

**The Wrong Now**

**Vonny Thenasten**

*For Ania*



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This novel is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental

### Acknowledgements

**Page 10** *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock*, by TS Eliot

**Page 19** *Death Trips*, by Ann Neumann  
<https://thebaffler.com/salvos/death-trips-neumann>

**Page 42** *How It Is*, by Samuel Beckett

**Page 43** *Tao te ching*, by Lao Tzu, translated by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English

**Page 54** *Walking and falling*, by Laurie Anderson

**Page 65** Jiddu Krishnamurti

**Page 68** Sri Nisargatta Maharaj

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# Contents

Logos #1	5
Logos #2	30
Logos #3	45
Logos #4	61
Logos #5	82

## The Wrong Now

*Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν τὸν θεόν, καὶ ὁ λόγος πρὸς ἦν τὸ θεὸς*

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God, and the Word was with God*

*God is dead*  
— Zarathustra

*The world of names and forms is the result of mental activity. Ignorance begins at the very moment when the ego takes names and forms to be separate realities.*

— Jean Klein

*We exist only as particles continuously moving in an interplay of actions. Only the moment is still, and it is the stillness that creates, for a moment, a being.*

— VT

*Put a man in the wrong atmosphere and nothing will function as it should. He will seem unhealthy in every part. Put him back into his proper element and everything will blossom and look healthy. But if he is not in his right element, what then? Well, then he has to make the best of appearing before the world as a cripple.*

— Ludwig Wittgenstein (Culture and Value)

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# Logos #1

There's not much to say when the story is going well. You'd think it would be a cause for celebration, wouldn't you? But no, because there's no need: managing the story is reward enough. And when the story is writing itself fairly predictably, with little drama, our hopes are fulfilled and our bodies satisfied. Equally, if the prospects are poor, we reduce our expectations until the drama diminishes: because it's all about the story.

I'm not talking about you finishing that book you always wanted to write, but about the story you tell yourself every day, about the stories you tell your family and your friends about yourself. You know, when you lie a little to the girl or boy you fancy, or to your boss or your children, and the lie starts cropping up when you talk to yourself. You're pretty convincing, aren't you, when you're involved? You're convinced, anyway. You stick the lie in to see how it looks and then you mould it and shape it until it fits with the other little embellishments and secrets, preserving the flow of the story... All to avoid the drama, to avoid the shame. And you become shameless about telling the story, if you can, if you have the right stuff.

But now it's time to have a little conversation, just between us, just to introduce ourselves, for we are yet strangers.

—o0o—

Our stories—well, our stories begin when two strangers like ourselves meet. I'm rather at a disadvantage here, because I'm telling you my story but yours, well, I know you like to keep quiet about it in case of criticism. I'm not judging you for that because I know only too well how defensive people can be when it comes to their own story, as if one story is better or truer than another.

So these two strangers flirt a little at the beginning, but then they get serious, and it's not a good sign. It's too soon. And, at the end of the meeting, as they kiss and part, when the woman says she doesn't feel as if she's wasted her time, it makes the man feel like he's wasted his time—and he doesn't like waste. Packaging, queues, stupid arguments, too many clothes, heating too high, moving things to get to other things, too much food, pointless journeys, unsatisfactory meetings... they're all offensive to him.

But time, you can't waste that, it's the one thing you can't do. As if you occupy a place in time as you do in space. 'Length' of time, now there's a

concept, a metaphor that's more real than the thing it idealises. It fascinates him the way people he meets keep saying, *I want to make the most of every moment!* as if there were a choice.

We are seduced by words into thinking that explanations are more than ways of making excuses for experience, but explanations are like eyes, whose structure determines what we see. We don't know what eyes 'see' just as we don't know what explanations explain. Words have a certain flavour and can suggest relations and sensings but they are not the things themselves. We only know what seeing is when we see.

It took him a long time to come to that realisation. And when at last he unstuck himself from that and from the other teachings of the wordy state it was too late, and in any case he couldn't talk about it with many people, who had their own realisation: that resisting group obsessions is futile, because obsessions are the physical forms of faith, and faith literally rules the world.

And faith resides in *words* now, mostly, and you already know what I think of words.

—o0o—

It sounds like it's going to be hard to be positive about that meeting, so to give it a chance we'll make these strangers you and me. Is that OK with you? You can be the *I* if you like. I haven't decided what sex *I* am yet.

One of the first things you say when we get serious is that you're a doula, a death-doula. Could we get more serious than that? But you make it sound positive, so maybe I need to think about it a bit more. Maybe it's all part of the birth-and-death package that some people obsess about—already I'm reviewing that 'waste of time' label. Aren't words miraculous!

But why don't we set the scene now?

A quiet pub in a country lane. Across from our table, through the windows, I can see a car park and the banks of a river. Not the water, the banks are too high, so I can't see the water flowing, just a couple of feet of the far bank, vertical mud with high, dead grass growing to the edge that stops the whole lot collapsing. It's pretty dull.

You're facing the wall behind me and I'm concerned that the view from that side is even duller, but during a pause in our conversation I ask you if you want to move, and you say no.

Hmm.

There are flashes of the radiant smile you boasted about in our emails, but most of the time you hide your face and I find myself wondering if you're smiling in an unguarded moment or if you're feeding the smiles out

carefully, challenging me to enthuse you: whether they are sunbeams through layers of wary cloud or whether they are seeds of encouragement.

I wonder too if you're trying to keep control of our conversation. There's every indication that you are - you start sentences that you don't finish, change the subject often, occasionally hint that you know where the conversation is going and don't want to go there, closing it down.

After a few minutes of that I don't know what to say, because by the time I've worked out what you're talking about, you're talking about something else. At one point you show me pictures of your children, and I find myself encouraging you although I have no interest in your children. I feel scattered. Your plan's working, and frankly, if this is to go anywhere I have a stark choice: I can submit or I can force you to submit. There's no other way. I either let you continue or I crack down.

Or. There's always another Or, and this time it's: Perhaps I'm frustrated that you won't look at me while you speak, that you're avoiding being seduced? Perhaps you had a plan but can't stick to it: or you can stick to it, but you're afraid that I have a cleverer and more effective one?

I think about it while you're giving me one of your chopped-up episodes and I'm pretty sure I don't have a plan. Not a glimmer. I interrupt and try to talk about a subject you might stick with: you. But there don't seem to be too many things you want to tell me about yourself. Instead you create another jagged little maze of uncertainties. I can't help but think it's deliberate. This is an interview, and you're setting me up.

So here we are, both suspecting and trying to stymie the other's unknown games, at sea in a world of misunderstanding. We don't know each other's vocabulary so we're using words whose meanings we're guessing at, and after an hour talking we're still strangers, having to drag in meanings we know from other conversations with other people.

But maybe not. In my attempts to have a proper conversation I think I'm giving you a lot of information. You're good at this. I have to regroup.

I tune out and concentrate on your body. You're sitting opposite me, your face and body averted, your eyes hidden except for those sudden, rare, radiant, smiles. You're not speaking to me, but to the wall. I am your audience, or maybe not. Maybe you're talking to yourself. I think you must do that a lot.

And now you hunch over, telling me about your last lover, who moved in with their child just a few weeks after meeting you, and took over your house. The child was rude, and careless with your possessions. You emphasise how quickly the lover changed once they'd moved in, how they became angry, how difficult it was to rid yourself of them, and now how afraid you are that 'someone' will take advantage of your good nature



again. ‘Someone’ meaning me, of course. You speak in a detached way, looking at the floor.

You casually ask me how I can afford to live—you’ve already worked out that I don’t have a regular job. It’s no longer about feelings. You’re looking for ways I might take advantage of you, checking tickboxes. We’re skirting around the death of the conversation.

We even have a brief argument—well, it might have become an argument but you were quick to nip it in the bud. I don’t think it takes much for you to get angry—the corners of your mouth were turned down and your neck was blotchy. But you can’t allow yourself to get angry. You don’t want to reveal yourself, that’s clear. You suspect you might have to justify your anger, and while you feel entitled to express it, it does clash rather with the quirky-and-gentle-but-not-a-pushover persona I think you’re trying to set up. You like to be the spiritual one, not the fishwife. You don’t want to fight, but you do want to win. Tricky.

So, you’re angry and wary, but you don’t want any kind of discussion about that. I can’t blame you. The time might come for truth-telling, but that time isn’t now, which is a shame because I’d like to have heard your rant. Ranting is at least honest.

It’s not going well.

Suddenly it hits me that you remind me of someone. I watch you more closely, and yes, I can’t think how I missed your resemblance to that ancient lover. Was that why I invited you here, and why I feel so disappointed now? Did I come here expecting someone I already knew?

And then you surprise me by speaking of the two worlds, the men’s world and the women’s world, and how they are so different. I’m surprised because it’s usually me who brings that up. You tell me that women are *holistic*, and imply that they are more connected to what’s real, are more knowledgeable about real things. That’s how women describe themselves. *Holistic* is a powerful word in a woman’s story. Personally I think that *dispersed* is a better description, like a fungus, invasive and indiscriminate, and not quite so flattering. Or *scattered*: but I’m not going to tell you that.

Again you drop the subject as soon as I show interest, without elaborating. I only get enough time to briefly agree that many people seem to be of that opinion, and then you say it’s time to go.

We gather up our stuff and walk awkwardly to the car park where we stop for a moment and kiss cheeks. You ask me if I’d like to go to the Death Café you run, and I say yes. You look surprised but you recover quickly and say you’ll be in touch, then you get into your car and go.

*In the room the women come and go  
Talking of Michelangelo.*

—o0o—

So that's it for that episode. What am I taking away from it? Is this my diary for that day? When I read it a year from now will I laugh or become thoughtful? And what about you? What are you taking away from it?

For the moment, it seems to me that I have just been party to a lesson in dissimulation. I have met a stranger—you—and spoken to you for two hours and I have no feeling for you or about you. You weren't *there*. The way you hid your face and averted your body, and the fractured way you talked—nope, I wasn't given a chance. When you spoke of the men's world, the women's world, your world, my world, *the* world, I thought we'd found something we could discuss, but you cut me off. You're committed to your story and you don't want to change it. You came here to present yourself as finished goods, but instead I have a whole new slew of theories and observations about human interaction. How did that happen? I hate that.

*There will be time, there will be time  
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;  
There will be time to murder and create,  
And time for all the works and days of hands  
That lift and drop a question on your plate;  
Time for you and time for me,  
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,  
And for a hundred visions and revisions,  
Before the taking of a toast and tea.*

What I wanted to say to you, if you had allowed me to, was that the illusion we all live is that there is a world outside the story, a world we can reach, a reference world that makes this story true or that story true, this action right or that action right, that telling me your story will make your world mine too, that I will understand and play my part nicely.

But each story creates its own truths and deceptions. In my story, in my world, your actions give the lie to your words, and that can't be what you expect, can it? But I can only guess at what you expect. That I acknowledge your truths? But there is truth only when there are words, and the words are just another story, and not my story.

No, words are not the thing. The thing is in the silence that comes when you let go of the words and the thoughts that give rise to them, in feeling the silence, in letting your body listen. You say you listen to the wise people, you say you meditate on the silence, and maybe you do: but you

don't live in the silence. When it comes to other people you live in the word-world, in your stories of plot and character and drama.

By the end I was starting to feel sorry for you and I wanted to tell you to shut up and look at me, touch my arm, forget the words, forget the story. But you couldn't. You were busy studying the plot, creating the drama. You were busy making plans.

Try it now. Put the book down. Take my hand. Press and hold.

Now, aren't you feeling better?

—o0o—

When I arrived back at my place I sat for an hour on the computer, staring at the screen. I used the excuse that I was replying to emails—the first item on my list of things to do—but it wasn't that. It was more that I wanted to look at a blank screen, with nothing going on in my head.

At the end of the hour there was a brief moment when I could have done something, been active, fix something or clean something, but it quickly passed, and I ended up going to the fridge to see what there was to eat. There was too much—fish, sausages, the remains of a chicken—so I ate too much. I don't like doing that, I don't like feeling too full, but as I said before I don't like waste either.

Then I had another cigarette, another coffee, another cigarette... and back to the computer. I steadily worked through the emails.

It's not a hard job, replying to emails, but every reply involves everything else, including the other replies. They all have to be made ready, they all have to mesh, and each one is part of an episode with its own theme, its own argument, and its own origin somewhere in that 'everything else'.

I know most of you don't think like this, and I suppose you might wonder why I do. I do it because otherwise nothing makes sense. Most of the emails I'm replying to don't make sense. They're disconnected and incoherent, and I say as much. The people who sent them tell me to loosen up. I tell them to pay attention. They tell me it's not important. I tell them not to email me if it's not important. Then they don't email me.

They probably think I'm talking about the subjects of the emails, but I'm not. I'm saying that something's gone wrong with how and why we're talking and that I feel burdened with the pressure of our non-relation, so much so that I want to try ways to repair it. But they don't seem to want a relationship—not as I know it, anyway.

I'd already divined as much. So much is symbolic, even in this least promising of media, that you can't hide as much as you think.

And so we seesaw, not between comfort and pain, not between success and frustration, but between the stories of drama and boredom, of effort and rest, of hope and despair. The start and end of the canon is in movement, in the rise and fall of the seesaw, in the knowledge that we are not alone in telling our stories.

So we must choose the vocabulary for our stories carefully. We must discard our preferences and, just for a while, subdue our raging concerns, for they don't lend themselves easily to the story. Not yet anyway. They're one-sided, and the story must at least appear to be even-handed or it's unconvincing, and it must mean something, for we are creating the thing that will become our lives. If there is such a thing as free will, then this is where it is exercised.

And then we will slowly introduce our cradle of romances, our preferred notions of certainty. But that comes at the end, when we join in the glorious victory over the words of which the world is made.

—o0o—

Later, sitting on the deserted beach listening to the wind, the first real autumn day, looking over the mudflats, I heard a dog barking, too far away to see. If it wasn't for the dog I would live right here on the beach.

The displaced noise and its anticipated re-occurrence reminded me of another episode the week before, in a café listening to staccato voices in undertones on the other side of a wooden partition, and being unable to decipher the words or to stop listening, helplessly focused on the incomprehensible and invisible.

Later still, a decent interval after the dog stopped barking, and after I had filled myself with the silence, after I had insulated myself with it, I walked back along the thorny, scrubby paths and waded through the muddy mouth of a stream, the only purpose to preserve the silence as long as I could, before the long trek back.

It was Monday afternoon and the village was quiet. It's an old-fashioned place with old paths, often overgrown, that you can use to avoid the roads; but still, as you get nearer to the centre and the houses get more concentrated there comes the weight of sound, continuous, ever more burdensome... voices, engines, roads, all reaching out to smother you. Even a single voice then is a barb, even if it's saying 'how beautiful'...

When I emerged from the last hidden path there was a van in front of my house, its engine running, the driver staring at his phone behind the windscreen, music playing, and two women approaching, talking over each other, their responses getting louder as they neared the van where the driver sat head down in his own personal oblivion.

I made it to my back door and my shelter, and standing on the rough wood floor I slipped off my clothes and stood for a moment feeling the tension in my muscles relax. I slouched over to the chair and sat down at my desk. There was a new email.

My new-found lack of tension dissolved. The needle of the day was back in my head and I knew I'd spend the next hours attending to things that demanded my attention.

But there was a surprise: the new email was an invitation to the next meeting of the Death Café.

—o0o—

Once I thought I lived in the *here* and *now*. I had things to do, I knew people, we did stuff, but somehow it was never right. I was always wrong. I was living in the wrong here, the wrong now.

I never had parents: imagine that. Nor brothers or sisters: imagine that. Imagine waking up one day in a cold, dirty room, in a broken bed, looking through grey net curtains at a filthy stone courtyard. There's £5 in your wallet, the last of your wages, and there are no more jobs. You know two people, both a long way away. Are they your friends? It looks like you're about to find out.

I've been there, in that room or in something very like it, and it worked out. The first time my idea of rescue was unformed and hopeful, but the second time I was scared because I knew how slender the lifeline was, I knew that the circumstances that saved me the first time could not be expected again.

Afterwards, when I was safe (that's one of the good things: that afterwards you feel pretty safe in most circumstances because you know how bad it can get)... well, afterwards, I couldn't imagine what it had been like. You'd think that once you'd experienced it, it would never go away, but actually it's only possible to feel like that while it's happening: the memory doesn't begin to do it justice. When you're there, words fall away, but afterwards, afterwards it's just another part of another story. You know that it happened, and you can describe it, but you can't feel it. It's not happening *now*.

I'll try to tell you though.

You were born in that room, on the broken bed, just now. You have no history, you have only your scant belongings piled on the cold floor in front of the dirty curtains and you have the memory of hope. And that's all.

You can't recreate that, the purity of complete submission to the idea that there's no hope and no escape. At first you panic, but that passes. Your

mind becomes clear, your breathing easy and deep. Trying to recreate it just surrounds it with interpretation and drama, and dramatic is the very last thing it is. At the end, there's only calmness and clarity.

Another time I was living in another cold place. For hours I would walk the paths over the hills and through the forest, along the bursting, deep river. The stepping stones, rough and uneven, weathered and sloped by the years and always precarious, were covered with inches of solid rushing water. The pool was deep on the downstream side, and small trees and branches were wedged under overhanging roots.

She was with me, visiting, and I went over first, leaning back to take her hand and feeling the weight of the water against the side of my boot. We stopped, balancing on the middle stone which was larger and higher than the others. I felt suspended by her hand.

She left soon after, and I never crossed those stones again.

And again, another winter, alone in front of the big woodburner, hat, coat and boots steaming on the hearth. The draught through the curtains over the doorway cooled my face as I stared at a big oak log whistling behind the glass. The stillness stretched away into the corners, through the windows and far over the valley. Snow-padded fields sat untouched, and a dead crow-tree with its broken-fingered branches haunted the low red sunset while the invisible blue of the high sky became transparent and disappeared.

—o0o—

The death doula lived an hour away along the coast, and I decided to go by train. I wanted to stay detached, and the train's good for that. You're a pure observer moving through fields and past gardens with which you have no connection other than sight. You ask yourself no questions and make no comment. There is nothing to say. The train moves, it stops. You see people waiting, you see them entering, you see them sitting. Few speak, and I appreciate that.

The death doula had sent me a printed map and directions: the group was well organised. It had a name, probably Sanskrit, that I doubted I could pronounce properly, but that was OK, better than OK in fact, because I wanted to pretend I was journeying somewhere in 30s Paris and would meet Hemingway and Anaïs Nin at least, or Henry Miller, and so it was good that it was sufficiently foreign. Foreign is good. Did I mention that I was a romantic? No? But you had already guessed, hadn't you?

In my defence, I really did think it would be interesting. A death club? How could it not be? And I was sure I remembered being interested when she told me about it—but perhaps I had been staring out at the windswept grey riverbank, lost in my own world. I don't remember her looking at me once all the time she spoke. Maybe that's why I'm here, to see what she's like when the audience is different.

It was a large room, and she was sat cross-legged on a low sofa facing three rows of bean bags, wearing some sort of gauzy half-veil and a loose cotton dress. Either side of her were small carved wooden tables with candles and incense sticks and figurines with unhuggable arms. I'd showered thoroughly before coming out in case there was hugging. All the bean bags were occupied and I was signalled to sit at the back, on one of the only two chairs, one each side of the door. Something about the nearest one made me think of Anubis sitting on a Rennie Mackintosh chair so I sat on the farthest one, out of reach of Art.

I don't know what it is about lectures and satsangs and so on but for the first five or ten minutes I almost expect miracles, truly. I close my eyes and really listen, going into a meditative state and waiting... And then I start noticing the music. There's always music, and this time it was a single low voice chanting with tabla and harmonium, very soothing, and to be honest I didn't notice when she started speaking. Even when I did, at first the low, quiet tones from under the veil seemed to be chanting along with the background.

The silence... When the music stopped the silence hung in the air softly, wrapping us all for a moment in its warm embrace. Just for a moment the open distances between us were gone and we rested together, all touched by each.

I felt the silence, the miracle, and then I lost it. The fullness of the air subsided, furniture creaked, the afternoon sun lay warm on my skin, and the luminosity died. Maybe I was the only one who felt it. Maybe this was my own epiphany.

I opened my eyes. The death doula didn't seem to have shared my epiphany. She was still posed on the sofa, already talking again, talking, talking, continuing in the same low voice. She was so quiet I didn't catch a word that she was saying, not one thing. Why couldn't she actually be quiet? She had worked a miracle for me, but she couldn't let it be.

And why couldn't I let it be? I had felt the timeless moment, but already I was analysing it, chasing it, so that I could put it into words. But a miracle can't be caught like that. It can only exist where there are no words. Words are the death of miracles.

Meanwhile, somebody had slipped in quietly and sat on the other chair, and when I sneaked a look at her she was scribbling something I hoped were notes. But when I took a second look I saw she was going over and over the lines of an eye she had drawn, heavy-lidded and curlicued where there should be brows. She was pressing so hard the fibres of her felt-tip pen were mashed to pieces.

*Cat*, that was the name of the woman who invited me here, the death doula. I'd forgotten until it popped into my head just now, as I fought to catch her words. I couldn't have been concentrating as much as I thought.

Someone had asked *Cat* a question, or I suppose they had, and she was smiling her ravishing smile, her rat smile.

'You'll do things your own way,' she was saying, smiling and radiating assurance. 'Of course it's important to empathise, but you have to distance yourself, to restrain your impulses. That restraint will come quickly enough. Many of us have our own grief and our own worries, but we can't let ourselves grieve indiscriminately. It's the wrong place. Both the dying and those witnessing the death are looking to us: perhaps for strength, perhaps to witness their grief, or simply to witness their witnessing. They are looking to us, and they pay us to be able to do so.'

I thought she sounded like an interior designer—which she had been, I found out later—describing the theme for a new creation; or a playwright teasing out the theme for a new script.

I began to be slightly irritated at what I saw as the disjunction between her words and her presentation, but I reminded myself how difficult it must be finding a way to engage the emotional and practical prejudices that her audience might bring to her gathering—and then I was sympathetic.

My attention drifted more often as the afternoon wore on, but I caught enough to know that we need trained people to teach us how to die, and how to survive the death of others. Left to ourselves, we make a mess of it. But there are tools and techniques, and there are doulas (but too few, obviously).

'The aim is to become an animal—or a god. Without knowing—without knowledge—without abstractions—then *being* is realised.'

I jerked awake and cautiously slid my eyes sideways. My neighbour on the other side of the doorway was talking to herself in an undertone, scratching away on her cheap reporter's pad.

'The body and the spirit are one, but consciousness and intellection, when they do not serve the body and the spirit, bring chaos and death. Consciousness creates knowledge by creating abstractions about the body



—by making the body abstract—and those abstractions are not of the spirit. It is consciousness itself that we must attend to, and its malign desire to surveille, characterise and explain.’

She was digging hard into the paper as if to make her message clear, her hair swinging gently as she nodded and smiled in agreement with herself.

Thinking that her furious reaction was in response to a particularly controversial point, I tuned in and tried to pick up the death doula’s theme. But Cat was talking about practicalities: liaising with the medical team, interacting with hospices, doing the laundry.

I imagined hearing the housekeeper in some country house reading her CV aloud in front of a mirror. *Tick tick tick*. She was advocating competence. Nothing wrong with that but, unlike many, I was never turned on by nurses. I’ll take a slobbering tearful wreck any day, especially if I’m dying.

And that’s another thing: you would have thought a death doula would be as welcome in a house filled with the scary fissuring of emotion as would a last-minute priest. But apparently they were, even if they told you, in the face of their evidence, that ‘in the end it’s your choice.’

*It’s your choice.*

‘What?’

I looked around. The woman on the other chair was staring at me with one eye, the other hidden by the heavy curtain of black hair, her blotted pen suspended loosely in her fingers.

‘Sorry. What?’

I must have looked surprised because she started smiling.

‘You said something in your sleep.’

‘Oh. Thanks.’

What was I supposed to say? She seemed amused but you can never be sure.

Cat was no longer holding court on the sofa. She had given me a brief smile earlier, but now that the formal part of the death club was over, and people were starting to hug and touch in small groups, she stayed clear. It seems that smile was all I was getting from her, and I had to remind myself that there was probably nothing more to my invitation than keeping the room filled.

I turned to my neighbour.

‘Did I miss anything?’

The calm grey eyes were steady. 'Not really. She didn't say much that isn't in the booklet.'

'What booklet?'

'Most people read it before coming...'. She riffled through the sheaf of papers underneath her writing pad. 'I think I've got one somewhere. Here'. She held out a crumpled sheet. 'There are more on the table.'

I took it, knowing that I wouldn't read it. Pamphlets never say anything useful, or even interesting. I think of them as those cheap plastic toys you get to remind you you just wasted your money on a thrill-free fairground stall.

She seemed to be more than casually interested, and for my part I felt a little rise of pressure in my chest and that gearing-up-for-action sensation you get sometimes.

'How come you haven't read it?' she asked. 'It's normally the first thing people are given.' She glanced at it critically as I smoothed it out. 'The kind of people who come to these things want to think they're part of an education service or something—teaching people how to die. It's crazy.'

I could feel my eyes beginning to round out her shape. She had that kind of casual swingy hair that I like, loose and heavy, falling over her face and cut sharply at her neck.

'So what are you doing here? Surely you don't see yourself as a teacher?'

'God forbid!' she laughed quietly. 'Look at this stuff: *I'll help create memory boxes*'. She pointed to a block of italics on the back cover. 'That's a quote from the website of a practising death doula.' She laughed again. 'It puts me in mind of kindergarten training. No, that's not what I'm here for. You?'

'Honestly?'

She bobbed her head up sharply, her hair swinging. 'Don't I look like I can handle the truth?'

There was a moment's pause.

'You'd be surprised,' I said carefully. 'Telling the truth is the gateway to damnation in some people's eyes.'

'It does seem to be, doesn't it? Not in mine, though.' She smiled. 'Come on, spill the beans.'

We stared at each other, still smiling.

'I thought there was a chance I'd get laid.'

'Me too.'

‘My name’s Zak,’ I continued when I couldn’t hold her eyes any more. I nodded towards the others. ‘You’ve got more chance than I have from what I can see.’

‘Yes,’ she agreed without looking around, ‘I think you’re probably right. It’s Olive, by the way.’

I flicked my eyes sideways. ‘What do you make of all this, Olive?’

‘It’s really not that funny, is it? There’s an acronym: NODA. No-One Dies Alone. Or else...’

‘Or else? I mean, there aren’t a lot of ways you can threaten someone who’s dying, is there?’

‘*Or else* those who take the online courses and training certification programs won’t see the promised returns on their investment.’ She shrugged. ‘Somewhere along the line dying became a self-improvement area, and doula-dealing a new career opportunity. Some might describe it as the ideal combination of sanctification and profitability.’

‘You really think so? That’s a rather cynical way of looking at it.’

‘Sure, why not?’ She pointed at the booklet. ‘This only hints at how rewarding it might be financially, but *Time Magazine* recently called being a death doula—sorry, *End-of-Life Doula*—one of the top new alternative professions of the year. You can see how it might appeal to women who want to set themselves up and *do good*.’ She stopped, her lips compressed. ‘It’s pretty much an extension of the sisterhood. You don’t really get men turning up here, except for the odd few fey new-age types.’ She lifted her chin. ‘You don’t look very typical.’

‘I hope not. I was just interested,’ I heard myself saying. ‘Actually, no, I didn’t mean that. I *am* interested, but not like that.’

‘Like what?’

‘Oh, you know, in the details. In the opportunity.’

She had a wide forehead, and beneath that, wide grey eyes, cool eyes, with a hint of gold around the iris. I found myself following the lines on her face, enjoying the firmness of her chin and smooth cheeks, her barely lipsticked lips.

‘I mean, I’m not really that...’

‘Cynical?’ Her eyes brightened.

‘Yes. No. No, not so...’ I fought to find the right word, staring into her eyes. She didn’t flinch. ‘...harsh, I suppose.’ I hesitated. ‘Or... I don’t know. It’s like when you’re not quite as skeptical as you think you ought to be, and you can’t think of a good reason why you’re not.’

Her brow creased while she worked out what I was saying and then she grunted, 'You're giving her the benefit of the doubt, you mean?'

'Who? Oh, *Cat*...' I turned back to the room. We had been leaning towards each other and I could feel the strained muscles in my neck relax. Someone in the front row was speaking, and Cat was sitting attentively, inclining herself towards the speaker with a grave expression, her eyelids lowered.

Olive's eyes followed mine. 'You don't trust her, do you?'

I sighed. 'I don't know... it's not really about trust, is it? I look at her and I'm trying to understand, but understanding doesn't seem appropriate somehow.'

I wondered whether I should mention the miracle, the thing that was beyond understanding, the thing that had filled me and that I had lost and that I wanted to find again. But then I told myself that nobody wants to hear stuff like that.

'There's something missing, but I wonder if it's something that *I* lack rather than her...' I trailed off. 'I mean, these people are here for a reason after all, and there's something in me that's saying *Pay attention!* but what am I supposed to be paying attention to? I just can't see it. I don't think there's anything here for me.' I stopped. 'But to answer your question: no. I wouldn't trust her. Not even if she worked miracles.'

I think the weariness in my voice got through to her and she stopped doodling.

'Trust?' She sighed sympathetically. 'Yes, that's always the problem, isn't it? Trust and commitment.'

*No, I thought, the problem isn't that. The problem is that we have given ourselves to words, and to people who sell words. I don't want words, and I don't want to know the people who sell them, and I don't want to know the people who buy them. I want to live in the miracle.*

After the session had ended I hung around outside, hoping to catch Olive before she disappeared. She felt familiar somehow and I wanted to talk some more.

She came out eventually, wrapping a scarf around her neck. When she saw me waiting she came up and took my arm.

'I thought you'd be here,' she said, pulling me along the pavement. 'Let's walk on the beach for a bit and get some air.' She put her hand over my mouth as I started to speak. 'I think we've had more than enough talking for the moment, don't you?'

We walked companionably through the park down to the shore, unconsciously matching stride as if we weren't strangers. It felt good just having her by my side, and once or twice I squeezed her arm to me without thinking. She didn't seem to mind.

After about half a mile she steered us towards a beach café, and planting herself on the stones, asked me to get her a tea. When I returned she was staring out over the gently waving sea.

'My husband bought an old place over there,' she sniffed as I crouched at her feet and made myself a stony hollow to sit in, doglike.

'Oh?' I flicked my eyes over the beach to the horizon. 'You mean France?'

'Yes. He fell ill just after he bought it, and died six months later,' she stated flatly.

'I'm sorry.'

'Thank you. It's unbelievably hidden away, and probably doesn't even really qualify as a *place*,' she said distractedly. 'It was his own project. I doubt I could even find it again by myself.'

'When you say hidden away, do you mean in the mountains?' I asked.

'The Pyrenees? I've thought about getting away to somewhere around there once or twice. Mirepoix is nice.'

'No, not the Pyrenees. He didn't like mountains, particularly.' She took a lingering sip of tea, her eyes lowered. 'He didn't like anything much, not even me. That's why he wanted to hide away.'

'That's hard to believe.' It was meant as a compliment but she pretended to misunderstand, which was rather gracious of her, I thought.

'You'd believe it if you'd known him.'

I shuffled myself further into the stones. 'Is that why you started going to the death café? For him, your husband?'

'Yes. He was in pain and I wanted to learn how not to seem callous.'

'Hmm.' I hadn't thought about that possibility.

'I wanted to learn about compassion.'

'Oh.' I didn't want the conversation to go that way yet, and it must have showed. She turned towards me.

'Don't worry, I'm not being deep. Actually,' she went on in a meditative voice, 'the reason I keep going to the café... it's kind of anthropological...' She giggled, shaking her head. 'This constant promotion of female psychology... the publication of it... I'm not sure what to make of it all.' There was a long pause. 'It's kind of exhibitionistic,

really, don't you think? A bit insistent... almost masturbatory. I mean, what are they trying to do?'

I was lost. 'Er, who?'

'These *women*,' she sounded exasperated, 'emoting all over the place. It must be very trying...' she trailed off.

I waited for her to continue, but she was obviously having trouble untangling some convoluted argument in her head.

'I take it you're not keen, then?'

'Everything gets so fuzzy, so stuck together,' she complained, squeezing her eyes. 'You go to something and you end up hearing exactly the same things, whatever it is, wherever it is. All the words... none of the words... *How special we are*... If I hear one more time that I'm supposed to be modest about how special I am I think I'll kill someone.'

'You could use a .38 Special.'

'What?'

'It's a kind of gun. A .38 Special.'

'Hmm.' She seemed put out. 'What do you mean? Why's it special?'

'I don't know. It's a joke.' No response. 'It's just a name, I guess. It doesn't mean anything. It's just special.'

'That's exactly it! You see?' she exclaimed triumphantly.

I shook my head. 'No, not really.'

She rolled her eyes. 'Do I have to spell it out? It's just words, all of it, it's all just words.'

'Well, yes, it's words,' I replied, not understanding. 'Isn't that how we talk to each other? I don't know why you're so upset.'

'I'm not upset.' There was a pause while she gathered herself, taking a breath. 'I'm sorry,' she continued with a smile, 'it's a pet peeve. I'll explain some other time.'

We both turned and picked up our cups, staring out over the grey sea to another place.

'Do you think you'll come to the death club again?'

I didn't expect the miracle to be repeated, because that doesn't seem to be the way it works. Expecting it is fatal. I shook my head. 'Unlikely.'

I waited for her to say that it was a shame, that she wanted me to come again and sit with her and talk. I forget how complicated things have to be. Eventually I added, 'But I might. Do you come...?'

‘I do, actually. I’ve been coming every month for the last year.’

I waited impatiently for the invitation, but her voice had a sad edge now.

‘I don’t think they know what to make of me now that they know I’ve done my duty by Edward and I’m not interested in being a doula,’ she continued pensively. ‘Cat just ignores me and leaves me alone in my chair by the door. The other one—they alternate as Chair—thinks I’m being deliberately subversive and irritating by not joining in. She doesn’t like me writing either. She keeps giving me death looks.’

‘And are you?’

‘What, a subversive? No! I’m not a rebel and I don’t deliberately piss people off. I just see things differently, that’s all. But it isn’t really allowed, is it? You have to be an —*ist* of some sort these days, but I’m not. I don’t think labelling people helps anything. It just creates divisions, which of course is the idea—to point the finger.’ She leaned closer and whispered, ‘You’re not a misogynist, are you? It would make things very awkward if you were.’

‘Actually, I’m an Epicurean.’

‘Really? I’ve no idea what that is but it sounds rather refined.’ She looked amused. ‘Don’t tell me now. Maybe, if we get to know each other better, then you can.’ She paused, her eyes sparkling. ‘I take it that it *is* something and you’re not just having me on?’

‘Oh yes, it’s something, but it’d take a drink or two to explain.’ I took a deep breath. ‘I don’t suppose you fancy...?’

‘Mmm.’ Her eyes were clear and bright and dreamy. ‘Yes, I do. You *were* going to ask me out for a drink, weren’t you?’

—o0o—

The art of moving the body is a medical art, and the soul is moved equally. I have had glimpses of that truth.

Moving the body and stilling the mind, that’s one secret, but there are so many secrets hidden in the mind. Not in the soul, though: the body and the soul don’t hide things from each other. It’s the mind that’s the crazy one.

I was only half-joking when I told Olive I was an Epicurean. Another day I might have assured her I was a Zen Master. It’s not important—and that’s lucky, because I wasn’t trained to be anything. I’ve learned things, but too many things, and I’m stoically trying to empty them out of my head.

One thing I’ve learned and won’t empty myself of is that defending yourself and helping others is the most important thing. Body and soul.

That's what it all boils down to. I'm ready to learn how to defend myself against the wrong people and to ally myself with the right ones. But then, even if I'm ready, how will I know who the right people are? How will I know the right defence?

My body will know, and that's all I need to know—but only if I start the training. I'm waiting for my body to start the training. I don't mean going to meetings and workshops, nothing like that. I'm waiting for that person, and I'm waiting for an invitation from that person. It's personal.

—o0o—

Olive had been waiting too.

We met a few days later, at the pub where I'd been interviewed by Cat. It was a grey day, and the pub was crowded and noisy, and after ten minutes trying to hear each other we'd both had enough of it, so we left and went for a walk in the drizzle.

We didn't talk much. She said she saw a lot of dead souls.

When we returned to the pub to get warm, we kissed before going in, and left again soon after.



I woke late the next morning, and she had already gone. There was an earring on the kitchen table with a note saying she'd be back for it later. The earring looked delicate and I picked it up carefully as I filled the kettle, feeling the fine lattice that held the tiny green heartstone warm in my hand.

Usually I'd go outside to drink my tea on the terrace—I like to breathe in a good lungful of cool air in the morning—but today I found myself drinking on the move, slowly retracing the shedding of clothes through the house, and the smell of her. We had paused *here* in the hall just by the grainy photo I pretended was an ancient relative, and *here* by the door of the kitchen, and we had lingered *here* at the top of the stair. I took a long breath of her scent, strong in my nostrils where she had rubbed against the wall.

Sipping the hot tea, I stood and stared into my bedroom, then cautiously entered and knelt by the bed, trying not to disturb the complex of scents that rose and faded as I turned my head this way and that.

We hadn't spoken much on the way back from the pub, nor afterwards as we lay together, nor even on the late night walk we took to the chip shop, or when sitting together on the wooden bench that overlooked the moonlit sea. There didn't seem to be anything to say. We'd walked back slowly, arms pressed together, and had silently returned to bed to sleep.

I got up from the bed and went downstairs to refill my cup, replacing the earring on her note, a smile on my lips, my head empty. Another miracle.

Olive returned as promised, carrying a bunch of roses.

'Your bedroom stinks. I'll put these on the table on my side of the bed until we can clean it properly. When was the last time you washed your sheets? Never mind. I bought some new ones.'

Grinning happily, I pointed to a cupboard. I didn't mind being adopted by her.

'If I have a vase, it'll be in there.'

'Don't you know?'

'People don't often bring me flowers.'

'No, I can imagine.' She gave me a sweet smile and put her head on my shoulder. 'It's OK, you've been neglected but I think you can still be rescued.'

My mouth went dry. How could she know?

'I'm sorry, did I say something?'

‘What?’

‘You’ve gone pale. What’s the matter?’ She looked worried.

‘Oh,’ I said, startled, and I made an effort to relax, ‘it’s old stuff. Not to worry. Here,’ I touched her upturned face and drew her to me. ‘It’s lovely to see you.’

We began to see each other most days. I asked about her flat, but she was vague, saying that she was having some work done. Most evenings we’d go to one or other of her favourite bars and sit talking over a couple of bottles of red.

One night I asked her about Edward.

‘How long were you together?’

‘Ten years, on and off. We met at the Buddhist centre. He was an ascetic, which I admired, but that sort of life’s not for me. It didn’t suit him either I don’t think. He wasn’t interested in food and didn’t eat properly, and was forever getting colds and chills, but it didn’t bother him. He couldn’t bear noise or people, and spent a lot of time in retreat—or anyway, he liked to be alone a lot.’

‘That doesn’t sound like much of a life. How come you lasted so long?’

She was leaning forward the way I liked, her face serious under the weight of hair as she swirled the wine in her half-empty glass, listening.

‘I suppose I must have loved him.’

‘Don’t you know?’

‘No,’ she admitted, fingering the stem.

It’s times like these that I lose my way. ‘I don’t mean to be funny, but he doesn’t sound like a warm sort of guy,’ I said, attempting to sympathise.

‘Why would you want to saddle yourself with a sociopath?’

‘Sociopath?’ She looked at me curiously. ‘I don’t think labelling people is that useful, personally.’

‘No, I’m sorry,’ I said sincerely. I could see her point. ‘OK then, what was it like living with him?’

‘Not much different from living with anyone else, I imagine. You get into a routine and try to be as happy as you can. Isn’t that how it goes?’

‘That’s what people say, but I doubt it’s true.’

‘No,’ she laughed, ‘it’s nonsense of course, but you have to say it or people think you’re whining.’

‘So...?’

‘So it wasn’t perfect. In fact —’ she stopped speaking for a moment, her eyes lowered.

‘What?’

‘I’d been trying to leave him for months when he suddenly fell ill.’

Now I knew what was coming next. I should have kept quiet but there was something about her use of the word ‘trying’ that irritated my sense of correctness.

‘Trying? How did he prevent you? I mean, I know it’s always hard but short of tying you up...’

She sighed. ‘He made it impossible. Even though it was my flat and I paid for the food and everything, when he realised I was serious about splitting up he said that he wouldn’t go.’

‘What? That’s crazy. Why didn’t you kick him out?’

‘I couldn’t do it. He had no friends and nowhere to go.’

‘Surely he had somebody he could ask? Family?’

‘No family.’

‘Where did he live before he met you?’

‘At the retreat centre.’

‘Why couldn’t he go back?’

‘Why are you so interested in Edward?’

I leaned back. ‘Because ten years is a long time to live with someone and I was hoping you had a good reason.’

‘What do you mean? You think I didn’t know what a sucker I was being?’

‘Well, did you? It sounds like he completely used you.’

‘How can you say that? You didn’t know him.’ She took a swig from her glass and refilled it, breathing heavily. Suddenly she didn’t look happy.

‘Of course not,’ I apologised. ‘I’m just going on what you told me.’

‘He wasn’t to blame, was he? We all do what we’re programmed to do.’

‘You really believe that? That we have no responsibility? You think he had no choice but to be a cold sonofabitch?’

‘You’re doing it again...’

‘Well, how else would you describe him? You think he was just a victim with no choices? Was he grateful?’

There was a long silence. ‘I don’t want to talk about it any more.’

It's at times like these I need to step back, but of course I never can. I mean, should I have taken her answer as an evasion, as an admission that she wanted to continue some kind of self-deception? Should I have tried to educate her in the joys of honesty? Would it have made any difference to the eventual outcome? Would it have been good for her? For me? For a potential Us? I ploughed on regardless.

'OK, but do you really think we have no choice about how we behave?'

'I don't know. I just know that I had to help him.'

'But what about helping yourself? Living with someone like that changes you, and not for the better.'

She threw back the remains of her glass and stood up noisily.

'I need the loo.'

*Bollocks.*

I'd already asked her what she knew about Edward's cottage. He had asked her to go with him to check it out, and they had flown together to Limoges and hired a car. She was the practical one, and besides, she had paid for it, but she couldn't tell me much more than that it was an old stone cottage in a wood.

'I didn't actually get to see it,' she told me. 'We pulled up in the middle of nowhere, and he just got out, telling me to wait in the car. I watched him put on his walking boots and take his stick and disappear into some trees, and then I fell asleep.'

'That's it? You didn't follow him? You weren't curious at all?'

'I'm afraid not. We'd driven all day and I was tired. It didn't seem particularly strange at the time. He often did things without pretending or trying to impress anyone. You get so tired of all that, don't you?'

At last, an invitation, but one I had to refuse. I'm inclined to go full pelt, probing, analysing, dissecting, theorising, *invading*, and I'm hard to stop once I get going. For instance, I might have started with *How do you know he wasn't pretending?* Or *Isn't that because society demands pretence?* But this time I let it go, and instead I just nodded.

'You have to defend yourself, I guess.'

She sighed. 'Yes, you do, unfortunately, and he wasn't good at that. And I couldn't help him. I didn't know how to. I don't know what he wanted. He said that he loved me, but he didn't want anything from me.' She took a deep breath. 'All I wanted was to be able to comfort him, and he couldn't even be bothered to give me that.'

Another deep sigh made her shiver, and a splash of wine spilled from her glass. She grabbed her napkin and tried to mop it up but the thin tissue was already sodden, and the wine spread to the edge of the table and started to drip. Her eyes were bright with tears, and, giving up, she sat back and let them overflow.

‘I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be telling you this,’ she said between blinks. ‘You don’t want to know how pathetic I am.’

I wanted to hug her. ‘It’s exactly what you should be telling me if you... we... I mean, I’d even thank you,’ I stammered, ‘but that would sound creepy. I’m only sorry I can’t be more...’

She sniffed, tears sparkling on her cheeks, and looked up, smiling.

‘You’re very sweet, you know that? You remind me of him.’

Why did my face go pale? It’s a long story. Does it need telling or letting go? I wish I knew. There’s so much contradictory advice, and I often wonder whether any of it can actually be taken.

When I told Olive that I was an Epicurean, the joke was that Epicurus believed that sex is a dubious pleasure since it causes perturbations in the soul, and those perturbations are interpreted as mental pain. Since the aim of life is to minimise pain, the avoidance of women would then provide more tranquillity to my soul than the pleasures of sex would provide to my body.

Some people would interpret this as a hostile attitude to women, as misogyny, but frankly, in the face of such an accusation I’d don my Zen Master suit and look at them inscrutably until they realised how stupid they were being.

But to get back to the question: if I go pale when I’m reminded of an obviously painful episode of my story, do I need to relive it or ignore it, or do something else with it? Of course, as an Epicurean I wouldn’t want to relive a painful episode, because mental pain and discomfort are as real as physical pain, and pain is to be avoided. Of course, if I were a Stoic, I would be proud to endure it. Probably.

But I didn’t get to choose whether or not the pain arrived, and it didn’t matter whether or not I thought I deserved it, or whether or not I thought I could endure it, and my body decided whether or not I survived it. It didn’t matter what I thought about the pain, it was just there, and there it would stay whether I was an Epicurean or a Stoic, a Zen Master or a Pathetic Victim. We can’t avoid the pain, all we can do is distract ourselves from it by telling ourselves a comforting story.

So where do we go from there? I wish I knew.

Speaking about Edward seemed to have relaxed Olive, and for the next few days she was more than usually affectionate, touching my arm as she brushed past and kissing me at every opportunity. I was in heaven.

She became businesslike about the cottage.

'It's turning to expensive rubble as we speak,' she complained. 'I need to put it on the market, and quickly.'

'Why do you have to sell it? You've said that you're looking to do something different. Why not try living there for a while and doing it up?'

'Impossible. It needs loads of work. I could never take it on by myself.'

'But you're not by yourself...'

We hadn't spoken about what was happening between us, and a tremor of anxiety passed through me as I waited for her response.

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## Logos #2

Two days later we stood hand in hand at the stern of the Dover ferry, watching England disappear in its churning wake.

I don't know how I changed her mind. We hadn't argued or even had much of a discussion as far as I could recall. I'd casually hinted that I was interested in seeing it and she'd paused thoughtfully before flipping up the lid of her laptop and spending the next two hours tracking down somewhere to stay.

'I'm not camping in a ruin,' she stated flatly, 'but I can't imagine there are no gites somewhere near.'

'What about when you went with Edward? Where did you stay?'

She laughed. 'Edward in a gite or a hotel? You're kidding. No, we drove straight there and afterwards I dropped him off at a retreat centre a couple of hours farther south.'

My ears pricked up. 'I've thought about doing that, a retreat. Did it help him?'

'He thought so.'

She turned and concentrated on the screen. She was right, there were gites within a few kilometres, but they were either not available this early in the year or were already on long-term lets.

'Nom de Dieu!' she said good-humouredly, 'there must be more to that area than meets the eye. All I remember is grass, trees and cows.'

She'd almost given up when she'd found the Dutchman's place almost by chance, and I'd had to agree that if she didn't like it we'd treat the trip as a holiday.

And now, driving down through the mists and rain of Normandy, there was nothing in my head except a quiet contentment with the deserted motorway, and an anticipation of the pleasure that would fill me when we were past Le Mans and the Loire and would see the south rising wide and sun-filled in front of us. We kept to the limit, and stopped just once to refuel. It was quiet in the car and the miles passed soothingly.

As the road unwound in front of us, the thought that I still hadn't been to her flat began to nag at me, and I found myself looking at her out of the corner of my eye. She had curled up in the passenger seat with her coat

covering her, heavy hair obscuring her face. She seemed to be able to sleep instantly, wherever she was.

At Poitiers we turned off and headed into the country. Slowly the landscape emptied until there was nothing but fields and grass and the occasional small herd of animals glimpsed lazing in the shade of a wood. High on the currents of warm air, lone buzzards slowly circled. I could feel the crusty skin of civilisation being eaten away.

We passed through many villages, seeing no-one, feeling the emptiness. The road simply continued between deep ditches towards the tree-fringed horizon. Once or twice we found ourselves on the outskirts of a larger town, but there was always a new bypass that flung us back into the lost and welcoming wilderness.

After an hour a small river appeared in the fields, and soon we were driving along a tree-tunnelled ledge between a rock-face and a water-meadow.

'Isn't it stunning!'

'Magical.'

'But there's nobody here!'

'No,' I smiled. 'Even the French call it *La France Perdue*. It's abandoned.'

'Why? It's so beautiful.'

'Yes, but it's beautiful because there are no people, and there are no people because there's no work, just small family farms and the odd chateau.'

She looked at me quizzically.

'How do you know so much about it?'

'I did some research. I was thinking of buying somewhere here myself, once.'

'What happened?'

'It didn't work out.'

I felt her eyes rest on me as I stared through the windscreen at the pointed turrets of a large house shining in the sun.

'Is that the chateau you were talking about?'

'Where?'

'Through those trees.'

Olive lifted her sunglasses and peered ahead. 'Looks like it. The lane to the house should be farther down on the right, according to this. *Le Petit Monde*.'



‘Hah.’

‘Absolutely,’ she smiled, amused. ‘And our gite is the next left. I need coffee and a shower.’

‘Don’t you want—’

‘Tomorrow. Right now I just want to get out of these clothes.’

‘OK.’

The owner of the gite, Norbert, a brawny Dutchman, was waiting for us at the end of the lane.

‘That’s a relief,’ Olive had breathed when we’d called to book it. ‘You can trust the Dutch. At least the plumbing will work.’

The tour of the gite didn’t take long. An old mill, it was smaller than I had hoped, but clean, and the Dutchman said we could wander where we liked on the estate.

‘You should visit the garden. We grow everything we need in it. It is very beautiful. There is also fresh milk and eggs, and a van on Mondays and Thursdays.’

‘A van?’ Olive inquired.

‘From the shop in the village. If you telephone, they will bring what you order—cheese, washing-up liquid, you know.’

‘Oh, I see. But there must be a supermarket somewhere?’

‘Of course, in Montmorillon, yes. That’s about 20 kilometres from here.’

Olive and I exchanged glances.

‘There’s nowhere else, and it’s certainly quaint,’ I murmured, trying not to sound too anxious. To be honest, I loved the feeling of raw essentialness that permeated the solid but crudely-renovated building, and was praying she wouldn’t come up with an objection.

‘*Le Moulin du Rat*, though...’

‘It’s only a name.’

‘I suppose so.’

She didn’t look reassured, but to my relief nodded OK. I relaxed and re-read the agreement. ‘So that’s two hundred a month for six months?’ I asked eventually, ‘including two steres of oak?’

‘Yes, and weekly cleaning.’

‘We should be able to get a few things done in that time,’ I enthused to Olive, who was tapping away on her phone. ‘I’ll go ahead and sign it, shall I?’

She flicked her eyes up without pausing. ‘Mmm.’

I couldn’t believe my luck.

The days were hot and the nights warm. We tramped the fields and woods and swam in the river ten metres from the gite. A barn owl flew over every night precisely at nine o’clock, and bats slung themselves around the margins of the small garden. We drank red wine and made love by the draughty fire, the blustery late Spring winds whistling in the chimney.

We drove hundreds of kilometres visiting the towns and villages around, asking about builders and sources of materials and checking out the markets and bars, and slowly we came to understand how far into Lost France Edward had run, and how far from the modern world someone could take themselves if they chose to. Edward had been in earnest when he bought his hideaway.

After a week I became restless about the amount of work needed on *Le Petit Monde*. The old cottage was on the other side of the river that ran at the bottom of the garden, on the edge of a clearing at the end of a deeply rutted track that wound through a wood. The Dutchman had kept the clearing roughly cut, since it lay on a shortcut to a big lake that he owned and needed to inspect from time to time. That was a relief: We had seen enough abandoned and bramble-and-nettle-infested farms to realise the importance of maintaining the land, even if it could not be cultivated immediately. I thought about the five hectares that Edward had bought with the cottage. We were in for a lot of work.

*We*. When the excitement of tracking down Edward’s folly, as she called it, had passed, Olive hadn’t shown much interest in the cottage. She simply told me to get quotes for the work I thought needed doing, so I wasn’t surprised when she casually announced one morning that she had to return to England for a week or so.

‘You’ll be all right on your own. You have plenty to keep you busy here.’

I could feel my stomach clenching. ‘We talked about this, Olive.’

‘I know, but I miss my friends, and what will I do while you’re digging holes and repairing roofs? Make the tea?’

‘But we agreed...’

‘I know, and I’m sorry, but I didn’t think anywhere could be so desolate!’ Her face clouded. ‘I can’t believe how Edward could prefer this place to me.’

We were sitting outside on the plastic garden chairs that the Dutchman had assured us were perfectly adequate, but which creaked and groaned on the soft earth. *Edward again*. I fought down my jealousy of this not-so-dead rival.

She turned her face away, staring over the muddy fields. ‘The trees in the wood are so twisted, and walking’s impossible, there’s barely a path. It’s so depressing. And as for Norbert...’ She lit a cigarette and took a long drag. ‘... he might be Dutch but there’s something creepy about him. He gives me the shivers. I need a break.’

A chilly tremor went through me.

‘We’ve only been here a few weeks.’

‘I know. I’m sorry.’

I put the list I had been making on the cracked table.

‘Maybe it’s all this rain. Do you want to do something? We could go to Montmorillon...’

She didn’t respond.

‘...Or Limoges? We could check out that porcelain factory you mentioned.’

‘Actually, I booked a flight for this afternoon,’ she said in a cool voice. ‘I didn’t think you’d be so silly about it. It’s only a week, after all. I promise, when I come back I’ll get stuck in. I just have to sort a few things out in my head.’

I nodded, trying to understand.

—o0o—

She was right, there was a lot to occupy me. The first thing I discovered was that the *laissez-faire* attitude to the enforcement of building regulations, that I had been assured was the norm in France, was hastily being revised. Architect’s plans were now required. A pond would be necessary to feed the Fire Brigade’s pump if they were called out. The *fosse septique* didn’t conform to the new legislation and would have to be replaced. The electricity supply and phone line would have to be buried. The roof and chimney needed work. Heating and insulation had to be installed and approved.

‘How much?’

‘Eighty thousand euros, more or less, plus taxes.’

The Frenchman's face was blank. He knew there was nobody else we could go to.

'You're far from the road,' he continued, shrugging his shoulders. 'A trench must be dug. The track to the house must be repaired.' His face softened. 'A world, even a little one, demands its price, monsieur. Such is life.' He seemed to make a small gesture. 'But perhaps it is possible to make it less taxing than it might be.'

It was far more money than we had hoped, even if we paid for the work *sous la table*. I had a sinking feeling that when I told Olive she wouldn't bother to come back, so I wasn't surprised at her reaction.

'Con! Impossible!'

Even though I had been expecting it, I still felt my heart sink at Olive's crude dismissal. Our purpose in being there was gone. Now we were on holiday, and Olive had ideas about her holidays that didn't include being two hundred kilometres from the sea, or camping, which was how she saw our efforts at civilised living in *Le Moulin du Rat*.

Nevertheless, she stayed. I was never sure why. We quickly exhausted the few local attractions, and only once attempted the slow route to the coast. The day we swam in the public swimming lake ten minutes away a group of youths on mopeds made such a noise that we never went back.

We rarely saw the Dutchman, who seemed to live alone in the chateau hidden in the trees at the top of the hill. Sometimes we heard his quadbike in the distance, or a voice calling the sheep, but most of the time we might have been living on a desert island.

There was nothing to do but let it play out.

I had come here in the hope of beginning a project with a lover, but the likelihood of achieving either seemed to dwindle with each day that passed. Olive simply wasn't interested in starting a new project, as I should have realised at the beginning: there was nothing in what she had told me about herself that suggested she thought in terms of goals at all. Instead she sought revelation, even while struggling with the knowledge of its impossibility.

'Why do you say it's impossible?' she had demanded after I had endured another day of frustrations. 'You don't seem to be getting very far using your own methods.'

'My own methods?' I was stung by her tone. 'You think trying to make plans is a waste of time?'

'Isn't that what you told me? How else do you interpret all this... *stuff*' she sneered, waving at my bookshelf. 'Didn't you tell me that logic and reason were the last resort of the desperate?'

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’

‘Are you denying it? What else did you mean when you quoted those koans to me? Or did you think I wasn’t listening?’

‘I didn’t say anything about answers, and that’s what you’re hoping for, isn’t it? That one day, without any effort on your part, suddenly everything will become clear? Well, for one thing, for that to happen you need to be open to persuasion,’ I answered curtly.

‘And I’m not open to persuasion? How dare you say that! We’re here, aren’t we, just as you wanted?’

*I didn’t persuade you to come here.*

‘How can you be persuaded when you don’t believe in anything?’

‘What does that matter?’

‘Of course it matters. How will you recognise your revelation if you have no framework for it, no context? You can’t just drift along aimlessly. You have to provide the meaning.’

I knew as soon as I said it that would be the end of the conversation, but I couldn’t stop myself, and I didn’t want to. She was no longer my lover.

‘So you think my life is meaningless?’

‘I didn’t say that.’

‘What are you saying then?’

‘I think you need to commit yourself to something. Really commit.’

‘Oh God, the same old story.’ She stubbed out her cigarette. ‘Edward used to go on about my *inability to commit*, as he put it. I’m going to bed.’

I tried several times to get Olive to tell me more about Edward and his asceticism. It rather appealed to me, along with the idea that perhaps I had found in her and in this place the thing I was waiting for.

But I was not invited to share either with her. Whenever I mentioned his name her face clouded and often she would leave the room, only reappearing a couple of hours later.

—o0o—

‘What have you got against dogs?’

I stopped shaving and looked at her. Her eyes were still and cold, her pupils contracted. Another day lost, another failed expedition. What was she looking for?

‘I just don’t like the idea of animals as pets. I was thinking about what it must be like for animists, living in this—’

‘Animists? Last week it was Taoism. What happened to that? And before that it was Tarot and Alchemy. Don’t you want to be Jacques de Molay any more? What happened to walking gladly into the fire? Too hot for you now?’ Her mouth twisted derisively. ‘So who’s your hero this week?’

‘Hero?’ I shook my head, spattering foam on the mirror. ‘I don’t have heroes.’

‘Oh, I forgot. Nobody’s good enough for you, are they?’

I could feel it coming now, the weight of her resentful disappointment. She meant that *she* thought *I* thought *she* wasn’t good enough. But I didn’t know anything about her. She hid everything, so what did she expect?

Even now, when the anger inside her threatened to spill over into her resisting face, her anchored face, it would kill her to say why. I didn’t think it was anything specific this time, but maybe it was. Probably something to do with Edward. Not that it mattered: she couldn’t say why, because then I could argue, and she might have to admit that she didn’t want resolution.

I began to think she hadn’t come here with me at all, but with the ghost of Edward. She still couldn’t accept that he had left her, and even though she had never really considered living in his cottage, she had allowed my enthusiasm to carry her along for a while in case it would be possible to pretend I was him.

Or maybe she just didn’t know what she wanted. Maybe I was completely wrong about her. But why else would she even have come back, let alone stay? Did she need something from me? Whatever it was, it clearly wasn’t a matter of love any longer, even if it once might have been.

I picked up the razor again, and wetting my face, blew out the rough patch in my hollow cheek.

‘So what now? You freeze me out? It worked with the others. It’ll work with me too, eventually.’

‘You’re so full of shit.’ There was no emotion in her voice. She was still making minute adjustments to her eyes, black-ringed under the fringe of black hair, black targets distracting from the heavy face below, immobile in the mirror.

Her makeup didn’t take long, because it never came off. *Maquillage* in French, the same root as *maquis*, the scrublands where the Resistance would hide after sabotaging a train or ambushing a convoy of trucks. Camouflage. The kohl stayed, even in the shower, even resisting the harsh spray as she lifted her face: and was repaired immediately she was dry.

Would she ever be less than composed? I wondered. What might it take? What would the code suggest? I didn't know, because nobody had taught me the code, and the code was a big deal.

My heart was ringing in my ears as I rinsed the soap off the razor and wiped my own face. Another glance at her and I left the bathroom, listening as I descended the stair, but she was quiet.

Would I break first? Obviously. She kept herself busy, but I was lazy: All I had to think about was what she wanted, what she was thinking, what her plan was. I didn't think I was part of it. If I went back upstairs now she would be drying her hair in front of the mirror, her face showing nothing.

In the kitchen, I sat at the bare table wondering if there was some way I could get through to her, but of course there wasn't. There was no path from me to her.

People tell me to write it all down when I feel like this, but I'm not a writer, and words complicate things for me. They seem so precise when you see them on the page, and yet they're so hazy and deceptive when you try to understand what they actually mean.

I write down my helplessness, and suddenly it seems there is a solution, but if I alter a word there's a different solution. How can that be right? Words make you think there's a solution, but that's only because the word forms are designed to create a solvable problem. If nothing else, you can simply take what you've written and make it negative. 'I'm hungry' is solved by 'I'm not hungry'. With words, you can suggest a solution to anything, and everything has a solution. 'You can stop being hungry by eating.' Well yes, but if there's no food? 'Then grow food.' Easy, according to the grammar. But how? Organise a petition or a marketing campaign?

The world isn't a problem, it's a story created by actions: you act, you act again, you act again... and there's no solution, there's only ability and inability to act.

But as soon as you write the world down, as soon as you try to tell your story, the actions are gone, mutated into assertions, causes and results, justifications and apologies, retractions, panics and victories. And they all promise a solution.

I'm not talking about meeting someone, a Zen Master say, or suddenly getting rich. That's not how you swap worlds. I don't actually know how you do it, I just know you can—or anyway, I know *I* can.

To swap worlds you need to make an opening between the worlds, and to make an opening you need to break something in this world: a door, a wall, a chain. And to get through the opening you need to let yourself be broken. You need to drive to the very edge and then you need to close your eyes and jump.

*Revelation.*

*Show me*, you say, but I can't show you, and then you don't believe me, you don't even listen any more.

Listen: once, we were knowers and we lived in knowledge, which is to say that every scent, every sound, every sight and every touch moved us. We lived in an immediate world of moments and of significance, and we knew everything there was to know, and yet every moment was a revelation.

Then we began to to remember what we had seen, and to give names, and to wonder, and to desire permanence for some of the things we remembered, and destruction of others. And as our desire increased, so we created more names and declared that knowledge of names was more important than the revelation of things.

*Things*: there are no things before they are named. And once the world is divided into name-and-thing, those things can be divided and categorised and *understood*. But that understanding is only of the names, and the world that is understood is not the world that is *known*.

The only world you *know* is the world that touches you, and that world is revealed to you at every moment. You know your lover when she sleeps in your arms, and when you wake next to her with the warmth of her hand on your belly, and when you walk and feel her hand in yours, and when she calls to you. Knowledge is heart, and in the heart-world there is only knowing and not-knowing, and in that knowing, nothing is hidden. *tat tvam asi*: thus thou art. And thus am I, and I am here, and the world flows from us, and this is the world, our little world, revealed.

But in the world of understanding there can be no revelation. You must learn the names of things so that you can identify them and seek them - you must plan to find them and not to lose them, and to be safe you must own them. But seeking and finding is not the same as knowing. You can try to find your lover but this is to seek a name. In the world of knowing, your lover has no name and you cannot seek her, and you can know her only when she is beside you and you feel her there. Otherwise, you can only know her absence and not being beside her.

To be born into the world of knowledge, and then to dwell in the world of understanding and of struggle for names: why would you choose that? Why would you choose to have to learn so many names, to attend to so many things, and to the interactions of those many things? They are not



your names and they are not your things. Names and things are the creations of others, and the understandings of others. They don't concern you.

The original sin in the world of understanding is not-understanding, and its heaven is a state-of-understanding, and its prayers are the jewels of suffering.

—o0o—

Zak and Olive are watching TV. She is sitting beside him on the sofa, her eyes shining and her face placid. They are not touching.

Zak would like her to say something. He doesn't want to start the conversation himself because he can't think of anything that wouldn't provoke her. He just wants to smile and agree and make her laugh.

But she's silent, as usual. She doesn't start conversations any more. He thinks about her continuously, but most of his thoughts are an attempt to explain away the fear, and when he speaks he can't talk about that because she doesn't respond. She just gives him the blank smile. All he can do is let the well of feeling overflow, which makes him passionate but inarticulate. He speaks of bliss and other words that are tokens from one of the vocabularies she uses, but talking like that makes her bored and eventually angry.

She's no longer interested in his story, and she doesn't want him in hers. She's already editing him out, and Zak knows that, but he has no plan that doesn't include her, so he waits.

He has waited a lot, and often Zen has comforted him. He is reduced to tears of frustration by the incomprehensibility of the world, but when he reads about the Zen Master who kicks his pupil in response to a question, he laughs.

There are these senses we have that feed us continually, that give us sensings that shape and help us fill out the story. But we filter out most of the sensings, and transform only the poor remnants into words.

But words, all words, are jargon—technical labels for the impoverished ideas provoked by our butchered sensings. The only value they have is to preserve the sense of the present moment, the only moment we can rely on.

But when you look for it, that moment disappears. And if there is no moment, then there is no perceiver. The idea of a present moment and of a perceiver of that moment is the most deeply poisonous creation conceivable. The idea of *consciousness*, which arises from the idea of a perceiver, is almost as bad.

The acceptance or rejection of these two *ideas*—that are created by words and have only tautological, technical existence—determine our entire understanding of the world, if you can call it understanding. For, by accepting those ideas, we start to live abstractly, in a world suddenly governed by ‘rules’, especially perceptual rules. Acceptance of the ideas actually means modifying our sense filters to implement an agenda, and not only are we capable of doing that, but we actively seek it.

We all describe our world according to an agenda. And then we persist in going beyond mere description and add another layer of words—explanations—and then we take all those words and worship them, forgetting that the words are abstract conveniences, implied and created by the agenda, and *explain* nothing.

So when the Zen student asks the question, he has an agenda, even while he thinks he is extracting the essence of the world from its nameless existence. But he is merely arranging abstractions. The Zen Master kicks him to remind him that the world is not abstract, and that in the world there are no questions or answers, no falsity or truth, and no essence or existence, especially nameless existence. These are but consequences of accepting the poisoned chalice of consciousness.

Zak thinks the pupil is lucky that Samuel Beckett is not his master and doesn’t lay into him with a can-opener. Of course, it might come to that if he keeps asking questions.

The two worlds... Zak had a vague memory of Olive starting to say something when they had met in the noisy pub. And then they’d left... Was it the most important thing he would ever need to know about Olive? Was it the key to persuading her to stay? What was it? Zak flicked his eyes sideways to her, wondering, waiting.

Olive doesn’t want Zak to be near her, to have to listen to him placate her, so she has withdrawn so far she no longer senses his presence beside her. She is somewhere else.

Some days she feels quite schizophrenic, and on those days she likes to go into the woods down by the river. They are always deserted, and the paths are not well-used, so she often finds small flowers or fungi as she goes, and she wears something light and dull that she hopes blends in, or even makes her invisible. She walks quietly, listening to the birds and to the small noises.

When she reaches the small water-filled pithole, she takes off her clothes and stands tall with her arms above her head, and breathes deeply until her lungs are full of clean air. Then she stands on tiptoe and screams as loudly as she can, *‘Will you just shut the fuck up for a moment, just for one fucking*

*moment!* Then she breathes again, and depending on how she feels she might scream again five or 20 times. Then she gets dressed.

She's not schizophrenic, and she's not talking to voices in her head, nor to the trees, nor is she dancing to the harmonies of the world. No, she's trying to bully the word-world in her head. Some days I feel like her, and I do that, but it's hard to fuck with the words so that they make any kind of prolonged sense. It feels good but it hasn't worked yet. It can't ever work, can it? But that doesn't stop her, or me.

Today, Olive doesn't want to dress quite yet. When she runs out of energy for screaming she closes her eyes. She wants to scream a lot more, until she gets it all out, but if she continues she'll start thinking again, monitoring the tone of her cries, changing the words to include specific enemies, or events that hurt her, or situations that frustrated her. And there are so many. Big and small, they fill her so there's no more space, and none will be ejected just because she wants them out. They still touch her, prick her, in spite of her will. She's frustrated because she has so many frustrations she can't vent them all.

As I say, she's not in control. She hasn't learned to shape her stories.

She looks around for somewhere to sit, but cows have grazed here, churning up the grass and earth, and now that it has dried out all around the pithole she can't find an unrutted and dung-free spot. The dress she discarded is too thin and would make no difference to her comfort if she sat on it: and so a new frustration is added to her list of frustrations.

Eventually she dresses, her chest tight, almost tearing the thin stuff as she pulls it over her head and roughly smooths it down. Then she reaches into her bag and pulls out the book, and opens it.

*The nameless is the beginning of  
heaven and Earth.*

*The named is the mother of the ten  
thousand things.*

Words like this usually calm her down, but today she reads the words twice, then she throws the book down and screams and screams and screams until she is exhausted.

It's to do with being solitary. While Zak is waiting for Olive, he feels so utterly alone that he imagines himself on a cold mountain top, seated with just a blanket against the wind. He has done this many times, comparing himself to Zarathustra. Sometimes, when Zak is optimistic, Zarathustra is watching the dawn and feeling the light of the sun increasing and warming

him. But often he is watching the dusk and preparing himself for the return to darkness, like now.

—o0o—

When Zarathustra came down from the mountain he'd had a revelation—and so he had a message.

I know that feeling, but stupidly, like him, I tried to put the message into words. I even tried to answer questions about what the message meant, but my answers were so lame I gave up. The message was for me, only for me.

Zarathustra put a lot of effort into making his revelation attractive to people. Well, he thought they'd find it attractive, but even though he was a lot cleverer than they were and I am, he got it wrong. The message wasn't for them, and they didn't want to listen. I tried to warn Olive about the downside of having revelations, but she didn't want to listen.

To listen you first need to be alone, because when you're alone enough you get broken, and only when you're broken do you start to listen. It takes a lot to break some people. They'd rather die than listen. I think Olive would rather die than listen.

I didn't feel like dying, I felt like listening, but I didn't want to listen to *them*. *They* spoke of the mechanics of the men's world, the politics of living, the psychology of desire, but what were those things to me? I wanted to bring the peace of the mountains to them, the strong peace of the solitary, but it was hostile to them. Peace for them consists of endless and perfect control of the man's world, where to rest is to die. They'd rather die than rest.

Zarathustra had retreated to the mountain after his friend Leila died. She was a woman unlike other women, and she it was who had persuaded him to seek the mountain, reassuring him that it wasn't hostile.

Leila was a strong, tall, clever woman who had sought love, but had found no love worth the name. Her man, a respected and powerful law-keeper, beat her though she did no wrong to him, nor to others, and was without flaw. He had seduced her, though she was not weak except in her desire for love.

Their house was large and well-appointed, a wedding gift from those more powerful, in expectation that Leila's man would favour them in his law-keeping.

One morning, Leila awoke to find him dead beside her. She ran to her friends for help but they turned and accused her of murdering him, even though neither wounds nor poison were found in him. They beat her and

took her to the tribunal where she was summarily condemned to death by the powerful men who had gifted them their house.

Fearing to die without having found love, Leila managed to kill her guard and escape to the far land of her birth. She ran to her sister, who hid her when men came searching, and thereafter Leila was beholden, and resigned herself to the women's world that her sister and her relatives inhabited.

But that world did not recognise her and it did not accept her, and after a short time had passed her sister and her relatives rejected her and threw her out, and she became solitary.

Not long after, Leila fell sick and died on the island, far from the mountain that she had persuaded Zarathustra to climb.

When he heard of her death Zarathustra wept, and the same day he started back up the mountain, for she had told him that he would be able to see to the edges of the world from the mountain top. He climbed for many days and at last, reaching the utmost ridge, he turned and saw far away the land where Leila had died.

After the painful and arduous climb, the sight of Leila's island in the far distance brought home to him what he had lost—the most virtuous and the most beautiful of all women, a woman above all other women—and he wailed and beat the ground for her, and his mind was broken with his love for her, and he lay down alone on the mountain top and wept to the ends of the earth.

Thus Zarathustra became wise.

—o0o—

The next day, when Zak came down from the spare bedroom, Olive had disappeared, taking all her things. She'd left the keys to *Le Petit Monde* on the table with a note: *You can have the cottage. I'll take care of the legal stuff. Don't come looking for me. Goodbye.*

Zak stared at the words until his eyes blurred, then he made a circuit of the house, packing what he wanted in a rucksack.

He turned off the electricity and water, isolated the cooker's gas bottle, then leaving the note and the keys, he closed the front door and started down the river path.

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## Logos #3

The old cottage was wreathed in damp ribbons of mist as the car wallowed down the wooded track towards it, the driver's face set in an habitual scowl. She changed gear abruptly, throwing her passenger back in her seat.

'Sorry about that. It needs a service. These roads are murder on the springs.'

'I imagine they are.'

The car slowed and stopped.

'Well, here we are. I won't come in.'

'No? Well, thanks for the lift.'

'No problem. Can you tell Sarah to get a move on?'

'Sarah? That's the other carer, isn't it? Of course. Can I call you if there's an emergency?'

The driver hesitated: 'Of course, but I warn you, there's a two mile walk before you'll get a signal. It's useless around here once you leave the main road.'

'Isn't there a landline?'

'There was, once. He isn't good at paying bills.'

'Oh. I wasn't expecting that. Still, I daresay I'll be fine. When will I be seeing you?'

'We've stocked you up with everything you asked for, so you should be OK for a week or so. Sally, my partner, will be along every Saturday to take you into town.'

Seeing the look on her passenger's face, the driver relented.

'It's not as bad as it looks, really, and the cottage is nice and comfortable. A week will pass just like that.' She clicked her fingers. 'Johnny's pretty much out of it, as I told you. His bed's in the living room, but you can use the rest of the place as you want. If you paint, there's an easel and some canvases and stuff in one of the bedrooms.'

'Thanks, but I don't paint. I did think I might be a sculptor at one point, but... well, I obviously wasn't cut out for it.'

‘I know what you mean. I thought I was a painter, once... Oh well, at least the world has been spared our pretensions.’ The driver sniffed and sat back. ‘Anyway, there’s a neighbour just across the stream up there.’ She ducked her head under the windscreen to point at a path scratched through the wood on the steeply-sloping far bank of the small stream that ran alongside the track and disappeared behind the house. ‘It’s about a quarter of a mile.’

She paused. ‘I know it’s none of my business, but why are you doing this? You don’t look like the type we usually get.’

‘No, I suppose not, and to be honest, I’m not really sure why I’m here. I was stuck on something—’

The driver laughed. ‘You mean *someone*?’

‘Yes, of course. And he was dead, so there *really* wasn’t anything I could do. Then I met somebody who I thought could take my mind off him and maybe start again, but it was a stupid thought and he got hurt. And now... I decided that I needed to be alone for a while, and then something made me call Lucinda, even though I hadn’t spoken to her for years, and she mentioned there was a job going down here, and—’

‘And here you are.’

‘Yes, here I am. Don’t worry, I’ve had plenty of practice looking after dying people. And I’m looking forward to having some space to think. I haven’t done enough of that.’ Olive’s voice softened as she added, ‘And actually, I knew Johnny briefly. It’s perfect.’

‘You knew him?’

‘Oh yes, Patrissia.’ Olive turned to look at the driver, who was wearing an old purple hippie dress and not much else as far as she could tell. ‘You probably don’t remember me, but I remember you. You took him away from me. Oh, don’t worry,’ she smiled as the other woman stared at her, ‘I didn’t mind. But imagine my feelings last week when Lucinda mentioned his name. I must admit it threw me for a minute or two, but the job sounded perfect, so... Anyway, as I said, I don’t mind being a bit cut off. I couldn’t not take it, could I?’ she smiled. ‘Lucinda sends her love, by the way.’

‘Yes, she would.’ Patrissia grunted, then raised her eyes, ‘There’s snow forecast, so you’d better check that you have everything you need before I go. I’ll wait here,’ she sniffed again, ‘Olive.’

‘I’ll go and get Sarah,’ said Olive, opening the car door. ‘Back in a sec.’

Olive closed the kitchen door with relief, listening to the sound of Patrissia’s car wheezing back down the long track to the main road as she

carried her small rucksack up the creaking stairs to her bedroom. She didn't bother unpacking, but spent a few minutes wandering around the other rooms. They seemed almost familiar. One contained a very old, heavy easel, as Patrissia had promised, and she stroked the whirls and whorls and splatters of paint caked to every limb, remembering how he had used her, and how willing she had been.

She felt quite at home in the cottage, whose simple flagstone-floored kitchen and enormous scrubbed oak table had pleased her immediately she had seen it. She wondered if Patrissia had helped Johnny to choose it. An old black range cooker filled the hearth, and two green-painted floor-to-ceiling cupboards stood in the corners. Together with a flyscreened pantry and a few nondescript paintings, that was all there was.

She had been warned that there were few modern conveniences, and was relieved to find an ancient microwave oven sitting on top of the washing machine when she investigated the garage. After cleaning it with an old towel, she carried it into the kitchen and put it on a crate she'd discovered under the sink.

After making herself some tea, Olive sat down at the table in her new home and scanned the list of routine jobs Sarah had prepared for her, but there was nothing out of the ordinary. She had two hours before Johnny would be needing her.

She looked around, vaguely thinking there was something she should be doing, but Sarah was conscientious and the whole place was spotless.

Picking up her mug, she went into the living room. Patrissia had explained that the old man never left his bed, and Olive had steeled herself to find him a dried up ruin, but as she bent to stroke his shaven face she thought he looked healthier than when she had known him thirty years before, the deep lines she remembered somehow smoother, his skin pink instead of an alcoholic red, his eyes a clear blue.

'Hello again, Johnny,' she whispered as she kissed his forehead. 'Long time no see. Do you remember me?'

She waited while he slowly turned his head towards her, his eyes widening.

'Is that you, Patrissia?'

'No, not Patrissia, Johnny,' she managed to say after a few seconds.

'Olive. Vee.'

'Patrissia?'

'Yes, Johnny. I'm here with you,' Olive replied sadly, her eyes stinging.

A hand emerged from under the sheets. As it clawed weakly, she took it in hers and kissed the soft skin, remembering how hard and rough his touch had been when he had caressed her, so long ago.



‘There, my love.’

The old man’s hand dropped from hers, and drawing up a chair, Olive sat with him as his eyes closed and he drifted in and out of sleep, dreaming, mumbling, and occasionally crying. In one of his lucid moments, he asked her name.

‘Olive.’

‘I’m sorry, I don’t remember you, Olive.’

‘I know, Johnny. That’s all right, I remember you.’

The next day, the promised snow arrived, lightly at first, sprinkling the trees and bushes, and bringing a ghostly quiet.

Olive had finished most of the chores by midday, and, feeling that she could permit herself a break, put on her boots and hat, intending to walk to the main road and reassure herself that there really was a signal within reach.

Closing the front door, she stepped out of the porch and began the long trek up the shallow incline out of the valley. Once she thought she heard the sea and stopped to listen, but it was only the wind.

In the months since Olive had left France, she had stayed with a succession of old friends, and after many long and sometimes painful conversations she came to realise that she would only find the peace she needed when she stopped trying to find it in the life she had drifted into. Suddenly she had seen the days and months and years streaming past in persistent grey, the faces of Edward, Zak, and the others appearing and disappearing like ghostly paracletes, beckoning and pulling her into grey swirling eddies, then clutching at her as she drifted back into the slow, deathly current.

It had been the goose that had finally got to her. Norbert had arrived one day holding a trussed bird, saying that he had to cull his flock, and offering to kill it for her there and then. She had been horrified watching him slash carelessly at the bird’s neck, its eyes open and unwavering, silently bleeding into the mud of the riverbank.

She had managed to take the heavy warm body from him and then she had vomited when a stray drop of blood had fallen on her arm, and he had laughed.

At that moment it came to her that she wanted none of it. Not the parody of the peasant life that Zak had wanted her to share, not the parody of care that Cat had offered, and certainly not the parody she herself had become, a mere roamer and sampler of life. She wanted to dig herself in

somewhere and compose herself to work, whatever that work might turn out to be.

And then Lucinda had mentioned that Johnny was dying and needed care and comfort, and that finding suitable people was so difficult... And Olive needed comfort too, and she knew she would find it in Johnny's presence and his house. Comfort was what she yearned for, silence and the comfort of place, and it had been magically offered to her. She felt that Johnny had somehow invited her to partake in his dying as proxy for her own, so she would not be afraid.

Humming to the intimate southing of wind through the trees as she trudged towards the distant road, she tried not to think about Edward or Zak or France. All that was behind her now, buried with the goose on the riverbank.

Although she felt a twinge of guilt at the way she had dumped him, she knew that Zak had always expected it to end nastily or messily. He'd even said as much once, when he was drunk. In spite of his apparent optimism, his coolness and determination, she had felt there was a deep black pool of resignation and *nothingness* hidden in him. She didn't think he would ever escape it, and she didn't have the will to help him.

The sound of a car interrupted her thoughts, and looking up, she saw a crossroad and the dim light of a signpost through the thick grey air. Walking up to it, she stared at the words so boldly written there, and repeated the placenames to herself under her breath until they were only sounds.

The car she had heard passed her on the main road, flakes of snow illuminated in its headlights, and she stood for a moment watching its pinpoint rear lights diminish and disappear.

Her phone beeped. There were two texts from Zak. She deleted them without reading them, as she had the others, and as she watched the screen clear she suddenly felt that everything had finally come together, that she was meant to be there, just at that spot, just at that moment, doing just what she was doing. She was in the right place. A perfect moment.

A snowflake landing on her neck startled her, and pulling her collar up against the sudden chill, she turned to go back.

By the time she reached the cottage, the snow was falling thick and fast, already settling on the cold ground and frosting the spectral trunks and branches of the trees that lined the valley.

Johnny's voice greeted her as she opened the kitchen door, rising and falling softly, monotonously, conducting some arcane and unintelligible conversation with himself. She had sat with him the previous evening, at first hoping to decipher words in the stream of sounds, but after a while she had given up and just listened, as if to the contented babble of a baby or to birdsong, and had fallen asleep next to him.

Olive removed her wet boots. *Is this work?* she asked herself as she padded towards the living room in her thick socks. Johnny's head had sunk into the soft pillows, and she carefully rearranged them, running her fingers through his sparse white hair.

The rest of the day and night passed uneventfully, and when she woke it was to the bright silence of the snowfields through her curtains. She dressed slowly, standing by the open window, taking her time and feeling the chill air on her skin, gasping under her breath.

After putting on the kettle, she went to see to Johnny. He was quiet and still this morning and looked quite angelic with his white hair spread around him and his pink complexion.

*Angelic.* Olive smiled as she thought how appalled he would have been if she had called him that when she knew him.

'Christ, Olive, look at me with your *eyes*, damn you! I'm a crude bag of guts in saggy skin. That's what I am, and so are you, in spite of your arty haircut and silk knickers. And stop smiling!'

But she couldn't stop smiling.

'And is Patrissia just a bag of guts, Johnny? I've seen you looking at her. I don't think you see fatty blisters when she bares her breasts for you, or sacs of jelly when you gaze into her eyes. You're all talk.'

That was the last time they had slept together. The next term she had met Edward, and had watched in amusement as Patrissia, the class's scintillating and slutty Italian sorceress, had so mesmerised Johnny that he had briefly left his wife for her.

And they were still connected, after all these years. The thought made Olive pause as she stuffed last night's sheets into the washing machine. Both of them were self-absorbed, obsessive, demanding and critical, and they had fought all the time she had known them, but here they were at the end, together in some mystical way that required neither proximity nor, it seemed, even the normal appearance of care.

She had looked for the portrait of Patrissia that Johnny had exhibited a few years before, but it wasn't anywhere in the house. Instead she had found a stack of old art-school sketches of herself and Lucinda. Olive had

forgotten about those secret sessions so completely that at first she was too shocked to look at them.

*How could I possibly have done that? It's just cheap pornography. And with Lucinda...*

But slowly she began to recall how things were then, and how she had been allowed to live—without shame, without judgement, and without consequences—utterly selfishly. And how good it felt.

*Selfish. It sounds like an accusation, but how can it possibly be that? I was unselfish with Edward, and how did that turn out? I unselfishly wanted to give Zak his dream, but how did that turn out? Was I selfish when I posed with Lucinda, pretending it was just to please Johnny when it was really to please myself?*

She picked one of the paintings out of the stack and took it over to the window. There was no pretence in the expression of desire for Lucinda on her face, or of Lucinda's for her. It was completely honest, more honest than she had been with Edward, more honest than she had been with Zak. She had been truly naked, and Johnny had seen her nakedness and had shown it to her, and then he had left her and taken her nakedness with him.

It snowed the whole day, and the next, and Olive began to ration her food. It was impossible to walk far. The track to the main road was a series of deep drifts. The day before, she had gone to find the path up to her neighbour on the other side of the stream, thinking she might be able to climb the valley by holding on to trees and bushes, but the path had disappeared.

She woke shivering several times during the night, hugging her hot-water bottle to her belly. Restless and unable to sleep, at last she put on her dressing-gown and went downstairs to check the range, even though she knew that she had filled it with enough wood to keep the radiators warm until morning. It was glowing nicely, and after looking in on Johnny she sat in the old leather chair sipping sweet tea and watching tiny flames flicker along the cracks in the logs, waiting for the kettle on the hob above to warm. After half an hour she used the barely-hot water to refill her hot-water bottle, tucking it into the folds of her gown.

She awoke to a scratching sound, and glancing at the window she saw a climbing rose being blown back and forth across the cold panes, etching lines in the light frosting of snow. Beyond the garden fence, saplings were swaying and shedding flurries of white dust.

Reaching out she pulled at the damper, rubbing her hands as the remains of the logs caught fire, and then she regarded the fast-diminishing woodpile. She would need to replenish it from the garage. She shivered at the thought. It could wait until after breakfast.

Still shivering, Olive hugged her dressing gown tightly to her and put a cup of water into the rescued microwave on her way to the living room, wondering why she was feeling so chilly. Johnny's room was usually the warmest in the house, sheltered from the wind and insulated from the leaky window frames by thick floral curtains, but the cold seemed to increase as she crossed the threshold, and her whole body was shaking as she approached the bed.

Johnny's head had sunk completely into the pillows again, hiding his face in the dim light. Automatically, she slipped her hand under his neck and started to raise it but as she leaned closer to give him his morning kiss, she saw that his lips were blue and caked with saliva. Lifting the duvet, she put her ear to his chest. Nothing.

Olive dressed herself and went into the garage for more armfuls of wood, which she threw indiscriminately into the corners of the kitchen. Then she gently stripped and washed the body, just as she had done since she had arrived, rummaging through the wastebin to find a cork before dressing him in fresh pyjamas. She piled logs onto the fire in the range, made herself breakfast and a pot of tea, and sitting down at the kitchen table, stared through the window at the new snow falling.

She hadn't moved when, hours later, the day began to fade. She had been expecting Johnny's death, but only notionally, abstractly, and now that it had happened she found herself simply waiting to see what happened next, as if the death itself was an unremarkable point in the flow of sensations. After all, she barely knew this remnant of a man, even though her feeling was that he was deeply woven in her. It seemed there was nothing at all to think, but that the thing to do, that her body did without her intervention, was to wait, so she did.

Olive sat at the table all through the evening and night, only getting up to make more tea and feed the fire. At one point she took a couple of dusty household candles from their box in the garage and lit them, one for his bedside table and one for the kitchen. When they went out she sat in the glow of the fire.

When dawn came, she brought in the last of the firewood from the garage, and then heaved open the creaky doors, spending the next two hours barrowing in fresh supplies from the stacks under the eaves at the back of the house.

When night came again, she entered Johnny's room for the first time since she had dressed him, and lifting him as she had been taught, dragged him into the kitchen and up onto the table, interlocking his hands over his chest and arranging his hair, and placing a folded towel gently under his head.

Opening another full box of candles, she placed half a dozen around him, and lighting them, started to hum and whistle softly like the wind in the trees, moving in a kind of dance around the table, slowly spinning and curtsying. As she circled back to the fire, she kicked off her shoes, and unbuttoning herself slowly, became naked, her movements leaflike and dramatic in the shadowy firelight.

After a while the fire turned red, and Olive stopped dancing to pile on more logs, leaving the range door open. Then, exhausted, she drew up a chair and, turning her back on the body, sat with her arms around her knees staring into the fire until the new logs were crackling and spitting pieces onto the warm stone floor.

There were beginnings and there were endings—at least, that's how Olive saw it mostly—but beginnings, when she investigated, always turned out to be morasses of unending depth and dependence, like the flames that danced before her now, which disappeared if she tried to focus on their shapes and forms, and reappeared when she ceased her examination. They were neither there nor not there, or were both there and not there, she couldn't make up her mind. It was as if the world was a conspiracy hiding the fact that all things derived from their opposites, that apparent 'things' came into existence from the perception of their nonexistence, and vice versa—as if life was simply tension, and voltage the currency.

"Johnny's dead," yes, it was true—there was his body in front of her—and the pressure in her, that told her that *this* was *this* and *that* was *that*, confirmed that it was so. But what had changed? In what other way apart from the change in pressure was this deadness manifested? What was this *thing* before her?

Olive turned to the body again, waiting for a revelation. It seemed only to be sleeping, weightlessly suspended over something that might be a table or a bed: nothing important enough to need a particular name. She sat attentively, waiting to see if the body rose or moved or signalled, feeling at the same time that it was already doing so: doing and not doing, like walking and falling, with each step recovering, and continuing to walk and fall at the same time. The body had lived and decayed at the same time, and now the living had stopped, apparently. But if falling never stops, and decaying never stops, then walking and living surely cannot stop either. We simply walk another road and live another life.

Olive gazed at the body which had no name now and far from being a relict was coruscating with energy, and infused with light and colour, but of an elusive unfocused and unpressured kind. She herself had become only a vague presence, a blurred edge.

At one point she became aware of the room, and herself shivering, but she was too lost in watching the body to care. It was only about pressure, she was thinking, and attention to pressure: so when the pressure drops even for a second what is left should be a perfect moment, a taste of the gap between living and dying, between existence and nonexistence.

But this didn't feel perfect. She felt released, but from what she didn't know. Not from Johnny—she had never thought herself his captive. Reaching out, she ran a hand slowly over his cheek and up to an eyelid, pausing momentarily before sliding it open to reveal the pale blue eye. She felt nothing. It was dead, and he was dead, and she had been answered.

She closed the eye, nodding, and getting up from her cramped seat stretched to breathe life into her cold limbs.

—o0o—

We'll call that *Olive's story*, shall we? But what about Patrissia and Johnny, and Zak? The sad truth is that we don't care about them as long as Olive's story is compelling, and if anyone challenges us to justify our lack of compassion, we'll tell them that it's just a story. And what do we do when they point out that all of life is *just a story*, that everything we think is *just a story*, that a memory is *just a story*, that each of our histories is *just a story*?

I'll tell you what we do: we tell them a story.

Once upon a time in a land far to the West there lived a man called Johnny. Johnny was wise and strong, and he painted beautiful pictures. He lived in a cottage at the end of a track, right next to a beautiful clear stream. Every day when he opened his door he was happy to hear the birds singing and the cows lowing and he was especially happy to hear the sound of the stream rushing by his window. He would breathe deeply, look around him, smile and declare 'All's right with the world!'

Johnny's cottage was big enough for lots of people but he lived alone because none of his friends wanted to live with him. He always said it didn't make him sad when they refused but you could tell that he wasn't telling the truth and sometimes when he was alone in the big kitchen he drank and drank until the bottle was empty, and then he would open another bottle and drink some more.

Everything clearly *wasn't* right with the world, but he kept saying it anyway, until one day he looked out of the study where he was painting a

picture and saw a car coming down the track towards him. He didn't know whose car it was—it wasn't any of his friends' cars because he would have recognised it—so he went downstairs to watch it arrive.

As it got nearer, he could see that there were women in the car. It made him happy to see them and he began to think that perhaps everything really could be all right. He started to smile, hoping that they had heard of him or his work and had come to admire him. It had happened many times in the past, although he couldn't actually remember the last time it had happened now. Maybe he could persuade them to stay for a while.

Peering out of the window through his old eyes, he watched as the car slowly stopped and reversed towards the overgrown bank of the stream, and for a moment he thought that the women were lost and had come to the wrong place but then the sound of the car's engine died and they got out and looked around.

They were both dark-haired and were dressed in modest skirts and loose sweaters, which gave him hope—it had been the standard uniform of his female admirers for many years. They didn't look young nor particularly old, mid-fifties perhaps, which he considered a good age in a lover.

One of them approached his front door with a determined look on her face.

'Hallo!'

'Hello yourself,' he smiled as he opened the door to greet her. 'Are you lost?'

'Not at all. You're Johnny, aren't you? Pleased to meet you at last,' the woman gushed, holding out her hand. 'I'm Sally.'

'Come in, come in. There's tea in the pot,' he urged as he took her hand and guided her inside, trying to recall her face. 'I'm sorry, but I can't quite place you...'

There was a brief pause and then a voice came from outside.

'*Ciao* Johnny. Long time no see.'

He stiffened, recognising the voice at once.

'Patrissia?'

Johnny closed his front door and watched the two women climb back into their car and drive away.

It had been all very civilised. They had sat around the big old farmhouse table and Patrissia had introduced Sally as her partner, explaining that they



had moved down to that part of Cornwall almost eight years before and that she was sorry she had waited so long to call.

Johnny had replied that he understood how quickly the time passed when you were busy and that she shouldn't apologise.

'What prompted you to come down here?' he had asked curiously. 'Not me, obviously.'

Patrissia didn't seem to know what to say, eventually settling for 'We had to get away.'

He waited for her to continue, but she was glancing around, apparently too distracted by his kitchen to answer immediately. To be sure, it was bare and well-scrubbed, and a world away from the chaotic mess she must have expected from her previous visit. In fact it was so aggressively neat Patrissia had had an immediate urge to knock something off a shelf or spill something on the floor, but there was nothing to hand except a crumpled lipsticked tissue in her pocket that Sally retrieved almost before Patrissia had dropped it.

'She's always dropping things these days,' Sally apologised. 'I don't let her cook any more in case she hurts herself.'

Patrissia looked disconcerted and Johnny thought she almost blushed as she breathed out, 'I'm sorry I was so... *unpleasant* before, Johnny.' She looked up with tears in her dark, wide eyes. 'I can't have been so scared then, can I?'

'Scared of what?' Johnny was lost. Considering that her previous visit had ended with him on the floor and her heel on his chest, he could only assume this was a new game. 'You certainly didn't come across as scared. Quite the opposite—in fact, I was pretty scared myself.'

'I don't know why I wanted to hurt you, Johnny. You have to believe me. I loved you once.'

His ears pricked up.

'But that wasn't what it was. I just didn't understand then. What's happened to me—'

'She was in an awful state after that business with Nico and the statue and everything, Johnny,' Sally interjected. 'It took her a long time to get over that. It was years, wasn't it Trisha?'

Patrissia nodded distractedly, apparently happy to leave her thoughts unsaid.

'She wouldn't even go out,' Sally continued. 'Of course, she tried to hide it,' she smirked, 'but she couldn't hide it from *me*.'

Johnny smiled and nodded, wondering why Patrissia was allowing Sally to speak for her. That was certainly new. In fact she seemed to be using Sally to veil herself. He had done his best to respond to the conversational threesome with humour and tolerance, which had evoked a faint look of surprise from Patrissia. They seemed to be in a game that neither of them were prepared for.

‘Lucinda said she thought it had barely affected you,’ said Johnny, determinedly bringing the conversation back to earth, ‘which I wasn’t immensely surprised to see made her rather wary of you. She hasn’t been in touch with you a great deal in the last few years, has she?’

‘I thought she was trying to keep Jamie out of my clutches,’ Patrissia laughed, suddenly animated. ‘Poor boy...*man*’ she corrected herself, ‘what a time I gave *him*!’

‘So I understand.’

The conversation shifted to the joys of living in the place they did, continuing politely in that way for ten minutes, and then Patrissia announced that they had to go.

‘*So* nice to see you again, Johnny. Perhaps we won’t leave it so long next time now that we’re friends again. We’re not that far.’

‘Uh,’ said Johnny, thrown by the sudden change in tone. ‘Where—’

‘Not far, my dear Johnny. Not far,’ she laughed, standing abruptly. ‘Come on Sally, the light’s fading, it’s time to go.’

Later that evening, sitting in his armchair in the kitchen, after running over the visit several times, Johnny still couldn’t pin down why they had come. Of course, Patrissia had always been prone to random acts, but he didn’t get the impression that their visit was entirely unplanned.

‘Odd,’ was all he could come up with. ‘Very odd. She’s either become a much better actress than she was, or she’s changed considerably,’ he told himself between swigs of whisky. ‘And which is more likely? Hmm.’

He settled back comfortably. ‘Nice pair of legs on her still,’ he grinned to himself with satisfaction. ‘She always had a good set of pins, did Patrissia. Very nice.’ He paused. ‘But what does she want? She always wants something. She always has a plan. What is it this time?’

Johnny spent the next few days after her visit walking around the house, checking that it was up to scratch in case they reappeared, but if Patrissia had a plan, it couldn’t have been directed at him because he never saw them again: or at least, by the time they came back he wasn’t able to recognise them. He had already had the stroke, and while Sally somehow

ended up as his part-time live-in carer, Patrissia didn't so much as put her foot over the threshold again.

It was indeed, very odd.

—o0o—

Patrissia followed the tractor as it heaved its way down the track, the big box of supplies on the passenger seat lurching dangerously as her tyres lost and then regained grip on the chopped-up ice and stony mud. Her eyes were bad and she could hardly make out what was in front of her.

'Olive? Olive?' she was muttering to herself while straining to see through the windscreen, '*do* I remember your bloody name? I don't think I do. No, I'm sure I don't.'

She fumbled a cigarette out of the glovebox and lit it, inhaling sharply.

'Who the hell are you, anyway? What are you doing here? Are you spying on him? Did you come to gloat? Curse your eyes! And how do you know Lucinda? I never saw you with her. I would have remembered. What do you want with him? What do you *want*?'

Patrissia banged the steering wheel with her fist. It wasn't good for her, knowing these women were touching him, wondering what liberties they took. She had wanted to look after him, truly she had, but she really, really couldn't do it. She just couldn't bear to see him.

It was lucky she had Sally to tell her how he was, except she had had to come here today, to check on Olive. She wanted to keep an eye on Olive. Sarah was alright: she was a bit cold and efficient but Patrissia preferred that to Olive's air of secret knowingness.

The tractor had reached the house and was turning round in front of her, she could see that much. There was no sign of Olive, though, which was a bit odd—she'd been alone in the house with Johnny for six days and you'd have thought that she'd be dying to see someone.

She stopped and wound down the window, blowing a cloud of smoke into the cold air.

'Bloody woman! What are you up to?'

—o0o—

The evening before, Johnny's corpse had begun to smell quite strongly and Olive had moved him onto a pile of logs in the garage, where he lay spreadeagled in spite of her efforts to tidy him up. She hoped someone would come for her soon, or that the snow would melt so she could get to the road, otherwise there would undoubtedly be rats, and she'd already used up the little rat poison she'd found. As it was, there were already signs that he'd been nibbled.

So she waited, thinking about the long years of waiting that she had already endured. It wasn't as if she was lazy, or couldn't make up her mind, it was simply that...

*It was simply that* Olive felt that she had been caught up in the flow of history itself, in which her own personal story was an insignificant and even irrelevant part, and that she had been given no choices. Even now, she could see no alternative to sitting and waiting. Anything else would be inappropriate and wasteful. And yet... Olive was no wild child, nor was she given to flights of fancy, and yet history had determined that she would dance for him, and she had no explanation for that. Naked too, naked as the flaming fire, and she had no explanation for that, either.

She had already packed her few things, and was sitting at the freshly-scrubbed kitchen table sipping tea when she heard the sound of the tractor approaching. There was no point in going out to greet it until it actually arrived, she considered, and so she sat patiently waiting, trying not to imagine what story Patrissia would tell about Johnny's death, but instead waiting to hear what story she herself told—

*If she had her own story.* Sometimes she thought that perhaps she was one of those rarities, a witness, a being without a story, whose role was to validate and inform the flow itself, a vessel empty of personal significance, a conduit for the Eternal.

Johnny would have found comfort in such a conceit, and Olive nodded to herself in approval. Then she remembered that he was gone, and suddenly found herself crying for her own eventual and unremarkable dissolution.

—o0o—

'This was his favourite place. He promised to row us out here one day. He never did, of course.'

Olive looked back at the shore. She wasn't comfortable in the little boat with Patrissia and Sally. It wasn't their business and she wished she were alone with him, but it wasn't something she could do alone.

'The cove looks so grey and forbidding from the sea, doesn't it? Not at all welcoming. And those rocks look so dangerous.'

'They are dangerous. The current takes you in and you can't get out again. It's a wrecking coast.'

The boat stopped moving.

'Is this it?'

'Yes. We can't get any closer. Is there anything you want to say?'

'No.'

The two women stared at the stiff white bag lying between them until a nervous voice at their back said, 'I'm sorry, but the wind's getting up. We can't stay here much longer.'

'Give us another minute, Sally,' said Patrissia, taking Olive's hand and staring into her eyes. They were grey, but the pupils so wide that only a thin circle was showing.

'I'm such a coward, Olive. I did all the easy things and none of the hard things, and you... I don't know what to say. You stayed with him, and it should have been me, but I was too scared. And now he's gone I'm more scared than ever. And now you—'

'Try not to think about it, Patrissia, I'm not. I'm only doing what I have to do. I don't have a choice, not really. I don't think any of us do. All that thinking, and I never made a decision in my entire life. I'm no better than a piece of wrack drifting in the swell of the tide, and now that the tide is departing,' Olive closed her eyes, 'all I can do is go with it. I'm ready.'

'OK,' came Patrissia's voice from far away, 'then it's goodbye.'

There was a splash, then something like an echo of a splash, and then nothing except the hum of the wind.

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## Logos #4

There was nobody around but Zak as he slowly scanned the beach from his reedy cove. Stepping out of his pants he started into the water, ignoring the shock of the sudden cold, just as he had done as a child here.

His body shook as the bed of the sea dipped and the numbing coldness enveloped his thighs and waist, and he plunged forward under the next wave.

Zak didn't quite understand how he came to be back in his house in England. He remembered the sequence of events—the mill cottage, the river, the bus, the train, the other bus, the stay at Edward's retreat, and then the return—but how that sequence of events came about was a mystery to him, and he was OK with that.

The thing was, the weeks of meditation and contemplation at the retreat had given him time to settle as he had never done before. *Settle*—yes, finally. He'd had nothing in mind when he left the mill cottage, he'd just walked and then taken a bus and a train as though sleepwalking, and having bought a ticket to the end of the line, he'd descended when he recognised the name of the town that Olive had mentioned when she talked about Edward's retreat.

He'd got on the free bus and then got off when it stopped at the retreat centre. They had asked no questions, and given him a tent to sleep in and a piece of paper with his schedule. He would help in the kitchen and in the garden. He did what was asked of him, meditated in the morning, listened at the daily meeting, and managed to think hardly at all. The essentials of life were taken care of, and he didn't need anything else.

He had a lot of free time, and among these serious people he felt that it was OK to concentrate on himself, to observe himself, trying to be objective, because obviously *something* wasn't right, otherwise he wouldn't be in this odd place, in this foreign land, performing these strange, curiously comforting, practices. There were no distractions from the immediacy of life. Nothing demanded his attention—in itself a vast relief—and in that calm state he realised how much time he'd wasted reacting to people and things that constantly demanded his attention, but which had nothing to do with him.

The radio told him that fifty people had died in a hurricane in Puerto Rico, but what was that to him? They weren't *people*, not actual entities that had any relationship with him, they were just descriptions of strangers. Why was he being told about them? Who decided that he needed to know? How was he supposed to react, and who to?

The radio told him that he ought to be angry about something or other that somebody wanted or didn't want, but what was that to him? What made that particular injustice demand his attention? There were 8 billion other people who also wanted him to protest on their behalf, when he hadn't even got round to protesting the injustices he felt had already been visited on him.

He saw that mainly what he did was obey other people's demands and rules.

Even now, here, it seemed to Zak that where he was and what he was doing was almost irrelevant, and he decided to run with that thought. It helped to free himself from the nagging suspicion there was something he was supposed to be doing, but wasn't.

Watching himself tending a bean plant in the garden, he saw himself trying to remember if there were rules about watering, or staking, or arranging.

Watching himself in the kitchen, he saw himself trying to remember to keep the chef happy, to keep the knives sharp and the lettuces clean.

Watching himself with Olive, he saw both of them creating excuses and pursuing stories that had nothing to do with the actual situation they found themselves in. They were both trying to be somebody else, somewhere else.

Once he had stopped thinking about the playmaking he realised that almost nothing was left. There was nothing to him. He had been a mass of automatic learned reactions and romantic stories, with beneath that, an almost perfect silence.

With Olive gone the possibilities had gone, his choices had disappeared, the impossible temptations had disappeared, and he just did what there was left to do in a foreign land. He felt vastly grateful to her that she had brought him here. He had come to a dead end, and he felt extremely lucky about that.

The people at the retreat centre seemed to understand, just smiling and leaving him alone, and gently reminding him if he forgot about a duty. When it was time to return to England, he bought tickets, exchanged polite adieux, and left.

Someone had given him K's book as a going-away present, and he started reading it on the train. There was nothing to really object to in the first few pages, and gradually Zak was drawn in by the rhythm of the prose. He found himself relaxing and reading almost entirely uncritically, as if watching dragonflies over a pond on a sunny day.

A few short weeks ago he would have been *interested* in the dragonflies. He would have been *delighted* by their colour and movement, *curious* about their lifecycle and feeding habits, *impressed* by their predatory efficiency. But now he wasn't interested, he was simply participating in a motion that lacked a target or ending, and flowed without eagerness, without anticipation, and without disturbance, at rest in a movement that was intrinsically still, like a wave.

When Zak arrived back at his home in England, he felt like he was visiting. Standing outside the front gate, he wondered who lived there? What did they do in this unappealing house? Going down the short path to the front door he felt like a stranger, and once in the house he stood and stared around him uncomprehendingly. It didn't seem to be arranged to any purpose, and felt dull and haphazard.

It occurred to him that he didn't actually know what he was going to do now he was back. The agency that had given him work for the last ten years no longer answered his calls, and the others... He'd just have to see what happened. But the question remained, What was he to do?

He began to search for Olive. He phoned Cat, but she didn't have Olive's address and, like Zak, she didn't know if she worked, or which town she lived in.

Putting down the phone, all Zak could think of was that she had missed her friends when she was in France, but he couldn't remember her ever mentioning a name except one, a Lucretia or Lucinda or something, and the name of a town—Penzance? Lucinda had a husband, Jamie, and two daughters. He googled repeatedly in different variations and then he remembered that one was autistic so added that to the search, and via a roundabout route found the number of Lucinda's carer's agency.

He called Lucinda and discovered that Cornwall was where the arty middle class went to die, and that Lucinda provided the help that the artistic—and well-off—needed while dying. The name Zennor slipped out, which Zak had heard before. It was only a vague memory but he decided it was enough, and after being assured by Lucinda that she might have a job for him in a couple of weeks and would contact him then, he thanked her and rang off.



It seemed a rather fragile and uncertain way to go about things, just allowing them to happen like this, but nothing bad had been visited on him so far, and Zak's state of mind was such that he didn't have much alternative.

In fact his state of mind seemed much like that recommended by K, and described by Cat once as *mindful*. It felt like sleepwalking through an ancient dream where all was familiar and needed no direction or input from him. Things appeared and disappeared without drama—the retreat, for example—and left only a vague impression that persisted but held little significance. He was there, and he was not there, that's all he could say. He simply paid attention to whatever attracted him, and that was enough.

Is this what all those books and teachings and workshops and presentations and religions and lifetimes were all about? Had simply seeing what was around you become so difficult that it took an entire lifetime to achieve? Why did it take such dedication just to be ordinary?

*Yes, ordinary* thought Zak. *What's wrong with ordinary?*

Well, humans. What he meant was the humans he'd met, of course, and those humans had to be teased out from among everything he'd read and heard about 'humans'. There was much to be discarded, and at the end he was left with almost nothing about himself, and almost nothing about any other actual people. He realised that he knew almost *no* people, he only knew a few individuals that, if pressed, he supposed he might describe as human, just meaning their general appearance and demeanour. Talk of any other people was just stories and tales, and talk of *Zak* was almost as speculative.

He shook his head at his new-found humility and considered the state of his project.

Zak had only recently acknowledged that he even *had* a project, and that he was so closely bound up in it, but now that he had cleared out the dross it was clear that he did, and that the situation with Olive was the central concern: so he had his old and battered Vauxhall serviced, and headed to the West Country.

"The speaker has no value." *Well, so what? Throw yourself off a bridge?*

Zak had become impatient with the self-important pronouncements of much that he read, and fake humility really got to him now. He'd heard that K was arrogant, but maybe that was a different K.

Zak was reading about the need for suffering, and recalled a story about a K who was harrowed. No doubt someone had told him that suffering was

inevitable, and the thing to do was to distance yourself from it, but how would that work when you're strapped into a purpose-built suffering-machine like the harrow, or when you're being prodded into an intentionally-lit fire like that Templar guy, what's-his-name? How could anyone be indifferent to that? Some said it was a matter of moving your attention elsewhere, like in yoga classes, but could you really think about pretty bird-filled woodland glades while your feet were being burned off? That would take some concentration.

He laid down the book and rubbed his hands. It was getting cold in the caravan but he was reluctant to light the gas fire, it made everything feel damp and unhealthy, and misted the windows. He didn't mind that his home was so small, but he needed to be able to see outside otherwise it felt confined—although he'd have to get over that if he was staying through the winter.

The voice on the radio caught his attention. It was on low, tuned to a local news station:

'It's going to be a cold winter.'

*Really?* He gazed through the window and over the hedge into the tops of the trees that overhung the little valley, wondering how the voice could be so sure. Admittedly, the air felt chilly already in September, but was that enough evidence? How much do you need to acquire such certainty? Was it a result of concentration too? Was that it? You became certain by focusing on your own belief? It sounded a little crazy when you put it like that.

Zak was hardly ever sure of anything, even of what he thought or felt, which sometimes mildly alarmed him. To wonder how you feel? That can't be right, can it? How can you be uncertain about your core, your view of the world? How can you *not* feel part of the world? After all, your point of view *is* the world, isn't it? and you *are* your feelings about it. Not anyone else's feelings—you can't share anyone else's view—well, only if they tell you what their view is—but then it isn't their view, is it? It's just what they say their view is, and you have to be very naïve to take someone's self-analysis as gospel, don't you? They might *want* to be truthful, but... well, we all know what that means. And even then, it's only your understanding of what they say...

It seemed so complicated, and Zak thought *that* wasn't right, either. Is our source so hidden that it's impossible to find it again? How can that be when the source is *everything*? How can we feel so artificial and out of place? K said it was because our feelings and thinkings are misleading us, but then he went off on some cynical view of the actualities and possibilities, but was so persuasive that Zak shared his evident frustration.

K was doing what he warned us not to do, engaging with abstract thought—speculating—so what did he expect but frustration? Someone should have reminded him that the world is a juggernaut, and our desires, in comparison, a spiritous mist. How could anyone believe that things would take a different course just because they wanted it to? And if two people want different things, who decides who will triumph? And, finally—where is the mechanism for enacting will? In atoms? In the air?

And you can't look at things from someone else's point of view, nice as that might sound, can you? You're completely different people, made of different experiences. I mean, is a polished granite worktop in a chic Parisien suburb the same thing as a rough granite foundation to a Scottish castle? They're both granite, right? You could just exchange them, couldn't you? So everyone else is just like you, right?

*It's going to be a cold winter.*

Zak felt confused and scattered, and he thought that was probably because he wasn't concentrating enough. Most of his thoughts that weren't about nonsense like this were about Olive. Zak wasn't sure what he felt about the situation with Olive, except it wasn't up to her to decide that it was over, was it?

The trouble was, that if he looked at it from her point of view he might not believe they had actually had a relationship, and that puzzled him more than he was puzzled already... What could he point to as evidence of a relationship? Not even a ring or a token, not even an 'x' on a note. Olive didn't go in for stuff like that.

Without knowing what was going through her mind the way stuff was going through his mind, all he had were the bare facts. They met, they talked, they had sex, they parted. What can you make of that without the other stuff, the shivers and the feelings of... communion, he supposed he had to call them. *Love* seemed like too loaded a word. The times when you felt you had submitted to the current? That was romantically acceptable—and at the same time completely mad. And the other times when you felt a nameless reluctance? Wasn't that all because of past experience? What else could it be? And why exactly would you want to remember that?

Anyway, it all pointed to it being a crazy game—not for serious people like K and Zak. He wished he could get past all that, and K seemed to suggest the beginnings of a method.

*As long as you are a beginner certain formalised meditations or prayers may be good for you. But for a seeker for reality there is only one meditation — the rigorous refusal to harbour thoughts. To be free from thoughts is itself meditation.... You begin by letting thoughts flow and watching them. The very observation slows down the mind till it stops altogether. Once the mind is quiet, keep it quiet. Don't get bored with peace, be in it, go deeper into it.... Watch your thoughts and watch yourself watching the thoughts.*

He sighed and stared at the words in front of him. Yesterday he'd thought they'd made sense, but today it was difficult to see anything profound in them. *The speaker has no value.* Well, yes, because he's disappeared, yes? So what's the point of talking about the value of anything? Everything disappears eventually, even life. Really, you just either want it or you don't want it. What it's worth and whether or not you have it is beside the point.

And, according to the words, you can't both want something *and* have it, because a *want* is technically a lack, and that's why you can't appreciate something you have.

These kinds of thoughts made Zak pause. Was Olive more *advanced* than him because she didn't appreciate having him? That would be weird. He nodded. What a curious thing this language is, and these thoughts were. It seemed that when you take thoughts far enough they always become strange, and even stranger was that sometimes Zak thought he was only thinking about something because the words appeared. They just appeared out of the blue—like last night, in the middle of the night, he woke up and found himself thinking about Olive, only he wasn't thinking about *her*, was he, he was thinking about what *he* thought of what she did, processing *his* memory. His memory, but not *his* memory really until something appeared in it. Where had it come from? How much had disappeared? He didn't seem to be much in control of it anyway.

He'd told himself to forget her, but it was hard to do when his memory insisted on reminding him so often, even though he'd rather it didn't. She wasn't still arguing, was she? And yet the memories meant he was still being argued at. This was the kind of thing he wanted to understand, these thoughts that selected themselves so carefully.

Can memory be masochistic? Not really. He was just reviewing his *interactions*, wasn't he? Trying to understand. He wanted to know what his reactions were to her, he wanted to know if he felt anything, and if so, what? And he wanted to know how the memories were selected. It all seemed like a setup. As far as he could determine, and after much effort,

he could find no originating, unemotional, *cause*. There was only an endless speculation about what or who was to *blame*, and he gave up each time, bored and exhausted.

It had slowly dawned on him that the reason he didn't know how he felt was that no-one had *told* him how to feel. Wasn't that odd? To have to be told? But it was odd only until he realised that the reason he had no natural responses, the reason he felt so empty, was that none of the things he was supposed to respond to were real. Oh, there was something—words—but nothing behind the words. The people he met and talked to were real, his home was real, the streets he walked were real, but everything else... was just gossip and hearsay. France and the retreat were hearsay, memories were hearsay, *Olive* was just hearsay.

He couldn't discover his true feelings about Olive because there weren't any. There were only thoughts about her, and the more he investigated himself, the more clearly he saw that *most* of his feelings were actually thoughts—and most of his thoughts were hearsay.

And that's pretty much what K raged on about. Nobody lived *properly*. Even K's supposed devoted followers had no idea. They'd been told how to think by somebody, and so that's what they did. They couldn't see that their thoughts were mostly other people's thoughts, and that their *feelings* were mostly other people's judgements—thoughts again.

Zak was rapidly tiring of the whole thing. It seemed there were so many complicated words for things that seemed to be outside the scope of words that meanings flowered like cancer cells. But maybe, just maybe, if you kept piling them all up, eventually something like an answer would appear, and wouldn't that be nice?

That's how it went for the first few days in the caravan, more or less continuing the routine Zak had followed at the retreat, but by the fourth day he started to get fidgetty. He wanted to practise the new things he was learning, but the method said he couldn't *try*.

That was one of the main stumbling blocks, the assumption that if you observed yourself, just the process of doing that would change your point of view to one that could be considered unbiased and without expectation. It sounded odd, but Zak was willing to give it a go. In his case it was a more a case of stopping himself being distracted, although as his daily activities became simpler he discovered that he could be completely engaged in nothing very much. Eventually he did get bored, but even so, spending half an hour watching the repetitive flight of a dragonfly was now a regular occurrence. He probably did that every day, along with losing himself in household tasks like washing up. Sometimes he would think he ought to do the dishes, only to find them already done;

or he would want coffee, and find it already made; or he would find himself closing the door on his way out, apparently without deciding to do so.

He *caught* himself doing these things, and realised that, without trying much, he was living to a great extent unconsciously—or, more accurately, he was living consciously, but without analysing or memorising anything. When memories of his past life intruded, they seemed unfocused and irrelevant.

One morning he was interrupted in his reading by a sudden flurry of snow against the window, and he turned to the radio for the first time in days. The voice told him that the snow would be prolonged—he should get supplies before he was cut off.

Returning from the supermarket, he passed the sign to Johnny's cottage, and almost turned into the track down the valley, stopping himself only at the last moment and continuing the half mile to the lane leading to the caravan.

After unpacking, he walked the few hundred metres to the top of Olive's valley, wondering whether he should offer to go shopping for her or something, or just ask if she was OK, but, standing looking over the wooded valley side to the old and ramshackle cottage, he realised they were no longer attached. He stayed for several minutes, absorbing the chill, and then checked his phone signal. Nothing. There was hardly ever a signal here, and when he wanted to use his phone he had to walk to the main road.

He turned back and spent the rest of the afternoon repairing the door to the old outhouse, which hadn't been used for many years. The caravan had its own modern toilet but Zak wasn't keen on the cheap and tiny plastic box that it sat in. He washed there, but was happy when he'd reinstated the old privy outside, enjoying the inconvenience.

The day came when Zak found himself stumbling and sliding down the bank towards the small stream that ran down Johnny's valley. A hesitant jump took him to the other side and in two minutes he was standing at Olive's door. He had forgotten why he wanted to see her, and didn't know what he would say when she appeared. But it seemed the thing to do and the time to do it, so here he was.

He peered through the window. There was a woman sitting in a rocking chair with a cane by her side, asleep in front of the big black oven range. It seemed a shame to disturb her but Zak had been a long time getting to this moment, and he was tired. He knocked on the door.

‘You’ll have to excuse the mess.’

It didn’t seem to be a request, but a command. Zak obeyed.

‘Looks fine to me.’ He swallowed and added quickly, ‘I thought Olive might be here.’

‘Olive?’ said the woman, looking surprised. ‘Oh no, Olive isn’t here any more.’

‘They said she was still here. Where did she go?’

‘I’ve no idea. Did you know her?’ The woman angled her head suspiciously.

‘We were friends for a while, but she disappeared.’

‘Ah. Well, she *was* here, looking after Johnny, you see, but Johnny died and left me the cottage. I live here now. I’m Patrissia, by the way. Who are you?’

‘Zak, a friend of hers. Was she OK?’

‘Oh.’ Patrissia paused, looking thoughtful. ‘She didn’t seem to be all there, to be honest with you. You know, *vague*—and she said odd things. I told her she could stay in the cottage while the lawyers sorted things out, but she didn’t seem keen, although she didn’t know what else she was going to do. Sally brought her a couple of weeks’ worth of supplies and then we left her to it. The last time I visited was just before I moved in, and she’d already left, I’m afraid.’

‘She didn’t mention me at all?’

‘Sorry.’

‘Ah. I was hoping. . . well, not really. I mean, I wanted to say things to her, but I don’t know, it’s a relief her not being here.’ He sniffed. ‘Isn’t it all strange, the way things happen? Almost like we don’t really have any idea what we’re doing at all.’

‘Hmm.’ Patrissia looked at him curiously. ‘Well, you must be hungry. Do you want to share lunch? I hope you’re not a veggie, it’s pork chops with spuds and carrots from the garden.’

‘Sounds good. I’ve been living on cheese and ham sandwiches for weeks.’

Zak stayed for lunch, and was still sitting in the kitchen chair where Olive had contemplated Johnny’s dissolving body when it got dark. Patrissia brought tea and scones, having made an aromatic lamb stew for later.

‘I thought you would be a veggie, Patrissia. Didn’t you say you were a Buddhist?’

‘Yes, I am. I even took the vows.’

‘The Bodhisattva vows? You don’t seem to be too concerned about keeping them.’

‘I keep them, Zak, or I try. The thing is, you have to live in this world, even if it is an *illusion*,’ Patrissia said with a grimace, ‘and that means joining in. If you live in that other place, then great, religiously follow the vows, but don’t be surprised if everybody else gets in your way or misunderstands you or thinks you’re strange.’

‘Let’s face it, most people don’t care about any of that, they just want to be well-treated, to do pretty much what they want, and to be left alone to do it. And what’s wrong with that?’

‘Trouble is,’ she continued after a pause, and in a sadder voice, ‘those who do it properly are always struggling against the tide of what they’d probably call ignorance, aren’t they? and they generally end up badly. So why do they continue?’

Zak shrugged. ‘I imagine when it gets really bad they just tell themselves it’s all illusion anyway.’ He began to wonder how long the woman had been alone here. ‘It’s Illusion Therapy, really, don’t you think?’

‘Of course, but it works, in its own way.’

‘Really? If it’s that easy why don’t we all just *do* it?’

‘Well, isn’t that an odd thing?’ said Patrissia, curiously. ‘We feel that we’re being railroaded into doing things we don’t want to do, being manipulated and controlled and so on, but when *we* try a little bit of coercion ourselves it doesn’t seem to work that well, does it? or it has unexpected results. We don’t seem to benefit, anyway.’

‘So are we inferior people to those who we imagine are doing the controlling? Or don’t we get what we want because we’re not worth it? Who decides what we’re worth? And if we *are* worth it, what’s going on?’

Patrissia laughed. ‘I do try to understand, you see, Zak, but I hardly ever succeed.’ She paused, thoughtfully. ‘I can tell you one thing though, and that’s what you definitely *can’t* do.’

‘Yes?’

‘You can’t import the rules of that other place into this place.’

‘But they’re the same place, according to the gurus. We just have to realise that.’



‘Don’t be silly, of course they’re not the same place. We’re not talking coordinates here, darling. They are two absolutely different places, they have completely different characteristics, and they can’t be mixed up, wriggle how we want. It’s like trying to melt gold into plastic, you just get a smelly tangled mess that’s useless for anything. We’re here, and we have to make the most of it. And we can’t even manage to do that properly, can we?’

She paused in her preparation, and began to stack the dirty pans in the sink in a manner that seemed faintly fragile and dangerous. Zak regarded her curiously, wondering how old she was. She had obviously lived, there was an air about her—not world-weary, just worn in.

‘I’ve never really thought of it like that. I think you’re right.’ He sniffed and nodded. ‘There are loads of self-proclaimed *spiritual* people mouthing off everywhere, aren’t there, telling the world off for not being diverse enough, or not tolerant enough or something or other, and all they’re actually achieving is to make enemies of us all. Just bloody middle-class people looking for a cause because they fail so miserably at making anything meaningful of their actual lives. Crusading tarts with Armani hearts. Spirituality must increase the karmic profit.’

Patrissia laughed. ‘You don’t like us much, do you? The Religious Left, yes?’

‘I only meet people individually, and I can only speak of those I have met, but I have to say that if you get them angry enough, people usually speak hidden truths, and the truths I have heard are generally in line with the *Religious Left* label, so reluctantly, I’d have to say no, I don’t like them particularly.’

‘But Zak, that’s who humans aspire to be, that’s their idea of heaven. A few nice houses in pretty and interesting places, some flash cars, and as many affairs and as much getting out of their heads as possible. The middle-class dream, of course, is to get *completely* out of our heads by adopting an unrealistic cause based on what we think we ought to want.’

‘Ought to?’

‘Of course. Virtue is its own reward, Zak, so we pretend to do what we ought in order to make sure that people know why *we* are doing so well when *they* are not. We’re being rewarded for being virtuous, as any fool can see, and so they should do what we say, because *they* are sinners. Harassing and bullying other people into undertaking our causes is almost a duty.’

‘And *are* you virtuous?’

‘What do you think?’ Patrissia laughed. ‘It’s only PR, Zak. What we really do is make enough money to buy status, peace, and a nice country

cottage.’ She sighed and glanced around the room. ‘And that generally works well for us, don’t you think?’

‘I suppose it does,’ Zak admitted, ‘but I imagine the big test is that you have to make sure you’re on the committee that *counts* in those pretty places, making damned sure the jobs do the jobs and don’t disturb your little idyll, or more importantly, disrupt the organisation that provides you with all those scrummy possibilities.’

‘You’re serious, aren’t you?’ Patrissia’s face lost its smile. ‘Well, indeed, that’s the plan, of course, and it goes all the way up to those untouchables building real fortresses in the mountains and on the islands. Of course, there has to be someone at the bottom so the rest of us can fortify our houses and be admired for our environmental thoughtfulness as we glide by in our electric cars.’

‘Hah!’ Zak smiled. ‘So what do you really think? Who’s the real enemy?’

Patrissia looked unexpectedly serious.

‘Enemies are only made by unthinking people, Zak. There are enemies only in our minds, and what’s a mind to do about it? When we meet actual people we find all our so-called prejudices and conditioning and brainwashing letting us down because the monkey brain is sharp and can throw it all out the window. There, that’s all the thinking I’m doing tonight. Shall we go to bed now?’

Patrissia’s smile reappeared as she watched the invitation slowly become real in Zak’s head. His face relaxed, smiling.

‘Monkey brain. Joking. One more thing, though,’ she continued, as though she’d just mentioned the weather. ‘The real middle class aren’t like that, Zak. They’re serious people and they do serious things for serious reasons, because they like to, and they have the means to get things done. And people like us do it for them.’

‘Us?’ snorted Zak. ‘Don’t give me that, Patrissia. Aren’t you a princess or something? I don’t think I can trust your word about the hierarchy, to be honest.’

He had been reassured by Patrissia’s remark. None of this was serious, then. And if it was, it didn’t matter.

Patrissia sighed. ‘Do you know why I moved down here, Zak? Because here I can be a nobody, and as mad as I like, and nobody cares. And I don’t have to pander to anyone’s ideas of morality as long as I don’t piss off the neighbours. It’s a lot easier than being a princess, I can tell you.’

‘That’s the core of it, isn’t it, eh Princess? Not pissing off the neighbours? I mean, we’re basically just tribal animals, and to us everything unknown is a danger, especially other tribes. And we go and live in cities where

we're *surrounded* by strangers, and we've lost our tribes so there's nowhere to retreat to, and nobody to defend us. And we wonder why we feel anxious and afraid all the time! How could we not? Most of our lives we're being restrained from reacting as we're designed to do.'

'Designed?'

'I don't know what other word I could use. I mean, it's not random is it? And yet we hardly ever get to do what we want. Our actions are superficial, artificial and meaningless because we don't have any idea what's actually going on. We *think* it all through, but it makes no sense.'

'I realise you're exaggerating, but I know...'

'You don't *know*, Patrissia. You've always had the means to live in your own princess-world. You couldn't live *here*, with me, even if you could understand what that meant, but you can't understand because it's not understanding that's needed, it's living *my* life. *Your* life and my life are like plastic and gold too, and can't really be compared. Those two *lives* don't mean the same thing. Don't think this is criticism, Patrissia, I'm just saying what I see.'

'It sounds very angry.'

'Maybe, but that's your view. You've trained yourself to hear anger when someone is loud and disagrees with you. It takes care of everything, doesn't it? Very convenient. Very middle-class. Very *superior*.'

'Well, aren't you angry? I would be, if I felt the way you say you feel. I think you are, but you want to rationalise it.'

'Well, if I'm rational, you could just as easily call me 'forceful' as 'angry', couldn't you? You simply choose not to. But it's not anger, and I'm not angry. I'm just trying to get something across to you that I can see you don't want to hear.' He stopped, tiring of having this same argument again. 'On the positive side, we can admire each other's seriousness when we see it, and recognise the sincerity of purpose.'

Patrissia was poised, alert—and thinking how much Zak sounded like Marc, her dead partner. Impatient for him to finish, she replied brightly, 'Oh, Zak, that sounds lovely, but do you know how many people have explained to me how the world works? I *know* that I don't know, darling, I *know* it. I also know that thinking about it all just depresses anybody who tries, because we're not *right*. We don't think right and we don't act right.'

'And isn't that odd? How did *we* get to be wrong when nothing else is wrong? Are cockroaches or jackals or trees or viruses *wrong*? Then how can we be wrong?' She paused, glancing into Zak's black eyes, thinking *He looks a bit like Marc, he speaks like him. Black eyes too. I wonder?*

‘As for living with you, I imagine that’s something we’d have to experiment with, in case that’s wrong too.’ She laughed. ‘Joking again, sorry.’

Zak let her words play in his mind as he watched her soften and sit back, composed. Hadn’t she said that she’d been at art college with Olive and Lucinda? She looked ten years older, at least.

‘Plenty of questions, eh Princess? But no answers. K says it comes down to recognising there’s nothing to understand because living isn’t an intellectual process, it’s just continuous interaction. A piece of the interaction can’t be memorised because it would involve memorising the whole of creation, and so the memory is a description of a selected piece. We can analyse and understand the description of the interaction, but we can’t analyse or understand the interaction itself. When we turn off the memories and hopes we can join in and drift with the flow.’

‘That sounds so peaceful.’ Patrissia’s poise deserted her momentarily, and she sagged a little. ‘I should like that.’

‘It seems to me you have it pretty much right here. You’re one of the lucky ones.’

‘Hmm.’ Patrissia lifted and grimaced at the ladle in her hand. ‘If I was, I don’t think this sauce would need liquidising.’

A few days later, Zak moved into the cottage with Patrissia. They took several trips to the dump in a hired pickup filled with most of the contents of the cottage, leaving it almost empty except for the essentials. They had separate rooms, big enough to use as private studies. The arrangement suited them both.

Sally visited occasionally, but she didn’t seem particularly surprised or bothered at how things had turned out. She was happy by herself on the farm. Patrissia rarely mentioned her, and Zak forgot about Olive. He occupied himself with reading and writing, and messing about in the garden, which had a gazebo and a big old wooden greenhouse with cast-iron pipes fed from an old boiler. It had been used as a shed for many years, so he cleared it out and planted tomatoes. Edward’s four hectares entered his mind and he wondered briefly what he would be doing if he’d stayed in France.

One afternoon as he waited for the water snake to appear in the overgrown pond, he heard the muted sound of an expensive car negotiating the valley track. Patrissia emerged from the cottage drying her hands as the big Mercedes purred to a stop a little way from the cottage.

‘Lucinda and Jamie,’ she sniffed, lifting her chin. ‘I think Lucinda’s just being nose-y, but it’s nice to see Jamie again. They’re staying for a couple of days.’

Jamie bounded up and gave Patrissia a huge bearhug. ‘Age cannot wither her...’

‘Just stop there, Jamie,’ Patrissia interrupted, ‘this is a no-smut zone.’

‘Ha, I’ll believe that when the cows come home.’ He grinned. ‘Is this the new man?’ The grin broadened as he turned towards Zak, standing just behind her. ‘Zak, yes? Nice to meet you. You have a catch, friend!’

Zak nodded and glanced at the car. ‘Is that your daughter? Is she shy?’

They all looked towards the car as Lucinda arrived, looking less than composed. ‘Sorry Trisha, Zara won’t come in, she won’t say why. I’ll leave her in the car for ten minutes, then I’ll have another go. Oh, hello, you must be Zak.’ She pecked him on the cheek and took a breath. ‘I’m Lucinda, and this is Jamie. Zara’s autistic,’ she added, hurriedly, glancing vaguely behind her. ‘She’ll be all right when she gets used to being here. She takes time to adjust.’

She stopped and exhaled, and then smiled warmly. ‘Hello, Trisha, it’s been a long time,’ and kissed her cheek.

‘Hello Lu, I suppose it has. Well, we have plenty of time to catch up. I know it’s not very warm, but would you like to sit in the garden? It’s a bit stuffy in the house, and I’m sure you’ll appreciate the fresh air after the journey. I’ll get the tea things while we wait for Zara.’

She went with Zak to dust off some old wooden deckchairs.

‘Blimey, Trish’s looking a bit worn,’ said Jamie as soon as they were out of sight. He took a long look around him at the damp trees and grass. ‘And living in a rainy valley can’t be healthy, either. She looks a bit rusty, doesn’t she? And she’s got a bit of a cough.’

‘Hmm, has she?’ replied Lucinda in a tired voice. ‘Look, Jamie, I think we should only stay the night. Zara needs to be settled before she starts school on Monday, and there’s only the weekend. You know what she’s like when she isn’t settled.’

Jamie looked resigned. ‘Yeah, OK.’

‘I’m sorry, Jamie. I know you were looking forward to a few days off, but it can’t be helped.’

Seeing Zak coming out with a full tray, Jamie went to help.

‘Zara’s eighteen now, isn’t she?’

The conversation wasn’t flowing. Lucinda seemed uncharacteristically nervous, and occupied with worrying about Zara, and after a few attempts to get Zak to speak in more than monosyllables, Jamie had given up and contented himself with listening to Lucinda’s familiar tales of the incompetence and ignorance exhibited by the social services and by Zara’s special school.

‘Yes. It’s a difficult thing for her, leaving school. She’s doing well.’

The move from London to Penzance had been her idea, and was supposed to be for Zara’s sake. Jamie didn’t think it had worked that well but he himself was happy anywhere, and he contented himself with the thought that at least Zara kept them both occupied.

Lucinda had made another trip to the car, and this time she had been successful. Zara approached Zak and Patrissia.

‘Hello. Sorry to be a nuisance. I’m a bit slow, I’m afraid.’ Her voice was clear and confident, which Zak wasn’t expecting. He studied her closely: she seemed perfectly normal except for a gaze that was particularly direct and which he found slightly disturbing.

‘Lucinda says you’re quite mad, Patrissia.’

‘Does she indeed, Zara? And what do *you* think?’

Zara compressed her lips and angled her head as if sniffing the air. ‘No, I don’t think so. But I think you like people to think so.’

‘Ah,’ said Patrissia, smiling. ‘And what about Zak?’

Zara swivelled her head to where Zak was sitting slightly apart from the others, staring into the pond.

‘No.’

They waited for her to continue, but she stayed with her eyes on Zak. ‘He’s like me, he likes being alone too.’

Later in the afternoon, Patrissia took Jamie and Zara to the cove where they had buried Johnny the month before. It seemed like years. Without Lucinda and Zak overseeing them, they had relaxed. Even Zara wore a rare smile as they skirted the rocks scattered below the cliff.

‘Careful, Zara, the rocks are slippery.’

‘Yes, I know. Lucinda makes sure I know about everything that she thinks might scratch me. She fusses too much.’

Jamie nodded. ‘She’s doing her best, sweetheart.’

‘Yes, but she fusses too much. I’m not six any more.’

‘Hmm, I’ll speak to her, darling.’

‘No, you won’t. You’re scared of her.’

Jamie reddened. ‘I wouldn’t say that...’

Zara interrupted him. ‘Yes you are. She always gets what she wants, and you always let her.’

Patrissia smiled brightly. ‘Tell me, Zara, do you think you’d like to stay here for a few days without Lucinda? Would you like that?’

Zara looked into her eyes. ‘All right.’

A look of relief flashed across Lucinda’s face when they told her the plan. She made half-hearted objections, but when Patrissia said she would make sure that Zara was back in plenty of time for school, she capitulated, and the next day she left for Penzance early with Zak, who wanted to visit the big DIY stores outside the city. Jamie stayed to take care of Zara.

‘Why do we bother trying to change things when we know that we can’t change them?’

Zara, Patrissia, and Jamie were playing Truth or Dare, one of Zara’s favourite games.

‘That’s what people do, Zara. They think they know better than Nature what’s best.’

‘There isn’t any Nature. I like being alone, and reading, and taking photographs, but they’re not the same.’

‘Not the same as what? Nature?’

‘The photographs aren’t the same. There’s different things in a photograph. They always look funny. They’re not *right*.’

Patrissia leaned forward. ‘I’m sorry, Zara, I still don’t understand.’ A thought occurred to her. ‘A very famous painter once said that painters only paint what’s inside their heads. Is that what you mean?’

Zara tilted her head. ‘No. I know. Picasso. But that’s silly, there’s nothing in our heads but sloppy old brains. I mean,’ she paused, concentrating, ‘the things we say aren’t there, the stories aren’t there, and the photographs and pictures aren’t there. They’re nowhere. It’s empty. People just don’t *look* properly, do they?’

‘Look where? Inside their heads?’

‘Of course. They keep saying there are things in their heads, but there aren’t. There’s nothing, but they won’t admit it.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘They pretend to see things that they don’t really see. They say things that aren’t true. They say things are interesting when they’re dull. They say things are beautiful when they’re ordinary. They prefer stories. They say I’m clever when I’m not. I’m just *ordinary* and they’re just ordinary, but they get upset if you say so, even though it’s true. They prefer things that aren’t true.’

‘Maybe they’re just trying to be nice to each other,’ Patrissia said coolly.

‘Why?’ Zara frowned. ‘Being nice isn’t very useful, is it? It gets in the way when you want to do things. I have to be nice to other girls at school, but I don’t want to be nice because they don’t do anything. You have to *do* things, don’t you? That’s what’s important. Not being nice.’

Jamie looked at Patrissia and shrugged.

Zara noticed. ‘You’re too nice, daddy, and so is Lucinda, but she’s not as nice as you. She spends a lot of time with me and she gets bored but she won’t say so.’

‘She just needs a rest, darling. We all need a rest sometimes.’

‘Hmm,’ said Zara, nodding. ‘Can we stay here? I don’t want to go home.’

Lucinda cruised to a stop, automatically glancing over her shoulder at the empty back seat. Zak looked across at her.

‘She must be a full-time job.’

Lucinda exhaled slowly. ‘Yes, she is. Jamie’s very good, he’s a tremendous help with her, but there are things she lets only me do.’ She smiled. ‘Let’s go inside and I’ll make some tea.’

‘Ah, tea, that would be nice. Patrissia prefers coffee.’

‘Yes, I know.’ She paused, her voice lowering. ‘I know I shouldn’t ask, but what do you think of Trisha, Zak? Is that short for Zachary?’

‘Zachariah, I’m afraid. What do I think of her?’

‘Yes. She must have told you some of her history. It’s quite lurid, isn’t it? Did she tell you about Domenico?’

‘No. She told me about Johnny, though. He was her tutor at art college, yes? And yours, too?’

Lucinda relaxed, giggling. ‘Yes, and more.’

Zak returned her smile. ‘Of course.’



‘She’s extremely well-off too.’

‘I know. A princess, no less.’

‘Not really, but almost. How do you know? Did she tell you?’

‘Olive told me.’

Zak had already apologised for misleading Lucinda about looking for a job, and now he explained about Olive. He suddenly felt quite different from the way he had just two days before. The thought of the dark cottage in the lonely valley now made him shiver. He had forgotten about everything that had brought him to Cornwall, and had a hard time remembering Olive or Patrissia at all.

That evening, he cooked Lucinda one of the meals he had learned to prepare at the retreat. Lucinda brought out a couple of bottles of wine. Afterwards, they watched an old movie.

Halfway through the film Jamie called to tell Lucinda everything was fine, and she could forget about them for a while. They’d had a pleasant day, and were tired. They’d start back the day after next, as planned. He sent kisses from them both.

Lucinda returned to the sofa where Zak was waiting with another glass of red, and when the movie ended, they went to bed.

Jamie woke the next morning with the sun in his eyes. He felt deathly tired and couldn’t understand why. Dressing slowly, he made his way to the kitchen, where he found a note from Patrissia. He glanced up at the clock. Ten-thirty. The note said that she’d gone shopping with Zara and they’d be back in a few hours.

There was an old ride-on lawnmower in the garage, and Jamie looked it over with interest. He had become much more practical since leaving London, and enjoyed mending things, not always as successfully as he would have liked.

Finishing his inspection, he went out into the cool air and decided to walk to the main road. Maybe there was a pub he could go to for lunch.

Patrissia leaned back from the café table, watching Zara methodically finish her sandwich.

‘Tell me, Zara, what does it feel like to get so much attention? I mean, do you feel special at all?’

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ she sniffed between delicate mouthfuls. ‘I’m normal.’

‘Yes, of course.’ Patrissia laughed. ‘Good for you. But I mean, is it irritating when people treat you differently?’

‘They always treat me the same.’

‘Ah, yes.’

‘They ask me questions all the time, and that can be *wearing*,’ Zara recited, with Lucinda’s familiar inflection. ‘Usually, I don’t answer.’

‘Why not?’

She shrugged. ‘I don’t know what they want. They’re always asking me if I *like* things, like clothes or other things, but they’re just things, aren’t they? There’s not a lot to talk about.’

‘Hmm, I suppose not,’ said Patrissia thoughtfully.

‘I don’t think people know very much.’

‘About what?’

‘About anything. About things, about themselves, about me. People are always saying silly things.’

Patrissia sighed. ‘Well, Zara, I think I agree with you. People have no idea, do they?’ She looked around her at the sunny terrace and the streets filled with cars and people shopping. ‘There isn’t much that *isn’t* silly, is there? What do you think?’

Zara looked startled and began to rock gently on the wicker chair, her expression turning slowly to worry and fear. She began to pick at some hard skin on the palm of her hand.

‘It doesn’t matter, Zara. Forget I asked,’ said Patrissia quickly, but Zara continued to rock, becoming more and more agitated, until she finally exclaimed, ‘It’s all silly! It’s all wrong!’ over and over again.

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## Logos #5

The body on the rock lay bloated blue, green and orange like the sea that lapped around it, a few inches deep. It might have been a walrus except that a torn ragged grey shroud, an old shift or smock, lifted and flapped around it in the sharp cold wind.

The thin watcher planted his stick and stood for many minutes leaning one-legged, lightly, quite still in the misty pre-dawn light, invisible among the dim monochrome trees. He tensed as a shadow arrived beside him, but relaxed again when he recognised his sister's familiar scent. She took his arm, concentrating, staring silently down with him, and he felt her warm weight comforting his chilly flesh as she pressed forward.

It was the third day since they had first seen the body, and each day they had returned to it from the forest. Little changed: the shroud a little more ragged, the flesh a little more pecked, a little more nibbled, a little more dissolved.

Sometimes things appeared on the edge of the world, but the watchers had learned that they would soon disappear again. It happened like that. Each day the watchers had to study the world anew—every dawn brought new scents, new sounds, new feelings, and signalled the loss of some that had become familiar, subtly changing what they knew.

They learned that all things flow: the heat of the day into the silence of the night and the bite of the wind; the warmth of the heart into the terror of pursuit and the chill of exile; a full belly into panting hunger and exhaustion; each sensation sliding or cascading or evanescently or tumultuously into another.

Nothing persisted long. They watched as bird-people that flew alone became flocks, and they watched as flocks disintegrated in the sky. They watched the ground, where food-people abandoned their habitual routes, their paths overgrown. They watched the sky shift from grey to blue to black and red, and the heavens fade into oblivion. They watched the old and the new slowly become each other, and tried to remember how things were, yearning for beginnings and endings where neither were to be found.

It hadn't always been like that. Once upon a time the woman had sung while she walked the paths of her world, had listened to wind-stories

while watching the evening fire and the bright eyes of her lovers, had laughed easily. She had known the world and its dangers and delights, and had rested in the sweetness of its familiarity.

And then, only a vague memory now, in the long days of one summer she had chanced across something unexpected, a marsh, and when she told the men of it they had built her a floating platform and had poled it silently among the water-people for her amusement. The breeze and the sounds had been different there, and the tall reeds had made her feel uncomfortable and nervous, and she wished they had never come there.

This rocky, inhospitable margin gave her the same feeling. The salt winds blew through the weaves of connection that hung between sister and brother, fraying the subtle strands and leaving only the stark cords of the flesh.

She frowned and wondered irritably why her brother was so interested in such a place. It made her scalp itch to see him so absorbed. He had continued to want to return long after she had begun to be afraid, and even though she stayed beside him and tried to see as he did, the salt breeze and ominous swell constantly distracted her. They removed his very presence from her senses and left only a blank unknowing.

Staring beside him at the sea below, cold, cold, and at the body... her skin prickled under the warm furs. She had seen bodies before—it was the women's job to return them to the earth—but she had never felt such damp and bone-chilling cold as she felt now, not even when the ground was frozen and they'd dug out the weighting stones with axes, and scraped moss into the resting place with frozen fingers.

Shivering, the woman leaned back, and lifting her arm from her brother's, turned back into the trees with only a glance and a parting click.

The firs were quiet as she walked, the soft sussurus of the sea barely heard, and the sparse and broken canopy silent and still.

The peace of these trees was different, it made her pause sometimes, and linger, though there was nothing to see. It was not welcoming and there was little to eat, even if you scratched beneath the thick layer of half-rotted needles, but she liked the light, slightly dusty, smell of the forest as she moved slowly along the path, and she stopped often to listen to the earth and silence, and to sniff the air. It was always wise to be circumspect, even, and perhaps especially, when urged by the heart.

Ahead, she saw water glinting through the trees. Walk any path and sooner or later you'll come to water. What else were paths for?

A great grey calm had settled where the man still leaned on his stick, watching the ripples lapping the body as the moving water nudged it.

Some things persisted, even here at the edge: the hunger of the fish and bird people, the wracking of hard rock, the fragility of the world. He let his eyes feel the contours of the loosening flesh: he knew it like he knew his sister's softness, her comfort and warmth, a distraction from the dissolution to come, but equally a reminder. It was always so, that one thought engendered its opposite: he felt that it did not pay to be too curious except in small ways.

His gaze left the swelling corpse and strayed along the rock face beneath his bare feet, seeking a way down. In a different time he might have jumped from the flat place at the waves' edge and swum to the body's flat rock. He was tempted to do that now, to push the body off the rock, to release it—but he was curious how many days it would lie there before it was picked clean or swept away by a storm.

He closed his eyes and inclined his head towards the corpse for a long moment, then lifting his face he inhaled deeply the salty, dusty air as if gauging its danger, then, finally, he turned his back dismissively and followed his sister's scent through the trees.

He felt his father guiding him, working his legs as he walked. He never thought of him as such, never wondered what had become of him, but when he avoided a hidden danger or when he found food in an unknown territory, he gave thanks to him. His father's spirit was a light that glowed and, when needed, a hand that led. His sister, she too was there inside him, another guide, another hand, inseparable.

Slowing and hunching as he approached the clearing, he softened and lightened his tread, becoming almost inaudible, invisible. They had made a sleeping place, and in the three days they had watched they had seen no animals drink there, nor fish disturb the surface, nor birds fly near. There were none today. The peace was of a different kind here.

Skirting the small beach, he approached his sister who was sitting cross-legged against a rock, facing the embers of the fire. She continued chewing thoughtfully as he lay his bag down and sat beside her, his hand falling lightly on her thigh.

Restless, his thoughts returned to the shore. Had the body been that of a woman? The feeling was *woman* but he could not be sure. And where had it come from? No-one could live here. He had never been in such a place before and he felt unsure of himself.

Not like his sister, he thought, glancing at her: she was sanguine wherever she was. Familiar and unfamiliar, old places and new places, she seemed to have no preference, all were the same to her. If there was food, shelter

and peace she was indifferent to the many things that occupied him. She hunted carefully and rarely returned with nothing, and she prepared their camp swiftly and well. Perhaps her mother comforted and advised her as his father did him.

—o0o—

Before they had journeyed to this desolate place, in which a corpse had more life than the forest, they had passed the summer's lazy days and soft unmoving nights by a small lake on the edge of the hills. They had watched animals and birds come to drink and to die at their hands or at the hands of other watchers, they had watched plants flower and fruit and fade, they had watched the days flow and ebb.

And then one evening, sitting close by the fire, after they had eaten and drunk and smoked, and feeling warm and satisfied, they had exchanged a long look.

The look contained many things but most of all it contained a question. Very soon the summer would be over, the days would be cooler and shorter, and the camp beside the lake would be too cold for the winter. Should they renew their wandering or stay and build a winter shelter?

This was new. The people of their tribe had always been wanderers, pausing only when sickness or death intervened. But the brother and sister were no longer with their tribe, and the brother had begun to feel his body becoming older and in need of rest, and he had slowly come to the realisation that he had found the place that could become *his* land, *his* soil: *his* place, that his wandering could end at this lake with the scrubby trees and tough grass.

The sister felt it too. No longer young, at the end of the day she would feel where her flesh was softening, and, sitting, would give her joints more time to get comfortable. She was more careful where she rested, more deliberate in her movements while she settled herself, and now that the heat of the sun lingered barely longer than its light, she was wary of the morning mists that sucked what warmth there was out of overnight bones.

They looked at each other a long time, and knew they were in agreement. There would be one more journey, to the end of the world, and to the end of seeking, and then rest.

They both had already known of the coast and the dead forest that led to it, from tales told by the old men of the tribe. That was when they had still been with their people, many seasons before.

Their tribe were wanderers. From the great lakes and rivers of the sunrise, through the forests and valleys to the plains of the sunset they had moved with the seasons and the wind and the game, staying no longer than it took to rest, even in the places where food was plentiful. They took their share and they moved on, going through the world as shadows, lightly. It had been like that for as long as anyone could remember—and the old men remembered everything, and retold the tales so they were not forgotten.

Wandering was the way of men but the bane of women, who preferred to stay and dream, awake and asleep. The women had no need of tales, not the sister nor any other of them. The sister had dwelt in the forest by the coast many times in her dreams, had set up camp by the pool, had trodden the paths, had sickened from drinking the still water. She had buried a child there, by the rocks where her brother had stood watching the rise and fall of the water, had watched it sicken and fade and die in the camp by the pool, had carried it along the dusty path to the shore and had placed it in a cleft, alone.

She had watched the sea, felt the storms and the wind, cut her hands on the barnacled rocks, bled into the rough grass. She knew how the body on the rock had ended up there, knew who had held it in its last hours, and who had shrouded it.

The women's world was tied to beginnings and ends, births and deaths. That was their domain. The sister's eyes were fixed on the ever-present shadows at the beginning and the end of life, and she knew all things about the dying and the dead. In between birth and death was the playground of the men, a journey to be endured, on a path already known.

The man turned to his sister, uneasy, and lifted his hand to stroke her cheek, watching her.

She was sitting quite still, staring into the canopy on the far side of the small lake, her long black hair unwound and falling to her waist. As his fingers moved softly from her cheek beneath her chin, she tautened her throat and began to hum the song of the warm wind, the song that their wandering tribe sang at the return of summer.

Then she took his hand, and putting it to her breast, gave a long sigh. He understood that they must make the journey to the dead forest: but then they would return and replant themselves and end their wandering.

—o0o—

On the last day in the dead lands, they woke early and struck camp, tying their few possessions into a light bundle that the woman would carry. They walked silently on the path down to the sea, searching for where they had left tracks, and erasing them. They felt the dusty breeze of the

forest become stronger and colder as they approached the seaward edge, and they pulled their furs tighter.

The man left his sister waiting by the last tree, and walked slowly towards the place where he could see the rock. The body had disappeared in the night. There should have been something left, some sign, but there was nothing. He moved along the sharp edge of the land, careful to leave no track, searching the rocks below and the spaces between and around them, but nothing had been disturbed. The sea had taken it: either that, or something that had come from the sea.

Turning at last, he nodded his head as he rejoined his sister in the trees, and they hugged each other. He could feel that she was relieved to have come to this dead place and found only another's death, and that their last journey together was still to come. Kissing her he stepped back. Her eyes were shining.

Avoiding the path, they started on the journey back, stepping softly, four or five body-lengths apart, breathing in the faint dry smells and listening closely, moving along the track at the bidding of their senses.

The woman carried the conversations of the tribe with her, and as she walked she rehearsed the advice and warnings and tales of all its women's journeying, and was content. The tales were not like the men's tales. When her mother walked with her, or a cousin, they shared the small pleasures of an unexpected scent or chance arrangement of leaves: everything was significant and reminded them of something else, and they reminded each other, pointing out and sharing their world.

Unlike the men, who were focused on finding their way through the present, the women interwove memories of other places and other times so that they were barely aware that the ground they trod was a path to another place. There were no paths or trails in their world, only places to be, and they were never alone.

Nevertheless, the woman followed her brother with care and attention through the men's silent, untouchable, world, even though there were times when it was an effort for her to recognise him among the host that accompanied her. He was no more real than the trees and the wind and the path and the endless conversation of which she was an eternal part. Often she did not understand why he went where he went or did what he did, especially when it meant moving on and leaving a place she had made comfortable. She followed, and did what was expected of her, but if he explained his reasons she didn't listen. It wasn't important in the same way that maintaining the conversation was important.

The man gradually became aware that the silence had become lighter and, looking ahead, he saw a brighter sliver of light. They were approaching the forest's edge. He went more slowly, senses alert, his knife sharp in his



hand, and stopping for a moment in a small clearing he let himself enter the other world: his sister was close, and farther away was a small animal, maybe one of the rabbit people, frightened. Nothing else.

He returned and waited for his sister to catch up.

It was still cool when they emerged from the wood, and the man was glad to see the low hills ahead. In a few hours they would be back in the living land, where they would set up camp and live in the unending present once more.

Brother and sister walked all day, taking turns with the pack. The air was cool and still, and the path soft on their feet. They kept to the land except when they felt the presence of others, however faint or far, and especially where there were pools to drink at and places to rest: then they took to the shadow.

The two worlds, the land and the shadow, were not different in kind, and the man had learned to swap between them as he had learned to walk and to eat, and as he walked beside his sister he let his thoughts wander, seeking guidance from both worlds. He wanted to know what would become of them, his sister and himself, but time and again he came to the end of his thoughts having found nothing new. There was no past in the worlds, neither in the living world nor in the shadow world, nor any future.

Many times he found himself remembering when they had abandoned the tribe, he rehearsed their journeys and dangers, he lived again their life and wandering, but there was never resolution, just as the old men said.

—o0o—

They had abandoned the tribe when the oldest of the old men had died. It was the middle of the day, the sun hot overhead, the old man sitting in the shade with the women, talking in his soft old voice, retelling the story of the two worlds, of how the shadow had been born from the land.

The old man was speaking of a time when there was light and there was dark, heat, cold, cries and silence, but no days, no nights, no expectations of changing seasons. A time far back, a time before stories, before the shadow and the land separated, before the land was catalogued, when the old ones moved among the things of the land without thinking *this is that* but thinking only *this*, and then *this* and then *this*; when being and doing were not separated from not-being and not-doing.

The old men remembered that simpler time, but it was not in the past. Just as the women carried the tribe with them, so the old men carried the

land. The land did not change, but eventually its meanings became beyond the capacity of men to recall, and so the shadow was born, and the land itself became only a kind of memory, and living-in-the-land only a kind of skill, and the shadow usurped the minds of the wanderers, and they became still.

That ancient kind of living-in-the-land had been in a child born to one of the women of their tribe. The old women had called the men and they had sat for days watching as it fed and slept and uttered quiet sounds. It never cried or seemed disturbed or uncomfortable, and within days could be left by the fire while its mother foraged. She, too, was not disturbed, but lay with it quietly most of the day apart from the others, which was not the custom: normally the old women would claim a new child and each would pretend to nurse and comfort it, and it would be passed from the oldest to the youngest in that way while the new mother rested.

But this child was not taken into the tribe by the old women, who saw that it would never know them or its mother as other people knew them. They had called the old men of the tribe to sit with them and tell the old stories so that it would be known what they should do with the child. But after all the stories had been told, the men were silent, and the women too. Although the stories spoke of the time before words, the stories were not of those times, and could not guide them.

The sister had gone to the woman and asked to hold the child. It was light and smooth and had clung to her softly as she let it nuzzle and suckle though she had no milk. It seemed to be exploring without the desperate need that others had, at length relaxing and mouthing her breast softly without crying, nestling into her, lying and dozing, apparently content.

The old women looked sadly at each other and whispered that it would never speak, because it did not see the world they saw or hear the sounds they heard.

The sister looked at the child and felt herself melt into it. She wanted its strangeness and difference for herself, she wanted its silent repose. She would speak to her brother.

But the next day the child had gone, and its mother, and the old men were silent when the woman questioned them. Only the oldest of the old men would look her in the eye, and she sat with him through the long morning, and one by one the other women came to sit with him and listen to his stories of the time before words.

And as the sun rose to its height in the sky, the old man died.

The women took him and laid him in the ground, and then the sister went to her brother, and they laid together, and promised each other to return

to the time before words, to look for the mother and the child, and in the morning they were gone from the tribe.

The End

## **A novel by Vonny Thenasten**

Vonny Thenasten is a poet and part-time odd-job man

### **Novels**

*I think* (2009)

*Less Understanding* (2015)

*Beyond Understanding* (2016)

*The Wrong Now* (2019)

*Alexandra's Palace* (2019)

### **Poetry**

*Love and Stuff* (2010)

*If Not Us* (2013)

### **Other**

*Yet more words about silence* (2019)