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The Ghost of Sarah Stable

The set is the modernised kitchen of a large old country house with a doorway entrance; a wooden table set in the centre, surrounded by three matching stools or chairs; an exposed beam overhead; varnished wooden floorboards; and a window, sink, drawers, cupboards, and preparation surface to one side. A radio/cd player and an electric kettle can be seen on the surface next to the sink. There is a calendar fixed to the wall near the door and an incongruous rug on the floor beneath the beam.

I

Afternoon. Sunlight shines in through the kitchen window. Enter Jane, followed by Dan, both in their early thirties, both dressed in shirtsleeves, indicative of professional workers at the end of a warm day. Jane's hair is pinned-up.

- JANE Tea or coffee?
DAN Tea please, no sugar.
JANE So what do you think?
DAN It's very impressive.
JANE I thought you'd like it.
DAN I do have some questions though.
JANE Have a seat.

Dan sits at the table. Jane puts tea bags into a pair of mugs on the breakfast bar and pours water from the kettle before adding

milk.

DAN Who else lives here?

JANE No one else - just me.

DAN How do you get to work?

JANE By train if I need to be in London. I spend a lot of time working from home. You saw my office - it's like Mission Control.

Dan glances around.

DAN I thought you'd still be living in London.

Jane hands Dan a mug then turns her face to the window, clutching her mug and taking a sip.

JANE I like the view from here - and the air is a lot cleaner.

Dan appears sceptical.

Don't look at me like that.

DAN Like what?

JANE Like you think I'm trying to sell you something.

DAN Why else would you ask me to come all the way down here?

JANE Can't old friends keep in touch?

DAN Ten years between calls is hardly keeping in touch.

Jane turns her back to the window and leans against the sink, still clutching the mug.

JANE I didn't realise it had been that long. Time flies, as they say. It's been over a year since my divorce.

DAN Sorry to hear that. Who's the lucky jail-breaker?

JANE You wouldn't know him.

DAN I might - I knew all the others.

Jane glances sideways at Dan.

JANE Did you come all the way down here just to score points for the past?

DAN Of course not. I thought it might be worth digging up your garden for the hidden candlesticks.

JANE You're too late. The grave robbers came and went in the fifties. If you want to know what they found, ask the county archaeologist.

DAN I already have. Now tell me the truth and spare me the old friends song. Why did you call me?

Jane pauses for a moment, considering what to say.

JANE I've got a problem. It's a delicate matter, and I have a reputation to consider.

DAN You mean as a slightly superior bitch?

JANE Precisely. So what I have to say is strictly between us.

DAN Alright, you've sworn me to secrecy. Now draw me into your tangled plot of blackmail and extra marital affairs.

Jane smiles wryly.

JANE As in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*?

DAN Just don't ask me to break the law for you. I wannabe one of the good guys.

JANE They all start out as good guys, they just don't stay that way. When I discovered this place last summer, it was derelict. I've never been a very spiritual person, but to me it was like an ancient temple being reclaimed by a jungle of neglect. The walls and foundations were sound, but the interior needed a massive amount of work; though by Easter, when I moved in, everything was perfect. It seemed like a wonderful investment. Maybe the failed marriage had something to do with it, but I fell in love with the character of the old place

right from the start.

Dan glances around again in grudging admiration.

DAN It looks like things have worked out well enough. So what's the problem?

JANE That was the situation up until the beginning of June. Then the mood of the house began to change.

DAN In what way?

JANE It's difficult to put into words, but I feel as if I'm no longer welcome here. There are creaks and groans late at night, and cold places and shadows in the house where before it was always warm and bright.

DAN The weather hasn't been very good lately.

JANE The weather down here has been fine through spring and early summer. And when all this began the solstice was still two weeks away. The days should have been growing longer, not shorter. Sometimes the smell of incense lingers in here until morning, and best of all, think me mad if you like, but I've even sensed a presence down here late at night.

DAN That would explain a few things.

JANE Thinking me mad or sensing a presence?

DAN You're obviously not mad, but you do look a bit weary. Have you been having sleepless nights?

JANE How would you sleep if you thought there was something lurking downstairs in your kitchen?

DAN Anxiety can make us imagine all sorts of things. You're living on the site of an old priory destroyed in the Reformation.

Jane sits at the table adjacent to Dan.

JANE It's not just me, you'd sense it too if you spent the night here.

DAN Is that an invitation?

JANE A professional one.

DAN I have to be at my desk early tomorrow morning. I have a deadline to meet. If I don't publish twice a year, I'm deemed to have missed my target.

JANE I had a friend stay over a few weeks ago. A City trader and rugby player - completely devoid of imagination. I woke to find him sitting on the edge of the bed at first light, unable to speak. His skin was icy cold and his whole body was trembling as if in a state of shock.

DAN Did you call an ambulance?

JANE An emergency call-out would have gone straight into his medical record.

DAN Surely his life is more important than his job?

JANE That's easy for you to say, Dan. Somehow you've managed to avoid swimming in the same shark pool as the rest of us.

Dan looks around in alarm.

DAN He's not in a trunk, is he?

JANE No, he recovered as the sun rose higher and left soon after.

DAN Thank God for that. For a moment there, I felt like a character from *Arsenic and Old Lace*.

Jane frowns.

JANE Do I remind you of an elderly aunt?

DAN No.

JANE Perhaps you'd like some elderberry wine?

Dan smiles and sips his tea.

DAN When your guest arrived, did you go out for a meal?

JANE Yes, we went to a seafront restaurant.

DAN And I suppose he had fish?

JANE This was more than just a simple case of food poisoning. When he was able to speak again, he said he'd

woken up feeling unwell, then grabbed his stuff and left like someone who couldn't wait to get away. I haven't seen or heard anything from him since. He hasn't answered any of my calls. Too embarrassed, probably, or concerned that I might think he had some sort of epileptic fit. We were getting on really well ...

Jane rises, steps away from the table, and twirls to survey the interior.

... until this house shafted me, like a bitch who doesn't like seeing other people enjoying themselves.

DAN So what do you want from me - advice on choosing houses or boyfriends?

JANE You're not making this very easy. Why would someone with no history of illness suddenly be struck down in my house at this particular time - just when I can sense there's something odd going on? It's more than just a coincidence.

DAN You don't know his full medical history. There could be any number of reasons for someone exhibiting those sorts of symptoms.

Jane sits at the table again.

JANE If I were you, I'd be sceptical too. But you're supposed to be outside the loop of logical *Übermenschen* I usually have to deal with. I hoped that you, of all people, might listen and give some credence to what I'm saying.

DAN All you've told me so far is that you've got a funny feeling about this house and your boyfriend fell sick after a night out.

JANE I think he lied.

DAN About what?

JANE Waking up and feeling unwell.

DAN Why would he lie?

- JANE I don't know, but he must have come down here for a drink of water. He left a glass in the sink.
- DAN So he had a glass of water. What's so unusual about that?
- JANE He denied coming down to the kitchen. Something happened down here that scared the wits out of him. Something he doesn't want to talk about.
- DAN That's a huge leap of deduction to make from a glass in the sink and a guest who fell ill. I think you want the facts to justify your misgivings about buying this house and living so far from civilisation.

Jane rises again, folds her arms, and steps away from the table, staring at the floor in contemplation.

- JANE I was warned against buying when I first discovered it.
- DAN By whom?
- JANE I drove down here last summer to get out of London for a weekend after a difficult week at work, and stayed at the hotel just down the road by the bridge. You must have passed it.

Jane glances up at him.

Dan nods.

Jane leans a shoulder against the wall by the door and continues speaking meditatively with her arms folded.

On Saturday morning, I left the hotel to drive around, and came across this site purely by chance. It was a derelict ruin with holes in the roof and no windows or doors. The inside walls were black as if it had been gutted by a fire. Just to get here, where I'm standing, I had to battle through the nettles and thorn bushes which were trying to reclaim the site for nature. But there was evidence that the garden had been landscaped in the past. And you must have noticed the view of the estuary - only the soulless could fail to be

moved by it.

DAN What happened to the icy cold disdain for sentiment I used to envy and admire?

JANE It melted. But not straight away - a lot of other things had to happen first, any one of which could have scuppered the deal. Surveys, searches, estimates, planning permission, negotiations with the county over public access to the ruins hidden in the undergrowth.

DAN So who warned you against this generous act of civic patronage? Your bank manager?

JANE He thought it was a great idea - and showered me in mortgage leaflets. The warning came from the friendly old Cornish couple who owned the hotel where I was staying on my first visit. Saturday night in the bar, I told them of my discovery and asked why the house had been abandoned. The landlord is your typical larger-than-life host who likes swapping tall stories with the guests over a few brandies, and so it was difficult to take him seriously at the time; but he insisted, in deadly earnest, that it was "... 'aunted by the ghost of a dead nun who loiked to set foires."

DAN I'm not a psychical researcher. If you think your house is haunted, try talking to the local priest.

JANE I already have. He doesn't believe in ghosts - except the holy one, I suppose, and even that might be optional now. The Church is a joke in the 21st century.

DAN I hate to disappoint you, but I don't believe in ghosts either.

Jane approaches Dan and leans forward with her palms resting on the table opposite him.

JANE Not even privately? Off the record? For my sake?

Dan shakes his head slowly in response to each appeal.

DAN Sorry, not even for you.

Jane takes a colour magazine from a drawer and drops it onto the table.

JANE What about these articles you wrote?

Dan lifts the magazine, flicks it open and smiles.

DAN I suppose I should be flattered that you kept this.

JANE Your fifteen minutes of fame.

DAN Unfortunately, none of these people ever claimed to have actually seen a ghost, nor did they express any firm belief in their existence.

JANE But they had experienced something.

DAN They were curators and archaeologists. Their work with relics and artifacts made them conscious of their own mortality. You would expect their senses to be more susceptible to the power of suggestion, especially in the twilight hours. Most hauntings are easily explained by natural phenomena, or human psychology, or even a deliberate hoax.

JANE So do you think this is all down to a hoax - or my wild imagination?

DAN Maybe both.

JANE This isn't *The Amityville Horror*. I don't need a book deal to pay the mortgage. Let me show you something.

Jane removes the rug beneath the beam to reveal an area of blackened floorboards.

How do you explain this?

Dan rises to examine the floor.

DAN It looks like someone lit a fire on your kitchen floor. Maybe the decorators had an accident with something flammable.

JANE They finished their work before I moved in. This happened less than a month ago. One of my stools caught fire. I had a set of four which came with the table. Now I've only got three.

DAN Was it completely destroyed - or was there anything left?

JANE It was a pile of ash with the legs sticking out.

DAN Hestia of the Hearth.

JANE What?

DAN Greek Mythology. Hestia was a goddess associated with the fire of the hearth.

JANE Well, it looks like she paid me a visit.

Dan looks at the walls in puzzlement.

DAN A fire like this would have filled the kitchen with heat and smoke - unless it occurred outside and the hot ashes were brought in afterwards. Did you contact the police?

JANE They couldn't find any evidence of a break-in. 'Keep your doors and windows shut tight and securely locked, Madam, and don't keep flammable liquids in the house,' they advised.

DAN Do you keep the kitchen window open at nights?

JANE I close and lock everything down here before I go to bed - London habits die hard.

Dan glances at the key in the window lock.

DAN Do you leave the key in the lock?

Jane nods.

JANE I'd lose it otherwise.

DAN That would make it easy for anyone with a glass-cutter and a suction pad.

JANE Yes, but they would have left a big hole in the glass

pane.

DAN Not if they replaced the glass.

JANE They didn't. The sealant was hard and dry.

Jane leans forward and runs a finger along the dry window sealant.

DAN In that case ...

Dan shrugs

... it must have been the ghostly nun.

JANE Be serious, Dan.

DAN I thought that's what you wanted to hear.

Dan frowns and glances around, surveying the interior for something amiss.

Is the building insured?

JANE Of course. You don't think the bank would lend me all that money without selling me some insurance first.

Dan looks up at the ceiling.

DAN A big old house like this would need smoke detectors for the insurance policy.

JANE Heat detectors. Smoke detectors go off every time you burn toast. There was one up there on the beam.

Jane points to a charred section of an exposed beam with a light circular shadow about four inches across, as if a disc-shaped object, now removed, had protected the wood from flames.

DAN Where is it now?

JANE The fire inspector took it away with the ash from the stool. He wanted to run some tests on it - what was left of it.

DAN What happened to it?

JANE Somehow, it just melted in situ. Some of it dripped onto the floor, you can still see the marks.

Dan inspects some marks on the laminated floor.

It's not everyday your state-of-the-art heat-detector gets vaporised and the rest of the house stays standing.

DAN Did it work when it was installed and tested?

JANE Perfectly.

DAN But did it go off when this happened?

JANE I think it might have done, briefly. I thought I heard a few bleeps, but it wasn't enough to fully wake me up.

Dan examines the burnt floor again; placing his palm over the dark, pitted surface as if expecting to feel heat.

It was still glowing in the morning.

Dan straightens up.

DAN Aren't you afraid to stay here by yourself after a break-in?

JANE If that's what it was.

DAN How long would it take the police to get here in an emergency?

JANE An hour or so, maybe less, depending on how busy they are watching their cameras. I'm not worried about intruders though, I keep a loaded shotgun by my bedside.

DAN Is that wise?

Jane steps away from him.

JANE Maybe not. But there's something going on here. I can sense there's more to come like the approach of thunder at the end of a muggy day.

- DAN Maybe this big old house just isn't right for you. Have you thought about moving back to London? I'm sure you could sell-up easily enough, or rent it out.
- JANE Why should I move? I like it here. There's the beach, the woods, the country lanes, and the local pubs and restaurants. I'm not being forced out by something I haven't even seen yet.
- DAN This may not be what you want to hear, but let's suppose that you really would like to return to London for some reason you're not admitting to yourself. These strange perceptions are providing a convenient rationale for that to happen.
- JANE Are you saying that I subconsciously set fire to my own kitchen to drive myself out? Do you have to see everything in psychoanalytical terms? I remember why we used to give psychology students a wide berth in the bar.
- DAN I must have slipped though the torpedo net. Do you want rational answers or do you want ghosts and goblins?
- JANE I'd prefer rational answers, but the problem's not up here.

Jane taps her temple.

It's somewhere in this house - or out there.

Jane nods in the direction of the garden, visible to them both through the window.

I can move back to London almost anytime I want - I don't need a rationale. How do you explain the experience of my guest and the fire in my kitchen - other than to accuse me of lying, or suspect that I'm suffering from some sort of acute personality disorder and making the whole thing up?

- DAN I'd need to know more about what's going on - and

this sort of investigation usually takes up a lot of valuable time which I just don't have right now. Sorry, I know that's not much help to you but ...

JANE Don't worry about expenses, I'll pay whatever it costs.

DAN It's not a question of money ...

JANE I used to think there was nothing you wouldn't do for me.

DAN That was a long time ago.

JANE They say that to achieve success, all you have to do is to persuade the right people. What more can I say to get you onboard?

Dan sighs.

DAN What exactly is it you want me to do?

Jane smiles in triumph and grips his elbow.

JANE Start by researching the history of the house as far back as you can. I want to know if anything unusual has happened here in the past, or if anyone else has had any strange experiences.

DAN Do you know when it was built?

JANE Mid-seventeenth century, I think.

DAN That's a long way back. Just think how many lives must have passed through here in the last three and a half centuries.

Jane steps back.

JANE It's something I try not to think about.

Dan goes to the window and looks out over the garden. He leans forward to look up at the sky.

DAN I can't see the sun. What aspect is this?

JANE East. The sun pours in each morning - weather permit-

ting.

DAN When did the fire occur?

JANE Three weeks ago.

DAN Can you give me a more precise date?

Jane consults a wall calendar.

JANE 24th of June - Saturday.

DAN And when did your boyfriend have his grand mal?

JANE The same night - actually it was Sunday morning - so the 25th.

DAN Could he have had something to do with the fire?

JANE I don't think so.

DAN How well do you know him?

JANE Well enough. He was a victim of whatever happened here, not the cause. He was shivering, shaking, and drenched in his own sweat as if feverish - or the demons of hell were after him ...

Dan glances over sharply.

... You just can't fake that sort of thing.

DAN Alright, we'll leave that possibility for now. I'll have to ask him some questions though - with your permission, of course.

JANE Just be careful what you say, I don't want this going beyond us three.

Dan consults the wall calendar.

There was no moon on the night of the 24th - new moon was at 1705 on Sunday - and it was just a few days after the summer solstice.

JANE Is that significant in some way?

DAN It's probably just another coincidence, but lighting fires around the solstice is an old pagan tradition.

JANE You think there's some connection with the fire in my

kitchen and a bunch of new-age druids?

DAN Most pagan traditions have got nothing to do with druids. Some rituals and festivals involving fire have survived in the West Country despite the efforts of the Christian Church to eradicate them. It's going to take a few days to make some inquiries about the history of this site. Can you wait that long?

JANE Do I have any choice?

DAN You could always move into the hotel for the rest of the week.

JANE And what would I say to the owner?

DAN You could admit that you're having trouble with the ghostly nun. He'll probably spread the word through the local newspaper, and soon you'll both be making a fortune selling drinks and tickets.

JANE I've already made a fortune - now I just want some peace and quiet. Don't worry about me, if the druids come back, I'll paint my face blue, drink their scrumpy, and dance naked round their campfire.

DAN That's one way to scare 'em off.

JANE Cheeky bastard!

Exit Dan, followed by Jane.

Lights down.

II

Night. The kitchen is lit by a fluorescent light bulb. The curtains are drawn apart to reveal a dark pane of glass.

Dan is wearing slacks, spectacles, and a t-shirt with a logo on the front. He sits at the kitchen table, working on his laptop. A rucksack lies on the floor and there is a half empty bottle of wine on the table.

Enter Jane, with a glass of wine in her hand. She is wearing a t-shirt and denim jeans, and is slightly tipsy. Her hair is down. She picks up a small digital thermometer which he has placed on the table.

JANE Here is the general synopsis at 2230. High pressure in my kitchen will produce a balmy temperature of 26 degrees with no chance of showers unless someone leaves the bathtaps running upstairs. I should have been a weather girl.

Dan ignores her and carries on writing. Jane puts her glass and the thermometer down on the table. She lifts a heavy copy of the Bible in both hands and flips through the pages.

We're not living in the 16th century. You can get a copy of this in English from most good book stores. You can even bring one through Customs without getting burnt at the stake.

DAN Customs have relaxed a bit recently. MEPs don't like getting frisked for copies of Ulysses every time they go through Stansted or Gatwick.

JANE I've always wondered about the ethics of taking a

Gideons bible from a hotel room for your own personal use. Is that allowed - or would you be damned to hell for it?

DAN You might be forgiven, if you used it to find God. But English is not the source language of the Church.

JANE Neither is Latin - strictly speaking.

DAN It's the major source of our knowledge and belief.

JANE Some Anglicans might beg to differ. The word of God is most truly revealed in the Revised English Bible.

DAN Most Anglicans are just lapsed Catholics with a sense of humour who play cricket.

JANE What about the Presbyterians? No one ever accused them of having a sense of humour. They don't play much cricket either - except on the playing fields of Edinburgh.

DAN The Presbyterians are not the Church, they're a break-away Protestant sect.

JANE They're still Christians.

DAN There's no mysticism or iconography in the Protestant tradition. If you want to understand the true nature of the Western Church, you have to study its origins rather than its dour later fashions.

JANE How would you know, Dan? When did you last step foot inside one?

DAN I go to weddings when I'm invited.

JANE I would have sent you an invitation - I didn't know where to send it.

DAN You found me last week.

JANE That's hardly fair, you know it's easier to find people these days.

DAN Well, I'm glad you did. You've given me an idea for an article which can pay next month's extortionate rent.

JANE What sort of article?

DAN I'll tell you tomorrow when it's done.

JANE I thought we had a confidentiality agreement?

DAN Don't worry, they won't know it's you. "Jan - not her real name - moved to a big house in the country ..."

JANE Even so, I don't like being used as the inspiration for your populist scribblings.
DAN I thought you wanted to know what's going on here.
JANE If you know, why don't you just tell me?
DAN Because I'm not sure myself yet.
JANE When will you be sure?
DAN Maybe tomorrow.
JANE Do magazine articles count towards your targets?
DAN No, they're not peer reviewed. You don't have to let the facts get in the way of a good story.
JANE A bit like tabloid journalism.
DAN Well researched tabloid journalism.
JANE Isn't that a contradiction in terms?

Jane allows the Bible to collapse and slam shut between the palms of her hands. A loud thunderclap resonates through the timbers of the old building, setting up a series of reverberating echoes that startle Dan. He looks up in alarm, but Jane doesn't seem to have heard anything.

DAN What was that?
JANE What?
DAN When you closed the book ...

Jane opens and closes the Bible again - with an ordinary thump.

JANE What did you hear?
DAN The foundations settling. You'd expect an old house like this to make some noise.

*Dan glances at his wristwatch and types something into his laptop.
Jane puts the Bible down on the table and lifts her glass.*

JANE I thought you were an atheist.
DAN I was baptised a Catholic. But I could never agree with the politics of the Catholic Church, or make any sense

of its theology.

JANE So now you're a woolly agnostic - a product of your own personal Reformation. And it didn't even take the need for a divorce to persuade you.

DAN Why do Bible scholars have to be Christians? People who study Old Norse or Ancient Greek literature don't believe in the gods of Asgard or Mount Olympus.

JANE Maybe they secretly do - or want to. They must believe in something mystical or they'd make better use of their lives.

DAN By better use, you mean doing something which makes more money?

JANE Earns money. Making money, the way you say it, sounds disagreeable; even when you're creating wealth to feed the hungry, heal the sick and pay taxes to raise humanity out of the clutches of religion. If you want to make money out of gods and monsters you should do it through the box office, not from a lectern or a pulpit. The multiplier effect on jobs and the economy is much greater.

DAN Some people need a more permanent fix than two hours of escapism in a cinema. And they're not all poor and ignorant either.

Dan opens the Bible at a marked page and copies a quote into the article he is writing.

JANE Why carry that big heavy thing around when you could have a digitised copy on your computer?

DAN I like the feel of it - saves me working out at the gym.

JANE I don't believe you. For some reason, you brought the oldest version of the Bible you could find into my house this night.

DAN So I like the company of antiquarian books.

Jane sits down on one of the stools opposite to him.

JANE I can understand why women go in for all that 'I love your hair' Jesus-cult thing. You see them singing in church with their doey eyes, painted faces, and swelling breasts; and you know exactly what's going on in their pants. But I don't see what's in it for real men. At least the pagan religions were about courage in a nihilistic void. Whatever happened to the Heroic Age? Catholicism is nothing but pre-feminist Freudian goo.

Jane puts her glass on the table and clasps her hands in prayer, adopting a child-like tone.

'Oh Heavenly Father, we love you, please don't punish us for our sins! Oh Virgin Mother, we love you too. Take us back into the protection of your hallowed womb, away from all those fornicating heathens!'

DAN I think your parents created a monster.

Jane recovers her glass.

JANE That's what you get from a brace of English teachers. I was weaned on high-fibre cereal and a critical reading of Milton; and then they had the cheek to send me to a Catholic boarding school.

DAN Perhaps they wanted to broaden your mind beyond Milton. They must have thought you'd learn something to help you in the struggles to come.

JANE All I learned at that school was how to ask awkward questions of church dignitaries. For instance, in pagan literature the heroes are willing to defy the gods and face up to the consequences. On that basis, the Christian hero should be Old Nick. Why don't they worship him instead of a male model from a shampoo commercial?

DAN Because then they wouldn't be Christians. They'd be Satanists.

JANE At least they'd have a life.

DAN But not the eternal one. Is this really a good time to be tempting Providence with all this blasphemy?

JANE I've eaten the apple, Dan. No one can save me now except you.

DAN You've drunk too much wine, that's all. Why don't you go to bed and get some sleep?

Jane gets up and begins to massage his shoulders.

JANE Only if you come too, my Lord Dionysus. You can leave the ouji board down here for the spooks to play with.

DAN Do they still teach classics at the Catholic school for little ravers?

JANE They taught us everything - even the parable of the condom and the banana - which is quite something to behold in the hands of a nun - but I still need extra homework.

DAN I have to stay down here tonight.

JANE Fragile ego?

Jane slips her hands under his t-shirt and digs her nails into his chest. He winces.

DAN You're forgetting the reason for my being here.

Jane relents and returns to her seat.

JANE Sorry, I was being presumptuous. Life is too short to wait for flowers every time. Risk-taking has become a bit of a habit.

DAN Risk-taking is all about timing.

Dan checks his watch and arranges the wine bottle and two glasses in a planetary line.

This is the sun, this the moon, and we're here.

Dan touches the far rim of the glass at the end of the line.

This is a dark night, the last before the new moon, just like before - except this is July, with seven hours still to go until sunrise.

JANE You sound like a hippy camping out on the solstice with a bucket and spade.

Dan glances at the dark night sky through the window pane with concern etched on his face.

DAN It was a moonless night a month ago when your boyfriend had his seizure.

JANE Did you speak to him about it?

DAN Yes, briefly.

JANE What did he say?

DAN Not very much. He said nothing unusual happened when he was here.

JANE What about the fire?

DAN He didn't know anything about a fire. He said it must have happened after he left.

JANE He's lying!

DAN Don't judge him too harshly - he may have a good reason.

JANE Why do men always make excuses for each other?

DAN I'm not interested in your personal relationship, just your problem with this house.

JANE I thought you were here for me - for old time's sake.

DAN I am here for you. And because your previous guest had his seizure and the firebug struck on this same night in the previous lunar cycle.

JANE What makes you think she'll come back?

DAN She?

JANE The ghostly nun.

Pause.

DAN Did you know that the old house was gutted by a fire in 1898?

JANE Isn't that what I'm paying you to find out?

DAN Well, here's your first two pennies worth. An Anglican priest, the Reverend Arnold Green, was caught up in that fire and died later from his injuries. According to the astronomical record there was no moon on the night of June 18th, 1898 - the fire occurred in the early hours of June 19th - very near the solstice.

JANE How did you find out about this Reverend Green?

DAN The local parish records and the British Museum Library. He wrote a pamphlet on the conduct of the old Latin mass. Reverend Green was one of those nineteenth-century Church of England vicars with a mystical interest in Catholic ritual.

JANE You mean he was a flagellant?

DAN Whatever he was, he converted to Catholicism on his death bed and was given the last rites by a priest.

JANE Did he start the fire that killed him?

DAN We don't know. But the priest who administered the last rites also blessed the site of the fire shortly afterwards.

JANE Maybe the old geezer confessed to doing something the Church disapproved of.

The grin vanishes from Jane's face.

I've just remembered something.

DAN Here we go.

JANE About six weeks ago, the gardener dug up what looked like someone's thigh bone. It turned out to be a sixteenth century relic.

DAN Male or female?

JANE Male. The gardener guessed it was very old when he passed it to me with a huge grin on his face like a

friendly bulldog and asked me if I knew what it was. I was shocked by the thought that it was part of a human being who may have lived here before me.

DAN Quite possibly.

JANE My garden was once used as a graveyard, so I paid the local priest, the same hypocrite who doesn't believe in ghosts, to sprinkle holy water on the roses and say some of those Latin prayers that no one understands anymore. It was like a scene from *The Exorcist*. You could almost hear the spirits groaning in protest at their eviction.

DAN Are you saying you've just had the site deconsecrated?

JANE Yes, I suppose so.

DAN Why didn't you tell me this before?

JANE I didn't think it was important. Actually I forgot all about it.

DAN How could you forget something like that? It's not every day you get a priest round to perform a sacred rite in your garden.

JANE It was no big deal either. Just something I thought you were supposed to do, like laying a wreath at a funeral for someone you never really knew. I left him to get on with it and went shopping.

DAN And when you got home, the troubled started?

JANE I suppose so.

DAN Has anything else happened? Anything you've forgotten to mention?

JANE I don't think so. Why would a priest mumbling to himself in Latin be important to anyone living in the 21st century?

DAN To anyone living, it probably wouldn't, consciously. Has the idea of living a secular life on the site of an old priory ever bothered you?

JANE I don't feel any guilt, if that's what you mean. This place is mine now - lock, stock and spirit barrel. I told you before, if you're looking for answers in my head then you're barking up the wrong tree. What else did

you find out?

Dan reaches into his rucksack and takes out a pin folder containing about a dozen A4 sheets, which he hands to Jane.

DAN This is a brief summary. The house was built in 1649 by a Parliamentarian who obtained the land from the estate of the Crown after the abolition of the Monarchy. He used the original stone and timber, and built on the foundations of the old priory.

Jane flips through the pages and scans the text as if looking for something in particular.

JANE What happened to the graves?

DAN The bodies were exhumed. Don't forget, this was more than a century after the dissolution, and followed the upheaval and dislocation of a civil war. The link between the ruined priory and the local community had ceased to exist, so there were no qualms about digging up the bodies of the Papists and cremating them on a pyre.

JANE That'll please 'em no end in Eternity. Cremation was against Catholic doctrine - used only for disposing of live heretics. What happened to the ashes?

DAN Sprinkled on the garden to make the roses grow.

JANE That's just great! I've got a sackful of angry spirits spread out there like unwanted compost. Dead nuns with PMT. No wonder it's like the house of The Evil Dead around here every month!

DAN By the time Reverend Green showed up in the late nineteenth century the house was derelict. The old money was spent, the adjacent lands had been sold off to farmers, and new money had yet to move in. The only people interested in the site were mystics and ghost hunters. But if we go back to the summer of 1537, more than a hundred years before this house was

built, the old priory was plagued by a series of fires. The dissolution of the monasteries had been taking place all across England and Wales, but apparently these fires had nothing to do with the politics of the time. They occurred in May and June. Exact dates are not given but we can guess that they occurred on moonless nights. They ceased after a requiem mass was said for a young suicide called Sarah Stable who was buried in unconsecrated ground - which means that she may not have been exhumed and cremated with the others.

Jane sits forward on hearing this.

JANE How did she die?

DAN She hanged herself.

JANE That's not right.

DAN What isn't?

JANE It wasn't suicide.

DAN How do you know?

Jane stands up and looks away, reluctant to answer.

Jane?

JANE I just know.

DAN You can't just know something like that. How do you know?

JANE I saw it happen - in here.

Dan pauses and frowns.

DAN This building didn't exist back then. What connection would it have to her?

Jane looks up at the exposed beam.

JANE You said material from the old priory was used to

build the house. That beam has been preserved and treated. It's centuries old.

DAN You still haven't told me how you managed to observe an event which happened nearly five hundred years ago.

JANE You'd call it a dream, but it was more vivid than that. I can still remember it clearly after all these weeks have passed.

DAN So what did you see?

JANE I was down here the night after the fire, sitting in a comfortable armchair and clutching the shotgun like Calamity Jane - and a mobile phone, of course. I was hoping the fire-starter would come back so I could shoot his balls off, but I must have fallen asleep. It was one of those dreams where you think you've just woken up - but you're really still asleep, or half-asleep. I was still sitting in the chair, but no longer in the kitchen. It was someone's sleeping quarters, lit by candlelight; damp and earthy, it stank like a pig sty, and there was a strong smell of incense in the air. There was straw on the floor and trestles overhead, propping up a roof. A large sack stuffed with straw served as a mattress, and there was a painting, like a Biblical scene from the Renaissance, on an easel in a corner. Three figures were standing a few feet away from me. Two of them were dressed like hooded monks, the third was a young woman in a coarse mediaeval gown - as if they were playing out a reenactment for tourists. Either the woman was very tall, or the monks were short - it's hard to tell when you're sitting down, like judging the heights of characters on a stage - but she towered over them. They were talking in a strange, archaic dialect, and didn't seem to notice me. Then, despite her stature, one of the monks suddenly pinned her arms behind her back while the other looped a noose over her head and used the beam to hoist her up. It was incredibly quick and surreal; one minute they were

talking, then they were gone; leaving her limp body strung up like a pheasant with its neck stretched, and a stool lying on its side near her feet to make it look as if she'd taken her own life.

DAN Then what happened?

JANE I woke up. It was dawn by then, thank God. If I'd woken in the darkness, it really would have freaked me out.

DAN Did you see their faces?

JANE I saw the woman. She was quite striking, or at least, she would have been after a good scrub and a touch of make-up. She had long dark hair and large oval eyes - like a Pre-Raphaelite subject.

DAN What about the monks?

Jane pauses for a moment, trying to recall the details.

JANE I didn't see them. There wasn't much light and their faces were hidden by hoods.

DAN Sounds like a fairly predictable nightmare - almost to be expected under the circumstances. Most likely triggered by something you heard.

JANE I knew nothing about this Sarah Stable until you mentioned her just now.

DAN It's easy to absorb something we've read or overheard without realising we've taken it onboard. Notice the way a stool appeared in your dream like a resonant prop - a burnt stool was the reason you were camped-out in the kitchen at such a late hour.

JANE Maybe other people forget - but I depend for a living on my ability to absorb and recall minutiae every day.

DAN Like the priest and the thigh bone?

JANE I have never heard of Sarah Stable.

DAN What about the ghostly nun? Did the landlord tell you how she died?

JANE He just said she was killed by agents of the King during the Reformation.

Dan pauses in consideration.

DAN There could be some logical connection between Sarah Stable and the fires back then. Suicide was considered a mortal sin, so someone may have wanted her grave to be blessed after the burial.

JANE An arsonist?

DAN The fires could have been a protest or a hoax to play on superstitious beliefs and persuade the local clergy that a troubled spirit was in need of absolution.

JANE But that was nearly five hundred years ago. It doesn't help to explain the fire last month.

DAN It could explain the origins of the fire-starting nun story. Maybe someone else knows the history of the house and the old priory. It's all in the parish records for anyone who's curious enough to research it. The hotel owner seemed to know something about it.

JANE Why would he want to start a fire in my house? He hardly knows me.

DAN You said he tried to discourage you from buying. Maybe he had plans of his own.

JANE He had plenty of time to act upon them before I arrived.

DAN There is a tide in the affairs of men ...

JANE Well, he's missed the boat on this occasion. Bit of a coincidence to think that it was lying derelict for a century and then suddenly two different people make plans to renovate it.

DAN But what if the rich lady from London decided to sell-up in a hurry? He, or someone else, could benefit from your capital investment.

JANE A Cornish conspiracy theory? Do you think Scooby and his gang are going to unmask the evil landlord before morning?

DAN My money would be on the priest.

JANE What motive would a priest have?

DAN God knows.
JANE Maybe there really is a ghostly fire-setting nun.
DAN Or maybe the locals just don't like you being here, desecrating an ancient site with the latest in make-overs and modernity.
JANE If that were true, you'd think I would have experienced some form of enmity by now. The people around here can be wry and abrasive, typical West Country, but they're not hostile or unfriendly.
DAN What about your boyfriend?
JANE What boyfriend, Dan?
DAN Your guest.

Jane sits opposite Dan again.

JANE Is there a jealous ghost still crawling around inside that cynical brain of yours? We can exorcise it for all time if you like.
DAN The fire was set the night your previous guest was here.
JANE And something traumatic happened to him here in the kitchen, but he wasn't to blame for the fire.
DAN Sherlock Holmes would take a lot more convincing.
JANE You're not Sherlock Holmes - more's the pity. I could do with a decent literary detective right now. He'd wrap this thing up quicker than the mystery of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.
DAN *The Hound of the Baskervilles* mystery took more than a week to solve. And I don't have to be Sherlock Holmes to suspect that your previous guest is involved in some way. Does he have any financial stake in the property?
JANE No, it's all mine.
DAN Does he have any religious affiliation?
JANE I don't know, it's not the sort of thing you ask people these days - unless you work for MI5. Why didn't you ask him yourself when you spoke to him?

DAN I did. He confessed to being a wayward Catholic. It would seem that we three sinners have something in common.

JANE Why does it matter what we are? Catholics were emancipated in 1829.

DAN Two reasons - esoteric knowledge and a link with the history of the site. Catholic teaching is a form of indoctrination which leaves people susceptible to irrational perceptions - hence the impact of films like *The Exorcist*. In taking the sacrament, for instance, you are required to believe, quite literally, that you are eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ.

JANE I think he's old enough to know that isn't true.

DAN Well, maybe he wants you to move back to London so you can spend some more time together.

JANE You're doing it again.

DAN I can't help it. You were a source of tortured inspiration once.

JANE Why didn't you say?

DAN I thought I did. Maybe he feels the same way and doesn't like the idea of you living down here at the ends of the Earth.

JANE A touching thought, but like I said, he hasn't returned any of my calls.

Dan takes a camera with a flashbulb from his rucksack, gets to his feet, and begins photographing the kitchen.

DAN Do you know anyone else with an interest in the past and a sick sense of humour who might be behind all of this?

JANE Only one person like that comes to mind. Someone who holds a grudge and wants to pay me back for some perceived wrong I did him.

DAN Smile!

Dan takes a photograph of Jane. The flashbulb causes her to

blink and grimace.

How could you think such a thing? I even bought you a present today.

Dan offers her a colourful little paper bag. Jane's eyes narrow with suspicion as she takes the gift.

JANE I don't know what to say.

DAN Don't say anything, just open it.

Jane takes a small jewellery case from the bag and opens it. Inside is a miniature silver cross on a fine chain.

JANE It's very nice, thank you.

DAN Aren't you going to try it on?

Jane begins trying to fix the clasp behind her neck.

Dan slips a CD into a player by the sink. An arrangement of Greensleeves begins to play.

Jane frowns, slightly perplexed by the archaic music. Dan switches off the music.

I spoke to your parish priest today. He told me all about this place and what he thought of its new resident from the big city.

JANE I'm not sure I like the sound of that.

DAN He blessed the cross with holy water - for a small fee.

JANE That priest is doing very well out of us.

Jane finally succeeds with the clasp and smiles as the cross stays in place, visible over her t-shirt.

If you spoke to him, then you must have known about the prayers he said in the garden.

DAN Holmes never tells Watson everything he knows until after the mystery has been solved.

JANE That's only because he'd spoil it for the reader. You can tell me, what else do you know?

DAN Do you remember the Lord's Prayer?

JANE Yes, vaguely.

DAN And the Holy Creed?

JANE Not very well, but there's plenty of garlic in the cupboard and wooden stakes in the shed. Dan, what's all this about?

DAN A few precautions, that's all.

JANE Against what?

DAN Maybe nothing. Ask me tomorrow, I should have an answer by then.

JANE I'm asking you now. Is there a vampire on the loose?

Jane holds up the cross as if he were the vampire. Dan leans forward, puts his hand over it and looks into her eyes.

DAN There are no such things as vampires.

JANE That's what you said about ghosts.

DAN You're feeling tired. More tired than you think. The wine has made you feel like sleeping. Your eyelids are closing, you can barely keep them open. You should go upstairs now. Go to your room and sleep until the morning.

Jane sits back and smiles.

JANE I'm not a good subject for hypnosis, never have been. You can ask my analyst. He doesn't believe in ghosts either.

Dan sighs, packs his laptop in its case, slings the strap over his shoulder, and lifts the wine bottle and two glasses.

DAN Alright then, let's go.

JANE Go where?

DAN You said you wanted to lay a ghost to rest.

Exit Jane and Dan.

Lights down.

III

Night. The kitchen is in twilight. Faint sighs and groans are heard, perhaps floating in through the open-latched window above the sink.

The door opens slowly and Dan enters. He flicks a wall switch by the door and waits for the electric light to come on.

He takes a candle from his rucksack, lights it with a disposable plastic lighter, and sets it on a saucer on the table. He switches off the electric light, sits down and begins reading the Bible and making written notes in an A4 pad by candlelight.

Time passes. He hears a faint sound like a whistling draft. The candle flickers and he rubs his arms as if suddenly caught in a cold draught. He checks the thermometer, sniffs the air, checks his watch, and writes a comment in his note book. He hears a quiet whistling sound, then a giggle.

DAN Who's there?

No reply.

Sarah?

Dan stands slowly and raises his voice.

Sarah Stable! In God's name, I command you to come forth!

Pause; then a voice is heard coming from the shadows at the back of the kitchen. The accent is from the West Country, the dialect is Tudor English.

SARAH And who might ye be? To invoke my name and that of thy Lord so boldly?

Dan takes a mini voice-recorder from his pocket, switches it on, puts it down, and stands with his back to the table.

DAN Dan ... Daniel Levin.

The cover of the Bible on the table suddenly flips open, and the pages are turned by invisible hands, as if for invisible eyes to scan the text.

Dan spins round to observe this.

SARAH Art ye a priest?

DAN No.

Dan looks for the source of the voice, which is not emanating from the animated Bible.

SARAH Without absolution from a priest, thy soul will perish in the flames with thy flesh.

DAN You're very quick to pass judgment. Why should I need absolution?

SARAH 'Tis easy to see from thy strange words and manner. Dost ye deny thy heresy?

DAN I'm not a Catholic, or even a Christian, if that's what you mean.

SARAH A willing confession from thine own lips. Dost ye repent on thy knees and beg forgiveness of Almighty God?

DAN Why bother? For my sins he'd probably hum *Te Deum* and roast chestnuts on the fire.

SARAH Ye speak'st gibberish like a fool. Fools hath no fear of fire - until they see the flames beckon.

Enter Sarah, emerging from the shadows, a young woman with

long, dark, straggly hair, wearing a coarse mediaeval gown. Her countenance is grim and maniacal, her dark eyes narrowly set in a cruel expression. She lifts a sheet of paper from the table and fixes her gaze upon it. A corner ignites spontaneously. She drops the paper on to the table where it burns away harmlessly.

DAN Why should I be afraid of a conjuring trick? Anyone can set fire to a piece of paper.

The plastic lighter appears in Dan's hand and he briefly creates a fierce flame.

SARAH Tis more than just a trick with a tinder box.

Sarah reaches out a hand towards his face. Dan steps back towards the kitchen door.

DAN You're right. Where books burn, people follow. But there is also a Commandment saying thou shalt not kill. Or do the Commandments mean nothing to you?

SARAH Deuteronomy claims life for life.

DAN For false accusers. I've accused you of nothing - so far.

Sarah allows her arm to fall as she considers this with a wry smile. Dan has his back pressed against the kitchen door.

SARAH You have denied the word of the one true God. Thou shalt have no other gods but me.

DAN Is that what they told you? Or did you read it for yourself?

SARAH Tis the word of the Lord.

DAN Isn't it blasphemy to claim that God speaks directly to you?

SARAH He speaks to everyone through the scriptures. Satan may hath imprisoned my body, but not my mind. The sisters would not deny me the word of God.

DAN I thought that's exactly what the Catholic clergy were

supposed to do. The Latin mass and the intermediary priests negate the need for people to study the scriptures for themselves. Interpretive self-study is regarded as heresy, is it not?

SARAH Thy words are bluntly spoken. The last heretic who sought to deny my faith did so with much finer eloquence.

DAN Arnold Green?

SARAH Art ye known to him?

DAN No, we never met. The parish records say he died here in a fire. We don't know much about the circumstances, whether it was an accident or deliberate.

SARAH Damnation will be his reward and thine.

DAN Did you start the fire?

SARAH 'Twas God's work.

DAN This used to be a priory. How could Satan have held you in a house of God?

SARAH He doth many things - with the compliance of a king.

DAN Which king?

Sarah laughs maniacally.

SARAH Art ye so base ye dost not know his name?

DAN Henry VIII?

SARAH Aye. And know ye well thy sovereign liege and his ministers are in league with the Devil.

Dan pauses, wondering what to say.

DAN This may come as a bit of a shock to you, but Henry VIII has been dead for over four hundred and fifty years.

SARAH Dost ye lie to escape thy fate? Ye art already damned just as he will be.

DAN You last spoke to Reverend Green a century ago. He may have been eloquent, but I don't think he was entirely honest with you. Have you ever seen clothes

like these before? Or any of the objects in this kitchen?

Sarah scrutinises the logo on his t-shirt.

SARAH 'Tis an evil-looking sign.

DAN It's intended to be amusing. Gods and monsters no longer frighten people the way they used to.

SARAH You smell like a flower.

DAN How can you still have a sense of smell?

SARAH I see thee, do I not?

DAN Can you still feel what you touch?

Sarah walks around the kitchen and runs an exploratory finger over the smooth surfaces of the kettle and CD player.

SARAH What are all these strange things?

Dan moves to the sink, lifting the camera from the table en route.

DAN I could boil water in this kettle without any flame, or play music, or I could even capture your image with this ...

Dan lifts the camera and illuminates her with the flash. Sarah withdraws into the shadows like smoke sucked into a vacuum, and a sharp distant cry of pain is heard.

Dan switches on the electric light and sits down, his breath laboured as if anxious from the ordeal. He scribbles notes in his pad.

The light begins to fizzle and dim before a fluorescent tube bursts with a loud report, restoring the room to candlelight.

Dan takes a heavy torch from his rucksack and holds it like a cosh, testing the beam with the palm of his hand.

A moment later, Sarah speaks from the shadows.

SARAH Art ye a sorcerer with the power to blind?

Dan rises and steps away from the table to confront her again, gripping the flashlight tightly.

DAN It's called a flashbulb. We use electricity for heat and light instead of fire.

SARAH Why then dost ye sit by candlelight?

DAN For the ambience it creates. Electric light is not soft like that from the moon or the stars.

Sarah emerges from the shadows.

SARAH Tis bright though, like forks of lightning in a storm. What is that ye holds?

DAN Another source of light.

Dan switches on the beam and projects it onto the floor near her feet.

Sarah gasps and takes a few steps back as if afraid.

SARAH What art ye, if not a priest or a sorcerer, to have so much power at thy command?

Dan switches off the flashlight and puts it on the table.

DAN I have no more power than anyone else living in this century. I work as a scribe and a scholar. We know a lot about Henry VIII, but we don't know anything about you except for a brief entry in the parish records. We need to know what happened to you here and why.

SARAH God knows what happened. Tis all that matters.

DAN Perhaps your god wants me to know - so that I might spread the word of your faith.

SARAH Faith does not spread from a heretic - only lies and deceit will come from those who deny the one true God.

DAN Surely that depends on the heretic. Saul of Tarsus

didn't think much of the Christian cult to begin with.

SARAH St Paul was blessed by a visitation.

DAN Well, maybe you could pass for an angel if you smiled.

SARAH Dost ye think flattery will save thee?

DAN I simply want to know what you're doing here? Why do you seek to harm others for events which happened centuries ago?

SARAH 'Tis not retribution for myself that I seek.

A stool rises toward the ceiling and hovers menacingly over Dan's head. He moves to one side as it drops and crashes onto the wooden floor near his feet with a loud clatter.

DAN Why did you do that?

SARAH So ye might know and fear the wrath and power of thy God.

Footsteps are heard coming down the stairs. Dan glances at the door. Light seeps under the sill when the hallway light is switched on. The door opens and light floods into the kitchen. Enter Jane, wearing a bathrobe, looking bleary-eyed as if awoken from sleep.

JANE Dan, what's going on?

Dan glances at Sarah who steps back into the shadows to escape the light and avoid being seen.

DAN I tripped over a stool. Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you up.

Dan bends down to pick up the stool and places it tidily under the table.

JANE If you turn on the light you might see what you're doing.

Jane flicks on the wall switch on, then off, several times.

DAN The tube needs replacing.

JANE There's a spare one in the cupboard under the stairs.

DAN I'll change it in the morning.

Jane looks around suspiciously and sniffs the air.

JANE I can smell incense again, just like before.

DAN It's coming from the candle.

JANE It sounded as if you were talking to someone.

DAN I was taking notes with this just before you came down.

Dan switches off the mini-cassette recorder on the table.

JANE No ghostly arsonists yet then?

DAN No, not yet.

JANE Maybe you should come upstairs and get some sleep. You can't spend the entire night down here in the kitchen.

DAN Alright, give me an hour or so.

JANE And don't make too much noise, some of us have to work for a living. That means getting up early in the morning to catch a train.

Dan acknowledges this with a nod and a wry smile.

Exit Jane, closing the door behind her.

Pause while footsteps recede and the hallway light goes out.

He switches the recorder on again.

DAN Why are you hiding in the shadows?

Sarah reemerges.

SARAH Would ye introduce me to the fair lady and confess to my acquaintance? Or dost ye value her good opinion

too highly?

DAN Introducing you wouldn't be a problem, but convincing her of who you are might. She'll think you're one of my students in fancy dress.

SARAH Is she the mistress of the priory?

DAN There is no priory on this site anymore. Some old timbers and a wrathful ghost are all that remain of a once vibrant settlement.

Sarah glares at him as if affronted.

SARAH Then what is this place where we stand now?

DAN The kitchen of a house, built in the 17th century.

SARAH Is she the mistress of the house?

DAN She owns the house.

SARAH By what name?

DAN Jane Conway.

SARAH Not thy wife then?

DAN No.

SARAH What thinks the husband of ye being here this night?

DAN She's not married any ...

Dan pauses warily

... to anyone.

SARAH Is she a widow? Or divorced?

DAN Neither. She's a spinster.

SARAH 'Tis sinful to bear false witness, Master Levin.

DAN Why don't you call me Dan?

SARAH Art ye married?

DAN No.

SARAH Then ye art her suitor?

DAN I'm not that either.

SARAH 'Tis strange ye say'st. Doth she not appeal to thee?

DAN Relationships are not as simple as they used to be.

SARAH How came a spinster by this house?

DAN She bought it. She works for a living.
SARAH Is she a whore?
DAN She works for a bank - a house of usury.
SARAH A Jew?
DAN Gentiles also lend money nowadays.
SARAH But a heretic nonetheless!
DAN Heresy is no longer regarded as a serious crime.
SARAH Neither is divorce, I'll wager, after the King's fine example. Tis still a crime against God though.
DAN Divorce is common place. Hell must be full to overflowing with heretics and divorcees by now, including Henry VIII.
SARAH Even so, those who continue to plunder the monasteries must answer to God.
DAN There have been no monasteries to plunder for over four hundred years. They were abandoned or destroyed with the reformation of the Church.
SARAH But their sites are still being desecrated - for the sake of vanity and secular ambition.

Sarah stares angrily at the immaculate kitchen and a cupboard door begins to open and close repeatedly. Others follow suit, with sound building to a crescendo as pots and pans tumble out onto the floor with a crash, then silence.

DAN Do you have to keep doing that? I'm the one who has to clear up the mess.
SARAH Tis the wrath of God sent to purge this sin.
DAN God's got nothing to do with it. You're obviously angry about something, but that doesn't give you the right to wreck Jane's kitchen.
SARAH The heretic shall receive his just reward - the sinner shall have his wages of sin.

Eerie red light illuminates the kitchen door sill and wispy white smoke seeps in from under it.

DAN I came here tonight to seek you out - just like Reverend Green before me. I want to help you, but I can't let you do anything that would harm Jane.

SARAH Then have concern for thyself, disciple of Lucifer. Tis thy wits against mine.

DAN You don't know what you're doing. This is not the way to salvation. You could bring damnation down upon your own head.

SARAH This head is already damned.

DAN How can that be - if you have free will?

SARAH Tis too late for me - and for her.

Sarah slowly raises a hand and points a finger at the door which seems to shimmer like a gateway to hell.

DAN I was the one who summoned you here this night. Jane is not to blame. She knows nothing about what's happening here.

The kitchen door swings opens. Red light and white mist pour in as if from some hellish underworld. Jane stands in the doorway, dressed in a buttoned night-shirt with rolled-up sleeves and a plunging neckline, transfixed as if sleepwalking. She steps into the kitchen.

SARAH I did warn thee, Master Levin. Tis sinful to bear false witness.

DAN Your quarrel is with me. She can leave the house and never return.

SARAH She is trapped in her own nightmare - she cannot escape.

Dan lifts the torch from the table.

If ye thinks to blind me again, Master Levin, ye'll suffer the fate of Master Green - and then there'll be no one to stand between her and the gates of hell.

DAN You set your fire on Reverend Green?

SARAH As I would the man who came here with the last new moon; but he fell to his knees and begged forgiveness of Almighty God, and was spared the flames.

DAN So would Jane - if you gave her a chance. She shares your faith. Look, she's wearing a cross.

Sarah notices the chain around Jane's neck and rips the buttons of the night shirt to reveal the crucifix.

SARAH The Devil takes many guises.

Sarah pulls on the fragile chain until it gives way.

DAN Let her speak and confirm her faith. Or would you deny Almighty God the chance to hear her speak his name?

SARAH She may speak - if she is able to.

DAN Jane, say the Creed. Remember the words. You must remember them. I believe in God, the Father Almighty
...

Jane opens her mouth and begins, though falteringly.

JANE I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only-begotten son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell, the third day he rose again from the dead, he ascended into heaven, sitteth at the right hand of God the Father, from thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting ...

SARAH She uses the Devil's coarse tongue. Disciples of

Lucifer dare not say the words of the Holy Mass.

Dan steps between them, facing Sarah with his back to Jane.

DAN Mass today is said in the vernacular. Latin is a dead language - used only by priests and scholars. We have no more use for it in everyday life than we have for the ignorance and bigotry of your religion. This world is no longer yours to rule. You have no right to pass judgment or impose your values on anyone here.

SARAH If this is not my world, then how can I be standing here before thee?

DAN I don't know. My only concern is that no one else should come to any harm this night.

SARAH So be it.

Dan looks over his shoulder. Jane is no longer there. The light and smoke have vanished and the kitchen door is closed.

DAN Where is she now?

SARAH Sleeping peacefully - as we all should be.

DAN Sleeping where?

SARAH In her fine bed. Fear not, Master Levin, she'll awake in the morning, if God wills it so.

Dan drops the torch on the table, sits on a stool, rubs his brow and the back of his neck, and sighs with relief.

DAN What is it you really want from me?

SARAH Why should I want anything from a heretic?

DAN Because you're not behaving like a true zealot. You're more like a spiteful little girl playing a game as a cat does with a mouse.

SARAH 'Tis true I find thee amusing.

DAN Zealots are not noted for their sense of humour.

SARAH Ye art very sure of thyself, for a mouse under a cat's paw. Why art ye so brave, Master Levin? Ye have no

faith. Dost ye really think that I shan't harm thee? If not, why risk thy life so recklessly for the life of that woman?

DAN We do not live with mortality and death constantly, as you have done. We value each life highly and seek to preserve it if at all possible.

SARAH Even at the expense of thine own?

DAN Jane is a wealthy patron for my work. It's in my interest to protect her property or my good name will suffer.

SARAH But if she were not wealthy or desirable? If she were poor, plain-looking, and ignorant as a simple peasant, would ye still be ready to extend thy chivalry to her?

DAN That's a spiritual question. We live in a material world.

SARAH 'Is that what they told you? Or did you read it for yourself?' For if thy words are true, why did ye stand between us? The dead hath no use for worldly goods or pleasures of the flesh. She cannot pay thee if ye art banished from this earth forever.

DAN I realised you were playing a game or I would have blinded you again with a flashbulb. Harming us won't help your situation or your cause.

SARAH Yet ye played along in a most convincing manner.

DAN What would you have done if she hadn't been able to remember the words?

SARAH Better to ask thyself, what ye would have done, Master Levin? Would ye have died for her sins as our Lord did?

DAN Will she remember anything when she wakes up?

SARAH Dost ye wish it so?

DAN I think it best if she forgets for a while.

SARAH Why dost ye think she was ever here?

Dan rises and clutches Sarah's sleeve. He raises the hand holding the crucifix by its chain and takes it from her grasp.

The dead have no need of worldly goods.

Sarah turns away as if hurt.

SARAH How would'st ye know what we have need of?

DAN My vocation requires me to understand such things.
Why do you think your god has forsaken you?

SARAH He forsakes no one!

DAN He forsakes the heretics he incites you to burn.

SARAH 'Tis they who hath forsaken him.

DAN If you are not forsaken, why are you still here?

SARAH His will is not yet done.

DAN Your church was destroyed many centuries ago. In that time the world has changed beyond anything you could ever imagine.

SARAH I have only your word for that. The word of a heretic and a sorcerer.

Dan switches on the radio by the sink. A presenter gives a brief weather summary for the coming day and some pop music begins to play. Sarah looks around in confusion, then approaches the radio, her curiosity overcoming her caution.

DAN This music is coming directly from London.

Dan tunes to a classical station.

This music was composed in the 18th century. We can store music on discs like this.

Dan takes a CD from its case and hands it to Sarah. She studies its mesmerising optical properties with an aesthetic eye and child-like fascination. He switches off the radio and begins playing the Greensleeves CD he had loaded earlier in the evening. Sarah turns her head slightly in recognition of the score, despite the modern arrangement.

We have machines which send voices through the air

at the speed of light, and other machines which fly like birds, only much faster, carrying hundreds of people at a time. In the 1960s, we got so carried away with our progress that we even sent a few men to the moon.

Sarah looks up at the starry night sky through the window.

SARAH 'Tis still up there on moonlit nights. Why did they not bring it down to earth as a gift for your king?

DAN That would have caused a diplomatic incident. The men who went to the moon were not English subjects.

SARAH What were they?

DAN Colonists from the New World.

SARAH Spaniards!

DAN The moon is a very large sphere, it only looks small because it's so far away. There's no air to breathe up there so people have to take their own. And the sky is always black because there is no atmosphere to scatter the sunlight. And the surface is barren rock because there is no water ...

SARAH And yet it still shines like a golden orb.

DAN That is also an illusion.

Sarah switches off the CD player.

SARAH If ye know'st so much of history, tell me what became of the King.

DAN Henry VIII died of syphilis in 1547. Syphilis is a disease spread through original sin - so that should please the Puritan in you.

SARAH May God have mercy on his soul, for Satan shall have none.

Sarah closes her eyes and cusps her hands for a moment in prayer.

Did he have a son?

DAN Edward VI reigned for seven years after his father died. Then he, too, passed away.

SARAH What heirs did he leave?

DAN He was only fifteen.

SARAH 'Twas God himself who brought about the destruction of the Tudor line.

DAN The Tudor dynasty didn't end there. Henry had two daughters, Mary and Elizabeth. Bloody Mary ruled from 1553 to 1558, and Elizabeth from 1558 to 1603.

SARAH Did either of them bear children?

DAN No, at least none that survived. The succession passed to the Scottish House of Stuart.

SARAH Does it not surprise ye that neither woman could bear a child?

DAN Inbreeding causes problems, you should know that coming from Cornwall. Mary Tudor was a devout Catholic, married to Philip II of Spain, but she still couldn't make babies. Modern science can explain why bloodlines die out.

Sarah steps away in thoughtful contemplation.

SARAH Why dost ye call me 'Puritan'? 'Tis a strange term.

DAN The original Puritans were Protestant extremists who opposed Queen Elizabeth's more moderate stance on Catholicism.

SARAH Did they go to the stake?

DAN No, they went into politics. A Stuart King, Charles I, was deposed and executed by Parliament in 1649. For a while England was a republic - ruled by a Puritan who was a king in all but name. The Stuarts were restored to the throne in 1660 and many Puritans left England to terrorise the New World.

SARAH The Americas?

DAN You've heard of them?

Sarah nods.

SARAH Did Christ conquer the heathens there?

DAN Both continents were colonised by huge numbers of Europeans who displaced the native peoples. The Protestants took over much of the northern continent and the Catholics most of the southern one.

SARAH And was England restored to Christ?

DAN Catholicism was never reestablished as the state religion. Catholics were not allowed to hold public office until after 1829, when ministers began shifting their attention from the activities of Papists to those of militant Radicals who were campaigning for democracy and universal suffrage - issues which became more important than religious conflict.

SARAH Who rules the kingdom this day?

DAN Queen Elizabeth II, with an army of courtiers, and a Puritan Parliament.

SARAH 'Tis no matter. The politics of thy world are no longer a concern of mine.

DAN Then why seek to draw our attention with the fires?

SARAH 'Tis very conceited of thee, Master Levin, to think that I sought to draw thy attention.

DAN There was also Reverend Green and, for all I know, Jane's guest last month. It's a perfectly natural thing to do after being trapped here alone for centuries, but I don't understand why Reverend Green had to die?

SARAH Dost ye think I caused his death?

DAN Did you?

SARAH Ye art mistaken - I have not been trapped here for centuries.

DAN Then where have you been?

SARAH Here in the darkness, but not for centuries.

DAN For how long?

SARAH Without sunrise, there is no way to count the days. Five moons have waxed and waned since first they came.

DAN Since who came?

SARAH I cannot say.

DAN Cannot or will not?

SARAH For thy sake, I will not.

Dan pauses to consider his next question.

DAN When did they first come?

SARAH In the spring of 1537, soon after the soldiers encamped by the priory.

DAN Christ forgave Pilate's soldiers for putting him on the cross. Can't you forgive the King's men for what they did to you?

SARAH Henry's assassins were not men.

DAN Assassins? The priory recorded your death as suicide.

SARAH To take one's own life would be a terrible sin.

DAN If the assassins were not men, what were they?

SARAH Master Green asked of me the very same question. That knowledge cost him his life, maybe even his soul.

DAN If you know who they were, you can tell me their names.

SARAH I dare not, for they may awake and come hither without delay.

DAN Awake and come hither? How?

SARAH Do not ask again, Master Levin. For thine own sake, I shall not tell thee.

DAN Men make perfectly good assassins. If you're saying what I think you're saying, why would a great king go to all that trouble for a simple peasant girl?

SARAH This is a holy place. He who spills blood here would pay a heavy price in the next life. And there were still those willing to die defending the sanctuary against the soldiers. Cornishmen had risen before. 'Twas hoped they would do so again to defend the Church or avenge such an outrage against one of their own. Besides, murder was not subtle enough for the King. He sought to destroy my good name so I could not be martyred.

DAN Henry VIII is not remembered for his subtlety.

SARAH 'Twas a time of revolt and religious fervour. We began to hear tales of prophets and martyrs who dared to criticise the King and arouse the masses. Of Anne Wentworth, Elizabeth Barton, and even Sir Thomas More, the King's former Chancellor, who was relieved of his conscience on the scaffold.

DAN Do you compare yourself to them?

SARAH The King's ministers feared my work.

DAN What work is that?

SARAH I am, ... I was a painter.

DAN That was an unusual occupation for a woman in the sixteenth century. What did you paint with?

SARAH Dost ye doubt me?

DAN Let's just say I'm curious about the historical details.

SARAH We made brushes from the hair of pigs and horses and stretched linen over wooden frames for canvas.

DAN What paints did you use?

SARAH Tempera and linseed oil mixed with ground pigment.

DAN Oil painting was a feature of the Italian Renaissance. It was not common here in the early sixteenth century.

SARAH My teacher was Italian - a Florentine. This is hardly fair, Master Levin. Ye wishest me to believe in thy world of magical powers and yet would deny my word to those events which ye hast not even witnessed.

DAN But I am a witness, in one sense. I know, as sure as the sunrise, that a vast number of people were executed during Henry's reign. If he wanted you dead, whatever your rank or status, he would have used the process of judicial murder.

SARAH For some of us, the sun never rises. There is perpetual darkness but for the precious light of the flame.

Sarah cups her hand reverently around the candle flame as if guarding it. Her eyes remain fixed on the flame as she speaks.

DAN There is no surviving record of what you propose.

SARAH In the year of our Lord, 1513, Henry was campaigning in France when the Scotch invaded Northumberland with a huge army. Weeks later, the Scotch army was routed by the Devil on Flodden Field and all its nobles slaughtered.

DAN Superior weapons and tactics. Battles between the Scots and the English were usually one-sided affairs. It still happens today when they play football. How could you know anything about the battle of Flodden? It was fought before you were born - in the far north of England.

SARAH Was not Henry's reign long before thy birth and yet ye profess to know so much?

DAN We think that books were rare and valuable items in the sixteenth century, and that very few people could read them.

SARAH Ye presum'st too much, Master Levin.

Sarah studies the chrome taps of the sink. She twists one and observes the stream of water for a moment.

Why are the dark miseries of the past so important to thee in such a brave new world of wealth and sunlight?

DAN Material wealth is not always enough to ensure contentment. Western philosophy is driven by a compulsion to question the arbitrary order of things, and to seek answers in the past to questions which concern us still.

SARAH 'Tis all in the Chronicles. Before the battle, a spectre appeared to the Scotch King James IV in a chapel, warning him of a demonic host which would cut a swathe through his army and carry his soul away. Who but the Son of God could withstand such a force?

DAN Anyone who doesn't believe in it.

Sarah's eyes dart fearfully to him.

SARAH Denial shall not save thee - or Mistress Conway. Only

faith in the one true God, if it so pleases him, can save thee now. Take her and leave this place before it is too late.

DAN I've given my word to stay until the morning. Would you have me break that word?

SARAH Return with the dawn and ye shall be saved. Ye dost no disservice to Mistress Conway - there'll be no more fires tonight, I swear.

DAN How can I believe you?

SARAH Ye hast my solemn oath. Now please go.

DAN Why the sudden concern for our welfare?

SARAH 'Tis a Christian virtue.

DAN It wasn't very Christian of you to cremate one of Jane's wooden stools.

SARAH I was trying to warn the man, but could not make him understand, or rather, he seemed lacking the wit to perceive the danger he was in.

DAN Sounds just like one of Jane's boyfriends. What danger was he in?

SARAH Of losing his soul.

DAN Losing his soul to whom?

SARAH Ye ask again that which I will not answer.

DAN Reverend Green was a committed Christian. He believed in your god. Why did your Christian virtues not extend to him?

SARAH I tried to force him away, but like thee he would not go. He urged me to defy them with fiery zeal, but his mortal flesh could not withstand the inferno.

DAN Is that so hard for you to understand? He may have been a Christian, but he was also a scholar and a man. Whatever you may say, you're neither ignorant nor plain to behold.

SARAH Is this jest - or more flattery?

DAN It is the truth, as I perceive it.

Sarah smiles enigmatically.

You still haven't told me very much about yourself.
There is a lot more I need to know.

SARAH Ye say'st the priory was destroyed. Twas done to
expunge all trace of my life and work.

DAN Why do you think that?

SARAH My paintings were brought to the attention of the
King's ministers. Twas God's will that it should be so -
but then he forsook his people and allowed the priory
to be destroyed.

DAN Many hundreds of thousands of people, some entirely
innocent and blameless, were purged or persecuted by
the King and his ministers. You shouldn't blame
yourself for the destruction of the priory, there was
nothing you could have done to prevent it.

SARAH Very well. Since ye put so little value on thy soul, I
shall tell thee what ye wishes to know - as much as I
dare.

*Dan sits at the table facing her, picks up a pen, and begins
making notes.*

DAN When were you born?

SARAH The year of our Lord 1517. My earliest memories are
of the sisters and midwives who cared for the livestock
and the parish orphans in lowly wooden quarters, built
around the stone buildings of the priory. They said that
I was found on the morning of the first Sunday of
Advent, abandoned at birth in a stable by a passing
Romany girl.

Such a prophetic gift, however much a burden, could
not be spurned by a holy order; and so I was raised
here with charity until old enough to undertake chores
and tend to others, as others had for me; in blissful
ignorance of events unfolding in the wider world, save
for the occasional ripple of anxiety spreading from the
Prioress through the hierarchy of holy sisters like a
shiver on a cold day.

By day, I would work in the kitchen or in the fields, wherever my labour was needed; whilst in the evenings and on the Sabbath after mass, I would often walk through the woods to the bluff and look out over the sea. If the weather was calm, the boats of fisherman could be seen rising and falling on the gentle swell. At other times, the wind would drive the waves against the rocky shore, with a sound rising like the song of sirens. I would imbibe that view, then close my eyes among the fragrance of oak blossom and wild flowers and try to imagine the colours changing with the sunset. There was something magical about this force of nature that I wanted to possess, untroubled by the desire to usurp God's hand in creation.

Since early childhood, I'd had visions in my head; though without the means or skill to draw, until an elderly sister showed me a way of inscribing faces using chalk on a slate. My early portraits were crude and lifeless, but improved gradually after many months of practice on the willing subjects of the priory. Seeing that I had a skilful hand and an eye for detail, the sisters considered that despite my lowly birth I might also have a mind for letters. So more in hope than expectation, the Advent child was given instruction in reading and writing without thought to where such teaching might lead - for the only works to study were the chronicles and the holy scriptures. My defiant nature saved me from being married off to a lusty yeoman once I came of age - the sisters seemed to know that God's hand was guiding me.

Being near a great ocean, we were exposed to the full fury of the elements blowing in off the sea; and on the night of a terrible summer storm, as wise men and women cowered under shelter, I slipped away into the woods and stood on the edge of the bluff; leaning forward with my arms spread like wings, buoyed up by the wind in my face and hair, and the spray thrown up

by great waves crashing on the rocks below. Hubris bid me lean forward and cry out through a crash of thunder, defying Satan to take me, for I was sure that I could fly on such a wind. Suddenly the hair rose from my scalp, and I was blinded by a lightning bolt that struck the earth at my feet, causing the edge of the cliff to collapse beneath me. My hand managed to grasp a tree root and I screamed out to God in his mercy as I hung in the firmament, knowing that far below the gateway to hell had opened in readiness to receive my sinful soul.

I held on desperately as the root began to slip from its anchor in the soil. But then a miracle occurred, as happens to those whose work on earth is not yet done. A strong hand grasped my wrist to arrest the descent and drew me back from the edge of the abyss. Lightning flashed overhead to illuminate the face of my saviour, bordered by the hood of a coarse robe. Rain water dripped slowly from those striking features, and in the presence of such grace all I could do was to flee back to the priory and collapse on my stable bedding with exhaustion and fright.

The following evening, I ventured back to the same place, now tranquil with the sun setting over a calm sea. At the cliff-face, the scorched earth had collapsed as if from the weight of someone foolish enough to stand too close to the edge. I shuddered at the memory of what had so nearly come to pass, and after meditating for a short while, started back towards the priory with a wiser head on my shoulders. Barely had I gone a hundred paces when a caravan became visible among the tall sentinels of beech and oak, half-hidden by cut leaves and branches. A stranger was sitting on a stool nearby, staring out to sea beside a canvass mounted on an easel.

I trod lightly to get a closer view without giving my presence away - only to gasp aloud with astonishment

at what I beheld. The evening sun had been caught on a canvass with all its red and gold, setting over the fishing boats as if on the Sea of Galilee.

The painter was a Florentine pilgrim. The same one who had saved me on the night of the storm. His name was Giovanni and he spoke with a rich, resonant dialect, quite unlike any I'd heard before. His features, bordered by flowing locks of ebony hair, were strong and elegant as they had been in the rain, and his spiritual aura was more powerful than any I'd ever encountered.

My accusations of witchcraft and idolatry drew a bemused smile from him as I backed away slowly into the trees, then turned and ran back to the priory with the sound of his laughter ringing in my ears. Nor would he leave me after that. In the days and nights which followed, he would appear whenever I closed my eyes or recalled the sea and imagined the waves beckoning.

To exorcise my torment, I sketched his likeness with charcoal; though the grey image, lacking in lustre, merely reminded me of the glory I'd seen on his canvas. In desperation, I slipped out of the Priory at night to seek the traveller once again. It was late summer and the moon was full and bright as a beacon, lighting my way as if it were day.

His caravan was in the same spot and he lay on a blanket near a campfire with his head propped up by an elbow, smoking a pipe which gave off a rich intoxicating aroma. He gazed out to sea and spoke of things I knew nothing about. Of a Genoese sailor who'd discovered a new world of heathen savages awaiting Christ across the sea. Of Italian art and politics, and a new faith called humanism. And of England as a spiritual and artistic wilderness, ruled by a tyrant king who, like Herod Antipas, had taken his brother's wife.

I let the parchment drop to the ground and lamely asked how to bring forth life. He lifted and studied his own likeness with a bemused smile. Turning the parchment over, he invited me to sit by the light of the fire and maintain my pose. Then, taking some quills and ink from a sack, he began to scribe while still clenching the pipe between his teeth. A short time later, he handed the parchment back to me.

I looked with horror on my countenance, or rather his corruption of it. My complexion was dark, my features angular, and my eyes were black like coals. I dropped it fearfully, denying the self he'd seen taunting the Devil on the night of the storm.

He held up a broken twig with the leaves still attached. I quickly drew what seemed a perfect likeness, and yet still it was lacking in lustre until he applied his hand to it.

But I wanted more than this, much more. There were the colours of the grass, the leaves, the sunset, and most of all the deep blue ocean. These were not conceived by shades of charcoal, but by sinful thoughts of all creation at my behest and flowing from my hand.

And so began my blessing, day and night, throughout summer and autumn. He showed me how to use the broad and fine edges of charcoal and wax. How to use faint and bold strokes to present light and shadow. How to grind his coloured rocks into powder, then mix with egg yolk or linseed oil to make paints, and how to paint the world exactly as we see it. Though I could never match the mastery of his biblical allegories which so vividly conveyed a likeness he claimed was the King.

To lessen my frustration, he convinced me to paint that which I alone could see. I drew a sketch on a canvas which was the length of a man and half as high, and now stood ready for the scarlet and the black oils - the dark blood of its creation.

The canvass captured the scene of a battle on a hillside, with dark storm clouds gathering overhead as a demonic host broke through the enemy line to slay a king and scatter his soldiers in terror, thus ensuring victory for the leader of this unholy vanguard.

Giovanni viewed my work grimly. When it was finished, some weeks later, he anointed me; declaring that whereas he could only paint with oils, henceforth I would paint with the Holy Spirit. The following day his caravan was gone; he'd silently slipped away in the night, leaving me fearful of his augur.

Without the guidance of his tutelage, my world seemed to collapse; my inner thoughts laid bare as the flesh of Eve after eating from the tree of life. The priory became an alien place, peopled by strange creatures with whom I had nothing in common. The sisters noticed the change and chastened me for my sullen moods. From my sunken eyes and pallid complexion it was said that I was sick, or bewitched. Some even whispered 'plague', but I cared little, for I'd sipped from the Holy Grail and was weary of this mundane existence. *Sic transit gloria mundi.*

'Twas a bleak and lonely winter - but as the months passed into spring, the memory of the Florentine began to fade. I had only a few sketches to remember him by, until one day, Father Adrian, our parish priest, brought a letter from London.

Giovanni wrote that he'd been arrested as a Vatican spy whilst on the road to London; and hence taken to see the King himself, whose vanity was pricked by his epic work. He was even invited to paint a portrait of Queen Catherine; but those allied to the new queen, Anne Boleyn, and her uncle, the Duke of Norfolk, intrigued against him, and he was about to end his days at Tyburn.

Father Adrian wanted to know why the Florentine had chosen to write to me. I agreed to tell him through the

confessional - if he would absolve me of all sin. He was a witch who'd beguiled me, I insisted, fearful of sharing his fate on a gibbet. From beyond the stone walls of the chapel we heard a cock crow loudly to mark my fateful words. No, he was a saint and a martyr, the priest proclaimed sadly.

Stung by my shameful denial of him, and confused by the comment of the priest, I started to paint again, continuing the work of the Florentine for the sake of the Church. Land was being seized from the monasteries and priories and their buildings destroyed in acts of vandalism not seen since the fall of Rome. Of their precious works from the centuries stretching back to the birth of Christ, all art and literature deemed seditious or Popish was thrown onto flaming pyres, and all who resisted were hanged or put to the sword.

Cornwall, the most remote county in England, waited fearfully as the Apocalypse swept through other parts of the country. But as others waited, I continued with God's work. When the Lord's angel took Anne Boleyn's stillborn son, I painted Henry's court at the feast of Passover. When the Northern risings were crushed, I painted Norfolk as Marcus Crassus, crucifying slaves on the road to London. My work so alarmed the prioress that I was put under house arrest, guarded by the sisters, but they did not, or dared not, stop me from painting.

Meanwhile, Father Adrian, like Moses to Pharaoh, took my work to London, to petition the King as a messenger from God; thinking he alone could save the priory. 'Twas the last I ever saw of him. He made the mistake of so many others by trying to reason with King Henry.

The soldiers came soon after and made camp nearby, though did nothing to provoke the local townsfolk into open rebellion. Then, late one night as I prayed for guidance, two pious emissaries arrived from the King

begging an audience with the painter and her work so that they might be advised on future policy. They were garbed as pilgrims, and I assumed they had been granted admittance. The moonless night made it difficult to see their hooded faces. But then I saw in their eyes a dark empty void that should have housed a soul. 'Twas hell's inquisition. Overwhelmed by their power, I could not even cry out.

To the sisters it must have seemed that I had taken my own life. Suicide is a mortal sin. A suicide cannot receive the last rites, be buried in consecrated ground, or enter the Kingdom of Heaven. So I was damned to lay in the barren earth until Satan's legions returned at their leisure to recover my soul like scavenging wolves.

DAN That was nearly five centuries ago. If they intended to return for you, what's taking them so long?

SARAH Someone must have blessed the grave. Someone who knew the truth perhaps; or had witnessed the unholy machinations at Henry's court.

DAN The priest - Father Adrian? We know a requiem mass was held for you in 1537 - an unusual occurrence in the wake of a suicide.

SARAH An act of atonement.

DAN You think he betrayed you in some way?

SARAH Who can say what anyone might do for the sake of their church, or to save themselves from the rack or the gibbet.

DAN If Father Adrian blessed the grave, and said mass on your behalf in the chapel, why aren't you at peace and laid to rest?

SARAH A blessing is not absolution in the eyes of the Lord. This place is both sanctuary and purgatory.

DAN But if God knows the truth, as he must, why are you being made to suffer for something which you did not do?

SARAH My task is not yet done. He hath deemed that I am not yet worthy of his grace and must be tested further.

With the darkness before each new moon they will come again, and I must hold them off with the pale light of the flame until we are both banished from this world by the approach of the dawn.

DAN The sun rises early in May and June. This is late July - the longest, darkest, moonless night you've had to face since ... since they first came.

SARAH If it is God's will, then I shall face them with the power of the Holy Spirit by my side.

DAN I've never had much faith in the Holy Spirit.

SARAH If he has forsaken me, then my fate will be damnation. I am Alpha and Omega; the beginning and the end. To him that thirsteth, I will give of the water of the fountain of life, freely. He that shall overcome shall possess these things, and I will be his God; and he shall be my son. But for the fearful, and unbelieving ... their lot will be the second death, in the pool of sulphurous flames.

DAN Surely you don't believe that? It's a manifesto for spiritual Armageddon.

SARAH But we do believe it, Master Levin. I beg of thee, if not for her sake then for mine. Please do not make me force thee to flee.

DAN According to your beliefs, I'm going to hell anyway.

SARAH Ye may still repent - if ye can survive this night.

DAN But whosoever speaketh against the Holy Spirit shall not be forgiven, in this world or the next.

SARAH Ye may repent of any sin whilst ye still hast life.

DAN Isn't it heresy to interpret the Bible in your own way? That's how Martin Luther got started.

SARAH Why dost ye continue to mock me?

DAN I'm not trying to mock you.

SARAH Ye think'st my beliefs are false. My words a lie.

DAN The fires of hell were a mediaeval invention to frighten people into Christian worship and make them easier to control. In the century after you were born, a new tool of philosophy known as empiricism came into vogue.

Beliefs had to be based on experiment and observation rather than faith, and religion became a matter of personal conscience. We simply don't believe in the influence of gods or devils anymore. Those who do are regarded as delusional.

SARAH After all I've told thee, after all that's happened here, dost ye think'st me a liar or a feeble-minded fool?

DAN Those who murdered you were not the inquisitors from hell you believed them to be, but ordinary men in the service of the government.

SARAH If ye dost not believe me, if this is not the work of God, or the Devil, then how dost ye explain my presence here before thee?

DAN You existed as a human being, quite a remarkable one in many ways, and your will was very strong. A traumatic life and violent death have somehow preserved your consciousness.

SARAH Oh ye of little faith, what must I do to save thy soul?

Sarah looks upwards.

Is that my task this night?

DAN Jane's helpful priest recently performed a sacred act of deconsecration somewhere near your grave, disturbing its sanctity.

SARAH How can there still be priests in this Godless world?

DAN Christianity is dying in this country, but it's not yet dead. It's like a wounded mammoth which could roll over and crush some of the hunters if they get too close before the end.

SARAH Are ye one of the hunters?

DAN Yes, in a way, I suppose I am.

SARAH Hast ye no conscience in the destruction of all God's work? No fear of eternal damnation?

DAN I would fear it - if I believed in it. Religion has devoured truth and held back progress for centuries. I just want to see it eradicated like the pox, or put in a

glass cage behind a big warning sign and studied as part of early human development - what we call anthro-pology.

SARAH Is that how ye see me? As a beast to put in a cage and study?

DAN I want your soul to find eternal peace by daybreak. But you won't find it by setting more fires. Reverend Green performed the same rite as Jane's priest to satisfy his curiosity. He wasn't a Catholic priest, just a learned man. On his deathbed, he confessed to another priest who carried out his last wish and restored the blessing on this site. Your subconscious, your soul, may be responding to such symbolic acts - we don't know much about the psychology of ghosts.

SARAH If ye speak'st the truth, why did ye not bring me a priest and put me to sleep again before this night? I thought ye sought to help me. Ye could have spared me this night and yet ye hast done nothing but talk - and ask questions.

DAN It may not be so easy now - after your exposure to the modern world and its heretical ideas. And for how long will you sleep this time before you're disturbed again by another thrill-seeking mystic? I don't want to bring another priest into this house - they're the cause of the problem, not the solution.

SARAH Would'st ye rather let the devils drag me down to hell?

DAN If there are such things as mediaeval devils, then our cynical modern priests won't be of much use to you.

SARAH Tell that to Mistress Conway when she picks your bones from the ashes of her house tomorrow - if she is still able to.

Dan rises from his seat.

DAN You said there would be no more fires.

SARAH I wanted no one else else to suffer the fate of Master Green, and for that I was prepared to lie, but I shan't

let them take my soul.

DAN Even if you hold them off tonight, they'll be back with each new moon of the waning year. Each night will be longer and darker than the last until the dawn is well beyond your reach.

SARAH If needs be, if a mighty host of demons descendeth upon me, then a greater conflagration will occur than ever before, but I'll survive this night. And tomorrow, ye shalt seek out a priest for me. A suitable, learned priest; one who can lay me to rest until the final judgment.

Dan leans on the table in a bargaining pose.

DAN Why should I return here if Jane's house has been destroyed?

SARAH Ye boasts of thy conscience. Dost ye forget that I have earnestly sought to spare her life and thine, when I could so easily have left ye ignorant of what will befall this night.

DAN In that case, there's something you have to do for me. You must sketch the layout of the priory and the place where you lie for me to show the priest.

SARAH I cannot. I do not know the place.

DAN I think you do. The power of the priest will be greater if he can bless the grave site.

Dan takes his note pad and pencil from the table and offers them to Sarah. She bows her head and shakes it slowly.

SARAH There's no time for such things. They'll be here soon. I can feel them coming. You must go now.

DAN It's the only way I can help you.

Dan puts the pencil in her hand and puts the open note pad down on the table.

Mark on the features you can remember - they'll provide reference points for comparison with archaeological plans of the site.

SARAH Archaeological plans?

DAN Archaeologists study the past by digging things up. They excavated this site back in the 1950s, but somehow you got missed.

SARAH They sought to violate my grave?

DAN No one is going to violate your grave, I swear.

Sarah holds up the pencil in fascination.

You'll find it's like a fine charcoal point. Try drawing a line.

Sarah begins to draw.

Dan checks his watch and stands by the window. The sky is turning indigo and there is an orange band spreading upwards from the horizon.

Sarah pauses for a moment to observe him intently. He feels her eyes on him and turns around. She drops her gaze and resumes her work.

Dan takes a thick reference book from his rucksack and flicks through the pages.

What happened to the letter you received from the Florentine?

SARAH I don't know - it may have been lost or destroyed with the priory.

DAN There's something in this book I'd like you to see. Do you recognise the face?

Sarah studies a detail in the book.

SARAH 'Tis a likeness of Queen Catherine, Henry's first wife, as the Florentine used to paint her.

DAN This painting hangs in the National Portrait Gallery.

The artist is unknown. Could he have painted it?

SARAH 'Tis similar to his hand.

Sarah continues to draw. He watches patiently and points to certain features.

DAN Most of this structure has gone now, only the foundations have survived. Part of this wall still exists, but all these outlying buildings have also gone. There are still a few apple trees where this orchard used to be and that pond is still there, but much smaller now. This area is covered by lawn and surrounded by flower beds. Would you like to see how it looks today?

Sarah looks up, her face taut with emotion.

SARAH 'Tis not possible. I am confined within this cell.

DAN There is a way - one which you might appreciate.

SARAH 'Tis beginning to seem like centuries since I've known the smell of grass or flowers, or the sight of trees, or felt the warm sun on my cheek; and I greatly fear that I never shall again ...

Sarah stares straight at him accusingly.

... Ye lead'st me to confess my envy, Master Levin. Ye art a most clever Devil's advocate. I put my trust in thee and never did suspect. 'Tis right ye brought no priest for company. Thy work shall please him well when I am consigned to the pit of hell.

Dan takes a colour photograph from his rucksack and shows it to Sarah. She glances at it briefly then shuts her eyes and looks away.

Art ye offering me the world if I bow down before thee?

Dan looks at the photograph with a bemused smile.

DAN No, just a photograph of a summer garden.

SARAH Begone Satan! Before I should turn my wrath on thee.

DAN If I really were Satan, do you think I'd have this much free time to spend here? There's a whole world of souls out there to steal. So before you do anything rash in the name of religion look closely at this image.

Sarah takes the photograph.

SARAH 'Tis well lit by the sun.

DAN There was bright sunshine when it was taken. Why do so many artists worship the sun?

SARAH 'Tis God's creation. A source of strength and well being. We need to see the light or we slowly die like flowers in winter.

DAN That's why you must escape from this house. People once believed the sun to be a god. They would light fires on certain nights to keep the demons at bay until the sunrise would banish them back to the underworld just as you've been doing.

SARAH Now that ye know'st everything, ye must go. 'Tis growing cold - they approach through the darkness.

Dan rubs his arms as if suddenly feeling cold. He consults the thermometer on the table and shows it to her.

DAN This room is no colder than it was an hour ago.

SARAH They're nearby; I see them as a deer can see the eyes of wolves in a dark forest.

DAN Who do you see? Adramalech? Asmodeus? Astaroth? Baal? Beelzebub? Behemoth ...

Sarah puts a hand over his mouth.

SARAH I have warned ye, Master Levin, not to say his name.

DAN I do not know his name - unless you think ...

Sarah strikes his chest with the blunt palm of her hand as if to silence him. There is the flash of an inductive spark, and a loud report, and Dan is propelled backwards against the door, where he falls to the floor and sits with his head slumped. The front of his t-shirt is torn and burnt, with smoke rising from his chest.

Dan raises his head. Time is frozen. Sarah stands motionless, projecting the palm of her hand. Dan gets to his feet and steps towards her, then notices two other figures - hooded waxworks - behind her, half concealed by the shadows. He approaches them cautiously to study their sinister features, and raises his lighter flame to illuminate a face. He considers setting the hood alight, but a loud voice booms out, 'Vengeance is mine, I shall repay!' Dan spins round to see Sarah facing him.

SARAH You've seen them - now go!

Dan looks over his shoulder in alarm, fearing the figures behind him may have become animated, but they have vanished.

Return with a priest in the morning.

Dan surveys the shadows all around him in alarm.

DAN I'm staying.

SARAH I've kept my word and told ye all I can. What is there to stay for? If they find ye here with me, no power on earth can save thy soul, not even the fire.

DAN I saw men, not devils. I want you to concentrate on this.

Dan holds up the little crucifix in front of her. Sarah glances anxiously around the kitchen.

Don't look away. Just look at the cross. Take note of

every detail, everything you see inside it.

Sarah fixes her gaze on it.

Notice how it reflects the candlelight. A white silvery light. Now watch as it changes. You'll see it transmute into a bright celestial sphere. Keep the sight of it fixed in your mind and pray to your god for the sun to rise. Pray for us all.

SARAH Libera nos, quaesumus, Domine, ab omnibus malis, praeteritis, praesentibus et fururis; Pereumdem Dominum nostrum Jesum Christum Filium tuum. Qui tecum vivit et regnat in unitate Spiritus Sancti Deus ...

Dan puts a hand on her shoulder and translates.

DAN Deliver us, O Lord, we beseech thee, from all evils, past, present, and to come. Through Jesus Christ, thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee, in the union of the holy spirit, world without end... It'll be morning soon, just a few minutes more and you'll see the first rays of sunlight probing through the window.

Sarah presses her head against his chest and closes her eyes. A tear trickles down her cheek.

SARAH Too late. They're already here.

A whistling draught causes the candle to flicker and die, plunging them into a twilight in which they are barely visible. A chilling scream is heard travelling away into the distance as the scene fades into blackness.

IV

Morning. The sun is streaming through the kitchen window. Birdsong can be heard. The kitchen floor is a mess with pots, cutlery, and smashed crockery scattered around as if a struggle had taken place.

Enter Jane, dressed for work. She stops in her tracks and surveys the kitchen for a few seconds, then sees Dan lying on his side on the floor beneath the beam. She rushes to him and shakes his shoulder.

JANE Dan! Dan!!

Dan stirs, and draws himself up into a sitting position. His hair is dishevelled and he appears to be disorientated.

Jane parts the front of his torn and burnt shirt to reveal a blistered area on his chest in the shape of a palm print.

Are you hurt?

DAN No.

Dan struggles to his feet, helped by Jane.

I'm alright.

He steps away from her.

JANE What happened? Did someone break in?

Dan chuckles wryly.

DAN More of a break-out than a break-in.

JANE What have you done?

DAN I wish I knew - for certain. I promised her she'd see the sunrise if she caused no more fires.

JANE Promised who?

DAN Sarah Stable. The young woman I told you about. Her grave is under the lawn.

JANE I was afraid of that. Do you think there could be others buried out there? I'll have the whole garden excavated if I have to.

DAN No, there are no others.

JANE How do you know?

DAN She would have told me.

JANE Who would have told you?

DAN Sarah. She was here until first light.

JANE I thought you said she was dead. You expect me to believe that you spent the night talking to a dead nun? How did you manage to keep awake?

DAN The supernatural explanation was your idea to begin with. It's what you wanted hear, isn't it?

JANE That was yesterday. You were right - the stress of work must have been getting to me.

DAN You had an unusual experience last night. It may take a while for you to remember.

JANE What sort of experience?

DAN The sort that pole-axed your guest last month.

JANE I feel fine - I had a good night's sleep.

Dan wears a puzzled expression. He rubs his arms, sits on a stool, and shivers as if feverish.

DAN Maybe he saw something more, or was affected in a different way.

JANE What's wrong, Dan? You're shaking, just like he did.

DAN The sun is still rising, I'll warm up soon enough. This won't happen to anyone else, she's finally gone.

JANE Gone where?

DAN To heaven; or to hell; or to oblivion. Who can say until it's their turn?

Jane looks puzzled.

JANE Did you find out what happened to my stool?

DAN I think she wielded it like a flaming torch before dropping it on to the floor to burn out. She was defending herself - and your guest when he came down here just before dawn and was caught up in the denouement of her moonless night. The sun rises early in June. July would have been different. A greater conflagration would have been needed - had she chosen to fight.

JANE Fight who?

DAN You wouldn't believe me. I didn't believe her despite evidence to the contrary. It simply isn't possible in the 21st century.

JANE What about her remains? You can't just leave them buried out there. Can you get a museum to come and take her away?

DAN We'll get the priest to bury her in consecrated ground - with the full blessing of the Church.

JANE Whatever. So long as he's discrete. I don't want the vultures from the local newspaper swarming around here like flies. How did the kitchen manage to get into such a state?

DAN What do you remember from last night?

JANE You were making a lot of noise and I came down to see what was going on. You said the light wasn't working.

Jane looks up at the blackened tube.

How did that happen?

DAN It blew up. She had some sort of telekinetic power with fire.

JANE I didn't hear anything after I went back to bed.

DAN You were sleepwalking down here. She tore the buttons from your nightshirt.

Dan scans the floor until he spots one of the tiny coloured discs. He picks it up and hands it to her. Jane examines it curiously.

I'll clear up the mess before I go. Aren't you going to be late for your train?

JANE I can spare a few more minutes.

Dan picks up some of the pots and pans and puts them back in the cupboard, then begins sweeping up the broken crockery with a broom.

DAN She thought we were in danger. Not just our bodies, but our souls. This was her way of driving us out of the house. The burn on my chest came from her hand. She was murdered in 1537 by agents of Henry VIII, who made it look like suicide to prevent any chance of martyrdom. But somehow her consciousness survived, reliving the trauma of her murder and the fear of damnation for having been judged a suicide. This kitchen is where her quarters used to be. Her own priest knew the truth and absolved her, and she was at peace until the Reverend Green disturbed her rest. The priest whom Green confessed to absolved her again, but your parish priest unwittingly disturbed her sanctuary. She believed that without the blessing of the Church, the Devil would return for her soul on moonless nights, and that of anyone else who happened to be with her, unless she could hold out until the light of the dawn banished the evil back to hell. I had to convince her that there was no such thing as the Devil or this whole place might have gone up in flames, with you upstairs like Guy Fawkes sitting on a bonfire.

JANE That's an interesting story, but it's a bit difficult to accept this early in the morning.

DAN It's easy to be sceptical in the daylight.

Dan finishes the clearing up and begins packing his bag.

JANE About last night, I think I had a bit too much to drink.

DAN Forget it. It never happened.

JANE Thanks for your help. Sorry to have brought you all the way down here for ... whatever you did. Send me an invoice for any expenses you incurred. You won't say anything about this to anyone else, will you? We agreed that this was strictly between us.

DAN It's not something I feel like discussing with anyone else. Who can ever tell me that I did the right thing?

Dan looks at the sketch of the priory in his note pad. He lifts the pad and discovers an old piece of parchment under the page with the portrait of a young woman staring back at him. She has an intense stare but a faint smile on her lips.

Jane catches sight of it as Dan packs the note pad, camera, and video camera in the rucksack.

JANE That was her! The woman I saw in my dream. Let me see it again.

Dan passes the note pad to her.

Did you draw this?

DAN I think it's from the sixteenth century.

JANE Where did you get it from?

DAN I found it just now when I picked up the note pad.

Jane closes the pad and passes it back to Dan. He puts it in his rucksack.

JANE Did you get any physical evidence of your ghost - like a

photograph?

DAN We'll have to wait and see.

JANE What about the voice-recorder? Did you catch any ghostly wails or clanking of chains?

Dan picks up the recorder.

DAN Do you remember the words of the Holy Creed?

JANE You asked me that before.

DAN What if your life depended upon it?

JANE Not all of it - not after all these years.

DAN You dropped this.

Dan holds up by the silver cross by its broken chain.

Jane frowns, feeling her chest for the one he gave her. He lays the cross on the table beside the voice-recorder and presses the play button. Jane's voice is heard reciting the Creed.

Dan lifts his rucksack and walks towards the door.

Jane switches off the tape.

JANE I lied about my dream. I saw their faces quite clearly.

Dan halts, without turning round.

DAN Whose faces?

JANE The hooded monks. I didn't want you to think it was just a nightmare. They were hideously ugly - not human at all - more like - gargoyles.

Dan considers this carefully.

DAN You saw it from her perspective. What she thought she saw.

Dan continues walking.

Jane grabs his arm.

JANE Wait! You said you'd change the lightbulb.

Fade Out

End