them and she wanted Hilary to be happy. Sophie was a pure embodiment of love. Caroline was the embodiment of intellect. They were complementary to each other and to Marcus who was the cement that bound them to each other. She understood now why they were together and that it wasn't just about sex. There was something else, deeper, stranger, which even they did not understand. If she wished she too could take her place in this complex relationship between familiar strangers and bind herself to them for life, and not just for life, but for eternity.

“You see,” Sophie murmured, her healing hand cupping one side of Hilary's face, her dark eyes searching into Hilary's startled blue grey eyes, almost the colour of Marcus's eyes, “you can do it too. Most women can. It's nothing mysterious, just empathy, just female intuition You know now who you are meant to love. You just have to be aware of it and give in to it when it comes to you.”

Hilary smiled to herself. She was quietly happy again, thinking of what it would be like to once more have a man caress her body and enter her, not to torture her but to love her as she was meant to be loved. She hugged herself, savouring the warmth of her body, relishing the full firmness of her breasts, the length of her slim thighs and the strength of her well turned but muscular calves, and that beautiful warm wet place between her legs which had brought her so much teenage pleasure and so much adult pain. She would enjoy a man again, and she would love him properly and tenderly, not for houses or money, but for himself, as he would love her and want her for herself. And this time it would be the right man, a man like her. She sensed again the approving warmth of Sophie's heart. It was going to be alright. She would go to their.... symposium, and do whatever was expected of her. She would go like a lamb, like Marcus, being led to her rebirth by these mysterious midwives.

Winter shadows crept through the orangery, shrouding the pool in numinous darkness and wrapping themselves round the soft creatures dreaming under the orange glow of the hanging gas heaters. Complex vortices of evanescent energy ruffled the glass flat surface of the dormant pool and waited for the gathering.

Hilary did not have to wait until Christmas Day to meet her promised man. Sophie had been quite transparent. The man would come back from Wales with Marcus. All she had to do was to sit in the little bow window in her cottage opposite the great wrought iron gates at the end of the drive up to the Hall. Sooner or later Marcus would appear with the Transit, and all would be revealed. She sat patiently for nearly two days, mulling over all that had happened by the pool and trying to make sense of her new friends. She did like them and, in spite of their strangeness, she trusted them. She had nothing to lose, anyway, and the man she had seen standing under the portico of the Hall had looked nice enough, though she couldn't really remember anything significant about him, not even the colour of his hair, or his name, which she remembered being given but could not recall. Never mind. Marcus probably had many friends and if they were his friends they would probably be as nice as Marcus. In the end she had to admit that she was just clutching at straws and this admission reminded her of just how desperate she was to be loved and how frightened she was of being loved. She would need all that was left of her once daredevil courage to get through this weekend.

Then there were the girls, Sophie and Caroline. They were not what she had expected but she desperately wanted to talk to them again and find out more about their strange lifestyle and especially their bizarre relationship with Marcus. It was possible to think of Marcus in bed with a teddy bear, but to be in bed with two gorgeous and highly sexed women was stretching credibility, and, if it was true, it proved that she really didn't know Marcus at all. Suppose his friends were the same? Given her recent experiences she didn't know whether she could cope with that. But most of all she just wanted to talk to them, about anything really, even, she struggled with the word, about epitomelology. They were totally unlike any women she had ever met before, though she could recall clever girls at her Quaker school who walked the same walk and talked the same talk. But she had been too contemptuous of them to seek their friendship, preferring instead to whack their ankles at hockey in a futile demonstration of her physical superiority. Now she regretted it, as she regretted so much of her youthful excesses. The second chance was not just for her body, but for her mind which was actually far better than she had ever imagined.

Then, late on the afternoon of the Friday before Christmas weekend, she saw the Transit turn into the drive with Marcus at the wheel, and another figure in the passenger seat. It was getting dark, and it was snowing. If Marcus had left it any later he would have had difficulty getting across the Pennines. By morning there would two or three inches of snow under foot. If tomorrow was a nice day, Marcus thought, they could all go for a walk on the moors. He parked the Transit with the back doors facing his double front doors and stepped

out only to be nearly knocked off his feet by the flying bundle of Sophie's fur hooded parka which flung itself round his neck. It was a genuine American army alpaca packed parka which had originally come from Drew and so was far too big for Sophie. She rarely wore it but when she did it reminded her of Drew, as though a part of him was still inside the coat with her. It was a sweet but silly notion, but then Sophie had a weakness for sweet but silly notions. When Sophie had stopped kissing him, Caroline, who had been kissing James, changed places with her and the whole osculatory ceremony started all over again. Given that Marcus had only been away for a few days it was all a bit over the top, but when the kissing stopped they went into the kitchen for a quick cup of coffee then started to unload the boxes and clothes from the van before the weather deteriorated any further. Apart from the books it was surprising how little they had actually possessed in St Dynion's. Sophie and Marcus had very few clothes between them. Caroline, who was more

dressy, had several suitcases of neatly folded suits and blouses, as well as her smart casual clothes and accessories and assorted shoes and boots. But, all in all, it was their books which took up most of the space. Marcus would have to put more bookcases in the study, or remove the aged bound copies of Punch and the Field, which clogged up most of the existing shelves. For the time being they just stacked the boxes and coffins full of books on the black and white marble tiled floor of the spacious entrance hall, and had almost finished when Marcus noticed a figure striding purposefully up the snow filled drive.

"Oh, no," said Marcus, "Hilary bloody Outhwaite."

Sophie tugged at his sleeve and looked at him with as severe a face as she could muster, "be nice to her Marcus. Marcus. Listen. She needs us."

Caroline nodded approvingly.

"I know," said Marcus, "I'm just a bit tired, "I don't want to have to fight her off. Has she been here while I've been away?"

Sophie smiled, "we've had a long chat. She's our friend. She's like us. Do you understand?"

"I don't think she's at all like you. Either of you."

"No Marcus. You still haven't understood. She's like us, Marcus. Like us," Caroline said emphatically, "so be nice to her."

Marcus shook his head and looked puzzled.

They stopped unloading books and watched Hilary approach them. Sophie went forward to greet her and gave her a quick welcoming hug but before Hilary could speak to Marcus, towards whom she was instinctively walking, Sophie redirected her at James.

"This is James Sinclair," Sophie said.

James held out his hand and Hilary took it. The handshake was firm and reassuring. But she couldn't really make out his features because he was muffled up inside a very old duffel coat.

“Hi,” said Hilary cheerfully, “I'm Hilary...,” she paused to consider what surname to use. She hated her dead husband's surname, “Hilary Outhwaite... Pronounced Oothwaite,” she added.

“I'm James Sinclair,”

“You're Marcus’s colleague?”

“I used to be. Not any more. But I am Marcus friend.”

“We've met before,” said Hilary trying very unsuccessfully not to be too excited, “you were here in October. Do you remember me? On my horse. I was very rude. I didn't introduce myself. I thought Dennis would introduce us, but he didn't. Isn't the weather fun. I love the snow well maybe not if you have to drive somewhere are you staying long do you know Sophie and Caroline I've just met them they're so nice I've known Marcus since we were children I'm sure you'll like coming here the Hall's lovely what was the journey like from Wales where is it you've come from St something's I've never been to Wales they say the Welsh don't like the English why's that what have we done to them I've been to Scotland though and to Spain and France for holidays have you been to France bet you've been everywhere oh dear,” Hilary stopped and put her hands to her mouth, “I'm talking too much.”

“It's okay,” said James, pulling the scarf away from his face, and remembering the seductive body in the skin tight jodhpurs, “just slow down. I'm very pleased to meet you and I do remember you. I remember you on your horse. You were very smart and very ladylike. I wondered who you were.” *I remember very well,* James thought, *she's got a fabulous figure.*

“Well, thank you kind sir,” said Hilary demurely, as her heart leapt over itself. At least he'd noticed her, even if she hadn't noticed him, “I'm afraid it used to be better. I've let myself go to seed a bit recently.”

“Oh, no,” James exclaimed, “not you too.”Hilary looked puzzled, “what do you mean? I’ve just been eating too much, you know. I can soon get it off.”

“Those three,” said James, gesturing at the troika who were still unloading boxes, “continuously second guess me. They seem to know what I'm thinking just before I think it. It's beginning to worry me. I sometimes wonder if they’re aliens or mutants or something.”

Tell him it's just female intuition a fleeting memory whispered in Hilary's head

“It's just, you know, female intuition,” Hilary said, aware that James had not let go of her hand.

“Are you two going to help, or not,” said Marcus sarcastically, “ouch, that hurt Sophie, I wish you wouldn't do that.”

“Then leave them alone,” Sophie whispered, “we can do this, we've almost finished. Then we can all go inside. There's a lovely fire in the drawing room and I've made a beef stifado, for all of us. All of us.”

“A beef what? How did you know that James was coming?” Marcus insisted, “don't do that Sophie, it hurts,” he dodged another loving kick in the shins. They

both turned and looked at Hilary and James, who appeared to be looking at each other and ignoring what was going on around them.

"Just, leave them alone," Sophie hissed, "Marcus, Marcus," she added with sudden and tremulous urgency, Marcus, that bush is moving." She grabbed his arm tightly and pointed with her other arm towards a row of short bell shaped conifers which marked the outer edges of the large lawn in front of the Hall. In the cloud shrouded moonless darkness the bushes would not normally have been visible, but they were capped with new snow which reflected back the lights from the front of the Hall. Marcus turned to look. The bushes were not moving, but one of them was out of line with the others. After a while it did move. Very slowly, but definitely moving up the edge of the drive towards the humans clustered round the Transit. James and Hilary were still intent on each other and had not noticed. But Caroline had, and came up on the other side of Marcus and slipped her hand into his.

"What is it Marcus?" she asked, curious rather than frightened. Sophie was trembling and holding tight to Marcus's other arm. James and Hilary, aware of the sudden silence round the Transit, looked up and surveyed the approach of a six foot cone of darkness lightly topped with a sprinkling of snow.

"Oh, bloody hell," Hilary exclaimed, "it's Fangdale. I wish he wouldn't creep around like this. For God's sake. It's snowing. Why doesn't he bloody well go back to his burrow or wherever he goes."

Marcus started to laugh, "he's got a perfectly good cottage, and a wife and two little Fangdales. There have to be little Fangdales to grow up and keep the gardens tidy."

The snow cone approached and resolved itself into an ex WD poncho inside the hood of which it was just possible to make out a neanderthal gargoyle of a face barely recognisable as human. It towered over Marcus and brought a hand roughly carved from a lump of dark brown wood up to its forelock which it touched, and then grunted a deferential greeting, as its kind had done to its masters since time began. Then it came closer to Sophie who tried to bury herself in Marcus. In its left hand was a thick wooden pole which, on closer inspection, had a sharpened metal blade at one end and was, in fact, a hedge lopper which Fangdale always carried as a dual purpose walking stick. The other hand stretched out and touched Sophie's face. Sophie tried unsuccessfully to back further into Marcus, but as the calloused hand stroked her cheek her expression changed from fear to surprise and then to wonder. The touch was intimately gentle and lasted for only a second. Then the claw was withdrawn and Fangdale resumed its ponderous trek through the snow without even a parting grunt.

"What the hell was that Marcus?" James asked.

"The gardener," Marcus replied, "he's a bit strange. Can't speak. There have always been Fangdales here. Even before my family came here. They're in the

manorial records as far back as they go. He was already ancient when I was a child. No one knows how old he really is."

"It's beautiful," Sophie whispered in an awe struck voice, "beautiful inside. Like an angel. And it is old. Thousands and thousands of years old."

"Come off it Sophie," said James, "not thousands of years."

"It's an old soul, like Mrs Moore," Sophie insisted, "old as time. It's been here many times. Always here. This is its place."

James pulled a face.

"To bloody Gothic by half Marcus," he laughed, "I wouldn't put that in your novel if I were you. The bloody critics would laugh themselves silly."

"It's only Fangdale," Marcus said, "I've seen Fangdale in a suit. And I've seen him playing bar skittles in the *Blackwell Ox*. He's an essential part of the estate. Fangdale is okay. We've almost done here. This is the last coffin of books. James, you and Hilary can carry it. Then Sophie will feed us all."

"Why are they called coffins?" Hilary asked, taking the handle at one end of the oblong box of books.

"I don't know," James said, lifting the other handle, "I suppose they look like coffins. Marcus borrowed them from the library."

"But books aren't dead things are they," said Hilary, manoeuvring the coffin out of the back of the van.

"I sometimes think history books are pretty dead. They're mostly about dead people, after all," James replied. The others had disappeared discreetly into the house, leaving them on their own to finish the unloading.

"But novels are alive aren't they. I mean, novels give you pictures in your mind, don't they. And they make you think things. And if you have lots of knowledge and a vivid imagination they can be....I mean... the reader makes the novel..in a way. I like novels." Hilary paused, they were inside the hall now and lowering the coffin onto the marble tiles. James closed the door, shutting out the increasingly dense falling snow. Hilary was looking curiously at the covers of the top layer of books in one of the coffins.

"Whose books are these? Are these Marcus's books?" There was an anguished expression on what James could see of her face under the hood of her coat. "I hate this book," Hilary growled, "I hate it. I hate it." She picked out a slim volume and hurled it across the hall with manic venom, then burst into tears, her face now contorted with rage.

"Steady on," said James, "what's the matter? It's just a book. These are Sophie's books."

James scanned the titles on the bindings. They were mostly history books, with a lot of romantic novels, science fiction, boat books, some books of poetry, some, ahah, sex manuals, and books on astral knowledge, cosmic awareness and psychic discovery. So that was where Sophie's cranky ideas came from. Well, she was no different from other girls, and boys for that matter, of her generation.

James was prepared to bet that Drew Parkin had a similar collection on his bookshelf, probably not the romantic stuff though.

"I'm sorry," Hilary said, "I'm sorry. It's just that my ex husband read that book. And after he read it he wanted to make it real and live that life for himself. And he did dreadful things to me. He beat me. He's left me physically scarred. I'm ashamed. Have you read it? Do you know what it's about? It's awful. No sane woman would ever submit to that willingly. I must have been mad," she started to cry again, "and now I've told you before I meant to."

James shook his head and put his arm round her. Hilary put her hand up and pushed back the hood, releasing her torrent of tawny hair. She put her arms round James's waist and held him tight, her face against his shoulder. She felt reassured by him. It was comforting to be in a man's arms again. James could hear Sophie and Caroline screaming with laughter in the kitchen. They were trying to escape from Marcus who was pretending to be a gorilla and chasing them round the big kitchen table making gorilla noises and stopping every now and again to beat his chest. James turned back to Hilary and looked at her face. It was a strong face. Not fine and delicate like the two nymphs in the kitchen, but broader, with a firm mouth and arched eyebrows, giving Hilary a slightly startled look which was offset by her half closed eyelids and very sexy bedroom eyes. Hilary was a very attractive woman, even when tear stained and evidently unhappy .

James was nonplussed, but the signals that the unsubtle Hilary was sending out were totally unambiguous.

"It's just a book," he said, "I've heard of it but I've never read it. I don't know why Sophie would read it," he added, knowing only too well that Sophie's voracious sexual curiosity would have made *The Story of O* compulsory, if not compulsive, reading.

"I know. I'm sorry. It's just people read books and then, sometimes, they want to live like that and they turn fiction into fact. And sometimes it's not nice. I'm sorry. I'll have to tell you about my husband sometime. But not now."

James continued to hold Hilary in his arms for a while, savouring the warmth that flowed from her. She said nothing but kept her face pressed into his shoulder, allowing her silent tears to soak into the coarse fabric of his duffel coat.

"You realise," said James eventually, "that we've been set up. Sophie has engineered this, though how she could have known that I was going to accept Marcus's invitation I really don't know. I'm not sure whether I like being set up. How do you feel about it?"

Hilary looked up at him. James was taller than her. He wasn't matinee idol handsome, like her ex, just nondescript really, a bit like Marcus. Not surprising they were friends. But his face was kind and gentle. His thinning wavy dark blonde hair was ruffled from his duffel hood, and still speckled with drops of half melted snow. His eyes were grey, like Marcus's, and like her own. She put

her gloved hand up and touched his face, then took the glove off and traced her naked fingers round his cheek. He was older than her, older than Marcus. The lines and furrows on his forehead and the nascent wrinkles round his eyes suggested mid thirties probably. Much the same age as her ex. And she sensed in his face his own unhappiness and need for love.

"I don't know," she said, anxious not to lose this opportunity, "but, if we've been set up, maybe we should play their game and have a bit of fun with them."

James undid the toggles on Hilary's sheepskin coat and put his hand on her hips.

"Do you really want to?" he asked, smiling.

"Why not," Hilary replied, "we're grown ups, after all, and let's be frank, both of us are on our own and looking for someone. Maybe we should get to know each other better. Just go slowly. We've nothing to lose. I don't know whether I believe in love at first sight. I think your friend Sophie probably does. Do you trust Sophie? I mean, you've known her longer than I have. I only met them three days ago."

"I think so. Sophie's a romantic. She believes that some people are intended for each other and must meet. She would say that marriages should be made in heaven and she obviously thinks that you and I are intended for each other. She's as strange as she is beautiful, but I do trust her. I think she just wants to help people and if she thinks that we are intended for each other perhaps we should give her the benefit of the doubt."

"Let's play their game then," said Hilary, offering up her face, "kiss me."

James tightened his grip on her and before either of them had time to stop and think about the consequences of leaping blindly over a precipice they were kissing each other, tentatively at first, then more and more passionately until mouths, tongues and faces locked together, merging into one. From that instant they were no longer playing anyone's game except their own.

Sophie peeped round the corridor into the entrance hall, then went back to the kitchen and looked at the clock on the wall.

"Thirty five minutes," she laughed quietly. Caroline and Marcus looked at her quizzically.

"Thirty five minutes, about, from first meeting each other to kissing. Let's see how quickly we can get them into bed," she looked at the clock again. It was coming up to six thirty, "three more hours?"

"You set this up, didn't you?" said Marcus disapprovingly.

"Seemed like a good idea. Two unhappy people who can make each other happy. James is much like you, and she certainly fancied you, though for all the wrong reasons. And James desperately needs someone. And she's never been in love with anyone in her life, though she would have been in love with you if you'd let her. And she desperately needs someone too. I think they can be very happy together. They can work it out. And, if it doesn't work, at least they will have got their confidence back. Pity they can't have kids, though."

“You're a naughty person Sophie Davenport,” said Caroline tartly, “like that wretched Jane Austen woman, you know, Emma Woodhouse, messing about with other people's lives. They should have more time to get to know each other.”

“I prefer to think of myself as being like Esther Summerson,” Sophie replied crisply, “going around unlocking people's hearts and letting the light in. Anyway, if they are meant for each other they will know the minute they kiss. I knew at once that I was to be with Marcus. The minute I first saw him. Without even kissing him. It just took a long time to get there. And you tried to interfere. You're the wicked one,” she added, grinning mischievously at Caroline.

“Esther Summerson was plain, boring and sensible and she suffered. You are definitely not plain, boring or sensible and you certainly haven't suffered. You are wise though.” Caroline paused, “didn't stop you shagging Drew though, did it, and anything else you fancied.”

Sophie made a petulant moue and looked appealingly at Marcus, but she had recognised familiar signs and had already forgiven Caroline's irritability.

“I have suffered,” she said thoughtfully, “in other lives. And so have you.”

Marcus was smiling too, “come on you two. That's all in the past now,” he said, “and anyway, Sophie had three years to get to know me, though I knew nothing of her until it happened. It was Caroline I fantasised about. And now I can love both of you. But they're not really like us. They have a lot of bad emotional baggage, well James has. I don't know about Hilary. Well, yes I do, actually. Hilary had a reputation. What do you mean, can't have kids?”

“You have no idea,” said Caroline solemnly, “let's eat this Greek stew before it goes cold.”

Out in the hall two new faces explored each other.

“I think it's time we joined them,” Hilary said, “what are we going to say?”

“We don't need to say anything,” said James, “they already know, but let's keep them guessing for a bit.”

Marcus looked up as they came into the kitchen and half stood for Hilary. They looked different, he thought. More relaxed, but it wasn't obvious to him that anything had happened between them and he rather doubted that they had enough in common to make them attractive to each other. His own last recollection was of a drunken naked Hilary storming out of his house in a tornado of obscenities and then coming back sheepishly for her clothes. Then he remembered the scars. How would James cope with that, he wondered? Hilary had a great body he thought, with all the confidence of a recently graduated connoisseur of women's bodies, but the scars? Well, they were only just to say noticeable. By the time James noticed them he would already be committed and James would be far too polite to back out, and this time politeness would not land him in the soup. Hilary, after all, had once had a

pretty formidable reputation for sexual precocity. James was in for a well deserved good time and after that the scars wouldn't matter.

Shorn of her hooded Antartex sheepskin coat Hilary was dressed in a fashionable stiff navy blue military style tunic with elaborate frogging, epaulets and a high collar, and neatly pressed black maxi skirt worn over long boots with brown tops, which looked suspiciously like riding boots. James was in his usual leather patched tweed jacket and cavalry twills, the universal uniform of sixties academics. They looked surprisingly good together, he thought. Sophie might be right. She usually was, he had to admit. Hilary kept covertly glancing at James as though fearful that he would disappear, and every so often James would turn and look at her beautiful face, almost unable to believe what was happening. Marcus had said nothing on the journey from Wales. He wondered if Marcus actually knew. Marcus had invited him to stay over Christmas, but he might have said no. Would he still have met Hilary, at some other time or place?

“Beef stifado,” said Sophie, gesturing at the various pots and dishes neatly arranged down the middle of the big kitchen table, “potatoes boulangere, fasolakia, and some brussel sprouts sauteed with ginger. Well, it is Christmas. Garlic bread. It's a bit of a mish mash 'cos I had to use what I could get in Stokesley. The shops here aren't very good Marcus. Where can we get peppers and olive oil and things like that?”

“Northallerton is better,” Marcus said, “you should have talked to Janet.”

Hilary looked in amazement at the eclectic feast spread before them.

“How can you be so beautiful, so clever and cook like this? I've only just mastered coq au vin. It's not fair on ordinary women,” Hilary sighed.

“No mystery,” said Caroline, who had been watching the body language between James and Hilary, and had picked up on the covert glances missed by Marcus. “Sophie's daddy has crazy business schemes and one of his crazier schemes was to charter a really big yacht and take really rich people cruising. And Sophie was going to do the cooking. So, at the age of sixteen, Sophie was packed off one summer to a cordon bleu cookery school in Thessalonika because he couldn't afford to send her to a school in England, and now she can't tell a kleftiko from a lob scouse. Sophie!! Stop throwing Brussel sprouts at me. Sophie!!!.” Caroline squealed and ducked to avoid a hail of green missiles. Hilary started to laugh, then they were all laughing.

“It's true,” said Sophie, “and anyway stifado is supposed to be made with rabbit. But ...I can't eat rabbits. They're cuddly things. Like Marcus. Sorry about the sprouts,” she added apologetically, “but there's plenty left.”

Sophie's food was delicious. Wine flowed and the conversation meandered around what they would do over Christmas, the forthcoming visit of Drew and the others, and recent events in St Dynion’s. Nothing much had happened in the week since they had all left, except that the ostrich like creature who had purported to preside over Marcus's disciplinary hearing had been found dead in his chair in the Council Chamber, having been abandoned there by the rest of

the Committee who had not dared to wake him at the end of the meeting. James had heard this from Alwyn, the man who cleaned the toilets in the famous battlefield corridor, who had found the body the next day. He had also learned that the deceased bird was actually Lord Tybach, president of the College Council and quondam uncle and protector of Owen Seaton. Hilary sat quietly and listened to stories of people and events of which she knew nothing. But, although the context was different, she had listened to similar dinner party conversations between her ex husband and his legal friends. The tone of the conversation was eerily familiar.

"And Seaton," said James, "has been dropped as the Labour candidate for Bethel. I told you so."

"Who's Seaton?" Hilary asked.

"Well," said James, looking pained, "he's one of our colleagues."

"He's the bastard who was screwing James's wife," said Caroline, looking straight at Hilary. Hilary's face registered a frantic palimpsest of confused emotions revealing everything that Caroline wanted to know. Caroline and Sophie generally considered it impolite to go unbidden into people's minds, but the face often told the whole story anyway, so simple empathy sufficed. Hilary had already committed herself to James. Now she was terrified that her new hopes and dreams were about to be smashed before they had even begun to take shape.

"I didn't know you were married," Hilary said anxiously.

"I'm not," said James grimly, "my wife is dead."

"Dead? Oh my God. I'm so sorry. Really. Oh bloody hell. What happened? Was she ill?"

James sat quietly for a moment, as though ordering his thoughts.

"Well, perhaps, in the mind," he said eventually. "It seems she and Seaton were into bondage and he had tied her up so tight she couldn't move. I disturbed them in my house, and there was a fight and he chased me out of the bedroom. And neither of us paid any attention to Sandra and she fell off the bed and choked to death on a gag he'd stuffed into her mouth."

"Oh my giddy aunt," said Hilary, "oh bloody hell. Not you too." She fought a losing battle against her tears. James took her hand.

"That wasn't very bright was it," Sophie hissed at Caroline.

"On the contrary," Caroline replied in a very superior voice, "and just look at the fearful symmetry."

Hilary peered at them through puzzled and tear stricken eyes.

"I don't normally cry," she said to James, who passed her a handkerchief still neatly pressed because it was brand new and straight out of its box, James didn't do neatly pressed old hankies, "but recently I've been crying a lot."

"Sophie is always crying about something," said Caroline condescendingly, "or nothing. I never cry."

Hilary wiped away the tears and then held on to James's hand under the tablecloth. Neither Sandra nor Seaton were mentioned again.

When they had finished, Sophie and Caroline began to collect the plates and started to wash up, helped by Marcus and eventually by James and Hilary who did the wiping. James was surprised to find that Hilary knew where everything was to be put away. And after everything was put away they went upstairs to the drawing room for coffee. Sophie and Caroline with their shoes off and feet tucked under them, sat on either side of Marcus on one of the two big comfortable sofas facing each other on either side of the fireplace. James and Hilary sat more primly on the other sofa. The log fire which Sophie had lit and then omitted to mend was almost reduced to flickering embers. Marcus put a couple of logs on it and it slowly recovered its failing energy.

"I used to come up here when I was a child," Hilary said in response to James's question about her intimate knowledge of the Hall, "and help Dennis's mother with the housekeeping. I love this Hall. I know every room. I know it better than Marcus. And since I've been keeping my horse here I've been coming in occasionally to talk to Janet Mowbray. She's very nice. It's nice just to sit in the kitchen and have a coffee with real friends." She sipped at her mug to emphasize the point. Sophie had at least found an old fashioned grocer in Stokesley from whom she had bought freshly roasted and ground coffee and it was very good indeed, but the residual student in her had passed over the Crown Derby demitasses in favour of familiar earthenware mugs. Hilary began to feel better. Finding out about James's wife had been a serious shock. Caroline had warned her not to fall for a man who felt sorry for her, but Caroline had engineered a total reversal of roles. Now she felt sorry for James, and also for herself. They would rebuild their lives together. What had happened to James's wife could easily have happened to her. At least James's wife had not been beaten to within an inch of her life, but she had lost her life, in the end. She looked at the clock on the Adam mantelpiece above the fire. It was just after nine. It was only about four hours since she had first shaken hands with James yet it seemed that she had known him all of her life. Sophie was looking at the clock as well, then at Caroline, who looked vaguely annoyed, because she knew what was coming and would not be able to take an active part in it. But she also knew that their shared consciousness would let her feel everything that they would feel, and afterwards they would kiss and cuddle her and she would be spoiled by them for the rest of the holiday.

James, distracted for a moment from Hilary, gestured at the portrait which hung over the fireplace. "Who is she? " he asked.

"My mother," Marcus replied.

"You once told me that Caroline reminded you of your mother. I can see why."

They all looked at the elegant blonde woman in the painting. She did look uncannily like Caroline, even to the silver blonde hair which fell to her shoulders in familiar waves. Marcus shrugged.

"Well, her mother, my grandmother, she was Swedish, so..."

"Lots of people think I'm Swedish," Caroline said, "I don't see the resemblance though."

"That's because we don't usually see ourselves as others see us," James replied, "but she does look very like you. But actually," he craned his neck, tilting his head to one side, "from another angle she looks a bit like Sophie."

"Who knows who we really are?" Sophie said contemplatively, "our ancestor's genes have been scattered over millenia. We could all be related to each other. Who knows? Maybe Marcus's mother was a distant relative of Caroline."

The little group relaxed in silence in the flickering light of the dying fire which wrapped sensuous shadows around their divine bodies. The silence lingered as the bodies merged sleepily into each other. Eventually Hilary made a reluctant decision.

"I'd better go," she said, "in case the snow gets any worse. It's over a mile down the drive you know, to the village. Would it be possible for someone to take me home?" She hoped that James would volunteer, then she could invite him into her cottage for a night cap, and perhaps an exploratory cuddle on her own territory.

"Poor Marcus is very tired, said Sophie, ignoring Hilary, "aren't you Marcus."

She prodded Marcus, who yawned cooperatively.

"I think it's time we went to bed," Sophie continued, "I think we should all have an early night. I bet you're tired too James."

James shrugged his shoulders. He wasn't particularly tired. Marcus had done all the driving.

"Anyway," Sophie continued, "all the bedrooms are made up for the others coming on Christmas Eve, so you and Hilary get first choice. I'd go for one with a bath in it if I were you," she said archly, "showers are not as much fun. Come on King Kong."

She pulled Marcus off the sofa, twisted his arm playfully behind his back, and pushed him towards the door, followed by a forlorn Caroline. As she closed the door Caroline flicked off the light switch, plunging the room into darkness relieved only by the embers of the fire. Hilary and James sat quietly, each trying to think what to do next.

"I think they just called our bluff," James said eventually, "are you going to stay?"

"I hadn't intended to," Hilary admitted, "I just wanted to meet you and see what you were like. I didn't think....I hadn't expected....it's all so.... sudden..." But when she put her mind to it Hilary could remember many occasions when

she had got her knickers off within twenty minutes of first meeting some fleetingly gorgeous boy. Then again, she had not been in love before, and this time it was going to be different. Not right to jump straight into bed. It would make her seem cheap. And then she remembered her scars. Did she want to show her body to this man so soon, before he had time do uncover the deeper attractions which would bind him to her?

"What about you?" she asked diffidently.

"I think we should go and find a room. We don't have to make love if you don't want to. We can just be together and talk, you know. And it is still snowing."

Hilary hesitated, torn between heart and head.

"Okay," she said at last, "I know which room Sophie means, but promise me you won't think I'm too easy."

"As you said," James replied, smiling gently, "we're grown ups. Sex is important, but there's more to it than that. Let's just see how it goes. If you want to." He looked up again at the portrait over the fireplace. The blonde lady seemed to be smiling at them. "Did you know her?" he asked Hilary, "what was she called?"

"I don't know. I was ten when she was killed in the plane crash. I can remember the whole village in mourning though. It was a terrible tragedy. Poor Marcus, losing his father and his mother. I think she was called Lucinda. Yes, Lucinda. Let's go and find this room."

Hilary closed the big mahogany door behind them.

"This is called the Indian room," she said, "there's a nice big four poster, and a bath."

James surveyed the bedroom. It was obvious why it was called the Indian room. It was dimly lit and decorated with a deep red flock wall paper, a rag bag assortment of rickety Indian furniture, a stuffed tiger's head on one wall, and some rather dubious Victorian paintings of half naked dusky ladies in what appeared to be a harem. And there was a huge four poster, neatly made up, as Sophie had promised, with cotton sheets folded back over the oriental fabric coverlet, and a large box of paper handkerchiefs prominently positioned in the centre of the bed. Sophie had thought of everything, and she knew that they would marvel that she had known exactly which room they would choose, though she had hedged her bets by putting a box of Kleenex on every available bed in the house.

"I like this room," said Hilary, putting her arms around James's neck and looking up into his anxious face, "I always thought this was a sexy room. Though I can't imagine who slept here. Marcus's uncle was a career bachelor. Must have been someone in the past. Maybe Marcus grandfather. He had a bit of a reputation, apparently. And there is a bath, see." She opened the bathroom door to reveal a large Victorian double ended bath surmounted by a complex and very antique shower mechanism. Hilary crossed to the bed and sat on the

edge, suddenly feeling extremely apprehensive and, for the first time in her life, quite reluctant to undress in front of a man. James sat quietly beside her and took her hand again, stroking her short strong fingers with his other hand.

"What's the matter?" James said.

"I'm very frightened."

"Of sex? You must have slept with your husband. You know what to expect."

"Oh yes," said Hilary bitterly, "I know what to expect. I expect to be trussed up like a chicken and beaten until I bleed, and then raped till I scream. I've got terrible scars. Mental scars and physical scars. You won't do that to me will you."

"Of course not," said James, still stroking her hand, "what one earth do you imagine I am. My God! Did he really do that to you?"

"Yes, really. But you mustn't feel sorry for me. You mustn't. The bastard is dead and out of my life."

"Dead? You too?"

Hilary nodded and began to sob.

"Don't be frightened," James murmured, putting his arm round her, "don't be frightened. I'm not going to run away."

Hilary sat silently for a long time, still clutching James's hand tightly, then, eventually, taking it and placing it on her chest.

"Undress me," her voice was shaking and uncertain.

"You're absolutely sure?"

"Yes, undress me...please....I want to do it. I want to get it over with..better to do it now...than later."

James began to unbutton the military tunic, then slipped it slowly off her shoulders and arms. Hilary put her hands behind her back and undid the bra, as conscious as Sophie of the ineptitude of men faced with intractable hooks and eyes. No slapping faces now and waiting for a wrestling match. It had never been like this before. James took hold of the bra straps and slid them gently over her arms. Her uncupped breasts fell out in all their glory. She was beautiful. He felt tears start in his eyes, and buried his face in the luscious flesh. She put her arms round his head and crushed him into her softness, then stood up and undid the belt on her Maxi skirt which fell away effortlessly. James let his fingers caress the curve of her breasts and then gently down her waist and hips, no tights, in spite of the cold outside, just lacy knickers which he slid very slowly over her long strong thighs, looking up first at her face which was flickering between terror and elation, then down as the falling white lace uncovered a thick tangle of curly brown hair. Hilary stepped out of the knickers and skirt.

"My boots," she said in a choked and barely audible whisper.

James pulled each boot off reverentially then stood up and faced her. Hilary put her arms round his neck and kissed him very gently, then stood back from him and turned round so that he could see her naked back. Hilary had an hour

glass waist and a proper woman's bottom. Not like the scrawny Sandra or the snake hipped Caroline and Sophie. Hilary was a real woman, full, rich, voluptuous and beautiful to behold. But across her shoulders and down her back to her buttocks and the upper part of her thighs was a series of fine white wheals, scarcely visible, and on one buttock a tiny scar of small concentric white rings, like a miniature shooting target embossed in her skin. Hilary turned and faced him again, her face white with fear and apprehension.

"You're very beautiful," said James, his voice as choked with emotions as Hilary's was. He hesitated, "and I love you," he added, "my beautiful lady on a horse."

Hilary smiled shyly. Men would say anything when faced with an available body, but she wanted to believe him and wanted him to love her. She had spent her adult life leaping into sexual whirlpools and mostly drowning in disappointment. This time it would be different. She undressed James as slowly as he had undressed her and opened her body to him. He was clumsy, but slow and gentle and took time to caress and arouse her. He ran his tongue round her nipples, kissed his way down the curves of her stomach and curled his tongue into her vagina. In her turn she let her hands rove down his back and round his buttocks and his balls and his cock. His was not the most beautiful male body she had ever felt. James was just an ordinary man, slightly overweight, but well enough endowed so that when he entered her she felt the tight thrill of his length and breadth. And James played her very slowly, as Caroline had taught him, and much more slowly and sensitively than the greedy men who had previously occupied Hilary, so that when they eventually came it was with a mutual orgasm which left them gasping and crying and hugging each other with joy and relief.

Later they sat opposite each other in the vast Victorian bath which took so long to fill that the water was tepid by the time they could get into it. And they told each other almost everything that needed to be told, washing away their pasts and stepping out of the bath cleansed of almost all of the shame and despair which had once besmirched them.

"Why do people fall in love?" James asked as Hilary lay in his arms in the massive bed, "why did you marry your husband if you didn't love him?"

"I suppose," she replied, "I wanted to live in a Hall. I couldn't have Marcus, so he was the next best thing. But I never loved him. I never knew the difference between lust and love. And he turned out to be a mad sadistic bastard."

"Do you still want to live in a Hall?"

"It was a daydream. Now all I want is to be with you. And with Nicholas, of course."

"Nicholas," James exclaimed in an alarmed voice, "who is Nicholas?"

"My horse. You'll meet him tomorrow. You were jealous, weren't you, for a minute," Hilary was laughing, "and tell me, since we are to have no secrets, why did you marry your wife, if you didn't love her?"

“I suppose,” James echoed, “you know, I was very inexperienced. I thought at twenty six I ought to be married. Then I met this Homerton girl who seemed to fancy me. You know, young men never think, I love this woman. They think, wow she loves me, and mostly they just go along with it until it's too late to back out without hurting someone. Anyway she told me that her father was a banker and had a Rolls Royce. And I was a penniless postgraduate and I thought, wayhey, I'll go for it. Anyway, he was just a bank manager, not a banker, and he didn't have a Rolls Royce. He had a Rover, and he despised academics. Later I worked out that she had married me because her younger sister had just got married to a glamorous airline pilot and Sandra didn't want to be left behind. That's it, I suppose.”

Hilary hugged him, “then we were both very stupid weren't we.”

“No,” James replied, “not stupid, just young.”

James looked up. There were soft footsteps coming along the corridor outside. They stopped at the door of the Indian Room. James frowned and looked at Hilary.

“Who's that,” he whispered to Hilary, his heart in his throat.

Hilary shook her head. The footsteps did not resume or retreat. The corridor was silent.

“This is an old house,” Hilary said, “and it's built on older houses. Sometimes you feel things. But I've never been frightened here. When I was a child I used to think an angel lived here. I used to feel it sometimes, when I was helping old Mrs Mowbray make beds and things. It was so full of kindness. She felt it too, but she said to ignore it because it meant no harm. Generations have lived and died here. But it has always been a happy place. And if it has ghosts they are happy ghosts. They are just watching us and remembering through us what it was like to be alive. I've always felt drawn to this house. I've always felt that I was meant to be here. Not because of wealth or status, though I used to think it was that when I was young and stupid. No.. it's something else. Like a kind of spiritual attraction. They feel it too.”

“Sorry,” James replied, “they ?”

“Yes, those girls. Sophie and Caroline. They told me how happy they were to be here. They're meant to be here too. Oh...I'm being silly...forgive me. Come here. Make love to me again.”

Ekstasis

In another bedroom, safe and snug in the soft cuddling warmth of her companions' bodies, Sophie turned in her sleep and awoke within her own dream of Hilary making love to James to listen to the approaching footsteps in the corridor outside. She opened her sleeping eyes. Fangdale was standing beside the bed. She could not see him, but she knew he was there, a luminous darkness in a darkened room. She knew now what Fangdale was because she had met him many times in the past and he was not to be ignored. She followed him reluctantly out of her unconscious body. As she left the mortal world she looked down briefly at the three sleepers below her before her corporeal senses faded. I love you both so much, she thought, so much.

Into the looking glass, Fangdale whispered.

Sophie fell into the velvet black foothills between life and death so familiar from their meditations. But there were no strong hands here to pull her back to life. Only Fangdale, whose hands were stronger than any she had ever known, and he was leading her away from life towards that blue white emptiness.

Why? her mind cried out in anguish to Fangdale, why? I love this life. This is the best life I've ever had. I'm not ready to go. Why?

Do not be frightened child, Fangdale replied as he folded her into the protection of his dark wings, life is only the briefest of dreams. The dreams of death are eternal. Come and see.

She was alone in a modern tiered lecture theatre which she recognised as the main Arts Lecture theatre at St Dynion's college. The person giving the lecture was herself.

"The subject of today's lecture," Marcus said, "is the complex matter of life and death. But this is a dream Sophie, so you must use your imagination. In dreams anything is possible and there is no logic or reason. And you will not remember this dream until we have found the truth for ourselves. Then you can tell us and we will not believe you because we are rational creatures who do not believe in the testimony of dreams. Now, think of your past lives and remember the king's two bodies. The mortal man and the immortal crown and remember, imagination makes us what we are. Imagination can take us anywhere. Now, many cultures have imagined water as the gateway to eternity...."

Sophie slipped slowly into the mirror cold waters of the river Acheron and dissolved the last memories of her beloved mortal body, reuniting that tiny part of her soul which had lived so briefly on earth with the memories of her many lives and with the one soul which flowed through all of them. Here, in this endless river of death, the waters teemed with dead lives like a myriad tiny bubbles trapped in a frozen torrent of souls. All the lives that had shared the unique and ancient DNA which linked them to this cosmic medium, passively recorded electroencephalograms on a blind and endless cosmic tape, and all the other soulless lives which slept the dreamless sleep of death. There was nothing

to see here, anymore than the naked eye can see the content of radio waves bringing sound and images into a television set. If Sophie had been a neuroscientist or computer engineer she might have visualised the infinitely complex network of neurons and synapses, switches, relays, and memory stores which sustained a disembodied brain embossed on a dimension outside time. If she had been a biochemist she would have recognised the intricate spiral of the double helix twisted through a myriad lives. If she had been a physicist she would have imagined a universe of Implicate Order enfolded in bundles of oscillating quantum energy whose elegant mathematical harmonies determined the forms of matter, animate and inanimate, physical and metaphysical, body and soul, consciousness and intelligence.

But Sophie was not a scientist and so she imagined instead a single unfolding page of a book of the dead in which elusive twisting words encapsulated fractal genealogies of recorded memory threaded along the gossamer syntax of her consciousness which connected them to each other and to all the branching lives which had once shared her DNA. From here Sophie could feel the memory of all of her lives, and the lives of her ancestors, back almost to the time of the shy small people of the Northern forests who first sensed the strange invisible light which surrounded them and learned how to use it. In her dreams Sophie visualised them as elves, wise and noble, like Tolkein's elves, and this was how their racial memory of themselves was passed into the gene banks of the rational world of homo sapiens when it had come to kill, rape and enslave them and their coarse Neanderthal cousins over fifty thousand years ago. In their remote future their lost identity would be recreated as the mysterious faery folk of art and literature who defied belief and challenged the imagination, like the Jurassic dragons that mankind remembered without ever having seen. The relicts of these lost souls passed on to homo sapiens a unique genetic gift which linked some of their human descendants to this cold dimension of life and death and allowed them to use it to talk to the minds of others, as birds use the Earth's magnetic field to navigate vast distances across empty oceans. In life they were the seers, shamans, prophets, visionaries, demi-gods, demagogues, leaders, artists, musicians, poets, wizards, witches, warlocks, mathematicians, healers, physicians, scientists. In death their transient mortal lives survived as memories frozen in the creeping glaciers of time, but accessible to their immortal souls, their essence, powerlessly sentient in this static medium which was itself only one page in an infinity of pages in an infinite book.

Sophie could also move forwards through the lexicon of death, tracing the shining threads of consciousness through the branching memories of her descendants to those who were alive now in the mortal world of irreversible time. Each continuous shimmering gossamer soul threaded through the cascading memories was gathered together into a ganglion which passed like a spinal cord from this intangible world of living death into the material world of dying life. Most of the threaded words faded and vanished into nothingness, like

severed puppet strings, because there were now so few humans with the DNA necessary to receive and read them, though there were many who had the potential to receive if their latent powers could be unlocked. Sophie was one of the very few whose unbroken matrilineal line still retained the strong genetic capability for telepathy which was the essential key to communication in both forms of life. And most of what made up the soul of Sophie was now alive in the mortal bodies of her friends who were also her familial descendants, drawn to each other by genetic beacons which transcended death. She traced back the threads she had loved most in all of her incarnations down through the tiny filaments of invisible light which connected her to the coronas of the three bodies sleeping in that great bed at Carston Hall. Her gentle mind caressed them in their dreams and felt their love and joy.

Sophie's was not the only story on this endlessly unfolding page. There were many other jewelled palimpsests of lives like hers, conscious and infinitely intersected into her own life lines. Hilary was here, but not part of Sophie's lives until now. She belonged, like the angelic Fangdale, to another and much older thread of consciousness, from those who came before the glaciers and had retreated from them, leaving the relics of their fragile world to be ground to dust by the pulverizing ice, only to be themselves overwhelmed by the primitive primate rationalists as they advanced out of Africa to claim dominion over the world. And James. James too had his own Orphean thread in this invisible underworld. But in life they were all crafted by the DNA which allowed them to share their minds and to exist both in their mortal bodies and in their immortal consciousness. All of this myriad of lives and lifelines were aware and spoke to each other in death as they had spoken to each other in life, though in life they remembered nothing of the other lives, except, perhaps in childhood, and in death the memory of their sparrow short lives soon faded so that each new incarnation came fresh and unencumbered by the past. Here they were one mind, without passion or any emotion other than sublime love for everything that was alive and sublime compassion for the vastly greater number of dark, dead human lives whose souls slept within the prison cells of their memories, detached from the consciousness which surrounded them but crisscrossing it where their lives had once intersected with the blessed. For them there would no awakening until these timid angels discovered themselves and dared to resurrect the memories of the lives they had once shared with the sleeping dead, and to judge them.

Nor was there any real energy here. The souls that were conscious had no physical powers other than the power of thought because the conventional mortal senses had no meaning in this incorporeal existence. Their only source of sensation and energy was the demonic power house of the mortal subconscious. To reach that living inferno they had to bridge the gap between energy and matter and speak to the individual mortal mind which was too weak to accept the totality of its collective immortal consciousness. When they had

tried to speak directly to the few minds capable of hearing them the results had usually been catastrophic. Either the receiving mind went mad or, worse, it stayed sane and believed that it had heard the imperative word of God and did sublime and unspeakable deeds in his name. Children were more receptive, because their minds were open and malleable and they sometimes remembered where they had come from, at least until their adult minds denied their childhood dreams. But what could be understood by children had no meaning in the adult world. Nor could they always restrain the powers of their unfettered imaginations which sometimes manifested themselves as paranormal events ranging from harmless invisible friends to involuntary psychokinesis which invited such extreme hostility from adults that they quickly learned to suppress their psychic talents and deny their poltergeists. Children were also more vulnerable to physical damage. Their DNA was more easily disrupted, their minds more easily overwhelmed and the genetic damage that was done to them had extended over generations. So they no longer spoke directly to children, though they listened with joy when the minds of children spoke to them and they played with them in their waking dreams until their adult minds had forgotten their origins. Only those few who had the strong genes for the telepathic empathy which allowed them to communicate with each other both in life and in death were truly open to their eternal souls. But even for them eternity spoke only to the subconscious through dreams and visions because the conscious mind was at the mercy of sceptical reason or blind belief which invoked that snake pit of turbulent human emotions with all its lethal potentials. Only when they forgot themselves and merged their own consciousness, in the ekstasis of communal sex or the calm peace of meditation, was it possible for their souls to step outside their human egos and whisper directly to their mortal minds.

But, even if they could not speak directly to most mortal minds, they could at least listen to the minds of the living and learn what they learned and, because they knew everything that had been, and everything that was, they could also imagine everything that might be and act upon it. Sophie may not have recognised the double helix, but there were other brighter souls here which had patiently watched the human struggle to comprehend the secrets of the genome. They had already understood how that knowledge might be used and were feeding it back to living scientists as inspirational dreams. Sophie, herself a remote genetic relic of Troy, was now a Trojan horse engaged in an evolutionary invasion orchestrated from beyond the grave.

She looked back along the timeline of her many lives and the lives of her ancestors who shared her singularly unique DNA. They were so brief, their lives, never enough time for them to learn the truth about themselves. In the life she had just left she had often dreamed mysterious dreams of other lives and talked about them to Marcus and her friends, but two of the lives engraved in this living mausoleum were rarely visited by her immortal soul, though

fragments of recollection sometimes filtered through to her living dreams as inexplicable painful memories. She unlocked the sepulchral doors and returned reluctantly to the day when she had first become aware of the psychic powers that she would transmit to her descendants for generations to come.

She stood under an intolerably hot sun on a paved square bounded by carved columns of hawk faced gods backed by the glistening white gatehouse of the Temple of Amun at Pi-Ramses and wept at the violent emasculation of her warrior husband. This was no recollected film or book. This was real. She had been here. There was an Egyptian, a Pharaoh, sitting on a gilded throne, and a vast crowd of his subjects silently watching this dusty, panic flinched handful of naked men and women hemmed in by a circle of spears. Their arms were pinioned behind them at their elbows, their ankles hobbled with short bonds of papyrus rope. This was all that was left of the Weshesh, a tribe of the Peoples of the Sea, fugitives from Troy, their beautiful galleys capsized in the sea battle and most of their kinsmen drowned, or killed by the Egyptian archers as the survivors struggled to land. All that remained was this pitiful remnant, now offered as a public sacrifice to the ego of a living God to demonstrate his power and potency. The Pharaoh proclaimed his victory over the Ameluti Misi, the Peoples of the Sea. The Shardana and the Weshesh of the sea, they were made as those that did not exist, captured all together and brought into captivity to Egypt like the sands of the shore. Those few that were left had already witnessed their fate. Death by emasculation for the men. Rape and slavery for the women. The beached footprints of the Weshesh, the flotsam of the Trojan war, would be washed away by the fetch of time. They cowered in terror. Her beardless husband, like her, scarcely more than a child, was wrenched from her side, kicked forward, held from behind by an Egyptian soldier who grasped his hair and bent him backwards over a stone altar. Another man, naked as his defeated enemy and livid with the blood of those he had already mortally maimed, stamped on the rope which hobbled the flailing legs, grabbed the genitals of the howling Weshesh warrior and cut them off with one deft stroke of a practised knife. The severed penis and its little sack of life was tossed into an overflowing basket and the squealing flesh hauled away to die writhing with his fellow warriors in a crocodile infested swamp. The naked executioner, aroused and engorged by the hot torrent of Weshesh blood sprayed into his own groin, grasped his other weapon and looked to his lord. It was time to take another woman. The Pharaoh raised his flail in a gesture of consent. The Pharaoh is the father of his people his herald declaimed, and the seed of his people is truly great. The women of the Weshesh are the gift of the Pharaoh to his people. Do with them as you will. She was pushed forward. Her own pinioned arms were seized by the Egyptian warriors, her long black hair wrenched back and twisted into enduring waves by brutal hands, and she too was bent over the blood drenched block and raped with such violence that she screamed with all the shared pain of her dying husband. When it was over a

fierce hand, still slick with her husband's blood, gripped her chin and turned her sobbing face towards the face of her nemesis. He saw his death in her eyes. The women of the Weshesh have mystical powers, the executioner thought. She will curse me by sorcery. Kill her. Kill her now. He put his curved bronze knife to her throat and looked again into those terrified eyes so that he could watch the light go out in them. The tip of the curved blade bit into her neck, releasing a trickle of blood. He hesitated. The Pharaoh might be displeased at this abuse of his gift. He looked up at the Pharaoh's impassive face, then back into the dark seductive eyes which, suddenly calm in the face of certain death, speared deep into his soul. Another image floated through him. Not a witch but a whore. She was beautiful, young, nubile and lascivious. In the darkness of his heart her naked flesh twined itself around his willing body. The women of the Weshesh were skilled in the arts of lust. He would keep her for his pleasure. He kicked her off the altar and she was dragged away by her twisted hair to survive the involuntary tears and compulsive nakedness which would haunt her throughout all her lives. But her seed was more potent than that of the Pharaoh and it would be scattered around the world. One of her myriad descendants would marry a Greek in the army of Ptolemy and return to Macedonia to start a line which would lead directly to Sophie's Greek mother, and to Caroline whose remote ancestor was bought in Byzantium by a blonde haired Viking merchant and taken back to Sweden as his concubine. Some of her grandchildren would come to Anglo Saxon England with the Danes. Others would stay in Sweden. Another left Egypt with the Israelites and her descendants would find themselves once more in slavery in Babylon. From this line would come Jaz.

That was why women were more likely to be empathic than men. Women were always at risk so they became expert at reading faces and body language which sometimes allowed them to divert men from harming them, or to attract men who would protect them. Some women eventually went beyond this and remembered how to use the mysterious cosmic energy to actually enter the minds of others in order to influence them, to heal or harm. Those who could do this were more likely to survive the violence of the males, and pass on their talent to be refined by generations of adaptive selection. But it could also make them more vulnerable. If their power was too obvious they might be seen as witches, and witches were, and are, intolerable to most men. So they learned to conceal their psychic skills, and sometimes, through concealment, they forgot how to use them. But their DNA survived because even a limited power of precognition gave women an advantage in a world dominated by the cold rationality of men and it could be unlocked again in the future by a man with the power to reach into their souls. A man like Marcus, or Drew. Such men were desperately rare and must be shared without pain or jealousy.

Sophie's soul slipped back through the glacially slow waters of death. She could feel the other parts of her soul merging into her consciousness. Marcus and Drew, and Caroline and Jaz, Puck, Tinkerbell, Mo, and the legions of others

who shared her DNA, the distant descendants of that woman of the Weshesh and the even more distant descendants of those ancient elvish creatures. Their love enfolded Sophie and pushed her forward through time towards that other lost life to which she most feared to return. The embodiment of the demonic perversion of reason and faith masquerading as the word of God. Here neither lust, nor love nor compassion had been able to save her.

"She is strong in Satan," the black cloaked, foul breathed priest shuddered and took the Cross away from her innocent forehead, "strong in the Devil. She does not flinch at the Cross." The priest flicked holy water onto her face. It trickled away harmlessly.

"And she resists the blessed holy water. It does not scald her. She is a witch and a harlot and a heretic. She will burn this day and she will burn in hell forever. Take her. Do not kill her first. Burn her quick to torment the Devil. In the name of our merciful Lord Jesus and our Lord King Edward Plantagenet, our anointed sovereign."

He brought the cross up to his own lips, kissed it and intoned a short prayer for his own soul and the souls of those who had been in the presence of this speculum of evil.

The huddling peasant stench of her mutable accusers shrank back into the corners of the dismal improvised court room, groaned with fear, and furiously crossed themselves. Her head sank forward onto her chest. She was tired and in pain from the cruel pricking of her soft body and from the torture of the pronged bridle which spiked her tongue so that she could not cast spells or curse them. She did not need to cast spells. Spells were merely words which gave form to the power of thoughts. If she willed it she could kill them all with a single unvoiced thought. But to do so would be to descend to their diabolical level. Instead she forgave them for their ignorance and stupidity and prepared herself for the next life. She could at least have avoided the pain. She could switch off those parts of her brain which controlled pain, but to do that would also confirm their belief in her witchcraft, and by their standards she was certainly a witch. She could even use her powers to snuff out her own life before the flames took her. But life was so precious that it must be embraced and endured until the very last moment, no matter what the pain. So she did not use her powers, except to persuade her husband to testify against her because she knew that if he tried to defend her he too would die and her beloved daughters would probably die with him as the spawn of evil. Instead she allowed herself to feel the pain and to scream out with it through the bridle until her tongue was torn and bleeding. She knew that there was no escape and that in the end they would kill her, as they had killed so many like her. In her extreme pain she had remembered the truth about death and did not fear it. They trusted in faith alone and most would die without redemption, their inanimate lives suspended forever in their own unique rivers of death until the victims of their evil deeds dared to judge them. In earlier lives her healing powers had been accepted with gratitude by ordinary

mortals as a gift from the Gods. But the God of Abraham was a most jealous God who tolerated no exceptions to obedience and these were His zealous servants who had hardened their hearts with the flints of faith and sharpened their swords on the whetstones of reason. They had authorised themselves to act as God's judges and executioners and found eloquent reasons to excuse themselves for the evil they did. Craven reason. The Devil's whore. The unrepentant apologist for the follies of faith.

There was no more discussion. This was not an authorised court of law but a hysterical village tribunal bent on finding a scapegoat for the inexplicable horrors of the Black Death. They dragged her out of the barn by her golden hair and looped her lashed wrists through an iron staple driven into the charred end of a long tree trunk. She was not the first to die like this and she would not be the last. The manic priest had a divine calling to burn witches and had prepared the village with the necessary instruments of torment. Her body was stretched along the trunk and her ankles tied so that she would hang face down above the fire to be roasted like a pig on a spit. From the staple a length of chain was spliced into a rope fed over the notched top of a vertical mast post from which the tree trunk could be hauled up and swung round like the boom of a crane so that she could look down on the bonfire about to be lit for her burning. The villagers alternately jeered and prayed. The same villagers who had come to her with all their ailments. She had cupped her hands against the sides of their faces and reached into their minds and told them how to heal themselves, as her ancestors had done for millennia. And they repaid her in the same way that they had repaid that rare and sacred man who they worshipped as a God, who had given love and compassion and healing with exactly the same gifts that she had used. But in their eyes the earthly church alone was allowed the monopoly of miracles. It didn't matter. Religions were a passing fantasy and she had lived and died through many religions in many places. What did matter was that so many of her own kind had died like this. She had felt the little lights go out in her mind as it lost its tenuous contact with her psychic siblings. But most were not like her. Most were just old or foolish women who had provoked the malice of men. There were even fewer men. The age of the wise and devious wizards had gone long ago when they had first encountered mortal men who feared their powers and killed them on sight. Men's minds were too rational and even those few who had the remnants of this lethal gift struggled with it and often they too had died in agony. Her kind had been virtually wiped out by fear and bigotry. Now there were too few of them to accommodate even the tiniest parts of the immortal souls which waited patiently for the chance to return to the joy and pain of life and to escape, however briefly, the cold tedium of this eternal continuum.

The fire was lit and the crowd fell silent. She was lowered slowly towards the flames. The searing heat blazed away her coarse shift and scorched into her soft flesh. She would die quick but quickly, before the mercifully thin bindings

burnt through and dropped her bursting blackened body into the flames. She allowed her mortal mind to scream as loudly as the bridle would permit to satisfy the lust of the rabble who strained their ears to hear the devils desert her mortal flesh and return to hell. But her immortal soul was already detaching itself from this torture and preparing to return to its cold eternal refuge which was neither hell nor heaven. The dark wings of that gentle ancient angel were already folding silently around her and reminding her of the other existence that she had almost forgotten. Behind the crowd, subdued now in the face of the mystery of death, she could see her husband standing under a tree and hugging her daughters. They were all crying desperate tears at their loss. Her husband was a rare man who understood her powers and, though he could not do what she could do, he could listen to her mind and in his presence her powers were always stronger. You must go, she thought at him as the last flickers of mortal consciousness succumbed to the flames, you must go far from here. She turned her thoughts to the open minds of her child daughters. Do not reveal what you are. Hide your powers. Look for those like you. And do not grieve. There are many lives and you will meet me again in this life and in the next. Many times. The light of life withdrew, pulling her back into that strange light which led to rebirth in the river of death. Her beloved husband fled to the relative anonymity of London. Here one of her descendants would marry a sea captain and emigrate with him to the New World where she would continue the lifeline which would lead to Drew Parkin. Another descendant would marry a Scottish lawyer in the court of the second Charles and would become an ancestor of Marcus's father who would marry a Swedish descendant of that Dark Age Viking trader thus reuniting two strands of the same ancient DNA which now endowed Marcus with his unique intangible strength.

In life the burning woman had never known who she was, or what she was, or why she could do what she could do. In death her cumulative immortal soul could know only her soul's past and her body's present, and she had lived in a present of ignorance and superstition which cast no rational light on the mystery of life, or death. But in Sophie's present the world of empirical science understood the imperatives of natural selection and the principles of genetics, and it was beginning to understand the elusive energies which governed the universe. Everything that mortal minds knew was accessible to the listening immortal minds which struggled to make sense of it because they too yearned to know what they were, and where they were. Although she was not a scientist Sophie was an educated woman and she understood. The genetic pool to which she belonged had been virtually wiped out in the mongrel Western world by that first encounter with emergent homo sapiens which had eliminated most of the males, and by the witch hunts of the medieval and early modern period which had decimated the females. In the more homogeneous gene pool of the mystical East it hardly existed at all, though Eastern visionaries had found their own ways to communicate with the forces of the universe. How ironic it was

that her modern world of scientific rationalism tolerated the paranormal simply by not believing in it. In the last millennium before his death the great god Pan had revelled in the mysterious and the inexplicable. The philosophers and visionaries of the Axial Age who founded the great monotheistic religions in both the East and the West had also understood that moral behaviour counted for more than religious faith which was an irrelevant distraction from the crucial reverence for life. Compassion was a religion in itself, and was all that was needed as a moral guide. But that simple message was soon drowned in the clamour of competing creeds which believed that they alone held the keys to eternity and systematically purged those who chose to disagree.

In an infinite instant Sophie shuddered through millennia of human horror. The slaughter and enslavement of one tribe at the whim of another, the enthusiastic servants of homicidal Gods exhorting death for unbelievers, the lethal gulags of malign ideologies, the inexorable blood-lust of deranged minds with absolute powers. Every conceivable monster in the demonic inferno of the human subconscious let loose into the world of faith. Sometimes she was a passive observer. Sometimes a victim. Sometimes the executioner. The axe fell. The sword slashed. The spear thrust. The lion leapt. The cross crucified. The crucethus crushed. The rack wrenched. The noose throttled. The fires of faith seared the flesh of the innocent. And after the death of faith the merciless machines of the age of reason exterminated entire races. The bodies she had shared were raped, tortured, murdered, mutilated in every conceivable way and lived and died and allowed it to happen.

An urgent memory from her present life reverberated in her mind. She felt the soul of Hilary, like her, temporarily alive in the mortal world. They can do this evil, Hilary said quietly, by Faith and Reason alone. Reason finds ways to endorse Faith and seduces those who understand neither. Then as now. Think what they could do if they had the powers of our minds. If they could kill, as I can, by thought alone. Remember the monsters from the Id. You cannot rely on reason to restrain them. We cannot rely on reason to restrain ourselves. We ourselves have done immeasurable good and unspeakable evil. We have been their gods and their demons. And we have suffered for it. Our mortal ruling passions are irresistible and reason is too often their willing servant. We must not give them that gift. They cannot use it wisely. And neither can we, unless we use it together. Only when we are together, to restrain each other. All of us. Together."

She hung naked from the pulley block in the kitchen of Hilary's house and waited for the lash to come from her husband's riding crop. It came, again, and again, and again. The pain was excruciating. Not just the cane lashing into her loving flesh, but the lashed rope biting into her wrists, her arms outstretched, her feet on tiptoe so there was no escape. Every sinew strained to breaking point. Doors burst open in the darkness of her mind. She hated men. Hatred surged through her. The light began to go out. She was going to die, and she loved life

so much. Rage engulfed her. In desperation she reached into his manic brain and squeezed and twisted the tiny blood vessels until they burst and the man fell backwards groaning with pain. She hung there and watched him twitch into death, then began to die herself, until her subconscious mind undid the knots binding her wrists and she fell to the floor, overwhelmed with terror and guilt.

Now you understand, Yasmine said from the security of the lectern, the powers which we struggle to remember are too great to be entrusted to any but the wisest and purest in heart and we can use them only if we think and act as one. Caroline understands but she refuses to believe. Drew believes but does not understand. Marcus is strong but he is confused. Yours is the purest of our hearts. You believe and you understand and you accept the mystery. You were the mother from whom we came. Long, long ago. You love life so much and you are so full of love for life and you do not let your mortal head rule your heart as we do. You do not ask the awkward questions for which we have no answers. And you have never used your strength to harm anyone. So we have told you who you are and what you are. And we have tried to change you. All of you. It has taken millennia for chance to bring you all together in the same place at the same time and it will take more time for you to discover the truth about yourselves. You must stay together, all of you, and you must find the others who are like you. But you will not remember. Not until you have found out what we are and understood what we have done. Then you will remember and you will tell us, and we will probably not believe you because we do not believe in dreams. In dreams anything is possible. We need proof. But you understand without proof. You have faith in your heart. Understanding is the best gift. But love is the greatest gift. Love one another.

Sophie understood. Love of life was everything because this eternity was cold and sterile and held nothing but memories of death and dreams of life. It was merely a resting place between lives rather than an eternal home. Life was the richly chaotic world of flesh with all its pain and pleasure. Their mortal lives were too short. Their immortal lives were too long. There was a balance to be redressed. This was a second chance in an evolutionary struggle which they had lost fifty thousand years ago when they had greeted humans with love and been annihilated for it. This time they would learn to obey the Darwinian imperatives of human reason and allow humanity to destroy itself. All they had to do was to survive and learn how to outwit death and Darwin. But it would be very hard to stand back and deny the unconditional love which made them what they were.

She stood with Marcus in the unending corridors of Jenny Saville's hall of residence and jangled Esther Summerson's master keys, then tried to unlock a billion doors most of which were locked against her and could not be opened. But every now and again the key turned and the door opened and Sophie's heart sang with joy. They were not alone.

Sophie turned again in her sleep. The dream's vivid plasticity dissolved into

a lonely lighthouse, its loom of light summoning distant voyagers into a safe haven, its sonorous bell warning them of the dangers in their path. There were many dangers. Enemies who would try to stop them. This was not the only page in this seamless volume. There were other parallel pages. Inscribed membranes of alternate universes, where their lives and deaths could be different, and sometimes the words that shaped the infinite dimensions of their lives would seep between the pages and deceive them. And there was the inherent frailty of their mortal flesh. It would take time for their powers to strengthen to the point at which they could consciously repair their bodies, and in that time at least one of them would die. Perhaps all of them. The outcome of this experiment was by no means certain. She turned again in her sleep and nestled up against Marcus's warm flesh. The lighthouse dissolved into a bandicoot striped three legged rabbit with a face like Marcus being chased by a herd of ravenous purple stifados wielding bloodstained lances made out of snow covered hedge loppers. It was, after all, only a dream.

"This is Nicholas," Hilary patted the head of the great dapple grey horse and grinned happily at her new love, "isn't he nice? I wonder if he remembers you? Go on, stroke his nose, he won't bite you."

"You once said that he might," James replied, tentatively extending his hand and stroking the horse's nose. The horse gave a little whinny and shook its head.

"What sort of horse is he?" James asked, "I suppose being a he, he must be a stallion."

Hilary laughed, her sexy eyes crinkled and twinkled, she had not been as happy as this for many years, "no," she said, "he's a gelding. Stallions have minds of their own. I used to get teased about him because people used to say fancy Hilary on a gelding, because of my," she paused, "well, you know, because of my reputation for being ridden. You know about all that now. It's better that you know.

James agreed. All the secrets that they could think of were behind them. All baggage was unpacked, more or less.

Anyway, he's a thoroughbred cross Irish draft, and he's sixteen hands. And he's a good horse. Aren't you boy," she stroked the long nose affectionately. "I'll be hunting on Boxing Day," Hilary continued, "you'll see me in all my finery."

"I look forward to that," James smiled. He put his arm around her and she snuggled up to him.

"There was something I wanted to ask you," she said, "about Marcus. Why was he in front of a disciplinary tribunal? Has he been in trouble?"

"It's a long and complicated story and Marcus is going to write a novel about it one day. And if he doesn't I will because it's so bloody bizarre that it has to be written down."

"You write novels?" Hilary exclaimed, "how exciting. What do you write about? Can I read one? Are they in Smiths?"

"Well, yes. I try to write novels about malicious academics, but publishers don't find malicious academics interesting, so they don't get published and I'm afraid you won't find them in Smiths. I live in hope though. But, to answer your question, Marcus was so fed up with the way he was being treated that he resigned. He's a lucky man. He can afford to resign. I wish I could."

"You don't like your job? I thought being a university lecturer was a pretty soft option. You can more or less do what you like can't you? And what about those enormous long holidays."

"Well, it isn't what people think it is. It's the hardest of all professions to enter, the worst paid and the most gratuitously malicious world you could possibly imagine, especially in a crap university like St Dynion's where lifetime vendettas are forged on whether or not the college has put a telephone in your office. And technically the holidays are twenty eight working days plus public holidays. We're meant to work in the vacations. Not at all like schoolteachers.

Marcus is well out of it. He's far too naive to survive. And if I get even a whiff of royalties I shall be off like a rocket. And anyway I shall have to give it up in order to be with you. I don't think you would like to live in St Dynion's, and Nicholas certainly wouldn't like it. I'm too old to change universities but I can probably get a job teaching history in a school or teacher training college round here."

"Hmm," said Hilary, "we shall have to talk about this and make plans. It's only our second day together and already I'm worried about you going back. I don't want to be apart from you. Once my husband's will has gone through probate I should have more than enough money for both of us. You could write your novels. And you'd be near to Marcus as well. And Sophie. Sophie's lovely. I'm not sure about Caroline though. She can be very fierce."

They left Nicholas who neighed and puffed out clouds of steam which condensed into wraiths in the frosty air. They walked slowly back from the stables to the kitchen door at the back of the West wing of the Hall, crunching through the snow and debating their possible futures together.

There was a white Range Rover parked at the back of the Hall.

"Colonel Fawcett," Hilary said, sensing the question in James's mind.

Colonel Fawcett was in the kitchen trying to come to terms with Marcus and two outrageously beautiful women, one of whom was covered in flour and the other was chopping up onions and streaming with tears. Marcus was lounging in a chair peeling potatoes for tonight's sausage and mash. Preparations for Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and Boxing Day were under way. After that, Sophie would have to do some serious thinking about feeding her guests.

"And here's another one," said Colonel Fawcett, as Hilary and James stamped the snow off their boots at the open kitchen door. "Hello sexy eyes, how are you today? You look super."

Hilary gave him a hug and kissed his cheek. James wondered whether the Colonel had ever been a rider. Hilary looked alarmed and shook her head. The boys, she thought at him, but not the father. James could not feel her thoughts, but Marcus did. He smiled but said nothing. James would enjoy the most amazing sex with Hilary, but he would never have the reciprocal spiritual sex that he shared with Sophie and Caroline, and would have shared with Hilary had he submitted to her.

"This is James," Hilary and Marcus said simultaneously.

"James Sinclair," James said extending his hand into the iron fist of the Colonel.

"Nice to meet you. Another Scot?" the Colonel asked.

"Perhaps," James replied, "but further back than any of my family can remember."

"Jolly good. Well, anyway," the Colonel shifted his attention back to Marcus, "we can't tempt you?"

“I'm awfully sorry,” Marcus said, “I should have let you know. But things have happened in a bit of a rush. As you see I have friends staying and more are coming on Christmas Eve. So it's a bit difficult.” This would be the first Christmas for many years that Marcus had not spent with the Fawcetts at the Manor House. He was relieved in a way. Trying to explain the truth about Sophie and Caroline to the Fawcett boys would present a serious problem, not least because whoever was deemed not to be Marcus's girlfriend would be considered to be fair game.

“I understand,” the Colonel replied, “ we'll miss you, but it's really good that the Hall is coming to life again. There used to be superb parties here, and dances. We used to have a band and do the Gay Gordons in the hall at New Year. Such a happy place this. Wasn't it Hilary. Always has been. What about shooting on Boxing Day?”

Marcus shook his head.

“Oh well,” the Colonel sighed, “I did try. There's a case of wine for you Marcus,” he gestured at a box wrapped in Christmas paper which he had put on the kitchen table. “Don't forget; you're all very welcome to the New Year bash at the Manor. All the best. Goodbye beautiful ladies.”

Marcus followed him out into the courtyard at the side of the kitchen.

“Nice girls,” whispered the Colonel, “I hear you’re courting Marcus. Which one? The blonde's a cracker and the brunette is stunning. Pity you can't have both of them.”

“All the best,” said Marcus, shaking the Colonel's hand, “I'll get in touch after Christmas and we can talk some more about the merger of the estates. I need to talk to my accountant. That'll have to wait until the New Year. I'm making some other investments which will be rather long term, and it may mean making some economies in the way the estate is run. So we do need to talk.”

He watched the Range Rover crunch down the drive, then went back to the kitchen.

“Bloody hell, Marcus,” Sophie complained as Marcus closed the door on the snow.

“What's the matter?”

“We haven't got any Christmas presents for anyone. I forgot all about Christmas presents. Well, dad and I never really celebrated Christmas. The Greeks do New Year and they only give token presents.”

“And we can't find any Christmas decorations,” Caroline added, “the poncho man, what's his name, Fangything, came this morning with a tree. He didn't say anything. Just dumped the tree and some holly by the kitchen door and grunted. I've put the tree in the hall, by the bottom of the stairs.”

“He's dumb,” said Marcus, “he can't talk. Just grunt. His father was the same apparently. I never met the father. Fangdale was here before I was born, but my uncle told me about him. The local superstition is that male Fangdales have never been able to speak, for as far back as anyone can remember. They do

say," Marcus was chuckling and affecting a mummerset accent, "that Fangdales be witches and warlocks. They do say that in the time of the Lord Protector female Fangdales was burned at the stake for having too many nipples. Arr."

"Nothing bad like that ever happened here. Marcus is being silly." Hilary interjected with an authority that surprised her, "but it's true Fangdale can't talk, not properly anyway. He can make grunting noises, but the strange thing is people can usually work out what he wants. He's goes to the *Blackwell Ox*, you know, and stands at the bar and Grace usually pulls him a pint, and she always knows which one he wants. Sometimes he'll have a Scotch. She thinks, he'd like a Scotch tonight, and so she gets him one. Strange. And, for what it's worth, his wife's sixth months pregnant. He's very excited about it. His third child. He hopes it will be a girl."

"How do you know that?" Marcus asked, "if he can't talk?"

"He can read and write and his wife can talk. She goes to the pub with him. Everyone in the village knows. It is a village, after all. And Fangdale is more popular than you might think. He always turns out to help with village events. And he's lovely with children. So gentle."

"Fangdale?" Sophie reflected, suddenly curious about Fangdale and dimly remembering last night's dream but unable to hang on to it. "Never mind. What are we going to do about Christmas presents? It's too late to buy presents for everyone. There'll be nine of us."

"Doesn't matter," said Marcus flippantly, "James and Hilary have given themselves to each other, and we can all do the same, like we did that night at Penhesgyn, after graduation day."

"Not this time," said Caroline sharply, "those days are over Marcus. Grow up." Marcus looked cowed and offered no further suggestions.

"It isn't going to be like that," said Sophie reassuringly, "maybe just meditation. No sex. Or we can just be normal human beings and enjoy each other's company."

"What do they mean," Hilary whispered to James, "what's Penhesgyn? What are they talking about?"

"I'll tell you about it later," James whispered back.

"What about the decorations?" said Sophie, "and presents?" returning to an earlier problem.

"I know where the decorations used to be kept," Hilary said eagerly, seizing an opportunity to be on her own with her newly beloved. "James and I can go and look for them. And if we look in the wine cellar we can probably find some decent plonk and wrap a bottle up for each of the men. And I think Marcus might donate some of his family jewellery for the ladies. Just little things. There used to be jewellery boxes lying around in all the bedrooms from the days when there were house parties here and people dressed up for dinner. I'm sure we can find some nice necklaces or bracelets or something, for the girls. Marcus won't miss them."

“Oh, Hilary,” Sophie sighed, “we do need you. This will be your home, as well as ours.”

Hilary grabbed James by the hand and hurried him out of the kitchen, into the hall and upstairs to the landing and the large built in cupboard where the Christmas decorations had always been stored.

“What are they talking about?” Hilary demanded.

“Well, you have been a victim of the dark side of sex,” James said, “they are victims of another kind of sex. They think that sex brings psychic enlightenment. They sit in a circle in the nude and meditate and then they share partners in a kind of ritualistic group sex. According to Caroline it's a mind blowing experience. But, it's just hippy stuff you know. They're still young. They have a weakness for freaky ideas.”

“And Penhesgyn?”

“It's a place. At one time or another we've all lived there. I was going back there to live in the flat that they had there, which properly speaking belongs to Drew Parkin, until my house is sold and I can find somewhere else. But, of course, that's all changed now hasn't it.”

“I've done the meditation thing with them,” Hilary said, “I didn't want to but I couldn't resist them. Then, afterwards, I thought it helped me. It did help me. And I felt different, as though I'd been changed in some way. I'm not worried about doing that, except, well, I'm a bit frightened of being naked with a group of people I don't know, because of my scars. But, if you're with me I'll get through it. Group sex is bloody well out though. I've had that. Never again. Have you tried meditation? With them?”

James remembered something he had omitted to tell her, “Yes, but just the four of us. Not the others,” he said eventually, “I didn't think much of it.”

“And did you....afterwards?” Hilary sounded hurt. James wished that he had told her about it during the soul baring in the bath. He nodded and looked down at his feet, ashamed to look Hilary in the eye.

“Yes, with Caroline. I've done it twice with Caroline. But there wasn't a relationship. I think the first time she was very upset about Mo and she wanted a cuddle, and the rest. The other time she was just being kind to me because I was down after the Coroner's inquest. And it did help me, actually, to get my confidence back, in the same way that they helped you. They seem to use sex as a kind of bandage for bleeding hearts, as though they're giving something to you to make you happy again.”

Hilary took his hand and held it tight.

“Who am I to complain. I've done it with more men than I can bloody well remember, and you've accepted me with all my scars, and I'm only your third and you’re the first one I've ever felt like this about. And there is something that I didn't tell you, which I should have done. I can't have children.”

Hilary registered no surprise in James and sensed only tenderness and a form of relief. James was not enthusiastic about children, and neither, Hilary thought, was she.

"Then," he said, "if you want children we can always adopt. There are enough unwanted children in the world. But it doesn't worry me if we don't have any. And in any case we will have their children to love, when they come."

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. I don't think that I'm a maternal person, and it doesn't worry me too much either way. Maybe it's selfish but I'd rather it was just you and me. Now, what about these people who are coming tomorrow? Who are they?"

"Well, Drew Parkin is half American. He was a history student, very bright indeed, but he's dropped out. I think he fancies himself as a kind of guru. Very close to Sophie. Well, lets not mince words, he was keeping her warm for Marcus but he was determined to get Marcus and Sophie together. Now he claims to be a businessman. Jaz is his girlfriend. She's Persian, but I've never met her, only seen her in the distance. She's very beautiful. If you think Sophie and Caroline are beautiful, Jaz is something else, that is, if you like enigmatic middle eastern beauties. And the others I don't know. There were two girls who were part of the group, but I don't know which is which and only one of them is coming. I just mentioned Mo. Mo was one of the other members of their circle and she committed suicide. Caroline found her body, on the day that my wife died. That was the day that Caroline slept with me. They were very upset about Mo. They felt guilty about it because they had never really treated her as one of the group. Anyway I wouldn't worry. I think that Sophie is only for Marcus. I don't know about Caroline. She's very grumpy at the moment. As for the others, I think they will behave themselves. I don't think there's anything to worry about."

"Caroline's got her period."

"How do you know? Did she tell you?"

"No, I just know. I can tell. She's upset because she isn't going to be able to screw this Drew person."

"I don't think so. I thought she was scolding Marcus for suggesting that. Cheer up," said James, giving her a hug, "they're our friends."

"Maybe. I don't understand them. God knows, I've slept around. But with them it's like a religion. You won't let anyone hurt me, will you," Hilary said, remaining unconvinced, "I don't want to be hurt again."

James hugged her tightly, and kissed her.

"I promise. Nothing terrible will happen to you," he said, "now let's deck the hall with boughs of holly, shall we?"

"Actually," Hilary said, looking into the box of broken and faded Victorian decorations, that's not a bad idea. There's a load of holly outside the kitchen door. Fangdale brought it when he brought the tree. We can use some of these

baubles though. Let's just decorate the tree and put some streamers up in the drawing room."

"Why did you think that they changed you," James asked, coming back with a bundle of holly, "when you did the meditation with them?"

"I don't know. I've always been quite good at reading faces, most women are you know. But now I seem to know what people are thinking. Not exactly what they are thinking but their emotions, and that tells me what they are probably thinking. And not all the time. Just when there is a strong emotion. For example when I gave Colonel Fawcett a kiss I knew that you were jealous and I thought, he's wondering whether the Colonel was one of my lovers. And I tried to think at you that I hadn't but I had with the boys, if you see what I mean. You didn't feel that?"

James shook his head.

"And I know that you really do love me," Hilary continued, "because it's such a strong emotion, the strongest emotion, and it sort of radiates out from you. I've never sensed that with anyone else. I'm puzzled by it too. And I'm puzzled because I can feel the same emotion between Marcus and Sophie and Sophie and Caroline and Caroline and Marcus, as though they all loved each other equally. I can't see how you can love two people at the same time, not like that anyway. Brothers and sisters maybe. But they radiate love for each other, real spiritual and sexual love. It's as though they are actually one person, not three. It's bloody amazing. But I don't want it for us. I just want you and me. And I don't want to have to share my body with anyone else ever again. It may be fun for Marcus to have both of those gorgeous bodies to play with, but I couldn't tolerate it. I'd be jealous. I'll tell you something else. I've been watching them. It's the girls that call the shots. Marcus just does as he's told. That can't be right. I wonder if he's being used. No, they really do love him. You don't use someone you really love. Marcus is just timid. He always has been. We need a stepladder for the angel on the top of the tree. There's one in the utility room at the back of the kitchen."

James left Hilary dipping into the box and went back into the kitchen to get the stepladder. When he returned Hilary was on her knees sorting out glass decorations on a sheet of tattered newspaper. The angel, its wings yellowed and frayed with age, was on the top of the tree.

"Oh," said James, "you managed to put the angel up yourself."

"No," said Hilary, "I've been trying to find sufficient glass balls that aren't broken."

"Well, it's there," he pointed. Hilary looked up, and shook her head.

"Not me. I couldn't reach up there. It must have flown up of its own accord. I told you. Strange things happen in this house."

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Drew and Jaz arrived very late on Christmas Eve together with Adrian accompanied by the bobbed flapper Puck and not, as expected, the pre-Raphaelite Tinkerbell. Nothing was said by way of explanation, and no questions were asked. Drew was delighted to see James, and even more delighted to discover that James had found himself a beautiful woman. Like Sophie he knew as soon as he held Hilary's hand that she shared their strange talent, and that she was as much in love with James as he was with her. Hilary was a little bemused by the gangling dynamic Anglo-American who was now much more American than Anglo, and she was totally blown away by Jaz whose silent radiance lit up her soul and covertly pillaged her mind. Drew himself had continued to change. Now he had a short pointed beard which helped to conceal his slightly receding chin. His long hair had been cut to an executive length, and ragged shirts had been replaced by an expensive mandarin jacket of the kind worn by Dr No. But he was as affable and animated and as mysterious as ever. He hugged Sophie and Caroline and kissed both of them as he had always kissed them, leaving them both breathless. Hilary wondered if Marcus was jealous, but sensed only gratitude to Drew and pleasure in his company. Adrian was more problematical. He reminded her of her ex husband's friends, smooth, greedy and possibly untrustworthy, but when he insisted on kissing her what she sensed was a man of great professional integrity and a boundless libido, which, unlike the others, he had not yet reined in to specific partners. One of the two women that he shared, like Marcus, had got tired of his one night stands with strangers and had abandoned him. He did not seem to be worried. His other partner, the girl they called Puck was still bursting with youthful lust and shared Adrian's passions, individual and collective, but was silently grieving for the absent partner that she truly loved. He did remind Hilary of her husband, but without the violence. Sex for them was just fun with no real thought of pain, though there had clearly been pain between Adrian and the two girls who thought they shared him equally. Hilary accepted them as best she could, but stayed close to James who was evidently respected by the group but was not fully recognized by them.

Much to her own amazement Sophie managed to cook a full Christmas dinner for nine people, with a lot of help from Hilary, less from Caroline and Puck, and enthusiastic, but inexpert, help from James. Whilst they slaved away happily in the kitchen, Marcus disappeared into the study on Christmas Day morning to discuss the great business of the king and the kingdom with Drew, Adrian and the silent Jaz.

“We have two things to consider,” said Drew, once they had all settled themselves into aged but comfortable leather chairs in the study. “Firstly, Adrian has drawn up the papers for the formation and registration of the company. We need you to sign, Marcus, and to release you investment so that the bank can allocate the shares. You're putting up a lot of money. More than

Adrian and me, so you will be the principal shareholder. Please be sure that you want to do this. It will be a limited company, which means that your personal assets would not be charged against debts if the company went bankrupt, but you could lose your investment."

"I've given it a lot of consideration," Marcus replied, "I understand the risk. However this estate is also going to form itself into a limited company and merge with another estate in the next village and will not be linked to your companies. The money that I am investing with you is personal money. The financial viability of the estates will not be affected. So, I'm happy to take the risk."

"Well done Marcus," said Adrian, "you won't regret it. This is going to be a long term project, but in ten years time you are going be a very rich man indeed. We'll sign the papers after dinner, the girls and your other friends can act as witnesses."

"The company will be called **Trigonos Holdings**," said Drew, handing Marcus a draft of the company prospectus, "it will be, as it says, a holding company. What we will do is buy out companies, restructure them, and then sell them on. In addition we will concentrate on buying into core companies in electronics, aerospace and medical technology using income generated from mass market businesses in travel, tourism and hotels and pop records. We aim to become very rich, but we also intend to be strictly ethical. We will think no evil and do no evil. Our primary objective is to finance research into the nature of this phenomenon which we have all experienced and which we do not understand. This means that a proportion of the income of the business will be allocated each year to academic and industrial research into high energy physics, cosmology, and neuroscience. I'd also like us to fund an academic parapsychology unit. All this is way down the line. We have to make a lot of money before we can make a significant impact on that."

"We have a logo," said Adrian, passing Marcus a sheet of paper on which had been drawn an isometric three dimensional triangle. Marcus looked at the triangle, then turned it round and looked at it from another angle.

"It's an optical illusion," said Drew, "the inside lines of the three dimensional object are continuous where they should be finite. It's known as the Penrose illusion. Nice symbolism, I thought. Three of us held together by energy from another dimension."

Marcus grinned, "I'm not sure whether an optical illusion is a good starting point for a company. But **Trigonos** is a good Greek name. Sophie would approve."

"This is one heck of a nice pad," said Drew, looking appreciatively round the study, "it's got real good vibes, nothing bad has every happened here. You don't have a book on ley lines do you? I wonder if we're sitting on a node right here."

Marcus shook his head, "I don't believe in ley lines," he said, "but we are close to the pilgrims walk to Whitby. The Lyke Wake Walk. And Mount Grace

Priory is just up the road. Carthusians, you know, a silent order. This used to be monastic land, until the Dissolution."

"Interesting," Drew pondered, "one heck of a calm place. I can sure feel the angels."

Jaz, sitting beside Drew, on the arm of the leather wing chair, smiled at Marcus and nodded, as though echoing Drew's sentiment.

"We'll sign the papers after dinner," said Adrian, "well, lunch actually. But you know what I mean."

"Now, our other prime directive," Drew continued, "this friend of yours, Hilary. Jaz thinks that she's like us. So do I. How well do you know her?"

"I've known her virtually all my life. We went to junior school together, after that we rather lost contact. She's okay. Pretty lurid sex life, I think. She's certainly like us in that respect. Her husband died last year. She made a play for me but now she seems to have latched onto James. Well, I think Sophie set them up actually. It seems to be working."

"Well done Sophie. She's always been my best diviner. So: like us, full of lust and sensitive to the cosmic consciousness. Do you think she would be willing to enter the Circle and be unlocked by one of us?"

Jaz was shaking her head, saying nothing but looking intently at Drew.

"Oh," said Drew, "she can't have kids, apparently. She might be willing to be part of the Circle but she won't do anything without James. James is not one of us. And she absolutely would not allow herself to be screwed by anyone else. Something pretty bad has happened to her in the past. She's walked on the dark side. Jesus Christ," Drew's voice rose dramatically, "she's walked on the dark side. She killed him!"

"What do you mean? Killed who?" Marcus exclaimed.

"Doesn't matter," Drew replied, "don't ask. It's her secret."

"What about James?" said Marcus, "he did a meditation with Caroline and Sophie and me, and it was alright."

"Yeah, but, first of all Jaz wasn't there, and second of all, did he actually feel anything?"

Marcus didn't know.

"It's like the fairy lights on the Christmas tree," Drew said, "if one light is out nothing lights up. We've tried it. For it to work everyone in the circle should be sensitive and willing to give themselves absolutely, and that means body and soul. But, if you think we should try, it's okay by me."

"Perhaps we ought to ask her," Adrian suggested, "Jaz might persuade her. She can always say no. And if she can't have children she's not going to be useful in the long term anyway."

"Shall I get her?" Marcus asked. Jaz nodded. Marcus left the study and came back shortly with Hilary, who was wearing a pinafore and looking confused. She sat on a stool facing the semi circle of curious faces.

“We want you to think about something,” said Drew, “you know that you have a latent empathic capability.”

Hilary looked even more confused, “empathic what?”

“Empathy, the ability to feel the emotions of others,” said Marcus helpfully.

“Sophie says so,” Hilary replied, “but she said most women have it. So, what's special?”

“That's true,” said Drew, “but you are particularly sensitive and it can be amplified by controlled meditation.”

“Well, I did the meditation thing with Sophie and Caroline. It's true, it did help me free myself from the past, but nothing else. Just calming really. Like yoga.”

“But you were changed weren't you,” Drew insisted, “you can hear people's thoughts better now, can't you.”

“Yes, but...I thought...”

“It wasn't a full circle. We can unlock that sensitivity and amplify it to a much higher level. At the moment you can just occasionally receive emotions and extrapolate from them. You may have other potentials that you don't know about. We would like to know what they are, but it means going through a kind of ritual initiation to release your full powers. You have to want to do it and understand what is required. These perceptions you have are linked to strong emotions, and the strongest emotions are the climax of sex, *la petit morte*, which is the primal source of life, and the experience of death, which is the transmission of life to a higher order. Sex is the key. Death is the gateway. Do you want to know more?”

Hilary hesitated, then nodded. It was gobbledygook as far as she was concerned, but she was curious and Drew had long ago learned that curiosity is easily exploited. The exquisite Persian girl slipped off the arm of the chair, knelt reverently in front of Hilary, and placed Hilary's hands between her own. A battle between light and dark erupted in Hilary's mind. She tried to fight it but the brightness of Jaz was irresistible. Jaz was inside her mind, gentle, soothing, but irresistible and Jaz did not think in words. Words were mere syntactical objects strung out like washing on the clothes line of time. Jaz dazzled her with technicolour images in which the whole meaning of the message was flashed unambiguously into her comprehension. Past, present and future appeared as one. Life danced around the arrow of time. Then she was in a darkened room in which a circle of naked people knelt in prayer. Not in prayer. Not to any God that she knew. Three women, two blonde, one brunette were stretched out like spokes across a wheel, head to head, arms behind them, hands tightly grasped, locked into the sex of men who held the hands of those next to them so that the sensations they felt were transmitted round the circle. She recognised all but two of them at once and felt the overwhelming power of their shared passion, more intense and more powerful than anything she had ever known with all the men who had ever passed through her. She wanted that sensation for herself. To be

inside the consciousness of the others. To feel what they felt at that critical moment when the body gave itself away totally and danced on the edge of infinity. And there was something else. At the edge of Jaz's consciousness. An indistinct but familiar presence which watched over them. And there was Drew. Drew's mind was there as well. Jaz did not speak, could not speak, but she spoke to Drew in visions and she spoke to him of the future. She was the pythian priestess who did not baffle with riddles because she did not speak in words. Marcus's money was safe. Marcus would one day be a billionaire. Drew didn't take risks. Jaz knew what was going to happen and Jaz and Drew were the same mind. Terror of the past focussed her unconscious mind. A large book slid slowly out of a bookcase and crashed to the floor of the study. Hilary dragged herself out of the trance and stared at them in horror, gasping with shock.

"I won't do it," she snapped. Drew recoiled in surprise. Jaz sat back, her delicate face confused. She knew exactly what was going through Hilary's mind and was relaying it to Drew but the mind she read was irrational, unrelentingly defiant, and darkly strong. This mind could kill. Had killed. Jaz pressed her hands to the side of her head as the opposing mind fought successfully to expel her. Her face twisted with pain. Her link to Drew stretched out like a piece of elastic and then snapped. Darkness poured into the study.

"James can be part of it," Drew said sympathetically, dimly aware that he could no longer feel Jaz, "but it has to be with one of us. You would only have to do it once. Marcus did it. He survived. You could do it with Marcus. You've always wanted to do it with Marcus, haven't you?"

"It's not natural," Hilary said, "we aren't meant to know about this. It's against God. You're meddling with things you don't understand. I won't do it. And I'm not going to cheat on James."

"Knowledge is power," said Drew, becoming more anxious about Jaz, "and through power we can understand. What is there more important than to understand the mind of the universe and to know why we are here?"

"I don't want to know," Hilary barked back, "I'm just a country girl and I've just found a man who will love me properly. I'm not going to lose him for some mad hippy idea. I just want to be with James. I just want to lead an ordinary life and I don't want people shagging me to fulfil some stupid fantasy. I don't want group sex. I've been there. I hate it."

"Okay," said Drew resignedly, "I read you. And I respect you. Stay with James. You will have a rich life with him, but it could be richer. And remember that you are one of us and we will always be here for you. You will never be left out."

Hilary stood up and made her way to the study door. As she reached the door she turned and looked back at the disappointed faces. It worried her that they could read her mind. Nothing could ever be private from them. But then she could do that too and she could keep them out, as she'd kept Caroline and Sophie out of the dark room in her mind where she had killed her husband. But

the Persian girl had seen everything, everything. She paused again, paralysed by conflicting desires. Think of the advantages of knowing in advance. Maybe they could put ideas into her mind. Maybe they were putting ideas into her mind right now. She had no way of knowing. She hesitated. Maybe she should agree. They were looking at her expectantly, reading the uncertainty. It was not right. She closed the door into her mind and locked them out.

"Why Marcus?" she said, "why Marcus?"

"Marcus has enormous psychic energy," said Drew, "he's our powerhouse and Jaz is our gateway."

"You're going to con him out of his money, aren't you," Hilary replied with wilful malice, "this is all a plot to fleece Marcus. Be careful Marcus. They're using you."

Hilary slammed the door and stormed down the grand stair case into the hallway. Fangdale was standing in the hall looking blankly at something on the staircase behind Hilary. Fangdale never, ever, came inside the Hall and, when he realised that he was where he should not be, he opened the front door and went back into the snow.

In the study Drew looked nonplussed.

"It's a pity," he said, "she's very strong, stronger than the other girls but she has no control. And if she won't she won't. And I suppose if she can't have children she isn't going to pass on her genes. So, it's a blind alley. And there's a darkness there. We never thought about that. We've always assumed that it is beneficial. But maybe not. Maybe there really is good and evil, and she is on the other side. She's dangerous. We'd better forget it. And we're not trying to con you Marcus. You can back out now if you want to."

"We've got a problem," said Adrian, who had other considerations on his mind, "Caroline is *hors de combat*, Sophie doesn't seem very keen. If Hilary isn't going to play, that just leaves Jaz and Puck."

"Forget it," said Drew irritably, "it's not about sex. Sex is just the medium. It's the message we're interested in. Jaz, Jaz, are you alright?"

Jaz was unconscious on the floor. Drew picked up her doll like body and put her on the chaise longue by the window. Outside he could see a tall creature in a camouflaged poncho leaning on a pole with a sharpened spear like blade at one end, staring up at the window. Jaz looked up at Drew with frightened eyes and for the first time questioned the mission that she had accepted so enthusiastically when she had first met the spirit in the desert.

"Yasmine," she said, "I am Yasmine. I am not this Jaz."

The men stared at her in amazement. They all knew that Jaz was autistic. She had never spoken because she thought not in words but in pictures. Pictures. Detailed, complex, perceptive beyond the reach of men and outside the straight-jacket of linear time. The images that flowed into Drew's mind became confused, the clear unambiguous visions of infinity breaking up and partially re-forming into plodding words and sentences. Jaz had returned from the world of

light to the world of words, but she had not lost her powers of divination. Marcus's money was still safe.

In the kitchen Sophie confronted Hilary who was incandescent with rage.

“We're leaving,” Hilary shouted at James, “I won't stay with these people.” She looked accusingly at Sophie. “I saw you, and you,” she pointed at Caroline who looked up startled, “in that circle, screwing Marcus and that other man. I trusted you. But you're no different to me. You're sex mad. All of you.” She looked at James, who looked back at her completely bewildered, and she knew that he had not taken part in the activities at Penhesgyn.

“Wait a minute,” said Sophie, “you saw us meditating...in a circle.”

“Not meditating,” Hilary exclaimed, “you were fucking each other and it was.....”

“Fantastic,” Caroline murmured.

“Bugger that,” said Hilary, “I may be a sinner and a lustful woman, but deep down I believe in God and all the angels. What you are doing is wrong.”

“Calm down sweetheart,” said James, recovering his balance, “what actually happened?”

“That Persian woman put me in a trance, and she showed me what they wanted me to do. They wanted Marcus to shag me, in tandem with you,” she pointed at Sophie, “and the American. I won't do it. Why do you do it? Why?”

“Because,” Sophie hesitated, “because extreme shared sex unlocks the soul. It releases our psychic powers. It's beautiful. It is ekstasis.”

“It's a load of horse shit,” Hilary was white with rage. “Do you think you're the only ones who've had extreme shared sex, as you call it? How extreme do you think it is to be bloody shagged and beaten bloody senseless by three bloody drunken men until you think you're going to bloody die. That really is bloody extreme sex and it releases powers you cannot imagine. You're just playing at this. My husband didn't just die of a brain haemorrhage. I bloody well killed him. I was in such bloody pain that in desperation I went into his head and scrambled his brain. I don't want that bloody power. I have to live with the guilt of it and I'm terrified that it will happen again because I can’t control it. Come on James. We're leaving. You can stay with me at the cottage.”

“Wait a minute,” said Sophie, now as ashen faced under her perpetual tan as Hilary, “let's just sit down and calm down and talk this through.”

Marcus came into the kitchen.

“Jaz is...,” he said.

“Bugger off Marcus,” Caroline snapped, “this is getting interesting.”

Marcus frowned but obeyed and returned to the study where Jaz was still lying on the chaise longue and sobbing at her loss and gain, consoled by an equally distraught Drew. Hilary allowed herself to be soothed by Sophie's emollient gentleness.

“Alright,” said Caroline the inquisitor, “what makes you think that you killed your husband by thinking death at him? You said you were in trance. Were you aware of trying to kill him by some kind of telekinesis?”

“I don't even know what telekinesis is,” Hilary admitted dolefully.

“Causing material objects to move by the power of thought alone. Can you make things move?” Sophie volunteered, “by will alone? See if you can move that.” She put a mince pie down on the table in front of Hilary. Once again the gross disparity between what they were talking about and the mundane world around them clashed with Hilary's perception of reality. The mince pie remained where it was.

“I don't know,” Hilary replied more calmly, “sometimes, as a child, I thought things weren't where they should have been. But I never thought that I moved them. I just put it down to carelessness.”

James remembered the unexplained angel on the top of the Christmas tree, but said nothing. Like Hilary he wished that this fantasy would go away. It was too dangerous to even think about it. A tiny fragment of a dream from another life seeped into Sophie's consciousness and she understood what Hilary was talking about. Her heart went out to Hilary, and Hilary felt her compassion and began to calm down.

“I once had two girl students,” James said, “who came to me as their moral tutor because they had held a séance in the room of one of them in their hall of residence. And they claimed that something had happened and they refused to go back into the room because it was haunted. They said someone had committed suicide there and they wanted me to persuade the Warden of the hall to move the girl to another room. They were both freaky girls and they were both in a high state of hysteria.”

“What are you saying James,” Caroline demanded angrily, “are you suggesting that we are freaky girls in a high state of hysteria?”

“No, no, of course not. But the warden said that the suicide had been in another room. These girls had convinced themselves that something had happened because of the séance when actually it was just a kind of mutual illusion brought on by their state of mind. If you believe in something strongly enough sometimes you can believe that it actually happened,” he added lamely.

He paused and sipped from the mug of tea which Sophie had now supplied to everyone else round the table.

“Hmm,” Caroline grunted, “or maybe she just wanted a change of room and dreamt up a cock and bull story to justify it. James seems to think that we found a way of having good group sex and turned it into some kind of religion. The collective orgasm as the gateway to God. When actually there's nothing there at all. We're just kidding ourselves. Group hysteria. It's entirely possible. And we would not be the first to believe in ritual sex as a means of divine revelation. Priapic festivals are a common feature of pagan religions. Hieros Gamos rituals in Greek antiquity. The Great Rite fertility ritual in some aspects of Wicca. By

contrast the churches of the axial religions marginalised sex because they wished to be the only intermediaries between man and God. Drew Parkin could easily be the leader of some religious cult. Fortunately he's more interested in making money and shagging beautiful women. Mind you, what better way of getting to shag beautiful women than persuading them that the path to spiritual enlightenment is unlocked by his prick."

Hilary listened with despair and astonishment. These people could sit on top of an erupting volcano and talk philosophy as though nothing was happening. Sophie looked crestfallen. She wanted to believe that there was something special about them which made them different from ordinary mortals. James and Caroline were destructive sceptical academic thinkers but that didn't mean that they were automatically right. Most people need to believe in something and Sophie liked the idea of a cosmic consciousness which linked all of life and death. But when she actually stopped to think about it she did find it hard to accept, though no more so than conventional religions which were blatantly absurd when viewed through rational eyes. She knew that she had felt its presence, in the same way that devout Christians would believe in the immanence of God, and even though she no longer belonged to the Orthodox Church into which she had been baptised, she still had a lingering affection for churches and mosques and temples because they did seem to embody the spiritual calm of another form of existence.

"Why did you go along with this," she demanded of Caroline, "if you didn't believe in it?"

"What about me," Hilary interrupted plaintively before Caroline had time to reply, "do you think I just imagined killing my husband?"

"I don't think you killed your husband," James took her hand, "somehow this idea got into your subconscious mind, perhaps because you felt guilty. You can't kill people by thinking at them."

Hilary shook her head, "I don't know. I just had this feeling of blind bloody rage and I kind of focussed it at him and wished that he would die. And he did. But whether I killed him or not I will never know, except that I certainly wanted him dead."

Caroline shrugged her elegant shoulders and returned to Sophie's question, "I liked the sex. It was fabulous. But whether it was fabulous because we were tapping into some metaphysical entity or because we just enjoyed it so much I really don't know. I like to think so. It gives some meaning to life. I don't believe in Gods or churches, but I do believe in spirituality. We just chose an exotic way to get to it. But, for what it's worth, I do think there is something there."

"Multi co-linearity," said Puck helpfully, then, recognising that everyone was looking at her blankly, "it's a term from statistics, where two trends appear to be running parallel to each other and influencing each other but are actually the result of totally distinct causal phenomena and not connected at all." Her

observation sank like a lead balloon. Nobody here took social sciences seriously.

“So,” said Caroline, returning to James with more than a hint of sarcasm, “we'll just put it down to collective hysteria and pack it in. Suits me. I'm tired of group sex. Marcus and Sophie are more than enough. What about Jaz?”

“What about Jaz?” said Puck.

“Jaz is pretty bloody freaky,” Caroline agreed “if Drew sees himself as a cult leader, Jaz is definitely the high priestess. We've all felt something strange in the presence of Jaz.”

“Have you thought,” said Hilary, dimly perceiving that she was being seduced into their intellectual trap, “that your meditations might actually be seances. The way you do it is the same. Holding hands and sitting in a circle and going into a trance. You could be calling up the spirits of the dead. Suppose something bad comes? What I felt when I thought I was dying was almost the same as what I felt when we did that meditation by the swimming pool. You don't realise what you're playing with.”

“I don't like to think about that,” Caroline replied, “spiritualism is a much discredited practice. I prefer to think that we are opening our minds and our bodies to....enlightenment.”

“Sounds more like a witches’ coven to me,” James laughed, “people sitting around in a circle in the nude.”

Caroline also started to laugh, “don’t be ridiculous James. We just meditate. It’s harmless. And we don’t cast spells and we don’t pray to imaginary gods.”

“Perhaps we were witches, once” said Sophie, aware once again of a footfall on an ancient grave. Then, sensing that the tension had been eased, she slipped into common sense mode. “This is what we're going to do. We'll have our Christmas dinner. All of us. You too Hilary 'cos you're welcome. You're more welcome here than we are because this really is your place. Then after dinner we'll have a meditation, nothing wrong with meditation. But we'll keep our clothes on and we'll just hold hands and try to come to terms with all of this. And then, if you want to, James, you can go back to Hilary's cottage for the rest of the holiday.”

Hilary nodded reluctantly. But Christmas dinner was a subdued affair. After the makeshift presents were gratefully opened the Circle sat at the great table in the elegant dining room and quietly worked its way through Sophie's Christmas cooking, which amazed Sophie as much as it amazed everybody else. There was very little conversation. Yasmine sat next to Drew and spoke to him occasionally in hoarse Farsi which nobody else understood. Every so often she looked accusingly at Hilary who blocked her until she felt Jaz forgive her. Nobody remarked on her sudden ability to speak, or on Drew's unexpected fluency in an ancient oriental language. Caroline, sceptical as ever, wondered whether making herself out to be mute was part of Jaz's mystique. It was as though Jaz and Drew were always going to be an impenetrable mystery, so

nobody even bothered to ask. Behind it all was a shared sense that something had been lost, but all of them also had a sense of the Hall weaving itself into their souls and casting its spell over them. They would all come back here from time to time. Not often, but when they felt in need of peace and renewal. After dinner and coffee in the drawing room they sat in a circle and held hands to meditate. Nothing dramatic happened. No bolts of psychic lightning. No insights into each other's minds. No overt communion with the cosmic consciousness. Except for James, who slipped into a reverie about Esther Summerson unlocking the doors to his inspiration, and for Hilary, who awoke from the meditation purged of guilt for the death of her husband, and for Yasmine who recovered her visionary insight without losing her newly unlocked words. The Circle was complete again, but travelling in a different direction, and no longer needing the stimulus of extreme sex. They had grown up.

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In a soft bed in the disorderly bedroom of a disorderly cottage Hilary rested her face against James's slightly hairy chest and stroked his soft stomach down to his thick and curly pubes.

"I'm sorry I lost my temper," Hilary said sadly, "but she did see into my mind, you know, and I saw into hers. I'm terrified to admit it, especially to them, but there is something different about them, and me. If they think it's true they will never leave me alone."

"I know," James said, gently stroking her hair, "but they are our friends. And oddly enough I feel closer to them than I did before. Nevertheless it's safer if we keep our distance, for the time being."

"Me too," said Hilary, "strange that. I was really angry. Now I feel calmer than I've felt for years. I was so angry at what they wanted me to do. Yet, I wasn't angry with them. I was angry with my husband for turning me against that kind of sex. It was so...horny...so erotic...what those girls were doing with Marcus and Drew and the other one. You can't imagine. Not at all like what I suffered with my husband and his friends. It was pure unadulterated one hundred percent lust, and yet so full of shared love, yes, and giving too, and no pain, except the pain of ecstasy. And there was something else. Something watching. I can't explain. I really wanted to do it, to be like them, to be a spoke in that wheel. I would have done it with you, but not with anyone else. Not even Marcus. But it had to be one of them. I had a real fight with myself and in the end I had to throw Jaz out of my mind. And that damaged her. She lost something, for a while, but she has gained something in return. You know, she could see the whole of time, as though she was standing outside it and looking in. It was all there like a crystal, like a diamond with an infinity of facets and within each facet an infinity of alternative facets. Now she can only see a few

days ahead, but she can see it in great detail. Drew cannot fail in his enterprises so long as he has Jaz. And that means that Marcus is safe." Hilary paused for breath and ran her fingers delicately round the tip of James's dick, "And Fangdale was there too. I could feel his consciousness. But I don't know what he was thinking, or why he was there. Creepy."

James wondered what Hilary would have done if he had been included in the circle and admitted to himself that he too was curious about this mysterious wheel of lust. He would not have resisted if the temptation had been offered to him. As it was he could only imagine what it might be like and that would have to be enough.

"One more time," Hilary giggled, "then we must sleep. We have to be up early tomorrow. Tomorrow I'm going hunting, with Nicholas. You can watch!!"

In the morning James stood on the steps of the Hall with the others and watched Hilary in her neat black velvet riding jacket, black cap, and bottom hugging jodhpurs; riding away with the eager hounds, bursting with life but hunting for death.

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The visitors left Carston the day after Boxing Day, still a little subdued but generally enthusiastic about the future and clutching a cheque for a very large sum of money which might bring fortune for them and for the perennially unlucky Marcus. James stayed on with Hilary in her cottage until the beginning of term but on New Year's Eve they were all invited to a party at Faceby Manor which began with an intimate encounter between Peter Fawcett's hands and Caroline's bottom followed by a dramatic withdrawal when Caroline explained to Peter what she did for a living. The Fawcetts were delighted that Marcus had returned to the fold, though surprised by his sudden change of mind about his career. When questioned about it Marcus decided to tell them rather less than the whole truth. He was still ashamed of what had happened and did not know how he could explain the crazy world of the universities to these down to earth people. At least here he was not surrounded by sneering academics who did have their doctorates and knew that he did not. He covered himself by saying that he was dissatisfied with current trends in the universities, and that he didn't much care for his new boss. The arcane fate of the thesis was never mentioned. James, who was a party to this conversation, nodded supportively and praised Marcus for having the courage to resign from a job which was become increasingly fraught with bureaucracy and in country where the English were less than welcome. This resonated with the Fawcetts' natural prejudices so they accepted it, but they were all curious that anyone should give up a job which was well known to have no responsibilities and half of the year off in holidays, albeit for a risible salary. Explaining the two girls, who had already beaten off the Fawcett boys with polysyllabic words, was more difficult until Caroline

rescued Marcus by explaining that she was staying at Carston until she found a suitable flat in Durham but expected to be back at weekends to see her friend Sophie. Once these hurdles had been successfully cleared no further questions were asked. Thereafter they talked about the price of beef, the implications of membership of the European Economic Community which Britain would join tomorrow, the incompetence of Ted Heath, the advantages of John Deere tractors compared with Fordson and the outrageous prices charged for animal feedstuffs by Hilary's father's corn and seed business which had grown too big for its own good. All spiced up with ribald anecdotes and downright dirty stories which made Sophie laugh so much that she almost choked on a chipollata. Of course, Colonel Fawcett protested, these stories should not be told in the presence of ladies. At midnight they all sang Auld Lang Syne and the Fawcett boys got to kiss Sophie, Caroline and Hilary but kept their hands to themselves.

Marcus was happy enough with this rustic diet, with which he was very familiar, and James too warmed to its simplicity. James had never found academics particularly interesting as people. The very nature of academic research was so dull that it inevitably attracted dullness to it, like maggots to a corpse. Most academics have a capacity for being stupendous bores, especially when holding forth on their research speciality. This fact was brought home to the Fawcett boys when they had tried to get Caroline to talk about anything other than epistemology, teleology and the well known maxim *Pluralitas non est ponenda sine necessitate* which Caroline helpfully translated for them as *Plurality should not be posited without necessity,* better known as Occam's Razor. The boys shook their heads knowingly and made straight for the scrumptiously shagable Sophie, who was, unfortunately, out of bounds because she was with Marcus, and Hilary, who had once been good for a tumble but might not be any more because she had this suspiciously tweedy cove in tow. A relieved Caroline was left to chuckle into her gin and tonic until accosted by the elder Fawcett who was prepared to talk to her at length in return for being able to appreciate the body in the very short and almost, but not quite, translucent white voile dress.

“I hear you're doing research in religion,” he said inquisitively, “what are you researching?”

Caroline looked startled. The moustached and weather beaten military face of this rather handsome old man did not seem the type and this did not seem a good time to talk about anything as boring as religion.

“I thought that gentlemen never discussed politics or religion,” she said.

“I'm curious,” the Colonel replied, “and I hope that you may enlighten me.”

“Well, in that case, I was looking at the ways by which Gods speak to man. What I'm interested in really, is how we can know anything about Gods given that they never speak directly to us and their existence cannot be proved by any known scientific methods. So I was looking at incidents in the Bible and other

religious texts where people claim to have heard the word of God. But recently I've shifted my focus to specialise on Occam's epistemology. And of course I'm doing a full and critical literature review on all the other scholars who have contributed to this debate. ”

“Ah, yes, William of Occam. The fourteenth century nominalist? The principle of parsimony?”

“Yes....” Caroline hesitated, suddenly aware that the Colonel had to be taken seriously. Unlike his sons.

“But surely we know about God through the Bible,” The Colonel put his whisky glass down, paused to light a small cheroot and edged Caroline into a corner. “The Bible is the word of God. And I also think that God speaks to me directly sometimes. I hope He does and I pray sometimes that God will be in my head, and in my understanding, as the hymn says. And I sometimes feel that He is there.”

“Yes, a lot of people believe that. If we believe strongly enough we can make it happen,” Caroline's voice was cautious but sceptical, “but it doesn't mean that it's true. Organised religion is just a comfort blanket for the spiritually insecure. And the Bible is not the literal word of God. It is the word of people who claim to have heard the word of God. Nowadays we tend to lock up people who hear voices.”

“That's very hard,” the Colonel replied, “are you one of those people who believe that God is dead?”

“Nietzsche is old hat. To believe that God is dead I would first have to believe that he was ever alive. And logically God cannot die. He must be immortal and therefore cannot be either alive or dead.”

“Surely you can't be a theologian and study God without believing in him.” The Colonel fixed Caroline's ice blue eyes with his own gimlets, squinting at her through a haze of cigar smoke.

“I think it would be very difficult for me to study God objectively if I were to believe in him,” Caroline retorted tartly. “But I do believe in scientific rationalism. Ask yourself why we have religions. The reasons are anthropological and psychological. Humans are the only animals who can conceive of their own death and they can't cope with it. Reason demands that there must be life after death but reason can’t prove it so reason invents faith to paper over the holes. Religion provides a promise of an afterlife in return for obedience to the will of God and, of course, to the will of God's earthly servants. It's an irresistible formula for a humanity hot for certainties. And it’s also a conduit for unspeakable evil.”

“That is a very harsh and cynical view,” said Fawcett censoriously, “I think there are many good men who serve God for the highest of ideals. But, I suppose you're an intellectual and it's your job to ask questions. Still, I think we need religion. It is good for us. I often talk to the vicar, but usually about the village fête and school sports day and things like that, you know, village things.

But sometimes we talk about the war. You know, we had to do things which were....wrong....but they had to be done. The church helps me to come to terms with what I did. I feel better for it."

Caroline smiled, "of course, and that is why we so willingly submit to organised religion. We live in hope of comfort and salvation. We want to know what cannot be known, and religions claim to provide the answer. But you shouldn't confuse Gods and religions. Gods are intrinsically unknowable. They may, or may not, exist. Religions are created by man as mechanisms to communicate with God. They can bring out the very best in their followers, and also the very worst. But in the end it's all a matter of faith because Gods cannot tolerate rationality. They always fall back on faith and the bombproof bunkers of belief. Which is a blatant intellectual cop out."

"Blessed are they that have not seen yet still have believed," the Colonel said sadly, "I still don't see how can you be a theologian and not believe in God. It must be hard not to believe. How do you cope? How do you see good and evil. How can you be so cynical?"

"Well, I no longer consider myself to be a theologian," Caroline replied, "I'm more into history and philosophy now. And my view of good and evil is essentially Christian. Christianity is a perfectly acceptable ethical system. Do unto others as you would they should do unto you. Christ's message was just to love your neighbour. Compassion. That's all you need to know. It works, and you don't need a God or a Church to tell you about it. It's common sense. I try to lead a moral life, but I'm not always very good at it. My brain tells me one thing, but my body has other ideas. Sometimes I love my neighbour rather too well," Caroline laughed, and teased the Colonel with a momentary vision of white hot writhing passion which gripped parts of his body which he thought he had forgotten. He tried to hang on to the sensuous images but they had gone in a flash.

"So, you really don't believe in anything?"

"Not quite. As I said, I believe in reason and in science. But I do think that there may well be something else, a force or energy which pervades the universe but which did not create it, and I think that some people can have a consciousness of it and can use it. Clairvoyants perhaps, telepaths, poets and artists. You know. Things that we call supernatural or paranormal may just be unique capabilities of the human brain perhaps enhanced by some external force that we do not yet understand. After all, we swim in an ocean of electro magnetic energy and radiation and mysterious quantum forces. And we certainly don't understand our own consciousness. We don't even know what it is. Maybe there is a connection between our consciousness and the unknown energies of the universe. Think of it as being like radio waves, all around us, only most are not properly tuned in to it, though many people have fleeting perceptions of it. We all have sublime and transcendental moments when we think something greater enters our minds. Perhaps it does. But it's not God."

“Maybe. Interesting idea. What about God's mercy, you know, people who get cured miraculously from cancer and rescued and so on. You know, surely God intervenes to save Mankind. There are miracles, aren't there? We pray for miracles and often our prayers are answered.” The Colonel was getting desperate. Caroline shrugged. These were common arguments hardly worth refuting.

“And often He doesn't intervene. What about God's lack of mercy to those who die cruel deaths at the hands of men, like the Jews in the Holocaust, or at the whim of nature, earthquakes, floods, natural disasters. If God is all powerful why is he not able to control the natural world?”

“Well,” the Colonel was tenacious, “maybe God is just testing us, to see how strong our Faith is in the face of suffering.”

“Oh,” Caroline sighed, “so he kills thousands of innocents in an earthquake and then if we turn against him as a result he condemns us all to burn in hell. And what are we being saved for? The afterlife? Reunions with dead loved ones? Harps and Clouds? Elysian fields? Forty one Virgins? Come on. Do you really want to believe in a just and merciful God who holds his creations in so much contempt? Who was it said that God is just a senile delinquent?”

“Tennessee Williams,” the Colonel snapped, “but he was wrong.”

The New Year party raged around them. In the dining hall next door a conga was forming and drunken farmers' wives were shrieking with profane hilarity. The Colonel was beginning to regret starting a conversation with this arrogant and corrosive girl.

“Well, the God of the Old Testament is a jealous God. But, if it makes you feel better, then it is acceptable to believe. The answer is not to ask too many questions,” Caroline was also tiring of the conversation which covered ground that she had covered many times in seminars with devout students. She had no wish to dissuade people from beliefs which comforted them, though she did expect intelligent people to question them and this old man was undoubtedly intelligent, and also informed.

“Surely it is enough just to be saved,” the Colonel asserted lamely, “to be in the presence of God. You have to have Faith. And what about my soul? If there is no salvation is there no soul? What happens when I die?”

“Oh,” Caroline sighed again, “*Faith is the fog which shrouds the ocean of truth.*”

“I prefer to think of Faith as the sea in which we should all swim,” the Colonel replied patiently, “only through Faith can we truly know God, and God is the only truth that matters.”

“*I only hear its long retreating roar.*” Caroline retorted, “God is intrinsically unknowable and cannot be a source of truth. Only faith in reason and science can lead us to the truth. Occam was right. Aquinas was wrong. Faith and Reason cannot coexist. If God is truly omnipotent then it is not possible for us to know

anything certain about him because any certain knowledge would be a limitation on his omnipotence."

"Occam never said that God doesn't exist," the Colonel replied tetchily, noting with satisfaction the sudden flash of uncertainty in those ice blue eyes, "he just suggested that we could never know about God through reason but only through faith and revelation." The Colonel paused, relishing the girl's discomfort, "you thought I was just an ignorant country squire, didn't you. Well, there is a long English tradition of educated country squires. You can't blithely quote Occam and misquote Newton and Arnold at me and get away with it. Some of us did go to university and did study history, long, long ago, at least until Adolf yanked us out of it. And we still read, you know. Why do you think I'm so close to Marcus? I enjoy my talks with Marcus. I learn from him. And I hope he learns from me. You are a very clever girl and I look forward to talking to you again, because you know far more about these things than you are letting on, but you should not patronise people, especially old people."

Caroline's face fell, "I'm sorry," she said, with genuine sincerity, "I didn't mean to patronise you. I have a kind of tutorial mentality. Set things up and knock them down. You kind of forget, outside. I'm so sorry. Please forgive me. You asked about your soul. Strange as it may seem to you I do believe that we have something which Christians would call a soul. But it is not a moral entity. It just the sum of what we are, our personalities and our knowledge, what we have done with our lives, stored in our brains as a pattern of electrical charges. Like the data in a computer. And yes, I believe it may survive our physical death."

"You believe? May survive?" the Colonel said, "but you don't know. And where does it go? Where is Heaven? And where is Hell?"

"No Heaven, or Hell, just memory. Perhaps the universe is itself alive and intelligent, and it is evolving with us and through us. It is an entity without mass or form or power. It can enter the material world only through our consciousness and it can influence the material world only through us. It sees through our eyes. It hears through our ears. It learns through our minds. As Friedrich Schelling said, *nature is visible spirit and spirit is invisible nature. Nature opens its eyes...and notices that it exists.* It is part of us and we are part of it. We are just separated by matter. And matter and energy are, in principle, interchangeable. When you said God was in your head, you were closer than you imagined, but it is not a God and it must not be worshipped. And when we die it remembers us and it learns from us and it passes our memories on to others further down the arrow of time. So in that sense we survive death. Religions that believe in reincarnation, like Buddhists and Hindus, are probably closest to the truth, though still a million light years from its reality. Or maybe we are its physical manifestation and it is trying to help us to improve ourselves so that we can understand it and help it to enter the material world... Or we can leave it." Caroline paused as an idea struck her which had not occurred to her

before, “maybe that's it,” she murmured to herself, “Athanasius. *God becomes man so that man might become God.* Maybe that’s what it's aiming for. It wants us to evolve faster. It wants us to learn how to change ourselves genetically so that it can coexist in us without harming us. I must talk to Drew about this. Or maybe it's just waiting for a random mutation. Sorry, I digress.”

The Colonel leant towards her to try to hear what she was saying against the din of the party, but could not catch it. All that he caught was the whiff of Chanel and the warmth of her body which was now very close to him. The conga charged into the sitting room, scattering everything before it. At the back were Sophie and Marcus, and James and Hilary, kicking their legs out, singing and squealing with laughter. *Nice to see Hilary so happy again*, the Colonel thought. To his surprise Caroline nodded, as though she agreed with him. He resumed his debate.

“That is a very frightening idea. I had never thought of God being in my head in that literal sense,” the Colonel smiled, “we are taught to believe that God sees everything and that is how he judges, in the end. We tend to think of Him sitting up there on his throne and watching us. But that's very anthropocentric. If God does see everything, then perhaps he would see it through our own eyes. Perhaps he really is within us. That would certainly fit with Christian belief. I don't think that you and I are so far apart after all. Perhaps your cosmic energy is a transcendental force. Maybe it is all part of God's design. Do your friends believe these things? Does Marcus believe this? Marcus has always been a good churchman.”

The conga squirmed noisily out of the sitting room. Less deafening pandemonium reasserted itself. The Colonel was tenacious, but Caroline was finding her throat going hoarse through inhaling cigar smoke and shouting to make herself heard over the ear shattering ambient noise.

“I suspect that Marcus has always done what he was expected to do, whether he believed in it or not. But Marcus is also very sceptical. Then again, what half decent academic isn't. It's the way we are taught to think,” Caroline replied, “but I have to admit to you that in the end it is still a matter of belief and I am not entirely convinced myself. My friend Drew, who was here over Christmas, he believes in the intelligent universe, and he intends to dedicate his life to proving it because he is certain that there is a rational, provable, scientific explanation.” Caroline's voice was now very hoarse. She did not want to continue this discussion and sought to deflect the old man by offering him the gift she shared with Sophie. “Do you love your wife?” she asked, already knowing the answer.

The Colonel reacted with predictable outrage to this unexpected question which seemed to him to be totally impertinent.

“Of course I love my wife,” he snapped, “how dare you suggest such a thing?”

“When did you last make love to her?” Caroline knew the answer to that too.

“None of your business,” the Colonel replied angrily, banging at the side of his head with the palm of his hand to try to dislodge the bee which had suddenly started buzzing in his brain.

“But.....you would make love to me, if I offered myself to you?”

The Colonel was now totally confused by this radical change of direction. Was this devilishly clever woman propositioning him? Impossible. His face went red as forgotten desires seared through him. In his mind's eye he felt this seductive young body curling itself around him like some succulent vine. The girl had changed from mind to flesh. She was naked and clinging and hot and lusting for him. He felt young again and virile, and embarrassingly erect.

“No,” he snapped, dismissing the thought, “I love my wife, and I'm faithful to her.”

“Of course you would,” Caroline whispered seductively in his ear, her hand on his arm, her thinly veiled nipples brushing against his equally thin shirt front. “You could never resist me. Listen to me,” she whispered seductively, “listen. Love is everything. Eternity is simply cold and lonely. You will long to return to the world of sunlight and to feel the warmth of flesh,” Caroline paused, once again flashing her naked lasciviousness into the Colonel's less than innocent mind, “you would like to make love to me, because I am young and nubile. But you are a good man who doesn't cheat. So make love to your wife tonight, and whenever you can, and remember that underneath her years she is just like me. She wants to love and to be loved. In every way. Including this.”

The Colonel smiled guiltily at Caroline. His mind seethed with intense erotic images which surged through his brain with such force that he could barely restrain the reactions of his body. He backed off, mumbling something about Caroline's work being very interesting, but clutching his whisky and soda as though it was Holy Water, consecrated to salvation from the sin with which he had just been tempted. He retreated to his study where he slumped into an armchair and tried to recover his composure. It was one thing to have a discussion about religion with a clever woman, but this woman was a witch and a damn seductive one at that. He would remember this New Year's Day, not least because later he would take Caroline's advice and make tender but passionate love to his very surprised wife who would respond with joy at this unexpected gift and wonder what had put so much lead into the old dog's pencil.

The Return of the Natives

The car-less James was returned to St Dynion's for the beginning of term in Hilary's little green MG. She came back about a week later with exaggerated horror stories about naked hippies living in a corrugated iron shed and very anxious that James should not be tempted by the lure of the swings and ropes, which they had quietly tried for themselves when the other occupants of Penhesgyn were all out at lectures. James's house was now up for sale and Hilary was urging him to move out of Penhesgyn into somewhere less like Gomorrah. Marcus suggested his old flat at Rhianda, but that had been re-let. James eventually found a place to rent in the new marina at Felinheli. He also bought a very reliable secondhand Volkswagen Beetle to replace the very unreliable Maxi and thereafter tended to come back to Carston every other weekend, so they were all kept up to date with what little worthwhile scandal emanated from St Dynion's, and Hilary could enjoy fortnightly bouts of passionate lovemaking which became more and more ecstatic as their souls became subtly attuned to reach other. It was unlike anything that either of them had ever experienced with their other partners.

Before he left after New Year James had discussed with Marcus the possibility of turning his recent experiences into a novel.

"You won't find it difficult to write," James suggested, "you've got the basis of a good story. You might have to loosen up your literary style a bit, but above all, you're disciplined. That's the crucial thing. A lot of professional novelists have to force themselves to write. For what it's worth you and I have both suffered a rigorous academic training. Anyone who can fester in the Public Record Office for weeks on end won't have much difficulty getting down to writing a novel. And you're used to churning out lectures at short notice. It's a good training. So get to it, and keep me informed. You'll find the writing process is very interesting. Anyway, writing's one thing. It's getting published that's the problem. These days the world and his dog are writing novels, so getting published is a bit of a lottery. Still, have a go, and when you've got sufficient material I'll put you in touch with my agent. Not that he's much good. He hasn't got me published yet."

"Oh," said Marcus, "I doubt if I shall actually want to publish it. It will be more of a therapeutic exercise, you know, clearing out the devils. And anyway I wouldn't want to risk a libel action."

"Make your characters nasty enough and no one will notice. Anyway, there isn't a novelist alive who doesn't draw on real people for his characters. Academics are such outrageous egotists that they'll never ever recognise themselves. They'll just marvel at how true it is to university life. But don't copy too accurately from reality. Use your experiences and observations and imagination and mix them up a bit. Bake 'em. Like a cake. It's surprising how easy it is, once you actually get started. Dialogue can be a bit of a problem.

You'll probably have to work at that. If you actually listen to conversations you'll realise that people rarely speak in coherent sentences. The brain makes sense of conversation. But it can look weird when transcribed literally so it can be difficult to convert speech to the written word. Anyway, the first few chapters are always the worst, after that I find that things take on a life of their own. It's almost as though there is a kind of critical mass after which your characters become alive and take control of your story. It's a fascinating process actually. Sometimes I think someone else is writing. I reckon a lot of it comes straight out of the subconscious. Or else the Greeks were right about the muses. I sometimes wish I'd done Eng. Lit. But in the end history is at least rooted in fact and evidence. Literature is largely a matter of subjective opinion. *De gustibus no est disputandum etc*. All Eng. Lit. does, in my opinion, is take books apart and leave a pile of useless debris. One should just read and enjoy. Or not. Oddly enough I'm dead keen to get back to the novel I was writing last year. Ever since Christmas Day I've had all kinds of characters and plot lines roaring around in my head. I really need to get them onto paper. I don't know where they came from. But they're there."

"Are you going to stay at St Dynion's?"

"Can't afford not to. I'm further up the salary scale than you were and I don't have a country estate. I'm a wage slave really. But if I ever get a novel into the big time I'm off. Then I'll write a really malicious novel about the place and pillory the whole bloody lot of them. But....it won't happen, so I'm going to have put up with Professor Rawlings, our glorious leader. For the time being anyway."

"What about Hilary," Marcus asked, thinking of the three girls chattering away happily in the kitchen downstairs, "she'll never be happy in a dump like St Dynion's. You can't expect her to live there. Apart for everything else she'd miss Nicholas. And she's getting on really well with Sophie and Sophie likes her. Even I'm beginning to like her. She's changed. Well, really, I only ever knew her as a child and teenager and the less said about that the better."

"Yeah, she's told me all about her wild youth. She's grown up now. I really don't know what we're going to do. Of course I want to be with her all the time. But you're right she's happiest here. She wants me to resign and come and live in the cottage. Apparently she's got her own income and she'll be getting money from her husband's estate when probate is cleared."

"Probably true. From what I hear from the Fawcetts Julian Stackpole was loaded. They're an old family so you can bet that the house is in a family trust. But he had a lot of his own money. She could be pretty rich. Think about it. After all I'm supporting these two. They don't seem to mind. You could be a kept man."

"It's different for women," said James, "they don't mind being kept. It's harder for a man. I need to have my own income as well. Still, my house was on a joint endowment mortgage with Sandra and secured with a life insurance

policy on both of us. So her untimely death effectively clears the mortgage. Once the house is sold I should have a nice bit of capital."

"And what if Rawlings carries out his threat?"

"Actually, that has been nagging away at the back of my mind. I doubt if he can fire me without going to court and, as we know, the college doesn't like that kind of publicity. But he's clearly looking for weak spots amongst his staff so that he can replace them with people in his own image. He's obsessed with publication and I haven't been amongst the most prolific researchers. He could well try to stop me at the efficiency bar. And we've seen that he can make our lives a misery by unloading work on to us. Anyway, good luck with your novel. And good luck for my novel. And maybe I'll escape from the asylum before the lunatics take complete control."

In the weeks that followed Marcus began to settle into the traditional routines of estate life. There were regular meetings with Dennis Mowbray who Marcus left in charge of day to day operations, and occasional meetings with the Fawcetts over the merging of the two estates. But much of the time was spent with the girls until Caroline found her feet in Durham and became another fortnightly visitor, leaving Marcus happily alone in bed with Sophie who grew more beloved with every minute. Little by they sorted their books and filled up the empty shelves in the library. When he got round to the plastic sacks of documents and papers which he had hurriedly removed from his room in St Dynion's he found that most of the material which he had so painstakingly accumulated during the past ten years was of little or no value outside the swamps of academe. He took his plastic bags to the fifty gallon oil drum which served as a garden incinerator and disconsolately fed his waste paper into the flames. At the bottom of the first bag he discovered both of the remaining copies of his thesis and all the careful research notes on which it had been based. He weighed the two volumes in his hands again, as he had done nine months ago in the college bindery. He remembered how solid and substantial they had felt. How exciting it had been to see his research bound up into something which, if not actually a book, was at least the next best thing, and would have become a real book in course of time, but for Vipont and Armiger. He still could not understand what had happened and no further enlightenment had come from Cambridge, nor ever would. He ran his fingers down the spine, feeling for one last time the gold embossed title and the lost Ph.D against his name. So much work, so much patient effort, so much heartache and frustration. But it was nothing real. Just an illusion. A pattern of marks on paper. A thing so insubstantial that it could be snuffed out by nothing more than another man's ego.

Marcus settled back on his haunches. Tears pricked at his eyes. He felt a sudden and acute anguish for the world which he had revered so much, and lost so meaninglessly. Angry with himself he threw the thesis into the flames. He watched the first copy shrivel up, blacken and curl into incandescence. He was

about to throw the second copy after it when a thought struck him. He ripped off the hard spine and binding and threw it into the fire. The ream of typescript which had been such a labour of extreme love he put on one side. The contents of the remaining sacks were stuffed into the oil drum without a second thought. All his lectures, carefully typed up, all the notes on which his thesis was based, more valuable than the thesis itself because they were unique. All the relics of his recent life were snuffed out as though they had never existed. He looked round apprehensively, half expecting some cosmic rumble of discontent at the wilful destruction of so much scholarship, and felt, for an instant, the malign thrill of the pagan Viking gleefully burning priceless manuscripts. But the world of learning had not noticed, nor, blinkered as it was, would it ever have noticed. It was as though the research had never been done, and it didn't matter one little bit. The few dons who might have read his book would never miss reading it. And even if it had been published it would have been read, reviewed, and forgotten, as most academic publications are. It was without real value or significance. He heard footsteps crunching on the gravel path behind him and turned to find Sophie looking at him pityingly. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. She put her arm around him, hugged him tightly to her heart and mingled her tears with his.

"I do love you," she murmured, "I love you so much."

Marcus set up his Olivetti Praxis electric typewriter on the desk in his study and began to restructure his life. In the mornings he worked with Dennis in the estate office, or spent time visiting the tenant farms. Once a week he had lunch in the makeshift estate canteen with his workers and listened to their gripes and grievances. Then, after lunch, he retired to his study to think, read and draft out his novel. In the evening he and Sophie lay in each others arms and made love and talked and at the weekends Caroline joined them and then they all lay in each others arms and made love and talked. So far as the estate was concerned Marcus found that he had very little to do. Plans for the amalgamation of the estates were advancing and Marcus had no wish to trespass on the authority which he happily ceded to the very capable Dennis Mowbray. He concentrated instead on the complicated legal and financial problems which arose from the amalgamation but their plans were disrupted by the deteriorating financial situation as Ted Heath and the miners squared up for a final showdown and Colonel Fawcett began to talk ominously about the real possibility of a communist revolution in Britain. In most other respects Marcus found his life to be much more diverse and challenging than it had ever been at St Dynion's. He met a lot more people, and from a much wider cross section of society and he was surprised to find that he spent a great deal of time talking to them. That, he now realised, was his true vocation. It was why he had become a teacher in the first place; he liked talking to people. But scholarship had placed a dead hand on that. Now he found conversation on his doorstep and he discovered that

he was no longer cold and tongue tied but had a knack of getting on equally well with men of all positions in life and enjoying their company.

Sophie too enjoyed this new life and often came with Marcus on his visits to his tenants or to the markets. And every day Hilary came up to the Hall to groom and exercise Nicholas and afterwards she would meet Sophie and talk to her and Janet Mowbray over coffee in the kitchen around which the life of the Hall revolved, as it had always done. Sometimes there were letters from James with news of St Dynion's, but they were few and far between compared with the letters which Hilary sent to James nearly every day, urging him to give up lecturing and come and live with her in Carston. And as each encounter with Rawlings became more fraught James became increasingly tempted to accept her offer. Of Owen the Drwg Seaton there was no news. He seemed to have disappeared off the face of the earth. There were also letters from Drew or Adrian on sumptuous **Trigonos** notepaper informing Marcus of the progress of their joint enterprise. At the moment they were setting up a recording company, which they had mischievously called Harlot Records to compete with the newly formed Virgin Records, and signing up hopeful pop singers. Marcus crossed his fingers and counted his remaining pennies.

Marcus guillotined the stitching which held together the last surviving copy of his thesis and, as an ironical gesture, used the blank dorse of the original typescript for the first draft of his novel. Because he had once been an historian his initial plan had been to follow the chronology of events, beginning by setting the opening chapter on an apposite lecture on Edward the Second, then working through the car crash on the M62 which he now recognised as the first crack in his confidence in a rational and just universe, then the suicide of Jenny Saville, the examiners meetings, those sublime days of sexual discovery with Sophie, his developing relationship with Drew Parkin's circle of libidinous friends, the oral in Cambridge, the fabulous Greek holiday and so on. But, as James had warned, this account of his own reality soon began to metamorphose into a parallel fiction as he succumbed to the seductive powers of authorial omniscience and converted himself into a conventional impoverished junior lecturer with a termagant wife who already had a doctorate but could not get a suitable academic job. The rejection of his own doctorate further poisoned this already unhappy marriage and precipitated him into an affair with a frivolous student which ended in disaster and, eventually, death. Marcus also reinvented himself in the persona of a successful James Sinclair living with two beautiful women and writing best selling novels about sex, sadism and sorcery in an obscure Welsh university college. Sometimes he was astonished at what he had written. Sometime it bore no obvious relationship to what he had intended, as though his conscious intentions were somehow being amplified and redirected into a deeper and more meaningful resonance. He began to appreciate more clearly why the ancient Greeks had believed that poets must be men possessed by spirits through whom they communicated with another dimension of reality,

as though the Gods themselves were speaking through the thoughts of men. The process of writing fiction began to fascinate him, to such an extent that Sophie started to tease him because he talked of nothing else. He realised too that far from merely slashing at his intellectual enemies he was investigating his own psychology and what he found was not always pleasant or expected. For one who had always considered himself to be timid he discovered that he had a capacity for violence, hatred and licentiousness which transcended his own worst nightmares. But, like nightmares, it was all in the mind. The technique of fiction writing was, he now understood, a true art, a process of discovery in which the unconscious mind and conscious intellect were moulded together into something new, rich and rare. How different it was from the dead sterile process of academic writing, where every word was weighed, every ambiguity suppressed, every sentence underpinned by a relentless *apparatus criticus* of footnotes and references. Creative writing offered a more seductive synthesis of reason and emotion, harmony and balance, fantasy and reality. This perception further reinforced Marcus's conviction that the pursuit of the purely rational was itself warping and stultifying. Reason made the most appalling horrors bearable by dehumanising them in order to explain them. To explain everything is to excuse everything. It was this obsessive faith in rationality, in aspirations to scientific detachment in worlds where science had no dominion, that twisted up the minds of academics, cutting them off from any real awareness of the human condition, or knowledge of themselves.

In addition to thinking about his novel Marcus often spent the afternoons reading and he read more widely and with more interest than he had ever done before. He returned once more to Andre Gide, and read the *Counterfeiters* over and over again, trying to unravel the complex and shifting authorial voice. He also renewed his schoolboy interest in the Lakeland poets, Shakespeare, and the Jacobean revenge tragedies, especially Webster and Ford. The problem of revenging an injustice when all the normal sources of redress were denied because the injustice was perpetrated by the source of justice itself appealed to him enormously. But most of all he worked on his novel. Although he had changed the context in which the events occurred, his initial intention of exacting violent revenge was not abandoned. He was not so blinded by anger that he could not see that such an attack might be unworthy of him, but at the same time he felt the need to exorcise himself of the corrosive bitterness which still poisoned that part of his soul which Sophie had not yet touched. Revenge, however, could be concealed in a sugar coating of sex and mystery and the mystery that he created for his characters gradually became more interesting to him than his own cathartic crusade. Since he did not intend to publish the novel he maintained throughout the names and characters of those who had played a part in destroying his academic career. They could always be changed later if by any remote chance he did seek to publish his testimony.

Once he got into the way of writing Marcus proceeded very rapidly. Words and ideas came easily to him, though he had some difficulty in overcoming his self consciousness at committing his more lurid fantasies to paper in a fictional form, especially the sexual fantasies. He enjoyed writing more than anything he had ever done before with his mind, though nothing could compare with the clinging warmth of Sophie's flesh and the soothing coolness of Caroline's breasts. It began to occur to him that he might have tapped into some latent and unperceived talent and as the novel grew in size and complexity he began to think more seriously about the possibility of publishing it. The thought heartened him and strengthened his resolve. Perhaps he would, after all, have an opportunity to prove himself by his own worth, without falling back on the privileges of wealth, which made almost anything both possible and worthless.

In this way the winter months slipped by. Carston Hall was once more his home, the place where he belonged. He and Sophie would walk arm in arm through Hall gardens and at the weekend when Caroline or James and Hilary were around they would all go for more extended walks on the moors. The Hall became a macrocosm of his own mind. Quiet, calm, contented, basking in the warmth of a newly found sense of fulfilment. He would sit for hours in one of the wing backed chairs in the study, staring out of the great windows at the triangle of landscaped parkland and spinning through his mind the unfolding webs and tangles of his story. Sophie read what he had written and made encouraging noises. Caroline read it, brutally exposed all the inconsistencies, and demanded more lurid sex. Marcus felt that he was at last finding that balance and calm in his life that had previously eluded him. The demands of the estate, the practical business of running an economic machine, the mud, the fields, the animals, the fractious tenants, all rooted him in a simple and easily understood reality whilst the afternoon excursions into the world of his imagination satisfied his intellect and his emotions together. And at night there was Sophie, and at the weekends Sophie and Caroline who more and more seemed to be two facets of the same person. No man could hope for more.

Apart from a flurry of acidic letters from the frog footman formally terminating his contract Marcus received no further communications from St Dynion’s. So far as he was concerned it had ceased to exist. Nor did he hear from his old friends in Cambridge to whom he had not written because he was too embarrassed to reveal that his thesis had failed and they, in turn, had forgotten that he even existed, except for two letters from the sympathetic Francis Clifford. The first urged him to forget about the thesis and publish his research anyway. He wrote back explaining that he had resigned and was living happily in Carston and that he had destroyed his thesis and all his research notes. There was no going back. The second was a short note informing him that Julian Armiger had died in hospital of prostate cancer. Armiger's death deprived Marcus of one possible explanation for the rejection of his thesis. He felt some sympathy for Armiger and shared John Donne's perception that every

death diminishes us. Perhaps his illness had clouded Armiger's academic judgment, or perhaps Armiger really was just lazy and malicious. Now he would never know. No matter, Marcus decided, the Armiger in his novel would be brought to book and die by the sword he had lived by. On the 13th of March a large buff envelope arrived, forwarded from St Dynion's, but originating in Cambridge. Inside was his degree certificate. As with all Cambridge degrees the rubric was simple to the point of crudity and the certificate itself was printed on thick coarse paper, of indifferent quality, perforated at the top and the bottom as though torn from some gargantuan academic toilet roll, quite unlike the florid baroque monstrosity on which Sophie's degree had been delivered and which she had eventually thrown into the Aga. The message was succinct:

I hereby certify that Marcus Alexander Ross of Gallus College in the University of Cambridge was at a full congregation holden at the Senate House on the 20th of January 1973 admitted to the Degree of Master of Letters. Witness my hand this 20th day of January one thousand nine hundred and seventy three.

Marcus looked at it ruefully. It was illegibly signed by the Deputy Registrar. He had not bothered to take the degree in person, seeing no point in further humiliation, so it had been taken for him by proxy. This piece of tacky paper, utterly worthless and meaningless, was the final act of his lost career. He was not even considered worthy of the signature of the Registrar. Marcus turned the certificate over and found a further slip of paper attached to it.

The Registry begs leave, it began, *to draw attention to the following regulations: Original certificates of degrees are issued without charge to all persons proceeding to degrees. A fee of one pound is charged for a certificate issued from the Registry attesting to matriculation or the passing of any examination or for the repetition of a Certificate of a degree, or of a Certificate of Proficiency.*

It had taken them almost a year to examine his thesis and to award the degree, and even that was nearly two months late in arriving. Even St Dynion's could do better than that. But then, of course, St Dynion's was not Cambridge. He tore the certificate into shreds which followed Sophie's degree into the Aga.

"Shit to them," he muttered under his breath. That was definitely the end of that. Well, not quite. Shortly afterwards Marcus received the current edition of the *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* which he had omitted to cancel, and which was also forwarded to Carston by the patient porters at St Dynion's. He was astonished to find an article in it on *The Role of Manucaptors in Elections to the Parliaments of Edward Ist*. He glanced at it, interested, in spite of himself. It was very familiar. It was, in fact, a chapter of his thesis, rewritten in a different form and style and augmented by some additional information, and the author was one Dr. R. J. Vipont of Kegan College Oxford. It didn't matter much. Probably Vipont would get round to plagiarising the rest of Marcus's research in due course. Marcus thought idly about taking legal action

against him but wrote instead to the Syndicate of Research Studies in Cambridge protesting that an external examiner had plagiarised his doctoral research. The Board wrote back more promptly than usual stating that this was a serious allegation and suggesting that Marcus initiate legal proceedings against Vipont. Marcus decided that it would be a waste of time and money. The incident might be put to use in his novel. The final blow perhaps, which would tip his hero into homicidal insanity. Vipont, like the Welsh prince Dafydd ap Gryffyd, who had rebelled twice against Edward Plantagenet, would die a death unheard of in earlier times. The journal followed the degree certificates into the omniverous Aga and helped to cook a particular succulent kleftiko made with fresh lamb from the estate which was eaten with gusto by the troika and by James and Hilary who were honoured dinner guests. James had good news for once, he had finally found a publisher, but this was followed by Sophie's tearful announcement that she would be away for a few weeks helping her father to deliver a large yacht from Gothenberg to Gibraltar. This was not good news.

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Dr Owen Seaton stood in the rain outside the front door of his melancholy terraced house in Caellepa. He had lost his keys and there was no one in the house to answer the banging on the door. Indeed the house appeared to be devoid of all life. Nor was there any sign of his white Volkswagen, which was usually parked outside, or of his long suffering wife. The sodding woman must be out. Perhaps he should have written to her to tell her that he was returning from Cuba, but he had never written to her in the past so there was no reason to start now. Nor was there a key hidden in the usual place under the flower pot at the bottom of the short flight of steps which led up to the house. Seaton cursed his wife in a variety of languages, including Welsh and Spanish. He went to the end of the terrace and came to the rear entrance down a narrow alleyway. The back yard was full of rubbish. Seaton had bought the house in Caellepa because he thought it would be good to live in a proletarian area, only to discover that most of the adjacent houses were gradually being occupied by a new proletariat of young academics who were as impoverished as he had been when he first came back to St Dynion's as a lecturer. There was a mortice key hanging up behind the door of what had once been an outside toilet. Seaton let himself in through the back door and put his bags down in the kitchen. The house was cold and smelt dank and mouldy and had obviously been empty for some time. He filled the electric kettle at the sink and plugged it in. Nothing happened. He flicked a light switch with the same result. This was not unusual because Seaton never opened anything that looked remotely like a bill and so Rhiannon was constantly having to coax money out of him to pay the electricity company before the house was disconnected. On more than one occasion she had been too late. The telephone was regularly disconnected for months on end.

Seaton cursed again and inspected the rest of the house. Everything was cold and deserted. Nobody had lived here for some time. There was, however, a very large heap of unopened mail behind the front door. So large in fact that even if he had possessed his keys he would have had difficulty opening the door. The telephone in the hallway was also dead, as was the gas fire in the living room. Everything had been cut off. Seaton collapsed into one of the two armchairs on either side of the fire and lit a cigarillo. His extended visit to Cuba had transformed him both physically and morally. Gone was the crew cut and trendy clothes. Now he wore his hair long and tied back into a pony tail under a Che Guevara beret complete with a large red star. He had several days of what would now be called designer stubble and wore a Red Army greatcoat over khaki fatigues, and army boots in place of snakeskin shoes.

Gone also was the gold chain he had used to wear around his neck. It had been stolen within days of his arrival in Havana. Two weeks later the police informed their honoured guest that the thief had been caught and invited him to call at the police barracks to recover his property and witness the punishment of the thief, who was summarily stood in front of pock marked wall and shot. Seaton was impressed. A month later the chain was snatched from his neck yet again. This time the police couldn't find it, but they invited him to come and watch another thief being executed in lieu of whoever had stolen his chain. The villain was despatched by garrotting. Seaton was even more impressed. Cuba was truly a law abiding country. He had thanked the police and presented them with several bottles of rather bad wine and a box of cigars which he bought in the market. The police were so delighted with his generosity that they invited him to pop round any Thursday afternoon, which was the day set aside for the execution of political prisoners, and introduced him to some men in smart suits and dark glasses who regularly took him out for drinks to discuss the potential for a Marxist insurrection in Britain where, Seaton assured them, the government had revealed itself to be at the mercy of Comrade McGahey, leader of the revolutionary miners' union, who would soon bring England into the Socialist brotherhood. Eventually they got to know him so well that they invited him to join a firing squad and shoot someone, just to see what it was like. Seaton was very tempted. Over the years he had unwittingly left a trail of maimed or dead bodies, but he had never knowingly killed anyone, except, perhaps, the police constable into whose stomach he had lanced a rusty fencing post during the Bog Side riots in 1969. To kill legally, with the full authority of the state, was an unexpected privilege. Nevertheless he hesitated, temporarily stricken by an attack of bourgeois conscience, but he was so fearful of losing face with these macho hombres that he took his appointed place in the firing squad, aimed a carbine at a white card pinned over the heart of a prayer whimpering traitor and concentrated on pulling the trigger at the same time as everyone else. It was an interesting and seductive experience, almost as good as sex, which left him wondering why he had once been so paranoid about

capital punishment. Quite a coup really. There couldn't be many university lecturers of his generation who had actually taken part in a firing squad. He remembered as an undergraduate meeting a mature student who had been in the Hong Kong police and had proudly showed his mates a photograph of himself holding a rifle and standing with his foot on the chest of a Chinese drug smuggler who he had just shot dead for attempting to resisted arrest. He'd always rather admired that man, but had never expected to be able to emulate him. Regrettably he did not have a photograph of his own achievement.

It was cold in the house and there was no obvious way of heating it. The open fireplace in the front room had been replaced by a gas fire which no longer worked because the gas had been cut off. He looked for another front door key and eventually found one in a drawer in the bedroom. The bedroom was also empty and the bed stripped of sheets and blankets. Almost everything of any value had been removed from the house except for his fancy designer clothes which had been comprehensively slashed with a razor and thrown in a heap in the middle of the floor. His wife's clothes were missing altogether. In fact the more he looked around the house the less evidence he found that he had ever had a wife. Rhiannon had disappeared. He fingered the small change in his pocket and decided to go to the phone box at the end of the street and call Rhiannon's parents in Harlech. The reply he got from his father in law was short and sharp. Rhiannon had read the article in the local paper about the death of Sandra Sinclair, never wanted to see her useless husband again and had gone to live with an aunt in Birmingham because she was ashamed to show her face in Wales. And no, he could not have her address and telephone number. Somewhere in the heap of mail behind the front door there would be a letter from Rhiannon's solicitor initiating divorce proceedings. That was three months ago. For all he knew Seaton could well be divorced by now.

“She can fuck off then,” Seaton said, slamming down the phone, then picking it up again and shouting, “and I want my fuckin car back.” Rhiannon had been useless in the bedroom and less than understanding about his totally reasonable sexual needs with other women. She was not truly liberated and was unwilling to sacrifice her own petty desires for a greater cause. Well sod her. He walked into town to get some money from the bank but the bank refused to cash his cheque. His salary had not been paid since January and his account was virtually empty. Seaton began to get seriously angry. He swore at the female cashier who burst into tears, provoking him into another bout of swearing which brought the bank manager out from under his stone. Seaton was manhandled out of the bank. He stood in the rain in the middle of the High Street and tried to take stock of the situation. Three days ago he had been an honoured guest studying at the University of Havana, under the patronage of President Fidel himself, and enjoying the vibrant culture of a Hispanic communist state, including the fleshy delights of a succession of dusky maidens, graciously provided by his new friends in dark glasses. Now he was standing in the rain in

the grey and miserable St Dynion's High Street, outside a treacherous capitalist bank, with very little money, a cold and inhospitable house and an ex wife somewhere in Birmingham. The answer must lie in the monolithic building perched on the side of the valley above the town, as dark and menacing as the walls of Gormenghast. He made his way through College Park up to the Old College, but stopped short at the shops and spent most of his remaining change on a coffee in Capones.

The Arts Faculty was surprisingly quiet. No students to be seen and very few staff, though there were lights on in some office windows. It dawned on Seaton that it was the last Friday of term. Most students would have gone home for the Easter vacation, and most of the staff for that matter. He'd forgotten about the ebb and flow of academic terms, not that he'd ever paid much attention to them anyway. The name on the door of his office in the New Arts Building was not Dr Owen Seaton but Dr Rosalind Cunningham, Department of English. He opened the door without knocking and was confronted by a rather pretty young woman sitting behind his desk. She had curly dark hair and a nice pair of tits nestling under a silk blouse. Seaton's snake tongue flicked over his lips.

"It's polite to knock," Dr Cunningham said.

"Who the fuckin hell are you," Seaton hissed, "and what are you doing in my room?"

"It says who I am on the door," said Dr Cunningham in an icy voice, "and as for it being your room I wouldn't know about that. It was allocated to me at the beginning of term, in January, when I was promoted. I assume that you are Dr Seaton."

"Yes, now fuckin get out of my room, you stupid bitch,"

"I think you should go and talk to your head of department," Dr Cunningham replied, her hand poised over her phone ready to call the porters. Seaton hated these cool academic women. This bitch was just like that blonde cow that Marcus Ross used to hang around with, the one who looked like Heidi with a fuckin icicle up her backside. And since when had they started giving Senior Lectureships to teenage girls? Nevertheless he backed out of the room and slammed the door, just to reinforce his point. Given half a chance he'd like to garrot the pair of them. Heidi and this silly bitch. In Cuba they'd have gone to the wall long ago. He looked at his Russian Navy watch. He shouldn't have stopped for coffee. It was coming up to five. Rawlings might just be in his office. He made his way back through the labyrinthine stairways to the Council Chamber Corridor, which appeared to have been repaired after that epic battle, though there was no sign of any crockery on display. The room of the Professor of History was ancestrally located at the end of Professors' Corridor, next to the Senior Common Room Mausoleum. Unpleasant memories flooded back into his mind. Rawlings' name was not on the door. The room was now occupied by someone from Sociology. This time Seaton knocked. A mild voice invited him to enter and a bearded gent in a corduroy jacket redirected him. Professor

Rawlings had moved to a professorial suite in the New Arts Building, more appropriate to his exalted status. The sociologist clearly did not like Rawlings. Seaton made his way back along the same dreary corridors and stairwells until he found himself outside a door on which the nameplate did say Professor K.R. Rawlings, Department of History. He knocked on the door. There was no response. He knocked again, then tried the door. It was locked. A secretary came down the corridor dressed for going home.

"Sadie's gone home early today," she said, as she passed Seaton, "Friday you know, and last day of term," she added confidingly, "but Professor Rawlings often works late. You could try the other door. This one's his secretary's office. That's his door. The one with no name on it. Normally you can only get to see Professor Rawlings through Sadie, you know, but you might be lucky. Nos da."

Seaton repositioned himself in front of the unmarked door a few feet down the corridor from the absent Sadie's room. He tapped cautiously on the door. Rawlings was in. He looked up at the khaki monster shambling into his neat room and recognised the snake inside its new skin.

"I've been wondering when you were going to turn up," he said.

Seaton sat down in the chair in front of the clinically uncluttered desk and surveyed the mirror image of his soul, a cobra and a python locked in a universal hiss.

"Did I say you could sit down?" Rawlings smiled.

"Well, I'm fuckin sitting," Seaton replied, "why is there someone else in my room?"

"Probably because it's been reallocated."

"I'll say again. Why is there someone in my office?"

"Well, probably because you no longer work here. In fact you haven't worked here since the beginning of the calendar year."

"What do you mean?" Seaton's hackles were rising.

"In crude terms, which I'm sure you prefer, you've been sacked."

Seaton recoiled.

"What do you mean sacked. You can't fuckin sack me. I have tenure. You can't sack me without just cause. I know my rights."

"I'm sure you do. But I think your contract says that you can be sacked for bringing the university into disrepute. Gross Moral Turpitude I think is the term. I've checked your contract, such as it is, and there is a clause to that effect. That constitutes just cause."

"What the hell have I done to bring the fuckin university into disrepute? I've been away for the last six months doing research."

"That's true. But the press publicity arising from your unusual liaison with Dr Sinclair's wife caused some consternation amongst the Crachach. That was certainly Gross, certainly Moral and definitely Turpitude, don't you think. You are no longer their blue eyed boy. And do you have to swear in every sentence?"

“I'm showing fuckin solidarity with the fuckin workers,” Seaton snarled back.

“Don't be ridiculous,” Rawlings replied, “your father is a QC and your uncle was a judge, a Government minister and a life peer. You're no more working class than Richard Crossman.”

“My father is a total shit. I wouldn't cross the road to save him. My uncle was?” Seaton's voice went up an interrogative octave, “what do you mean, my uncle was? What's happened to him?”

“He's dead. He died after a Senate Disciplinary meeting.”

Seaton took some moments to assimilate this information.

“Well, no surprise. He was fuckin ancient. A disciplinary meeting? About me?”

“No, it was about Marcus Ross. I feel a little guilty about Marcus Ross. It now seems that you were behind the student demonstrations and I suspect you lied about some other things for which Mr Ross was held responsible. Still Mr Ross has resigned, and is no longer my problem. And I have dealt with you appropriately. Your contract has been terminated. You will find a letter from Mr Sligh in your post at home. If you bother to open it.”

“Oh, come on,” said Seaton oozing instant affability, “you and I were contemporaries at Oxford. We were both in the Fabian Society. We're comrades. You aren't going to sack a comrade are you?”

“Yes,” sniggered Rawlings, “I remember you at Oxford. You weren't a Fabian. You were a Marxist. You still are. And you borrowed my notes on Darius Mortmain's lectures on Napoleonic Europe and never returned them. That was the only paper I didn't get a First in because I wasn't able to tell him what he wanted to hear. I haven't forgotten you. You have been sacked. Not about to be sacked. You have been sacked. Now please leave.”

Seaton stood up, dazed and uncomprehending. As he got to the door Rawlings released his customary Parthian shaft.

“Of course,” he said, “I did my best to rescue you. After all, what you do with a colleague's wife in the privacy of her own bedroom is your business, I suppose, and her husband's of course. Though killing her was probably excessive.”

“I didn't fuckin mean to kill her!!”

“Oh. Well, in that case you were very careless. You might as well have killed her. You were very lucky to get away with it. The coroner should have returned manslaughter, in my opinion. I suspect your uncle was looking out for you. At least he engineered the sabbatical and the grant and got you out of the country for six months. But the shock of it probably killed him. And he's not here to protect you now so I no longer have to look over my shoulder. Incidentally the police still want to talk to you about it. You'd better go and see them.”

“I've had enough of this crap,” Seaton walked back towards the desk and leaned over it until the reptilian faces were within spitting distance.

“Yes, well. I could have excused that. Especially in view of your outstanding research record. You have been one of the most prolific researchers in the Department, albeit entirely in Welsh and in obscure Welsh journals at that. But still, publications are publications and the College especially likes staff who publish in Welsh. It's just a little unfortunate that very few academics outside Wales speak Welsh, especially in Cuba, it seems.”

Seaton has a sudden and sickening intimation of where this was going.

“Have you ever heard of a Professor Merfyn Williams?” the sibilance in Rawling's voice was charged with venom.

“Yes,” Seaton admitted reluctantly, “he's professor of Latin American Studies at the University of Buenos Aires.

“That's right,” Rawlings' snake tongue flicked between his thin lips, “well done. Not a real professor of course. Almost everyone is a professor in American universities. He wrote to me, you know. Did you know that he's a fluent Welsh speaker? Patagonian Welsh. Came to Aberystwyth to improve his Welsh and read modern history, then to Harvard as a postgraduate, then back to Argentina. He has quite a reputation. And so have you. He's heard of you.”

Seaton sank into the chair. He knew what was coming.

“Did I say you could sit,” Rawlings sneered, “anyway, it appears he's been reading your articles, in Welsh, and he's also been reading articles on similar subjects in Spanish, published in Cuban historical journals, by Cuban academics. It appears that your research is very similar. In fact, it's identical. You've been taking material published by other academics in obscure foreign journals, translating them into Welsh and passing them off as your own work in obscure Welsh journals. I rather wonder whether your doctorate is your own work. You'll appreciate that the College could not ignore something which so seriously compromises its academic credibility. Killing a colleague's wife is one thing. Cheating at research is absolutely inexcusable. You had to go.”

“And so do you,” said Seaton. He stood up and punched Rawlings full in his smug snake face with sufficient force to send his chair flying backwards against the wall behind the desk, snapping his neck forwards then backwards. Newtonian Momentum splashed the great Professorial brain against the walls of its cranial prison, then twisted it slightly around the spinal cord shutting off autonomic respiration. The head fell down on the chest. There was a brief spasm in the torso then silence. Seaton slumped back into his seat and sat quite still, staring at Rawlings in disbelief. He had not intended to kill him. He never intended to kill anyone, with one exception, but death seemed to follow him around as though he was born to dispense it. It didn't worry him in the slightest. Dead bodies were nothing new and individual human lives were easily expendable in the greater scheme of things. Eggs were there to be broken. It was the omelette that mattered. Cuba had proved to him that a Marxist Leninist

paradise could be reached only by eliminating all counter revolutionary influences, by force if necessary. Rawlings was clearly on the wrong side. Seaton acted with the cool and clinical detachment of a fully paid up psychopath whose actions had always been totally justified by the categorical imperatives of his political beliefs. And if he was now going to be held to account for killing Rawlings he might as well rid the world of other undesirables, starting with James Sinclair and the ridiculous Marcus Ross.

He considered what to do next. Rawlings was smartly suited and there was a small overnight bag beside his desk. He was clearly going somewhere. Seaton bent over him and removed his wallet from his jacket pocket. Inside was sufficient money to last for two or three days and a first class return railway ticket for Euston together with a one way sleeper ticket from Colwyn Bay, the nearest mainline station to St Dynion's. Seaton went through the connecting door into the secretary's room and checked the wall planner. Friday, March the 23rd. Rawlings had a public lecture booked at LSE tomorrow and was staying in London until Tuesday. The New Arts Building was closing up. With luck the body would not be found until Monday morning, possibly later depending on whether or not the secretarial mice took their customary opportunity to steal a couple of days off in the absence of the professorial cat. Time to get away and finish unfinished business before the fascist police finally caught up with him, as he knew they would, unless, it occurred to him, he could escape to Ireland and seek refuge with the friends he had made in 1969, when he had speared that barbed metal fence post into the stomach of a member of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. But first came revenge and the liquidation of counter revolutionaries. He searched carefully through the materials on the secretary's desk until he found the departmental address book. Sinclair was there, but no longer in that miserable dormer bungalow in Porth Aethwy. The address was one of the tacky new houses on the Marina development at Felinheli. Well, that would be his first port of call. Sinclair was going to answer for fuckin up his life by turning up at Porth Aethwy when he wasn't wanted. But then there was a note on the wall planner to the effect that Dr Sinclair was abroad on holiday until the beginning of term. Bastard would have to wait. He flicked back through the address book until he found an alternative victim in the form of the rich prat Marcus Ross who had several addresses, all crossed out except for the last one, which was the ancestral shit heap in Yorkshire. He'd have to think about that. Ross was directly responsible for all his troubles and he deserved a comeuppance anyway. Just for being a fuckin rich aristo, not to mention shagging the juicy Sophie Davenport who had nearly landed him in the shit over that stupid girl's suicide. Seaton went back into Rawlings' office and pocketed the bank notes from his wallet, together with the train tickets. He would go to Colwyn Bay, take the train to Chester and then hitch to Yorkshire from there. He put out the lights and left Rawlings' office, locking the door behind him. Let

the capitalist pigs and feudal landlords take cover. Comrade Commissar Drwg Seaton was coming to avenge their crimes against the people.

Appointments with Atropos

"Marcus! Marcus!" Sophie's voice was crystal clear and urgent. Marcus woke up with start from a deep and troubled sleep and felt for the bedside light switch. There was no one there. He was alone in the bed for the first time since he had come back to Carston. Caroline had been invited at very short notice to give a paper at an academic conference in York. Sophie was somewhere in the North Sea with her father. Marcus shook his sleepy head and looked wistfully around the room. He had become so used to the two warm and loving bodies lying beside him that their absence left him feeling lonely and uneasy. Everything now revolved round them. Without them he was nothing. He missed them so much. He must have been dreaming about Sophie, dearest Sophie. She would ring soon. He turned over and went back to sleep.

Two days later Marcus made his way on foot from the Hall to the Home Farm for his daily discussion with Dennis Mowbray. There was the faintest glow of warmth in the late March sun which promised something of the spring to come, but the morning was still sharp and brisk. It was good day for a walk in the country. A day to see mad March hares boxing in the fallow fields, bushes enmeshed with delicate filigrees of dew dusted cobwebs, wheeling rooks and sudden startled pigeons, the crowing of an insistent distant cockerel, groups of ponies, their hot breath steaming in the cold morning air, cavalcades of newly milked cows winding purposelessly after an unappointed leader towards their appointed meadow. The whole panoply of nature immersed Marcus in its vitality, from the tiny clouds of evanescent gnats lured out by the nascent sun, to the great lumbering bull which surveyed him across the divide of a gate and bellowed its menacing warning. Marcus had never felt more alive. That dank and miserable place was forgotten, the thesis a trivial irrelevance. Love and life was everything. He hugged himself in disbelief at his undeserved good fortune. This was where he belonged.

On the way down the drive Marcus encountered Fangdale who was expertly trimming the grass verge at the edge of the drive with a half moon cutter. Marcus saluted him and said good morning but received nothing back but the customary grunt and deferential forelock tug. At the Home Farm his meeting with Dennis was over remarkably quickly. Dennis was always very efficient and there was really no need for such quotidian meetings but Marcus liked to talk to him, especially since the girls were away and he felt a little lonely rattling around in the great house on his own, and, anyway, he enjoyed the walk down the drive and the short cut across the fields.

On the way back Marcus noticed that Fangdale was no longer there. The wooden wheel barrow containing his gardening tools, including the ever present hedge lopper, was still parked on the grass. But of Fangdale there was no sign. Fangdale was a law unto himself, but it was unlike him to abandon his tools, especially the hedge lopper. Had he remembered a conversation in the kitchen

on Christmas Eve Marcus would have known that Fangdale's wife was pregnant. This morning she had been rushed into the maternity hospital in Northallerton where Fangdale would follow her, once his son had found him in the grounds, and there he would remain until the twin girls were born. For the next twenty four hours the Hall would be without its guardian angel. Marcus smiled to himself and went back into the Hall through the kitchen door. In the comfy womb of the warm kitchen he picked up today's *Times* and slumped into the old armchair beside the Aga. He missed them so much. It was so quiet without them. The joy, the laughter, the giggles, the teasing, the tears, the cuddles, the wet kisses, the soft warm willing bodies, the wild and the gentle sex, the pure lust for life that radiated from them. Well, Caroline would be back by Sunday. It would be April the first, Palm Sunday. Was it really a year since he had sent off his thesis to Cambridge? It seemed like no time at all, and it seemed like aeons. He opened the *Times* and began to work his way through it. On an inside page there was short report of the tragic death of one Dr Roger Vipont, a promising young academic, who had fallen from the roof of his flat during the course of a party intended to celebrate his election to a full fellowship at St Onans College Oxford. Marcus flipped to the obituary pages but there was nothing. Vipont's star had not risen far enough in the academic firmament to warrant an obituary in the Times. Marcus gave a dry laugh. Now that they had both gone he would never know what had really happened to his thesis. He put the newspaper down and went upstairs to his study where he switched on his electric typewriter, inserted a sheet of his recycled thesis into the platen and gathered his thoughts.

The *Times* had been economical with the truth. The account of Vipont's death in the *News of the World* on April Fool's Day would be more explicit. Dr Randolph Grendell, Professor Emeritus of Anglo Saxon History, was sick and tired of the racket from the flat upstairs. Vipont might well be a rising star in the History Faculty, thanks, as Professor Grendell well knew, to the patronage of that fat slob Darius Mortmain, but his personal behaviour was beyond the pale. Almost every Saturday night he would invite his friends round and the entire evening would be spent in crashing about to a cacophonous combination of Elton John, Suzie Quatro, and the Who, all played at maximum volume and sometimes simultaneously, and transmitted unmodulated through Vipont's floor to the flat below where Grendell and his wife cowered, until eventually they took cover in the conservatory built onto the side of their ground floor flat, or retired to bed with their heads under the coverlet and cotton wool stuffed into their ears. Occasionally Grendell would summon up enough courage to go upstairs to complain but the visions of half naked painted men doing unspeakable things to each other was too much for his conservative constitution. And after the parties Vipont's friends appeared to take interminable communal baths which involved a great deal of splashing and squealing and ended only

when Vipont ushered them down his stairs shouting “Goodnight my darlings. See you next week.” That was bad enough. But this party was something else. For a start it was in the late afternoon, but still light, and the stamping on the floor, raucous music, and frenetic yelling were of a different order of magnitude. Grendell had had enough. He went upstairs and banged on Vipont's door.

After a long delay the door opened and Grendell was presented with a ginger haired man wearing a strange leather harness to the back of which was attached two large and very fluffy angel wings. The rest of Dr Vipont was unambiguously exposed to view. Through the open door Grendell could see a number of other boys and young men in various stages of undress or exotic fancy dress which left nothing to the imagination, especially the size and status of their genitalia. Grendell had nothing against homosexuals but Vipont carried Gay liberation a step too far. Vipont looked Grendell in the eye.

“Bugger off,” he said, “or I'll get Beowulf to pull your arm off.” He gestured towards a leering giant clad in a leather posing pouch, studded leather cuffs around his wrists, and a massive spiked dog collar. Grendell shook his head and went back to his wife.

“Nothing I can do,” he said, “they're not going to listen to me. I could call the police I suppose.”

His wife shook her head, “no point. It's legal now. They're not interested.”

“I would say that some of them are under twenty one,” Grendell persisted, “it's time an example was made.”

“Forget it,” said his more tolerant wife, “let them have their fun. They'll be sad old queens soon enough.”

Grendell frowned, picked up his book and followed his wife into the relative sanctuary of the conservatory. Once the French windows were closed the insufferable cacophony of the Who was contained within the brickwork of the house. He poured glasses of wine for himself and his wife, and tried to block out the residual din with Erica Jong. But there is a limit to what can be achieved with books, unless they are lethally heavy, which *Fear of Flying* was not.

Eventually Professor Grendell put down Erica Jong on the round mirror glass table in the middle of the conservatory and sat back in his wicker chair. Even here there was no escaping the noise. If this party had been taking place on some impoverished Oxford council estate the police would have arrived unbidden hours ago. But this was suburban Oxford, and the noise was being made by high spirited young gentleman. The Oxford police knew their place.

Upstairs Roger Vipont was being offered something on a small square of blotting paper which, he was informed, would make him see through solid matter and fly like an angel. Vipont was anxious to unlock his hidden potentials. He allowed the blotting paper to dissolve under his tongue and then swallowed it. After a while he did, indeed, begin to see through solid walls and the urge to take wing and join the celestial hosts became irresistible. The urge became even

more powerful when one of his friends inserted a small battery operated fan up Roger's anus and switched it on. The sensation was delirious. It tickled his prostate and stimulated his cock. Roger was out of his head. Fully fuelled with a mixture of Campari and Theakston's Old Peculiar he was ready to come out of his hangar and take to the air. Someone else looped a length of lightweight chain around his cock and clipped the loose ends to the roots of his feathered wings. Roger shrieked with delight. “Contact. To the roof, to the roof,” he yelled, “come and watch the Angel fly. I will touch the face of God.”

“I don't know why people read this kind of rubbish,” Professor Grendell remarked.

“It was very well reviewed,” Mrs Grendell replied, “in the *TLS*. So it must have something going for it. I prefer Harold Robbins myself. At least he doesn't pretend to be clever. What's going on up there?” She gestured at the shapes on the balcony in front of the dormer windows on the top floor of the building, just visible above them through the streaks of purple green mould on the glass roof of the conservatory.

“God knows,” Grendell sighed, “young Oxford dons and their students. These are some of the finest brains in the world. What in God's name gets into them?”

The answer, in this case, was lysergic acid and alcohol, which confirmed Roger Vipont's absolute conviction that he could soar aloft with the aid of his marvellous fluffy wings assisted by the blades of the electric fan throbbing in his bum. He grabbed his joystick and launched himself confidently into space. He rose up without restraint through the sublunary region of earth and water, air and fire. Purple and lime green strands of time stretched out to infinity. Above him he could see the shimmering mirrored facets of the first crystal sphere, the sphere of the moon which marked the limit of the realm of man. Beyond were the spheres of the sun and the planets, and beyond that the sphere of the stars, and beyond that the Empyrean sphere where he would look upon the face of God and walk with his angels. He stretched out his fist to punch upwards through the moon crystal. Through it he could already see his own reflection in the glistening sphere of the sun.

“*My soul leaps up to my God*,” he shouted, smashing his fist through the first crystal.

Professor Grendell stared, horror struck, at the pink and white blur hurtling towards the roof of the conservatory. Then the naked body, one hand clutching its erect penis, the other stretched out in a clenched supermanic fist, crashed through the glass and plunged head first into the circular glass table shattering it into a thousand deadly shards, shredding the frail flesh and slicing into the heart, definitively terminating a promising academic career. Dr Roger Vipont soared into the darkness beyond the crystal spheres and touched the face of his God. Professor and Mrs Grendell stared open mouthed at the bizarre ginger haired, ginger pubed man with chains connecting his genitals to the torn white

feathers ripped out of the leather harness on his torso, and a miniature electric hand fan still buzzing manically between his buttocks.

Marcus sat back from the Praxis and surveyed the progress so far. Planning the end was not easy. He would have welcomed advice from James Sinclair, but James at this moment was somewhere in the Peloponnese rediscovering his youth in the enthusiastic company of Hilary. So far he'd had three stabs at finishing off his demons. None of them very satisfactory. He stretched and yawned then got up and went through the door in the corner of the study which led into the windowless gun room. After a moment's thought he bent down and unlocked one of the drawers underneath the glass fronted gun racks. At the back of the drawer was a polished wooden box with a brass plate on which was inscribed the title *Rittmeister Ludwig von Giessen*, and, underneath the name, in smaller letters, *Abteilung Abwehr II – Sonderdeinst*. Marcus pushed up the little brass catch and opened the box. Inside was a Luger pistol, with various attachments, two spare magazines, a set of cleaning rods and a two boxes of 9mm ammunition. It was not the standard P.08 but the so called Navy version which had a six inch barrel. He weighed the gun in his hand. It balanced perfectly. The original owner had been an Oberst in the Special Services division of the Wermacht Intelligence. In the last days of the war Marcus's father had captured Giessen outside Frankfurt. Giessen was not a Nazi. He was a regular army officer from much the same social background as Captain Ross. He had surrendered with dignity, and, lacking a sword, had given Captain Ross the Luger. It was a very special weapon, quite distinct from the standard issue. After the war Giessen and Marcus's father had corresponded with each other. Giessen had even visited Carston, though Marcus had been too small to remember anything other than a friendly man with a lean and pockmarked face. Marcus turned the gun over in his hands. In spite of its reputation the Luger had not been a reliable weapon compared with the Walther P38 which had succeeded it in 1931 as the weapon of choice for the Wermacht. The Luger was expensive to manufacture and its parabellum mechanism was prone to jamming. But when it did work the 9mm bullet could remove most of a man's head. In order to balance the slightly longer barrel Giessen had replaced the wooden grips on the butt with machined steel grips and had his name engraved on one side of the butt. On the toggle which cocked the firing mechanism there was an Imperial crown, and the date and place of manufacture at Erfurt in 1917. This gun had belonged to Giessen's father, it was almost as much an heirloom as a ceremonial sword. An historical artefact, nearly sixty years old. Marcus pulled back the toggle and cocked the gun. The action was smooth and precise. He pressed the trigger and the firing pin clicked harmlessly on an empty chamber. He took one of the boxes of cartridges, opened it and tipped some shells into the palm of his hand. The cartridges were solid and heavy, like the gun itself. He ran his finger round the base of a shell. There was some kind of code stamped

on it but the symbols were incomprehensible to him. He put the cartridges back into their honeycomb box, then stood up and walked back into the study, taking the Luger with him.

Just after two in the morning he sat back from his typewriter, then leaned over it with his head in his hands. Far from liberating him the novel was flooding him with lethally depressing memories which he now realised he would have been better advised to forget. All the misery and the pain of failure engulfed him, sapping the few reserves of sanity that still remained. Then the buzzing in his head stopped and he saw with awful clarity what he must do next to rid himself of his despair. He flipped shells into the magazine of the pistol. When it was full he slid it sensuously into the butt of the gun. The seeds of death primed into an all destroying phallus. He looked at the gun as though he had never seen it before. He pulled back the slide to load the chamber. His mind went blank. He placed the muzzle of the gun in his mouth and began to squeeze the trigger. Clarions of alarms reverberated in his brain. He jerked the gun away. This was not what he intended. Not at all. He found a black plastic document pouch and hid the gun in it. He put on his coat and thin pair of driving gloves. Five hours later he was sitting in the car park at the back of Gallus College waiting for Armiger to get up. It was seven o'clock. Cold, sharp, dark and fen misty. Armiger was still an early riser, a legacy of the army routines which had so shaped his life. When the curtains twitched back from the windows of his rooms Marcus got out of the car and made his way up the narrow staircase to the door. Armiger, unshaven and in a dressing gown opened the door to face a young man with a pistol. He showed no surprise.

"What do you want," he said coldly.

"I want to know why you rejected my thesis," Marcus replied.

"Oh," said Armiger, "Mr Cross," his gaunt face betrayed no emotion, it was not the first time he had faced young men with pistols, "You'd better come in."

Marcus followed Armiger into the dingy set with its bookcases full of old copies of Punch and Wisden. They sat down, facing each other over a scratched and stained coffee table. Armiger was far from well. Since Marcus had seen him last at the *viva* he had lost weight, his hair was thinning, and his face was gaunt and ashen.

"Put the gun down," Armiger sighed, "you're not going to use it."

Marcus did not respond.

"Why did you reject my thesis?" Marcus repeated.

"What does it matter. You're never going to amount to anything. You were nothing special when you were here. Just another mediocre Grammar School boy. No good at sport. Nothing to give to the college. Now you're stuck in some remote Welsh backwater where you can spend your life being mediocre. What does a thesis matter?"

“That's not an answer,” Marcus insisted, “I devoted six years of my life to that work. It meant everything to me. You don't just reject theses out of hand. What was wrong with it?”

“It was boring. Unoriginal. You had nothing new to say. And,” he paused, “Dr Vipont had his own reasons for sending the thesis back. They seemed convincing enough to me. It's not my period, after all. I was happy to go along with them.”

“What have I ever done to you that you should treat me with such contempt?”

“You're young. You've had it easy. You've never suffered. My youth was squandered in a war. I had to watch my own side destroying the things that I most loved and admired. The greatest buildings, the greatest monument to monastic idealism. Reduced to rubble. And I killed a lot of young men. It does something to you, killing people. You can come to enjoy it, or at least, not to care. There is something satisfying about taking life, especially when you are justified in taking it. You don't know how to kill. You never will.” Armiger leaned forward, twisted the gun from Marcus's unsuspecting hand and turned it on him.

Marcus recoiled in surprise.

“You see,” Armiger sneered, “you don't have the will to kill, or to live. I can take your life without a second thought. It's worthless. I'll tell you why your thesis was failed. It was because Bob Vavassour got the Mastership of Walsingham. Nothing more. Just academic malice. Vavassour got to be too big for his boots. You were just cannon fodder. You weren't the first, and you won't be the last.”

“This isn't a war,” said Marcus, horrified, “you don't ruin people's lives because of some petty jealousy. It's monstrous. You are responsible for the care and nurture of young lives. You're supposed to help young people make the best of themselves. Not ruin them.”

“Don't talk to me about ruining people's lives,” Armiger replied, “you don't know what you're talking about. My life was ruined. I had no say in it.” He looked curiously at the pistol. “Walther P38,” he said, “standard Wermacht issue. I haven't seen one of these for years. Where did you get it?”

Marcus said nothing.

“Does it work?” Armiger continued. He pointed it at Marcus's chest and pulled the trigger. It worked. Marcus was hurled back into the chair, then collapsed forward, a look of total surprise on his dying face. “It works,” Armiger smiled. He sat quietly, looking at the stupid boy and savouring again the intoxicating scent of cordite. He continued to sit quite still for a long time, waiting for the porters to come and investigate the gun shot. But Mr Westerman, just arrived in the Porter's lodge, had heard a car backfire, and thought nothing of it. Then, at the periphery of his vision, Armiger saw another young man, his

face blackened and bloody, his hair matted with oil and sweat, his grey blue uniform torn and burnt. He sat down in the chair next to the dead Marcus.

"Time for you to join us," he said in perfect English, "your race is run and you have lost the battle. You are one of us. Come and join us in hell."

Armiger sighed. He was going to die anyway. Better here than in some desolate prison hospital. He put the pistol barrel into his mouth and pulled the trigger. This time Mr Westerman did hear a sharp crack, a sound which he had not heard since those years, long ago, when he had stood beside his officer in the ruins of Monte Cassino, and turned a blind eye to mass murder.

Marcus pulled the paper forcibly out of the typewriter and flung it onto the accumulating heap on his desk. It was not going the way he wanted it to. He had no intention of killing his hero off in the last chapter. Quite the contrary. The fictional Marcus was going to kill Armiger in the most horrible way and then go to Oxford to confront Vipont. After that he would himself be killed in a car crash on the motorway. It was necessary for him to die, because he had killed. But by blind fate, not by Armiger. Why had that happened? What had come out of his head bore no relation to what he had intended. It was as though the story was rewriting itself without his conscious consent. It was well after midnight. He went to bed, but could not sleep. Dreams and visions fought furiously in his imagination. He tossed and turned, and when he eventually dropped off it was only to wake again after a few minutes and reach out for the comforting flesh of the absent girls. At around six o'clock he did fall into a deep and dark sleep which lingered into the morning so that he got up later than usual and with a sore head as though he had been drinking. He made himself some coffee and sat by the Aga in the kitchen considering how to rewrite the story which was pounding away in his head. Caroline would probably be back today, though he didn't know quite when. He would try again.

Just after midnight he sat back from his typewriter, then leaned over it, his head in his hands. He stifled back a sob of despair and frustration. The novel depressed him more than he could bear. He stood up and roamed around the shabby room. It had been unwise to set his mind down on paper. All the misery had erupted again, sapping what few reserves of sanity remained to him. The pain in his head stopped suddenly to be replaced by an awful clarity. He knew what he must do next. He took a road atlas out of his bookcase and checked the routes to Oxford. He knew that Vipont lived in Stanton Harcourt but he did not know exactly where. He paced up and down the room, clenching and unclenching his fists and allowing the tide of red rage to engulf his mind until all inhibitions had been swept away and the rational mind stood naked, waiting to serve the imperatives of unfettered emotions.

He put on a pair of thin leather driving gloves and once again removed the Luger from its drawer. He polished it meticulously then counted out eight shells

and polished them too. With infinite patience he slipped each shell into the magazine then slid the magazine into the butt of the gun. It slipped into place with smooth sensuality and locked into the breach with a soft click. He pulled back the toggle, injecting the first shell into the chamber.

It was cold outside. That biting cold which comes in the dying hours before dawn. He got into the Mini and started it up. The car was filthy, covered in dust and grime. He never washed it. But the tank was full enough to get him to Oxford, after that it would all depend on chance. He drove as fast as possible, but carefully so as not to attract the attention of early watch traffic policeman bored by the empty wastelands of the A5. Once in Oxfordshire he stopped at a telephone kiosk, looked up Vipont's name and found his home address and telephone number. It was six thirty. He rang the Stanton Harcourt number and to his surprise the phone was answered almost immediately. Vipont's high pitched effeminate voice came across with startling clarity. Either he had a phone by his bedside, or he was an abnormally early riser. Marcus replaced the phone without saying anything.

Stanton Harcourt was deserted. Mist and dew wraithed itself round the cricket pitch. The houses were silent. Vipont lived some way out of the village, at the end of a long farm track and down a short drive leading into an overgrown and secluded garden. Marcus drove past the entrance then reversed the Mini into the open gateway of a field. He got out and walked down the track to Vipont's cottage. He looked back over his shoulder. The Mini was well concealed behind a hedge and could not be seen from the track. Marcus hesitated then continued on his mission, walking carefully on the grass to avoid crunching the gravel on the drive. The garden was a shambles. It had obviously not been tended for years. The cottage was little better. Paint blistered on the doors and window frames. There was a porch approached by a short flight of stairs, and a garage built on to the side of the cottage. The doors of the garage were open, and inside was a Ford Cortina, not the latest model, perhaps three or four years old. The boot was open, in anticipation of loading. Marcus rang the door bell. Footsteps echoed inside and the door was opened by Vipont, fully dressed in a pale lightweight suit and looking slightly flustered. Just inside the door were two large suitcases.

“Who are you?” Vipont snapped irritably.

“Don't you remember me Dr Vipont. I met you at a *viva voce* last year. You rejected my thesis.”

“Oh,” Vipont grunted, “you. Haven't you rewritten it yet? What do you want? I haven't much time. My friend and I are just going on holiday. We have a flight to catch. As you can see I have to pack the car.”

Marcus was not quite sure what to say. Action alone was not good enough here. In any case he was committed to an intellectual appreciation of the situation. He wanted answers. Moreover, there was the friend to consider. He had not calculated on Vipont having a girl friend. He would have to be careful.

“I want to talk to you about the article you stole from my thesis.”

Vipont's ginger face clouded over, “I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about. Now go away. I'm busy.” He turned and stepped back into the corridor, leaving the front door open.

“And I want to know why you sent my thesis back for rewriting knowing that what you wanted me to do was impossible to achieve.”

“I always fail theses,” Vipont snapped, “it's a great honour to be failed by me.”

Marcus followed Vipont through the front door.

“Where are you going on holiday Dr Vipont?”

“Who said you could come in here? Mykonos.”

The cottage was as decrepit inside as it was out. Marcus guessed that Vipont was a tenant, and a careless one at that. He followed him into what was apparently the living room It was painted in a dingy cream colour and the walls were hung with a variety of stuffed animal trophies, and weapons, including swords, claymores, a particularly vicious looking mace with a spiked ball attached to it and a brace of crossed Zulu Assegais. Marcus looked at Vipont quizzically.

“Why don't you go away,” Vipont said, “if you've got a complaint about the way your thesis was examined take it up with Cambridge.”

“I want an answer from you,” Marcus replied, “I've read your report. It was grossly unfair, and you know it. Now, why did you refer the thesis back with impossible conditions?”

Vipont's face twitched into a kind of snarl which made him look even more ridiculous.

“You're not supposed to see the examiner's reports and I'm certainly not going to discuss your thesis. The decision to refer was taken by the whole committee of the Syndicate of Graduate Studies on the basis of my report, and of course, the report of the internal examiner. Now please leave. I'm not going to stand here and have my professional integrity impugned. Leave now, or I'll call my friend to throw you out.”

Marcus laughed at him, “and what about the article you stole? How much more of my research are you going to publish?”

“Owen,” Vipont screamed, “Owen, come quickly. I'm being attacked.”

“What's the fuckin matter,” said a petulant voice at the other end of the corridor. Bare feet slouched along the bare floorboards towards the living room. Marcus’s mind began to race with the speed and accuracy of a guided missile. Action stimulated the intellect as it had never been stimulated before. Owen Seaton appeared in the doorway, wearing a slovenly silk dressing gown, his familiar gold chain still slung around his neck. His narrow reptilian face was bleary and his hair disordered. He look at Marcus and his face went purple with rage.

“What the fuckin hell are you doing here?” he bawled, “fuck off out of my affairs. Haven't you made a big enough fool of yourself already?” He turned on Vipont, snake eyes narrowing, snake tongue flicking.

“What have you told him?” he demanded.

“Nothing, Owen, really nothing.” Vipont's hands flitted about nervously.“He's just arrived. Throw him out Owen, I don't like him. I don't like violence.”

Marcus stared at Seaton.

“You're supposed to be in...”

“Yeah, well I'm fuckin not. Now fuck off.”

Marcus said nothing. Nothing needed to be said. The whole random pattern of his misfortunes suddenly fell into brilliant order. It was all as inevitable as death, and at the bottom of the pit was Seaton the snake. Lazy, malicious, malevolent Seaton, tribune of the people.

“Owen,” Vipont whispered nervously, “he'll guess...”

“Shut up you fool,” Seaton snapped, “he may be a wishy washy liberal, but he's not stupid. He's already worked it out.” He turned to Marcus, “now, see here you fuckin twat, you can't do anything. No one will believe you. We're all respected academics and you are a fuckin failure. If you try to accuse us of anything we will deny it. Nobody will believe you. Things like this just don't happen in the academic world. No one will believe you. You've lost, Mr Ross. You've always been a loser. Now fuck off back to the other losers at St Dynion’s and let us get off on holiday.”

“Owen,” Vipont hissed, “Owen, he can wreck our careers. We're going to have to get rid of him. There's two of us. We can do it. ”

“I don't think so,” Seaton muttered, “this is a crap story. This kind of thing wouldn't even happen in Sinclair's crappy novels.”

“We'll see about that,” said Marcus crisply. He reached up and took one of the assegais off the wall.

“What are you going to fuckin do now,” Seaton said derisively.

“Kill you,” Marcus replied coldly.

“Oh no you're fuckin not.” Seaton raised his fists in front of his face and charged at Marcus, “now fuckin get out of here before I beat the shit out of you.”

Marcus remained silent. He tightened his grip on the Assegai and allowed Seaton to impale himself on it. The bullet and the bomb have deprived Western man of the sensation of driving cold steel into the guts of the enemy. Marcus savoured it.

“This is what happens in revolutions,” he said coldly, “people just get killed, for no reason at all. Just for crazy ideas.”

Seaton stared back at him, his mouth hanging open in surprise, the snake eyes rolling. He began to make a deep gurgling noise in his throat. His face distorted into feral fear. The bastard Ross had surprised him again. Marcus

slowly pulled the assegai out of the stomach and thrust it back into Seaton's chest, aiming for the heart but the blade slid off the rib cage and sent tingling shocks up Marcus wrists. Then the steel tipped spear glanced off the bone and slid easily through the right lung, missing the heart, and exited through Seaton's back. Marcus released his grip on the assegai. From this point there was no going back.

"That's for Jenny Saville," he said.

Seaton gurgled, and sank to his knees. He tried to articulate one last dying insult but nothing came out of his mouth except blood and lung tissue. He tried to fall onto his back but the protruding blade of the spear prevented him from lying flat, nor had he the remaining strength to pull himself into a kneeling position. The whole weight of his body lay diagonally against the shaft of the spear, provoking unbelievable pain. He tried to scream but nothing came but more blood and tissue. His body began to thrash and convulse in paroxysms of agony. Marcus could not bear it. As a child he had once shot a wood pigeon with an air rifle and, having failed to kill it with the first shot, was so appalled by its suffering that he had pounded it to death with a brick. He grabbed the mace off the wall, swung the spiked ball and smashed it down onto Seaton's head. The skull shattered, not like an egg, but with with a soft crunching implosion. The body stretched out in one final spasm.

Marcus stood back and caught his breath. Every human quality was now far from his mind. The last door in his soul had been unlocked. Cold, efficient, wholly rational blinding rage. As his mind refocussed he became aware of Vipont, screaming. He turned and transfixed him with cold and heartless eyes. He weighed the mace in his hands, noting dispassionately the fragments of hair and brain tissue clotted onto the spikes of the iron ball. Vipont saw it too, and began to gibber wildly.

The cold scholarly mind, trained to a lifetime of detached observation, assessed the situation. He flung the mace to the floor beside the dead body and turned his back on Vipont. Vipont sprang across the room, not towards Marcus, but to the side of Seaton. He cradled the broken head briefly in his arms covering himself with Seaton's blood. He muttered and whined, and tried unsuccessfully to pull the assegai out of the body, then, as Marcus had hoped, he grabbed the mace and hurled himself at Marcus only to find himself looking straight into the barrel of the Luger. He dropped the mace. His hands and suit were covered in blood.

"You bastard," Vipont whined, "bastard, bastard," he fell to his knees and crawled back to Seaton's body. "We were going to Mykonos, " he sobbed.

"Get away from that," Marcus snarled. He gestured with the Luger.

"Don't kill me," Vipont whined, "please, I'll do anything. Please."

"Then tell me what happened to my thesis," Marcus replied.

Vipont sobbed and mumbled something unintelligible.

"Did he tell you to fail it?" Marcus looked at the body.

Vipont nodded.

"And if he hadn't said anything. Would you still have failed it? Answer me."

"Yes, yes, probably. I've never examined a thesis before. You were my first. Darius Mortmain always used to send back Cambridge theses. He said it helped to maintain high standards. I only wanted to follow his example."

"Did it not occur to you what despair and misery you might cause. It's not like giving an undergraduate a lower class of degree than he rightly deserves. I've been committed to an academic career for more than six years. How can I stay in a profession when every day I'm going to be reminded of my own failure and humiliation. You wrecked my life. For what?"

Vipont shook his head.

"You disgust me," Marcus said, " just because you have a fellowship in Oxford you think you can play at being God, making and breaking lives. And another thing. Why did Armiger go along with you?"

"He," Vipont gulped, "it was all agreed beforehand. Even before the oral. He said he couldn't understand your thesis. He'd never done a doctorate himself. He didn't know how to deal with all your figures and statistics. Neither did I. He said he was going camping in Andalusia for the summer and because you didn't accept the first date he offered for the oral he'd been forced to delay the start of his holiday. He was very peeved about that. He said he was happy to accept my decision. He didn't seem to like you." Vipont looked wistfully at Seaton's half naked, hairy, blood soaked ape body. "We were going to Mykonos," he added, then, more angrily, "but that doesn't justify this. You can't go around killing people just because you've failed a doctorate. It's unreasonable. You must be mad."

"That's entirely possible, " Marcus replied coldly, "but madness is just an aberrant form of sanity. And anyway, there are abstract principles of justice involved. You should understand. You wilfully failed my thesis, knowing that it was actually perfectly acceptable. You did it to gratify that loathsome little shit, and to inflate your own silly ego. You put me in a position from which it has been impossible to obtain any kind of redress. You destroyed my career and my life. And now, by God, I'm going to ruin you."

"Oh, dear God," Vipont pleaded, "please don't kill me. What are you going to do?"

"Get up," Marcus was governed now only by the logic of the situation in which he found himself. All human feelings were excluded. All that remained was a series of neutral objects to be manipulated by his detached and totally objective mind. A logical conclusion to a logical game which was now so far advanced that there was no escape from it.

"Get up," he said again. Vipont staggered to his feet, terrified of the pistol and expecting the fatal bullet at any moment.

"Car keys."

“In the car,” Vipont whimpered, “dear God what are you going to do with me. Have mercy. I never thought it would end like this. We were going to Mykonos. How can you be so cruel? Don't you have feelings?”

“Did you have any feelings when you threw away six years of my life, ruined my marriage, and wrecked my mental health.”

“What are you going to do?” Please, please, don't kill me.” Vipont looked around shiftily. “I promise, I won't say anything. I'll....I'll...help you bury the body. In the garden. Nobody knows he's here. He's not supposed to be here. He should be in...”

“Not even faithful in love, Dr Vipont,” Marcus said scornfully, “what a perfect little don you are, Dr Vipont. Just another coward, like so many of my colleagues. Shut away in your ivory towers playing at being gods. It's all just a game. No harm done so long as it's just ideas. Well ideas do affect people. And this is reality. Reality. Do you understand?” Marcus paused, “it seems to me Dr Vipont that there has been a lover's tiff. Your finger prints are on the murder weapons. His blood is on your clothes. I, as you can see, am still wearing my driving gloves. Let's look at this dispassionately, in a scholarly way. If I were in your position, having just killed my lover in a particularly brutal way, I think that I would probably be overcome with remorse and guilt and I'd kill myself. Wouldn't you think?”

Vipont shivered.

“Well, I think it's time for you to find out,” Marcus gestured with the Luger. Vipont walked in front of him down the corridor, out of the front door. Marcus inspected the open boot of the Cortina to see if it could be unlocked from the inside. The keys were still in the lock.

“Get in,”

Vipont turned even whiter.

“Get in the bloody boot.”

Vipont obeyed, scrambling sheep like into the boot and curling up in a foetal position with his hands over his head.

“What are you going to do now?”

“Use your imagination,” Marcus snapped. He slammed down the boot lid which locked itself. Vipont's imagination was already racing ahead. He began to scream hysterically. He hammered and kicked against the panels of the car.

“It's dark,” he howled, “let me out.”

Marcus began to act quickly. He edged up the side of the car inside the small cramped garage and got into the driving seat. He switched on the ignition. The fuel tank was less than a quarter full, but enough for the engine to tick over for a couple of hours at least. Long enough. He started the engine, then edged back down the side of the garage and closed the double doors but did not lock them. He could just hear the engine running and remote banging and screaming, but in that confined space it would not last long. Vipont was already dying. Marcus went back into the sitting room and looked at the body of Seaton. He had not

expected him to be there. He was supposed to be doing research in Cuba, and it was a revelation to discover that this notoriously promiscuous monster was bisexual. He'd never planned to kill him, or Vipont for that matter, but once the game had started, its outcome was dictated by cold logic. And anyway they had openly discussed getting rid of him, which could only mean that they would have killed him if they got the chance. It was all so remote and unreal, like a film or a vivid dream. He closed the front door. He was not pleased with himself, or displeased, any more than a computer is pleased with the solution of a problem. Dawn birds chirruped in the hedgerows. This was a remote place. With luck no one else would visit the house until the post came tomorrow, by which time the car would have run out of fuel and the occupant of the house would be assumed to be on holiday. He walked briskly back to the Mini and sat quietly in it for a few minutes. Perhaps nothing had really happened. Perhaps it was all just a tableau, a play, a film, an episode in a bad novel in which he was just a detached reader. He started the Mini, and drove away from Stanton Harcourt.

It began to rain. Just drizzle at first, then a downpour. Marcus stayed in the inside lane of the dual carriageway. The elderly Mini did not have the stamina to stay in the fast lane. He came up behind a red and gold Shell petrol tanker which was travelling very slowly. He looked in his mirror but the rear window was filthy so he could not see what was behind. He decided to take a chance and edged the little car out into the fast lane. Something large and black hurtled past, striking his offside wing and wrenching the steering wheel out of his grasp. The Mini began to spin. Marcus sat quite still, his detached mind chronicling events which were taking place in an unfamiliar time scale. Everything had slowed down. The Mini was facing the other way now. He saw other cars hurtling towards him, then the passenger side of the Mini smashed into the crash barrier and the Mini began to roll over. The windscreen burst into a thousand fragments. Something hard ripped into his cheek. The car was on its roof now, sliding along the wet road in a shower of sparks. Then all movement stopped. He hung silently in his seat belt. His arms dangled down. *I must get out* he thought. In the red haze he could smell petrol, pouring into the car through the smashed rear window.

"Petrol," he whispered, "must get out."

The inside of the little car exploded into a golden blaze. The blast of the igniting fuel used up all the oxygen in the little cabin. In his dying instants he saw a grey Porsche sports car flash past him in the outside lane. In the passenger seat a beautiful woman with long blonde hair and ice blue eyes stared at him with a face frozen with horror. He gasped for breath and inhaled pure flame. There was one blinding, searing instant of purification. Then.....nothing.

Marcus picked up yesterday's newspaper and flicked through it again to reread the short account of the death of Roger Vipont. He would never know

the truth about his thesis, and in the end, it didn't really matter. He was not destined for that world. He was about to put the paper down when he noticed a small item at the bottom of a column on the third page. The headline simply read: English Yacht lost in North Sea. His heart stopped. A small headline:

English yacht lost in North Sea. *The English registered yacht* ***Shadowfax*** *was reported missing two days after leaving Gothenberg en route for Gibraltar. No distress messages were received but wreckage associated with the yacht was discovered in the sea by a passing Norwegian trawler. Subsequent air and sea searches have not yet discovered any bodies or further wreckage and hope of finding survivors alive is fading fast. A spokesman at Hallberg Rassy yacht builders in Sweden said the yacht was on a delivery voyage under the command of an Englishman, Christopher Davenport together with his daughter Sophia and a Greek lady, Elpida Economou, all of whom are assumed to have been lost with the yacht. Christopher Davenport, an ex Royal Navy Lieutenant Commander, is understood to have been an extremely experienced yachtsman. There is no clue as to the cause of the sinking. The weather and visibility in the North Sea was good at the time and the yacht was brand new and in perfect condition. It is thought that the yacht may been disabled for some reason and was then run down by a larger vessel which did not report the incident. Coastguards commented that a number of yachts had been disabled recently in that area of the North Sea by fishing nets caught in their propellers. Yachtsmen would normally expect to continue their journey under sail so the reason for the loss of the* ***Shadowfax*** *will remain a mystery.*

Marcus stared at the report incredulously. It could not be possible. Sophie could not die. Sophie could not just vanish. Then he remembered Sophie calling to him. His dead mother had once called to him like that, crystal clear and imperative. And then he knew that Sophie was dead. He knew it in his heart and in his head. Nevertheless he went up to his study and rang the Coastguards who merely confirmed the newspaper story. Marcus realised with horror that he had no other contact numbers to phone for corroboration. Sophie had no family other than her father, or at least none that Marcus knew of. There were Greek relatives, but he had no idea who or where they were. Nor did he know where Elpida Economou came from. In fact he knew nothing about Sophie, except what had been revealed to him by her. It had not seemed necessary. They were young and would live forever. He remembered the office in Gibraltar but he did not know the telephone number, nor the name of Chris Davenport's company, if it existed at all. Directory enquiries eventually found a telephone number for the Hallberg Rassy importers in Britain. It was Saturday, but the brokers office was open. They knew about the loss of the ***Shadowfax*** and were distressed about it. They had a contact number for Chris Daveport's Gibraltar office but that was the only number they had. Lieutenant Commander Davenport lived on boats. He did not have a home address and the Gibraltar office number had been disconnected. Marcus scrabbled frantically up blind alleys but he knew that

whatever he might find out it was too late. Sophie had gone. There was nowhere that he could turn for certainty, except his heart, which had turned to ice. There was Drew Parkin. Drew Parkin. Drew always knew everything, especially where Sophie was concerned. He rang the number on the **Trigonos** notepaper. It was Saturday. There was no one in the office. He rang Adrian's bank. There was someone there, but Adrian had left the bank recently in order to go into business on his own. The telephone number held by the bank was the same as the number on the **Trigonos** notepaper. Marcus had no other contact numbers. He faced a blank wall. An appalling thought entered his mind. *They're going to fleece you*, Hilary had said. How could she know? She had never met them before that night. Where were they? Where were Drew and Adrian? Suppose Sophie was still alive. Suppose the yacht had been sunk deliberately and they had all conspired to vanish together with Marcus's money.

Drew might do such a thing. But he could not believe that of Sophie. She would never harm him.

Marcus was almost hyperventilating with shock. He went across the landing and down the corridor to their bedroom. He and Sophie had kept their meagre stock of clothes in one wardrobe. Caroline's clothes required an entire wardrobe to themselves. Caroline. If Caroline did not return today he would suspect the worst. But it wouldn't matter as long as Sophie was still alive. He opened their wardrobe and felt for her clothes to remind himself that she had existed. She had so few clothes. There was a little tinkle of bells. His heart leapt up. How often he had sat in his office in that miserable damp hut and listened to those little bells trilling their way down the corridor to his room and his heart had beat faster. He took out Sophie's deep purple jeans with the little rows of tiny bells sewn into the flairs. The bells jangled as cheerfully as ever. He pressed the jeans to his face, then remembered the clothes flapping their way out of the shattered suitcases after that horrendous car crash on the M62. He knew absolutely that Sophie was dead. He fell to his knees and uttered a piercing shriek which attenuated itself into a sustained and heart breaking wail, then into shaking sobs. He fell forward onto the floor and hammered futilely at the carpet with his fists then clasped his hands behind his neck and pounded his forehead against the floor in despair. The thesis, and this ridiculous attempt to revenge himself by writing this absurd novel, paled into pathetic insignificance. He could not live without Sophie. How could she just vanish without a trace? A week ago he had kissed and hugged her in the departure lounge at Newcastle docks, before she boarded the ferry to Gothenberg. He should have gone with her. She wanted him to go. At least they would have died together. But he had pressing estate business and, anyway, he thought Sophie might want to spend some time alone with her father, and so had declined her offer.

Marcus picked himself up from the floor of his bedroom and limped back to the study. On his desk was the Luger. He sat down and thought about Jenny Saville. Jenny Saville who had killed herself because she thought that nobody

loved her. And Mo, Big Mo, who could not live in a world without Sophie. Could he kill himself because he loved too much and could not bear to be parted from his love? Suppose Drew Parkin was right. Suppose there really was another world where they would all be together and Sophie was already there. He picked up the pistol and brought it slowly up to his temple. He pulled the trigger. But the gun was neither loaded nor cocked. Nothing happened, except that a familiar voice in his mind whispered, "*what about her? She loved me too. And you. You mustn't leave her.*" He put the gun down and collapsed face forward onto the desk sobbing hysterically, salt tears soaking the sheets of paper scattered around his typewriter, failed fiction on one side, failed thesis on the other. He stayed like that until the shadows began to fall in the late afternoon. He tried to visualise Sophie in his mind's eye, but the image was blurred. He had no photograph of her, nothing to remind himself, nothing to assuage the pain of loss. At around seven o'clock he heard the unmistakable sound of Caroline's Mini arriving but he did not get up. Caroline let herself in. She looked first in the kitchen, then came up to the study and looked at the weeping body slumped behind the desk. Death caressed her heart. She put her arm round Marcus and kissed him.

"Marcus," she said softly,"what's wrong my love? What is it?"

"Sophie," Marcus's voice was strangled, as though he could not bear to speak, "Sophie is dead. Look." He pointed at the newspaper open on the desk. Caroline read it slowly and carefully then looked up at Marcus.

"She cannot be dead. I would have felt it."

Marcus shook his head.

"I know you don't really believe," Caroline said, "but if Sophie had died I would have felt her go. Sophie and I are always together. We are like twins. If something happens to one of us the other feels it. She is not dead. You know how sensitive we are, especially at moments of high passion. Think of all those amazing psychic revelations we've had through sex. And death must be more powerful than sex. Remember Mo. Sophie felt her die. I would surely have felt Sophie die. And even if you don't want to believe then think rationally. These big yachts have life rafts. They could have got off and still be bobbing around in the North Sea. Someone will find them. Marcus, listen to me. Don't give in. You give in too easily. There is still time. Marcus, there's still time." She hugged his face against her chest and stroked his hair as though he were a stricken child, but her heart shivered as her own faith faltered.

"What would Sophie do in this situation? Yes," she preempted any response from Marcus, "she would meditate and make love. And that is what we must do. Remember how we saw Sophie's vision of that Greek sunset. Marcus, we must do it. I need to know."

Marcus detected the anxiety in Caroline's voice. Caroline was no longer certain and wanted to try to make contact with Sophie by the methods that had sometimes worked in the past. He followed her reluctantly to the Indian room

whose dusky ambience had always appealed to Caroline, not least because there was a radiant gas fire there which made it a lot warmer than some of the other bedrooms. Sex was the last thing on his mind at this moment but he allowed her to undress him and watched dispassionately as she carefully folded his clothes onto a chair and then undressed herself, methodically putting her suit onto a coat hanger and neatly placing her bra, suspender belt and stockings, and knickers on top of his clothes. Then they knelt facing each other, holding hands and trying to meditate. But nothing came. No falling into light or darkness. No insight into the divine. No gentle caress by Sophie's soul. Eventually Caroline let go of Marcus's hands and looked straight into his sad grey eyes still puffy and red with tears. She began to panic but held it back. There was one last chance.

"Make love to me Marcus," she said, "it's important for us to affirm life. And you know how our perceptions are amplified by sex. Maybe she will join us. Make love to me Marcus." She allowed herself to recline onto her back, her legs apart, her arms stretched out as though crucified. "Marcus, make love to me." Her voice became more imperative. "Marcus !!"

Marcus looked down at himself. There was no life there. Caroline pulled herself upright, leaned forward and rolled Marcus's limp dick between her palms. The effect was instantaneous. She lay back, pulling Marcus down into her.

"Marcus, close your eyes Marcus. Close your eyes Marcus. Keep them closed. Do as I do. Listen to me. Listen to me. Don't open your eyes."

Marcus obeyed, as he had always done. Caroline had made love to Sophie so many times that she knew every intimate inch of Sophie's body, every little sigh, every nuance of delight, every fingertip caress, every tiny love bite, everything that Sophie ever felt or did in her remorseless gentle lust. And more than that. Caroline had often lain beside Marcus and Sophie and watched them make love, and unknown to Marcus had felt everything that Sophie felt. And when she in turn had made love to Marcus with Sophie watching, everything that she felt was empathised with Sophie. That was what had made the Troika possible. There was no jealousy because everything was shared down to the last gasp of final ecstasy. When Marcus made love to one, he made love to the other. The memory of that love remained to be shared. Just as Sophie had once given Caroline to Marcus, so Caroline now gave Sophie back to him. In his mind the body which pressed itself against Marcus was not the slender athletic body of Caroline. The breasts which crushed against him were fuller, softer, the lips which brushed his lips were lusher and gentler, the tongue which probed his mouth less hurried, the hair that brushed against his face thicker and more fragrant, the pubes that slipped against his groin more silky than the harsh brush of Caroline. Nor was the rhythm of love the violent gymnastic exuberance of Caroline, but slow and gentle and undemanding, giving everything and expecting nothing but the joy of sharing. Marcus made love to Sophie for the

last time, but Sophie was not there. And afterwards they fell asleep weeping in each others arms knowing that life and love must continue.

At about five Marcus woke with a start from a deep dream of a dark and drowning sea lit only by a sweeping pencil loom of light and the rhythmic tolling of a distant hollow bell. Caroline had turned over and was lying on her front. Marcus shook the sleep from his head. A shaft of moonlight speared down through a slit where the curtains had not fully met. The bell was the front doorbell, ringing far away in the hall. Marcus slid quietly out of the bed, taking great care not to wake Caroline. He felt in his heart a sudden optimism about Sophie. Making love to Caroline had unlocked his rational brain and released it from the miasma of distraught emotions which had so clouded his judgement. Caroline was right. Of course these big yachts had inflatable life rafts and distress flairs and other kinds of safety equipment. Sophie's father might be a garrulous clown but he took safety at sea very seriously and there, at least, he knew what he was doing. Sophie might still be alive. Just.....not found yet. There was still hope. He slipped on a dressing gown and made his way down the corridors and the grand staircase to the front door, half expecting Sophie to be there. He opened the door.

"April fuckin fool arse hole," the khaki clad Seaton snarled, "this is for the fuckin workers."

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Detective Inspector Mike Roberts parked his car next to the two panda cars and the ambulance in the large gravelled parking area in front of the Hall. There was a third car here, a black Rover 2000 which he knew belonged to Dr Cargill, the Police Surgeon. It was Palm Sunday, the first day of April. A clear, sunny, slightly sharp morning which lit the small Palladian mansion with a warm light which would normally have made the house glow as though it was alive. But not today. Today the Hall was grey and lifeless. Mike had been here before, both as a child on outings with his mother to the Church Fetes and WI Open Days, and also as a young constable sent to check the firearm certificates and the security of the gun room of the estate. He had always enjoyed coming here. The Hall was friendly and welcoming, unlike some great country houses which seemed to be full of ghosts, so that one always felt like looking over one's shoulder in fear of the frightful fiend that close behind doth tread. The constable at the front door saluted him. Just inside the door, stretched out on its back in a pool of blood was the body of man, scarcely covered by a silk dressing gown which had fallen open leaving him virtually naked. There was a massive wound in his chest. Two uniformed officers and his Detective Constable greeted him.

"Who is it?" Mike asked.

"This is the owner of the estate, Mr Marcus Ross. The two upstairs we're not quite sure." The DC shrugged, "it's not nice, and it's a puzzle."

“Any sign of the murder weapon?”

“Upstairs, in the bedroom, there's a hedge lopper. Covered in blood.”

“Hedge lopper ?”

“Long pole with a sharp blade at the end. They use it for cutting and layering hedges. This one's been sharpened on both sides. More like a pike or halberd than a garden tool.”

“And who found the bodies?”

“The housekeeper. A Mrs Janet Mowbray. She found this one. We found the other two upstairs. She's in the kitchen with her husband and a WPC. He's the estate manager. They're both very upset.”

“Not surprised,” said Mike, “I see that Dr Cargill is here. Is he upstairs?”

The DC nodded. Mike followed him up the great staircase and down the corridor to a darkened bedroom decorated with plum coloured flock wallpaper and Indian furniture. There was an enormous four poster bed on which was spread eagled a naked woman, her ankles and wrists pinioned to the posts of the bed with white nylon stockings and bits of pyjama cord. Her mouth was gagged. Her wide open blue eyes radiated an expression of extreme rage. The left side of her face was lividly bruised. Against the wall opposite the end of the bed was what at first sight appeared to be an ape, squatting motionless in a brown pool, its mouth open and its eyes out on stalks, wide with absolute terror. A massive erection thrust itself out of a forest of pubic hair.

“Bloody hell,” Mike exclaimed, “open the windows.” The DC obeyed, flooding the bedroom with the morning light. Dr Cargill, the police surgeon, round, plump faced and owlish behind old fashioned round NHS spectacle in black plastic frames, was leaning in front of the ape creature peering into its blind staring eyes with an opthalmoscope. He finished what he was doing and stood to greet the familiar policeman.

“Good morning Mike,” he said, “this is bad. Sometimes this job gets to me.”

“Yeah, me too, “said Mike morosely, “what in God's name is that?” pointing at the hairy thing slumped against the wall, “and what is that smell. Don't tell me.”

“Yes,” said the doctor, “when he died he lost control of his bowels.”

“So much hair. It looks almost like fur. Creepy or what.”

Dr Cargill looked up from his notes, “hypertrichosis,” he said, “follicular disorder, probably genetic. Quite rare here. Not uncommon in Mediterranean countries.”

“Looks to me like a bloody gorilla.”

Mike Roberts looked carefully around the room. A pair of trousers, a shirt and underwear, including a white bra, and wispy white suspender belt were neatly folded on one of the chairs at the edge of the room. An expensive white tailored woman's suit was folded over a hanger on the back of another chair, together with a white polo necked skinny ribbed sweater. By the door was a pile of dirty khaki fatigues, a green shirt, a dark green parka jacket, a black beret

with a red star on the front and a pair of army boots. Leaning again the door jamb was a bloodstained hedge lopper. Mike's eyes met the surgeon's eyes.

"What killed them?" he asked quietly.

"Ross was killed with the hedge chopper thing. Straight through the heart. And she was murdered too, asphyxiated," the doctor replied, "as for him. More of a mystery. I was just checking to see if there was any blood inside the eyes. You know, Terson's syndrome. That would indicate a sub arachnoid haemorrhage. Commonest form of fatal brain haemorrhage. But you need to be quick off the mark to spot it. Unfortunately he's been dead too long. So I won't know until we do an autopsy. It's got to be that or a massive cardiac infarction. But if it wasn't for the fact that there's no sign of burning and no power source I'd say he'd had a severe electrical shock. Whatever it was it was very violent and very quick."

"She was strangled?"

"No, there is no bruising round the neck. This is more complicated. It's a kind of perversion. I've read of it but never encountered it before. Essentially he ties her up and gags her. If we take the gag off we'll probably find she's also got something stuffed into her mouth. Can I?"

Mike nodded. Dr Cargill undid the gag, delicately extracted a ball of fabric from the mouth and shook it back into the shape of a pair of fine lacy French knickers.

"So," he continued, "she can't breath through her mouth. Then he mounts her and he pinches her nostrils, you can see, there is slight bruising on the nostrils. She can't breathe, she fights for breath and her body thrashes around. That excites him. He lets off the pressure, waits for her to recover, then starts again. He can do this many times until he orgasms but his aim is to orgasm at exactly the moment that she dies. That's it really."

"He must have done this before."

"Not necessarily. It could be worked out from first principles. Anyway, at the moment that she dies he has a massive seizure. It almost looks as though something actually threw him off the bed. Look how far away he is. Right across the room. Difficult to see how he did that. He should have just collapsed on top of her. Funny thing is, he didn't ejaculate inside her. Whatever happened, he was ejaculating as he fell backwards off the bed. There's a stream of semen across the bottom of the counterpane and down the front panel of the bed. But nothing between her legs, where you'd expect it. Strange."

"Serves the bastard right."

Mike turned to the DC.

"Do we know who they are?"

"The woman is called Caroline Howarth. She was a house quest apparently. According to Mrs Mowbray the housekeeper, she came and went fairly regularly. Seems she was a postgraduate student at Durham. There was another girl here as well, but according to Mrs Mowbray she's been away for more than

a week. She's not sure where. As for the ape man. We don't know. There is no identification on him. Nothing. Just a few pounds in his pocket. The clothes are not British manufacture. We think possibly Spanish military, but not a proper uniform. He's certainly been living rough, so he could just be a tramp."

Mike turned back to Dr Cargill.

"Do you think this was some kind of kinky threesome that went wrong?"

Dr Cargill shook his head.

"It's possible, but I doubt it. No, the woman fought every inch of the way. In order to tie her up he had to hit her hard enough to knock her out. Look at the bruise on her face. Look at the abrasions on her wrists and ankles, and look at the rage in her eyes. She was furious. Not frightened though. Outraged. She never gave in. I think the ape man came here, early in the morning. She was in bed with Ross, probably asleep. Ross got up, answered the door bell, and the ape man killed him with the lopper thing. Then he came up here, found Miss Howarth, temporarily knocked her out, tied her up and raped and murdered her, killing himself with excitement in the process. That's my theory anyway. For what it's worth."

"How old was she, do you think?"

"Twenty four, twenty five," Dr Cargill shrugged, "not a kid, but still young, anyway. She's very beautiful isn't she. Look at that hair and the colour of her skin."

Even in the pallid morning light Caroline's skin was still golden brown and her hair shining silver blonde.

"Looks a bit like Britt Eklund. Stronger face though. Must have been abroad recently," Roberts observed, "she's very sunburnt."

"No. Not sunburnt," the doctor replied, "that's the colour of her skin. Look at her pubes, but the rest of her hair is natural blonde. That's odd. Somewhere in the past one of her Teutonic ancestors must have had it away with an Arab, or at least a Mediterranean type. Spanish, Greek, Turkish maybe. You'd be surprised at how many olive skinned blondes there are wandering around Istanbul."

"Well, she didn't deserve this. And look at that bastard. He looks to me as though he came face to face with a pit full of demons."

"Yes," Dr Cargill replied, "I hope so. I hope he rots in hell. These were young people with their whole lives in front of them. Beautiful people. They didn't deserve to die like this."

"Who does," Mike muttered, dimly aware of a telephone ringing somewhere else in the house. He gestured to the DC, who disappeared, then looked pensively at the bloodstained hedge lopper, "we need to find out where that came from."

"Well," Dr Cargill said, "it's not for me to trespass on your patch, but I noticed a wheelbarrow full of gardening tools beside the drive as I came in. Maybe you should find the gardener."

The DC returned.

“There's a woman on the phone in the hall,” he said, “erm... someone called Sophie. She's sounds very distraught. I think you'd better talk to her.”

Mike Roberts sprinted down the stairs and picked up the phone. There was neither a voice nor a ring tone. Just a silence so black and impenetrable that it made the hairs stand up on the back of his neck. The phone was as dead as the people it was calling.

Deus Ex Machina

The end of September.....already. As one gets older the years seem to pass more quickly. But for James Sinclair life had not turned out to be such a catalogue of disasters as he had expected. On the contrary, the fates and the muses had been very good to him, though he constantly reminded himself of Sophocles' admonition to call no man happy until he goes down to his grave in peace. He read the e-mail from Drew Parkin again. He debated whether or not to print it out and decided against it. He would have to tell Hilary, of course. He always told her everything, but he did not think that she would be amused by Drew's obsessional enthusiasm for things which she would rather forget. He sat back in his comfortable typing chair and stretched his arms behind his head, then stood up and crossed to the window of the first floor study. It was really Marcus's study and the books which they had helped to unload that Christmas in 1972 still lined the shelves, untouched for years, together with Caroline's desk and her formidable library, James's own academic books and papers, and the row of novels that he had completed and published in the last thirty years. Thirty years. The leaves on the trees lining the drive were just beginning to colour up, but summer still seemed to be an unconscionably long time in dying. His wife was riding slowly up the long drive, the large dapple grey horse walking sedately, their two beagles running excitedly in front. Not Nicholas, who was long gone, but another horse just as proud and noble. Sometimes James rode with her, but he never felt very secure on horseback and feared that he was holding Hilary back when she wanted to gallop or jump. She reached the parking area in front of the Hall and dismounted, looking up to see if her beloved husband was watching her, and, seeing that he was there, as he always was, she waved at him and smiled broadly. She was just as beautiful as the first time that he had seen her, a little older, but, like James she had worn well, and their love for each other had grown stronger with each passing year. One of the stable boys came from the back of the Hall and took the horse. Hilary walked briskly into the Hall and bounded up the stairs. She put her head round the study door.

"I'm going to have a quick shower," she said, "see you in a few minutes. Are you alright?"

James smiled and nodded. He returned to the computer and the pile of yellowed quarto paper stacked neatly on the desk beside it. He had all but completed the task of typing the original text into his word processor, but there would be a lot of work to do before he could make it acceptable for his publisher. Marcus had been struggling at the end and clearly had not worked out how to finish his novel satisfactorily. James, eventually a moderately successful novelist, had been given the original manuscript and asked if he wanted to finish it as his own, and had agreed, somewhat reluctantly, because it was a little painful to return to events which had taken place thirty years ago. He picked up

the last sheet of the manuscript and turned it over in his hand. He remembered reading chapters for Marcus all those years ago and advising him on what to do next. At the time he had been very enthusiastic about it. But in distant retrospect it all seemed rather trivial and parochial. Who really cared about a rich young man who had fallen foul of Oxbridge malice and incompetence, not to mention the Mad Hatter's tea party at St Dynion's? If the novel was to succeed it would need to be spiced up a little. Well, there was certainly plenty of sex. Marcus's first year with the troika had been one long orgasm, which he had not hesitated to chronicle in great detail. But, perhaps because of the confidence that his sexual prowess had given him, Marcus had abandoned the novel at the end of the first draft, content instead to forget that dull past in favour of the golden future which he was to share with those two irredeemably lascivious girls. Now it seemed that he would have to transmute Marcus's vision through his own perceptions of what had happened and spin the unfinished novel in another direction. The back of the sheet of quarto was also typed, with a page recycled from Marcus's original thesis. Laboriously typed with an old fashioned electric typewriter and complete with many Tipexed corrections. Dead accounts of the lives and lands of long lost medieval knights, carefully annotated with detailed footnotes and ancient Public Record Office catalogue numbers. His mind wandered over the dead past until he heard Hilary come back into the room and felt her strong soft hands cover his eyes.

"Guess who," she said, leaning forward and gently kissing the tiny bald patch in the centre of his scalp, "how's it going?"

"Well," James leaned back and let Hilary massage his shoulders, "I've finished retyping the original. I've put some additional material into it and I'll have to change the names to satisfy Drew. There is a big problem with the last chapter, though."

"How so?" Hilary laughed, "did Marcus lose the plot?"

"Yes, in a way. He certainly made it very complicated. But I think, actually, he lost interest."

"Who wouldn't with those girls around him all the time. I'm amazed he ever did anything except shag."

"The odd thing is, he had several goes at finishing it. All he wanted to do was to humiliate those who had hurt him by killing them off in the most gory and ridiculous way possible. But every time he wrote the last chapter he killed off not only his enemies, but also himself, and in the last draft he kills off Sophie and Caroline as well." James paused, "it's almost as though he subconsciously wanted to terminate everything. As though he was going start again with a clean slate."

"What are you going to do?"

"Depends on whether you look at it as a literary novel or a commercial novel. If the former, killing off the hero and heroines is probably acceptable. If it's a commercial novel publishers generally like happy endings. A Hamletesque

pile of bodies does not go down well with the readers, though they don't mind piles of dead villains. Most people like happy endings. Even I like happy endings. So I'll try to devise a happy ending. Actually, I don't think Marcus ever envisaged publishing it. I think it was largely a therapeutic exercise and once it was done, it was done. After that the girls kept him amused, then the **Trigonos** project really got going, and everything changed."

James got up from the desk and cuddled up to Hilary on the comfortable little sofa in front of the fireplace. She was wearing nothing under her silk dressing gown and every contour of her fine body rippled against him. It still felt to him like the sumptuously firm body of a thirty five year old woman, not a woman in her late fifties. James was also aware of his own sixty four years but it did not seem to weigh heavily on him. He put his arm round her and hugged her.

"They have been very kind to us," Hilary said, "I know I didn't like all of them at first. Especially Drew and Yasmine. Poor Yasmine. She didn't deserve that. But it's all worked out for us anyway. Because of them we've had a good life. We share the Hall with them. Funny how they drew us into their little commune, even though we didn't want to at first. And at one time or another we all lived at Penhesgyn as well. I know I was only there for a few weekends. But I still feel that it was once part of our lives. And now we all live together here. Except that they're not here most of the time. Sometimes I wish they'd come back more often. Sometimes I think I hear them laughing and giggling and chasing each other down the corridors like their children."

"Well, they were children, really. Full of dreams and wild enthusiasms and crazy theories. Drew still is. But I think that Marcus always wanted you to live here. To be mistress of the Hall as you had dreamed. Since they are here so infrequently it makes sense. And you've got the stud and riding school business. It's good. But..."

"But?"

"You aren't going to like this. There's been an e-mail from Drew. He wants us to join him and the others on the **Trigonos III**. Executive jet from Teesside to Athens. Helicopter to the ship."

"Sounds okay. We've been often enough in the past. What's the problem?"

"It's not just a holiday. Drew says that he's completed the first set of state of the art scans on the Circle. He wants to report on his findings. Apparently there's a full set of NMR brain scans, high sensitivity electroencephalograms, and DNA tests. And.... he's got a full genetic profile for everyone in the Circle. Including you. That's why he wants us there." James found it difficult to conceal his own excitement, but he knew that Hilary would not be so enthusiastic.

"Shit," Hilary exclaimed, "bloody hell. I've never been anywhere near his bloody machines. For God's sake. How did he get hold of my DNA?"

"You said yourself, we've been often enough on the **Trigonos**. And all the other houses. You probably left some hair on a pillow."

“I'll say this for Drew. He's bloody persistent. Thirty years and he's never let go. It's an obsession with him, especially since Yasmine died. He's never let up.”

“Well, you don't get to be one of the richest men in the world without being a little obsessional. And remember, he and Marcus and Adrian may be billionaires, but he's made every one of us millionaires as well. We should be very grateful to him. And there's a personal dimension to this now. He hopes that he can contact Yasmine...in the afterlife...somehow.”

“Oh...” Hilary huffed, “be fair to yourself, you have made more than a million in your own right, from your books.”

“True, but would I have been so successful if Drew hadn't bought out my publisher? I'll never know for certain.”

“That doesn't matter. Lots of people buy your books. They don't buy the publisher. And anyway your publisher was just an element in an entire corporation when **Trigonos** took it over. I doubt if Drew even knew that your publisher was amongst his acquisitions.”

“No. Drew is meticulous in his attention to detail. He knows exactly what he's doing. It’s publisher’s hype that sells books, not quality, and my books didn’t get hyped until after the takeover. I’m not fooling myself. He made us wealthy. Drew may be one of the most generous men I have ever met, but he is also one of the most devious. Nevertheless we have a moral obligation to him.”

“I sometimes think,” Hilary continued, “that Drew built up this whole bloody business empire for the sole purpose of financing his research into his cosmic bloody consciousness theories. I really don't want to know. I can still sometimes read your mind, if I think about it. But I'd rather not. The only time I ever think it's worthwhile is when we make love. Then it's terrific. But the last time we saw Sophie she said she no longer cared. Caroline now thinks it's a load of horse shit and wishes she'd never suggested it to him. Drew should leave us alone. We're not freaks to be studied like this. He put real fear into my mind. I still think of myself as odd. I still think there's something wrong with me.”

“Of course there's nothing wrong with you,” James said gently, then, “I take it that we're not going.”

“Too bloody true we're not going.” Hilary pulled a sulky face, but her eyes soon relaxed into her familiar smile, “well, give it a bit of time. I'd rather go and slum it on **The Three Lovers**. At least Sophie knows how to run a laid back boat. The **Trigonos** is just too bloody big. It's like some impersonal floating hotel. Full of luxury, but no soul. Like a machine. This house has a soul. It cares for us. And besides he always has those bloody pop stars and models and other assorted celebrity riff raff hanging around. They can be a real pain in the bum.”

“Steady on girl,” James hugged her, “it's not so bad. It could be worse. They could be footballers. Thank God he never got involved with buying football clubs. Anyway I doubt if we can stay on **The Three Lovers**. The season's

almost over. Sophie usually lays her up for the winter. The troika and the others will be back here soon for Christmas. They all come back to the Hall for Christmas. They always have, ever since that first Christmas."

"If I were them I'd stay in Greece for the winter. It's a bloody sight warmer than Yorkshire. That house on Alonissos is stupendous."

"Well, Alonissos can be pretty wet in the winter, and Patitiri has nothing going for it. And, anyway, there are better places. **Trigonos** has houses all over the world which we can use whenever we like. And most of them not being used most of the time. Whether we like it or not Drew and Marcus have never let us leave, and never will. Everything has been shared. The Circle is a genuine commune. And a very wealthy one. We are very lucky to be part of it, especially since I'm the only one who doesn't really fit. And anyway we're happiest here. This is where we belong. Sophie is happiest floating around in the Aegean. And Drew keeps the paparazzi at bay by never coming off his ship."

"It's always amazed me that they stayed together as a threesome." Hilary was already going full tilt at a field of familiar fences which James had jumped with her many times before. He knew what was coming next, and his answers would always be the same, "especially since Caroline was so set on her academic career. I have never been able to understand that, though, according to the celebrity mags, threesomes are quite fashionable these days," she added.

"They love each other, just as we do. And besides, it suited them, especially Caroline. Caroline got to have her academic career. She fulfilled the dream that Marcus had for himself. She was always her own woman. She got her doctorate and her lectureship and she did very well. She ended up with a Chair in a reasonably prestigious university, at least until Mrs Thatcher let her bulls loose in the academic china shop. Caroline had her career and she was able to have a child, without any of the normal domestic impediments. She didn't need to marry. She never had to run a house and she never had to be a harassed working mother because you and Sophie brought her daughter up with Sophie's twins as one happy family. All of Marcus's children and Drew's child as well, after Yasmine died. It suited them and it suited us. It still does. We are all members of a happy and devoted but very unconventional family. And it's been fun for us. We've all lived together, here, and in the other places. And their children are the children you never had. As dear to us as they are to their biological parents. They always call us uncle and auntie, even though we're not related to them at all." James gazed into the fire, as though looking for divine revelation.

"That's true," Hilary agreed, "I miss them, now they've grown up. Living here with them and with you was everything I always wanted, though it would have been nice if we could have had a child of our own. I know I said I didn't want children but..." she stifled an incipient sob. James squeezed her gently and stroked her hair.

"Never mind," he said soothingly, "what will be will be. Funny, all those barmy ideas that floated around in the sixties and seventies. You know the

whole pseudo hippy thing. The commune, the free love, the casual nudity, the exotic group sex, more sex than you could shake a stick at, the incipient violence behind the love and peace mantras. The Zen philosophy. It's all in Marcus's book. Young people are so full of hope and enthusiasm and so easily led astray. They can be persuaded to believe almost anything, and sometimes they really can make make-belief come true. But mostly it fades with time and dull domesticity. Passions wane for most of us. With Drew it's stayed fresh. He still believes that we are all special and he's determined to convince us. We should go, you know."

"No. Sophie will tell us what happened when she gets back. And anyway I've never really forgiven them for not including you."

"How could they include me? I don't have the gift, whatever it is. They have bent over backwards to include me in every other possible way but that. And remember, it was you who didn't want to take part in it. Anyway they stopped that wild sexual meditation long ago, and they always let me meditate with them in the normal way. Don't know what good it does me."

"Yes, that's true. I'm sorry. But I think it's more like a curse. Do you believe in it?" Hilary's voice was sad.

James pondered for a few moments. "Yes, I suppose so. I believe it because you believe it, even though you don't want to. We both know that there is something strange and unexplained about the Circle, and you share the same gift. So, yes, I believe in it. But what it is and why it is I don't know. And why you should all be brought together in one place must be more than coincidence, but I can't explain that either."

"Drew thinks that Marcus was the magnet that brought them all together, first at St Dynion's, and then here. This is the real gathering point. A kind of beacon that summoned them."

James nodded, "I've heard that theory from Caroline. If what Drew claims is true there must be others but they gave up looking after Mo committed suicide. I used to think that much of what Drew did was just showmanship, you know, a kind of confidence trick which came true. But there is always that element of unexplained mystery. Especially the clairvoyance and the telepathy. It's difficult to deny that. And that otherness. Even I have felt that, right here in this house. That feeling we've all had that something else is watching over us. What Sophie calls their angel. The sense of it so strong, but it's impossible to prove. And Sophie has always insisted that she can feel the minds of the others and communicate with them. I've always thought that Sophie was psychic. But then, so are the others. And I never understood Yasmine. She could well have been from another dimension. We should go, you know." James was still pricked by his academic curiosity. Even though he did not share in the mystery, its solution continued to intrigue him.

"Well, I might change my mind," Hilary's voice was firm and insistent, "the **Trigonos** is always tempting, but I doubt it. I don't want to know about these

things from Drew because he's going to put pressure on me to have the scans and God knows what else. I'm not having that. Sophie will tell us when she comes back. I'd rather hear it from Sophie. And that's it and all about it. That's my last word." Hilary leaned her head on James's shoulder. "Let's not argue," she said gently, "sufficient unto the day...."

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"Why aren't they here," Drew asked, with more than a hint of exasperation, "I've gone to a lot of trouble." He surveyed the faces arrayed in the comfortable leather bucket chairs round the Board Room table on the **Trigonos III**. His eyes met those of the cool blonde in the flimsy blue halter top and torn denim shorts. A long single plait tied with a massive bow of stiff blue lace swished across her bare, golden brown back. Marcus's cool grey eyes looked back at him with a confused expression of love and defiance. "Well?" he asked.

"Mum says it's a waste of time," Lucy replied, looking down at the table to avoid Drew's glare.

"Imogen?" Drew looked at the young Sophie. The olive skinned brunette with the long dark wavy hair and equally grey eyes shrugged her elegant shoulders and looked at him sadly. Uncle Drew might be one of the richest men in the world, but he was losing it.

"Mum's says she's busy," she said apologetically, "and anyway, dad is here. So she doesn't need to be. She's here with dad."

Drew sighed. Apart from the grey eyes which came from Marcus they looked exactly like their mothers had done when he had first known them. But this was a new spoilt and stroppy generation which appeared to be in a permanent sulk and despised and denied the unique powers they had inherited from their parents. He looked out of the window at the distant beach and the outline of **The Three Lovers** anchored in the little bay. Sophie preferred to call her by her Greek name **οι τρεις εραστές**, which somehow conveyed the erotic connotations of their mutual love better than the English. By comparison with the **Trigonos** Sophie's 45 foot Southerly motor sailer was tiny, but close up it was big by most people's standards. The yacht was registered in Piraeus and the name on her transom was her Greek name. She could be handled with ease by only two people and with her keel retracted her draught was less than a metre. Drew stood up and took a pair of binoculars from a drawer under the table. He focussed them on the distant yacht, close in to the small, sandy, and otherwise inaccessible, beach. He knew that Sophie had deliberately bought a yacht with a lifting keel so that she could get into places that the giant **Trigonos** could not begin to go. But he could always launch one of the Maxum speedboats and join her and Caroline and Marcus, and, in truth, he much preferred to be with them on their cosy little yacht, rather than living in this 350 foot Bannenberg behemoth which was really just the floating head office of a vast business

empire, and a safe residence for its reclusive owners. From the relative modesty of **The Three Lovers** he and Ayesha could go ashore without attracting any attention and lead a normal life with his beloved family. And they all had their staterooms on the **Trigonos,** for when they wanted a little luxury. So the two vessels often cruised together, with the **The Three Lovers** tagging along behind like a remora flitting around a great shark.

Drew had come to regret his high profile which had attracted too much media attention. Marcus had been much more successful in concealing his great wealth and living an inconspicuous life, mainly because he and Sophie were inherently modest people who lived relatively simple lives. Most of Marcus's money and Sophie's time was given away to charity. Caroline, by contrast, had her moments, but her expensive clothes, and her taste for crashing exotic sports cars, made little impact on her much more extensive income. Few people outside the discreet financial world knew that Marcus was the principal shareholder in the **Trigonos Corporation**, having put up the biggest investment when they had first started, and even fewer knew that he had divided his holdings equally with Sophie and Caroline. As a result his children walked the streets and went to school and university without being hounded by the press, or by more sinister interests. The adolescent Ayesha, however, had been brought up in a panoply of wealth which prevented her from ever living the kind of free and normal life the others had enjoyed. Wherever Ayesha went on her own in the hostile public world there would always be an armed bodyguard three paces behind her. She would never be entirely free. Drew now felt very guilty at denying her the joyous excess of life which he had shared with his dearest friends when they had been her age and so he encouraged her to stay on the **The Three Lovers** from which she could slip ashore with her surrogate siblings and skinny dip and sunbathe nude on the beach, and do all the other crazy things that young people do, without anybody noticing who she was. Marcus's girls, by contrast, much preferred the luxury of the **Trigonos III** and stayed on it whenever the opportunity arose, leaving the cosy double forecastle birth on their mother's yacht for Nikos and Ayesha.

"Your mum," he said to Imogen, "is sitting on the after deck of **The Three Lovers** drinking wine and talking to your mum," he looked at Lucy.

"I bet they haven't got any clothes on," Lucy retorted, "it's so gross. The minute we're off the yacht off come their clothes. And often when we're on it too. And dad," she pouted at Marcus, "so gross. Why don't they grow up?"

"You're so prim, Lucy," Marcus chided, "didn't you have a good time at university? Didn't you ever want to take your clothes off and let it all hang out and shag all night."

Lucy shrugged her father's shrug, "Yeah, but, we never did it much. There wasn't time. We had to work you know. Not like in your day. All those silly sixties mediocrities. So gross. And it's too bloody risky. We don't want to get AIDs. Sleeping around is so seventies. Universities are serious places now. And

anyway," she looked knowingly at Imogen, "we've done the sex thing, haven't we. You're not the first people in the world to go three in a bed. And the rest. But boys are a waste of time. So childish. No staying power." She looked again at Imogen, "sisters are more fun. Better the devil you know." The two girls started to giggle. Then stopped when they saw the expression on their father's face.

Drew smiled gently at them. It was obvious just how close these two were and no surprise to find that they were like their mothers in more ways than one. Perhaps the whole crazy sexual tricycle was set to repeat itself ad infinitum.

"Where's Nikos and Ayesha?" Drew asked.

"Last seen in the gym, and they've locked the door," Lucy grinned maliciously, "can't imagine what they might be doing."

"Well, they should be here. But obviously they aren't interested either."

"Why are we here uncle Drew?" Imogen asked in her mother's gentle voice.

"I wanted to tell you about my research into our...your...curious gifts, but now I wonder whether I should bother." Drew looked at the neat pile of files ranged on the Board Room table. What he had intended to tell them was so bizarre and so totally unexpected that it was beyond belief. Yet it was the outcome of systematic and irrefutable scientific investigation conducted by the very best of **Trigonos** scientists using cutting edge technology.

"You not going to go on about that cosmic consciousness Star Wars may the Force be with you stuff, and telepathy, and all that Babylon 5 eyes and ears of the universe crap," Lucy said in her most patronising voice, "what the hell. So, we can sometimes read each other's thoughts. We can sometimes predict what might happen in the next five minutes. So what. I've met loads of people who can do that. It's all down to body language and facial expression and reading the right signs. There's no mystery to it."

"Have you really met so many Lucy?" Drew asked patiently, "I have met very few. And all of them are my intimate friends. And remember, those abilities helped to make the fortunes that you are so happy to enjoy."

"No, uncle Drew," Lucy never pulled her punches, "you made our fortunes because you are a very intelligent, energetic and resourceful businessman who knows how to read the economic and financial trends and extrapolate the most likely outcomes and act on them before anyone else does. And you also know how to be in the right place at the right time, and you make your own luck, and you pick the right people to work for you. And we're very grateful to you, and we love you. But we don't believe in the supernatural. The universe is governed by the laws of physics."

"But you know that you can share your consciousness with us, when you want to. You know it," Drew insisted.

"Yeah, well, maybe," Lucy looked embarrassed, "but it's not polite to look into other people's minds and I certainly don't want anyone poking around in my mind. And normals make such a mental racket. All I want to do is shut them

out. It's alright for you. You don't feel it like us. Telepathy is a curse. It gives me a bloody headache."

"Sometimes Caroline," Drew growled, "you can be a real pain in the ass."

"I'm not Caroline. I'm Lucinda," Lucy snapped back, "Caroline's my mum. Remember. You should do. You sleep with her often enough. So seventies. Gross."

Drew leaned forward and rested his face in his hands. For an instant Marcus thought that there was a sob. Drew had never been the same since Yasmine had died in childbirth taking one of the twins with her and leaving the other for Drew. One might have thought that the finest Swiss doctors that money could buy would have guaranteed her passage through an event which most women take in their stride. But it had not. It was Ayesha or Yasmine. And Yasmine chose Ayesha. By contrast Marcus's own children had arrived effortlessly for Sophie and with some pain for Caroline, within two days of each other, enthusiastically conceived, Marcus liked to believe, on the same night but twenty minutes apart. Drew would never find anyone else to love as much as he had loved Yasmine and he had never tried. From time to time Sophie or Caroline would stay with him, partly out of gratitude for all that he had done for them, and partly because they still enjoyed making love to Drew, who was almost pathetically grateful for the warm comfort of their loving bodies. In response to tragedy Drew had redirected all his love and boundless energy to his baby daughter and to his friends and their children, and to the ruthless expansion of the **Trigonos Corporation,** now with the sole intention of developing a technology which would allow him to communicate with the Cosmic Consciousness and through it reunite himself with his lost wife. He looked at Lucy with sad affection.

"I can understand why you might be cynical," he said, "it's the privilege of the young to know better than anyone else. And young people always have something better to do. But I don't understand why Caroline and Sophie aren't here when they're just half a mile away from us. Puck and Tinkerbell have sent their apologies. They have a big deal going down in our Australian division. Puck is going to try to come if she can get away. I'm still waiting for confirmation of that. Adrian, of course, is not invited because he isn't one of us, and what I have to say is not relevant to him. I'd hoped that James and Hilary would come. But knowing Hilary's attitude I can understand why they haven't. And I'm beginning to think that what I was going to tell you is best not told. Not yet, anyway. I see now that it is all probably irrelevant, except to me. You all have your own lives to live. It's probably better that way."

Lucy, her inherent intellectual curiosity suddenly whetted, looked disappointed, "Uncle Drew, I didn't, you know, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. You know I do love you. We all love you to bits. We would like to know. Really."

Imogen nodded in agreement. How like Sophie she is, Drew thought. His

heart leapt out to her, but Imogen, unlike her mother, was a forbidden fruit. She smiled Sophie's sweet smile back at him and shook her head. *"It's not possible,"* she thought at him, *"we are not like you. It wouldn't be right*."

"No, that's true. It wouldn't be right," he said, sadly, "anyway, Marcus and I will discuss it. And we'll decide what to do for the best. Maybe I let my own excitement get ahead of the rest of you. You go and enjoy yourselves. I love you both, very, very much. But first, find Nikos and Ayesha and get them to come here. Tell them I'm not angry with them. And I'm not angry with you either."

Lucy and Imogen stood up reluctantly and left the plush Board Room, Imogen poking Lucy in the ribs with her fingers and whispering angrily at her. Drew put his head in his hands again. This time there was an audible sob. He looked up at Marcus, silent tears trickling down his cheeks.

"I miss her," he said, "I miss her so much. More than twenty years now, since she died. And still I think of her all the time. And sometimes I think that she talks to me. I still get images, you know. In dreams. I dream about her and she talks to me. Sometime I think she is just there, right next to me. Just on the other side of an impenetrable curtain. In one of those parallel universes which intersect with our own. Surrounding us, but invisible to us."

"I know," said Marcus consolingly. How different this image was from the popular press image of the mysterious Drew Parkin; ruthless go-getting entrepreneur, philanthropic captain of a thousand industries, "We all miss her, Drew. We all miss her. But you must move on. There are other women who will love you. Jaz would not expect you to stay single. Surely she tells you that."

Drew nodded.

"It's not easy. I've had many women in the past, but only Sophie and Caroline even begin to compare with Jaz, so I don't bother to look. I wish I could, but there are so few like us."

The two men sat in silence in the maple panelled Board Room, insulated from the hurly burly of common life. Somewhere in a remote part of the motor yacht a generator kicked in, almost imperceptible except for the faintest vibration felt through the edge of the boardroom table. Eventually Marcus broke the silence.

"Are you going to tell me?"

"Of, course," Drew replied, "of course old friend. There have never been any secrets between us." The briskness and confidence which had always characterised Drew returned.

There was a knock at the door which opened without waiting to be bidden. Nikos slipped cautiously into the Board Room, holding the hand of a young woman who looked so like her dead mother that Marcus's heart always skipped a beat whenever he saw her, though in truth his own daughters were so like their mothers that it was sometimes impossible to tell them apart. He remembered Chris Davenport's feelings when he had talked about Sophie and he knew the

sadness that fathers must feel when they relinquish their daughters to another man. It would come to him too, when Lucy and Imogen rediscovered boys. He saw the same look in Drew's face, but also the joy that these two would soon marry and carry forward his dreams.

"Hi," said Nikos tentatively, "sorry, I forgot. We forgot. We were in the gym. Really. Sorry uncle Drew." He looked around the empty table. "Where is everyone?"

Nikos was darkly Greek, and gently handsome, like a male version of Sophie, with soft, long, dark brown wavy hair and his mother's enchanting smile. But his eyes were grey, like his sisters', the only physical attribute that they had taken from their father.

"It's okay,"Drew smiled at them, "it's okay. I want you to do something for me." He jotted some instructions onto a notepad, tore off the leaf and handed it to Nikos.

"Take this to the chief steward and ask him to get it for you from the wine cellar. Then ask the boatswain to launch one of the Maxums, but wait until the helicopter has gone because the crew will be busy with that. Take it to Caroline with my regards. She'll remember why. And tell them both I do expect them to come to dinner tonight on the **Trigonos**. Absolutely no excuses. They must come. Tell them Puck is coming. From Australia. And dress properly. I know they've got posh frocks in their stateroom. And don't drop it!"

Nikos looked at the note, then at his father, then back to Drew.

"Okay," he said, "can Yesha come with me?"

"Of course. Take care of her. And don't take your kit off until you're well away from the **Trigonos**."

Ayesha grinned. Nikos was wearing a pair of flowery Bermuda shorts, and Ayesha a blue bikini top and shorts which left little to the imagination. She smiled at her father and at Marcus, but said nothing.

The two young people left the room. Silence returned. Marcus looked up at the ceiling on which reflections of the sun on the water outside danced in an animated mosaic of blue light and golden shade, so that he and Drew seemed to be under the sea, looking up at the dappled surface. He remembered this experience once before, in another world, far away in the nefrotic past of St Dynion's. Drew picked up the first of the folders.

"Okay. It's just you and me. Let's have a tutorial and kick some ideas around. Like old times. I've got my essay. Shall I read it out Mr Ross," Drew grinned, Marcus grinned back and opened his hands in a gesture of agreement.

"Okay. So, we'll start by just defining our terms. We have known since we first met that we have certain unusual skills. In particular we have an ability to read the minds of others. It's not uniform amongst us, and it's not very strong. The girls are better at it than the men. Caroline and Lucy try to argue that it's just female intuition, natural empathy. But they just do it to annoy me. They know the truth. Empathy just means the ability to appreciate the position of

another person. For us it goes far beyond that. We can sometimes actually enter the consciousness of another person. Under certain circumstances, for example when we make love to each other, we actually merge consciousness and become the other person. We feel what the other person is feeling. What Caroline calls ekstasis. But only with people who are like us. Which, alas, is just us, really. Agreed?"

Marcus nodded.

"Okay. Also we are sometimes aware of each other at a distance, and we know when something has happened to one of us. You remember..."

Marcus remembered exactly what had happened when Yasmine died. Her death had exploded in their minds like a thousand screaming banshees and they had collapsed on the floor of the Swiss maternity clinic with their hands over their ears as the consciousness which did not want to leave them fell into the dark brightness from which their strong hands could not pull her back. Not just Yasmine, but the other unborn child that she took with her. The silent Yasmine did not go quietly into the light.

"Sophie knew when Big Mo died, remember?" Drew continued quietly, "and sometimes Sophie can send images to us, imperfectly, but sometimes we see what she sees. And the girls are very good at putting feelings into the minds of others. Agreed?"

Marcus remembered the first time that had happened too. That apocalyptic crimson sunset which had so frightened him and Caroline on his carpet in Plas Rhianda. "Agreed," he replied.

"We know that we have these abilities. And in addition we also have a heightened awareness of something else. Something outside us which we sense but do not understand. What Sophie calls our angel. For convenience let's call these powers extra sensory perception. ESP for short. Agreed?"

"Maybe. Though, I wonder whether the angel is really outside us."

Drew didn't want to pursue this, so he continued on his theme, "anyway, we are what we are. And we are different. As you know, I've spent my life and a considerable fortune trying to explain these phenomena. There are three areas of explanation which we can explore. Oh, and of course, we must rule out Gods, religions or the supernatural. Whatever it is, it must stand up to Occam's razor. It is not acceptable to fall back on blind faith in the face of things we do not understand. It must be reasonable and subject to logical analysis and scientific proof. And it must be the simplest possible explanation. We have faith only in reason. Nothing less will do. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Marcus said. Drew, as always, dominated the debate.

"First of all, if these capabilities are internal to us, that is to say, a function of our brains, then they are aspects of genetics and neuroscience. Alternatively, if they are external to us, that is to say some external force or energy which is affecting or using our brains, then that is a metaphysical phenomenon. The third possibility is that it is a function of both. That is to say, our brains are

developing in a certain way such that our consciousness is interacting with as yet undiscovered forces or energies in the universe. You know I've always been a sucker for the cosmic intelligence theory and Bohm's Implicate Order. It does offer an explanation but not a solution. But Caroline and her demon daughter just laugh at me and say I read too much science fiction. I don't care about that. Science fiction authors dream the dreams which scientists turn into realities and their dreams have been very profitable for **Trigonos** and its shareholders, which is us. And who is to say that authors are not one of the channels through which the cosmic intelligence communicates with us?"

"Perhaps, but you've already strayed into religion. Stick to reason," Marcus had heard all of this before. He looked covertly at his watch, as he had seen students do so many times in tutorials and lectures, "You know," he said, "the problem is that our abilities are far from perfect. We aren't telepaths. If we were we would not be having this conversation. We still need words and speech. And our ability to send each other messages is not reliable. It doesn't usually work when we want it to, and it often manifests itself unconsciously. As a means of communication it's pants. And we can't actually send messages. Just vague images, feelings and sensations. It's difficult to see what use it all is."

"Well, it has certainly given me an edge in business to know what the next man is thinking. But, as you heard, Lucy has a very convincing explanation for that, courtesy of her mother. I wish she was here. I would have valued her views on the cosmology. She's young, and she think outside the box. Young people are so creative. And Lucy is, after all, a postgraduate astrophysicist. I'd hoped for some input from her. But she's not interested in my ideas. I don't understand it."

"She's young. Young people are arrogant. We were the same at their age. Remember. It isn't cool to be seen to agree with your parents."

"Okay, we'll skip the cosmology, for the time being," Drew returned to the tutorial, "suffice it to say that there are a number of possible explanations out there, but nothing that will, as yet, satisfy Occam's razor. The Dark Matter we used to talk about has been replaced by Dark Energy, alternative universes, quantum metaphysics, other dimensions, flat space outside the arrow of time, string theory, membranes, the Higgs Boson, the God particle. David Bohm's Implicate Order. The cosmic intelligence could be lurking in any of them. My money is on Implicate Order. Bohm was right but, unfortunately, we don't have reliable proof for these ontological mind games. So, let's cut to the chase. But first..." He paused and picked up a phone.

"Julie, can we have some coffee please, and some of those nice Viennese swirls that the chef does so well." There was an affirmative squeak from the PA at her desk in the office next door to the Board Room. Drew resumed.

"We don't need to spend much time on the neuroscience either." He picked up a folder and opened it. "The results are interesting but not conclusive. We have brain wave patterns which are shared with an estimated thirty percent of the adult population, mostly women. There are some spikes in the neural-

imaging scans which might be explained by paranormal brain activity. But we can't yet pin it down. Nor have we found anything that would account for our ability to transmit images to each other. There is a detectable electro-magnetic field around us but not enough to sustain communication over any distance without an independent carrier wave. And we haven't found that either. It may be related to the as yet unidentified dark energy problem. Caroline long ago suggested the possibility that something in our brains can access this energy and use it as a medium for communication. Perhaps even amplify it in some way and focus it. In much the same way that some migrating birds can detect and use the earth's magnetic field. That might also explain Hilary's apparent telekinesis. We'll have to wait for the cosmologists to catch up with our imaginations."

"It would also explain miracles and other paranormal phenomena where matter appears to be affected by thought," Marcus interjected, "but the truth is that we can analyse electrical activity in the brain until we're blue in the face, but the real issue is our consciousness and we really have little or no understanding of what consciousness is, and even less understanding of the subconscious mind, pace Freud. We don't know whether consciousness is something within the brain and unique to it. Or whether, as theologians argue, it is a spark of the divine. An intrusion into the world of matter from a spiritual dimension. And does it return to the spiritual dimension when the biological host dies, as it must? It's an old idea. You can find it in Aristotle, and, oddly enough, in Aquinas. The soul is divine and returns to God when the body dies. And that, pretty well, is what Bohm was saying. We come from somewhere else. Wordsworth was right too."

Drew paused. "Now it's you straying off the beaten path. I'm about to come on to that. You're finishing my sentences for me, Marcus. The real stunner is closer to home. Much closer. And I've been kicking myself for not spotting it sooner." He picked up another folder and opened it.

"Second major point. If we have these ESP skills they must be encoded in our DNA like everything else and they must therefore constitute a potential evolutionary advantage. Now, one of our university based bioscience companies has developed very sophisticated techniques for DNA profiling. We can do a highly accurate analysis of individual genomes. Our profiles are, well, odd. There are two things. Firstly, we all have virtually identical mitochondrial DNA. There are minor discrepancies which account for superficial physical and gender differences but the core is virtually identical. As you know, mitochondrial DNA does not change significantly over time whereas nuclear DNA changes by fifty percent with each generation. Our profiles would certainly put us all into the same family group. Even Hilary and James, though they diverge more than the others. Again, this is not, actually, very unusual. There is some evidence to suggest that people with similar DNA profiles are attracted to each other, as friends, or lovers. Or, in our cases, both. The children are even closer. Well, Sophie's two are real birth twins, though not identical, two separately fertilised

eggs, but the others are not significantly different. We are all, genetically, members of the same family. With the possible exception of Hilary and James we have all had a common ancestor at some time in the remote past. When your children call me uncle they are closer to the truth than they know. In addition I also have DNA samples from Yasmine's hair, which I kept after her death. Her mitochondrial DNA profile is analogous to ours and identical to Sophie's. They could have been twins. And we all have a cluster of genes which we think relate to our ESP capabilities. They're linked to the genes which control language skills. Telepathy, after all, is just a rather specialised language skill. But again, these are shared with a statistically estimated third of the population, and again, mostly female. Women's brains are so much more complex than men's. Unfortunately we do not have DNA samples taken from the Circle before it came into contact with Yasmine in 1971. The significance of this will be obvious when I move on to the next point." Drew paused again.

Marcus absorbed this opinion with interest, but was distracted by a more immediate anxiety, "how did you get Hilary's DNA sample," he asked, "she certainly wouldn't give it to you freely. And she won't like it when she finds out."

There was a knock on the door and the sleek, pencil slim, pinstriped PA came in carrying a tray with a large cafetiere, cups, two glasses of water, and a plate of biscuits.

"The captain asked me to tell you that the plane has left Zurich and is expected in Athens around four," she said, "the helicopter will be leaving for Athens shortly."

"Great," Drew replied, "thank you Julie." Julie poured out two coffees, placed them in front of Marcus and Drew, and left the room.

"Is this wise?" Marcus raised his eyebrows.

Drew looked slightly embarrassed,

"Well, I though it would be a nice surprise. And she's not exactly hard to find. Anyway," Drew picked up where he had left off, "the Sinclairs like coming here and we're often at the Hall. It's kind of easy, these days, to get a sample from hair, or a wine glass, pretty well anything. Anyway, she'll know by now. I e-mailed the bare bones to James. That's probably why they aren't here. Hilary's having a huff. The DNA evidence is absolutely conclusive. But there's something else that's come out of this. Something which I think is quite terrifying and totally awesome. Years ago Caroline suggested something to me during one of those brainstorming pillow talks that she goes in for after she's screwed you so senseless that you can't argue with her. She was talking about theosis in St Athanasius. You know, man's ultimate destiny is to be divine, to become a god. The opportunity to test it has only recently arisen. Hold on to your cock. This is a shocker." Drew sipped at the delicious coffee whose aroma now wafted briefly round the Board Room until the air-conditioning intercepted it and expelled it into the hot sunlight outside. Drew's voice was trembling with

excitement.

“Third point. We now know that all chromosomes are capped by a complex of molecules called a telomere which regulates the natural process of cellular regeneration. Whenever a cell divides and is replaced by a daughter cell the telomere appended to its chromosome sheds some of its molecules and loses a little of its ability to protect the chromosome from further degeneration. The less protected mitochondrial DNA in the outer layer of the cell may suffer decay or mutation. After around 22 divisions the telomere has used up all of its capacity. The cell can no longer divide and eventually breaks down. The process starts in the mid thirties and the end result is cell degeneration and death. However, there is nothing in the human genome which actually programs ageing. Ageing is a consequence of random damage to cells. If we can prevent cells from being damaged we can slow down or eliminate ageing and possibly postpone death. However, cellular mutation and ultimate degeneration are necessary for evolution. So that the next generation can be exposed to cumulative mutation. You know where this going?”

Marcus nodded, “but I'm not sure that I want to know.”

“It is possible to genetically engineer an enzyme called telomerase which will repair or reconstruct telomeres. In laboratory tests on mice and fruit flies the introduction of telomerase has led to a significant increase in life expectancy. However, telomerase does not normally occur naturally except in sperm, stem cells, and the developing foetus. We do not yet know how to insert telomerase producing genes into human cells and to do so could be dangerous because telomeres appear to have a significant role both in the ageing process and in the formation of cancers.”

“Are you suggesting that our pharmaceutical division is looking at this kind of gene therapy? Are we going to be selling artificial immortality? That'll go a bomb in Bangladesh. And the God botherers will be out for our blood. Literally.”

“We're certainly working on it, but more for therapeutic applications, you know, gene replacement and cancer treatment. Stem cells. That kind of thing. Telomerase is a spin off. That is not the point. The point is that our bodies, and I mean our bodies, you, me, the girls, Hilary, James, Puck, Tinkerbell and the children are all producing telomerase and as a result our telomeres are not reducing at the normal rate and our mitochondrial DNA is not degenerating. Don't dispute it Marcus, there is a relevant marker in our genetic profiles. We all have a gene which initiates the production of telomerase and maintains healthy cell division at the same time. That is not technically feasible according to the current state of research. Our bodies are subconsciously repairing themselves and keeping us young.”

“What are you saying Drew,” Marcus was almost shouting, “are you saying that we are immortal? That's preposterous!” He slammed his fist down on the table. Drew was startled at Marcus's reaction but stayed characteristically cool.

“No, I don't think so. Not immortal. Not yet. The telomeres are shortening, but at a much slower rate. We will get older and we will die, eventually. And of course, we are subject to the thousand natural shocks, and so on. However, you were the oldest of us. You are, I think, fifty eight. Do you feel fifty eight? Do you look fifty eight?” Drew could not contain his excitement.

“I've never really thought about it. You grow old unconsciously. I suppose I am in good condition for my age. I know men of fifty eight who look a lot older than me.”

“We are all the same biological age Marcus. We are all in our mid to late thirties. The body continues to grow and develop until we are in our thirties. Then the telomeres kick in, mitochondrial DNA starts to mutate and we start to age. But at around thirty five our genetic clocks reset themselves and started ticking at a different rate. We've caught up with each other. And there is no reason to doubt that at some time in the future we can introduce telomerase artificially and extend life indefinitely. Think of the market for that!”

Marcus was horrified. He had always regarded Drew's obsessions with a mixture of awe and despair. Awe because they had driven the creation of this complex commercial empire, which in so many respects had been enormously beneficial to humanity in general, especially in its medical and pharmaceutical research. Despair because they had focussed on the pursuit of impenetrable cosmological ideas which had so often led Drew to clutch at scientific straws. This was something else. Too big to even contemplate. But, being at heart academics, dispassionate contemplation was what they did.

“It's not so improbable,” Drew said in his most persuasive voice, “we know that there is a gene which disposes some people to believe in transcendental experiences. The so called God gene. It stimulates the release of seratonin which makes believers feel good when they worship. You could say that some people are programmed to believe in God because a genetic predisposition to religious faith may at some time have conferred an evolutionary advantage. We just happen to have a gene which generates an enzyme which extends length of life. And maybe enhances telepathic capability which might give us the next evolutionary advantage. Why not?”

“Yes, but, do we programme ourselves through evolution? Or are we being programmed? Where has it come from?” Marcus said reluctantly, “I can accept the idea that we might be genetically similar. I can even cope with the idea of an as yet undiscovered cosmic energy, which somehow enhances our latent powers of ESP. But this is a step too far. Too complicated. Too many multiplied entities. Too many coincidences. Why us? Why were we all at St Dynion’s? Where are the others? There must be others. Does it imply that we don't have freewill? It doesn't make sense. Unless there is some design, some supernatural provenance which deliberately brought us all together. And I don't want to believe that because it defies our rule of reason.”

“That has worried me too.” A phone rang. Drew picked it up and listened to

the voice at the other end. A ripple from the harsh commercial world outside washed briefly into the Olympian detachment of the Board Room and washed just as quickly out again. “Tell them I want a meeting to resolve this problem,” Drew said quietly, “next week in our Hammersmith offices. Fix it with Julie. Tell them that there is thirty million dollars of capex riding on this and we're contributing nearly ten million dollars in charitable aid to build health centres. I want our guys to look again at these figures and get their targets back up to speed. And don't let Mitchell in on this. If all we needed was enthusiasm he'd be great. But we need some smart guy to solve this one. So get your asses into gear.” He put the phone down then picked it up again, “Julie, no more calls. Okay.”

Drew leaned back and put his hands behind his head, then continued in his slow drawl. “This argument from design keeps cropping up. We rule out Gods, and then we end up thinking that there must be something pulling the strings. Well, maybe there is. We have all felt the presence of what we like to call angels. The ghosts in the machine. But what they are or where they come from we do not yet know. I'm hopeful that cosmology will eventually produce an answer. But it may be a long time coming. Myself, I've always liked the idea that the universe itself is alive and sentient and that it is seeing itself through us and learning about itself through us. And maybe trying to communicate with us. But you know what Lucy thinks about that!!”

“I've never accepted that either,” Marcus replied, “you know I haven't. Caroline is right. It requires a great leap of faith and I don't accept faith in the unknown. I could accept a hypothesis by which a random genetic variation allowed us to use this energy in some way. But I cannot believe that it is sentient or conscious. To suggest that it is manipulating us in this way requires too many coincidences.”

“You talk about coincidence. What was it that brought us together? I'll tell you. The key has always been Yasmine. At around the age of puberty Yasmine went to sleep one night in the desert and when she woke up she could not speak or write. In the beginning was the Word. But what Yasmine got was light and geometry. She could no longer even visualise words. Everything was light, pictures and patterns, like the patterns on the ceiling above us, but much, much more intricate. Like the inside of a multi dimensional mosque or a baroque cathedral decorated with infinite facets of the finest detail. Above all, mathematical, symmetrical and, ultimately, comprehensible. She could not see the future. But she could see all the patterns which led to the future and determined what it would be. And she could see into the minds of others and put ideas there.”

Drew paused for breath and coffee.

“She was not infallible of course. There was a time, just after you got together with Sophie, when she thought you were both going to die within a year, and Caroline too. That was why I was in such a hurry to get you into the

Circle. But it didn't happen. Not in this universe anyway. At first the doctors thought that Yasmine had suffered a stroke. But everything else was normal and in default of any other explanation she was eventually dismissed as harmlessly autistic, which was a fashionable diagnosis at the time. But she could understand everything, and people understood her. Or rather they anticipated what she wanted because she put the idea into their minds. So she could lead a sort of normal life. She loved girlie things, clothes, and games and travel, and, eventually, when she discovered it, she loved sex. She especially loved sex because it empowered her. Her parents were surprisingly sympathetic, given their culture, and tried every possible form of therapy for her. Eventually, when she was sixteen, she was sent to a clinic in Oxford. As you know I met her at a diplomatic party in London and there was an instant mental rapport, literally across a crowded room. I was the first person she had met whose mind spoke back to her. I didn't know I could do this. It was a shock to me. When she came to England she was still a virgin, but when we made love she was extraordinary. Sex with Yasmine was unbelievable. Well you know what it was like with Yasmine. You've been there too. She gave herself to all of us, body and soul. And she changed again, and she changed me. It was fantastic. My perception of numbers and statistical trends was enormously enhanced. It was as though we shared one mind. I could instantaneously visualise a variety of possible business outcomes extrapolated from the present, and choose the ones most likely to succeed. I still can. That is why we are where we are today. And that is why it would be so interesting to know what our genetic profiles were before we met Yasmine. Were we all like her before we met her? Or did she change us to what we are now? And, if so, how?"

Drew paused for another sip of coffee, then continued, "so, I found that I too could sense the strong ESP potential in other people. Sophie, Caroline, then Mo, Puck, Tinkerbell, you. We all felt that we already knew each other, and had known each other in the past. I can't explain that, except in terms of sharing in the cosmic consciousness."

"Perhaps we just recognise ourselves as being alike and that gives us an illusion of having known each other in the past. Like deja vu. And what about Adrian? I never felt that about Adrian." Marcus raised his eyebrows. Drew frowned.

"No, not Adrian. Adrian was only ever along for the sex and the money. The only paranormal skill he shared with us was the ability to keep his dick up indefinitely. But he had other uses, especially his banking connections. I needed those. So I tolerated it until that business with Puck and cocain when she lost control and nearly killed him, same way that Hilary killed her husband. That was a real wake up call. But for the rest of us our latent skills were enhanced by contact with Yasmine, and especially by the energy released in those extraordinary sexual rituals. You remember the spoked wheel? The sacred Square of Three? The shared orgasm. The ekstasis. So intense that it was

almost too much to bear. I made it all up from some cod Zen handbook with a little help from Caroline. Bit of a joke, at the time, but to my astonishment it worked. Unfortunately, after Mo died we were so frightened that we never really did it again. I know you and I have done it occasionally with Sophie and Caroline, but it's not the same as a full square of three, though we have never really had a full square of three because Adrian was so weak, and we no longer have six women to make up the circle round the triangle. Anyway, the only coincidence was meeting Yasmine and making love to her with the rest of the group, and maybe that was no coincidence. At some stage we all shagged each other, one way or the other. And then we all changed. Our ESP powers became stronger. You and the girls were the strongest. In general it is stronger in the women. Not surprising given the genetic evidence we now have."

"I've never felt that my abilities amounted to much," Marcus mused, "it's great for sex, but I've never been able to do what the girls can do. I can't really read minds. But they can. And our children certainly can, even if they perversely choose to deny it. And they can do other things which we can't."

"Too bloody true," Drew agreed, "I think they have powers which they are frightened of and they won't tell us. I can't really talk to Yasmine. But Ayesha can, and that's why I know she's still there."

"Hmm....well," Marcus pondered, "Jaz wouldn't be the first to go into the desert and see visions, and come back and change the world," then, "oh my God," he exclaimed, "her DNA was changed...and she had to..."

"That's right. She had to pass it on. I don't to this day know whether she understood what she was doing. But it was a genetic imperative."

"How," Marcus asked querulously, fearing each successive answer, "how is it passed on?"

"Fourth point. Sex, of course. You were the last piece in the jigsaw. I've always assumed that when we did the Square of Three thing, she entered our consciousness and her mind was amplified by your psychic power. The ESP energy released by our shared sexual ekstasis somehow changed our DNA." Drew's voice was hesitant, as though he knew that he was walking on thin ice and feared that Marcus was about to break it, "I assume that she changed us and that we were meant to pass it on to the next generation by selective breeding. That's why I have built this financial bunker for us and our children. We should have had more children," he added regretfully, "many more."

"So, let me get this straight," Marcus said, "we did the group sex thing in the circle, and that somehow rewired our synaptic relays which improved our pre-existing extra sensory abilities. What you call unlocking. And that gave us the power to unconsciously change our DNA. Mind over matter. How Cartesian. In particular it modified those genes which enhance ESP potential and used that enhanced power to modify our longevity gene to produce telomerase. And it also synchronised all our genetic profiles so that we are more alike than we were before. The sexual act is not just for reproduction. The psychic energy

generated by it acts as a catalyst to change the DNA, and the altered genes will be consolidated and passed on in the next generation. And the cycle begins again."

"Yeah, that's about it."

Both men sat quietly, contemplating the implications of this revised scenario.

"How long?" Marcus eventually asked.

"Don't know for certain. But it's easier to think of it as a discontinuity between biological time and chronological time. That's not so unusual. We've all met people who look much older than they actually are. And others who look younger, like us. So the longevity genes are already developed and it's building on what is already there. But only where it's strong. At the moment we think that for every six chronological years we advance by one biological year, after the mid thirties. But it must speed up, eventually, as the segments of the telomere get shorter. At the moment, say one hundred and forty to one hundred and eighty years, but by the time we get there we may well have found out how to generate telomeres for ourselves. Immortality could be within our grasp. Should we want it. Of course, we may not have any choice. I've got a university research group working on tests for determining biological age against chronological age so that we can be checked out, in the future."

There was another long and contemplative silence. Outside the Board Room, through windows, too large and too high up in the side of the **Trigonos III** to be called portholes, Marcus saw the top of the sail of an investigating yacht swish past, then tack away. Small boats often came to look at the sleek great motor yacht with its American flag, helipad, and massive satellite communication domes, and wonder who it might belong to, until they got to the stern and saw the discreet name and the Delaware registration, then they knew. There was never any noise or shouts of recognition, just silent awe followed by rapid retreat when armed men dressed in black coveralls appeared on the upper decks. How different it was when similar yachts encountered **The Three Lovers** and everyone waved and shouted enthusiastic greetings to the happy people of the sea. Unless, of course, they tried to pass ahead of Sophie when she was on a starboard tack. Then Sophie's formidable command of naval invective would be unleashed on the hapless novices who would sheer away in terror.

Marcus continued to ponder Drew's revelations.

"My poor girls," he said, eventually. Drew looked at him, puzzled. "They will outlive whoever they marry. Perhaps many times. So much pain."

"Perhaps not, if they find men who are like us."

"But are there such people? Or is it just us? The remaining members of the Square of Three? What we now call the Circle. No one else?"

"I don't know. Men with ESP are very rare and we stopped looking, didn't we, because we are so much in love with ourselves. But there must be others. You know, as a kid I always dreamed of masterminding the breeding of a new race of humans with extraordinary powers. Like the Xmen in comics. Each of

us would have children by each of the women. And breed a master race. And here we are. Fantastic, isn't it. Science fiction come true."

"Sorry," Marcus said after a very long pause, "that would not be genetically sensible. You'd get recessive genes. You would breed monsters. And we didn't do that, did we. We may have shagged like rabbits but we haven't bred like rabbits. Far from it. That must be significant in itself. And anyway there are two other flaws in your argument. Firstly, evolution works in small steps by cumulative selection. This is too focussed. Too many things are being changed too fast. It implies purpose and I won't accept intelligent design. Not exactly Occam's principle of parsimony is it. Not the simplest answer."

"That's your problem," Drew retorted, "you're too sceptical. I have no difficulty with intelligent design. I believe that something out there is trying to change us."

"Well, I don't accept that. Not exactly. But it may be that we have unconsciously found a way of changing our own DNA. And secondly, what about Hilary? Hilary was never part of the Circle. We never had sex with her. Amazingly, since almost everybody else did when she was a teenager. But you say her DNA has been changed. She is not getting older, and she does have ESP powers similar to our own. Where did that come from?"

"I agree. Hilary is a problem. She may just be one of the others we should have been looking for. If what Hilary believes about the death of her husband is true, and I believe that it is because Yasmine got it out of her before she realised what was happening, she would appear to have a telekinetic ability, which is something we don't seem to have. You remember, we didn't have to put Hilary into the Circle. She wouldn't do it anyway. But she went directly head to head with Yasmine and it was a disaster. There was a literal clash of minds and she knocked Yasmine out. Nearly killed her. Yasmine had a very powerful psyche. But Hilary's was stronger, and darker. Maybe Yasmine did something to her in return. Maybe she changed Hilary's DNA as well. So I guess it was a two way trade. Jaz got to speak. Hilary got the enhanced longevity gene."

"Was Yasmine the only one of us who could identify and unlock a latent talent for ESP? I don't like this," Marcus replied, "are you telling me the whole truth?"

"Of course I am," Drew stroked his beard thoughtfully, "We can all sense a potential if we touch the person. Shake hands, for example. That little static shock. That's how I found you. There are lots of people with weak ESP potential. Statistically we estimate about thirty percent, as I said. The only sure test of strong ESP is the ritualistic shared sex. The sharing of orgasmic consciousness. That was the function of the Kong Parties and the Square of Three. The former to test, the latter to confirm and unlock. We found lots of weak ESP at the Kong parties, all women, but not worth pursuing. Unfortunately, the present Circle, plus Hilary and excepting Adrian, is all I ever found with strong potential. But we stopped looking after Mo committed

suicide. After that we kept the sex to ourselves. And anyway, by that time, Sophie only really wanted to be with you, and Caroline. So I didn't bother. It seemed to me that there were enough of us to breed new talents amongst ourselves and I liked the idea of us being an evolutionary elite. As for unlocking. I always assumed that was part of the sex thing. A kick start to the psychic potential."

"But Hilary was already unlocked. Before she met Yasmine. And you mentioned James. Has he been changed? None of us sensed him."

"No. We didn't and yes, James Sinclair's DNA has been changed. He's like us. He would have been about thirty four in 1972 when he first became involved with us. He should now be sixty four chronological years but his biological age would be around thirty nine to forty. He's the same biological age as us. Roughly. Bit older maybe. And that means he must have some form of strong ESP capability in order to be able to modify his longevity gene."

"What!!" Marcus exclaimed, "James? He never took part in any of our rituals, except simple meditation. And he certainly never had sex with Jaz. And so far as we know she never entered his mind. That meditation we did on the first Christmas was a flop. Nothing happened. We couldn't even sense each other, let alone James. He certainly doesn't have ESP. Except....oh....shit. This is one hell of a mess!"

Marcus thought for a little while then arrived at the truth by another route, and it was appalling.

"You've got it wrong Drew. Maybe psychic contact with Jaz did unlock our latent ESP potential, but that was just a bonus, like the amazing sex, the sugar coating to keep us hot for it. It's not difficult to change DNA. Usually for the worse. Random background radiation can do it. Chemical pollution. Tobacco. It happens regularly when cells reproduce. But constructive DNA splicing is a highly complex laboratory technique. And it's visceral. It has to get into the body as an organism, not as an idea, and what better way to get your DNA into other bodies than through group sex. The orgasm is the direct route into the organism. The primal drive. And once her DNA was incorporated into ours we could pass it on as well. That's why Yasmine chose such beautiful randy people as her friends. Perfect breeding specimens. Especially the women." Marcus paused, "I'm missing something here," he muttered.

"Well," Drew said sniffily, "I don't think so. Her friends were people she liked. People she was attracted to. People like us. Anyway even if James never had sex with us in the circle he could have been influenced by Yasmine, without him realising it. He may even have been changed by Hilary, when they made love. Which they surely did."

"No, no, not in the Circle, but," Marcus was thinking very fast, "James and Hilary regularly meditate with us, nowadays they even take their clothes off, and he had sex a couple of times with Caroline before he met Hilary. Maybe Caroline gave it to him, and he passed it on to Hilary who was already

unlocked. Oh...Jesus....that means...it's like an infection! It's nothing to do with mind over matter. It's a biological infection."

Drew stared open mouthed at his friend, his mind accelerating to comprehend another and altogether less acceptable possibility.

"And who unlocked Hilary?" Marcus raced ahead, "Hilary's strong ESP powers predate both James and Yasmine. Well they must do if she really killed her husband with them. It was fear of death which unlocked Hilary, not Yasmine. That was her psychic shock. Sex and death. Ekstasis again. The flight of the soul from the body. The orgasm is often spoke of as a little death. La petit morte. That's why she was so strong and that's why she won't use it, because she's terrified of it. And what about James? It skipped Adrian because he didn't have the necessary ESP gene. But it infected James, with Caroline as the vector, and James infected Hilary. James is an author. The muses speak to him. James really is one of us. We should not have left him out."

Marcus stood up and walked round the table to look through the window at **The Three Lovers** riding peacefully at anchor. He could clearly see the shapes of the two brown bodies stretched out on the deck. He returned to his chair.

"Maybe, another maybe." Marcus was now thinking aloud and more slowly, "evolution works by cumulative selection of desirable attributes in each successive generation and it is very slow. Beneficial mutations are rare and where they occur in animals we often enhance them ourselves by selective breeding. That's our intelligent design, artificial rather than natural selection. But there is a molecular clock which periodically shifts evolution forward. This mutation has bypassed the normal mechanism of gene transmission by sexual reproduction. Fine for rats and fruit flies, but too slow in humans. It's doing the natural selection on a shotgun principle, like a virus or bacterium. When we were young we were certainly programmed for lust. But nothing strange about that. Most normal young people are. I never went to your Kong Parties. But I heard of them from Sophie and once I had lost my fear of sex I would have liked to have gone, given the chance. They would be the ideal arena to distribute an infection to all and sundry. Some would have the specific ESP genes which could be locked onto as the key to changing the longevity gene. And they would pass it on, initially through promiscuity and then further enhancing it through reproduction in the conventional way. Others, who don't have those specific genes, would not be infected. We hope."

"Well, the Kong Parties were Yasmine's idea, and I saw them as a way to make money, and screw lots of silly girls and maybe find some like us." Drew also had the bit between his teeth and was attempting to re-rationalise the situation. "Now we know why. Her mission was to spread it as widely possible. Not by the power of the mind, or even by conventional sexual reproduction, but by simple infection. We are all carriers. In theory, any potential empath we have sex with could find their DNA changed and become a carrier themselves. Like AIDs. Awesome."

Marcus sat back from the beautifully veneered table and looked mournfully at Drew.

“Are you sure that it is only transmitted through penetrative sex?” he asked, his face puckered into a thoughtful frown because he already knew the answer.

“Well, I've focussed on sex but, yes, obviously infections can be transmitted in many ways. A kiss. Sharing a glass of wine. Potentially almost anything we touch. Even an airborne infection. I suppose it could transmit itself like a virus or bacterium. Virus would be best. Something harmless. Perhaps something already endemic in the body and easily modified. That would be even more efficient. Sexual intercourse would be just one of many routes into another body and once in the body it infects the immune system and splices itself into our DNA. But only if our genetic profile fits its selection criteria. This is turning into a nightmare.”

“The real nightmare is that if it is true we are faced with an epidemic of longevity,” Marcus snapped back. “If you are right and thirty percent of the population has some form of latent genetic extra sensory capability to which this 'virus' may be attracted, the future is bleak indeed. And we now know that it can be transmitted, in theory, by a variety of means. Not just sex. Even if it was just sex it would spread rapidly enough. If you can transmit it just by kissing, or sharing a glass, or swigging out of the same bottle, or whatever, it will already have infected half of the world, or more. The effects are only just beginning to emerge. But in the long term they will be catastrophic.”

“Why Marcus, for God's sake, why?” Drew gesticulated with wild enthusiasm, “surely immortality is something we should welcome with open arms. Surely death is the final enemy. This is the end of the death of matter. The ultimate goal. Not of faith, but of reason and science. The soul no longer imprisoned in the body and forced to flee into the darkness when the body fails. The universe incarnate. The spirit made flesh, and living in the material world.... forever. We're no longer stuck between apes and angels. Think what we can achieve.”

“Only if we stop reproducing. And what about those who are not like us? What happens to them? The world is already grossly overpopulated. Even if people start living only twice as long, the world population is going to rise to unsustainable levels and there will be an apocalyptic demographic crisis. Remember the fourteenth century? Remember those first year lectures I gave to you long ago on the Black Death and Malthusian checks. Populations must be in balance with the resources available to feed them. Otherwise the Four Horsemen leap out of their coffins. It was bad enough then. A third of the population of Europe wiped out. Our society is much more complex and immensely more vulnerable. The death toll would be unbelievably high. But.....perhaps that is the price that has to be paid for evolution....for the survival of the fittest. The question is, are we the fittest?” Another possibility presented itself for Marcus to mull over.

“I understand,” Drew said sadly, “My God, what have we done?”

“We haven't done anything. All of this was way beyond our control. How were we to know that we were carrying a contagious mutated gene. Genetic profiling was barely on the scientific horizon when we were young, though in retrospect it was obvious where it was going once they'd cracked the double helix. It can't be stopped. So we can stand back and enjoy the luxury of treating it as a purely academic problem. Where did it come from? Is it just a random mutation leading to further cumulative genetic selection? The first step in a major new direction in human evolution. Or is it, as you believe, a deliberate intervention in human evolution by some intelligent external force?”

“Is there nothing we can do?”

“Nothing,” Marcus replied firmly, “if what you say is true, and I see no reason to doubt it, then it's already far too late. For Christ's sake. It was thirty years ago. Anyway, what could we do? Nothing. We are pawns in this. We'd better hope that it works only on people with strong ESP, like us, and that people like us are as rare as you think they are. But you keep telling me that thirty percent of the population has a genetic profile similar to ours. So I wouldn't count on it. And suppose these paranormal powers are not something new but something which some humans have always had. We just shut them down, along with witches and wizards, when we transferred our faith to scientific rationalism in the eighteenth century. And now we've accidentally found a way to reactivate them. Ironic really. We supremely rational creatures may be the heirs of the wizards and witches,” Marcus sipped at the glass of water.

They both looked again at the mesmeric cat's cradle of shifting patterns on the ceiling.

“Maybe there's another trade off,” Marcus said eventually, “maybe greater longevity will be offset by lower fertility. We just won't be able to have so many children. A reduction in fertility. That could be achieved simply by genetically manipulating oestrogen production. Natural contraception. Or longer intervals between generations. And besides, the world is overdue for a pandemic. Some other malignant mutant gene, a 1918 type bird flu, HIV, Ebola, there are plenty of candidates, which could easily take out the Malthusian surplus population. Then there's nuclear proliferation, not to mention asteroids. Climate change. And the war between reason and faith is not over yet either. After 9/11 it's gearing up for another battle which may be the bloodiest religious war yet. Can you imagine. The twenty first century and men are still killing each other for religion. It's beyond belief. But maybe that's the way it has to be. Perhaps the gene pool is about to be purged. After all, death is the final arbiter of genetic survival. It will be interesting to see who survives. But I bet you any money that our immune systems have been altered in other ways as well. We are all ridiculously healthy. We always have been.”

“It seems,” Drew said, “that whatever 'it' is, it wants humans who live a long

time and have telepathic powers. I tell you. It want us to learn how to speak with it. It wants to enter our world through us. It wants to be human. It is not man who aspires to enter heaven but God who aspires to become human. God becomes man so that man might become God."

On the helipad at the stern of the motor yacht the helicopter roared into life and, after a brief instrument check, lifted off for Athens, trailing its departing presence in a dying Doppler shift.

A vice gripped Marcus's heart. He closed his eyes and started to breath very slowly, as though he was about to meditate. Terrifying images slithered into his consciousness. A young girl, not more than fifteen or sixteen, was standing by one of the Board Room windows, almost translucent in the light from a strange and searing sun. She was naked, her lithe pubescent body thin to the point of emaciation, her dark skin and gentle oval face streaked with blood. Her deep dark eyes were wide with terror and her beloved mind was shouting so loudly at Marcus that he put his hands to his ears.

"Sophie!!" he screamed back silently. He opened his eyes and looked at Drew who was staring transfixed at the place by the window where the apparition had stood.

"You saw that?" Marcus gasped.

"You bet," Drew's face was white with shock, "and I felt it and I got the message too. All of it. I've been so wrong. We've both been so wrong. There is no cosmic consciousness. No superior intelligence. It's us. It's us. Our immortal souls are out there somewhere, trying to talk to us. We're pulling our own goddamned strings. Trying to get us to find out what we are. Trying to get back to life. Trying to outsmart Darwin. I always thought it was Yasmine. But it wasn't Yasmine. Yasmine was just the vector. Sophie was the first of us. Sophia, the Goddess of wisdom and love. The soul in our bodies. Sophie knew. Sophie has always known. We're all part of Sophie. Literally. Body and soul. That's why we have the same DNA. We are the seed of her seed and we're already immortal. In our souls and in our genes. Now we are going to be physically immortal."

"It was a dream," Marcus said, equally shocked by what he had seen in that revelatory instant and trying desperately to rationalise it, "just a dream she dreamed long ago. Sophie often shares her dreams with me and Caroline. But she's never shared this one before."

"Those goddammed kids know too. It's talking to them and they're refusing to listen because they don't want to believe it. Do we believe it?" Drew asked.

"It's too complicated to pass the Occam test. But it is, as Caroline would say, an interesting hypothesis. And the genetic evidence certainly supports it. We have changed. We are changing. But do we believe the evidence of a dream? We could never prove it."

"I've never understood why you don't believe," Drew said quietly, "you, of all people. You are the only one of us who has ever experienced it directly. That

is why you are unique. You know it's there."

"Me?" Marcus raised his eyebrows.

"Yes. Have you really forgotten? At your first circle. At Penhesgyn. You told us how you felt it in your consciousness. How you saw us as it sees us. How much it loved us. None of the rest of us has ever felt that."

"My heart wanted to believe but my head could not accept it. But now...I don't know. This is hard to refute and hard to believe. Cold reason is not enough. Aquinas was right. It has to be reason and faith. We have to believe in ourselves because what we are confronting is ourselves."

"What should we do? Are we expected to intervene?" The ever optimistic Drew was already anticipating the future and making plans for it. "We could you know. We are close to having the technology. We can make ourselves immortal through genetic engineering. We can speed things up. We could give immortality to everyone. Not just those like us. And if sex is the key to communication we should revive the Square of Three and the Kong parties. We need to know more. We must get Hilary involved, and James. We must meditate like we used to. All of us. You heard the message. We are closer to it when we merge our consciousness in sex and if we act together we can really unlock all our powers. Think what we can do. We need more information."

"I don't know," Marcus replied. "Maybe we should let evolution take its own course, if that is what we want. I really don't know. If we intervene we will draw attention to ourselves. We may put ourselves at risk. You heard what they said. Humanity has proved itself unworthy of these gifts. Two thirds of humanity is not going to like us very much and survival is everything. She said all we have to do is survive. We've been given time to ensure the survival of our kind. That should be our first priority."

"And what are we going to tell the others?"

"About longevity? Who else knows about this? Our scientists?"

"Give me some credit Marcus. The DNA tests were done anonymously. Someone knows the outcomes, but they don't know who the samples came from."

"Well that's probably okay, for the time being, but we can't conceal much from the girls and nothing from our children. Apart from anything else it's obvious that we aren't getting any older. We pretend not to notice but we can't go on not noticing. And it also seems we really are one consciousness, or maybe we're really one subconscious which occasionally talks to our conscious selves. I've never known Sophie to project so much power. They must know everything we know. They're here with us right now. Can't you feel them? They are so much better at it than we are. And we had better start looking for the others. Because there must be others. Jaz has seen to that. There are soon going to be a lot of people who won't look their age. We don't need Kong Parties and Squares of Three. We have computers now. Computers can find people who live longer than they should and computers can search genetic data banks. Our

problem is going to be how to conceal people like us. There are over six billion people on this planet. Two billion of them may be potential immortal telepaths. How the hell do we deal with that? Quite apart from the demographic chaos, there is bound to be a financial meltdown. And once the truth is out the religious psychopaths are going to come after us in the name of their Gods, like they did before. We have to find some way to become invisible. We can make a start by getting rid of these files. The less that is known about this the better. And then we'd better think about where we can hide until we're strong enough to defend ourselves."

"No," said Drew, "not two billion with strong ESP. Nowhere near. "There's something else. Something I didn't tell you," he continued, pursing his lips, "the difference is minuscule, but our mitochondrial DNA is not entirely human. Or rather it is not pure homo sapiens. The nearest but very distant analogue would be late Neanderthal DNA, but it's not Neanderthal. It's older, and more advanced. Closer to modern humans, but much, much older."

"I've always assumed that homo sapiens interbred with Neanderthal females," Marcus said, "and bumped off the males."

"Well you'd be wrong. Until now there has been no evidence of Neanderthal DNA in modern humans, yet we know that they coexisted in the Middle East for over sixty thousand years. But then again, no one has tested all humans for Neanderthal DNA and in any case these are not Neanderthals in the popular sense. Just contemporary with Neanderthals. And if they looked like homo sapiens whose to say they didn't interbreed with homo sapiens." Drew raised his eyebrows and grinned, "but of course mitochondrial DNA is transmitted only down the female line and fails only when there are no female heirs. Has it ever seemed odd to you that there are so few species of the genus homo sapiens compared with other genera? Look how many species of monkey there are. Given that modern man is the product of at least two million years of evolution, there must once have been other species of intelligent hominids. Where are their descendants? Something happened to them. Some extinction event maybe. Perhaps the last ice age. Perhaps homo sapiens killed them all. We are, after all, quite willing to kill our own kind, unlike most other animals. Who knows. This may be a unique survival. The last genetic flicker of an ancient race which came before the Neanderthals. If so we are, indeed, very old souls."

Marcus looked at his hands and spread out his fingers. Drew really had lost it.

Drew sat quietly, his head back, looking once again at the coruscating patterns of light on the ceiling. It all begins with light, he thought. The first act of God. He stood up and gathered the files together then walked over to a large shredder in the corner of the room and fed the files into it one by one. After a few brief mechanical shrieks they were gone.

Elysian Fields

Sophie knelt beside Caroline on the padded cushions spread over the deck of ***The Three Lovers***. She shook the bottle of Ambre Solaire and looked at it philosophically. A thought flashed across her mind of Marcus discussing genetics with Drew in the ***Trigonos*** Board Room. Then it was gone.

"We'll have to get some more oil," she said. Caroline ignored her. Sophie inverted the bottle and drizzled the oil onto Caroline's back, from the nape of her neck, across her shoulders, down the curve of her back and up to her smooth tight buttocks, then down the backs of each of the slender thighs and elegant legs to the slim ankles. Caroline no longer had her distinctive thick plait. Instead her hair was cut elfin short, which made her fine featured face softer and less haughty. It suited her, and marked her out from her daughter who was almost her identical twin. Sophie poured some oil onto her hands and began to massage it into Caroline's supple skin. She rubbed her hands slowly and sensuously over her shoulders and arms, then inch by inch down her back to her superb bottom, and between the legs and down to the feet.

"We're still in pretty good nick, aren't we," Sophie murmured, "we can give those silly girls a run for their money any time." She looked up, disturbed by the clatter of the helicopter which had risen from deck of the distant ***Trigonos III,*** silhouetted across the mouth of the little bay. "I wonder where that's going?" she mused. Caroline grunted.

"Drew's toys," she muttered, "I hope the kid's aren't on it."

"Do you think we should have gone?" Sophie asked, "we should have gone. Poor Drew. He gets so excited about these things. We should try to take him seriously. They're still discussing it," she said, listening to the echoes in her mind.

"What does it matter," Caroline replied, "we are what we are. He's never going to explain it. You know," she continued, "we've been just about everywhere on this planet. But we've never been to Egypt. Let's go to Egypt." She rolled over and looked up at the kneeling Sophie.

"We've been to Egypt," she replied, "don't you remember? Ouch." Sophie winced, as though pricked by a ghost.

"Sophie," Caroline looked concerned, "you're bleeding. From your neck."

Sophie put her hand up to her neck and felt the little trickle of blood oozing from a slight cut just beside her windpipe. She looked at Caroline and her face went blank. Caroline raised herself rapidly to her knees and grabbed Sophie who was falling forward into her arms.

"Sophie!!" Caroline's voice was urgent and bordering on panic. For an eternal instant she thought that Sophie was dying. A succession of bizarre images flooded into her mind which explained the cut on Sophie's throat, and almost everything else that had exercised her own scholarly mind for the last thirty six years. Then it was gone. Sophie opened her eyes.

“You felt it?” she asked calmly.

“Yes. They have explained it. Almost. And what they haven't explained Drew and Marcus have just teased out by themselves. It's all down to genetics, and evolution.”

Caroline touched Sophie's throat. The blood was congealing, and, as she watched, it disappeared, leaving a tiny cut which vanished into Sophie's flawless brown skin. Sophie hugged Caroline tightly.

“It's us, isn't it,” she said, “here, in this life, and in that other place. Wherever it is. Not gods or angels, or devils or demons or some crazy cosmic intelligence. Just us. Our Bodies and Souls. Alive and not alive, but not dead. The king's two bodies. Trying to talk to each other.”

Caroline nodded. She had spent her life denying what she had always wanted to believe, but, even now, like Marcus, she was reluctant to accept it. It was, after all, only a dream, and her ruling passion dictated that dreams were not admissible as evidence in the case of Reason versus Faith.

“How bloody ironic,” she said in a resigned voice, “they've put us in exactly the same position as the lunatic who thinks his dreams are the voice of God. We've heard the voice of our own souls and we can't bloody well believe it.”

“Yes we can,” Sophie replied gently, “the blood on my neck. That's real. It was first shed in the reign of Rameses III, twelve hundred years before the birth of Christ. That's the proof.”

“It's gone,” Caroline replied sadly, “there's nothing there. No miracle. Just imagination.” Then she looked at her fingers which still had traces of Sophie's blood on them. “Sophie, Sophie,” Caroline started to cry, “why is it that we can hold the truth between our fingers, but we can never grasp it? It still isn't proof enough. It won’t stand the test of reason!”

Sophie hugged Caroline’s sobbing face to her breasts and gently stroked her hair.

“Perhaps you worry too much about reason. After all, Martin Luther said that reason is the Devil's whore,” she murmured soothingly.

“Well, he would wouldn't he! But if reason is the Devil's whore then faith must be the Devil’s pimp. There has to be objective repeatable scientific proof. And if not reason, what else is there? Faith, Hope and Charity? No reason there!”

“No, no, sweetheart,” Sophie continued to stroke the shining blonde hair. “Listen to me. Listen. Reason is just one tool in our pursuit of the truth. But reason can only explain the intrinsically explicable. It’s our imaginations which make us what we are and it is imagination which allows us to lead reason into the dark places where it fears to go. Reason without Faith is almost as dangerous as Faith without Reason. They are not enough on their own. You used to be a theologian and you've forgotten. The greatest of these is...?”

Caroline looked up at Sophie, smiled, and wiped the tears from her eyes.

"Charity. Dearest Sophia. My beautiful Gnostic goddess. The keeper of my soul. Not Charity but Caritas. In New Testament Greek it's Agape, not Eros. Unconditional love, not carnal love. St Paul, of all people. Corinthians One:

Love is patient, love is kind. Love does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

"Agape," Sophie said gently, "love, and compassion and understanding. Understanding is the best gift, but love is the greatest gift. Faith and hope we cannot prove but love is true to itself. It needs no proof. Reason, and faith in ourselves, and love. So let's just accept it and not ask too many questions. Think about that mooring rope. Imagine it with me."

Sophie continued to hug Caroline and as she did so their minds began to fold into each other. A neatly coiled mooring rope slowly unwound itself and rose upright above the foredeck almost to the height of the spreaders on the mast.

"Oh, Sophie," Caroline laughed, "an Indian rope trick. How silly. Did we do that? Is that all they've given us? Really? How banal! But if we did it then it must be true. Is that proof enough?"

"I tried to do it on my own," Sophie replied, "but I couldn't. No one of us has the power on our own. We can only do it when we all think as one. We both subconsciously agreed to do it. If the boys were here to give us their energy we could probably move mountains. If we have faith in ourselves."

They were both laughing and crying at the same time.

The rope fell to the deck and the two bodies collapsed slowly back onto the sun mats and slithered together in a sea of sun tan oil. Sophie kissed her other self with a passion unwithered by age. Caroline gave a little moan and shiver of delight.

"We still enjoy Eros though," Sophie whispered, "with or without Marcus and Drew."

"Yeah, we're obsessed with it," Caroline moaned, "and so are our *alter egos* because when we make love is when we are most alive. And life is everything."

Another distant roar made Sophie looked up again at the ***Trigonos***. A white wake arced away from the stern of the ship and was hurtling towards them.

"There's a launch coming from the ***Trigonos***."

"Is it crew? Do we need to put our knickers on?"

Sophie sat up and looked at the little beach which was almost as deserted as it had been thirty years ago. Only one couple, from a yacht moored on the other side of the bay, were lying naked on their fronts on brightly coloured towels. They had watched the naked bodies on the ***The Three*** Lovers and concluded that it was safe for them to strip too. A male hand was gently caressing a female bottom. There was a bottle of wine stuck in the sand, and one glass between the two of them. They reacted to the noise of the approaching speedboat by sitting

up and frantically putting their bathing costumes on. Sophie chuckled and picked up the binoculars, which she always kept to hand. She looked out to sea at the very fast speedboat.

“It's Nikos, and Yesha. They aren't wearing much. So...please yourself. I'm not going to. They've seen it all often enough.

Caroline rolled onto her side, and shaded her eyes against the sun so that she could watch the speedboat slow down and came alongside. Nikos had taken off his Bermuda shorts, to reveal a thong underneath. Ayesha too was wearing a tiny jewelled thong and nothing else. They were marginally more modest than their parents. Nikos threw a rope which Sophie caught and deftly cleated off, allowing the speed boat to drift against the yacht's fenders, then let it slip backwards so that they could come aboard from the stern bathing platform.

“Hi guys,” she said, “what was the meeting like?”

Nikos looked at his beautiful naked mother, who he frequently mistook for his beautiful naked sister. The guilt that radiated from his mind flashed across his face.

“You didn't go,” Sophie said accusingly.

“Erm...er...no...we forgot about it. We were..... Well you didn't go either!!!”

Sophie looked at him more closely. These two had not yet learned how to hide their thoughts. They were broadcasting their excitement with each other on all available psychic frequencies.

What they had been doing on the exercise bench in the gym was still fresh in their minds. Sophie was not surprised. Their minds were now so tuned to each other that secrets were hard to conceal, especially where sex was concerned. Nikos and Ayesha knew it. They both looked slightly ashamed.

“Never mind. I hope you two enjoyed each other. Poor uncle Drew. I wonder what he was going to tell us.”

The couple looked even more embarrassed.

“It doesn't matter, “Sophie said, “ we did it without guilt when we were your age. And we still do. Just be careful.”

“Mum,” said Nikos in a concerned tone of voice, “something just happened. Ayesha felt it too. We had a kind of waking dream. Just now. You were in it. But it wasn't you. And lots of ideas.... But it was so quick. Neither of us can remember anything..... except,” he shuddered, “the blood, and this naked guy, with a knife. And a woman being burned alive. Horrible. How could they do such things?”

“Nothing happened,” Sophie replied gently, conscious of the two other young minds which had also felt the dream and were now cowering in each other’s arms in their stateroom on the ***Trigonos*** and praying that their mothers' loving minds would come to soothe their nightmares, as they had always done in their childhood. Sophie thought to them the words she spoke to Nikos and Ayesha. “It was just a dream we shared. A scary dream. You know how we often share our thoughts. Sometimes we share our dreams. Don't worry about

it. It's just a dream. Maybe you'll remember one day. When it means something."

"Yeah..well... like...it was well weird. Anyway uncle Drew asked me to bring this for Caroline, with his compliments." He held up a magnum of champagne. "Hope you enjoyed each other."

"Cheeky little sod," Caroline exclaimed. She leapt up and grabbed at the champagne bottle, but Nikos evaded her. Eventually he relented and passed Caroline the bottle.

"To what do I owe this honour?" she asked.

"Uncle Drew said you'd remember," Nikos replied.

"Oh yes," Caroline replied, "thirty years. Well, he's a couple of weeks out. It was October."

"Not my problem," said Nikos. He grabbed Ayesha's hand and the pair of them dived off the yacht and swam towards the beach. Nikos turned back and trod water next to the yacht.

"Oh...I nearly forgot. Uncle Drew says you have to come to dinner tonight. No excuses. The launch will come for you, or you can come back with us. He says dress properly. There are posh frocks in your stateroom. Puck is coming," he added conspiratorially.

"Puck?" Sophie yelled, but Nikos had already swum away and rejoined Ayesha.

"Oh well, saves us cooking," Sophie sighed, "it'll be lovely to see Puck. She hasn't been to Europe for a long time." She settled down beside Caroline, both women lying on their backs, soaking in the late afternoon sun.

"Nicely done Sophie," Caroline smiled, "they obviously aren't meant to know. Not until they're older. Presumably when they've learned to control their emotions. Our *alter egos* have thought of everything haven't they."

"It's comforting, sort of," Sophie said, "to know that we have ancestors who go right back to the twelfth century BC. And the rest. But do you think we really are witches? And I wonder why we were never able to remember our past lives, except odd fragments in dreams? I can see them much more clearly now. Why could we never be certain that we really do have an immortal soul?"

"If we believe the dream," Caroline replied, "but we already know that most people of European stock can trace their mitochondrial DNA back to only seven women over two hundred thousand years ago. So, no surprise, really. Witches?" Caroline pulled a face, "most witches were innocents killed by stupid men and jealous women. Perhaps we once were witches. And whores too. And saints, and scholars, poets and priests, physicians and philosophers. Everything that we could be. And each life is unique. That's why we don't remember our past lives. We must always start from scratch and take back what we have learned so that our souls can evolve. But so much pain. In so many lives. We deserved better than that."

“Humanity deserved better than that,” Sophie sighed, “but there was a lot of love too. And that’s what really matters.”

Caroline frowned, “I suppose,” she replied, “that it would dangerous to be certain of eternity. Most religions promise eternal salvation but only on condition of good behaviour. And most condemn suicide as a mortal sin. But if we were certain of eternal salvation, or even just interminable reincarnation, we might value life less. Both our own lives and the lives of others. We might do what Mo did and try to escape to somewhere we believed to be better. Now we know that life is what really matters. Religions have got it back to front. Our minds should be focused on immortal life, not eternal death.”

“Hmm,” Sophie sighed, “well, at least we know who we are, and perhaps what we are, and now we know that we can move ropes around with our minds, if we think together, and we're going to live a long time. But we don't know what we are supposed to do with our powers, except survive and find others like us.”

“We'll let the men worry about that,” Caroline rolled over onto her stomach, “that's why they're there and we are here. Let's see if we can feel what they're thinking about.” She held Sophie's hand and felt the enhanced power of their shared mind invade the minds in the ***Trigonos*** Board Room.

Drew believes and is already making plans, they thought in unison, *Marcus is dithering. Typical. They're aware of us. Hi guys! Bye bye guys.*

The two minds withdrew pursued by indignant thoughts from Drew and Marcus. They lay silent for a long time, mulling over the forces that had brought them together and that still watched over them.

“Do you think that what we did was right?” Sophie said at last, fiddling with the little leather bracelet which she had taken off only twice since Marcus had bought it for her in Chester so many years ago, and then only to have it repaired. It was a little the worse for wear, of course, but years of vicarious soaking in sun tan oil and body lotion had kept it as young and supple as Sophie herself. Sophie needed no other jewellery.

“What do you mean?”

“All those years ago. When we were their age. At St Dunnies. At Penhesgyn.”

“What, you mean all that shagging? Course it was right. We were young. We had one hell of time. And we had the Pill. And no one had heard of HIV.”

“No, no, I mean, was it right that we set Marcus up the way we did. I mean, we set out to trap him didn't we. Just for a laugh 'cos he was so innocent.”

“Yes, that's what we thought at the time. But then you went and fell in love with him. So I had to fall in love with him too. Just to stay with you. And don't forget Drew was egging you on. Drew wanted his money. We wanted his body. Marcus wanted to be loved. And now we know that the other us wanted to share our sex lives. Fair deal. I would say. And we never really used our powers to influence either of them. We could have done. If we really are witches.”

“But was it right? With hindsight it seems so cynical. Marcus could have lost everything. For a timid man he took one hell of a risk. And all those theological theories you fed to Drew. He took them so seriously.”

“Forget it,” Caroline sighed, “listen to me. I don't think we had any choice. We are not as free as we like to imagine. Something else is pulling our strings. Anyway, look on the bright side. If we had not landed Marcus you would have ended up married to some poverty stricken Greek waiter and had lots of poverty stricken Greek children. And I would have ended up married to some boring academic who would have eventually forced me to give up my career so that he could go to some tin pot professorship in some backwoods university. And none of this would have happened.”

“Like St Dunnies,” Sophie volunteered with a laugh.

“Yeah, like St Dunnies. My God, we’ve come a long way from St Dunnies haven’t we. Anyway Drew played fair by Marcus and made our fortunes. There was never any risk. And now we know why. Apparently we have a destiny. We just don't know what it is. But we were all meant to be together. I'm sure of that. And this story is far from over. Indeed it may only just have begun.”

Caroline raised herself up on one elbow and looked out to sea. “Bloody hell. We've been so amazingly lucky. And it's all down to Marcus and Drew. So don't knock it. Okay, so neither of us got married to him because our Christian state doesn't condone bigamy. Mormons are boring and I don't see us in Burqas. You could have married Marcus, if you'd wanted to, and I could quite happily have been the live in mistress. I could have accepted that. But Marcus wanted us to be equal. He's a bland and boring person, but he's amazingly tolerant and very kind and generous and gentle. And he loves us. And he has the gift which empowers our gift. And we can twist him round our little fingers. We’ve changed our names to include Ross, and our children are all called Ross. We all have our own independent fortunes. Drew and Marcus have made us all unbelievably rich. We lead charmed lives. We are creatures of dreams. We are such stuff as other people's dreams are made on. It has been amazing. And it's not over yet. Not by a long way. Look at us. Our stomachs are flat as boards, our nipples are still pointing North, our bums are still tiny, our hair and skin is still perfect, our brains are still sharp. Your legs need shaving though.”

Sophie sat up and looked quizzically at her legs. Caroline was right. There was a dark stubble appearing which would have to be dealt with. So unfair, having to shave one's legs. No one had complained about the Queen of Sheba's hairy legs. They had been quite a curiosity and were considered to be a sign of unbridled sexual appetite.

“You're right, I suppose,” she said, “we have been lucky. Though I'd have liked more children. I suppose we must be past it by now. Funny. We both stopped taking the pill long ago, but neither of us got pregnant again. And not for want of trying. Well by me anyway. I know you didn't like being pregnant. And since Yasmine died we've both been going with Drew as well. You'd think

one of them would have got us up the duff. After all, Drew was always banging on about how it was our duty to have lots of kids. I took him seriously, you know. I wonder if we were not supposed to have any more kids. Maybe that's part of their master plan."

"And bloody Marcus has been the luckiest of us all," Caroline continued to pontificate, ignoring Sophie's parallel reverie, "remember the state he got into over that stupid thesis. Silly boy. These days doctorates are ten a penny. They don't mean a thing. And that ridiculous novel, which James is rewriting. He's had thirty years of non-stop shagging with two unbelievably beautiful women who adore him. And we've given him three beautiful, clever children. Not to mention becoming a billionaire with no real effort. Drew did all the hard work. I sometimes have to pinch myself to make sure I'm really still alive and not dead and gone to heaven."

"I wonder sometimes," Sophie murmured, "whether any of this is real. Sometimes I think we are all nothing more than a dream in someone else's imagination, just dreams within dreams."

"Well, let's hope the sleeper never wakes. But the universe is balanced on the principle of uncertainty, and it is finely tuned for life, so anything is possible. And there are dreams and dreams, as we have just seen. Remember when I woke up screaming when you went missing at sea and I dreamed that you had drowned and Seaton came to Carston and killed Marcus and raped and murdered me. I frightened the wits out of Marcus. Where did that come from? And then Marcus went and put it in his bloody novel!"

"Well, the **Shadowfax** did sink, but we were rescued, eventually. And Seaton went to prison when the police caught him for killing that professor. But maybe Drew is right. Maybe there are parallel universes where different things happen to us and sometimes we get echoes of our other lives in our dreams." Sophie's voice was sad and contemplative. "Poor Drew, he's so forlorn. I wish he would let Yasmine go. He could find somebody else...maybe even somebody like us and we could all be truly happy again. I wish he could. Maybe if Tinkerbell and Puck came back. Now that Adrian's off the scene. Maybe that's why Puck is coming tonight."

"I don't know," Caroline replied more thoughtfully, "Puck and Tinkerbell have always been in love with each other. After the way Adrian treated them they don't want anyone else. Pity they didn't have children though. Too late now. And Drew's in more of a gilded cage than we are. Marcus may be boring, but he's not stupid. He kept us all out of the limelight. Drew was attracted to it and now it burns him. When you're that rich how can you be sure of anyone's motives? He's at the mercy of every gold digging celebrity bimbo. Fortunately he's bright enough to spot them. And no normal outsider is going to shag him as well as we do. I can understand why he stays alone."

"We're all still pretty good at it, aren't we. I think it's odd, sometimes, that we are still so bloody sexy. Lucy thinks we should have given up sex thirty years

ago. Ugh.. parents...," Sophie imitated Lucy's sardonic voice, "screwing... So Gross !!! And why haven't we gone through the menopause? It should have happened by now. Our periods stopped long before they should have done, we're not ovulating, yet we don't have any other menopausal symptoms and we're still wet and willing. I'm not complaining though. I like our bodies. I don't want them to change. I dread it. But there must somebody for Drew. Remember James and Hilary. They were made for each other weren't they. I wish they were here. I wonder why they wouldn't come. They've never turned down a visit to the ***Trigonos*** before."

"Well, we'll see them at Christmas, sooner probably" Caroline replied, rolling over onto her front, "and Drew will be alright. And our bodies are not going to change. You know that James hates unhappy endings. And they don't get much happier than this. It'll be okay. You'll see."

Sophie hunched her knees up to her chin and ran her fingers down her legs. The stubble was no longer there. Her legs were silky smooth. She sighed, and smiled to herself, then rolled over onto her stomach and fell asleep beside Caroline.

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The helicopter jinked over the little bay. The pilot could see the large small yacht anchored close in to the shore, and the vast motor yacht outside the bay. He flew over the mast of ***The Three Lovers*** knowing that her owners would not complain because they would now be on the ***Trigonos*** waiting for him. He glanced at his passenger, who had chosen to sit beside him in the copilot's seat and wear headphones so that she could talk to him through the intercom. He knew who she was of course. The whole world recognised her face. But then most of the people he shuttled to and from the ***Trigonos*** were famous for something or other. He had got used to it, and was quite blasé about it. Even so he had been startled at how well she had kept her looks. Then again, this was a high maintenance woman whose looks had always been her fortune. She took care of herself. She could afford to. She had also been surprisingly talkative and friendly, much better than many of his newly rich passengers who often treated him like dirt.

"Where are we?" she asked through the intercom, looking at the rapidly closing ship. From the air the little enclosed bay looked vaguely familiar. But she had no idea where she was. She was no stranger to invitations to stay on luxury yachts and approached them with gleeful malice knowing that rich and vain men would think they could use her, when she was actually using them. But this was different. Like most of the world, she knew all about the **Trigonos Corporation**, and had even worked for parts of it in the past, but she knew nothing of its owner, except that he was fabulously wealthy, but old and reclusive and not, therefore, a suitable case for punishment. So she would enjoy

this unexpected invitation and luxuriate in the opulence of one of the finest and greatest motor yachts of its kind.

"This is the island of Sifnos," the pilot replied, "lovely island. No airfield so no mass tourism. Unspoilt. Ever been here before?"

"I think so."

The helicopter jinked again and settled cautiously onto its pad. The passenger took off the headphones and shook out her long thick hair.

"Thank you," she smiled, "for an excellent flight."

Two uniformed crewmen opened the door for her and helped her to step out onto the deck. At the edge of the helipad, walking rapidly towards her, were two smiling people who she had never quite forgotten, but could have been forgiven for not recognising because, except for wearing clothes, they looked almost exactly as they had looked thirty years ago when they had rescued a naked waif, abandoned on a Greek beach by a heartless man, and shared their bread and wine with her. But then, she too looked far younger than she actually was. Sonja flicked her glorious mane of thick auburn hair back from her emerald green eyes. Behind Sophie and Marcus was a taller man with a small beard and a sad, crumpled, face which reminded her of the young Alan Alda, and a young blonde woman with a face which she took at first for one of her familiar model colleagues but then realised that it could not be. Sophie looked into Sonja's eyes, her mouth open in wonder and delight, her hands clapped in front of her face like a child presented with an amazing gift. She threw her arms round Sonja.

"Welcome home, dear old friend," she whispered, folding Sonja into an embrace which overwhelmed her with a tidal wave of joy and love and hope. Sonja closed her eyes and relaxed in Sophie's arms, resting her chin on Sophie's shoulder and hugging her tightly in return. The tidal wave engulfed the ivory tower in which she had imprisoned her heart for most of her adult life. Thirty years of vengeful rage drowned in an instant. Then she opened her eyes and looked over Sophie's shoulder into the sad eyes of Drew Parkin.