

The Knowing: A Fantasy
an epistemological enquiry
into creative process, form, and genre.

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A Creative Writing PhD Thesis

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Notebook of Rev. Robert Kirk (1660/1-1672) Dc.8.114. University of Edinburgh special collection. Photographed with permission by Kevan Manwaring, December 2015.

NOTE TO EXAMINERS:

The creative component (a novel) is 135,000 words in length and so has been divided at an appropriate point. The first 60,000 words are enclosed here, along with the 20,000-word thesis. The remainder is printed in the Appendices and it is entirely at your discretion whether you wish to read it.

Motifs have been designed to metonymically represent supplementary narrative voices. These can be viewed via the website (www.theseecretcommonwealth.com). See ‘Discover the McEttrick Women’ and ‘Discover the Characters’. The novel can be read without referring to these, but it may enhance your experience, if you wish to know more. The choice to know is fundamental to this project (mirroring the protagonist’s problematic gift and chief line of desire).

Additional material is also available on the website: other voices from the world of the novel; audio and video recordings; original artwork; articles (by me as a research-practitioner); photographs of field research; a biographical comic strip about Rev. Robert Kirk; and so on. Collectively, this constitutes the totality of my research project.

This multi-linear, transmedia approach is intrinsic to the project’s challenging of conventions of form and genre. Owing to the articulation of this approach in the critical reflective essay, I recommend that you read that first. My reason being that I wanted it to be clear to the examiners that I am trying to be innovative with the novel form and fantasy genre, and because I felt it was important to convey the journey of research and development that has led to the novel, but of course the order of reading is ultimately your choice.

ABSTRACT

This creative writing PhD thesis consists of a novel and a critical reflective essay. Both articulate a distinctive approach to the challenges of writing genre fiction in the 21st Century that I define as ‘Goldendark’ – one that actively engages with the ethical and political implications of the field via the specific aesthetic choices made about methodology, content, and form.

The Knowing: A Fantasy is a novel written in the High Mimetic style that, through the story of Janey McEttrick, a Scottish-Cherokee musician descended from the Reverend Robert Kirk, a 17th Century Episcopalian minister from Aberfoyle (author of the 1691 monograph, *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies*), fictionalises the diasporic translocation of song- and tale-cultures between the Scottish Lowlands and the Southern Appalachians, and is a dramatisation of the creative process.

In the accompanying critical reflective essay, ‘An Epistemological Enquiry into Creative Process, Form and Genre’, I chart the development of my novel: its initial inspiration, my practice-based research, its composition and completion, all informed both by my practice as a storyteller/poet and by my archival discoveries. In the section ‘Walking Between Worlds’ I articulate my methodology and seek to defend experiential research as a multi-modal approach – one that included long-distance walking, illustration, spoken word performance, ballad-singing and learning an instrument. In ‘Framing the Narrative’ I discuss matters of form – how I engaged with hyperfictionality and digital technology in destabilising traditional conventions of linear narrative and generic expectation. Finally, in ‘Defining Goldendark’ I articulate in detail my approach to a new ethical aesthetics of the fantasy genre.

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SECTION ONE: CRITICAL COMPONENT

**AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL ENQUIRY INTO
CREATIVE PROCESS, FORM AND GENRE**

PREFACE

Why was I compelled to write a novel about a thirty-something Scottish–Cherokee American musician based in Asheville, North Carolina, who goes in search of her roots? It may seem on the surface an odd choice. What is my connection to such material?

Most imaginative writing is, arguably, driven by wish-fulfilment – a desire for a person, a place, a power or a world that never was, that might have been, or could yet be ... In hindsight it is possible to discern the subconscious forces that influence our choice of material. I suspect the reason I ended up writing a novel about a woman of mixed heritage with the ‘gift’ of second sight, one that enables her to discover the stories of her ancestors (through the heirlooms she inherits), is that there is such a painful, frustrating lacuna in my own life.

I was made an orphan at 40, losing my parents in quick succession (my father in 2008, my mother in 2010). My grandparents (on my mother’s side) died about ten years before that. I never knew my father’s parents – an English naval policeman who had married an elegant Chinese woman in Hong Kong (they had died long before I was born). I have only a single, taciturn sister left and no one else to ask about family history. I teased what I could out of my parents while they were alive, but neither of them was keen to talk about their parents or past. There were some vintage photos and a suitcase of old newspaper clippings and frail documents – but that was it. I was able to piece together a basic family tree, but only as far back as my grandparents. The past was a closed book in our family (World War II and post-traumatic stress disorder had a lot to do with it). And yet I had inherited a mixed heritage, which, growing up in a predominantly white working-class Northampton, was challenging (e.g. the usual casual racism). And, thus, I grew up knowing that I came from two very different worlds; grew up not knowing one whole side of my family; grew up not quite fully knowing who I was. Hence, the desire *to know* became central to the novel I found myself compelled to write. Through my protagonist, Janey McEttrick, and her pseudo-lineage, I was able to explore notions of hybridity that have haunted me all of my life.

A note on representation: ethical considerations are at the core of this project and I articulate them in detail in the chapter on ‘Defining Goldendark’. In terms of fictional representation of so-called ‘minorities’ (as symbolised by my cross-section of diverse supporting characters),

as a writer of mixed heritage from a working class background I am writing from another ‘subaltern position’ (Spivak, 1988); not from the position of so-called ‘white, male privilege’, which has been problematized (and to a certain extent demonized) in recent years. Rather than writing from the apex of a hypothetical pyramid, I am writing from *across the base*, and so the power discourse is no longer hierarchical. I call this approach ‘translateral representation’. However, such justification should not be necessary if the endeavour is done with sufficient skill, sensitivity, research, and field-testing. The debate over ‘cultural appropriation’ (or, to reframe it in terms of literary praxis, ‘writing the Other’) will continue to rage, but for writers of the imagination it is their sine qua non. Kim Stanley Robinson emphasises this: ‘writing about the Other is what we invented literature to do’ (quoted in VanderMeer, 2018: 56). Nnedi Okorafor asserts: ‘Of course, anybody can write about anything. Nobody wants to shut anything down,’ (2016) while emphasising marginalised communities should be allowed to tell their stories first (which apart from the denizens of Elphame is the case here). *Zoo City* author, Lauren Beukes, critiqued this authorial trepidation: ‘I don’t have a lot of patience for authors who say they are too scared to write a character outside their cultural experience. Because we do that all the time. It’s called using your imagination’ (ibid, 2018: 193), with an important caveat: ‘...it’s not about creating one-trick ponies that reflect some quintessential property of what we think being Other is about. It’s about creating complex, deep, rich characters driven by their own motivations and shaped by their experiences’ (ibid, 2018: 194). So, I have attempted to do just that, claiming not *authority*, but conscionable creative freedom.

INTRODUCTION

0.1 The Three Roads

The inherent tensions of producing a creative artefact within a critical framework is at the heart of creative writing as a discipline in the academy and has been discussed widely (Kureishi, 2014; Self, 2014; Vanderslice, 2011; Webb, 2015; Whitehead, 2016). Though informed by this continuing discourse, my intention here is to focus upon the actuality and outcomes of my experience. During the research, composition and editing of my project I have discovered a creative–critical approach and ‘voice’ that have been fine-tuned through the by-products of my research, in conference papers (Manwaring, 2014a; 2014c; 2014d; 2015a; 2015b; 2015c; 2016a; 2016c; 2017b; 2017c), articles (Manwaring, 2016g; 2018a; 2018b; 2018c; 2018d) and commissions (Manwaring, 2014f; 2015f; 2016b; 2016e; 2016f; 2017d). This hybrid approach, while growing within an ecosystem of post-colonial discourse (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988; Bhaba, 1994), was fed in a more intuitive way by ‘taproot texts’ – i.e. pre-18th-century literature that displays significant elements of ur- or proto-fantasy (Clute & Grant, 1999: 921–922) – and embodied, experiential research.

Primary among these taproot texts is the supernatural ballad of ‘Thomas the Rhymer’, attributed to the 13th-century Thomas of Erceldoune but recorded in numerous versions from Sir Walter Scott (1806) onwards (Farrell, 2009). The earliest version of this was transcribed by the singer Anna Gordon Brown at the request of collector Alexander Fraser Tytler in 1800 (NLS, Acc. 10611 (2)). Apparently learned from her mother and aunt (Between Worlds exhibition, Durham University, 2017), the ballad appears to have existed exclusively in the oral tradition until Brown was encouraged to write it down for her father for the Musical Society of Aberdeen. At the time (late 18th century) it was fashionable to record ballads, chiefly thanks to the popularity and success of Robert Burns’s output, which bestowed upon them, in the eyes of society, a tinge of respectability.

In the ballad in question, the young Thomas meets the ‘queen of fair Elfland’ as he idles by the Eildon Hills, near Melrose. Tempted by her offer of a kiss, he is bound to go with her to her otherworldly realm and serve her for seven ‘mortal years’ (coincidentally the upper limit of a part-time PhD). Crossing through a gloomy, liminal zone where they see ‘neither

sun nor moon’, they pause by another tree where the Queen shows Thomas three roads to choose from:

‘O see ye not yon narrow road,
So thick beset with thorns and briars?
That is the path of righteousness,
Tho’ after it but few enquires.

‘And see ye not that braid braid road,
That lies across that lily leven?
That is the path of wickedness,
Tho’ some call it the road to heaven.

‘And see not ye that bonny road,
That winds about the fernie brae?
That is the road to fair Elfland,
Where thou and I this night maun gae.’

(Anon., cited in Skelton & Blackwood, 1990: 208)

These three ontological choices (‘ferlies three’) chart a metaphorical landscape that resonates with my project and my approach. The ‘narrow road’ could be read as the critical one – of academic discourse and the minute analysis of literary criticism. The ‘braid braid road’ could be seen as the purely creative path – expansive, lateral, unboundaried. The former needs the synaptic leap and appeal to the aesthetic of the latter; the latter, the discipline and rigour of the former. Either extreme by itself can be ultimately lacking – too dry or too indulgent. This is a crude distinction, and possibly a false dichotomy, akin to that of left/right brain function myths (Gilchrist, 2012), but it will serve our purpose for now. However, there is a third way, as suggested by the Queen of Elfland’s choices – the ‘bonny road/That winds about the fernie brae’. This is the road that takes the travellers to ‘fair Elfland’, a place of testing and transformation, gifts and geasa (taboos). And this, I posit, is my path ‘across the creative/critical divide’.ⁱ

In actuality, I have physically experienced this liminal landscape whilst walking the Southern Upland Way, a 212-mile footpath that runs across the Scottish Borders from coast to coast, during the summer of 2017. After several days walking eastwards I reached the Ettrick Valley (home of writer Thomas Hogg, the so-called ‘Ettrick Shepherd’, and a key setting for my novel). From there I climbed up over the hills into the neighbouring Yarrow Valley, traversing a lonely but lovely moorland: this ‘inbetween space’, miles from anywhere and anyone, seemed to me to be most numinous and inspiring I had traversed in two weeks of walking. No doubt enchanted by the psychogeography of the place, with its rich peat of balladry and folklore, social history and the sublime, and by my fugue state of epiphanic exhaustion, it inspired an impromptu song and, later, one of my self-styled ‘illuminated poems’ (‘Between the Yarrow and the Ettrick’, unpublished), demonstrating how conducive such liminal spaces (between two places, two states of being) can be: ‘bonny roads’ of creativity and insight.

Looking back over the last six years, as though from near the end of a long walk, I have found that the creative tension between the creative and critical has frequently yielded an exciting cross-fertilisation of ideas and energies. This often intuitive approach is something I will attempt to evidence, deconstruct and interrogate here. Much of this will be back-extrapolation, retrofitting my project with intentionality – when in truth the process was far more organic, free-ranging and emergent (Whitehead, 2013). It is with the heart that one responds to the invitation to take the ‘bonny road’ – and my ‘choice’ to write *The Knowing* was really no choice at all.

I do not recall the precise moment when the story ‘chose me’ (although there are early mentions of it in my notebooks from 2012), but as soon as I gave it voice it took hold and would not let me go. I just knew I was in for the long haul. Would I, like Thomas, be bound for ‘seven mortal years’ and end up with a double-edged gift? Thomas received the ‘Tongue that Cannot Lie’, the all-knowing prophetic gift from the Queen of Elfland (his prophecies passed into the oral tradition of the area); but my gift was inevitably to be of limited omniscience, a self-knowing, self-reflexive one, insights gleaned with hard-won hindsight into my writing practice, as I look back upon my methodology and the choices I made in terms of material, genre and form.

0.2 The Terroir of the Literature Review

A highlight of my hill walk between the Yarrow and the Ettrick was coming across the ruinous 14th-century Blackhouse Tower, the remote former residence of Hogg, visited by the likes of Sir Walter Scott and Thomas Carlyle. Finding this tower in the wild with my own efforts felt like a satisfying point of synchrony with my own research. James Hogg (1770–1835), poet, essayist and novelist, is perhaps best known for his semi-autobiographic novel *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (2009 [1824]), which went on to influence Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (2003 [1886]), itself a dramatisation of the disturbing, chthonic energies of the creative mind, as discussed in his contribution to *Scribner's*, 'A Chapter on Dreams' (1888), and my commentary upon it (Manwaring, 2018d). Yet Hogg, with his repertoire of ballads and poems informed by the oral tradition of the Borders, was first and foremost a tradition-bearer, and a primary source for Scott, who became his mentor and friend. From his mother he imbibed the folklore and fairy traditions of the area, and from his father, an elder of the church, the strictures of the Scottish Kirk. His grandfather, Will o' Phaup, was reputed to have been the last man to converse with the fairies.ⁱⁱ And so to walk in Hogg's footsteps was to intersect with this vibrant skein. But the risk with all such 'towers in the wild' is one of romanticisation. What in the mist can appear to be a place of mystery, in clear light is no more than a pile of overgrown rubble. Reaching Blackhouse Tower as I entered the final phase of my PhD (the task of writing up awaiting me upon my return), I could not but help feel similarly towards the unstable edifice of my endeavour. Like Hogg's distinguished visitors I risked looking upon a rusticated dwelling (the modest shepherd's cottage next to the tower) with an antiquarian's curiosity (fathoming the mystery of the past), admiration (at such a bold if naive undertaking), an element of nostalgia (for an idealised pastoral innocence) and relief (at not having to actually live there). Extending this metaphor to my own 'edifice', in the way locals would often repurpose ancient bits of stonework, there are certainly elements that could be incorporated into the new structure (the redraft), and each 'stone' is symbolic of the ideas, research, texts and extrapolations that go into the final iteration, even if not all of them are visible.

As I began to sift through the rubble, not only did I feel the need to jettison much of my initial proposal, but also the immense amount of research that had informed each

subsequent draft would barely see the light of day – neither in the novel nor here, where I have been forced to pare down exactly what to discuss. Every text is cited in the notes and/or bibliography, of course, but only the key aspects remain foregrounded in this commentary. This process is an unavoidable part of ‘stripping of leaves’, the scrubbing back to what matters, the living skin beneath the dead cells.

Yet after years of being ‘weathered’ in such a climate it is almost impossible to tell what is one’s skin and what is one’s environment (where does the tower end and the wild begin?). This is not necessarily a problem. Plagiarism can be creative, as Alasdair Gray wittily illustrates in his ‘confessional appendices’ in *Lanark* – ‘Diff-Plag’, ‘Self-Plag’, etc (1994: 485–499) – and as Jonathan Lethem argues in his essay ‘The Ecstasy of Influence’, invoking Roland Barthes’ dictum “From Work to Text,”: ‘Any text is woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony’ (Barthes, quoted in Lethem, 2007: 68). This ‘vast stereophony’ is not merely a by-product, the sum of our influences; it is a creative process in itself: ‘It becomes apparent that appropriation, mimicry, quotation, allusion, and sublimated collaboration consist of a kind of sine qua non of the creative act, cutting across all forms and genres in the realm of cultural production’ (2007: 61).

Although I would not go as far as Lethem in his vehement refuting of copyright and his claim that everything is a mere patchwork of influences (I bring to my work more than a ‘minor discolouration ...’), it has to be acknowledged that nothing is created in isolation. By working in a certain idiom, one is inevitably shaped by its tradition – either by working with or reacting against it: ‘Inspiration could be called inhaling,’ Lethem continues, even if one ‘submerges that knowing’ (2007: 61). We awake from a vivid dream, Stevenson’s ‘small theatre of the brain’ (1888: 122), which inspires a painting, a poem, a symphony – having watched a film, seen a play, listened to a concerto the night before, or sometimes years before. We forget the source – a process called ‘cryptomnesia’ (‘The phenomenon of perceiving a latent or subconscious memory as an original thought or idea; latent or subconscious recollection’ [OED, 10th edn]) – but the dream remains.

This chancy terrain between the unconscious and the conscious is the artistic (and critical) ecosystem that writers of the fantastic inhabit. It is my chosen ‘terroir’ – a wine-making term I have appropriated from Jeff VanderMeer’s hallucinatory Southern Reach Trilogy (2014a; 2014b; 2014c), where it is used to define ‘Area X’, a hazardous zone of

metamorphic potentiality investigated by a series of scientific and military teams. In terms of my novel, I see it as everything that has gone into the mulch of my imagination – the totality of my influences. The conventional literature review is expected to show a depth and breadth of reading, demonstrating that you know ‘the field’. When a field has no edges it is difficult to know what to include, for I have been reading science fiction and fantasy all of my life, as well as poetry, books about folklore, folk tales, mythology and legends. And similarly I have been visiting numinous places – the kinds of locations I feature in my novel – for a long time. I recall visiting the Eildon Hills (associated with ‘Thomas the Rhymer’) in 1992. Twenty-five years later I was once more at the Rhymer’s Stone (a stone erected by the Melrose Literary Society in 1929 and relocated in 1970 to its current position – the purported site of the ‘Eildon Tree’ mentioned in the ballad), recording on video a spoken-word version of the ballad in situ. The conversation never stops.

A lifetime of words and wandering – but such romantic peregrinations could be seen as crepuscular, undertaken in a kind of ‘twilight’ consciousness, not critical enough to cut it. When you embark upon a PhD you switch on the spotlights. All of your bad habits and guilty pleasures are revealed. In this critical light it is clear what is lacking. To rectify this, seminal texts must be studied, the authorities of the field (Todorov, 1975; Moorcock, 1987; Garner, 2003b; Clute & Grant, 1999; Clarke, 2004; Le Guin, 2004; Mendlesohn, 2008; Atwood, 2011; Pullman, 2017a). The academic discourse you are hoping to contribute to – a fool knight, rocking up to court on your donkey; Parsifal-like you may be, but you may yet win the Grail. But the hard work commences. Before the glory of the tourney ground, scrubbing pots in the scullery. Hours, days, weeks spent in libraries or in the solitary act of reading.

Apart from the nexus of texts around Cecil Sharp, folk songs, ballads, the collectors and the collected (Roud, 2017); and likewise the body of work around Robert Kirk, *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies*, the fairy tradition in Scotland and so forth (Sanderson, 1976; Stewart, 1990; Hunter, 2001; Warner, 2006; Henderson & Cowan, 2001; Henderson, 2009; 2016a; 2016b; Purkiss, 2000; 2007); the third main ‘cluster’ – around fantasy (the writing and reading of it) – I had thoroughly plundered during the writing of my non-fiction book on the subject, *Desiring Dragons: Creativity, Imagination and the Writer’s Quest* (Manwaring, 2014b). I revisited many of these texts and greatly extended my reading in the course of writing several conference papers and articles during my PhD.ⁱⁱⁱ Through engagement with delegates and peer reviewers I have fine-tuned these further and

shamelessly cannibalised them for this thesis. They have been the embryonic articulation and testing ground of my emergent ideas throughout the process of working on the novel.

One thing is painfully clear – you cannot read it all. Even if you somehow manage to read everything ever written on the subject (in every language), new work is continually emerging or coming to light (new translations, critical editions and so forth). Any literature review is like painting the Forth Bridge – an endless task – and I would be suspicious of anyone claiming omniscience. This brings me to an essential part of my project.

0.3 An Epistemological Enquiry

One starts a PhD hoping (perhaps naively) to become the expert upon your chosen micro-niche of knowledge. I certainly started to get my hopes up to the point of retitling my novel as *The Knowing* (sans subtitle at this point), and not just because this was the ecolectical term (Appalachian) for my protagonist's gift of second sight. The ideal title should have a polysemous quality. Throughout the novel, characters are driven by their desire *to know* – as I, the writer-researcher, was, and as I hoped the reader would be. Achieving a PhD would, I hoped, accredit my knowledge – but any desire for omniscience, in any field, however niche, is flawed and ultimately doomed to failure (although we shouldn't stop trying). For an epistemological hunger is at the heart of the human condition – we are meaning-making machines (Lewis-Williams, 2004; Harari & Perkins 2017) – and is at the core of my project.

As Paul Gauguin questioned in his masterpiece, *D'ou venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Ou allons-nous?* (1897–1898): Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? These questions are central to the human condition. They are questions that haunt me and have, until now, subconsciously driven my writing. With this current project they have been brought into the light and provide the internal combustion engine of my narrative. Like the three Fates or Norns they influence everything my central protagonist, Janey McEtrick, does. They are questions I had to apply to my own knowledge of Janey. They became the novel itself.

Here, briefly, I will summarise the way they intersect with the plot.

(i) Where do we come from?

Our origins follow us like a shadow throughout our life. Sometimes we may deny them, but we cannot escape them. They are like Ouroboros: the more we exert energy to break free of their influence, the more we will encounter their presence encircling our lives, for, as T.S. Eliot put it, 'In my beginning is my end ... In my end is my beginning' ('East Coker', 1940). Janey was brought up by her mother, Marsha; her father having been absent since before her birth. He was an undercover FBI agent with Cherokee blood, who used Marsha to infiltrate a group of anti-war activists. Janey has never met him, and so that side of her heritage remains something of a mystery (although her Cherokee friend Quatie compensates a little as a surrogate mother figure). After her interrogation by the FBI and the revelation of her lover's true identity and purpose, Janey's birth mother suffered a breakdown. Although she has moments of lucidity, Marsha is an unreliable narrator when it comes to conveying to Janey knowledge of her heritage. Janey knows she has Scottish blood from the matrilineal line, but that is about as far as it goes, until her mother bequeaths to her a box of heirlooms that have belonged to nine generations of McEtrick women. Through these Janey starts to discover her 'roots', for she can access the memories and voices contained within each through her special inheritance: the gift of the 'knowing'.

Janey McEtrick, on one level, personifies the hybridity that has haunted me my whole adult life. She is uncertain of her position, her status – a Scottish-Cherokee *Métis*, who has never known her father, and is also in denial of the tradition her mother represents, her journey is to re-align with her mixed heritage and by doing so connect with her authentic voice. And therefore she performs what I myself, as researcher-practitioner, have attempted to do here. Walking between the 'worlds' of the creative and critical disciplines, in my novel I have tried to reconcile their apparently antithetical modalities through the lens of the Fantastic, which 'functions within the locus of competing claims' (Sandner, 2011: 32). Other characters within the novel personify different knowledge sets, varying levels of 'knowing' and of belief. The 'academic' if not the 'wildman' (quoted in Anderson, 2006: 65) in me remains sceptical about many aspects of Fairy folklore and neo-pagan beliefs, but as a novelist I can inhabit different belief systems through my characters and, vicariously, imagine what it would be like to have, for instance, Christian faith (as in the case of Kirk). My characters perform their gradations of belief and knowledge for me – often articulating the

dialectic between different positions (e.g. Eliza Thomas, the ethnomusicologist; Allen Raven, the amateur enthusiast; Agent Trent, the baffled but curious FBI agent). In this way, they perform, indirectly, a ficto-critical function – characters lucidly dreaming the story they are within, the ballads and folklore intersecting with their lives, so many Red Kings threatening to awaken from the ‘fictive dream’, (quoted in Neale, 2009: 149–151) creating an internal self-reflexive commentary.

(ii) What are we?

The nature of our being can create a lifelong existential crisis. As Ophelia laments in *Hamlet*: ‘My lord, we know what we are, but not what we may be’ (Act IV, Scene 5). Since puberty, Janey has been disturbed by strange, often terrifying visions. She quickly learned to drown them out with drink and drugs, beginning a long-tailed descent down the slippery slope of substance abuse and addiction. Losing her first child in a tragic accident compounded this self-destructive trajectory. We meet her at the start of the novel in her early thirties, barely keeping it together: living in a trailer, working part-time in a vintage record store, playing in a jobbing rock band, but essentially spinning wheels. All of her life Janey has been running from what she is, from her gift, and what that implies about the nature of reality. It is more than meets the eye, as William Stafford epitomises in his poem ‘Bifocal’: ‘So, the world happens twice—/once what we see it as;/second it legends itself/deep, the way it is’ (1998). Only by coming to terms with this, ‘the two sights’ (*an da shealladh*, Gaelic), can Janey find some kind of peace, and that is her main ‘arc’: by connecting with her ancestors and accepting her gift she starts to achieve her true potential, finding her authentic voice as a musician and, through that, the healing of the rift inside of her.

(iii) Where are we going?

Eschatological concerns have obsessed *Homo sapiens* since the dawn of consciousness (Harari & Perkins, 2017). All sentient people speculate about their extinction, about what happens to us when we die. In some sense every novel is a rehearsal for death (McHale, 2003: 228–232), and every ending is a kind of death. Inevitably, I wrestled with the way to

finish *The Knowing*. Initially, I structured the novel using the seven-note heptatonic scale of Appalachian music, extending beyond the classic three- or five-act structure. I deliberately continued the narrative beyond the climax (intentionally undermining the linear and rather phallogocentric hegemony of the Campbellian hero's journey) for something more feminine and multi-climactic: a diminishing series of structural 'after-shocks' to cover what happened next: in Janey's case, her pregnancy, the development of her musical career and the birth of her 'gifted' child. But feedback from my supervisor (Whitehead, supervision, 2 October 2015) suggested this was all deadwood and that I should cut the last 100 pages (24,000 words), instead ending with Allen Raven, the comatose boyfriend, waking up and recognising Janey. I could see how, from that point onwards, the tension evaporated. The McKeesian diktats of plot pay-off and narrative traction (McKee, 1999) deserve subverting – but my novel, not being an experimental, post-modernist affair, did not suit such iconoclasm. So, I murdered my darlings and cut those pages (an epilogue, showing Janey three years on, was eventually dropped also). In those final two acts I also described a road trip undertaken by Janey and her English academic friend (Eliza Thomas) westwards to find her father. Janey's full journey to her father I intend to relate in a follow-up, entitled *Bone of My Bone* (after the Kirk quote I use as an epigraph in *The Knowing*). This will also explore the startling development of Janey's uncanny child. All important stuff, but I realise not relevant to this first novel. The reader does not need to know this yet.

So, it is evident how levels and qualities of knowing underpin and interlace my novel project – for me as the writer, for the characters and for readers. Ultimately, I suggest, the very novel itself is an epistemological enquiry into the nature of knowledge: What do we know? How do we know what we know? Why is some knowledge valued more than others? And is knowledge only validated if it is shared with others, as Montaigne reflects, via Persius: 'Does *knowing* mean nothing to you, unless somebody else knows that you know it?' (2003: 274)

These hierarchies of knowledge I wished to make porous through the multi-linear structure of the narrative. Various 'knowledge sets' are epitomised by the characters: some are informed by reading (Allen Raven, the poet; Shelly DuPont, the lawyer; Eliza Thomas, the academic); some by intuition (Marsha; Quatie; Janey); some by an experience (Janey and fellow musician Fingal Lewis). I have attempted to show how all have their pros and cons. Nobody has full omniscience, including myself as the writer. The experience of a PhD is

often a humbling process – as you realise how little you *actually* know, how much *more* there is to know. There is always someone smarter, better read, more experienced, more published, more cited, more funded or better connected.

Therefore, I added a critical subtitle to my novel, so it became, *The Knowing: A Fantasy*. This is to acknowledge the fallacy of omniscience while at the same time flagging up the genre. This semantic play gives the title a more multi-layered snap. It no longer sits square within its apparent genre, but attempts to do something else, vibrating against the edges.

Finally, in the very format of the novel (initially an ebook and then with a website augmenting the print version) I wished to give readers the choice about how *much* they read, driven by how much they *wished* to know. Complementary narrative threads are accessed via hyperlinked motifs. The reader can choose whether to scrupulously read all these as they go along, to cherry-pick, or to just read the main narrative (as the author Charles de Lint decided to do^{iv}). The reader experience, in this way, is aligned with the epistemologies of the project (researcher; author; characters). I wanted the reader to experience something similar to Janey when she holds the heirlooms in her hands (through her gift of the ‘knowing’ she is able to access the memories encoded within each artefact). When the reader touches the motif on their ‘smart’ device they mirror Janey’s psychometry. It bestows upon them a kinaesthetic analogue of her gift.

I will discuss matters of form in more detail in ‘Framing the Narrative’. But to conclude this introduction I will address the concern my supervisor raised regarding my ‘X-ray’ approach: ‘Are you just an author reluctant to allow the berg beneath to remain hidden’ (annotations on MS, Harry Whitehead, 2017). In writing *The Knowing* I wished to challenge the dominance of Hemingway’s iceberg, an approach that has often dominated creative writing praxis (in the West). Although there is much to admire in Papa’s hard, objective-omniscient prose (and in his heirs, Carver and McCarthy), it is not my style and not my way of seeing the world. I find it too hard, too cold and too cynical. Tonally, I wished to attempt something different, which I shall explain and explore in ‘Defining Goldendark’.

CHAPTER 1

WALKING BETWEEN WORLDS: in defence of experiential research

1.1 Reiving insight in the Debatable Lands

In an introduction to her best-known poem, 'Not Waving, but Drowning', Stevie Smith (1966) said that trying to describe how and why you write poetry is 'like digging up plants to see how they're getting on ... we all know what happens to the plants – they die'. Smith seemed wary of brooding too much on (the often hidden) creative process of a poem – its inspiration, gestation and development. She did go on to provide some context for its genesis, so perhaps she was merely playing coy.

This wariness, however, is not uncommon among writers.

Hemingway, when interviewed by George Plimpton for the *Paris Review* about his writing, responded with a customary growl: 'It is not the writer's province to explain it or to run guided tours through the more difficult country of his work' (1965: 230)

Amy Tan also warned against revealing the hidden workings behind a novelist's legerdemain when discussing her 'writer's memoir', *When the Past Begins* (2017). Finding herself reflecting on 'how I write and what inspires me', Tan regretted the disclosure upon publication: 'once it was done I realised you shouldn't explain the magic tricks. Writing shouldn't be dissected and pulled apart' (Tan, 2018).

In his discussion on authorial 'intentions' Philip Pullman (2017: 113-121) bemoans the 'occupational hazard' of the writer continually asked about their ideas at book festival events, 'where the task at hand is that of entertaining an audience rather than revealing deep and complex truths' (2017: 114). The experienced writer will often have 'instant stories about telling a story' (ibid) at their disposal – pat answers that elicit a crowd-pleasing response.

When I asked Liz Lochhead about her 'creative process' at the Bath Literature Festival in 2003 she quipped, 'a pen and a piece of paper'. Was she being deliberately disingenuous? Another magician not wishing to reveal her stage secrets? Just playing to the crowd (a large packed Guildhall)? Or was she truly unaware of her own methodology? And does that matter?

As a self-reflexive writer in the academy I do not have the luxury of fobbing off such interrogations, but must scrutinise my process, searching for ‘deep and complex truths’ (ibid). What is often instinctual and chthonic – arising mysteriously from the depths of the subconscious, written in a fugue state, a first draft groped towards in the dark – as Philip Pullman (2017c) also articulates – must now be examined in the harsh light of the laboratory. In such conditions I hope it will not wither, but flourish – the laboratory becoming a greenhouse.

It is tempting to speculate that writers struggle at, or are resistant to, articulating their creative process because the creative act occurs in one part of the brain, the critical in another – the classic left/right brain split. However crude this distinction – one that is a false dichotomy (Gilchrist, 2012) – it provides a useful metaphor. These two ‘sides’ of the brain are in continual communication – lightning fields of synaptic firings across the hemispheres – but sometimes the communication breaks down (Sachs, 1985). The ‘zone’ we are in when we write (creatively) *may* be a very different one from the editing or critical space. This methodological schizophrenia seems endemic to the academy: Tolkien critiqued the Lit/Lang divide in his valedictory address;^v and in many modern English faculties there seems an unbridgeable gulf between the disciplines of creative writing and English literature, although clearly they are part of the same ecosystem (Harper/Kerridge, 2010: 1-5). Personally, I have found the creative and critical approaches to be not mutually exclusive; indeed they cross-fertilise in exciting ways. For me, their shared border is the ‘hot zone’ of emergence. If one is able to hold the tension between these approaches, straddling the place of negotiated territory, a Debatable Land of creative reiving and insight, then great things can emerge.

1.2 Practice-Based Research

To qualify practice-based research’s validity as a core methodology in my discipline, it is worth citing the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Benchmark Statement: ‘original creative work is the essence of research in this practice-led subject’ (2008). Emphasising this, Jen Webb, in her analysis of research in creative writing, has said, ‘Research in or through creative practice can provide a way to bridge these two worlds: to result in an output that undeniably adds knowledge, while also producing a satisfying work of literature’ (2015: 20) My wish here, through the creation of my novel and this accompanying

thesis, has been to attempt this. I have endeavoured to do so by drawing upon an embodied and multi-modal approach. My creative practice extends *beyond* the page, but feeds *back* into it. To return to the Benchmark Statement: ‘Research into content may include **experiential learning**, whereby creative writers put themselves in a particular situation or make an experience happen for the sake of Creative Writing’ (2008: 13). The experiential method is at the heart of my creative practice and this project.

As a long-time storyteller, performance poet, host of spoken-word events and (more recently) fledgling folk singer, I have used the performative aspect of my practice to inform my prose fiction, field-testing material to live audiences. In 2002 I co-created and performed in a commissioned storytelling show for the Bath Literature Festival called *Voices of the Past*. In that I performed a monologue as Robert Kirk, the ‘fairy minister’ of Aberfoyle. I could not have known then that I would undertake a PhD with him as a major focus, or that this kind of ‘method-writing’, as I call it, repurposing Stanislavski’s system (1936; 1948; 1957), would become a central practice of mine. I will explore the chief iterations of this in this chapter (walking; spoken word; illustration), as well as challenging this approach, but before striking out ‘into the wild’ it is wise to establish theoretical coordinates to triangulate by.

1.3 The Musical, the Architectonic and the Textile

Walter Benjamin suggested that to ‘Work on good prose [one has to follow] ... three steps: a musical stage when it is composed, an architectonic one when it is built, and a textile one when it is woven’ (2015: 61). To extend the metaphor of these points in relation to my practice-based research: I would argue that the ‘musical’ stage has involved the composition of my work as informed by my research into folk music (English; Scottish; Appalachian), folk dance (Border Morris), ballad-singing and learning to play an instrument (guitar/mandolin). The ‘architectonic’ stage encompasses a month spent in Hawthornden Castle as a writer-in-residence, where I worked on a second draft, informed by the physical experience of staying in a castle that was the former residence of William Drummond. This was complemented by my visits to Edinburgh (with its many levels and wynds, the latter suggesting ‘portals’ from one ‘textual layer’ to another); and to Appalachia, where I visited ‘old’ timber-frame buildings and modern Asheville. The ‘textile’ stage has been enriched by

the numerous talks and seminars I have attended on the craft of creative writing, by detailed feedback from my supervisor, by close readings from a select peer group (including American friends), by the study of particular authors (Graham Joyce; John Crowley; Robert Holdstock; Susan Hill; Elizabeth Hand; Philip Pullman; among many others), by visits to exhibitions (e.g. Appalachian Women, aSHEville Women's Museum, Asheville, NC, September 2015; Alice in Wonderland, British Library, March 2016; Certain Wytches: Fear, Myth and Magick: Anne Jackson, Museum in the Park, Stroud, October 2017; The Lost Words: Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris, Compton Verney, October 2017) and by reading interviews with writers (chiefly 'The Art of Fiction' in the *Paris Review*, 1953–2018). In actuality, Benjamin's triad relates to the formation of the text and to extend it beyond this to justify my wide-ranging activities and interests risks punishing the metaphor. So, to augment Benjamin's process, it is necessary to apply Christopher Frayling's useful demarcation of arts research into three modes of enquiry: 'Research ... *for* practice (activities supporting the artist in her work), *through* practice (creative drafting and editing), *into* practice (e.g. observations of artists at work)' (1993). Any artist worth their salt will engage with these at different stages, often flowing organically between them: they are, in my mind, part of one continuum. But rather than reject them as a redundant taxonomy I would also argue for their validity as a lucid parsing of this process (the splitting of the spectrum that does no harm to its source-light). *For*, *through* and *into*, my practice-based research strove to cast light into every corner. If blind spots occurred, it was through no fault of this multi-modal method of enquiry.

1.4 Writing as Method Acting: Experiential Research

Complementing archival research and the practical application of craft, my preferred method of research, when it comes to bringing alive the world of my characters and their settings, is an experiential one. I find that by visiting actual locations connected to my story (wherever possible) or having analogous experiences, I soak up atmosphere in an immersive, multi-sensory way (which no amount of text research could replicate), creating a reservoir of experiences and associations that I can draw upon in the recreation of the setting or characters' perceptions. And I stumble upon telling details, things I would only notice in situ, which often influence my creative decisions. This form of 'qualia-capture' (Lodge, 2002: 14)

is intrinsic to the performance of authenticity that follows, rather as a method actor draws upon childhood memories, past traumas and triumphs, importing them into their performance to give it the ring of truth.

There are counter-arguments to this approach. Geoff Dyer's excoriating deconstruction of an experiential method in his attempt to write a biography about D.H. Lawrence (2012) proves, at least, that it did not work for him; but that does not invalidate it as a methodology. Some writers relish field research; others prefer to do research from the comfort of their study. What matters, ultimately, is the writing. The embodied method provides me with a visceral experience to draw upon and allows me to inhabit the zone of my characters. The imported affect helps to create an ambience of authenticity within the prose. However, the notion of 'authenticity' in a piece of creative writing has been increasingly problematised in recent years (Whitehead, 2010b; Baker, 2014; Darwin & De Groot, 2014). James Frey's controversial 'memoir' of alcoholism and recovery, *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), has achieved notoriety for its initial claims to be a genuine memoir of recovery from addiction (Wyatt, 2006). The device of verisimilitude is as old as storytelling itself, but first modernism then post-modernism have challenged that – the unreliable narrator (Hobsbaum, 1995: 37–46) destabilizing the omniscient claims of the Grand Narrative (Lyotard, 1979). Any claims of truthfulness seem increasingly slippery in a post-truth age. And mimetic fiction's traditional claim to realism has been increasingly destabilised by the bot-generated fictions of 'fake news'. What seems real can no longer be trusted. As Chabon observes, fictional truth 'is under siege by spurious fact in so many ways' (in Clark, 2017). And there are plenty of examples of novels that have been written without any experiential research. Stef Penney's award-winning debut novel, *The Tenderness of Wolves* (2006), convincingly evokes the Alaskan wilderness despite the author having never set foot there. Exhaustive research does not guarantee the 'success' of a literary project, as Iain Sinclair pithily articulates:

You can make as many charts as you like, plot graphs with different-coloured inks, predict movements, the arguments of ungrateful characters. You can spend years ploughing through biographies, reminiscences of tourists in search of the pastoral; libraries of geology, church histories, mythology. You can visit every site a dozen

times, live on the road. It makes no difference. The first sentence on the page and the game's up, the story goes its own way. A fly that refuses to buzz. (2001: 307)

Yet even Sinclair, the flâneur par excellence, acknowledges the efficacy of both the physical act of walking^{vi} and what he calls the 'trance of writing': 'The trance of writing is the author's only defence against the world. He sleepwalks between assignments, between welcoming ghosts, looking out for the next prompt, the next milestone hidden in the grass' (2006: 362).

Haruki Murakami is a strong advocate for running and writing, not necessarily for inspiration, but to balance out the sedentary life-style, clear the mind and inculcate what he sees as essential qualities for the (novel) writer: focus and endurance (2009: 76–83, 96–97). For him, running is an intrinsic part of his writing practice, a way to counteract the loneliness of the long-distance writer: 'Writing novels and running full marathons are very much alike. Basically a writer has a quiet, inner motivation, and doesn't seek validation in the outwardly visible' (2009: 10).

Whatever other authors refute (Dyer, 2012) or advocate in their methodology, I find that experiential research does help *me*. It affords me an 'otter's-eye view' (Macfarlane, 2005) of the terrain of the novel I am inhabiting, as Macfarlane describes in the approach of Henry Williamson:

Williamson's research was obsessive-compulsive – writing as method acting. He returned repeatedly to the scenes of Tarka's story as it developed. He crawled on hands and knees, squinting out sightlines, peering at close-up textures, working out what an otter's-eye view of Weest Gully or Dark Hams Wood or Horsey Marsh would be. So it is that the landscape in Tarka is always seen from a few inches' height: water bubbles 'as large as apples', the spines of 'blackened thistles', reeds in ice like wire in clear flex. The prose of the book has little interest in panoramas – in the sweeps and long horizons which are given to eyes carried at five feet. (2005)

As a keen walker, my experiential research includes, like Williamson's, literal fieldwork. As part of my way into the world of my novel I have walked long-distance footpaths: Hadrian's Wall (2014), West Highland Way (2015), Offa's Dyke (2016), Southern

Uplands Way (2017) – a collective distance of 568 miles – walks exploring borders and debatable lands, And I have discovered my enjoyment of singing in the process ... While walking the West Highland Way solo I started to pick a song each day to keep me going.^{vii} For Offa's Dyke I created a deliberate songbook.^{viii} These walks gave me an embodied sense of geography, of psychogeography – following mindfully in the footsteps of great walker-writers like Thoreau, Leigh Fermor, Solnit, Sinclair, Sebald, Macfarlane, Shepherd, et al., and plenty of time to think about borders. Outcomes include a poetry collection, *Lost Border* (2015); a performance at the Cheltenham Poetry Festival, *Across the Lost Border*; a ballad and tale show; and, of course, the novel itself.^{ix}

1.5 Spoken/Written

Most of all, the two worlds of the 'spoken' and 'written' forms have cross-fertilised in my creative practice and published works. Since I first started to write poetry, in 1991, I have straddled these worlds – discovering that the performance of my words (initially at 'open mike' nights) was just as important as the writing of them, as a way of getting them out there, connecting with an audience, gleaning a response, starting a discussion. I soon realised that to do so successfully required practice and sometimes a tailoring of the text for performance, focusing on its orality/aurality and factoring in mnemonic devices. I have made a study of these aspects and techniques (and the traditions that inform them) ever since. I collected my field-tested research in *The Bardic Handbook: The Complete Manual for the 21st Century Bard* (2006a). In my folk tales collections for the History Press (2012a; 2014a) I rendered into prose fiction a mixture of folklore, folk tale and ballad – culminating in the anthology I've edited, *Ballad Tales* (2017a). These, in turn, have been restored to orality in subsequent launch events – through either straight reading, extempore performance or song. In storytelling, the 'performative text' (Honko, 2002) – not a verbatim transcript but the cluster of phrases, gestures, plot points and tropes the performer holds in their memory – can result in a different telling each time. There are many paths through the forest of the narrative, its 'story-world' (Pullman, 2017: 89), modulated by the feedback loop of performance, audience, performance space, regionality and topicality.^x

1.6 Live Lit

One by-product of my PhD research has been the ‘ballad and tale’ show called *The Bonnie Road*. A one-hour blend of storytelling, song and poetry co-created with my partner, the folksinger Chantelle Smith, it draws directly upon the supernatural Border ballads of Thomas the Rhymer and Tam Lin and my research into Scottish folk traditions. This illustrates how it is possible to turn elements of a novel into a ‘live lit’ experience, one that is co-created with the audience in a slightly different form every single time, thanks to the extempore style of delivery. It has been performed at festivals, small theatres, pubs and gatherings. Bringing alive the characters in the two ballads (Thomas the Rhymer; Tam Lin; Janet; the Queen of Elfland), in some cases acting them, was an effective way of getting under their skin and finding a way in. Embodied insights deepened my understanding of them, nuancing my depiction of them in fiction. This was augmented by a workshop I ran called ‘The Wheel of Transformation’, in the US and UK, in which participants role-played those four characters, sometimes swapping roles and genders, resulting in flashes of personal insight.

1.7 Illustration as a Method of Enquiry

Another aspect of my practice-based research has been drawing. I originally trained as an artist, taking a degree in fine art, and, although I have not pursued this discipline as a career, it has influenced my writing ever since – chiefly in my visualisation of *mis en scène*, rendering of characters and my use of imagery and symbolism. I have always had an appreciation of text and image,^{xi} and in more recent years I have discovered the joy of illustration, creating textual illustrations for collections of folk tales (Manwaring, 2012a; 2014e; 2017a). In the course of archival research of Kirk’s notebooks (1660–1690) I discovered his remarkable illustrations,^{xiii} which inspired me, in part, to incorporate similar elements in my novel. I created a series of motifs symbolising the main characters. On one level, this was purely practical – to flag up the hyperlinked threads, differentiating them clearly to facilitate reader navigation – although I took great satisfaction in selecting and rendering these motifs, deciding on the synecdochic detail that could best epitomise each character. This approach I first developed in my illustrations for *Ballad Tales* (2017a), although elements of it had been in my notebooks for decades (e.g. sketches of corbel stones,

St Peter's, Northampton, 1992; the metopes of the King's Circus, Bath, 1998). I also discovered that by doing my own versions of Kirk's notebook drawings I gained an insight into Kirk as a young man, his mindset and pre-occupations. As a theology student at St Andrews, Kirk was prone to doodle, drawing creatures and characters that seem to foreshadow his famous monograph, to create romantic anagrams of sweethearts, to fill his notebooks on biblical exegesis with ludic marginalia ... details that humanised him and created a way in for me as a novelist to bring him alive on the page. I have found the same benefits in my studies of the art of William Blake for a graphic short story, 'Another Sun' (unpublished). Scrutinising and replicating each pen or brush mark of an artist is akin to walking in their shoes. By spending time with these historical figures in a non-verbal form one can gain intuitive insights, gleaned through a kinaesthetic approach. My visualisation was further enriched by participating in an annual initiative, called 'Inktober', started by an American artist, Jake Parker, in 2009. I committed to do an ink drawing every day for a month. Although I used the given list of prompts (Parker, 2017) as starting points, I quickly decided to bias my responses to the world of *The Knowing*. Forcing myself to come up with new images after completing the novel (2.5 draft) enriched my visualisation, which fed back into the editing of its final version (3.0 draft).^{xiii}

1.8 Pushing the Boundaries

The Knowing has attempted to push the boundaries of both form and content – finding fertile ground in the creative tension between the 'Actual and Imaginary', as Nathaniel Hawthorne terms it (1850). I argue that true 'fantastika' – 'a term appropriated from a range of Slavonic languages by John Clute – [that] embraces the genres of Fantasy, Science Fiction, and Horror, but can also include Alternate History, Gothic, Steampunk, Young Adult Dystopic Fiction, or any other radically imaginative narrative space'^{xiv} – lies within the negative space of these apparent extremes. I certainly choose to pitch my flag in this liminal zone where the magical and the mundane rub shoulders, finding neither straight realism (so-called mimetic fiction) or high fantasy to my taste. I have dramatised this transitional space as 'The Rift' within my novel, a place between the Iron World of humans and the Silver World of the fey – ever widening after the cataclysm of the Sundering, when the Borders were sealed. Yet in my novel there are irruptions on both sides: characters and contraband slip through; and in the

trickster figure of Sideways Brannelly, a 19th-century Ulster-American who has become a ‘Wayfarer’ – a trader between the worlds – I have someone who acts out the synaptic cross-fire between these hemispheres. He smuggles the lost journal of Robert Kirk out from Elfhome, metaphorically mimicking the production of the actual text itself – the result of my own walking between the worlds. And in my career as a writer-academic I continually straddle the apparent creative–critical divide, finding it a place of intense creative generation – a Mid-Atlantic Ridge for the black fumers of my mind. Gary Snyder captured this perfectly: ‘A frontier is a burning edge, a frazzle, a strange market zone between utterly different worlds’ (1990: 15).

1.9 Feeding Back into the Novel

All these ‘researches’ *for, through and into* practice (Frayling, 1993) have enriched the ‘diegetic universe’ (Scott & Roffey, 2017) of my novel – the world-building, visualisation of scenes and depiction of characters. The response from audiences, discussion generated and comments garnered in my spoken-word activities have helped create a fertile feedback loop (text-to-stage/stage-to-text). My archival research has uncovered invaluable details (marginalia; poems; diary entries), which have directly fed back into the novel – through characterisation, plot and the paratextual.

Benjamin’s triadic structure provides a practicable ‘arc’ for the creation of any long prose project. It provides useful reminders of the focus for each stage: the expansiveness of the musical, the application of the architectonic, and the exactitude of the textile. Intersected by the experiential, the textual field created is enriched by the nutrients of practice-based research. Reified by this mulch of methodological layers, the abstract becomes embodied.

In conclusion, I have found my writing develops through experiential research, performance, illustration and engagement with the world (via panels, performances, commissions, workshops, residencies and social media) – from having an expansive, outward-looking practice. All of this has helped to ground my contemporary fantasy novel in a (hopefully) convincing milieu.

Once the research has been undertaken (and in truth it can be an endless process, curtailed only by time, parameters and other practical matters), the next challenge is to find a suitable container.

CHAPTER 2

FRAMING THE NARRATIVE: monomyth, non-linearity and digital fiction

2.1 An Enquiry into Form

Can a genre novel interrogate form? Some would say that such an artefact is formulaic by definition, complying rigidly with diegetic expectations of plot, characterisation and tone – the deep, unquestioned patterning that provides comfort reading to the genre’s fans. This presumption predicates upon a certain snobbishness still lingering within the academy, one that reifies a classist hegemony:

...genre distinctions, in particular the distinction between literary fiction (high culture) and genre fiction (low culture), are structures that actively but implicitly reproduce the literary canon in its exclusiveness and normativity. (Waidner, 2018: 11)

Although science fiction continues to receive critical attention and the Gothic has been experiencing a revival in recent years, fantasy has largely remained the Cinderella form, left behind while the Ugly Sisters go off to the ball. There seems to be a blind spot about it, as if it’s relegated to the embarrassing ‘box of toys’ labelled ‘sword and sorcery’. Much of it, it has to be acknowledged, *is* derivative of the early pioneers (Lord Dunsany, Robert E. Howard, J.R.R. Tolkien, etc.) and, ironically, *unimaginative*, showing the painful absence of anything truly ‘fantastic’ (I challenge the narrow Todorovian definition of this in ‘Defining Goldendark’ below). Middle-of-the-road authors writing safely within the genre’s (or publishers’) expectations play dressing up, but do not succeed in interrogating the form. Writers of a finer calibre sometimes dabble in the genre (as in Kazuo Ishiguro’s 2015 novel, *The Buried Giant*), but the result is often an unconvincing form of literary tourism. It is often the outliers, the black swans, *sui generis* writers like Angela Carter, who truly innovate.

On the surface, my novel steps into the tradition that has been defined as ‘urban fantasy’: ‘normally texts where fantasy and the mundane world intersect and interweave throughout a tale which is significantly *about* a real city’ (Clute & Grant, 1999: 975).

This territory has historical antecedents (notably Dickens, as Clute suggests) but in the late 20th century it coalesced into a distinct mode of fantasy, mapped out by trailblazers

like Charles de Lint, in *Moonheart* (1984), Emma Bull, in *War for the Oaks* (1987), and explored by a whole slew of authors since: Feist (1988); Bear (1988); Windling (1997); Gaiman (2001); Hand (2004); Niffenegger (2005); Tuttle (2006); Thomas (2007); Donohue (2007); Morgenstern (2012); et al. Essentially, these ‘intrusion fantasies’, where a supernatural or otherworldly element irrupts into everyday reality (Mendlesohn, 2008: 114–181), depict scenarios where the Other is encountered, but is, critically, *contained*. From a promising start in which the magical and the mundane ‘crosshatch’ (Clute & Grant, 1999: 237) in (then) refreshing ways, the form has descended into formulaic schlock or irritating whimsy, a kind of fantasy lite. Although modern British fantasy writers like Ali Shaw and Jo Walton are, in works like *The Girl with Glass Feet* (2010) and *Among Others* (2011), respectively, enriching the prose – the textual plane that so often disappoints in the previous examples – the plots often lack ambition, focusing claustrophobically on a solipsistic protagonist prone to flights of fancy and trapped in the conventions of realism.

That said, there is no reason why a genre novel cannot weave in literary elements such as stylistic complexity, experiments of form, and intertextuality (see works by Alan Garner [1996; 2003a]; Susanna Clarke [2005]; Philip Pullman [2001]). ‘Why is a Raven like a writing desk?’ cries the Mad Hatter (Carroll, 1865). The Mooreeffocian answer to the nonsense riddle, provided by Carroll in the original preface, was: ‘Because it can produce a few notes, tho they are very flat; and it is Naver put with the wrong end in front!’ And this fixity of thinking mirrors that around fantasy: that it has to be written in a certain way, about certain kinds of material. And, thus, it either hamstring itself or is ghettoised, as Le Guin, a passionate advocate for fantasy, drily observed:

Realism is a genre – a very rich one, that gave us and continues to give us lots of great fiction ... But by making that one genre the standard of quality, by limiting literature to it, we were leaving too much serious writing out of serious consideration. Too many imaginative babies were going out with the bathwater. Too many critics and teachers ignored – were ignorant of – any kind of fiction but realism. (2016)

In my novel I have tried to destabilise these expectations of form and genre (the latter is discussed in more detail in ‘Defining Goldendark’). I have separated them here for the purposes of analysis, although this is an artificial bifurcation, for, like the separated twins of a

folk-tale (Garry & El-Shamy, 2016), their fates are entwined, their presences inextricably entwined with the story-forest.

First, though, I shall examine the specific ways in which I have challenged form.

2.2 The Shibboleth of the Monomyth

Joyce's term, 'Monomyth' (from *Finnegan's Wake* [1939]), repurposed by comparative mythologists (Campbell, 1949) and perpetuated by Hollywood (Vogler, 1999) has long needed challenging, as it risks constraining the organic heterodoxy of imaginative fiction. Although as a point of departure open to creative interpretation and debate it has mileage, the notion of 'monomyth' has worryingly neocolonialist undertones, perpetuating a hegemonic appropriation and whitewashing of indigenous cultures, while simultaneously promoting a neoliberal 'Brand X', via the Iowan writing workshop model, around the world (Whitehead, 2016). As a writer who has used it intensively over the years – in my workshops and writing (although never merely at face value) – I must throw my hands up and cry *mea culpa*. I have used it selectively (in my fantasy series, *The Windsmith Elegy* [Manwaring, 2004; 2006b; 2008; 2010; 2012c]), comprehensively (as an MA experiment I wrote a YA adult novel, *The Sun Miners* [2007], using the Hero's Journey as a plot template) and reactively (in *Desiring Dragons* [2014a] I deliberately went *against* its grain, creating my own model based specifically on *Beowulf*). But in *The Knowing* I wanted to consciously eschew that model. What could be seen as a phallogentric plot imperative – the thrusting quest of the linear narrative – did not seem appropriate for a story about, among other things, a woman finding her place in the world (what I like to think of as a feminist fantasy).

Although the classic triadic (or five-act) structure may also be seen as part of a lazy cultural imperialism, a reiteration of the Aristotelian model (Whitehead, 2016: 366), I wanted to use the 'found form' of the heptatonic scale (distinctive to Appalachian music, as noted by Sharp, 1916^{xv}) by creating a seven-act narrative structure. This pushed the story beyond the closure of the fifth act and the usual quick termination (a climactic finale, derived from the Hollywood model, driven by commercial imperatives) for an extended, more feminine 'multi-orgasmic' series of endings: the Big Death subsumed by *la petite mort*. However, I was reminded of the need to maintain tension and so these were cut. Ironically, the heptatonic's extended mode, with the signature long notes of Appalachian music, evokes a

gap of longing, of *hiraeth* (the keynote of such songs of exile and diaspora), which does imply a certain narrative tension. Nevertheless, this experimental ‘long tail’ did not chime with the generic expectations I had set up. The following dictum was cited often: ‘The writer’s job is to get the main character up a tree and then, once they are up there, to throw rocks at them’ (attributed to Nabokov^{xvi}). Although this is generally sound advice – for a narrative without conflict reads ‘flat’, lacks narrative traction or bite – I wanted to challenge this straitjacketing of what a ‘writer’s job’ is. As Geoff Dyer said: ‘Don’t be one of those writers who sentence themselves to a lifetime of sucking up to Nabokov’ (*The Guardian*, 2010). Though I feel it would be unwise to chop down Nabokov’s tree, perhaps one should avoid building the house of one’s novel up it. A multi-pillared approach would be more stable, something closer to the ground of one’s own being. The risk of emulating the edicts of great writers is that they come from completely different milieux. What might have made sense to them in their life doesn’t always translate into one’s own – the unique micro-climate of a project.

But without these nutrients other ‘taproot texts’ are needed – other roads to Ithaca, in which the gender dynamic is challenged. We can no longer expect Penelope to wait dutifully at home for her husband to return; she (and her sisters) can have their own odysseys (Atwood, 2005; Miller, 2018).

In place of Campbell’s ‘monomyth’, I drew upon, among other things (like ballads, Kirk’s oeuvre, etc.) Maureen J. Murdoch’s feminist riposte to the Hero’s Journey, *The Heroine’s Journey* (1990). This offers a cyclical structure based mainly upon the mother/daughter dynamic and informed by the myth of Demeter and Persephone. I used this to flesh out my female protagonist in my first novel, *The Long Woman* (2004) and had it in the back of my mind for *The Knowing*. Although I didn’t follow Murdoch’s structure religiously, I cherry-picked it to construct a more ‘rounded’ dramatic arc for my main character, Janey McEttrick. Clarissa Pinkola Estes’s *Women Who Run with the Wolves* (1992) also informed this, providing examples of ‘wild women’ carving their own fate; as did works by Robert Bly and Marion Woodman (1998) and Marina Warner (1995) that explore the mythic feminine and feminist reclamations of the fairy tale.

Thus, I found an alternative to the Campbellian approach, one that felt like a good match for my materials. Ultimately, my novel’s form was informed by a number of factors.

To attempt to pathologise the process is to superimpose full intentionality and linearity onto something that emerged artesian-like from often subconscious aquifers.

2.3 The Non-Linear Novel

Having found a workable structure, what would be the best *form* for the novel to take? A ‘marriage of form and content’ would be the ideal, but how practicable would that be? I explored various options, which I shall describe below.

By choosing to experiment with the possibilities of hyperfiction via an ebook format I was attempting to destabilise the hegemony of the linear narrative. This came with its own attendant problems and was not entirely successful (as I gleaned from initial reader responses). However, it was all part of my interrogation of form.

Recent trends (Tivnan, 2016) show that ebook sales have plateaued, rather than replaced print as feared, suggesting the appeal of a well-produced book for the majority of readers. But for some the ebook format is more accessible (allowing for eyesight, hand/wrist injuries and portability). One novelist who prefers the digital format is Nicola Barker, whose attachment to the screen does not end with composition:

I see my books on a screen and always have. This is because I feel a sense of immense space and speed behind the screen and below the screen *and a novel is always an infinite number of versions of itself*. It’s like I keep that sense of possibility alive while the text is on the screen. I hate looking at the printing version. My perfectionism loathes the idea of something being complete – being solid. A novel dies to me when it leaves the screen and I instantly lose all interest in it. (Barker, 2017, my emphasis)

So, although I would not agree with her antipathy to the printed word (of her work), we can perhaps take from it the polysemous ‘sense of possibility’ that a digital work contains. Of course, she is talking about her ur-text, still malleable in its draft form; and an ebook is, in some ways, just as fixed as a printed version (a final text; unless the edition allows for comparison *between editions*), but hyperfictionality allows a more porous relationship with the narrative. Physically, we, as readers, are diachronically bound – DNA messages-in-a-

bottle moving through time one day at a time. But, in terms of consciousness, our phenomenological reality is less bound by time's arrow. We are soft time machines frequently inhabiting more than one reality, as immediate experience triggers associations and dislodges memories projected over the 'story moment' of the present.

How to represent this simultaneity in fiction? This is the technical challenge that authors have grappled with for centuries (Lodge, 1992: 74–79). When we read an electronic text the experience of navigating the text becomes a potentially synchronous one – different narrative threads running concurrently (sometimes on the same screen). The electronic text is 'performed' by the reader in a more engaged, physical, interactive way. This leads us to the notion of 'transmedia storytelling'.

2.4 Transmedia Storytelling (or It Takes a Village to Raise a Book)

Walter Benjamin said, 'The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual' and that 'the earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times' (2015: 87). Yet the notion of the novel as both a solitary endeavour and an art-form antithetical to storytelling is something I wish to challenge. In the design and delivery of *The Knowing*, I have taken a broadly transmedia approach: one that is idiosyncratic and continually evolving. Initially conceived as a conventionally printed novel, during its development the book has evolved into a very different beast encompassing the ebook format, hypertextuality, illustration, blogs, Twitter, spoken-word performance, radio and video (with potential for further expansions and iterations). Although it is not 'transmedia' in the conventional sense, I have adopted some of the strategies increasingly used by mega-budget blockbuster franchises in a lo-fi idiosyncratic way – what could be called 'transmedia-punk'. Firstly, though, let us look at some definitions of 'Transmedia'.

2.5 Some Definitions

In his seminal text, *Convergence Culture* (2006), Henry Jenkins is considered to have defined the term 'transmedia storytelling'. On his website he has updated this 'working definition' to take on board the rapid developments in the field:

Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story. So, for example, in *The Matrix* franchise, key bits of information are conveyed through three live action films, a series of animated shorts, two collections of comic book stories, and several video games. There is no one single source or ur-text where one can turn to gain all of the information needed to comprehend the *Matrix* universe. (Jenkins, 2007)

This approach has become almost so ubiquitous that we hardly notice it any more. Monolithic cultural artefacts (mega-budget or mega-successful films, novels, games, apps, websites, albums) have become ‘hyper-objects’ (Morton, 2013): viscous, molten, non-local, phased and interobjective. Applied primarily to the phenomenon of anthropocentric climate change, it may seem reductive to repurpose Morton’s term to refer to such ephemeral or trivial things as movie franchises, and certainly to a no-budget fantasy novel about a singer-seer, until one realises the neologism ‘hyperobject’ was originally derived from Björk’s ‘Hyperballad’ (on the album *Post* [1995]). Transmedia, through global marketing campaigns, has become a consensus reality. But before we look at how I have pirated this approach it is necessary to understand its industry-standard legitimisation.

In their preface to *Storytelling Across Worlds* (which posits itself as the ur-text ‘industry bible’, the new Hero’s Journey for the 21st century) Dowd et al. boldly state, ‘The modern narrative property cannot exist in one form alone’ (2015: xiii). They cite the ‘official definition’ used by the Producers Guild of America, Code of Credits – New Media: ‘A Transmedia Narrative project must consist of three or more narrative storylines existing within the same fictional universe’ (2015: 4).

Note this doesn’t specify *different media*, but Dowd et al. emphasise that point: ‘For a property to be transmedia, it also has to be more than just adapting the same story to different media. *Each expression has to tell a complete piece of a larger story*’ (2015: 4, my emphasis)

Thus, each element has to have a both a hermetic and a synecdochic quality.

Perhaps the broadest definition is offered by US television writer/producer Jane Espenson: ‘all media is transmedia’ (cited by Dowd et al., 2015: ii). According to *LOST*

showrunner, Carlton Cuse, it has become the ‘motherhood’ (ibid, 2015: 151). Transmedia has become a kind of hyper-object: so pervasive, so normative, that it is hard to discern its presence or parameters. As consumers we are perpetually locked within its *Truman Show*.

A Marxist critique of transmedia storytelling is that it is merely the marketing strategy of mega-corporations and a perpetuation of a neoliberal discourse. As a particular franchise strives for marketplace dominance, mega-brands are created: the consumer is given the illusion of choice but they end up buying the same product, often in several different formats. In this way, MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe) is the modern ACME; *Star Wars* is Brand X. Every spin-off feeds back into the same coffers. Yet the counter-argument is that fans of such franchises are not just consumers but ‘prosumers’ (Alvin Toffler’s 1980 term for a ‘person who consumes and produces media’), that through fan-fic, cosplay, filk, etc. transmedia encourages a hyperabundance of fan-driven creativity (some of which feeds back into the ‘canon’ – the placing of ‘Easter eggs’ by the official creatives for fans to spot) and iconoclastic transgression from the ‘official’ version – a queering, hacking and subversion of the dominant discourse. This itself may just be more corporate spin: the myth of the ‘empowered consumer’ is a convenient fiction that feeds back into the business models of multinationals. The Revolution has been corporatised.

2.6 Transmedia Vamp: the new reader

Although embryonic transmedia have been texts around for decades (e.g. *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*, which kickstarted the whole blockbuster merchandising phenomenon 40 years ago^{xvii}), it has been the rapid expansion and now ubiquity of ICT facilitated by the internet that have resulted in it reaching warp speed. Now it is more or less expected that we be able to access (and engage with) our favourite franchises in a multiplicity of ways, via our smart TVs, laptops, phones, tablets, smart watches, earphones, Googles glasses and so on. Companies that do not facilitate this are clearly missing a trick, since the loyal fan devours every available quantum of output – from featurettes on extended-version box sets to plushes, *Saturday Night Live* skits to YouTube memes. The hunger for new (or reified) content is rapacious and is often vocalised through social media:

I REALLY WANT TO SEE RED SISTER BY @Mark_Lawrence AS A TV SHOW/MOVIE RIGHT THIS SECOND RIGHT NOW I NEED IT

(Twitter [accessed 27 November 2017])

It is not enough to consume the text in its source form; it must now be legitimised through transmedia. The greater the reifications (the obscurer the better, e.g. ‘rare’ merchandising, synechdochic marketing), the more cultural capital it has.

Nevertheless, despite the neoliberalist undertones transmedia marketing strategies promote *some* good work has emerged from this approach (e.g. Gaiman, 2001; Pears, 2015a; Alderman, 2016; Brown & Brown, 2016; Pullman, 2017b; Okorafor, 2018). I could claim this multimodal approach in my own project was planned, but the truth is that its transmedia expansion manifested in an organic way, partly in response to the material, and partly in response to the parameters of my PhD. When I finished the second draft of my novel it totalled 160,000 words. My supervisor informed me that this would not be suitable. I had already cut out 100 pages (24,000 words), so rather than reduce it further I came up with another solution. The narrative is constructed of several threads with different voices. So I filleted out these (the McEttrick Women; Sideways Brannelly; the Xævæx; Eliza Thomas; Agent Trent) and hyperlinked them (reducing the main text to a more manageable 100,000 words). I suddenly found myself having to get to grips with the ebook format and with elements of digital fiction.

2.7 Digital Fiction

My project shares *some* elements of digital fiction, as discussed below, but as one drills down into the detail the differences (compared with other iterations) become apparent. One definition is provided by the Reading Digital Fiction website:

Digital Fiction is fiction that is written for and read from a computer and can be web- or app-based (for tablets and smartphones) or accessed via CD-ROMs. *Digital fictions are different to e-books, however. Rather than existing as a digital version of a print novel, digital fictions are what are known as ‘born digital’ – that is, they would lose something of their aesthetic and/or structural form and meaning if they were removed*

from the digital medium. For example, they may contain hyperlinks, moving images, mini-games or sound effects. Further, unlike e-books in which the reader moves from one page to another in a linear fashion, in many digital fictions, the reader has a role in constructing the narrative, either by selecting hyperlinks or by controlling a character's journey through the storyworld. Digital fictions therefore require that the reader interacts with the narrative throughout the reading experience and include texts such as hypertext fictions, Flash fictions and some video games.^{xviii}

This caveat is affirmed by 'A [S]creed for Digital Fiction', an attempt to tentatively chart the emerging territory by 'An international group of digital fiction scholars [who] propose[d] a platform of critical principles, seeking to build the foundation for a truly "digital" approach to literary study.'

digital fiction: of course, which, in our DeFINition, is fiction written for and read on a computer screen that pursues its verbal, discursive and/or conceptual complexity through the digital medium, and would lose something of its aesthetic and semiotic function if it were removed from that medium. (Bell et al., 2007)

The Knowing, as a non-digital native narrative, is evidently the uninvited guest to this gathering. It would perhaps rightly be treated with suspicion. I would argue that the novel touches upon elements of the '[s]creed', but extends beyond it, beyond the screen, a multi-dimensional interloper into their digital *Flatland*. It includes ebook, blog, spoken-word performance, audio field recordings, video field recordings, Twitter, conference papers, articles, illustrations, comic strip and photographs. Much of this is archived and presented via the specially created website: www.secretcommonwealth.com

But there is commonality in so much that *The Knowing* is *topological* in form, rather than topographical, existing *between* the various nodes: digital/print; fantasy/literary; critical/creative; old world/new world; and so on. It is no coincidence that at the heart of my 'story world' is the terroir of the Rift. This chimes with key [s]creed tenets such as 'immersion & interaction' and 'nodes and nodal coherence', and with 'multi-linearity', a 'defining element of digital fiction' (Bell et al., 2007). Yet even Bell et al. concede that it is impossible to escape the diachronic experience of navigating a text in whatever format it

appears: ‘we keep in mind that reading itself is a temporal act that is characterized by its irrefutable linearity, which is undertaken by an irrefutably embodied reader’.

The reader becomes a Sideways Brannelly figure, walking between the worlds of their immediate reality and the imagined reality of the novel. What seems ‘low-tech’, in the actuality of reading, is a highly complex phenomenological experience (Sutherland, 2006).

Also, my multi-media approach – designed with a desire for maximum accessibility and the imperative of ‘open access’ – challenges the often unquestioned assumptions of ‘digital fiction’. The use of technology assumes a certain skill-set and level of affluence: the mode of production (access to a computer, to software, to training) and resource-heavy infrastructure of dissemination (fibre-optic cables and satellite, phone lines, broadband and wifi) mean it is essentially consumerist. A deep ecology critique of ‘digital fiction’ would ask: what is its true environmental impact? Of course, printed books have their carbon footprint too, although this is often offset by Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and other initiatives (or the fact the book is directly gifted, recycled or donated).

And so, although there are some alignments with ‘digital fiction’, *The Knowing* (with its ‘porous’ portal structure and topologies) is perhaps closer in design to ‘hyperfiction’.

2.8 Hyperfiction

Hyperfiction (hypertext fiction) is defined by its hypertextuality. This is commonly created through hypertext links, which offer the reader multiple pathways for navigating the ‘nodes’ of the text. However, precursors of this apparently very modern-seeming form pre-date the digital age. Early examples are sometimes referred to as ‘counter-fiction’, the ‘anti-novel’ (*anti-roman* – Sorel, 1633); or ‘asterisk fiction’. From its inception the novel has seen deliberate attempts to destabilise its conventions, despite Will Self’s claim that ‘Joyce got there first’^{xix}. Although *Ulysses* (Joyce, 1922) could rightly be thought of as the mothership of hyperfiction, in early experiments like *Don Quixote* (Cervantes, 1605/1615) and *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (Sterne, 1759–1767) we see its first ludic glimmerings. Novelists of all ages like to tilt at windmills. But, whatever devices are deployed to create this effect, the result is non-linearity: a destabilizing of diachronic narrative reality that challenges the conventions of mimetic fiction. Examples of hyperfiction include *Hopscotch* (Cortazar, 1963), *Chimera* (John Barth, 1972), *House of Leaves* (Danielewski, 2000), *Kafka’s Wound*

(Self, 2012) and *S* (Abrams, 2013). Often cited as the first hyperfiction text to fully embrace the possibilities of the internet, Geoff Ryman's *253* (2010) is 'a novel for the Internet about London Underground in seven cars and a crash'. It exists virtually on a dedicated site.^{xx} The reader becomes the omniscient narrator as they pry into the lives of the passengers on the brink of their extinction – the ultimate dramatic irony. And yet, as Ryman points out, this omniscience is a temporary status: 'But please remember that once you leave *253*, you are no longer Godlike. The author, of course, is.' (ibid)

The author is akin to Carroll's Red King. In *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871), the eponymous heroine encounters a cast of animate, sentient chesspieces. The whole narrative seems a game enacted in the dream of a sleeping Red King (Chapter 8, 'It's My Own Invention'). The existential question is, if he awakes, would they all vanish? In hyperfiction that possibility is always there – although that in itself may be an illusion: the reader can explore but remains trapped within the diegetic universe. The reader is held under the spell of what John Gardner calls the 'fictive dream' (quoted in Neale, 2009: 149–151). Although Gardner meant by this the 'zone the writer needs to immerse themselves in to create their work' – a kind of 'willed hallucination the fiction writer needs to be able to foster' (Anderson, 2009: 149) – it is ontologically aligned with the Coleridgean 'willing suspension of disbelief' (1847: 95-96). And yet the possibility does remain that we may wake the Red King – waking ourselves up from the fictive dream and, in doing so, refreshing our perception of the world.

The work of William Burroughs was intended to do exactly that. His 'cut-up' technique (literally done with scissors, paper and glue) smashed text and image together in unexpected ways, creating an embryonic multi-media form of hyperfiction. In a *Paris Review* interview he suggested that this perpetual juxtaposing, 'quoting' and connection is how we experience life; but, deeper than this, he posits it as a way of deconstructing the dominant discourse and aesthetic (in the West): the declarative sentence, 'either/or' reasoning and the confines of 'linear' thinking: 'I feel the Aristotelian construct is one of the great shackles of Western civilisation. Cut ups are a movement toward breaking this down' (in Plimpton, 1967: 157).

I myself explored hyperfiction in an 'enhanced content' version of Richard Jefferies' 1885 post-apocalyptic novel *After London* I created for Bookdrum back in 2012.^{xxi}

In the ebook version of *The Knowing* I consciously created hyperlinked ‘portals’ for the reader to navigate, portals accessed through illustrated motifs.

My project shares some elements of hyperfiction – the hypertextual, the non-linear. But it is not bound by the post-modernist games and the (frequent) lack of narrative traction inherent within the form. I needed to push the form further.

2.9 Ergodic Literature and Ergodic Fiction

Various factors caused me to reconsider my plan to offer *The Knowing* (solely) as an ebook. During the noughties the ebook was heralded as the future of publishing, but in recent years ebook sales have plateaued.^{xxii} Ebooks *by themselves* are seen by many as increasingly ersatz and outdated. ‘The e-reader itself has also turned out to have the shelf life of a two-star murder mystery’ (Wood, 2017). At the same time there has been a resurgence in printed book sales, arresting the downward trend, and a renaissance in book design. It is evident that the printed book, as an aesthetic object, and as a delivery of narrative, information and entertainment, is not going away soon, despite its frequently predicted demise (Self, 2014).

Furthermore, according to the ‘[S]creed for Digital Fiction’, and the Wonderbox Digital Writing website, the ebook, of itself, is not ‘digital fiction’.

So, what is?

One term that identifies its distinct qualities, ‘ergodic literature’, was posited by Espen J. Aarseth. In his book, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997), he defines and explores what he means. The term Aarseth fashioned from the Greek words for ‘work’, *ergon*, and ‘path’, *hodos*, encoding into the neologism the notion of effort.

In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text. If ergodic literature is to make sense as a concept, there must also be nonergodic literature, where the effort to traverse the text is trivial, with no extraneous responsibilities placed on the reader except (for example) eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages. (1997: 1–2)

Aarseth’s argument for a distinct ‘ergodic literature’ is debatable, since experimental writers have destabilised the conventions of the linear narrative and the textual plane for

centuries (Cervantes; Sterne; Joyce; et al.), demanding of their readers a ‘non-trivial effort’. But as an attempt to define more recent transmedia evolutions of the novel, the literature of the digital age, it is useful. Examples of ‘ergodic literature’ include *The 50-Year Sword* (Danielewski, 2005), *Flight Paths* (Pullinger & Joseph, 2007), *The Kills* (House, 2013) and *Arcadia* (Pears, 2015a).

I have refashioned Aarseth’s term to create my own: ‘ergotdic fiction’, incorporating the term *ergot* to allude to mycelial (rhizomatic) networks. The idea came to me when I conceived of using a fairy ring as a splash page for the website (11 January 2018). According to popular legend, Kirk was believed to have stepped into a fairy ring on Doon Hill, which was purportedly a portal to Elfhame. Aware of mycelial networks, I envisioned (in a flash) such ‘fungal portals’ as a leitmotif connecting the different nodes of the project together. I already had hyperlinked motifs for the characters (in the beta ebook version), but this new approach would enable a more radical transformation at a deeper structural level: the sub-threads would no longer be accessed through a unicursory branching network (which reinforces the main narrative as the dominant one) but through a multicursory one – one that is diasporic and synchronic. Freed from the novel’s chronology, these mycelial ‘strands’ can be read in any order.

My introduction to mycelia was via the work of mycologist Alan Rayner, at the University of Bath, who has written extensively on such ‘flow networks’ (2012; 2017) as well as depicting them in his ‘Bio*Art’ (e.g. *Fountains of the Forest*, oil, 1998). Networks of higher fungi transmit ‘information’ across large distances. They are ‘the behind-the-scenes “production teams” responsible for the amazingly rapid emergence of mushrooms and toadstools’ (Rayner, 2017: 41). They are also ‘response teams’, in the way they create an early warning system across the wider mycorrhizal network (the plant/fungi interface that some scientists term a ‘wood wide web’^{xxiii}) which is able to transmit alerts of, for instance, forest fires. This remarkable flow of information becomes even more profound when Rayner describes the mycelial network as ‘a communication interface for energy transfer from neighbour to neighbour, from living to dead, and from dead to living’ (1998). This transmission across states of being is a perfect match for my project, which seeks to connect ancestors with descendants across a 300-year gap. On a phenomenological level, an analogous feedback loop occurs between text to reader.

Thus, ergodic fiction, with its rhizomatic structures, seeks to ‘democratise’ and destabilise the hierarchy of the text (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). The optimum medium to facilitate this level of interaction is the website. Current and emergent technologies may well offer other levels of interaction (e.g. apps; augmented reality) but the creation of a website was within my means and abilities. Another advantage of this option was that a website enables a wider level of participation, one that is not dependent on the affordability and usability of certain software or hardware (owning a device and a wifi connection is convenient, but any good public library provides a low-income option). I set myself the aim of creating a website that uses a form of ‘fungal’ links incorporating articles, recordings, links, artwork and so on. The ‘domain name’ would be ‘Secret Commonwealth’, since this refers to my ur-text and also implies an egalitarian community. Furthermore, such a format would align with the expectation that contemporary research share in the spirit of ‘open access’ (REF Framework Review, 2016^{xxiv}). It will be a way of bringing together the *totality* of my research. A ‘reader’ may feel a bit like Kirk stepping into the ring or Alice plunging down the rabbit hole. They can read as much or as little as they like. As a marriage of form and content that creates intersectionality between the creative and critical, ergodic fiction offers a workable innovation within the continuum of ‘digital writing’ and ‘ergodic literature’. What distinguishes it from these is perhaps more aesthetic than systemic. It may only be fit for purpose for this particular project, one that is entwined on a fundamental level with the folklore of fungus, the iconography of which has long been associated with the fairy tradition, from early woodcuts onwards.



Fairies dancing in a ring. 17th Century chapbook, unknown artist.

The hallucinogenic properties of some fungus have been used to explain outbreaks of ‘visions’ as in the outbreaks of ergot poisoning, also known as ‘St Anthony’s fire’, that took place in medieval Europe resulting in mass hysteria, convulsions and fatalities. In some cultures mushroom-based hallucinogens are seen as a sacrament and part of intense rituals of initiation and transformation (Letcher, 2007). Kirk’s own premature demise (aged 47) may have been brought on by a fatal experiment with hallucinogenic fungus. To this day, the Doon Hill ‘Fairy Trail’ is demarcated with signs depicting red-and-white mushrooms. The association between fairies and fungus has become commonplace kitsch, replicated in countless images and ornaments, cartoons and counter-culture psychedelia appropriated from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *The Lord of the Rings*. But beneath the surface of often garish pop culture, mycelial networks offer a fertile metaphor for the complex, porous flow systems of a creative–critical project.

2.10 Complexity versus Readability

The challenges inherent in any of these approaches requires a careful balancing of complexity and ‘readability’. In his article on ‘The Shaping of Hypertextual Narrative’ (2000) Jorgio Ciccino admits to being ‘unable to get rid of the feelings of uneasiness and irritation I feel when facing a narrative hypertext’, and lists the common reactions:

reading hypertexts, and narrative hypertexts in particular, is difficult; often there is no pleasure while reading, there is no understanding of what has been read. Narrative hypertexts are anonymous, cold, impersonal, chaotic, inconclusive. In short: narrative hypertexts are ugly. (2000: 101)

How to evoke a sense of a porous reality which encompasses multiple paradigms while simultaneously sustaining narrative traction?

Regardless of all the stardust (or imagined glamour) and contemporaneity of the digital or transmedia approach, at the end of the day it is still story that matters. As US TV producer Vlad Woynetz acknowledges: ‘[it is] the actual, practical bedrock of modern entertainment’ (quoted in Dowd et al., 2015: ii). Fundamentals of storytelling must be hard-

wired into such elaborate structures if they are to be engaging. Steve Peters of No Mimes Media concurs:

While story is still king, creating an experience where people need to discover and undercover the evidence of a story and then actually tell the story to each other as a community is *hugely powerful, immersive and effective*. (Quoted in Dowd et al., 2015: 715, original emphasis)

The buzz-phrase in transmedia circles is to ‘create a conversation’ with your readers/prosumers (and draw upon their ‘collective intelligence’) to accelerate the potentiality (of a product) into actuality.

2.11. Intended Readership

So, where does this leave the reader? And what kind of reader are they? The intended readership of *The Knowing – a Fantasy* was tested in an e-book beta version trialled in 2017. Initially prompted by an Amazon Kindle competition for new digital writing, I realised such a format (i.e. e-reader friendly) would provide an opportunity to explore a hyperlinked version of the text. Part of the judging criteria was based upon reader reviews, and so I contacted anybody I knew who would be interested in reading it. These were primarily self-identifying Pagans and Fantasy fans: my novel fits primarily within the Venn diagram of those demographics, which would be very niche, if they did not overlap with a third: readers of what is now termed ‘Folk Realism’, an emergent sub-genre that has developed in the last couple of years with the success of Andrew Michael Hurley’s *The Loney* (2016) and Sarah Perry’s *The Essex Serpent* (2017). Although there are things I find unconvincing about these kinds of novels (a half-hearted use of folkloric tropes, exploiting the frisson of fear around the uncanny before containing it safely with a rational explanation – ultimately, a reification of materialism despite its superficial supernaturalism – a kind of Weird-Lit-lite) they are undoubtedly popular. Ideally, I would like to attract the fans of the work of the late Graham Joyce (1954-2014), a singular purveyor of what could be called ‘Midlands Gothic’, who masterfully evoked the magical in the mundane without compromising either, and whose *Fantastika* (e.g. *The Facts of Life*, 2003) was often marketed like literary fiction.

2.12 The End of Endings

Digital writing, hyperfiction and transmedia offer a destabilisation of hegemonic narrative conventions. However, I posit that such approaches are only effective if they *enhance* the art (and, on a craft level, if you can execute them with sufficient skill). Creative practitioners who adopt them should not let it be at the expense of or in the absence of a good story, complexity of structure, and good characterisation and tone. The principles of storytelling endure, as the novelist Pears observes: ‘when moulding [the narrative threads of *Arcadia*] into the software it was vital to keep a strict discipline, making the technology the servant of the story rather than its master’ (2015b).

One key aspect of the transmedia approach which can be salvaged is the principle of collaboration. In creative terms, it is fruitful, often essential. In a JSTOR Labs report ‘Reimagining the Digital Monograph’ the authors concluded, ‘The reimagined monograph – whatever that ultimately means – will not be built in a single step, or by a single organisation. Libraries, publishers, scholars, scholarly societies, and others will all have a role to play – in promoting standards, in convening thinkers, in carrying out technology development, and so on – and in doing so, they will be drawing on the wonderful history of collaboration in the scholarly communications community’ (Humphreys, et al, 2017). Clearly, there is ‘room for experimentation’ (ibid) and future research.

This interrogation of form has challenged my notions of both narrative structure and the way in which the reader interfaces with the text. It has pushed me out of my comfort zone and forced me to engage with the latest developments, with software, hardware and attendant skills. I began this chapter by mentioning the expectations of genre, which I found to be intimately connected with form. To separate them is an artificial bifurcation – they are a symbiotic part of the narrative, in effect ‘nature’ (the intrinsic content) and ‘nurture’ (the extrinsic container). But now it is time to turn to questions of genre.

CHAPTER 3

DEFINING GOLDENDARK: towards an ethical aesthetics of fantasy

In this chapter I explore my approach to genre, firstly by contextualising it within the contemporary scene (as exemplified by what is referred to as ‘Grimdark’). I then lay out the criteria of ‘Goldendark’, with some examples from my novel, and suggest a list of existing exemplars. I conclude by reflecting on the inherent challenges to such an endeavour.

3.1 Challenging Genre

In the process of researching and writing *The Knowing* a major outcome has been the development and application of an original approach to fantasy, one that (I hope) rejuvenates the genre, reaffirming its quintessential qualities while recalibrating its aesthetics along an ethical dimension. This is something I have been working towards for a long time. Informed by a lifetime of reading, it began to be formulated throughout the decade spent on the research and composition of my five-volume fantasy series, *The Windsmith Elegy* (Manwaring, 2004; 2006b; 2008; 2010; 2012c). I started to articulate my theories about the genre in *Desiring Dragons* (Manwaring, 2014b), but they did not fully crystallise until I came up with the adjectival term ‘golden-dark’ (which I fashioned into the compound noun ‘Goldendark’ afterwards) in an early draft of *The Knowing*. In a scene in which Janey McEttrick expresses her modus operandi as a songwriter, she describes her inspiration as

Coming from a deeper source. Before I played to the crowd – desperate to entertain them, to be liked. Now, I want to write songs that I want to hear, that express something of my ‘back country’ self, not the glitzy one on stage. Songs of the soul, of the soil. That express something about ... all that we’ve seen. The golden-dark and heart-breaking beauty of it all. (Manwaring, *The Knowing*, 1st draft, 2015)

With Janey serving (initially subconsciously) as my mouthpiece character, I was clearly trying to differentiate myself from the modern trend of the genre, as Janey was in her own way – both of us groping towards something more authentic. Dissatisfied by much contemporary fantasy, which lacks ‘the catch of the breath’ (Cooper, 2017) I have found in

the prose and plots of, say, Ursula K. Le Guin, Alan Garner, Susan Cooper, Robert Holdstock or Graham Joyce, I set out to ‘write the book that [I] want to read’.^{xxv} It was to be a project informed by my ‘deep mapping’ not of place in the way of Nan Shepherd’s *Cairngorms* (2011: ix–xxxiv) or Alan Garner’s *Alderley Edge* (1960/1980), but of myth, legend, folk tales and ballads. My novel sprang almost involuntarily from a lifetime’s ‘steeping’ in these, echoing Koestler’s dictum, ‘Soak; and wait’ (1965, quoted in Garner, 2003b); but as I embarked upon the PhD process I knew such chthonic inklings would not suffice. Forced to interrogate the entirety of the endeavour in the context of the canon and the academy, I began to formulate an intentional response, one motivated internally (by my ‘back country self’, mirroring Le Guin’s ‘*language of the unconscious*’^{xxvi}) and externally, as a conscious challenge to what I perceived as a worrying discourse within mainstream iterations of fantasy (i.e. Grimdark).

3.2 It’s Grim up North (of the Wall)

‘Grimdark’ is a term first used in association with the *Warhammer 40,000* wargame and role-playing game as a marketing tag: ‘In the grim darkness of the far future, there is only war’ (Priestley, 1987). It has now come to denote a tonally distinct sub-genre of imaginative fiction and is sometimes called ‘dark fantasy’. It is characterised by markedly dystopian or amoral scenarios with particularly violent or grittily realistic elements. Emerging initially through fan fiction, it has come to be an identifying characteristic of 21st-century writers of fantastika such as Joe Abercrombie, Richard Morgan, Adam Roberts, Genevieve Valentine and George R.R. Martin. More than any single author, Martin epitomises this style with his anti-Tolkienian epic fantasy (although he has acknowledged his debt to Tolkien^{xxvii}). *The Song of Ice and Fire*’s first instalment, *A Game of Thrones*, was published in 1996, just as momentum was building to make Tolkien ‘Author of the Century’ (Shippey, 2000). Subsequent volumes ran parallel with the huge success of the Peter Jackson *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–2004), but it was the broadcast of the HBO TV adaptation, *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019) that made a deliberately marketed land-grab for the legions of fantasy fans hungry for more, but with appetites possibly jaded by effete, Anglo-centric hobbits.

However healthily iconoclastic Grimdark may have initially been in deconstructing the tropes and cosy medieval tone of mainstream fantasy for modern readers less familiar

with the darker counter-tradition (as pioneered in the oeuvres of Robert E. Howard, Clark Ashton Smith, Michael Moorcock, M. John Harrison, and others), it has become depressingly pervasive (pumped out not only by authors, but in films, TV, computer games, pop videos, et cetera, ad nauseam). With its emphasis on gratuitous violence, misogynistic warrior culture, mercenary and rapacious economies, casual cruelty and villainous victories, Grimdark hammers home that ‘there is only war’. It has become, for its fans, another kind of consoling fiction: escapism for nihilists, but whereas the common criticism of fantasy is that it’s ‘escapist’ (a criticism that Le Guin, echoing Tolkien, critiques [1989: 31–36]), Grimdark’s escape hatch perversely traps us in the world.

3.3 From Prog-Rock Fantasy to Punk Fantasy

It has to be acknowledged that, as with any long-lived tradition, (mainstream) fantasy *had* become bloated and complacent, as Le Guin noted:

In the sixties and seventies, the language of serious fantasy was still based largely on the styles of writers of earlier generation – Tolkien, of course, but also Dunsany, Eddison, MacDonald, clear back to Malory. (2013: 77)

The worst examples of the genre rehashed the hand-me-down tropes of the innovative visionaries, a formulaic schlock – and in many ways deserved to be beheaded. After the excesses and indulgences of the ‘prog-rock’ phase of fantasy (the initial vision and ambition curdled into endless gaudy pastiche), the ‘punk’ phase had to happen. It was time to kick against the pricks.

Le Guin and her contemporaries (e.g. Philip K. Dick; Harlan Ellison) found their own way to react against the conventions of science fiction and fantasy (Le Guin, 2004: 72–78), but it was the next generation who put the boot in.

Novelist Joe Abercrombie (the self-styled ‘Lord Grimdark’) argues in a provocative but insightful way in ‘The Value of Grit’ (2013) for Grimdark as a healthy response to the tired conventions of genre and to the moral complexity and infinite cruelty of the world. He defines it as follows:

1. Tight focus on character.
2. Moral ambiguity.
3. Honesty.
4. Sometimes life really is that shit.
5. Modernity.
6. Shock value.
7. Range.

‘So, yeah, shitty gritty books are no better than shitty shiny books. But I proudly and unapologetically assert that there’s a great deal more to grit than a capacity to shock and titillate. Although I must equally proudly and unapologetically assert that I do sometimes quite enjoy being shocked and titillated’ (Abercrombie, 2013: 2).

Yet Liz Bourke considers Grimdark’s defining characteristic to be ‘a retreat into the valorisation of darkness for darkness’s sake, into a kind of nihilism that portrays right action ... as either impossible or futile’ (2015: 4). This, according to her, has the effect of absolving the protagonists as well as the reader from moral responsibility.

Much of Grimdark could be seen as merely pissing in the Brandywine or shiteing on the Shire – an adolescent reaction against the status quo. A new wave of fantasy writers sticking it to the Man (‘Up yours, J.R.R.!’). As we can see with punk, safely turned into an exhibition 40 years on (‘Punk 76–78’, British Library, 2016), phlegm, snot and attitude only take you so far. Anger can be a monotone and ultimately impotent response. The amoral dimension of Grimdark would be pretty harmless by itself; it is, after all, ‘only fantasy’. Except for one critical corollary.

3.4 The Neoliberalist rhetoric of Grimdark

I would argue that Grimdark (its *rhetoric* as a subgenre, not necessarily the ethos of individual authors) is just another expression of a neoliberal consensus reality, what George Monbiot called ‘The Zombie Doctrine’ (2016). Neoliberalism has a pervasive influence so permeated into modern life it has become virtually invisible: a Mortonesque ‘hyperobject’, a phenomenon so wide-ranging and long term in its impact that it is almost beyond our ability

to perceive it (Morton, 2013: 1–24). As Monbiot observes: ‘What greater power can there be than to operate namelessly?’ (2016).

Well, the demon has been named. In his acceptance speech upon winning the Palme d’Or at Cannes for *I, Daniel Blake*, British director Ken Loach said, ‘The world we live in is at a dangerous point right now. We are in the grip of a dangerous project of austerity driven by ideas that we call neoliberalism that have brought us to near catastrophe’ (2016). Monbiot calls neoliberalism the modern ‘defining characteristic of human relations’: ‘It redefines citizens as consumers, whose democratic choices are best exercised by buying and selling, a process that rewards merit and punishes inefficiency. It maintains that “the market” delivers benefits that could never be achieved by planning’ (2016).

Mark Fisher warned of this worrying trend ten years’ earlier, defining it in his expansion of the term ‘Capitalist Realism’: ‘It is more like a pervasive *atmosphere*, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action.’ (2006: 16)

The lazy acceptance of this ‘pervasive atmosphere’ as the new normal – as every survival-of-the-fittest novel, film, TV show and computer game underpins (‘it’s tough out there, so let’s fight off the zombie masses and hoard our resources for ourselves, the few against the many’) – helps to perpetuate the ethos, an ethos that, ironically (for authors and publishers who perpetuate it), closes libraries. It has to be named, shamed and met with a strong, well-crafted rebuttal. ‘A coherent alternative has to be proposed’ (Monbiot, 2016). The conscious writer, reader or consumer should seek to break free of the cycle of Grimdark schlock. Consider alternatives, and if none is available, create them. That is where, I posit, Goldendark comes in.

3.5 An Ethical Aesthetics

In ‘Goldendark’ I have attempted to fashion an ethical aesthetics – the two are entwined and any aesthetic choice *always* has ethical implications. Poet and activist John Kinsella affirms, ‘Writing is always a political act’ (2011). Ben Okri says our stories should be ‘oxygenated with a sense of responsibility’ (1997: 63). For a conscious writer working in the 21st century there can be no abnegation of this. The *Beyond the Benchmark* statement asks,

Should we be encouraging our students to just ‘express themselves creatively’ without considering the potential consequences? Of course, good writing articulates polysemous and polyphonic complexity, ambiguity, cultural empathy, and a healthy diversity of paradigms. But a more pro-active approach to this issue (e.g. ethics in writing classes) might equip students better for writing in the real world. (Blunden, 2013)

I have taken on this challenge, initially as a co-author of *An Ecobardic Manifesto* (Nanson et al, 2008), which offered an environmentally aware ‘vision of the arts’; then in my paper ‘Creative Freedom and Social Responsibility’ (Manwaring, 2015a); and now in a long-form manner with *The Knowing*.

Goldendark is primarily an ethical *aesthetics* of Fantasy and thus focuses on the subtleties of the prose and the storytelling, rather than any particular political stance. The best fiction avoids dogmatism, as John Fowles asserts: ‘If literature becomes dogma, it ceases to be literature’ (1980: 7). Ursula K. Le Guin, exasperated by requests for recommendations from school librarians for books with particular ‘messages’, asserted defiantly: ‘As a fiction writer, I don’t speak message. I speak story...’ (Quoted in VanderMeer, 2018: 67); and Philip Pullman, in his William Blake Lecture, said: ‘I do try very hard not to preach ... Ideas are best conveyed by making them look not like ideas at all but events.’ (2018). Nevertheless, any aesthetical stance suggests, implicitly, a political stance, in terms of the innate power discourses it evokes; its ‘take’ on the human condition (e.g. pessimistic; optimistic; compassionate; cynical), and the version of reality (materialist; spiritual; scientific; romantic; tragic-comic, etc) it wishes to promote. The Goldendark project, borne out of a creative response to Grimdark – which it sees, *at its worst*, as the thin end of the wedge of Neoliberalism, a kind of proto-Fascism – is inevitably charged with a political energies, for it seeks, in Foucauldian terms, to subvert the dominant discourse (Hall, 2001: 72-81). And if Neoliberalism is to be acknowledged as a threat to the biodiversity of humanity, as well as the natural world, in its rapacious and prejudicial competitive paradigm, then it is essential that it *must* be challenged by all writers of conscience, as Waidner asserts: ‘In a ‘post-truth’ socio-political context where powerful narratives and metaphors shape public opinion and influence electoral results, fictions and literary imaginaries must aim to advance a more progressive politics within marginalised communities and beyond, and to act as a mode of

cultural resistance' (2018: 10). So, however problematic such an endeavour – in terms of how it can be achieved without descending into didacticism – it cannot be avoided. Goldendark actively engages with this challenge, and may not offer the best solution, but is a foray into what will continue to be a major fault-line in the 21st Century: the new Debatable Lands. As search Goldendark positions itself as part of the creative Resistance (as has emerged in America since Donald Trump's inauguration).

In Goldendark there is acknowledgment of the 'lateness of the hour' (geopolitical tensions; climate chaos) but *also* a gleam of hope. There is a sense of something greater trying to break through, an immanence. Yet if it actually *does*, it becomes too literal and the numinous is lost (the fantastic predicated on the 'moment of hesitation',^{xxviii}). We become beholden to one person's belief system rather than experiencing our *own* sense of ineffable mystery. The nearest articulation of this quality in literature is the Tolkienian concept of 'eucatastrophe':

I coined the word 'eucatastrophe': the sudden happy turn in a story which pierces you with a joy that brings tears (which I argued it is the highest function of fairy-stories to produce). (1995: 100)

Stripping away the Christian, specifically Catholic (in Tolkien's case), context and you have something very close to Goldendark. However, rather than being the 'sudden happy turn', Goldendark evokes a certain mood that limns the dark with some sense of hope or beauty, *without necessarily resulting in a happy ending*. Tonally it is less like a fairy tale and more like a myth or legend – in which sex and death occur, where gods meet their Ragnarök, but everything is imbued with a sense of magic, of significance. Unlike Grimdark, which is essentially nihilistic, Goldendark articulates a paradigm where there is *some* meaning to life, where the plot has causal significance and leads somewhere, where virtue has value and not all good deeds come to naught, where truth and beauty – however tenuous – can exist, as indeed they *can*, even in this messed-up world. The media would have us believe that it is all bad everywhere, that every stranger is a terrorist, that every neighbour is a murderer. But that's not the whole picture, an observation that Huxley makes in his essay on 'Tragedy and the Whole Truth' (Plimpton, 1963: 213). Yet 'Project Fear' continues in countless ways every day. The hack journalist's job is to sell their product – so they use thrilling narrative to

do so. Like so many Ratatoskrs, the worst of journalists love to spread dissent. The talk shows are rigged for contention. Conflict sells. Peace reads white. We can be aware of the countless tragedies, the geopolitical nightmare of the present, but still cherish simple things, value the sanctity of life and nature, community and imagination. Goldendark, in this respect, is more radical than the moral and intellectual laziness of Grimdark. It requires more effort. More imagination. More vision.

If this sounds like a reiteration of Romanticism, so be it. Grimdark, after all, is nothing more than the new Gothic (at its best). The two estranged siblings (Gothic/Romanticism; Grimdark/Goldendark) meet in the idea of the sublime, as originally explicated by Burke (1958 [1757]), but whereas Grimdark dwells in the ‘shock’ of horror, Goldendark revels in the ‘awe’ of terror. There is an important difference. In the former, the mask slips and the ugly truth is revealed; in the latter, the mask remains intact and we are forced to use our imagination. It is, I would argue, a more sophisticated aesthetic. It is the Venice Carnival with the sinister and exquisite masks, or Dia de los Muertos in Mexico. The darkness is acknowledged, death is danced with, but, critically, it is transcended, or at least transformed, into (a higher) art.

I propose a reimagining of possibilities within the spectrum of imaginative/non-mimetic fiction, one that does not merely mirror the state of the world with wearisome ‘fake realism’^{xxix} but instead boldly seeks to transform. This new approach I term ‘Goldendark’, an aesthetic that seeks to engage with the ethical without descending into didacticism. While acknowledging the disturbing dysfunctionality of the present (what could be called the ‘Endarkenment’) it offers an escape hatch of hope – a last gleam of the sun before it sets. This ‘gleam’ could be manifest in the arresting quality of the prose, the originality of the imagery, the freshness of the characterisation, or in redemptive plots. The approach can be, and should be, as individual as the author, but to approach a working definition I shall now offer more detailed criteria.

3.6 Goldendark – suggested criteria

First, an anti-definition. What Goldendark is *not*: just for optimists, idealists or romantics; blatantly and blandly Christian/Pagan/New Age fiction; inspirational fiction; thinly veiled self-help McProse (as Le Guin calls it); naïve consoling fictions with no sense of the

challenges facing us in the modern age (e.g. climate chaos, resource wars); a sparkly counterspell to Grimdark; puppy food, whether sad or rabid (re the Hugo Awards controversy^{xxx}); prescriptive or programmatic. It is exploratory and open to further debate, fine-tuning or rejection. With caveats duly in place here is my tentative list of criteria:

- i. Chiaroscuro.
- ii. An interrogative sense of realism.
- iii. Embracing the difficulty of representation.
- iv. Slaying the monomyth.
- v. Immanence.
- vi. Ambiguity.
- vii. The re-enchantment of language.
- viii. Redemptive causality

I shall offer examples from the novel for each of these, although out of context they will not do justice to an effect created incrementally. As the narrative is permeated with the Goldendark aesthetic only a full reading will convey this.

(i) Chiaroscuro

‘Chiaroscuro’ is an Italian painting term referring to the dramatic effect of tonal contrast (literally meaning ‘light-dark’), a technique mastered by Leonardo da Vinci and Caravaggio. Both artists were aware of the emotional impact of this light-in-darkness. In Goldendark, tonal contrast is essential. It is not all dark, dark, dark. But it’s not all sweetness and light either. One sets off the other, giving the writing a bittersweet atonality, a ying-yangness. The magical is seen in the mundane, the mundane in the magical. Hope is found in the bleakest of circumstances, and every happy moment has a fly in the ointment. This quality is encapsulated in Jeff VanderMeer’s *Annihilation*, in which a group of four scientists explore a perilously rewilded stretch of American coastline, Area X: ‘The effect of this cannot be understood without being there. The beauty of it cannot be understood, either, and when you see beauty in desolation it changes something inside you. Desolation tries to colonize you’ (2014a: 4). If Goldendark were to be summed up in three words, they would be: ‘beauty in desolation’. This form of apocalyptic sublime was foreshadowed in the works of Richard

Jefferies (e.g. *After London, or Wild England* [1885]) and Casper David Friedrich (e.g. *Der Träumer* [1820–1840]), but most spectacularly by the painter John Martin (1789–1854), in such works as *Solitude* (1843) and *The Last Man* (1833?). It is the highlight, the redemptive detail, which makes the darkness bearable.

In this example from Chapter 1 of the novel, Janey drives home late after a gig:

As she drove sleepily back – homing instinct kicking in just enough to keep her shiny side up – she felt as vast and as hollow as the night, the sky one big teepee of rhinestones. The music and the smoke made her float off. Only the big sticky wheel of the pick-up kept her grounded.

(ii) An interrogative sense of realism

Goldendark seeks not to merely mirror ‘reality’, either with apparent authenticity, as in mimetic fiction, or with a gratuitous exaggeration of the modern world’s worst aspects, as in Grimdark. Through plot, depiction of character, and subtext it seeks to question consensual realities and perceptions of what is real. It seeks to undermine both genre expectations and lazy assumptions about ‘the way things are’. The texture of reality is manifest through close attention to detail, and yet there is a sense that the tectonic plates of the world could shudder and crack at any point. Thus, Goldendark offers a window through which other worlds, other ways of being can be glimpsed. This ultimately implicates the way we live here and now and makes us reconsider our choices. Rather than advocating utopia or dystopia, Goldendark embraces the Atwoodian ‘Ustopia’: ‘a world I made up by combining utopia and dystopia – the imagined perfect society and its opposite – because, in my view, each contains a latent version of the other’ (Atwood, 2011).

In this example from Chapter 17 Janey experiments with her ‘gift’ on Main Street:

The double-vision persisted. Most shoppers remained human – but a few leapt alive in a radiance of prismatic fire.

At first the rival visions jarred in her brain like a 3-D movie without the glasses.

Yet, slowly, she fought back the nausea and, with an act of will, could sustain them both.

The street furniture, the traffic, the sales signs in the store windows, the litter on the sidewalk, the yapping terrier at her feet – all stabilised.

Simultaneously, she could perceive this other phantasmagoric reality co-existing side-by-side with the mundane.

And part of her knew it had always been there.

(iii) Embracing the difficulty of representation

Goldendark embraces the difficulty of representation (Thebo, 2017), challenging the endarkenment of our age: the normative prejudices or attacks on equality, diversity, intelligent debate or democratic values. This is more critical now than ever in an age where liberal values are besieged and the alt-right is on the rise. It does this not in a tub-thumping, didactic way, but by being especially sensitive and skilful in representations of gender, race, sexuality, religion and ‘minority’ cultures (e.g. heteronormative and neuronormal are two ‘norms’ that it seeks to challenge), seeing something positive in the challenge. It is not advocating a bland ‘PC’ airbrushing, token multi-culturalism, that assimilates differences into a new kind of homogeneity – a Disneyfication of the ‘exotic’ other (a strategic but facile importing of the ‘optics of diversity’^{xxxii}) – but has edges, shadows, spikiness. It is willing to look at the uncomfortable and hold its gaze.

In this example from Chapter 4 Janey arrives on the Cherokee reservation to visit her friend:

This place was nowhere near as desperate as the trailer parks she avoided staying in.

Guess she had her pride too. But then, she was half-blood. *A breed.*

A buzzing caught her attention. At first she thought it was some kind of gnat in the cab, then she realised it was coming from above. Looking out of the rolled down window a quick movement caught her eye. It was one of those drones. A couple of college kids were playing with the controls from their porch. The camera on it tracked her progress.

She gave it a wave.

As Janey killed the engine the front door opened and her old friend appeared.

Quatie, dressed as ever in lumberjack shirt, Levis and Crocs, was whip-thin with a wild mane of iron-grey hair. Janey always thought her friend looked like an old Patti Smith on a bad day.

(iv) Slaying the monomyth

While not denying the rich oral and written traditions of European and North American myths and legends, folk tale, fairy story, ballad and folk play (and the mythic literacy they foster), Goldendark encourages a destabilisation of white, Western hegemonic conventions of narrative structure (Campbell, 1949; McKee, 1999; Vogler, 1999; Booker, 2004) and the implicit colonial rhetoric they perpetuate, as posited by Whitehead (2016). It seeks to widen the genre pool through being enriched by other cultures and their traditions, while at all times being mindful of cultural appropriation. It seeks a position that avoids Shriver's problematic sense of indignant privilege^{xxxii} and the pigeonholing of only being 'allowed' to write about one's own culture/heritage/locality.^{xxxiii} With sufficient imagination, skill and sensitivity it is possible to write about *anything* – other lives, other places, other times, other worlds – in short, lives beyond our own. Indeed, it is imperative that we do so, to foster culture empathy, to 'Only connect!' (Forster, 1910).

In this example from Chapter 36 Janey hears Quatie Stormchaser relate a Cherokee legend, which helps to frame her experience in a First Nations context:

Her heart was a black lake that morning.

The phone-call had been a shock. A wake-up call max. Yet amid the guilt-nado, Quatie had given her a straw of hope – to go and find the Lake of the Wounded.

But where? Scotland was full of lochs, lochans and '*alo' o' fuckan watter*', as she'd overheard someone on the bus back from the rental place say, describing the latest weather forecast.

She opened up her driving map of Scotland – and sighed. Needle in a haystack

...

(v) Immanence

Goldendark escapes the entropy of a clockwork universe by conjuring a tone of immanence. Although not denying a monotheistic paradigm, Goldendark can just as easily hold a pantheistic one. The manifest universe is sacred and is revealed through the numinous world. The prose is a prism through which the one light splits into the spectrum, or is reunited. There

is something almost animistic about the Goldendark novel: life is charged with a luminescence, even a sentience. The natural world is not necessarily benign, but it is aware. The diegetic Goldendark world has a metaphoric quality – yet it is not ‘just’ an allegory. Critically, it is within the qualia of its actuality that the potent charge exists to bring about metamorphosis. The walls of reality can crumble at any point.

In this example from Chapter 11 Kirk climbs Doon Knowe:

I hurried up the track – my bare feet wet with dew, the hem of my nightshirt sodden. I could hear the strains of fey music calling me – I could feel it surging through the hillside: the whimsical melody of a whistle, the blood-thrilling skirl of a pipe; and the racing heart-beat tattoo of drums. I was going to join them! Tears irrigated my cheeks. I was overwhelmed with an almost unbearable bliss. The gladdening light mirrored the tide of joy rising within me. As I breached the silent grove of the summit, the orb of the sun broke through in its undiminished glory, a bronze gong ringing in the day. I drank in its light, breathed in the sweet air, and stepped into the ring.

(vi) Ambiguity

In a Goldendark narrative a definitive exegesis is deferred, a ‘final reading’ of events is impossible, or at least open to the reader’s interpretation. Uncanny or supernatural events are framed in such a way as to make psychological interpretations cogent. The magical or mystical is never taken as a ‘given’ but is just as one possible reading of reality. Scenarios are left to speak for themselves, endings are open and characters’ actions are seldom straightforward – sometimes motives are unclear even to the characters themselves, as Ophelia articulates: ‘We know what we are, but not what we may be’ (*Hamlet*, Act IV, Scene 5).

In this example from Chapter 44 Janey confesses at Allen Raven’s bedside:

Finally, in a whisper, she spoke of her fears and concerns about the unborn child and what he might think. How different she felt. The knowing that the knowing was part of her – that she had finally embraced it, accepting who and what she was.

And then she stopped and her coffee was cold. The room was sterile, dormant,

and stifled with white noise, the clock's incessant memento mori.

Allen lay there, recumbent, breathing shallow, with a steady pulse.

Then he opened his eyes and looked straight at her.

'Oh.' Her voice caught. She felt exposed in the spotlights of his gaze.

Allen tried to speak, but only managed a cough, his mouth blocked by a tube.

Then his voice, in her mind, like a black butterfly hatching: *I know you.*

(vii) The re-enchantment of language

Goldendark begins its project in the very fabric of the prose. It treats language with the same respect it does the natural world and humankind. There is an effort to create works of beauty – not in an overt lyricism but in the use of imagery, the crafting of each sentence and paragraph, the skilful attention to names, to dialogue, to the multifarious possibilities of language and the delights of the written word. It takes seriously the responsibility of the storyteller and the duty of care they have to their audience – what they choose to focus on and bring into the world (Gersie et al., 2014).

In this example from Chapter 37 Janey recalls the 'black day' when she lost her daughter:

They pulled up at a railroad crossing and waited for the great Amtrak to thunder by – the long tail of trucks a herd of stampeding metal buffalos. Janey continued to sing along with Dolly, hypnotized by the freight cars, wondering what they must be carrying, where they were heading, where they had come from. Just more junk people didn't need. They didn't have much, but they got by. She kept on giggling. And one day she might get that lucky break. An A&R man would stroll up to her after a gig and offer her a million bucks to press a record. The wheels on the train became discs being cut in a factory – and fired off to her eager fans. She indulged in the fantasy as a counter-charm to the juggernaut's trembling anger: the implacable inexorability of its trajectory as it railroaded over the fragile dreams of those in its way.

The banshee wail of its siren, then a vacuum of sound in its wake, as though it had taken all the world's noise with it.

(viii) Redemptive causality

Goldendark moves beyond the hopeful Christian discourse of eucatastrophe (a sudden joyous turn) or its antithesis in Grimdark's dyscatastrophe (sorrow or failure) into a liminal state of quantum possibility. The redemption it offers is in breaking free of dualism, reductive paradigms and moral defaults. Further, Goldendark narratives may resist the comforts of closure. Robert Holdstock is the prime purveyor of this refusal of completion – things cannot be put in their box, the lives of the protagonists will be changed utterly – yet even the master of no return provided a sense of healing circularity in his last novel, *Avilion* (2009), though it took us 25 years to get there. Heterodiegetically (Scott & Roffey, 2017), the redemption can manifest in a lingering sense of hope or life affirmation. When a reader puts down a Goldendark novel, they are left, ideally, with a renewed hope – not only for the possibilities of the human condition but for the possibilities of language, the power of the imagination to inspire positive change in the world. The moral causality of our actions has been restored. We have agency, and what we do in this world, how we act, and interact with others, means something. Goldendark seeks to realign us to the natural cycle of things – day and night; spring, summer, autumn, winter; life and death. Through it we make peace with the universe and our place within it. The gold and the dark remind us that every moment is laced with such qualities. We see the world in a new light. Ultimately, Goldendark hopes to contribute to what Barry Lopez described as 'a literature of hope'.^{xxxiv}

Example from *The Knowing* (Chapter 42: Kirk makes his way back through the Glen of Shadows):

I looked out across the Glen – both bright and dark as clouds skirled across it, herding shadows.

Then a strange melody arose – at first I wondered from where – then I realised that it was from the Urisg. He crouched upon a rock and lifted his shaggy head to the sky like a wolf howling at the moon, and yet the song that came out of his mouth was a song of heartbreak and longing.

All of these criteria are undoubtedly ambitious, contentious and aspirational, and it is questionable whether I have achieved all of them in *The Knowing*. To achieve them may take a lifetime of dedication to one's craft. It is an ongoing endeavour.

3.7 A Note on Style

My style, which has elements of ‘Literary Fiction’, ‘Magic Realism’ and ‘Fantasy’ (Taylor, Viva, 2018), destabilizes the reader, who may find it hard to orientate themselves – but that dislocation is part of my intended effect: a ‘cognitive estrangement’ (Suvin, 1979: 3-15) which is part of the affect of the Fantastic. Nevertheless, if it is necessary to pigeon-hole my prose then the nearest available category is what Northrop Frye terms the ‘High Mimetic’ style (1957: 366):

A mode of literature in which, as in most epics and tragedies, the central characters are above our own level of power and authority, though within the order of nature and subject to social criticism.

This for me sums up the, at times, higher register of my style (deliberated heightened for effect in moments of uncanny irruption into the everyday, or for Kirk’s travails in *Elfhome*), and my protagonist, Janey McEttrick, who with her gift of second sight, is ‘above our own level of power’ and via the omniscience it bestows (on her ancestral line) above our own ‘authority’ of knowledge, yet is nevertheless bound within the ‘order of nature’ of the mundane (struggling to pay her bills, at risk of arrest, etc) and certainly subject to ‘social criticism’ (via Shelly, Quatie, Eliza, etc). She has feet of clay – yet has an erratic gift that enables her (and thus the narrative plain) to access something ‘deeper’ or ‘other’, beyond materiality. This is to bridge the rift of the Cartesian Divide that has been a foundational philosophy of Empiricism, advanced by the Royal Society whose motto is *Nullius in Verba*: take nobody’s word for it). Fictional Janey’s historical ancestor, the Reverend Robert Kirk, turned 16 years of age when the Royal Society was founded in 1660, and his adult life and professional career, and extracurricular research interests were in direct opposition to its agenda. In the shadow of the birth of the Enlightenment (1685) and the Glorious Revolution (1688) Kirk began his counterblast to the ‘atheism of the age’ (title page of *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies*, 1691). In his resistance to the cold scientific rationalism of Empiricism, Kirk is a proto-Romantic figure. Twenty years after his death Joseph Addison was to provide a ‘working definition’ of the Fantastic for the long Eighteenth Century in his ‘fairy way of writing’ (1712) – forged from the same tensions as Kirk’s project at the fault-line between religious belief and positivist scientific discourse: ‘The fantastic is an acutely modern literature always coming after primary belief in the supernatural has been

emptied of meaning, marking the uncanny return of exploded supernatural belief.’ (Sandner, 2011: 12). This underlying tension I have attempted to evoke in my High Mimetic style, where something immanent seeks to break through the plain of materialism.

3.8 Goldendark Authors: a speculative list

This list is by no means comprehensive; it will continue to grow and could include artists, musicians, storytellers, poets. The exempla below may apply to specific works by the respective author, in which instance they are cited; otherwise their entire oeuvre is implied:

- Naomi Alderman (*The Power* [2016])
- William Blake
- Mikhail Bulgakov (*The Master and Magarita* [1967])
- Angela Carter
- Lindsay Clarke
- Charles Frazier (*Cold Mountain* [1997])
- Neil Gaiman
- Alan Garner
- Elizabeth Hand (*Mortal Love* [2004])
- Robert Holdstock
- Margaret Elphinstone
- Kazuo Ishiguro (*The Buried Giant* [2015])
- David Jones
- Graham Joyce
- Ursula K. Le Guin
- Fiona Macleod
- Anthony Nanson (*Deep Time* [2015])
- Ben Okri
- Christopher Priest
- Philip Pullman
- Jeff VanderMeer (Southern Reach Trilogy [2014a; 2014b; 2014c])

- Colson Whitehead (*The Underground Railroad* [2016])

This is a deliberately broad church; I would argue that true fantasy resides not in a mindless rehashing of tired tropes, but in a certain quality of writing, and in what M. John Harrison called ‘the transliminal moment’ (cited in Mendlesohn, 2008: xxiii) – a lingering on the threshold, or a deferment of ingress, preventing closure, the full reveal. In that Keatsian uncertainty, deemed ‘negative capability’ (letter to George and Thomas Keats, 21 December, 1817), *that* is where fantasy happens. It is akin to the affect of the sublime, but, to drill down into the detail, it is in nuanced interstices of Tolkienian consolation (Tolkien, 1997, pp. 109–161) and more negative readings of the sublime as being about ‘blockage’ or ‘usurpation’ (Sandner, 2016): ‘The tension between these two different outcomes is the dynamic energy of the fantastic itself for readers’ (2011: 27).

I am aware of the limitations of such a list and there are undoubtedly other authors and artists who would qualify. Those writers categorised under the umbrella of Afro-futurism (Dery, 1993) certainly overlap with Goldendark’s embryonic canon, but I do not wish to appropriate them for my agenda. I see Goldendark and Afro-futurism as parallel, non-mutually exclusive projects.

3.9 Challenges to Goldendark

Is Goldendark a valid category?

I discern Goldendark qualities in the writers I have cited as examples, but I acknowledge that no obvious subgenre exists at present. It is a deliberate Attebery-esque ‘fuzzy set’ (Attebery, 1994), or what Mendlesohn might term ‘The Irregulars’.^{xxxv} In totality, the Goldendark project is akin to VanderMeer’s utterly alien word-crawler in *Annihilation*. Oozing strange and beautiful words in the dark of its negative lighthouse, it leaves a trail of word-spores that ‘Gleam ... darkly golden’ and, infesting us, transform our perception (2014a: 65).

How does Goldendark differ from pre-Grimdark fantasy?

We cannot go back to a pre-9/11 world. To write with the style or morality of mid-20th-century fantasy authors would be redundant even if it were possible. Was Grimdark necessary

in some way? Darwinian, even? Gal Cohen (2013) describes Grimdark as ‘an ‘Evolution of the fantasy genre’. And yet Grimdark is just as formulaic and escapist in its own way. Goldendark differs from contemporary mainstream fantasy in the ways I have listed. There is an absence or deconstruction of grand narrative, a refusal of simplistic dualism, an engagement with the world and its complexity, an embracing of ambiguity and an attempt at psychological realism. Female characters are strong, and meaningful diversity is offered among the cast of characters. Representations of the ‘other’ are handled sensitively.

Do we need Goldendark?

I would argue that Goldendark is a necessary correlative to the neoliberalist rhetoric of Grimdark. As George Monbiot (2016) postulates: ‘A coherent alternative has to be proposed.’ Whereas he was imagining an economic paradigm shift, I’m imagining an aesthetic one. We have a choice: to buy into the consensus reality or create alternatives. Ultimately, both extremes exist within the same ghettoised genre. *Some* Grimdark is more than competently written, even if its moral compass may be questionable. It has its fans and its place within the ecosystem of Fantastika. I am not advocating a single kind of ‘pure’ fantasy – an aesthetic fascism – but the very opposite. Goldendark’s remit is to resist the erosion of choice by a form of cultural hegemony which seeks to normalise nihilism and neoliberalism.

Is Goldendark diametrically opposed to Grimdark?

No. There can be elements of ‘Grimdark’ in ‘Goldendark’ and vice versa. It is more of a yin and yang effect than a dualistic black-or-white difference. Depending on one’s taste or values, a spectrum of literature should be available. There is room for all on the bookshelves. The very act of reading a book is redemptive in itself (see Manwaring, 2016b); the more, the merrier. To repurpose the Zapatista slogan: ‘El mundo que queremos es uno donde quepan mucho mundos’ (Marcos, 2002: xxi): the world I want is one where many worlds fit. This means the destabilisation of all hegemonies and an active celebration of literary diversity, and in particular the disenfranchised, left at the wayside by the commercial imperative that drives the mainstream (Freire, 1996). It is only the pervasiveness of neoliberalism (which Grimdark is but one iteration of), as the new normal, that is problematic. If we are only fed grim schlock then that is all we’ll see or expect. We have become habituated to it. And at the risk of being the heretic, the boy in the Emperor’s new clothes, I suggest that a perceptual shift is

required. It takes a significant mental effort to see beyond what they want you to see: to ‘pierce-the-veil’, as Perceval/Parsifal achieved. The Grail awaits for those who do.

Ethically, how does Goldendark differ to pre-existing genres?

While not directly antagonistic to other styles of Fantastika (positioning itself within a niche of the current literary ecosystem), Goldendark differentiates itself from Grimdark and other mainstream fantasy by consciously resisting the style of storytelling influenced by the commercial imperative, which developed a narrative style shaped by the spacing of advertising-breaks, e.g. George RR Martin’s deployment of the ‘act break’ style of structuring from his TV screenwriting career in his prose fiction (Martin, quoted in VanderMeer, 2018: 288-289); and the desire for profits from lucrative franchises screen-tested on attention-deficient adolescents. The hunger for ‘cross-over’ appeal – material that will appeal to a wider demographic – means an endemic dumbing down, but also, a relentless ‘fix’ of sex and violence, chases and explosions; the smoke and mirror of special FX, distracting us from the weaknesses of characterisation, dialogue and plot. Goldendark also offers an alternative to the Grimdarkian nihilistic shutting down of hope and the political quietism that implies. It actively resists the project of ‘Capitalist Realism’ and its ‘widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it.’ (Fisher, 2006: 2) In its more balanced depiction of the human condition, it offers an alternative to the dog-eat-dog/strongest-will-survive ethos of Grimdark; it presents a different ‘game’ and reading of humanity. While accepting that *some* people are motivated by hard, competitive drives; that *some* people are driven by selfish or even malicious motives, it attempts to offer other modalities. For even if this was representative of humanity (which I believe it isn’t) it would seek to be interventionist – to break the cycle. If Fantastika cannot imagine other ways of being, other worlds (rather than mirror the dominant discourse of this one) then it has failed in its *raison d’être*.

3.10 Final Thoughts

Goldendark is a speculative category, but one that I hope will coalesce into a distinctive subgenre – yet not one too rigidly prescriptive or formulaic. While it remains embryonic it

has the frisson of possibility about it; it is a new frontier waiting to be explored, a new world to be discovered. This relates directly back to an approach advocated by Joseph Addison, in an article for *The Spectator* (1712) in which he discusses ‘the Fairy way of writing’:

Thus we see how many ways Poetry addresses it self to the Imagination, as it has not only the whole Circle of Nature for its Province, but makes new Worlds of its own, shews us Persons that are not to be found in Being, and represents even the Faculties of the Soul, with her several Virtues and Vices, in a sensible Shape and Character.

Addison goes beyond the ‘inherent values’ of 18th-century personification in his conception of the Fairy way of writing as not restricted to ‘mere allegory’ (and in this sense his argument is proto-Tolkienian), and imagines the function of such writing in making ‘new Worlds of its own’ and other ways of Being. So, more radical than his reductionist commentators (e.g. Wasserman, 1950: 443) would claim, Addison’s project has the flavour of Kirk about it, an air of potentiality, though more formally cloaked in the discourse of the period: ‘an inquiry into the psychology of the imagination and a scientific discrimination of the functions and limits of the different arts’ (Routh, 1913). It dovetails with the opus of a contemporary of Kirk’s, John Aubrey, gentleman antiquarian, whose near religious fervour in pursuit of scientific enquiry mirrors Kirk’s adoption of pseudo-scientific, empiricist methodology in pursuit of religious enquiry (Scurr, 2015: 430). In a further, more contemporary symmetry, Ruth Scurr, in her experimental biography of the antiquarian, *John Aubrey: My Own Life*, articulates her approach in a fashion that mirrors my own:

Aubrey’s approach to his own and other lives was imaginative and empirical in equal measure. In imagining his diary by collating the evidence, I have echoed the idea of antiquities – the searching after remnants – that meant so much to him. I have collected the fragmentary remains of his life – from manuscripts, letters and books, his own and other people’s – and arranged them carefully in chronological order. I have done so playingly (a word he used of his own writing) but with purpose. Ultimately, my aim has been to write a book in which he is still alive. (2015: 13)

This ‘imaginative and empirical’ approach chimes with my own creative–critical one and is encoded in the title of the novel: *The Knowing: A Fantasy*. It echoes the manner in which Sandner locates ‘the fantastic within the locus of competing claims’ (2016: 32). It has been in the space-between of this locus, this ‘bonnie road’, which I have ventured in this project. I have sought to return with more than fairy fruit from my enquiries into creative process, form and genre. My wish is that this foray will entice others to explore further.

CONCLUSION

This has been an enquiry into creative process, form and genre, focused upon the research and development of my novel, *The Knowing: A Fantasy*.

So what have I learned?

In terms of *creative process*, I have argued for the validity of practice-based research. Insights gleaned through experiential methods (long-distance walks, drawing, ballad-singing, storytelling and residencies) have nuanced and enriched both my novel and my thesis. In seeking to dramatise the creative process of my protagonist, Janey McEttrick – whose experiences lead her to come to terms with her mixed heritage and ‘find’ her authentic voice encompassed by both a lineage of oral tradition and her own presence in the world – I have dramatized my own. In doing so, I can identify my novel as a poioumena. This ‘performance’ of the creative process is of course highly fictionalised, but reifies the synthetic, counter-intuitive task of self-analysis of an often organic, intuitive process; and it serves as a kind of localised creation myth (for author and protagonist), conveying a sense of faux historicity in the tradition of the ‘found manuscript’ trope of the Gothic (Baker, 2014: 54–88). The fact that during the process of researching a key character (Robert Kirk) I unearthed a lost version of his handwritten manuscript, *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies* (1691), felt like simultaneously an affirmation of Baker’s ‘authentic inauthenticity’ and a destabilizing of it – for the manuscript I discovered in the archives was real, not just a fictional device.^{xxxvi} Suddenly, I found myself plunged into my own story.

In terms of *form*, I have sought to interrogate the hermeneutic conventions of the medium of prose fiction. By tackling the challenges of digital writing, I more consciously entered Eco’s ‘Labyrinth’ of text, the arborescent (branching) becoming the rhizomatic (networked):

To the contemplating intellect, the edifice of the universe manifests itself as a labyrinth, with a maze of ambiguous routes, of deceptive appearances of things and signs, of winding and complicated nodes and spirals. (2014: 36–37)

Faced with the challenges of presenting a multi-linear narrative in a way that does not undermine narrative traction or genre expectations (completely), I created an ebook. But

finding that not adequate to represent the totality of my novel's legendarium, I then developed it into the form of 'ergodic' fiction (Aarseth, 1997), creating (according to his taxonomy) a unicursory narrative with a multicursory macro-structure: essentially, a tree within a forest. This led me to the development of what I have termed 'ergotdic' fiction, through a digital form of biomimicry: emulating the mycelial networks that underpin Kirk's folkloric fairy ring, his subterranean secret commonwealth.

The heteroglossia that this approach is meant to convey (and the ontological challenges that the reader is confronted with in navigating it) is perhaps more complex than even that – for nothing is in isolation. The mycelial network is plugged into an even wider one:

some [fungi] ... bond[s] with algae to form lichens, or together with plant roots to form complex underground networks called mycorrhizae, a 'wood-wide web'. (Letcher, 2007: 7)

Like the Carrollian rabbit hole, these labyrinthine networks are as deep as your curiosity. A single tale connects to the forest of tales, to the chorus of voices heard within its groves, and ultimately to the primeval wildwood of the human imagination.

Finally, in terms of *genre*, I have sought to create an 'ethical aesthetics', what I call 'Goldendark', as a way of challenging the 'Grimdark' discourse. I have sought to challenge the false dichotomy of fantasy/mimesis and the ghettoization of fantasy as a genre worthy of academic enquiry.

Other lines of enquiry, foregrounded in the early stages of my research, provided important texture, but are inevitably omitted here for more exhaustive studies or appropriate disciplines: Cecil Sharp and Maud Karpales in Appalachia and the role of the folk music collector; the folk traditions of Lowland Scotland and their diasporic translocation to the Southern Appalachians; longing, liminality and transgression – the fairy tradition as a metaphor of the creative process; and the representation of 'Faerie' (the otherworld and its denizens) in literature. As a novelist I have shamelessly plundered all of these for 'insight'. The writer is the most rapacious of creatures, a Border Reiver of the imagination. Everything is material, and life is research. Novelists thrive on interdisciplinarity, or, to put it another way, other people's research and expertise. I merely follow a time-honoured tradition, the

‘ways of the jackdaw’: ‘we steal the shiny bits, and build them into the structures of our own disorderly nests’ (Atwood, 2003: xviii).

In none of the primary foci of this project (creative process; form; genre) do I expect to have stated the final word. My findings are the result of a finite enquiry by a particular writer in a particular juncture of time and place and, as such, invite further research from a plurality of perspectives. Throughout this project I have emphasised the fallibility of any claims to omniscience. Epistemological hunger, combined with embodied, feminist, fire-in-the-head inspiration, drove this creative–critical study. It has pushed me in every conceivable way: academically and creatively; physically, mentally and emotionally. Like Janey (who offers her completed album to the Cailleach in exchange for Kirk’s release), I feel I have offered my own ‘secret commonwealth’ for emancipation from outmoded patterns and habits (in terms of my writing practice), for creative and critical development and for an elevation of perspective and status. The website I have created offers a multiplicity of ways for the journey to continue for anyone who is interested, but, for now, mine is over. As far as I know.

FIN.

NOTES

ⁱ See my *Bardic Academic* blog: <https://thebardicacademic.wordpress.com/>

ⁱⁱ BBC (n.d.) James Hogg: Biography. *Writing Scotland*. Available from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/profiles/29mbnSxdmTg99TpfkcHpRtm/james-hogg> [accessed 10 January 2018].

ⁱⁱⁱ See my research website: www.thesecondcommonwealth.com

^{iv} Personal communication, 25 March 2017.

^v 5 June 1959, Merton College, Oxford (Tolkien, 1997, pp. 224–240).

^{vi} ‘I do a walk around here every morning before I start. It’s opening up your system to the world, making the skin porous, letting all the impressions pour through and charging circuits to be able to write. And the burning of neural pathways is when you’ve established a set of pathways in the head. To go somewhere new is to feel the brain is being remapped, in an interesting way. And you hope that by doing that, a new form of writing might emerge.’ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/nov/01/iain-sinclair-interview> [accessed 23 March 2018].

^{vii} I wrote an account, ‘Let the Mountain Sing Its Own Song’, for the *London Magazine* (2015e).

^{viii} *Ballads Across Borders*. Available from:

<https://thebardicacademic.wordpress.com/2016/07/21/ballads-across-borders/>

^{ix} For further field research outcomes, see www.thesecondcommonwealth.com

^x Which I discuss in more detail in Manwaring (2012b).

^{xi} See my blogpost, ‘The Illustrated Novelist’. Available from:

<https://thebardicacademic.wordpress.com/2017/04/17/the-illustrated-novelist/>

^{xii} <https://thebardicacademic.wordpress.com/2017/04/03/the-remarkable-notebooks-of-robert-kirk/>

^{xiii} For illustrations, motifs of characters from *The Knowing*, drawings inspired by Kirk’s notebooks, etc. see the website: <http://thesecondcommonwealth.com/>

^{xiv} <http://www.fantastikajournal.com/> [accessed 18 January 2018].

^{xv} ‘And it was left to the art-musician to take the final step and evolve the 7-note scale of which every note could be used with equal freedom and certainty’ (Sharp, 1917).

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- ^{xvi} <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2015/09/05/up-tree/> [accessed 29 January 2018].
- ^{xvii} <http://uk.businessinsider.com/how-star-wars-made-george-lucas-a-billionaire-2015-12/#the-high-school-comedy-remains-one-of-the-most-profitable-movies-of-all-time-made-on-a-budget-of-777000-it-earned-140-million-in-revenue-2> [accessed 26 February 2018].
- ^{xviii} <https://readingdigitalfiction.com/about/what-is-digital-fiction/> [accessed 24 November 2017], my emphasis.
- ^{xix} *A Good Read*, BBC Radio 4, broadcast 4 June 2017.
- ^{xx} <http://www.ryman-novel.com/> [accessed 15 June 2017].
- ^{xxi} <http://www.bookdrum.com/books/after-london/9781846378676/index.html>
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- ^{xxiv} Available from:
<http://www.ref.ac.uk/publications/2017/consultationonthesecondresearchexcellenceframeworksummaryofresponses.html> [accessed 29 January 2018].
- ^{xxv} Moyra Caldecott, 2003, private correspondence.
- ^{xxvi} ‘The great fantasies, myths and tales are indeed like dreams: they speak *from* the unconscious *to* the unconscious, in the *language* of the unconscious – symbol and archetype’ (Le Guin, 1989: 51).
- ^{xxvii} <http://www.bernardcornwell.net/interview-with-george-r-r-martin/> [accessed 9 February 2018].
- ^{xxviii} Discussed at length by Sandner (2016: 4, 17–45, 159–172).
- ^{xxix} ‘Fake realism is the escapist literature of our time’ (Le Guin, 1989: 34).
- ^{xxx} <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/26/hugo-awards-shortlist-rightwing-campaign-sad-rabid-puppies> [accessed 5 February 2018].
- ^{xxxi} Jacques Rocks!: ‘One thing I hope Marvel and other companies learn from the success #BlackPanther will bring is that inclusion within the process yields better results than the "optics" of diversity.’ @jnyemb [Twitter] 18 February. Available from:
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^{xxxii} <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/13/lionel-shrivers-full-speech-i-hope-the-concept-of-cultural-appropriation-is-a-passing-fad> [accessed 9 February 2018].

^{xxxiii} Vigorously debated in ‘Writing and Racism’, lecture, Literary Leicester, University of Leicester, 16 November 2016.

^{xxxiv} ‘If I were asked what I want to accomplish as a writer, I would say it’s to contribute to a literature of hope ...’ (Lopez, 1999: 14)

^{xxxv} Mendlesohn’s speculative categories (2003: xviii–xxv), with my descriptors in italics, are:

- The Portal-Quest – *the fantastic is entered via a portal and does not bleed back out.*
- Immersive – *the fantastic is normative, as in classic secondary world fantasy.*
- Intrusion – *the fantastic erupts through into the ordinary world.*
- Liminal – *the fantastic and the mundane uneasily co-exist.*
- Irregulars – *a destabilisation of the above: the black swans and outliers.*

^{xxxvi} The details of this manuscript will be discussed in a forthcoming article.

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C. Wider Reading

- i. **Appalachia**
- ii. **Balladology**
- iii. **Contemporary Fantastika**
- iv. **Creative Writing Pedagogy**
- v. **Fairy Tradition**
- vi. **Fiction**
- vii. **Non-fiction**
- viii. **Poetry**
- ix. **Recordings**
- x. **Related Scholarship**

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SECTION TWO: CREATIVE COMPONENT (NOVEL)

THE KNOWING

A Fantasy

by

Kevan Manwaring

Reminder to Examiners:

Additional material can be viewed via the website (www.thesecondcommonwealth.com).

*And if this be thought only a fancy and forgery because
obscure and unknown to the most of mankind for so
long a time, I answer the antipodes and inhabitants of
America, the bone of our bone, yet their first discovery
was lookt on as a Fayrie Tale, and the reporters hooted
at as inventors of ridiculous Utopias.*

Robert Kirk



*Far from heaven, safe from hell,
Unknown of earth, he wanders free...
Would that he might return and tell
Of his mysterious company.*

Andrew Lang

1

Janey picked up the guitar. She strummed a few shimmering F-chords, her silver nails and ring-knuckled fingers flashing against the neck and board. Her trusty steel-string held its tune. Here's hoping she would.

'Well, hidey! How y'all doing out there?' She beamed her killer smile, scanned the crowd. Tried not to sigh. Same old song – a beer-soaked roadhouse in the back of beyond, drunken weekenders who couldn't care less about the act taking to the stage: some band they'd never heard of. The Jackalopes? Sounded like a joke.

Just sing, girl, sing.

A no-neck trucker in an oily Dodgers cap threw peanut-shells at regular intervals onto the stage. Others roared at their own jokes, scraped chairs, belched for show, slammed down growlers of draft to cheering cronies.

Screamed in her head: We're the real deal, you morons, not some bullshit tribute band...

What actually came out of her mouth: 'Before we get rolling, please welcome the band!'

As she bigged 'em up with her mouth, she dressed 'em down with her eyes.

'The stupendous Slim Lightning on lead guitar!'

Swaggering around in his Stetson and stirrups like some rock-star cowboy Slim winked

at the hen-party in the front row, jutting his guitar crotch to a chorus of squeals, giggles, and jeers from the guys.

‘Stage-right, on bass, oh-so-cool EZ Tyger!’

Behind his disguise of aviators and cheroot, EZ wore a perpetual morose expression that made him look like he'd just heard his dog had been run over, and he'd been responsible.

‘On the sticks, the mighty Feed Me Seymour!’

Living up to his sobriquet, Feed Me munched on a pink donut with one hand while the other tap tapped the snare rim. ‘Over-weight, over-time, and over here,’ as the band often lamented of their Limey drummer.

‘And I’m Janey McEtrick, pleased to meet y’all!’

Here we are and off we go. Janey nodded without looking behind her, and, as Feed Me called out ‘One, Two...One, Two, Three, Four,’ his mouth still full of donut, they were off.

Amidst this cut-and-paste of hair-styles, flat-pack fashion statements, musical styles, and attitudes, long-boned Janey McEtrick teased alive her rhythm guitar with her wooden pick, its fretboard worn smooth, covered in stickers of festivals and right-on slogans – from ‘Bury My Heart at Standing Rock’ and ‘Love Trumps Hate’, to ‘Je sUiS Immigrant’ and ‘Protect the Smokys’. Red hair tumbled down her piedmont frame as she hit the power chords. The spots picked out her trademark patchwork waistcoat and embroidered jeans; Celtic triple spiral on her bare shoulder; spangly jewellery snagging the light – turquoise choker and earrings, Cherokee bead necklace draped fetchingly down to her pumped-up cleavage. ‘Hot stuff’ with her fey green eyes and voluptuous lips just a ‘beggin to be kissed,’ though not many got past her defences.

The Jackalopes rattled through their first half set – ‘the ascent of the Matterhorn’, as Janey often joked. Win the audience and make them want to listen. If you could push through

their blue collar blues, their weekend testosterone and oestrogen high, then you had them on your side for the second half: 'the slide down like mojito', as also she put it (and she would know, being more than partial to them herself). They'd sing along, treat you like their ol' bosom pal.

She did her best, warbled and pouted, but a part of Janey seemed to slip away. Found herself gazing at the audience as though down the wrong end of a telescope...

There, at the back. Even beyond the glare of the lights she could sense them watching her: the gothic-looking pair in shades.

Pale and statue-like amid the scrum of bodies, as though in the scratched loop of a silent movie.

A white laser-beam threatened to pierce her skull. Janey felt the pressure building, and her body started to tremble and her hands became clammy.

'White-out,' EZ Tyger mouthed to the others, back to the audience.

Her band members glanced at her, rolled their eyes, and did their best to compensate as she slurred the words and fumbled the chords.

The whole place suddenly seemed strange and remote. The glaring spotlights, the arcade machines, the optics and glitter ball, the vulgar décor and brash clothing – all jarred.

It was as though she was seeing through the glassy surface of the world – like she was looking into Mactucket's Pond back down the full five fathoms of childhood. Something deeper and more complex lurked beneath.

Strange shadows moved in silent conspiracy.

A pebble of sound rippled the illusion away. The volume of the evening cranked up and she was back in the sweaty fug of the gig, fronting a band. The song mercifully ended.

'Woo-wee! I don't know about you folks, but that took me riiiiighhtt back.'

From a trembling hand she took a sip of mart water, and let the band do a number with Slim on vocals.

They somehow made it to the end of the show.

The final applause was half-hearted, and mercifully drowned out quickly as the jukebox kicked in with some Nashville honky-tonk number, pacifying the crowds with the predictable highways of a truck-driver's loneliness.

'Like a dog gnawing a bone,' EZ growled under his breath before pulling the jack and striding off.

'Well, that went down just swell,' Slim drawled, clicking his guitar case shut. He spat his gum somewhere in the vicinity of the long-gone audience, his lean frame taut as a crossbow.

The scowling barman at the back called out across the detritus-strewn floor, threatening them with his brush. 'Hey, you fucking barbarians, leave the place as you found it!'

Slim shot him a look. 'We are. What a dump.'

Feed Me loudly put away his drums, 'accidentally' knocking over a bottle of luke-warm Bud. 'Kiss mine,' he bellowed.

Janey rubbed her temples as she sat on the edge of the stage.

'Where the fuck did you go tonight?'

She looked up to see EZ standing over her. Even behind his Aviators she could feel his glare.

'I ... I'm sorry. Had one of my ... attacks.'

'And what brought that on, I wonder? How much junk did you take before the show?'

'Nothing, I swear!'

EZ folded his arms across his chest. 'Change the vinyl, Dorothy. Off to Oz every fucking night! Gimme strength! Too. Many. Times.' He rolled up cable like he was off to a lynching.

'Oh, quit your griping, grandma. We's got through it, didn't we?' rumbled Feed Me, slamming one of his boxes onto the trolley.

'Don't you start, ass-wipe! Remember, next time – we play on forty-five, not thirty three.'

The drummer raised his side-of-ham fist. 'Why you bloody...'

Slim dashed between them, holding them at bay. 'Hey guys, cut that out!'

'Get out the fucking way Slim-Jim, before I snap you intwo!' roared Feed Me.

Janey screamed, throwing a mike-stand across the stage.

The three men turned to look at her, looking shocked at her unreasonable behaviour. Feral eyes stared at them beneath a wild mane of hair.

With a knowing look of male conspiracy, EZ, Feed Me and Slim backed away from one another, hands raised, flicked, or limp.

They packed up the rest of the kit in bruised silence. The meagre earnings were doled out, more insult than profit, and without so much as a goodnight one by one they drove off into the dark, until it was only Janey left with her Dodge pickup – a tarp thrown over the kit in the back.

Unsteadily, she just stared at it, hoping the heap might mean something.

White knuckles on the wheel, she breathed in slow, releasing the tension in a great sigh.

With a click of her skull Zippo, Janey lit up her customary post-show reefer – pre-

rolled and waiting behind the rear-view mirror. In the urine-yellow light of the car park she took a long slow drag. The smoke swirled around her head in a comforting cloud.

Another night, another crummy dollar.

Twisting the ignition, on the second try the car grumbled into life. The stereo came on mid-song – some jaunty pre-gig number by Della Mae. She ejected the disc, tossing it onto the pile on the passenger seat, and slipped in something ... more mellow. As the sublime melodies of Crooked Still floated through the cab, Janey pulled away.

The smoke eased the cogs of her mind, and a ghost image of the gothic pair floated up.

Who were they?

But the thought was gone in the next deadening cloud.

At the crossroads she ran a red as there wasn't a soul in sight, but as the lights changed two pairs of burning eyes blinked open.

Janey drove out onto the freeway that would lead her backcountry, to her place up in the mountains above Asheville – a piece of scrubby land by a creek that she called home; just another beat-up place down a dead-end lane. There she had parked her airstream some years back as a temporary stop-gap 'between houses', and that's where she had stayed ever since, her chrome trailer like some marooned spaceship. She joked about someday she'd recharge its Dilithium crystals and reach escape velocity, but it hadn't happened yet.

She turned off from the river of red and white lights at her lonely holler, indicator ticking like a metronome between songs.

As the familiar two-lane blacktop snaked away into the night Janey started to relax – the roach taking effect. After a good gig she felt buzzed up and unable to sleep for hours, needing to party or stay up until the small hours talking to friends. But when the show was a

stinker, she felt scooped out afterward – drained at the effort of trying to keep the audience on their side, raising the energy, or 'poking a dead pony' as EZ would say. Tonight it was definitely the latter – and then some – but more than just feeling flat, Janey felt ... raked clean.

The visions, when they came, always wiped her out. She would laugh about them afterwards, make out to the guys that they were flashbacks to her Kool Aid days.

But the truth was scarier.

As she drove sleepily back – homing instinct kicking in just enough to keep her shiny side up – she felt as vast and as hollow as the night, the sky one big teepee of rhinestones. The music and the smoke made her float off. Only the big sticky wheel of the pick-up kept her grounded.

She sang along with the sublime vocals of O'Donovan, wishing she could be as talented and successful as her.

Bitch.

Janey seemed destined to envy every other lucky fucker on the planet, which made her hate herself even more. Her foot pressed on the gas as she counted her lack of blessings.

Her hot-shot legal friend Shelly DuPont lectured her how the late-night drives back from gigs were playing craps with death; regaling her with tragic tales of other jobbing musicians who had come a-cropper or who had suffered near misses when the Reaper had swished his scythe.

'Book a motel, for Chrissakes!' Shelly typically nagged, playing the bossy older sister.

'Sure, and blow my takings?' Janey found herself responding out loud, before catching herself in the mirror. She shook her head, laughing.

Something dashed in front of her truck – something large and dark. It thudded against

the fender, hard.

She screamed and swerved, and the Dodge skidded off the road. Spitting gravel, it juddered to a stop at the edge of blackness.

The flat note of the car-horn split the night wide.

Janey dangled painfully at an angle, seatbelt snagged tight. Thank God she'd remembered to do that! No airbag in her old jalopy. 'Shaken, not stirred,' she could hear herself joking, while another part of her was screaming 'Oh fuck! Not the truck!' A sick feeling in her stomach grew at the thought of the repair bills; at what she would do if her wheels were off the road for ages, or worse, written off.

She unbuckled herself, and fell heavily against the dashboard. She extricated herself from the cabin, and stumbled onto the ground, weak-kneed and wobbly. The dry sweet scent of sage and rock, warm from the day, filled her senses. She got up slowly, brushed herself down, and turned – bracing herself for what she might see.

The pickup wasn't in a bad way – just a few scratches, but nothing new there. The back wheels were still on the gravel although her nose poked out precariously over a ridge which dropped away in the darkness.

Jesusfuck, that was a close one!

The kit in the back looked okay apart from a cable box that had burst open, spewing its contents like a can of worms. It could have been worse.

'You're one lucky girl,' she muttered to herself, over and over.

She went to do a roll-up but her hands were trembling too much. Somewhere, she found a bottle of water, and guzzled it down, splashing her face.

Then she remembered that thing – what was it? A bison?

Slowly she got up and walked back to the road – there was no sign of a road-kill.

Strange. She swore she had hit it.

'Hope you're okay out there...' she called out into the hot, anonymous night. 'Real sorry an' all...'

There was a sound, a cracking of underbrush. Something moved in the shadows.

'You alright there, darlin'?' Janey ventured closer, afraid she had wounded it. She loved animals.

She stopped dead.

From the darkness came breathing, ragged and feral.

Then – slitting the shadows – two eyes of fire, staring straight at her, piercing her with fear.

The night growled.

Janey quickly backed away.

From behind came another growl.

A blur of shadow.

Heart pounding, she jumped into the cab and slammed the door just as the shadow crashed against it with a yelp.

Agonisingly slow, she wound up the window as the beast stepped back, tensed and leapt again. It cracked against the windscreen, which held, just. The massive paw tried to reach through, nearly gouging her face. She leaned away from it as far as possible while frantically trying to close the window. With a grunt she squeezed it shut, but still the beast clung on, its hell eyes blazing, slobber smearing the glass.

And so she released the lock on the door and booted it with all her might.

With a howl, the beast fell out of sight down the cliff-face.

Below, a series of thuds and dislodged rock clattering down.

Then silence.

Janey slowly reached out and hooked the door closed, holding her breath. The pick-up teetered precariously.

Head spinning she noticed a single claw left jammed in the crack.

Finally, she let out her breath.

She sat in the cab, a tiny parcel of life in the wilderness. The road was an enormous tarmac mamba, stretching into the night.

Scrambling for her cell, she turned it on.

Not a single bar.

Through the wing mirror she spied a second jagged shadow-hound unpeeling itself from the undergrowth and sliding across the road towards her.

With a sweating hand, she fumbled with the ignition key. She twisted it – and it stalled. Again. 'C'mon, c'mon...'

The beast could have been from the same infernal litter. Bigger than an Irish wolfhound and as black as night. Those fiery eyes fixed on her, its raw slathering mouth gaped like the pit of Hell.

She prayed to MotherTheresaGandalfBuddhaJehovah...

There was a heavy thud and the pickup tilted backwards.

'Oh, sweet mercy...'

The truck suddenly grunted into life. She revved the engine; yanked it into the reverse. The wheels skidded on the gravel, spittooning grit across the road.

If ScoobyfuckinDoo – whatever it was – leapt onto her roof, it'd tip them both over the edge.

'C'mon!'

With a lurch, the rear tyres bit and the pickup jolted backwards. She swerved it wildly onto the blacktop and slammed on the brakes.

The thing was thrown off, yelping as it hit the road.

She reversed back onto it with a sickening crunch, then gunned the car forward, pedal on the floor – heart thrumming like a Boston bodhran.

Janey didn't know how she got home – her mind was in meltdown, but self-preservation maintained her motor-functions, blind panic keeping her foot to the floor, body pumped with adrenalin, eyes riveted to the rear-view.

Every shadow, a black shuck.

She skidded down the track – London barking in the distance, recognising the grizzly sound of the pickup. He was chained up outside the trailer. *Boy, was he a welcome sight!*

The truck came to an abrupt stop, and she killed the engine. Her head was a merry-go-round – she took some deep breaths, hoping it would quit turning.

London's woowoo snapped her out of it, his eyes lambent in the headlights.

Janey stumbled out of the car, and embraced her old buddy, sobbing.

Here she was in the ass-end of nowhere, out of signal range. No fucking paddle. Whatever those things were, she hoped she'd lost them. Hoped they didn't find her.

'Thank God I have you,' she hollered, face deep in his thick musty fur.

He licked her tears and scampered around her, making a fuss.

Letting him off the chain, she dashed inside and, after a brief rattling and cussing, appeared with a shotgun. She slotted two cartridges in the barrel, and snapped it into place.

London cocked his head, and held up a paw.

'That's right, old pal. When the chips are down, you can always rely on Granpa here.'

Let the fuckers come now – and we'll give him a homecoming, Smoky Mountain style.'

Pulling a half-drunk bottle of bourbon from the trailer, she took a deep swig, watching the halo of dawn slowly vanquish the night.

2

Janey woke with a start, slumped painfully against the doorframe – the cold iron of the shotgun resting on her knees. She rubbed the raw indent on her cheek and cracked her jaw.

Falling asleep on the pizer hadn't been a good idea. Nor had the bourbon. The empty bottle skittered across the trailer floor as her boot caught it.

London, sensing her movement, trotted back across the yard and made an admonitory 'What time do you call this?' yip.

'Hey, not so loud, buddy!' she groaned, fussing him some. To stop his whining, she scratched around for something, taking it real slow. There was a half-empty can of his favourite offal in the cooler, fork sticking out of it, but she couldn't stomach scooping out wet food this morning, so she reached for a box. As his Iams rattled into the silver bowl, she winced. Refilling his water bowl made her realise how thirsty she was all of a sudden, tongue as dry as Jenson's Creek.

'Wader...' she croaked.

She filled a stolen beer glass and guzzled it down, then refilled it for some more.

Her trailer looked like it had been burgled, but that was normal: clothes and underwear, music-kit and make-up strewn every which way; a stash of records domino-ed onto the floor. The sun breached the top of the holler and pierced the gloom of the trailer like it was King Tut's tomb. The invasive shard revealed questionable treasures: the multi-coloured cobweb of a dream-catcher; Buddhas of diminishing sizes like a gender-bending Russian doll; a crystal

skull ash-tray; a Celtic knotwork bodhran; thrift store books on astrology and past lives; a Stonehenge of Jack Daniel bottles; a mouldering strata of pizza boxes; and an assortment of cacti she named after old boyfriends.

The only clear space was what she called her 'shrine' in the corner. Flanked by candles and crystals, and guarded by a battered My Little Pony, there stood a golden frame with a photograph of a young girl with coppery curls. Janey kissed the glass tenderly; lit a joss-stick to smoulder in front of it. Then, grabbing her shades and tobacco, she went out to greet the day.

As she watched the watery egg of sunlight spill its yoke into the frying pan of her world, Janey drew upon a rolled-up cigarette – straight, as it was a work day – and tried to put her thoughts in order.

What had she seen last night? Did it even really happen? Or was it one of those flashbacks the Deadheads talk about?

She walked across to her pick-up and examined the fender. Sure enough, there was a dent on it: another to add to the collection. It might have been a beat-up pile of crap but it had got her out of a tight-spot. She patted the hood, 'Thanks, Mickey.' She had named it after one of her favourite actors who had a similarly beat up face, and had bounced back from obscurity to win an Oscar. Her jalopy could do with some plastic surgery. Hell, her *life* could.

London sniffed sheepishly around the battered door.

'Hey buddy, what's that?' She pulled the talon out of the cracked and lacerated window where it was wedged. Holding it between her forefinger and thumb she let out a low whistle. It was the size of a bullet. Would make one helluva of pendant. Pocketing it for now, she walked to the back of the truck and saw large feral footprints on the tarp.

The flash of jagged shadow and fiery eyes in the rear-view mirror made her steady

herself on the dew-spangled metal. Catching her breath, she took another look.

That must have been one *mother*, she brooded. Coyote tracks maybe, but way out of proportion, too big. El lobo? Hound-of-the-fucking-Baskervilles more like! Shuddering, she pulled the tarp away, bracing herself for the worst.

Nervously, she checked for damage. Fortunately, everything seemed intact.

That was something at least. She still had her music.

Thanking the Holy Trinity – Jimi, Janis and Jim – she started to unload her kit.

A tepid shower, a change of clothes, some out-of-date pop tarts and cup of joe later, she was on the road, with London in the back – nose in the wind – heading for work, shotgun propped next to her.

In her haste, she hadn't noticed the curiously-wrapped package on her porch.

On the road back to the freeway, she scanned the verges until she recognised the place.

Pulling in, she grabbed the cold, solid reassurance of the shotgun and stepped out. Skidmarks to the cliff-edge were as plain as day.

London sniffed around, barking warnings.

'I know, *compañero*, I don't like it neither.'

Janey took a tentative peek over the edge. She could see the broken bushes where something large, heavy and mean had tumbled down. Walking back to where her truck had reversed out, she saw the smear of blood. Kneeling down, she dabbed a patch with a finger.

It had the consistency of tar and reeked like sin.

London stuck his wet snout in her palm and growled.

'You got it in one, Lon. Know your enemy.'

Frowning, she wiped her hand on a tissue, scanning the undergrowth. Not a place she wanted to hang around.

London did his business with almost professional pride.

'C'mon, boy. Let's get to work.'

Asheville's eastern district was up-and-coming, the main street lined with hip coffee-houses, galleries and bars, although the tide of gentrification hadn't quite reached the backstreet where she pulled in, triumphantly claiming her parking spot amid the dust and rust of vehicles crammed along the litter-congested kerb.

The sun had snuck behind a cloud and the day was as dull as a hangover as she let herself in to the store (twisting her spare key *just so* while forcing the door at precisely the right moment), London following.

The familiar musty smell of Electric Ladyland assailed her nostrils – the whiff of old vinyl, mouldering memorabilia and Raddle's stogie.

Hitting the lights, she flipped the sign on the door to 'open' and put the door on the latch.

Saluting the gods of music who looked down upon her from posters and picture-discs, she inspected the rows of storage boxes, each crammed with its alphabet of bedfellows. A few sleeves needed slotting back into place, but otherwise, things were in order.

Humming, she selected something mellow from the 'M's' – 'Blue' by Joni Mitchell – as London flopped in his basket by the counter. Placing the disc on the turntable she steered the needle into place, then, to its crackle and hiss, set about her next priority: coffee.

She preferred it when she was working solo shifts, like today, when it was quiet. Then she could think up lyrics and melodies without the constant background chatter of her

colleagues, who liked to keep up a running commentary on every customer's tastes, speculating on their musical affiliations as soon as they walked in the door, based purely upon their hair-dos (which was Eli's theory) or their footwear (which was Rani's).

After going through the mail, she sorted out all the trash and recycling, flattening the cardboard. Carrying it all out back, she had a melancholic ciggie on the fire-escape, letting Joni's crushed diamonds of heart-break wash over her.

She exhaled a lazy question mark of smoke into the square of sky above.

In her lunch break Janey closed the store for an hour and met her friend Shelly for a wrap and a coffee at Howlers, a pet-friendly café that let her bring London inside.

Her yearbook neighbour sat in her usual seat, dressed in her 'professional armour', as she put it, of a no-nonsense black business outfit, wide-collared white blouse, and chunky gold jewellery – make-up and hair immaculate as usual. Seeing her friend breeze in, wind-blown and slightly out of breath from the dash across town, Shelly just shook her head, laughing.

'Hidey, dear heart. Sorry I'm late!' gasped Janey.

'Hell, it'll be bad luck to break tradition now, wouldn't it?' Shelly feigned a frown, then broke into her mega-kilowatt smile. 'Hey, come here.'

They hugged warmly, Janey holding on a fraction longer than normal.

Shelly looked hard at her friend. 'Everything alright, sister mine?'

Janey felt her eyes tingle and bit her lip.

'Sit down. Let's order. And, when you're ready, you can tell me all.'

Shelly ensured London got his share of attention as he curled up beneath their feet.

For a while they just engaged in small talk until the food arrived. Shelly took the

initiative, filling in her friend on the latest office politics and exciting developments at her firm, Legal Angels. The state's only all-female non-white law firm was in the media's cyclopean gaze more and more these days with all that was happening since Hurricane Donald had hit. There was rarely a day now when one of them wasn't interviewed for a soundbite about the latest incursions and outrages to human rights, gender and racial equality in the Land of the Free.

Hearing about the exploits of the 'fearless crusader Shelly DuPont' (as the more enlightened cable channels liked to tag her), Janey marvelled that they had gone to the same High School sometimes. It only served to remind her of what a clusterfuck she'd made of her life.

Janey picked at her plate. 'Sometimes I wonder why you hang out with a loser like me...'

Shelly slammed down her cutlery. 'Cut the violin, please! You don't fool anyone. My old partner-in-crime, Janey McEttrick? Who all the boys slobbered after? The one with the legs and the hair and the talent...? I'll have none of your self-pity, sister!' She placed her hand over Janey's. 'Now, from the beginning...'

Sighing, Janey related the disastrous gig.

'Is that *it*? You've had stinkers and bust-ups before, but my Janey...' she clicked her tongue. 'She keeps on rolling.'

Shaking her head, Janey relented and related what happened afterwards, to her friend's increasing alarm.

Crossing herself, Shelly was aghast. 'Holy Lord, sister girlfriend, are you okay?' She held Janey's hand and looked with concern into her friend's green eyes. Under her breath, she said: 'You should call the NCPD.'

'And tell them what? That I hit a prairie mutt?'

'But you yourself said the prints were too big? You have evidence...?'

Clenching her free hand over her jean pocket, Janey shook her head vehemently. The last thing she wanted was the cops sniffing around her place. She'd already been stopped for a dodgy tail-light – a heartstopping moment when she'd had to swallow her stash. Boy, had she been high when she got home!

'I've got my shotgun in the car, in case I meet anything else on the way back. I'll be going home in the daylight any how. And London will protect me, won't you, buddy?'

Ears pricking up at his name, London looked up. Janey stroked the thick fur of his long neck.

Shelly rolled her eyes. 'Well, have it your way, but keep in touch, okay? Promise?'

Janey nodded. Bless her friend. Someone at least had got her back.

Settling up – Shelly's treat – they got up to leave, London frisky with excitement.

Shelly looked at her hard, shaking her head. 'All the more reason to get yourself a fella – it's a big bad world out there...'

Janey laughed away the suggestion. 'Oh, come off it. You know me – I can handle myself. Find me a man who can fix a truck, a decent mojito, and stay out of my hair when I need to practise, and I might be interested! Somehow I don't think I'll find one in this dump of a town!' They giggled at the 'fine displays of manhood' passing their window seat.

'You may be right there, sister. Sometimes you have to look in another pond...'

'Widen the gene pool?' Janey smirked.

'Well, look at my fella. Met him at a legal conference on the West Coast. You can't just sit there, waiting for them to come to you – all Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair. You have to go out hunting for one!'

'Can I take my gun?'

'Take London if you have to – just go and get your man!'

They hugged and kissed on the sidewalk before parting company. When Janey turned back to wave one last time she saw her friend watching her go, hands on hips.

Work passed in a blur of deliveries, displays and clueless customers asking for random items – the stuck record of her Monday routine.

Only driving back, windows down and music up, gave her the head-space to think.

Seeing her friend made Janey feel a whole bunch better. Laughing about bad gigs was always therapeutic.

And it had put last night's strange encounter into perspective.

Perhaps it had simply been the potent gumbo of post-show fatigue, booze'n'tokes, the lonely road, and her *Twilight Zone* imagination?

As a child she had often 'seen things' – a phenomenon that reached crisis point in the hormonal apocalypse of adolescence. Shaking with the buzz of transgression, she had taken to sneaking slugs from the liquor cabinet, stealing the key and topping up the bottles with water. Then she'd started to hang out with the neighbourhood 'bad apples', the Dawson boys, the Hell Marys – and experimented with drugs. From then on she was known as a bit of a wildcat, trying to be crazier than everyone else, getting stoned, getting laid, doing anything to drown out the things she saw. It had been like seeing double. Gasp as you glimpse some bad trip vision in broad daylight – a comic-book monster in garish colours – then you'd blink and it'd just be some old man, hobbling down the street. She hadn't seen anything like that for a long time, they were mercifully rare ... but then she'd spent most of her adult life stoned or drunk.

But last night had reminded her of those childhood horrors.

And that is what had rattled her so.

Once again, she drove past the spot of the attack and shuddered.

It was dusk by the time she arrived home. The sun, hidden behind the pine-serrated hills, illuminated the shaggy summits in a band of crimson fire.

Her pickup came to a chuntering halt in front of the trailer.

'Sweet home, Carolina,' she sighed. It had felt like a long day after a longer night and, dead beat, she was relieved to get back. A quiet night in was urgently needed: a favourite DVD, maybe *The Big Lebowski* or *Groundhog Day*, a large glass of wine, and a burrito or two.

London wagged his tail and, as soon as she opened the door for him, leapt out with a joyous woof.

As she killed the engine the deep silence of the creek backwashed into the absence – the peacefulness emphasised by the chirrup of crickets and the sougning of the evening wind through the dry sage leaves.

Stepping out of the cab, while balancing keys and an armful of groceries, Janey noticed London acting strange. Normally he would run around the yard a few times, roll in the dirt, act goofy; but this time, he stopped dead in his tracks, hackles raised, growling.

'What is it, Lonny?' Slowly, she turned towards the trailer ... and saw the door swinging wide.

She was sure she had locked it. Even she wasn't *that* much of a slowpoke.

Without taking her gaze from the trailer, she placed the keys and stiff grocery bag softly down on the driver's seat and, reaching behind, pulled out the shotgun.

She clicked off the safety as quietly as possible.

Lifting the barrel, she warily approached.

'Hey! If you're in there you'd better come out real slow, arms raised. Granpa here doesn't fire blanks.'

The door banged in the wind. The trailer creaked.

London started barking wildly.

Janey steadied her grip, finger on the apostrophe of the trigger.

That doorway looked mighty empty. Swallowing seemed difficult.

Maybe the door had just blown open? Perhaps it was a false alarm? Janey, you're starting to jump at shadows, she admonished herself. You need to lay off the weed, she could hear Shelly saying.

She was about to respond to her friend as though she had spoken the words to her out loud, when a dark figure burst from the cabin, rushing towards her.

The trespasser was tall, wearing a long black coat flapping like bat's wings. There was a flash of a white collar, a deathly pale face, long dark hair, and eyes like emeralds.

Instinctively Janey fired. The impact knocked her back, making her lose her footing. She stumbled onto the gravel.

Point blank. If she hadn't hit him, he'd be on her in seconds.

But nothing happened.

London finally stopped barking. He was cowering under the Dodge, whining.

She brushed herself down and pulled herself up.

There was no sign of the dark figure.

What the Hell ... was she losing her mind?

She made a quick search of the area. There was no trace of the infernal dingblatter – not

even any footprints.

Recovering his usual bounce, London did his bit, but turned up nothing.

She whistled, and he came trotting back, tongue lolling.

Shaking her head, she returned to the cabin.

And that's when she spotted the package on her doorstep. It was wrapped up in what looked like birch bark.

She nudged it gingerly with the butt of her shotgun.

'What's in there, buddy?'

London sniffed it, but seemed nonplussed, scooting off to piss on her flag-pole.

'Hey, I told you not to do that, you Yankee!'

Looking sheepish, he roamed off.

Janey went into the cabin. There was no sign of a disturbance – more than the usual mess that was. She checked her valuables. All her music kit was still there. Nothing had been touched.

She poured herself some cold coffee, and sat down on the makeshift porch, looking at the strange parcel, pondering it like it was something dropped from outer space.

On a whim, she tugged on the rough cord that fastened it and split it open.

Her nostrils were immediately assailed by the smell of leather and bark, but beneath that, something odd. Was that horse sweat?

Inside, there was some kind of book. She tipped it onto her lap.

Out flopped a beat-up old journal, covered in tooled leather, a design of intricate knotwork that seemed to become more detailed the closer you looked at it.

She tipped up the packaging and gave it a good shake.

Nothing else.

Damn sure weren't from Amazon, *that* was clear.

Returning to the journal, she opened it with a crack of the binding. The parchment pages had roughly-cut edges and crackled like static when she brushed them with her fingers. She tried to read the first page. It was written in an old-fashioned script.

All she could make out to begin with were the initials:



Rubbing her temple, she groaned. 'What is this crap?' She nearly tossed it aside there and then – but something, a tug in the guts, made her persist.

She ran her shellac nails over the arcane lettering. A kaleidoscope of images – people with whistlepig heads, a goat man, a silver hand – crowded her mind and she withdrew as though stung.

Heart beating faster, she carefully held the journal by its binding and tried again.

It was like the building of feedback – a thousand scratching voices reaching a crescendo – until ... the swirls of handwriting coalesced into legibility.

The journal you hold in your hands is the contraband of Elfhome. A double exists within the library of diablerie there. The parchment, of which it is constructed, has an uncanny property – whatever is written upon one appears on its twin, identical in the hand, however geographically distant. By this means the author, a prisoner at Her Majesty's Pleasure, is able to relate his fantastical adventures, and disclose state secrets of the Secret Commonwealth. I am compelled to risk all for this purpose for, although some of the Subterraneans are benign, others of their tribes are intent upon our doom. We are imperilled by our ignorance – and so I share the knowledge, hard-

won by my incarceration, and urge you to act upon it if your conscience be piqued.

She didn't know what it meant but she'd always loved weird shit. Tossing it inside, she fired up the jenny. The fairy lights and lamp came on, and the stereo woke up. She put 'Astral Weeks' on and flopped into the bed.

Lighting up her post-work fat one and taking a long, slow toke, she picked up the journal and carried on...

If you are reading this then I pray you are my living descendant – only you have the power to release me. Within you will find the clew that will lead to my emancipation and your own – from the terrible curse placed upon our blood. The Janus paper will, I am told, make my words intelligible to you, whichever century or country you read it in, although the process is by no means exacting – unlike my scrupulous translation of the Good Book into the tongues of the Tramontaines, there is no controlling intelligence behind the process. It would appear to be governed by the humour and wit of the reader. Fayrie technology is cat-brained. We are beyond the Realms of Science and Reason here.

Janey looked at it for long while, browsing through the pages of dense, writhing script all the while thinking of her family tree... Her mother's kin were said to have come from Scotland. She recalled an obscure cousin once trying to explain to her the complexity of their blood-lines that connected them back to the Lowlands of Scotland. There had been a swirl of romantic sounding surnames that had gone into the melting pot of the McEttrick Clan.

Hadn't one of them been some kind of preacher? Something had happened to him, something that made his name almost a curse in the family, the mention of which compelled

mountain folk to cross themselves.

She shuddered, as though someone had played Twister over her grave.

The leaves of the manuscript, fluttering in the wind, seemed to whisper to her.

‘Screw it. Screw it all.’ She took another toke.

3

Janey sat in her trailer lost in one of her favourite tracks – 'Born to Run' by Springsteen – singing along to it at the top of her voice. She waved her arms in the air, conducting the E-Street Band, imagining she was playing side by side with The Boss and they were backing her. In one hand she held a can of cheap beer; in another, a roach.

'Tramps! Like! Us!' she yelled until it hurt. At the climax of the song she downed the contents of the can, scrunched it up and tossed it into the corner with the others; then she took a long determined drag on her joint, watching it burn down to her fingertips, before flicking the stub towards the open window.

It missed and bounced back in the room, making a singe-hole on the throw.

'Oh, fuck!' She leapt up and poured the dregs of one of the cans on it. She held it up and examined the damage – her green eye peering through the badly-printed knotwork. 'Bummer!' She chucked it out the door and flopped clumsily back on the sofa amid the takeaway cartons, laughing a Janis cackle.

London lingered on the porch, silhouetted by the golden evening light. He barked, and scratched on the threshold – lowering his head to his paws and wagging his tail.

'Wassup, buddy? Wanna play ball?'

The dog yipped, and searched around for something to use. He snapped up her favourite guitar sash, the tartan one. She'd had the sash made up with earnings from her first gig with the Jackalopes. Earlier, she'd been half-heartedly strumming a few chords as the sun set behind Grandfather Mountain and the guitar case was open – temptingly so, it would

seem.

London bolted out the door.

'Hey, come back with that!'

Groaning, she got unsteadily to her feet and followed, muttering to herself. She brushed past the journal, perched on the edge of the table.

A cold cup of coffee splashed onto the cover.

'Dammit!' She quickly wiped it off with the edge of her t-shirt; then tossed it onto the rocking chair on her makeshift porch, before chasing after London.

The dog was in the yard – at a safe distance – guitar sash in its mouth.

'Quit your momucking! You give me that right now!' she slurred, trying to sound firm. The low sun made her squint.

London sheepishly took it towards her, but as she lunged to grab it, he whipped it away.

'You!'

Laughing, and annoyed, she tried to chase after him, but fell over. Spitting dirt from her mouth and brushing the gravel from her hair, she hollered after London, who was already half-way up the track.

Sweat dripping down her grimy face in streaks – she slid against the pickup and sighed.

'Nothing to see here. Everything is just biscuits and gravy.' She gritted her teeth.

Her dog cocked his head, and rolled onto the floor.

'Damn you, mutt!'

Overhead, the screech of an eagle drew her gaze.

For a slow moment, she followed its deadly grace.

A gut-churning lurch of perspective and suddenly she was looking down on herself, lying in the dirt.

Molten tears bubbled up from some deep lava flow of misery.

'Alrighty then! Havvit your way.'

London ran in a circle, chasing his tail.

Janey painfully pulled herself up. She staggered towards the waterfall that flowed by her pitch – one good decision she had made – and doused her head under the tumbling, icy water.

'Jiminy! That's hot!'

Rainbows snagged in the wet light. How often had she gazed into its flow, the continual rush of water cleaning her mind out and calming her down? Sometimes tunes came to her there, slipping into her mind like darters in a net.

But today, she needed darkness, not the light.

She shook her hair free of droplets, feeling a little bit more alert. 'Okay. You're forgiven. Looks like you've got more sense than ol' Janey here.'

London came over and dropped the guitar sash at her feet. She fussed him, burying her face in his musky mane. 'At least there's someone looking out for me, hey?'

Shoving her favourite Cherokee blanket, a cantina, torch, hastily-made sandwiches, and a flask of coffee into a kitbag, she locked up the trailer. The journal caught her eye, its spiral snagging the remaining light. On a whim she stashed it in with the other stuff. Then grabbing the shotgun and a box of cartridges she whistled to London, and headed up to the craggy outcrop that overlooked her camp, as the evening shadows crept over the rocks.

With London enthusiastically leading the way, Janey reached the access ledge just before sundown. She was dripping sweat from the exertion – *Jeez, her body was fucked!* – and she

had to take a moment to catch her breath. As she placed her hand against the warm rock for support she gasped and pulled it away quickly.

A hypodermic needle of images plunged into her temple. A bone pipe decorated with a skull. The back of a gnarled hand, as wizened as a weathered wooden Indian outside a five-and-dime store. Two mules, eyes glinting with a strange knowledge.

Janey shook her head.

The reek of pipe baccy was strong in the air, then, in a gust, was gone.

London looked back at her from the threshold.

‘Looks like we had a visitor, buddy. But ... what century?’

Sometimes Janey picked up impressions like this in the rare instances she was ‘straight’. They were like recordings – stored up in a wall, a tree, an object – locked inside for sometimes centuries before she came along and inadvertently sprung them like a jack-in-a-box. They bugged her out. She’d never picked up anything in the cave before, but then she’d never rested her hand on that particular spot before either. It could have been from a day ago, or two hundred years. By the brief bewildering download, she’d guess the latter.

This place was *old*, after all.

The Cave of Whispers Janey called it, although it might have had an older, native name going by the hand-prints, hunters and dancing prey on the walls from Lord knew how long back. The narrow cave mouth – high on a ledge approached from an obscure back-trail she had stumbled on when trying to reach the top – went back into the side of the mountain a long way. She never risked venturing too far, nervous of slipping down some Balrogian chasm of doom, but from its depths issued an eerie whistling. Although she reasoned it was just the sound of the wind moving through the subterranean passages – like a giant love-flute played by the gods – the sound still gave her the heebie-jeebies.

The place felt secure to her though – old and solid and discreet. Something about its remoteness had preserved it. Whether anyone else knew of its presence, or of the existence of the paintings, she didn't know, but for her it felt like a comfortable bolt-hole. Well, 'comfortable' was hardly the right word – for it was never an easy night sleeping there. She always woke up with some kind of ache or pain; but it was always worth it. She would descend refreshed, determined, fired up. There was something primally satisfying about spending a night in the cave, watching the flickering flames dance, sparks skirling into the pristine sky. The stars always seemed newly-minted above it.

The cave had another distinct advantage – from it, with binoculars, she could look down on her trailer and see anyone coming or going up the track from some miles off. She took the heavy field glasses from the metal box she kept stashed in the cave with emergency kit in. She ran her fingers over the mute bakelite casing – manmade material was resistant to her probing, which was darned frustrating as they were the sole keepsake of her long-gone pa.

Hell, he hadn't left much else, except a whole shit-heap of bad feeling.

Her mom never wanted to talk about him. By the way things had worked out all Janey could fathom was: he had been bad news, and they were 'better off without him' ... which made her want to know him even more. But the past was a closed book in their family.

Until now.

She pulled the journal from her knapsack.

What skeletons lay waiting for her within – ghosts and ghoulies wailing out of the maze of its pages, rattling her out of the waking dream of her life?

She placed it with the blanket and other stuff and went back to the bins. Cleaning the lenses with the soft cloth in the red light of dusk, she cast a gaze over her silver trailer far

below. If she had any more nasty visitors she'd feel safe in her hidden sanctuary in the way that her place down there no longer did.

Night fell like a trapdoor. Janey got a small fire going, carefully out of sight of the road. Pulling the blanket around her, she sipped some coffee.

London flopped at her feet, eyes lambent in the glow, tongue lolling. He loved nights in the cave, and the fact that he always seemed very relaxed reassured Janey more than anything.

'This is the life, hey compañero?' She stroked his smoky fur and sighed, feeling the tension of the last twenty-four hours ease away. Why hadn't she thought about coming up here sooner? *Perhaps something to do with the amount of hooch and weed she'd consumed, hmm?* The sobering fact was her system couldn't take it like she used to. She knew she needed to stop. At one point she had tried yoga and a better diet, herbal teas, meditating – the whole nine yards – but it didn't last. The truth was she didn't *like* being straight – in fact she couldn't remember the last time she didn't have some kind of drug in her. Caffeine, booze, grass, sleeping pills, uppers and downers... But the bottom line was her body felt like crap. There was a sick feeling in her stomach that just wouldn't go away these days.

Face the music, woman, you need to clean up your act, she could hear Shelly again, ticking her off. *Get your pretty butt on a detox regime before I kick it!*

Hell, she knew the truth of it, but the same terror stopped her: she was afraid about what she might start to see. The last few days had been bad enough. She'd had flashes in the past – of little green men and the like, the usual acid casualty stuff – but nothing compared to this, nothing that bashed into her car, came cherry-knocking, or left her strange packages.

Curious, she reached for the journal and opened it.

At first it was hard to focus on the writing in the flickering firelight, which seemed to

be alive. She nearly threw it down in disgust, but something – a whisper from the back of the skull; a sudden gust that bellowed the flames brighter – made her persist.

As she concentrated the letters seemed to steady themselves.

I, Rev. Robert Kirk, do testify that the following is an honest and accurate account of my sojourn (or, should I say, my misprision) here in Elfhame, as the Lord is my witness. I pray that His gaze can penetrate the Walls of Horn that enshroud this place and veil it from mortal eyes. There are things that exist here, which transpire here, which surely do not belong in His Universe.

Half the words were unfamiliar to her, but she caught the gist. Normally, anything old-timey would've gone straight in the bin. She was never much of a reader – preferring only the odd celeb-biog picked up in a thrift store. But knowing this was apparently her ancestor made her give it a go. The pull of the blood was too strong – like looking down a deep well and seeing a reflection far below.

Janey gazed into the flames. What was going on in her life? It was getting weird – weirder than usual, that was. Normally she loved 'quark, strangeness and charm' as she put it, singing the old song – but not this. The shucks were bad enough, but the ghost of Christmas Past, or whatever the fuck *that* was...? This was dark shit and she could do without it.

Despite the gallon of coffee she must have drank by that point, her head lolled forward. She was just able to roll out her sleeping bag, before flopping exhausted upon it.

'Keep the fire going, Londunnnn....' she mumbled, before succumbing to the ineluctable tide.

Janey found herself falling into a deeper sleep than she'd had in years, as though a

backlog of weariness that had built up in her life hit her all at once. Here, in the cave, she felt safe enough to finally, completely, let go. The last few days (weeks ... months ... years ...) had taken it out of her – bingeing, eating badly, sleeping erratically. *Sister, your system is worn out – it's as simple as that. It's like that wreck of a car of yours – you need to give it some TLC!* Shelly's well-intentioned hectoring faded, until all that could be heard was the spit and crackle of the fire and London's dog-dream yips.

The flames in her mind became swirling kaleidoscopes of Celtic knots. Faces leered at her from the dark – ancient faces, montaged into the shadows, beckoning to her with bony hands.

'I'm not that old!' she protested. 'I'm not dead yet!'

Yes you are, breathed the writhing walls, *dead inside.*

She jolted awake.

The fire was low.

London spasmed in his slumber, dream-barked.

The shadows were just shadows again.

She placed another log on the embers and drew the blanket around her shoulders.

Then the cave floor tipped like a portcullis.

Frantic, she struggled to crawl out, but inexorably it raised. Her fingernails broke on the stone and she lost her grip, plummeting down into the depthless chasms beneath the mountain.

Like a pinball ricocheted around a machine, she tumbled along the labyrinthine tunnels, past squat totems that came alive as she neared, creaking and splintering awake with a grave-breathed groan. They mumbled dark utterances in vaguely familiar languages, trying to tell her something, if only she understood their tongue.

A heart-racing jolt and her descent abruptly terminated.

She opened her eyes but could see nothing at first.

The mountain pressed down upon her, smothered her with the chloroform and black leather glove of its whispering shadows. Only the steady slop of water against a hidden shore could be heard. Something slithered over her foot and she recoiled in disgust.

She hollered with rising panic until her voice was raw – red as the cavern, throbbing with a crimson life, seams of rock pulsating like veins. As she gasped for breath in the stifling closeness, the walls seemed to expand and contract. Unable to resist, she stretched out a hand to touch the slimy surface and felt a sudden kick inside her, which made her keel over.

Suddenly, the bile surged and she retched violently into the black water.

When she finally stopped she heard a tiny sobbing – a child's sobbing.

Compelled, she ventured towards it.

The underground scene was illuminated by a visceral red light, and a pulse could be felt through her feet. Yet the crying carried above it.

Finally, she located the source, and there, confirming her dread, was the figure of a girl, a girl with copper curls.

Janey licked her lips, barely daring to speak the words.

'Elly ... is that you ...?'

The girl stopped crying and slowly turned – revealing a face of seething maggots.

'Mommy, where have you been?'

She screamed herself awake.

Beaded with sweat, Janey tried to steady her breathing. She juddered as the waves of the nightmare subsided. Blew out her cheeks. Boy, that was a roller-coaster! Never had one

that bad before!

The fire was dull embers and London was nowhere to be seen.

Taking a shaking sip from her cantina, Janey tried to compose herself. The temperature in the cave was constant, but she couldn't stop trembling. The blanket had fallen to the floor and she pulled it around her.

Then she heard a low whine.

'Lonny?'

She followed the sound outside.

The dog's gaze was fixed on the road that wound its way up to the head of the creek. It was little more than a dirt-track and nobody came up there unless they were visiting her, which was rare. It was still dark, but there was a penumbra of light in the east, the pale outriders of dawn high in the air. Clearly visible below were the headlights of a car snaking its way up the track. The twitching beams swept across the hillside and Janey instinctively ducked for cover.

'Down, boy!' She pulled him down low with her.

In response to the distant sound of the engine, London let out a low growl, his body rigid.

'Looks like we've got visitors, Lonny. Who'd come calling at this time...?'

Heart pounding, Janey went back into the cave, kicked dust over the fire, and got her shotgun and field glasses.

Then, crawling on her belly, she wriggled her way to the edge of the cliff and focused her bins on the trailer – now lit up by the cones of the headlights. The car had pulled right into her yard, awkwardly parked. It was a long black Cadillac fresh out of the showroom. Too fancy for around here. The engine cut, the beams killed and, when her eyes adjusted to the

pre-dawn twilight, Janey made out two shadow-suited figures – possibly a man and a woman, although there wasn't much to go on – who stepped out of the vehicle.

Janey released the safety on the shotgun, and held her grip on London's collar.

Both intruders were tall, with long white-blonde hair tied back tight over their scalps. Their skin seemed to give off a soft moonglow in the half-light. Despite the gloom of the holler they wore shades.

One of them – which sex it was hard to tell – headed to the trailer with a slight limp, while the other kept watch.

The rattle of a handle carried across the still night air; pounding.

Thank goodness she had locked it, she thought. That fuck-off padlock should do—

A flash, and a moment later, the thunder of it echoed off the butte's sheer face. Then the intruder kicked in the door and went inside.

Janey bridled at the invasion of her privacy. *Who the Hell do they think they are...?*

Finally the figure came out, shaking its head, and they continued their search of the yard.

What were they looking for? Was this a drugs bust?

Janey froze, remembering her stash – but then realised the intruder was standing directly on top of her hidey hole. Rubbing a finger as though from some wound.

These were not your usual FBI goons, Janey knew that much.

The other figure called out something that sounded like a bird-call and limped back to the car.

Janey breathed a sigh of relief – but then the limper paused, took the Raybans off, and scanned the surrounding hills. Owl-like, the head rotated and locked onto the ledge. The figure seemed to stare straight at her ... and the eyes, the eyes were a fox's caught in the light

of a flashlight – yellow burning slits.

Janey stifled a scream and dropped her field-glasses. They landed on right on the edge, dislodging some rubble, which clattered down the cliff face.

She froze, and tried to make herself smaller – pulling London to her, covering his mouth. She prayed to whatever was in the cave to protect her. There was an older magic in the land and sometimes she felt it in these places. Her heartbeat sounded like a hall of Japanese drummers. Surely they would have heard...?

Whatever those things were, she did not want to have them come a-calling. She thought about her options. Fight them off? Two against one and both of them probably deadshots? No chance. Flight into the depths of the cave didn't exactly appeal either – its ghost-train even more dangerous than staying. Hand herself in? But who knew what they'd do to her. They looked like Men in fucking Black. Janey had watched too many *X-Files*, and read too many abduction books. She didn't want to be experimented on by the Greys, thank you very much!

There was nothing for it but sit tight and wait for her whatever fate had in its barrel. Janey wasn't of the religious persuasion, but in that moment she was willing to pray to anything.

She closed her eyes, beetled her brow, but it was like ringing God and getting an engaged tone.

Opening her eyes, their gaze fell on the journal.

She reached for it with her foot, and hooked it to her. Placing her shotgun on top of it, she appealed to her Reverend ancestor, wherever he was, to help her. She vowed to have faith in his words. To believe in his story. To honour his memory.

Of the two dingbatters there was no sign, apart from the vehicle. Were they on their way up? Using the john? Helping themselves to her coffee? There was no way of knowing.

So, in the gathering light, with London vigilant by her side, she continued reading.

First, I must explain the motivation for my singular obsession. I had at first pursued a respectable, academic career, obtaining my Masters after a young life dedicated to the study of the Word. It was with no mickle pride I accepted the position of Parish Minister for Aberfoyle. Stepping into my father's shoes seemed like the natural culmination of my life's path. What more could a humble servant of the Lord ask for? I maintained a modest, sober household, attending to the concerns of my flock. I married, and was blessed with the fruit of that union. Sadly, what the Lord giveth with one hand he can taketh with another.

My beautiful Isobel died on Christmas Day.

I lived on, if life you can call it. I am ashamed to say it pained me to see our firstborn, Colin. It served only to remind me of my beloved wife.

I became a distant figure, lost in my hermeneutics and sermons.

And there I might have remained, eking out my days as a devoted minister – conscientious, yet not quite alive.

My heart may as well have been covered with a dust-sheet.

But the Almighty had other plans.

She looked up, but nothing seemed to have changed except the strength of the light. London was tense, but remained by her side. If any fucker had chosen to sneak up, she'd know before they did.

She turned the page.

I met Margaret at a dance in Edinburgh – it was a most rare occasion; that I should attend that is. The possibility of this occurrence and of my meeting my future wife there was of the slimmest happenstance.

It was the persuasion of an old college friend, concerned I was becoming a fusty old bachelor widower, which tipped the balance. To make him happy I agreed to go – to make a show of it. It wasn't that I did not find the female of the species beguiling and mesmerising in their movements and moods (had I not as a student idled many a dusty afternoon away, lost in my ink-stained daydreams? Ah, Miss Napier!), it was simply that it seemed my constant studies and devout vocation did not allow for such fripperies.

If I had but known it, such 'frippery' was to become my questing beast!

I made an effort to look the part, at least, and had received enough education to know how to deport myself in such affairs. Yet however prepared I was, it was with some trepidation that I entered the dance-hall of the newly-completed Queensberry House on the Royal Mile. Its owner, the Duke of Buccleuch, was preening himself, pleased with his new purchase.

What a pell-mell of peacocks and gadflies! I found my friend, to some relief and allowed myself a glass of claret to steady my nerves. As I sipped – coughing slightly at the full-bodied burr on my gullet – I glanced coolly across the dance floor, unimpressed by the pageantry and energetic flirting.

And that is when I saw her amid the Tripping Darlings.

By the time Janey dared to look, the sun, pale but defiant, was breaching the skyline.

Down below, the Cadillac's red tail-lights vanished into the distance.

Frantically she scanned the trailer in case one of them had stayed behind, but she could see no sign of the intruders.

She slumped down in relief and exhaustion – the bow-string of her body suddenly slack.

London licked her face, his whole body wagging.

‘Lonny! My hero of the hour! Great team-work! But no need to get all emotional. Quit that fussing! Down, boy!’

She poured herself the dregs of her coffee and guzzled it down, watching the sun burn away the mist and chase away the shadows.

Whatever was going on in her life, she wasn't going to stick around, waiting for more trouble to come calling. Those spooks were after something... Then it dawned on her. She held the journal up to the light breaching the fastness of the holler.

What secrets were held within its pages?

She'd gladly give it to them and have done with it.

But it was too late now. She had vowed to her ancestor. And something had protected her. The power of its words, or the cave of whispers, had warded off that evil, of that she was certain – for was she not still alive?

Yet how much longer, with heavies like that on her tail?

All she could do was run – find somewhere to hide out until things cooled off.

And looking up at the paintings on the wall, glowing brighter in the morning light – she knew just the place.

4

Janey's battered old pick-up looked out of place on the Reservation these days. The cars were often bigger and shinier – aggressively large four-wheel drives or gleaming people carriers. She passed the pristine trailers and lovingly-tended yards with their plots of flowers and vegetables, kitsch signs ('Home of the Brave'; 'Please Wash Your Hands in the Bison', 'Shoots First'), Stars 'n' Stripes and Cherokee Nation flags snapping side-by-side in the September breeze.

The odd rotting tooth of a dilapidated shack was a reminder of the hardship still present.

Posters announcing a demonstration against government sell-offs of native land emblazoned the telegraph poles. It made Janey so angry, the way her friends were treated. But it was good to see they still had their fighting spirit, their pride. This place was nowhere near as desperate as the trailer parks she avoided staying in.

Guess she had her pride too. But then, she was half-blood. A *breed*.

A buzzing caught her attention. At first she thought it was some kind of gnat in the cab, then she realised it was coming from above. Looking out of the rolled down window a quick movement caught her eye. It was one of those drones. A couple of college kids were playing with the controls from their porch. The camera on it tracked her progress.

She gave it a wave.

As Janey killed the engine the front door opened and her old friend appeared.

Quatie, dressed as ever in lumberjack shirt, Levis and Crocs, was whip-thin with a wild

mane of iron-grey hair. Janey always thought her friend looked like an old Patti Smith on a bad day.

London leapt from the back of the truck and barrelled towards the arms open in welcome. For a moment Quatie got down to the serious business of fussing him some.

Janey's heart felt like an over-ripe melon as she walked up to her old friend.

Shielding her eyes from the morning sun, Quatie gave her visitor a hard stare. The old woman said nothing – simply held out her arms, and Janey fell into them.

The melon burst, and she found herself balling her eyes out like a little girl who had grazed her knee or lost her pet rabbit.

Quatie hummed an old Plains lullaby as the waves of Janey's pain broke against her bony breast.

London yipped; licked his owner's ankles; then left them to it.

'Are you done yet? You're making my shirt wet!' Quatie joked, making her friend stop, wipe her nose, and nod.

'Better come inside then. I suspect this will require coffee.'

Quatie's house was even crazier than Janey's – but the chaos had a healthier feel: house-plants ran amok, straining to the light; outsider paintings adorned the walls; the shelves were punctuated with Old West ornaments. On the chairs, piles of books and magazines – something on the Qabalah on top of one; a celebrity magazine opened at a feature on George Clooney on another. Oprah Winfrey blared away on her tiny old TV. A turquoise bead necklace was in progress – similar in design to the one Janey wore at her gigs. Curling around the furniture, or ensconced in cosy corners, a dozen slightly feral cats accepted London with a frosty insouciance: despite his goofy efforts, they never melted to his charms.

The place as always smelled of sage, cats and Quatie's favourite cheroots.

Janey had tried to ring ahead, but Quatie had an erratic relationship with her phone, sometimes leaving it off the hook for days, or forgetting to pick up messages.

Yet once again Janey felt expected.

Quatie gently placed a big steaming mug of coffee in front of her visitor, alongside a plate of her finest peanut cookies. 'So, in your own time, from the start.'

London trotted up and plonked his head on Janey's legs, looking up at her with his big eyes – ice-blue ringed with black – his gaze occasionally flicking to the plate. She ruffled his charcoal, rust, and silver fur and sighed.

'None of it makes sense...'

'Tell me about it.' Quatie struck a match and held it to a fresh cheroot, inhaling until the tip glowed. 'It's called life.' She blew out the pungent smoke and sat back with a contented sigh.

They both laughed – Quatie's a husky cackle; Janey's higher pitched.

Slowly, as though sipping at something scolding, Janey related the events of the last few days – stopping frequently and shaking her head, but Quatie's steady gaze and occasional supportive squeeze of the hand encouraged her to go on.

When Janey had finished she was exhausted. 'Can I just lay here for a minute..?' Before she knew it, she was fast asleep.

Later, Janey awoke, disorientated. Her hair was mussed and she had sleep in her eyes. She had slumbered deeply and dreamlessly.

Here, dream-catchers were more than just money-spinners.

A blanket fell from her shoulders as she stiffly got up.

It was late afternoon and Quatie was fixing something up in the kitchen, tunelessly singing along to a noisy pop song on the radio, cheroot clamped in her teeth in poker player fashion. London sat vigilant for scraps at her feet.

As Janey shuffled to the door, her hostess shrugged. 'So, the walking dead's back with us, huh?'

Janey rubbed her head. 'Do you have any cowboy aspirin?'

Quatie turned down the radio. 'No, but I have a glass of water. Here.' She filled a tumbler from the chiller tap and thrust it into Janey's hand. 'Drink. A lot. You need to flush out that system of yours.' She waited until her friend complied. 'How long have you been on the booze this time?'

Mouth wide, Janey put her fists on her hips.

'I didn't want to say, but you stank like a roadhouse when you came in. There's a towel and robe there. Help yourself to a shower before we all pass out.'

Janey bridled at first, but checked herself.

When Quatie was like this there was no talking back to her. She was usually right.

'There'll be some food here when you come back – but don't think I'll do this mom routine for long. I've got to write! Got the midnight disease real bad these days.'

Smiling, Janey shuffled off. Her friend had taken up poetry with the same wild abandon she lived her life by. Her latest efforts – written boldly in Sharpie – were pinned up around the place and Janey enjoyed reading them as she undressed.

A little while later, wrapped in a big fluffy grey robe, towel around her hair, Janey sat herself down at the table as Quatie came in carrying a big crock.

'Tuck in. It's bison-tail broth. An old family recipe courtesy of K-Mart. There's bread

as well, if it's defrosted.'

Quatie wasn't the greatest cook in the world, but Janey appreciated the gesture.

Her friend returned with a couple of bottles – one dark, one clear.

'Seltzer for you, lady. You need to dry out. Fortunately, I don't,' she smiled, pouring herself a glass of the red.

Janey went to complain, but Quatie stopped her. 'Look at you, you're a mess! If you don't look after yourself, how are you going to defend that breed hide of yours?'

'Defend myself?' Janey mumbled, between mouthfuls of broth.

Quatie took a sip of the wine, smacking her lips in appreciation. 'You're being attacked by something ancient, something dark. You need to be strong.'

The hot food settled into Janey's stomach, making her feel more centred. After the shower, her body glowed – but she still felt weak. The broth restored her strength, little by little.

'Whatever is after you is bigger and badder than you are. But there's no running away from it. No hiding in your liquor and drugs. You need to turn and face it.'

Janey blathered about the bad visions she used to get.

Quatie held her hand across the table, looking at her hard. 'You've got the knowing. You can't keep drowning it out for ever.'

Janey snuck London a bit of gristle under the table.

'Hey! Don't act dumb. You know what I'm talking about!' She jabbed a bony digit at her. 'It's in your blood.'

'C'mon... I'm just a singer.' She shrugged. 'I work part-time in a record store...'

Quatie snorted at this, rolling her eyes. 'Where are your ma's people from...?'

'Oh, Quatie, you know well enough. West of Asheville, mostly. The McEttrick's have

always been Smoky Mountain folks.'

'Tch, before that, dumb ass. Your *old* kin...?'

'Well, Scotland I suppose... but that's waaay back. I don't even know from where...'

'Matters not, young miss. Like I say, it's in your blood. Let alone the Red in you.'

Head down, Janey mopped up the broth with a heel of bread.

An awkward silence suddenly filled the room.

Changing tack, Quatie reached for her box of Kentuckys and own-brand matches. 'They call them seers over there, don't they...?'

Janey scraped the spoon around the bowl. 'Oh, come on... I'm not the seventh son of the seventh son, anything like that.'

'I can see that even with these old eyes!' She lit up again, puffed. 'But, what if the sight is passed down the *female* line? Have you reckoned on that...?'

Janey scoffed at the idea. The notion she had inherited anything except hang-ups and a good head of hair from her mother and her clan seemed ludicrous. If *that* lot had the knowing they didn't act like they did! Wilful ignorance seemed to be her family's speciality. They seemed to have a particular genius for being ingenuous.

As though reading her mind, Quatie added, 'It's quite common for it to re-emerge in later generations, skipping a few.'

Janey lay down her bowl of broth for her 'mobile dishwasher' to polish off, and pondered this some. Certainly her childhood experiences suggested she had some kind of 'gift', or curse more like.

She shuddered at the thought.

'Well, it's felt like a whole bunch of bad luck since this darn thing turned up.' She pulled out the journal and passed it to Quatie, who wiped her fingers on her jeans before accepting

it.

'Help yourself to more joe,' her friend gestured to the pot of coffee on the hob, 'and let's think this through.'

As Janey topped up a mug, Quatie carefully inspected the journal, as though she expected a rattlesnake to jump out from the pages.

'Mm. The words don't make a whole lot of sense to me. Seems to be written in some Olde Worlde gobbledigook.'

Janey placed the steaming mug on the coffee table. 'That's what I felt at first. But when I concentrated upon it, the words kinda ... cleared up. Like muddy water suddenly running clear.'

Quatie nodded, handing it back. 'It's your ancestor speaking to you, and you alone. He's trapped on the other side of those pages, and only you can free him. These Yunwi Tsundi that are after you clearly don't want that to happen.' She gestured with her cheroot. 'This is contraband, sister, smuggled from the other side – and they want it back. They won't let up until they get it. But I suspect that until you accept your knowing, you will never find rest anyhow. It's all part-and-parcel of the same thing.'

Quatie examined a bit of tobacco that had got stuck to her teeth. 'I know all too well about the shadow of our ancestors. You need to make peace with them, or they'll make war with you. This land has seen that. Look around this junkyard of dreams – I see it every day. The more we lose, the more they steal from under our feet, the prouder we become. But that's all we have. Do you want to end up like us?'

Janey sighed, ruffling London's fur.

Quatie put her long, thin arms around her. 'You need to get some healing, little sister. Otherwise, you are not going to survive!'

Janey was surprised to see tears in the eyes of her old friend. 'I don't want to lose you, you, silly girl. I've lost too much in my life...' She choked up, and now it was Janey's turn to hold her.

For a while, they just sat there, supporting one another, until London came along and tried to nudge his way in.

'Want some too, little brother?' Quatie chuckled, giving him a stroke. 'I care for you, you great lug.' She prodded Janey's arm. 'I don't want to see you keep damaging yourself. You can't keep running forever.'

'Well thanks, wise oracle.'

Quatie gave her a pinch.

'Y'ouch!'

'I have a more practical suggestion. We're gonna get you straightened out, but I need you to agree to whatever I say.'

Janey looked unsure, but then she recalled how crap she'd been feeling lately. Her body was needing a break and, now, more than ever, she needed to think straight.

'Okay, you got it.'

'Good. First you're gonna fast; and then you're gonna sweat – sweat for a vision. My Sioux friend is visiting soon, and she'll like nothing better than lead a ceremony for you and the Mothers.'

That evening Janey rested, curled up on the sofa with the journal, London at her feet. She could hardly move her arms to turn the page:

I have never seen anyone dance like her in all my time on the Lord's Earth or after. She

was Terpsichore herself – swirling, skipping, curtsying, swaying, in perfect synchrony with the music and the other dancers. Such grace, such poise, such elegance! She radiated a natural, unaffected beauty which all the other women aspired to.

'Who – who is she?' I stammered to my friend.

He could see I was smitten and smiled. 'Ah, that belle is Margaret Campbell. I ken her folk hail from the Ettrick Valley.'

Her luxuriant tresses – a cataract of red against her moon-pale skin, her glittering necklace, hypnotised me. Her profile, caught in the briefest of pauses between movements, was of the most exquisite refinement. She seemed to bring another reality into the room.

My friend made introductions, following the usual etiquette, and I asked for a dance, rather stiffly. Her book was nearly full – but she might just fit me in. I think she found my stuffiness rather amusing. When we finally danced she was surprised by the lightness of my feet – but had I not been brought up a true Scot, weaned on ceilidhs since I was bairn? She had a bright mind, I noticed to my pleasure, and we danced with our wits as much as with our feet. She continually wrong-footed me – metaphorically, challenging my views, making me see things from a different angle.

I was smitten.

I left that night reeling and soon made enquiries as to the likelihood of visiting her, and her receiving me favourably. I was invited to tea, with chaperones of course, and thus began our courtship – a strange and somewhat terrifying terrain of which I had very little experience. Isobel forgive me. I threw myself, against all reason, on the mercy of Eros – the one insensible act of my life.

I was spell-bound.

5

‘Welcome to the Moon Lodge.’ Quatie, dressed in an embroidered blanket coat, gestured to the low bender made of birch poles with several tarps lashed over it, sheltered by a grove of birch trees from the edge of the Reservation.

Janey gave the construction a wary look. Nearby, a palette with a mat on beneath a sprinkler hanging from a tree served as a shower; and a makeshift hot-tub next to it steamed invitingly. A laminated sign warned: ‘Any man caught lurking will be skinned and castrated. Have a nice day!’

‘Looks charming.’

Quatie poked her. ‘It ain’t meant to look nice, you dumb ass. What happens inside matters, is all. It’s a place to sweat your prayers, face your demons, honour Mother Earth.’

Janey chewed a bit of skin on her thumb. ‘Right.’

‘Now, prepare yourself!’ Quatie walked off to talk to a squat, baked-apple-faced woman tending the fire, her face lit up by spunks of flame in the gloom as she stoked the base with a long pole.

Janey had done her bit in helping build the ritual fire – a neat stack of logs interspersed with rocks. It had been going all afternoon, the sun setting in alignment with it and the Lodge. As the wood slowly burnt down the rocks were deposited, piping hot, among the ashes.

Nearby, around a smaller fire, the Mothers’ drum circle was in full swing – the thrombotic bass-line and the ululating voices of the singers making Janey sway on her feet, light-headed as she was from lack of food in her body. The nettle soup and beetroot smoothies of the last few days had hardly staved off her hunger and today nothing at all had

passed her lips beyond a sip of water. Her belly was a tight knot, but it was from more than lack of a square meal.

Prepare yourself. Janey was feeling anything but. Weak and ragged – she plucked at a loose thread of the poncho she wore. Unravelling, like her.

The night sky was a deer-hide drum, the full moon hidden behind its skin of clouds. The lunar tide tugged at her like a butcher's hook. Blood pounded in her skull, surged through her body. She had a terrible urge to howl.

London, standing guard, eyes effulgent in the flames, would like that – but there'd be plenty of time for hollering later.

Abruptly, the drumming and singing stopped, the flaps were thrown wide open and one-by-one the women rose from the circle, disrobed and shuffled ungracefully on their hands and knees into the dark opening.

Finally, only she and Quatie were left. Her friend gave her a stern look. 'You must kneel as you greet the mother – Mother Earth.'

Janey took off her poncho and stood naked and shivering, even though the fire roared nearby, its heat warming her flanks.

The maw gaped before her.

Gulping, she bent down and entered, the darkness embracing her.

Inside, Janey sensed rather than saw the other women – blobs of heat in the dark. They shuffled along and she was offered a place.

On her hands and knees Janey awkwardly wriggled into her slot, sitting down with relief, her back against the damp tarp. She wanted to make a quip, to break the tense silence, but she stifled the urge, sensing it wouldn't have gone down well.

There was something primal about sitting there, naked in the dark. It should have made

her feel spiritual, but it just made her want to scream.

Quatie entered, bone-thin behind a curtain of iron-grey hair, bringing a rush of chill air, the dank smell of the night, and a blast of resinous woodsmoke. The flaps were quickly closed behind her. She proceeded to smudge herself and the space, before passing the glowing bundle of sage around the circle. Janey took the smudge-stick and wafted the pungent smoke over herself, hoping it'd cast out any bad demons, though she suspected it'd take more than a bit of incense to do that.

'Sisters, let us make our circle,' Quatie spoke, her gruff voice a welcome anchor point in the smoke and shadows.

Without further prompting, members of the circle took turns to call in the seven sacred directions.

Quatie's Sioux friend, Sitting Fox, a quiet woman who exuded a calm strength, prepared the medicine pipe with due reverence, taking care that it did not touch the earth. Once it was filled and lit she took a draw, blew the smoke in each of the directions, passing the pipe over her head each time. Then, the pipe was refilled and passed around so each might imbibe its sacred warmth.

Janey, despite being a toker, still managed an embarrassing cough, but the women gently laughed it off.

Then the flaps opened, and the bright rocks – red ingots carrying the secret heat of the Earth – were passed in on a shovel by the firekeeper, who carefully lowered them into the central pit. Then, the empty shovel was withdrawn and the entrance sealed.

A pause, then, from outside the tent the firekeeper's solo drum punctuated the night, maintaining a slow, steady beat.

The Sioux woman, anonymous in the gloom, made prayer in her native tongue as she

doused the rocks with a large ladle from a bucket. The rocks hissed, spat and one cracked – as they glowed a fierce red, and the tent was quickly filled with steam. The women made appreciative sounds as the heat blasted out any aches and pains.

Soon Janey was dripping sweat – the women either side of her held her hand as she shook, the toxins exiting her body.

Quatie's voice cut through the shadows: 'Great Spirit, Ancestors, All Our Relations, support our sister in her struggle.'

Janey chewed on a raw bit of finger-skin in the dark.

The silence was pregnant, pressing in on her as the women patiently waited, listening.

'I'm just a musician ... I don't even know why I'm here. You've all been so sweet to me, but ...' Her voice constricted to a choke.

Another dousing sent a blast of steam rising through the tent.

Quatie's strong voice was a lance to her pain: 'Our sister is beset by dark forces. A beast, a ghost, sinister visitors... What are they trying to teach her? Do they bring medicine or sorrow? We ask the ancestors to guide us, to show us the way to protect our sister. We ask the dark to show us the light.'

The temperature suddenly, inexplicably, dropped.

'Hey, close that flap!' somebody hissed.

'It is,' Quatie whispered, closest to the entrance.

The stones flared, as though caressed by a breeze. An icy hand swept across the naked bodies of the women. Janey felt it brush against her brow and recoil.

'What the...?'

Outside, London growled. Then his barking split the night.

A human cry and a heavy thud.

‘Oh my God? What’s going on?’ breathed one of the younger Mothers.

‘The firekeeper. Something’s happened to her!’ said another, heading towards the flap.

‘Don’t open that!’ Quatie’s voice, loud and firm.

Panic rose through the women. Someone starting sobbing, another praying.

‘Hold hands. Chant! Loud!’ Sitting Fox this time, her voice a pebble cast into a pond.

Janey was paralysed – but not with fear, with guilt. ‘It’s me. It’s coming for me...’

‘Don’t even think it, Janey McEttrick! Your sisters are with you. Whatever is out there will have to deal with us first.’ Quatie lead the chant, her voice defiant in the shadows.

London’s barking became snarling. Sounds of a fight ripped the darkness.

‘My dog’s out there!’ Janey lunged towards the door, but was pulled back by a couple of the Mothers. ‘Please!’

‘Hold her!’ Quatie commanded. ‘Keep singing!’

A yelp, then silence.

‘Lon—’

Something heavy landed on the tent.

The chant died.

The poles creaked and the fabric started to rip.

Inside, the women crouched, naked in the dark, breath freezing before them, eyes white in the dull light of the stones.

Somebody started to scream, and the hysteria spread through them like wildfire.

‘Stay strong!’ Quatie shouted above the din. ‘Sing, damn you! Sing!’

Janey’s voice – clear and loud, split through the screams. It was joined by Quatie’s, shaken but determined. Then others joined in, a counter-spell to the fear.

On the other side of the tarp something pounded, scratched, whined, but couldn’t get in.

They sang until their throats were raw – for how long, it was hard to tell. They sang anything that came to mind – from chants in the old tongue to pop songs, hymns to camp fire classics. Janey shared some of her mother’s repertoire, feeling the strength in the melody, the lyrics. She tried not let her anxiety for London, for the firekeeper and for the safety of her sisters overwhelm her. If anything had happened to her hound... Her voice nearly broke, but she knew that it, and the wall of sound it helped create, was the only thing keeping whatever was out there at bay.

At times the women’s voices became a keening fuelled by primal fear and fathomless sorrow, by all that the darkness held – a frail skein of voices in defiance of oblivion. The sound broke open the grief fossilised inside Janey. In the dark, blips and chevrons of light started to play across her vision, pulsing to the sound. Slowly, the lozenges of colour coalesced into a necklace of rainbows.

Eloise ran under a sprinkler in the sunshine, laughing and squealing as Janey chased after her with a camcorder. The scene shattered into a thousand shards as an enormous black bison broke through it, bellowing furious with eyes of blue flashing lights. A faltering heartbeat became the submarine beep of a life-support, tubes erupting from a small broken body. Janey held a little hand, praying for something, anything to save the fragile life within. 'Take me instead ... just save my little girl,' muttered over and over again. The ECG monitor went dead and the music of the world corrupted into feedback. Janey, in hysterics, pulled away as the doctors descended, white crows circling for carrion. The unbearable cliché of a funeral. An undersized coffin, like something out of *Alice in Wonderland*, lowered into the ground. Surrounded, smothered, by friends offering support, sympathy, when all she wanted was to be left alone – to throw herself into the ground after her girl, to be buried with her. Let. The.

Earth. Eat. Me. Up.

Janey howled her grief and the women keened with her.

Slowly, the waves of pain and sound subsided.

The attacks became weaker and weaker. A hurricane to a branch in a gale, creaking and tapping against a pane.

Then, finally, all was stillness and silence.

The women, exhausted. Only their ragged breathing was left to dare the dark – until even that eased.

Outside, a bird sang – the bright notes of its colours the first upon the day's fresh canvas. Something had compelled it to start, an instinct as old as Creation. And now it was joined by others, creating a weave of melody to capture the gathering light.

'Our little brothers greet the new day,' observed Quatie, her voice hoarse. 'We've ... made it.'

They listened to the electrophonic chorus build in strength and complexity, hot tears streaming down cheeks. The stones had long grown cold, but the atmosphere was no longer icy. The simple, human warmth of bodies in close proximity took the edge off of the dawn chill.

Quatie crawled over and lifted back the flap.

The women held each other tight – Janey supported amid the huddle. She had no fight left in her; she could barely move.

Quatie got out and stood up, bones creaking.

'A sister out here needs our help,' she called back, prompting them all to action.

Janey was helped out, the dead weight of anxiety in her belly.

As the Mothers rushed to the aid of the firekeeper, who lay prone on the wet grass, Janey cast about the clearing. ‘London? London?’

A stirring in the undergrowth made everybody freeze. Quatie, naked and fierce, slowly reached for the staff by the firekeeper’s body.

Then out of the bushes burst the Alaskan Malamute – barking at the sight of Janey.

He barrelled into her, and she collapsed on the floor with him in a blur of fur and tongue.

6

Janey stared at the smouldering ashes of the fire-pit, trying to make sense of it all. Someone had placed a steaming mug in her hands, a blanket around her shoulders. The sharp autumnal day did little to banish the knot of guilt in her belly. The Mothers had tended their fallen friend until the ambulance came, and now the remnant – those who hadn't retreated to the safety of their homes to sleep – huddled together in twos and threes, offering soft words and strong shoulders.

London's reassuring bulk lay by her feet. His coat was covered in burrs, leaf mould, and mud, but apart from a few scratches he was none the worse, thank goodness – just dog-tired.

'Out for the count, hey?' indicated Quatie to the heavily sleeping hound. 'Bet you could do with some shut eye too?' Her friend sat down next to her on the log, blanket coat wrapped around her, cheroot in hand.

They put their free arms around one another.

'Strange. I feel wide awake. Running on fumes. No doubt I'll crash and burn at some point.'

'When the adrenalin wears off.' Quatie took a long toke, letting the warm smoke linger in her mouth before blowing it out in a slow snake. 'It was quite a night, wasn't it?'

Janey shook her head in disbelief.

Quatie looked at her hard, frowning. 'Listen. Whatever attacked us ... whatever that thing was ... it wasn't your fault.'

Janey went to protest, but her friend stopped her. ‘There are dark spirits in this world and you’re not to blame for all of them.’ Quatie waved her smoke. ‘Shit happens.’

‘But *I* brought it to your door. The firekeeper...’

Quatie took a long draw. ‘I admit I’m worried about her. But she was doing what she believed in. She was guarding the circle, and did it well. The fact that she’s alive at all shows what she’s made of. That old Mother has been through a lot. She’s made of tough stuff, and...’ She poked Janey lightly with a boney finger. ‘...so are you. Like you’re fella here.’ Quatie smiled fondly down at London.

Janey chewed her lip. ‘But ... these women. What they endured...’

Quatie shrugged. ‘They had a bad scare, is all. Admittedly, our lodges are not quite so ... spook-tacular.’ She cackled. ‘But it’s a good war story. And our songs, our strength ... held the darkness at bay. And you, your voice, was instrumental in that. Don’t forget it!’

Janey looked at the cooling ash. A breeze stirred it, and a skein of grey was snagged away. She sipped her coffee, and shivered as its warmth entered her. Her friend’s words were better than caffeine and helped to take the mortal chill from her bones.

‘Listen, we didn’t quite get to do everything we needed too in the lodge. I knew you saw your daughter...’

Janey suddenly stiffened, but Quatie placated her with a firm hold of her free hand. ‘And I wanted to offer you this story ... it came to me just before it all kicked off.’

Janey looked up, her eyes glistening. ‘Go on.’

‘Grandfather Rock whispered to me a story, a story of my people, a story from the long back and the yet-to-come...’

‘In the time before time, when the rivers flowed free and the hunting was good, there was young Brave – the best hunter in his tribe whose bright young star was doused in tears

when his bride died on the eve of their wedding. The Brave had bested every beast on the Plain, but he could not beat Death, who took his wife to be, leaving him heartbroken. Whatever any said or did, they could not stop his tears, could not stop his sorrow. His heart was a gloomy tent. He refused to eat, he refused to sleep. When his brothers called for him to join them in the hunt, he did not hear them. Every day he spent by the grave of his bride-to-be, as though he was a tree about to take root.

‘And an old bent tree he might well have been, the good he was to his tribe. It is one thing to mourn, but it is another to die in life. Sorrow, or joy – you still have to get on with the business of living.

‘What could be done?

‘Well, one day, he was busy doing nothing while his friends went off hunting and he overheard a bunch of elders nearby having a lively discussion about the way to the realm of the spirits. It appeared the way led far to the south, to the lodge of a medicine man, who could guide people there and back.

‘Hearing this, the Brave's ears pricked up and he committed the directions to the lodge to heart.

‘The old people wandered off.

‘The Brave did not hesitate. His heart was pounding. He knew what he had to do. He packed some provisions, leapt upon his horse, and galloped south.

‘The old people watched him go and smiled.

‘He journeyed for a week, and the land stayed the same.

‘He journeyed for two weeks, and still the land remained as he had known it all of his life.

‘Maybe the old people had got it wrong – they always said crazy things and should

have known better!

‘By this time, he was lost in a forest and about to give up and go back, when he emerged into a plain of great beauty – tall swaying grasses, great herds of buffalo, a winding river, everything blessed by the sun, by the rain, by the wind. There, ahead, he saw a humble dwelling – it was no more than a tumbledown hut, hardly the home of a wise man. And yet, as he approached, an old man appeared. He seemed to be expecting him. He smiled gently and gestured for the Brave to enter his lodge. The Brave wanted to ask the way to the realm of the spirits there and then, but the old man wasn't having any of it. He just smiled and held the rickety door open. Inside, there was simple straw bed. The old man gestured to him to lie down.

‘Suddenly the Brave felt very weary. He wanted to explain about his lost bride, stolen by death, but he was overcome with a great fatigue rendering him incapable of speech. The old man smudged him with some sage, and beat his drum over him, sending the Brave into a trance. His body felt lighter, and he felt himself rise through the smoke hole of the lodge, and float over the plain. He passed over this like a bird, until he came to a place of reeds, enshrouded in mists. There he found a birch bark canoe. The Brave got in, and pushed out into the water. For a while all he heard was the plashing of his oar. Then he heard other canoes. Shadowy forms in the mist – all paddling in the same direction. To the Isle of Ghosts, hidden in the mists of a great lake. And then he saw her – his bride! The Brave wanted to call out, but he could not. All he could do was match her stroke for stroke.

‘So they journeyed alone together to the realm of the spirits.

‘We enter this world by our self – and we return to the Great Spirit alone. It is by our deeds alone we are judged – and if we have led a good life, we are allowed to reach the island.

‘Yet not all make it.

‘A great storm swept across the water, tossing the canoes like matchwood. Many were taken by the chill, dark waters. Yet when the Great Creator looked down upon the Brave and his bride he could see their love was strong and their hearts were good. And so he held the storm at bay for them, and they passed through its fatal veil.

‘Beyond the tempest gate, the waters were calm, the skies were blue, their way was clear. Ahead, they could see the island – and a lovelier place neither of them had ever laid upon.

‘They made landfall – a little way apart from each other. The island was brimming with flowers in bloom, with birds in song. The springs were sweet, the fruit was ripe.

‘The two lovers were reunited on that distant shore, and there they embraced – and if the tears outnumbered the kisses, or the kisses the tears I could not say.

‘Finally, hand-in-hand, they walked along that beach of soft sand. His bride leaned her head upon his shoulder and they sighed with happiness. They could have stayed like that forever, but it was not to be.

‘In the distance, the Brave thought he heard a distant drumming. A voice carried on the wind, from far away. He asked if his bride could hear it, but she could not.

‘But the voice was insistent. It grew louder and louder until it seemed to echo across the sky. It was the voice of the Great Creator himself – telling the Brave it was not yet his privilege to stay upon the island. Unlike his bride he was still alive. He had been allowed this sweet reunion but now he must return.

‘The Brave wept as he told his bride. He would defy death for her. He would stay, heedless of what sacred law he broke. But now, she kissed him and gently told him he must go.

'She would be waiting for him.

'And so sadly, the lovers parted. The drumming was louder now as the Brave got into his canoe and put out from that golden shore. His bride waved until he vanished from view. The mist descended, and once more he was amongst the reeds, then flying over the plain, descending through the smoke-hole – into his body, waiting below.

'He awoke. The old man stopped his drumming, smoked his pipe, watching him thoughtfully. The Brave thanked the medicine man, leaving him a gift of tobacco. He left the lodge, climbed on his horse, and rode north, back to his people, where, it is said, he became a great chief, living a full and long life, happy in the certainty that his bride was waiting for him, and one day – when the Great Creator deemed it right – he would join her again on that distant, golden shore.'

Quatie finished her story and took a final drag of her cheroot. 'You need to go on a quest...' She flicked the butt into the fire pit. 'To let go of this ghost you've been carrying.'

'But to where...?'

'To the land of your ancestors...'

'Scotland?' Janey rolled the word around her mouth. She'd seen it in the movies – what was that one with Mel Gibson in a red wig? It seemed like a helluva long way ... and expensive.

As if reading her thoughts, Quatie said, 'Whatever it costs, whatever it takes, you need to get yourself there – otherwise these hungry ghosts will consume you.'

'But what has this to do with Elly?'

'She had the blood, same as you. Perhaps she was taken *because* of it. A gift like that ... comes at a price.' The old woman's eyes glittered with starlight. 'Maybe you'll keep paying it until you come to terms with it.'

Janey wanted to rage at this idea, but something in Quatie's gaze told her it would be pointless to try – the old woman's thin, humourless face spoke of a lifetime of trying.

'There is no way of hiding from your destiny. You can do all the dancing you like, but it'll still sting you on the butt. Trace that blood-line back to its source. There you will find healing; there you will find meaning. Something has followed you here from there – I'm convinced of that now. Won't let you go until you've faced it. You've been sent that journal for a reason. Someone wants you to return. And when your ancestors come a-knocking, you don't ignore them, girl.'

7

Monday morning and Janey was back at work. It felt weird after what she'd been through these last couple of weeks, but it was kind of reassuring too. The same peeling posters on the wall, the same dog-eared customers, the same tired in-jokes – although her boss was even grumpier than usual. He had taken exception to her sudden absence of leave. 'I am a reasonable man,' he said, emphasising his point with a skunk trail of stogie smoke, 'but this is watering the owl.'

Raddle (short for Arnold Marion Radowkovitz) was corpulently over-bearing, a constant smell of onion bagels about his breath, and damp patches perpetually under the armpits of his Hawaiian shirt. Beneath, a white string vest strained – copious salt and pepper hair protruding like nettles through a barbed wire fence. He ran his business like a drug-dealer – keeping odd hours and poor standards of hygiene, giving credit to favoured clients, striking the fear of God into unsuspecting enquirers, tradesmen, and officials, hanging out back with his insalubrious cronies, a never-ending game of poker on the go from which the reek of beer and cigar wafted out with the occasional colourful curse or wolf-howl to the confusion and dismay of virgin browsers.

He was standing in front of Janey now, the counter taking the weight of his Miller-sponsored gut as he leaned towards her, jabbing his butt in her general direction. He liked to think of himself as some kind of mafia boss – in the spirit of the late great Gandolfini – but he came across more like Sergeant Bilko. 'You throw a sicky for the day – sure, it happens. Women's problems. Man flu. Whatever. But then you take off a frickin' fortnight! Give you an inch, and you think you're a ruler! Jeez!'

'I'm sorry, boss. I've been going through a tough time...' she curled her hair round her fingers, and gave him those big green eyes.

'Tough time! Yeah, and the rest of Western democracy! Have you seen the state of this street recently? Half the shops boarded up. The other half, fighting off bankruptcy. You're lucky to have a job at all. This isn't frickin' summer camp!'

'I know. I really appreciate it. I love working here, you know I do. I'm happy to work extra shifts, whatever you want...'

Janey leaned towards him and gave him a generous flash of cleavage.

'Okay, okay. I'll let it go this once. But this is your yellow card, Janey!' He waddled off, leaving his skunk-trail. 'Anyways, you're looking better, whatever you had. It done you good.'

Janey relaxed as her boss slid like an octopus under its rock back into his pungent, porn channel-lit den. She'd be safe now he'd done his bit of 'managing' for the day.

London barked.

'I know. Yes he is.'

She cranked up some Neil Young, singing along to the chorus of 'Keep on Rockin' in the Free World' and smiled. It was true – she *was* feeling better. Her time with Quatie had really helped on many levels. Sure, the attack on the lodge had rattled her, rattled them all, but her head felt clearer; she felt stronger. She'd cut back on the booze and smoking (but not entirely), and started to eat more healthily.

And she had a mission.

Somehow she had to get to Scotland. That was clear. Although *how* exactly was another matter... It seemed like a fool's quest: a kooky journal turns up out of the blue; batshit crazy things start happening; and she is compelled to go to the Old Country to lay to rest a ghost somehow connected to her lost daughter. Right.

Go with it, Janey. Sure beat the daily grind! It was true that life had lost some of its sheen since she'd got back. Everything looked so beaten up; folk, plain tired out. And now, she had glimpsed something behind the threadbare world, something that wouldn't leave her be.

Crazy Horse thundered through the end chords of the track. Thank God for rock'n'roll! There and then, Janey knew what she had to do – find some live music and *play*. Dammit, her fingers were getting itchy. It had been too long.

Making a mental note to herself, she sighed – back to work for now, girl.

As she went to sort through the latest deliveries, she noticed the Post-it stuck to the top of the pile. The hand of Rani was unmistakable, though it was even shakier than usual.

MIBs came looking for you. WTF!?

Scary dude/sses (?) but kinda cool.

Kraftwerk, we reckon...

Watch your butt! R

Janey gripped the edge of the counter, kicking it again and again.

London rubbed up against her, licking her ankles.

She knelt down and buried her face in his fur, holding him tight.

Her eyes caught sight of the dark barrel.

Thank goodness she still had the shotgun with her, kept under the counter when she was at work now, a constant friend.

'I won't let the fuckers frighten me,' she vowed to London. He yapped.

You have to keep on living, girl, otherwise they will've won.

She stood up, took a sceptical look at the empty store. ‘Screw it.’

She opened the fire escape and lit up, while London sniffed around the scruffy yard. Taking a long, slow drag, she blew away her fear and guilt. She could imagine Quatie wagging a finger.

‘Screw it all.’

Making a decision, she pulled out the journal.

How could a single book be the cause of so many problems? She flicked it open to the crow feather she'd found at Quatie's, saved for a bookmark. Sinking down onto the step, she started to read, escaping into its pages:

Within half a year I betrothed to her and felicitously, she accepted. A year later we were married. I accepted a position in my native Aberfoyle. We moved into Inch-Alladine – my father's former manse.

A little nervously I stepped into his shoes.

Doon Knowe loomed opposite, where I was to take to walking ... but that was yet to come.

My new wife made it a home – putting the womanly touches to it of which I could never conceive. We were comfortable. I enjoyed my work. We had tea with pleasant, interesting people, making ourselves part of the community. Like a well-exercised hound curling into its familiar corner, we settled into our provincial life with a contented sigh. Our lives had led us here and we need go no further.

How were we to know then that we had reached the high-tide of our happiness?

The wave of our newly-wed bliss broke upon those fey hills.

As I noted from the first time I had met my darling wife, Margaret loved to dance

– and in the social round there seemed plenty of opportunities, enough to sate a normal appetite. Or so I thought. But for my dancing bride it was not enough. She would dance around the house as though music was the elixir of life, and not simply a pleasant cordial to be occasionally sipped. I joined in with her now and then – her gay spirits were infectious. But I always had work to do and soon found it distracting, toil being more to my taste than triviality. I asked her to restrain herself – while I was at home working at least. When she still did not desist I forbade music and dancing in the house altogether.

This was hard – until then I had not denied my wife anything – and caused a chilly atmosphere between us. Could she not see how unreasonable her behaviour was? I asked a consultant physician friend of mine and he agreed that it was abnormal. He agreed to examine her. Afterwards, he reassured me that there was nothing physically wrong with her, and put it down to a nervous distemper. He proscribed rest, a calming atmosphere, a gentle hobby, cold baths and regular brisk walks. The latter would prove to be disastrous – for me – and yet the doctor's advice seemed to work, at first.

The dancing stopped in the daytime, and I was immensely relieved. Margaret seemed, on the surface, content – but I sensed her demure manner took effort. She did her utmost to please me, but curtailing her desire placed her under a great strain if I had but known it. Our lives seemed to 'normalise', reaching a moderate equilibrium – like Goldilocks' porridge; neither too hot nor too cold. This suited me – my work demanded a peaceful domesticity. I had been translating the Bible into Gaelic, to spread the good word of the Lord amid the heathen north. The devout contemplation that my profession demanded meant peace and quiet were essential. Yet the house, however well-managed, seemed to grow chillier and sadder. Our wedding bed became

an icy wilderness – nothing beyond the politest of small talk or the chastest of kisses passed across it. Yes, a child was produced of our union on one of the rare occasions when our bodies remembered what our minds had forgotten, and for a while, our delightful daughter Marjorie distracted her.

But as the year passed I knew that Margaret lived a secret inner life hidden from me.

We became strangers to one another, as though we dwelled on either side of a widening rift.

Then one night I awoke to find Margaret gone – the cotton sheet still warm and scented with her clean body. I took a candleholder and got up, exploring the dark house, its wooden bones creaking in the hoolie that rolled off the mountain like a galleon at sea. And that was when I spied her from the top of the stairs.

She danced on the landing in a rapturous ecstasy – front door flung wide, allowing in the restless air and the moon's ragged light. I called to her, but this did not arrest her motion. My patience rapidly evaporating, I descended and went to grab her arm. Then I realised that she was sleep-walking, nay, no ordinary noctambulos, but a sleep-dancer! Aware that awakening her could prove risky, I feigned to dance with her. She softened into my embrace, sighing with desire. For a moment I remembered, with a pang, that first vision of her. I choked back the tears, overwhelmed with love, and with sorrow – at the chasm that had sundered us since.

Gently, I waltzed her back to the bedchamber.

In the morning I questioned her about the moondancing, but she claimed to not know anything of her lychnobious pursuits.

Disturbed, I once more consulted my physician friend. He wondered if there was

something in her family history that might explain her condition. I knew very little of her background other than she hailed from the banks of the River Ettrick, which runs close by Carterhaugh. She is apparently descended from the former owners of that place. So, of good stock, it would seem. Yet, looking into her genealogy, it turned out that her good name had fallen upon hard times after a series of misfortunes. Some muttered that a curse lay upon their blood. When I asked the nature of this, my informants would make their excuses and leave.

I am all too familiar with such fear and superstition.

Being born a seventh son I had grown up in its shadow. In the Highlands it is kened that a seventh child bears the Gift (though some a curse would have it) of dha shealladh, the 'two sights'. It is true I have long suspected that I had something of the like; but now confronted with the reality of the Sith in my life I was forced to accept it.

Had it been in some way responsible for my being drawn to Margaret, blood to blood?

Both terrified and intrigued, I plunged into the arcane of the Fayrie Folk – the Secret Commonwealth of this land, a co-narrative hiding in plain sight. I researched, with scholarly diligence, the folklore, tales and customs of the Lowlands and Highlands as a way of understanding my wife's condition and in hope of finding a way to free her from it.

Love drove me on...

Janey's mind raced. Kirk's revelation was like a lightning strike. Had she too inherited this 'gift'? What did he call it? The two sights.

All the visions she had seen, that had haunted her, since childhood... It started to finally

make sense.

Perhaps she wasn't crazy, just fighting her own inheritance.

Quatie was right. There is no way of hiding from your destiny.

She stubbed out the roach, and went back inside, closing the fire exit firmly.

Pouring herself a coffee, she thought she'd better do some more work.

She needed grounding and time to think.

Flipping the disc, she finished the deliveries. Next, to a bit of Crosby, Stills and Nash she went over to the door and started pulling off old posters. Once a month they would clear out any out-of-date ones. As she worked her way through the mulch of events that a city like Asheville attracted, one caught her eye. Partially hidden behind a flyer for a death-metal night she spied a Celtic spiral. Uncovering it, she saw that it was advertising a Folk Jam and open mic downtown, MCed by someone called Allen Raven. Checking the date, she realised it was happening in a couple of days. She took a note of the address and time. She'd heard about these 'sessions' – there was a big traditional music scene in the town, which her mother had been into, but being dragged along to them as a kid acted as aversion therapy and she had steered clear of them. Too many Aran sweaters for her liking, a wannabe rocker.

She folded the note and put it in the back pocket of her jeans.

Maybe it was time to reconnect to her roots – and Mister Raven's event might be a good place to start.

8

The Sneaky Hooch Saloon – situated in the backroom of a store and entered through a shady side-door frequented by ne'er-do-wells – was filled to the brim with culture-vultures keen to savour the ambience when Janey arrived, hauling her guitar.

'Ah, a musician. Most welcome!' The man sitting behind a table arranged with leaflets and pamphlets by the door sported serious ink on his arms and neck, and a well-groomed hipster beard.

'Hi. How much is it ...?'

'In many ways priceless,' he grinned, '...but to you – just a buck.'

'Wow, that's a good deal. Priceless is a bunch more affordable these days.'

'Sign o' the times, my friend. You have to become a member because this here is a private club. See the lady at the bar – it's her place. She'll sign you up for one silver dollar. I'm just running it tonight. If you want a slot let me know.' He gave her a winning smile.

She thanked him and walked to the bar.

'Scotland.'

'Sorry?' Janey caught the eye of the landlady who held court behind the counter. She wore a vibrant headscarf and strange day-glo polyps entangled in her dreads, as though she was a barrier reef. Piercings constellated her face.

'I pick things up. Got that as soon as you walked in.'

The other clientele propping up the bar – the cast of a grungier version of *Cheers* – just shrugged and carried on nursing their cold ones.

'Must be my *Brave* hair – bit of a giveaway, I guess!' Janey joked nervously.

The landlady just gave her a knowing look. 'If you say so. Here's the membership form. That'll be one dollar. Welcome to the mad house.'

It was hard to get a seat and Janey manoeuvred her guitar case awkwardly through the onlookers towards the stage end. Sitting in front of it in a loose circle, the session was already in full swing, with three fiddlers – two black, one white; a couple of banjo-players in baseball caps and smart jackets; a pixy-ish box player with heavily-ringed fingers; a bald man on a bodhran looking like he meant business; and a South Korean clacking on bones.

Janey lingered on the threshold with her guitar case – half-expecting someone to spot her as the interloper she was – until she was offered a seat by a friendly woman with a big smile and unruly purple hair.

'Your first time?' she called out across the din. 'You'll do fine – folk here are real friendly.' She offered a hand, 'Wanda.'

'Janey.'

'Hey, haven't I seen you around somewhere...?'

Just then the tune came to the end and immediately a young woman got up and started singing acapella, with a clear bold voice like a mountain stream cascading down through a pine forest. She sang an old Appalachian ballad – 'Bury Me Under the Weeping Willow' – and the effect, Janey thought, was spine-tingling. The concentrated attention of the room, suddenly fallen silent out of respect and appreciation, intensified the magic of the moment.

Janey, who was used to drowning out the catcalls of a rowdy crowd with a loud PA, was impressed. She closed her eyes and let herself be taken by the melody, the words sinking into the mulch of her mind. If she heard a song once – listened to it with her whole being – she could 'capture it'. This was one of her gifts, picked up from a young age. Hearing the

singer minded her of her mother who would sing unaccompanied, as was the mountain way. Songs of misery, more often than not, usually involving a pregnant woman getting murdered by her lover. As a rebellious daughter she had mocked their unrelenting gloom, but was starting to feel an empathy. Life was tough for women. The song's extended high notes tightened the knot in her belly. Irritated, she rubbed away the burn of tears in her eye.

When the young singer ended, Janey joined in the applause with gusto.

Blowing out her cheeks, she caught the eye of Wanda, who nodded emphatically. 'How about a tune from you?'

Everyone suddenly seemed to be looking at her. 'Well, I...'

'Go on, you look like you can handle that thing.'

Calls from the crowd encouraged her, and so she pulled out her guitar and fiddled with the pegs while she thought of a song. Most of her material wouldn't seem right for here – too fast, too loud, too modern – but she had a couple of slow ones, and she was feeling sad inside. So she chose a 'choker', as she referred to her stock of heartbreak ballads, and poured it out. She was a bit jangly at first, but soon got into it – finding the right vibe for the room. Her heart beat wildly. Why was this more nerve-wracking than on a stage? She felt exposed, and the experience triggered memories of her childhood, of her mother. Suddenly, she found herself doing what her mother used to do – probably at her age with a young Janey sulking at the back, bored, thinking of boys. The sensation, which could have broken her open suddenly made her feel stronger somehow. As though she was surrounded by the Mothers in the sweat-lodge, wishing her well, praying for her, singing with her, drumming her back into her skin.

The last chords floated into the air like a star winking out.

And then the room erupted in applause.

Janey was patted on the back and offered drinks. She could get into this! Something in

the craic stirred the Celt in her.

A reel was struck up and the session continued in earnest – the spirits raised. The room seemed to take off, 'away with the fairies', as Wanda joked when they bumped into each other in the Ladies. 'Hey, you did good! And I remember seeing you perform with your band – the Jackalopes, isn't it? It was at some biker bar... Boy, that was one rough crowd! They didn't give you the respect you deserved. Well, I hope tonight has made up for it.'

'Thank you. That's kind.'

Janey beamed as she checked her hair. Oh, how she'd missed the pleasure of performing her music! This shared experience was a whole different ball-game – more communal, with no 'stars'. Everyone was equal, everyone got a turn.

Unlike the band.

She thought back to the roadhouse and grimaced. Man, *that* was a stinker! Apart from an irate text from EZ the day after she hadn't heard from any of them since. She may as well have fallen down a black hole for all they seemed to care. She caught herself frowning. Not good. She didn't want to develop frown lines like her mom. Smile, girl, smile. Perhaps she needed to try and patch things up with them and arrange a rehearsal – and, boy, they needed it! All of them were getting too complacent. Perhaps they'd known each other too long. And having to put up with her ... mess. She scrutinised her reflection in the smudged glass and sighed.

She returned just as the last reel died to cheers and calls for fresh rounds.

Musicians slaked their thirst, stretched, or adjusted their tunings.

Just then the hipster by the door stood up behind his table, tapping the mike in his hand.

'Good evening, Ashevilleins! It's great to see so many of you here tonight. And to have some very talented new faces as well.' He nodded to Janey and everyone cheered. 'As many

of you know, I took a trip to bonnie Scotland this summer. It was mainly for the Edinburgh Fringe.' He waved down the cat-calls from the floor. 'Yeah, yeah, I know, lucky bastard. I'm writing it up for the News. While there I managed to go backcountry and do some exploring. And this is what I stumbled upon. It's a Border Ballad called 'Thomas the Rhymer'...'

Janey listened in. This was getting interesting.

The man explained the context – something about a character, no, a real person called Thomas of Ercildoune who lived in the Twelfth Century, and how he received the gift of prophecy from the Queen of Elfland herself after meeting her on the Eildon Hills, near the Scottish Border. The host boasted that he'd been there – and had spent a night sleeping out on those windy hills, although 'he wasn't as lucky as Thomas', he added, which got a laugh. He had found the Rhymer's Stone though, and made a vow there to share this ballad. And so he launched into it – and Janey listened with rapt attention to the strange and powerful symbolism – 'the milk white steed' of the fairy queen, the journey to Elfland 'wading through blood red to the knee', a 'magical tree with forbidden fruit', the vision of the three paths ... she was hit by a powerful feeling of recognition, which riveted her to the spot. And here was someone who knew this place, who knew the traditions.

Someone who could be a guide.

She stared at him so, that he couldn't fail to notice. Mid-song, he smiled warmly back and carried on – lost in the trance of its narrative – until the end. He bowed to the applause, and sat down – raising his glass to Janey.

Janey nipped outside for some fresh air to calm her nerves. She resisted the temptation to light up her emergency reefer. Enlightenment hadn't come to North Carolina yet.

She leaned on the railings, trying to get her head in order – a tumble-dryer of thoughts

and feelings, hopes and fears.

The side-street was empty and quiet.

Too quiet.

Then, from the shadows opposite there was a crash.

Janey's eyes flicked to the source. A trash-bin, tipped under the sodium-pool of the lamp, its ripped contents spilled, caught in the devil of wind.

Janey froze, knuckles white on the cold metal rod. Her shotgun was back in the car. She wished London was with her. She'd left him back at Quatie's for the day, so she could attend the session.

She was on her own.

It was just her, and whatever was on the other side of the dark.

There was something moving there, in the shadows – skulking low to the ground. Feral eyes, catching the light.

Suddenly, a fox darted across the road, slipping inbetween the buildings.

She breathed again, releasing her death-grip from the metal railings.

Her heart sprinting, as she laughed with relief. 'Whooo-weee, Janey-girl! Now you're jumping at shadows!'

And then, sliding obliquely out of the dark pool between the street lights, a smart black Cadillac, its angular mass throwing harsh shadows.

Beams off. Dead slow.

The shaded windows kept the occupants invisible, but she could feel them watching her.

Janey knew her time had come.

Drunken laughter behind her made her jump. Some of the crowd spilled out, pulling out

e-vapes or chatting on phones.

The Cadillac's headlamps came on in a blinding fury and it accelerated away into the night.

'Hey, lady. You knocked 'em dead!' called out one.

'Thanks,' she mumbled, brushing past in a hurry to return to the safety of the bar.

'So glad you came back. That's always a good sign.'

She turned to see the man who had performed 'Rhymer'.

'Let me buy you one,' she said, giddily grateful for this return to normality. 'You blew me away with that ballad. Whew!'

The MC considered this, and nodded. 'You're on – but I'll get the next round. Bring 'em over to my office.' He gestured to the table by the door.

While she waited to be served, Janey tried to calm down. She was turning into a bug-eyed paranoid, jumping at shadows. *Get a grip, woman!*

Minutes later, Janey carried the chiller-beaded bottles over and put them next to the mixing desk.

'Why thank you kindly, ma'am. Take a seat.' He reached out a hand. 'Allen Raven.'

'I knew it! And I'm Janey ...'

'McEttrick. I know.'

'Really? What is this place – the psychic salon?'

He considered this with a smile. 'Maybe, but ... it's kinda my job. I write for the *Smoky Mountain News*. Did a write-up on your last gig in town.'

She pulled a face. 'I'm allergic to reviews.'

'Don't worry. It was positive. Didn't see it?'

She shrugged.

'Shame. I'll send you a copy...'

Janey gave him a look.

'But only if you want.' He looked straight back at her with an open, honest face.

There was something solid and reassuring about him. And, hell, she needed some of that right now.

'Cheers,' she raised her bottle and they clinked.

Musicians clicked cases shut. The nine-sheets-to-the-wind regulars were ushered out onto the cruel asphalt ocean of life by a brisk landlady southerly. 'That's all folks. Now skedaddle!' she boomed. 'Some of us have a store to run, come morning.'

As the Folk Jam wound down Allen suggested they had a beer round the corner at his second favourite watering hole in town, the Green Jack.

Trying to get the measure of him Janey gave him in a hard stare, which wasn't easy considering she was seeing double by then. 'Why not?'

After a protracted series of goodbyes to the remaining contributors they finally left the landlady to lock up and walked up the road, Allen offering to carry her case.

'It's okay, thanks. I'm used to hauling my own load.'

'Ho-kay, lady! Should have figured that. My apologies.' Allen walked at a respectful distance, stiffly, arms behind his back, until they started sniggering.

Downtown was lively with folk piling out of bars, calling cabs, or hanging out on street corners. It seemed perfectly safe.

Janey remembered the Cadillac with a shudder, and slipped an arm through his. He was a big guy, and the ink and metal he was displaying would make anyone think twice.

Allen seemed to take it in his stride – as though a gorgeous red-head hooked him every day.

Janey scanned the shadows and every dark car that cruised past made her tense.

‘You okay?’

‘Sure. Just need a drink.’

‘Well, you’re in luck. Voila!’

They had arrived at the Green Jack – its cheery glow inviting in the dark.

‘Just like a British pub!’

Janey peered into the dimly-lit wooden interior decorated with swathes of hops hanging from the beams. A bluegrass trio were playing in the corner. The mood was chilled, with small groups of friends huddled together over beer and nachos in the alcoves.

They went to the bar.

‘What are you having?’

Janey smiled. ‘Whatever you are – and raise you!’

‘Find us a table. I’ll be right over.’

She claimed a little cubby-hole with a couple of empty stools and a table made of an old barrel. She slid the guitar along the wall and sat down.

Well, Ms McEttrick. Here we are! Shelly would be pleased for her, but Quatie would be furious. All that good work undone, but ... one night wouldn't do any harm. Not every day you met a poet. One who has recently been to Scotland at that. And, she was having a ball, dammit! Forgetting all her worries of the last few days.

The fear in the dark.

He brought over a pitcher of dark ale to the table she found. ‘This is from the Green Man Brewery.’

Janey looked at him and grinned. 'Like it already.'

He poured them both a glass. 'A toast.'

They raised their glasses.

'To ... new friends.'

Janey made a show of pondering this, before breaking into a smile. 'New friends.'

They listened to the band, grooving on the sound of fiddle, banjo and double-bass, until the young musicians finished their set. As the applause died down, Allen folded a note into their tips jar. He thanked them for a great set, and took their details, offering to do them a write-up. A few friendly handshakes later, he was back.

'My, you're a real wheeler and dealer, ain't you though.'

'All part of the job.' He refilled their glasses.

'So.'

'Here we are.'

They blew out their cheeks at the same time, which reduced them both to hysterics.

Finally, they were able to compose themselves.

Janey looked at him as she sipped her pint. 'Okay, mystery man. Let's cut to the chase.'

He feigned embarrassment. 'Really? We've only just met.'

'Not *that*.' She laughed. 'Tell me about yourself.'

Allen sipped on his beer, pondering this. Slammed it down. 'Right. You asked for it! In media res then.'

Janey stopped him ... 'No, it's okay. Let me just hold your hand.' She gazed into his eyes...

'What? You're going to read my palm instead?'

'It's a helluva lot quicker...'

Allen squirmed, but tried to laugh it off. ‘Do I have to cross your palm with silver?’

‘No. Just buy me another drink. But, shhh!’

She closed her eyes, focused inward. She’d never normally be so foolhardy to try such a thing, but she was relaxed.

‘I’m getting ... fish.’

‘Come off it!’ He pulled away. ‘You’re pulling my daisy.’

Janey held out her hand, and he finally replaced his. She closed her eyes again, a mischievous smile on her face.

‘The sea. A fishing port...’

She could feel his pulse quicken.

‘A raven ... on top of a pile of books.’

She opened her eyes and looked straight into his.

He looked at her with wonder. ‘You’ve read me.’

‘You’re an open book to me, mister.’

9

Somehow they had got back in one piece, Allen leading the way in his black and yellow Ford van, which had emblazoned on it ‘Raven Books’ in Ralph Steadman-esque handwriting, next to a stylised *corvus corvus* and, underneath: *purveyor of rare & second-hand books, recordings, & ephemera.*

She parked up next to his van, outside a non-descript town-house – nothing to the exterior to suggest the abode of a poet or a serial killer. But in her experience Janey often found the more normal someone looked on the outside, the weirder they would be inside. By which logic, Allen Raven would be Joe Normal on the inside – and, hell, she could do with some of that right now. That moment of contact with Allen back in the Green Jack – she’d made a joke of it at the time, but she hadn’t expected anything. Alcohol and psychic insight rarely go hand-in-hand. But she *had* received a flash. A lifestory, in an instant. Too much to process, just a strong sense that the man before her was, despite a desperation to disown his past ... decent, or at least trying to be.

But could she trust herself? How often had her ‘gut instincts’ let her down in the past?

Killing the engine she hesitated, finger hooking the door lever, scrutinising herself in the rear-view. In the cab light she already looked guilty. She pondered if she should just scoot while she could – reverse out of there and get herself home...

Allen tapped on her windscreen, waved, and made a gesture for coffee.

She smiled back and found herself getting out. ‘I can resist anything except caffeine.’

They stumbled inside, squeezing past the stacks of books, *Poets and Writers, The Paris*

Review, Smoky Mountain News, manuscripts, and random objects that looked like props from some dodgy Seventies fantasy film.

'Well, here we are – be it ever so humble...'

'No place like home,' Janey rejoined, caught offguard by the undertow of the phrase.

Despite the apparent clutter, Allen's pad was remarkably clean and there was an anorak logic to his 'filing system' – books were stacked according to subject matter, magazines by date, vinyl by artist. He was a clear aficionado of Appalachian music – trad and modern, with all sorts of obscure gems that Janey oohed and ahed over, as he proudly introduced his collection, slipping a precious disc onto his turntable.

As Allen clattered in the kitchen, preparing the coffee, Janey conducted a sly inspection of his place – ostensibly admiring his bookshelves, but also, despite the voice in her head which said this was just a friendship, checking for evidence of a female presence – a territorial, almost feline instinct for rivals. There were photos on the mantelpiece of a dark-haired woman, with a boy – clearly her son – and group-shots of them together in a park.

'That's Louisa, my sister, and her kid, Cal. Love 'em to bits. He's the closest I've got to a son.' Allen placed down a tray of steaming mugs of coffee and brownies.

'Never wished you had any?' Janey asked boldly.

Allen sipped his coffee, eyes downcast.

'Sorry, that was a bit forward of me...'

Allen sighed. 'It's a long story – and I'm not sure I want to go into it tonight. We're having such a ball.'

'Sure, I understand. I really do.' Janey sensed a pain there, and did not wish to probe. It was a sore point for her as well, to say the least.

Allen went to examine the turntable, blowing on the needle before placing it carefully

back down.

'Bit of fluff there.' He gave her a vulnerable look as he slid next to her. Dunking the slightly-burnt brownie in his coffee, he changed tack: 'Anyway, tell me about this Scottish thing – what's your interest?'

Janey started skinning up. 'Do you mind?'

Allen shrugged. 'Go on.'

'Oh, wow! Christmas has come early!' Allen got up and started pulling out books. 'You could say the work of Robert Kirk has been something of an obsession of mine for a while...' He turned to her, balancing a pile by RJ Stewart, John Matthews, Michael Hunter, Lizanne Henderson and Marina Warner. 'If that's the real deal you've got something very exciting there.'

She lit up her reefer and took a long slow draw, leaning back on the sofa. She blew the smoke towards the light-fitting, watching the lazy spirals curl in the air. 'Man, such a relief to talk about it with someone who *understands*. Makes it feel more real. I was starting to think I'd imagined the whole thing!'

Allen sat on the edge of the sofa, rocking a little. 'I'd love to see it – even if it's just a facsimile of the real thing. I've only read transcripts...' He flattened the dog-eared cover of one of the books.

Janey pulled it out of her bag. 'Here.'

'Gutenberg's ghost! Really? Are you sure?' Allen received it as though she handed him the Holy Grail, holding it in the flat of his hands. He examined the spiral motif of the cover, tracing it with a finger. The spine next, with its rough vertebrae of saddle-stitching; the smooth back and ragged end-papers; then, with a lick of his lips, he slowly parted its stiff

leather cover.

'I took one look at it and thought ... what the Hell, y'know? It all looked like Martian to me, at first anyway.'

Allen brooded over each page, turning them slowly. 'You're right ... it's pretty illegible.' He looked at her with amazement. 'And you can read this?'

She shrugged. 'It was like a doctor's handwriting, at first. Gave me a headache. But then, it seemed to clear. Gotten easier as I read on.'

Allen whistled. 'It's like he was trying to write in code or something. Didn't want it read by prying eyes.' He scratched his head. 'What I find amazing about *The Secret Commonwealth*, what gives it its special magic, is the fact it was written by a Presbyterian Minister.'

Janey looked nonplussed.

Allen accepted the joint from her and continued. 'Kinda Protestant max. Council of poker-faced Elders. Lots of forbads and Thou Shalt Nots. Basically, not much fun. Anyway, researching and collecting fairy lore was pretty eccentric hobby to have – even back in those days. But our man was one of a kind, that's for sure.'

'Must be my ancestor then...!' Janey mused, chuckling to herself.

Allen sat up – looked at her hard. 'You mean..?'

'Well, it's not definite – but there's a possibility I could be related to him...'

Allen took a long draw, exhaling slowly. The journal in his hands seemed to vibrate. Nearly choking, he held it at arm's length. 'Um. Think you better have this back.' He tried to catch his breath. Shaking his head, he reached for a glass of water. 'That's the real deal, alright.' He looked at the journal nervously. 'Can you read some out to me?'

'A bedtime story?'

'I doubt it's going to make me sleepy, but please. Indulge me.'

Taking a draw, she balanced the joint on the edge of the ash-tray and sat up. 'Well, since you've been such a fine host...'

'My pleasure.' Allen sank into the sofa sipped the water, and closed his eyes.

Janey opened it at her place-marker and began to read...

That was what served as the catalyst at least, but my obsession, for that is what it became, grew out of all proportion to what the circumstances demanded. I visited rare libraries in search of volumes on Fayrie lore. I consulted with Lord Tarbat on matters of the Second Sight. He was knowledgeable, but in truth there can be no authority on a matter so chthonic. I feared it was a bottomless well into which I gazed – yet I could not cease in my enquiries.

I visited any Fayrie site I heard of, talking to rustics and gentry alike. I hoarded arcana like a miser does wealth. I began to neglect my parochial duties, and took to wandering the hills above Aberfoyle. The affairs of my flock seemed as idiotic and inconsequential as the sheep scattered across the glen. Daily life faded, felt ... distant. Only my wife shone out, and now I finally began to understand what drove her, what made her want to dance like one of the flitting creatures of folklore. The world beyond the world was a strange and magical place – and I could hear its music calling to me...

The banshee wail of police sirens interrupted the reading. Blue flashing lights swept across the ceiling.

'What's going on?' blurted Allen, rising.

'Sounds exciting, whatever it is!' Janey put the journal to one side. 'Sorry, Reverend.'

To be continued.'

'Let's check it out...' Allen gestured to the blind-slatted window.

Out on the street half a dozen police cars had cornered two black-suited figures – a dozen weapons had them pinned down.

Lights flicked on in bedroom windows.

A man with a loud-hailer told them to put their hands above their heads.

Above, the sky roared, whipping the avenue of trees alive. A cluster of lights descended, dazzling them – its spotlight suddenly rendering the tableaux in sharp shadow.

'Looks like they've got a chopper filming it too,' observed Allen. 'It's quite a circus.'

Janey went pale, and held out her hand to stop herself from collapsing.

'What's wrong?' asked Allen, concerned.

'I ... I know those people!'

'Them?' Allen clicked the blind apart and looked closer. They both had long white hair tied back, and wore Raybans and black gloves. 'They look like hitmen, or ... aliens.'

'They might be both.' Janey reached for Allen's hand and held it tight. 'They must have followed me...' The image of the Cadillac cruising past suddenly flashed in her mind. 'I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have led them here!'

'What is it? I don't get it. Janey, tell me. What's happening?'

Wild-eyed, she shook her head. 'I wish I knew. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.' Janey looked on in dread. What shock and awe had she rained down upon the good man's life? The Men in Black were bad enough – but now half of the NCPD seemed to be on his doorstep too.

'I'm ... bad news. You don't want to get to know me. Believe me.' A sick feeling curdled her stomach. The attack on the Lodge, and now this.

Above, the roar of a helicopter split the night, its cyclopean eye swept restlessly across

the scene.

'Hey, normally you'd have to pay for a show like this on cable.' He smiled, but she didn't change her expression. 'Mm, I wonder...' Allen reached for the remote and turned on the news channel. 'Hey, check this out!'

The breaking news depicted the same scene, but from the perspective of the helicopter. The rolling headline stated: 'THE VAMPIRES OF ASHEVILLE CAUGHT...' 'Live' flashed in the corner of the frame, as a news commentator described the gripping scene. In a thumbnail an interview with a waitress was looped, as she breathlessly described the strange customers.

'Jeezus, it's *them*!'

Janey was bewildered. 'The vampires of Asheville...?'

'Where have you been?'

Janey folded her arms.

He held out his hands. 'Sorry. That's what the media tagged them when vagrant bodies kept being discovered withered like empty wine skins. They've been hunting them for days.'

Her head was spinning. 'Those are the ones who ... who came to my trailer.'

'What do you mean?'

Janey bit her lip. 'There's some stuff I didn't tell you.'

Allen watched the scene on his doorstep with wide eyes. 'No shit.'

The intruders were forced onto the ground and brutally cuffed – which made them scream and writhe. It took a scrum of officers to subdue them. In the scuffle, the sunglasses were knocked off and the fire of their eyes left a hieroglyph of trace patterns in the dark as they were dragged away.

'Look, there are more of them.'

'Christ, don't say that!'

'No, look.' Allen pointed to a dark Cadillac pulled up behind the Incident Control wagon. Standing watching the whole scene were two dark-suited figures.

'Feds,' he snorted. 'Those are the real fuckers we have to worry about.'

It took a stiff drink to calm them down after all the vehicles had finally left, returning the street to relative peace, although many neighbours talked excitedly on their porches in their dressing gowns and nightwear.

They withdrew to the living room – its apparent sanctuary as brittle as the thin light breaching the rooftops.

Running on adrenalin, Janey related the rest of her experiences to a jaw-dropped Allen.

The ice had more or less melted in her scotch by the time she had finished. 'If those cops hadn't turned up when they did ...' She downed the ice-floe in one, shuddering as the cold liquid sluiced down her gullet.

'But they *did*. You have an angel looking over you, Janey McEttrick. Get some shut eye.' Allen got up and searched around in his cupboards for a sleeping bag.

Overcome with exhaustion, Janey let the wave of sleep engulf her.

Janey woke up, not exactly sure where she was. Somebody's sofa. She sat up, regretted it. A heavy sleeping bag, unzipped and placed on top of her, flopped onto the floor.

Looking around at the shade-striped room, scratching her head, flashes of the night before started to come back to her.

Daylight could be glimpsed behind the blinds.

'Ah, it lives.' The lamp clicked on. It was Allen, dressed in a navy blue flannel robe,

looking grizzled and carrying a glass.

Janey pulled unruly tangles back from her face, rubbed her face, trying to straighten herself out. 'What time is it?'

'It's late, if you're an early bird; or early, if you're a night owl. It's all relative, really.' He yawned and looked again. 'You look a bit rough. Hope you don't mind me saying. Here, drink this seltzer. Coffee's on. Bathroom's through there.'

As she splashed water on her face, she remembered the scenes of the night, lurid and surreal. What would have happened if the cops hadn't showed? How did they find them? Did she have an angel looking over her, or a demon? She wouldn't be surprised if she had both, as sometimes it felt as though she had little say over her life – an actor, repeating her lines, nothing more.

Janey shuffled into the kitchen.

'Top of the day to you! Feeling better?'

She mumbled something.

'What was that? Coffee? Coming right up!'

After Allen had fed her pancakes, eggs, fruit juice and several top-ups of Beanwerks coffee, she felt a little more human.

'That was quite some action we saw last night, huh?'

Janey nodded, looking a little pale.

'Don't worry. They got 'em. You're safe. Nothing's gonna get you here, right? And you can stay as long as you like. Okay?' He held her shoulders, gently but firmly.

She nodded, eyes flicking to the journal that lay on the side.

Allen cleared the breakfast things away, and wiped his hands clean before picking it up.

He pulled up a chair next to hers.

'If this is the real McCoy, and from all that I can see it is, then it's incredible!' He opened it at random and shook his head. 'I still can't figure how you can read this scrawl, as I can't make head nor tails of it.'

Janey looked at the handwriting. Although it was spidery, it was legible. As she ran her fingers over it, she could hear the scratch of a quill and quickly pulled her hand away.

It was too early in the morning for weird.

I found it hard to sleep after the episode of Crime Scene Live! last night, so I did some research. Let me tell you about this dude. The far out thing about the whole thing is he is thought to have stepped into a fairy ring and ... disappeared. Puff, like that...' He blew across his coffee and the steam dissipated.

'Disappeared?' They were now slouched comfortably next to each other – like old pals, or lovers – she could feel the warmth of his body next to hers. It felt good.

'Uh huh. Taken to Fairyland.'

'You're kidding me...?'

'Swapped with a changeling...'

'Sesame,' Janey whispered.

Allen smiled. 'A substitute. Something which looked and acted like Kirk, but seemed ... soulless.'

'Because his soul was elsewhere...' Janey gazed into the mid-distance.

'If you like. Bit of a zombie. *Zombie Preacher from Hell* – now there's a schlock movie concept for you!'

They both laughed. Allen got up and put on a record – something suitably mellow for their delicate state. The strains of Sunday's Child drifted through, John Martyn's subtonal

murmurings and sublime chords weaving their magic.

'The awesome thing was ... Kirk was said to be trapped in Fairyland but could be freed by a living relative...'

A tingle went down Janey's spine. She sipped some coffee. 'Go on...'

'The first chance was at a wedding – Kirk appeared. If the bridegroom threw a dirk over his shoulder at the phantom, it would break the spell of Fairy – fairies hate iron by the way – and release him! They failed. The second chance was when a female descendant became pregnant. If she went to his rectory, entered his study, and plunged a dirk into his study chair – this would also release him. For whatever reason, neither of these was achieved. Perhaps he didn't get on with his relatives, who knows? But the thrilling thought is...'

'He might still be there.' Janey got up suddenly and paced up and down. The vision of the ghostly preacher came back to her...

'Wait, wait – this is baking my noodle. If this is all true...'

Allen lifted up the journal. 'Kirk existed. His monograph, *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies* exists. And you have this... You're his blood, man!'

'Then, if Kirk is still trapped...'

Their eyes locked. They stared at each other, barely able to contain themselves.

'You can free him Janey, you can free him!' He handed her the journal back.

She looked at the intricate spirals of the cover – a tangled knot that she could unravel. 'Oh fuck!'

They hugged each other, laughing and trembling with excitement. It was almost too much. They fell onto the sofa in a pile. They found themselves drawn into each other – but as they went to kiss, they banged their heads, which broke the spell.

Both collapsed in hysterics – partly through relief.

Wiping the tears from their eyes, they lay there in a tangled mess, trying to compose themselves. 'Oh Jeez...I think I'm still strung out from last night. That was quite a session.' Allen said. 'I'm sorry if...?'

'No, it's fine. We're cool. I like you, Allen. I like you a lot. But for once I don't want to rush things.'

'That's fine with me, Janey. I'm a confirmed bachelor and I'm not ready to give up my nation statehood yet! Like Scotland, I clamour for independence!'

They punched the air together. 'Freedom!'

The sudden awkwardness was diffused, and they were both relieved.

Allen lit up the remains of a roach to calm them both down.

Janey accepted it, taking a draw. She let the warm smoke linger in her mouth before exorcising it. 'Do you really think I can free this Kirk?'

'Who knows? But wouldn't it be one helluva of an adventure to find out?'

Janey thought about it. 'This sounds crazy, but ...'

'Crazy, schmazy. What's normal anyway?'

'All my life I've been haunted by ... visions. I've been told I have the knowing. But that's stupid! I don't even remember when to put out the trash.'

Allen shook his head. 'These gifts are hereditary, apparently. Strong traits are passed down through mitochondrial DNA...'

'Woah there! Mitochrond ... what?'

'Sorry. The female line...'

'My mother? Come off it...!'

'You never know, Janey. Blood is thicker than water. You need to get your good self over there, lay this ghost to rest, and learn to accept your gifts.'

'But where do I start?'

Allen pondered this, as he finished off the roach. 'Well, I would be happy to try and figure this thing out and do some rooting around for you,' he stubbed out the butt and took a sip of his coffee. 'Find out the places and people you need to see.'

'What about me...?'

'I think you need to go and speak with your mom.'

'I don't think that'll work...'

Just as 'Spencer the Rover' was about to begin, the needle stuck.

'I don't think you have a choice.' He got up, went over to the deck. 'Otherwise, you'll keep repeating the same chords over and over.' Taking the needle off, he removed the vinyl and slipped it back in its sleeve with loving care. 'Sometimes we fall in love with a song, even if it's really sad. Think that's all there is. Keep playing it again and again.' He placed the record back in its correct place. 'But other tracks await.' He started flipping through the stack. 'Ah, yes.'

10

Whenever Janey visited Sunnyside Carehome she felt guilty in some way, as though she should be doing something more for her mother. But what *could* she do? She barely held body and soul together as it was. Fortunately, her mother's care costs were covered by anonymous monthly payments. Just as well for Janey barely had a bean, no matter how hard she tried to economise. Budgeting effectively just wasn't a life-skill she was born with. 'Born poor, but rich at heart,' her mom used to joke. 'That's us McEttrick girls.'

Squeezing Mickey into the last free space at the far end of the visitor car park, she grabbed the flowers from the passenger seat, and the *Citizen-Times*, whose headline had caught her eye – 'Goldsboro Crash: East Coast Armageddon Narrowly Averted.' Recently declassified information had revealed how close they had actually come that day to being all blown to kingdom come, and the news was full of it, burying the 'vampire' story, which was destined for the *National Enquirer*.

Janey was a little worried what her mother would make of the revelation. The catastrophic events that transpired on the day of her birth had led, indirectly, to the reason she was a resident of Sunnyside, as though her whole life had been defined in a single blinding flash.

The sharp October sun glinted off the revolving doors as she entered the lobby.

The receptionist looked up from her magazine, breaking into a gap-toothed smile. 'Always nice to see you, Miss McEttrick. How's it going?'

Janey rolled her eyes. 'Had better, Brenda.' She signed in, avoiding eye contact.

The receptionist leaned close, thickly-kohled eyes, half-enlarged behind the bifocals, flicking across her visitor hungrily as though hoping to find clues there.

Questions fizzed in the air like flies, but Janey didn't elaborate.

Brenda gave her a mock hurt expression that failed to get a response, so she tore off the card and slipped it into the laminated wallet with its lanyard, handing it to the visitor.

'Seeya.'

The receptionist frowned. She buzzed and the door clicked open. 'Have a nice visit now.'

The security door closed behind her. Janey walked along the antiseptic smelling corridor to her mother's ward. Everything was anaemic: insipid pastel décor; functional and offensive in its inoffensiveness; vague watercolours in safety glass frames; plastic cheese-plants; watery coffee; piped muzak. Medicated zombies shuffled around in robes, gazed out of windows, drooled in chairs, or rocked themselves in front of daytime TV, watched sternly by the white-clad wardens.

The place gave her the creeps.

Buck up, Janey girl! At least you're not a patient here. Yet.

She would try to be as breezy as possible. Hard, after recent events. She was still in shock, if truth was told, but Allen's solid presence and cool temperament had been a lifeline. She still couldn't believe her change in luck, and tried not to tempt her usual kind of fortune coming back by dwelling on it too much.

Janey knocked, waited for a beat ... then gently entered her mother's room.

Marsha was sitting up in her bed, reading the old *National Geographics* they let her have. For someone only in her early fifties she looked shockingly old. She'd 'let herself go', as they liked to say in such places. As though people held themselves up by sheer will, trapeze

artists in life's circus. But that's how it felt, more often than not. Janey always tried to do her up a bit, brush her long silvering hair – she still had a fine mane – and painting her nails. In her day her mother had been quite a looker, and still mischievously flashed her legs at the wardens. 'These pins of mine used to drive the boys wild!' she'd laugh naughtily.

Marsha was prone to random snippets of conversation – several threads often running concurrently. Sometimes she would answer something from a conversation held in the previous visit, or pre-empt your question before you'd finished the sentence, rolling it around in her mouth like a boiled sweet, amused at the taste but never answering it. The drugs they pumped her with definitely didn't help matters, and Janey frequently implored them to reduce the dosage, but they said 'it was for her mother's own good'. One time, when her medication had been lessened, 'extreme episodes' ensued, which left her, or members of staff, hurt. She became agitated, swore she saw things that weren't there, and grew hysterical when the wardens tried to calm her down, calling them: 'Fucking. Bastard. Imbeciles.'

'Hi Mom,' she called breezily as she peered around the door. 'It's Janey.'

Slowly, a flicker of recognition.

Marsha had been told of her daughter's arrival, but always acted surprised and delighted.

'Ah, my dear! Fancy seeing you here. Hearing you see. Seeing your hear.'

'I've brought you some flowers.'

A twitch of the head. 'Hours, it was. Hours.'

'I'll put them in a vase for you.'

'Ah, that's nice. Ah, that's nice.'

Janey hummed to herself as she arranged them, trying to stay positive. 'So, how have you been...?'

'Been? I haven't been anywhere, silly girl! I'm stuck here. They won't let me go. I have to go to Washington. I have to...'

Janey sat on the edge of the bed and held her mother's hand. 'I know Mom, I know.' She tried to channel calm, loving energy through her hands into her mother's – which were still slender and smooth.

They used to play the guitar so beautifully.

Finally, her mother looked her in the eye – and grew calm. Janey saw a flicker of lucidity there, of fear, shame, vulnerability, and remorse.

'I'm so sorry...'

'Shhush, Mom. It's okay.'

Janey started singing one of Marsha's favourite songs, 'Where Have All the Flowers Gone?' and her mother started to join in. Together, they harmonised and for a while they could have been at a folk club, or peace camp.

When they finished, they were both crying – but it felt good.

Janey remembered the newspaper, and flopped it on her mother's lap. 'You're not going to believe this... Look, it's official. They've finally admitted it, after all this time.'

Her mother stared at it, shaking her head, then turned away, chewing her thumbnail.

'This was what you were trying to prove, wasn't it?'

Janey remembered the endless hours her mother had spent in dreary libraries, the complicated discussions on the phone, the long letters, the piles of photocopies, the bulging folders, the room filled with her obsessive research – in search of the truth. Marsha had met with another Carolinian family, from the South – the Greggs – who had experienced a similar calamity, and a support group had been set up. Others came forward and shared their stories. Apparently it wasn't the first time there had been scary nuclear mishaps on American soil.

For a while, her mother had been a tireless campaigner, driving their search for truth.

Hard to imagine now. But the truth she had been after was now public knowledge. The media was full of it.

But it did not seem to make her mother happy.

'I thought you'd be interested...'

Marsha shoved the paper away until it fell on the floor.

'Oh, Mom!' Janey bent down to pick it up and noticed an old box underneath the bed. It looked too intriguing to ignore, so she pulled it out. 'Hey, what's this...?'

'Giveitthere, giveitthere, giveitthere.'

'Alright, alright. I'm not going to run off with it.' Shaking her head, she placed it on the bed, and her mother snatched it up protectively.

'What's in it, Mom?'

Marsha turned away, flinching.

Janey tried to look nonchalant, chucking the withered flowers away, and emptying the stagnant water in the sink. 'If you don't want to tell me, that's fine. Hell, we all need secrets. And I bet you don't get much privacy around here.' She cut the stems of the fresh flowers and placed them in the vase with some fresh water. 'There.' She placed the yellow roses on the window-sill, where they caught the light. 'Ain't they a pretty picture?' Janey turned and saw that her mother had opened up the box and slid something out.

Noticing Janey looking, she slid the box shut quick.

'My! Gone all Watergate on me?' Janey smiled, sitting back down. 'What's that...?'

Marsha shoved a handbill at her. It was yellowing and fragile. Janey wrinkled her nose. 'Well, what have we here...?' Inspecting it closer, she could see it was an old anti-war flyer from the Eighties, announcing a 'Ban the Bomb' peace march. Janey's eyes widened. 'Mom, is

this what you used to go to...?'

Marsha nodded, tapping Janey's brow. 'No. Know.'

Janey was used to her mother's strange requests. 'Allrighhttt.' Feeling a little foolish, she closed her eyes. The fragile handbill crinkled in her hand. On the wall, the clock with its flowered numerals, ticked like a bomb.

Somewhere, a fly buzzed itself into a fury, head butting the pane.

Janey wanted to get up and let it out. But it wouldn't go away.

It was inside her head.

The buzzing stopped.

Janey opened her eyes and blinked, feeling a little faint. The handbill lay in her palm. She looked around, relieved to find the room exactly where she had left it. 'What the...?'

Her mother was looking at her with gleaming eyes.

Janey gazed into them. And knew. Knew that her mother knew what she had just seen.

Marsha snatched the handbill back and snapping the box open, quickly placed it inside.

With a trembling hand Janey reached for the glass, filling it with water, and managing to spill about half before finally get its contents, cool and soothing, to her lips.

The shock of the birth-vision had unsettled her, and she took a moment to compose herself.

Janey had a thousand questions to ask. But she could see her mother shaking her head, and so once again she found herself having to reassure and console when that's exactly what she needed herself.

'I'm sorry, Mom. I didn't mean to upset you. Here, let me fix your hair for you.'

She brushed in silence. It never failed to soothe them both.

'I have some better news. I've ... met a nice man – at a folk night, can you believe it?'

Me, going to one of *those*? I actually enjoyed it. And we got chatting. He's a poet; runs a bookstore. It's early days yet, but I ... like him. Anyway, he's helping me. You see, I have to go to Scotland. I want to...' She tried to find the right phrase as she started to plait her mother's hair into braids. 'Reconnect with our ancestors. We're from over there originally, ain't we? I've been sent this wacky journal – out of the blue. It's apparently written by the-one-we-never-speak-about. Freaky, huh? But, a bit of an adventure as well. I don't know how I'm going to manage it, but I just have to go. I thought you'd like to know. If there's anything you can tell me, any pointers...' Janey finished the French-plait – looking at the pattern hard in the hope she might find some meaning in its woven strands. 'I'm in the dark here.'

Her mother stiffened, started trembling.

For one awful moment, Janey thought she was going to have a stroke or something. 'Mom, are you...?'

Suddenly, her mother burst out singing.

Marsha still had a fine voice, and now it was warmed up, it had shaken free the hoarseness. She sang verses of a Scottish ballad that Janey half-recognised from her childhood, but she couldn't remember the name. Something about a fairy knight and an evil Queen of Elfland. The shape-changing section was always very thrilling, as was the final reaction by the jilted queen. Janey had been called after the female protagonist – Janet – but had been called Janey since a child by family and friends and it had stuck.

Somehow, her destiny was tied up with such material.

When her mother finished, Janey clapped. 'Oh, Mom, that was ...' It was now her turn to weep, weep with joy. Her mother was still in there, and sometimes she came forth and shone and all was well again.

'Thank you for sharing that. But how...?'

All of a sudden, her mother was the admonishing parent, folding her arms crossly. 'Use the songs, silly girl. Use the songs. They will carry you across. Sing yourself back home.'

Back at Allen's, they discussed the Goldsboro news excitedly over lunch – the Kirk journal forgotten for a moment by the rush of Twentieth Century history bursting into the present. Allen had spent most of the morning online, following the fallout of the formerly classified information coming to light. According to him, the social media aftermath was 'white hot'.

Janey related her own personal connection, augmented by the contact with the handbill.

Describing the scene, so fresh in her mind, made it seem almost natural – the way she had received the intense download of memory from a piece of paper (a key detail she carefully left out).

Allen sat back and took it all in. 'Wow, that's ... mind-blowing!' He tried to figure it out. 'So your mom...?'

'Was born the very moment her pop, my grandfather, died.'

'That's just ... too tragic. I'm sorry.'

'It kinda set the tone for my Mom. Life in the key of A.'

'No shit.' He blew out his cheeks. 'Something like that casts a long shadow.'

'Mom made it her mission to find out the truth. It wasn't easy to get straight answers.'

He shook his head. 'I can imagine.'

'My grandfather, having been a veteran of Korea, honourably discharged mind you, in his last few micro-seconds of life–' Her voice caught. 'Would have recognised the payload from the B-52s.'

Allen nodded vigorously: 'Big Boys. A-Bombs, but with a payload of twenty-four megatons. More than two hundred and fifty times more powerful than the one dropped on

Hiroshima, with a one hundred per cent kill-zone of seventeen miles.'

Janey looked at him, slightly horrified, but she couldn't say if it was what he was saying, or the fact he seemed to be relishing the details.

'If it had gone off, it would have exceeded the yield of all munitions ever detonated outside of testing in the history of the world – the blast of all the TNT, gunpowder, conventional bombs and the Hiroshima and Nagasaki blasts combined.' He paused for dramatic effect. 'It would have created a Bay of North Carolina.'

They both spent a moment absorbing the gravity of this information. It was sobering shit.

Allen started to skin up. 'A genuine, solid gold miracle.'

Janey put her hands together in mock prayer. 'God looks after his own.'

'I wish He would look after our fucking bombs.'

They made some more coffee and returned to the sofa.

Lighting up, Allen continued: 'It was all hushed up of course. The press were spun the usual bullshit. The bombs were unarmed and couldn't have gone off. Smoke and mirrors. Apparently the whole area was sealed off, farm included, so the evidence could be discreetly removed, though flooding prevented retrieval of the bomb. Its core was embedded twenty feet down.'

Janey shook her head. 'You're loving all this, aren't you?'

Allen held up his hands. 'My bad. I get high on the facts. I should be more sensitive. It's been a long while since I had company.'

Janey folded her arms. 'I can tell.'

He put his arm around her very carefully, as though she was the unexplored bomb. 'I can't imagine what it must feel like.'

'You're right there.'

'It's just this shit makes me so *angry*. Everyone needs to know about it. If you ever wanted to tell your story, I'd be happy to write it up for the *Smoky* or *Xpress*.'

Janey could see he was being sincere. Perhaps bringing this stuff out into the light would be ... healing. She took a deep breath and made a decision. 'Okay.'

Allen pulled out a Dictaphone from his jacket pocket, placing it on the coffee table.

When Janey nodded, he turned it on.

She accepted the joint, took a thoughtful toke, and, exhaling the pungent smoke, started talking: 'My Mom was ... a child of the Sixties. She came of age in the Seventies, and graduated in the early Eighties with a major in Political History. She was the first one of her family to get to university, and it was right here, in good ol' Asheville, that she became highly politicised, joined societies, attending rallies, demos, marches – her apartment given over to placard painting, to earnest meetings, and to the production of handbills and posters for numerous causes. Coming from mountain folks, she had inherited the singing tradition from *her* mom, and had turned her gift to protest songs. Growing up in the shadow of the Cold War had made her highly aware of the threats of MAD and nuclear Armageddon. She signed up to CND, then the Women's Peace Movement, joining her sisters in their camps outside bases.'

Allen made an 'O' with his fingers.

Janey took a deep breath. 'It was hitchhiking back from one of these, that she got picked up by a handsome Cherokee drifter who “swept her off her feet”, as she was bitterly fond of describing – always vague, always over-romanticising the details.' Janey picked at her nails, a quaver of anger in her voice. 'Later, she was to discover this “drifter” had in fact been an FBI agent, who had charmed his way into her life as a way of discovering information about covert activities by the protesters.'

Allen raised his eyebrows, mouthed *man*.

Janey took another pull on the reefer, her hand a white-knuckled fist around its smouldering fuse.

'She had found herself pregnant and single, but this didn't stop her. At the age of twenty-one, she gave birth to me, and continued her lifestyle – taking me to protests in a buggy, and later folk evenings, where she sang ballads. She was an ... erratic but loving mother – wanting to give me a “rounded education”, as she put it. Dragged me along to all kinds of risky situations. Breaking into airbases to damage expensive fighter planes. Stuff like that. Oh yes, quite an Amazon in her day was my Mom! She was prone to getting busted, to the point that the local Sheriff's office knew her on first name terms and even had a makeshift crèche for little baby Janey. But on one occasion she was grilled by FBI officers in a way which left her ... traumatised.'

Allen waited patiently for her to continue.

'It was there, in the cells once again, she met her “drifter”, now dressed in a dark suit. One of her interrogators. Afterwards, she became twitchy at the sight of anyone in uniform, in a suit for that matter. She swore she was being followed, being bugged, being monitored. The Feds held a file on her, as an activist, as they had on poor old John Lennon: shot down the year I came into the world...

'By the Nineties, she was showing signs of what they called ‘mental illness’ – swearing it was something they were putting in the water. I was looked after by Grandma Dotty more and more while she was still alive, until they declared my Mom unfit to be my guardian, and I had to be placed in a home. Her days as a political firebrand were over. And to this day, she resides in care. I suspect she's not the only one to have suffered due to the seedy actions of undercover agents. I've never met my ... father, but I hope he gets to read this and I hope it

hurts him. The truth needs to come out.'

Allen turned the recorder off with a click. 'That's a mighty sad story... Thank you.'

Janey's eyes glittered like wet steel. 'Probably just as well that I haven't met the bastard. I think I'd murder him for what he did. I may be half-Cherokee, but that's all he's given me. Mongrel blood and bad at that.'

She flicked the roach into the fireplace.

Allen put down the Dictaphone. 'Hey, come here.'

For a while they just held one another.

11

The day I crossed over was like the first day of Creation. A mist clung to the hills as a shroud; no, like a parlour covered in dust-sheets where, imminently, the sun was going to come in and whip them away revealing their antique glory anew. The colours, as they emerged in the burgeoning light, seemed like the primal colours of Genesis. The deep clean blue of the cloudless sky; the luscious green and gold of the Scots Pine and gorse; the imperial robes of the heather. And then the higher trees caught the first filaments of the rising sun and were rewritten in fire. I was called to the wild hills. Resist, I could not. I did not wait to even pull on my robes. Wearing only my night shirt, I slipped out of bed.

I gazed sadly upon my wife, sleeping heavily after another night's exhausting noctambulation. I kissed her gently upon the brow. 'My darling, I must away. I am going to find you physik,' I whispered. 'I shall not return without the elixir that will heal you. It is love that drives me, and will bring me back to you. On my grandsire's bones, I swear.'

I padded quietly down the stairs and out of the front door, leaving it ajar in my distraction. My bony extremities were prinked with gooseflesh, and my heart knocked against my chest. I felt an almost suffocating sense of urgency – I needed to get to the Fayrie hill in time for when the rising sun blessed it with its light. The shadowy flanks of the steep-sided valley gave me a little time. I hurried up the track – my bare feet wet with dew, the hem of my nightshirt sodden. I could hear the strains of fey music calling me – I could feel it surging through the hillside: the whimsical melody of a whistle, the

blood-thrilling skirl of a pipe; and the racing heart-beat tattoo of drums. I was going to join them! Tears irrigated my cheeks. I was overwhelmed with an almost unbearable bliss. The gladdening light mirrored the tide of joy rising within me. As I breached the silent grove of the summit, the orb of the sun broke through in its undiminished glory, a bronze gong ringing in the day. I drank in its light, breathed in the sweet air, and stepped into the ring.

First day of October and there was a distinctive autumnal tang in the air – the stands of birch, beech, basswood, and the many kinds of maple just starting to turn, as though catching fire. The hillsides were swathed in the yellow and purple of sunflowers and asters. The morning air was soft with mist, and the riches of the land slowly revealed themselves as the new sun emerged – 'like a shy bride lifting her veil', as her fellow walker put it as they took in the splendour.

Janey gave him a look.

'Autumn and poets – it's a deadly combination,' he shrugged. 'There's something about the time of year that makes you want to wax lyrical ... write songs or something.'

'Well, I have been known...!' Janey answered, playing it coy. She was always a little awkward around her own material – compared to the masters and mistresses she emulated, she was a rank amateur. That's how she felt anyhow. With such tried-and-trusted classics out there – which the audiences always preferred – why bother attempting to pen new stuff? And yet ... she did get creative urges sometimes. But with so much inside her to express, where do you start?

Raven slid out the Boogerman Trail map from the pocket of his cargo pants, turning it the right way up. He frowned, squinted up the track. 'Mm. Let's go up this way. Get away

from the crowds. Man, that parking was pain.'

Inspired by the latest extract from the journal they had decided to go for a walk in the foothills with London, upcountry. Reading had become part of their shared routine while Janey remained an 'emergency guest' – a temporary arrangement which seemed to agree with both of them, although Allen insisted he took the couch.

'C'mon, boy,' Janey called her wayward companion, who was gallivanting about the underbrush, bothering squirrels.

For a while they just walked in silence, enjoying the break from the intensity of the last few days. The world could change in a week, and theirs certainly had.

Vampires and atom bombs, zombie preachers and earthquakes of the heart.

The ground under their feet no longer felt so solid.

Janey trudged behind Raven who bounded ahead. She was still figuring him out. Was he too nice for her? She was used to her diamonds being rougher.

London barrelled towards her and she knelt to fuss him, burying her nose in his musky fur. 'What do you reckon, Lonny?'

He barked, sprinted along the track, turned, nose low to the ground, barked again.

'Alright. I'm coming!'

She pushed on up the track. Raven was waiting at the turn, checking the map. Her own Boy Scout. Perhaps he was too good to be true. A closet psycho. Yet the flash she received in the Green Jack didn't set the alarm bells ringing. Metal and tattoos on the outside he may be – but inside, he seemed all sheep. A poet, for Crissakes! Yet around him she did feel ... safe. The recent incident on the doorstep had wobbled her.

Nowhere seemed safe anymore.

'Hey.'

'Hey.' She hooked her arm around his and they carried on.

'How you doin'??'

Janey gave him her best smile. 'Dandy.'

The roar that filled the holler told them they had come to Cataloochee Creek. They picked their way down to one of the log bridges – the usual crossing places, but the creek was in spate after the recent rains.

Janey appraised it sceptically. 'Looks a might tricky.'

'Hell, no. It'll be fun. Life is a risk, and fortune favours the bold. C'mon!'

London needed no further encouragement and deftly trotted across.

Allen went next, feigning a wobble in the middle above the churning waters. 'Oh, ohhh...'

'Be careful! Quit fooling around!'

Allen made it swiftly to the other side, and pirouetted, making a bow.

Janey bit her lip, then arms wide, edged her way across.

Allen was waiting to embrace her. 'There, that wasn't too scary was it?'

Janey flicked him fondly across the hooter.

Rubbing his nose, he spoke over the roar. 'It's like this place. You'd think it was haunted or something with a name like the Boogerman Trail, but it's just named after a guy who, when asked at school what did he want to be, said, 'The Boogerman', and that's how Robert 'Boogerman' Palmer got his name. He lived up in these woods – you'll see his old place in a while. Hell, we'll even be walking along his road.'

Janey looped her arm into his again. She loved hearing him talk about stuff.

'What we think is scary is just a state of mind.'

‘Right. What I’ve experienced during the last month hasn’t felt like “a state of mind!”’

Allen stopped. Squirmed in his boots.

‘I’ve been attacked in my truck by Hound of the Fucking-Baskervilles; spooked out my house by a spectral preacher and the Men in Black; had vampires stalk me...’

‘Okay...’ Allen held up his hands.

‘...And the Evil Dead attack the Lodge. Took out the firekeeper. She’s still recovering. And not from a fucking “state of mind” Mister Expert!’

‘Okay, okay.’

Janey clenched her fists. She picked up a branch and thwacked a tree with it.

‘Aaarghhh!’

Allen waited for her to calm down. ‘Jeez, Janey, I’m so sorry.’

‘Alright, just quit fucking apologising. And never lay that ‘mansplaining’ shit on me!’

Allen backed away, holding his hands up in surrender. He went to speak, but thought better of it.

They carried on in silence.

The sharp light cut between the trees in dust-moted planes through which they passed. For a while there was just the trudge of boots and their breathing as they pushed upwards.

The dog ran in loops around them, a ragged intermediary, occasionally pausing to check on their progress. On one pass, Allen bent down and picked up a stick, throwing it into the weft of shadow and light.

There was a furtive scrambling, then London burst out of the underbrush, holding the stick triumphantly.

‘You wouldn’t think this stuff was called dog-hobble would you?’ Allen spoke to no one in particular. ‘It’s mountain slang from when the bear hunters used to bring their dogs up here

– it was said to stop their hunting dogs from chasing down their quarry. But they didn't figure on an Alaskan Malamute – like a four-legged Humvee, aren't you?'

London gave a bark, and nudged the stick.

Smiling shyly back at Janey, Allen picked it up and threw it again and the dog went bounding off.

She thawed a little. No point letting it ruin the walk. The day was too nice to be blighted for long. So she smiled back.

They continued on through sun-dappled hemlock and rhododendron. A pair of horse-trekkers passed by, waving to them. A few minutes there was a tinkle and a lycra-clad mountain biker swished by.

After about a mile they reached a sign for the Boogerman Trail, cutting straight up the hillside.

She paused to catch her breath. 'Looks steep.'

'Well, we can carry on Caldwell Fork and join it later on. Choice is yours...'

London looked up at her, eyes shining, tongue lolling, breath steaming slightly in the coolness.

'The road most taken...?' Allen whimsied, pointing to the gentler track.

Janey finally smiled, and hooked her arm in his once again as they made their way along the winding path that snaked alongside the creek, frequently crossing it via well-maintained footbridges. The scenery just got more and more damn beautiful. She tried to enjoy it. Breathed in the healthy normality of it. Hoped it was infectious.

The whole scene was a bit too perfect for her to feel relaxed. She was expecting it to spit her out. *Jeez, girl, stop trying to look for the problem!* She was so used to bad luck following her around that it felt weird for something not to go south for once. Allen seemed

unfazed by her show of anger. It was all ‘cool’ with him.

Part of her wanted to do something that would crack his good egg composure wide open.

They stopped at a bench to savour the view, and Allen pulled out his flask, pouring them both some coffee. ‘Isn’t this glorious? Like looking at an Ansell Adams photograph.’

Janey cradled the steaming cup. ‘God’s own country,’ she muttered through gritted teeth.

Allen turned to her. ‘Okay. No apologies. Just for future reference. What have I done this time?’

Janey sighed. ‘I don’t mean to be ... y’know. It’s just that, well, you do like the sound of your own voice, don’t you?’

Allen looked a bit put out.

‘Why can’t we just ‘be’, y’know. It doesn’t always have to be fucking Shakespeare.’

‘Mea culpa, I’m a poet. What can I say.’

‘There you go again. Loving the words that come out of your mouth. Why don’t you just try *enjoying* what’s in front of you for a change?’

He frowned, turned away, looking into the distance. All she could see was the quarter moon of his profile – the swell of beard, crag of nose, buttress of brow.

The day swirled around them – the light, the hikers, the clouds – as though a projection, while they sat in their empty silent room.

Finally, he spoke. ‘You’re right. I must have fucking Tourette’s or something. I can’t help myself.’ He clenched a fist.

Janey sidled closer, wrapped a hand around the knuckles. He tensed. She ran her fingers up his vertebrae, massaged a stiff shoulder blade. ‘Just try *feeling* it. It’s a beautiful day.’

He breathed out and she could feel him relax a little. Closing his eyes, he tilted his face to the sun.

'Mmm. That's good.' He turned to her. 'Thanks.'

They just held hands for a while, enjoying the truce.

Allen pointed; bit his tongue.

'Okay, go on. Out with it.'

'Those tall fellas are Schweinitz's Sunflowers – they're protected by the State. And those bright red ones are cardinal flowers.'

'Christ, how do you know all this stuff?'

'Oh, it's just bits of trivia I pick up here and there. There's no system to my knowledge. It's like a yard sale. There's all kinds of random junk rattling around in here.' He tapped his temple.

'That's what worries me.'

He nudge her, and she nudged back. They laughed.

Time slowed, as though here in the bend of the creek it rested up for a while.

Allen produced a candy bar and London became very interested. He sat and lifted up a paw. 'That is so adorable, how can I resist?'

'Oh, he's just trying it on. I've got some proper snacks for him here. Better for his teeth. Here, Lonny.' She tossed one in the air and it was snapped away. In an instant it was wolfed down and he was begging for more.

'That didn't even touch the sides!' said Allen.

They sat and soaked up the view, savouring the chocolate and hot coffee from a flask, waving at the walkers passing by.

'S'ppose we should be getting on if we're gonna reach Boogerman's place before

sundown,' sighed Janey. 'Can't keep a ghost waiting now, can we?'

'The forest has its own clock.'

They leaned in close. At first Janey felt a little awkward, as though they were role-playing being a couple. But ... it felt like a good fit, an old pair of Levis.

Finally, they got up and carried on their way.

'Ah, here it is.' Allen pointed to another sign for the Boogerman Trail. 'Shall we?'

Janey held out her arm. 'After you, Grizzly Adams.'

They carried on for a while, soaking up the sheer majesty of the old growth forest – the Fraser firs, oaks, spruce and maple, ablaze with colour.

Allen threw a stick for London and he came bounding back with it almost immediately.

'Oh, that's it now – he's got you...'

'Yup, I'm hooked,' he smiled, looking at her slyly. He took the now slimy stick from the dog, and pretended to throw it again. London barked, and Allen tossed it the other way.

'You tease!'

I get off on the illusion of power, anyway. It gives me some consolation that I'm actually the one in control.'

They looked at each other – seeing the forest reflected in each others' eyes.

I wonder what it will be like...' Janey suddenly said.

'What...?'

'The other country...'

'Oh. You mean Scotland?'

She nodded.

'Well...' He gestured to the path. 'Shall we carry on...?'

'A little farther? As long as you're not a wolf...'

'You'd make a good Red Riding Hood.'

'Hey, mister, you'd better watch out. Perhaps *I'm* the wolf!'

London barked at them.

'Oh, okay, you've got the job!' They laughed.

'Hiding in plain sight,' observed Allen. They carried on a little way. 'You were wondering about Scotland... Well, look around you.'

Janey took in the pine forests that swathed the hillsides in resinous silence, the purple peaks stretching beyond, the roar of a waterfall, the sharp cry of a bird of prey above, the sense of space, of peace, of wildness.

'What do you mean?'

'Are you sure...?'

She kicked him.

'Ow, okay! A long while back Scotland and the Appalachians were joined together in a continent called Laurentia. Finally, they split apart – but when the first Celtic settlers came here, they felt a sense of familiarity. It was almost the same landscape – same geology, even if the vast amount of time had sundered things, in evolutionary terms. And that's why, partly, I think so many Celts – Scottish, Scotch-Irish, that is – settled here. They felt at home. When you go over to the Old Country, you'll no doubt feel something similar.'

Janey pondered this as she gazed out over the view – it was as though she was looking at two places at once, flickering between being slightly overlapping to locking in. She explained this to Allen.

'It's the parallax view. Our eyes see two slightly different versions of the world, and the brain merges them.'

'Like there's a little guy in there with 3-D glasses on, watching the whole thing?'

'Yeah, something like that! All alone in the multiplex of the mind.'

'Aww.'

'But, wait! He's been joined by a cute gal bearing popcorn. Can you hear them munching it?' Allen stomped through the mulch.

'Shhh! I'm trying to enjoy the movie.'

'Boogerman ... in glorious Skull-o-rama. Wooo!'

'You'd make a rubbish ghost.'

A snap of a twig made them freeze.

London bared his fangs, growling low.

They looked at one another.

'Get behind me.' Allen pushed in front, bending down to pick up a branch.

From out the undergrowth exploded a red deer. Seeing the dog, it froze, watching them all with dark, liquid eyes.

Janey grabbed London's collar.

For a moment all were bound by the spell of the gaze, until the deer snorted and bounded off, quickly vanishing into the dense lattice of forest.

They both breathed with relief.

'For a minute there...'

'I know.'

'Thought it was ...'

'The Boogerman?'

They laughed. It felt good to defeat their fear.

They pushed on up the trail and soon started to notice old stone walls, covered in lichen and

moss. Then, in a clearing the rotting framework of a settler cabin. Half-hidden in the underbrush could be seen the remnants of a split-rail fence.

'It looks like someone used to live here...' said Janey

'You'd be right in thinking that. This is old Boogerman's place.'

They explored, with London leading the way.

'Be careful of snakes.'

'Oh, you old maid!' Janey laughed, brushing away his concern.

'Just be careful where you put your hands and feet, is all. Mind them, and they'll mind you.'

'Yes, sir!' Janey saluted, but looked on Allen as he pushed ahead with fondness. The way he looked out for her was ... touching, or annoying. It was a novel experience, anyhow. There was something chivalrous, almost medieval about him.

The next part of the trail was called Snake Branch – but, as her guide reassured her (or himself) any snakes were probably scared off long ago by the regular footfall of hikers passing back and forth, taking stills or videos of the stone walls and foundations on their tablets and phones.

'Lord knows what Boogerman Palmer would have made of all these crowds traipsing through his land,' observed Allen dryly.' Seems to me he preferred trees to people. He managed to protect a lot of the old growth.'

'I'm liking this fella the more I hear about him! I can see why he lived all the way out here...'

'Wouldn't you get lonesome?' asked Allen.

'Not with Lonny to keep me company, surely not.' She fussed him some, giving her hound a sly wink.

'London might have his qualities, but he wouldn't be much good at fixing a shelf.'

'Well, that ain't a fair comparison. He'd earn his keep and then some – and wouldn't need much in return, except the odd scratch behind the ear. The problem with people is – well, they're high maintenance.'

Allen shrugged, as they passed through a white cloud of rhododendron. 'Sure. But you can get so much in return...'

'Like what? I need some convincing here. Sell me the deal.'

'Mm. Let's see. Company...'

'London gives me as much as I want.'

'Conversation...'

'London's a great listener.'

'Compassion.'

'I reckon Lonny here has the biggest heart I know. He'll forgive all my fuck-ups, and I have plenty. Not many men would do that, and still have a waggin' tail.'

'Er, a kiss and a cuddle.'

They looked at each other, framed by the mountain laurel in the sun, and for a nano-second, an invisible current of high voltage passed between them.

But Janey swatted it away as though it were a fly. 'Lonny here is a good licker. And loves a cuddle.'

'You've got me there, then. There isn't any competing with the man of the house. He's obviously your ideal companion.'

Janey swished at the doghobble with a stick. 'Pretty much.'

'Well, I'm glad you're happy.'

'You are?' A sly smile broke out on her face before she could stop herself. Fortunately,

Allen was oblivious to it.

'I wouldn't want you to go lonely now.'

'Sweet of you,' she called after him, watching him stomp ahead.

London cocked his head, as Janey paused in thought.

Then she remembered what Shelly had said.

'C'mon, Lonny. We've got a man to catch!' They raced after Allen, and pounced on him together.

When he'd caught his breath, Janey pulled him to her and planted a kiss on his lips before he could do a damn thing about it.

She stopped, and his expression made her laugh. 'You look like you've found a rattlesnake in your boot.'

'Then I'd better find another one then to match.' Now it was his turn to kiss her, and they held each other for a long while.

Finally, London's curious barking made them stop, and laugh.

'I believe he's jealous!'

'I believe you're right.' Janey fussed him some. 'Don't worry pard'ner – you'll always be my right-hand man.'

'I guess I'll have to be your left, then.' Allen took her left hand in his, and they walked on ahead.

Janey let out a shrill laugh. 'Look at us! Like peas in a pod, ain't we though?'

'If you want I could tell you what I've found out about Kirk...?'

They'd arrived at a viewpoint looking out over the mountains and valley. There were picnic benches, a telescope, and a cluster of walkers enjoying the vista and the autumnal day.

London was put on his lead, and given some water and treats. They sat down and broke open the provisions – a flask, sandwiches, chips, and apples.

‘Go on then. You know you’re dying to.’

Allen gave her a look, then put on his reading glasses.

They slurped and munched happily (along with London, who showed a keen interest in the meal), as Allen gave Janey a summary of his research, reading from his moleskine notebook: ‘Kirk wrote the book a year before he died, or vanished – depending on what version you believe. A transcript was made by his relative, Robert Campbell, at Kirk’s bedside. He died in 1692, aged 48. His wife gave birth to their second child, a boy also called Robert, shortly after Kirk’s death – and presumably your folks are descended him or their first child, Marjorie. Kirk himself was born in 1644, from a long line of educated men. His grandfather, John Kirk, was a notary and scrivener in Edinburgh. His father, the Reverend James Kirk...’

Janey started humming the theme from *Star Trek*.

Allen gave her a mock serious stare, and clearing his throat, continued: ‘...Was appointed minister to Aberfoyle parish, Perthshire, in 1639 and, settled into parochial life, had a large family. Are you keeping up...?’

Janey spluttered some coffee. ‘Sure. This is fascinating stuff – they’re my ancestors after all. Keep going, Scotty!’

Allen frowned at her; then he kept going. ‘Kirk, would you believe it – was actually the seventh son...’

‘Oh my! So, he would have had...’

‘Second Sight, right. He was gifted in other ways too – in linguistics.’

‘A cunning linguist?’

'I don't think they knew of such things back then! We're talking stiff church folk, after all.'

'Oh, come on! They must have had oral sex back then!'

Some of the hikers looked around, rather shocked.

Allen and Janey sniggered.

'You're distracting me! Shhh!'

'Sorry, sir.' She did her best schoolgirl act.

'Ahem!' Allen pretended to smooth his 'tweed'. 'He got an MA from St Andrews at the age of seventeen. He was ordained at twenty, and worked in various parishes. He became a pillar of the community – getting married in 1678.'

'Was his wife a pillar of the community then?'

He gave her a scowl. 'He translated psalms into Gaelic verse, and other Scots dialect; was the editor of a new Irish edition of the Bible.'

Janey gazed across the pines. 'Jeez, it's hard to imagine anyone with my DNA being so bright...'

'In June of 1685 he was appointed to his father's old parish of Aberfoyle – and there he stayed until his death, or disappearance. And it was there he started to develop his strange old hobby of collecting fairy lore...'

'A-ha! Enter stage left, Master Goodfellow.'

'His monograph, *The Secret Commonwealth*, was finished in 1691, a year before his death...'

'Hey, 1691 – that's like my Mom's birth year ... 1961.'

Allen raised his eyebrows, impressed. 'So it is ... kind of palindromic.'

'If you say so.'

'The next isn't until 6009.'

'I won't hold my breath.'

Ignoring her, he licked his finger and turned the page. 'He took to going on evening strolls in his nightshirt ... on a fairy-mound.'

'That could so easily be misconstrued...'

'Stop it! He's a reverend!'

'Exactly.'

'Anyway! He was found there one night, collapsed.'

'Of exhaustion?'

'He died soon afterwards, and was buried in his own ... kirkyard.'

'Neat.'

'His wife gave birth to their child.'

'So his genes lived on.'

'But that's not the end of the story. They hadn't seen the last of him. Kirk appeared to his cousin, Graham of Duchray, revealing to him he was not dead ... but a prisoner in fairyland! He could reappear at the christening of his posthumous child, when Graham was to throw a knife at the apparition, breaking the spell and restoring Kirk to the upperworld. Alas, at the christening, when Kirk appeared, the cousin was too stunned to act. Kirk vanished, never to be seen again...'

'Bummer.'

'Then, weird-upon-weird, they opened the coffin and found it full of ... stones. The general conclusion was he had been swapped for a changeling, identical in all but soul – a clone, if you will. The lights are on but nobody's home. And from this, they surmised that ... he was still trapped in fairyland.'

'Creepy. Hearing that made me shiver...'

'As though someone had stepped over your grave...?'

'Right.'

'There's a tantalising footnote to this...'

Janey handed her companion an apple and crunched into her own, enjoying the sweet tang. They now had the viewpoint to themselves – the other hikers seemed to have given them a wide berth.

'When Katherine Briggs, the great English folk tale collector, visited in 1943, she found evidence of a more recent tradition. She met a woman who had been expecting a baby, and was anxious to get it to Kirk's old place and christen it there, for it was locally believed that if a baby was born there, and a dirk thrust into his chair, the erstwhile reverend could still be freed.'

They chewed this over while finishing the apples. Biting it down to the core, Janey cast hers over the edge. 'This one's for Johnny Appleseed.' She gave London his midday snack, and pondered on what she'd heard. 'It's such a great story...'

'And the exciting thing is – it might all be true! And that it's up to you, young lady, to free him!'

Janey gazed out across the mountains. 'Quite a responsibility...'

Allen turned to her, and squeezed her hand. 'You're not alone.'

The moment opened between them – like a portal – and they found themselves embracing. A wave of warmth enveloped them. To Janey the euphoria she felt was of relief – as though she had stumbled upon a rock in a storm to cling onto.

'I'm so glad I've found you, I really am,' she whispered, her vision blurred with tears. 'I'm sorry if I keep, y'know, poking you. It's like being told there's a snake in a bush. The

perverse part of me can't stop with the stick. Guess I'm wanting to see if you have any venom.'

He hissed, baring his teeth.

'Thought not.'

Allen glowered, which just made Janey laugh, until he broke too.

'I'd ... given up looking. Hoping. I was getting used to my bachelor ways. Then you stroll into Sneaky Hooch, and my War of Independence was ... lost.' He feigned a flag-wave. 'I surrender.'

Janey got up, brushing the crumbs from her. She picked up a stick, and let London off the lead. 'Come on!'

Allen makes a polite cough. 'It's this way. The way is easier from now on.'

Janey looked at him go. 'Perhaps,' she whispered under her breath.

12

'Whoah, stop! Can it!' EZ roared, and one-by-one the instruments fell dead.

The band dripped sweat. EZ's garage was usually stuffy but today felt completely airless. A battered dog-eared sofa sat in one corner next to a chiller and a table littered with take-away cartons. The walls had old gig posters tacked up optimistically next to Lou Reed, Tom Petty, and Eddie Veder. Music gear was stacked everywhere.

'What was it *this* time?' snapped Slim, looking like he was ready to smash his Fender over EZ's skull.

Feed Me threw his sticks up in the air and let them clatter to the concrete, leaning back to crack his knuckles. He bent down and scooped up a handful of his favourite peanut-butter filled pretzels before shovelling them into his mouth, munching them in a deliberately slobbish way.

Janey took a deep breath and turned to face them all. Getting them all back together for a rehearsal after the last bust-up had been tricky enough. But the tension in the room hadn't gone away, and they were only half-way through their first set.

EZ paced up and down, dressed in black jeans and a sweat-soaked Canned Heat t-shirt. 'What is it? You have to ask?' He ran blistered fingers through his tangle of question-mark hair. 'You sound like you're all playing a different song, that's what's up! Jeezus F Christ! Anybody think we were sixth-graders jerking off on Guitar-hero with our sticky dreams of spandex!'

'Get fucking Shakespeare over here!' gestured Feed Me, spitting pretzel. 'Since when did you get to be the American Idol ass-hole?'

EZ went to snap, then took a breath to reload with exploding ammo. 'I'm the only fucking jerk holding this group together. Since that's when!'

Slim snorted in derision. 'There you go on that high-goddamn-horse of yours. 'Scuse me if I don't tip ma hat, Sheriff Shit-faced. The only thing you like to hold is your pecker, 'cos no-one else will.' He held his forefinger and thumb together. 'If they could find it.'

'While yours grows conveniently from your forehead,' EZ guffawed.

They started to square up to each other, but stopped when they saw Janey lift up the mike stand. She didn't say anything, just raised it; then lowered it again, very slowly.

'Boys, boys, boys. How I'm gonna miss y'all.'

The three men looked at her now.

'I've been meaning to tell you but, well, we haven't seen each other much lately, and it's been one crazy time.'

Folded arms and frowns.

'You see ... I've met this man.'

'Give us his address and we'll send our condolences,' grunted Feed Me.

'Ha ha. Anyhow, he's got good connections in the music scene. Writes for the *Smoky Mountain News* and *Mountain Xpress*. Reviews and the like. He actually gave us a decent write-up once...'

'Get to the fucking last act.' EZ sat down on a stool, glaring at the stained, grey slab beneath his sneakers like it was a Jackson Pollock.

'He's got me a booking at the Gaelic Gathering festival in Glasgow!' Her eyes lit up as she said it, hardly believing it herself.

Slim scratched his bullet-shaped head. 'Glasgow. Is that in Maine somewhere?'

'Glasgow, Scotland, you cretin!' EZ seethed. He raised his baleful gaze at Janey. 'The

fuck?'

'He's got a contact over there. Sent them a demo – remember my little solo project that went nowhere? They liked it. He must have bigged me up or something because next thing I know they're giving me a call, asking if I wanted to come over.'

The men looked at her as though she was Judas.

'Allen's been brilliant. He's arranged everything. Negotiated the fee. Booked the flight, the hotel. I'm going the end of January, so it won't affect our Christmas and New Year schedule. Plenty of winter gigs between now and then.'

'Dial back a bit there, Calamity.' EZ's voice was measured. He gripped the stool beneath him as though it was about to take off. 'You're jetting off to bonny fucking Scotland to do a *solo* gig? And getting *paid* for it?'

'Well, the fee just about covers the expenses...'

'Hey, since when were you a solo act?' added Slim. 'I don't remember you being the Lone Ranger type...'

'Where's your fucking *loyalty*? You're in a band. B. A. N. D. Doesn't that mean anything to you?' His raised his arms wide, then dropped them to his side. 'Obviously not.' EZ walked to the garage door and banged it loud. 'You didn't think for a moment of trying to arrange a gig for the rest of us, hey? The poor ol' Jackalopes, remember them? Or are we such an embarrassment to you that you forgot to mention us?'

'Hey, guys, it's not like that. Just a one-off. To tell you the truth, I'm terrified at the prospect. I wish you could be there with me. It'll be mighty lonesome up there on stage.'

'Where's that violin? Oh, please! Janey McEttrick, you didn't think twice about it. We're just your stop-gap.'

'Ain't that the truth,' said Slim.

Feed Me started to beat the bass-drum, getting louder and louder. He snatched up some spare sticks from their holder, and launched into a frenzied drum solo, spitting pretzels.

‘Jeez, guys. Sorry!’ Janey hollered, straining to be heard. ‘But it’s not the end of the world, is it?’

Between two beats of the heart, the blink of an eye, the gap betwixt day and night – through the crack of dawn I fell and within that instant, which seemed to dilate the further I stepped into it, the rising sun became the rising moon, and the glorious morning, a star-pricked evening; the cusp of spring, the penumbra of autumn. Yet the mountains of my home remained steadfast and constant.

It was as though I had stepped into a second edition of the world.

The bracing Highland air; the sensation of the chill, damp night upon my cheek; the cool grass beneath my feet – the very blades seemed to crackle with tiny sparks of light, and, as I looked down, woad-blue fire swirled around my toes, dislodged at my passing. It lingered at ankle height as a fen mist would, yet like none I had encountered on Rannoch Moor or on any other drear places of the world that I had knowledge of.

This was not familiar ground, at least in the corporeal sense. Yet in another way, I knew this place.

From my research I was cogniscent of the antipodal conditions of Fayrie-land. When we have scarcity they have plenty and vice versa. Our day was their night. The glory of our summer is to them the dead of winter.

The thrill of awareness shuddered through my body. I knew in the very fibre of my being that I had passed over – that I was a Minister ... in Elfland!

By crossing that fungal threshold I had ex-communicated myself.

I also knew that I was freezing, clad only in my night-shirt on a mountain-side, and that if I did not get down soon I would perish. So I set off as swiftly as I could over the benighted terrain, trusting my legs more than my eyes.

Janey put down the journal and rubbed her eyes. She sat in Pack Square, taking five while downtown on errands. A svelte octogenarian jogger padded past, running to the soundtrack on her iPod. In the other direction whizzed a man in a business suit on a personal transporter, checking his watch, briefcase under his arm. To a different time signature, London chased a squirrel that dashed up a tree, a fat nut in its mouth. It paused, triumphant, looking down mockingly on the earth-bound hound.

The sky had a new lick of paint that day and the trees glowed with the knowledge of the year. A brisk mid-October breeze teased the leaves. Janey looked up at them as though with fresh eyes. The trees of Asheville played their part in the seasonal masque, changing through a spectrum of allegiances – yellow to orange to red to purple, dropping their leaves like handkerchiefs, their nutshells like slippers into which an acorn, cob, beechnut, or conker, would fit precisely. The autumn light seemed to linger over the transient Earth, praising every kink.

Her ancestor's strange experiences were starting to bleed into her world, shifting her perception of it. She too felt as though she stood upon the edge of a strange land, the ground beneath her feet no longer so stable.

On one level though, nothing had changed: she still worked at the store, taking on extra shifts; she met up with Shelly for coffee; visited Quatie when she could; argued with the band... Some things would never change!

And yet, on another level, everything was different. She was staying at Allen's place –

he insisted. His protectiveness was touching, and took some getting used to. It was like a new coat – Janey still wasn't sure if it fitted, if it felt entirely comfortable. But it felt like the best solution for the time being.

She didn't like the prospect of returning to that lonely, isolated trailer.

Even if those *things*, whatever they were, were behind bars, their intrusion into her world had rattled her. Nowhere felt safe, if she was honest – but being with Allen made her feel a little safer. Even if his OCD ways drove her mad at times. She worried that one day she'd wake up to find her life alphabetised.

To his credit, though, he had been a whiz at organising everything. Having recently been there himself he knew the score. He even offered to look after London while she was away, which would save a small fortune in kennel fees. She planned to go for a couple of weeks. She had booked the holiday with her boss, who might have complained if not for her recent hard work – she was more than pulling her weight at the moment. A fortnight in early spring – two-thirds of her annual leave – was fair enough, although it would give him 'staffing head-aches'.

Then again, anything involving management gave him headaches.

The sound of a jet high overhead made Janey raise her head. She watched its vapour-trail chalk the sky.

Janey had only flown once – on a 'rave flight' to Thailand – en route to see a cousin in Oz. She wasn't so nervous of the flying – indeed she was a bit of an adrenalin-junkie, so any rush was good. If there was a big fat motorbike to get on the back of, she was there. And yet ... the thought of this solo excursion, 'into the wild' (as she framed it, imagining Picts and Wicker Men), filled her with a frisson of anxiety. In truth, she had become set in her ways in these last few years, and the prospect was pushing her out of her comfort zone. Everything

she experienced now had that sense of poignant evanescence.

Each moment, a leaf on a tree snatched away by the wind.

In preparation for the big solo gig, Janey had been spending more time with her mother learning old mountain songs: 'Barbara Ellen'; 'The Seven Sleepers'; 'Three Little Babes'; 'The Outlandish Knight'; 'Matty Groves'. Despite her confused conversation, Marsha's recall, when it came to the old love songs as she called them, was perfect; and her singing voice was still strong – the years and hardship giving it a bittersweet edge as golden-dark as the Smokys. When they sang together time sat on its porch, creaking as the world rushed by. Their voices skirled together like strands of DNA, a double-helix of sound.

The nurses and other patients of Sunnyside would listen in, and burst into applause, making both of them blush like beetroots.

After one of these sessions, late in the afternoon, with the sun just deciding whether to stick around some more, her mother nodded to the box under her bed.

'Are you sure?'

Her mother jerked impatiently.

Janey slid it out and lifted it into the striped light from the blinds. The box was a rusting biscuit-tin that must have been at least a hundred years old, faded images of Scotland still discernible beneath the patina of age. She slowly prised the lid, careful not to break her plucking nails. At first, it was stiff, but finally popped open.

A dank smell of autumnal forest startled her nostrils.

Looking inside, Janey was surprised to find the box was full of leaves – of every colour and shape. Sycamore, oak, beech, holly, hazel, ash, hornbeam, alder, pine needle.

'What's this...?'

Marsha's eyes glittered. 'Rememberries.'

Janey tentatively picked through the leaves. They rustled like old newspapers. Then her fingers alighted upon something hard. Gently clearing away the leaves she unearthed a small treasure-board. And amid the yellowing leaves were nine objects, including the Anti-War handbill she recognised from a couple of weeks ago. With fascination she carefully examined the rest: a bow-tie, school slate and stylus, a small brass telescope, a tuning key, a ceramic double-mask of tragedy and comedy, a rosary, the mouth-piece for a wind-instrument, and an ancient satin dancing shoe, fragile and exquisitely made.

Her mother took them out and placed them in a circle on the bed. When the configuration was right, with lots of nodding and tutting, she took her daughter's hand by the wrist and directed it towards the bow-tie.

'Grandma Dotty.'

Then, the school-slate.

'Molly.'

The telescope.

'Fanny.'

Tuning key.

'Elizabeth.'

The mask.

'Clarence and Constance.'

The Rosary.

'Bethany.'

The mouth-piece.

'Marjorie.'

Dancing shoe.

'Margaret.'

Then, finally, the anti-war handbill.

She pointed at herself.

As her mother touched them, Janey received a crackle of recognition – skeletons tap-dancing on her grave. Before her eyes appeared a rapid flash of faces, as though she flicked through an album – photographs of long-lost relatives presented themselves, each with a ghost of familiarity in their features. They were all her mother's side, of course – the McEttrick women, going back through the generations. She could see the eyes, the line of the cheekbone, the assertive tick of the nose.

'Oh, Mom ...' Janey's voice broke. A geyser of tears threatened to well up.

Marsha blinked like a cat, her eyes wise with understanding. Then she walked her fingers from object to object, as though she were stepping over stones – starting with hers and ending with Margaret. When she finished she breathed 'Kirk' and then blew him away, like a dandelion. She put the objects back in the box, covered them carefully with the leaves, closed the lid, and handed it to Janey.

'Get. Lost. Ghost.'

13

Janey sat up in bed and tapped the lamp. She picked up her cell. 3.27am. Next to the lamp sat the biscuit-tin and Kirk's journal.

Somewhere in the distance, a police siren caterwauled – its adrenalin-inducing sound carried across the dark canyons of the city.

Janey gripped the duvet tight to her, until the siren faded away.

Full moon. A thermostat in the blood. The crazies would be out tonight. Her mouth was dry. She took a sip from the tumbler by her bedside.

She was still getting used to sleeping in Allen's bed, a king-sized futon with midnight blue linen. The bedroom was a nest of books – piles of them stacked in precarious piles around the walls. The floor-boards' dark stain reflected a narrow beam of moon-light which pierced the edge of the blinds. There was a rack of clothes on hangers, an old wooden desk in the corner on which sat a Remington typewriter, a battered office chair, and a wicker waste-paper basket. The only decoration was a large framed poster of *Five Easy Pieces*.

At the foot of her bed, London snored lightly. Sensing his mistress awake, he sat up. He padded over to her, tail wagging. 'Hey, how ya doin?'

She let him flop on the bed, and she took some comfort of his warm bulk next to her.

'Okay, just this once, but don't tell the old man. It can be our secret.' Sleepily, she rubbed her eyes.

Marsha's revelation was still buzzing around in her brain. A box of heirlooms, connecting her to her kin, going back ... Lord knew how far.

Nine generations of McEtrick women.

She let out a low whistle.

Why had her mother kept the box shut to her for so long? She'd wanted to ask, but Marsha clammed up. Once the shutters came down, that was that.

Could it have been the songs? It was the first time Janey had shown an interest in them, after the aversion therapy of childhood. They were part of her inheritance, a part of her which she had denied for too long. But now she sensed the voices stirring inside her. Their lost song, wanting to be sung.

She resisted opening the tin. 'Not tonight Pandora.' Hell, she had to try and get some sleep. Another long-shift tomorrow. Good for the trip-fund, but boy, did it take its toll.

Instead, she reached for Kirk's journal.

She was finding comfort in it, as well as fascination. How much of it was true? Hard to fathom, but going by the strange days she'd been living lately, Janey was willing to give almost anything the benefit of the doubt. Life was weirder than most folks realised. Not the gaudy Ripley kind – two-headed crocodiles, werewolf women, creatures from the swamp – but layers of mystery waiting to be unearthed, if you were willing to dig. Who knew where you might end up though?

Janey opened the journal at her last place, and continued reading.

They took me in an unexpected direction. Rather than lead me back towards Aberfoyle down the path I was deeply familiar with (no longer in the gloaming, but had I not traversed it practically every day since moving here?) I found myself going deeper into the foothills. The dark mass of the mountain loomed above me, delineated by an absence of stars. I was a tiny point of consciousness in the unknowable night, and yet, I did not feel alone. The very air seemed alive. The rocks, cruel upon my naked feet,

hummed as though they were tuning forks. Many a time I stubbed a toe and stifled a curse.

Slowly, painfully, I continued through a dark pass for some time, becoming increasingly anxious about my chances for survival – I was shivering uncontrollably by now. Only my continued movement stopped me from freezing where I stood.

Then, ahead I saw a savage cleft in the cliff face – I thought this would provide some semblance of shelter at least, but as I stepped inside I was surprised to discover lights glowing like miniscule jewels from deeper within, luring me inwards – they had the semblance of the merry lights of a tavern, twinkling invitingly to a weary wayfarer – yet they multiplied, swarmed, until it seemed I entered a city under the Earth.

What Schiehallion had I stumbled upon?

As though in a dream I made my way towards the effulgence, glowing many-coloured like emeralds, rubies, topaz, sapphires, and diamonds. To my surprise the rough cavern surface became a smooth, well-made cobbled ride like I've had occasion to walk along by the shores of Loch Maree. A drove-way of the netherworld. Stepping stones enabled me to cross the subterranean streams that occasionally issued out of the glittering dark. Sometimes I traversed well-hewn steps, carved into the rock. With every step I became increasingly certain that I entered a realm hewn by hands in possession of conscious skill. Grotesque statues leered from the dark, illuminated by an eerie underglow that swirled with sinister sentience. Whether they were human or not, I did not wish to speculate.

Why did I venture on? To release my wife from her enchantment. Little did I realise that I was endangering myself. I was no Orpheus with a lyre to charm his way into the realm of Hades and back again. In seeking Eurydice's emancipation I may end

up imprisoning myself. All I had was my unshakeable faith. I began to recite Bunyan's prayer, braying out with false courage 'O, to be a pilgrim!' but my words seemed hollow and foolish and soon I stopped. Instead I began to hum and found this far more conducive – the tune seemed to arise organically from the ground beneath me. I was merely its conduit.

I recalled the tales of the piper who was lured into the Fayrie knowe at Ednam, tempted to learn the secrets of its song. He had been unwise enough to enter without a talisman of protection and was never seen again. That place became known as Piper's Grave.

Had I, with equal folly, entered my own?

Yet the humming seemed to help expunge these gloomy thoughts.

My spirits raised a little as I made good progress. With relief, I emerged from the tunnel into a glen, equally penumbral but at least out doors. I gulped down the clean mountain air and pushed on.

Soon I approached what looked like a hamlet of simple dwellings, resembling the humble blackhouses that you find upon Harris and Lewis. From the small windows glowed cheery lights, partially obscured by faces peering nervously out. My arrival had not been unobserved, yet in more ways than I realised at the time (all my way there I had been followed by creature, a nameless but palpable presence in this Glen of Shadow – but more of him later).

14

A log spat in the grate, its sap hissing into nothingness.

'Nothing like the real thing,' Allen said, vigorously stoking the fire with the iron poker before hooking it back on its set.

Janey hooked her arms around him as knelt before the flames. 'Brings out your inner caveman, does it?'

'You wish!' He went to bite her hand – but she tugged it away, pulling him to his feet, laughing.

'Hey, I thought you were a vegetarian!'

'Sure, I only eat vegetarians!' He made a mock-lunge at her, and she made a mock-scream. Both looking like extras from *The Munsters* in their party outfits, the visual made them laugh even more.

London barked at them, picking up their high spirits.

Allen changed direction at the last minute and Boris Karloffed over to the record player. He flipped through his stack, and pulled out an old friend, grinning fiendishly. 'Let's exorcise those slimers!'

The start of the 'Ghostbusters' theme (twelve inch) blasted from the speakers.

He joined Janey as she gyrated to the music. They matched each other's moves, bodies rhyming, eyes catching the flames from the hearth.

'Shall we skip the bar?' breathed Allen, as he writhed next to her.

Janey bit on his ear-lobe with her teeth. 'Are you sure? Do you feel safe in here with

me? Maybe *I'm* the vampire of Asheville.'

Suddenly, there was a low but determined knock at the door.

Janey turned down the music a little and straightened her dress.

The trick-and-treaters had been out in full force all evening, prowling the streets in their monster-masks and witches hats, demanding candy.

'If it wasn't for those pesky kids...' Janey tutted.

'I'll go,' said Allen – turning up the collar of his tux and affecting a zombie shuffle.

London started to growl.

'Allen!' she called, a feeling of dread rushing up inside of her; but it was too late.

Smiling, he swung wide the door – ready to give the kids a fright.

From the passageway, Janey screamed out. 'It's them!'

Standing before Allen were two children – a boy and a girl, dressed as a diminutive vampire and witch respectively.

They stood there, expressions fixed beneath the gaudy face-paint.

'Wow! Those are some contact lenses you're wearing!'

In the gloom of the October night their eyes flashed like foxes in torchlight.

'Aren't you meant to say trick or treat at this point?' Allen suggested, smiling knowingly back at Janey.

The pale masks cracked into cruel smiles.

'Close the door!'

Allen tried to slam the door shut, but the vampire-boy jammed it with his small, but strong foot.

The witch pounced, in one fluid motion turning from kitten-cute to feline-deadly. Black nails seized her prey by the throat.

The impact lifted Allen into the air and threw him halfway up the hall-way stairs. Heavily, he thudded down to land in a crumpled heap at the bottom, the witch-child still clinging to him.

'Allen!' Janey screamed; the realisation of what was transpiring a triple-espresso shot to the brain.

London barrelled into the vampire-child. Together they tumbled out of the door and down the steps of the porch – a snarling blur of claws and fangs.

Back on the landing, the witch rose from the groaning form of Allen, extricating an elongated hand from his chest. The fingers snapped back into place like a rubber glove.

The girl turned towards her – deathly pale – and cocked her head to the side.

Janey put a hand to her mouth.

For a moment, the vision of her lost daughter in the nightmare threatened to overwhelm her.

Janey managed to shut the inner door – but the witch burst through it as though it was matchwood.

Janey hit her assailant over the head with the nearest thing to hand – an ornamental Samurai sword, still in its scabbard. It flew apart on impact, snapping off at the hilt, managing only to dislodge the pointy hat.

'Cheap Chinese shit!' she cursed.

The witch rotated her green-wigged head three-hundred and sixty degrees, cracking her jaw, then continued to approach in little, leisurely strides.

'Who are you? What do you want...?'

The thing's voice, a series of clicks and whistles like a bucket-load of ice down the spine, was inside her head.

Janey nodded, turned.

On the coffee table was Kirk's journal. 'Here ... here, take it,' she said, trembling. Reaching further, she lunged for the iron poker from the fire. Spun around, thrusting it forward, adrenalin taking over her limbs.

Powered by the rocket fuel of rage, the missile sunk into one of the witch-girl's eye sockets. A banshee scream issued from the red 'o' of her mouth. The iron sizzled, issuing a black smoke.

Janey buried her mouth and nose into the crook of her free arm.

All spikes and angles, the witch staggered towards Janey, squealing.

With a last burst of frustrated anger, it went to pounce, but froze. The exclamation mark of its eye widened. A dark crack zigzagged down its body. Then the thing split apart in a plume of foul smoke.

Janey was left, standing, dazed, but unharmed.

The record jumped on the turntable: 'No ghost ... no ghost.'

Her thoughts raced to Allen. That hand pulled out of the chest...

When she saw her lover's prone form she was forced to grip the doorframe to steady herself. *'What have you done to him?'*

Howls and screams outside stopped Janey from rushing to Allen's side. Instead, she raced out to the porch.

Below, London valiantly fought off the other attacker with a ferocity she had not witnessed before but had long suspected her Alaskan Malamute to be capable of.

Letting out a growl of rage, she launched into the fray. Lashing out again and again with the iron poker, she forced the vampire-boy back down the stone steps of the building.

She did not stop until the intruder was forced out onto the road. She roared after him – a

primal, territorial sound.

Halloween make-up streaked into a feral mask, she stood on the threshold, sweating, trembling, and wild-eyed.

London snarled and barked.

‘You tell him, Lonny!’

The vampire-child, torn and battered, retreated into the shadows.

She could have finished the job there and then, but she pulled London inside and slammed the door.

She ran to collapse beside Allen. Hand shaking, she gently caressed the grey features of his face. He was unmarked, but his limbs were leaden.

I'm sorry. I...'

London whined, nudging the deadweight of leg.

No time.

She choked back the guilt and reached for her cell.

15

Blue lights streaked their butane ghosts across the front of the house. Wide-eyed and open-mouthed, it looked like ‘The Scream’ in stone.

‘So, lady, in your own time.’

The Hispanic policewoman tapped her Bic on her notebook.

Janey took a deep breath.

Words.

Words seemed too flimsy to connect to hard reality.

Her Elvira nails wrapped around a mug of sweet tea someone had thrust in her hands. Janey noticed one was cracked and picked at it. Over her bare shoulders the foil blanket covered her party dress. She couldn't stop shivering. Everything seemed ripped open. The whole house had been sealed off: crime-zone tape around the perimeter, camera flashes burning Hiroshima shadows onto the brick, uniforms everywhere, cops, meds, forensics, suits.

London, still in his spiked collar, slept at her feet, exhausted from the fight. Beyond that he seemed none the worse. A small mercy.

Janey tried to delete the loop that was running in her head of the cold passageway, her desperate attempts to revive Allen, sobbing his name into the dark, the sirens, paramedics strapping the limp body onto a stretcher and carrying him out of the house. Outside, the full set of emergency vehicles stood like props in some Spielberg movie.

The whole street was being treated to the circus – ringside seats again. Neighbours, a

costumed freak show, loudly proclaimed their observations on doorsteps and balconies, arguing the details with the hectoring chorus. They were two of them. No, three. They were large brutes. Evil midgets. Killer clowns. The vampires of Asheville. Aliens. Street gangs. Feral youths. Migrants. What is the world coming to?

She sighed and tried again.

'There were two of them. Children, sort of. A boy and a girl, I think. We thought they were trick-or-treaters. They were dressed up. As a vampire and a witch. Allen went to answer the door. They attacked him.'

'Hold on, lady. You're saying your, what, six three, two hundred pound boyfriend, was overpowered by two small children?'

Tight-lipped, she nodded.

'They were like ... demons. If it hadn't been for London...'

'Your dog attacked them?'

'He defended the house. Saved my life...'

'Was he wearing that collar?'

A nod. 'Forensics might need to take a look at that. Go on.'

Janey sipped her tea. 'One of them seemed to stick ... something ... in Allen's chest.'

'A weapon?'

She shake of the head. 'A hand.'

The police officer frowned.

'Together, we ... managed to scare them off. They ran off.'

'They both got away?'

Janey stared at the pavement. Nodded.

The notebook was snapped closed. 'That's all for now. My colleague will take your

details. We'll be in touch. Don't leave town.'

She had gone straight to the hospital where she sat up all night in the waiting room nursing plastic cups of coffee. Gaunt-eyed in the morning, she was told by a nurse that they were still treating him. He was in a critical condition. The best thing she could do, the nurse said, was go home. Get some rest. As soon as he was stable, they'll let her know.

Allen's place was still sealed off in the morning. Unable to bear the thought of her airstream she drove over to Quatie's place and slept for a day and a half.

She woke up groggy the following lunch-time, dry-mouthed and ravenous. At least she had an appetite. She had to keep her strength up.

'Back in Kansas?' Quatie stood in the doorway, holding a steaming mug of coffee.

Janey tried to speak but nothing came out.

'I know. I heard it all on the news.' Quatie came over, put the mug down softly, and held out her arms. 'Here.'

Janey let herself be held.

'Thank you, Great Mystery, that you're safe. You're a tough cookie, Janey McEttrick.'

'I'm a fucking disaster zone, more like. My daughter. The firekeeper. Now this.' The words congealed in her throat.

'If you're just gonna sit there feeling sorry for yourself...'

Janey pushed her away. 'You're better off kicking me out. Steering clear. For all I know you'll be next.'

Quatie went to speak, but thought better of it, raised her hands, got up and left.

The perfect storm of her life rose before her.

She reached for the journal.

I decided the forward approach was the best. And so I walked up to the nearest blackhouse and knocked on the low dark door. I was aware my appearance was somewhat unorthodox, but there was nothing I could do about it now. I cleared my throat and tried to assume an imperious manner. I am tall and sometimes my height is an advantage. I heard a shuffling inside and something akin to the sound a hog makes when nosing around in the yard. The door opened and a man and woman of diminutive stature looked up at me, blinking nervously. They were of ruddy complexion with skin like baked apples, their faces round, grubby, but honest. Their clothes were little more than rags. I did not know where to begin – how to explain my unusual circumstances and appearance.

Their astonished expressions crinkled into a smile. 'Och, look dear, we have a visitor,' said the husband to his wife. 'Please, honoured guest, enter! I'm afraid we haven't got much to offer, and you'll have to take us as you find us...'

This made me smile, for the house was modestly furnished but spotless, and soon upon the scrubbed kitchen table (at which I had to squat, my bony knees protruding out like shaven-headed sentries on the battlements – a sight which seemed to produce great mirth) appeared all manner of homely fare, produced with apologies from the wife, who dared not look me in the eye. Freshly-baked bannocks, a pat of butter, a wedge of cheese, jars of jam and chutney, a seed cake, and a comically large pot of tea. I thanked them profusely – they bade me eat. Though they joined me at the table, they did not partake themselves. I was a little suspicious, I am ashamed to say – but then remembering my studies saw how they imbibed the essence of what was before them – a

mug of tea, and a slice of cake, or bread and jam, shrivelling away before touching their lips. This could have seemed comic, a pair of Highland Tantaluses forever denied gratification, but the action made them lick their lips and sigh, so I surmised they must receive sustenance in this way.

The fire was crackling in the grate, and I was invited to sit by the fire in their best chair – barely able to contain my frame. They provided a lovely woven blanket for about my knees and a 'wee dram', which, after the shock of my translation, and the contrast in climate, I gladly sipped. They were not great conversationalists. I sensed a certain awkwardness about me which they compensated with busy-ness, but I concluded that it was no more than shyness. I probed them as best I could – without offending my hosts – about their lives and situation. I managed to ascertain the following: Donal and Mary, as they're simply known (a clan name was not forthcoming), have 'always lived here', that they live a life very similar to the cottars, eking out an existence from the hard soil with their kine, and what bounty nature bestows upon them – fruit, berries, nuts, roots, fungus, herbs and the like. They lead quiet lives, keep themselves to themselves on the whole, but sometimes go to the 'big houses' for work – cooking, mending, making, and cleaning, which they took great pride and satisfaction in. Clearly they gained little reward beyond this, but were bound by an ancient fealty. I asked them about the lights beyond and they grew even more reticent. It was where the 'high and mighty' lived – they rarely went there; it wasn't for the likes of them, as they put it. Who ruled over their land? Her Majesty, the Queen of Elfhame, of course. Not one to dandle with, by the way they spoke of her in nervous, hushed tones. Did they know the Word of the Lord? Their kind had long ago been cast out of God's Grace, so now what had they to worship except the sky, the mountains, and

the moon? Did they not afear their souls? They whispered of Judgement Day, but no, only what lurked in the hills – the Xævæx, the Wild Hunt. They warned me of the Urisg that haunt the Glen. Donal spat into the fire. ‘Caw cannie, laddie,’ he advised in a low voice. ‘Stay on the narrow road; don’t look behind you. They’re a clashie rabble, best avoided.’ Mary cleared away the things with a deftness that belied her rotund appearance. The host stoked up the fire for me, and seeing that their guest was as comfortable as their lodgings could offer, they bade me good night, scurrying up a rickety ladder into a loft space. There were some low murmuring, and a few chuckles, before a gentle snoring and the crack of a log were the only sounds.

I gazed into the dancing flames before finally nodding off.

And that was my first day.

16

'So, let me get this straight...'

Agent Trent cricked his shoulder, the dull ache there would never go away since he took that hit. Richards had saved his hide that day. Busting a minor drug-lord had got them decorated. Stayed partners as they'd risen through the ranks. Promoted to suits. But he hadn't been around to cover his partner's back the day the break-out happened.

He took another long, hard stare at the witness. She was a looker, if you liked that kind of thing. Too pale for him. And too scrawny. He liked his women big-hipped and black.

By the shadows under her eyes and the chewed skin around her fingernails, she was clearly suffering. From what? Guilt? Trent's instincts told him she was involved in some way, but he just couldn't get an angle on her.

He drummed on the table, a thin band of gold around his second finger. 'Two children in costume came to your door. Your boyfriend answered. He's attacked by...' he checked the xeroxes. 'The girl. You and your dog fight them off. Call 911. The end.' He shook his quarterback head, all buzz-cut and brawn.

'It's a pretty story. My little boy would love it.'

Janey looked at the corner of the room, wishing she could crawl into it.

The room was a grey box. Two chairs, a table, a door, and a mirrored window. The air was stale. The strip lights flickered and crackled, setting her teeth on edge. A white noise, a low background hum, made her want to scream.

They'd been waiting for her at the hospital.

When she saw Agent Trent she recognised him from being one of the two officers

who'd been there that day they had caught the 'Men in Black'.

He leaned closer, the table creaking under him, the small white scars on his fist runes of pain.

'Here's another story. Two highly dangerous suspects escape from a maximum security prison, resulting in the...' He slammed down the copies. 'Death of an FBI agent. A major manhunt is conducted, lasting for several days, with no success. Then a fortnight later your house is attacked. The same place where the suspects were apprehended. Nearby two children are found, aged seven and nine...'

Janey put her hands to her mouth.

'In an identical condition to the string of victims that gotten the media creaming its pants a month back.'

Trent sat on the corner of the table, close, so close she could smell his stale cologne, smell the coffee on his breath. 'And you are telling me two children attacked your partner? This is very serious, Miss McEttrick. Very serious indeed.' The solid block of his head occluded the light, stern as a Mount Rushmore president. 'Tell us what really happened.'

Janey could barely speak. 'I had ... no idea ... Those poor children.' Tears scolded her cheeks.

Trent reached for a pressed handkerchief smelling, faintly, of coconut. 'Here. From the top.'

She tried to compose herself. 'I received a package...'

'Go on.'

She didn't have any defence, except the truth. All she wanted to do was walk through that door and get back to Allen.

'An old journal. From ... a distant relative. Then they turned up.'

'They?'

'Two of them. Adults. Long ash-blond hair. A man and a woman I think. Hard to tell. They wore exactly the same suits, gloves... Drove a black sedan.'

Trent's eyes flicked to the mirrored glass.

'They broke into my place. I didn't know it then, but later I realised they were searching for the journal.'

'Why?'

Janey shook her head. 'It's just full of ... old stories. I have it on me if you want a look...'

'Sure.'

Regretting her honesty, she went to pull it out of her bag; then realised it wasn't there.

'Your bag?' He nodded to the glass.

'Why didn't you report the break-in, Miss McEttrick?'

'I was too scared. My friend, Quatie, looked after me. I was in a terrible state. I stayed there for a fortnight until I straightened out.'

'Where does this Quatie live? That's, what, a Cherokee name, isn't it?'

'Yes. On the reservation. I had no idea about the attacks until I returned to work. Apparently these two ... people ... had been asking about me. Called in at the store.'

Flicked through his notes. 'Electric Ladyland.'

She nodded, feeling exposed.

'Next time I see them they're being busted outside Allen's place. We thought we were safe. Forgot about them. Me and Allen, well, y'know. We were just getting to know one another.'

Trent stood up, prowling the room. 'But the attackers on the night of October 31st – they weren't these two you're talking about?'

Janey hesitated. 'They looked like them.'

'I thought you said they were children.'

She held his gaze. 'They were. But ... they had the same eyes. You must believe me, please. I just want to see Allen. He needs me.'

The agent stared at the glass, his large frame in silhouette.

He tried to remain calm.

He'd seen the footage from the holding cell. Snakes, for Christ's sake! But one thing haunted him.

Those eyes ... It had been like looking into Satan's heart. He uttered a silent prayer. Lord protect them all.

'You're free to go, Miss McEttrick. Stay in town. And watch how you go. We'll detail an officer for your personal safety. Do not be alarmed by their presence. If we need you for further enquiries, we'll let you know.'

Janey got to her feet, a little unsteadily. 'I can go...? Oh, thank you.'

Trent nodded to the camera and the door was opened.

'The journal...?'

'We'll be needing to look at that. You'll get it back when we're finished.'

Before she could protest she was ushered out.

Janey walked out into the light, looking up at the sky in disbelief. It was mid-morning in Asheville on a chilly November day. Outside the NCPD building phantoms in business suits and uniforms came and went. Clouds scudded overhead. The wind snatched up swirls of dry leaves. Cars rushed by, busily oblivious.

It was her city, but she might as well have been on the moon.

She walked a little bit to try and clear her head, nearly managing to get herself knocked over.

A car horn blared. 'Hey, Mrs Magoo. Watch the fucking road!'

She sat down on a bench, feeling sick from the fallout. The bombshell of the children... Her shadow stuck to the sidewalk, a frozen mime of destruction.

Everything within her path ... What would Allen call it, her 'blast radius'. Janey girl, *you're* the atom bomb.

The sky weighed down upon her.

Then her cell vibrated in her bag.

She pulled it out.

It was Shelly.

'My Lord, they are *so* fucked. When I'm finished with them they'll wish they had not gotten up in the morning.'

Shelly was in man-eating mode, a panther in a business suit.

They sat in a downtown café overlooking Pack Square – Janey hadn't been up for going much further. She was still in a daze, but seeing her friend, who had dropped everything to 'scoop her up', made it easier.

Shelly advised her not to talk about any details on the cell, but to meet face-to-face.

When, five minutes later, she was there, a cappuccino was quickly ordered and left to go cold, as they held hands and all was shared.

Well, not exactly all.

Janey was reticent about describing how she had stabbed the witch-child in the eye with the poker, and then watched as she'd split apart before her and vanished in a puff of smoke.

She'd seen some weird shit in her time, but even that just ... baked her noodle.

And the two child deaths haunted her.

Of course, common sense would dictate that she wasn't culpable. She knew that, but didn't feel it. And the authorities would see it differently.

Somehow she was caught up in the whole shitnado and that Trent guy knew it.

'What they've just put you through, after Hallowe'en ... But don't worry, honey. They haven't charged you. They haven't got anything to charge you with. Defending your home? That's your goddam right! They can't do jack shit.'

Shelly squeezed her hand.

Janey nodded, fighting back the tears. To have a friend like her. She didn't deserve it.

'You let me handle things from now on, huh? You don't talk to nobody, unless I'm present, got it? Sister Shelly has your back covered.'

She let out a big breath.

The world seemed to stop vibrating.

Asheville rattled and swirled and whizzed and buzzed and hissed around her, but that was okay. She was no longer alone.

Then she saw the cop standing opposite them. Just standing there. Watching her from behind his Aviators.

Janey sat in the sterile purgatory of the intensive care ward. Beside her, Allen Raven's prone form lay pale and tubed up. The beep of the ECG monitor was the only sound – its dilated exclamation of life fracturing the white noise of the ward, the metronome of a minimalist symphony. His dark, bearded features seemed waxen and frail on the snowdrifts of pillows. The swirling tattoo that snaked up his neck and across his shaven scalp mocked the inertness

of his form.

A table by his head displayed a still life of unread Get Well cards, uneaten fruit and an unseen vase of flowers from colleagues at the *Smoky Mountain News*, slowly wilting.

Allen had been in a critical state for three days now – permanently unconscious and kept alive by machines. Hallowe'en's unwelcome guest had inflicted some serious damage on him – as Doctor Utnapishtim explained as gently as possible, a white-coated expert, tunnel-vision distant, his prognosis delivered in muffled bursts, a disembodied ticker-tape. The heart had been crushed ... the skin unblemished. Visiting consultants baffled ... fascinated. System gone into shut-down ... only the narrowest of threads kept him alive.

Janey, blinking back into sharp focus, stared at the doctor's thick, black hair. Not a strand out of place.

She'd sat with her man – seemed strange to think it, but the tug in her guts made it true.

The solid walls, the journal in her lap, the chair beneath her. If not for their cold solidity she would unravel.

The nightmare was happening again.

Her mother.

Beep.

Eloise.

Beep.

The firekeeper.

Beep.

Now this.

Beep.

All those she loved.

You're jinxed, Janey McEttrick. The High School taunts echoed in her head, a whispering gallery of contempt. *Don't look at her, she'll put her witchy curse on you. Bad News McEttrick. Fucking freak.*

Voices passed in the corridor, a word cloud of advice.

Loser! Do everyone a favour and throw yourself under a train.

She opened her mouth to cry out in anguish, but nothing came out.

Janey held the limp hand emerging from the hospital gown, stroking the wiry hair upon its back. 'I'm so ... sorry ... I will make this right, somehow.'

Her daily vigil was taking its toll. She'd hardly slept, hardly eaten – despite Quatie's remonstrations – her entire focus on Allen's recovery, as though she could transmit her life-force into the man lying there by sheer will.

Shadow-eyed and frayed around the edges, she felt winnowed by her concern and guilt. Around her, the world was a muted, slow-motion blur. Stuck in the isolation ward of her own untreatable nightmare. Walled in by white-coats, mouths moving, sounds coming out, she was being buried by opinions. But no one could help. No one understood.

Straight off the flight from Massachusetts, Allen's sister, Louisa, arrived the next day and immediately 'took charge'. Dressed like a Stepford Wife, exuding an air of Concordian superiority, she had heard of her baby brother's new love interest and had obviously formed an opinion prior to their meeting.

'So, you must be ... ah, what did he say your name was? Jojo, or something.'

Through gritted teeth: 'It's Janey.'

Louisa inspected the room sceptically. She ran a finger along one of the surfaces and looked at it with disdain.

'I'll like some quality time with my brother. If you don't mind.'

Janey held her gaze across the room, the recumbent body between them, the life support punctuating the silence.

Fuming, she left.

This 'quality time' alone with Allen, seemed to extend all day, then all week.

Janey would turn up at the hospital only to be turned away because of 'brother-and-sister' time. In the end she had to put her foot down and insisted she was allowed to see him.

'And who the Hell do you think you are, making any kinds of demands?' Louisa bristled, as Janey entered her domain.

A nurse gave them a frosty look, forcing the sister into a sinister sotto voce: 'Are you paying his med bills?'

'I'm his partner!' This challenge had crystallised the fact. 'I've been seeing him pretty much every day for the last month. How often do you see him – once a year?'

'How dare you!'

The nurse coughed as though she was bringing up a hair-ball.

'You've know him for, what, all of a *lunch-break*? I've known him all my life,' she hissed. 'I've seen your types come and go. You swan in and claim him, but the more you squeeze, the more he'll slip through your fingers.'

'I'm not letting him slip anyway. I am visiting him whether you like it or not.'

'Over my dead body.'

Janey gave her a look, but she bit her tongue.

The next day a schedule was emailed to her (Allen must have copied her into a message to his sister at some point) for alternate visits.

With this new arrangement in place, the two women circled warily around each other.

Janey had tried to reconcile the sister with what Allen had said about his fish-refinery family. Had she married into wealth? The siblings couldn't be more different. It was like switching channels between PBS and Fox.

Quatie coughed with dry laughter as she stoked the fire, her long, weathered features suddenly animated in the merry glow. Cat-shadows spiralled around her negative spaces as she moved, or watched with amber eyes from hidey holes amid the clutter of the living room.

Her friend had been deeply sympathetic and concerned up until this point, as she listened to Janey's 'week from Hell'. 'You're like those old timey mechanical figures in a clock tower, appearing on the hour!'

'Death, the Maiden or the Devil ... which one am I?' mused Janey bitterly? 'Sometimes, I feel like all three.'

'Throughout our lives we play many parts,' observed Quatie, gesturing to her domestic chaos as she settled back on her favourite, battered armchair, 'but this apparent reality makes us act as if we are only *one* of those in each scene we play throughout the day.'

'Ain't that the truth,' Janey agreed. She was struggling to keep together these aspects of herself – singer, seer, record store assistant, the dutiful partner, the descendant with ancestral obligations, murder suspect. Only the fulcrum of Allen's condition maintained her teetering life. If not for that, she would have given up on the whole shitheap lot of it.

'So.' Quatie reached for a half-used pack of cheroots and pulled one out with her teeth, then, reaching for a brand from the fire, held it to the black tip until it glowed orange. 'The

state of play is: they've got the journal, they got you under investigation and surveillance – drone-boy is enjoying returning the attention – and you're not to leave town?'

Janey sighed.

'What about your trip?' She rolled the smoke around her mouth.

'I'm grounded for now, and anyhow, what's the point? I need to be here for Allen.'

The notion of a crazy Scottish trip that she could ill afford, and at such a time, seemed selfish to the extreme, but her old friend reminded her that the attack had happened in part because she hadn't been facing up to the situation. By sweeping it under the carpet for so long it had reached crisis point, and now the only way to deal with it was head on.

'You have to go. When your ancestors come a-knocking you do *not* ignore them. Your friend Shelly is on the case. You'll be free to go, come the New Year, I'm sure of it. Time to clear out the karmic cupboard.'

'But what of that ... thing? One of them got away.'

Images of that vampire-child haunted her sleep.

'While you're in my circle, girl, nothing's gonna touch you.'

Janey went to mention the firekeeper, but Quatie waved her down.

'I know, I know.' She took a sharp tug on her cheroot, sucking in the bitter smoke. 'We won't get caught with our britches down again.' Glaring hard into the flames, she exhaled, bony fingers curled around the black. 'Remember, you dealt with one, and sent the other one packing. You can handle yourself. It's the Cherokee in you. You're a warrior.'

17

Janey stared at the shrine. Over the last fortnight it had slowly colonised the vacant lot where the two children had been found. Dozens of bouquets of flowers, teddy bears, dolls, candle-jars, small crucifixes and statuettes of Mary and the baby Jesus, jostled for visibility next to laminated prayers and handwritten expressions of condolence. Her eyes were snagged by the wind-twitched front page of the local newspaper bearing the original 'Vampires of Asheville' headline – a hunting knife plunged through it. A later 'special edition' had what looked like a bullet-hole.

Inexorably, her gaze was drawn to the point of singularity at the centre of this black hole of grief and anger – a cluster of photographs of the children. A brother and sister, Jason and Rebecca, aged seven and nine.

Janey reached out and brushed her fingers against the images.

Laughter. Warmth. Love. Jason, in a space-suit, playing with his Buzz Lightyear, chasing after a puppy on a beach. Rebecca, practising a song in her bedroom, dancing on stage with the Glee Club, nervously smoothing down her leotard.

Two brief lives, snuffed out.

She pulled her fingers back sharply.

It was midday and several citizens had stopped to pay their respects, just as Janey had on her lunch-break. It wasn't an alleyway or shady area of a park. Just an empty lot – a missing tooth in the road's denture. Pumpkins rotted on doorsteps. A skein of jokey skeleton lights swayed in the wind, but most signs of that night had been sensitively removed.

The voices crowded her head like a migraine.

She's the one.

It was her fault.

She killed them.

Murderess!

How can she live with herself?

Witch!

Janey held her hands to her head. 'Stop! Please stop!'

Bystanders turned around to look at her – faces masks of concern or disgust.

'Junkie,' an obese man in a track-suit muttered.

Janey turned to go.

That's when she heard the children's laughter.

She looked in horror about her, expecting to see the brother and sister standing there, holding hands.

Nothing.

As though hidden speakers were wired into all the street furniture, the brittle laughter, crackly and warped like a wax cylinder recording, followed her down the street. Walking quickly around the block Janey tried to quell the panic attack. She stopped and took some deep breaths.

Over the street a black Cadillac with tinted windows was parked. Turning the other way, she saw a police officer walking towards her.

She would have crumpled there and then on the sidewalk had she not looked up and seen Allen's house, no longer taped up.

She still had the spare key in her purse.

As calmly as possible, she crossed the road, resisting the instinct to dash up the steps. She fumbled with her purse on the porch, dropped it, cursing. Finally, she managed to slot the key in. Breathing a small prayer she twisted, and the door opened.

Heart racing, she let herself in and shut the world out.

Sanctuary.

At least his sister hadn't changed the locks yet.

Looked like she hadn't been there yet either.

And Janey could see why.

The house was dark and cold. Nothing had been moved since the incident. Signs of a struggle remained frozen in situ. Tilted picture frames. A knocked over broly stand. The splintered door. Boot prints everywhere.

She didn't care.

Somehow, being inside Allen's place made her feel safer. She liked being surrounded by his stuff, the books, the records, the ephemera – it comforted her.

Walking into the living room, she went to the drinks cabinet and poured herself a large scotch.

Slumping onto the sofa, she sipped it in the dark, letting its slow fire burn away her fear.

Slowly, she started to compose herself. She just had to accept that this shit was her reality and she had to deal with it.

Her life, the haunted house.

Okay, girl, then make yourself at home! she chided herself.

She flicked on all the downstairs lights, although resisted opening the blinds. Pulling out some cleaning products, she set to sorting the place out a bit, putting on some Robert

Johnson to keep her company.

As she dusted Allen's desk – carefully, around the opened slumbering laptop – and tidied the precarious pile of books stacked next to it, a title caught her eye amid the tomes on Scottish folklore, which he must have dug out that first night she stayed. She held it up to the lamp. It was a small hardback with a cream dust-jacket adorned only with title in capitals: *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies* by Robert Kirk. It looked quite new, a New York Review of Books edition from 2007 with an introduction by someone called Marina Warner.

Janey placed it to one side, contemplating it as she finished her cleaning – not her usual habit, but she felt protected by and protective of Allen's place. In a way, it was her shrine.

Finally, she sat down with a mug of coffee – she was going to be late back to work, but what the hey? – and flipped through the academic waffle until she got to the start of the actual text:

AN ESSAY

Of the nature and actions of the subterranean (and for the most part) invisible people, heretofore going under the names of elves, fauns and fairies, or the like, among the low-country Scots, and termed hubhrígedh, caiben, lusbarthen, and siotbrudh among the tramontaines or Scottish-Irish, as they are described by those who have the second sight, and now, to occasion further enquiry, collected and compared.

At first, none of it made sense and normally she would have quickly lost patience with such an obscure text and thrown it down in disgust. But reading the journal had accustomed her to the archaic idiom a little. And this was printed, rather than handwritten in that awful, tiny writing. Nevertheless, all those Gaelic names looked like gobbledegook to her and made her

eyes water! Still, she persevered.

Truth was she was missing the journal. She was getting hooked. The thought of them Feds – that annoying agent! – scrutinising it all made her skin crawl, as though someone walked over her grave, which in a way they did. He was her ancestor, God dammit! The journal was hers, by rights. Well, Shelly was on the case, and until then ... this might scratch that itch.

Any information she could glean might help. She badly needed some guidance.

Quatie was always advising her to 'talk to her ancestors'.

Well, here he was!

Okay, Reverend, what advice can you offer?

Dutifully, she scanned through it, although it was heavy going. Reading anything other than trashy novels was not second nature to her. Why bother, when you could get any info you needed from the internet?

But her whole trip, indeed her sanity, hinged on it.

One phrase, conveniently capitalised, leapt out: 'Second Sight'. She feverishly scanned through for more. One extract made her hairs stand on end:

The men of that second sight do not discover strange things when asked, but at fits and raptures, as if inspired with some genius at that instant, which before did lurk in or about them. Thus I have frequently spoke to one of them, who in his transport told he cut the body of one of these people in two with his iron weapon, and so escaped this onset, yet he saw nothing left behind of the appearingly divided body: at other times he outwrestled some of them.

Not only did it seem to describe the encounter with the demons – and their reaction to the poker, her 'iron weapon' – it also described how the visions came to her, in 'fits and raptures'.

She could relate to that!

Since Quatie helped straighten her out, she had been 'seeing things' more and more lately. Cutting back on the booze and improving her diet clearly made a difference. Her body was feeling cleaner, inside, and so was her mind.

The scotch earlier had been for emergency purposes only! She had received a nasty shock at the shrine after all.

The cleaning and coffee had helped ground her. She was ready to go back to work, and she had the perfect reading to take with her.

'I'll bring it back, I promise,' she spoke the silent house. She took a breath and stepped outside. The dark car was there, but let her go.

Back at Electric Ladyland, Raddle hadn't even noticed her absence. He was snoring in front of a re-run of *Fantasy Island* out the back.

Behold, the captain of industry, she smirked, hitting the remote.

The bear stirred in his cave. 'Hey! I was watching that!'

After doing some token indexing, Janey put her feet up behind the counter and scoured the Kirk book for anything about this 'gift', which seemed a mixed blessing at best.

In a letter from someone called Lord Tarbat, it was noted how:

The sight is of no long duration, only continuing so long as they can keep their eye steady without twinkling. The hardy therefore fix their look that they may see the

longer.

Janey sensed a presence in the room. Looking up, indeed there was. A sweaty elephant. How long Raddle had been standing there, staring at her tits she didn't like to think.

'This ain't a fucking library! Do some work!'

After her shift Janey had to swing by the mart to pick up some groceries. It was the least she could do to repay Quatie's hospitality. In a rush to get to the hospital before visiting hours were over – desperate not to miss her designated 'slot' – she had parked badly across a couple of bays. After a particularly stressful day (Raddle had been on her ass all afternoon) she was feeling tired and wired.

Gritting her teeth, she grabbed a basket and headed inside.

Malls always spaced Janey out – what with their muzak and noisy aisles with shelf-talkers screaming their bargains at you, confusing you as to what is on offer, making you buy twice as much as you need.

She searched for some dog-food for London. Dammit! They never kept things in the same place. Just as you got it figured out, they moved everything around some more. Hell that was typical of being alive on planet Earth... Whenever you felt you had a good hand, life shuffled the pack.

As she bent down to pick up the cheapest deal – taking a humbling bow to the lowest shelf – the aisle telescoped into infinity. Everything seemed to go into slow-motion, like in one of those dumb action movies. Reaching out she managed to pull over a pile of twenty pound boxes of Iams.

Small dogs, big mess.

Stunned, she looked at the avalanche she had caused – the scene telescoping away.

An assistant, who had been feeding the shelves from a trolley in a bored manner – nodding mechanically to something on his i-Pod rip-off, turned to say something, but his words came out in a slow, unintelligible drone. The tin beat of his earphones became a Richter-scale throb. Light shone through his acned face like a flash-light through a colander.

She held out her hand. Tried to block the glare.

He shrugged and turned back to his shelf-stacking.

To her horror, she could see the back of his head was hollow, as though it was a Jack-o'-lantern that had been scooped out.

Other shoppers in their gang colours, onesies, or light casual day-wear stared at Janey – pulling faces of disgust. Mothers dragged their gawping, nose-picking darlings away.

An over-bodied security guard strode up to see what the problem was – and Janey gasped for breath, for he appeared to her an angry ogre. His dark uniform became a block of shadow, slabs of shoulders hunched aggressively, boulder fists clenched, dark smoke issuing from the vents of his eyes.

She wanted to scream, but felt as though she was smothered in cling-film.

The ogre closed in on her, radiating collateral damage.

Suddenly, warm light broke through the eclipse.

‘Are you alright, honey?’ A kindly old lady, with concern glowing on her face, came up to her, and placed a fragile hand on hers, speaking soothing words. She helped Janey with her dropped groceries, and told the security guard off for frightening a defenceless woman.

The guard squirmed under the lambasting – his shadowy presence rapidly diminishing, until he stood before her, a normal man in an ill-fitting uniform. Rather embarrassed, he retreated to the scowls of the shoppers, who now saw him as some kind of bully.

The elderly lady – wreathed in a pink light – helped Janey to the checkout, where her goods were processed.

To the idiot bleeping of the scanner, she found her sight returning to normal and finally, she could breathe again.

Outside, she spotted the old lady – helping her with her goods to her car. 'Thank you, you're so kind.'

'Not a problem, my dear. You're not the only one to have turns in there. I've had my share and know exactly what it's like.' She held Janey's gaze for a second, before closing her boot and softly padding to her driver's side. 'Take care now,' she smiled sweetly before driving off.

Janey looked around the car-park – at the shoppers coming and going, the shopping trolleys, the pickups and space wagons, transits and sports cars, and everything seemed depressingly normal again – mere cages on wheels – but for once, Janey was relieved at the solid, Prozac reality she beheld.

She breathed out, shaking her head.

The cards and flowers were once again re-arranged from her last visit.

She moved them back.

Janey thought about Kirk's curious words, 'The hardy therefore fix their look,' as she gazed at Allen's pale form. It cut her to the core to see him lying there, but she forced herself not to turn away.

He was in there somewhere.

She told him about the experience in the mart.

Most of the time we only glance at things, she could hear Allen saying (she'd been having conversations with him a lot lately. In the car. In the shower. Sometimes she'd be engrossed in a discussion, only to turn around and realize he wasn't there). We see the world through a kind of visual short-hand – a fragment here, a scrap there, and we stitch it together in our minds.

She imagined Allen warming to his theme (once he started, it was hard to stop him).

How many of us actually take time to look at something properly? In the West it is thought rude to stare, but in other cultures it is quite common for travellers to experience the discomfiture of being stared at by apparently shameless natives. We might spend an evening glued to the goggle-box; a whole weekend binge-watching a favourite show; or hours staring at the computer screen for work, gaming, surfing and socialising. Some go to galleries and linger over an oil painting or sculpture, taking delight in the pleasure of seeing. So much of the time our 'seeing' is a functional thing, processing information – rarely is it used for its own sake. The power of the gaze is not something to be underrated...

Janey knew this from performing. It was a double-edged sword – standing there on centre-stage, drawing folks' attention. Sometimes she felt the guys mentally undressing her and squirmed; she would counter this by adopting a kiss-my-ass attitude. Folk saw what she wanted them to see, in that moment. They did not see the vulnerable, home-in-sloppy-joes Janey. They saw a brassy singer, belting out her tunes – supported by a bunch of guys, who (usually) made her feel protected on and off-stage. She would direct their gaze with a gesture, with her voice, with what she wore and how she wore it. As long as she was in control, she felt safe.

But this Second Sight felt scarier – open the door a crack and a whole phantom world would come flooding in. Was she hallucinating, or seeing things as they really were? If not

for recent events – especially the hard reality of Allen's condition – she would have feared she was going out of her mind.

But, here, in her hands was a different kind of proof.

The writings of a Seventeenth Century Scottish man of the cloth, and his noble acquaintances – folkloric evidence from across the Highlands and Islands of the Old Country. It would probably not stand up to modern-day academic or scientific scrutiny, but something prompted Kirk to write this extraordinary treatise. It had come from somewhere. Had it been 'channelled', she pondered? Had Kirk possessed the same gift he described, being a 'seventh son'? The same gift that perhaps she had inherited?

Janey suspected the Reverend would have thought little of her claim to the Gift. Whereas Lord Tarbat claimed, in a letter cited in full, 'men, women and children indistinctly were subject to it', Kirk refuted this: 'But a few women are endowed with this sight in respect of men, and their predictions not so certain.'

How she would have liked to put him right on that matter!

Tarbat seemed to speak more sense, saying how sometimes the Gift emerged in: '...children where parents were not. Sometimes people came to age who had it not when young, nor could any tell by what means produced. It is a trouble to most of them who are subject to it, and they would be rid of it at any rate if they could.'

Damn straight! Janey had ambivalent feelings about the whole thing. If she did have the knowing, it felt like a burden as much as a blessing. How could she function in daily life, if these visions occurred unexpectedly? What happened if she got one while driving? Or in the middle of a gig?

She shuddered, as the magma of memory threatened to erupt.

'I'm gonna get on top of this thing, Al. For both of us.'

And so, during her next lunch-break, Janey tried an experiment.

Going for a stroll down the main drag of the Eastern District, she looked at the passersby, hard.

At first, nothing happened and she felt a little foolish.

It was an average week-day, and folk were out shopping, hanging out, in rush, doing what they normally do. She stopped in a discreet archway and pretended to look at a text on her cell. But now and then she would flash a glance at a pedestrian, rubber-necking the back of their heads. Worried she would see a hollow skull, she beheld nothing more prosaic than the odd bald patch.

She tried blinking ... Glancing sideways ... Looking up suddenly ... Down her nose ...

Everything, until she nearly went cross-eyed.

She caught a young boy staring at her, as he held his mother's hand – the freckles spreading out over his face like some Martian virus. 'Mom, why is that lady pulling faces?'

Great, now she'd be thought of as the fruitbasket on the street. The men in white coats, rather than black, would be sent for.

She lowered her head and walked quickly by, feeling the boy's gaze burn into her. Halfway down the street she looked over her shoulder to check – and he was still watching, taking a long, slow slurp of his chocolate milk-shake.

It was then that it happened.

How the shift occurred it was hard to pin down. One moment, it was Normal-ville, USA; the next, Del Toro-town.

A young, pretty busker, strumming her guitar, turned into an unnaturally thin sylph-like being with wings like a damsel-fly. As she played, the notes turned into curling colours that floated away like blossom on the wind.

Janey took a sharp intake of breath. Forced herself to not blink.

Pedestrians didn't seem to notice anything strange. One or two would toss in a coin to the sylph's case. Most just avoided the busker's gaze and kept walking. Compared to her, they all looked like *Minecraft* characters.

The skeins of the song spiralled away in thermals of sound, rippling the air, thawing the edges of what it came in contact with. She had always felt music was a kind of magic, affecting reality in some way – but now she could *see* it through the sheen of her tears.

Then, a satyr-like man sidled up to the sylph – his gaze goggle-eyed as he lingered over her lithe form; his talk punctuated by the flick of a long, tongue – red and obscene. She emitted a caustic put-down – spitting black spikes – which made him recoil. Defeated, he melted into the crowd.

Janey walked on, eyes wide with wonder.

Street-hawkers called their wares – it was a Farmers' Market today – and their faces became like the vegetables and fruit they sold, Arcimboldo goblins in dungarees and baseball caps.

Hooded youths skateboarded past, urban gremlins, all jagged energy and attitude.

The mechanical knight of a NCPD officer scanned the shoppers beneath his Aviators, his gaze lingering a fraction too long on her.

She walked on quickly around the corner.

The double-vision persisted. Most shoppers remained human – but a few leapt alive in a radiance of prismatic fire.

At first the rival visions jarred in her brain like a 3-D movie without the glasses.

Yet, slowly, she fought back the nausea and, with an act of will, could sustain them both.

The street furniture, the traffic, the sales signs in the store windows, the litter on the sidewalk, the yapping terrier at her feet – all stabilised.

Simultaneously, she could perceive this other phantasmagoric reality co-existing side-by-side with the mundane.

And part of her knew it had always been there.

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The next day, at the store, there was a special delivery that required her signature. Whatever it was felt firm, rectangular and flat. Heart racing, she zipped open the package and put her hand to her mouth.

Kirk's journal.

There was a note attached.

Voila!

It took some wrangling but I managed to get it out of their filthy paws. That T. guy is a jerk. He's got some personal vendetta thing going. Well, if he wants to go all Dirty Harry, good luck to him. He won't last long. From what I was able to find out, they haven't been able to make head-nor-tail of it. Lot of Ivy League types sniffing around it. But I explained to them – in sub-pena English – that it wasn't their property. That it was a family heirloom of great sentimental value. And that I would trawl their tweedy asses through High Court if they didn't step away from the book. So, here it is, courtesy of the Shelly Express.

Keep that skinny butt of yours safe,

Sx

Janey made a mental note to take her guardian angel out for a meal soon.

She caressed the worn leather of the cover. Carefully leafed through its ragged edged

pages. All seemed to be in place.

The relief of its return was quickly replaced, however, by anger.

Part of her felt like shredding it, so much misery it had caused.

But ... would she want Allen's suffering to be in vain? He was the one still in a coma because of it.

The battered old journal was valuable in some way, *that* was crystal. That night they had unwittingly defended it with their lives. For some cockamamie reason she had been sent it, and to destroy it would be like denying her destiny.

And so she poured herself a coffee. It was quiet in the store, and Homer Simpson was off 'on business', which normally meant a trip to the bookmakers. She put some Clannad on and settled down, returning to her place.

The next day I set off for the castle – although 'day' was euphemistic, as it never got truly light. A lid of grey cloud cowled the heavens and the glen was drear, mantled in a chill mist which made my bones ache.

Still, I had a bowl of warm porridge in my belly and a kirtle of plaid about me, held in place by a brooch of bronze, one of antique and intricate design (the closer I looked at the knotwork, the more complex it became) – kindly bequeathed by the Brownies (for I am certain that is what they were), making me look like a true Tramontaine.

I thanked my generous hosts, who bid me, once again, to 'Caw cannie!' They were more nervous of my going than I was and cast anxious glances about the gloomy glen before quickly going inside and shutting the door.

After my night's sojourn at their humble abode I felt quite refreshed – chair or

no'. My mind and spirits were revived, and I strode forth. The kindly Brownies had even produced some hard-wearing sandals from somewhere. They fitted me perfectly; the leather felt freshly-tooled. Had they busied themselves in the night, in accordance to their nature?

I am glad that in this, at least, my research proved correct. I looked forward to whatever new experiences might allow me to field-test my theories, appearing less and less fanciful with each step in this uncanny land.

As I turned to go I remembered the Celtic rune of hospitality – as surely my hosts had – and offered a blessing to Donal and Mary, to their house, kine and kin.

The cobbled path continued through the glen and I wended my way, reciting for courage, the twenty-third psalm: 'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.'

What a strange weird. To wander in such a place, and I a Minister! How often had I preached my flock not to stray from the path; and yet here I was, walking the Devil's road. I did not know whether to be thrilled or a-feared.

Aye, in truth, I felt both.

In the grey distance the lights of the town, which flanked the castle, glimmered invitingly. I reckoned it would be half a days' walk.

I hoped my new sandals would bear up, but they seemed made for long miles.

Setting myself to the task, I ploughed ahead.

I was just pondering what I would do when I reached there, when a barbaric shout shattered the silence, echoing across the hillside.

I looked about nervously, but saw no one.

Then a clatter of rocks drew my attention.

I thought I caught a flash of a figure out of the corner of my eye – but when I looked directly there was nothing there.

From the opposite side of the valley the dislodging of rocks again, and now a feral laugh.

A cold flush of fear shot down my spine, and I quickened my step, reciting with increasing boldness an old lorica of the Highlands, which here I shall relate in the English:

From every gruagach and banshee,

From every evil wish and sorrow,

From every glaistig and ban-nigh,

From every fairy-mouse and grass-mouse,

From every fuath among the hills,

From every siren hard pressing me,

From every urisg within the glens,

Oh! save me till the end of my day.

Oh! save me till the end of my day.

Wild laughter mocked me from the boulders, strewn about the glen as though the legacy of some shot-putting game of giants. I hurried forth, feeling the panic rise, until I could bear it no more. I felt foolish and vulnerable in my disreputable attire – hardly the regalia befitting my rank. Mustering what dignity I could I turned, deciding to make a stand and face my foe. 'Show yourself, whether you be de'il or man!' My voice rang

out across the glen. I'd always prided myself on my vocal abilities, delivering my sermons with relish.

There was an eerie hollow of sound – and then suddenly the beast of the glen sprang afore, making a most fearsome noise.

At first all I could make out was a blur of fur, hoof and horn – yet the assailant was a man for a' that ... at least half a man – the rest of him was largely goat. He certainly stank like one, and I covered my nose with the sleeve of my nightshirt. I noticed that he lacked an ear – one had been clearly torn off in some kind of rut.

The Urisg – for I surmised that is what it was (I have heard of these wild men of the forests: Maclachlan of Maclachan of Strathlachan was said to have one as a faithful retainer called Harry) looked at me inquisitively, a sadistic smile upon its face. Its eyes were most fierce, flickering with a strange fire – like the kind seen amid the frets of marshes, and yet its expression was human enough. There was a sentience there, no doubt – a sinister intelligence.

It seemed to be working out what to do with me.

Finally, it spoke, poking me and laughing gutturally. 'Ironblood.'

'Human? Yes, I am one of God's children. Pray, what in high Heaven's name are you?' The cold, dark, disorientating experience – it made me finally snap. 'And what do you think of yersel, a-frittin' wayfarers like this? Is this how you greet visitors to your realm?' I bristled like a capercaillie.

The Urisg flinched at my words as though I had birched him – the mention of the Lord's name particularly seemed to harm him, and he whined in pain. He held his head low and his rank tail flicked between his legs as he squatted in shame. I was amused by this reaction – it would seem adopting the tone of an admonishing schoolmaster did the

trick. I knew I must strike a bargain quickly – such creatures can turn on you at the drop of a hat unless you have established who is boss. The beastie reminded me not a mickle of some of my more wayward parishioners, all too partial to the water of life. They only responded to a hard talking to, needing the nonsense knocked out of them.

'Bo'ca bad,' the creature howled; and for the first time I noticed its pitiful state – his fur was mangy, knotted with brambles and daglocks, its ribs all too visible. White scars could be glimpsed across his bony limbs, like striations of rock through the tufts of gorse. This was a body all too accustomed to pain.

Feeling the milk of compassion well up in me, I spoke to this Pooka in a reconciliatory manner. 'Listen, I am not an unreasonable sort. Perhaps if you made yourself useful – by showing me the quickest, safest way to the castle, I can forgive your outburst?'

The sobbings ceased. 'Help you?'

'Yes, be my guide, Urisg, and I won't mention it again.'

A light of hope flared in his eyes and he beamed. 'Useful? Useful!' He leapt to his feet. 'Bo'ca will be useful to kind human and human will be kind to Bo'ca!' The fellow capered around me, leaping from rock to rock. 'Bo'ca know all the paths. Bo'ca lived here a long time. These mountains are made from family bones.'

'Quite. But a little less jigging about if you please – it's making me giddy! And we must give you a name. Something friendly and sensible.'

The Urisg's eyes lit up again. 'You give Bo'ca a name? A name...'

Anyone would think I was one of the Magi, bestowing gifts. Perhaps in this world I was. Pondering for a moment, scratching my chin, I snapped my fingers. 'A ha! I have it. Let's call you ... Hamish.'

'Hamish? Hamish!' the Urisg stood up and bellowed it to the Glen, banging his chest. He seemed pleased, with the answer the mountains gave him. Then he bowed low before me – an extraordinary thing to behold when done by an Urisg – and said with relish: 'Hamish is ...' he searched for the phrase, '...at your service.' Pleased with the words, he said them again and again, making mock bows to the bushes.

I cast my eyes about the glen, pondering on this turn of events. 'Well, let's see now. I need to get to the castle yonder – the road seems clear enough.'

The creature spat over his shoulder. 'Bad road. Hungry. Eat people up. Follow mountain paths. Safer.'

I raised my eyebrows – not only at his suggestion (the cliffs loomed terrifyingly over us), but at his sudden burst of loquaciousness.

The Urisg clearly knew the lay of the land like the proverbial back of his hairy hand. So sighing, I acquiesced, and let him lead.

Janey put the journal down. What joy to be reading it again! She found herself forgiving its devastations, almost. It was becoming quite an adventure. And what of the 'Urisg'? She reckoned she might have seen one on the street, eyeing up the busker!

How could one be on *this* side?

Then Raddle walked in with a six-pack hooked in his bear-paw, and she realised it was all too likely.

Gigs with the band came and went like thrush. She endured them for the sake of the trip-fund; but the atmosphere these days was toxic. She preferred going to the folk sessions – something Janey thought she would never admit! A venerable Asheville folkie had stepped in to MC,

but it wasn't the same without Allen. Still, she dutifully went along, building up her confidence as a solo performer, practicing her growing repertoire. Her latest, 'Down in Yon Forest', choked her up, but she felt compelled to give it a crack, having loved it ever since hearing Jeff Buckley's version.

And Hell, her life was turning into a ballad!

When she updated Shelly in their regular catch-ups, her friend, once she had composed herself after a fit of giggles about the bad folk habit, offered her this advice: 'Your life couldn't get any more *Addams Family* than it already is. Steer into the skid.'

Back at Quatie's she settled down and read some more of the journal:

Like some laird's gillie, Hamish delighted in leading the way and moved easily over the precipitous terrain with his goatish legs. I, being made from Adam's stock, huffed and puffed behind him. I am a keen hill-walker, but even I struggled to keep up. The Urisg would bound ahead, then stop like a loyal gun-dog to check I was still there before gambolling onwards. In this fashion we made brisk, steady progress up into the hills.

Soon, we were on a level with the main ridge that snaked alongside the glen, matching the one opposite for size and grandeur.

Exhausted, I needed to stop and catch my breath.

Hamish found a ledge where a spring bubbled next to a rowan tree. He cupped his hand and gestured to the water: 'Drink from Beinn mouth.'

The water was the sweetest, most refreshing I had ever tasted. It made me feel more alive than I had felt in a long time.

We sat in companionable silence (Hamish's the deep silence of the animal),

drinking in the majesty of the scene before us. Even in the greyness of the day, the Glen of Shadows was breathtaking, flanked as it was by ranks of mountains extending into the distance.

Following the contour of the ridge, our way was a little easier, in terms of gradient, but far more treacherous. I focused on every footing, and tried not to think of the thousand foot drop inches away. The mist wreathed the ridge like a wet shroud – moisture bejewelling my kirtle, which kept me still surprisingly dry and warm. The air around my legs felt edifying. I smiled at the thought: what would my parishioners make of me now, looking like a true Highlander, in the company of a shaggy de'il?

I asked my guide questions as we went and he reluctantly obliged, each answer prised from him like deer-tics. It was clear the Urisg was a private fellow unused to company or sharing his inner life. He minded me of some of the hill-crofters I have met. Taciturn fellows – more content with the company of their favourite collie than their fellow man. Gruff, but often soft-hearted underneath, shedding a tear at a lamb frozen in a snow-drift. I admired them for their quiet, self-contained dignity. They did not expect anything from the world, and they hoped the world would leave them to be to get on with their business – stoic stewards of the lonely hills.

We continued along the ridge, making progress. It was dream-like, a minister following a fawn, up in the clouds – as though we were the stuff of hearth-tales.

As tactfully as I could, I probed further.

Didn't he ever get lonely?

The Urisg thought about this for a beat. No – he had many friends: the mountains, the eagle, the buzzard, the rain, the waterfall, the wind, the stars ... always speaking to him, keeping him company.

Were there females of his kind?

This time he was slower to respond, looking wistfully across the chasm. Yes, but few and far between, alas. There was Mag Mulloch, Hairy Meg, and her kind, who preferred to skivvy in some household. The Cloud Road was not for them – only the Cailleachs, the Stormhags, favoured the heights, and they were not for houghmagandie-ing!

What of other male Urisgs? Did he not yearn for the company of his brothers?

Hamish grew merrier, his gestures livelier, miming drinking, dancing, camaraderie. He almost burst with excitement at the memory. Once a year there was a great gathering – in Coire nan Uruisgean.

The Corry of the Urisgs? I had heard of it – it was in my world, on the slopes of Beinn Venue above Ellen's Isle, if I remember right.

Crossing places, the Urisg explained, gesturing into the middle distance.

Like my Fayrie ring above Aberfoyle? Yes, although they only work at certain times of the wheel – when sun and moon and stars are in alignment. He couldn't explain it, beyond saying a waterfall does not flow upwards.

'It is easier coming through than going back.'

The phrase seemed fossilised inside him from a former life, the syntax alien to his feral tongue.

I pondered this. Was this the only way forward? Was my doom decided? 'Why is the road in the vale dangerous?' I interrogated. 'You said it was ... "hungry".'

Here the Urisg's body language grew tense, vigilant. He waved a knotted and taloned hand in the air, hiding his face with the other like some grease-painted tragedian. Yet I got the gist fair enough: It is best to stay out of the way...

'Who?'

'The Fayrie Rade...' he whispered, fear and desire blended in his voice. Summoning courage, he continued: 'Bo'ca-Hamish watch them pass.' His goat eyes gleamed. 'The Elves, so bonnie; music so lovely. But ice for hearts. Beauty their weapon.' Baring his yellow fangs, he hit the ground with a fist. Breathing heavily, it took a moment for him to compose himself again. 'Trust the mud, the rock, the dark and the cold. Bo'ca knows it; it knows Bo'ca.'

I was surprised by the Urisg's sudden burst of eloquence – he seems to have found it easier to talk the more we went along, as though remembering the gift of speech in my company. I sensed there was some calamity that had driven him into the hills and made him shun the world, like Arthur's sorcerer, Myrddin Wyllt, traumatised by battle, retreating into the forest of Caledon to live with wolves – the human in him fading like a dream.

I wanted to ask my feral guide if he grew less and less man-like every year – a difficult question to frame without causing offence!

But we were interrupted by a hellish baying.

Hamish made me take cover and we watched from behind a rock as down below a dark blur streaked across the sky. 'Beware! Reivers of the air!'

Janey stopped reading.

A gust of wind made the house creak, a giant stirring in its sleep – finally, it seemed to settle, but the unfamiliar sounds made her skittish.

Quatie's medicine was older, stronger and meaner than anything that the past could spit out.

So she hoped.

London roused at her feet, sensing her shift of energy. He looked at her with his vivid, intelligent eyes. 'What is it, Lonny? Anything there?' He cocked his head, and got up, stretching, before trotting to the front door. He sniffed the draught that always managed to sneak through, no matter what was placed there.

Janey reached for her shotgun – kept oiled and loaded since the first encounter.

She was not going to get caught on the hop again.

The cold iron sat heavy on her thigh.

London trotted back and slumped at her feet with a bellow's wheeze.

Then, the door went. A loud, aggressive knock that sent Janey's heart pounding.

Picking up the weapon and flipping the safety, she slowly walked to the door, barrel-first, trying not to creak the floor-boards.

She stood one side of the wood.

Someone, or thing, was on the other side.

'Open up. We know you're in there.' A gruff laugh.

Puzzled, she pulled open the door.

Standing there was Agent Trent, wearing not his usual suit but a fleece-collared pilot jacket, plaid shirt, and jeans. 'Put that thing away before you hurt yourself.'

He walked straight into the house without so much as a by your leave.

'No need to get antsy, Mizz McEttrick. This is just neighbourly visit. An informal chat.'

He sat down heavily in Quatie's chair.

The phone sat next to him, a million miles away.

The FBI agent sported a dark frost of stubble and she'd got a blast of liquor as he'd brushed by her.

'Take a seat,' he gestured, as though it were his place.

London growled at him. 'Calm down, fella. I'm just here to jaw-jaw.'

Janey looked at him, hard. Nothing but a black wall of booze.

Sliding the catch back on, she slowly sat down opposite, Granpa across her knees.

Trent ran his fingers across his face, his buzz-cut. For a while he just sat there, head in his hands.

Janey wasn't entirely sure what to do. Was he here to question her, intimidate her?

Shelly had said he'd gone a 'bit strange'. No shit.

Nothing to hide, she thought. Don't act guilty. Yet as soon as she thought it, her palms started to sweat.

Finally, he spoke. A low murmur, as though to himself.

'Those eyes ... They stick in the mind, don't they? I ... can't stop seeing them. I know that ... thing ... is out there. I know you know it too.' He looked at her through blood-shot eyes. 'Two came in. One came out.' He counted on his fingers. 'That's the consensus. The only consensus. The crazy shit people come out with.' He laughed. From his jacket pocket he pulled out a hipflask. There was briefest flash of holster; some heavy piece. He unscrewed the top and raised it. 'To Richards. Best goddamn partner in the business.' He took a slug. 'They got him. But you got them back. An eye for an eye.' He pointed a finger at her like a pistol and took aim along its barrel. 'Guess that should make us all square, huh? But those poor children ...' Another sip. 'That fucking *chupacabra*, whatever it is, is still on the loose. Folk are terrified. Someone has to bring it down.' His knuckles whitened around the hipflask. 'I want to be that man. I ... thought letting you go would ... draw it out. Bait.' He bared his teeth as he spat the word out. 'But it ain't biting. Must be laying low. Licking his wounds. Whatever you and White Fang here did, you did good.' He raised the flask, took another sip.

'Fucking Grade-A heroes. Should be decorated. But nobody would un'erstand, would they? They'd think we're crazy. Gotta play the game, yes ma'am. Act straight'n'narrow. Bide my time. I can wait. Fucking deer-hunter, that's me.'

Janey sat rigid, her senses alert. The barrel cold on her thigh.

He wiped his face. Flicked his hands. 'And delete.' He let out a sigh. 'Forget ... everything that I've said. I wasn't here.' He got to his feet, wavered like a tree in the forest. 'I'm gonna nail that fucker. As soon as it makes its move...' He pointed his finger again. 'Boom.'

19

Janey sat in Mickey, psyching herself up with a roll-up. The hospital parking lot was crammed full with visitors driven by love, greed, or like her, guilt. They spilled out of their big shiny cars, carrying bundles of presents under their arms, laughing like 1950s adverts: nuclear families wrapped up against the biting cold in kitsch Christmas sweaters, Santa hats, antlers.

She hated them.

Every radio station was playing cloyingly sentimental tracks. She killed the sound with a stab of her finger and sat in her parcel of silence.

Christmas fucking Eve.

Each day revealed another window of misery, like some perverted advent calendar – behind each cardboard flap a bomb, a turd, a skull. She joked to Shelly that the only Christmas spirit she could muster was in a bottle, but that wasn't far from the truth.

For once, though, she had someone else to consider beyond her own sorry ass.

She picked up the leaflet from her dashboard: 'Friends of Coma Victims'. They had a weekly drop-in session. Hell, *that* would be a lively gathering. But from the spinners of support group literature in the Chuckle-land foyer over yonder she had found none offering advice about dealing with supernatural persecution – black shucks, men in black, journals from beyond the grave, and bouts of second sight... Her shit, her shovel.

Stoving the butt into the asphalt with her heel, she took a deep breath, and set off across the parking lot.

The ward was decorated with garish garlands suspended like jellyfish above the dying coral of the patients. A plastic tree strangulated by tinsel appeared more vibrant than the grey-faced staff, nursing hangovers in the private clinics of their skulls. The walking dead shuffled about bearing drip-feeds of memories, ghosts of Christmas past. Visitors arrived dutifully packaged, conducting cost-benefit analyses with their abacus eyes.

Janey signed in and made her way to Allen's room.

Tinsel caduceused the end of the bed, engulfing the dreamcatcher Quatie had made.

In the corner a diminutive fibre-optic tree stood, working its way through the spectrum, courtesy of the sister, mercifully back north.

Janey preferred natural decorations, but the ward sisters weren't going to let holly, ivy and mistletoe into the sterile environment.

Under the tree she added to the pile of presents and cards that he had accrued from friends and well-wishers, inundating Louisa's large effort. Janey had thought long and hard about what she should get him – and why. In the end, she thought it was a positive statement, an affirmation that he *would* get better. And so she had bought him a stylish beret, a notebook and cartridge pen, and a lovely hardback edition of his favourite modern poet, David Whyte.

She opened these for him, placed the beret on his shaved head, the notebook and pen by his bed, and read out some of the poems.

Sometimes she would take in her guitar and gently sing him one of the songs she was working on, hoping it would glean a response – although it broke her open, feeling the energy in the room lift as she poured her heart out, and then seeing him there, inert. 'Critics, hey, who needs them?' she would joke, fighting back the tears.

But the music wouldn't come today.

She stopped, sighing heavily – looking around at the depressing sight.

No amount of tinsel and glitter was going to cheer this place up. When friends had asked her, what she had wanted for Christmas, her reply had been every time: 'For Allen to be well again.'

In silence, she closed her eyes and bowed her head, holding his hand and imagining him better. *Please, please, please – make him better.* She wasn't sure to whom she was praying, but she imagined her ancestors smiling down, somehow helping. Wiping the tear from her eye, she kissed Allen gently upon his brow, and said, 'Seeya in a couple of days. Don't drink too much sherry. I'll save you some Xmas pud.' The words left a film of ash on her tongue.

Thin-lipped, she left, and drove up in the foothills, London on the passenger seat, nose in the wind. She didn't want to be around any revelry. The streets were apocalypse-empty as she made her way out of town on the Interstate, heading for the Tennessee border.

Stepping out of the Dodge, she breathed out a ghost-cloud. The sky was a metallic blue assailed by arrows of pine.

And a whole lot of nothing.

The Max Patch Trail had called her, a favourite of London's (and every pooch and its owner this side of the Smokys, it seemed, on some days). Today, fortunately, the car-park was empty.

The outer peace mirrored her own internal silence. She felt frozen up with grief – but she had to believe he'd get better. She had to be there for him when he did; she had to be strong. 'Snap out of it,' she said to the gaunt reflection in the rear-view. She pulled on her

Afghan jacket and grabbed the lead. 'C'mon, fella, let's find you one of Santa's squirrels.' The cold made her eyes sting.

That night, Quatie and her friends did their best to raise her spirits. She did too. Made the right faces and noises, but her heart wasn't in it. She went to bed early, curling up with the journal, London at her feet.

The shapes grew more distinct as they approached – swirling in the air like a murmuration of starlings. Shadow-cloaked riders, pale hounds with blood-red ears, and at their head – a fearsome horned warrior. My guide cowered in terror, pulling me down. 'Wild Hunt! Beware!' His nostrils flared. 'Smell Ironblood.' The hunters circled once overhead – the baying unbearable – then a deep horn blast sent them onwards into the gloaming.

I was rooted to the spot by an instinctual terror akin to that of a mouse crossed by a raptor's shadow until Hamish pulled me to my feet. 'Flytt we must!'

With haste now, we carried on our way, descending down to the far end of the Glen where the lights of the town glittered like a Fayrie-tale hoard. 'There are gude wichts and wicked wichts,' spoke the Urisg, as though stating an incontrovertible law of the cosmos.

I sensed the Wild Hunt were of the latter variety.

Finally, with night at our heels we made it to the edge of town that flourished within the walls under the aegis of a castle. A spiked crown of stone, the battlements glowered imperiously down from their commanding position at the head of the ravine. Flanked by high crags, any invading force would be siphoned into this bottleneck and

picked off with ease. Around its base a torrid river raged.

The Urisg acted skittish, watching the buttress of the town walls nervously. He clearly was not happy being so close. 'Here,' Hamish gestured roughly to the town gates as though they were an abomination – the mouth of Hell itself.

I thanked my guide and said that I hoped to see him again.

He was already gone – melted into the night.

Christmas morning. While Quatie entertained her extended family and friends with her customary open house, Janey sat in the back-room, staring at the biscuit-tin her mother had given her, its lid firmly sealed.

She hadn't plucked up the courage to examine the rest of the contents after the terrifying download she had received last time. The terror of daily life was more than enough at present. She was barely holding it together as it was without any Quantum Leap shit going on right now. Reality was breathing down her neck.

But Christmas Day always seemed like a truce, real or imagined. Peace on Earth, *just for once, please*, she prayed ... to anyone or thing listening.

Whatever she felt, Scrooge-McGrinch that she was, this day wasn't about her.

She got her things and headed out.

'You off?' Quatie, dressed in black beneath a blood-spattered Elvira apron, tray in hand.

'Yeah. Family calls.'

Mid-morning and the festivities of Sunnyside were in full swing. Janey looked through the windows at the merry tableau within.

Outside, the lights flashed in sequence, glowing to brighten up the somewhat overcast

day. The familiar pattern of the day. How many years had she done this now?

The lights never changed.

Her mother was in high spirits for once, enjoying one of her lucid phases.

'June bug! Come and join us!'

Old Bill Gribben was on the piano and the residents were enjoying a singalong. There was something in the colourful chaos that clean broke through Janey's fug. How could she feel sorry for herself when these sweet old folks, many enjoying maybe their last Christmas, marooned by time and riddled by its harsh assaults, could be jolly?

She hugged her mother, handing over presents, but Marsha wasn't interested. Only the music.

To reach her, she had to join her.

So, Janey perched next to her on the couch, and picked up the chorus of 'Coming Round the Mountain.' As that song faded, Marsha burst into the 'Bonny Banks o' Loch Lomond.' Janey harmonised with her, and it went down a storm. Fired up, they kept going, and before they knew it, an impromptu concert was in full flow. While it lasted, her mother was fully alive once again.

Later, she helped out serving up the Christmas lunch, and the diners' expressions made it all worthwhile. They made her forget her own misery anyhow.

Afterward, sharing a secret toke with one of the staff out the back, Janey found herself smiling for what felt like the first time in ages. Singing with her mother in public ... she hadn't done that in a long time. More than ever, she felt part of a tradition – which held her, supported her, raised her up, making her taller and stronger than by herself.

Her mother had been stirred up by it as well.

As they sat after dinner, their stomachs full as Christmas stockings, Marsha sat up: 'Y'know, your great grandmother was a famous lady.'

Marsha had a way of coming out with such statements – astonishing facts that she assumed Janey was aware of, when in fact they were bolts from the blue. 'Really?'

Her mother continued. 'Great Grandma Molly met an English gentleman who came walking over the mountain, collecting songs like butterflies. Blunt, or something, he was called.'

Janey watched her mom with fascination. So much time locked up in there. So many worlds.

'Grandma Dotty told me this once as I sat at her knee, like you are today...'

Janey pulled a face – she was a grown woman, but her mom would always think of her as her 'little June bug'.

'He seemed like a nice enough fellow, by all accounts, of which there was a plenitude. He might have had a companion with him too, a well-to-do lady, so it all seemed respectable enough. Great Grandma Molly only seventeen at the time, mind, and in the full bloom of her beauty. After much deliberating – we don't like to give away nothin' for nothin' in the mountains, but the gentleman seemed the kindly sort more into the music-making than shiny money – her dowry was shared, set down with great interest. The McEttrick jewels ... put in his book, pinned to the pages, notes and all, the charm of them broken.'

'A book...?'

Marsha waved her hand vaguely. 'I used to have a copy – inscribed by the man himself and sent in gratitude to Great Grandma Molly, for her 'sweet voice' and 'clear memory'. Lord knows what happened to it! It had a long title and I only had a short shelf.'

'Oh, Mom! You can't tell me something like that and then make me squirm – dangling

like a worm on the end of a fishing rod.'

'I'm sure you could look it up. Doogle it, or whatever you do these days...' She started playing with the settee cover and humming to herself.

Janey looked at her. At times she could throttle her, but she had to laugh. 'You're priceless!'

'Well, I like to think I'm very expensive at least...' She pushed up her hair, which Janey had pinned up, and decorated with a flowery brooch for the day.

Janey gave her a big hug.

'Oh, there is one thing...' her mother suddenly remembered, her gaze fixed on the fairy on top of the tree. She looked about, checking for eavesdroppers. Residents snoozed in front of the television or played games with the staff. She leaned close, cupping her mouth to Janey's ear. 'There was a song Great Grandma Molly didn't share with the Englishman,' she whispered. 'A secret song, kept for kin only. Passed down from long back. Carried all the way from the Old Country.'

'Really...?' Janey couldn't believe what she was hearing. 'Do you remember it?'

'Of course, do you think I've lost my mind or something?' she bridled. Marsha always claimed she was completely sane. 'Not like these Loony Tunes here!' she gestured dismissively.

Janey looked on, expectantly. 'Could you share it with me?'

Her mother looked at her sideways, giving her a sharp discerning once over. 'Mmm. No. Yes. You are my daughter, aren't you? It is Christmas, isn't it? Have you been a good girl though?'

'Oh, Mom, come off it – I'm thirty two!'

Marsha looked over her again, as if noticing this detail for the first time.

'That may be so. Very well. This can be your Christmas present, from me to you.'

Janey's face lit up.

'But not here. I don't want these chatterboxes hearing it. And not in my room. Walls have ears. And eyes. Outside.'

Janey looked through the French doors. 'It'll be freezing.'

'Then it'll keep it fresh.'

So they wrapped up, and with some explanation to the staff, went out onto the terrace. It was starting to get dark and the sky was covered in low cloud. It seemed to be particularly chilly – the cold making their cheeks burn.

Janey stamped her feet and blew on her hands.

Her mother didn't seem to notice the cold, but stood, rapt – staring into the middle distance.

And, then, against the encroaching dark, night bleeding around them from the wound of day, she began to sing.

Marsha's lost song stayed with Janey for days. It was more than an ear-worm – it was a lost fragment of her DNA. A full-bloodied ballad, stretching over about thirty verses, she would sing it around the house when no-one was about, doing the chores (determined to be more diligent in cleaning than back in her trailer), driving to work, walking London. She took care not to sing it around people though. It felt like a private thing – kept in the McEttrick family for centuries, uncollected, unrecorded, uncommodified. She was mighty proud of the fact.

It drained a little of the bitterness from things.

Mercifully, the 'festive season' past – pre-Christmas sales became post-Christmas sales.

Janey kept her head down, waiting for the all clear. She revelled in spending whole days in one of Allen's old dressing gowns and her favourite pyjamas, binge-watching box sets amid a nest of chocolates, books and a drinks tray.

The biscuit-tin remained unopened on the side.

By it, Janey placed the folder of information Allen had compiled for her for the trip: details about the flight, the hotel, the gig, a map of Glasgow, and larger touring map of Scotland with key locations marked on it. Most excitingly, there was a print-out of the 'Fairy Walk' at Aberfoyle and some stuff from the internet about Kirk.

Janey had thought long and hard about whether she should still go, all things considered. The embargo on her leaving town had been lifted, thanks to Shelly. She'd received no further contact from Agent Trent, and she wasn't going to poke the hornets' nest. Free to go she might be, but the cold fact remained about her boyfriend.

Yet his condition was stable, and her friends insisted she went. 'It's what he would want,' Quatie had told her unequivocally over a turkey club sandwich at one of the Mothers' meet-ups. 'He made all that effort to set this up for you. Handed it to you on a plate. Are you going to throw that away? Get your tartan butt over there!'

Over a medicinal mojito, toasting her toes by the fire, London flumped out on the rug, Janey made her decision, and breathed a sigh of relief.

So, that's that.

Suddenly, the prospect filled her with excitement. It was a little bit scary, but, hey, when had she ever stayed in the safety zone?

It was hard to believe that, in less than a month, she would be on her way: going to Scotland! It would make it more real, somehow.

She had been dimly aware of her Scottish ancestry for a long time. Vague memories of Burns' Night Suppers from childhood flickered in the grate: a surreal affair involving the piping in of the unspeakable concoction called a haggis (tasted better than its recipe sounded), the reciting of bizarre poetry that sounded better the more scotch you drank, and sentimental conversations about the Old Country and hoary 'Clan lore'. It had all seemed a bit forced to her, transplanted to North Carolina – but there was no getting around the fact she 'had some Celt in her'. One look in the mirror was enough to remind her of that.

Well, soon enough she'd be experiencing the 'real thing'. If such a thing existed, she reflected, swooshing the tumbler of malt before her. The elusive shapes of the flames through its facets fascinated her. Reality seemed less and less certain these days.

'To all my relations.' She raised the glass and took a sip, savouring its peaty fire – the tang of her ancestors calling to her, blood to blood, across the centuries.

She picked up the journal and traced the spiral pattern on the cover. Opened it at her place. A slight crack of the pungent leather. The rough fibre of the paper.

These words were her only guide to help her make sense of it all. She had to keep reading and hope that some key would emerge to unlock her predicament.

I made my way to the formidable entrance of the castle-town – its flanking towers encrusted with gargoyles and occult designs like witch-posts. The massive fortified gates were just being closed for the night. 'Wait!' I called out, my clear sermon voice ringing off the stone. The gatekeeper ignored me, continuing to crank the doors shut from his alcove. He looked a boarish sort, and I do not exaggerate. He was squat, with a bristly head of hair and tusks curving up either side of an ugly snout. He was dressed in studded leather armour. I did not want to be shut out in the night. Who knows what

other beasts lurked out there (my new friend accepted excepted, who was alas long gone)? 'In the name of God, man – let me in!' It is rare that I lose my temper, yet it seemed to do the trick. The boar-man froze in his actions, literally. I could get no further response from him. Fortunately, the door was still slightly ajar and so I slipped in – there was just enough space. I passed the gatekeeper, whose glassy gaze unnerved me. He smelled worse than he looked and I quickly left him behind, wishing him a good evening.

With some relief (and a little pleased indignation at the power of the Lord's name in this infernal place) I entered the main town.

A night market was taking place – and what a market it was!

Even though the hour was late, the streets were still lively. The customers and traders were as colourful as the wares. Arrayed in exotic fashion, of every colour, shape and size, rank and humour were: pale, fine-boned aristocrats with cool eyes and exquisite clothes of lace like snow-flakes; silk-robed Oriental merchants and leopard-skin draped African diplomats, nobly deporting themselves through the crowd; Princes of Araby with hawks on their forearms and harems and eunuchs in tow; Slavik warriors, swaggering and drunk; stinking fur-clad seal-hunters; and dazzling ice-princesses slim as icicles, laughter tinkling like glass.

This remarkable cavalcade rubbed shoulders with darker robed figures, cowed and hooded due to their faith, profession or persuasion. As bright and gay as some were, others were hewn from shadow and the crowds melted at their approach.

A company of knights passed, clearly on important business, looking splendid in their livery of indigo and gold. A richly-clad customer declared that he was on the Queen's business. He was served immediately, while the queues muttered amongst

themselves.

Lit up with brightly-coloured lamps, the stalls offered every delicacy imaginable: fruits I have never seen before, delicious-looking cakes, tarts, pies, and sweets. There were others that displayed the riches of the seas, the forests, or the fields. Some offered fine metalwork, leatherwork, pottery, linen, weapons, musical instruments of exquisite skill. Yet it was the food stalls that caught my eye the most, or rather my stomach. I hesitated, knowing the taboo on Fayrie fruit. Yet had I not partaken of the Brownies' humble fare? Did that count? I imagined that the epicurean vittles that were on offer would be of finer quality, and thus more potent.

It was hellish, to not to yield to temptation – but before I could succumb, a squeal split the air.

I had been spotted.

A company of guards quickly surrounded me, pikes blocking my escape.

The boar-man grunted with satisfaction – his eyes pinpricks of hate.

The officer declared in stentorian fashion: 'In the name of Her Majesty, I arrest you!'

Before I could answer they had knocked me senseless and my mouth was bound.

Janey put the journal down, her heart racing. She felt as though Kirk's experience was happening to her.

More resolved than ever, she vowed: *I will set you free.*

20

New Year's Eve arrived like an unwelcome guest. Janey sat alone in Allen's house. The empty space around her seemed fuller than her own life.

She had called round to just check on things: messages; post; give the place a dust.

Standing there, duster in hand, it hit her. The sad tableaux of her alone in the empty house tonight of all nights. She could hear the premature fireworks and throb of distant parties. Jeezus, she had never felt like such an old maid before!

The plain fact was she just wasn't in the party mood this year, even though she knew Hogmanay was a big deal over in the Old Country (and now, by default, the rest of the world). When Scotland drinks, she mused, the rest of the world gets a hang-over. Any excuse for a 'pish up', Auld Lang Syne slurred along to by millions who hadn't a clue what it meant. One day, she'd like to experience it in Edinburgh – the footage from Princes Street looked enticing – but for now, she was happy enough to lay low, a nip of decent single malt to help burn the supernatural chill of the place away, London, and Allen's music collection for comfort.

On the turn-table, Sandy Denny lamented about the loss of time, the needle spiralling to its singularity.

Janey kept her cell phone on and bandied back-and-forth various text messages and calls – including a chiding one from her Shelly, who lambasted her for being such a 'stick-in-the-mud'. Her best friend, dressed like one of the Ramones, had called round earlier for a pre-party cocktail and had done her best to cajole her out, to no effect. Janey felt the empathy beneath her fond antagonism and took it in good humour. 'You go and have a great time,' she

said, waving Shelly off as the taxi arrived.

'Alright, grandma – don't stay up too late now, will you?'

Janey laughed about this as she recollected it. A strange sound in the silent house. She immediately felt guilty, as though its owner was frowning down at her.

Sighing, she sat down and took a sip from her toddy. Not *too* much – she had to drive back to Quatie's after all. Letting the smoky taste of the Ardbeg warm her mouth, she looked into the dark grate and tried to see a bright future.

Although she had an itinerary, of sorts, for her trip – starting at Gaelic Gathering in Glasgow – Janey found it hard to imagine what her time in Scotland would bring. And beyond, there was even more of a void. Who knew what the coming year would entail? She mainly tried to picture Allen well, recovered, running his business or the open mic, and their relationship, friendship, whatever it was, developing. She prayed dearly this would be the case. If she had to go to the ends of the Earth to rid herself of this thing, then she would – if it meant her and Allen could live in peace, in happiness. If she could not exorcise her demon, then she was willing to leave him alone – though it would shatter her heart.

Time slipped away like a broken hour-glass.

Years of exhaustion seemed to descend.

So tired...

She closed her eyes.

Just for a moment.

The crack of Winchesters echoes across the canyon. Cavalry charges into a Cherokee camp, a dark blue wave against the yellow grass. Women, children, elders are mown down by the blind scythe of bullets. Warriors reach for their tomahawks, their rifles. Leap upon snorting

painted horses. Fight back, ullulating war cries. But the white tide is unstoppable. The river swirls with blood. She hides behind the beaded hem of her mother's skirt, peering between her long legs. An officer aims. Fires. The thunder brings the sky falling down.

Janey woke up with a start.

Disorientated, she rubbed her eyes. Half-drunk tumbler in her hand. Allen's place. Late.

Outside, the report of fireworks across the neighbourhood.

She reached for her cell. Christ, it was nearly midnight.

Getting up, a little dizzy, she went to the kitchen. Splashed her face. Guzzled down some water.

Two minutes to go. She picked up the remote and flicked on the TV.

Scenes of what normal people do.

She topped herself up and raised a glass to 'absent friends' and loved ones.

The whizz, crack and boom of fireworks reached its crescendo.

London was skittish. 'It's okay, boy. They're just scaring away the old year.' She stroked him, trying to assuage his fear.

The bells of the New Year echoed as the announcers tried to describe the euphoric scenes from Pack Square, Times Square, Trafalgar Square – when London had sat up, ears cocked, and emitted a quick, curious yip.

Somebody at the door.

Janey remembered the tradition of 'First Footing' from her childhood as well – the first guest to arrive after midnight on New Year's Eve, was said to be auspicious. Traditionally, they brought gifts of bread, coal, a coin, and, ideally, a good bottle of single malt – at the production of which they would be made most welcome. But the knock had made her jump

out of her skin, and reach for the shotgun.

Bad habits.

With London close by her side, heart beating like a bodhran, Janey warily approached the door, weapon cocked and loaded.

Stealthily, she peeped through the spy-hole and could see no one there. What if it was one of the *Little People*, she mused – feeling a little merry from the malt. She wouldn't be surprised if it was a leprechaun, or something, going by the way things had been so crazy lately!

There was no sign of a caller, and she could hear nothing.

She nearly turned back, blaming it on the high spirits of revellers, but at the last moment, her curiosity got the better of her. She turned and opened it suddenly. 'Alright, who the hell is there?'

The stone-cold sober air of New Year slapped her across the face. London bared his fangs, head low, but looked scared – barking and skittering on the tiles.

Janey stared at the empty space.

Fireworks crackled above the houses, and waves of drunken cheers carried across the night. The air was filled with festive atmosphere and a tangible sense of countless lives marking the moment in their bubbles of warmth and friendship – not just across the city, but across the whole Eastern seaboard, a longitudinal elation.

Shot-gun pointing into the dark, Janey ventured out onto the steps and scanned the street. A breeze picked up a few dry leaves and tumbled them along the lonely road.

London whined, and tugged at Janey's jeans with his teeth.

'There's no one there, boy. Just the new...'

Out of the dark stepped Agent Trent.

'Oh my God! You!' She looked him up and down. This time, he was back in his Fed regs. Even wearing shades. Middle of the night. Crazysonnuvabitch.

'Y'know, you should quit harassing me! I'll get my friend onto you.'

He just stood there, silent, an unreadable expression on his face.

London snarled, eyes full of blue murder.

Janey cast a glance to him, and could see the primal reaction. No mistaking it.

Enemy.

As she looked up, the visitor took off his glasses.

The eyes were like incinerators.

Janey started to raise the shotgun, but the creature was already pouncing.

London sprang too.

The stranger reached out with one claw, while the other pulled what looked like a dart-gun on the dog.

There was a deafening boom.

And Janey's attacker spun off, recoiling from a powerful impact.

Janey staggered back in shock, pulling London to her. Holding him, holding him tight.

Into the pool of light cast by the nearest lamp-post stepped Agent Trent – this time dressed in leather jacket and jeans. He held his automatic like he was in his own personal range, and continued to fire into the darkness where the creature had fallen to one side of the steps, striding closer with every blast.

The flash of the weapon lit up his face in a series of grim masks.

Overhead, the sky was a battlefield.

By the time he had reached Janey he had emptied his clip.

'Cover me.'

Jettisoning his spent clip, he swiftly reloaded.

Together, they aimed into the dark, breathing heavy.

The fireworks faded, the gunpowder in the smoky air mingling with the smell of cordite.

Nothing came out of the shadows.

They looked over at one another.

The slightest of nods.

21

'Ma'am, please look into the eye-piece.'

Janey blinked. 'The what?'

'The retina scanner. Right in front of you, ma'am.'

Janey gave her a deadpan look.

The airport security 'team member' looked bored. Just another grunt in a TSA deep-blue uniform: a forty-something woman with a Wyoming accent, bad breath, and a cold-fish eye stare. She spoke as though she was on a loop, as tired as her nicotine gum.

Nothing Sith about this one. Perhaps something similar though.

Janey hadn't flown for over a decade, and things had tightened up even more, what with all the restrictions around hand-luggage; what you could and couldn't take on. She'd been forced to go back out of customs and empty her bag of anything on the long stern list, including a wash-bag of toiletries. And all this 'biometric data' stuff was shocking. 'Take my fingerprints, why don't you?'

And they did.

Janey sighed.

There was no point arguing with these types. She'd met them all before: the traffic cops; the bank clerks; the utilities staff in call centers; the complaints department spooks and insurance claims Stasi. Anyone given a minor role of authority. They raised Janey's hackles – it was a kind of instinctual mountain thing. They seemed to sense her rebel streak and did all they could to make her encounter with them as long-winded and as exasperating as possible.

So Janey gritted her teeth and looked into the scanner, giving it her best poker face.

'Don't blink,' said Homeland Nazi, as though it was as easy as that. But now, Janey found herself wanting to more than ever.

Miss Wyoming tutted, and punched some buttons. 'Darn it. Would you step back a minute, ma'am.' She reset the device. 'Try again.'

Janey begrudgingly complied, staring into the eye-piece as though it was Satan's sphincter; but the scanner did not seem to work.

'Piece of Korean crap!' exclaimed the Breath.

A queue was building up behind Janey.

'Step through the body scanner.' The uninviting portal was gestured to.

'What, and be Kentucky-fried with cancer-waves? No thank you!'

The Breath seemed pleased by this response. She nodded to some serious looking security gorillas.

'Ma'am, if you'd like to follow these gentlemen.' With two fingers, she jabbed towards her own eyes, then Janey's. 'And don't worry, we'll get you on the way back.'

If a full body pat-down and body-search wasn't enough of a humiliation, they'd even ripped open the lining of her guitar case. Mercifully, they hadn't smashed her beloved steel-string, although they had given it a good shake.

And now Janey sat in a perspex cell with the gorillas in front of her.

On the table between them, ridiculously anachronistic and homely in the bleak cell, sat the biscuit-tin.

Gorilla One examined the passport. 'Miss ... McEttrick. Can you explain what's in the, ahem, container?'

'Family heirlooms.'

Gorilla Two: 'You are aware of the restrictions about hand-luggage?'

'Well, I tried to figure out the new Commandments, but...'

'Are you aware of the restrictions about hand-luggage?'

'Yes, but... These are priceless.' She tried to ignore their scornful glares 'To *me*. I couldn't risk them being in the hold.'

She was starting to regret not putting the tin in with her main luggage. On a whim, she'd thrust it in her smaller carry aboard case, thinking she might finally have a look through the items on the long flight.

Gorilla One: 'Would you like to open the receptacle? Slowly.'

Janey tried to swallow. They were making her feel like the Unabomber. She pulled open the tin and laid the lid by its side.

The gorillas peered inside, slightly puzzled by the presence of leaves. Looked at her like she was the Witch of Endor.

Two: 'Empty the contents onto the table. Slowly.'

Janey rifled through the leaves, placing the items carefully on the hard surface. With each one, Janey felt their judgement: CND handbill; bow-tie; school-slate; telescope; tuning key; ceramic mask; rosary beads; flute mouth-piece; dancing shoe.

Her ancestors, exposed in the strip-light. It felt ... desecrating.

Two leaned in, his words like knuckles on her skull: 'Do any of these items look like they should be brought onto an American aircraft, ma'am?'

Janey shook. She quelled the tears threatening to spill out. She wouldn't give them the satisfaction.

One: 'Ma'am, you are in a lot of trouble.'

Janey was made to wait in the cell, while one of them went off. She squirmed under

Number Two's glare.

The clock ticked away and the closing of the gate approached. If she missed that flight ... *Why was her life such a disaster movie?* she remonstrated with herself. For once, it had all been going so well.

Quatie had driven her to the airport, with London in the backseat, poking his head between them. Her friend had been full of 'motherly advice', spun in her usual wry manner: don't drink the water; wear a money belt; find me some decent whisky. What Janey would have done without her these last four weeks she didn't know: she'd been functioning in survival mode.

The shoot-out had been big news of course. 'Hogmanay Showdown' bellowed the papers; and 'FBI Agent Saves Asheville Singer's Life'. When her photograph and name had been plastered everywhere, she'd been overwhelmed by the concern and care of her friends. Quatie and Shelly had rallied around her, and did a fine job of keeping the reporters and weirdos at bay. The fact that the creatures had escaped, killing the agent's partner, and had attacked Allen's house *twice* (the first was a deadly draw; the second, a grudge match) was kept quiet. Rendered stone cold sober by a second brush with death, Janey had had enough wherewithal to avoid mentioning any of this in the initial media squall. The other *thing* was still out there. Trent, the 'midnight hero' (the epithet flashed up in all the news reports) had winged it, perhaps fatally, but it had clearly got away. In the morning there had been no sign of it, just a bloody trail that had led into a drain.

She had been eventually left in peace, as the attention-deficient gaze of the media moved on. Dazed by it all she had robotically finished off her shifts at the store and her final commitments with the band – predictably, they had mocked her 'fifteen seconds of fame'. EZ

had suggested she'd arranged it all as a publicity stunt to launch her solo career.

She left her bandmates feeling little love. Not so much as a 'bon voyage'.

Her visits to Allen's side had sustained her. But she hadn't been able to bring herself to open the journal or the tin. For a while all she craved was mundanity. She focused on practical stuff. On her preparations for the trip. Rehearsing her set. Getting her head straight. The last few months had been a succession of bad craziness.

Of Agent Trent she had not seen or heard anything. After the official mopping up, which he had supervised, he had left with nothing more than a knowing look.

The final call echoed around the terminus.

Janey closed her eyes, made a silent prayer.

'You're like a bad luck charm, huh?'

She looked up, and there he was. He own personal FBI shadow. Suited and shaved.

Standing next to him was Gorilla One, looking flustered.

Trent scanned the items of the table and let out a sound of derision.

'Security risk?' He looked at the men with scorn. 'You morons.'

He nodded to Janey. 'Put your trinkets back in your tin, and get your ass on that plane before you cause any more trouble.'

Janey looked through the little oblong window at the cloudscape below – a quilted blanket stretching across the late January land frozen beneath. Were they still American clouds – stars-and-stripes *cumulo nimbus*, each one trademarked and bar-coded; or were they over the Atlantic already, high on duty free water vapour?

Most passengers were too absorbed by the screen or device in front of them to marvel

at the view. She clutched her biscuit-tin, not caring two farts if she looked like a mad mountain bird. After what she'd just gone through, the modern world could go hang.

The couple next to her with a young boy were agreeable enough – nice folks from Ohio, off on a 'big trip' to London. Their boy, Franklin, was a bit restless at first, kicking the seat in front of him. The father gently encouraged him to play a computer game, or watch some cartoons. He noisily protested, spraying more M&Ms everywhere. His little table was already a mess of candy wrappers, cans, and comics. With that much sugar in him, no wonder he was hyperactive, thought Janey – though still feeling some compassion for the mother. They exchanged looks – the tired-looking mother apologetic, but Janey waved it away. *Not a problem*, she mouthed.

She had once known what it was like.

In another life.

She caught the smear of her own diluted reflection in the small window. Outside, the clouds were stained with ink in the east. A whole ocean of night for them to cross.

'Ma'am, would you like anything?'

Janey scanned the trolley and asked for a Jack Daniels and some nuts. Flying made her feel as though she was being sucked down a vacuum tube.

The hostess passed them to her and turned to serve the rest of the row.

Janey scooped a handful of the wasabi into her mouth, then washed them down with a slug of Jack. As it hit, she could feel the deceleration, her limbs finally relaxing. She reclined back with a sigh.

They say that if you travel too fast it takes a while for your soul to catch up with your body. Well, she'd been living her whole damn life on *fast forward*. Perhaps she had a whole bunch of souls trying to catch up with her.

Time, Janey McEttrick, to catch up.

Pulling it from her bag, she opened the box, and shuffled through the leaves, revealing the treasures beneath.

The boy's eyes shone as he strained to look: 'What are they? Why do you have a forest in a box? Are you a crazy witch?'

'Franklin, don't be nosy.'

Janey looked across at the mother. 'It's okay. They're mementos – things reminding me of my folks, going way back...'

She lifted up the bow-tie. 'See this – it was from my grandma, who was something of a showbiz gal...'

The boy was already losing interest. 'Old stuff.' He went back to reading his *Captain America* comic.

Janey smiled across at the mother, fingering the stripy material.

'Belonged to your..?'

'Grandma Dotty. They say she was born laughing, that gal! A delight to all who knew her. I have some silver pierrot earrings I keep for special gigs.'

'Oh, so you're a....?'

'Musician. No one famous. I'm off to play in a festival in Scotland.'

'My. Imagine! You must be so excited.'

'Yes, it's my first time to Britain.'

'Ours too.'

The woman introduced herself and her family. Janey was clearly expected to do the same.

'Janey McEttrick, from Asheville – though my folks are from the mountains. My

grandma lived near Goldsboro. Her husband was a mechanic. She led quite a bohemian life for her day, for that place...'

'Oh really – can I see..?'

Janey considered it for a moment, but thought it would be impolite to refuse, so handed over the bow-tie, squirming a little.

The woman carefully handled it, a wistful gleam in her eye. 'Wasn't life so much more innocent in those days? Folks had fun without needing drugs or anything – clog-dancin' and all. It was the Lord on the Sabbath and hard work the rest of the week.'

Deciding the best way to avoid difficult discussions around religion was to let it pass, Janey added: 'She was a mean banjo player, by all accounts – and was recorded in the Forties on camera with some friends, plucking away with a fiendish abandon. Wish I had her finger-picking skill...' Janey plucked the air. 'She did one song that you're boy would like: "How many biscuits can you eat...?" It was one of my favourites, as a child, going round to visit. Whenever I smell biscuits and gravy, it always takes me right back.' She started humming it.

The woman handed back the bow-tie, thanking her.

Janey gently stroked the cloth – so frail and yet so much more real than the whole 747, the glossy, meaningless magazines, the screens and devices in every direction stealing you away from the moment.

There was a sudden dip in the white noise whine as the pressure shifted within the cabin. Everything became muffled, yet she could hear the minute sound of the whorls of her fingers brushing lightly against the striped fabric. The surface of things ruckled and the thirty five thousand feet separating Janey McEttrick from her native coast vanished into thin air.

Janey snapped back – jolted by a movement of the boy next to her, who was getting animated playing a shoot'em-up.

At first she was disorientated, and blinked in confusion, shaking her head. A cylinder in the sky crammed full of bodies. Through her window, a dusky sky. The aisle telescoped away from her, shutters pulled down, lights low. The slumped forms of passengers, settled into watching movies, mouthing conversations, or heads held by flight pillows like guillotine victims.

A stewardess leaned over, speaking in a slowed down way. The woman from Ohio looked at her a little concerned – placing a gentle hand on hers.

'—right there?'

Her ears popped. 'Yes... I think so. Maybe a glass of water, please?'

The stewardess nodded and went to get one.

'I'm just a little woozy, is all. Haven't been getting much sleep lately. Must have ... nodded off.'

'You certainly did – you were out for the count, young lady. For a moment there, I thought you'd had a turn.'

'Die! Die! Die!'

'Now, Tommy, pipe down. The lady can be doing without your fooling.'

When the mother turned away, the boy stuck his tongue out at her.

The stewardess returned and Janey accepted the plastic beaker of water, thanking her. She sipped it mechanically, each cold draft shocking her back into the now.

'Does that help?'

'I'm fine now, really. Sorry to trouble you.'

The woman smiled sweetly. 'Well let me know if you need anything. I know what these

flights are like. They give me a funny one every time.'

'Thank you.' Janey looked down. The bow-tie was still in her lap.

She had long been sensitive around objects, but had spent her adult life drowning out the whispers. Well, seemed like those whispers were *demanding* to be heard.

Or perhaps she was finally ready to hear them.

Putting the bow-tie carefully back in the box, nested beneath the leaves, Janey stowed it away in her bag, selected a middle-of-the-road movie from the inflight selection, and let herself be carried away. Sometimes, other peoples' dreams were safer. She asked for another Jack and Coke, and settled back.

Halfway through the movie – a predictable Rom-com involving a grouchy-but-wealthy bachelor who is eventually tamed into marriage by a spunky-but-accident-prone young woman – Janey slipped into a dream...

It started with an old time version of 'She'll be Coming around the Mountain', which speeded up, like the polarised black-and-white footage of musical hillbillies sitting on haystacks in matching faux-cowboy gear, grins fixed, looking too clean. When re-runs like that were on, Gran Ole Opry and the like, her mom used to love watching them when she was feeling tearsome. But they used to set Janey's teeth on edge. 'I aint ever gonna play crap like that!' she vowed to herself. It seemed like something from hundreds of years ago, not within a generation. That song in particular would drive her mad with its exhausting chorus.

This time, the footage transformed from monochrome to technicolour, as though they'd just entered Oz. Janey's rapidly-flickering retina saw an enormous bottle of Herb-O-Lac gleaming in bright letters – beneath it, a procession of guitar-playing cowboys, un-convincing Injuns, sad-faced clowns and other showbiz bit-players emerge. Among them Janey spotted

her grandmother, Dotty – impossibly young and pretty, in a gingham dress and bow-tie, with plaits and a banjo. A curtain bore the legend, 'Herb–O–Lac Medicine Show'. A girl in a leotard stepped forward holding up a sign to cover her shapely torso – 'Brought to you by the Manoree Network'. She winked at the camera, before turning to reveal the corporate logo on her cute butt. This sigil expanded, peep-hole fashion, into a big cartoon-like radio transmitter, bearing the logo WBIG, pulsing forked lightning radio waves.

As the show got under way out front – a weary cabaret of hokey Americana – backstage things heated up. The big star, 'Steel' Stetson, in his immaculate white ten-gallon hat, groped Dotty as he swaggered passed. She turned, slapped him on the face.

Her words were drowned out by the gaudy chorus, but a caption read: 'What have I told you, you varmint? Keep those meat-hooks to yerself!'

Contemplating this embargo, Stetson rubbed his smarting stubble and grinned with a Satanic glint in his eye. Grabbing her wrists, he smothered her cries for help with a rough kiss, thick tongue gagging her. Against the backdrop of the Medicine Show, which carried on noisily in front of the curtain, he forced himself roughly upon her.

The mock gunfight drowned out her cries.

Injuns fell down and the West was won again to a surge of applause from the audience, sour-faced farmers and buck-toothed inbreeds to a man.

The dream-footage snagged, then spooled onwards – a poor edit.

Mascara streaking down Dotty's face, her tights torn and hair dishevelled. She made to leave the back of the theatre – pushing past the aghast onlookers. Close-ups of grease-painted masks of disgust. Another caption appeared, screamed: 'Whore!'

Stetson looked on smugly, drawing upon his cheroot and tipping his hat, as though passing her on Main Street. Then he was surrounded by his entourage, brushing it off with a

joke, to which they all laugh heartily.

A montage of hellish faces swirled around her like tormenting devils.

Enraged, Dotty snatched up a bottle of the snake oil they flogged, Herb–O–Lac's finest, and tossed it in his big smug face, before storming out.

Stetson's face seemed to melt as it dripped oil. His image became a circle, receding to a full stop.

The dream cut to a wide-angle of a scrawny farm. A skew-whiff signpost announced: GOLDSBORO 3 MILES. A painted tyre: RedSaddle Farm. Flinging corn to the chickens, Dotty in apron, hair tied back beneath a scarf, paused in her chores. She dabbed her brow and stretched her back, holding her bump, as her husband looked on proudly, a greasy rag sticking out of his dungarees.

Throwing her a kiss, he kickstarted his Black Hawk.

Shielding her eyes from the sun, Dotty watched him dwindle to a dusty vanishing point from the doorstep of the farmstead. Sighing happily, she looked up at the sky with its clouds like kicking lambs.

[End of Creative Component extract. Continues in Appendices.]