

Author's Note

These tales have metamorphosed between stage play and short story over the last decade or so. The short story is the most obvious medium through which to describe the experiences of Daniel Levin, but his streams of consciousness, when faced with the inexplicable, are an irritating distraction from the far more interesting ghostly manifestations he often encounters. Hence the choice of single-set play, with narrative flashbacks where necessary.

Tax Fries

2006

By Tax Fries:

A Spider Ballet

The Wulfmarsh Weekend

Ragnarok

LEVIN PLAYS:

The Ghost of Sarah Stable

The Moon Trap

The Ghost of Gideon Mager

The Timber Trap

Tax Fries

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The Ghost of Gideon Mayer

The set is a large study set in an isolated country mansion. The study resembles a private chapel. An arched wooden door panel on one side provides an entrance. There are high windows built into the walls with bars across the glass and the vaulted ceiling is supported by trestles.

An oil portrait of a stern, fair-haired young man astride a grey stallion, dressed in a tweed jacket and riding boots, and clutching a crop, hangs on a wall to the rear. The man stares down at the stage as if he is a critical spectator.

There is an armchair and a wooden stool beneath the painting. A long dining table, and a sofa and matching chairs are placed centre-stage. A large video screen is fixed to a beam near the entrance which shows a monochrome image of the stage captured by a CCTV camera. A church organ sits in a shadowy corner next to shelves replete with books, and a life-sized sculpture on a plinth modelled on 'Death seizing a maiden' from the Campo Santo, Genoa.

I

Friday evening. The centre of the set is moderately well lit, the back and the corners are in shadow. A dim spot illuminates the portrait.

Enter Isobel; a slim, attractive woman aged about thirty, with high cheekbones and dark hair tied into a tight ponytail. She appears to be stern and pragmatic, humourless from the fatigue

of a long journey. She wears an overcoat, having just arrived at the house, and carries an overnight bag. She puts her bag down and walks around, studying every detail of her surroundings as a stranger would before finally standing in front of the painting with a curious frown on her face.

Enter Gemma; of similar age to Isobel, also carrying a bag and dressed for a journey. She has long fair hair and a face which carries a broad smile. She has a confident, breezy air about her, of the sort possessed by those who think they understand the world, even if their attempts to manipulate it have not always been successful. She looks around the study, orientating herself, then approaches Isobel, who turns to greet her.

GEM. Hello, I'm Gemma.

Gemma puts her bag down and extends a hand which Isobel shakes.

ISOB. Isobel.

GEM. Are you the host?

ISOB. No, I've been invited for the weekend.

GEM. We must be two of the party guests.

Isobel glances warily around the room again.

ISOB. If we are, then we're early.

GEM. Scary place. Did you see those gargoyles sitting outside like guard dogs? I'll bet they've been there since the Middle Ages.

ISOB. Neo-Gothic - mid nineteenth century or later.

GEM. Still pretty gruesome though. Why do you think they have bars on the windows? To keep something out?

ISOB. Or keep someone in.

GEM. That's false imprisonment. We can sue them for that.

ISOB. It's a bit early to get litigious. We don't even know why we're here.

Gemma frowns.

GEM. You look vaguely familiar. Have we met before?

ISOB. I don't think so.

GEM. Why would a pair of complete strangers be invited here for the weekend? We must have something in common.

Isobel pauses to study Gemma's features. Her eyes narrow as if she recalls something, but then she just shrugs and shakes her head.

ISOB. I was offered money.

GEM. So was I.

ISOB. But who are they?

GEM. A lawyer acting for the hosts, whoever they are.

ISOB. I think we're looking at one of them now. Or rather, he's looking at us.

Gemma stares up at the painting.

GEM. He doesn't seem very pleased to see us. I've seen him somewhere before, just like I'm sure I've seen you. There's something very *deja vu* about all of this.

ISOB. Did you go to university?

GEM. Sort of, if you can call it that. Brille College in Dorset.

ISOB. We have met before - I remember now.

Gemma nods as she recalls and her smile broadens further.

GEM. That was more than ten years ago. So what have you been doing since then?

ISOB. Teaching.

GEM. At a school or a college?

ISOB. I have a dance school.

Enter Kristy. Similar in age and dress to the first two women.

She is tall and statuesque, with wavy hair and striking features. She appears anxious in unfamiliar surrounds and clutches a mobile phone for security.

KRIS. Excuse me, I'm not sure if I'm in the right place.

ISOB. You're Kristy, aren't you?

KRIS. Yes.

ISOB. Do you remember me?

Kristy tries to recall her face but is unable to.

Isobel from Brille College. This is Gemma.

Kristy shakes their hands warily.

KRIS. Is this is a reunion of some sort?

ISOB. It looks that way.

GEM. But we didn't organise it.

Kristy glances around.

KRIS. So who did?

ISOB. We don't know that yet.

GEM. Welcome to Journey's End!

ISOB. Don't say things like that till we find out what's going on.

GEM. It's a way of blocking the hex - like saying 'break a leg'. But you don't have to stay if you don't want to.

ISOB. I'm staying till I find out why we've been asked to come here.

GEM. It could be too late by then.

ISOB. Too late for what?

GEM. You mean, too late for whom?

KRIS. The taxi driver said he was to wait half an hour, in case I need a lift back to the station.

GEM. I'm in no hurry to escape. If they want to pay me to take part in a mystery weekend, then fine. This could

be reality TV.

Gemma points to a CCTV surveillance camera high in the corner pointing straight at them.

ISOB. The question is still - who are they?

Kristy looks up at the painting

KRIS. Gideon.

ISOB. I was thinking that.

GEM. Who?

KRIS. Gideon something - I can't remember his last name.

ISOB. Gideon Mayer.

GEM. What?

Gemma laughs.

Isobel and Kristy exchange an uneasy glance.

He must have done quite well for himself to have his portrait painted.

KRIS. Like Dorian Gray.

ISOB. We don't know for sure that it's him.

GEM. I'll give you ten-to-one.

The opening bars of a Bach fugue suddenly rent the air and a spotlight illuminates Dan playing the organ at the back of the set. Aged about 40, dark and sinister in appearance.

He ceases playing and walks towards them carrying a loose-leaf folder.

KRIS. An entrance with Bach?

DAN. I have a weakness for melodrama.

GEM. Who are you?

DAN. Daniel Levin.

GEM. Is this your house?

DAN. No, I'm a paid guest, just like you.

ISOB. We were wondering about the painting. Is it a portrait of Gideon Mayer?

Dan glances up at the painting as if consulting with it.

DAN Yes, that's him.

KRIS. Is he here now?

DAN In a manner of speaking.

Dan uses a remote control device to switch the image on the video screen to the courtyard at the front of the house. An oak tree is clearly visible and a small headstone can be seen on the grass verge beneath its spreading boughs.

Gideon Mayer is dead. His headstone is under the oak tree in the courtyard.

Kristy emits a quiet but audible gasp.

ISOB. When did it happen?

DAN Three months ago. You can read about it for your selves. This obituary appeared in a national newspaper.

Dan hands out photocopies from a folder, which they study for a moment.

ISOB. He was a composer.

GEM. I remember he was a music student.

DAN He wrote film scores for a living.

ISOB. I didn't know he wrote all of these.

GEM. I didn't know he wrote any of them.

KRIS. It doesn't say how he died.

DAN Drug overdose.

ISOB. He was only thirty two.

KRIS. Thirty-three.

GEM. Was he gay? I always thought there was something a bit queer about him.

DAN Why don't you ask him yourself.
GEM. You said he was dead. Is this some sort of sick joke?

Dan smiles and glances up at the painting.

DAN If you want to leave - go now. Your taxi is still waiting.
GEM. Not till I find out what this is all about.
ISOB. Isn't there a law against being buried in your own garden?
DAN It depends on the location of the garden.
GEM. It must lower the property value. I wouldn't buy a house with the previous owner buried outside the front door - unless it was someone really famous - like a reality TV star.
DAN It's not a permanent grave. Mr Mayer has left provision for himself to be moved to the local cemetery at the discretion of the new owner.
GEM. That's very considerate of him.
DAN Was very considerate of him.
GEM. Yeah, right.
ISOB. Was he a friend of yours?
DAN No, we never met. I was given full access to his papers in order to prepare for this assignment, so you might say that I've managed to get inside his head.
ISOB. Do you think that was wise?
DAN Why do you say that?

Isobel glances up at the painting.

ISOB. He wasn't the most stable person in the world. I'd say he was quite seriously disturbed - not the sort of head you'd want to get inside.
DAN Maybe it's the price some people pay for a creative mind. Most artists sacrifice something for their art.

Dan smiles knowingly at Isobel, which Gemma picks up on.

GEM. How much do you know about us?
DAN Only what's in your files.
GEM. What files?
DAN Gideon Mayer kept files on all of you.
ISOB. Why would he do that?
DAN He had an obsessive personality disorder, like a stalker; and seems to have planned for this weekend years in advance.
ISOB. Was the overdose deliberate?
DAN The coroner recorded misadventure, but nobody knows for sure.
GEM. What exactly is your role in all of this?
DAN I've been asked to play the host in accordance with the terms of his will.
GEM. Asked by whom?
DAN The trustees of the estate.
ISOB. But why you?
DAN My expertise lies in a field which is beyond the normal experience of your everyday country solicitor - and so the entire project was contracted out to me.
ISOB. Contracted out? You're very cold. Almost like an under-taker.
DAN I suppose, in a way, that's what I am.
KRIS. Like Charon.
GEM. Who's she?
KRIS. The ferryman - who conveys the souls of the dead across the River Styx.
GEM. So what expertise have you got? Rowing certificates?
DAN I'm a psychologist.
ISOB. What sort of psychologist?
DAN A fairly ordinary sort.
GEM. Are you married, Dr Levin?
DAN No.
GEM. Is there a reason for that?
DAN There's a reason for everything.
GEM. Would you like to share it with us?
DAN Would you like to know why you've been asked to

come here - or do you just want to spend the whole night getting to know me?

GEM. I don't think it'll take the whole night. A few minutes at most.

Kristy and Isobel exchange a glance and giggle briefly.

ISOB. Do you know the terms of the will?

DAN As much as I need to at this stage.

ISOB. Are we the beneficiaries? I assume that's why we're here?

DAN If you stay within this house until the sun rises on Monday morning, the agreed sureties held by your acting solicitors will be paid into your bank accounts sometime next week. The stipendaries of those who venture outside the house, or who try to contact anyone from the outside world before sunrise on Monday, will be returned to the trustees of the estate. So I suggest you keep your mobile phones switched off until then.

Attention turns to Kristy as she switches off her bleeping mobile and slips it into her coat pocket.

GEM. Welcome to Hell House. Is that all we have to do? Spend a weekend in a haunted house? I didn't realise he had a sense of humour.

ISOB. There's more to it than that, isn't there, Dan?

DAN There usually is.

ISOB. If Gideon had simply wanted to leave us some money, he could have sent us a cheque in the post. Instead, we are to be 'entertained' by a non-specified, but no doubt highly specialised, psychologist.

DAN Gideon Mayer was a wealthy man when he died and made provision in his will for this activity to take place. He left a task to be completed by Monday morning. Whoever succeeds will be awarded the remains of the

estate - after this house and grounds are sold off to pay the death duties.

Kristy steps toward a bare patch of wall. She presses her palms and her cheek against the stonework somewhat dreamily.

KRIS. I'd like to keep it as it is.

GEM. You've got to win it first!

Kristy looks up at the painting.

KRIS. Was Gideon a keen horseman?

DAN. Yes, he used to ride quite a lot.

KRIS. Are there still horses in the stables?

DAN. No, they've all been sold.

KRIS. What happened to that one?

DAN. It was a favourite of his. It died shortly before he did and was interred with him.

KRIS. A pagan burial. What colour was the horse in real life?

ISOB. Why do you ask that?

KRIS. I'd like to know.

DAN. A pale grey.

Gemma frowns impatiently.

GEM. So what do we have to do to win the jackpot?

DAN. To become the main beneficiary - you have to remain in the house until first light on Monday - and sleep with the Angel of Death.

Gemma and Isobel look shocked and perplexed.

GEM. What the hell does that mean?

ISOB. What is the Angel of Death?

KRIS. And behold a pale horse, and his name that sat on him was Death.

Kristy pauses and smiles smugly.

Book of Revelation, chapter six. You said the horse was a pale grey.

DAN That's a question you'll have to answer for yourselves. What do you remember about Gideon Mayer? Perhaps one of you already knows the answer.

The three women look at each other, each wondering about the others and their relationships with Gideon Mayer.

ISOB. Ten years have passed since we last saw him. How do you expect us to remember anything that far back?

DAN Is that true for all of you?

Kristy and Gemma glance at each other and nod warily.

Our brains retain a great deal more than we consciously remember. The problem is how to recall the information. For that you need a set of prompts or keys to unlock the memories. He seemed to know quite a lot about each of you.

Dan consults a file.

Isobel, as a teenager you wanted to be a ballerina and trained in Paris, but you failed to progress and so, aged nineteen, you returned to England to read for a degree in English. You continued your career in contemporary dance and choreography, but you're constantly struggling to keep your dance company solvent. Wilful and single-minded, you never allowed the intractable financial impediments to deter you from your chosen profession. No children. Current partner - a Soho bar manager.

Kristy. Read theatre studies and aspired to be an actor. Elegant and articulate in private, academically gifted,

but you never found a way of dealing with the affliction of stage-fright, so you became a model. Models don't have to remember their lines or extend their emotional range beyond an icy smile. Catwalk and catalogue modelling gradually gave way to the more explicit demands of the industry before you 'retired'. Married and divorced. Your ambitious husband needed a more stable and reliable partner. You currently work in a department store. Single, living with a female colleague, no children. History of mental illness. Recently diagnosed as schizophrenic. Gemma ...

GEM. You're enjoying this, aren't you, you bastard!

DAN Married and separated before going to university at the age of 21. Started off studying history and English, but gave up on the history because it was too much work reading all those books. You soon established a dubious reputation on-campus for your extra-curricular activities, which equipped you well for the hospitality profession you subsequently entered. Currently working for a London-based escort agency. As a teenager you had an abortion. You profess to hate children.

ISOB. Was that absolutely necessary?

DAN This weekend is about digging up the past.

ISOB. Suppose we're not interested in the past? What if we don't want to take part in this ridiculous charade?

DAN Aren't you intrigued by the prospect of pitting your wits against his after all these years?

ISOB. How can we if he's dead?

DAN That's something you'll discover, if you decide to stay. You each have three options. You can go home now, the taxis are still waiting and your travel expenses have been paid. You can stay for the weekend and make no effort to solve the riddle, but still receive the fee held by your solicitor. Or, since you're here anyway, you can keep an open mind and one eye on the main chance.

Kristy smiles cynically.

KRIS. They'll stay - and not just for the money.

ISOB. What do you know about the Angel of Death?

DAN I don't know anything. If I did, I could make a deal with any one of you for a share of the settlement, which would upset Mr Mayer and defeat the object of the exercise.

GEM. Gideon is dead. What does he care?

Dan glances at the painting.

ISOB. What is the object of the exercise?

DAN That's something you ought to consider before deciding whether or not you want to stay.

GEM. You're being very abstruse, Mr Psychologist. Are you sure you're here to help us?

DAN I didn't say I was here to help you.

ISOB. Someone else must know what this task is. Someone has to judge fairly whether or not the terms of the will have been fulfilled.

DAN The trustees of the estate will decide - based on the criteria laid down by Mr Mayer before his death, and known only to them.

ISOB. If you're not here to judge or to help, then why exactly are you here?

DAN To make sure no one gets hurt. Gold-diggers have been known to catch gold-fever.

The three women view each other with uneasy suspicion.

GEM. Well, if you do happen to figure it out before I do, let me know. I'm sure we can come to some arrangement.

Gemma goes to the statue, half hidden in the shadow.

Maybe we should ask his art dealer.

- KRIS. 'Death seizing a maiden', from the Campo Santo in Genoa.
- GEM. Campo what?
- KRIS. Public cemetery. It's famous for its sculpture, especially the bronze on which this piece was modelled.
- GEM. Did he actually collect things like this - or did you just put it here to freak us out?
- DAN. Whatever you encounter is by his design. This sort of art work should make you wonder about his life and death instincts.

Kristy touches the statue.

- KRIS. Eros and Thanatos.
- ISOB. You said you had his papers.
- DAN. You can read some of them tomorrow. It's getting late now. If you follow me, I'll show you to your rooms. We're alone in the house so you'll have to select and prepare your own food from the kitchen.

Dan stands by the open doorway.

- GEM. Is there anything to drink around here?
- DAN. There's plenty of tap-water, but no alcohol. It might dampen your wits.
- ISOB. Are the cameras being monitored?
- DAN. No. But the recording is taking place in a remote and secure location so that no one can tamper with the tapes.
- GEM. That's reassuring to know - if we're to be murdered in our beds.
- DAN. There are no cameras in the bedrooms or the bathrooms. Voyeurism is not the object of the exercise.

Exit the three women.

Dan glances around again uneasily, then exits.

The lights dim slightly and there is a slight perception of movement. A painting frame tilts slightly. A chandelier begins to sway. Dust descends from a beam as if disturbed by a draught. A faint ghostly whistle is heard that could easily be the wind.

Enter Gemma and Isobel, no longer wearing coats. Each carries a mug and a plate of sandwiches. They sit down at the dining table to eat. Gemma looks around to see if anyone else is in the room.

GEM. How well did you know him?

ISOB. Who? Gideon?

Gemma nods.

Not very well. We used to talk occasionally, but I don't remember him ever saying anything about angels of death.

GEM. Did you sleep with him?

Isobel pauses and frowns.

ISOB. No. Did you?

GEM. He didn't seem all that interested in girls. Either too shy or too gay. What about Kristy? I don't remember seeing her at Brille.

ISOB. We were on the same media course, but it was Gideon who introduced us.

GEM. So how close were they?

ISOB. I don't know. He never used to talk about other women.

GEM. He used to talk about you.

ISOB. Did he?

GEM. Oh yes.

Isobel appears surprised.

- ISOB. I thought he had a crush on me at first, but he seemed to lose interest after a while. He was a drunk. His brain was a sponge soaked in alcohol.
- GEM. Well, he must have dried out after he graduated - at least long enough to compose a few scores. Maybe that's why there's nothing to drink around here. Did you keep in touch?
- ISOB. No.
- GEM. What if one of us works this out. We could agree to split the money in advance. Double our chances of a pay off. What do you think?
- ISOB. Would that be ethical?
- GEM. What have ethics got to do with it? One, three, or ten million, it's all the same to me right now; and if one of us doesn't figure it out this weekend, the entire estate may end up going to some well deserving cat sanctuary.
- ISOB. I don't think he had any pets - except the horses.
- GEM. Well? Do we have a deal?
- ISOB. You're assuming that I'm staying till the end.
- GEM. Don't leave me here on my own with just Kristy and Norman Bates for company.
- ISOB. Would this be a verbal agreement, or should we form some sort of written contract?
- GEM. I think we can get a piece of paper from somewhere.
- ISOB. What about Kristy? Shouldn't we involve her as well?
- GEM. I get the impression that she's not really a team player. If she already knows the answer, she's not going to share it with us; and if she doesn't, then it simply means smaller shares all round.
- ISOB. She could be the one who works out the meaning of the term 'Angel of Death'.
- GEM. She's a bit nervy. I don't think she'll stay the whole weekend. Let's wait and see if she's still here in the morning.

Enter Dan.

He walks up to the table and lays out a pen and two blank sheets of paper.

DAN You'll need two copies - one each - and strictly speaking, you'll need a witness to sign it. And don't forget the date.

Dan writes his signature at the base of each piece of paper.

ISOB. Aren't we breaking the rules?

DAN Perhaps. But you're much too vulnerable as individuals working independently. If you pull together as a team you're more likely to succeed, and less likely to scratch each other's eyes out.

ISOB. Vulnerable to what?

DAN The forces arranged against you. It's not going to be easy for any one of you. Hang together or you'll hang separately, as they say. You've got ten minutes before the lights go down.

Dan begins to walk away.

GEM. Just a minute, Mr Psycho!

Dan halts and turns to face her.

You didn't tell us the room was bugged.

Dan glances around the room as if sensing something.

DAN I don't think it is bugged.

GEM. How did you know what we were talking about?

Exit Dan.

GEM. What do you make of him?

ISOB. Hard to say. You wonder how much he's keeping to

himself.

GEOR. He could be the Angel of Death. Would you sleep with him for an old house in the country?

Isobel wrinkles her nose at the thought.

ISOB. How about you?

Gemma laughs.

What's so funny?

GEM. It's a bit more than I usually charge.

Isobel collects the sheets of paper, the pen, her mug and plate, then rises to her feet.

ISOB. Let's go before we have to grope our way out of here.

Exit Gemma and Isobel.

Lights dim down so that the set is in twilight and the clock chimes at midnight.

Enter Kristy holding a candle. She is dressed in a nightshirt and appears to be sleep walking. She halts in front of the portrait, whose eyes glow faintly as if luminous.

KRIS. Why did you bring me here? I tried, you know I did, so many times. We were like leaves blown around in a vortex beyond our control. Occasionally colliding, but only for brief instants before the current tore us apart. Neither of us knew our own minds, neither of us ruled our own lives. It just wasn't meant to be

Kristy hears groaning and looks across the stage.

Who's there?

Kristy hears more groaning, then the sound of footsteps approaching. The footsteps become louder as if someone is bearing down on her.

Kristy steps back towards the door but it slams shut, trapping her in the study. She drops the candle and stands with her back to the door.

A shadow spreads across the stage towards her and rises to engulf her. She covers beneath it and screams.

Lights down.

II

*Saturday morning. Daylight enters through the windows.
Dan is standing behind the table, still dressed in black, sifting
through piles of books and papers.
Enter Gemma and Isobel, casually dressed and carrying mugs of
coffee.
Gemma sits in a chair, Isobel sits on the sofa.
Dan glances up at them.*

- DAN Where's Kristy?
ISOB. We haven't seen her this morning.
DAN You should look out for each other while you're here.
GEM. Why? Is there a bogey man on the loose?
DAN You still don't seem to understand what you're up
 against.
GEM. Isn't it your job to tell us?
DAN I am telling you, but you're not listening. We can't
 begin until she gets here.
GEM. Maybe she left during the night. You said she was nuts.
 Maybe she freaked out and ran away.
ISOB. I'll go and find her.

*Isobel puts her mug down and rises to her feet, but Gemma
jumps up ahead of her.*

- GEM. I'll go with you.

Gemma glances tendentiously at Dan.

We shouldn't be left alone.

Enter Kristy, casually dressed, looking dishevelled and bleary eyed as if through lack of sleep.

Where have you been? We were just coming to find you.

KRIS. Sorry, I slept in.

Isobel puts a sympathetic hand on Kristy's shoulder.

ISOB. Did you have trouble sleeping?

KRIS. Nightmares.

GEM. It's this strange place, it's like a mausoleum. Wait till you meet the Angel of Death. He'll make you dream of Armageddon.

Kristy glances sharply at Gemma and sits down on the sofa next to Isobel.

Gemma resumes her seat.

Dan walks round to the front of the table clutching a sheet of paper and some envelopes as if about to give a lecture.

DAN Does anyone have any idea yet what the term 'Angel of Death' refers to?

They look at each other and shake their heads in silence.

GEM. Back to you, big guy. We need a clue.

DAN I don't have any clues. I have a set of sealed envelopes which Gideon left for each of you. Isobel, Kristy, Gemma.

Dan hands out the envelopes in named order.

You are not to discuss the information enclosed with each other until after you have completed the instructions.

GEM. That's hardly fair. He could be giving more help to one of us than the others.

DAN It's his game - those are his rules. Remember, any infraction of the rules will disqualify you at the end.

GEM. If the house isn't bugged, how are you going to know what we discuss in private?

DAN Those are the rules. I don't know how they're going to be enforced - so I suggest you follow them until we find out.

Isobel views her envelope warily.

ISOB. Do you know what instructions these envelopes contain?

DAN Private communication from Mr Mayer, I expect.

Gemma does a Boris Karloff voice.

GEM. From beyond the grave!

They open their envelopes, read briefly, and glance at each other like poker players before putting the sheets back in the envelopes. Dan gestures to a small pile of notebooks and folders on the table.

DAN These are his private papers, including those from his university years. They reveal quite a lot about his state of mind at the time. He was in love with Isobel's stylish sophistication, but he could never find the courage to tell her. Is that what you remember?

Isobel nods.

ISOB. He wrote a letter to me describing his condition. A pathological fear of rejection which made it impossible to form relationships with anyone. He couldn't do anything about it - except drink.

GEM. Why didn't you mention this last night?

ISOB. I'd forgotten all about it until this morning.
DAN That's to be expected. Your memories will need prompting.
ISOB. I tried talking to him, but he refused to discuss it. That was the last time we ever spoke.
DAN Did you show the letter to anyone else?
ISOB. Yes - two friends.
DAN Male or female?
ISOB. Female. Why?
DAN Did he know these people?
ISOB. Yes - one of them had a somewhat romantic view of him. I thought she ought to know what he was really like.
DAN But did he know you showed them the letter?
ISOB. He must have known I would - young women are not very discrete when it comes to relationships.
DAN It seems a small thing to us, but perhaps he felt a sense of betrayal.
GEM. If he hates us so much, why would he invite us here?
DAN Hates?
GEM. Alright - hated.
DAN He could be seeking revenge for some perceived grievance or injustice he believes he suffered.
GEM. Now you're talking as if he is still alive.
DAN He may be seeking redress from beyond the grave - not through any supernatural power, but simply by the arrangements he put in place before his death.
GEM. Was he a misogynist?
DAN Do you mean like F. Scott Fitzgerald - or Jack the Ripper?
GEM. I haven't read much Jack the Ripper.
KRIS. She means - did Gideon ever criticize orthodox feminist views?
DAN He became disillusioned with politics at quite an early age and took no interest in the real world. He was a fantasist who described Kristy as the most enigmatic and beguiling human being he'd ever known. He was

intrigued by her stage-fright. He wrote that being near her was enthralling - as if a psychic bond existed between them through which he could draw creative inspiration.

KRIS. Whatever he was feeling, he kept to himself. We spent quite a lot of time together; went to see films and plays. He liked to talk about the arts, but whenever I tried to get physically close to him, he'd make his excuses and leave. I thought there was something about me he just didn't like.

GEM. Sounds like he didn't want to get too intimate with anyone. Maybe he wasn't a bloke after all. He could have been a butch-looking lesbo trying to fool us all.

KRIS. He used to strip down backstage and on the beach.

GEM. But did you see his todger? Maybe he didn't have one. A birth deformity or industrial accident. Maybe he'd been in the army. You know the old joke about the distance from the tip of your penis to your balls? He could have left his in some corner of a foreign field that is forever England.

DAN I checked his medical record and postmortem report. There was no accident or deformity. I also found a girlfriend who knew him before any of you did.

Dan hands a photograph of a teenage couple to Gemma. She glances at it then passes it on to Kristy and Isobel.

She said they had a normal sexual relationship. The pathological fear, as Isobel appropriately described it, came later.

Isobel studies the photograph.

ISOB. How long did it take you to find her?

DAN Not long once I had a name. Gideon's diaries go back a long way.

ISOB. But you didn't have to.

DAN Didn't have to what?

ISOB. Go to all that trouble. Above and beyond the call of duty. Do you get a bonus if one of us solves the riddle?

GEM. He wants us to cut him in on the deal. Nothing wrong with that, so long as he earns his share.

DAN I'm not doing this for money - directly.

GEM. Yeah, right.

DAN Mr Mayer is my client. I'm simply following his instructions.

GEM. But afterwards, you can write a learned paper for one of your pop psychology journals.

ISOB. Were there any more girlfriends after he left Brille?

DAN No. After his recovery from a breakdown, he seems to have withdrawn from life almost completely; working graveyard shifts, living only to compose. He remained a recluse despite his commercial success.

ISOB. Did he have any family members?

DAN He was estranged from his family and had very little contact with them in the years leading up to his death.

GEM. So what did he write about me?

DAN Very little, surprisingly. Either that or it's been lost or destroyed. I'm still trying to work out why you were invited here this weekend. You seem to have nothing in common with either Gideon, or Isobel, or Kristy - all of whom shared an artistic passion and thwarted ambition. The only common factor seems to be that you went to the same university at the same time. How would you describe your relationship with him?

GEM. What relationship? He was just a weird bloke I met at college. If I saw him coming I'd duck into the nearest corner shop.

DAN How long did it take for you to conclude that he was - weird?

GEOR About a year.

DAN Quite a long time. His interest in you may have been simply transient and prurient.

GEM. What's that supposed to mean?

DAN He was curious about your relationships with other men. He wrote down the names of several lecturers he suspected you were sleeping with.

Dan hands her another sheet of paper.

Gemma studies it and raises her eyebrows in surprise.

GEM. Bastard! He must have been stalking me.

Isobel leans over towards her.

ISOB. Can I see that?

Isobel takes the sheet and shares it with Kristy.

Gemma! How could you?

GEM. It was easier than reading all those books.

Kristy goes to the table and opens one of the volumes at a page marked by a loose leaf sheet.

KRIS. Have you read through all of these?

DAN Yes.

KRIS. How long did it take?

DAN About a week.

KRIS. A week to analyze a life. It doesn't sound very long. Did you mark this page?

DAN No.

Kristy reads from the page.

KRIS. The nineteenth-century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in the glass.

ISOB. Sounds like Oscar Wilde.

KRIS. The Preface from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

GEM. I always thought he was a bit queer. What do you make of that, Mr Psychologist? Evidence of self-loathing?

DAN It depends on whether he regarded himself, or someone else, or something else, as Caliban.

ISOB. Do you think Wilde's novel inspired him to have that portrait painted.

DAN Have you noticed any change in it since yesterday?

Isobel stands in front of the painting.

ISOB. I'd say the demeanour is darker and more severe, as if a scowl is developing.

Gemma joins her.

GEM. Crap! The light's changed, that's all.

DAN Dorian Gray's debauched lifestyle was a cause of the changes to his portrait - Gideon Mayer is now beyond ageing and sin - and therefore, logically, the picture shouldn't change.

GEM. Maybe he's not beyond sin. I think I know the answer to the riddle - but you're not going to like this.

DAN Go on.

GEM. Well, sleeping with the Angel of Death could relate to sex and death. And you could say that he was the angel of his own destruction.

Gemma collects the remote device from the table and switches on the video screen. The large tree is plainly visible with the small headstone beneath the canopy.

His remains are buried under the oak tree out there right under our noses - together with his favourite stallion, in true neo-Gothic style. What if he is the Angel of Death?

Pause.

I did say you're not going to like it.

DAN What are you suggesting? An act of necrophilia with the man or the horse?

GEM. I suppose it might be a bit difficult without the aid of rigor mortis.

Isobel expresses her disapproval with a frown.

ISOB. Gemma!

Isobel and Kristy look to Dan with deep concern on their faces.

DAN It's almost a plausible suggestion, but for one slight problem. There's nothing buried out there except two urns of ashes. Both bodies were cremated.

There is an audible sigh of relief from Kristy and Isobel followed by a pause.

GEM. How do you cremate a horse? It wouldn't fit in the oven.

DAN Pet crematoria cater for the whims of wealthy people.

ISOB. If Gideon's lawyers agreed to this, then surely it can't involve anything obscene or illegal?

DAN I wouldn't have thought so - depending on how much he told them.

KRIS. The Angel of Death is a kenning.

GEM. What's a kenning?

ISOB. A sort of poetic allegory. Which means it could relate to just about anything.

KRIS. Sex, death, and religion are the most likely references. The Angel of Death sounds like an incubus or a succubus - a demon that seduces mortals.

DAN I don't think you'll be meeting one of those this weekend.

GEM. More's the pity. I'm getting bored with ordinary men. They're so dull and predictable.

ISOB. Isn't there a biblical reference to an Angel of Death in

the Old Testament? Sent by God to take the first born of the Egyptians when Pharaoh refused to free the Israelites?

DAN There have been Protestant translations of Exodus which refer to a destroying angel. In Jewish mythology, the Angel of Death is a figure like the grim reaper, who collects your soul when you pass away.

Gemma stands in front of the sculpture.

GEM. Would a Jewish Angel of Death have a predilection for partially clothed young women?

DAN That sculptor was catering for Italian taste. Moses told the Israelites to smear lambs blood on their door posts and lintels and the Eternal would pass over their homes and spare them. The event is commemorated each year by the feast of Passover.

Gemma glances across at the painting.

GEM. You'd think a god of all creation would have a more high tech way of discriminating against the people he doesn't like.

ISOB. When is the feast of Passover?

DAN It usually takes place in April, between nightfall and dawn on the first full moon of spring.

ISOB. There was nearly a full moon last night.

KRIS. Passover is tomorrow night.

ISOB. A bit of a coincidence.

GEM. At least it's not Hallowe'en. That would really get me spooked.

KRIS. Don't you want to know if any of us were first born in our families?

DAN I already know. It's all in your files. I didn't want to alarm anyone with a three thousand year old superstition.

GEM. So who else was first born?

Isobel and Kristy are silent.

DAN Just you, Gemma.

GEM. Why am I beginning to feel singled out here?

ISOB. Was Gideon Jewish?

DAN Half-Jewish, on his mother's side, which makes him Jewish. He was familiar with Rabbinic teachings.

ISOB. This could all be a red herring. We don't know that Gideon's Angel of Death has anything to do with religion, or sex, or even death. Those are just the predilections of our society. It could refer to anything, like his stamp collection, or cooking, or yoga, or dance, or

GEM. Drugs! He was into drugs - he died of an overdose. Sleeping with the Angel of Death could refer to a bad trip.

ISOB. Is there a drug called the Angel of Death? If it's a kenning then it could refer to any drug or aphrodisiac. What drugs are associated with sex and death?

GEM. What drug did he overdose on?

Dan consults a file.

DAN A form of phencyclidine or PCP.

GEM. Angel Dust. They use it to tranquillize horses!

ISOB. How did the horse die?

DAN It was being treating for a strained muscle when it died suddenly - an adverse reaction to a drug.

GEM. He must have dropped some in a drink for himself. Way to go, Gideon! Waste not, want not! He's in good company now - with the stoned bloke who wrote about the four horsemen of the Apocalypse.

DAN But the four horsemen of the Apocalypse were not angels of death.

GEM. There was an Angel of Death in one of those old sixties Hammer horror films. Christopher Lee was

holding a seance and Death came riding in on his horse to steal their souls.

KRIS. The Devil Rides Out was based on a Dennis Wheatley novel, first published in 1934. One of his characters, the Duke de Richleau, uttered the last lines of the 'Sussamma Ritual' to save the souls of those present from the Angel of Death as it broke into their pentacle.

GEM. That's it! What is the Sussamma Ritual?

Kristy smiles knowingly and shakes her head.

KRIS. A literary invention inspired by the novelist and short-story writer William Hope Hodgson. Hodgson's ghost-finder, Thomas Carnacki, used a pentacle and a 'Saaamaaa Ritual' to ward off a demonic horse, in *The Horse of the Invisible* – published in 1910.

GEM. Not much good to us then.

DAN. Actually, the horse turned out to be the butler in a pantomime costume. You could say that Hodgson anticipated *Scooby Doo*.

ISOB. Dan, there's something I need to discuss with you - in private.

Dan acknowledges with a nod.

Exit Isobel, followed by Dan.

KRIS. That's not right.

GEM. What isn't?

KRIS. At the end of the story, the butler who had staged the hoax was attacked by a ghostly horse - and died.

GEM. I get the feeling you knew him better than any of us.

KRIS. Who? Gideon?

GEM. Think back, he must have said something to you.

KRIS. I don't remember very much about our conversations.

GEM. If I remember anything, I'll let you know. But you must do the same for me.

KRIS. I thought we already had that understanding.

- GEM. An old boyfriend once put a hundred pounds on a football team to win the FA Cup. They started out at 20-1, but they managed to reach the final. So on the day of the match, he put a thousand on the other side. Why do you think he did that?
- KRIS. To win a thousand pounds.
- GEM. Right. Whichever team won, he won. You and I ought to have the same arrangement. Whoever works out how to sleep with this Angel of Death thing shares the money with the other person.
- KRIS. Wouldn't it be a bit difficult to draw up a formal contract out here without lawyers?
- GEM. No, I've got it all written out. All you've got to do is sign this bit of paper.

Gemma hands her a bit of paper.

Kristy takes and signs without even reading, then hands it back.

Gemma raises her eyebrows in surprise, folds up the paper and puts it in her pocket.

That was easy enough.

- KRIS. Have you made a similar deal with Isobel?
- GEM. Er, no, I don't think she's a team player. Are we supposed to be on some sort of guilt trip here? Punished for not being nicer to him, is that it?
- KRIS. Do you feel guilty?
- GEM. What am I supposed to feel guilty for?
- KRIS. Only you can answer that.
- GEM. No, I don't. What about you?
- KRIS. There was more going on in his head than I realised. When you're young, it's a bit like being dumped in a stormy sea after a shipwreck. There are other people in the water around you, but you tend not to notice their struggles. Your main concern is keeping your own head above water.
- GEM. I hear what you're saying - but I never had much of a chance to explore all that middle-class teen-angst stuff.

I left home at fifteen to escape the attentions of my step-dad.

KRIS. What happened to your real father?

GEM. My parents were divorced. When you've got nowhere to live, you've got more to worry about than making friends.

KRIS. Were did you go?

GEM. Into a damp, freezing bedsit. I lived alone with pimps and dossers banging on my door until I found a half-decent bloke with a one bedroom flat to move in with. I got married at eighteen - to a man with a two bedroom house - and studied A levels at night school to get a place at Brille and a degree that was supposed to get me a decent job.

KRIS. It sounds like your only problem has been a lack of money.

Exit Kristy.

GEM. That's easy for you to say - snotty bitch!

Exit Gemma.

Lights down

III

Saturday evening. The study is bathed in a soft amber light.

Enter Isobel, wearing a classical tunic with a towel draped across her shoulders. She carries a CD player, which she places on the floor and plugs into a nearby wall socket.

She warms up using the edge of the table as a bar, then leaves the towel on a chair and plays a track from a CD.

She begins dancing a ballet solo to Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten.

Enter Dan. He sits at the table and watches her until the music ends.

She holds her final pose meditatively.

DAN Did he ever see you dance?

Isobel turns to face him.

ISOB. I never danced at Brille. There were some public performances after graduation which he might have attended.

DAN Why do you think he chose that piece?

Isobel smiles.

ISOB. A haunting elegy for a dead composer.

DAN If you were a dancer, why study for an English degree?

ISOB. I thought you knew everything about us?

DAN Not everything.

ISOB. I didn't fail to progress because I wasn't good enough. A serious ankle injury in Paris took two operations to

fix and several years to heal. The chance of a career in classical dance slipped away in that time and I needed other options.

Isobel lifts the towel and drapes it across the back of her neck. She keeps warm with stretching exercises.

DAN Did he know what you were going through?

ISOB. In the evenings, he would come to my flat and we'd talk about arts and literature, and anything else that came to mind, including our future plans. I had a regular warm up programme to rehabilitate and stay toned; and if he called round I'd simply let him in and carry on exercising.

DAN He became your audience and your critic.

Isobel pauses for a moment, in reflection, then continues exercising.

ISOB. He composed a piece for me, but we never got round to choreographing it. My ankle was still healing and wasn't strong enough to dance on.

DAN What was the title of the piece?

ISOB. *Spring Ether.*

DAN Spring was important to him. He used to long for it each year. In the winter he used to sleep with a desk lamp shining in his face.

ISOB. I didn't know that. Well, at least he achieved something with his music before the end. Not many artists can say that. I'm glad for him, but I doubt whether it made him very happy. Some people are destined to lead troubled lives.

DAN You knew about his successes though, didn't you?

ISOB. Some of them, yes.

DAN But you made no effort to contact him.

ISOB. He would have contacted me when he was alive if he'd wanted to. He toyed with me, but to use a pun - he

never responded to my overtures - or anyone else's.

DAN What was it like studying at Brille College?

ISOB. Art, music, design, art history, and theatre were the subjects taught, with history and English departments thrown in almost as an afterthought. From an academic point of view, it was a pissant little place with a tiny campus and virtually no library, but it was a beautiful site on the Dorset coast, and most of the students didn't care much about books anyway.

DAN You mean they were not academic high-achievers?

ISOB. It was partly that. Most had a C-grade average and were just looking for an easy route to a degree; but there was a lot of ambition. People who wanted to act, or dance, or sing, or do stand-up, but lacked the talent or the confidence to pursue their dream head-on at one of the more prestigious dance or drama schools. So a degree course provided a good fall back, and there were always shows and performances going on for those who wanted to get involved in that sort of thing.

DAN In such a small college the students must have got to know each other fairly well.

ISOB. Too well. Gossip, rumour, and innuendo were everywhere. Relationships are easily complicated by other relationships and so defensive cliques would form and mistrust abounded. It was an easy place to make friends - and to lose them. Thinking back, it was almost surreal compared to life in the real world. A sort of Brigadoon, looming out of the temporal mist and then vanishing after three years of study.

DAN Do you remember when you first met Gideon?

Isobel nods.

ISOB. A poetry seminar. He seemed to have some interesting ideas and we carried on talking in the refectory. He seemed articulate and self-assured then, but three years

later he was a pariah and a drunk who belonged in a hospital.

DAN Did he ever mention Kristy or Gemma?

ISOB. Kristy was the one he really loved.

DAN Why do you say that?

ISOB. His interest in me seemed to be driven by intellectual curiosity rather than any sort of passion. I represented something abstract and exotic. But with Kristy, he was totally smitten, as if he'd found in her a *raison d'être*.

DAN How did she feel about him?

ISOB. You'll have to ask her that. Kristy could always turn heads in a room, but she seemed to want male friends she could trust and rely on. The ratio of women to men was about ten to one so she didn't have many to choose from. Maybe Gideon thought he could use her to develop his own artistic vision, like a sort of Christine in *Phantom of the Opera*.

DAN Or Margaret from *Faust*. Why do you think he chose you and Gemma to play out this posthumous game when there might have been a dozen other possible candidates from his college days?

ISOB. Maybe the others declined the invitation. Or maybe we were selected because we were considered most likely to accept.

Dan stands.

DAN There were no others. You three were named in the original plan. It was one of the first questions I asked when I was briefed on this assignment. It's becoming fairly clear why he chose Kristy. If you can work out why he also chose the two of you; find the link you two have with Kristy; then you might be closer to solving the riddle of the Angel of Death.

Isobel stops exercising and faces him.

ISOB. You seem to know a lot about us, but we still don't know anything about you. That's hardly fair, is it?

DAN There isn't very much to know. I'm just here to moderate the proceedings and encourage fair play.

ISOB. What do you do when you're not here?

DAN I provide consultations on other situations like this.

ISOB. I didn't realise there was such a demand for this sort of thing. Don't you find it disturbing?

DAN I find life disturbing.

ISOB. Just like he did. You're becoming a part of this - in a way in which you probably never intended.

Isobel moves her lips towards his. Dan kisses her lips for a moment before before taking a step back.

DAN I still have a job to do.

ISOB. Does the job allow you to give honest answers to my questions?

DAN If I can.

Isobel glances around.

ISOB. Do you think he's still here?

DAN Is who still here?

ISOB. Gideon. Like a puppet master - and we're just marionettes on strings for him to play with?

DAN That's an illogical suggestion.

ISOB. Then why do you think he asked me to dance for him?

Isobel glances around again.

DAN You can sense his presence here in this room.

DAN The painting was put up there to induce that sort of feeling. It's sending a message to those who are receptive to the idea that he's still here.

ISOB. But why? He wasn't a manipulative person. Mind games were never his style.

DAN Don't make the mistake of thinking you know him now. Assume that you don't. Treat him with caution, as you would a complete stranger.

ISOB. How can I know him now if he's no longer here?

DAN This game is a legacy of his personality. The Gideon Mayer who set up the game was probably different to the man you knew. Certainly older and so much less deferential to women.

Dan consults his watch.

It's getting late, you should go up to your room before the lights go down.

ISOB. Why don't you come with me? You must have some more questions to ask. Or is that against the rules?

Dan glances at the painting.

DAN There's something I have to do first.

Isobel glances warily at the painting.

ISOB. Don't be too late.

Exit Isobel with the CD player.

Dan walks up to the painting and stands in front of it.

The lights dim down to twilight and the clock chimes at midnight.

DAN What are you trying to achieve from all of this? You can't turn the clock back. The past has gone. They never really existed, not as you remember them. We all expect too much of our youth - it's part of growing up. I can't continue to represent your interests if you intend to harm them in any way.

A faint, low, growling chuckle is heard and a thin red volume

falls off a bookshelf and lands at Dan's feet. He bends down to pick it up but hears a sound of someone approaching before he can open it. He steps into the shadow to observe events.

Enter Kristy, wearing a nightshirt, carrying a coil of rope as if it were an offering. She stands in front of the painting and lets the coil fall to the floor whilst keeping a grip on one end. She fashions a noose, throws it over a beam and wraps the free end several times around the table leg so that the coils jam. She positions a wooden stool under the noose, steps up, and places it around her neck.

Dan emerges from the shadows, leaves the book on the table, and stands facing Kristy with his back to the painting.

Kristy is staring at the painting as if in a trance.

Kristy, what are you doing?

Kristy looks down at him, reaches above her head to grasp the rope, then suddenly kicks the chair backwards and is left suspended.

Dan utters an expletive and puts his arms around her thighs to support her weight, but the stool is too far away for him to retrieve without letting go of her. He utters another expletive, dashes to the table leg, and begins uncoiling the rope until it slithers free under Kristy's weight.

Kristy falls to the ground and lies still.

Dan finds her conscious, removes the noose, and helps her to sit up.

DAN What was all that about?

KRIS. Something I had to do.

DAN Had to? Why?

KRIS. I was required to.

DAN You mean someone forced you?

Kristy looks up at the painting.

KRIS. He asked me do it.

DAN I don't understand?
KRIS. He's still here. I've heard him speak.
DAN Are you saying you can hear his voice?
KRIS. No, not audibly. But in here.

Kristy presses her temples with her fingertips.

DAN When did these voices start?
KRIS. Not voices - just him. Last night, I heard him calling out to me, asking me to come down here.
DAN Did you come down by yourself?
KRIS. Yes.
DAN What did he want?
KRIS. He said he wanted to see me again, alone, without the others.
DAN Did he say why the others are here?
KRIS. No.

Dan lifts the noose.

DAN Is he telling you to kill yourself?
KRIS. He said you'd be here. It all happened just as he predicted, as if he had scripted it in advance, just like the scenes we filmed as students.
DAN Did he ever hurt you?
KRIS. No, never. He was very good at creating illusions for the camera.
DAN Well, you're going to have a bruise on your neck this time.

Dan drops the noose and puts his finger to her throat. Kristy grabs his hand defensively at first, but then gently rubs the finger up and down her cheek and jaw.

KRIS. Can you feel that?

Dan rubs his thumb and fingers together as if analysing a

strange substance.

- DAN The skin felt a bit rough under the make-up.
- KRIS. The cause had gone by the time I got to Brille, but the scars remained. I learned to hide them with make-up, but if you look closely you can still see them.
- DAN Many people have acne scars from their teenage years.
- KRIS. Other girls would avoid me as if I were a leper, and the boys wouldn't look at me except to make sick jokes.
- DAN But the ugly duckling became a beautiful swan.
- KRIS. The scars are more than just skin deep. There's still the ugly feeling inside. Gideon was the first man I met who seemed to understand what I was thinking and feeling. It was almost like telepathy. For a while I thought he might even help me to overcome my inhibition on stage. I didn't realise the extent to which he was fighting his own demons.
- DAN Don't you think there was a sexual motive behind his attraction to you?
- KRIS. Of course. Why else do you think I was attracted to him.

Dan lifts the rope.

- DAN Where did you get this from?
- KRIS. It was in my room. Did you put it there?
- DAN No.
- KRIS. Someone left it on my bed.
- DAN Were you a willing participant just now, or do you feel you were coerced or deceived in some way?
- KRIS. Why do you ask?
- DAN That was a dangerous stunt he persuaded you to perform. I need to know if the rest of us are in any sort of danger.
- KRIS. I feel perfectly safe. I don't know about any of you. I may not have your mental fortitude, Dr Levin, but I can still match your intellect - and whatever powers of

deductive reasoning you think you possess. As for the dangerous stunt we just performed - I enjoyed it.

Kristy gets up and walks to the door.

Exit Kristy.

Dan examines the rope thoughtfully as he reflects on her comment, then leaves it on the table, collects the book and walks to the door.

Exit Dan.

Lights down.

IV

Sunday morning. Daylight enters through the windows.

Isobel is sitting and reading one of Gideon's diaries.

Gemma storms in dragging a hideous-looking mannequin by the hair. This mannequin is in the form of a partially decomposed corpse, dressed in rags. She props it on the table in a seating position.

Isobel gets up to look at it.

ISOB. Where did this thing come from?

GEM. I found it on my bed last night. Gideon Mayer has a sick sense of humour. Watch this!

Gemma points a small remote control unit at the thing and presses a button. The mouth opens in a leery grin to reveal rotting teeth, and emits a hoarse, deep-throated chuckle, while the arms extend and curl in an inviting embrace.

Those aren't the only moving parts. I'd say it's fully functional for cold winter nights.

ISOB. You're joking!

Isobel puts a hand to its crotch to check the contents.

Did you sleep with it?

GEM. That's not all. My instructions were to go down on it first to fluff it up.

Gemma switches off the mannequin, puts down the remote control device, and picks up the noose Dan left on the table.

What's this for?

ISOB. Dan's way of saying go hang yourself.

GEM. I'd like to string him up by the chestnuts, if he had any.
Where is he?

ISOB. He hasn't shown yet. Neither has Kristy.

GEM. He's got a cheek to lecture us about getting here on time. You don't think those two have ... that's gotta be against the rules.

ISOB. It's Sunday morning. Maybe Dan's gone to a church service.

GEM. He'd have to leave the house to do that.

ISOB. The rules don't apply to him - he's not playing the game.

GEM. So he says. Do you think he's the sort of bloke who goes to church? He's a heathen if ever I saw one.

ISOB. A heathen who believes in ghosts.

GEM. You don't mean ...?

Gemma looks at the painting.

Maybe that's why he's going out of his way to make Gideon happy?

ISOB. What's the difference between a ghost and someone who can project their will from beyond the grave?

GEM. I suppose it depends on how they do it. There's nothing supernatural about doing it by proxy. Don't tell me you believe in ghosts too?

ISOB. No - but I am afraid of them.

GEM. You don't have to worry about Gideon, I'm the one who really pissed him off. If I seriously thought he was haunting this place, I'd be out of here like a shot. Money or no money.

ISOB. What did you do to him?

GEM. Can't you guess?

ISOB. Tell me.

GEM. Kristy wasn't the only one with stage-fright back then.

I'm going to wake up our saintly psychologist with a few Hail Marys.

Isobel frowns as Gemma walks towards the door.

Enter Dan and Kristy.

Dan is wearing light coloured slacks and a short-sleeved cotton shirt. His hair is brushed forward and he is clutching the red book he discovered the previous night.

Kristy is wearing a more formal black skirt and blue blouse, with her hair pinned up tightly.

DAN No need for Hail Marys. Not that I'd mind been woken up by your sweet voice chanting in my ear.

GEM. In that case - here's my business card.

Gemma places the card on the book Dan is holding.

You can buy me dinner and take me to a movie. It must be lonely spending so much time with all those books.

DAN Books bring their own reward. They can be quite revealing at times.

GEM. Maybe you'd like to reveal the reason why you left a sex-zombie on my bed. Dan - meet Dan's brother.

Gemma picks up the control device and animates the mannequin again.

Dan examines the mannequin.

Gemma switches it off and puts the device down on the table.

DAN I don't know where this thing came from, I've never seen it before.

ISOB. Then there must be someone else in the house!

DAN Not necessarily. It could have been timed to fall out of a wall compartment and land on your bed - or even land on top of you in the dark.

GEM. Do you know what my written instructions were?

- DAN No, but I can guess that they related to 'my brother' here in some way.
- ISOB. I thought we wouldn't be asked to do anything illegal or obscene?
- DAN So did I. It seems that we were both wrong.
- GEM. Do you have any more surprises lined up for us?
- DAN There are no more written instructions that I'm aware of. From now on, as far as I know, we're on our own.
- ISOB. Have you discovered anything more about the drugs he took?

Dan raises the book in his hand.

- DAN This diary describes his final year. This house was his retreat from the world, but it wasn't far enough. He wanted to escape from reality through an altered state of consciousness, or into oblivion, and did so by experimenting with hallucinogenics, even if it involved courting Death.
- KRIS. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death - Corinthians.

Dan gives Kristy a quizzical glance.

- DAN Do you know what else he wrote?
- KRIS. I only know what he tells me.
- GEM. Tells you? You're nuts - hearing voices - that's what schizos do.

Kristy glares at Gemma with chilling disdain and an icy smile.

- ISOB. But how do you sleep with a drug?
- GEM. Maybe you just go to sleep after crawling around on the ceiling for a few hours. There's no sex or religion involved.
- ISOB. What about the death bit?
- DAN Fatalities frequently result from the delusions caused

by mind-bending drugs. Flying out of windows and such like - or even simple heart failure.

GEM. We'll be alright, we've got a psychologist to look after us. It's all beginning to make sense now. We've got to get hold of some first. I know a few people who can help.

DAN No contact with the outside world is allowed. If the Angel of Death is a drug, and if the idea is that you should take some, then there'll be a dose in the building for one of you to find.

ISOB. Why just one?

DAN He brought all three of you here to play this game - but he's really only interested in one of you.

The three women look at each other slightly uncomfortably.

ISOB. Do you know which one of us he has in mind?

DAN The odd man out.

GEM. This is all supposition. The truth is you don't know anything more than we do.

DAN Tell me what you've learned about Gideon Mayer since you got here - apart from the fact that he died of a drug overdose.

GEM. We know that he fancied Kristy and Isobel but was too afraid to try his luck.

DAN You've known that all the time, you didn't learn it here. What you don't seem to realise is that the Gideon Mayer you knew no longer exists.

GEM. Well, of course he doesn't exist. He's dead.

DAN I mean the personality ceased to exist some time ago. In layman's terms he changed. Not in the way you or I have gradually matured over the years, but through a catastrophic shift in personality traits. The evidence for that is in his music. You've all heard the expression Jekyll and Hyde. Well, if the Gideon you knew was Dr Jekyll, then what came later, what constructed this experiment, was Mr Hyde.

ISOB. Is it possible to change that much?
DAN It happens to people who recover, or appear to recover, from great trauma.
ISOB. What trauma? Were we responsible in some way?
DAN No, he was already reeling when you met. That's why he empathised so strongly with Isobel, the crippled dancer, and Kristy, the severely inhibited, and hence emotionally crippled, actor.
ISOB. Then why is he trying to hurt us?
DAN I don't know whether he is trying to hurt you. That's just the most obvious motive which comes to mind.
GEM. You still haven't told us yet why he's so interested in me. I'm not like Isobel or Kristy - there's nothing wrong with me.
DAN Why did you say 'is' so interested in me?
GEM. What should I have said?
DAN You spoke in the present tense.
GEM. So did you.

Dan sighs.

DAN It looks like all four of us are now in a state of mind which believes that some part of him is still alive and existing here in this house.

Gemma laughs breezily.

GEM. Not me. There's no way you'll convince me of the existence of ghosts. Hear that, Gideon? I don't believe in ghosts!

*The others look around anxiously as if waiting for a reply.
A faint rumbling is heard from a pipe.*

That's just the old plumbing.
DAN You don't have to believe now. The suggestion has already been planted in your subconscious, just waiting

to be activated at a pre-determined time.

ISOB. Why would that be a problem?

DAN He may have been driven by an irrational desire for revenge against one or more of you. The sadistic aspect of his personality, which he repressed in life, was finally let loose by the drugs which ultimately killed him, and now he is seeking to influence your lives from beyond the grave.

ISOB. Why wait till after he died? If he wanted to harm us, he could have done so when he was alive. If you're rich and vindictive enough, there are any number of ways you can damage and disrupt the lives of other people.

DAN He may have considered such actions an abuse of power.

GEM. He made me fuck a mannequin with bad breath!

DAN He didn't force you to do anything. There are no cameras in the bedrooms. The choice was yours.

GEM. How do I know that thing isn't going to be forensically tested for evidence that we - that I - did as I was told?

DAN You could have said you made him use a condom. I did try to warn you - this may be just a battle of wits. It's a fascinating experiment to set up - but it requires the right sort of subjects to play the different roles.

ISOB. What if it's more than just an experiment? We could be like insects caught by a disturbed and damaged psyche.

DAN Or you could be three exemplary characters he once encountered at the same extraordinary moment in time. From a professional point of view, I can well understand why he was drawn to you.

ISOB. And from a personal point of view?

DAN Personal feelings are much more complex. They vary according to your state of mind.

ISOB. That's like saying being in love is just an illusion.

DAN It is an illusion - it never lasts for very long. What we love are the memories of it.

GEM. You're as weird as he is.

DAN Not quite. The way this game has been set up is

dangerous. There are not enough safeguards in place. Gideon Mayer could be the sort of madman who sets a time bomb to go off in his apartment block after his death to wreak revenge on his noisy neighbours.

ISOB. What do you think is going to happen?

DAN I don't know yet.

GEM. So what should we do - bail out before Monday morning?

Dan makes no reply.

ISOB. Dan, we'd like to trust you. You know we would. But we don't even know for sure who you are. How do we know you're not part of the script? Winding us up with dire warnings to scare us into leaving early - and losing out on what we've already been promised?

DAN I can't tell you whether to leave or to stay. It's entirely up to you. I can only try to ensure that there are no more surprises.

Gemma gestures toward the painting.

GEM. What if our interests conflict with his interests? He's your client, remember? He's the organ grinder, you're just the monkey.

DAN There is no conflict of interest now. My concerns are for the living, not the dead.

KRIS. I don't believe he'd want to harm me.

ISOB. Do you think we're all equally at risk?

DAN No, I think his vengeance is directed towards one person.

Everyone looks at Gemma.

GEM. Why me?

DAN He was genuinely fond of Kristy and Isobel. But he regarded you with a certain degree of hostility which

never died.

Gemma laughs defiantly.

GEM. So what's he going to do about it? Do you think the ghost of Gideon Mayer is going to rise up out of his urn like a pissed-off genie and shout boo in my ear? That adolescent-minded little prick couldn't even get it up when he was alive, how's he going manage it now that he's dead?

Kristy and Isobel exchange glances.

DAN I thought you didn't know him very well?

GEM. I didn't want to speak ill of dead.

Dan opens the red book at a marked page and hands it to Gemma.

DAN But you didn't mind while he was still alive. In his fragile state, it's hardly surprising that he didn't want to risk getting too close to Kristy or Isobel.

GEM. Alright, so I shouldn't have said anything. But any normal bloke would have just blamed it on brewer's droop and laughed it off. He shouldn't have been so sensitive. Are you saying we're all here today just because Gideon Mayer had a limp biscuit twelve years ago.

DAN We're not dealing with a 'normal bloke' here. He had very naive and idealised expectations of women. He saw them as poetic muses and totally misjudged Gemma. He trusted her and felt betrayed by her contempt for him.

GEM. I'm not his mother. If he wanted 'love' he should have gone to someone else.

KRIS. Boys have been known to murder their mothers.

DAN He wasn't prepared to risk a relationship with anyone

else after such a disastrous encounter, and so he turned for courage and solace to alcohol and drugs. Now we have an exercise in manipulation from beyond the grave. We don't know what booby traps are going to spring out of the cupboards, or worse ...

ISOB. What could be worse?

DAN I'd rather not speculate for now, but he does seem to have influence over Kristy and Isobel through their memories of him. Gemma, I think you should apologise.

GEM. What?

DAN A simple apology could make a difference.

GEM. Apologise to whom?

DAN To Gideon, of course. And to Isobel and Kristy. You're actions affected their lives too.

GEM. Alright. Giddy, Isobel, and Kristy - I'm sorry for being a slut with a big mouth all those years ago. Will that do?

DAN Now I think you should leave before nightfall.

GEM. And lose my fee for being here? You must be joking!

DAN You can have my fee as compensation.

GEM. Why would you do that?

DAN I've already told you, my interest in this game is purely academic - I don't need the money.

GEM. You don't need the money! God, I hate people like you, with your middle-class virtues and secure finances. I'll bet you don't even watch Corrie!

KRIS. What's that?

ISOB. A soap opera. I thought you wanted to be an actor?

KRIS. On the stage, darling. Television is just vulgar.

GEM. Not even rich people give their money away unless there's something in it for them.

DAN It could save me having to testify at an inquest.

GEM. Is that some sort of a threat?

DAN If anything does happen to you, I'd rather not be blamed.

GEM. Or it could mean you've already worked out where the

drug is. You three are working as a team. Get me out of here and Kristy and Isobel can split the money with you. How do I know this diary is authentic? For all I know you wrote it yourself last night.

Gemma drops the book on the table.

KRIS. Dan is right. Gideon is a sadist. He'll take pleasure in hurting you if he can.

GEM. I've already told you, I don't believe in ghosts.

DAN You don't have to believe in them to be afraid of them. That fear itself is a danger, especially if you intend taking hallucinogenic drugs.

GEM. In that case, you three have more to worry about than me.

Exit Gemma.

DAN Go with her - just in case.

Exit Isobel and Kristy.

Dan pauses in front of the painting for a moment.

Exit Dan.

The head of the mannequin twists around to track him, then looks straight ahead at the audience before slumping to its chest.

Lights down.

V

Sunday evening. Soft lighting.

Dan, Kristy, and Isobel are standing in front of the table, staring at something on the table.

Enter Gemma. Her view of the object on the table is obscured by their bodies.

GEM. What have you found?

The others step aside to reveal a rectangular wooden tray on which sits a sealed flagon of wine and three sets of four very old looking, smooth, round, wooden cups grouped together. A rolled parchment tied with ribbon lies across the cups. Strings emanating from the four corners of the tray lie in a tangled mess as if the tray were lowered from a high trestle before the strings were released.

Gemma steps forward for a closer look.

Where did this come from? I thought no alcohol was allowed.

DAN It looks like the rules have just changed.

GEM. Who left it here? Is there someone else in the house?

Dan lifts one of the strings and looks up at the high ceiling.

DAN There's an electric hoist up there, which could be controlled by a timer.

ISOB. You mean it's been up there all weekend?

DAN Probably.

GEM. So what's the point? Are we celebrating something?

DAN The feast of passover.
GEM. Why do we need twelve cups?
DAN The cups are for each of you. If you partake in the Seder ceremony at Passover you are expected to drink at least four cups, symbolising release, emancipation, redemption, and acceptance by God.

Kristy takes and examines the parchment.

KRIS. Accipite, et bibite ex eo omnes ... it's Latin.

Kristy hands the parchment to Dan.

DAN It's from the Catholic mass.
GEM. It's not human skin, is it?
DAN Sheepskin.
GEM. Do you know what it says?
KRIS. Take ye all and drink of this: For this is the cup of my blood of the new and eternal covenant. The mystery of faith which shall be shed for you unto the forgiveness of sins ...
DAN He had an eclectic approach to religion.
GEM. There are cups for all three of us. You were wrong in your prognosis, Mr Psychologist. Listening to you is a bit like listening to a priest. Once you spot one flaw in the argument, you start wondering how much of the rest is pure bullshit.

Gemma lifts the flagon and pulls a cork from the spout. She fills four of the cups.

He just wants to get us plastered like he used to. This is his revenge. Oh well, here goes number one.

*Gemma lifts the cup to her lips.
Dan grabs her arm.*

DAN You don't know what you're drinking.

Gemma takes a sip.

GEM. Tastes like quality red to me.

Dan takes one of Gemma's cups and holds it under his nose then puts it down.

DAN You don't know what's in it.

GEM. The Angel of Death, I expect? We're obviously meant to drink it or it wouldn't be here.

Gemma gulps down the contents of the cup and beams with a satisfied grin.

At least his taste became more refined as he got older.

She lifts a second cup and drains it.

DAN I wouldn't drink anymore if I were you.

GEM. Why not? It's part of the game.

DAN It's what he wants you to do. You still have your wits about you. Drink, and you'll be leaving yourself open and vulnerable to God-only-knows what's lurking in your subconscious mind; planted and primed by the experience of the last forty-eight hours - which for you included sleeping with a zombie.

GEM. I can take a bad trip - so long as he pays up in the end. If he doesn't, Dr Levin, I'm going to hold you responsible. Gideon Mayer is not the only one with a lawyer.

ISOB. How do you know it's not poisoned?

GEM. He's not going to risk harming his beloved muses just to settle a score with me.

Gemma drinks cup number three.

You know, I think maybe you've got Gideon all wrong. He invited you two along to make up the numbers, but he knew I'd be the only one with the guts to see it through.

ISOB. Dan? What should we do? Maybe she's right. He clearly wants us to drink the wine.

Dan hesitates, uncertain of what to say. He wanders over to the painting and looks up at the face like a poker player trying to gauge his opponent's hand. He takes the flagon, pours some into the palm of his hand and tastes it with his tongue. He passes the flagon to Isobel.

DAN Drink four cups. Quickly - before the chimes.

Isobel pours four cups for Kristy and four for herself. The two women drink, though with less enthusiasm than Gemma.

GEM. We still have a few minutes to go. I can afford to take my time over this one.

Gemma is tipsy and presses herself against Dan.

You'd hate for me to win, wouldn't you. You've fallen for them, just like he did. Most of all, you'd hate to be wrong. All men hate to be wrong. Maybe you're wrong about him. If he's grown up, his taste in women has probably changed a bit too.

The chimes sound and the lights begin to dim. They hear the sound of slow-walking horse hoofs approaching - and the neighing of a horse.

The mannequin lifts its head and cocks its ear.

ISOB. Dan, what's that? What's going on? Is this part of the game?

DAN I don't know.

Dan looks around nervously, then grabs Gemma's wrist and roughly takes the cup from her grasp.

GEM. Give me that - it's mine!

Dan daubs his right thumb in the wine and lets the cup fall. He grabs Gemma roughly by the hair, pulls back her head.

GEM. Ouch! What are you doing?

DAN Saving your soul.

Dan smears a cross on her forehead.

In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Kneel down and pray!

GEM. What?

DAN Get to your knees!

He forces her down and kneels beside her, clutching her hand.

Our Father, who art in Heaven ... say it with me! Our Father, who art in Heaven ...

Gemma recites the Lord's prayer with Dan.

Before they finish there is the sound of horse hoofs approaching becomes much louder and the kneeling couple are illuminated by a pale spot. Gemma looks around, panic stricken, and tries to get up, but Dan keeps hold of her hand.

Stay down!

GEM. Oh my God, he's coming! He's coming for me!

DAN Close your eyes and keep praying!

GEM. No, I can't. I've got to get out of here.

DAN He wants you to run. Stay where you are! You're safe so long as you stay here.

Gemma pulls her hand free and gets to her feet. She turns to run towards the door, but staggers and falls. The spot remains on her. She rises to her feet and reaches the door just as the hoof sounds reach a crescendo and a horse is heard rearing and neighing. Gemma disappears through the open portal and the rope on the table suddenly flies through the air in pursuit as if the end were grabbed by a passing horseman chasing after her. The door slams shut. Dan runs to the door and tries to open it but can't.

ISOB. Dan, what's happening?

DAN It's locked. He wants to keep us in here.

ISOB. What's he going to do?

DAN To us? Probably nothing. To Gemma ...

Dan switches the video screen to the courtyard. Gemma is hanging by the neck from the tree while desperately trying to hold on to the rope with her hands.

.... Try talking to him. He might listen to you.

ISOB. And say what?

DAN Anything which might save her.

Isobel steps forward and pleads with the painting.

ISOB. You can't do this, Gideon. We're sorry, we're all sorry for the past. But this isn't the way. You never harmed anyone before this isn't right. No one has the right to take another life ...

Kristy stands at her shoulder and speaks forcefully.

KRIS. Gideon, you've got what you want, now open the door.

The former lighting level is restored and the door swings open.

Dan views Kristy with some suspicion.

If you want to save her, you better hurry.

Dan and Isobel dash out to help Gemma.

Kristy watches the rescue through the video camera, then switches off the screen.

The head of the grinning mannequin turns slightly to leer at her with a grin.

Kristy projects the palm of her hand to strike its face, knocking it backwards to lie still on the table, then she addresses the portrait.

I haven't left the house, Gideon. So where is it?

Kristy begins dragging the books off the shelves in search of something.

The door slams shut and the lights go down.

Kristy looks around warily.

Dan begins knocking at the door.

DAN Kristy! Kristy are you still in there?

Pause.

Kristy, answer me!

Kristy goes to the door.

KRIS. Yes, I'm here.

DAN Are you alright?

KRIS. Fine. How is Gemma?

DAN She'll be alright. Can you open the door?

KRIS. No, he's locked it again.

DAN I'm going to find some tools and break it down.

KRIS. No, don't do that. I have to stay here tonight. I haven't left the house yet, I'm still in the game. Come back in

the morning.

DAN It's too dangerous. You don't know what he's capable of. He's insane ... Kristy! Open the door! Kristy!!

Kristy turns and grins in a slightly maniacal manner as if possessed.

Lights down.

VI

Monday morning. Daylight enters through the windows.

The door is wide open.

Kristy is hanging from the beam, facing the painting. Her hair is unpinned and loose around her shoulders.

The mannequin sits in a chair beneath the painting; clutching a scroll of paper, tied with ribbon, in one hand.

Enter Dan and Isobel.

Isobel takes the paper scroll from the mannequin, removes the ribbon, and examines it.

ISOB. A copy of the last will and testament of Gideon Mayer. Written just before his death and witnessed by his solicitor. It sets out a generous provision for myself and Gemma. Kristy was to inherit the remainder of the estate, including this property.

Isobel passes the paper to Dan.

I don't understand. Why include them in his will if his intention was to kill them?

DAN He never intended to kill either of them.

ISOB. Then why did he do this?

DAN He didn't, she did it herself.

ISOB. Well, she's certainly sleeping with the Angel of Death now.

Exit Isobel, followed by Dan.

Kristy comes to life and struggles for a few seconds. Then stops and smiles.

KRIS. If we shadows have offended,
Think but this and all is mended ...

She pulls on a free end of the rope to take her weight and releases a steel clip, then drops to the ground, slackens and discards the noose. A harness drops from under her skirt. She smiles at the painting.

KRIS. An interesting lament, and a convincing performance on my part, don't you think? It's a shame no audience will ever see it. Goodbye Gideon.

Exit Kristy.

Low, menacing laughter is heard from the mannequin.

Curtain.