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Fantastical journeys : an investigation of magical realist travel fiction, including Eithe's Way, a magical realist novel and Fantastical journeys: a fusion form, a critical thesis

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FANTASTICAL JOURNEYS:
AN INVESTIGATION OF MAGICAL
REALIST TRAVEL FICTION

Including Eithe's Way, a magical realist novel

and

Fantastical Journeys: a Fusion Form, a critical thesis

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Fantastical Journeys: Abstract

Magical realism is a mode of literature that does not fit easily in any one genre. In contrast, travel fiction has existed for so long that it has evolved into a straggling, cross-genre narrative form.

Nevertheless, when coupled together, magical realist and travel fiction narratives share in common a number of features that allow the resulting text to traverse, create and challenge notions of space, territory and borders. I theorise that a number of key authors have already harnessed these features to criticise and deconstruct dominant hegemonic ideologies, including those of class, gender inequality and racial constructs.

This thesis is an examination and discussion of how the two forms intertwine and complement each other, and how the features and characteristics encountered in one form augment and inform the other. I also posit clear examples of the phenomenon of intermingling in established texts.

This thesis includes an in-depth discussion of key magical realist travel texts and the production of a new novel. The critical essay stretches to 27,000 words.

The novel, a 71,000 word work, is written with these concerns as a central feature. It incorporates travel fiction and magical realist genres in an attempt to update and re-deploy the form in a contemporary setting.

The process of creating both texts necessitated a great deal of background reading from primary and critical sources.

My analysis of source texts and critical texts led to the conclusion that my initial theory was correct. Select examples of travel and magical realist literature employ narrative features to reinforce challenges to the established status-quo.

However, the thesis further argues the two forms are interrelated in other ways, containing contradictory elements, a preoccupation with place and identity and the deconstruction and re-creation of myth. These features are also examined and discussed.

Analytical reading and the writing of a related novel indicate that the use of magical realism and travel fiction results in a dynamic and effective challenge to the construction of oppressive societal norms.

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Eithe's Way

A Novel

Chapter 1 – Through the Window

The dress hung from the top of the door. It was off-white and smelled musty. She touched it with one finger. The pressure of old silk screamed against her hypersensitive skin. Her head throbbed and her tongue felt toxic. The bed covers were awry. Without trying, she could close her eyes and imagine Joe-of-half-hour-ago slip from the mattress, move into the bathroom and open the cabinet. She could hear him clean his teeth, with little retching sounds as the brush hit his soft palate, and then the gurgle and spit of mouthwash.

Where was he?

She brought the hanger down, her hand trembling, and posed in front of the full-length mirror, the dress brought up to her chin. She stood in stasis until a shudder riddled her bones. The dress hit the carpet. She wrenched open the drawers, scrabbled through the wardrobe for the carry case and blindly shoved handfuls of underwear into it. She stopped to look up and listen for an instant.

A key slid into the lock. She heard the bitings grind against the pins. Each click of metal was a hammer on an anvil. Her head turned toward the sound and fear sliced through the nausea, bright and shining and as sharp as a needle.

The sash window above the dresser was open. She grabbed the case, stopping only to snatch up her driver's license and passport, clambered up on to the polished wood, put her leg over the window sill and squeezed through. She was tall, so it was a tight fit, and she fell onto the fire escape in a tangle of gangling limbs. She picked herself up and did a stupid down-the-stairs tiptoeing run to the ground. Her feet skittered on the slimy concrete of the back alley, and she pushed her way out of the forest of recycling bins and fled.

Chapter 2 – The List

Detective Inspector Keane was not happy. She stood by her desk, her knuckles pressing the plastic as though she was imprinting her territory.

‘Don’t see why I have to be co-opted. Not my specialty. Don’t know a thing about finance. Can’t some toss-bucket from upstairs do it?’ she said, gruffly.

‘No,’ said the Superintendent. ‘It’s orders from higher-up. You’re being re-assigned. I know it’s not a great time for you, but everyone’s feeling the pinch. We all have to muck in.’

‘This isn’t the way of things,’ said Keane. ‘Too fast. Something’s not right.’

‘Think of it as a sideways promotion,’ the Superintendent made a one-shoulder shrug. ‘Oh, and here.’ He passed her an envelope. ‘A golden handshake, I’d imagine.’

Keane waited until he left before she tore open the gummed flap. There was a piece of paper inside. She pulled it out and unfolded it. It read:

Joshua, Dale High, year 11. Football, rugby. Walks to school.

Daniel, Everpool Controlled Primary, year 4. Choir, chess. School bus catchment area. Departs 8.15 pm from Stanley Street.

The list continued for another thirty lines. Keane’s usually florid face flushed a deeper shade of red. There was no name at the bottom of the letter, only a single sentence:

We will be in touch.

Chapter 3 – Stranger in the Station

Eithe's half-empty drag-along case bounced and clattered as it hit the lines between the tiles. Euston Station was choked. Some people smelled of body odour and bad breath laced with hunger. She followed the surge as it swept her past turnstiles and timetables, and down a long corridor where she collided with a man. It was like slamming into a tree-trunk.

'Ouch,' she said.

'Excuse me,' said the body. His voice was turned off and utterly distracted. The rest of the crowd broke around them like surf as, for a moment, curiosity overrode her panic. She followed his gaze. It bored through the glass which protected a dead LCD billboard. His reflection was clear on the blank surface. Little prickles of unease slid through her skin.

On the surrounding screens, duplicate shining Cartier watches faded to reveal glistening, perfect burgers. She looked back at the man. Her first thought was that maybe he was homeless, except that his suit, ruckled at the ankles and wrists, was designer. She waved an experimental hand past his gaze.

'Excuse me,' he said. It was a reflex, something said a dozen times an hour to the pedestrians bouncing off his bulk.

'Sir, why are you just standing there? Don't you need to get somewhere?' The seconds ticked by. 'What are you looking at?'

His smile spread, thickened and lengthened like a feeding leech. Around them, the impossibly beautiful Burger King buns radiated a chilly, digital glow. Eithe saw what was wrong. Her stomach tightened and she felt something cold swim down her spine, because the man staring out of the glass screen was not smiling.

She asked, 'Is it a trick?'

'No,' said the man staring into the mirror.

'How is it happening?'

She heard strain in her voice because her refuge was the rational, and there was nothing rational about a reflection which would not obey physics. Maybe there was something wrong with the screen. Perhaps it was glitching. Her fingertips met in the glass, and his reflection turned to look at her. His stare was molten and black.

'Why?'

‘Part of me,’ said the man. The muscles of his jaw bunched and slackened. ‘It’s gone.’

She jogged his arm. ‘How are you doing this?’

He did not look away from the screen. She reached up and took his head in her hands. They were almost of a height, and he was weak and wilting from days without sleep or food. It felt strange to be so close to a man who was not Joe. His cheeks were bristled and his skin felt damp and unhealthy, as though he had a cold fever. Gently, she eased his face from the window, cupping her fingers to funnel his gaze. He resisted at first, but then he broke contact and his pupils latched on to hers.

‘There,’ she said. Around them, the crowd parted and fused back together. She took her hands away.

‘I’m Eithe,’ she said.

‘I don’t know my name. I think I lost it. I leaned too far in and I dropped it.’

The staring man frowned until a thick line pushed into the skin between his brows, deep, like a knife wound. Impossibly, in the curve of his cornea and the dark of his iris, she saw nothing, not her own face, no glint of light, nothing, except a gaping vacuum.

‘I’m going to have to go now,’ she said, suddenly afraid again. ‘I’m sorry. I don’t know how to help you.’ As she turned and walked away, she didn’t notice the reflection leave the glass, or that the man stared into blankness.

She was about ten yards into the forecourt when there was a sound of heavy cloth hitting the floor. On reflex, she looked over her shoulder. The man lay in a heap before the indifferent screen. Eithe took a step back, then away, and then she hovered, inadequate, uncertain, paralysed by her lack of competence. She didn’t know if she should put something under his head, take his pulse or if she would just get in the way. An attendant in a high visibility jacket arrived and knelt by the sprawled casualty. A clump of people gathered and, abashed, she sloped off.

The alien reflection followed her down the corridor, distorting in the plastic cases of the rolling billboard advertisements, dappled by the plastic of a water bottle held by a toddler, stretched into thin strips by the metal handrail. She grasped her case and hurried on. His feet followed the bottom of hers, step for step, but she didn’t notice. In the main terminal, she paused and stared up at the Departures board. She looked for a very long time.

The first notes of *Ten Green Bottles* played, and she went into her bag, shuffling through underwear and hastily packed toiletries until her hand closed around her phone.

The tip of her forefinger wavered over the button. She bit her lip. The little tune played out and started again. She stood there, tiny beneath a night held high by the steel struts of the arching roof, one undecided speck in a spill and spin of people who knew exactly where they wanted to go.

Eventually, he gave up, but a little chirrup prompted her to check her texts.

Come back to me.

She put the phone away and settled down on a waiting room chair, her coat pulled up to her chin, her arms hard around the case on her lap, and fell into a fitful sleep. Strange eyes watched her through windows, belt buckles, coins and a thin sheen of spilled water guarded by a yellow easel and its WARNING letters.

Her dreams were vivid.

Once, she woke and a face that wasn't hers looked back at her from the curved Perspex of a newspaper stand and said, 'I lost the way. Do you know where it is?', but she knew it couldn't be real and she fell back into her turbulent visions. With Joe's threats still crackling in her brain, she dreamed about death - about how the bowels and bladder relaxed and evacuated, about the smells, the gurgling and the rigor mortis.

Nobody noticed her, until a hand landed on her shoulder. She jolted awake.

'Are you all right?' The policeman looked closely at Eithe, who fidgeted.

She thought about all of the other things the man must see on his beat, drunken fights with teeth rolling across the pavement, women with torn clothes and faces, kids puking on the street, mad, cunning scrappers who clawed and spat to pass on their hepatitis, neighbours burning each other's sheds down over fencing disputes, puddles of blood and piss and cold, stiff, sad people lying blue and silent in the gutter. Somehow, all of it seemed bigger and harder than her ill-defined fear and the twisting in her guts.

'I'll be all right,' she said, and he left. Her teeth were furry. She paid a pound to use a toilet cubicle, brought out a toothbrush and started to tidy herself up under the sick violet light. She was building a fine white lather when she looked up at the mirror. It should have been her own self, a face framed by curling hair, her skin an indifferent taupe, her wide lips slightly chapped from her nervous habit of sucking on them. But that wasn't who she saw.

She recognised him at once.

Her teeth clenched hard on the brush and her face shut down with shock. A little foam leaked from her mouth.

‘Don’t scream,’ he said.

Chapter 4 – The Mess Left Behind

The flat was a morass of ash and empty wrappers because Joe was too miserable and too superstitious to clean up. He had been vegetarian for years. Now burger boxes littered every surface, and greasy kebab papers lay on the floor. He hated them as relics of his failure, but perhaps if the mess stayed, she would have to come back and clean for him.

He drank because it made the anger burn. Anger was simple.

He smoked because the government wouldn't let him do it in the pub any more, and he hated politicians, with their hypocrisy and their back-room business buddies and their publically funded duck houses and moats.

He watched the blue coils twist toward the stained ceiling.

They'd shared the flat for years, ever since they graduated. He hadn't been able to find a job, or pay off his university debt, and they wouldn't have been offered a mortgage. He was going to become a social worker, and he applied for posts up and down the country, but he was one of hundreds. With so little experience and so many veteran workers redundant, he never even went to interview. So he remained a Jobseeker, attended his climate change awareness meetings, and the Young Socialists and his direct action group, where they had to pull the batteries out of their phones in case the authorities accessed them remotely and listened in. So he and Eithe stayed in the same grotty flat and dreamed of a better future. But the strange, solemn little girl from the other side of the fence was gone. His wife-to-be was gone and she'd taken his future with her.

She had no money and only the clothes she ran away with, second hand threads that he'd picked for her from Scope and Oxfam while she was at work. He thought about what lay beneath her clothes. He thought about a stranger touching her. The stranger might have used his fingers. Joe would break them, one by one. The stranger might have kissed her. Joe would take his cigarette lighter and burn those lips to weeping scabs. The stranger might have fucked her.

Joe's breath streaked grey from between his teeth. He didn't like to think about another man's penis near his woman. He didn't want to think about having to hold it to cut it off, about how the soft flesh would flop, twitch and retract.

He got up and stalked around the room. His limbs quivered with nicotine and hate and, to his horror, a trickle of arousal. He sat down and masturbated desperately into a dirty tissue. At the climax, he remembered the first time they lay together, virgins unlocked, and he recalled the way she trembled with what he mistook for desire.

He mopped up and felt pathetic.

Eithe was quiet, she did not impose. She had no mass, she presented no resistance to the wind. She was fragile, and the sun shone through her. She made no marks. She was the sort to die quietly.

He lit another cigarette. The ember flared orange as he breathed in. He drew the duvet around him like a meaty cocoon.

His nightmares were ghastly. Joe was sitting at his mother's kitchen table with a copy of the Communist Manifesto. Everything in the room was big; the tablecloth was a blue field, the flaws on the cupboard doors distorted into toothy mouths and the shining knobs on the door and drawers winked like eyes. He was wary and kept the cover out of view, but he had to carry on reading, with that strange dream-compulsion which makes people leap out of towers or count worthless coins over and over and over.

He read the sentences but couldn't remember them, because dream books don't hold written words – though he knew it was the Communist Manifesto because of the dream prescience that convinced him that Mr King would come bursting through the door.

His belly lurched as the behemoth crashed into the room, filling it from corner to corner with broken veins, bristling nasal hairs and barely-dammed anger.

A massive hand scooped down and pulled up the book. Joe reached for it with feeble fingers, but he was too weak. Mr King thrust him aside with one hand, the other clutched around the neck of a black bin bag. Inside, more of Joe's books struggled, the corners piercing the plastic, their spines arching against their prison, and they screamed. It was the sound of tearing paper and grief.

Joe ran after him, but the floor turned into ash so fine his feet sank into it, and he couldn't follow. When Mr King slammed the front door, which was suddenly as thick as the iron-studded oak of a castle, Joe could hear him laughing, an opulent, rolling, booming sound. It didn't cover the crying of the pages.

Chapter 5 – A Bargain

‘And don’t run,’ said the man from the mirror. Eithe took a step back. The toothbrush dropped out of her jaw and landed in the bowl. She retired to the nearest toilet, and sat there, head in hands. ‘What’s your name?’ he said.

‘Hahaha.’ Her laugh was horrifyingly flat.

‘Tell me.’

‘Eithe,’ she said.

‘Evie,’ he said, in a voice like a wet finger sliding on glass.

‘Eithe.’

‘Aofie,’ he tried again.

‘It’s Ee-thee. Go away!’ she shouted, loud enough for the people in the next cubicles to hear. Maybe the absurdity of the situation unwound her nerves, or perhaps she’d used up her reserve of emotion, because she quieted down. The fingers in her hair quaked. ‘You’re the Mirror Staring Man,’ she said.

‘You ran into me,’ he said, ‘the flesh part of me.’

‘Then what are you?’

‘The mind part, I think.’

Her nostrils flared.

‘You haven’t gone mad,’ he said.

Then she surprised him by laughing. ‘The voice in my head is telling me I’m sane.’

‘You are,’ said the Mirror Staring Man, desperately.

‘Perhaps I’m mad, although I can’t be mad because mad people don’t think they’re mad, so maybe I’m not,’ she said. She held on to the idea tight, curling around it, afraid that it would trickle away like sand in a clenched hand. ‘I can’t deal with this right now,’ she said. ‘I was supposed to get married next week. I had a dress, and a maid of honour, and a hen do with people from work who I didn’t really know, which I shouldn’t have gone on, and I had a husband-to-be. Now I don’t know what to do. I haven’t got anyone to go to, or anywhere to go. I’m alone. I’ve never been alone, and now I am.’

The Mirror Staring Man said, ‘Don’t tell anyone you see me. They will lock you up.’

‘What are you?’ she said, very quietly.

‘I’m stuck.’

‘And I’m stranded,’ she said.

‘Then we have something in common.’

‘Of course we do,’ she said. ‘I invented you because I’m scared and lonely, and I don’t have any friends.’

‘No you didn’t,’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

‘Prove it,’ said Eithe.

‘You need a place to stay,’ he said. He sounded more confident now they were negotiating. This seemed to be familiar territory for him.

‘Yes,’ said Eithe.

‘Then you can stay in my flat. There’s no one there at the moment. I promise you’ll be safe.’

‘This is stupid,’ said Eithe.

‘Sleeping in a train station on your own is stupid,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. Eithe thought about the hard chairs and her vulnerability, about the grimy feeling beneath her unwashed clothes, about the indifference of the passengers, and then she nodded.

The Mirror Staring Man was with her on the Tube train, where the rails sparked and screamed as though they were in pain. He looked as bored as every other commuter at the roll-call of stations. They were strange names like Tooting Bec, Goodge and Morden. She saw him in every bright surface as they exited from London Bridge station into the South Bank, and in the puddles, and in the windows on the way to his high rise.

Someone had sprayed the word ‘TWAT’ across the intercom, and someone else with a slightly more refined hand had added: ‘Wit of a banker’ below the penthouse buzzer.

‘It’s a spoonerism,’ the Mirror Staring Man sighed. ‘Written by someone with too much time on their hands.’

He told her the combination for the door, and waited with her as the lift ascended.

The flat on the top floor was dark and dusty, but it was large for somewhere near the centre of the city. Eithe’s feet sank into the carpet. Expensive prints hung on the walls – photographs of Jeff Koons’ soulless vacuum cleaners and a pastiche of Warhol’s endless, pointless self-replication, except that it was the Mirror Staring Man looking out of the canvas, blodged with primaries and neons. There were also framed photographs of him shaking hands with a lot of different men. She didn’t recognise any of them, although they were wearing very nice suits and they all looked quite smug. There was a lot of chrome and a huge, shatterproof pane of glass looking out over the London lights. In the middle distance, the Thames flowed. She could see the Eye glaring back at her, white and blank as a cataract.

‘I am real,’ said the Mirror Staring Man from the window. Little points of light shone through him. ‘This is my home.’

Eithe looked around. It was not very homely. The prints were alienating and there were no ornaments. It looked like a page from a Habitat catalogue. ‘Make yourself some food, if you can find any,’ he said.

There were flax seed and nori crackers in the cupboard and a jar of organic pasta sauce. Eithe ate it out of its container, perched on a leather sofa in front of a television that was big enough to crush a grown human. The Mirror Staring Man looked out of the screen. ‘It’s a Super Hi-Vision eight-k TV, developed by NHK.’ He sounded proprietorial. ‘Top of the range. Cutting edge. What do you think?’

Eithe shrugged.

‘For fuck’s sake,’ he said, affronted. ‘Can’t you see how much it cost?’

‘But you can’t watch it,’ she pointed out. ‘You’re in it.’ He scowled. ‘Why don’t you use your body?’ said Eithe, her mouth full of crunch and red slime.

‘None of your business,’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

Eithe sucked the cracker crumbs from her lips and stuck her finger into the jar to scrape at the last of her sauce. She licked it with relish.

‘Where are you from?’ he said.

‘From up north.’

‘What do you do?’

‘Breathe, eat, sleep,’ said Eithe.

The Mirror Staring Man regarded her with cool distaste.

‘I meant for a job. It can’t be anything too complicated.’

‘I do numbers,’ she said. ‘I saw you fall.’

‘Yes,’ he said. He seemed taken aback by her sudden interest, as though he hadn’t expected her to show concern.

‘Did it hurt?’

‘No. I’m further away from it.’

There was something unaccountably sad about the unfeeling way he spoke about his own body, and she shied away from the subject.

‘Is it strange, being in the television? Do you feel famous?’

‘I feel flat.’

She laughed, and the stretch of her jaw turned into a yawn, the pink skin at the back of her throat spasming.

‘You need a proper rest. Go to sleep, and we’ll talk about it in the morning.’

Eithe found the master bedroom. The mattress was as high as her hip and copies of the Wall Street Journal and Business lay on the bedside table. The bed linen was purple Egyptian cotton.

‘Swanky,’ she said, and went into the bathroom. Eithe, unfamiliar with luxury, felt the towels, fascinated by their softness, and ran the hot water right to the top of the bath. Every lotion and bath oil she could find went in, until the surface of the water was thick with botanicals, green tea essence and jojoba.

‘Wait,’ she said, her fingers playing with the wool of her tatty jumper. ‘You can see me out of every reflection?’

‘Yes,’ he said, from the mirror.

‘Can’t you shut your eyes? I’m going to strip off.’

The Mirror Staring Man didn’t reply, but she was already pulling at the zip of her jeans. Her briefs and bra hit the mat and there was a slosh as she stepped into the bath. ‘It’s okay now,’ she said, submerged up to her neck in bubbles. Then a thought hit her. ‘You can look out of the loo as well,’ she said.

‘Eithe, I’m not really concerned about your, er, undercarriage,’ he said.

‘You can though, can’t you?’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘but the last thing I want to do is look up your—’

‘We’ll have to work out a system,’ she said. ‘Maybe I can turn the light off before I sit down.’

‘I’ll close my eyes,’ he said, reluctantly. Eithe didn’t trust him. She even took off the cheap little ring that cinched her finger because the paste gemstones winked and shone. She wrapped herself in a towel and padded back to the bed. She slipped beneath the hand-stitched quilt and closed her eyes. The Mirror Staring Man regarded her dispassionately.

She muttered and moved, her limbs twitching as she was ridden by an unpleasant dream. The Mirror Staring Man didn’t wake her. It was not his job to comfort this strange girl, who seemed too young to be living in her own body.

A white woman lay on a bed soaked with sweat and waters from her womb. Her lips were hauled tight, but a scream was building behind them, pulled into the open by the tearing of her flesh. Then she was in a white room on top of a white sheet, which rapidly turned pink. The place smelled of thin soup, antiseptic and laundry. Wheelchairs, gurneys, visitors, patients and staff passed in a blur of skin and white coats.

The woman opened her mouth and the pain spilling out of it filled the world.

Eithe shot bolt upright and called for help, but only a croak escaped. For a second, she sat silent, her heart beating so fast it hurt. Her eyes adjusted to the gloom. It was still night-time. Outside, weighty yellow clouds recycled the city glow. The window blind sliced the diffuse glow and fade of light pollution into tiger-stripes.

She wanted to knock on her dad's door and shiveringly curl up at the foot of the futon. She wanted to cuddle a night-time teddy. She wanted her mother. But that was impossible, so she closed her eyes and pretended that she wasn't afraid.

In the morning, she was face down with the covers kicked off. There were bruises in the region of her kidneys, but if the Mirror Staring Man saw them, he said nothing.

She showered with the shower curtain closed, oblivious to the reflection in each tiny droplet. Breakfast was coffee, taken strong with sugar and no milk. There was no kettle, and the Mirror Staring Man grudgingly explained how to use the complicated espresso machine.

'It's not FairTrade,' said Eithe.

'Who gives a damn,' said the Mirror Staring Man. It was not a question.

If Eithe had been Joe, she would have shouted, 'Me and the barefoot pickers!' but she wasn't, so she didn't.

'It's high-grade Arabica and it'll wake you up. Get it down you.'

The fridge and the cunningly seamless cupboards were bare, so the coffee lay like a black lake in her empty stomach. 'If I was mad,' said Eithe into the mug, 'would I be able to tell the difference between my dreams and reality?'

'If you are mad, then it is a shared nightmare,' said the Mirror Staring Man from the dregs. 'Now, about our enterprise. I would like you to search my apartment. There might be a clue somewhere. Maybe we'll find out who I am. Start in the folders over there. Look for bills, letters, anything that will tell us who I am and where I've been.'

'I'm not sure,' said Eithe.

'What else do you have to do? Where else can you go?'

Eithe's mouth moved into a straight line. She thought about her own flat, which was signed in her fiancé's name, and about her abandoned job in accounts. Her money was gone. 'Okay,' she said.

She went through drawers and cabinets, and though she found a lot of documents, they were all financial and told her nothing except that he was good at his job. The

numbers that fed into his personal account ran in smooth curving lines, bulging with each bonus. They did not correlate with the diminishing business numbers, which dropped precipitously about five years into the record.

The only thing she discovered that looked personal, and therefore out of place, was a small box beneath the bed. It was a biscuit tin, and the lid was wedged on tight. She struggled to open it with her quick-bitten fingers, and when she did, the things inside exploded onto the quilt.

There were football cards featuring Beckham, Owen and Rooney, ticket stubs for rock gigs – Oasis, The Gorillaz and Muse, Glastonbury Festival, the Big Chill, a receipt for a visit to Thorpe park, a tiny toy racing car, a photograph of a little boy standing on sand clutching a plastic stegosaurus, and, most tragically of all, a green plush corythosaurus called Denver, its head hanging from a loose neck, the stuffing squeezed by the cuddling hands of a young child. There was also a soft-cover diary, stained and battered.

‘Wow, you really liked dinosaurs,’ said Eithe. There was no response. ‘This is all old,’ she continued, sorting through. ‘The stubs are dated from years ago.’

‘Rubbish,’ said the Mirror Staring Man, his words coming metallic from the stippled lid. ‘All of it.’

‘Wait a moment,’ said Eithe. ‘There’s this. It doesn’t look like the rest.’ She opened the diary. On the first page, someone had glued a small, rainbow striped card. ‘It isn’t a journal. It’s a scrapbook. This is a place in Montmartre,’ said Eithe. Her head snapped round as her phone rang. She froze.

‘Do you want to get that?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘It’s a weird ringtone. I didn’t know you could still get them in polyphonic. Is it a retro statement?’

Eithe looked at him with incomprehension.

‘Forget it.’

She brought the ancient handset out.

‘God, that’s huge,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘You could throw it in the swimming pool and force kids in pyjamas to jump in after it for personal survival training. Except they wouldn’t be able to lift it so they’d probably drown.’ The happy little tune shrilled like tinnitus. The rush and current of her blood synchronised with the sound. ‘Go on,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘It might be important.’ Her hands were unsteady as she accepted the call and sat, ear to ear, with the Mirror Staring Man.

‘Eithe,’ said Joe, his voice raw and ragged with passion. ‘Eithe, where are you? I’ve been out looking for you for two days.’

‘Away.’

‘Who did you go out with? Was it the girl from work?’

‘Maybe.’

‘Did you drink? Are you with another man?’

‘Perhaps.’

‘Who is he?’

‘I don’t know.’

The timbre of Joe’s voice shifted to a low growl.

‘Did he rape you?’

‘What?’ said Eithe.

‘If it was rape, then it wasn’t your fault. I’ll forgive you. Did you say no?’

Eithe cut the call.

She leaned against the bed and sucked in a shuddering breath.

The phone rang again.

‘The signal went,’ said Joe. ‘Are you all right? What happened?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Tell me where you are and I’ll come and get you.’

‘I’m not sure—’

There was a very long pause.

Eithe recognised the tone, because she’d heard it before. The voice wanted to reach through the phone, clamp its hand around her neck and crush her windpipe.

‘You’re not sure?’ he said.

‘Please, Joe—’

‘You went out, against my wishes, and you’re not sure if you want to come back?’

‘But—’

The phone went dead and Eithe let it go. It dropped with a dull thump and lay in the carpet like a great black beetle. ‘He sounds lovely,’ said the Mirror Staring Man, tinny through the mouthpiece. Eithe was too shaken to reply. The black beetle bucked on the floor as a text message arrived. Eithe opened it.

I am coming for you.

She shut it again. She sat on the carpet, unmoving, her arms wrapped around her long legs. She felt small and scared. 'You're not much of a saviour,' said the Mirror Staring Man. 'Look at you.'

'He'll find me,' she said. 'Oh, he'll find me. I had two things in the world I was sure about, and one of them was him.'

'So?'

'He wants me back.'

'So? Do you just do whatever anyone tells you?'

She gnawed on a knuckle.

'You do, don't you?' said the Mirror Staring Man.

'Maybe, perhaps. I don't know.'

'Eithe, I need you to go to the address on the card. Hurry,' said the Mirror Staring Man. 'I don't have the luxury of time. Look, Eithe, I'll pay your expenses. All of them. You can get some nice clothes. Okay, not clothes then,' he backtracked when he saw her expression. 'If clothes aren't your thing. What is your thing? I can help you buy it.'

Her eyes narrowed with suspicion, but he continued.

'He stole your money,' he said. 'He's using it to get you. And he didn't think twice. I'm offering you an escape. You take me where I want to go and I'll pay your expenses.'

She chewed it over. 'I'm not sure what I want.'

'Well this will give you time before you have to decide.'

'I've never been abroad before.'

'Then he won't think to follow you there. Do it.'

'Okay,' she said. 'Okay, I'll go.'

'Good. I'll give you my passwords. You can make the transfer online. There's a computer in the other room. And while you're at it, email the hostel and book a bed.'

They couldn't shake on the agreement, but later, in the living room she put her hands flat on the shiny black coffee table and he matched them, palm to palm.

Chapter 6 – Hidden Histories

Joe dreamed. He was small and hid at the bottom of the garden, behind the compost heap with its smell of rot and ripeness, where the woodlice and snails slept in last year's leaf litter. He was afraid, because he'd done something wrong, and Mr King was looking for him. He didn't know what the wrong thing was, although it could be anything from a stolen Penguin biscuit to an impertinent word.

As he crouched, his skin tacky at the armpit and crotch, he heard someone say, 'Who are you?'

Little brown fingers latched on to the slats of the trellis fence. Above them was a face, dark and freckled with a spurting corona of hair. She was a fairy from the dirt, a mud-sprite.

'Hello,' he said.

'Are you new here?'

'I'm seven,' he said. 'So I'm not really new.'

She told him her name. It was silly and ethereal, and it fit her habit of fading into the foreground. Then he told her his name, and because she was four and solemn, she didn't laugh like the children in the junior class, and he knew he'd found a friend. 'Who's your favourite turtle?' he asked.

'What?'

'Who's your favourite turtle? I liked Donatello best because he was brainy but now I think I prefer Leonardo. He's the leader. He has to tell people what to do and do the right thing. Don't you ever watch the turtles?'

'No,' said the pixie, shyly. 'My dad doesn't like violent cartoons.'

'Well, what's your favourite colour, red, blue, orange or purple?'

The pixie looked at him, bewildered.

'I think purple would be best for you. Let's go and find a pole and that can be your fighting stick.'

'Okay,' she said, and he took her by the hand and pulled her through the fence.

Later, she introduced him to her dad, who was also some kind of shy elf or spirit, who cooked a feast of fairy food – strange stews with spice, coconut and mango, fried fruits and stacked piles of gold discs which scalded his mouth but faded before they hit his stomach. And he stayed and ate strange things until he heard the knock on the door.

‘Don’t open it,’ he begged, but the girl’s dad flitted to the door and started unlatching it. There were sixteen locks so it took a long time, and he pleaded, his bladder pant-wettingly full, but each latch went back, slam, slide, slam, until he knew the door would open and let the monster in.

So he crawled under the table, but a hand found his ankle and hauled him out, and there was Mr King, a giant with a red face and huge teeth, and then came the falling hand, he winced in anticipation of the impact and woke up.

The banging didn’t stop.

He dragged himself out from under the duvet, knees aching with inaction, and answered the knocking knuckles.

Louse was at the door, small and bedraggled, her dreadlocks stale with old rain. Her clothes were a mismatch of home-stitched scraps, charity-shop chic and organic woollen-wear. Unlike Eithe, she wore her second-hand apparel as a statement, customised with appliqued patches bearing the WWF panda, the CND logo, little messages like YOLO (you only live once) and We Are The 99%.

‘What?’ he said.

They’d met at the short-lived Occupy Manchester movement when a policeman stopped to frisk Louse, who was wearing a V for Vendetta mask identical to one that had been used two weeks before by a mugger in Moss Side. Joe had intervened and been arrested for his trouble. After that, the girl had become as stubbornly adherent as her namesake.

‘What are you doing?’ she asked.

‘Waiting.’

‘You’re better off without her,’ she said, after wrinkling her nose at the smell. ‘She was a colossal drip.’

Joe knew that. He’d thought that she would always stay, because she would never be able to make up her mind to leave. Her running shook him to the core.

‘Why are you eating Domino’s?’ asked Louse. ‘They’re full of crap and the salami is probably reformed. Maybe it’s factory farmed.’

‘Go away, Louse,’ he said, but she shook her head.

‘A bunch of us are going on the march tomorrow,’ she said. ‘You’ll come, won’t you?’

Her grey eyes were wide and earnest.

Joe wanted to join the march. He'd been waiting for it all year, planning for it and thinking up slogans, and he'd spent hours putting together the banner. He intended to walk with his people, with the disenfranchised and dispossessed, with the redundant, with the families who lost their houses when the market crashed and with the teachers whose pensions had been stolen.

He wished to show solidarity with the disabled folk whose benefits were cut even though they were missing limbs and needed the extra room for their equipment and a car to carry their food, with the nurses from closing wards, with the social workers crushed by their caseloads. He would have been shoulder to shoulder with the students who were thousands of pounds in debt and would remain so for decades. He was with the real jobseekers, seeking where no jobs could be found – two-and-a-half-million people scrabbling for four-hundred-thousand places.

He wanted to break through the thin blue line, the constituents of which were, as far as he was concerned, quite thick because they would hold ranks and use their riot shields to protect their masters even through the recruitment freeze. He wanted to march against the bankers and businessmen and selfish speculators and the politicians who had sat in their plush studies and central London penthouses and let it go on, who had let the system age and warp like an old wooden sewage pipe because it didn't matter if it broke and haemorrhaged shit through the suburbs and the slums, just so long as it was directing the effluvia away from the grounds of their nice, clean second homes, just so long as the most important flow, the invisible stream of noughts, numbers and hypothetical gold kept pooling in the right places.

But he wanted to find Eithe more; he wanted to see confusion spread over her face. He wanted to pin her down and watch her try to crawl away in ten different directions at once.

'No,' he said, and slammed the door.

He lurched into the lounge, fired up the ancient computer and navigated to Eithe's email inbox. His reflection blurred on the matt screen. When it asked him to enter a password, he paused. Inside, he felt like clockwork, like an algorithm, like tumbling dice, like a ball spinning in a roulette table, unknowable but predetermined.

He opted for: answer the secret question: Who is your favourite artist?

Carefully, he typed out his guess. I--don't--know. He waited for one long, interminable second. Then the computer read: Welcome back, Eithe. His hands shook as

he opened her emails. There was an old message in the first folder from Imai, Gem. It read:

how about a hen nite, girlies? drinkahol and fit man-strippers, yeh?! lol.

‘Got you,’ he said.

Chapter 7 – At the End of the Rainbow

Eithe sat back on the grey Eurostar cushions, closed her eyes and tried to loosen her muscles. The window thrummed and the world went fuzzy as the engine shifted gear.

‘Your card,’ she said. ‘It has a name on it. Casey Jones. Is that you?’

‘No. But it’s not someone else, if that’s what you’re worried about. In my line, I suppose it paid to have an emergency stand-by.’

The Mirror Staring Man sat in Eithe’s seat in the translucent, parallel world held in the glass. She picked at the calloused skin under her bitten nails but he tapped his foot, a movement that jarred her nerves. The train was going fast, but not fast enough. She didn’t want to see the black outside the window - she wanted to go past the speed of dark. Then perhaps she would feel better

A few seats over, a teenage girl pulled out her phone and started playing *Born This Way*. The Mirror Staring Man lapsed into strangulated grumbling. ‘Little gobshites think they can do anything. It’s kids like her who go rioting with fucking shopping trolleys.’

Heads started turning. ‘Please,’ said Eithe. ‘Shush.’

‘You’re just a sack of neuroses, aren’t you? Clueless, ineffectual and dithering.’

Eithe made a neutral noise and closed her eyes. Billions of gallons of salt water sloshed somewhere above the vastness of rock. In the end, the tiredness of a disturbed night and the ebb of adrenaline took Eithe and her head drooped against its rest. Submerged in exhaustion, she did not wake until Paris.

She stepped from the train with a sticky face and a brain full of fluff.

The Gare du Nord, with its confusion of French signage and babble of accents, was a blur to Eithe. The Mirror Staring Man raged and chafed, gesturing from every surface as she meandered from the platform, moving with a kind of slow wonderment. ‘Hurry up,’ he mouthed, but she wasn’t aware of him. The Metro didn’t tell her to ‘mind the gap’, and it didn’t stop before the doors unlocked so she found herself stepping from the moving carriage.

She arrived at Montmartre and emerged into a miasma of fine drizzle, which veneered the shutters and flecked the mopeds leaning on their side stands. The Mirror Staring Man was present in the shop windows as her soles slapped the steep cobbled pavement, but she stared fixedly ahead as though blinkered. By the time she wandered past the edifice of the Sacre Coeur, she was out of breath. Gargoyles goggled down at her and

she would have shivered if it hadn't been for the bird shit that slid down between their ears and took away some of their menace.

Eithe stopped and looked down over Paris, which glittered and smoked under a hazy honey sky. Vertigo stole over her. Her phone jiggled and beeped in her pocket, and she pulled it free, but stood staring out over the metropolis.

A text arrived. It read:

I still love you. I haven't cancelled the wedding.

Eithe's expression was grim.

'Well,' the Mirror Staring Man muttered. 'If money won't make you move, maybe he will.'

Eithe hadn't heard him, but there was some truth to his words. She followed the slope until she came to a busy road where the flow of traffic obeyed no rules that she could see. She paused to look at a poster advertising a museum near the old Moulin Rouge. In the picture, a row of whores stood like a strange choir, corseted and flirting with winks and moues.

'Get a move on. Straight down and left.'

'How does it come so easily to you?' Eithe asked. 'Making your mind up, I mean.'

'I am a man,' he said.

'Seriously.'

'Just get to the hostel.'

'Okay,' she said, and turned away from the obsolete harem.

The hostel nestled in a residential terrace. Someone had painted the front wall with a rainbow. The colours were faded. The door in the indigo stripe was unlocked, admitting Eithe into a warm space with an aroma of fresh laundry and well-travelled living bodies. The waiting receptionist looked elegant and tired. She breathed deeply down her tapered nose. 'Can I help you?' The voice was accented lightly, in the same way that an after-note of her perfume accented the air of the room.

'I emailed about a room. Do you have one available?'

'Name?'

'Eithe.'

'Ah, we do. Was it to be dorm, double or single?'

'Double,' said the Mirror Staring man, and Eithe found herself parroting him.

The receptionist turned to look through the records and Eithe glanced around.

There were soft sofas tucked against the walls. There was a pin-perforated cork board holding pictures of smiling travellers. Eithe shifted her feet on the unvarnished floorboards, which creaked. The building was busy, but it looked battered, as though it was being cared for and repaired by someone without much money. The receptionist flexed her louche fingers on the keyboard.

‘Yes,’ she sighed. ‘We do have a room for you.’

She considered Eithe through her eyelashes, leaned forward and slid a key across the desk. Two exhausted girls walked in from the street. They wilted against each other, their fingers twined together. If one moved, the other would fall.

‘Okay,’ said Eithe.

‘The shower is en-suite. Check-out is at ten o’clock. This is a no smoking establishment. The kitchen is open for breakfast after eight thirty.’

‘Thank you. *Merci*. Um. Thanks.’

‘I’m Juliette. It means youthful.’ Her voice was smoky with irony.

‘I’m Eithe. It was a mistake.’

‘Good to meet you. Now excuse me.’

Eithe found her room and threw the bag onto her bed. The walls were thick, but footsteps filtered through and so did raised voices and the scuffing of furniture on the floor. She looked out of the window.

A sense of hugeness hit her in the space below her breastbone and made her ache. That wasn’t a home sky. It was a French sky. The light that was shining on the wet road was not light that had fallen on her childhood garden, or slid through the windows of her little flat. A ribbon of grey water lay between her and everything she knew.

‘Why didn’t you ask her?’ said the Mirror Staring Man, impatiently.

‘I don’t know,’ said Eithe.

She pulled the blind down and returned to the bed. Her buttocks hit the mattress and her shoulders dipped. She sat still for a while. Then she rubbed her burning eyes, snuffed the snot back up her reddened nose, woke her phone and dialled. ‘Are you calling your boyfriend?’ said the Mirror Staring Man, but she did not respond. A woman’s voice came out of the receiver, concerned and reedy.

‘Eithe?’

‘Gem?’

‘I was wondering how you were. No one knew where you got to. We thought you’d fallen into a ditch or something on the way home.’

‘I’m okay.’

‘Oh good.’ The relief was genuine. ‘The boss was asking when you’ll be back in.’

‘I don’t know when,’ said Eithe. ‘Sorry.’

‘You sound like you’re talking through a colander. Is the reception bad where you are?’

‘I’m in Paris,’ said Eithe, ‘on my own. Sort of.’ She giggled, once, sharply, with the absurdity of it. There was a tinge of hysteria to the sound.

‘All right,’ said Gemma. ‘Will you be coming back?’

‘Maybe,’ said Eithe. ‘Perhaps. I don’t know. Can you just tell them that? Don’t tell them where I am. Please.’

‘Will do,’ said Gemma. ‘Take care, darling. We miss you, babes.’

Eithe let the phone fall away from her ear. She sat and stared at the wall for a while. Her eyes were like dull pennies. The emptiness of her expression was eerie.

‘Hey,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘Hey! Get moving. You aren’t pretty enough to be a statue.’ Eithe switched back on. The process was like an ancient computer booting up. She didn’t respond to his nastiness, and that seemed to infuriate him even more. ‘There’s absolutely nothing going on behind your face, is there?’

‘Do you remember this place?’ she said, eventually.

‘I do,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘But not why I was here.’

‘Maybe you’re a secret agent, and that’s why the documents in your flat were unmarked. You know, with all that attention on tax dodgers and fraud since the banks collapsed. Perhaps you’re undercover?’

He shrugged.

Eithe shambled into the bathroom to scrub her face. ‘How did you enter this?’ she tapped the cracked bathroom mirror with a wet finger.

‘If I knew that, I’d know how to get out.’

‘Where do we start?’ she said. She lifted her hand away and ran her fingers across her bland features. ‘It’s so strange not to see myself,’ she said. ‘You don’t even move like me.’

‘Well, set me free.’

Eithe gave him a blank look. ‘Why do you need me?’ she said. ‘Why can’t you look yourself?’

‘I don’t have to justify myself to you,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘You’re my employee. You don’t ask questions. Go and ask her.’

Eithe obeyed.

She stood awkwardly as the receptionist checked a new couple in. She watched as fluid French slipped between them. The receptionist’s teeth were very white against her red lipstick. Fine lines bunched and radiated out around her moving mouth. ‘Did you both rest well?’ she said. Eithe was paralysed for a moment. A corn-gold strand was stuck to the receptionist’s lip-gloss. The rest of Juliette’s hair was dusted with grey.

Then she managed, ‘It’s only me.’

‘Ah,’ said the Frenchwoman. ‘If you need anything then you must ask. How do you like our hostel?’

‘I don’t have much to compare it to.’

Juliette looked over Eithe’s shoulder, and for an instant, she met the Mirror Staring Man’s eyes unwaveringly. Her look was one of speculation.

‘One moment. *Bonjour messieurs,*’ she said as two men shouldered through the door. They were laden with heavy bags. As the receptionist signed them in, they shared a quiet kiss. Eithe, whose only exposure to queer culture had been the occasional flash of the L-Word or Sugar Rush when she mis-tuned the TV, felt her face flare.

‘You did not know,’ said Juliette, ‘what it is to be a rainbow hotel? My partner and I, we opened it. *C’est bien.* It is good.’ She smiled for the first time. It was a slow, slinking thing. ‘Sweet,’ she said, at Eithe’s confusion, at her naivety. ‘Tonight,’ she said. ‘I think you should dine with me. Forget the tourist menus. I will show you real cuisine.’

Chapter 8 - Breaking

Gemma from the office looked immaculate in a mini dress as she stood in front of the mirror with a glass of fizzing wine. She was expecting a nice meal at Petrus, and she was dressed in something shapely and tasteful. She raised the glass in salute to the late, great Alexander McQueen, as she always did when she wore her favourite outfit, drained the wine and selected an eye shadow to bring out the depth of her brown irises. She expertly dusted one ivory-skinned, unfolded lid.

When her phone went off, she hooked it between her shoulder and chin to continue her careful application. ‘Oh hi! How are you? Me? Drunk? Of course. I have a drinking problem,’ she said drily, regarding her empty glass. ‘I’ve run out of wine.

‘Yes, I’ve got a few minutes till they pick me up, don’t worry. Oh, no. Not tonight. No, that was a rare one. I’d hoped she would, but she hasn’t been back to the office since. Maybe she’s on leave. It’s about time. I’ve never known her take a day off.

‘Yeah. Yeah, she’s quite shy. Well, she got talking a bit more at the bar. Dad from Haiti apparently, but she said she didn’t know any more. I know! Haiti! Think of all the stories he could tell. Oh yes?’ She replaced the eye shadow, picked up a hairbrush and ran it through her sheer, black hair and juggled the handset to the other ear.

‘Hah, well, my uncle on the English side has been doing some research. He found a smith called Cooper or a cooper called Smith or something. It’s pretty boring. And my mother brought all her ancestors from the Homeland. I still have to say hi to my dead grandparents at their shrine every time I visit.’

She laughed once.

‘I live in hope,’ she said. ‘But you know I like my men like I like my coffee, dark, strong and bitter.’ The intercom buzzed.

‘Really? Right. Look, darling, I have to go. That’s them, I think, to pick me up. I’m not quite ready still. Yeah, you too. I’ll see you on Monday. See you. Bye!’

She dropped her phone in her handbag and turned to the intercom. ‘Hello?’ she said. ‘You’re early.’

‘No I’m not.’

She was taken aback. It was a man’s voice.

‘Who is this?’

‘It’s Joe. Joe King. I’d like to talk.’

Gemma recoiled. This was awkward. She knew about the argument, because Eithe, the quiet girl in accounts, told her about it after they'd had a few cocktails. It was the most she'd ever spoken before. Gemma did not know Joe well. On the few occasions she met him at work functions, and once when she'd invited them to a house party, she'd noted him as mildly good looking with rolls of blond hair and the long features of a gravestone angel. He was never far from his fiancée.

Her spine tingled a warning, but the Champagne interfered with the signal.

'It isn't a good time,' she said.

'Please,' he begged. 'I won't stay long. I don't know where she is, and I'm worried about her.'

She felt a bit sorry for him, so she let him in.

'Hello—' she began, her hand still on the doorknob.

He was dishevelled; his hair awry and his eyes were bloodshot. His clothes gave off a stench of stale sweat. She remembered now that he was very tall. When he stood next to Eithe, it was less obvious, but he towered over Gemma.

'Have you been drinking?' she asked. She tried to close the door, but his foot was already jammed in the frame. Joe shouldered through the gap. It was not a gentle push and she was wearing heels. The air blasted from her lungs.

'Do you know where she is?' Joe asked.

Gemma was shocked, but she was not afraid, not yet. The Joe she'd met before was a sweet, rather earnest man, who wore his ethics on his sleeve. She believed he was drunk and distressed and not entirely himself. After a bath, a nap and a chat, he would be fine. She didn't know that this boy, with his hair sticking out and his jumper decorated with a humorous cartoon of a postman biting a dog on the bottom, wanted so much to be taken seriously by somebody, by anybody, that he was prepared to hunt a woman as far as she would go. It didn't occur to her that she was in danger.

She followed Joe into her lounge. 'Please,' she said. 'I'm going out and I have to get ready.'

'What happened?' he said. 'You should know. It was your idea to go out without me. She just said okay, didn't she? Did she go home with him? Did you see them kissing? What did he look like?'

'Look honey, I'm not into threesomes,' Gemma snorted. 'So if something did happen, I wasn't there.'

It is the laugh that did it. She saw his eyes change.

Gemma's flat was simple. There wasn't much to break, but she did have a geode resting on the mantelpiece of the feature fireplace. It was as big as a cat skull and the colour of milk. Joe picked it up and slammed it into Gemma's face. While she lay on the floor, bleeding from her nose, he leant over her and said, 'Where is she?'

'I don't know,' she sobbed. He seemed gratified. At last, someone was taking him seriously.

'Did she tell you?'

'Tell me what?' she said, the syllables punctuated by frightened gasps. She was playing for time, so he kicked her in the gut.

'Where she is.'

The man panted, with the dripping stone in his hand. Her mind turned over unevenly because of the concussion. Eithe was in Paris. She knew that. But she wouldn't tell him. 'Listen, you idiot. We're not,' she said, leaking red spit, 'exactly BFFs. She just sits across from me. I only thought she needed a night out. Just once.'

He left her bleeding on the floor. She watched him through swelling flesh as he scabbled through her stuff, emptying drawers, thrusting sheaves of paperwork onto the floor, sweeping lipsticks and perfume from the vanity cabinet, until he found her phone in her bag.

She was scared now, so she said nothing.

'Call her,' he said. 'Call her. Say you're calling from work. They want to know where she's gone, or she'll be sacked.' He forced the phone into her twitching hand. 'Do it, you stupid bitch.'

She looked up at him, blood pooling in the white of one eye.

'I don't know, Joe. The signal here is pretty rubbish—'

She was upsetting him so he punched her to sleep.

Gemma's flat was simple. There wasn't much to break, but he broke it anyway. He did not notice the dark thing slip from beneath the unconscious girl and gather beneath his soles.

Chapter 9 – Réve à Deux

The Frenchwoman's quarters were in an attic room. She was waiting at the door. 'With your leave,' said Juliette, and she leaned in. For a moment, Eithe thought the Frenchwoman was administering a continental kiss from cheek to cheek, and she stood stock-still, waiting for it to be over. But instead she felt the press of lips against hers, and a faint taste of clean tobacco and the tip of a tongue. Then Juliette stood back.

'Ah,' she said. 'I see. So it is that.'

Eithe fought the urge to wipe the back of her hand across her mouth. 'I'm not—'

'No,' said Juliette. 'I am sorry. You are not. Forgive me. When I saw your reflection, I saw - for a moment I thought that you had a man's soul in a woman's body, and I was intrigued. But there is nothing. Nothing at all. No desire, no repugnance. I do not know what you are. I think perhaps you do not, either.'

'I'll go,' said Eithe. 'I—'

'No, no,' said Juliette. 'I meant no offence. Please, sit. I have the food waiting. It was not my intent to seduce you. Only to know you more.'

'Eithe, sit down,' said the Mirror Staring Man. 'She might have information.'

Juliette lifted an eyebrow and cocked her head.

'Will you come in?'

The Mirror Staring Man said, 'Ask her if she remembers me at all?'

Eithe said, 'I'm trying to find out if there's a man in your database. He would have stayed here about ten, fifteen years ago. He was about six foot tall, dark hair, a bit...'

Juliette frowned. 'So many people pass through our doors. Eithe, *chère*, sit, sit. And tell me why you are here.'

The clouds darkened through the skylight. There were three seats at the table. Juliette placed an embroidered cushion on the third and rested a violin gently on the cloth, propping it against the backrest. The wood was faded but polished to a high shine, allowing a faint version of Mirror Staring Man to watch from it, his face made cartoonish by the curves. A small dog, all shaggy fur, put its front paws on the chair and thrust its blunt nose at the wood. 'It's a footstool with a face,' said the Mirror Staring Man. He rubbed at the nasal smudge from the inside but it didn't fade.

Juliette lifted the lid from the dish. Six glossy snail shells sat on a bed of lettuce. There was a puddle of butter in each one. A spindly fork sat on her serviette. It had two

slender tines. Eithe looked at it with consternation. 'No, go on. It's an acquired taste, but it isn't nasty at all,' said the Mirror Staring Man.

'Really?' said Eithe weakly as she rummaged. Her wrist movement felt clumsy rather than subtle. She found herself staring at a curl of grey flesh on the end of the fork. She blanched but forced her mouth open. She put the snail on her tongue. The taste of salt butter and heat-softened garlic flowed down her throat. She chewed and she swallowed. Then she nodded.

Juliette smiled, and this time it was genuine. 'It's surprising to find out what you like, sometimes. Unexpected things can have a delectable taste.' She cleared the plates and returned to the table with a thick brown casserole.

The Mirror Staring Man stared from the edge of reality, the taste buds of his absent tongue redundant, his nostrils defunct. Eithe met his envious stare in the empty plates and cutlery. 'This smells gorgeous,' she said and for a little while, all that could be heard was the scratching of metal on china. The dog woke up and circled the table, its frantic nub of a tail wagging.

'This is nice,' said the Mirror Staring Man, with a bright, rictus grin. 'Isn't this nice? Who the hell am I?'

Juliette picked up a piece of beef and dropped it for the begging dog. He caught and swallowed it and licked the grease from his moustache. 'Eithe, tell me of yourself.'

'I – there's not much worth saying.' Juliette observed her coolly over the rim of her wine glass, and Eithe admitted. 'There's a man. We played together when we were children. I've known him most of my life, and now he's not in it anymore.' A pang of nostalgia hit her, sharp and sweet in her stomach. The woman waited and listened, but Eithe had nothing left to say.

'Schnuff,' said the dog, and Juliette made room for it on her lap.

'What about me?' said the Mirror Staring Man. 'Ask her more.' But Eithe couldn't, and she felt the air in the attic grow sour as he ground his teeth. The atmosphere settled between them like a dark curtain.

'Do you want him to be in it?' said Juliette.

'I don't know,' said Eithe. The Mirror Staring Man sniffed.

'You are a strange girl,' said Juliette, but the words were not unkind. 'I do not think you know yourself yet. There are some people who are born whole, and there are others that build themselves. There is a third type who realise who they are all in a moment. I did

not know what it is I wanted in life until I met my partner and then it was all clear as,' she rang her fingernail against the rim of the wine glass, 'crystal.'

Eithe nodded, uncomprehending. 'What a load of bollocks,' said the Mirror Staring Man.

'Do you want to know how I found my way to the Rainbow and stayed, although I am old and it takes my life and my money?'

'Not really,' said the Mirror Staring Man, but Eithe looked at the violin, which lounged on the chair, all polished brown curves and long neck.

'Your partner,' she said. 'You don't mean a business partner, do you?'

'No.'

'Where is she?'

Juliette rested her hand on the little dog. 'I first saw her across the street as she unfolded her manuscript, lifted the violin and set it to her chin. The body of the instrument is supposed to be a woman, with a pinch-waist, round-rear and long-drawn moaning music. We smiled at each other.

'She came to Paris to escape her mother, who wanted little footprints and finger paintings. But back then, to have children you also had to have a man. Her mother smothered her so she picked up the instrument and left.

'She had hair the colour of seasoned wood worn pale by playing. Her name was a waltz: Romilly. She was fire and I was ice. When we came together, we made liquid. I still know the shape of her better than I know my own.'

Eithe nodded. She knew Joe better than she knew herself.

'Love is not always easy. I remember my father telling me it was against God's will; that we were doing something sinful and dirty. But we were not. After the *jouissance*, and *la petite mort*, there was no mess. We just licked our fingers and washed our faces clean.

'My *grand-maman* died, and we went to the funeral. My family stood in black and made a fence of their shoulders and spines. The coffin went down into the ground as they said the mass. Beside me Romilly stood tall, detached from them, with her dust-to-dust dry eyes. They would not let me lay a flower by the grave. Afterwards, my brother came up to us. I smiled. I thought, one at least will talk to us. And then he spat. His gunk slid down my face. When we went back to our cheap little room, Romilly played violin until her fingers blistered and I begged her to stop.'

For the first time, the Frenchwoman's composure broke. Her voice wobbled

'But there were good times?' said Eithe.

‘Oh yes,’ said Juliette. ‘In Paris, we went to the top of the Eiffel tower. She was afraid of heights, but with me she could look down to the ground. We laughed together at the woman who married the tower after falling in love with it. When she spoke of it, it was as a wife talks about a strong, tall husband, and even though it was just metal and architecture, she thought it had a soul that could speak with hers. There are far stranger than we in the world. Where there are people, there are infinite possibilities.

‘One night we sat in our little apartment and discussed how we had no family but each other, no place but our tiny home, and we thought about how many others were suffering the same, how many young people were cast out, how many people were being punished for the crime of their right, real love. And we thought; if we cannot keep our family, then we can make one for ourselves and for all those others who cannot.

‘We took out loans and made our future. When our hostel was ready, we stood side by side and cut the pink ribbon at the same time so that it fell in three pieces. People applauded. Genet, a famous poet. came to stay here in the first week, although he was old and angry. He visited the grave of Oscar Wilde in the *Père Lachaise*, and bowed to the tomb and rubbed away some of the lip-prints.’

She sighed and passed her fingers across her forehead.

‘She does well, our hostel, she has many friends. But we put ourselves in debt to buy her and I must employ more people. The hours I work are too long. I think perhaps we have three months, maybe four, before we must close our door. Then our dream will end.’

Eithe looked down at the lonely violin. The strings were frayed with age and there was dust on the fingerboard.

‘She died,’ she said. ‘Didn’t she?’

‘Yes,’ said Juliette. ‘She became ill, and it spread hard lumps through her flesh. I believe it came from her mother, not through inheritance, but through the hate she sent down the phone and through her letters. We fought it, but the doctors put poison in her to stop the growth and she could not keep going. They would not let me lie with her as she died, because I was not legally her wife, nor she mine. Our president would not allow marriage between two women. So at home I laid my head beside where hers should have been and, when I woke and went to the hospital, I was told she was gone and only her body was left. I was not even allowed to say goodbye.

‘Her mother tried to take the Rainbow away from me, claiming half belonged to her as next of kin, and took me to court. In the eyes of the law, we were business partners and no more. I had to settle. My parents would not speak with me. It was like a dagger in the

heart. But Juliette is always left behind. And this time, she will go on, even without her Romilly.’ She reached for the bottle. ‘More wine?’

‘No, thank you,’ said Eithe.

‘Ah,’ said Juliette, as she upended the remains into her glass. ‘All the more for me.’ She shrugged. ‘You learn that sometimes, there is a choice to be made. Between one misery and another. Between one happiness and another.’

‘I know that already,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘Jesus. She just goes *on*.’ Eithe sat, paralysed by his rudeness.

‘I forgive them,’ said Juliette. ‘I gave up the fighting. You cannot have the *dialogue de sourds*. The two deaf people shouting. Now it is for them to forgive me.’

‘Eithe please,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘We’re wasting time.’

‘I think we have to go,’ said Eithe.

‘What’s the hurry?’ said Juliette.

‘I – I don’t feel very well,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘There’s a hundred miles of numbness and, on the other side of that, there’s pain.’

‘I’m being paid to be here,’ said Eithe. ‘I’m on a deadline. Sorry.’

‘Come on, let’s go,’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

‘Okay,’ Eithe said.

Juliette stood, deposing the little dog who landed on the floor in a huff. She ushered Eithe to the door. ‘Thank you,’ said the younger woman, as they paused, awkwardly, before the stairwell. This time, Juliette simply brushed against her cheekbones, one at a time.

As Eithe left, Juliette turned to the violin and said, ‘A very unusual girl. Did you mark how she listened?’ In the stillness of the flat, the strings thrummed.

‘Yes,’ said Juliette, as though the violin had replied with the voice of her dead would-have-been wife. ‘She will have to learn how to choose, or else she will wait beyond the end of all possibilities.’

As Eithe trod the wedges of the spiral staircase, she was pensive. She turned back the covers of her bed and climbed under the duvet. She thought about the nothing kiss. She thought about Joe and the wrong she had done him. She thought about going home and she thought about running east. Her mind felt heavy and unbalanced, like a set of scales perpetually unbalanced. When thought about Joe, the loss of future kisses, of cool arms around her, of spice and pale skin, she felt a spasm of suffering. She had spent time

adoring Joe's nose, the flimsy bits of hair at the corner of his jaw that the razor never reached and the v-shaped scar on his temple where a stone hit him at a demonstration. She hoped if she tried hard to like the little parts, they would merge and she would suddenly, definitely, love the whole.

'Don't worry,' said the Mirror Staring Man, who misinterpreted her discomfort. 'I wasn't watching you and Juliette. Well, not like that. As far as I'm concerned, a bird in the hand is better than two in the bush.' Eithe did not reply. 'We leave tomorrow,' he said.

'I don't know,' said Eithe miserably.

'You are the most indecisive person I have ever met.'

'Maybe.' She sniffled. 'Go away.'

'I can't,' he said, reluctantly. 'There is something holding me to you. And even if there wasn't, I would just snap back to wherever my body was. Sometimes I can feel the cords stretching.'

'You've asked the wrong person for help,' said Eithe. 'I don't know what I'm doing or where I'm going. I can't even help myself. I don't even know what I am. Goodnight, Mirror Staring Man.'

She pushed her face into the pillow. After a while, she spoke out of the dark. 'Will you watch over me?' she said dozily. 'Like you did last night?'

'I didn't watch you last night.'

'Sure, okay.' She rolled over, and counted back from a hundred. After a while her breathing slowed and the rise and fall of her chest deepened. Despite what he'd said, the Mirror Staring Man watched her. Every so often she gave out a gentle snore, and then a series of twitches ran through her resting body.

Eithe's mother pulled her own legs apart by the knees. A diluvian rush of blood emerged. It wasn't the dead red of leaking veins, but the bright red of oxygenated cells, layering over and over until it became an ocean and swallowed up the pelmet of the bed, the wood-chip wallpaper, the doilies on the sideboard, the curtains and then the light.

Floating in the mixture of amniotic fluid and erythrocytes, Eithe swam toward her mother and tried to take her hand and lead her out of the door. But something inside the gravid woman knotted and snagged and she collapsed, drowning in pain. Eithe screamed into the liquid, but the sound was silenced.

Then they were in the white room. Eithe knew the white room as well as if she'd lived her life there rather than just dreamed it. Her mother's mouth was stuffed with tubes and covered with an oxygen mask. She was pinioned with needles and stared up at Eithe

over the mask. Her eyes were seized with sorrow, but it was the sorrow of a stranger.

In the morning, Eithe packed and checked the little scrapbook. It held a postcard of a ceiling fresco in a town called Würzburg. 'Is it a nice town?' she asked. The Mirror Staring Man shrugged. 'You watched me again last night,' she said.

'I don't have any bones or meat to lie down. I can't fall asleep and I can't laze around dreaming like you, so what else am I going to do?' he snapped. 'There's only so many times you can count the cracks in the wall. *It's not about you.*'

When she settled the bill, Juliette took payment and folded the receipt with nimble hands. 'Thank you,' she said, and then she leaned over the desk. 'Sometimes you have to go back to go forward. Choose well. And know.'

'Know what?' said Eithe.

'Your mind. *Bon voyage,*' said Juliette, handing Eithe the receipt.

'Goodbye'

It was only later, as she sped out of the city on another train that Eithe unfolded the paper and found the ring. It was dark gold with a crucifix incised into it.

A scribbled note read: *Send me a message when you wish on this number. Also our email.*

Maman Juliette.

Chapter 10 – Dreammembering

In a room hundreds of miles away, a man battled with his bedsheets.

In the disordered sludge of his sleeping mind, Gemma leaned out of the dark, her face a white Noh mask stretched in a grimace of pain.

‘Hello Joe,’ she said. Her breath was hot on her face. It smelled of acetone and anger. He shrank down into the mattress. The shadow of her nose cut sharp across his cheeks like the shadow of a sundial. He tried to say, ‘It wasn’t me,’ but the words wouldn’t come. He told himself he was dreaming.

‘Really?’ she asked, jerking her head so that her matted, brown-clotted hair flopped. ‘Really? Are you sure about that?’

The room was sucking at her, grey and grainy. The walls moved like lungs, bunching and stretching. Hours trickled by, and Gemma just breathed, boiling his forehead and the bridge of his nose and drying up the jelly of his terrified eyes. The fear-cold coiled around his spine and somewhere the two temperatures met, and he cracked like glass under stress.

He bit his tongue, and that was what woke him up.

A low moan wound from his dry throat. He lay, his nostrils flaring, but he could not stay still so he crawled out of the bed and returned to the computer. He stared at the screen, drawn and blue with the light from the monitor. He clicked, refresh, refresh, refresh. A tendon in his wrist twanged with repetitive strain. He didn’t want to go back to sleep. He was a pacifist – hadn’t he always been a pacifist? - but violence found him in the vulnerable hours.

The *I* newspaper lay at his elbow, opened like a cracked ribcage. There were two small images of Gemma-from-the-office, one a faded instagram of her grinning at the camera, the other an image released by the police as part of a witness appeal – her head depressing a hospital pillow, the side of her face the colour of an aubergine. Her parents had agreed to use the picture to show the world what had happened to their little girl. It was only a small article, sandwiched between a worrying dip in the Dow Jones index and details of how a county council in North Wales buried a report about child abuse some time back in the 1990s.

The Girl in a Coma headline made him feel sick every time he saw it. He wanted to be sick. He wanted to punish himself and purge, and he would, but not before he found Eithe, because it was their fate to be together.

It was raining outside, and the water drumming on the window made the streetlight scatter and woke an old memory. He opened his own account, created a fresh email and started typing.

Eithe,

Do you still dreammember?

I'm dreammembering an autumn semester, when the rain drew out the colour of the people, the cars, the sky, the road and buildings, the spindly trees and flat grass of the parks, until it flowed like water down the drains and left everything grey. My room felt too small, so I escaped to the Central Library.

The librarian wouldn't let me take a book out without proof of identity.

I had my passport, but he was being such a cock.

'Are you joking? This is a joke,' he said.

I was so pissed off, but you were there, and I asked if you would take the books out for me. I noticed your name when you pushed your card over. I said, 'Hello Eithe.'

You said, 'You got it right. That's unusual.'

And I said, 'A lot of people think I'm joking.'

You didn't get it. You said, 'It can't be that bad.'

That was when I knew I could love you.

I said, 'No, actually, it is. My name. Joe King. I thought about changing it by deed poll once I hit eighteen, but by then I'd spent so long correcting people that I didn't want to give up.'

I knew I'd heard your name before. And you blushed as you gave me the books. I promised I wouldn't get you fined, but I returned them when they were overdue, and the prick on the front desk wouldn't let me pay Eithe Dord's debt. He said it was your card, your problem. But I wasn't angry, because when I heard your name I remembered who you were, and I knew it didn't matter, because we'd meet again.

I put the exact change in a pocket in my wallet and carried it around with me for weeks. And then I saw you, with your curly hair, standing out of the crowd because of how tall you were. You'd grown so much since you used to play with me, barefoot by the compost heap.

That was when I knew it was fate. And I went up to you and gave you the money, and you were amazed, and I asked you out for coffee. You said okay, and that's how it started.

Just okay. That's all you said.

Are you okay now?

He sent the email. Then he signed off and logged into her account.

Joe wiped his hand across his scratchy skin. The muscles in his cheeks strained as they pulled his lips back in a smile with too much gum and too much tooth. With deliberation, he opened up the Sent folder. There were two new messages. One was from him, the other was not.

Dear Sir/Madam,

I would like to book a room at the Rainbow. Would it be possible to email me your information?

Eithe

'So you've found what you want,' the shadow on his headrest whispered.

Joe wheeled away from the desk and clapped his hands over his ears in terror.

Chapter 11 – Overland

The high speed train was sleek and quiet. It was not peak time, so the carriage was almost empty. The Mirror Staring Man had insisted on First Class, saying even if she didn't care about the leg room, he didn't want to have to look at the economy class passengers.

Eithe said to the window, 'Am I any closer to getting rid of you?'

'Hopefully.'

She started filling in a post card, the train so smooth on the tracks it didn't disturb her skritch handwriting.

Dear Juliette,

Thank you so much for the meal and your kindness. I just thought I'd tell you there was a ring wrapped up in the paper you gave me, and I wanted to know if I should post it back. I will arrive in Würzburg soon.

Eithe.

'Why are you keeping in touch with her?' asked the Mirror Staring Man. 'She can't do anything else for me.' The vibration distorted his voice into a low growl.

She could have said, 'I don't know'. Instead, she said, 'Because she was kind to me. You look sort of sick.'

He shook his gaunt head. 'Just bored. I'd like a beer. You have one.'

'We – I don't drink,' she said.

'You did once,' he said.

'On my hen night,' she said, 'and look what happened. Besides, I can't just use your money up.'

'Eithe, parked in a garage in London, there's a customised anthracite black Mercedes-Benz SLS AMG that goes from nought to sixty less than four seconds. I just drove it on Saturdays. My apartment is on the top floor. It has panoramic views of the city and you need a periscope to navigate through the carpet, but I only ever slept there. I have an Armani suit made out of the cocoons of murdered silk worms, and I don't have a body to put it on.'

Eithe made a noise of revulsion.

‘Order one and drink it for me,’ he said.

‘I don’t know what.’

‘You don’t prefer one?’

‘I’ve never had a preference.’

‘Eithe, opinions are like arseholes. Everyone has one.’

‘And they are best kept to yourself?’ she said, hopefully.

‘No,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘I mean if you don’t vent it occasionally, you will explode. Choose something.’

So when the waiter arrived, she ordered a tall frosty glass of weißbier. It ran like gold down her throat. ‘I’ve never tasted anything like this before,’ she said.

‘You’ve never lived,’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

‘Maybe not,’ she said.

‘Keep your voice down,’ he said. ‘They’ll think you’re talking to yourself.’

‘I never even knew there was a world out here,’ she said, her consonants softened by the beer. ‘I don’t know if I want to know.’ Her shoulder blades lifted against the leather seat. ‘I don’t have anyone else,’ said Eithe in a dull monotone. ‘We were going to get married in white, both of us, because I was his first and he was mine. He wanted to have a family with me. He said we were destined to be together, that we added up, two halves of a whole. He was happy with me. He said I took him seriously.’ She put her fists up to her face. Her spine twisted and her shoulders jerked. A horrible bubbling noise sluiced from between her fingers. ‘And now I’ve destroyed all of that. I just okayed my future away and I don’t know what’s going to happen next.’

‘No one knows what’s going to happen next,’ said the Mirror Staring Man, in a condescending tone. She frowned.

‘I did, because he told me. When he was around, it wasn’t so confusing. I didn’t know how to choose, but he did. And now I’ve ruined us. I am just,’ she hiccupped. ‘Just a machine for saying okay. Okay? Okay.’

‘I think it’s time for another glass,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. Eithe nodded mournfully.

‘Okay,’ she said, and then she stuffed her fist in her mouth and made a mew of self-loathing. But she ordered another beer and it consoled her as she drank.

The train bowled through broad, golden fields which spread to the horizon, rising and falling with the flow of the land. Birds sat in chattering clumps on the electric lines.

‘So what are we looking for?’ she said, as she wiped the froth from her top lip. ‘If some of you is in the mirror and your body is back there?’

‘Well I recall some things,’ the Mirror Staring Man admitted. ‘But not others. I don’t know my name. Or remember my childhood, my parents or my friends. If we find my name, that might help. I could Google myself. Perhaps there are pictures. They might help me remember who I was.’

‘And find a way to get you back to your body.’

‘Mmm,’ he said.

‘What happens if I don’t find a way to stitch you back in?’ she asked.

‘I think I’m safe for now.’

‘That wasn’t an answer,’ she said.

The Mirror Staring Man studied her as she licked her lips. ‘Okay,’ he said. ‘You are naïve, but you aren’t stupid. I’ll be honest with you. I don’t know. Maybe I’ll just carry on like this until we do find it.’

‘Ugh, That’s a horrible thought,’ she said.

‘Yeah.’

‘I wonder what happened to my reflection,’ she said. ‘Do you think I’ve lost part of myself? Am I in there with you?’

‘Er,’ he said, evasively. ‘Not exactly.’

She looked at him searchingly, but he wasn’t giving anything away. ‘So, what now?’ she said. ‘Where do we go next?’

‘You have to go back to go forward,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘That’s what the French lesbian said. Well, it’s a crap plan, but it’s better than no plan at all. You’re going to buy a new phone, one that’s internet enabled.’

‘I’ll put my ring back on as well,’ she said, ‘so there will always be something you can look out of that’s close to me. So you can speak to me whenever you want.’

‘Good,’ he said.

‘What’s it like?’ she asked timidly. ‘Where you are?’

‘Out here,’ he said. ‘It’s indescribable.’

‘Is it grey?’

‘It isn’t anything. Imagine nothing going on forever.’

‘I think I can.’

‘No,’ he said. ‘You can’t. It’s like looking through glass except there’s no sky behind it or water to catch the light and turn it blue. It isn’t grey or white or black. It’s no colour.’

‘When I ask you to look away, is that what you see?’

‘Yes.’

‘It could drive you mad.’

‘Yes.’

‘I won’t ask you to look away again.’

‘Thank you,’ he said, and she was surprised by how grateful he sounded.

‘Tell me what you remember,’ she said. ‘About your life.’

‘I can’t think of much,’ he said. ‘I think my memories are left locked in my brain, wherever that is now. That scares me, because what are we, except memories written in grey jelly? When that’s gone, we’re just cells. And I’m not even that. I’m just a bundle of fears and wants.’

‘You are more than that,’ said Eithe. ‘Think.’

‘I remember the smell of shredded paper and the hum of a computer. I remember sharp correction fluid. I don’t remember my parents, or my girlfriends, except in bits. Do you think that’s strange?’

‘No,’ said Eithe.

The Mirror Staring Man said, ‘I’ve lost it all. But you are young. You probably don’t know what it is like to lose someone.’

‘Yes, I do.’

They rested for a few heartbeats, both savouring old pain like salt.

She retrieved the ring from her purse and slid it on to her finger and he occupied the facets of the oval-cut glass. A faint echo of her heartbeat throbbed through the metal band.

When the train passed into Mannheim, they found a shop selling smartphones. Eithe hovered over a Blackberry, until the Mirror Staring Man said, ‘No, not that one. Try a Samsung Galaxy or an iPhone.’

The operative on the till took the Mirror Staring Man’s card, but she had to give him a billing address. When she realised she didn’t know it, she handed her own details over. The Mirror Staring Man looked vaguely queasy as he followed Eithe on the bullet train.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ she asked. ‘Motion sickness?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘My inner ear isn’t here. It can’t be that.’

On the next train, Eithe typed her postcard message into an email and sent it as an experiment. Then she stowed the handset in her pocket.

The Mirror Staring Man followed it in to the warm, dark pouch before the phone began to idle. He began to push here and there, on the screen, but then it went dark. He rode the rest of the way in sullen silence.

Chapter 12 – The Eloquent Spectre

Joe looked at the hole his body made in the light, aghast at the tapering of the waist and the ceaseless flickering of the fingers.

It stalked him across the pavement, talking all the time.

He'd blocked his ears with tissue as he fled the flat and bought earplugs when he was in the airport, but there was still a background buzzing at the periphery of his distressed concentration. Paris was supposed to be a rainy city, but the sun cut strong across the streets, making his shadow even sharper.

He grabbed a pastry at a corner shop and ate it without tasting it, staring at the dance of his disembodied hands written across a whitewashed wall. The fingers wrote a familiar pattern. Joe narrowed his eyes. His shadow was signing at him, and he recognised two phrases.

'Talk me,' it gestured. 'See me.' He blinked. 'See me.'

'Hallucinations don't sign,' he said.

The shadow's drooping shoulders lifted and it signed with new vigour. 'Listen.'

Joe took the wadded plug from his ears. 'American Sign Language,' he said.

'Yes,' said his shadow. 'My little brother is deaf. I've known it since I was five. When did you learn it? I've been trying to get your attention for two days.' It was Gemma's voice. It made him want to block his ears again, but it was too late for that. 'Funny,' she said. 'I don't remember what he looks like. Just that he's deaf.'

'Shut up,' he said.

'It's so lonely here. I can hear things, but I can't see anything except your silhouette. You're like – real, and nothing else is. It's all fog and grey veils.'

'I'm not listening,' he said.

'You didn't seem to understand all of it. Are you a bit rusty?' Joe did not respond. 'I like that you tried,' she said, 'even if you have forgotten some of it. You can always pick it up again. What's your name? I'm sorry I can't tell you mine. I don't know it right now. I'm glad I found you. It's very boring, wherever I am.'

For a moment, his heart beat like a hummingbird's, and a gulf opened up in his abdomen. She was haunting him. She'd died of her injuries, and she was going to follow him, wading through the ether, to exact her revenge. And then he realised she couldn't see him, and she didn't know who he was.

Joe balled up the wrapper and threw it in the bin. He was an environmentalist, or he had been, and he did not like litter.

‘So where are we going?’ she said. ‘I’m coming with you. I’m not going off on my own again.’ Joe strode on, his chin pulsing as he chewed on his own teeth.

‘You seem familiar,’ said Gemma. ‘Have we met before, on the other side? It’s all a bit blurry and far away. I try to remember, and sometimes I get close, but I can’t quite reach it. It’s like swimming underwater without air, and the faster you move, the more your energy just ebbs away and you fail.’

‘My head hurts,’ she said. She laughed. ‘I don’t even have a head, but it still hurts. I’ve been totally amputated. Do you think I’m the phantom pain? How does that even happen? Where are we?’

‘Paris,’ said Joe, bemused by the relentlessness of the breathy, lung-less whisper, and of her bonhomie.

‘It’s nice to have a break from work though. I haven’t had a holiday in years. France is nice. Are we going to go to the *Arc de Triomphe*? Or the cute little cafés. I’m not too bothered about the tourist traps. And I wouldn’t be able to see them anyway. Maybe a concert would be better – I could appreciate that.’

‘I’m not sightseeing,’ said Joe.

‘Why are you here? Pleasure or business?’

‘I’m looking for someone.’

‘Who?’

‘My wife.’

The wraith skipped along beside him, swinging her arms. ‘How romantic! I’m coming too,’ she said.

‘No,’ said Joe.

‘Oh go on,’ said the shade, brightly. ‘I’m your new travel companion. I can’t carry your bags, but I can keep you company.’

‘I don’t want company.’

‘It’s too late. I’m stitched to you, like when Wendy darned Peter Pan’s shadow back on to his feet. Soap didn’t work sticking it on, and you’ll need more than soap to remove me.’ The shadow reached through his shoe and tickled his soles. It was like being teased by a ghost. ‘You have no choice.’

Something about her selection of words stopped his protests. Joe hunched his shoulders as he tackled the hill. He wasn’t far from the Rainbow.

Chapter 13 – Night Shift

Würzburg was quiet at eleven pm. She was a little unsteady as she walked, her arm aching from pulling her case. ‘Left here,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘And just down the street.’

The hostel reminded her of a secondary school, all concrete, big square windows and plywood. She pushed the swing doors open over the scuffed linoleum floor. A small brass hand bell sat on the reception sill. ‘Hello,’ she said to the young man on the other side of the hatch. He looked up from his crossword and absent-mindedly brushed back his sandy fringe.

‘*Guten tag,*’ he said.

Eithe peered past the desk, into the little cubby hole which held a bunk-bed, a desk and a fridge. Empty mugs congregated on every surface. ‘Are you on a long shift?’ she asked. He looked up at her, his finger poised to turn a page.

‘*Ja.* Until I finish the books.’

Eithe noticed that when he spoke, a dimple glimmered on his cheek. It disappeared when he turned back to the book. She liked the click-clacking of his consonants. The Mirror Staring Man gurned out of a mug at her.

‘Room three,’ said the receptionist. ‘It is a dormitory. Your key.’

‘Ask him about the records,’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

‘Um,’ said Eithe.

‘Here,’ he disappeared below the desk and resurfaced with an armful of white bedding. ‘*Schwupp!*’ he said as he dropped it into her waiting arms. ‘There you are. *Guten nacht.*’

They stared at each other. Eithe felt something tickle in her stomach. She looked at his shoulders and at his clean, broad features, recognised his handsomeness and then she folded the thought away. ‘Er, good night,’ she said, blushing. She was ruffled as she found room three and went into the windowless cubicle bathroom. She hummed happily.

‘You like him, don’t you?’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

‘Stop making faces at me when I’m with other people,’ she said

‘He didn’t see me,’ he said.

‘You don’t have to close your eyes, but can you look away?’ she said to the mirror as she fiddled with the button of her jeans. ‘I’m going to go to the toilet.’ He obeyed, but she still breathed in sharply when she went back to the mirror. ‘It’s uncanny,’ she said.

‘I know,’ he said. ‘There’s not much I can do about it.’

‘You’re angry,’ she said.

‘I’m not used to it,’ he said. ‘I think whatever I was before I fell into the mirror, I had power.’

‘You are quite selfish.’

‘I just know what I want and how to get it. Take every opportunity, pass nothing up. Be the best you can be. The strong survive, the weak don’t thrive. The world gives you nothing for free. You have to take it. Adapt or die.’

‘That’s your choice.’

‘It’s an obvious choice.’

‘Even if you hurt other people? What about what they want?’

The Mirror Staring Man said, ‘I am not other people. Therefore I can’t be responsible for what they want.’ Eithe was ready to reply, but a group of travellers arrived and filled the room with chatter.

All night, people came in and out of the dormitory, dumped bags and climbed the bunk bed ladders. She slipped into a slumber thick with dreams, the new phone on the pillow. As she slept, the Mirror Staring Man pushed at the invisible barrier like a bee buzzing against a window, trying over and over to unlock the screen. But he couldn’t marshal enough strength to press, to change something in the world, even if it was as abstract as pixels and binary code.

It was four in the morning when he finally managed to make the phone admit he existed. It was just one digit but it took. And then Eithe started to fidget feverishly. He ignored her at first, intent on repeating his success. Around them, the sweaty travellers belched and dribbled in their sleep. He hammered at the interior of the screen, which locked itself.

Eithe moaned, and he gave up.

He hissed, ‘Eithe. Eithe. Wake up.’

She rolled over and sucked in a nose full of pillow. A frisson passed through her, she rolled over, sat bolt upright and hit her head on the bed above.

‘Urgh,’ she said.

‘Are you okay?’

‘Nightmares.’

‘Were you dreaming about him?’ said the Mirror Staring Man. He meant the German.

‘Yes,’ said Eithe. She thought he meant Joe.

‘Well do something about it,’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

‘I don’t know if I can,’ she said. ‘It’s someone else. Someone else’s life. I’m interfering.’

‘You have to interfere sometimes,’ said the Mirror Staring Man irritably. ‘Interfering is part of being alive. Every breath you take interferes with the air. It’s either that or be dead.’

‘I know that,’ said Eithe. She was not happy with what he was saying or the snappish way he said it.

She woke late and the German was at the hatch again. His head was down and he was working through an accounts book. The end of his pen wobbled back and forth as he wrestled with the calculations.

‘Doesn’t anyone else work here?’ The Mirror Staring Man muttered, from the side of the brass bell, in a voice like ringing metal.

Eithe put her hand on it to still the vibrations. ‘Morning,’ she said to the receptionist.

‘*Gut morgen,*’ he said, looking up. The Mirror Staring Man scowled. Eithe looked at the receptionist. He was tanned and broad-faced, with white teeth. The Mirror Staring Man cleared his throat.

‘I know this is unusual,’ said Eithe. ‘And I don’t know if you can, because of privacy laws and everything, but would it be possible to find someone on the system? They would have stayed here –’ she paused as though she was waiting for the next thought. In the brass bell, the Mirror Staring Man signalled with his fingers. ‘Oh, about fifteen years ago,’ Eithe finished.

He shook his head. ‘It would take some time. We have the written records, before they were transferred to computer. But there are many.’

‘I know it was stupid,’ said Eithe. Then there was another pause before she said, ‘I don’t even know the name. It’s not like I could have read them all out anyway, just to see if they sounded familiar.’

The receptionist nodded helpfully.

‘Am I interrupting?’ said Eithe.

‘I like that you interrupt,’ he said. ‘It means I do not have to do the sums.’

‘Oh,’ said Eithe. She leaned over the sill and ran an expert eye across the columns. Even upside down, she read the numbers fluently.

‘Do you want me to have a look?’ The German half-grinned and pushed the

book over. To her own utter surprise, she plucked the pen from his hand. ‘See, that’s wrong,’ she said, pointing at an unbalanced multiplication, ‘and someone forgot the remainder there. I’m not surprised you’re struggling.’

‘I speak a lot of languages, but not the language of numbers,’ said the German. ‘It makes my brain a mess.’

Eithe licked her finger and parted the pages, circling and underlining. The Mirror Staring Man mouthed, ‘What are you doing?’ at her as she looked up at the German.

‘This needs sorting,’ she said, and, for the first time, she sounded certain. ‘The sooner the better. The longer you leave it, the more it will cost.’

‘I see.’

‘Why don’t you do it on the computer? It’s easier to use a spreadsheet. I could set one up that would practically do the work for you.’

The receptionist laughed. ‘That would be good.’ Eithe offered the German the pen, and he reached just a little too far and closed his fingers around her hand very gently and just a little bit too long. ‘*Danke*,’ he said. ‘My name is Gerhardt.’

Eithe was shell-shocked, but the Mirror Staring Man looked unimpressed.

‘Sleaze,’ he whispered from the barrel of the pen, in a voice like a nib scratching on paper.

‘Sorry?’ said Gerhardt.

‘Please,’ said Eithe. ‘Could you tell me where the *Residenz* is? It sounds like it could make for an interesting afternoon.’

He said, ‘You wake late. I think perhaps you will not have time there. But, hmmm, I think if you make the right choice, you could have a very interesting evening instead.’

Stars of pale skin spread out from the sides of his eyes, marking his smile lines. Eithe giggled. If his throat hadn’t been hundreds of miles away, The Mirror Staring Man might have retched.

‘I will see you later,’ said German.

‘Okay.’ Eithe walked away, but she looked over her shoulder twice before she left.

‘You have a crush,’ said the Mirror Staring Man, his voice coming through the ring like a coin rolling on a table top. He sounded mildly contemptuous.

‘I don’t know,’ said Eithe.

‘Go to the *Residenz* now,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘Don’t wait around for Mr Smooth to take you. Did you see his back when he leant over? He has a tramp stamp.’

‘My eyes don’t move around as much as yours,’ said Eithe, pointedly. She went out into the sunlight and shaded the screen of her phone as walked.

‘You’re going the wrong way,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Just learning how to use it.’

‘You don’t really need to do that,’ he said, but she carried on clicking icons and exploring. ‘Please can we move on,’ he said wearily. ‘There isn’t anything for us here’

‘Maybe we should look for clues in town,’ she said.

But his recall of the area was shaky, and her map-reading was poor, and the phone kept loading the wrong page, so it was a while before they found the town centre, and late enough that the market in the square was folding up for the day.

‘The Fortress.’ The Mirror Staring Man pointed.

The Festung Marienberg loomed over the town, pale grey under a battlement-bitten sky, old and impressive. From somewhere in the town, Eithe could hear a gang of teenage football fans chanting, ‘*Du, du hast mich...*’ with a lusty cheerfulness quite at odds with the meaning of the lyrics.

Among the stalls, deconstructed into crates bristling with asparagus tips or melting ice impregnated with the smell of fish, there was a tent, small and made of old tarpaulin with frayed black stars stitched to it.

A young woman with her hair dyed a vivid red sat in the entrance. She tinkled as she moved, as her pentagrams and arcane jewellery knocked against the zips on her leather jacket and jeans. There was a collection of esoterica in front of her, but Eithe noticed the pair of Skullcandy headphones and a tiny iPod amongst the paraphernalia.

‘*Guten tag,*’ she said as Eithe passed. ‘*Deutsch? Francaise? Italiano? English?*’

‘English,’ said Eithe, her step seized by politeness.

‘I tell your fortune?’

‘She can’t be that good,’ muttered the Mirror Staring Man, ‘if she can’t even tell you what country you’re from.’

‘Would you like a reading?’ said the girl.

‘Don’t let her,’ the Mirror Staring Man clanged from the cauldron. ‘They take advantage of the stupid and the superstitious. Don’t give her one Euro.’

‘It is right to be suspicious,’ said the girl. ‘The cards can’t tell you what will happen, but they can tell you about yourself. We will do a reading.’

‘Oh,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘Can you hear me?’

But the girl simply stood there, waiting, her black-rimmed eyes still.

'Go on,' she said.

'Okay,' said Eithe. She sat on a rickety stool next to a velvet-covered tabletop which held a pink crystal ball. The girl squinted into the quartz. For a moment the stone held two rosy Janus-faces, one female, young and intent, the other male, older and apathetic.

'Sometimes a little choice can become a big change,' said the fortune-teller.

'Yes, yes,' said the Mirror Staring Man. 'I've heard it before. The butterfly effect. For the want of one shoe nail, all that sort of thing.'

'Still,' said Eithe.

He grunted.

'Here,' the girl materialised a pack of cards and handed them to Eithe to shuffle.

'Choose two for you and two for the one with which you are intertwined.'

Eithe sucked her lip into her teeth. Did the fortune-teller mean Joe or the Mirror Staring Man? Because she felt tangled by both, one wrapped around her present, the other snaring her with the threads of their shared history. 'I need a cigarette,' said the girl, after a while.

'Have you not chosen yet?' said the Mirror Staring Man. Eithe dithered, helplessly. She knew they were just symbols in a silly game, but the selection seemed so hard.

'Go on,' said the girl.

'Second on the left,' said the Mirror Staring Man, 'and the one on the middle.' Eithe selected his, and then tugged two others free at random. The girl set the four down on the tablecloth, her movements so deft that Eithe didn't have a glimpse of what lay below. Then she turned them in the order they had been drawn. They were all blank. 'What is it?' said Eithe. 'What does that mean?'

'There are too many choices,' the girl shrugged. 'Your future is not clear.' She scooped the cards up in a sudden flush of motion. 'But I will tell you this. There is something about you that is of death. Somewhere there is a body with its liver and kidneys working on nothing, recycling the same liquid around the bloodstream over and over until it becomes poison. Somewhere there is a starving, dehydrated husk. Somewhere there is envy and desperation with darkness tied to its hands. It is fixed to you. You need to shake it loose. You have to do the correct thing.'

Eithe blinked. 'What a load of crap,' said the Mirror Staring Man. 'Let's go.'

She obliged. 'Sorry,' she said to the fortune-teller, and then she walked away. They passed the massive maypole, crowned with a weathervane. Eithe glared at it, jealous of the piece of metal simply because it always knew which way the wind was blowing.

‘She didn’t get a euro off us,’ said The Mirror Staring Man.

‘You’d think a fortune-teller would just make up any old story,’ she said. ‘Not fob us off with a sorry-I-don’t-know.’

‘Mmm, bullshit,’ he concluded. ‘It’s got to be bullshit.’ But he seemed uncharacteristically thoughtful as Eithe trekked back through town.

‘Eithe!’ said Gerhardt, as she came through the door. ‘I struggle still. Will you teach me?’

‘Okay,’ she said. She entered the reception area, switched the computer on, opened up a spreadsheet and started putting commands in place. The German wheeled his chair close, so their legs touched, and she patiently showed him her workings, but he was not a good student, because he kept stealing glances at her instead of looking at the computer screen. She was rapt, and even when he brought out a biscuit and pressed it her lips, saying ‘Here, you need food for the brain,’ she didn’t respond, pulled into a finite, definite world, oblivious to his flirting.

‘You are so naïve,’ said the Mirror Staring Man, but she didn’t hear him, or the touch of relief in his tone. She worked doggedly at the accounting, unaware of either man. By the evening, Gerhardt was prone on the lower bunk, face-down on the mattress, napping before his night shift. The Mirror Staring Man was stony with frustration, glaring at her from the computer screen, and she was still working, searching through the older books with studious attention. On the television, tiny men kicked a ball around.

‘He likes you,’ said the Mirror Staring Man, his voice the sound of a clapper ringing lazily in the brass bell.

‘I don’t know,’ said Eithe.

‘Oh, he does,’ he said. ‘He asked you into the office because he wanted a kiss.’

‘Leave me alone,’ Eithe looked from the page to the screen and added some numbers.

‘You can hear him breathing,’ said the Mirror Staring Man tightly, as though he was picking at a scab. Eithe twiddled the pencil. In the bunk bed behind her, Gerhardt dozed. She was aware of his ribcage expanding and contracting beneath the thin sheet. It was muscular and she wondered whether his chest was smooth or furred.

The old ledger was a knotted mess of names and numbers. Normally she enjoyed the satisfaction of sorting, but she couldn’t concentrate. She heard his skin whisper as he moved under the linen and she shivered.

‘Why don’t you just fuck him then?’ said the Mirror Staring Man, angrily. ‘Just do it. Go and fuck him. And then we can get on with it and go.’

Eithe stood up.

The grey lino was dead against the soles of her feet. Gerhardt was still slumped, his head twisted to the side, one arm dangling to the floor, his eyes closed. Blue light flickered across his face. Eithe switched the hissing television off.

Gerhardt muttered, ‘*Ich hörte auf den.*’

She drew the curtain, draped the blanket from the top bunk across the television and computer, put the brass bell outside and shut the hatch. It trilled angrily. She believed the Mirror Staring Man would not be able to see, but the window was open and a cold wind blew through, rolling the curtains up so the moon shone through, silvering the pane.

Wafts of cotton lifted in the breeze, exposing the glass as she lifted her hands to her neck and unbuttoned her shirt and trousers until she stood in a puddle of her own clothes. Her form was long and undulant, and there were tufts of soft hair at the junction between her legs and where her arms met her trunk.

She stepped lightly over to the bed. The line of Gerhardt’s body was shadowed against the wall, sharp as a knife cut. His cheekbones were shapely, the dimples shallow with relaxation. Eithe breathed and stood and looked, her insides turning to fluid. Slowly, slowly, she stretched out a hand and rested it in the curve between his neck and shoulder. His eyes opened. They were a vivid blue.

She drew the sheet aside and then she settled onto the mattress. His arms curled her close. Wordless, they met lip-to-lip. And then he breathed out and she breathed in and the sweetness of him flooded her lungs. She pressed close so that her breasts squashed against his chest and his fingers sat in the gaps between her ribs as she wriggled her legs apart and made a tiny animal noise. His hands cupped her face and he slid inside her, and they fused together. They started to move, oblivious to the silent watcher.

After a few, long, liquid moments, the Mirror Staring Man turned away, his face a picture of pain.

Chapter 14 - Pulling the file

Mr Erwin leaned over the well-padded shoulder of Detective Inspector Keane and squinted at the screen. A grainy image showed a tall woman wave her hand at a man standing dead still in the middle of a crowded corridor.

‘Eithe Dord,’ said Keane. She liked monosyllables. ‘She’s twenty-six. Lived in Manchester eight years.’

‘That sounds like a made up name.’

‘It is. They both are,’ said Keane.

‘Change of ID?’ Erwin said. Something about his companion called for clipped, rapid-fire questions and responses. Unlike her body, there was nothing soft about her demeanour.

‘Not unless she was on the lam from five hours old. The surname her father adopted when he took citizenship. It isn’t a real name. I thought he made it up, but when I looked it up, it turned out to be a lexical error in the Webster Dictionary. Dord. Should have been “D or d” as an abbreviation for “density”, but someone fucked up, pushed the letters together. Invented a word with no provenance. A ghost word, like “scapegoat”. He must have picked it deliberately. And the first name is just rubbish. Some trendy thing like calling your kid Paris or Peaches. A non-name for a non-person.’

‘What’s her background?’

‘She works in accounting for an underwriting firm.’

‘Does she have any dodgy connections?’

Keane shrugged. ‘Not that we know of. She wasn’t a high up. Just a pen pusher. Quiet, never got promoted, never got fired. Same job since graduation.’ She reached over and restarted the CCTV video. They watched in silence as the tall woman ran into the man, spoke briefly, left him, turned back as he collapsed, took a step toward him, then a step back and finally hurried away.

‘Did he pass anything over when they made contact?’

‘Could have,’ said Keane. ‘If they both went to school with Penn and Teller. It would’ve had to be a very quick exchange. We’ve got a good angle on them here, and you can see her hands most of the time.’

Erwin sat back in the swivel chair and chewed the inside of his mouth. He was new to the Special Fraud Office, and this was the first time he’d worked with a policeman.

He'd assumed Keane would be bringing a box of doughnuts to the meeting, but she hadn't, and he was getting hungry.

'Clean record, although her boyfriend has previous for disturbing the peace and public nuisance. He's a bit of a hippy. Anyway, he's gone AWOL too. Probably sitting in a tent eating lentils in a democracy village or something. She's utterly boring. She's not so much as sneezed at the wrong time, hasn't made any big purchases, like, ever, no family, nothing. It's like she's not even real.'

'Oh yes?' said Erwin, intrigued. 'Maybe it's a deep cover.'

'If it is, it's crap. Fake identities have substance, otherwise they don't work. Anyway, this is what we have: there's this ten second romance. We swept the flat, found prints on the table. They matched ones we took from her desk at the office. She paid him a personal visit. That's it so far.'

'It'll take a while to go through the papers,' said Erwin. 'At the moment we're not sure there's anything in his private concerns that implicate him. We've found an account in the Caymans, but there's nothing illegal about it, even if it's unethical.'

'We're in the shit a bit,' said Keane. 'It'll be difficult to trace her. As long as she stays in the Schengen zone, she'll just flash her passport and walk through the boundaries.'

'But he's all we've got.'

'And she's all we've got on him. So she'll have to do.'

'We'll have to get Interpol on this.'

'No,' said Keane, at once. 'This is our jurisdiction.'

'Do you fancy a snack?' Erwin said hopefully. 'I could run to the tuck shop.'

'Nah, I'm on the Red and Green diet,' said Keane.

Chapter 15 – Flight

They were still a tangle when the sun came up. Eithe rose first, and pulled herself loose while Gerhardt stretched on the mattress until his tendons crackled. ‘Inge will be here soon, and I will take you to town.’

‘Okay,’ said Eithe, and she retreated to the bathroom.

‘Was it worth it?’ The Mirror Staring Man said as she cleansed her skin.

‘I don’t know.’

‘You know you don’t need to screw the first man you meet,’ he said.

‘Why do you care, Mirror Staring Man?’ she said, scraping at the thatch of her underarms with a half-blunt razor. ‘What’s it to you?’

‘I don’t care,’ he said. ‘It’s nothing.’

‘Right.’ She ran the razor under the tap and then turned back to the mirror, set her forefinger under one eye and drew it down. ‘I wish you’d get out of the way. I need to see what I look like.’

‘Why?’

‘I want to put some makeup on.’

‘That’s okay, I’ll tell you if you smudge.’ She gave him a sceptical look. ‘You won’t trust me?’

‘Should I?’

‘If I say yes, will you say okay?’

She sighed.

‘I promise I won’t make you draw a moustache,’ said the Mirror Staring Man, and she risked it, running kohl around her eyes with a tentative hand. She brushed at the up-tilted corner of her eye with the pad of her forefinger, blending. ‘You look fine,’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

‘Really?’

‘Yes. Freckles, philtrum and fawn skin,’ he said. ‘Everything’s still there.’

‘Fawn? I always thought it was boring beige.’

‘What about me?’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

‘Narcissist,’ she said, working on the other eye.

‘Am I that beautiful?’ he said.

She imagined Narcissus, polished, gilded, his muscles still under shining skin, face duplicated, nose to nose, lip to lip in clear, unpolluted, unmoving water. She looked at the

Mirror Staring Man, with his mossy chin and grey visage, and did not know how to lie.

‘He was vain,’ she said. ‘And selfish.’

‘I’m not vain.’

‘Actually,’ said Eithe, and she put down the eye pen, ‘you don’t look great.’

‘Thanks.’

‘No, really. You look ill.’

‘Describe it,’ he said.

‘You are very thin,’ she said, ‘and your skin looks a bit yellow. There’s dark around your eyes, and the veins are showing through like little blue worms.’

‘You are a poet, Eithe, but stop moving your mouth and put some lipstick on it.’

When she finished, she showed her teeth so he could check them for smears of red. She looked troubled as she put her makeup back in its pouch.

‘What?’ he said.

‘Narcissus drowned,’ she said. ‘He forgot all about his thirst, food, drink and sleep, and about everything except himself. Someone should have pulled him back, away from the water.’

‘Go.’

For an instant, the Mirror Staring Man’s control failed and he looked fragile and cold. But Eithe didn’t catch the lapse or the smirk he quickly marshalled into place, helped by the smudge of powder left on her temple. She was already turning to leave the room.

Gerhardt wiped the makeup off with his thumb before they set off. ‘Why did you come here?’ he said, as they walked across the white bridge.

‘Oh, just to get away,’ she said as the path bottlenecked, cramped with stalls selling painted tiles and bangles.

‘Now look there.’ He pointed. ‘Do you see the vine fields? The Würzburg region yields a golden wine. Tomorrow I will have you try a glass.’ The road twisted up the hill.

‘There,’ he said, ‘that is the Residenz.’

‘I’d like to visit.’

‘It’s pretty boring, but sure.’

They walked until they halted by a set of massive gates. The building was cool stone, elegant, high and many-windowed. Thin threads of music filtered across the courtyard, plucked notes pattering like falling blossom. Gerhardt poked her gently on the nose. ‘Why do you stop?’

‘Because it’s beautiful.’

When the passage of the concerto ended, Eithe bought the tickets and they walked into an empty hall which stretched out in every direction. Squat white arches supported the ceiling. At the far end, a staircase rose, split into two and flowed into the upper floor. The Mirror Staring Man slid through the marble.

Eithe's lips parted as she looked up.

'Pretty, huh?' said Gerhardt.

'Yes.'

Eithe was lost in clouds, cracks of blue sky and rays of sunlight, trying to memorise the details, the folds of cloth, the feathered head-dresses, the faces of the alabaster statues at each corner, with their biceps flexed to carry the sky. When she felt so full of colour and light that she could take no more, they toured the smaller rooms dripping with gilt and heavy hangings, and looked at the bed Napoleon once slept in. Some of the walls were still propped up with scaffolding or covered in tarpaulin.

Gerhardt looked up at the ravaged ceiling.

'What happened here?' said Eithe.

'I don't know, perhaps the damp, with the stuff of the walls lumping away.'

In the garden, fauns wrestled with putti on a sandstone balustrade. Eithe and Gerhardt followed the sweep of the stairs and passed along a shaded arbour. They found a fountain bordered by flowerbeds stuffed with orange tulips and brilliant blossoms. Eithe perched by the bubbling water, and the Mirror Staring Man watched them from each scintillating splash. Dryads and hamadryads hid in the branches of the encircling evergreens.

Gerhardt settled beside her. 'Mmm,' said Eithe. The sunlight on his skin was making his blood rise. He had a pleasant, savoury scent.

'So what's your story?'

'I have no story,' he said. 'Here I am.' The conversation lapsed. He tapped a finger on her knee. 'You worry a lot,' said Gerhardt.

'Yes,' said Eithe. '*Agito ergo sum.*'

'What do you worry about?'

'Maybe I worried about doing the wrong thing,' she said. 'So I didn't do anything at all. Now perhaps I worry that I'm too late.'

'*Torschkusspanik,*' said Gerhardt.

Eithe looked quizzical.

'You get old, you run out of time, you run out of chances.'

‘What do you worry about?’ said Eithe.

‘I do not wish for my team to be relegated.’

‘Oh,’ she said.

The flowers nodded their heads. There was a moment of quiet. In the space between their words, the water flowed. He toyed with her hair, pulling it long and letting it spring back into shape. They could have kissed then, but whatever had fizzed between them had stilled.

Chapter 16 - Spooked Quarry

In the evening, she stoked up the antique computer in the kitchen. It made a change from the tiny phone screen.

The Mirror Staring Man sounded digital and tinny from the speakers.

‘When I visited, the Residenz was in terrible disrepair,’ he said. ‘The Allies bombed it during the war and split the roof open. The rain came in and with it, the mould. Things went green. The walls began to fall away. It was quite sad, really. After the bombings, they tried to restore some of the images, but they used chemicals which ate into the walls and blistered the paint, or peeled it off and did more damage than good.’

‘See, this is the problem,’ said Eithe. ‘You never know what’s right.’

‘They did what they thought was best at the time,’ he said. ‘And now there are dedicated people still working on the building. Much was saved. The painting on the ceiling is the largest fresco in the world. The women you saw represent the continents, Africa, Asia, America and here. When you travel, you walk across Europe’s belly.’

‘Why are you telling me this?’

‘Because Gerhardt didn’t.’

‘He is actually quite dull, isn’t he?’ she laughed. ‘But good looking.’

‘Is it a bratwurst,’ the Mirror Staring Man said, slyly, ‘or mini frankfurter?’

‘Don’t be unpleasant.’

‘Will you be rounding off your evening with a bit of German sausage?’

‘Maybe, perhaps. I don’t know,’ said Eithe. ‘Shush and let me read my emails.’

Juliette replied.’

Dear Eithe,

We are well, thank you.

It is always good to hear from friends and guests: they are our family, as our family will not be so. I would say: please come back and stay with us next year, but it may be that the Rainbow will not be open. Our financial troubles are too big. Do not worry about the ring. It is my gift to you. This is the ring my mother gave to me, for a man to put on me when I married him. Perhaps I could pawn it for the hostel, but I wish for you to carry it until you can put it to a use. Your own man came to the hostel just yesterday. If you do not mind me to say, but he is very strange. He says you will meet in Würzburg soon.

Eithe felt her faint smile wither as she read the last line. Her features petrified into an unmoving configuration.

‘What is it?’

‘He went to the Rainbow,’ she said. ‘He went to the Rainbow and he’s coming here.’

She was deathly calm and methodical as she shut the computer down, went into the dormitory and began to stuff her clothes and toiletries into the case. She checked the journal, scanning the ticket pasted on to the dog-eared page, before she tucked it into her pocket.

‘Eithe, where do you go?’ said Gerhardt, as she strode into the reception to recover her coat and passport.

‘I have to leave. I’m sorry Gerhardt,’ and to the annoyance of the Mirror Staring Man, she stooped to enter his embrace and kissed the top of his head as she handed him the money. ‘This should cover the bill.’

‘Sure, sure, Eithe, but where do you go?’ he said, mystified.

‘Maybe it’s better if I don’t tell you. Goodbye.’

‘Eithe?’

But she was gone.

Chapter 17 – The Stranger

Gerhardt sat at the hatch. He faced a long night alone. The door creaked open, and the fluorescent tubes flickered. When they stabilised, they seemed weak and wan, but the shadows were richer, in defiance of the laws of light.

The stranger was tall, but his shoulders were rounded and he slouched with tiredness. He smelled faintly of sweat and he was wrinkled from long travelling. He had no luggage.

Gerhardt, a stranger to introversion, was so absorbed in thought that the stranger hammered the little clapper inside its brass shell. Gerhardt looked up. The stranger's eyes burned red-rimmed in a pale, ragged face. They roved, searching the shaded places, and they did not rest.

'Hi.'

'*Guten tag,*' said Gerhardt automatically.

'Shut up,' said Joe to the wall. The receptionist had to stop himself from recoiling. The stranger's breath was foul after five days of unbrushed teeth and black coffee taken on the move.

'Not you, sorry.'

'What's your name?' asked Gerhardt, reaching for the ledger.

'Joe. Joe King.'

Gerhardt began to smile. Joe barked, 'Don't laugh. I'm looking for someone.'

He slid a photograph across the table. Gerhardt wasn't surprised to see Eithe. They sat on a sofa and his arm was slung over her shoulders. It would have been a pleasant picture, except that, instead of resting loosely, Joe's fingers were fastened around her flesh. She was looking at him while he stared at the camera as if to say: see what I have. He had a *backpfeifengesicht*, a face Gerhardt wanted to punch.

'Stop waving your arms,' said the stranger, but he was not talking to the receptionist.

Gerhardt worked hard to control the muscles in his jaw. 'She has not stayed here,' he said, his words clipped and precise.

'Are you sure?' Joe leaned in, his slumping face suddenly tight with tension. 'No one else booked her in? Think hard.'

'We have not enough staff,' said Gerhardt. 'I am here often enough to have met every guest who has stayed here this week. I do not know who she is.' It was not quite an untruth.

‘Are you sure?’ Joe said again. Gerhardt met his eyes. It was not a nice experience. There was something wild and desperate worming in Joe's face. His pupils zipped like mayflies.

‘Yes.’

The pale eyes stopped searching the shadows and met Gerhardt's. The air sizzled. There was a nasty moment. Joe glared at him with a cocktail of suspicion and jealousy. Gerhardt did not blink.

‘Okay,’ Joe said. There was no warmth in the words. When he went away, the room seemed brighter.

‘He was lying,’ said Gemma, once they were outside. She was muffled by the night.

‘Arsehole.’

‘It has nothing to do with you,’ said Joe.

‘I'm sorry,’ she said, but her impossible silhouette, split three ways by the street lamp, did not look sorry, with its high chin and firm shoulders. ‘I'm just a romantic. Nothing should get in the way of true love.’

‘No,’ said Joe. ‘It shouldn't.’

Chapter 18 – Flowering

The carriage travelled along bridges and through the forest which closed thick and dark around the tracks. Wooden chalets with shutters, steep roofs and peeking windows grew from the ground. Then the mountains rose up, high and craggy.

‘Are you upset?’ said the Mirror Staring Man, as Eithe looked dismally out at the view. He was not trying hard to hide his pleasure at leaving.

‘There are people around,’ she reminded him.

‘Seriously,’ he said. ‘You can’t be sad.’

‘Well I am.’

‘You weren’t infatuated with him,’ he said.

‘No, but he was sweet, and he didn’t understand.’

‘Like a big stupid dog,’ he said.

‘Perhaps.’

‘Did he like being hit with a rolled up magazine?’

She cast a quick glance, but the carriage was almost deserted, with only a kid curled up under a coat, trainers sticking out, and an elderly woman with her head flopping forward. ‘As if you don’t know,’ Eithe said in an undertone.

‘I don’t,’ he said.

‘So you weren’t watching all the time.’

‘No, I wasn’t’ he said. ‘But you thought I was, and you did it anyway. Not such a good girl after all. Did you fuck him just because I told you to? That really would be sad. Was it because of the contract? If it is, I’m certainly getting my money’s worth. Bloody hell, I could have done with a PA like you. Hey, Eithe. Rub your stomach and pat your head at the same time.’ When she didn’t move, he continued, ‘Tell me, was all that stuff with the books some kind of mathematical seduction technique?’

‘I was going through the books to find you,’ she said. ‘I finished the spreadsheet in a few hours. The rest of the time I was cross-referencing dates and arrivals to see if I could find your name.’

‘Oh,’ he said, somewhat taken aback. ‘You tricked him.’ He sounded impressed.

‘You know, I think that underneath your woolly, criss-crossing, contradictory obedience, I think there’s actually a functioning mind.’

‘It didn’t work anyway.’

She wiped her nose and turned away from his face, spackled in the dirt-spattered window. She sucked in her cheeks, put her head back against the rest and closed her eyes. She feigned sleep for a moment, but then she said, 'I didn't do it to prove a point, or to get back at Joe, or even because you told me to do it. I wanted to feel it.'

'What?'

'It. What Juliette called *jouissance*.'

'Oh,' he said. 'An orgasm.'

Her eyes whipped open.

'Shhh.'

'We're on the continent. People are as likely to know what you mean by *jouissance* as orgasm. Besides, every other bugger has read 50 Shades of Shit by now.'

'Shush!' she said, scandalised, but on the edge of laughter.

The first rays of the sun were dyed by the filth on the window. The jerk of the brakes made ripples run through his surface. 'So never,' he said, 'have you ever had one?'

'No.'

'How long were you with Joe? You had him for years, and you didn't show him how to make you come?'

Eithe winced. 'It's difficult to teach someone something you don't know how to do yourself. Now I'm going to sleep.' She shut her eyes again and ersatz snores filtered across the space between them.

'Eithe?' he said. 'Keep on talking.'

'Why?' she said, muffled by her collar.

'I want to be distracted.'

But she was sinking and her breathing evolved into real snores.

When the train pulled into the next station, the sign read: *Bad Gastein*.

The exit led to a tube of white struts and corrugated metal that stretched above the main road. Her first dizzied view of the town was of cars speeding under her feet. The streak of asphalt was a pale tongue licking at the edge of dawn.

The town clumped along the left side of the road. On the right, the ground swelled and rolled and humped up until it disappeared into a bank of cloud. Mizzle settled on her hair as she entered the hotel.

Her single room was small, simple and clean. She stowed her bag under the bed, stripped off and showered. Her skin tingled under the stream of water. She didn't care

about the eyes in the mirror. When she was dressed, she switched the light off, pushed past the curtain and stepped out onto the balcony.

A fingernail sliver of silver hovered on the horizon, the moon's last wink before it set. The town was sketched in fine lines, light marking the straight edges of roofs, walls and kerbs. The mountain lurked as though it wanted to smash down like a black wave. On the other side of the road, streetlamps shone in hard white haloes.

Eithe was twitchy. She retreated from the window, sat at the dressing table and emailed Juliette.

I'm sorry to hear about your money troubles. If you want, I can look through your books. It will save you the cost of an accountant.

I am in Bad Gastein now.

Keep in touch,

Eithe.

She fidgeted. 'Go to sleep,' said the Mirror Staring Man. 'Whatever it is that's here, you have to find it tomorrow. You'll need your energy.' Then a spasm of pain passed through him.

'What was that?' she said.

'I don't know. Something's happening.'

'What?' said Eithe.

He shook with another seismic shudder, and his sallow skin blanched. There was an impact which shook his organs like balloons in a breeze. His lips were tight and his teeth barely parted as he sighed. A wash of lassitude came over him.

'Hey,' said Eithe. She rapped on the glass. 'Come back.' His eyes were rolling into the back of his head. 'Hey,' she pressed her palm to the cold surface. 'Pull back. Come on.'

'Ugh,' he said.

'Don't you drift away,' she said. 'Don't you dare go and leave me here on my own.'

'I'm here,' he said. 'I'm here, I'm here.'

Eithe sat back in the scroll-armed chair. She was breathing hard. 'Okay,' she said. 'Okay, okay.' They gazed at each other. 'How do you feel?'

‘Hollow. Something is slowly failing. My vacant tissue. It’s not just the nothing. I’m still too close to home. Got to go further.’

‘You aren’t making sense.’

‘I’m all right.’

She could see the effort it cost him to draw his attention to her and reassemble his consciousness. ‘I’ll hurry,’ she said. ‘I’ll ask the receptionist about the records.’

‘No,’ he said. ‘It doesn’t hurt anymore. You seem tired. Go and rest.’

She looked as though she was on the verge of argument, but then she nodded and took herself to bed.

Eithe drifted through the rooms of her old house.

The kitchen was quiet. The living room was quiet. The stairwell was quiet and the bedrooms were quiet. Earlier, Eithe’s dad put the radio and the television on and even set one of the clock alarms to go off, but something leaked into his ears and clogged them so that no sound got through.

She found him sitting in her bedroom, which, like every other room, still bore her mother’s touch, with fairy-tale curtains and a baby frieze around the walls. Eithe didn’t own much and she’d left little behind. The space seemed sad and empty. He too looked sad and empty, his black skin ashen and wrinkled.

She wanted to say hello, but she couldn’t speak, and even if she had, he wouldn’t have heard her. She was a phantom of a future he would never see. Lying on the bare boards beneath her bed, there was a red ribbon. Eithe’s dad picked it up. For a few moments, he sat on the mattress to breathe. He was distracted by a flicker in the dark.

A moth butted against the hot glass, showering wingdust like dandruff. Eithe’s dad watched it give itself a headache, too wrapped up in his solitude to rise and open the window. The moth whirled and tapped against the bulb. It reeled away, burned. Finally, Eithe’s father looked up as it cut a circle in the air and returned to the glass, suicidal with light.

The wings were monochrome, patterned white and black in a way which almost made sense. Eithe’s dad reached out caught it. It beat against his cupped hands, scattering fine scales and tickling his palms. He took it to the window and lifted the latch with his elbow. At the threshold, he paused. His fingers would not unlock, because his hands had let go of too many things. The moth would not settle. It fought to be free. His grasp was a trap.

He opened his hands, it sprang into the air, and Eithe went with it. She reached for him, but he shut the window before the moth could blunder back in. It flew away, leaving a trail of falling feathers like the tail of a comet.

And Eithe was left outside in the dark and the cold. She bumped against the glass, looking for the warmth and the light, but he didn't hear her and couldn't let her in.

In the morning she woke with a jolt and looked straight at the mirror.

'It's time to leave,' he said.

'No,' she said. 'I'm going to try to find your identity. Whatever it is.'

She threw back the eiderdown and grabbed her clothes, dressed and marched downstairs.

'Hi,' she said to the receptionist. 'I'm trying to find out if a specific person stayed here about ten years ago. Can I have a look at the records?'

But the receptionist, a young woman, valued her job and knew about privacy law and data protection, and she refused. No amount of persuasion could budge her, and when the Mirror Staring Man, whispering through a silver ballpoint pen, suggested a bribe, Eithe gave up in disgust and returned to her room.

'I'm not doing that,' she said, and to her surprise, the Mirror Staring Man agreed.

'I think we should stop looking through hostel records,' he said. 'They won't go back that far and even if they do, no one else would be stupid enough to let you search through them.'

Instead, Eithe re-checked the journal, smoothed out the time-yellowed ticket and peered at the details. It was for the Felsentherme mountain spa.

She hadn't thought to pack swimwear during her mad dash from the house, but they let her in anyway and gave her a robe which she put over her bare skin. She prowled past steamed glass and pools full of screaming, splashing children hurling themselves from diving boards. The floor was blood temperature and the air was humid. She reached the top level. As she walked through the upper complex of hot tubs and cold pools, an attendant came up and tweaked her sleeve.

'No robe,' he said.

Eithe retreated to a changing room to remove the garment.

'Brave,' said the Mirror Staring Man. He didn't sound sarcastic.

'Well, we have to check everywhere.'

She walked, awkward as a wading bird, past a woman vigorously towelling her buttocks and a chubby man whose smug belly bulged above two little hazelnuts and a cashew.

The last set of stairs led to the outside world. Eithe gasped as the mountain air hit her clammy flesh and chilled her until she puckered. She forgot her shame and bolted for the outdoor pool and wallowed into the water. At once, the geothermal heat penetrated her flesh and she breathed more easily. The liquid covered her like a slick blanket.

The Mirror Staring Man's reflection fluctuated in the water. His face looked as though it was wrapped in plastic. 'Nothing,' he said. 'There's nothing here. No reminders.'

Eithe had nothing to say. She looked across the mountainside, over the saw-tooth jag of the trees, into the far distance. 'How are you feeling?' she asked, eventually.

'Desperate.'

'So am I,' she said, into the foam. 'So am I.' She lay back against the side, lifted her legs and let herself float. Her toes rose out of the water. 'Beige,' she said, with disgust.

'Who told you that?'

'Joe.'

'He was right,' said the Mirror Staring Man.

'You are a dickhead.'

'Do you know the colour of the light of the universe?'

'No'

'The astronomers thought it was mint green,' said the Mirror Staring Man. 'But it isn't. They miscalibrated their instruments. It's beige.'

'Mmm.'

Eithe stretched sumptuously.

'Maybe Gerhardt did you good,' the Mirror Staring Man said, his voice coming grudgingly from the misted tiles. She sloshed the lukewarm water gently with her twirling fingers.

'Why's that?'

'You're not so prudish now.'

'Oh,' she said. 'No. I suppose you don't really count.' He didn't reply, but for an instant the hurt was visible on his face. Her words smote him. 'Back home, the narcissi will be out by now,' said Eithe, mollifying. 'Why did you stare into the mirror? Was it because you were handsome?'

'I don't really want to talk about it.'

‘Tell me,’ she said.

‘Don’t make fun of me,’ he said.

‘I won’t.’

‘For as long I saw myself I felt—’ He stopped. She tapped the tile to prompt him. ‘Real,’ he blurted. Eithe saw the skin under his stubble flood pink. ‘As though I had worth. I used to have value.’

‘You still seem to have a high opinion of yourself.’

‘Not arrogance,’ he said, and for the first time he seemed if not ashamed, then at least self-conscious. ‘Value is different to vanity.’

‘Ah.’

He grimaced with embarrassment. ‘I suppose it was something I couldn’t find in other people.’

Eithe laughed. She couldn’t help it. ‘I understand,’ she said. ‘I’m lonely too.’

The Mirror Staring Man let himself lap against her.

‘Eithe,’ he said. ‘You don’t have any scars.’ She looked startled, and he pulled away. ‘I should have drowned that before it came out,’ he said. ‘It’s a weird thing to say. I don’t know why I said it.’

Eithe stopped his almost-apology dead when she said, ‘He never broke the skin.’ The mist rolled down the mountain. The air went grey. The sun sank, its circumference frilled by the mountain ridge. Eithe’s breathing generated little rings in the water, the edges tipped with borrowed light. She could feel the mist coruscating at the back of her throat.

‘Oh, Eithe. I didn’t mean that,’ the Mirror Staring Man floundered. ‘I mean there isn’t a mark on you anywhere. No scuffed knees or cat scratches or chicken pock marks or anything. You are smooth. How do you go through life without being marked by it? It’s as though you’ve only just been born. Well, not exactly. Obviously your body...’

Eithe took pity on him.

‘My feet are getting calloused,’ she said. ‘Especially after today.’

‘If I could, I’d rub them,’ he said.

She kicked at the surface until it lathered, and he laughed from the iridescence of a thousand bubbles.

‘Maybe toughening up isn’t a bad thing. It’ll give you more definition, make your edges harder. You shouldn’t let other people shape you. Have you ever heard the one about the horse assembled by a committee? It comes out looking like a camel. All wrong.’

‘Yes,’ said Eithe. ‘But which would you rather be at the track and which would you rather be in the desert? Maybe it’s okay not to be fixed, as long as you can choose the shape that’s best at the time.’

‘Well,’ he said, through foam. ‘Things are changing.’

Eithe rested her head against the marble.

Chapter 19 – Eavesdropping

Joe sat in the soulless bar of the businessman's stopover. He was angry, too angry to engage with his coma-stricken companion's sporadic attempts at conversation.

The girl at the bar was stupid. He found himself speaking loud and slow, stabbing his finger on the menu and miming the twist and crick of a ring-pull. The money he handed over was Monopoly cash. He swallowed the ball of burning fury in his throat and told himself it was fate, that he and Eithe would meet further down the line. He would never give up. Joe was no linguist, so he didn't know the German word *liebestod*, but it was a perfect fit for his fantasies. He wanted to keep her and love her for the rest of his life, and hers, and if that was only possible by killing them both, then that was what he would do.

He checked his phone again, again and again. What if she flew home? He wanted to be sure he was still on her trail, so he phoned the police back in England.

'I want to report a missing person,' he said, when they picked up. 'It's my fiancée, her surname is Dord. She vanished six days ago. I think she was drunk. She doesn't drink. I phoned her work and they said she hasn't been in. It's not like her. She's very methodical, very set in her ways. She keeps a strict routine. She's a bit, you know, vulnerable. She has mental problems.'

'At first I just thought she was stressed about the wedding and had gone away to think, but I read about the woman, the one who was attacked in her flat. I'm really worried something has happened to her.'

The woman on the end of the line was sympathetic and took down the details. As he closed the call, the waitress put a plate down in front of him. He eyed the mess in an orange sauce. His teeth bounced off the tough flesh as he chewed. It could have been offal, connective tissue, the gristly end of a bone or a bottom feeder from around a volcanic vent.

Gemma was still talking when he went to bed. He lay down and, with the shadow so close to his ear, it was hard to ignore her. 'And anyway, why did you learn sign language?' she said.

'I volunteered at a centre for people with disabilities,' he said. 'Before I went to university.'

'That's nice,' she said.

'I wish more people thought that,' he said. 'Most people told me it was pointless.'

'They're just jealous,' said Gemma. 'They don't have the motivation or imagination. You shouldn't be so sensitive.'

‘People laugh at me,’ he said. ‘They always have.’

‘I don’t think you’re funny,’ she said.

‘Even my family laughed at me,’ he said. ‘Or at least, he laughed and they did nothing to stop him.’

‘Who?’

‘Mr King, when I was little.’

‘There was nothing you could have done,’ said Gemma, who was not given to pointless retrospection.

‘I know.’

‘Come here,’ said Gemma, moved by his little-boy distress, and she wrapped him in a shadowy hug.

Joe tolerated the spectral touch for a few moments and then pulled free.

He hesitated over the light switch. If he kept it on, he was afraid Gemma would sweep her arms around him again and babble her horribly cheerful chatter right into his ear. But if he turned the light off, his whole world would be steeped in shadow, and he might never escape. It reminded him of his childhood agonies, when he lay with a full bladder, too afraid to go to the toilet because of an imagined hand creeping out from under the bed to grasp his ankle.

‘Is something wrong?’ she said.

‘Where have you been, the last few nights?’ he said. ‘Have you been in the dark behind the door, or inside the wardrobe, or down the plughole?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘I’m not anywhere. I can’t see, but I know when it’s morning, because the world comes back. You come back. Will you leave the light on for me? I get so scared when everything disappears.’

‘No,’ he said and switched the light off.

She weltered in the black.

In the morning, at a dry, bread-heavy breakfast, he checked the phone again. Gemma was softly sobbing, stretched across the tired carpet.

The fork dropped as he bolted for the door, leaving the meal uneaten. He hauled the shadow with him.

Chapter 20 – Helping with Inquiries

At dawn the next day, Eithe was woken by the ringing telephone. Dazed, she reached for the smartphone, but it didn't matter how many times she swiped the screen, the sound kept coming. Eventually she lifted the old Bakelite receiver, dropped it, retrieved it and then said, 'Yes?'

'*Fräulein?* Hallo?' said the receptionist. 'There are some people here to see you.'

She said, 'Okay,' but she didn't put the phone down.

'People,' said the Mirror Staring Man. 'Not a person. Maybe not him. Ask what they look like.'

'What are they like?' she croaked.

'A woman and an older gentleman.'

'Okay.' She pulled her clothes on over her pyjamas and went downstairs without brushing her teeth. Her fingers snagged in her hair as she entered the reception area, and she had to pull them free.

'Miss Jones,' said the woman, with a sceptical lift of an eyebrow.

Some flash of self-preservation stopped Eithe from saying 'Who?' Instead, she went, 'Okay.'

'I'm Detective Inspector Keane.'

'And I'm from the Serious Fraud Office,' said Erwin. 'I'm not with the police. I'm an investigator. I do what you do, sort of, but in reverse. It's numerical forensics.'

'We would like to have a little chat with you,' said Keane, cutting in before her colleague embarrassed himself. She flipped her ID wallet open and shut.

'Oh shit,' said the Mirror Staring Man, from the whites of the policewoman's eyes.

'Please come with us.'

There was a driver waiting outside. Eithe hesitated at the car door. Maybe Detective Inspector Keane would press her head down as she entered. Perhaps there weren't any handles on the inside. But instead, the policewoman just sat in the front passenger seat and waited.

'Get in the car,' said the Mirror Staring Man from the window. 'You can't run for it. Just – when they interview you, hold the ring to your ear and listen to me.'

'Okay,' said Eithe. The SFO accountant didn't seem to notice, but Keane shot her a sharp look.

It was a normal car. Eithe could have slipped the seatbelt, opened the door and rolled out if she'd needed to, but she wouldn't have known the first thing about running from the law. 'My train is in two hours,' she said. Keane showed no sign of having heard, but Erwin gave her a sympathetic smile as the car rolled forward.

They took her to the small police station, and signed her in as Miss Jones at the front desk. The interview room was sparse. There was no two-way mirror. There was only a table, a telephone and three chairs. Keane indicated the lone chair. Eithe sat down, and Erwin settled on the opposite side of the table. But Keane stood and, for a few seconds, she simply stared at Eithe, appraising her. A girl, she thought, with big eyes and fear in her. But it could be an act.

'You aren't Miss Casey Jones,' she said.

'Admit it,' said the Mirror Staring Man.

'No,' said Eithe. 'I'm Eithe.'

'Dord.'

'Yes.'

'So why do you have a card saying Jones?'

'Ask them if this is an official interview. Ask them if you are under arrest,' said the Mirror Staring Man.

'Am I under arrest?' said Eithe.

'No,' said Keane. The unspoken 'not yet' was buried in the pause she left before adding, 'You are just helping us out.'

'Ask how you can do that.'

'How can I help you?' Eithe said, politely. Under the table, she rubbed the knuckles of her free hand against the wood until they hurt.

'You can tell us the truth.'

She didn't wait for the Mirror Staring Man to tell her what to say.

'Whatever he said I did, I didn't,' she blurted. 'He just wants me to come home, that's all. And I – I'm not sure I want to. I'm not a missing person. Not exactly. I mean, you can't make me go back just because he wants me to.'

'Who's "he"?' said Erwin.

'Joe,' said Eithe. She looked perplexed. 'Isn't that why you're here?'

'The fiancé,' said Keane. 'No. He's not why we're here. We're here about a friend of yours. You're using his card. A conveniently common surname, an ambiguous given name. Could be a man, could be a woman.'

‘He gave me the PIN,’ said Eithe. ‘I didn’t steal it.’ She heard the Mirror Staring Man groan.

‘Miss Dord,’ said Erwin, gently. ‘We’re not accusing you of anything. We have footage of you talking to a man in a railway station. We have your prints at a key location. If necessary we could do a DNA test, but we’re pretty sure we can pin you to the place.’

‘Is he in trouble?’ asked Eithe.

‘Not exactly,’ said Erwin, choosing his words carefully. ‘At the moment we’re just trying to draw on some leads. We know his flat was purchased by the company, and he leases it for a peppercorn rent, like a few of his colleagues. We know he works for the company. But things are a little muddled right now. We suspect that a number of instances of high level fraud have been carried out at the company, and one of the managers, who has disappeared, by the way, shredded a lot of the documents, including employee files. A number of people have gone missing. We checked all of the company-owned flats. Your prints were found in one. We are presuming it belongs to whoever is bankrolling you through that account. And that person is the man you were talking to at the station.’

‘Eithe,’ said the Mirror Staring Man, a quiet but emphatic warning in her ear. She nodded.

‘He may not be implicated in the fraud, but we believe he will have information somewhere that could lead us in the right direction.’

‘You might be wondering why we haven’t just interviewed him,’ said Keane.

Eithe did not know how to respond.

‘He is currently – indisposed,’ said Erwin.

‘He’s dying,’ said the policewoman, flatly.

‘What is his name?’ said Erwin.

‘I don’t know,’ said Eithe. Her ears began shrill with a constant, piercing noise, like the sine tone from the TV test card that had scared her at 3am when she was a child. The paste diamond stayed silent.

‘We need to know,’ said Erwin. ‘Somebody went through his personal documents and destroyed every one of them – insurance, car information, bank details, everything with his name on. The doctors can’t access his medical records, as they don’t have his details, so there’s no way of knowing if there is a degenerative condition contributing to the organ failure.’

‘Organ failure,’ said Eithe. Her voice was dull. She felt as though the room was filling up with water.

‘So you see,’ said Keane, from very, very far away. ‘It’s not just the investigation. It’s him as well. If you have any information, any at all, you have to share it.’

‘Ask them if they have a warrant to keep you here,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. He sounded bruised. ‘Ask them if you can leave.’

‘I don’t know his name,’ said Eithe. ‘He’s just someone I bumped into. He asked me to go to his flat to do him a favour. So I did. But I couldn’t help him. I just couldn’t. I can’t.’

‘That’s it?’ said Keane.

‘I’m sorry. Do I have to stay here?’

The policewoman stood, the chair grinding against the floor.

‘I will give you our details,’ she said. Every part of her, the drawn muscles in her neck, the control of her words, spoke of deep frustration. ‘If anything occurs to you, anything at all, let us know straight away, whatever time it is.’

‘Shake their hands,’ said the Mirror Staring Man, and Eithe obeyed automatically.

There was no suggestion of a lift back to the hostel and the bus was late. By the time Eithe cleared her room, she had missed the train to back Munich. She paced back and forth through the lobby as she waited, unaware of the receptionist trying not to stare too openly at her, until the Mirror Staring Man lost his temper and shouted, ‘For God’s sake, just go for a walk.’

Chapter 21 – Brief

Erwin was filling in the paperwork when his colleague cleared her throat.

‘We will have to keep an eye on her,’ said Keane. ‘She might have more to do with this than she thinks.’

‘You’re not going to freeze the account.’

‘No,’ said Keane. ‘We can use her transactions to trace her. Christ knows how many other little troves he has hidden away. We don’t want them tapping an untracked account. This way we’ll have her on a long leash.’

This Americanism sounded right to Erwin. It almost made up for the lack of doughnuts.

Chapter 22 - Men in the Mist

Eithe followed the struts of the cable car over ground spongy with recent rain. It was early in the year but the snow had left the lower slopes. Little snaking tracks had been worn in the russet dirt, and her feet found them naturally. Unseasonal alpine flowers grazed her legs as she walked, and the dew soaked the ankles of her jeans. Maybe Joe was right about climate chaos, she thought, in a disconnected way. She walked through dew and mud, slipping on the slick scrub and scrambling over rocks and tussocks. The cable cut a straight black line across the white firmament. The trees closed, flanking the skyway. Eithe found herself picking between stumps and felled logs. When she looked up, she gazed into cloud. The air she sucked in was wet. The crunch of her footsteps on pine needles sounded very far away. She couldn't hear birdcall or any animal sounds. She was walking in nothing.

The cable, half way between the supporting struts, sagged low to the ground. A cabin clanked overhead.

'I'm going to ride the mist,' said the Mirror Staring Man.

Eithe walked on in silence, and he followed her in the millions of microscopic droplets floating in the air. He looked almost real. Sometimes other shapes in the mist looked like people. The rocks became hunched backs and the wind-battered saplings became standing figures with skeleton arms.

'Do you remember where you work?' she asked.

'No,' he said.

'What was the company?'

'I don't know.'

'You do.'

'No.'

'Tell me.'

'It was a bank,' he said. 'A big bank.' And when he told her the name of the bank, she was not surprised.

'Did you take part in the fraud?'

'Alleged fraud,' he said.

'I suppose you just can't remember,' she said bitterly.

The Mirror Staring Man scrambled for an excuse, and when one didn't come, he attacked instead.

'*NO!*' he said, a million massed molecules speaking in unison. His voice reverberated like localised thunder.

Eithe did not quail. 'You can't hit me,' she said, unperturbed. 'I'm not afraid of you. But I think you are afraid of something. Please tell me what it is.' Her quiet, dignified words hobbled his anger.

'The witch in Würzburg was right,' he said. 'They were right. It's killing me. Human beings aren't meant to live asunder.' The mist swirled. 'And what then?' he said, as quiet as rolling tears. 'Ask me what's the worst thing about it all.'

'Tell me,' she whispered.

'There is nothing I can do about it on my own. Nothing at all. That it is down to you. It is your choice. I have never relied on anybody, ever. And now I am powerless. You have to save me. You, who can't make a choice to save your own life!'

His words were a torrent of rage, but she stood, her lips taut and her face stricken, and they subsided. 'I'm going to the hostel,' said Eithe. 'I'm going to get my stuff. Then I'm going to the station.'

She staggered, her mind pressed flat with panic. Disorientated and white-blinded, she fumbled on for what felt like a century. The ground was soft with mulch, but pitted with pine cones and pebbles. The Mirror Staring Man billowed out behind her like a cloak.

There was a man in the trees.

He was staring at them with such a terrible intensity that there could be no doubt who he was. He peeled out of the branches like a ghoul, murder on his mind. He moved easily – the mist blurred his shadow so it barely dragged his feet.

'Eithe, he's here,' said the Mirror Staring Man. 'To the right.'

Eithe's head whipped round and saw the silhouette, grey against white, a flicker in the fog.

She started to run.

Eithe was not a natural athlete. She did not move with grace. Her lanky legs were loose with dread and she blundered down the slope, sliding on the slippery grass. Joe, despite his lean form, was strong and fuelled by fury, and he was closing the ground between them. She wasn't breathing properly, sobbing with fear, her lungs starved of oxygen.

She keeled over, chest heaving.

'Carry on,' said the Mirror Staring Man. 'Keep going. He's coming after us.'

'Can't,' she said, between gasps.

‘You have to,’ he said.

She forced herself up, ribs red and screaming with stitch, and ran.

‘One, two, three, four,’ she panted, and she found her rhythm. ‘One, two, three, four,’ and slowly, slowly, she drew away. Joe carved a tunnel through the water droplets, his hair flying, his face fixed.

‘There’s a cable car station just down there,’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

‘No,’ Eithe rasped. ‘No time.’

‘If you don’t, he will.’

So she jinked and dodged as Joe receded into the bank of cloud, still there, still chasing. She turned abruptly left and hammered into the yawning mouth of the station. She paused at the booth, her knees quivering, her fingers fumbling as she counted the coins.

‘Don’t buy a fucking ticket!’ screamed the Mirror Staring Man. ‘Just jump the gate!’

Eithe ignored him. ‘All the way down,’ she said to the girl at the desk, who printed off the pass with infuriating slowness. Eithe glanced over her shoulder and took the ticket as the girl posted it through the turntable.

The machine slurped it into the slot and spat the ticket back out. Eithe grabbed it and rammed at the turnstile, which jammed and then, mercifully, cycled her through. She jumped into the first cab and the door ground shut, just as Joe slid past the ticket booth like an oiled fish and leaped the gate.

The car swung into the air.

She crouched against the plastic seat, facing the decline. The car juddered as it passed one of the cable supports, but Eithe didn’t even notice. She looked back in time to see Joe’s face appear at the window of the following car.

‘Stay down,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘He won’t be able to see you.’

Joe watched her every second of the descent, but Eithe ignored the prickles on the back of her neck and held the Mirror Staring Man’s gaze. Her chest heaved.

The cable lowered her into the bottom station and Eithe scrabbled at the door, bolting out of the box, straightening from her crouch. She heard raised voices behind her as she fled, and risked a backward glance.

A ticket attendant had his hand on Joe’s chest, and Joe was gesticulating furiously.

She put her head down and sprinted helter-skelter to the railway station. There were two trains, one at each platform, and she took the furthest, dragging herself over the bridge

and plunging into the queue. Once in the carriage, she pressed herself flat against the upholstery and prayed for the wheels to move.

Joe arrived on the platform, his fine paid, and shoved his way on to the nearest train. He loped down the aisle, his eyes flicking from side to side, but they met unfamiliar faces. And Eithe saw him pass by, less than two metres between them.

‘Shit, shit, shit, shit,’ she said, and grabbed an abandoned newspaper and used it as cover.

Joe swept from one end of the train to the other, clambering between the seats, catching people glancing blows with his hands as he pushed from headrest to headrest. He left a wake of disgruntled passengers behind him as, realising his error, he swore, exited and took the steps of the bridge in threes.

The resonance of the engine fell to a bass snarl. Eithe heard the warning ring as the doors locked and then he was at the window. They were eye to eye on either side of the glass. The Mirror Staring Man overlaid the other man’s features, so Eithe saw two faces, one sick, the other savage.

Joe slammed his fists on the side of the train in frustration, but drew back as it started to move.

Chapter 23 – Chase

Joe took the next train going in the same direction.

‘Why were you running? You can talk to me if you want. It’s good to get things off your chest,’ said his shadow. ‘You can trust me. You know how you can trust people only as far as you can throw them? Well don’t weigh anything, so you can throw me quite far.’

He didn’t hear her.

‘There was someone else on the mountain,’ whispered the wisp. ‘Someone else. Not you. Someone somewhere else, someone not – not entire. Not whole. And he’s angry.’

His knuckles were hard on the shoulder of the chair in front, and he stared straight ahead, into the future that lay out of sight, where the rails carried over the rim of the world. He was racing his fate against Eithe’s chance. The wheels pelted on.

Chapter 24 – The Surface Tension of Cold Water

The train to Salzburg was full, so Eithe and the Mirror Staring Man couldn't speak. And, when they transferred to Zurich, the sheer enormity of the main hall aborted any conversation. Eithe sat down on the shiny floor and put her back against the wall. She stared at the moving lights of the Nova as a quarter of a million people filed past her. None of them showed any interest in the huge LED array as it morphed and pulsed.

'Eithe, do you want to talk?' said the Mirror Staring Man. 'I don't want to be quiet right now. I have to talk or I'll just keep thinking about... things. Bad things.'

But Eithe's brain was closed for business.

'How could he possibly have known where we were? You haven't told anyone where you are going. The only map we have is my journal. The only plans we make are the online bookings, and they're ad-hoc— Hmm.'

A commuter thrust a magazine into a recycling bin, but it was full and the wadding of news slid on to the floor. On the front cover, Barak Obama lifted a hand in salute. The American president looked thin and his hair was a fresh fall of snow on asphalt. It looked like it was sticking. The Mirror Staring Man cleared his throat.

'That must mean a lot to you,' he said. 'That he was brought back in.'

'Why?' said Eithe.

'Because he's, you know, mixed, like you...'

Eithe said nothing.

'Don't bluescreen on me,' The Mirror Staring Man said. 'Not now.'

'You're wanted,' said Eithe, because she didn't want to think about the other thing. 'Did you know about the fraud?'

'Maybe I did. I don't remember.'

'What did you do,' she said. 'Really, what did you do?'

'I used to work with the big commercial banks, maximising their investments.'

'You were a speculator. Why didn't you tell me that?'

'We aren't exactly a popular species at the moment, Eithe. I didn't want to risk alienating you before we'd made the contract.'

'I read your finances. You did pretty well out of it.'

'Yes.'

'You gambled.'

'An informed gamble.'

‘That you lost, that left you in debt, and then you were given hundreds of billions of pounds of public money.’

‘It wasn’t just me. It was a failure of the system.’

‘And you still have your flat, and your car, and your credit cards, when I couldn’t afford a mortgage after years of study and work.’

‘Yes,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. It wasn’t an apology or an admission of guilt.

‘The police probably shut down your accounts. So why does the Casey Jones card still work?’

‘It doesn’t link to a British bank,’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

‘Offshore,’ said Eithe.

‘It’s legal.’

‘So you’re a tax dodger as well. You take and you give nothing back.’

Her tone held synthetic disgust and recycled rage. It wasn’t real. Eithe lapsed back into standby mode as she picked up her bags, bought a ticket to anywhere and climbed onto another train, sitting mute until it reached the end of the line.

Interlaken sprawled pretty and lazy in its mountain seat. Eithe paid a euro to vomit in the station toilet, and then she sat at a bus stop in a wide open square and watched water fold over a stone plinth. Shoppers ducked in and out of the hypermarché, laden with bulging bags. The mountains were immense teeth grinding up from the ground, sharply defined against the cyan sky. The clarity of their form was shockingly beautiful.

The place made her nervous, with its wide streets and sparse population. She couldn’t hide behind the bulk of buildings or in the bustle of a crowd. She joined a queue. ‘What are you waiting for?’ said the Mirror Staring Man, from behind the bus shelter graffiti.

‘The bus.’

‘He won’t have followed you here.’

‘I can’t stay,’ she said, afraid someone would remember her height, her hair, her skin. A bus pulled up and she swung herself through the hydraulic doors.

The sun strobed as it shone between scrubby little trees. Between the skinny trunks, she spotted the glitter of water and disembarked. In the distance, mellow-brown cattle mowed the short grass. She heard the clunk of the cow bells. The water lapped against the little stones on the shoreline. The surface was smooth. She approached the edge of the lake as though she was going to stride straight into the water.

A fibreglass kayak was beached on the shingle. It hadn't been used for a long time, autumn leaves had fallen into the foot well. Eithe glanced around but there was nobody to be seen. She shrugged her coat off and dropped it on to a rock.

'What are you doing?' said the Mirror Staring Man. Horrible chemicals pulsed through her blood as she tipped the boat to drain out the water. 'Eithe, have you used one of these before?'

'No,' she growled, as she pushed it out to the brink.

'Then don't use it now. It might not float.' She put a foot in the cockpit and the little boat dipped, pulling her off balance. 'Eithe,' he said, as she wobbled, risking her second leg. 'Don't fall in. The water is freezing cold. It comes from the glacier. If you fall, you'll struggle, and then your legs will go numb and your mind will go numb and then your heart will go numb and stop.'

'I am already numb. Perhaps I want to stop. And that would be good for you, wouldn't it? Because then there would be nothing holding you here. You'd just twang back to your body like an elastic band, problem solved.'

She sat down and launched clumsily by thrusting her feet against the little stones in the shallows. When she paddled with her hands, she felt the chill rising from the surface of the lake. It was not water. It was ice that had decided to move.

The kayak split the surface like strange green glass. The wind smarted her cheeks and she breathed hard. When her fingers ached too much to carry on, she wiped them on her trousers and slumped back against the low backrest. The sky was a blue-and-white bowl.

Eithe floated.

'You were so strong on the mountain,' he said.

'I can't do this,' she said, piteously. 'You're dying, and only I can stop it, and I don't know how, or why, or anything.'

The Mirror Staring Man said, 'Well, you have to learn how. You handed your life over to someone else so it wouldn't be your fault when things went wrong, and now that's backfired, and you don't know how to deal with it. Maybe he isn't out to get you,' he continued, relentlessly. 'Perhaps he's just angry and when he sees you, he won't put poison in your drink, or beat you until your bones splinter, but you don't know.'

'In fact, maybe that's the right idea. Murder roulette. It would save you the choice. He'd kill you and I'd go back, and everything would be sorted out. And it's not like you'd

notice being dead. You're like Teflon, Eithe. Life doesn't stick to you. It just slides right off. God, I want to shake you, but I haven't got any goddamn hands.'

'Yes,' she said, in a very small voice. 'You're right.'

'Why?' he said. 'Why are you like that?'

'I don't want the consequences,' she said, between her teeth.

'There are always consequences, Eithe,' he said. 'Always. Life is a fight, and you can dodge, or run or hit back, or you can stand there and get punched in the face. That's it.'

Eithe wondered what it would feel like to sink down to the pebbles and mud at the bottom. It would be like lying on a freezing bed, she decided, with a mattress that would slowly suck you down and hold you and close over your head. For a cold instant, the idea was appealing.

'I don't want to be alone anymore,' she said.

The boat circled. The breeze died until the surface was smooth. 'Eithe,' said the Mirror Staring Man, his voice like the slap of liquid on the hull.

'I can see right through you,' she said. 'You're only as solid as a dream, only as deep as the skin of water.'

'Yes.'

'Do you ever dreammember?' said Eithe.

'I don't know. What is that?'

'It's when you recall something, but you don't know whether it is a memory or a dream, or some mixture of the two. Joe and I used to talk about them all the time. I dreammember two things most often. My mother dying and my dad dying. It can't be a memory, because I wasn't there for either of them. I was in an incubator in another room when my mother died.'

Eithe was a clench of tormented flesh.

'It's just a dream then,' said the Mirror Staring Man, but she shook her head.

'My dad sat me down and told me he'd never made a decision without my mother. She was very sick with pre-eclampsia. She believed in the sanctity of the body and its capacity for healing. And she hated doctors. She wanted an entirely natural birth, so she never went for a check-up. And then something went wrong and they had to tear me out of her belly, but by then it was too late. She had a haemorrhage.'

'Dad didn't tell me how I got my name for ten years, although I asked every day. When people asked, I said it was short for Ethiopia. Then I told him about the nightmare I kept having, and he was horrified, because it was so like it was.'

‘He wanted to name me, but she couldn’t speak through the oxygen mask, so they gave her a pencil and a pad. She didn’t know whether I was going to be a girl or a boy, so she started writing ‘either’, but she wasn’t able to finish before they took her into theatre. My dad kept her final message and named me from it. Eithe—’

Eithe rolled onto the backrest and looked up at the clouds.

Her hands still hurt, so she opened her shirt and thrust them inside. They felt as dead as frozen meat under her breasts. She followed the draw of cold across her ribs and she went into her body. The cold scathed her nostrils and the tender skin inside her nose. She held her breath for as long as she could, until she felt the grey drought inside her chest and then she had to gasp. The pull of her diaphragm was uneven.

It would be so easy. All she would have to do was tilt her hips and she would smash through the Mirror Staring Man and spill into the water. Perhaps she would shut down before her lungs started to hurt. Maybe, before the end, it would feel warm.

‘Tell me about the other one,’ he said, as if he knew what she was thinking, as if, while they spoke, she would not fall. The boat rocked like a dangerous cradle. It was a scratched and grubby white, like a shard of polar ice that had gathered dirt as it floated south.

‘I don’t want to.’

The Mirror Staring Man said nothing, but it was a waiting silence.

The peaks were huge, the sun bounced off their sugar-powder caps, and in the high distance parachutists looped through the air. Eithe did not see them. The water beneath her echoed with depth.

‘I phoned my dad the evening Joe proposed,’ she said. ‘He sounded so happy. I said I’d see him on the weekend, because I hadn’t visited for a long time.’

‘The hospital rang three days later and said they found him in his easy chair with his hand on the phone. He just put the handset down and died. He wasn’t old. Maybe his heart broke because he knew I was leaving him. Perhaps he’d been waiting for years for someone else to look after me so he could just go. He thought Joe was a good man. So did I. I didn’t know.’

‘Is that what it’s all about?’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘All the maybe-perhaps-I-don’t-know, all the fear and all the hiding?’

She said nothing.

‘Eithe, you didn’t murder your parents.’

The air played with her ponytail. Some of the cold lifted itself out of the lake and soaked into her trousers and socks. She pulled her fingers out of their covering and sat up. Little waves hit the kayak sideways on and it bobbed. The lake wasn't green-blue now. It was granite-grey and tipped with foam.

She spoke in a low voice. 'There is always a choice. Yes and no. So half the time, you will be wrong. And it's even worse if there are more. The more choices you have, the more likely it is that you will make a mistake.'

'My mother - she was a very definite person. She very definitely didn't trust medicine, so she died. Because of her choice, I grew up without her.'

'My dad told me she sliced the crusts off his lunchtime sandwiches and added a sprig of parsley every single day, and cut a fresh carnation and planted it in his tight curled hair. She met a man from abroad and married him, and brought him to a tiny village and, through the sheer strength of will, shamed the gossips because *it was rude to stare*. If she hadn't, I wouldn't be here. How did she know what she was doing was right?'

'She didn't,' he said. 'She didn't know.'

'No,' said Eithe. 'But I know about Joe. He'd forgive me if I went back to him and apologised, I know he would. Joe is lanky and raddled and stares at people a bit too long, but at least he loves me.'

The wind was whipping at the water, churning the reflected world into fragments.

'Then go back to him,' said the Mirror Staring Man.

'I realised something, listening to Juliette,' she said. 'I realised I have never been in love. Not with Joe. Not really.'

'Then tell him.'

'But how do I choose? I live with a man who damages me, who controls me and won't let me out to celebrate my own wedding, or I live alone with no love at all.' The kayak yawed and bounced over a wave. The air was waking up. 'Tell me what to do,' she said.

'No,' said the Mirror Staring Man. 'I'm not going to decide for you so whatever happens isn't your fault.'

The front of the kayak dipped into a trough. A great green wave was racing toward her. She leaned back and the little boat rose, just enough. She was wet to the waist. Her legs were useless.

Suddenly, she didn't want to be immersed. She didn't want to feel the water press her ribs into stillness. She didn't want to sink down to the point where the sun gave in and left her.

Eithe plunged her hands into the water and heaved. The surge picked her up. The kayak climbed the slope and the nose slid into the peak. Foam spurted, the droplets pricking like cold pins against her skin, but Eithe mounted the wave and all of a sudden she was over it.

The shore was a little closer, but now there was another rising wall of water, and after that another, and she didn't have a lifejacket. If she was thrown from the boat, she would fall through the Mirror Staring Man, his lucent hands grabbing and grabbing, useless as she pierced the surface and went down.

Eithe fought the wind and the waves. She would not sink and drown. She would not die in the dark. Her breath came out in great ragged gusts with every heave of her arms. Her shoulders burned and her hands were no longer there. Soon her torso was wet with sweat. Then the lake bed rose and the plastic bottom of the boat scratched against driftwood and grit.

Eithe stood up. She splashed straight through the shallows. Her stiff fingers found the red rope and she hauled the kayak up the mud, her knees shaking, fighting the way the nylon hurt her palms.

'Good,' the Mirror Staring Man said, as she panted. 'You're doing really well.' She dropped the boat and fell to her knees, dragging herself up the shingle and onto the grass. 'Take your jeans off,' he said.

'I thought you weren't going to tell me what to do,' she said through chattering teeth. She struggled with the zip, her fingers crooked like peeled frozen prawns. Her legs were mottled as she rolled them free.

'Your coat is over there. Put it on and spread the trousers on the rock in the sun. Try to keep warm.'

She did as he said and huddled beneath the material. She brought her shaking hands up so she could see the Mirror Staring Man watching her from the diamonds on the ring. 'I've lost everything,' she said. 'I left the bag in the hotel.'

She heard his words reach out as though he wanted to put an arm around her. 'You have your valuables and my money,' said the Mirror Staring Man. 'And you have me, whether you like it or not.'

‘And I have this.’ She pulled the little book out of her breast pocket. It was mostly dry. ‘I’m glad you’re here,’ she said. ‘Even if you are a liar, a thief and a cheat.’

‘Eithe, I don’t want you to kill yourself,’ he said.

‘Even if it means not finding a way back?’

‘There will be another way,’ he said.

Chapter 25 – Serious Fraud

Keane slammed the phone down and swore. The swearing went on for a very long time. Then she dialled again, for the fourth time. It took an age for anyone to answer.

‘Josh,’ she said. ‘Thank God. Why the hell did it take you so long to pick up? Oh, that bloody, bloody game. Where’s your brother? Okay. No, I’m just stressed, that’s all. Look, I love you. Give him a kiss from me. I’ll be home soon.’

She returned to the office. Some of the tension had gone from her shoulders.

‘Eithe has unlucky friends,’ said Keane, as she pulled up a chair.

Erwin, who was poring through a spreadsheet, adjusted his spectacles. He was proud of them. He’d worn them so long they’d come back into style. Privately, he hoped Keane would notice and comment on them. He knew she was in the middle of a messy break-up, possibly a divorce. But she disappointed him.

‘Her colleague is in intensive care. Coincidence?’

Erwin waited. He knew his partner well enough by now to know when she was thinking aloud and needed an audience.

‘The attack was after she left the country. So it wasn’t Miss Dord. No contact between Dord and Imai’s company and his, except the usual six degrees of separation you get in business-to-business transactions. But Dord has a small circle of acquaintances. Bit odd. Too odd. Maybe someone is trying to get to her.’

Erwin nodded and tried not to wince when his colleague’s breath atomised between them. She had abandoned the Red and Green diet while they were on the road and turned to Atkins for the short term.

‘We should bring her in. This time we’ll try to keep her.’

Chapter 26 – Dreams Undone

Joe sat in a café and stewed. He could have put out his arm and taken hold of her ponytail, but he missed by a slice of air, and she'd faded away. He thought about determinism and cause and effect. He ordered sweet black tea and regretted it, because the continentals couldn't brew a good cup.

'What are you drinking?' said Gemma.

'What I always drink,' he said.

When the cup arrived, he watched the way the leaves stained the fluid, the way the colour moved with the convection of water molecules, and he saw the work of encoded physics. He thought about picking up the spoon and stirring it but, even if he interfered, it would be because a particular set of circumstances led to him having that thought and taking that action. Everything that lay ahead of him, from singeing his taste buds because he was too impatient to let the liquid cool, to the outcome of his chase, was pre-set, predetermined, inescapable.

He knew there was something wrong with him. A normal person would not bash a woman he barely knew half to death, and a normal person would not follow his fiancée halfway across a continent. He knew this, but he couldn't stop it. Maybe it was a faulty gene, or a medical imbalance, or the fallout from his childhood, or a noxious combination of everything, Joe didn't know. It didn't matter. It meant it wasn't his fault.

'Why do you always drink the same thing?' said Gemma.

'Why do you always want to talk?'

All he'd ever wanted was a nice life with a nice wife. Next time, he promised himself, she wouldn't have the chance to get away. He picked up the cup, sipped and burned his tongue.

Chapter 27 – Crux

It was only an hour and a half on the train until they reached Bern. Even after the wide spaces of Interlaken, it wasn't an intimidatingly huge city.

Eithe's jeans were damp, so the Mirror Staring Man persuaded her to visit the Westside shopping mall, a sun-sliced building that looked as though it had been glazed by a cubist. The Mirror Staring Man appeared from various angles, exploring the world through sheet glass. They passed Tommy Hilfiger, a H&M and a Tally Weijl, an unfamiliar shop which assured Eithe through its posters that 'it's fun to be sexy!'

'Oh, come on,' he said, after her third revolution of the central galleries.

'I'm choosing,' she said and, perversely, took another ten minutes to deliberate before she bought a backpack, sensible Gore-Tex boots, combat trousers and a camo-pattern stretch top. It suited her in an unexpectedly aggressive way.

Eithe rested and breakfasted at an internet café, where she took advantage of the free Wi-Fi. It was almost empty, so she risked speaking in a low voice to the screen. 'Where next?' she said, after consulting the scrapbook. She opened the next page and found a strange memento – a tiny chip of glass secured to the paper with a thick blob of glue. It glittered with microscopic flecks of copper. It was labelled 'avventurina'. 'It's Murano glass from Venice,' said Eithe, after she searched the word.

'Ah, good.'

'You know,' said Eithe. 'Getting you back to your body might not all just be down to jogging your memory.'

'What do you mean?'

'Maybe we could go to a doctor,' said Eithe.

The Mirror Staring Man failed to repress a scornful laugh.

'Yes,' he said. 'Because of course there's a diagnosis for what I'm suffering from. A non-terminal loss of body.'

Eithe was hurt. It was the first suggestion she had made. 'Wait,' she said. 'It's not a stupid idea. Maybe not a medical doctor, but someone who knows about psychology or bodies...'

She searched keyword after keyword – out-of-body, beyond-the-body, exterior-psychology, but all it came up with was a series of websites about astral projection and the spirit world. Eithe typed 'body-mind-personality-science-Switzerland' and pulled up a web page.

‘There’s a lab here, part of the University of Bern. There’s a genetics department. If there’s someone who specialises in biopsychology or something, maybe they will be able to give us some advice. Here. There’s a doctor of behavioural genetics and neuroscience.’

‘Okay,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. He sounded enthusiastic.

They set off. The centre for genetics was a square, modernist building lurking a short way from town.

‘I’m looking for Dr Danem Kapoor,’ she said to the receptionist.

‘On what business?’

‘It’s to do with his research,’ said Eithe. ‘I only need a few moments.’

‘Are you a student?’ said the woman.

‘I’m writing a paper,’ Eithe lied.

‘I will contact him. Please sit.’

Eithe sat for a very long time. She browsed through a stack of magazines, but most of them were in German and the English-language editions were impenetrable. Finally, the doctor emerged, walking swiftly with a lab coat over his arm.

‘I am Dr Kapoor. Do I know you?’ he said.

Eithe loomed over him. He was a short man, but powerfully built at the shoulders and younger than she’d expected, with curious brown eyes and neat close-cropped hair. ‘I’m Eithe,’ she said, shaking his hand. ‘I just have one question.’

‘I am very busy.’

‘Please,’ said Eithe. ‘I’ve come a long way to speak to you. I’ll be quick, Dr Kapoor. I’ve been told that you’re doing research into genetics.’

‘Very busy,’ he said, and he turned to go. Eithe followed.

‘I was hoping for some information,’ she said. ‘I’m looking into the effect of biology on choice and will.’

He swept around a corner and into a corridor lined with a bank of windows. The floor tiles were highly polished. The Mirror Staring Man was reflected on all sides, but the scientist hadn’t noticed. ‘Much of my work is unfinished,’ he said. ‘I am not ready to discuss it.’ He paused in his stride and reached for a door handle.

‘Wait,’ said Eithe.

‘Stop,’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

The scientist stopped.

‘Who was he?’ he said.

‘Who?’ said Eithe.

‘The man who spoke.’

‘Me?’ said The Mirror Staring Man.

Dr Kapoor turned around in a slow, sweeping circle, scanning the corridor, which was empty of everyone but them.

‘He’s not here,’ said Eithe, apologetically. ‘It’s confusing. I can explain, sort of. Not really. I mean, I can try, but I was hoping you could help.’

‘Come, then. Sit.’

Dr Kapoor opened the door into a cluttered little room. The shelves were crammed with books, photographs of dog paws and little office knick-knacks, including a Newton’s cradle with tangled strings. On the wall there were pictures that Eithe took as incomprehensible high art, until she realised they were depictions of genetic code written out in block colours, tinted, immensely magnified amino acids and the famous double helix, twisted like a mad spiral staircase.

‘Is that human?’ she asked.

‘For the purposes of the Department, we work only on animals. Horse, dog, goat, and so on. I have my own interests, but information on the findings cannot be released. Please,’ he gestured to a seat covered in papers. He retrieved his lunch box of meatballs and rice and sat on the only unoccupied chair. ‘You are not a researcher, are you?’ he said.

‘No,’ said Eithe, carefully shifting the mountain of files onto her lap.

The doctor propped his chin on the back of his hand. ‘Or a science writer.’

‘No. Something strange happened to my friend; he was thrown loose from his body and I’m trying to help him back in, but everyone keeps talking about choice and that’s not something I know about, so I was wondering,’ said Eithe, her words running into a swift seamless whole, as though he couldn’t interrupt if only she could keep going, ‘if it’s possible to know for certain if you are making the right choice?’

For a moment, she thought he’d order her out or laugh in her face, but instead he regarded her with a sort of mild interest.

‘Where is he?’ he said.

‘I’m right here,’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

‘I do not see you. But,’ the doctor shrugged. ‘I study what cannot normally be seen. Did you know bees and reindeer can see into the ultraviolet spectrum? But humans can’t. We must use technology. People are born anosmic, or become deaf with age, or lose their sight through an accident. Perhaps I am one such and I lack a sense you possess, or an ability I once had has grown dull.’

Eithe nodded.

‘Where do you see him?’

‘In the mirror,’ said Eithe. ‘Any mirror.’

Kapoor used his index finger and the ball of his thumb to rub both of his cheeks simultaneously. Eithe saw the digits sink into his generous flesh. ‘How do you feel?’ he said.

‘Far away,’ said the Mirror Staring Man wryly. ‘The distance makes the decay hurt less. I’m dying.’

Eithe winced. Dr Kapoor tipped his head. ‘Keep talking.’

‘It’s been like this for a while,’ said the Mirror Staring Man, as the doctor stalked around the room, his ears at an angle. ‘Since before I met her. But I only started moving after she bumped into me. I was with my body until then, although it was on the other side of the glass. It was very strange. Have you ever seen yourself from another perspective – I mean a real different perspective, not a metaphorical one? You don’t look like you think you do. It made me feel ill to see it. It was like looking at a dead thing. It was total body dysmorphia. And the weirdest thing was that my body kept staring at me, at me as a reflection of it. I didn’t like it, so I’d move through the mirror, and it kept staring at the glass even though I wasn’t in it any longer.’

Kapoor listened intently, pausing now and then to dip his head toward the computer screen, then to a picture frame and then to an empty glass on his desk.

‘I couldn’t move beyond sight of my body until she came along, though,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘Then she just ploughed right into me and now I’m stuck with her, being towed along like a fucking kite. I’m constantly aware of my body behind me, although the feeling is getting fainter. And my memory – I’m stretched. I have to reach back for words, for information, sometimes.’

The doctor straightened up and addressed Eithe.

‘Madam, either you have a flawless technological system which seems to emit sound from reflective surfaces at a volume proportionate to how far away from you they are, or you are an expert ventriloquist, or you are telling the truth.’

‘She’s telling the truth,’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

Dr Kapoor sat back on his chair, his posture controlled, but his face suffused with excitement.

‘He seems to be in a state of extended consciousness,’ he told Eithe. Then, to the middle distance, he said, ‘I apologise. I will address my comments to her, as it is difficult to talk to someone who is not there.’

‘Extended consciousness?’ said Eithe.

‘Oh, he is clearly conscious, there is no question of that. He has recall, analytical ability, he reacts to conversational cues and is capable of suffering. He interacts with you and with me. He is, in short, aware.’

‘I am here you know,’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

‘He is capable of taking offence at an abstract slight,’ Kapoor continued. ‘This requires higher reasoning. And yet he is not wholly present. As for the body – he has recognised it as an almost empty vessel. What is a body without a self? Just a lump of meat. You must be more than that to fill the flesh and make it a whole human animal.’

‘In any case, he is not a free-floating consciousness, but he has extended out from his body. Thus, an extended consciousness, although perhaps extruded consciousness would be a better term, as it seems as though the length of the extension is dependent on you. You provide some sort of locus or anchor-point, it seems. I would visualise it as being like a suspension bridge, where his body provides one source of vertical suspension while you provide the other and he is stretched across each point.’

‘I will admit,’ he said, massaging his nose, ‘that foremost I am an epigeneticist, but I do have a secondary interest in cognitive neuroscience. The implications of this are interesting. You would make a great study,’ the doctor finished, to the air in general.

‘But he’s dying,’ said Eithe. ‘Why’s he dying? I’ve heard about people lying in deep comas for years!’

‘Without medical evidence, it is very hard to say,’ said Dr Kapoor. ‘But I would hypothesise one of three things. Firstly, several brain functions associated with homeostasis - regulating lung and heart activity for instance - may have relocated alongside elements of his higher consciousness. The body can only survive with these lower functions intact. Secondly, if his functions are somehow hosted in you, there may be an element of rejection, a sort of cognitive auto-immune response on your part, attacking the foreign – no, you can’t call it a foreign body – call it an alien consciousness. Thirdly, it could just be that this is a fucking weird situation and his body is in shock and it just cannot cope.’

‘How do we put him back?’ said Eithe.

‘Eithe—’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

‘I do not know,’ said the doctor. ‘I am not aware of any prior studies. But think – if he does die, it would finally provide some evidence as to whether life continues after death.’

‘What?’ said Eithe.

‘*What?*’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

‘Well,’ said Dr Kapoor. ‘On considering consciousness, I have often concluded that Descartes was wrong. We are, therefore we think. Our awareness rises from a complex mind, the mind is an electrochemical construct arising from the brain, which is part of the body. No one can think without a brain or feel without glands. You cannot have psychology without physicality. We are our body. If, in this case, the link is severed, we will be able to see if consciousness is self-sustaining. Except that,’ he tapped his fingernails against his teeth. ‘Except that if you are providing a physical anchoring point, all that will happen is the connection will break at one end and whatever remains will trail after you. Or it will invade you completely. Of course, this is all purely theoretical and quite, quite unscienti—’

‘No,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘That isn’t going to happen.’

‘So,’ said Eithe. ‘We don’t know how to put him back yet. But when we do know, I’ll have to choose what to do.’

‘Choice – that is something I can discuss. I think it interesting to investigate the biggest question of all, which is: will you?’

‘Will you what?’ said Eithe.

‘Will you anything. Have you thought about the nature of determination?’ he said. ‘What it really is?’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Really, at the bottom of it all, choice is the product of a small storm of elements and electricity. Every human brain is a thundercloud, every human gut is a laboratory, and consciousness is simply a side-effect of something manufactured by the body.’

‘Okay,’ said Eithe.

‘We produce and react to hormones, generate electrical impulses which work on our muscles and our organs and we create a mental architecture, built from linked synapses and nerve networks. These, of course, are also shaped by the world around us – experience, sensation, memory, external influences. Hunger, fear, lust, the sensation of being satiated, joy – all are the consequences of chemical release and interaction, and so is choice. Are you with me so far?’

Eithe nodded. ‘That’s very mechanistic,’ The Mirror Staring Man said.

‘But no less wonderful for it. Do you know, there is evidence to suggest that when a human being is held for more than twenty seconds, their body releases oxytocin, which causes them to become relaxed and trusting? And everybody knows about the endorphins that come after sex.’

Eithe shifted uncomfortably. ‘Do they?’ she said.

‘There was a belief, for a while, in some circles, that we were chained by our DNA. That everything was pre-determined, that we would live for only as long as our biological fate allowed. But now we are in a very exciting time. The field of epigenetics, the way in which life affects the way our genes express, is opening up.

‘But even then, we butt up against the old nature versus nurture debate. Things happen *to* us, our genes shape us. And where are we in all of that? I believe that, just as there are levels of consciousness, there are levels of choice. Some are hard-wired, some instinctive, some down to social or environmental conditioning and some levels are intellectual and conscious.

‘Currently, my personal research is an attempt to free us from the determinism of biochemistry. I want it to be possible for people to control themselves – utterly and completely. To be able to refuse or choose hate, anger, love, any time, any day.’

‘You can’t make someone love someone else,’ said Eithe. ‘Not against their will.’

‘No,’ agreed the scientist. ‘It would be unethical. But there are other applications. For instance, is it possible to be immunised against love? Or hate? It is possible to delay the uptake of serotonin to help depressed people, and it is possible to synthesise insulin, and introduce hormonal control to prevent conception.

‘Immunised against love?’ said Eithe, baffled, ‘but it’s supposed to be a good thing.’

‘Not if it’s not wanted. What if you are smitten with a colleague, or someone with whom you share a house, and you cannot avoid them and cannot forget them? In this situation would it not be good to remove the source of the problem, the unwanted feelings, for a short time, until nature takes its course and the feelings fade?’

Eithe was not sure this was a good idea. ‘But why?’ she said. ‘When we’ve loved and lost and loved again for thousands of years, and never needed any help.’

The scientist shrugged. ‘There will be a market, believe me.’ Eithe, who understood economics, bit at the tip of her tongue.

‘I have a prototype oral drug,’ said Dr Kapoor. ‘A suppressant. The problem is to make sure it is safe and effective. Testing it would involve very specific subjects. It would

be interesting to see whether the body would become accustomed to it and build up a resistance. And we need to test for side effects.’

‘Love is not our problem,’ said Eithe. ‘We need to find a way to bring my friend back to himself. Can you help?’

‘No,’ said the scientist, pushing a few grains of rice around the box. ‘To begin a study, you must posit a theory, and then gain funding for an experiment, and then it may take many years to investigate.’

‘I don’t think he’ll last that long.’

‘Then I cannot be of use to you.’

‘There is someone else I know,’ said Eithe miserably, ‘who is in love with someone who is not in love with him. He’s chasing her, and she is running away.’

The scientist regarded Eithe through intelligent eyes.

‘Is she in fear of her life?’ he said.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘But she isn’t sure what he would do to her, and she doesn’t think the police would help.’

‘Maybe it would be better if he loved her no longer.’

‘Perhaps.’

‘That I cannot help you with either,’ he said. ‘Follow me.’ He led Eithe to the door of a laboratory, where he stopped her with a raised hand. ‘Wait here.’

He disappeared into the room. Eithe heard the suck of a released vacuum and then the jingle of glass vessels. He emerged holding a small plastic canister from his pocket. It rattled as he pressed it into her hand. ‘The pills cannot leave the lab. The formula is under patent protection, so if they are illegally duplicated, we can pursue the lawbreaker. They cannot be used on a human subject.’

‘Why?’ said Eithe, as she slipped the pills into her pocket.

‘Because I believe you,’ he said. ‘And because I want to find out what happens. You cannot use them, but if they are stolen and slipped into someone’s food, or accidentally ingested by a person, I want you to call me at once. Do you understand?’

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘You do not look satisfied.’

Eithe fidgeted.

‘It’s okay,’ she said. ‘Thank you. Goodbye.’

‘Bye,’ said the Mirror Staring Man from the door handle. The doctor nodded solemnly into thin air. Eithe escaped from the corridors of academia and back into Bern.

‘Well that was useless,’ said the Mirror Staring Man, as she walked them back toward town.

‘Maybe for you,’ said Eithe, aware of the weight of the drugs in her pocket.

She booked the tickets online and made her way to the station, her new belongings packed in a rugged rucksack. They left the city two hours later, and connected with the trans-border night train to Italy. Eithe was preoccupied on the journey.

She dropped the flip-table on the back of the seat, pulled out a magazine and popped the lid off the pill container. They were small, white and featureless, and they did not look powerful enough to kill Joe’s passion.

‘Are you going to give them to him?’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

She shook a single pill out onto the table. It landed with a tiny click.

‘Maybe,’ said Eithe. ‘Perhaps. I don’t know.’

‘Well you’ll have to decide, one way or another.’

‘Why did you choose me?’

The Mirror Staring Man said, ‘I couldn’t tell you.’

‘I can’t do this on my own,’ said Eithe.

‘You aren’t on your own,’ he said. ‘I’m here.’

‘Of course,’ she said. ‘It’s the simplest sum. You are one, I am one. One plus one equals two.’ She smiled. It was a cold smile but he returned it.

‘Life isn’t an equation, Eithe,’ he said gently.

‘No,’ she agreed, under her breath. ‘It isn’t. With an equation, you can check and double check. You can rub it out if you’re wrong. You can’t do that in real life.’

‘It’s choice, isn’t it?’ he said. ‘That’s what you’re fussing over now. The doc didn’t help by giving you those pills. He just gave you one more thing to worry about.’

‘If I give him the pills and they work, I am alone,’ she said, thoughtfully. ‘But perhaps it isn’t as simple as that.’

‘No?’

‘No, because there’s another variable.’

There was a strange, strained silence.

‘And what’s that?’

‘You,’ she said.

The Mirror Staring Man’s face tightened.

‘Maybe,’ she said, dreamily, ‘I will stop searching for your identity. Maybe I’ll go back to Britain and keep you with me.’

‘What about our contract?’

‘It isn’t about that anymore,’ she said. ‘It hasn’t been for a long time.’

‘You can’t stop,’ he said. ‘I’m dying.’

‘Perhaps. And if you die, you will stay around me forever, and I’ll never have to be alone again.’

‘I’m a person,’ he said. ‘I’m not an invisible friend. You don’t even like me.’

‘I stayed with a man who hit me rather than be lonely. At least you can’t do that,’ she said.

‘Eithe,’ he said, desperately. ‘You have to keep going. You can’t just keep me.’

‘I don’t have to keep going. You can’t make me.’

She folded her hands in her lap and thought about numbers. They allowed her to enter a quiet, pale blue zone with no shadows. The Mirror Staring Man did not try to rouse her as she sat in her self-made calm, but he did mutter, ‘Just how broken are you, really?’

Chapter 28 – A Mantle of Shadows

Joe hated the red lit windows. He hated the way the women looked at him, speculating, evaluating, weighing him up. He had six hundred euros in cash, and he knew exactly what it would be spent on.

A herd of drunken stags crashed past him, beers in hand. Joe watched them resentfully. He hadn't been to a party since the week before he'd left for university, and he barely remembered that. He would like to be able to go to parties, but he was afraid to. Amsterdam was too much like a big celebration, with the sweet herb smoke and the shouting and the sloshing litres of beer.

He wasn't sure what he was looking for. He'd approached a number of suspicious-looking characters with shadowed eyes and low-pulled hoods, but to his annoyance, they'd all been polite and offered him directions to the Anne Frank house. So he let fate take his feet.

'Where are we going?' said Gemma. She was dyed ruddy by the bulbs of the bordellos, running behind Joe like a puddle of blood.

'I want to find a criminal,' said Joe.

'Why would a nice person want to talk to one of them?' said Gemma.

'I'm not a nice person.'

'You are. You learned sign language to speak to deaf people. You drink ethical tea. You worry about the world.'

Joe thought about the years he'd wasted trying to be good. He'd tried so hard. He'd changed what he ate, what he wore, how he lived and refused to buy a car. He'd boycotted everyone from Nestlé for aggressively selling formula to Third World mothers who mixed the powder with infected water, to KFC for using paper made from the ravaged rainforest. He'd campaigned, complained and refrained. He'd licked envelopes until his tongue was desert dry, courted hypothermia at protests, been knocked off his bicycle during the Critical Mass rallies and his zero-carbon commutes.

'None of it made the slightest difference,' he said.

'It did,' said Gemma. 'It made a slight difference, a little change. Little changes add up to make big changes.'

Joe thought about the stone hitting the skull.

'I am a terrible man. I have done terrible things. I'm going to do more terrible things.'

‘But why?’

‘Because I have no choice. Because there is no such thing as choice. We have no power. The only reason we think we have is because we’re too stupid to be able to understand the machine we’re living in. Everything is set. We just can’t see how until it’s happened.’

‘What happened to you?’ said Gemma. ‘Why would you think that way?’ He turned down a side-street. ‘Don’t go down there,’ Gemma berated him, her scolding sharp as high heels on cobblestones. ‘It’s dark down there. Don’t go. They’ll hurt you. I don’t want you hurt. I hate seeing people hurt.’ She sucked at his shoes, trying to slow him, so he walked like a cinema-goer across a sticky floor

The alleyway was dirty and dismal, and it was not on the beaten track. If he’d been alone, Joe might have died in it, or woken up hours later, stripped and battered on a bed of bin bags, his wallet, phone and papers stolen, with his teeth broken. Instead, Gemma saved his life.

‘Come away,’ she said, as a mother might to a toddler approaching a blazing fireplace. ‘You don’t need to do this.’

‘Yes I do.’

The men saw him before he saw them. They were conversing in a knot, but at his arrival, they squared their shoulders, and killed the conversation. They looked like crooks, with gold teeth and corded muscles. One peeled off from the little group, his shoulders wide, his hips swaggering, toward Joe. This was the kind of person he’d been searching for.

‘No,’ said Gemma, panicking. ‘No, just walk away! You want to, and you can, if you want to!’ She hauled at him, scraps of shade clinging to his arms and his hems, but she was weak. He shrugged them away and walked on. Insubstantial fingers swiped at the uncovered skin of his hands and throat, clinging, streaking across his nose and face like a pall of dark tissue. He shook himself free of the soft, trailing fronds and swallowed hard. It was up to fate, he told himself. Whether they ignored him or attacked him or sold him what he wanted, it was up to fate.

‘Hi,’ he said. The word hung, tiny and foolish, in the air.

Joe was thin, tired, English and stuttering, a waiting victim- except he was wrapped all about in shadow. In the depths of the umbra, they saw their own darkness reflected, and they thought: this is not a man to mess with. So they didn’t beat him up and take his

belongings or just laugh at him, which would have been the worst thing they could have done. Instead, they nodded, recognising their own.

‘I want to make a purchase,’ said Joe.

Chapter 29 – The Sinking Maze

Eithe's bedroom was beautiful. The Venetian woodwork was resplendent with swirls. There was a television which beamed high-pitched, frenetic-fingered Italian soap operas. The lagoon blue silk on the wall flexed beneath her touch. She bathed in lavender in a suite complete with shower caps and shoe polish in a little basket. As she soaked, she played with the little bottle of pills, rattling them, passing them from hand to hand.

'Eithe,' said the Mirror Staring Man. 'What about our contract?'

'It's not as important as having someone. Mmm,' said Eithe. She set the canister aside and sank into the bubbles. When she came up again, he was waiting for her.

'Eithe, you can't do this.'

'I'm not doing anything.'

'I won't let you stop,' he said. 'I won't let you go back. I have some power. I'm not completely helpless. I might have no body and no way of stopping you using my money, but I still have words.' Eithe said nothing. 'If you keep me with you, they'll think you're a madwoman chatting to the glass,' he said. 'You won't have friends, because they'll be afraid of you.'

'I won't talk to you when other people are around,' said Eithe. 'Besides, someone will notice you eventually. Not everyone ignores you. They'll know I'm not mad.'

'Then I will make the rest of your life a misery. When you're with other people, I'll say the most terrible things to make you flinch. I will shout insults at them from the spit in your mouth. When you're alone, I'll scream until you go crazy. When you sleep, I'll whisper horrible things to give you nightmares. When you look someone else in the eye you'll see me staring back, hating you.'

'It would still be better than being alone,' said Eithe.

'Then I will be silent,' he said, 'for the rest of forever. I won't speak a word to you. I won't even look at you.'

'You can try,' she said, 'but it's not in your nature. You'll always have something to say.'

He sealed his lips.

'Fine,' she said, rolling over in the bath.

When she brushed her hair he said nothing. When she climbed into bed he said nothing. When she said goodnight, he said nothing. As she slept, he desperately stabbed at the inner surface of the smartphone, but it took no notice.

In the morning, she rose and left.

Venice was a labyrinth of canals, arches, sun-baked piazzas and little alleyways which wound out and around and back again. She paused beneath the shadow of a church where a white-robed priest looked askance at her bare ankles, and at market stalls which dangled with Murano glass trinkets and food sellers whose tiered fountains dribbled melting ice onto slices of glistening coconut. The steps were worn to curves by the feet of traders and tourists.

The city was fragile, unreal, cramped and winding. Sometimes, the stale water stank. Someone nudged her aside to take a photograph of a smoking *vaporetto* as it chugged under the bustling bridge. Some else grumbled as she trod on their feet.

Alleys gave way to waterways where weed whisked lazily in the backwash of a motorboat. Lather collected where the water laved against the stone. The Mirror Staring Man sat within the scum, his eyes averted.

When she'd walked for long enough, she returned to the hotel. In the bathroom, she found the tub of pills where she'd left it. 'These give me control,' she said to the mirror. 'I've never had that before. I could stop him now, if I knew where he was.'

She slipped them into her toiletries bag and prepared for her ablutions. If she was disappointed by their lack of interaction, she didn't show it, except that later, she stepped naked from the shower and dropped the towel on the plush carpet. He did not comment, despite the provocation.

'I like it here,' said Eithe. 'I might just stop and stay.' He turned away, so her last waking memory was the improbable sight of the back of his head reflected in the television.

As soon as her breathing became deep and regular, The Mirror Staring Man started working on the phone. A thin streak of her finger-grease gave a clue to the access code. His movements were deliberate and methodical.

At three am, he finally managed to unlock the handset.

'At fucking last,' he muttered. 'Now see who has the control.'

He explored the functions of the phone, riffling through the empty address book, testing the interface. His expression was eager and greedy as he opened the internet browser. But when he opened the email folder, he paused.

'Shit,' he said. 'I can't fucking remember anyone. Shit!'

He flicked between folders, his movements fast with frustration, until his eyes alighted on the latest message, the confirmation email from the hotel.

‘Strange.’

He tracked back through them, moving from Venice to Bad Gastein to Würzburg and Paris. Since she’d bought the phone, Eithe had made several bookings, but she hadn’t opened any of the auto-response emails. Nevertheless, they were marked as read. Another intruder had already been through Eithe’s inbox.

The next day, Eithe walked, holding the pills as tiny talismans as she dawdled aimlessly across the sinking city. Laundry wafted from lines strung between the buildings. An old woman wearing a navy head scarf shouted a warning and slopped a bucket of suds out of her back door. Little brown birds alighted on chinks in the plaster, on the rotting wooden beams that thrust out overhead, on the wrought iron bars set into the windows.

Eithe came out into St Mark’s Square, an expanse of pale stone bleached by the sunlight and weathered by frost and floodwaters in the winter. Vast flocks of pigeons wheeled and settled, navigating the pillars and perching on the shoulders of tourists and the sills of palaces.

‘I will find a way to make you speak again,’ she said, to the cheap ring. ‘I miss you. Even your bitching and criticising.’

The Mirror Staring Man’s back remained persistently stationary.

Neither of them saw the man on the other side of the square.

Chapter 30 - Hunt

Joe was tracking, his head turning right to left and back again like a radar receiver, methodical and calm, despite the confusion of faces and noise.

‘How will you know your wife if you see her?’ said Gemma, strong and stark in the direct sunshine as she rippled over the ground.

‘I know her,’ said Joe.

‘You’ve already got an idea of who you want?’ she said.

‘I know exactly what I want.’

‘I never really wanted much,’ the shadow sighed. ‘I only wanted someone with a sense of humour, who could pay his own way and wouldn’t be too possessive – the usual thing. But even that seems a lot to ask, sometimes.’

‘Shut up,’ said Joe. ‘I’m trying to see her.’

‘You’re very intense,’ said Gemma. ‘Don’t you ever just want to play?’

‘Play?’ he said absently.

‘Yes,’ said Gemma. ‘Have fun. Like this...’

And the people parted, naturally and spontaneously, obeying some unwritten pattern of crowd dynamics. The movement would have revealed Eithe to Joe and ended their journey. But Gemma slid under a flock of jostling pigeons, and in a moment of mischief, she threw her murky arms open and brought her hands together with a mighty clap that sounded like cracking rock.

The hazelnut-brained pigeons took flight all at once, their fanning wings obscuring Eithe. Joe jumped back, startled by the sudden detonation of feathers and claws. Gemma giggled and danced over the flagstones.

‘Stop fucking around!’ Joe said.

The shadow sobered up, but a dozen curious faces had turned to him with varying degrees of concern and amusement. He felt the pull of the weighty metal in his pocket. He wanted to slide his hand around it and stop their smiles, but he forced the feeling down and sidled away.

Eithe glided on, unconscious of how close she had come to a lethal kiss.

Chapter 31 – A Made Man

In the evening, Eithe ate tender venison medallions at a lavish restaurant, ordered a bottle of Italian red, a sumptuous praline dessert and every side dish on the menu. She left much of it, despite dutiful years of cooking up left overs and recycling with Joe. She was trying to aggravate the Mirror Staring Man into complaint, but he didn't rebuke her for the expense.

'Goodnight,' she said. 'I bet you thought I'd crumple in less than an hour, didn't you? I've surprised you, haven't I?'

Outside, the moon swelled like a pregnant belly sketched white and waiting in a black satin sky. She slept soundly. On the third day, Eithe was tucked up safely in bed, sleeping because she had nothing better to do.

She woke up feeling shapeless and thirsty, her brain tightened in its cradle of bone. She emerged and bought a drink and a slice of pizza from a street vendor. She drifted into the park and sat on a patch of bare earth, her head shaded by leaves, the roots of a tree wandering past her and into the soil.

'You don't have to keep giving me the silent treatment,' she said. 'I haven't decided whether to stay or not yet, either way.' When he didn't respond, she shook the bottle so it fizzed. He still said nothing. She pressed her back against the trunk and closed her eyes.

'Venetian dogs have pissed where you're sitting,' said the Mirror Staring Man, nastily, but she didn't flinch. 'And for as long as you're deciding whether or not to stay, then you're staying, so the decision is redundant.'

'I'm glad you're speaking to me again,' she said.

'I'm not,' said the Mirror Staring Man.

Eithe dozed beneath the boughs, her dreams spiced by the laughter of children, and dappled by the movement of leaves. Her hand was tight around the pills in her pocket. The light left by degrees, the brightness of the grass dulled, the air went blue and she felt the night on her skin.

Eithe opened her eyes.

The Mirror Staring Man was standing on the grass. She knew it was him, because she could see his eyes behind the mask, which covered his whole face and made it smooth and strange. His gaze was milky, mild and utterly unfamiliar. He bowed to her, which was not like him. And it was his voice when he spoke, but the tone was strange.

‘Take my hand.’ Eithe did so, but she looked at him questioningly. He pulled the papier-mâché mask from his face. ‘Yes,’ he said. His features were strangely luminous in the dark. ‘You are dreaming.’

He offered her his arm, and after a moment of hesitation, she looped her hand through the space between his body and limb. Even though she knew it was a product of her sleeping mind, she felt a faint thrill at the contact with his dream-sleeve and the warm dream-flesh beneath it.

Venice by night was a different world. The lights glittered on the canal, bright flashes on black. The streets were still thronged with people, but in the dark, with her vision dimmed, Eithe heard the night noises with astonishing clarity. Scraps of laughter filtered from the alleyways and the wash of little waves sounded sharp and silvery.

He did not look gaunt and haunted, as he did in waking life. His bones did not look ready to snap. He looked hale, calm and even-tempered, with no hint of the stress and snappish selfishness of his Mirror-Self.

‘Will you kiss me?’ he said.

Chapter 32 – Fleeting Sightings

Gemma sounded faint in the twilight, as she was slowly absorbed into the greater shadow cast by the earth turning away from the sun. ‘I hate this time of day,’ she said in a tiny voice, as Joe paced over the Rialto bridge, cresting it again and again, shoving and pushing at the half-obscured walkers. ‘I feel myself fading.’

Joe ignored her. The faces were becoming hard to read, but he thought he’d sense Eithe if she passed by. He felt sleepy, half drugged by the city, half mad and hopelessly lost. Some unconscious part of him resonated with the history of the bridge, of centuries of suicides who’d thrown themselves from the side, of the victims mugged and rolled over the wall and into the slow water.

‘When you go back to the caravan, will you leave the light on all night?’

‘Strange to find a shadow afraid of the dark,’ murmured Joe.

‘You know your wife,’ said Gemma.

‘I thought I did.’

‘She’s a real person, isn’t she? I thought you were looking for an ideal but, actually, you know her already. What do you like about her? Why did you choose her?’

Joe replied with slow irritation. ‘Have you ever asked anyone why they dislike peanut butter? They will say it’s because it gums up the top of your mouth, or because of the texture of the grains, or because it is too salty. But if you ask people why they like peanut butter, they will say the same things. No one explains why they like or dislike something, all they do is describe it. No one really knows why they like something.’

‘Oh,’ said Gemma, taken aback. ‘Right.’

They patrolled together, the shade and the searcher. And then, the shadow stopped. Joe slowed too. It was as though the friction between his feet and the floor had multiplied a dozen times. ‘I can see something,’ she said.

‘You can’t see,’ said Joe, pulling against the suddenly glutinous pavement.

‘Not here. In the outside. There’s nothing in the outside, but I saw something.’

Then, ‘No,’ she said. ‘No, it’s not him this time. It’s just shaped like him, but it’s filled with something else, an idea.’

‘It’s her,’ he said.

He could have run to the balustrade and targeted her as she drifted along the pavement, but his muscles had hardened with shock when he saw the shape beside her. They were holding hands.

Joe put his own hand in his pocket, but there were too many bodies between him and her. He struggled across the bridge, dodging a stall festooned with gilt edged masks and quills, and leaned over the other side.

His mind was a battleground of elation and a rising vapour of futility. There she was, and there she went, fading like a breath in the wind, and he had done nothing. 'Who is he?' he growled, as a boat pattered away beneath them. 'Who was he? The other man?'

'I don't know!' said Gemma.

Joe kicked the wall in frustration, jerking her leg like a puppet limb.

'You said he was on the mountain that day. Tell me what you know.'

'Not much,' said Gemma, composed despite his temper. 'He wasn't happy. I don't think he was all there.'

'I will murder him.'

Chapter 33 – Dark Canals

The Mirror Staring Man kissed her again, with closed lips, and when he pulled away, she followed. He said, ‘I am out of the mirror now. Here I am. I am sorry. For all of this. I wanted to share the city with you. I loved this place, when I was young.’

He smiled at her, and she knew for certain that this was only a phantasmagoria, a lucid vision, because the real man in the mirror would never apologise.

They walked past an old merchant’s house, magnificent and ruined. Mildew crawled up the sides and the wall was crumbling at the water line. The Mirror Staring Man’s face, flickering half-white, half ebony in the lantern light, was solemn. Even so, it was more open, more kindly and more agreeable than his waking version. And, shorn of the angularity and the tautness of starvation and the fierceness of his driven soul, he was almost beautiful. Eithe couldn’t find the right words, as her tongue tangled in her teeth. Instead, she reached over and lightly touched the mask dangling around his neck.

‘Pedrolino,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. Even his voice was softer, the edges blunted, and it was full, not distorted by glass, metal or false diamond. Eithe thought the mask seemed very sad. ‘Yes,’ said the Mirror Staring Man, ‘Because he is in love with someone who does not love him. He is a fool. He writes his poems and he moons around and stares into the stars, all for Columbina.’ Eithe turned the moon face with its moulded tear over and over in her hands. He seemed familiar.

‘He’s from the *Commedia Dell’ Arte*. Pedrolino was a zanni, a lover, a prankster, the butt of jokes, an innocent, a vengeful soul, an errand boy, an artist, an honest servant and a trickster. But Columbina will not have him because she loves the Harlequin. Poor, poor Pedrolino.’

Eithe wanted to kiss him again. She tied the mask back around his neck and then she pressed close and put her lips against his skin, licking at it gently. He tasted no more substantial than a cloud.

‘A lot of people think there is only one path and one way to walk it,’ he said. ‘And the road was laid out before their birth. I disagree. A good man makes his own fate. A strong man chooses his own path.’ He drew a deep breath. He held it for so long that Eithe worried he would faint before he expelled the stale air through his nostrils.

Then he said, ‘A lot of people think that only one possibility lies at the end of the road, and that is their destiny. But they forget that destiny is the same as destination, and,

as any traveller knows, there is nothing destined about where they fetch up, or what happens along the way.’

Eithe felt warm wind on her face. She didn’t want to kiss him any longer, she didn’t want to probe or explore him because she knew the dream’s insides would taste of nothing.

The Dream Mirror Staring Man said, ‘Fate can be fatal. How often have you told yourself you can’t do something, and don’t – and therefore make yourself right? These are the people who argue that death is everyone’s destiny – but death is a state, not a place, and where you lay down and die is not decided until it happens.’

Eithe looked at him, her eyes wide in the twilight. She didn’t want to wake up. She liked him better as a dream. ‘That’s because you dreamed me, as you wanted me to be. So you made yourself a stranger and wandered the city with him.

‘You might think it’s safer that way,’ said the Dream Mirror Staring Man. ‘But it’s not. Because you will have to wake soon, and I will be gone, and you will mourn that. And the man you see in the mirror is not me, because he is not you. He will argue with you, he will betray you, he will wound you and he will try to define you. You will do the same to him. And you must struggle with him, and forgive him, and grow strong and decide how much you wish him to shape you – just as you must with everyone you meet. And he will have to do the same with you. And you will always know he is not perfect, he is not exactly what you want, that nobody is, not even your own self, when you find it, which you must.’

She stood to say goodbye, wanting, with every part of her sleeping body, to keep him. She wanted to feel him, but he was not really there, not really human, not really himself. He was imagined and what she craved was something separate from her self.

He reached for her hand and reflexively, she gave it. He brushed her knuckles with his dust-dry lips and she felt flattered, but then silly, because if she had made him then she was simply flattering herself.

‘Beware Pedrolino and the anger of the clown,’ said the Dream Mirror Staring Man. ‘All he has is love. He is water and his longing is the vessel that holds him. He folds around her like a shroud and she shapes him. He wouldn’t give that up if he could.’

And then, with the logic of a dream, he pulled the ribbon from around his neck, cast the mask into the air where it twisted and hung in the black sky, like the smile of a skewed mouth crowded with white teeth, and he was gone.

Eithe woke in the dirt. She stretched her cramped arms and brushed the bark and grass from her face.

‘Good evening, sleeping beauty,’ said the Mirror Staring Man, from her ring finger. ‘Did you enjoy your nap? Don’t worry about me. I’m only dying, after all.’

For a moment she hated him for the tinny texture of his words, for his sardonic lilt, and because he was not the man from her dream. A great flame of self-righteousness ignited in her breast, and it burnt her shyness to cinders. ‘Why do you have to be such an arse?’ she snapped. ‘I’m going back to the hotel.’

‘I was watching for you,’ he said, hastily. ‘I’d have woken you if anyone came too close.’ She ignored him and extracted herself from the foliage.

As she passed a jetty, she heard the slosh of a gondola sliding back toward the mooring post. Two middle aged couples climbed out of the boat, giggling and teasing. They were a bit drunk, and one of them turned to Eithe and said, ‘Where’s your beau, honey? It’s a lonely walk all by yourself.’

Eithe smiled at him, but she didn’t mean it. When she looked down, all she saw was the half-globe of the moon reflected in the water, and the face that wasn’t hers, and wasn’t quite the face that she wanted. ‘I am like the moon. I’m invisible until the light hits me, and then I shine. Only then. And Joe was my sun. And he was a poor sun for all that. No wonder I am so weak.’ She crouched and struck the surface of the canal and broke the emaciated image of the Mirror Staring Man into bits.

Back in her hotel room, she opened the windows wide to let the air flow. Then she sat, dejected, in her bed and drank a glass of bittersweet limoncello. The Mirror Staring Man looked out of the television at her. ‘You’ve decided,’ he said, in a bleak, small voice. She shook her head.

‘Eithe,’ said the Mirror Staring Man, relenting. ‘You are more than a reflection. Tell me, why did you choose Joe in the first place?’

‘I told you. I didn’t. He picked me.’

‘But you chose not to say no.’

‘I didn’t know I had a choice,’ said Eithe. ‘Now I do. I’m sorry for hitting you.’

‘I didn’t feel it. I don’t feel anything here, most of the time. There’s something in my throat, back in England. I feel that, sometimes.’

‘I don’t know where we’re going next,’ said Eithe. ‘But you said we should go east, so I think we should carry on now. There’s nothing here for us. Don’t give up. Not yet. Don’t fail yet.’

‘I won’t,’ he said.

She didn't sleep. Instead, she worried about Juliette, estranged from her parents. She worried about Gerhardt, what he thought of her, and whether he had found someone else to help him with his spreadsheet. Most of all, she worried about Joe, and where he was, what he was doing, and what he was dreaming, if he dreamed at all, or if he lay like her with his back hard against the bed, his face to the ceiling, his eyes webbed with red and hurting with tiredness.

With superstitious fear, she tried to turn her mind to other things, in case, by some supernatural means, her thinking about him would lead to him thinking about her. She shuddered and reached for the phone. She flicked through the BBC front page to distract herself.

'Anything going on in the world?' said the Mirror Staring Man.

'People are dying in Syria,' said Eithe. 'Part two of the phone hacking inquiry is still on hold. Um, Silvio Berlusconi got done for tax fraud. Does that make you feel nervous?'

'Is this relaxing you?'

'No,' she said, and put the phone away. When she finally fell asleep, she dreamed about something heavy and female waiting for her, as cold as stone, arms sheared off at the shoulders.

In the morning, The Mirror Staring Man was waiting for her when she washed her face in the bathroom. She felt a sudden sweep of nostalgia for her own face, but when she looked up, he smiled. His lips were cracked and anaemic. 'Go on,' he said.

She walked to Santa Lucia station and, as she was buying the ticket, a policeman arrested her.

Chapter 34– Sharing Shame

Joe had lain in a tacky slump in a hot and cramped room, flavoured with tequila, whisky and vodka. He'd drunk far too much and was on the floor of a small bedroom with his head against the radiator and a cock drawn on his cheek. He'd felt soft cloth against his face, and his quasi-open eyes picked out the movement of an arm and the blur of a face.

'Don't worry. You'll like it.'

It had been a woman's voice, and woman's fingers on his fly, and a woman's hand around him, tugging. He'd moaned, addled, his senses awash in a sea of confusion, not sure, not wanting, but unable to get his tongue to work. And then she'd squatted over him, and slid him in, her insides wet and gripping.

'No,' he'd managed, 'I have a girlfriend,' and she'd laughed. *Laughed*, and not listened.

And then she'd gently raped him.

He woke with vomit in his throat. For one short, lovely moment, the world was clean and then he felt the after-shock of shame and violation. He curled up on the camp bed, not sticky and sore, as he had been, but still dirty under his skin. 'Nothing could have stopped it,' he told himself. 'It wasn't my fault. There was no choice.' It didn't occur to him that she, whoever she had been, could have chosen not to touch him.

'Stopped what?' said Gemma, as she stretched out beside him. He didn't answer. Instead, he checked it. He felt safer with it in his hands.

He'd felt it burning in his bag as he tracked her. Each border crossing was a trauma, and he was braced for arrest, but no one went through his belongings. No rubber-gloved official found it. He pulled it out and turned it over and over in his hands. Then he stowed it away among the dirty socks. He lay on his side and surveyed the wall.

Eithe had been so blank and unsoiled. He'd liked having sex with her, because it felt as though he was putting the pain and humiliation into her, and she had just soaked it up. But it always came back, later. He hoped, when he caught up with them, Eithe and her man, and he burst his skin and made a hole right through him, she would know, completely and utterly, how serious he was. And if she still laughed, and ran away, or refused him, he would do the same to her. And the indignation, all the impotence he'd tried to pump into her, would blow her away. And it would die with her.

'Whatcha thinking?' said Gemma, from beneath his head. He levered himself from the pillow and flapped his hand against his head to ward away the itching. He got up and

paced the room. 'Chill out,' she said. 'You're making me dizzy, marching me round like this. Left right, left right.'

'Why are you always so cheerful?' said Joe.

'Because I want to be. It's easier than being miserable.'

'That's logical.'

'I don't know why you're so concerned with logic. Life isn't logical. You look for reason, but life has no reason. It's not rational.'

'You can quantify or qualify everything,' said Joe, 'if you know all of the variables.'

'Why do you think that?'

'Because reality is what it is.'

'But reality changes. I mean, I wasn't always a shadow. Was I?'

Chapter 35 - Interrogation

Keane sat on the other side of the desk, watching her levelly. The interrogation room was not as nice as the one in Switzerland. It was small and smelled of damp and stagnation. The plaster sloughed off the walls, leaving great scabs, and the window was tiny. Eithe felt oddly calm as she rested her wrists on the table. They hadn't put her in handcuffs.

'So,' said Keane.

'So,' said Eithe.

'Conspiracy to defraud. That could be up to ten years.'

Eithe nodded.

'That's not a problem,' she said. 'I haven't tried to defraud anyone.'

'Your fingerprints were all over documentation. Anonymous papers, connected with the fraud. Suggests otherwise.'

Eithe shrugged. 'Anything you want to tell us?'

'Not really.'

'Miss Eithe, er, I mean, Miss Dord, this is a serious offence,' said Erwin. 'You don't seem like the type of girl to get mixed up in all that.'

'I'm not,' said Eithe. 'I'm not a girl.'

Keane glowered. 'Someone has been hurt. Does the name Gemma Imai mean anything to you?'

'She's my friend from work,' said Eithe. A chill went through her. Gemma wouldn't have implicated her. She couldn't have. Why would she?

'Well now she's your friend from the hospital,' said Keane. Eithe's horror was writ across her face, but the policewoman didn't modify her tone. 'Do you know why?'

'No!' said Eithe.

'Eithe,' said Erwin, who was as pale as she felt. He looked sideways at his colleague as he spoke and edged away as though she was sculpted from primed plastic explosive.

'I'm sorry. We're just concerned. We think Miss Imai may have been targeted because of her association with you. We know you have no living relatives...'

'And not many friends,' said Keane. 'Almost as though you didn't want anyone to get too close.'

'Gemma's hurt?' Eithe said. She was lost, all of a sudden. Her carefully constructed calm swirled into chaos.

‘She has suffered a severe brain injury,’ said Erwin. His manner, his comb-over and old spectacles reminded Eithe of her economics tutor. She stifled a hysterical giggle at the thought of her querulous lecturer strong-arming her into a police van. ‘She is in a critical condition. Why would anybody want to hurt her?’

‘I don’t know,’ whispered Eithe. Then she rallied. ‘Why do you think it has anything to do with me?’

‘The attack took place in her flat. They knew where she lived. She let them in. Nothing was stolen. It was a deliberate act,’ said Keane. Eithe stared at her fingers. She couldn’t think of anything to say. Keane made a sound that was halfway between a sigh and a snarl. ‘Back to her cell,’ she said.

‘Eithe,’ whispered the Mirror Staring Man. ‘You can’t let them keep you here. I feel - you need to hurry.’

‘How long will you keep me here?’ said Eithe.

‘As long as it takes,’ said Keane.

‘You can’t,’ said Eithe. ‘What about habeas corpus?’

‘We can charge you. And we will extradite you under a European Arrest Warrant. That’ll speed things up. You might be back in the UK in a few days.’

‘They can’t take you back,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘It’s the wrong direction. It’ll waste time, and time is killing me.’

‘Are you going to arrest me?’ Eithe asked.

‘Depends on how cooperative you are,’ said Keane. ‘We’ll let you think it over. You might remember something helpful.’

And Eithe was escorted back to the tiny cell, with its rusty bed and the shit-stinking hole in the corner. There was no sink, she noted, and no toilet paper. She needed to relieve herself, but she decided to hold it as long as she could.

‘You can’t let them take you back to England,’ said the Mirror Staring Man from the cracked tiles as the door cranked shut behind her.

‘What do you expect me to do,’ said Eithe. ‘Tie the bed sheets together and abseil out of the window? Do you happen to have baked a file in a cake? Will you dress in drag and seduce the guards? Or shall I just hope there’s a dog in the corridor that I can trick into carrying the keys to me? Gemma is in hospital.’ Eithe heard her voice winding up to a pitch of stridency she’d never used before. ‘And they think it’s because of *me!*’

‘Isn’t she just some girl in work?’ said the Mirror Staring Man, puzzled. ‘You’ve never mentioned her before.’

‘She’s my friend!’ Eithe snapped. ‘Do you know how few of them I have? She’s my friend.’ She sat on the bed and hid her face in her hands. There was a knock at the door. Eithe looked up. This was confusing. She hadn’t watched many cop shows – Joe had donated the television before everyone in work started talking about CSI and Dexter – but in the ones she remembered, the police didn’t knock before entering the cell. It was Erwin.

‘Miss Eithe?’ he said. ‘The police outside are saying you’re talking to someone. You gave up all of your personal devices on signing in, so you have no phone.’

‘Yes,’ said Eithe.

‘Are you okay?’

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘Er, all right. Well, if you think of anything, please let me know.’

Then he left her as alone as she could be. Eithe waited until his footsteps faded away before she turned to her fellow prisoner. Then she rasped at him. ‘You remember more than you say you do.’ The Mirror Staring Man’s face was the colour of rancid cream and bisected by a hairline crack in the tile. ‘You know one way we could get out of here fast? You could just admit it. Tell me what you know and I’ll tell it to them.’

‘There are things,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘But they’re personal.’

‘You’ve seen me naked. You watched me as I slept. You replaced my face. How much more personal can we get?’

‘Shhh, or he’ll have you committed, and we’ll never get away.’

‘Maybe I should let them take me home,’ she said. ‘Perhaps I should give myself up to the due process of law. It would only take what, a year? And that would be long enough for you to die. *Were you involved in fraud?*’

‘I—’

‘Do you know how much time my company spends mopping up messes? Do you understand how much it costs people like me?’ Even in an undertone, she wrapped her words around a knife-blade of controlled fury.

‘I wasn’t,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘I wasn’t involved. It was only the offshore account. Accounts.’

‘Oh well that’s just fine then.’

‘I don’t want to go back,’ he said, and for a moment he sounded vulnerable, like a sad little boy begging not to be sent to an unpleasant boarding school. ‘I mean, all I’ll be able to do is wait and watch my body die. We’ve got to carry on.’

Chapter 36 – Spoon-fed Information

Back in the office, Keane stirred an instant coffee with the end of her ballpoint pen. The *poliziotto* behind her winced and rolled his eyes.

‘How long do we wait?’ said Erwin. ‘I mean, how long does it normally take for them to, er, break.’ He said pronounced ‘break’ as though it was a swearword.

Keane took a sip. ‘Different for everyone. But the sooner the better. Sooner I can get back home to the kids.’

‘And Mr Keane?’ said Erwin.

‘Not him.’

Erwin suppressed a smile. Keane started filling in a Sudoku. Edwin turned to his books. Neither of them were expecting the announcement. A *poliziotto* strode in and said, ‘The girl, she wants to speak.’

‘That was quick’ said Keane. ‘Haven’t even started the sevens yet.’ Eithe was sitting calmly in the interrogation room. She didn’t flinch when they put the recorder on. ‘Right,’ said Keane, once the formalities were over. She folded her arms and waited.

‘I want to show you something,’ said Eithe. ‘But I’ll need a mirror.’

‘What the fuck are you doing?’ the Mirror Staring Man whispered from a bead of sweat on Keane’s temple.

‘Why?’ said the policewoman. She wiped the perspiration away.

‘I need to show you something hidden.’

Keane pressed her lips together hard, but indicated for the prop to be brought in. One of the younger officers provided a shaving mirror. Eithe’s heart was thudding as she took it. ‘Come on,’ she said. ‘Into the glass.’

‘You’re fucking *batshit*,’ said the Mirror Staring Man from beyond the frame.

Keane said, ‘Are you ill?’

‘Trust me. They won’t just let us go. This is the best way,’ said Eithe.

‘No!’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘Shut up, for Christ’s sake!’

‘Some people can see you. Maybe they will.’

‘Jesus!’

‘Okay, enough of this,’ said Keane.

‘Do it!’ said Eithe.

So, reluctantly, the Mirror Staring Man edged into the mirror. Eithe held it up and twisted so they could see the aberrant reflection. Then she looked back at them. Keane was

positively thunderous, but Erwin stared into the mirror, transfixed. 'It's a bit too early for an insanity plea,' said Keane. She took the mirror from Eithe's hand. 'Unless you have something useful to say, then it's back to the cell.'

Erwin's mouth hung open very slightly.

They escorted Eithe back to the room and locked the door behind her.

'And what good did that do?' railed the Mirror Staring Man, as soon as it shut. 'Now they just think you're stupid or nuts, or playing games. What if they think you're messing with them? They'll think you really do know something. We'll be on a plane before you can cough and they'll drag me right back with you. Shit. Shit!'

Then the little panel in the door slid sideways. Erwin and his spectacles looked through. 'There was a man,' he said. 'Blaspheming.'

'I call him the Mirror Staring Man,' said Eithe.

'That's unusual.'

'Yes.'

'You won't, you know, strangle me with my tie or seduce me if I come in.'

'I promise I won't,' said Eithe solemnly.

'Right.'

The door was unlocked and Erwin sidled in and perched on the edge of the bed. 'Detective Inspector Keane isn't happy,' he said. 'She's trying to find something to charge you with to keep you longer. Obstruction or withholding evidence, I'm not sure which.'

'I honestly can't tell you any more than I already have about the fraud,' said Eithe. 'But I can try to explain why I'm here.' And she told him as calmly as she could about her flight, about Joe and about the Mirror Staring Man.

'There are people who can help you,' said Erwin. He took off his glasses and buffed them with his tie. 'With the situation with your fiancé. I don't think there's much we could do unless you came back to Britain. But I can give you numbers for a domestic abuse line if he continues to harass you.'

'I'd like that,' said Eithe. 'But the most important thing now is for us to leave.'

'Can I – can I talk to him? I brought this.' Erwin pulled a spoon out of his pocket. 'It's all I could think of.'

'You might have to sit behind me,' said Eithe. She accepted the piece of cutlery and he repositioned himself so that he could see the Mirror Staring Man, inverted and distorted by the concavity of the shallow oval.

'Good afternoon,' said Erwin.

‘You need to change your hair,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘It’ll start flapping in a strong breeze.’

‘I heard him again,’ said Erwin, more fascinated than offended.

‘Look, we don’t have time for you to be all amazed and in denial,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘It’s very important that you let us go. I’m dying. I can’t remember much, but I think if I do start remembering then I’ll know how to go back to my body and wake up. If I don’t, then I die, and whatever information I had, well, that ends up rotting. Then we’re both fucked. I’m searching for something – anything – that will help me remember myself. When I find it, I’ll come back to you, and I’ll tell you everything I know. I promise. You can keep my body as a guarantee.’

Erwin was new to the job, but he was obviously no fool. ‘You’ll tell me,’ he said. ‘You come to me, not Scotland Yard, not Interpol.’

‘Just you,’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

‘Right,’ said Erwin. ‘Come on then, while Keane is busy.’ He hurried them back to the desk, had them discharged and hastily handed back the confiscated bag and phone. ‘Go,’ he said. ‘Fast. And if you have another account, a secure one, then use it. We have a trace on Casey Jones.’

‘Thank you,’ said Eithe.

Erwin watched her leave. Then he casually returned to the staff room where he picked up his copy of *American Gods* and started reading.

When Keane came in, blistering with rage at the incompetence of the police force, he looked over the pages and said, ‘I let them go. We’ll have to go back to England and wait for him to wake up. At least you’ll get to see your kids. And by the way, would you like to go for a drink some time?’

Chapter 37 – In the attic

Neither Eithe or the Mirror Staring Man paid much attention to the pretty buildings or bridges as the train pulled away. ‘They said they had a trace on me,’ she said. ‘Do you think Joe could as well, somehow?’

The Mirror Staring Man said, ‘Well, it’s not like we’re leaving a papertrail.’

‘No,’ she mused.

The Mirror Staring Man made a sudden involuntary grunt, as though he’d just forgotten, or just remembered, something inconvenient.

‘There’s only – oh,’ said Eithe.

A suspicion started growing in her mind. It was muddled and misty, but she waited and willed it to take form. But before the realisation coalesced, the Mirror Staring Man interrupted. ‘The emails,’ he blathered. ‘The only person who knows where you are—’

‘Is Juliette,’ said Eithe. Her face was dour. She ground her jaw.

‘Are you okay?’ said the Mirror Staring Man. If guilt tickled at him, and he pushed it away, Eithe failed to read it in his eyes.

‘You can’t trust anyone,’ she said, her voice held hard to stop it wobbling. To distract herself, she leafed through the journal. ‘Your next clue - it’s a postcard of a place called Rijeka. That’s not far.’

They crossed the border into Slovenia in just a few hours, and then changed lines. The livery of the carriage was muddy and the inside was battered, brown and smelled of smoke. As the engine tugged away from the platform, they entered a different, less luxurious Europe. At Rijeka, the train coughed, shunted forward once and died.

The Mirror Staring Man gave Eithe a reassuring wink from the window. She looked through him. Men were running up and down the platform, shouting. Some were in overalls. The people around her started to grumble, and a conductor arrived to usher them off. ‘This is right. This is it. We should stay here for a bit,’ said the Mirror Staring man. He added more quietly, ‘Because at least that way, no one knows where you are.’

On one side, Rijeka was a jumble of flats, high-rises and older four-floor buildings rising out of the trees on the hill. On the other, it was a mass of cargo ships and warehouses, towering cranes and sea mist. Eithe walked past the cafés and little shops, past a wine bar which shone with sprays of fairy lights, past students walking with books in hand. A wedding cavalcade, clad in mauve ribbons, blared their horns so loudly the noise could have been mistaken for a car crash.

Eithe wandered aimlessly around the town and saw the Roman gate sandwiched between two much younger buildings. The main street was paved with volcanic grey blocks pounded by the feet of shoppers. She rubbed her taut abdomen and felt her bladder strain. 'I need the toilet,' she said.

'Take a McPiss.'

But when she went into the McDonalds, there was a key pad on the door. She knew they would only give her the code if she bought something.

'Just get some McNuggets,' said the Mirror Staring Man as she tightened her legs.

'I don't know...'

'I bet Joe wouldn't let you,' he said. 'Because of McLibel or Supersize Me or because some vegetarians ate beef fries.'

Eithe steeled herself. 'Joe is full of shit,' she said. 'And he's a psychopath. But that doesn't mean he wasn't right about some things.' Then she left.

The Mirror Staring Man sounded grudgingly admiring when he said, 'We should find you somewhere to stay. There's a guest house on the front. Just go toward the port and follow the shore.'

She didn't say, 'Okay.' She said, 'Right,' and the word tasted better in her mouth, dry and crisp.

Wind scattered salt across the road. A tanker on the horizon sank into the dark smudge of the sky. Light sparkled over the little waves at the edge of the ending day. In the foreground, the sea sucked at the wall and in the middle distance cranes moved thirty-tonne cargo crates like toy building blocks.

The guest house lay where two roads pinched together. It was tall and triangular and its walls were plastered orange. Bits of it were rotting and the fence was weather-gnawed and rusty. Green shutters clashed with the crumbling walls. Plants that had outgrown their pots sat on the roof and flung their leaves over the guttering.

Eithe knocked on the door. Nobody answered so she knocked again. The third time, she gave up and decided to head back in town and find a hotel, but the door opened behind her. A quarter-face looked through the gap.

'Oh, hi,' she said to the one curious eye and a slew of curls. 'Do you have any rooms spare?'

'Yes.'

The door was caught on a hand-woven rag rug, so it took a few attempts to open. A dumpy woman with a kind face and a dated floral dress stood panting on the other side.

‘Thank you,’ said Eithe, as she stepped over the threshold. ‘Where shall I put my bags?’

‘Up and up again.’

Eithe climbed the stairs two at a time, discarded her luggage and ran to the bathroom on the first floor. After a while she emerged and took the squeaking staircase up to the attic room. There was a bed, a chest of drawers, a portrait mirror on a freestanding frame, an old telephone and not much else.

‘What are you doing?’ asked the Mirror Staring Man as Eithe reached for the phone.

‘I’m going to call him to find out.’ She dialled anonymously. There was a click.

‘Hello?’ said Joe. Eithe held the receiver so close to the side of her head that her ear hurt. ‘Hello?’ Eithe opened her mouth but nothing came out. There were too many things to say. The questions crammed against each other in her throat. ‘Listen, this is costing me money. I’m hanging up,’ said Joe. He sounded tired and reedy over the poor connection. There was an echo on the line.

‘Wait,’ said Eithe.

‘You,’ said Joe through the sound of cracking ice.

‘Me,’ said Eithe.

‘Where are you?’

‘I’m not saying,’ said Eithe. She was surprised by how firmly she spoke. ‘You need to tell me something. Did Juliette let you know where I am?’ There was white noise. ‘I need to know for sure.’ Eithe waited. Then she said something that surprised them both. ‘Joe, I’m sorry.’

‘So you did do it.’

‘You mistake me,’ said Eithe. ‘I went out that night, and I’m not sorry for that. I’m sorry you think you need me. I’m sorry you feel so strongly. You can stop now.’ A snowstorm blew out of the earpiece.

‘I don’t want you to make a decision right away,’ she said. ‘I know how it feels. It’s like standing in the middle of the crossroads and not knowing which road to take and all the time the traffic is coming faster and faster until you know you have to move, except that there is danger everywhere. I understand.’

She waited.

‘This is the longest you have ever listened to me,’ she said.

There was no reply. Eithe had once read that the hiss over the airwaves was the sound of entropy. She stood and listened to dying stars, red shift and the expansion of the universe.

‘Joe?’

‘I am going to hunt you down,’ said Joe at last. ‘I’m sorry. I have no choice.’

She slammed the phone onto its hook. She wondered if, through the cheap engagement ring, the Mirror Staring Man could feel the capillaries in her fingers drain with shock. He was observing her from the red curve of the receiver.

‘Are you okay?’ he said, after she’d stood for a few breaths.

‘Yeah.’

‘Maybe you should rest.’ Eithe lay down on the squeaky bedstead in the bare little room and dozed. She woke when he stroked her forehead with a cool hand. She opened her eyes.

‘I’m here,’ said the Mirror Staring Man, from the other pillow. She smiled at him. She moved closer and her fingers studied the sinuous line of his spine. Her lips moved soundlessly on his neck, spelling out a question.

The flux of his breath lifted the loose strands of her hair. He rolled away. Eithe’s arms stretched as she tried to keep contact, but their skin snapped apart. He scratched his arse as he shuffled along the corridor and into the bathroom. Eithe heard his urine gush into the toilet pan.

He didn’t come back.

She called for him, silently.

‘Eithe,’ he said. ‘I’m not really real.’

The toilet flushed. Eithe slid off the bed, wandered down the corridor and pushed the bathroom door open. He was in the shower. She could see his silhouette rippled by the folds of the curtain. The pool of water pushed under the hem. The flood crept further and further out, spreading until she stood in a puddle.

‘?,’ she mouthed, worried now.

The shower pattered. She lifted a cautious foot, came closer to the curtain. With a trembling hand, she drew it aside. His back was turned to her, cold and dripping.

‘!,’ she tried to shout, but he twisted, turned, changed, and suddenly it wasn’t The Mirror Staring Man at all. It was Joe, skinny, naked, wet and vicious, and his hands were out and his lips were wide and they closed over her mouth and nose like a seal. He sucked the air from her lungs and she felt her ribs squeaking as they rubbed against each other,

caving into her chest. She tried to scream, but her throat was shut and airless. Pale arms snaked and squeezed around her poking shoulder blades. Her spine bent under the stress of angry muscle, snapped, collapsed.

When he let go, she was just a skin hanging in his grip. He shook her out to flatten the kinks and wrinkles and folded her up like a sheet. Her staring eyes went blind as he tucked her soft head into her belly and used her lax arms to tie her up into a neat little parcel.

‘Hey.’ The voice was sharp and selfish. ‘Hey!’ It sliced through the dream like a newly stropped razor.

Eithe woke up. Her mouth felt dry and unsavoury. ‘Oh god,’ she said.

It was sunset and the birds were moving. She heard their skinny little feet tapping on the corrugated roof. She had only slept for a few moments. ‘I didn’t want to wake you,’ said the Mirror Staring Man, with the all the virtue of remorse. ‘I thought you needed the rest.’ She looked at the skylight and he looked down at her. His face was mean with strain and shrunken with worry, and it was not the one she had imagined, but she was still glad to see it.

‘You saved me from an evil dream,’ said Eithe.

‘It’s getting dark,’ he said.

‘It’s time to go looking,’ she said.

‘You know,’ he said, ‘you’re a woman on your own. Perhaps it isn’t such a good idea for you to go into the grimy parts of town.’

‘It isn’t a good idea,’ said Eithe. ‘But I’m going to do it anyway.’

‘Eithe,’ he said, and then he seemed to change his mind about whatever he was going to say.

She never found out if it was going to be advice, confession or argument, because she said, ‘You read about it all the time, coma patients waking up after sleeping for years. Do they all go wandering like you?’

‘Who knows?’

‘Maybe,’ she said, dreamily, ‘they are all out there too, with you. Perhaps you’ll meet them and introduce them to me.’ A chill rolled through her, like wind from the mountains, but it was the Mirror Staring Man who shivered.

‘It’s a big space out here,’ he said. ‘It goes on forever. If there is anyone else, I doubt I’d find them.’

‘Isn’t it funny?’ she said. ‘You’re probably in hospital right now, and that’s being funded by tax-payers. And you didn’t pay tax. You’d be dead already if it wasn’t for the rest of us.’

‘Please, Eithe. You’re making me feel strange.’

She showered and dressed in muted colours. She felt like a thief as she went down the stairs and out into the dusk. Eithe was distant as they followed the sea wall, blind to the movement of the city.

‘I remember the beach down there. I sprayed something on the wall. Maybe it was my name,’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

Eithe went down a flight of weed-slick stairs which led down from the pavement. It twisted at right angles and on the low wall, she saw two words.

‘Is this it? Is it my graffiti?’

She used her phone to illuminate the scrawl. It wasn’t a tag. It read: ‘Try Fly.’

‘No. They must have washed it off.’

She continued down to the concrete-cupped beach. Something about the curve of the coast took away a lot of the power of the sea, and the little peaks and troughs of Kvarner Bay sank down into bubbling frills which caressed the shingle.

She sat on a rock. A young couple had spread a coat over the smaller pebbles and were cuddling in the evening murk. They hadn’t noticed her.

A ship’s horn blared in the distance. The moon shone magnolia through the threadbare clouds. ‘What are you thinking about?’ the Mirror Staring Man murmured.

‘Nothing,’ said Eithe.

‘You are,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ she admitted. ‘I was thinking about the pills. I thought I could use them on Joe. I thought I could use the emails to lure him here and put them in his food, or grind one up and kiss it through his lips, or blow the powder into his eyes, or dissolve it and drip it into his ear. It might solve one of my problems.’

‘But you don’t know,’ said the Mirror Staring Man, through the roll of the waves. ‘You can’t decide.’

Behind her, the girl uttered a little needy noise.

Eithe left the beach. There was a blockage in her throat. She hurried along the sea wall as a mist rolled in, swallowing up the road ahead and behind, her sleeve over her nose to mop up the moisture. When she came to the guest house, she shouldered the door from

its swollen frame and rushed through the kitchen, up the stairs and into the bedroom where she curled up on the quilt.

‘Eithe, what’s wrong?’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

‘I’m afraid,’ she said.

‘You haven’t emailed any- Juliette,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘He won’t find you here.’

‘I’m not afraid of that. I’m afraid that - I can’t.’

Eithe looked at the stained ceiling.

When Joe had reached for her, she hadn’t minded. He was her fiancé, which was almost a husband, and a husband and wife were supposed to have sex. It was just something they did. He would rub her nipples and bite her earlobes and then he would push himself in and, after the first few times, it didn’t hurt. There was only the displacement of her flesh as he moved in and out. When he came, she could sleep.

‘Joe used to ask if it was good,’ she said. ‘I always said yes. I think he asked because he needed reassurance, not because he really cared.’

‘You lied,’ said the Mirror Staring Man,

‘Yes.’

‘It really bothers you, doesn’t it?’

‘Yes.’

‘You’ve never tried it out yourself?’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

‘No,’ she said. ‘Nobody ever taught me how.’

The Mirror Staring Man chuckled. It was a dark, throbbing sound.

‘I can tell you.’

‘No,’ said Eithe, with abject mortification.

‘It’s up to you,’ he said.

She turned the light off to cover her blush. In the darkness, she thought about Gerhardt, about want, and need, and thirst, and purpose and disappointment. She pulled the covers between her legs and clasped them tight. ‘Tell me,’ she said.

‘Okay,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. He was quiet for a few moments, and Eithe, waiting, felt a blend of acute frustration and fear.

‘Well?’ she said.

‘Do you know your own body?’ he said.

‘I – I don’t know.’

‘Then touch it,’ he said. ‘First your face. Use both hands.’

She brought her palms over the planes of her skull. It was familiar but alien, and she struggled to remember what she looked like. Maybe she'd needed to see herself, she thought, to remind herself that she had a solid shape, as the rest of her was so unformed. But perhaps touching would work just as well. Her nose was still her nose; her lips were still her lips. Her jaw curved into her neck, a bone edifice above a pillar of muscle. Her fingers found the soft dent of her clavicle.

'Further down,' said the Mirror Staring Man.

She slid between the weight of the covers and her breasts.

'Further down,' said the Mirror Staring Man.

She felt the eagle-wing sweep of her ribs and the tender flesh of her abdomen, wandered over the dent of her bellybutton and stopped.

'Further down.'

'I can't,' said Eithe, the motherless child, the girl who avoided the excruciating pastoral lessons by hiding beneath the table, her nose in a maths book, who found out about menses when she woke to a bloodied brown bed sheet and thought she was dying, whose father sat her down and asked if she had any questions, and was so embarrassed she said, 'I don't know'.

'It's up to you,' said the Mirror Staring Man.

She lay with her hands splayed over the narrowing triangle of her hips. She felt the coarse hair trickle beneath her fingernails. She stopped when her parting flesh made a faint liquid noise. 'What now?' she said, her breathing uneven.

'Move your fingers as though someone was kissing you,' said the Mirror Staring Man. 'Pull with them and then slide them inside. Pull them out slowly and then push them back in. Imagine a tongue touching and tasting you. Imagine—'

His words fused with her thoughts, until she wasn't sure if the low, slow instructions were entering her ears or emerging from her mind. Eithe felt the fluttering, tiny at first and then stronger and stronger, drawing her into herself. Then she relaxed so utterly that she didn't know whether she would draw another breath.

She didn't think the Mirror Staring Man had heard her climax. She was utterly quiet until she roused, left the bed, picked up the mirror, laid it on the pillow and then settled down next to it. Her breath glazed the glass. 'Thank you,' she said.

'You're welcome,' said the Mirror Staring Man.

They lay, nose to nose, cheek to cheek. 'Do you want to know who I thought about?' she said.

‘No,’ said the Mirror Staring Man after a while.

‘Why not?’

‘Because I think I’d be jealous,’ he said.

She leaned over and set her smiling lips to the glass. It was not a quick kiss.

‘Goodnight Eithe,’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

‘I wish I knew your name,’ she said. ‘Then I could say goodnight to you properly.’

‘I think you just did.’

Eithe let out a happy little sigh.

In the faint light of the streetlamp, the Mirror Staring Man watched her eyes move beneath their lids and felt remorse gnaw at his guts.

When she woke the next morning, her arms were around the mirror. He was as close to his side as she to hers, and he looked rested although he was not asleep.

She stretched and blinked her bleary eyes.

‘Well,’ she said.

‘Well,’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

‘There’s nothing for us here.’

When she peeled herself away, the gap opened up between them like a void. The imprint of her face stayed on the glass.

‘I should look at your book. Wait there.’ She rolled out of the bed and walked naked to her coat. She unzipped the poachers pocket of the waterproof, where she kept the journal.

‘Keeping it close to your heart?’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

She returned to the bed to peruse the pages. Turning the next one felt like opening the window of an Advent calendar. It revealed a pressed cutting from a pine tree. It was brown and squashed in a plastic wallet. There was a little label attached to it, reading: ‘Mt Vitosha, Sophia’.

‘I’ll check the times,’ said Eithe, reaching for her phone and twisting onto her back. ‘I can book the train online.’

‘Eithe—’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

‘Yes?’

‘There’s something I should have said earlier.’

‘Yes?’

‘—I’ve been thinking about choices. I just wanted you to know that if I said something that hurt you, or didn’t say something I should have, well, sometimes things go too far and too much time has passed to correct it. But I know that, out here, it’s only me and you. I’ve only got you.’ Then he closed his mouth.

Eithe smiled at him.

‘That’s okay. You can thank me when we’ve set you free.’

Three minutes later, the confirmation email dropped into her inbox.

Chapter 38 – The Dragon Bridge

The great grassy park led into the core of Ljubljana. Joe was between trains, so he stalked the byways of the Tivoli, past budding flowerbeds and gravel strips, rows of trees and stands of bushes. People picnicked in the morning sun. Gemma basked in the rays whenever he paused.

A dark, tall girl with her hair pulled into a strict plait jogged down the path. For a moment, he froze, but it wasn't her. A booth drew him with the promise of frying onions, but when he saw that the menu advertised horse burgers, he retreated, sickened.

The city centre streets were wide and clean. Crowds waited at the kerb until the crossing lights turned green. Joe and his shadow were in a liminal space. This was not the Mediterranean and it was not the Balkans. It was some strange blurring of the two. It was at the crook of the continent.

He knew he was getting closer.

It was unlikely that Eithe would be in Ljubljana, but he saw her in every movement, in every shop window, out of the corner of his eye when he turned his head too quickly. He tried to blink away the ghosts and walked past the candy pink facade of the church, over the left-most of the three bridges and along the river. Then he stopped in his tracks. He was being watched. It was a strange sensation. He wanted to flatten himself across the floor or hide. He looked up. There were dragons the green of corroded copper sitting on twin plinths. They regarded him with placid, reptilian disinterest.

'What is it?' said Gemma, blind but aware.

Joe experienced a sudden blossoming of fellow-feeling. He nodded at the nearest dragon with its tongue curled out of its snout, and leaned against the side of its plinth to light a cigarette. His back fitted into a scoop worn into the stone.

'Nothing,' he said. 'Just statues. Time for a breather.'

Smoke pushed out of his nostrils. Gemma sensed his pensive sadness and nuzzled the back of his neck.

'I could stand here forever,' said Joe. 'Watching, like the dragons. My stepfather used to shoot. He said that the best thing to do was not to run after the prey. You scare it off. Better to build yourself a hide or stay very, very still and wait.'

'He used to come back with a brace of birds, with their feathers broken and their chests blown half away. I didn't want to eat them. I wanted to be vegetarian. But he

laughed at me, which was worse than shouting, and he called me a pansy. I ate the pie and picked bits of lead out of my mouth. In the end I got used to the idea of blood.

‘I could wait here for years. I would get old and stooped and thin. I could come here every day from dawn until dusk with a packet of sandwiches and wear this hole in the wall deeper with my shoulder blades. I would take no one else. I don’t want anyone else.

‘She is going east. I could wait until she goes so far she has run all the way around the world back to me. And when I saw her again, she would be grey and tired. Perhaps she wouldn’t recognise me. But I would remember her.’ He lit a second cigarette from the stub of the first. The side of his mouth quirked with the start of a smile or the beginning of a sob.

‘I would ask her to dance with me. I would put down my stick and I would open my arms, and we would step together in the moonlight, and we would be married. You could be the maid of honour. The dragon could be my best man.

‘And while we were dancing, with my knees cracking, we would waltz closer and closer to the balustrade and I would whisper in her ear about all the children we never had, all the times we never spent together, all the years we lost. Then I would push her over the side. But I haven’t got the patience. So I’m going to carry on running for her and I will catch up. I will. It is inevitable.’

Gemma said nothing.

‘Well?’ Joe demanded. ‘What do you think?’

‘I’m tired arguing and tired of your responses – “why, because, why, because, why, because”. I’m tired of your refusal to be comforted and be friends. You aren’t going to listen to what I say.’

Above Joe’s head, the dragon shifted. It extended a long stone tongue and cleaned a talon. Joe turned around and there was a click as the dragon resumed the sejant pose, bolt upright, its feet tucked tight together.

He scraped the cigarette down the side of the plinth, scarring the shadow temporarily, and then ambled away. ‘That’s a bad habit,’ said Gemma from somewhere near his feet. She was softened in the failing light.

‘You can’t smell it,’ he said. ‘It doesn’t bother you.’

‘It will kill you.’

‘My grandfather smoked every day. He died aged ninety-six.’

‘So?’

‘So it doesn’t kill everyone. Some people are resistant.’

‘But you don’t know if you are.’

‘I am or I’m not,’ he shrugged.

‘I know. And it is as it is. And it’s fate if you die from lung cancer or an aneurysm. Blah, blah, blah,’ said Gemma, scathingly. ‘Except that it’s not. Because you might be resistant or you might be susceptible, but what you definitely are is addicted, and you could fight that addiction.’

Joe was about to reply when his phone warbled and he picked up the email.

Chapter 39 – The Overnight Express

Eithe felt the hard weave of the seat on her bare shoulders. A thin rail-issue blanket lay over her like a cheap shroud. A train on the opposite track shuttled past, its wind buffeting the carriage until it rocked a counterpoint to her pulse. She decanted the pills and cradled them. They nestled like little moons in the palm of her hand.

‘You are thinking about him again, aren’t you?’ said the Mirror Staring Man, with an echo of his old peevishness.

‘Yes,’ said Eithe.

‘It might be for the best if you use them,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘Take control.’

Eithe said, ‘But what if it’s wrong? If I do nothing, then I’m not doing anything wrong.’

The Mirror Staring Man sighed. ‘If you decide not to decide, you have still made a decision. You know, I used to think you were indecisive. Now I don’t. Now I think you just kept making the same decision not to decide over and over again. In a way, you’re the most stubborn person I’ve ever met.’

‘I’m going to sleep,’ said Eithe, as she dropped the white discs back into the tube. ‘We’re safe here, and nothing can be done while we’re moving.’

She didn’t know that, three carriages down, Joe was sitting in a compartment with his most recent purchase in his bag.

The train curved like a snake sliding through a pipe. Joe sat straight on the seat. His hair was a crushed mop and his clothes were stained. It was not physical strength holding him upright. He looked out of the window. There was nothing much to see. Orange and powder-yellow lights shone here and there, but mostly there were textures of darkness.

‘Do you have any hobbies?’ asked Gemma, whose dislike of silence was approaching phobic proportions. She wrapped her insubstantial arms around his chest, and he did not resist. The cuddle was gentle and cool, although it was strange, with her limbs rising straight from the cushion.

‘My father would have liked me to have liked football,’ said Joe. He muttered, mostly to himself. ‘Father would have liked me to have been anything else.’

Gemma, naturally loquacious, didn't like to see anyone descend into a black, miserable world no wider than their mind. She said, 'So, tell me about your wife. What is there about her that brings you across the Eurozone? It's a long way to go for a bit of ass.'

'Eithe is not a piece of ass.' He tore himself from the bizarre embrace.

'I'm sorry,' said Gemma. But something snagged in her memory, some shred of a former life.

Joe waved a hand. 'She's a strange girl. I didn't think that anyone else would want her, apart from me. I didn't think anyone else would see it.'

'See what?'

'She was the only one in the whole world who believed in me. Not once, not once—' he held up a wavering finger, 'did she laugh at me. And now she is gone.'

Gemma sensed dangerous waters and gamely paddled away.

'So, Joe, do you like to travel?'

Joe shrugged. 'I would like to go to Stalingrad and Leningrad, except that they aren't called that any more. I'd like to go to Cuba, but Fidel stepped down. I'd like to go to China, but McDonalds got there first. Do you know this is the first time I've ever left England?'

'We were going to go on honeymoon to volunteer at an orphanage in Romania. I never told her that, because it was going to be a surprise. You know, she wanted me to choose the dress? The groom choosing the dress.' He shook his head.

'A modern couple,' said Gemma.

'Do you believe in fate?' said Joe.

'No. I don't.'

'I don't believe either. I know it's true. You don't have to believe in the truth to make it true. Because, see, we are not free. There's only one way I can be otherwise I wouldn't be me. And we're all like that. All of us. Trapped. Bricks in a wall. Cells in blood. We might think we are choosing, but there's only one way we can go.'

'That's deep.'

The locomotive roamed through the blackness. A sudden biological urge cut through Joe's thoughts. 'I need a piss,' he said.

A few carriages down, Eithe felt fullness of her own bladder and pushed the blanket away. The first toilet was occupied, so she shuffled down the corridor to the second. The lavatory well was an open hole and if it had been light, she would have been able to see the sleepers

flickering past. The sink was blocked with paper. She tried not to touch anything as she hovered over the cold seat and let loose.

Joe waited outside the door, tapping his feet.

‘Fucking hell,’ he said.

He heard the rush of water.

Eithe pulled up her underwear and redid her zip. The lock flipped from engaged to vacant.

Eithe opened the door just as the man in the next cubicle came out, so there was a narrow plywood screen between her and her waiting fiancé, who stepped into the malodorous little space.

Unaware of Eithe’s close presence, Joe splashed the bowl and staggered back to his compartment. The train lowed a warning as it crossed a bridge. It sounded like a lost, rejected creature calling in the night. The carriage smelled of sweat and long journeys.

‘She betrayed me,’ said Joe. ‘She did the worst thing one person can do to another, except for rape or murder. She took my life and smashed it to pieces. I haven’t stopped since she left. I’ve searched and searched. I know I stink. I am so tired I can feel my heart drying out and turning black inside my chest. But I am still going to make her mine. Until death do us part.’

‘Why are you chasing for her if she hurt you so badly?’

Joe took a little while to decide what to say. Wheels scoured the tracks. The nose of the train folded the night on either side.

‘Nothing is undecided. Everything is set. No one is free to choose. To meet her, I had to bring the books back to the library at that time, and to do that I had to miss the first bus and to do that I had to oversleep, and to do that I had to have stayed up late reading Engels, and to do that I had to want to change the system. The pieces were all set in place years ago. It was an unavoidable fate. I wouldn’t have it be this way if I could. Do you think I want to care this much? Who would choose pain?’

‘A masochist,’ said Gemma under her breath.

Joe wasn’t listening. ‘I care,’ he said. ‘I care a lot. There are people starving to death all over the world and I care about them even though I haven’t met them. I gave them some of my pay check, when I had one. I’m happy to pay tax to the NHS, but I don’t want to give my money to the military. I want to make the world a better place. It’s my

prerogative and my purpose in life. I want to help. When I have her, I'll be able to. This is just an interruption.

‘Imagine you were a man. You wouldn't fuck another man's wife, would you?’

‘I—’ Gemma sounded stymied by the sudden change in direction.

‘I wouldn't fuck another man's wife. It's his wife. Even if she threw herself at me, I wouldn't. Even if she took off every thread of clothing and danced for me, I wouldn't. Even if she pulled her legs apart and told me to dive in, I wouldn't. It'd just be wrong. It would be unethical. So why is he doing that to her? *And why is she doing that to me?*’

‘But—’

‘I would break his backbone.’ said Joe. There was silence. Soon deep snores started filtering up to coat the ceiling with something thick and viscous.

Gemma was made and unmade with every flash passing the window, and stayed, deep in thought, trying to hold on to the slender thread. ‘Eithe,’ she said, and knew it was a word she'd used herself and used often, although it was an unusual name. She pulled at the thread, and began an unravelling that would take her back to the splitting of her self.

Some way down the carriage, Eithe slept, oblivious. She woke at dawn, her face unguarded against the light. ‘We'll be there soon,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘Get your things together.’

‘I feel hideous,’ said Eithe.

‘You look hideous too,’ said the Mirror Staring Man, but he was only teasing.

‘Shut up.’

She left the compartment and stood with her hands on the handle of the door, watching the new country unfold. Thousands of sunflowers beamed at her from the fields. When the train drew into the city of Sofia, Eithe alighted on the platform and strode away.

The conductor on patrol banged on the door of the compartment with the drawn curtains. Joe snorted and woke. He hurried down the corridor and staggered onto the platform before he found his balance. He was just in time to see her leave, her corkscrews bouncing, and join the clutter of people at the station.

Chapter 40 – Culture Shock

‘What are you doing?’ asked Gemma, as Joe piled goods into the wire basket. He only picked up the cans with ring-pulls and long-life milk, packets of crisps, chocolate and bread, things you could eat with your fingers, things that did not need cooking and would not spoil.

‘Getting supplies,’ muttered Joe.

He paid at the checkout and lugged the stretching plastic bags on to the tram. It rapidly filled with city folk heading for the railway station, and soon he was swamped by gently perspiring bodies. He squirmed. He was sitting at crotch height, and, despite not having washed in a week, it made him uncomfortable.

There was a woman among the people jammed up against him. She wore a loose polyester top and her arms stuck out from it like two knobbly sticks. Her hair was white at the base, but dyed a violent orange, and he could see the varicose veins winding up into her skirt. She looked tired, and she was carrying even more than him. He left the plastic cup of the seat and pushed into the people, gesturing to the vacant space.

‘Would you like to sit?’

He expected the woman to nod and smile her thanks. Instead, she gave him a look of utter contempt and lifted her chin. ‘No?’ he said, stung by her rudeness. ‘Really? Fine. Fuck you.’ He sat back down and smouldered.

‘Well I thought it was a nice thing you did,’ said Gemma.

He exited the carriage and walked back to the railway station, a huge, muscular box that, despite the addition of a marquee roof, a water feature and a bevy of little shops, could not disguise its nature. He found a bench and sat down.

A few hours later, Gemma, who had been thinking, said, ‘Do I know Eithe?’

‘No,’ said Joe.

A few hours later, she said, ‘Are we going to move on now?’

‘No,’ said Joe.

A few hours later, the light went.

Chapter 41 – Abandonment

They booked into a hostel and Eithe sat in the great hall with high rafters and cool flagstones. Around her, travellers ate pasta and tomato sauce doled out from an industrial sized catering bowl. Later, she retired to the ten-bed dormitory, which was hidden in a traditional Bulgarian house that skulked in a courtyard behind a steel shutter. ‘I’m glad we’re here,’ she said, as she locked the bathroom door. ‘It has more, I don’t know, something.’

‘Are you tired of hotel rooms?’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

‘I suppose you’ve seen a lot of them,’ said Eithe, to the looking-glass.

‘Too many. Before – a long time ago, I couldn’t afford them. Last time I was here, I don’t think I stayed in a hotel.’

‘Hostels seem friendlier.’ She sounded wistful. ‘Everyone seems to just hang out together.’

‘I’m stopping you from talking to other people,’ he said.

‘I don’t feel like making new friends yet. How are you feeling?’ she asked. He looked as grey as a three-day corpse.

‘Stable,’ he said.

‘That sounds like something a doctor would say,’ she said, as she stripped.

‘Yeah,’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

‘Better hurry then,’ said Eithe.

‘You need to get some sleep,’ he said. ‘I think we should take the tram around the city tomorrow. I remember that. Maybe we will find something that way.’

‘Goodnight,’ said Eithe.

‘Night.’

‘Are you still there?’ she whispered, a few minutes later, as she lay in her bunk.

‘Yes.’

‘Don’t you get bored when I sleep?’

‘I used to. I used to resent how you shut down,’ he admitted. ‘I can’t do that. Now I’m just glad you can sleep soundly. It’s restful to watch.’

The next morning, showered and fed, she took to the streets.

Eithe avoided one open manhole and almost fell down another. The road was uneven and the factory chimneys stuck up around the skyline and pumped grey fumes into the air.

The pills in her pocket rattled with every step, like a set of miniature castanets. They felt heavy, though she knew they only weighed a few grams.

She bought a bar of chocolate from a cellar-level vendor who handed her change back through the shutters. She walked down a road of yellow bricks and through a wide avenue. On one side, a huge golden dome glinted. In one lane, long black saloon cars crawled past, the passengers invisible behind tinted windows. A man drove a cart down the other. His horse swished its tail, dropped some dung on the road and chewed its bit.

She passed a bar with a sign on the door which showed a gun with a cross through it. 'If they don't allow guns in here', she said into her collar, 'then that means that they are allowed everywhere else.'

She stood at the stop and waited until the tram rattled into the bay. She climbed aboard and swung herself onto a battered plastic chair. The tram rolled over a bridge flanked by dumb, tongue-less stone lions.

It carried her through the town, beneath a bridge, through the underpass and the wasteland patches where the trees scratched at the carriage. It turned off into an industrial zone where the souls of old factories watched through smashed windows and lizards sunbathed on broken bricks. Little plants pushed through the bitumen of the pot-hole pocked pavements. The track looped around and took her to the other side of the city. Now they could see Mount Vitosha.

'I walked up it once,' he said, as they disembarked. 'There were dragonflies beside me, following the stream that ran alongside the track. Their bodies flashed green and blue as they flew.'

Eithe picked her way over the rubble of a demolished building. There was a half-built house, the slabs of concrete and metal skeleton still naked. It looked utterly abandoned. 'This is wrong,' said the Mirror Staring Man. 'This wasn't here. There were more trees. Maybe I sent you the wrong way.'

'I'll take a look,' said Eithe. 'If I go to the top floor maybe we'll see something.'

She navigated the stony slope, through the spiny little plants and past the hovering wasps that suckled at the tiny, brightly-coloured flowers. The pillars of the unfinished home admitted her as she stepped over the threshold. Her footsteps were crisp on the uncarpeted stairwell. The third storey was stunted, the walls only up to chest height, the roof was the sky. The flat concrete floor stretched out in front of them.

Eithe moved carefully until she came to the brink of open space. In the distance she could see the trees, but the city had taken a great grey bite out of the forest. 'It wasn't like this,' said the Mirror Staring Man. 'It was green, all the way out. What happened?'

'Progress, perhaps. How long ago were you here?'

'Half a life ago,' he said.

'I need to rest,' said Eithe, swinging her legs over the side. The ground was thirty feet down. 'And we need to think. We're following you. A younger you. Why did you come here?'

'I don't mean to sound like you, but I don't know,' he said. 'Truly.'

'But you remember it.'

'Some of it. The land, the language - a little, the weather, but not why I was here, or what I did. I hope it wasn't something pointless, stupid and unprofitable. Maybe I was here on business.'

'I don't think so,' said Eithe. 'Why would you spend time on the mountain in summer if you were working?'

'Hmm.'

'The sun will set soon,' said Eithe.

'Time to go back.'

'No,' said Eithe. 'I want to see the city light up.'

The shape of the Mirror Staring Man, duplicated in the facets of the ring, was almost too small to see. So Eithe didn't notice a peculiar expression pass across his face. It was partly irritation and partly a strange sort of pride. 'As you will,' he said. 'I'll leave you alone, if you like.'

'Please,' she said, and so he went.

The city winked and worked beneath a pall of smog. In the dark, as she lay back on the hard concrete, Eithe half-fancied that she could hear the bristling scrub grass drinking up the scattered droplets, like thousands of tiny straws sucking at the bottom of a glass. In the undergrowth, the crickets shrilled.

'I'm ready to go now,' she said, but the Mirror Staring Man did not reply. 'Hello,' she said, feeling as foolish as when she spoke into a dead phone. 'Hello?'

There was no answer.

'You aren't giving me the silent treatment again, are you?' said Eithe. She shook the ring, for all the difference it would make, as though he was a goldfish in a bag, but there was no response. She held her hand up to the failing light and stared into the diamond. It

was empty. There was no reflection at all. The Mirror Staring Man was gone and he had left nothing in his place.

Then she really wanted to know his name, so she could curse it.

Chapter 42 – Basilisk

The sky was the colour of scar tissue. ‘Please move,’ begged Gemma. ‘You can’t stay here all night again.’

But Joe did not move, and in despair, she turned away from him and into the unreality. This time, it was not completely empty.

Chapter 43 – Dissolution

The Mirror Staring Man saw the shadow in the distance, although in truth there was no distance between them. He was in the non-space that lay outside infinity, so there was more of it than everything and at the same time nothing at all.

At first, he didn't know what it was. It appeared as a dark smudge in space, shifting and shapeless without a body to give it form. But it was something, in the zero, and the revenant shape terrified him. He started to run with feet he didn't have at the sudden, puncturing realisation that he was not alone.

'Hey!' he heard. 'Hey!'

It billowed, then it pulled herself into a more familiar shape. Legs coalesced and kicked as it desperately began to swim for him. 'Stop!' it said. Its words were oddly dead in the nothingness. There was no air to carry them, no acoustics to texture them, so they were as real as the words he heard inside his own skull and as loud as thought.

He struggled away from it as it wallowed, its parts fluctuating, some as dark as the heart of a thunder cloud. Its borders were translucent and badly defined. 'Don't!' he said. 'I'm not going to hurt you.'

The memories of his legs were not strong enough to carry him. There was no ground to support him, no traction to give him speed. And he couldn't, no matter how hard he tried, run any further. Even though he couldn't see Eithe, he was still tethered to her. The shadow drew closer, closer to him.

It was a monster, an apparition of uncertainty, and because fear is based on the unknown, it was terrifying. It reached out, gathered up the frayed threads he trailed behind him and pulled. He felt himself being hauled toward it. The shadow wavered as it drew him close. He did the only thing he could think to do. He attacked.

'Get away!' he said, as his insubstantial arms pushed away at the clinging shade. It tried to scratch and snag. It couldn't get a hold on his flimsy body, which was as substantial as the silvering on the back of a mirror, the sheen of oil on a rainy road or the glassiness of a dying eye. They tangled around each other, terrified of letting go, terrified of touching, unable to do any damage.

'Calm down,' the shadow said. 'Please. I just want to know who you are. Wait, wait!'

His flailings slowed. ‘Who I am?’ he said. ‘Who are you?’ The Mirror Staring Man started to laugh. ‘I don’t know who I am. Well, not a lot about who I am. Do you know who you are?’

‘Not all of me,’ said the shadow. ‘But I did, once.’ The dark, flowing limbs released their hold on him. ‘I thought I was the only one out here,’ it said. ‘Until I saw you. You scared me.’

‘*I scared you? Why?*’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘There’s not much I can do to anyone like this.’

‘You aren’t complete. We are supposed to be whole. And all you were was dread and rage.’

‘Were?’

‘Not now,’ the shadow said. ‘Now there’s something else.’

They hung in the nothing, regarding each other.

‘You were a woman,’ he said. ‘From the way you hold yourself.’

‘I think so.’

‘How did you end up here?’

‘Something hurt me, hurt my body, very badly. So I left it. What about you?’

‘I –’ he hesitated.

‘There’s nothing to be ashamed of,’ said the shadow. ‘We’re not even really here.’

‘I haven’t told anyone how I ended up like this.’

‘Do you have anyone to tell?’

‘There is someone,’ he said, and he smiled, despite himself.

‘Ah, so there’s the change,’ said the other, with a shadowy little smirk. ‘I have someone too. It makes things easier, to know there is someone I can talk with, to comfort. He’s so cynical and sad. He is trying to find his true love. Maybe if I help him, I can find a way back to my body. I don’t have – these.’

She gestured at the red threads thrumming from his chest, fingertips and toes. They pulsed, gently, until they disappeared into nothingness. Some of them were see-through. They were little snares, more pink than red, some paler than pink.

‘I don’t like seeing them,’ he said. ‘They are holding me to my body.’ He looked at the shadow because the webbing made him feel faintly nauseous.

She said, ‘What’s your name?’

‘I don’t remember. Why do you think we can’t remember?’

‘I suppose it’s because memory is essentially an organic thing. Our brains are somewhere over there, *inside*. And our connections are growing weaker, so perhaps the longer we are out here, the less we will know. I love my body. Every time I stretch and hear the fibres cracking it makes me feel alive. I love its suppleness when I rub my skin with cream. I love the way it aches after I go to the gym. I really miss it. Not out of vanity, but because –’

‘But because it’s yours,’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

‘More than that. I don’t own it. I don’t think there’s a self without the flesh. It’s part of me. I’m part of it. No, that’s all wrong. That sounds like two things tied together. There is no me without it. Oh, I don’t know. I don’t have the right words.’

‘I understand.’

‘Oh, it’s good to hear someone say that. I miss everybody.’

‘Who?’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘I don’t remember anybody to miss.’

‘There must be some people. Colleagues, friends, maybe a lover. I worry about them.’

‘But you don’t know who they are.’

‘I remember I had a little brother, whoever he was. I might not know him, but he and the others are still people,’ said the shadow simply. ‘Anyway, you didn’t finish. About how you found yourself here. Nowhere.’

The Mirror Staring Man kept his attention on her face as he tried to find a way to phrase his thoughts. She moved like a cloud in high wind, shifting in complicated fluctuation, and he could see her refining herself, trying to maintain contours that she was only guessing at. Sometimes her face was sharp, sometimes rounded, sometimes not even humanoid. It was still better than looking at the arteries running from his trunk.

‘I wanted to,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘I don’t mean I wanted to be here. But I did want to get away.’

‘I had a dream once, when I was very young, that I was put on an operating table. There was another kid on the table next to me. The surgeons had a long piece of twine, and they implanted it in the other kid’s side. They were going to sew the other end to me, but I didn’t want it, I hadn’t asked for it and had never been asked if I wanted it. I ran away in my dream, and the rope tore out of my side and I bled to death.’

‘I’ve never wanted to be tied to anyone, ever. In the memories I still have access to, I can’t remember any time when I was with someone without a reason, because they would

help me succeed or because they had some information I needed, or because I worked with them. I wanted to be absolute, detached, distinct, self-sufficient. And I was.

‘I only remember bits. Useless bits. My desk, with a black leather chair. Shouting at someone incompetent. Lots of incompetent colleagues.’ He barked out a laugh. ‘I remember giving myself motivational speeches into a mirror. I used mirrors a lot. I liked to look at myself. It reminded me I didn’t need anyone else, because I was always with me.

‘The day I fell into the mirror, I don’t remember why, but I felt fabulously lonely, and horribly tired of being myself. I remember staring into the mirror, thinking that if I could only leave my self for a moment then I could be happy. And then something happened. It felt like something picked me up and flipped me over, inverted me and then I was looking at my own face. It looked different from the outside. Smaller.

‘And you know what the strangest thing was? For a moment, just for a moment, I felt relief. I thought I was free. And then I realised I’d carried my self with me. I had exactly what I wanted, and I hated it. I couldn’t even escape through my body. I can’t shower, I can’t fuck, I can’t get drunk. And now I have nothing else at all.’

‘Except for your person. What are they like?’

‘Some Caucasian and some African in her somewhere, maybe about five foot eleven, difficult hair, chews her lip sometimes and fiddles with her nails. She dressed plain, but now she’s started wearing colours.’

‘No, no,’ said the shadow. ‘I meant what’s she like, not what she looks like.’

‘Ah,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘She’s shaky, nervous, dithering, kind, innocent and stronger than she thinks she is. I don’t have an easy movie list like:- “she’s smart, she’s funny, she’s brave, she’s beautiful”.

‘Maybe she is beautiful, in a way and she is funny, sometimes, and she has ways of thinking that I can’t follow, which is a sort of smart, and she is kind-of brave, to travel alone with just a face and a voice for company. She is a runner, not a fighter like you.’

‘What is she running from?’

‘From one very bad decision she made a long time ago. There’s a man following her, and she’s afraid he’s going to kill her. And there’s me.’

‘Do you talk to her?’

‘Not about everything. There are some secrets I have to keep, some things she can’t know.’

‘And you are good to her?’ The Mirror Staring Man didn’t reply at first.

‘Not always,’ he said.

‘You should be,’ said Gemma. ‘She’s all you have.’

‘I have myself,’ he said, but he didn’t sound certain. ‘That used to be enough. That used to be everything.’

‘But not anymore.’

‘Mmm,’ he said, non-committal.

‘You know,’ she said. ‘Your dream reminds me of something. In Japan and China, there are legends that say people are joined together from birth by a red rope. My favourite was about a rich man who was told by a seer that he was destined for a poor young girl. He was horrified at the thought of marrying someone of such a low caste, so he sent a man out to kill her with a knife.’

‘The years went by and he met a beautiful young woman who he fell deeply in love with and asked her to marry him. Her features were delicate and her manners were perfect, but she always wore a cloth around her head. He asked her to take it off, but she refused. He asked again, and with tears on her cheeks, she said that when she was a child, a madman had appeared from the crowd and stabbed her, but she had run away. The wound left a scar. Her husband took her in his arms and sobbed with her.’

‘The bond can never be severed. Sometimes it leads to a wonderful romance, sometimes to a terrible tragedy.’

‘Nothing is inescapable,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘You can always change something. A good man makes his own fate.’

‘Some things are inevitable, some things aren’t,’ said the shadow, philosophically. ‘The trick is to know what you can change and just deal with the things you can’t.’

‘Very Zen.’

‘Don’t be facetious. Your woman hasn’t been putting up with you for too long, has she?’

‘Only a few weeks. You?’

‘About the same. I became aware and he was there, thank God.’

The Mirror Staring Man frowned. ‘What is he like?’

‘Romantic,’ said the shadow. ‘Melancholy, determined.’

‘I meant what does he look like?’

‘I can’t really see him. Not in the normal way. I can’t really see you, except for the threads going all the way through you. They go in two directions. Did you know that?’

The Mirror Staring Man looked down, reluctantly. They pulsed. Some would lead back to his body, he knew, and the others would link with Eithe. Could she feel them?

Probably not, he thought. She was strong and healthy, and he wasn't taking anything from her really, except her face, her time and a space in her psyche. In a flood of remorse, he realised just what he was – a vampire, a leech, a cancer.

‘How do you know he deserves your help?’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘How do you know he isn't the reason you're trapped out here?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I haven't told her why I'm here,’ he said, suddenly deeply abashed. ‘And I don't think I ever will.’

‘Why?’

‘Because if I did, she wouldn't help me. It's my fault, you see. There's a reason I chose her as my host. Everyone else was closed up, whole, complete. But when I saw her, and saw how precarious her sense of self was, I knew it would be easy to displace. She was a wide open window. So I attached myself to her and pushed her reflection aside. All I wanted was for someone to see me. I know it was wrong. I would never have done it if I'd known there was no way back. I'm in there now, curled up in her mind, and I have to stay small in case she feels me in there. And that's why I can't tell her.’

‘You could just say you are sorry,’ said Gem

‘I – I don't apologise.’

‘You could.’

The Mirror Staring Man said nothing. He wondered how long he'd been away, because there was no way to tell what time had passed in the outside. ‘I should go back to her,’ he said. ‘I've left her alone for a while. Will you be here tomorrow?’

‘We move quite a lot,’ she admitted. ‘I'm glad I met you, but I have to stay with him. He's my only link to the world.’

‘Ask him about the woman he's trying to find,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘If I have my secrets, then he probably has his.’

‘I will,’ said the shadow.

‘Goodbye then,’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

‘Bye.’

When he returned to the other side of unreality, it was with some relief. The dusky mountain, the first few stars and Eithe, lying on her back and breathing quietly, let him forget about the unnerving, fragile threads palpitating in the void.

He watched as Eithe sighed until her lungs were as empty as a spent balloon, and then she let go. At first he thought she was sleeping, and he waited patiently, watchful

from the sliced gem. And then he became aware of her heartbeat which had become a background sensation as natural as his own distant homeostasis. It was faltering.

Eithe, locked in her inner space, felt herself unravel. First her skin vaporised, and then the fibres of her muscles unpicked themselves. The moisture of her body evaporated and her hair flaked away.

‘Eithe,’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

Her sinews and ligaments disengaged, her joints unfastened.

‘Eithe?’

Her bones disintegrated, cell by cell.

‘Eithe!’

And then it was just her mind, and she was about to let go of that when the Mirror Staring Man screamed, and the sound was the smashing of diamonds. ‘Eithe, you’re losing yourself!’ His words woke her to herself and she slammed into her body with a sharp breath. There was a dense reverberation of thunder. Eithe shook herself like a dog. She felt indistinct and nebulous.

The ground pattered under the first heavy drops of rain.

‘I’m okay,’ she said.

‘I know what you were doing,’ he said. ‘I tried to do it myself. Do you know how close you were to ending up like me? You were half-empty and the rest was leaking away. Why did you do it?’

‘I thought you’d gone,’ she said. ‘It’s been hours. I kept looking in the glass and there was nothing there. Do you know how strange that is? It was as if I wasn’t real. I tried to follow you.’ Eithe shivered then.

‘No,’ he said. ‘No, Eithe. Maybe you can’t see yourself, but you are very real. Honestly.’

Thunder cracked.

‘Come on,’ said the Mirror Staring Man, as the rain gained weight, and in the earth at the foundations of the unfinished house, the worms began to wriggle to the surface.

She swore beneath her breath as she ran for the tram. The rain sheeted down, bouncing off the dusty road and creating a slurry that coated her shoes. She leaped onto the tram when the ponderous doors ground open. Drops splattered on the window and hammered on the roof. ‘You almost went,’ said the Mirror Staring Man from the window. ‘I almost lost you.’

‘It was too easy,’ said Eithe. ‘There’s so little holding me here.’

‘Don’t,’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

‘Why?’ said Eithe.

‘Because I’d miss you,’ he said, simply. Lightning strobed the concrete and cloud. ‘How did you get back?’ he said.

‘The red threads led me. There weren’t many, and I was afraid they would snap, but they held. I followed them back. One for my father and one for my mother, so thin because of time. One for Gemma, who is nice to me in work, but that one is frail too. One for Juliette. One for Joe, all tangled up and leading nowhere. One for you – the strongest one.’

He looked disturbed but all he said was: ‘I’m glad you came back.’

She was troubled. ‘I still have the pills,’ she said. ‘But if I cut Joe off, that’s one less thread.’

‘You can always weave more,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘And what value is a safety line that strangles you?’

‘True,’ she said. They said nothing for some time. She leaned her head on the window, and he did the same so they lolled, brow to brow.

‘Eithe,’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

‘Yes?’

‘About the emails. Don’t write Juliette off. You don’t know for sure that she’s been telling Joe where you are.’ She still looked worried. There was mischief in his voice when he said, ‘I met someone else, on the outside. A woman.’ Eithe said nothing at first. ‘She was very nice.’

‘So I will be seeing less of you then?’ she said, with a touch of exasperation. ‘Not that I’m complaining.’

‘Oh, Eithe, you aren’t jealous are you?’ he teased.

‘No,’ she sulked, and he was tickled.

‘There’s nothing wrong with being a little bit jealous. And it’s understandable, when you’re talking about me. I am marvellous, clever and very modest.’

‘You don’t need to get any more arrogant,’ she said.

He laughed. ‘No,’ he said, ‘I don’t.’

But Eithe had unstrung, the tension had faded. She was dozing and he had to wake her when they came to the stop. That night, as she settled into her bunk, he said, ‘There’s something you should know.’

‘Yes?’ Eithe was calm, peaceful and only half-awake.

‘Never mind,’ he said. ‘It’s probably not important. I’ll tell you tomorrow.’

‘What is it?’

‘Don’t worry. We’ve travelled far enough that it shouldn’t be a problem.’

She rolled over and soon there were no more questions.

By the morning, Eithe’s sleep and the Mirror Staring Man’s relief had swept away whatever would have been said. At noon, Eithe trailed toward the station, past the regurgitating water features and the little shops selling plastic things.

There was a tramp sitting on a seat outside the station, oblivious to the bustling buses and taxis. The hard slats of wood bit into his back. A beard crawled all over his face and his belongings were his pillow. Eithe wondered whether he’d chosen his life, or whether he’d ever known what choice was.

He scanned the crowd, left to right and back to the left.

He was so changed, Eithe didn’t know him. The Mirror Staring Man recognised him first. ‘Eithe,’ he said, ‘it’s Joe.’

Eithe froze, and the head stopped turning.

‘Go,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘Go!’

Joe rose from the seat he hadn’t left for thirty hours.

Eithe ran.

Joe kicked over the bottle of urine as he came after her. His hands were raw from where he’d pinched the skin to keep himself awake, and his heart palpitated with an excess of caffeine, but he moved fast.

Eithe slid between bodies, the crowd a blur. She worked her backpack from her shoulders and flung it at her pursuer. He leaped it without missing a step. Joe grabbed people by the shoulders and shoved them aside. He crashed into a kissing couple. The woman reeled back, hands to her tooth-gashed mouth.

‘Hoi,’ shouted the man, but Joe just whirled, his fist out, and grouted his gums with more blood.

Eithe ducked into a little alley shadowed by jutting balconies.

Joe’s heavy footsteps ricocheted off the breezeblock walls.

She took a turn and twisted left, upsetting a dustbin with a clang and wading through sacks of rubbish. ‘Get back into the street!’ shouted the Mirror Staring Man. ‘He can’t attack where there are people!’

She was too busy running to reply. The world turned into a series of angles and guttering. She took the maze of corners without seeing, without thinking, and then she ran into a dead end. There was a window behind corroded bars and a boarded up door.

Eithe wrenched the handle. It didn’t even rattle.

Joe slowed to a stroll. His shadow danced like a fish on a line. He paused, as though he was listening to a voice Eithe could not hear, but then he shook it away.

‘Don’t struggle, Eithe,’ he said. ‘You can’t fight fate. Say you’re sorry, you can still come back.’

‘Eithe,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘It’s a dead end. Save your strength. Tell him the truth. Tell him how you feel.’

Eithe threw her shoulder against the door and it tossed her back into the alley.

‘Eithe,’ said Joe. He sounded almost kind. ‘You don’t know what you want.’

‘Don’t I?’ she snarled. Her right hand quested and found a rusty bar. She tugged and the metal flaked and groaned, but it did not give way.

‘Eithe,’ said Joe. ‘I’m not coming back without you. Whoever he is, you’re safer with me. We are meant to be married.’

The Mirror Staring Man slammed his palms against the invisible barrier in desperation. ‘Eithe!’ he shouted.

Joe reached into his pocket and brought out the gun.

It had a gleaming stainless steel finish. The Mirror Staring Man slid around the barrel. He stretched diagonally and compressed again as the muzzle dipped up and down. Eithe knew the bullet would shine as it revolved through the air and he would ride it straight into her, and he would spread in the red reflection of her blood.

Joe released the safety catch. ‘No!’ he shouted to his shadow. ‘You can’t stop me!’

‘Oh God,’ said Eithe. She jerked the bars and they came away and clanged as they hit the ground.

‘Give up,’ said Joe, and she turned to face him. ‘Or I’ll take you down. Shut *up!*’

‘Who are you shouting at?’ Eithe said. Her shoulder clicked as she twisted it awkwardly to test the wall behind her.

‘I’ve been thinking about us,’ said Joe. ‘I think I was a little hard. I don’t want to scare you. It’s just that I love you so very much. Think what we would be like together. We could adopt a child. We could take him to the park and buy him ice-cream. I’d get a better job and you could stay at home and care for him. We could grow old and sit in the sun holding hands.’

Eithe’s patting fingers found the window. They drummed against the glass. ‘No,’ she said, in a very small voice.

‘Pardon?’ said Joe.

‘No,’ said Eithe, stronger now.

Joe’s throat jogged as he swallowed his anger. ‘Eithe.’ It was a growled warning.

‘No!’

Then he pulled the trigger.

The bullet ground out of the chamber, spiralling as it went, ripping the hot air. The Mirror Staring Man’s pressing hands found hers and her feet left the ground as he dragged her through the veil and into the void.

The lead hit the glass and it shattered in a cyclone of hail.

Chapter 44 – Realisation

‘It’s your fault,’ said Joe, low and furious. He threw the gun at her, but it just bounced off the ground and skittered into the bins. ‘You held me back.’

‘Wasn’t it fate?’ said the cowering shadow, her hands over her head after the ear-ruining noise.

‘Shut up.’

‘Tell me about your beloved,’ said Gemma, raggedly. ‘What does she look like? Is she bronze and tall and more scared than she should be?’

‘Shut up.’

‘She is, isn’t she? She’s running away. She’s running away from you.’

‘You don’t know anything. Stupid bitch.’

Then the shade uncoiled and drew herself up.

‘Say that again.’

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to call you a bitch.’

‘I’ve heard that once before,’ she said.

‘No you haven’t,’ said Joe, but he couldn’t convince her or himself. ‘You must be imagining it. It’s the shock, Gemma.’

‘Gemma?’ she said. ‘So you do know me. And I know you,’ she said. ‘Oh yes I do.’

Chapter 45 - Revelation

The void sucked at her eyes, her sinuses squeezed and she felt her skin strain to keep her blood in. ‘Don’t breathe out,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. His fingers were clinched with hers like the teeth of a zip. ‘Your lungs will collapse. Don’t talk.’

The space around them couldn’t be called space. It was a purer vacuum than the distance between galaxies. There was no dark energy, no radio waves, nothing. Looking at it hurt because she had nothing to focus on, so she locked eyes with the Mirror Staring Man.

She saw him reflected in his own cornea, over and over, and, without the subtle distortion of not-quite parallel mirrors, it went on forever, an endless repetition of selves leading into the pupil, which held infinite depth. She fell into it, down and down into the black, until she seized on a tiny pinprick of light. Hungry for something solid, she moved toward it, and it coalesced into a fire in a grate. Before it was the hunched shape of a weeping man feeding a sheaf of paper into the flames and watching the names and numbers burn.

There was a tug, she felt herself move as though she was being thrown into a spin by a dancing partner, and then she hit glass.

Eithe clawed her way out of the pane, falling out of the door dividing one carriage from the next. He’d pulled her into a train, but she didn’t have time to find out where it was heading. She clambered over the people sitting on the vestibule floor, barged into the toilet and leaned over the sink.

A stream of puke hit the Mirror Staring Man in the face. Then the diarrhoea started, and she was glad that the cubicle was small, because she could sit on the seat and keep her chin on the rim of the hand basin. The pain ripped down her belly and gut. She gasped and spluttered. Someone knocked on the door but Eithe was too busy ejecting to reply. Eventually she stopped bothering to flush. She shook uncontrollably and her throat was scalded by hot stomach juices.

When there was nothing left in her to lose, she pulled her pants up and washed her hands and face. She was utterly empty. Her brain was swimming in pickle brine. When she spoke her tongue felt like a fat caterpillar.

‘All the time?’ she said. ‘That’s what it’s like, all the time?’

‘Yes,’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

‘That’s where you’re trapped?’

‘Yes.’

‘But there’s nothing. Nothing at all.’

‘No.’

‘It’s awful.’

‘Yes.’

She put her arms around herself and rocked back and forth. ‘I don’t ever want to go back there,’ she said.

‘No.’

She looked at him, her face tearstained. ‘Is that what it’s like to die?’ she said.

‘I don’t think so,’ he said. ‘I think when you die, you’re gone. I’m still here, in nowhere.’

‘You saved me,’ she said, and he looked gratified and guilty all at once. Then her forehead corrugated. ‘I didn’t email the Rainbow,’ she said. ‘And he still knew.’

‘Eithe,’ said the Mirror Staring Man, as understanding dawned.

‘He hacked my account,’ she said. The Mirror Staring Man made a neutral noise. She turned to him, her face frozen. ‘You – you knew.’

‘I wanted to tell you,’ he said, wretchedly.

‘But you didn’t,’ she said, rage sweeping away her sympathy like floodwater spilling silt. ‘You just let me carry on, with him right there behind me. Was it what you wanted?’ she snapped. ‘For him to find me?’

‘No! You know, I could have turned your phone GPS tracker on.’

‘Stop telling me what you didn’t do. Tell me *why* you didn’t warn me!’

‘I didn’t want you to stop,’ he said, ashamed. ‘I wanted him to make you afraid. Which is shit. It’s really shit. I didn’t even want him to get close. I just wanted him somewhere behind us, so we would keep going forward.’

‘I’ve carried you like a parasite from one side of the continent to the other,’ said Eithe, her voice harsh with horror. ‘I’ve gone further than I ever wanted to find your stupid soul, which, if it’s anything like what I’ve seen of you, is selfish and shrivelled and not worth finding.’

‘I know,’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

‘You almost got me killed,’ she spat. ‘Of course you did, because your life is worth much more than mine.’

‘No,’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

‘Oh,’ she moaned, and for a second she thought she might be sick again. ‘Oh, the scientist was right. You wanted to get free, and you were worried – you were worried you were stuck to me. You wanted me dead.’

‘I didn’t know he had a gun,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘I didn’t want him to hurt you. If I’d wanted you to die, I would have told you to jump from the kayak,’ he said, appealing to logic. ‘Or I would have let you just float away when you were lying on the rooftop.’

‘You are as bad as him,’ she said. ‘You are just as bad as Joe. I swapped one for another. Is it me? What’s wrong with me that I end up with people like you?’

‘There’s nothing wrong with you,’ said the Mirror Staring Man helplessly. ‘There’s something wrong with me. I’m trying to fix it. Please, give me...’

‘Tricks and words,’ she said, rods of steel sliding through her voice. ‘I’ll find out how to set you free. But I’m not sure I’ll tell you how. When I know, I will keep it to myself.’

‘You would murder me?’ he sounded dazed and, oddly, hopeful.

‘No I wouldn’t,’ she said. ‘I’d go back to London, to wherever you lie. And I’d tell them everything I knew and so they could keep you alive, as you are, forever. You wouldn’t die, you wouldn’t go back to your body. You’d just stay.’

‘This isn’t life,’ said the Mirror Staring Man, and the hope had gone, replaced by an almost hysterical desperation. ‘This isn’t life! You felt it. You know what it’s like.’ Eithe shrugged. ‘I can’t taste or touch or feel. The only power I have is to keep or share what little information I’ve got. I had control, Eithe. You don’t know what it’s like to have that taken away, to feel utterly helpless.’

‘Yes,’ said Eithe in a small voice. ‘I do.’ And then with defiance, she said, ‘And I never, ever used it as an excuse to hurt someone else.’

‘I didn’t mean to hurt you,’ he said.

‘But you didn’t care if you did.’

‘I did care,’ he said. And then he was quiet as he digested his own words. ‘I do care,’ he said again. ‘I care about you.’

But Eithe, in her betrayed rage, mistook his words for mockery. ‘Shut up,’ she said. ‘Just shut up.’

The Mirror Staring Man said something else that sculpted an unfamiliar shape on his tongue and lips. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘You’re only sorry for yourself. But I’ll make you sorry.’

She pulled the journal from her pocket. He winced as she ripped out the first page, balled it and threw it down the toilet. Her anger was fuelled by the bitterness of betrayal, and the tang was worse because finally she'd touched him, and it had hurt. She ripped another leaf.

'Please don't,' he said.

'Now I know how you felt,' she said, with brutal satisfaction. 'Being in charge, withholding information. Good, isn't it?' The paper hissed as its fibres parted. Bit by bit, she fed the journal to the hole in the floor. Then she walked into a first class carriage and turned her shoulder to the window. She took off the ring and shoved it in her pocket. She put her coat over her head and ignored him.

She ignored him as she changed trains and in the café while she waited. She pretended she was alone in the coach and as she made the connection with another train. She still hadn't spoken to him by the time the sun set and rose again and she crossed the border into Serbia.

The train rolled through the outskirts of Belgrade. Rows and rows of tents clustered in the grim districts along the railway line. Bits of rag and plastic flapped in the wind. The sky was bullet grey behind the monolithic tower blocks. There were places around Manchester where refrigerators and cars were left to corrode. But in Belgrade, people lived where the metal things went to die.

She'd lost everything again, except for the two rings, one cheap, one antique, the pills, the phone, her wallet and passport.

Eithe's mind tumbled the same thought over and over like washing in a drier.

He knew, he knew and he didn't tell me. He knew.

The railway station was a dark concrete block. In the ticket room, the seats were made of battered wood and the tiles were scuffed. On the destination board, the times flipped and ticked as they rolled over. She picked up a tourist map from an information booth.

The street outside bordered a building site. Woodchip boards lined the pavement and cars rocketed around an incomprehensible set of junctions. Eithe followed the map up the hill. It wasn't steep, but she was tired. The traffic threw up blue-black clouds of leaded petrol.

She boarded a tram and stared out of the window. 'I remember this place,' said the Mirror Staring Man. 'If you leave at the next stop, you can find a hostel.' Eithe did not respond, but she disembarked. It could have been a different city.

Little stars sparkled in the trees. The cafés spilled out into a square and people sipped coffee and conversed under canvas awnings. Fountains sprayed spears of water which transformed from lilac to a chilly blue as the lights beneath them changed.

Eithe went down a side street which was thronged by pedestrians. Traders sold hair accessories and trinkets on wobbly trestle tables and an artist swore as he wrestled with his easel. She found the steel-reinforced door and pressed the button labelled 3-D8. There was a crackle and then a voice filtered casually through the intercom. ‘Hey?’

‘Oh, hi,’ said Eithe. ‘You take guests?’

‘Sure, sure,’ said someone. ‘Push the door.’

The stairwell was utilitarian and echoing, but well swept. She went up to the second floor and wandered along an open balcony that overlooked the tops of red umbrellas, while above, washing lines wrote a complicated geometry across the clouds.

The door to the hostel was open. It was a little flat that had seen better decades and tried to stay there. The carpet was brown, the wallpaper was swirly and floral and the furniture was well used. A table and bench filled the front room.

‘Hey,’ said one of the men sitting at the table. He had a stern, corrugated bulldog face. Eithe thought he would be quite lovely if he could stop sagging for a little while. ‘Do you want a beer?’

‘Oh, yeah,’ said Eithe. ‘Please.’ One of the guests shuffled down the bench to give her room. Eithe felt suddenly shy and hunched over the bottle. She drank it fast and was given another.

‘My name is Javor,’ said the man who had offered her the beer. Eithe decided that he was the hostel owner. ‘You are from England, quiet girl?’

‘Have you been there?’

‘Hah, no. It is hard to leave Serbia,’ he said. ‘The visas, they do not come easy. Would you like me to open you another beer?’

The Mirror Staring Man looked like a wrung washcloth, pale despite the brown glass of the bottle. ‘Is that a good idea?’ he said. His voice was a quiet fluting like breath over the open neck of a beer bottle.

‘Yes,’ she said, to Javor.

There was a whole roast chicken wrapped in tinfoil. Javor placed a loaf of bread beside it and took a bowl of chopped cucumber from the fridge. ‘It is for everyone,’ he said, when he saw how Eithe hung back.

It was only when one of the men, Igor, broke the bread that she realised how hungry she was. The slick chicken skin snapped between her fingers. Eithe ate and ate until her stomach bulged. ‘So what brings you here?’ said Igor.

‘A man.’

‘Is this someone who loves you?’

‘No,’ Eithe said, fiercely.

‘Do you love him?’

There was a pause. ‘No,’ said Eithe, finally. ‘It’s strictly business.’

‘You know,’ said Igor, ‘you sound very angry. Often you are angrier at someone you love than someone you hate.’

While the host cleared the table, Eithe said, ‘Do I owe you anything for the meal?’

The men stared at her with varying degrees of offended hurt. ‘Never mind then,’ said Eithe. She took out her handset, logged in and checked her emails. A scattering of messages let her know that Joe still cared. She opened one up.

I am going to find you and rip you apart.

Eithe sat back in her seat and glanced over her shoulder. The men were laughing and toasting and teasing each other. She told herself they were good people and that she was safe with them. Her fingers rested softly on the face of the phone.

Bon jour, read the next. Ca va?

I have not heard from you for an age. Tell us of your adventures.

Juliette

Eithe clicked on: reply, and typed:

Dear Juliette,

I am travelling with a traitor. I thought it was you. I am so, so sorry.

Then she erased the message. She was speaking to herself, not the Mirror Staring Man when she said, ‘Well, if he’s eavesdropping, then I’ll give him something to read,’ and wrote:

Dear Juliette,

I'm on the plane. I thought I'd let you know before I have to switch off.

I'm heading home. I'm tired and I've run out of money. I can't carry on. I'll keep in touch when I get back to England. I'm so looking forward to going home.

She signed off, drew a glass of water and said, 'I'm going to bed now.'

'Sleep well,' said Javor.

Her room was carpeted in tattered paisley-patterned brown. The open window overlooked the square. Drums drowned out the sounds of late night coffee chatter and foot traffic. She went to the window, but she did not close it. She didn't want to see the Mirror Staring Man and read his face.

The heavy clouds that gloomed over the inner city split down the middle. Through them, Eithe could see the beginnings of the sunset. She went into her pocket for the canister. It was there, as always. She tipped the pills out on the windowsill and picked up the glass of water.

'What are you doing, Eithe?' said the Mirror Staring Man, as she selected one. She wondered if it would taste bitter. Her lips parted and she raised it to her mouth. 'That's for Joe,' said the Mirror Staring Man. He sounded worried now. 'You don't need it. Who are you trying to unlove?'

'None of your business,' she said, but she put the pill back and took a drag of water.

The bedsheets were bobbed from a thousand washes. She shut her eyes obstinately and put her pillow over her head, so she didn't see the Mirror Staring Man convulse, or hear him grunt between his teeth as a cold glove closed around his heart. He did not cry out for help.

When the pain passed, he watched her as she slept.

Chapter 46 – Shadow Wrath

Joe didn't like flying. It was unecological, uncomfortable and above all, it scared him. He didn't like the lurch as the wheels kissed the runway goodbye, the naked rivets on the fuselage or the way the wing flaps juddered as they retracted, and he didn't like the pressure of the seatbelt on his abdomen. He especially disliked the way the burps and farts of the other passengers were recycled through the air conditioning, enlivened by the occasional squirt of peppermint spray.

The lights were down low. Flat, micro-packaged dinners had been served to the passengers who had paid. Joe crumpled the empty packet of hypoallergenic airline snacks and put them in the plastic glass, which still held the dregs of pasteurised orange juice. He was in the centre seat, sandwiched between a chubby man staring through the window that looked over the starboard wing, and another fat flyer who had chosen the aisle chair. Gemma had been quiet at the airport and that troubled him.

'You hit me,' she said suddenly, as they passed over Germany. 'You almost killed me, except you knocked me free of my body and I hid.

'You know for a little bit, I thought I'd never existed until you. That all of the pictures and words I remembered had been dreams. What did I lose, Joe? What did you take away from me? Who are my family? What do I do? Where did I grow up? I had no past, so I didn't think I'd *been*, until I came to be right under your feet. You shouldn't have called me a bitch. That's what pulled it all together.'

'No,' croaked Joe.

'You want people to take you seriously?' said the shadow, relentlessly, from somewhere at the back of his head.

'Yes,' said Joe. The fat man at the window turned to look at him with a frown.

'You can't do that by hurting people,' said Gemma. 'That doesn't earn you respect. It just buys you fear.'

'I didn't have a choice,' said Joe.

'I did!' said Gemma, her voice like rough hair rubbing against velour. 'Until you took it away from me when you bashed my brains in.'

'I'm sorry!' squealed Joe. The man at the aisle cast a panicked glance in his direction. 'I am! I'm not joking. I'm not joking!'

But Gemma wasn't done.

The dark boiled beneath the chair. It oozed out of the armrest and ran like an oilslick up his sleeves. He tried to grab the seatbelt and pull the catch free, but it was fused to his shirt. Joe flung himself against the strap as the man by the window reached up and treble-clicked the orange call button. Joe's feet were glued to the carpet by the lightlessness beneath. He felt the shadows of his fingers clamp onto his fleshly hands like a clasping lover.

'Do you want to know what it's like?' said Gemma, from just above his shoulders. 'Do you want to know where I am not? I can show you. I can drag you out of this world.'

Joe felt the shadows rise.

The fat man at the aisle unhooked his stomach and stood up. He waddled away hurriedly in search of a stewardess. The man at the window sat helplessly beside the jack-knifing passenger. He tried to draw as far away as he could from the jerking, part-paralysed limbs. 'No!' screamed Joe. 'No, no, no!'

He felt the black draw over him, up his heaving chest, around his neck, over his lips and nose, asphyxiating him. But he still fought, and carried on fighting as it took his eyes and filled the little channels of his ears, spreading into his sinuses, leaving him mumbling and spasming as the passengers scrambled away and the cabin crew came running.

Chapter 47 – Intractables

Back in the hostel, all was quiet. She sat in the lounge in front of an old glass-screen television. ‘Eithe,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. She ignored him. ‘Eithe,’ he said again.

‘What?’

‘Just talk to me,’ he said.

‘Why should I?’

‘Please.’

She turned the television on so the images behind him would block him out. As she drifted off, a news reader explained how Suzana Grubjesic, the deputy prime minister, refused to publically acknowledge the independence of Kosovo. Serbia would not be invited into the EU, yet.

Chapter 48 – Dead End

Joe came to in a warm, starched world. He felt disorientated, dehydrated and dizzy. There was a faint electrical hum, but it was a different frequency to the aeroplane. He risked opening one eye. It was dim, but the shadows were static and unthreatening.

‘Gemma?’ he said, but she did not reply. He lifted his head.

The room was small, there were more than the usual number of sockets in the wall and the bed had a metal frame. From the low voices and the occasional bleep outside, he guessed he was in a side ward of a hospital. He reached over for the handset and pressed the call button. As he waited for the nurse, he relaxed on to the pillow. A feeling of relief filtered through his blood vessels, circulating and spreading from his calm heart to his tingling fingers and toes. He was in a hospital. He was still. He was safe.

‘Mr King,’ said the doctor, as he came through the door. Joe nodded weakly. The doctor, a tall, quietly spoken black man, reached for the light switch.

‘No!’ said Joe. He leaped to his feet, his head swimming, and felt the wrench of a line in his hand. It was too late; he cringed and squinted in the glare. Gemma did not reach out of the sheer shadows and grab him. He blinked.

‘I understand you had quite a flight,’ said the doctor. ‘Excuse me.’ He pulled a small torch from his pocket and applied his fingers to Joe’s eyelids, inspecting the dilation of his pupils. Then he had the patient run through a series of counting exercises and simple questions, and finally he invited Joe to step across the room to display his balance and coordination. ‘No harm done by the incident as far as I can see,’ he said. ‘And nothing in your history that suggests you are prone to seizures. Although I would recommend a scan, just to rule out any problems. And I will arrange a blood test, although you don’t seem to have any viral symptoms. Do you remember what happened?’

‘Yes,’ said Joe.

‘And how do you feel?’

‘Not bad,’ said Joe. He looked down at his feet, afraid of his own shadow, but it wasn’t there. Relieved, he sat back down on the bed. She had gone. Maybe she hadn’t ever been there.

The doctor looked at him curiously. ‘Okay?’ he said. Joe nodded. A sense of subtle wrongness was nagging at him.

The doctor put his pen away and dragged a plastic chair up to the side of the bed. He sat down. 'Most people,' he said, 'who had an attack and passed out on a plane would want to know the cause. You haven't asked what's amiss.'

'What's wrong with me?' said Joe.

'We don't know,' said the doctor. 'Physically, your blood pressure, your reactions, your vitals seem fine. You are exhausted, but that's it.'

'Good,' said Joe.

'Tell me,' said the doctor. 'Have you ever suffered from auditory or visual hallucinations?'

Joe froze as he realised what was wrong. His shadow wasn't there.

'Mr King?'

'Are you asking if I'm mad?' he said. His mind raced. No shadow. None at all. The light shone through him onto the tiles as if he wasn't even present.

The doctor laughed, gently, in a way calculated to put him at his ease. Joe bridled. 'Extreme fatigue can cause problems,' said the doctor. 'It can affect your memory and your senses.' He waited expectantly, but Joe, angry at the chuckle and afraid of the wandering shade, wasn't really listening.

Gemma could be anywhere, he realised, anywhere at all. What could stop a shadow?

'Mr King,' said the doctor. It was a prompt, not a question.

'Sorry?'

'I said, have you ever suffered hallucinations?'

Joe wondered whether it possible to hallucinate that something that should be there but wasn't. How would you explain that? 'No,' he said.

The doctor looked at him, level and unconvinced. Joe forced a shaky smile, and he relented. 'I'll book the tests,' he said. 'Tomorrow. Get some sleep.' He stood up.

'Goodnight, Mr King.'

'Please,' said Joe. 'Can you leave the lights on?'

Chapter 49 – The Return of the Prodigal Parents

In the morning, Eithe picked her new bag up and left the tower block. The train wasn't due to leave for hours, and she wanted to use up her remaining currency. She walked, for exercise and the chance to clear her head. Her route passed under a mass of scaffolding. When Eithe looked up, she saw a torn mess of rose-and-lemon brickwork. Struts of metal protruded and twisted out against the sky.

'A scar left by NATO,' said the Mirror Staring Man.

'I know that,' she said. 'I'm not an idiot.'

She picked a café at random and looked at the menu. As she busied herself with arithmetic, she became aware that she was being watched. She lowered the menu, just a bit, to peep over the top.

There were two people sitting opposite her. They elderly, far beyond middle-age and quite elegant. The man wore a tailored shirt and the woman wore a demure black dress and glasses. Her hair was artistically curled. They prayed in quiet French. When they finished, the man caught Eithe's eye and smiled. She looked down at the menu again.

When the waitress came back, she ordered a glass of water and decided on a plate of bean soup and a salad, with extra bread to sop the juices. It would be nutritious and it would leave enough for a decent tip. A shadow fell across the table. She looked up into the amiable face of the Frenchman. He knotted his fingers bashfully.

'*Bonjour mademoiselle*. My wife and I—' he said. 'We want you to choose anything on the menu that you would like to eat. Anything at all. We will pay.'

'Oh,' said Eithe. She felt her eyes go round. 'That's very kind.'

'It is a Christian thing to do. You are alone and you are hungry.'

'Thank you,' said Eithe. 'I don't know what to say.'

'You do not need to thank us. I am sure it is part of the Lord's plan.'

Eithe, a born agnostic, felt awkward as well as grateful. The Frenchman went back to his table. Eithe knew that if she refused their offer, then they would be very offended. She ordered the soup and salad. When the meals ended, the couple joined Eithe at her table. The woman smiled at her in a vague, beneficent way. 'I am Jacqui and my husband is Philippe.'

'You travel?' said Philippe.

'Yes,' said Eithe.

‘We are travelling as well. We have been to the great cathedrals of London and Berlin, Madrid and Rome, and now we come to see the works of the Orthodox worship.’

‘Where are you from?’

‘We live in Paris,’ said the Frenchman.

As the talk continued and they asked each other polite questions, Eithe became aware of a gap in the conversation. They talked about their parents, now long dead, whose bequest had paid for their small pilgrimage, and about their cousins and nieces and nephews, but there was a space that the words would not fill. It reminded Eithe of how people avoided talking about her mother, who had once been but was there no longer. ‘My mother was quite religious,’ she said. ‘But I’m afraid I’m not. I worry sometimes that she wouldn’t be proud of me.’

‘I am sure she would be,’ said Jacqui.

‘I suppose most parents love their children no matter what.’

Philippe grunted.

‘Here’s to our absent family,’ Eithe said, and their faces tightened. ‘You know, that reminds me. There’s one story I never quite understood in the Bible.’

‘What is that, *chère*?’ asked Jacqui.

‘The prodigal son.’ said Eithe.

‘Well you see,’ said Philippe, ‘it is about forgiveness.’

“‘It was meet that we should make merry and be glad; for this thy brother was dead and is alive again; and was lost, and is found,’” quoted Jacqui. She looked a little bit pale.

‘I don’t know whether I’d be bitter if my son or daughter went off,’ Eithe found herself saying. ‘After all, your child is your child, whatever they have done.’ The couple exchanged a glance. ‘Do you have any children?’ she asked, artlessly.

There was a pause.

‘A son.’

‘Any daughters?’

‘No,’ said Jacqui eventually. ‘We had a daughter, but she was lost to us.’

‘I’m sorry about that,’ said Eithe. ‘My mother died when I was born. I don’t like saying I lost her. It sounds like I just left her somewhere without thinking. They say you don’t miss what you never had. But I don’t think that’s true. I never knew my mother, but I miss her anyway. They also say it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. I’m not sure about that either. It must be so much worse to have known what it was like to have a daughter or a mother or father and then not to have them anymore.’

‘Yes,’ said Jacqui. She looked into her drink.

‘If it hurts to love and lose, then I suppose the answer is to find it again. Thank you very much for the dinner,’ she said, and she meant it. ‘I’ve got to leave now, but I won’t forget your kindness. You’ve been very generous. I’d be glad to have parents like you.’

Philippe said nothing.

‘Look, I have to give you something to say thank you,’ said Eithe. ‘Just a little token.’ She went into her bag and her fingers found a coil of warm metal. It felt right, so she pulled it out and put the ring on the table. The engraved cross winked in the light of the fountains.

Jacqui reached for it and held it up with a kind of wondering. ‘Thank you,’ she said.

‘You’re welcome,’ said Eithe.

She put her coat on and set off for the station. She sat listlessly in the carriage, the Mirror Staring Man watchful in the window. ‘Eithe,’ he said. ‘You’re changing things.’

‘I don’t want to talk to you,’ she said.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘Then I’ll wait until you’re ready. I won’t tell you what to do or where to go. I won’t breathe a word at you. I have no power. Not even words. I’ll leave you to make the verdict. You decide what happens to me. It’s your choice. You go your way.’

Chapter 50 - Awakenings

Joe watched the sinking sun from the ward window. He'd been moved in the morning, and now he was parked between two neighbours, one with a urine bag and another with a wheezing cough. They'd taken blood and monitored his heart, booked him for an MRI scan and looked into every orifice, poked him, pricked him and even sent a psychiatrist to evaluate his mental state. He'd told them repeatedly that he felt fine, but they hadn't let him go.

And now the day was ending and the night was coming, and he didn't know what was worse – the light, which had made Gemma stronger or sharper, or the dark, which reminded him of the non-place she'd pulled him into.

He settled on to the bed and tried to relax. The patient next to him started snoring. The wall clock ticked. He hated it. The minute hand didn't work properly and it twitched backward before it told the second. Sometimes it didn't move at all for three seconds, and sometimes four, and dived forward through time with a shudder.

The light leeches away and his heart beat harder. It was a relief when he heard the soft sound of her footsteps sometime after midnight.

'I know you're awake,' said Gemma. She stood at the foot of his bed. Her outline was tenuous in the sombre ward, and if he narrowed his eyes she dissolved into the dimness, but she was there, an autonomous if insubstantial body.

'I knew you'd come,' he said. 'It was inevitable.'

'I want you to follow me,' she said.

'I don't want to.' When she reached for him, he jerked away involuntarily.

'You are going to,' she said. 'Not because it's written in the stars, but because you should.'

'No,' he said.

'Do it. Shadows get everywhere, even in locked rooms. You could be in the most secure bank vault in the world and I would still find you. Look in the dark places, where the bad things are, and I will be waiting for you. Come with me.'

'No!'

And then she started laughing at him. It was cruel and light, a happy torture which assaulted his ears. He pushed back the covers and slipped his trousers, shirt and shoes on, no pants, no socks. He moved as though he walking at an oblique angle to reality. There

was no nurse at the desk as he left the ward and trailed Gemma's shadow down the corridor. An orderly pushing a cage full of linen barely glanced at him as he passed.

'Funny,' said Gemma. 'A man following a shadow, when it should be the other way round.' She led him into another wing, down a deserted flight of stairs and through a set of double doors. She walked straight through them.

'I thought you were blind,' said Joe, as she guided him unswervingly.

'I found my body,' she said. 'I can feel where it is. I'm just going back to it.'

She passed through another door and Joe paused.

'I can't go through there,' he said. 'There's a keypad. They won't buzz me through.' But she pressed the green button on the other side of the doors and they parted for him. At each portal she opened the way, and he stalked past tired hospital staff, all busy with their own tasks, shuffling around in a weird medical dance. She brought him to the Intensive Care Unit, coaxed him around the vital wires and the loaded beds and then stopped.

Joe hated the hospital. He hated the bleeping monitors. He hated the ailing bodies. He especially hated the nearest patient, the only one with no teddies or bouquets, whose mouth was full of tubes, who breathed with a mechanical bellows, and whose eyes would not close though the nurses tried to tape them shut. They stared vacantly at the sheen of a screen, and the staff had to dribble synthetic tears into them to stop them crusting over.

But Gemma was standing at the foot of a different bed. 'Here,' she said.

They both stared down at her supine body. Her eyes were still beneath their thin, translucent shutters. Her skin looked like thin smoke. She was not asleep and she was not awake. She was absent.

'This is what you did to me,' said Gemma-the-phantom. 'Do you see it now?'

Joe hunched over the bed. His back was bent and his hands splayed across the mass-laundered sheet as though it was a cloth upon an altar. There were flowers all around her, mostly chrysanthemums, and a multitude of cards stuck to the board above her head, signed by friends and family.

'Gemma. It wasn't meant to be you. It was meant to be her. You were just in the way.' Joe lifted his head and his face was misery in flesh. 'It wasn't my fault. I am so weak.'

'Oh, but you did it anyway,' she said. She didn't sound angry, or bitter. She sounded flat with the magnitude of the accusation. 'No one else. You.'

He couldn't touch the shadow, so he reached for the hand of the unconscious woman and took it. 'It is my fault,' he said.

Her tendons and muscles felt flaccid and the small bones of her fingers were soft. He scrabbled but she flowed away, like water held too hard. And as her hand fell from his grasp, it tore something from him. Gemma made no reply. The shadow had gone.

Joe stood up. The movement atomised travel-dirt, the particles gathered in his hair, the grit of sleep, the insides of tired lungs, loose skin and sour sweat. The man with ragged hair and a seven-day beard gazed down at the sleeping woman. Her jaw was pinned and there were marks on the side of her head. With her eyes closed and her face still, Gemma was a living monument. Joe felt his chest ache. His ribs were a weak cage for his anger.

‘It isn’t fair,’ he said, and for a moment, he managed to convince himself. ‘It’s because of everything.’ Joe leaned in close. ‘Don’t you worry,’ he whispered. ‘I’m going to get her.’

‘Hey.’ Joe turned. The nurse stepped back. Joe looked horrific, like a thing gone feral. ‘Hey, this is a secure unit!’

Then two things happened which distracted the nurses. The man in the next bed bucked and clenched, and then he lay deathly still as the monitor shrilled. A doctor ran in and tugged the curtain shut. More staff followed, one wheeling a defibrillator. Then Gemma made a noise. She was waking up.

In the confusion, Joe sprinted out of the ward, hammering on the door release buttons as he escaped. He barged out of a side door and found himself in the car park. The police might get there soon, but he took a moment to lift his feet one at a time and watch the way his shadow danced, his own again, subservient, safe.

There was only one place for him to go, and that was the flat. He knew that it wasn’t wise; if Gemma remembered the attack and told the police, then it would be the first place they would raid. But he went there anyway, because it was what he had to do.

His key still worked. She hadn’t changed the lock. A small, snowy tumble of envelopes greeted him as he pushed the door open. It was clear Eithe had not been back.

He gathered the letters into a sheaf and, as if he’d just come home from work, he went into the kitchen to make himself a cup of tea. He swept some of the rubbish from the table and put the letters down. Mould had colonised most of the crockery, but he drained the stagnant water from the sink and scrubbed a mug clean.

Most of the letters were bills and junk, which he discarded. Then he recognised the logo of a phone company and retrieved the envelope. It was not a network he used. Eithe was always careful to file away her bills and receipts, and insisted, despite the march of

technology, on being posted a paper copy. He tore the most recent bill with jaggedly-bitten fingernails.

The very first item read: 'Roaming Charge, EuroTel'. He quivered with rage as he eviscerated each envelope. The last entry was: 'Roaming Charge, Serbcom.'

A scream chased the acid up his throat.

Chapter 51 – For the Love of God

Eithe walked until her soles blistered and then she limped. She sat down to take her shoes off and look at the damage, but she was afraid the wet feeling between her toes was blood, not sweat, so she got to her feet again and carried on. She was walking away from reflections. She knew the Mirror Staring Man was dying and she didn't want to see it.

Macedonia was a patchwork of gold and green. She'd seen men walking with scythes over their shoulders. Small ponies grazed on the slopes, their skin twitching as insects landed on them. In the upper troposphere, wind tore the clouds to shreds, but the air around was still as Eithe crawled across the surface of the earth.

There was a huge cross on the peak of a hill. Maybe it lit up. Eithe didn't want to stay on the hillside at night to find out. She walked through a stony field full of dung and flies. They settled on her temples and around her neck where the sweat gathered and tried to suck the salt from her skin. She brushed them away but she didn't squash them. Her feet hurt like hell.

The sky was clear but the way was not. There was no path. Every so often, she found crucifixes painted in red on large boulders. There were tricky places where she had to navigate overhangs and little gullies that made her guess where the next mark would be. At one point, she had to climb a smooth, angled rock face by hanging onto a rope improvised from electrical wire.

She stopped at a spring to refresh herself, filled a bottle with water and poured it over her head. After a moment, she hobbled along a narrow woodland track and came out into the sunlight and thyme-scented air. The red-tiled roof of a monastery rose from a stumpy, straight-sided tower within a small clump of trees.

Eithe wasn't sure that she would be allowed into the building as a woman alone, but the day would soon die. She wondered if there were wild wolves in Macedonia. The front door was set in a whitewashed wall. Her knock was answered by a furious barking. She heard someone shush the dog and then the door grated over the cobbles as it swung open.

'Dobro utro.'

The words were sieved through a colossal beard which formed a semi-circle beneath a large nose. The voice was not unkind.

'I've come a long way.'

'So I can hear,' said the monk.

'Will you let me come in?'

He chuckled. 'Of course!'

He was shorter than Eithe and broad across the chest and swelling stomach. He wore a heavy black cassock and his hair, which was streaked grey like his beard, escaped from under his hat in a chaos of ringlets. His eyelashes framed his eyes like kohl. He didn't look anything like the ascetic, raggedy hermit she'd imagined. Although he was middle aged, plump and unfamiliar, Eithe was drawn to him. There was something beautiful about his crow's feet and the rich baritone of his laugh. His English was impeccable, his manner urbane.

'Come in,' he said, and he let her into the courtyard.

The ground was uneven and set with pebbles. The walls of the monastery were two floors high and a wooden gallery ran along the inside of the hexagonal space. The church was half as high again and plain from the outside. It was all built from hand-hewn wood and fixed with daub. In the middle of the yard, a huge St Bernard lolled in front of a dog house. He moulted and chewed on a ring of stale bread.

'What is your name?'

'I'm Eithe.'

'I am Valentin. Would you like to see inside the church, Eithe?'

'Yes please,' said Eithe, her tender soles forgotten.

They crossed the courtyard and entered the cool shadow. It smelled of old incense and there were urns of sand flanking the door. The sand was pocked with coins. 'We do not take payment,' said Valentin, as he picked up the stub of an almost extinguished candle. 'People who come here leave us tokens. That is all we live off, together with the kindness of the villagers.'

'We?'

'Bruno and I,' he said, as they passed under a stone arch and into the interior.

He showed her the paintings that danced across the walls, all the way up to the ceiling and across the slanting stonework. The colours were dulled by a patina of age, but Eithe could see the richness underneath, the clever way the artist shaded each fold of clothing, painted the large, guilty eyes of the penitents and pressed gold leaf to form haloes. The faces of the saints were earnest and anxious, while the angels wore compassionate, radiant expressions - even the smiting ones with swords and wings of fire. Eithe could have sworn that she saw the flicker of a feather in her peripheral vision, but it was only the whisk of the candle flame.

‘In the Orthodox church, our paintings are not just supposed to be beautiful decoration,’ said Valentin. ‘Every one tells a story. When these were painted, not all could read. The peasants would listen to the stories from the Bible and then they could come here and see the ikons, to remind them of what they have learned.

‘Come and I will brew you some tea. It is a fine evening. We should sit outside.’

They sat at a picnic bench on the balcony and Eithe watched as he put three heaped spoonfuls of sugar in his cup. The tea had a wild perfume. ‘It is thyme picked from these hills. Very good,’ said Valentin. Eithe sipped it. When she looked at the dregs in her mug, she couldn’t read them. The Mirror Staring Man looked up at her blankly.

It was difficult to know what to say to the monk. When she thought about religion, Eithe had a confused notion of confession and priests, unleavened bread and guilt. But this man hadn’t judged her at all. He just sat, smiled so that his eyes sparkled, and said, ‘So tell me, what brings you so far?’

‘I have a problem,’ said Eithe, ‘a few problems, really.’

‘Don’t we all?’ said the monk, sympathetically. He steepled his fingers and set them under his chin in a listening pose.

‘I’m trying to make a decision,’ said Eithe. ‘But I don’t know how.’ Down in the courtyard, Big Bruno shook himself. Eithe could hear his wet jowls slapping. The noise was incongruous in the quiet.

‘Why not?’

‘Because I don’t trust myself to make the right decision.’

When Valentin chuckled, his entire body shook. He laughed from the soles of his feet to the top of his head.

‘Ah, so you are a doubter. It is not orthodox to admit doubt,’ said Valentin. ‘But personally, I think doubt, like faith, is also something that takes strength. The easiest thing is not to think, but doubt and faith both thrive on contemplation. Once, I lived like everyone else. I drank alcohol, I worked hard, I had no one to tell me where to go or what to wear. I spent time with my family. I cooked, I walked, I went to the toilet, as we all do. But I was tired. It did not make me happy, or even content.

‘So I decided to change. I worked hard to become a monk. I took my holy orders. I sacrificed the drink and money and the possibility of sex and the freedom to go where I wanted or wear what I wanted. But for me, that was no sacrifice at all, because I wanted to be wherever God, my Heavenly Father, sent me.

It is part of our tenet that we do not choose. We swear to abide by the rules of poverty, chastity and obedience. I am happy to wear the riassa every day, because now I don't have to stand in front of a mirror and put one tie after another to my shirt and worry about what is the best way to look.'

'But how did you know?'

'For some of us there is an epiphany. For me, not so much. I made a choice, which was to give up choice. It was a powerful decision, and day after day, second after second, I make it again and again. I reaffirm each hour, with my prayer, my thoughts, my breath. Long ago I took one turning on the path, which led to another and another, and always I stayed true. I could have gone another way, but I look back and I do not regret it.'

Eithe nodded. She understood.

'I think it's about time I went to sleep,' she said. 'I'm very tired.'

'Here is a key,' said Valentin. He pushed it across the table. 'If Big Bruno barks, he is chasing the birds. No one comes up here at night. There is nothing valuable that they can walk away with, apart from knowledge, and they need not steal that. You will be safe.'

The room reminded her of an old-fashioned orphanage. The bed was metal framed and squeaky. It was piled with hairy blankets. A crucifix was nailed to the wall and there was a bookcase. It was empty. There wasn't even a Bible. It smelled of spiders webs. If it was a miracle, it was very ordinary.

Eithe washed in cold water in a shower room and towelled herself down with one of the bedsheets. She left it to dry on the railing. Then she locked herself in the bedroom and buried herself beneath the hairy covers. But though there was no mirror and nothing to reflect once the light was off, she could not settle. She saw the Mirror Staring Man every time she shut her eyes.

In the deepest part of the night, she left the room and walked down the stairs, her hand heavy on the rail. Valentin was nowhere to be seen. She made her way into the church. She didn't light a candle stub, but she was careful to step around the excavated floor. She knelt because her heels hurt. The angels, saints and penitents were dark smudges across the walls.

'I don't know if anyone is there or if you care,' she said. 'I don't believe in God.' She stopped, feeling foolish, but then she forged on. 'I might as well sit by the spring and speak to the water, or sit in the wood and talk to a tree. But that's okay.'

'For ages I thought if my mother had an abortion, she would still be alive. Maybe I wouldn't be around, but instead, she might have given birth to all of the brothers and

sisters I never had, and they would have given birth to all of the children that they will never have. Maybe an ending for one person is a beginning for many others. And I would never know to regret not living, because I wouldn't be alive to regret it. But maybes are for the future. Perhaps is not for the past. The past is done with. It can be reinterpreted, but it can't be changed.'

The Mirror Staring Man looked out of the dusty metal candlestick, but he kept quiet, despite his distant degeneration. She was glad, because she wasn't speaking to him. 'I'm frightened. I've been frightened for a long time, of being alone, of not being alone. But in a way, that wasn't so bad, because the only person I could really hurt was me. If anyone else got involved, then that was their choice.'

The angels and saints didn't look at her. Their eyes were fixed on each other, on Heaven and the swords.

'You can't choose to love. You can choose to acknowledge it or you can choose to ignore it until it dies of thirst and starvation. But you can no more refuse to it than you can refuse to die and you can no more make yourself love someone than you can force yourself to be born.

'I think I was on the verge of knowing it. Right on the edge, and then it was ruined. But now I have a choice. I have control, not just over myself, but over someone else. And if I keep it, he will die.'

She touched her forehead to the step. It was cool and crenulated against her brow. She didn't cry and she didn't laugh. The feeling was so huge that she couldn't move for a long time and she fell asleep on the hard floor.

Big Bruno woke her by barking like a coughing bull. She moved stiffly. Her muscles were still hard from the trek and her joints seized. She stopped by the urns and rolled a few colourful banknotes into a hollow cigarette and thrust it into the sand. The back of her feet rubbed against the inside of her shoes. It felt like her skin had sloughed off and the leather was scraping across her bare nerves.

Bruno was running in circles around his dog house. The chain was taut. It looked like someone lunging an ungainly pony. Valentin was filling his bowl, just out of range. 'Have you been praying?' he asked as he set the food down.

Eithe looked at the brown and white tail whirring through the air. The wag travelled from Bruno's hindquarters to the shoulders until the dog seemed to oscillate around his breakfast. 'In a way,' said Eithe.

'You have not found your answer,' said the monk.

‘No,’ said Eithe. ‘Not here.’

‘Perhaps not,’ said the monk. ‘Perhaps yours is another path.’

‘I don’t know which direction it’s going in,’ said Eithe, ‘or even how to rejoin it.’

‘Ah,’ said Valentin. ‘Perhaps you should ask a friend.’

‘I don’t have any friends,’ said Eithe.

‘I’m sure you do.’

‘No,’ said Eithe. ‘But thank you.’

She stumbled down the mountain with her head stuck in some dark dream.

It took hours to return to Prilep, and she was limping by the time she arrived. She travelled to Skopje on a rattling, old fashioned train with wooden seats and netted luggage racks, and then sat in the station staring at the times and destinations.

She stood there, tiny in a concrete building stained with decades of use, one undecided speck in a spill and spin of people who knew exactly where they wanted to go. She was afraid that, despite everything, the distance she’d travelled and the decisions she’d made, she hadn’t really moved. She was in the same position she’d been in days ago, at Euston Station – except that she’d moved a thousand miles sideways.

The phone trilled in her pocket. She pulled it out. ‘Joe,’ she said.

‘I know you’re not in England.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘I’m not.’

‘You tricked me. Why would you do that?’

‘Really Joe?’ she snapped. ‘Really? Do you actually not understand?’

‘You wouldn’t come back,’ he said, plaintively. ‘Don’t *you* understand?’

‘I’m coming—’ he said, but she cut him off.

Eithe reined in her sudden rage. ‘Are you there?’ she said to the Mirror Staring Man. She was brusque and furious, but he felt a simple gladness that she was speaking to him.

‘Yes.’

‘We’re going to Greece.’

‘I think I remember,’ he croaked. ‘I think we should go south. It feels right. It feels warm.’

‘South,’ she said. ‘To Athens.’

Chapter 52 – Shadows Unshed

Before he'd left, Joe had charted Eithe's progress on a map. It zigzagged down the continent, but it followed a roughly predictable path, and he followed it.

Later and deeper and alone in former Yugoslavia, Joe was distressed by the profusion of jagged, violent sculptures, disturbed by the thickness of female ankles and the way everything bright and new seemed to be an anachronism, with tumbling Mars Bar wrappers and shiny Nike trainers creeping into a world he'd rather keep time-locked in the previous century. He didn't like the heavy Cyrillic and the way the letters looked like chisel strokes in stone.

He was given a bunk with a curtain and drew it. His world was a tiny place, the length and breadth of a mattress. Louse called again. She'd called him every three hours to let him know there was no post for Eithe. 'I would look after you better' she said. There was a current of covetousness in her voice. Joe put the phone down without answering. He didn't want to speak to Louse, poor lost child.

In his flat, before he'd left, he'd asked her over to check on the post, to tell him where Eithe had called from. She had attempted to kiss him. He'd held her away from his face as he would a kitten trying to wash him with her tongue. He hadn't been disgusted or repulsed or even amused. He had felt sorry for her. Sorry that a girl could be silly enough to want to kiss him, and sorry that he was so contaminated with hate, with fear and with Eithe that he could not, would not, touch anyone else. Hate, he knew, was contagious.

He had put the girl away from him, but the hate had not gone away.

For years, he'd wanted to see this world. But it wasn't what he'd thought it would be. It was a mess of ugly concrete, of abandoned politics, of military jeeps, of cast metal statues of workers and soldiers covered in chewing gum, of buildings with war wounds and decaying monuments to dead leaders. But he recognised the ugliness as the indelible stain of history. He felt an affinity for the place. It, like him, was what it was. He wrote an email to Eithe.

The first time we had sex was on a narrow, squeaky mattress in in your bedroom. I'm lying on a bed like that right now. There's a stain on it. With you, there wasn't much blood.

'Love you,' I said, and I held you.

Do you know, in some countries, if a woman betrays her man, she can be stoned to death? Or they pour petrol over her and set her alight. Sometimes even in Manchester they just disappear.

Do you remember that night? I asked you to give me your hand. I had a ring, the sort that came out of plastic eggs. I asked you to marry me, and I slipped it onto your finger. You just looked at the ring and said nothing.

Do you still have it?

Chapter 53 – Athens

The city was a swathe of red roofs and white walls that spread out to the sea. ‘Athens,’ said the Mirror Staring Man from the windows and the sunglasses of tourists. His voice was scratchy and faint. ‘Eithe, we’re in Athens. I remember it. We’re in Athens.’

‘It’s okay,’ said Eithe. ‘I can hear you.’

‘I know,’ he said, weakly. ‘I know.’

‘I don’t want to stay here long,’ said Eithe. ‘I’ve seen the pictures. The policeman on fire and protesters with blood on their faces.’

She roved through the simmering streets of Agios Nikolaos, Attica, and Syntagma. She searched through the streets where, only a few months before, the authorities had swept away the shards of Molotov cocktails.

‘It’s sadder than last time,’ he said. ‘More beggars. More dirt.’

‘You can see the money has gone,’ said Eithe.

‘Go to the ruins,’ he said.

Olive trees spread their silvered leaves over the streets. In the Metro, she saw reproductions of the Parthenon marbles and frescos showing women with bare breasts and bull dancers.

The caryatids troubled her. She wanted to lift up the stone and let them walk away. But she’d read the story of Atlas and now knew the dangers of lifting other people’s burdens. The dust below the Acropolis was dry. Little dome-backed bugs scuttled out of the gaps between the stones and climbed up the spiny stems of grass.

‘Nothing here,’ he said. It was all he could manage.

She returned to the hotel.

Someone familiar was sitting in the lobby. It was Keane. She was not in uniform, but she rose crisply as Eithe entered. Her heels clacked on the tiles.

‘Miss Dord,’ she said.

‘You,’ said Eithe.

‘I’m taking you in,’ said Keane.

‘That isn’t the same as arresting me,’ said Eithe. The questioning tone that Keane had thought so childish had vanished completely.

‘I’m not afraid to make a scene,’ said Keane. She unhooked a pair of handcuffs and reached for Eithe, who pulled away. Keane grasped her wrist hard and slapped the manacles on.

‘Pull me through,’ said Eithe quietly.

‘Are you sure?’ whispered the Mirror Staring Man.

‘Yes.’

So though it cost him dearly, the Mirror Staring Man reached through the metal, whirled her over the edge of reality and then swung her back from the precipice. It was as fast as the passage from life to death. All Keane saw was Eithe shiver in the air and then the handcuffs jangled on the floor.

‘You can try it again,’ said Eithe. ‘And it’ll happen again, as many times as you want. I promise.’

‘I don’t understand any of this shit.’ Keane sagged, and Eithe suddenly felt sorry for her.

‘Let’s sit down.’ She led the policewoman to a basket chair near the wall. ‘Where’s Erwin?’ said Eithe.

‘I had him transferred,’ said Keane. ‘I didn’t want to. He was right to let you go. He said something to me when I sent him away. Reminded me about ghost words. Took me a while to work it out. He thinks your man is a scapegoat. Doesn’t mean he’s innocent, but there’s more to this than some grown-up yuppie.’

‘What’s going on, Detective Inspector?’

‘Not a DI anymore,’ said Keane. ‘They were threatening my job. I quit.’

‘They? Who are they?’

‘Don’t know who. Anonymous messages. First it was cash for information. I said no. They have money. Lots. They want to know what I know about him. Your fella. He has them scared. If he dies, no problem. If he wakes – trouble. I was to track anyone he liaised with. You. In case he spread information.’

‘Have you told ‘them’ about me?’ said Eithe.

‘No. Was gonna bring you to them. A drop off point in London. Not now. Let them do their own damn dirty work.’

‘Why?’

‘They know where my kids are. School address, home address, afterschool tennis, football club, school bus, class timetable, doctor, everything.’

Eithe looked at the woman with her rugged features, her grey temples and double chin. Even with all her brawn, she looked defeated.

‘I’m sorry about your children,’ said Eithe. ‘Really I am. But I can’t let you take me in. I haven’t got any information anyway.’

‘Be useless soon anyway,’ said Keane. ‘He had a cardiac arrest.’

Eithe felt her own heart drain. ‘When?’ she managed.

‘Three days back. Probably a gonner.’

‘I have to go,’ said Eithe. ‘Now.’ She pressed Keane’s hand. ‘Whoever ‘they’ are, you’ll need someone who knows numbers. Go back to Britain, recruit Erwin and more like him. Watch your kids. If there’s anyone who can keep them safe, it’s you. And if I can help, I will. I promise. As long as you help me.’

Keane flinched.

‘No,’ said Eithe, gently. ‘I’m not bribing or bargaining with you. I’m telling you because I should have told someone weeks ago, but I didn’t, and I’m afraid he attacked Gemma Imai because I wouldn’t speak up. There’s a man called Joe King. He was my fiancé. I want him arrested. He’s threatened me and hurt me, and at one point he had a firearm. Remember his name.’

Keane nodded miserably.

‘Goodbye,’ said Eithe. She did not look over her shoulder as she entered the lift. As she packed, Eithe cast her mind over the journal, now blown about and pulverised by metal wheels. But she knew where she was heading. When Eithe came down from the room, Keane had gone.

Chapter 54 – The Isle of Venus

Eithe's last view of Athens was of the churning water pushing the docks into the distance. As the bow wave rippled off into the Mediterranean, she opened her mouth to taste the breeze. Her fingers found the little pack of pills, forgotten in her pocket, opened it and scattered them into the surging froth, which swallowed them.

And because there are always consequences, they melted into a million parts and for a few years, the fishermen suffered poor catches and the sea life thinned, but Eithe never knew that.

The Mirror Staring Man spoke from the rail. 'I can't do it again,' he said. 'Can't – take you through.'

'I know,' said Eithe. 'When you saved me from the bullet - after that you had the heart attack. It hurt you. But you did it again to free me.'

'You knew the way.' There was a torturous pause before he said, 'But you tore it up.'

Eithe smiled sadly. 'I memorised the journal,' she said. 'It was the only part of you I had.' She counted the entries off on her fingers. 'The card for the Rainbow, the picture of the fresco in Würzburg, the ticket for the spa in Bad Gastein, the Venetian bead, the postcard from Rijeka, the pine needles from Sophia. You took piece of brick from the NATO bombsite in Belgrade and in Prilep it was a wooden pendant with an orthodox saint. When you were here you tried to sketch the Venus de Milo. Don't give up the day job.'

He laughed painfully. 'Where now?'

'Milos,' she said.

'Last stop,' he said, and then he lapsed into silence.

The ferry docked at a port town where she found an apartment with blue shutters. It took a long time. The villas were all shut for the season and many of the owners had migrated elsewhere, or were busy doing the jobs that kept them solvent when the mass of tourists were shivering at home. But the little old lady Eithe found was incredibly happy to hand her the key. There wasn't much money to be made sweeping empty buildings.

It was a simple space with white walls and a tile floor. The chairs and tables were wicker and the shelves held seaside trinkets like shells, pebbles, dried sea horses and sea stars. Among them was a tiny replica of the statue of Venus.

‘Aphrodite,’ Eithe said. ‘She’s the goddess of love, but she hasn’t got arms. She can’t embrace.’

‘It’s where it ended,’ he said, faint and unfocused. ‘There was the Venus. Not the real one. Little ones. Everywhere. The same size as the dinosaurs.’

‘Shush,’ she said, but there was no anger left in her. ‘We will find who you are. I know it.’

‘I remember this island,’ he said, groggy. ‘It’s warm here.’ She was distracted and didn’t reply. ‘What are you thinking?’ he said.

‘I’m going to have to face him,’ said Eithe.

‘Joe? No,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘He’s insane.’

‘But in a way I understand,’ said Eithe.

‘Please don’t,’ said the Mirror Staring Man.

‘Why?’ said Eithe. ‘Because you’re afraid he’ll kill me and then you’ll never know how to escape the nothing?’

‘No,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. Then he saw her face. ‘Yes,’ he said, honestly. ‘Yes, I’m afraid of that. But I also don’t want to see you hurt. Eithe, I—’

‘What?’

‘You’re better than you think. You’re better than him.’

‘I know.’

‘I pushed your reflection aside. When I met you. I worried I’d thrown some part of you away. Couldn’t have been more wrong. I just packed you in tight. Now you’re expanding. Now you’re becoming.’

‘Shhh.’

‘Why did you throw the pills away? Your only weapon.’

‘He has to have a chance,’ said Eithe.

She took out her phone and sent a message. It was two lines long.

I am on Milos. Come and find me.

She thought about Joe and a quiver of something inexplicable ran through her. It took her a while to realise that it wasn’t fear. It was anticipation.

She checked her emails but there was only one message.

Dear Eithe,

The most wonderful thing has happened!

My Maman and Papa have written to me. I am not sure if I am yet forgiven, but they say there is money I am to inherit. Perhaps it will be enough to save the Rainbow. If your most kind offer to us is still available, we would like you to perhaps work on our accounts. We will pay. It is good to have an outside eye.

Juliette.

‘You see?’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘You changed things.’

Then she slept without nightmares.

In the morning, she hired a moped and drove to where the statue of Venus was discovered by a peasant almost two-hundred years ago. The speed limit was set at forty kilometres an hour, but the locals belted along at eighty. She had to use a mantra to make sure she stayed in the right lane and didn’t crash: right is right, right is right, right is right.

There wasn’t much in the ruins. The site was a dusty bowl. Torpid green and brown lizards, fresh from hibernation, licked their lips as they sat on the stones and watched her. She picked over the ground, eyes wide for any clues, but there was nothing. Just dirt. Her haunches hit the dust and she had to dash away tears of frustration and wasted effort. After a moment, she pulled out her phone.

‘Well this is it,’ she said. ‘Now you’ve seen the place, do you remember?’ The Mirror Staring Man managed a shallow shake of his head. ‘I need more,’ she said. ‘You need to give me more. Is there anywhere else?’

But his eyes were closed and he did not reply. Eithe felt numb. It was too late. ‘I hoped once I got here it would all sort itself out,’ she said.

‘Well it kind of did,’ whispered the Mirror Staring Man.

‘So it’s ended then,’ she said. ‘We’ve run out of options. We aren’t at a crossroads. We’ve reached a dead end.’

‘You don’t sound happy. I thought you’d be happy. This way, you don’t have to make a decision.’

‘I wanted to choose,’ she said. ‘For the first time ever, I wanted to choose, and the choice has been taken away.’

‘I understand,’ said the Mirror Staring Man, and for once he didn’t sound sarcastic.

‘How do you feel?’

‘Cold,’ he said.

‘I let you down,’ said Eithe.

‘No,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘You tried. You did exactly what I wanted. And that didn’t work.’ Then he jerked and gasped, as though he was coughing inwardly, and then there was a gurgle. Eithe felt horribly impotent as she watched him drown in his own fluids. His throat undulated and bulged, his head pulled up. Then, with a convulsion, he was back. ‘I’m okay,’ he said, in a crackling voice.

Eithe pulled away. ‘This is going to keep happening,’ she said, ‘isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘until it stops. I’m sorry. I thought if I went far enough, I would break the red threads. Then I wouldn’t feel the end.’

She put the phone away and sat, hunched in the dirt. After a while, she dusted off her hands and found her feet.

She returned to the village where old men played backgammon under awnings and stray cats gathered in the square for a daily meal of dried biscuits and a bucket of water. Goats grazed in the field beneath her balcony. The sea was a deep glorious blue. She sat alone as night fell and plumes of yellow smoke flared from the sulphur mines in the distance.

She thought about Juliette, Kapoor the scientist with no answers and the monk Valentin who was content to dress in a riassa - brief relationships, all of them. She felt a bit sad, because she knew she probably wouldn’t see them again. When she went inside, she was reluctant to look at the television in case she saw something dead looking back, in case she saw the corpse that would decay and reveal the smiling skull. But the Mirror Staring Man was still alive, just.

‘I want you to leave,’ he said. ‘I don’t want you to face him. Just go.’

‘No,’ said Eithe. ‘I want to help you.’

‘You won’t be able to if you’re dead,’ he said.

Eithe did not want to argue. ‘This is a nice place,’ she said. The Mirror Staring Man was as insubstantial as a hologram. She only saw him because she expected to see him. His face seized for a moment. ‘It hurts,’ she said.

‘Yes.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘It’s okay.’

She studied him, the deep crevices around his mouth, the way the skin hung loose from his jowls, the way the fat had burned away like wax, leaving hard bone.

‘You are the moon,’ he said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘You think the moon is only visible because of the sun. That’s true, but just because you can’t see it, that doesn’t mean it isn’t there. Even in the dark, the moon moves. It causes the tides. It stabilises the axial tilt. It pulls on the world and gives us seasons. There’s power in the moon.’

‘I don’t have any power,’ said Eithe.

‘You do. That’s why you can’t choose. You’re afraid of it. You are more than just a counting machine,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘You are more than just Joe and digits.’ She shook her head. ‘Oh, you have power,’ he said. ‘And it has nothing to do with guns or money, or muscle, speed or even wit. You listen and you understand, and you have a gift for recognising choices and of allowing other people do the same.’

She wrinkled her nose in disbelief.

‘Do you want to know why I followed you?’ he said. ‘You and nobody else? It wasn’t just because you were open to me. It’s because most of the time, when you look into someone’s eyes, you see yourself reflected right back, and because most of the time, when you’re speaking, they’re waiting for their turn. But you really saw me, even when most of me wasn’t there. I don’t know why you think you can’t love, or why you think you don’t deserve it.’

Her feet made faint sounds on the tiles. She went over to the television and lifted her hand to the surface. Static spat when she touched his face. ‘I haven’t found the way to restore you.’

‘That was because there isn’t a way, Eithe. I’m afraid that was my biggest lie, more than the fraud and the emails, and anything else.’

‘Eithe, when I die, I want you to take my money,’ he said. ‘All of it. I want you to go as far as you can and stay away from him. I want you to do it as soon as possible before they freeze my account.’

‘But it’s yours,’ she said, disturbed.

‘No it isn’t. And even if it was, it doesn’t mean anything, after a while,’ he said. ‘When you have enough, it’s just numbers. And I want you to find out how much I stole. Give it back.’

‘And then remember what you said on the mountain, about being made by life, and the people in your life? You were right and I was wrong. We are ourselves but we are shaped by other people.’

‘My feet are hard from all the walking,’ she said. ‘That’s because of you. Thanks for my first scars.’

‘You’re very welcome.’

‘I’m not going to run anymore,’ she said. ‘I’m going to stay here and think about your choice for as long as I can. I will find a way. And if he finds me, I’ll deal with it.’

‘When he comes for you, touch a mirror,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘And if he does something, I’ll move you.’

‘Don’t you dare,’ said Eithe. ‘Don’t you bloody dare. I’ll kill you if you do.’ He laughed at that. ‘I’m serious,’ she said. ‘This is something I have to do myself.’

‘Eithe,’ he said, and then he stopped as though he was on the cusp of saying something too big for words.

‘Yes?’

‘Goodnight.’

Chapter 55 – The Chosen Path

The plane touched down at the island's tiny airport. Joe disembarked and hired a car to take him from place to place. He bought a knife in a little supermarket. It was made for paring fruit, but he knew that if he stabbed hard enough it would penetrate her and she would bleed. To kill her he would have to stab her many times. He would have to puncture her guts and pierce her crotch and maybe, at the end, push it into her throat. He considered the act in a vague, flavourless way. Now he was here, he did not want to hurt other people, not any more.

But he had no choice. He had made his plan and it had to happen. How could other people take him seriously if he couldn't even trust himself to fulfil his mission?

Joe found Eithe's apartment by asking around. In a small village, the locals knew her by face if not by name, and they were curious about the tall, quiet, lone woman. He held back tears as he told her hosts he was her boyfriend, here to surprise her with a gift. They spoke poor English, but they drew a rough map on the back of an envelope and he climbed back into the taxi. She had gone to Sarakiniko, a geological peculiarity, a bright white beach on the north side of the island.

The sun was draining to a dark orange by the time he found her. Sarakiniko was a blasted, beautiful moonscape. Little grains whispered against their big brothers, wearing them down into more sand. The shape of the breeze was carved into the stone. Joe walked among the air-smoothed boulders and gulleys with a wrinkled nose. Someone had pissed up a rock wall in one of the little caves. Something lay rotting on the shore.

Eithe was up to her chest in water and her hair was tied tightly at the back of her head. All around her, ripples moved out. She was framed by the weird, wind-carved curves in the rock. She was wading through the water as though she was trying to find something with her feet. Her back was to him.

He had his knife in his hand. His palms were wet against the plastic handle. If he pushed through the water fast enough he could catch her before she swam away. Then he could ram the blade between her ribs. Maybe she would struggle, but he could hold her down until she choked. He imagined her hair swirling in the sea. The thought that has sustained him over several thousand miles was stale. It didn't excite him anymore. Here and now he felt tired. He wanted to wail, to warn her so she could run, but his tongue was dying because nothing he could say could change the future. He wanted her back, as she used to be.

He took a deep breath and paused at the point where the surf sucked at the sand. Eithe did not turn. 'Hello Joe,' she said.

'Hello Eithe.' He tensed, ready to leap and pin her down, but she did not run.

'Do you have the gun?' she said.

'No,' he said. 'I broke it and buried it before I went back to England. They would have arrested me at customs.'

'But you have something else,' she said.

'I have a knife.'

'You won't hurt me,' she said, and she turned around.

As she came ashore, the sanguine sea moved her from side to side so she seemed to dance slowly as she went. Behind her, the water burst into flame as the sun hit the horizon. Joe recoiled and narrowed his eyes until all he could see was a dark shape wavering in front of the blaze, like a spot on the surface of the sun.

When he opened them again, he saw her standing on the uncertain ground, sometimes sea, sometimes land. She smiled at him. She looked so sure.

She said, 'You know, I've been thinking. When you met me, you said it was too much of a coincidence that I came to the same city you did. Valentin the monk would say that it's God's Plan, and I think that Juliette, with her romance, would say it was destiny. I don't believe in either of those things.'

'But I do believe in probability. Coincidence is just a case of numbers. There are a finite number of places in the world and a finite number of people to encounter within them. It would be far more remarkable if there were no coincidences at all. I used to lie awake after midnight worrying about what would have happened if I hadn't gone to the library at exactly the right time to meet my fiancé. My life could have been very different if I'd felt lazy that morning.'

'Then, one day, I got my maths book out and did some sums. I worked out that the chance of bumping into you on campus at some point, through the places we went to or the things we had to do, like take our books back to the library or pay our fees into the finance office or stand in the sign-up queue, were about one in fifty-two.'

'My dad won thirty pounds once when he bet each way on a fifty-to-one outsider in the Cheltenham races. When he won he stopped betting. He wanted to finish ahead of the odds.'

'There's a one in twenty-six chance that you will share the first letter of your name with your lover. There's a one in seven chance that you were born on the same day of the

week. There's a one in three-hundred-and-sixty-five chance that you share a birthday. That doesn't mean that you are destined to be together. When I was conceived, one out of a hundred-million sperm made it to the egg. There were many million other versions of me who never existed. Compared to the odds of that, meeting you wasn't such a huge coincidence. So I stopped thinking about how amazing it was that I'd met you. I met you, and that's all that matters.

'And that's why I came here, in a roundabout way. It's a coincidence, and that isn't so strange if you think about it.'

'Eithe,' he said, as though he could turn her back into the weak, meek girl he'd known by invoking her name. He did not yet know that he was too late.

'Joe, I don't love you. I don't even like you. But I think we were drawn to each other because, even though we came from two directions, we fell into the same trap. I thought that choice was infinite, and I was responsible for every consequence, and that terrified me, so I did not choose. You believe in fate, and you believe that the consequences are set and that you have no choice. The truth is somewhere in the middle.

'You were good in some ways. I've learned a lot from you, about how to live lightly and not to hurt the world. You can go back to that, if you really want to. But all we really had in common were our nightmares. And they don't scare me anymore.'

'This has to happen,' said Joe.

'There are some things that have to happen, and some things we can change. You know this is the second one, not the first. And that is why you won't hurt me.'

Joe looked at her. The girl who'd said maybe-perhaps-I-don't-know was gone. If he killed her, he would be killing a stranger. He knew he had lost her forever.

'You can choose,' said Eithe. 'You can.'

Joe felt the world expand. It poured out in every direction, terrifying and brilliant. He felt as though he had crawled out of a cave or broken the surface of a cold pool and reached the air. The knife hit the sand.

'I'm sorry,' he said, as he hollowed out.

'Go home, Joe,' she said, and it was final.

'Okay.'

He turned around. He would go back to Britain and back to the flat where he would wait for the police to arrive. Then he would give himself up, not because it must happen but because it should.

He left the blade to corrode in the salt air and trudged away.

Chapter 56 – Solutions

Eithe watched Joe walk away, and he took the last trailing rags of fear with him. In its absence, she felt a wash of strange sadness, bittersweet, as though a good film had ended at an unexpected point.

‘It wasn’t the victory - you wanted,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. His voice was the sound of sliding particles, barely audible.

‘It was, but it’s not important anymore,’ said Eithe.

She sat down with her feet just beyond reach of the small surges of salt water.

Gulls perched and bickered on the cliffs. The water looked like wrinkled pink silk. Sand clotted the backs of her legs like crusty stockings. The grains prickled as they rubbed against the little hairs, but she didn’t want to separate herself from the water. She didn’t want to pull away from the Mirror Staring Man. She let the brine inch up to her feet. In the distance, a traditional *kaiki* fishing boat cut the sea like a set of shears. In the shallows, sea urchins rippled with organic fluidity.

Her gut did a fandango.

‘You’re my best friend,’ she said. ‘I hated you for a bit, but you are.’ She let out a sob.

‘Don’t be sad,’ he said, softly teasing. ‘I’m dying, not you.’

The tide towed a little further up the beach. It folded around her like soft armour.

‘Do you think you’re gone?’ she said.

‘Not yet,’ he said, ‘but not far off. Maybe an hour. Maybe less.’

‘I’ll stay with you,’ she said.

‘Don’t,’ he said. ‘You don’t have to. I don’t want you to see it. And I’ll still be here when it’s done.’

‘No,’ she said.

‘So - you’ve grown yourself a backbone,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. It took longer for him to speak. There was a gap between every word.

The water covered her ankles. She regarded his profile, with its sunken cheeks and translucency. Her fingers flexed and slid through the grains. She pushed them as deep as she could, down through the dry flecks of time-ground stone and into the wet, and then they touched something unnatural.

‘What’s this?’ she said.

She plunged her other hand into the sand and dug. Bit by bit she excavated a little plastic lump. It was scratched and faded, and at first she didn't recognise it for what it was until she rinsed it in the water.

It was a miniature brontosaurus buried by a child decades ago. Its tail had snapped off, its scutes were thin and all the paint had been scrubbed away by the slow evolution of the beach. 'Oh,' said the Mirror Staring Man. 'Oh. I loved dinosaurs.'

'You remember?'

'Yes. I remember,' said the Mirror Staring Man. And the memories came back, spilling inside him like sand spread by wind—

He glued the last postcard in the journal and closed it. He didn't know it would be the last time he would pore over the sketches and souvenirs.

He was part of the crowd of seething bodies moving to the time of the music, wet with sweat and euphoria, shapes shivering and jumping in the UV light, the drums faster than the heart, and his friend offering a foothold and then a shoulder, and then he was surfing, held aloft by a net of hands.

He heard the whine of electric and the roar the rollercoaster as he stood in the shadow of the track, bladder loose with wonderful fear.

He was pressed shoulder to shoulder with a crowd of boys swapping and changing football cards, haggling and squabbling until the bell rang and they filed back into class.

He smelled his green dinosaur, savoury from years of accumulated friendly dirt. He had his fist around its neck. His mum and dad had their own hands on his toddler reins. His eyes were wide at the sight of the sea, awed but not scared, because they were there with him.

He tasted chocolate in his mouth as he lurched for the cheapest Christmas present under the tree. He was puzzled because it was a cylinder wrapped in red paper. He'd opened it and out tumbled the little animals, blue, yellow, green and purple, colours from the imaginary Jurassic and Cretaceous.

Every memory was brighter and more real than the later years of grey suits and computers, speculation and analysis, which piled up like grey strata.

The Mirror Staring Man said, 'I travelled through Europe. I went on my own, with just a backpack. That was the last time I didn't have to worry about anything. I ended my journey here, at the edge of the Aegean, on a beach I'd visited with my parents when I was tiny. After that, I had to grow up. I had to get a job. I was good at my job, and I gave my life to it.

'I worked, I got up, I went home, I slept, I worked, I got up, I went home, I slept, I got up and I made money. I got good. And then they noticed me and started asking me to do things, and I said yeah, sure, because I was a realist, and you don't get on in life without making some moral compromises. And if the things they asked me to do didn't seem quite right, I didn't ask any questions and told myself that it was fine, I was a businessman, and it was how things were done.

'And then one day I woke up and I realised I didn't really like myself very much. In fact, I loathed myself. I wanted to go back to before. I wanted to be a scientist when I was little. It was the dinosaurs that started it all off, and then I started watching the stars and reading about the universe. But I'd forgotten all of that.

'I went to work, because that was all I could do. And then, when I was looking through the papers, I found my employers had tracked down my tax haven accounts and the names I used for them. I suppose the vice was closing in around them. With all the austerity and cuts the public were less and less inclined to let fraudsters get away with it and things were getting sticky. So they tied my fake names to all of their fake accounts, the ones they used to syphon funds away from our clients. And I knew I was fucked.

'I remember leaving the office. I remember feeling sick and breathing too fast. I leaned against a window and it felt as though there was a hurricane behind me, a screaming gale of loneliness and anger. It picked me up and carried me through the glass. I wanted to go. I wanted to flee. I wanted to get away from the blank faces and the blank spreadsheets and the commute. But mostly I wanted to leave myself.

'Then I found you. Now I don't want to leave here. I like it here. I like being with you. I don't want to go back.

'I'm not a spy,' he said. 'I'm not an investigator. I'm just a geek and a banker who fell through a mirror and got wedged in it like a fat cat in a pet door. Are you disappointed?'

‘Perhaps.’ Her smile quivered.

They sat, silent and staring, she at him and he at her, as the water licked at her bellybutton and stroked her floating ribs. The sea had risen to her hips. Little fish sucked at her toes. Time stretched and folded until it was as thick as toffee.

‘You didn’t want me to find your name,’ said Eithe. ‘You were running, just like me. You wanted to die.’

‘Yes,’ said the Mirror Staring Man. ‘And no. I wanted you to take me so far from myself that I could go back to where I was happy and stay there. And when I realised that I was dying, I thought if I went far enough I wouldn’t be able to feel it. I thought if I pushed you on and on we’d reach the point where the bonds between my body and whatever part of me is here would snap. That’s why I did the worst thing. That’s why I didn’t tell you about Joe. I was afraid you would stop.’

‘But everywhere is too close. I could buy a spacecraft and blast off and fly a million miles, and I’d still know the moment when my body failed. I can feel it somewhere remote. My blood is slowing down. I’m afraid.’

‘I’m sorry I didn’t help you.’

‘You did.’ He smiled, feeble but heartfelt. ‘You did. I’m not – I’m not angry any more. It wasn’t the place I needed to find. It was the person to be with. I suppose some people... travel to find themselves. But I – didn’t need that. I needed you.’

The little hairs on her spine lifted. Deep in the pool of her memories, something surfaced like a dark dorsal fin. ‘You took me through the surface,’ she said, ‘when I needed to escape. You brought me through to the other side. I could pull you back to this side.’

‘I know you want to ... help, but ... I don’t think that’s possible, Eithe,’ he said tenderly.

But Eithe was tired of worrying about impossibility. She was tired of being told to do, not to do, what to do. ‘I can,’ she said, utterly sure. She reached into the water, closed her fingers around his hand and hauled him out of the sea. He moved up with the wave, but stayed, glittering, as it ebbed back, so two torsos, one dark and one luminous, emerged from the surface.

She held his watery hand gently.

‘You did it,’ he said, amazed.

‘You taught me the trick of it,’ she said.

‘It’s almost too late,’ he said, through liquid lips. ‘But I don’t mind. You can say goodnight to me properly now.’

He leaned in gently.

‘Wait,’ said Eithe. She placed her free hand on his cheek to forestall the kiss. ‘I was wrong. I said someone should have pulled Narcissus back from the pool, but that wouldn’t have worked. He’d have gone straight back to his reflection. He would have learned nothing. They would have given him a little more time, that’s all, but they wouldn’t have saved him.’

‘What they should have done for Narcissus was push him in, to break the reflection and force him through the surface, smash the illusion. You need to fall through. And you can, if I give you a push.’

‘But I don’t want to go back. I want to stay here with you. I promise I wouldn’t take up much room. I would keep quiet.’

‘I don’t want you to die.’

‘You would let me go?’ he said. ‘And be alone again, after everything?’

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘I don’t want to go back,’ he repeated. ‘I don’t want to leave you by yourself.’

She looked into his eyes, and for the first time, they did not show fear or self-involvement or frustration. They held something she had never seen before, but she recognised it all the same. She knew a moment of total anguish, and she wanted to say, ‘Then don’t,’ but she knew if she had, he would have stayed. She could have held him until he died, then she would have had him always and lost him forever.

‘You have to go home,’ she said.

‘What if I get lost?’

‘You won’t,’ she said. ‘Follow the trail we made. Everywhere we’ve been has showed us the way back. And when you wake, call Erwin, like we promised. And you’ll tell them everything. If you go now, I’ll come and find you. Then you can give me your name.’

‘You promise?’ he said.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I will. When I have finished my journey.’

‘Okay,’ he said.

‘Okay,’ she said. ‘Ready?’

He nodded, and together they rose.

They stood, streaming in the twilight, the stars shining through him. For a moment each behaved as though they had never seen the other before, a fleeting meeting of the eyes, a turn away like strangers in the street. But their hands were pressed together, water against flesh.

He asked, 'There was something you never told me. 'Who were you thinking about that night in Rijeka? Will you tell me?'

She was lost for a moment, and then a smile filtered through her features until her eyes were polished copper. 'Perhaps I will, maybe I won't,' she said as though each word was delicious to her.

'Please.'

For just a few moments, she drew him close and felt his thin meniscus press against her body. And then she flung him away so that his self and the saltwater crashed back into the sea and then he was gone, outside and in.

'It was someone I haven't met yet,' she said to the foam. When it cleared, leaving a thin slick across the sand, she saw her own curious eyes, her dripping hair flaring down her back like the hood of a cobra. 'I'll see you soon, Mirror Staring Man,' she said.

A pressure she hadn't even been aware of eased. She felt her self unfurl, and the rushing expansion seemed to lift her from the inside. She looked further, out to the horizon, and then further still, to the deep sky. Eithe swung her arms wide and arched her back, in salute to the rising moon.

Fantastical Journeys: a Fusion Form

An examination of key magical realist texts and their
use of travel fiction features

Introduction

Magical realism has, for several decades, been regarded as a narrative mode that challenges, blurs and deconstructs boundaries of class, gender, geography, race and philosophy, imposed through Euro-centric historicity. Stephen Slemon argues several magical realist texts: “Comprise a positive and liberating engagement with the codes of imperial history and its legacy of fragmentation and discontinuity”.¹ In contrast, travel fiction has played a key role in depicting, shaping and delineating these same boundaries. Janice Bailey-Goldschmidt and Martin Kalfatovic regard fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth century travel writing as: “Information... manipulated and controlled by individuals and authorities interested in the larger context of global economic activity”, resulting in the production of a foreign “Other”.²

Despite the existence of critical interest in both narrative models, I have found very little evidence of a body of work detailing the way in which they co-exist and interact within a number of pivotal contemporary texts. These texts, including the bestselling works of Gabriel García Márquez and Jeanette Winterson, have informed and questioned the views of a vast numbers of readers. In many magical realist novels, the protagonists and antagonists undergo a journey, and that journey represents a significant function of the plot. In every source text, a protagonist crosses political-geographical boundaries, from one country to another or one culture to another.

I will examine and critique the way in which magical realism incorporates elements of travel fiction in order to radicalise geography and movement. I argue that magical realist literature, when reinforced by travel fiction, produces a text capable of issuing a two-pronged attack exposing repressive ideologies of space and place. I will also discuss what the two narrative forms can reveal about the creation of the self.

In order to do this, I refer to a number of novels written in the tradition of magical realism. These will include texts which may seem to brush against themes and narrative

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1 Slemon, Stephen, ‘Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse’, *Magical Realism, Theory, History, Community*, ed. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (London: Duke University Press, 1995) pp 422.

2 Bailey-Goldschmidt, Janice and Martin Kalfatovic, ‘Sex, Lies and European Hegemony: Travel Literature and Ideology’, *The Journal of Popular Culture* (Vol 26, issue 4. US: Michigan State University, March 2004. Online edition) pp 141.

systems employed by writers of magical realism in an almost ancillary way, such as Milan Kundera's philosophical novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*³ and Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*⁴ which more closely resembles science fiction than her more conventionally magical realist novels, such as *Nights at the Circus* (if any magical realist text can ever be called 'conventional').⁵

The thesis will also discuss texts that are thoroughly saturated in magical realist techniques, such as Jeanette Winterson's time-shifting *Sexing the Cherry*,⁶ and Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.⁷ By doing so, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which magical realism and travel fiction intertwine to become a tool used to pull apart the dominant social paradigm and the oppressive hegemonies it supports.

Magical realism: definitions

Magical realism is a difficult term to define, because its borders are already blurred. It sits at the junction between other, more readily recognisable genres, including fantasy and realist literary fiction, and frequently incorporates elements of history, fairy-tale and oral tradition, sometimes blended with a journalistic sensibility.⁸ The phrase "magic realism", first used by Franz Roh to describe a particularly hyper-real style of painting,⁹ was employed in the 1920s, but was not applied to literature, in a very different sense, until some time later. There is still some debate as to the nature of the term. Maggie Ann Bowers, in an effort to untangle the threads of interchangeable definitions and translations, argues for the preferred use of the epithet "magical realism" when referring to literary works. She claims magical realism (*realismo mágico*) was employed as early as 1950 in reference to Latin American fiction, but was later expanded into an umbrella term.¹⁰ This is the nomenclature I will adopt for the purposes of this thesis.

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3 Kundera, Milan, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995).

4 Carter, Angela, *The Passion of New Eve* (London: Virago, 1977).

5 Carter, Angela, *Nights at the Circus* (London: Vintage, 1994).

6 Winterson, Jeanette, *Sexing the Cherry* (London: Vintage, 2001).

7 Márquez, Gabriel García, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (London: Penguin, 1998).

8 Both Angela Carter and Gabriel García Márquez operated as journalists during their writing careers.

9 Roh, Franz, 'Nach-Expressionismus', *Magischer Realismus. Probleme der neuesten europäischen Malerei* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1925).

10 Bowers, Maggie Ann, *Magic(al) Realism* (New York: Routledge, 2004) pp 14-15.

Anthologies of ‘magic realist’ fiction¹¹ and critical essays on the subject¹² have been published, which has helped to codify the genre. But even in her attempt to refine and define the concept, Bowers, when drawing a line between “realism”, “magical realism” and “marvellous realism”, concedes: “These terms are notoriously difficult to define.”¹³

One of the more concise descriptions I have found lies with Faris, who argues the form is recognisable when: “The narrative voice reports extraordinary - magical - events, which would not normally be verifiable by sensory perception, in the same way in which other, ordinary events are recounted”.¹⁴

This is a necessarily nebulous definition, as I will argue below.

Magical realist texts are largely associated with South America due to the influence of Gabriel García Márquez and Alejo Carpentier. But magical realist novels have emerged in communities and cultures across the globe, including India (Salman Rushdie), Japan (Haruki Murakami), Britain (Carter and Winterson), the USA (Toni Morrison) and Nigeria (Ben Okri - although Okri rejects the use of the term in relation to his work).¹⁵ As such, the texts draw from a multitude of subject-positions and cultural and historical contexts.

All, to some degree or other, depict situations where the highly improbable, impossible or fantastical intrude in such a way as to become part of the fabric of the narrative. These events or objects are rarely depicted as fantastical within the textual world. As Ian Ousby indicates, magical realism: “Is characterised by a juxtaposition of apparently reliable, realistic reportage and extravagant fantasy”.¹⁶

Travel fiction: Definitions

Travel literature, by comparison, is a long-established commercially and critically recognised genre. Examples of travel literature date back beyond the second century with

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11 Young, David and Keith Hollaman eds, *Magic Realist Fiction: An Anthology* (Oberlin College Press, 1984).

12 Hartland, Stephen M. and Wen-chin Ouyang, eds, *A Companion to Magical Realism* (Woodbridge: Tarnesis, 2005).

13 Bowers, pp 2.

14 Faris, Wendy B., *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remistification of Narrative* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004) pp 7.

15 “It’s like saying about a horse that it has four legs and a tale [sic]” – Ben Okri on the categorisation of his work as magical realism. Anrys, Stefaan, ‘Interview with Booker Prize laureate Ben Okri’, *Mondiaal News*, trans. by Matthias Somers (August 26, 2009: <www.mo.be/?q=node/22211>)

16 Ousby, Ian, ed, *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) pp 591.

writers such as Pausanias¹⁷ providing cultural and (vaguely) geographical guides. It is codified firmly enough in western culture that many book stores carry dedicated travel sections, which include subsections of non-fiction travel books designed for entertainment rather than instruction (sometimes derogatively termed “armchair travel”). This thesis concerns the narrower field of fictional travel narratives rather than the inclusive term travel literature. Arguably, the roots of the fictional travel narrative grow from the same seeds as modern day travel non-fiction.

Travel literature is: “A genre composed of other genres, as well as one that importantly contributed to the genesis of the modern novel.”¹⁸ Real-world travel narratives, as forerunners of the novel, are naturally the forerunners of magical realist novels, by extension. My definition, at its simplest, is that travel literature is a text with the representation of a physical journey as its primary purpose. Travel fiction is a fictionalised account of a physical journey.

Early Fusions

It is worth noting the phenomenon of intertwined travel fiction and fantasy is not a new thing. It existed as far back as classical antiquity. For instance, both elements are identifiable in the 8th Century BC work *The Odyssey*¹⁹. Homer’s epic poem, which is among the oldest and most influential canonical texts, details an epic journey of magic (such as the bag containing the winds of Aeolus)²⁰ and morality (the greedy sailors who open the bag face a lengthy exile as punishment).²¹ It features allusions to pantheon gods such as Athena and their intervention in mortal warfare and romance and mingles this with the prosaic activities of farming, sailing, feasting and proscribed ritual. This, too, is a trademark of magical realist travel fiction, evidenced in Carter’s use of Oedipal, ouroboros and biblical motifs in *The Passion of New Eve*²² and Winterson’s deployment of classical

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17 Pausanias, *Descriptions of Greece*, trans. by W.H.S. Jones (Volume 1, William Heinemann Ltd., 1918. (Cached 1998 <www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/pausanias-bk1.asp>) accessed November 2 2012.

18 Campbell, Mary B., *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400-1600* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) pp 6.

19 Homer, *The Odyssey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

20 Ibid., ‘Book X’, pp 113.

21 Ibid., pp 114.

22 “Oedipus is the most fortunate man in the world...” Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, pp 56.

myth and European fairy tale in *Sexing the Cherry*.²³ Another very early text containing (possibly unintentional) proto-magical realist and travel fiction elements is *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*,²⁴ first circulated in the mid 1300s. It, too, draws on a tradition of oral storytelling, and suffers from the mimetic and factual mutations inherent in that mode. It is arguably close in form to later, self-consciously magical realist texts.

The first half of the Mandeville text concerns the exploration of routes to the Holy Land. The second half purports to describe the travels of Mandeville in China and Africa. It is this section which contains the more outlandish stories of gigantic snails, whose shells are big enough to house four men²⁵ and women whose bodies hide poisonous snakes (necessitating the services of a sexual surrogate for the husband on the first night of a new union).²⁶

The text itself could easily be described in postmodern terms. The veracity and identity of the author are both in question. This is despite fierce supporters such as Giles Milton who argues against detractors who “dismissed Mandeville as a charlatan and liar who never even left England”,²⁷ or believed Mandeville to be a construct of French writer Jean d’Outremeuse, who operated in the 1300s.²⁸ The instability of author-identity is comparable to a postmodern fascination with unreliable narrators, the blurring of the protagonist/author binary and the blending of the mundane, the provable-but-bizarre and the realistically-depicted fantastic. Mandeville’s work could easily be an early precursor to Winterson’s *Sexing the Cherry*, in its use of ill-defined geography and magic.

If we are to take Faris’s description of magical realism as a benchmark, then it would be difficult to describe much of Mandeville’s text as magical realist, because the protagonist openly identifies certain stories as miraculous. Others can be taken as misinterpreted reality, such as the giant snails, which Moseley readily explains as a large tortoise or turtle, seen through the lens of the European medieval imagination.²⁹ A tribal custom of employing surrogate-husbands could equally be explained as an analogue to the to the myth of vagina dentate (displayed in cultures across the world – more on this later) and

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²³ The myth of Artemis is expanded in ‘Fortunata’s Story’ in Winterson, Jeanette, *Sexing The Cherry* (London: Vintage Books, 2001) pp 131.

²⁴ *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, trans. by C. W. R. D. Moseley (London, Penguin, 2005).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 133.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 175.

²⁷ Milton, Giles, *The Riddle and the Knight, in Search of Sir John Mandeville* (London, Hodder and Staughton, 2005) pp 56.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp 10.

²⁹ *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, pp 133.

an analogy of the male psychological mistrust of the female reproductive system. Others, however, are related in realist terms, such as when Mandeville describes the painstaking process of growing diamonds by feeding them dew:

A man should carry a diamond on his left side; then it is of more virtue than when on the right, for the natural bent of its growth is to the north, which is the left side of the world and the left side of a man when he turns to face the east.³⁰

Mandeville recounts the marvellous in a matter-of-fact manner; the growing of diamonds is not only a rational process, but one which is tied to an established contemporary system of thought. Interestingly, the text contains several surprising examples of moral relativism and cultural understanding. At one point, Mandeville points out: “They say if they [Nubians] were to paint an angel, they would paint the angel black and the devil white”.³¹ An even more striking example is the explicit criticism of a corrupt and hypocritical Europe through the medium of the Egyptian Sultan. The blistering attack sees the Sultan describe how: “Christians are so proud, so envious, such great gluttons, so lecherous and moreover so full of covetousness, for a little silver they will sell their daughters...”³²

As Milton points out, this conversation could not have taken place as the Mameluke Sultan was about seven at the time Mandeville professes to have met him.³³ Moreover it seems that the passage was lifted from an older manuscript by Caesar of Heisterbach.³⁴ This may throw into doubt the historical accuracy of the text, but it does not diminish its function as a form of cultural critique. Its inclusion of this passage, not adding much in the way of verisimilitude or entertainment in the form of spectacle, could be seen as deliberately provocative.

As time goes by and geographical and historical facts become more readily

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30 *Ibid.*, pp 118.

31 *Ibid.*, pp 64.

32 *Ibid.*, pp 107-108.

33 Milton, pp 234.

34 *Ibid.*, pp 73.

verifiable, the gap between fiction and non-fiction travel widens. But magical/fantastical and travel fiction influences continue to appear within the established canon of literary texts, including Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*,³⁵ Spenser's allegorical quest *The Faerie Queene*,³⁶ Swift's coruscating satire *Gulliver's Travels*³⁷ and Woolf's modernist novel *Orlando*,³⁸ a text which paves the way into the realm of postmodern fiction. It is notable that each of these examples express elements of social criticism, with Chaucer, Spenser and Swift variously critiquing political and religious ideology and Woolf gently deconstructing gender roles. The use of magical realist travel literature as a counterpoint to a male, Christian, white and Euro-centric world-view has a very long pedigree.

Parallels

Travel and magical realism are by no means mutually exclusive terms. I believe that, in certain texts, the two inform, support, complement, accentuate and facilitate each other, working in textual symbiosis to challenge socially constructed norms. These norms include gender, sexual, class and societal roles, and the notion of fixed identity.

Both narrative modes seek to illustrate, in concrete terms, whether through geographical relocation or magical transformation, the construction, deconstruction or metamorphosis of the self:

Travel writing in this [existential] mode presents the journeys being undertaken as important rites of passage and as processes of self-realisation. Often, indeed, they are figured as some sort of pilgrimage or quest, since these are traditionally two types of travel that bring about a significant reinvention or renewal of the self.³⁹

Notions of time and space have long been embedded in western, Anglophone culture and texts. Magical realist writers, such as Salman Rushdie, frequently conflate chronology

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35 Chaucer, Geoffrey, *The Canterbury Tales* (London: J M Dent, an imprint of Orion Publishing Group, 2004).

36 Spenser, Edmund, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. by Hiroshi Yamashita and Toshiyuki Suzuki (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2001).

37 Full title: 'Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World, in Four Parts. By Lemuel Gulliver, First a Surgeon, and then a Captain of Several Ships'. Swift, Jonathan, *Gulliver's Travels* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1992).

38 Woolf, Virginia, *Orlando: A Biography* (London: Vintage Classics, 2004).

39 Thompson, Carl, 'Revealing the Self', *Travel Writing* (Abingdon: Oxford: Routledge, 2011) pp 115.

and geography within their narratives. In his collection of essays, *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie muses: “It may be argued that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity”.⁴⁰

In this, as well, magical realist texts and travel fiction also hold parallels. Time is one of the physical elements frequently warped and toyed with in magical realist texts – especially in the works of Angela Carter. It is taken to literal extremes in the works of Rushdie, where the temporal links between human birth and statehood are exploited with great narrative force in *Midnight’s Children*.⁴¹ The first clash between the old Kashmir and the new occurs while in transit on the waters of the Muskadoon. As Dr Adam Aziz returns from Europe, the ferryman Tai berates him as he is transported across a lake to his hometown, sowing the seeds of his eventual departure to Amritsar and the site of a massacre.⁴²

This intersecting of culture and era, which occurs during movement through space, draws attention to the significance of space as an arena for narrative action. But more than that, it is no accident that Rushdie chooses to place this intersection in a fluid territory. The river is at once a site of division and of convergence. It is ephemeral, shifting, a barrier and a mode of transport. Rushdie replicates this in his later work, the *Satanic Verses*,⁴³ when the two protagonists, Chamcha and Farishta are introduced and thematically linked as they fall from a plane, a process of movement through a medium even more nebulous than water.⁴⁴

Travel fiction, according to Kaplan, can offer opportunities to: “Problematize description, unpack dominant ideologies of space and time”,⁴⁵ and I would argue magical realism can do the same. It is probably no coincidence that the modern fusion of travel fiction and magical realism as it is recognised now, takes place roughly around the 1980s, the era in which critical writers were re-claiming spatial studies and reopening the field to critical thought. Castells argues: “Space is not a ‘reflection of society’, it is society...spatial forms, at least on our planet, will be produced, as all other objects are, by

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40 Rushdie, Salman, *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Vintage, 201) pp 12.

41 Rushdie, Salman, *Midnight’s Children* (London: Picador, 1982).

42 Ibid., pp 13-27.

43 Rushdie, Salman, *The Satanic Verses* (London: Vintage, 1988).

44 Ibid., pp 3.

45 Kaplan, Caren, *This Question of Moving, Questions of Travel, Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1996) pp 144.

human action”.⁴⁶ Therefore, to pass through a space is to pass through society, and any observations of that space will have societal implications. In addition, in passing through space, through arbitrary and geographical barriers, a subject (whether a textual subject or a real life subject) will experience a number of variations, within space and between locations. According to Gregory:

The production of space is not an incidental by-product of social life but a moment intrinsic to its conduct and constitution, and for geography to make a difference – politically and intellectually, it must be attentive to difference.⁴⁷

Travel fiction functions largely by acknowledging difference. In some forms, that acknowledgement has taken the form of Othering and boundary setting in order to support a hegemonic agenda. However, magical realist travel fiction has a tendency to reveal and expose hegemonic agendas, or Other perceived norms through the intrusion of the fantastic.

Magical realist writings, as a literary form, create and operate within postcolonial and postmodern textual spaces. Travel fiction enables a protagonist (or protagonists) to shift between spaces, opening them up as contrasting sites of critical perspective.

Words and journeys

Magical realism has been tied to geography and questions of space and place since it rose to prominence. It is described as: “A style of Latin American provenance”,⁴⁸ is strongly associated with: “The Third World”⁴⁹ and is produced in: “Globally marginal political conditions”.⁵⁰

The use of language like “marginal” in an attempt to critique and describe text highlights one of the most profound links between magical realism and travel literature, a link held in common with almost every genre of English literature. Notions of travel and

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46 Castells, Manuel, *The City and the Grassroots* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983) pp 4.

47 Gregory, Derek, *Geographical Imaginations* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell Publishers, 1994) pp 414.

48 Del Sarto, Ana, Alicia Ríos and Abril Trigo, *The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2004) pp 653.

49 Ibid., pp 653.

50 Takolander, Maria, *Catching Butterflies: Bringing Magical Realism to Ground* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2007) pp 82.

movement have thoroughly permeated our language. They have become embedded in our lexis and in the way we construct narratives. We use geographical metaphors to explain social, romantic, political and emotional states. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson cite numerous examples of the use of these tropes in *Philosophy in the Flesh*, such as:

...the Similarity is Proximity metaphor, in which Similarity is Spatial Closeness and Difference is Spatial Distance. It is very hard for us to imagine thinking about similarity without this metaphor... without such metaphors, abstract thought is virtually impossible.⁵¹

Lakoff and Johnson deconstruct the Love Is a Journey metaphor, citing sayings such as: “Our relationship is at a crossroads” as a “normal”, not “deviant” expression.⁵² This suggests the practice is endemic to the point where it is automatic and we no longer recognise it as metaphor in everyday speech. It is, to use another travel-related term, inescapable.

Wes Williams, when discussing memoir and autobiographical travel narratives, makes a similar assertion, claiming: “Verbs of travel become metaphors for thought and for belief: people are ‘in error’, they ‘fall into difficulty... albeit by different path...’⁵³ and: “It seems we can no more travel without narrative than we can narrate without reference to some form of journey”.⁵⁴

So it will come as no surprise that magical realist texts incorporate travel tropes as a matter of course. Magical realist writers, after all, employ the same (or similar) linguistic schema as any other English or English/polyglot writers.

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51 Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh* (New York: Basic Books, 1999) pp 59.

52 Ibid., pp 124.

53 Williams, Wes, ‘Rubbing up Against Others’, *Voyages & Visions, Toward a Cultural History of Travel*, ed. by Jaś Elsner and Joan-Pau Rubiés (London: Reaktion Books, 1999) pp 113.

54 Ibid., pp 123.

Chapter 1: Departures

From the start, magical realist texts refuse the paradigm of orthodox storytelling and also orthodox journeying by blurring the definition of departure. This is not a simplified narrative model, in which departures are clearly demarcated as clear, isolated starting points. Instead, the point at which a journey can be said to have begun is deliberately confused.

Jordan, one of the dual protagonists of *Sexing the Cherry*, begins his journey before he even has a name. He is discovered as a tiny baby abandoned to the Thames, and his adoptive mother names him, presciently enough, after another river running to the sea: “Jordan... I should have named him after a stagnant pond and then I could have kept him, but I named him after a river and in the flood-tide he slipped away.”¹

In Jordan’s case, the decision to begin travelling does not present itself as a choice. It seems to be part of his nature. The journey is inextricable from his life. Both he and his modern day equivalent dream about the sea. Their childhood toys are home-made boats, and they both go in search of the exotic as soon as they possibly can, one with the legendary adventurer John Tradescant and the other within the navy.

By presenting Jordan’s experiences as circular, tangential and divergent, Winterson gives the lie to the concept of a linear, isolated journey, and therefore of the linear, exclusively external life.

Every journey conceals another journey within its lines: the path not taken and the forgotten angle. These are journeys I wish to record. Not the ones I made, but the ones I might have made, or perhaps did make in some other place or time. I could tell you the truth as you will find it in diaries and maps and log-books. I could faithfully describe all that I saw and heard and give you a travel book. You could follow it then, tracing those travels with your finger, putting red flags where I went.²

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¹ Winterson, Jeanette, *Sexing the Cherry* (London: Vintage, 2001) pp 1.

² Ibid., pp 9.

Winterson's text privileges the internal, intertextual-yet-autonomous narrative. Pykett suggests: "Winterson's novels, like those of her magical realist contemporaries (and precursors such as Angela Carter) offer a form of time travel in hyperreality not least in their accounts of fabulous voyages, such as Jordan's journey."³

The narratives of modern-Jordan and the modern-Dog Woman intersect and interlock – they encounter each other through their "fictions" before they meet each other in "real life", suggesting that each reality is equally valid. Each runs mutually and is analogous to the other. Neither reality is more dominant or "true". Describing *Oranges are not the Only Fruit*, Jørgensen relates protagonist-Jeanette's narrative as: "A journey which is not linear but rather, like the novel in which it occurs, takes on the shape of a spiral."⁴ I would argue that, on the contrary, Winterson's texts are too multi-tangential to conform to a spiralling pattern. Rather, they concern interrelated, parallel, divergent, circular, and independent journeys and narratives – an explosion of possibilities.

As in *Sexing the Cherry*, Winterson's earlier novel *The Passion* features male and female characters motivated by love, and place is inextricably bound with person: "He [Bonaparte] believed he was the centre of the world and for a long time there was nothing to change him from this belief. He was in love with himself and France joined in."⁵

With many other authors, the phrase the "centre of the world" would be read and discarded as just another cliché, but Winterson uses language in a very deliberate way. Indeed, Napoleon does exert a form of gravitational pull; Henri and his comrades bodily reposition themselves in order to stay close to the focal point of their lives, even venturing into the Zero Winter of his unsuccessful Russian campaign. He becomes a central (but mobile) physical location and a repository for faith, ambition and love. Henri states this explicitly: "Wherever love is, I want to be, I will follow it as surely as the land-locked salmon finds the sea".⁶

By contrast, Fevvers, the colourful, winged protagonist of *Nights at the Circus*, enters Carter's own version of the Asian wastes for purely commercial reasons. The

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3 Pykett, Lyn, 'A New Way With Words?', *I'm telling you stories': Jeanette Winterson and the Politics of Reading*, ed. by Tim Grice and Helena Woods (Netherlands: Rodopi B.V., 2003) pp 54.

4 Jørgensen, Marie Herholdt, 'Autobiography and Lies', Empty Space and Points of Light, *The Self, Time, Sex, and Gender in Selected Works by Jeanette Winterson* (Museum Tusulanum Press, 2005. E-book) pp 25.

5 Winterson, Jeanette, *The Passion* (London: Vintage, 2001) pp 13.

clamorous, unglamorous circus train is not rolling through Siberia on a quest to escape, or find love, but to make money. Despite the practical motivation of the female character, her comically hopeless swain, the reporter Walser follows her out of curiosity rather than professionalism.

‘How did you find the Cockney Venus?’

‘It’s the ambition,’ said Walser, ‘of every red-blooded American kid to run away with the circus.’

‘So?’

‘I don’t think you realise just how much I’d like a break from hard news, chief.’⁷

It is interesting to note, as Koenigsberger does in *The Novel and the Menagerie*, that the mode of transport used by Fevvers, a lower-class female, is a “para-imperialist” circus caravan.⁸ The reader: “Must sign on to the story about the circus in order to get at the other story – about gender and performance”.⁹

It is notable that the “para-imperialist” circus is literally derailed during the course of the narrative, and that several characters attempt to subvert and use its projectory (more on this later) for their own purposes. Fevvers seeks liberation, while Lizzie, a Marxist-activist, employs the engine of capitalism against its own ends. In “writing” the circus, Carter creates a moving microcosm of colonialism and a caricature of the dominant hegemonic system. It is through the circus that Carter begins to chart an: “Alternative map [which] unfolds along a geopolitical axis of cultural formation”.¹⁰ Of course, ultimately, the steam engine/imperial system suffers a catastrophic crash.

Systems of hegemonic control are subverted in other ways within the text. The escape/departure of prisoners incarcerated in the all-female penitentiary in the Siberian wastes is a particularly fine example of boundary-transgressing magical realism.

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6 Ibid., pp 44.

7 Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, pp 90.

8 Koenigsberger, Kurt, *The Novel and the Menagerie: Totality, Englishness and Empire* (Dexter, Michigan: Thomson-Shore, Inc., 2007) pp 195.

9 Ibid., pp 197.

10 Ibid., pp 197

Olga is imprisoned by the Countess, a mariticide who attempts to facilitate her own redemption by securing the repentance of other female prisoners. Olga Alexandrovna, a victim of domestic abuse and later victim of a legal system that allows the rape of its female prisoners by turnkeys, establishes a relationship with a female guard. The illicit contact (speech, touch and even eye contact is forbidden) blossoms into a love which sweeps through the prison, leading to an all-out revolt.

Desire, that electricity transmitted by the charged touch of Olga Alexandrovna and Vera Andreyevna, leaped across the great divide between guards and guarded. Or, it was as if a wild seed took root in the cold soil of the prison and, when it bloomed, it scattered seeds around in its turn... so it was an army of lovers who finally rose up against the Countess on the morning when the cages opened for the final exercise hour, opened and never closed.¹¹

Even while contained within the all-female prison, the inmates are still under the oppressive influence of men, as the Countess vainly seeks redemption for the killing of her husband. Their imprisonment might be viewed as the ultimate form of social constriction. They are denied words and movement, in a way that mirrors Olga's domestic immobility and inability to protest or escape her husband's violence. The tables are turned and the Countess is symbolically imprisoned when the women triumphantly break out. They track into the wastes, determined to set up a female utopia, or to simply begin their new lives together. Their escape, largely bloodless, is an example of female solidarity and group liberation as the prisoners and guards find a common cause. They recover their voices and mobility as, marching into the wilderness, they start to "sing, for joy".¹²

For Evelyn, the sole protagonist of Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*, the impulse for travel is more abstract. His initial migration seems to be motivated by the desire not to discover but to shed the past, to begin a new phase of life in a new place: "I was bidding a last goodbye to the iconography of adolescence; tomorrow I would fly to a new place, another country".¹³

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¹¹ Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, pp 216-218.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp 218.

¹³ Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, pp 8.

However, instead of undergoing a clean metamorphosis, Evelyn finds himself jobless, aimless and loveless. He relocates from Britain to an apocalyptically dangerous version of New York, and stays there beyond his means and beyond rational understanding.

I imagined a clean, hard, bright city where towers reared to the sky in a paradigm of technological aspiration... But in New York I found, instead of hard edges and clean colours, a lurid, Gothic darkness that closed over my head entirely and became my world.¹⁴

Far from being repulsed by the dinginess and decay, Evelyn submerges himself in it. From the very start, Carter uses landscape and place as an evocative device. The darkness of New York is a geographical mirror to Evelyn's internal darkness, his misogyny and disregard for human dignity. His unwillingness to leave, to return to a more settled England, in the face of penury and personal risk, is never satisfactorily explained within the text, but there are two probable explanations.

The first is eloquently by Jaś Elsner and Joan-Pau Rubiés, who argue that the urge to journey is sometimes a search for evidence of superiority, rather than a comparative and educative exercise:

...the... traveller does not fulfil himself through a renunciation of identity in the face of a transcendent sacred reality. Rather he finds his pride gratified and his sense of a superior self affirmed through the accomplishment of a very different project... The desire to map is never innocent.¹⁵

Although New York subverts Evelyn's expectations of a clean, modern society, it more than fulfils the criteria of an inferior "civilisation", riven by internal conflict. However, the city may provide a more practical opportunity for self-indulgence than just affirmation.

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¹⁴ Ibid., pp 10.

¹⁵ Jaś Elsner, and Joan-Pau Rubiés, 'Introduction', *Voyages & Visions, Toward a Cultural History of Travel* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999) pp 2.

Evelyn encounters Leilah, a (presumed) prostitute. Tellingly, he is “lost”¹⁶ the moment he sees her, a word which is suggestive of how innocence, the senses and the physical self can be simultaneously “lost”. Leilah leads, or lures, him on a nightmarish tour of the most degraded parts of the city, where junkies slump and “rats outnumber humanity”.¹⁷ In this disintegrating place, Evelyn himself is able to degrade, morally and behaviourally, without fear of censure. Carter does not make explicit whether the city corrupts the man, or simply provides a safe space in which he can reveal his own endemic corruption – although Evelyn’s depersonalised description of receiving fellatio in a cinema earlier in the novel already indicates a personality with little sympathy or interest in the wellbeing of his sexual conquests.

During this short, urban journey, Evelyn undergoes a transformation far more profound than the intercontinental maturation he expected. He shifts from curious to predatory, loses what remains of his inhibitions, and is driven almost purely by his heterosexual urges. Evelyn’s disregard of both personal safety, in streets inhabited by terrorist groups and rioters, and the wellbeing of his lover, who almost bleeds to death after a botched abortion, suggests a strong drive toward nihilism.

It is this nihilism that may have prompted his departure from home, and sustained his presence in a dangerous America. It is a state of affairs closely linked with the history of journeying, from antiquity into the present day, according to Wes Williams:

The pilgrim not only travels in search of dialogue, he also leaves home ... anticipating death. This is not mere metaphor, since it was required of early modern heads of household, if they undertook pilgrimage, to draw up a will and make arrangements for the eventuality of not returning. The pilgrim can thus be thought of as a kind of liminal figure, suspended mid-way between life and death, freed from adherence to the social structures which normally regulate the Christian person.’¹⁸

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16 Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, pp 10.

17 Ibid., pp 23.

18 Williams, Wes, ‘Rubbing up Against Others’, *Voyages & Visions, Toward a Cultural History of Travel*, ed. by Jaś Elsner, and Joan-Pau Rubiés (London: Reaktion Books, 1999) pp 109.

Evelyn's life very quickly unravels. Aside from his eccentric neighbours and Leilah, he seeks no society. He does not work, he does not earn. He has no, to use a spatial-emotional metaphor, direction. Unlike the pilgrim, he does not seek an end to this state.

Interestingly, the conflict played out in Carter's New York is split into a series of territorial disputes between Othered subjects; militant feminists, radicalised black people and those typically viewed as repressed by the dominant hegemony Evelyn represents. That these combatants are not shuffled into the category of freedom fighters, and the fact their fight is not lionised, shows that Carter's deconstruction of societal norms is subtle, if bold. She is, as Raitt suggests, an author who deals with: "...ambiguities, gaps between the signifier and the signified, so that the significance and the outcome can be changed".¹⁹

Within a very short time of meeting Leilah, Evelyn is living in her bedroom on the proceeds of her night-time profession, using her body, dropping on her: "Like a bird of prey",²⁰ and eventually forcing her to have an abortion before fleeing the city for the desert. As in the case of the ravaged, gothic layers of Carter's New York, the desert is a deeply appropriate destination for Evelyn, who escapes from the ruined fecundity of Leilah to the dry, infertile dunes. In seeking sterility, he has found: "A landscape that matches the landscape of [his] heart".²¹ According to Day: "The sterility Evelyn gave to Leilah he now thinks of as a part of himself".²²

Here Carter shines a light on the social-philosophical nature of geography. The desert is described as "post-menopausal"²³, a term which both anthropomorphosises the landscape, and links it to perceptions of gender and engendering. The state of the post-menopausal female is linked with the desert, a region of inaccessibility and sterility. And yet it epitomises Evelyn's emotional-spiritual state, hinting at the mutability of gender. And, as we shall see, the desert has been reclaimed as female territory by the creation of Beulah. As in Winterson's work, detailing journeys within journeys, Carter's gendered landscape contains spaces within space. As Wilson suggests: "One world may lie hidden

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19 Raitt, Suzanne, 'The Dangers of Angela Carter', *New Feminist Discourse. Critical Essays on Theories and Texts*, ed. by Armstrong, Isobel (New York: Routledge, 2012. Web, retrieved 12 April 2012. Part 7. Page numbers unavailable in this e-version).

20 Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, pp 25.

21 Ibid., pp 41.

22 Day, Aidan. *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988) pp 112.

23 Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*., pp 40.

within another... [or a] hybrid construction emerges from a secret, already contained within, forming an occulted and latent dimension of the surface world".²⁴

Villanelle, of *The Passion*, is also a traveller. Like Jordan, her travels begin before she is conscious. In *The Passion*, it is a custom of the pregnant wives of the boatmen to row out to an island of the dead where they perform a ritual designed to bring good fortune for the unborn child. Villanelle's mother embarks on this journey, despite her widowhood, impelled by custom and superstition. In her case the ritual goes wrong and Villanelle is subsequently born with webbed feet.

As in Rushdie's text, water, as a fluctuating, disputed place, is the site of a collision of irreconcilable difference. In this case, rather than the past/future, it is the binary of female/male and limitation/freedom that is highlighted, through the: "Superimposing onto a conventional narrative a dynamic, fluid and occasionally magical view of ethnic or marginalized experiences".²⁵

This first journey shapes Villanelle's character and narrative. Webbed feet are the preserve of the male members of the old boating families. No woman has ever been born with this mutation, nor could any take advantage of the (presumably masculine) abilities and skills that webbed feet allow. Although she is biologically female, Villanelle is thematically androgynous, able to inhabit both male and female social spheres, through cross dressing, working as a croupier (a profession open to both sexes), and through her sexual adventures, which she enjoys with both men and women.

Villanelle's sexual exploration, particularly with the Queen of Hearts, and its attendant boundary-crossing, represents another intersection of travel-metaphor and politics. When describing Winterson's description of lesbian sex, Sonia Front cannot avoid travel and geography-saturated language:

The liberty comes from the fact that lesbian eroticism turns out the wild zone, the territory outside the dictate of patriarchal culture. The women's, especially lesbian, territory is thereby unmapped, unknown, undefined.²⁶

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24 Wilson, Rawdon, 'The Metamorphoses of Fictional Space: Magical Realism', *Magical Realism, Theory History Community*, ed. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1995) pp 225.

25 Benito, Jesús, Ana Manzanás, Begoña Simal, *Uncertain Mirrors: Magical Realism in US Ethnic Literatures* (New York: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2009) pp 126.

26 Front, Sonia, *Transgressing Boundaries in Jeanette Winterson's Fiction* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2009) pp 73-74.

Villanelle's transgressions are therefore innately political. Like Evelyn in Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*, Villanelle explores an intestinally twisted version of a city. Venice is dangerous, with cut-purses and rapists in the dark, but Villanelle, unlike Evelyn, tours the canals, streets and bridges in an attempt to orientate herself, culturally and practically. She does not intend to lose herself and excuse otherwise repressed behaviours. She aims to discover, to learn. Because she does not identify herself by sex, and cannot identify herself by profession, she identifies herself strongly as Venetian. Through physical exploration she learns not only about her home but also herself: "If ever I saw a stern disappearing down a black, inhospitable-looking waterway, I followed it and discovered the city within a city that is the knowledge of a few."²⁷

Villanelle's ability to traverse socially distinct locations and cross socially constructed boundaries between gender roles and class is established metaphorically through a magical realist sequence in which she uses her webbed feet to walk across water.

Could I walk on that water?

Could I?

I faltered at the slippery steps leading into the dark. It was November, after all. I might die if I fell in. I tried balancing my foot on the surface and it dropped beneath into the cold nothingness.

Could a woman love a woman for more than a night? I stepped out and in the morning they say a beggar was running round the Rialto talking about a young man who'd walked across the canal like it was solid.²⁸

This is a tangible demonstration of Villanelle's ability to inhabit two worlds, to permeate the boundaries between them, to move from the practical to the fantastical. It is because of this that Villanelle is able to become involved with the woman she names the Queen of Spades. The Queen would otherwise be unobtainable because she is female and therefore their relationship would be outside the heterosexual norm. The Queen of Spades also belongs to a more privileged world than that of the boatmen, or the Jews, exotics and

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²⁷ Winterson, Jeanette, *The Passion*, pp 53.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp 69.

lost children of the lower waterways. And yet Villanelle, who is of a lower caste, is invited into her castle-like villa.

Likewise, Jordan of *Sexing the Cherry* does not initially travel far, at least not physically. The first conscious journey he undergoes does not involve any corporeal movement at all. Even so, this internal voyage traverses space so profoundly that, a literal reading would suggest, he changes the world around him, relocating reality, rather than relocating himself within reality:

I saw Jordan standing stock still. He was standing with both his arms upraised and staring at the banana above Johnson's head. I put my head next to his head and looked where he looked and I saw deep blue waters against a pale shore and trees whose branches sang with green and birds in fairground colours and an old man in a loin-cloth.

This was the first time Jordan set sail.²⁹

The Dog Woman, who is narrating here, is characterised as being astonishingly inured to metaphor. This is illustrated in one memorable part of the novel, where she takes a rebel directive to “gouge out”³⁰ enemy eyes and “deprive them of their teeth”³¹ extremely literally, going on to keep a running tally of the body parts she collects. Her lack of imagination lends a certain amount of credibility to the idea that Jordan's travelling imagination is powerful enough to distort reality, creating visions and bringing the exotic into the prosaic. Jordan, like Villanelle, is a transgressive figure. Early in the novel, he dons travesty effectively enough that he is taken to be a legitimate female ingénue, allowing him to inhabit the private world of female experience and female confidence. Unlike Villanelle, he does not play on ambiguity in order to escape an enforced female role, but in order to explore that role by entering a brothel. What he discovers is surprising and revelatory, when compared with the narrative paradigm of the exploited, abused prostitute:

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²⁹ Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*, pp 13.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp 84.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp 84.

How could they live without space?

There was silence, and it seemed as though they were communicating without words. Then one spoke to me and explained that they were not so confined as it seemed. That through the night they came and went as they pleased...³²

The ingenuity of the women, and the lax security of their seraglio/prison, leads to an intriguingly subversive situation. The brothel claims systematic control of female bodies, as does the nunnery, by restricting and suppressing sexuality. This suggests clear parallels between the patriarchal imposition of celibacy and the manner in which the pimp assumes ownership of the women. But, through cunning, the whores are offered an exit route, while the nuns are offered erotic opportunities with both the prostitutes and their clients. Both find a way out of politically or religiously enforced poverty by stealing the fixtures and fittings.

And, of course, there is the triumphant inversion of the pimp/prostitute model. Far from being in control of his sequestered women, the master is thoroughly bamboozled and fleeced, and effectively provides droves of women with financial and physical independence.

Jordan, intrigued by this revelation, continues in drag to his next adventure. His encounters with women are described in geo-political terms, almost as though he is drafting an anthropological study of a foreign people.

I noticed that women have a private language, a language not dependent on the constructions of men but structured by signs and expressions, and that uses ordinary words as code-words meaning something other.

In my petticoats I was a traveller in a foreign country. I did not speak the language. I was regarded with suspicion.³³

Like many travellers hoping to penetrate an alien culture, Jordan is given a guide, not just of women and their culture, but of how they interact with the culture of men. This therefore provides a negative blueprint, by association, an inverted guide to the way in which women outwardly behave.

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³² *Ibid.*, pp 30.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp 31.

The guide advises a degree of inconsistency, particularly evident in fiscal dealings, i.e., to abandon a man who does not swiftly supply money, but never to supply money to a man.³⁴ This profoundly disturbs Jordan, who may have taken his previous interaction with women at face value – although the Dog Woman, with her hyper-masculine behaviour (dog taming and murdering) probably does not subscribe to the subtle (and less subtle) hypocrisies of the guide. Winterson here may be illustrating the subversive duplicity necessary to the survival of a minority culture within a hostile, oppressive majority. Alternatively, she may be criticising the members of the minority culture for their inability to break free from the majority culture and live without compromise. Whatever she is suggesting, the list certainly corroborates the maxim I already referenced: that no attempt at mapping is innocent.

The inversion of the feminised Jordan (who finds his ideal self replicated in a princess and dancer) and the masculine Dog Woman is echoed in *The Passion*. Henri is searching for passion, and surrenders himself in order to find it, falling in love with Villanelle in the space of nine paragraphs.³⁵ In comparison, she is sceptical and attempts to remain autonomous and unattached following the theft of her heart by another woman.

It is Villanelle who provides the direction, guiding the three, and then two, deserters along the long path to Venice. Her navigation methods are direct, both in terms of geography and metaphysical/emotional path finding:

...although she understood better than I the ambiguities of the heart she was not equivocal in her thinking.

‘I come from the city of mazes,’ she said, ‘but if you ask me a direction I will tell you straight ahead.’³⁶

Henri travels in order to follow and in order to experience passion by proxy. He subsumes himself in order to follow his love, whether unreciprocated Emperor-worship, or the emotionally unobtainable Villanelle. But why does Jordan feel the need to travel? According to Casey Blanton: “In particular, the theme of self-discovery or, more accurately, the search for a shattered and scattered self that one sees in much modernist

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³⁴ Ibid., pp 33.

³⁵ Winterson, *The Passion*, pp 87-88.

³⁶ Ibid., pp 109.

³⁷ Blanton, Casey, *Travel Writing (the Self and the World)*, (New York, Routledge, 2002) pp 59.

literature is itself often expressed in terms of travel.”³⁷

Although magical realism is located more firmly in the postmodern than the modern, the sentiment still applies. Jordan is much concerned with the problem of self. It may be that the traveller in search of his/her self is in search of a physical analogue to Derrida’s concept of linguistic *Différance*.³⁸ That is, words/signs cannot find meaning independently, but are dependent on comparisons within a heterogeneous system, and are defined by what they are not through a systemic process of elimination and opposition. A human/textual subject, therefore, who has no sense of an intrinsic self, may construct that self by seeking opposition with exterior subject(s), an Other or Others. The more foreign the Other, the more sharply defined is the self. But Jordan confesses he travels, physically and metaphysically, in order to “escape the weight of the world”,³⁹ although his self-described motivations are contradictory. At first, he states: “When I left England I thought I was running away. Running away from uncertainty and confusion but most of all running away from myself. I thought I might become someone else in time, grafted on to something better and stronger.”⁴⁰

However, this is explicitly refuted through Jordan’s discussion of his mother. The Dog Woman supplies love and rough affection in characteristically gigantic proportions. She would be an ideal root stock for his graft. And Jordan’s journeys are explained in deterministic terms, as a result of innate character or as a result of the fate he inherits through his name. Later in the text it is revealed his departure was an attempt to do what could be described, at risk of falling into cliché, as ‘finding’ himself:

I had myself to begin with, and that is what I lost. Lost it in my mother because she is bigger and stronger than me and that’s not how it’s supposed to be with sons. But lost it more importantly in the gap between my ideal of myself and my pounding heart.⁴¹

If Jordan ‘lost’ himself through his mother, it is debatable why, then, he felt the need to leave her in order to ‘escape’ himself. But then, Winterson’s text is an exercise in

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37 Blanton, Casey, *Travel Writing (the Self and the World)*, (New York, Routledge, 2002) pp 59.

38 Derrida, Jacques, ‘Différance’, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

39 Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*, pp 17.

40 Ibid., pp 80.

41 Ibid., pp 101.

plurality and contradiction. It features tangled myths and revised legends, unfolded internal journeys and collapsed external time. It may be that Jordan's contradiction is a product of this ambiguous narrative, or it may simply be that he himself does not know why he is compelled to travel.

Winterson's text invites and celebrates revisionism, with a timescale that loops without becoming circular. If Life is a Journey, and the journey is non-linear, then life, by extension, is not linear. This directly contradicts Nelson Graburn's essay discussing the traditional (almost exclusively religious) pilgrimage:

Each meaningful event marks the passage of time and thus life itself. Each secular or sacred period is a micro-life, with a bright beginning, a middle, and an end, and the beginnings and endings of these little 'lives' are marked by rituals that thrust us irreversibly down life's path.⁴²

Sexing the Cherry certainly accords a great deal of textual space to the idea of lives-within-lives and journeys-within-journeys. But these are not "irreversible", or set on a single path. Winterson's characters live simultaneous parallel lives. Jordan, with his reflection Fortunata and his modern-life equivalent, has no less than three. Even as Jordan in the singular, he lives parallel lives, the imaginary journeys carried out alongside the more conventional exploratory journeys. Indeed, more textual material is devoted to the improbable journeys, than to the practicalities of Tradescant's voyages. Jordan's description of imaginary narratives is evocative:

... I saw that running away was a running towards. An effort to catch up with my fleet-footed self, living another life in a different way.

I gave chase in a ship, but others make the journey without moving at all. Whenever someone's eyes glaze over, you have lost them. They are as far away from you as if their body were carried at the speed of light beyond the compass of the world.

Time has no meaning, space and place have no meaning, on this journey. All times can be inhabited, all places visited. In a single day the mind can make a

⁴² Graburn, Nelson, H., 'Tourism: the Sacred Journey', *Hosts and Guests, the Anthropology of Tourism*, ed. by Valene L. Smith (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989) pp 26.

millpond of oceans. Some people who have never crossed the land they were born on have travelled all over the world. The journey is not linear, it is always back and forth, denying the calendar, the wrinkles and lines of the body. The self is not contained in any moment or any place, but it is only in the intersection of the moment and place that the self might, for a moment, be seen vanishing through a door, which disappears at once.⁴³

In Winterson's text, all exploratory journeys, whether physical or metaphysical, are equally valid when it comes to rediscovering the self. The above passage follows directly on from Jordan's discussion of his self "lost" in the voluminous, weighty shadow of the Dog Woman. Initially, Evelyn, Jordan and Henri have one thing in common; their departures, if not the passage and outcome of their journeys, were planned. For Marianne, in Carter's earlier novel *Heroes and Villains*,⁴⁴ the decision is a split-second one:

[Jewel] 'It's the same everywhere you look, it's red in tooth and claw. Do you want to come with me?'

'Yes,' she [Marianne] said immediately. If she had allowed herself to think, she would never have said this.⁴⁵

Marianne, a Professor-class child, lives within strictly defined social strata. There is a clear demarcation between distinct social groups including Soldiers, Professors and Barbarians. Marianne has spent much of her sheltered life bored and disenchanted. Carter's protagonist grows up within a prescriptive fenced-off community, and while some of the early narrative concerns her premeditated short trek into the ruins, where she encounters the Barbarian tribes-people, they remain Other, and she voluntarily returns to the home that is not a home (more on this later).

The young male who invites her to flee with him is Jewel, described throughout the novel in largely materialistic terms which emphasise his beauty, the details of his carefully devised barbarous costuming, and his external cruelty. To Marianne, he represents a total departure from the hyper-rational civilisation she escapes. Her swift agreement in

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⁴³ Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*, pp 80.

⁴⁴ Carter, Angel, *Heroes and Villains* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 18.

transgressing the boundary from the hyper-rational to the irrational is then, perhaps, the strongest indication of her commitment to her movement into the unknown. Rather than considering the life-altering decision in a rational way, she makes an intuitive choice. This is just as profound a sign of her embracing of the instinctive barbarian way of life and the rejection of the Professorial mode of living as her actual departure.

Although the act of journeying is not as pressing a concern in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, it would be remiss of me if I did not make some reference to these novels. The birth of Macondo, Gabriel García Márquez' colourful, doomed town, set in an unspecified region of South America, is worth investigating.

One night when he found him [the ghost] washing his wound in his own room, José Arcadio Buendía could no longer resist.

“It’s all right Prudencio,” he told him. “We’re going to leave this town, just as far away as we can go, and we’ll never come back. Go in peace now.”

That was how they undertook the crossing of the mountains. Several friends of José Arcadio Buendía, young men like him, excited by the adventure, dismantled their houses and packed them up, along with their wives and children, to head toward the land no one had promised them.⁴⁶

The mass migration of young people is driven by the sense of enterprise and excitement, but it is triggered by the appearance of a ghost. This narrative device of the intrusion of the supernatural becomes a distinctive motif in the work of Marquez. The New World is particularly fertile ground for magic realist narratives, according to Alejo Carpentier:

...because of the virginity of the landscape, because of the formation, ontology and faustic presence of the Indian and the Black, because of the revelation of its recent discovery and the fecund racial mixtures to which it gave way, America is far from having exhausted its flow of mythologies.⁴⁷

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46 Márquez, Gabriel García, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (London: Penguin, 1998) pp 21.

47 Carpentier, Alejo, *El Reino De Este Mundo*, trans. by Joan-Pau Rubiés (Barcelona, 1995) Featured in the Introduction to: *Voyages & Visions, Toward a Cultural History of Travel*, pp 74.

The seeds of Márquez's emigrations, escapes and explorations are planted by a series of occurrences. Ursula's superstition and fear of incest leads to accusations that José Arcadio suffers from sexual inability, which in turn leads to a murder, which leads to a haunting, which leads to the departure. Desire here, and in *Heroes and Villains*, is a strong driver for the permeation of boundaries, particularly in the case of José Arcadio, who joins the gypsies after falling in love with a girl. The gypsies, like the Barbarians, are itinerant, but they travel to Macondo to trade and communicate, rather than steal, attack and misinform. On occasion, their intervention is highly beneficial, particularly in the case of Melquíades who provides the cure to the insomnia plague and becomes the prescient chronicler of the family history. However, there are clear lines drawn between the earlier settlers of Macondo and the wanderers, and it is a mixture of lust and fascination, concocted in a matter of moments, which triggers the crossing-over. Ursula, epitomising the contradictory, multifarious nature of the narrative, both illustrates the divide (through her prejudice) and ultimately unconsciously emulates the subjects of her scorn:

“He's become a gypsy!” she shouted to her husband, who had not shown the slightest sign of alarm over the disappearance.

... Ursula asked where the gypsies had gone. She went along asking and following the road she had been shown, thinking that she still had time to catch up with them. She kept getting farther from the village until she felt so far away that she did not think about returning.⁴⁸

Ursula, on her solo, unplanned journey, successfully discovers the path to the sea, searched for in vain by the male expeditions. The female figures in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* shape the community around them. Mariana Solanet suggests:

The history of the mythical Macondo is told through the saga of the Buendías, a tribe condemned to solitude because of their lack of love. Both the town and the family share the same fate, from birth up to the final ruin when the wind sweeps it all away.⁴⁹

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48 Márquez, pp 34-35.

49 Solanet, Mariana, *García Márquez* (New York: Writers and Readers Publishing, 2001) pp 103.

In this mode, Ursula's slow decline and eventual death, aged 120, foreshadows the dereliction of the town that was created because of her insistence in controlling her own reproductive state. This to some extent reflects Márquez's egalitarian agenda. In his world, where characters drawn from minority, subcultural, untouchable and outsider modes are given as much precedence in the whirling maelstrom of his narrative as the upper echelons, women carry weight. Carl Thompson suggests that frontier regions:

... are typically constructed as male-only spaces, where men can form intense, homosocial bonds; and when women do appear in these accounts, they are often depicted in a highly exoticised, and eroticised, fashion.⁵⁰

But the familial nature of the pioneers in Márquez's text subverts this. The women are a crucial part of the colonising process, not just as breeders. They are significant in their own right, although throughout the novel they repress themselves (and others) sexually.

Márquez's novel, among its many interpretations, can be seen as a deconstruction and criticism of the hegemony of a dominant culture, such as the brutal economic suppression by US-owned United Fruit. But it can also be seen as the story of a decolonisation, the failed attempt to tame a wilderness.

In this, it runs counter to a tradition of biographical, autobiographical, historical and fictional accounts of male, upper class, primarily European white explorers and pioneers successfully penetrating, conquering and establishing hegemony in another land. The traditional mode of colonial literature is summed up by Craig Owens:

What made the grand récits of modernity master narratives if not the fact that they were all narratives of mastery, of man seeking his telos in the conquest of nature? What function did these narratives play other than to legitimise Western man's self-appointed mission of transforming the entire planet in his own image? And what form did this mission take if not that of man's placing of his stamp on everything that exists... the transformation of the world into a representation with man as its subject?⁵¹

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50 Thompson, Carl, 'Gender and Sexuality', *Travel Writing* (Abingdon, Oxford: Routledge, 2011) pp 177.

51 Craig Owens, 'The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism', *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays in Postmodern Culture*, ed. by Hal Foster (Washington: Bay Press, 1983) pp 65.

The naming-customs and culture of the Macondo pioneers has explicit European links, with a profusion of Josés and Aurelianos, and with the import of Catholicism. The bombastic, thoroughly masculine José Arcadio Buendía (the elder) fits the mode of the stamp-placer to a tee. His eventual madness and regression to a wild state, together with the degradation of the town, could be read as a testament to the destructive futility of this model of transformation: external, illusory and temporary.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being is likewise a meditation on the illusory and the fleeting and contains a series of departures. Of the novels I have chosen to study *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is perhaps the lightest on magical realist features. Kundera's text is metaphysical, but in a philosophical rather than magical sense. Nonetheless, it has been located by writers such as Quinn⁵² and Ousby⁵³ within the magical realist tradition, and employs the technique as a: "Sharp political satire on the restrictions placed on information and truth".⁵⁴

Place has a great bearing on the emotional and philosophical concerns within *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. The principal characters, Tomas, Tereza and Sabina, are all, at crucial points, exiles, both outside and within their home country of Czechoslovakia. This status allows Kundera to criticise the occupying Russian regime, their methods of occupation and the population's attempts to defy that occupation, from both within and without. As Edward W. Said suggests: "Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience".⁵⁵

The protagonist most characterised by magical realist themes is Tereza. At certain points in the novel, her dreams and fantasies elide with the textual "reality" – especially in the case of the Petrin Hill sequence. Bowers states: "The extraordinary in magical realism is rarely presented in the form of a dream or a psychological experience because to do so takes the magic out of recognizable material reality"⁵⁶. But this section of the text is not delineated as neatly as in an earlier dream sequence, in which Tereza is forced to dance naked or be summarily executed by her husband. Here there is no declaration that the sequence is occurring in her sleeping imagination. The passage is related as though it is part of the realist narrative. Moving away from the beauty of Prague, Tereza comes to a

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52 Quinn, Edward, ed, *A Dictionary of Literary and Thematic Terms, Second Edition* (New York: Facts on File, Inc, 2006) pp 252.

53 Ousby, Ian, ed, *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) pp 591.

54 Ibid., pp 591.

55 Said, Edward W., 'Reflections on Exile', *After the Revolution* (London: Granta, 13., 1984) pp 170.

56 Bowers, pp 24.

quiet oasis where the citizens of the city go to commit suicide by shotgun.

The dream sequence is a very evocative portrait of Tereza's mental state, her relationship with Tomas, her anxiety and her loss of control. It is only in the last instant she admits the suicide is not of her choosing and is spared a self-inflicted execution. But it is also a sequence, in an otherwise largely bloodless novel, in which the brutal spectre of the Communist regime is given a strong, visual depiction, rather than remaining a creeping, administrative, understated presence:

Coming out at the foot of Petrin Hill, that great green mound rising up in the middle of Prague, she was surprised to see it devoid of people... On her way up, she paused several times to look back: below her she saw the towers and bridges; the saints were shaking their fists and lifting their stone eyes to the clouds. It was the most beautiful city in the world... She noticed several men on the lawn... one of them had a rifle in his hand.⁵⁷

Despite the beauty of the city and the quietude of the parkland, Tereza's only escape from the tyranny of the regime and the tyranny of her love for Tomas is through death (the ultimate departure). But suicide, in the end, is a form of violence she shies away from. The more realistic departures undertaken by the characters in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* replicate this preoccupation with escape.

They had been in Zurich for six or seven months when he came home late one evening to find a letter on the table telling him she had left for Prague. She had left because she lacked the strength to live abroad... For the hundred and fiftieth time he went over the situation: the borders between his country and the rest of the world were no longer open. No telegrams or telephone calls could bring her back. The authorities would never let her travel abroad. Her departure was staggeringly definitive.⁵⁸

Tereza's flight from Zurich and Tomas, back to Prague and marital isolation, is both a departure and a homecoming, a dual-status that echoes throughout the novel. The text

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57 Kundera, Milan, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995) pp 142-143.

58 Ibid. pp 27.

grapples with, but ultimately refuses to reconcile, opposing themes such as heaviness and the eponymous lightness of being and the inherent contradictions inscribed in the state of being in exile. For instance, an exile flees political oppression in search of freedom, but the state of being in exile precludes the freedom to return home.

Tereza's departure is an example of this confusion. She sees her flight as a symptom of a lack of strength, and yet she also believes it is her weakness which makes her tolerate Tomas's constant infidelities. Arguably, this break from her husband is the single most dynamic act carried out by Tereza, who is characterised by helplessness and repression, hence the highly symbolic dream-scapes. According to Edgar Morin:

The frontier is both an opening and a closing. It is at the frontier that there takes place the distinction from and liaison with the environment. All frontiers, including the membrane of living beings, including the frontier of nations, are, at the same time as they are barriers, places of communication and exchange. They are the places of dissociation and association, of separation and articulation.⁵⁹

If the membrane of a country becomes fossilised, this is no longer true. The barriers around Tereza's nation have been arbitrarily thickened by the Communist Party and interfering foreign powers. The "staggeringly definitive" passage then also implicitly illustrates the effects of oppression and dominion. In a contemporary essay, published in 1978, ten years after the Prague Spring, Lady Morrison suggests:

It is well-nigh impossible for a Pole, Czech or Romanian to travel as an individual to the Soviet Union and it is certainly not only the shortage of hard currencies in all the Soviet bloc countries which limits the number of people who can visit the West.⁶⁰

In the aftermath of subjugation, Czechoslovakia has been isolated from the Western world. Lines of communication have been broken, borders are sealed. But the oppressing

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59 Morin, Edgar, *La méthode*, vol 1, *La Nature de la nature*, (Paris: Seuil, 1977). Cited by Geoffrey Bennington in 'Postal politics and the institution of the nation', Chapter 7 of *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Bhabha, Homi K. (London: Routledge, 2004) pp 203-204.

60 Morrison, Lady Edith, 'Freedom and the Family', *In Defence of Freedom*, ed. by Dr K. W. Watkins (London: Cassell & Co LTD, 1978) pp 75.

power does not allow incoming migration any more than it permits emigration. The Czechs have nowhere to go. The country becomes insular, self-reflexive. The citizen's houses are (allegedly) bugged, secret policemen haunt bars, secretive, back-room political discussion is disseminated over radio as a propaganda tool and doctors are reduced to window-washers. The privacy, so sought after by Tereza, is catastrophically ruptured. The country becomes the conceptual "concentration camp"⁶¹ that horrified her in her youth – and yet she returns to it.

Chapter 2: Journeys

Angela Carter's novels frequently display elements of the picaresque and the *bildungsroman* modes of storytelling. *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*¹ borrows from archetypes of picaresque journeying. The protagonist Desiderio falls in and out of peril, faces corrupt small-town politicians, natural disasters, somnambulist tragic heroines, cannibalistic Indians and undertakes a wandering journey. In contrast *The Magic Toyshop*² is a small-scale *bildungsroman*, wherein the protagonist Melanie discovers her self and her sexuality. But the forms of travel fiction and magical realism are most effectively married in *The Passion of New Eve* and in *Nights at the Circus*.

The transformations of Fevvers and Walser are facilitated through a series of serendipitous events. While on the trans-Siberian railway, their circus train suffers a spectacular crash, resulting in the death or departure of many of the acts. Fevvers, already compromised by a near miss with a sexually aggressive and acquisitive count, finds herself losing the glitter and glamour with which she has constructed her own self – a creature indeterminately fact or fiction. She also loses the (already hotly debated) use of her wings, which serve as defining feature, income generator and the facilitators of her freedom.

Fevvers is a feminist construction, a physically powerful female (like the Dog Woman) with the power to independently earn in a sexually repressive fin-de-siècle era. She has two provocative elements. The first is her sexual freedom – supposedly remaining a virgin in a whore house, flirting without promising, and eventually being outed to Walser as *not* the “only fully-feathered intacta in the history of the world”,³ a state she reveals with glee rather than shame. The second is her mobility. Doreen Massey suggests:

If time-space compression can be imagined in that more socially formed, socially evaluative and differentiated way, then there may be here the possibility of developing a politics of mobility and access. For it does seem

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1 Carter, Angela, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books: Reissue edition, March 4, 1986).

2 Carter, Angela, *The Magic Toyshop* (London: Virago, 1981).

3 Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, pp 294.

that mobility, and control over mobility, both reflects and reinforces power.⁴

Fevvers is therefore a powerful figure, both in terms of her imposing physique and also in her freedom. In a largely male-dominated world, Fevvers claims autonomy. Most of the other female characters are sexually misused circus actors, prisoners in an all-female panopticon or members of a tribe which ritually binds and abandons women as they give birth. If her ability to fly is taken literally, Fevvers is one of the most liberated characters in the narrative.

Her crisis is her loss of self-constructed image and flight. Her wing is broken, her hair and feathers turn dingy and she is abandoned in the Siberian wastes, where money is worthless. She is stripped of the carapace she has carefully pulled around herself. Walser too is divested of his self, reverting to an infant state: “‘Mama,’ he said. That universal word. Smiling she [Olga] shook her head. She saw that Walser no longer knew enough to ask: ‘Where am I?’ Like the landscape, he was a perfect blank.”⁵

However, loss itself does not always imply disenfranchisement. Olga, the escaped convict, upon encountering a disorientated Walser, decides to leave him where he is. In doing so, she says farewell to the son who has grown up without her. This act is not merely symbolic. Although Olga does not know it, Walser put paid to an attempt by the boy, Little Ivan, to stow away and join the circus. Walser, whom she abandons, represents the last true link with the son. Her departure, like Tereza’s in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, is “staggeringly definitive”, but she escapes from, rather than returns to, a state of imprisonment. Meanwhile, Walser falls in with a group of semi-nomadic tribes-people, whose concept of time is non-existent rather than linear or circular. They are an a-historic society. Carter, in a self-referential flourish, brands the tribe as existing in a self-induced state of “magic realism”.⁶ Walser, then, is left with no foundation from which to reconstitute himself. He is a journalist who: “Find[s] himself in a place where no facts, as such, existed”.⁷

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4 Massey, Doreen, ‘A Global Sense of Place’, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) pp 150.

5 Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, pp 222.

6 Ibid., pp 260.

7 Ibid., pp 260

Walser begins to learn the language, eventually enough to try to interpret Western objects and ideas, but is largely unsuccessful. And therefore, the tribal society, although thrown into contrast with the disembodied memories he occasionally recalls, remains dominant. His past, as Rushdie suggests in *Imaginary Homelands*,⁸ becomes a place he has left behind, and his experiences give lie both to the closed metaphysical system of the tribe, and the linear assumptions of the West. To the tribes-people, Walser's English babbling is a sign of his otherworldliness. As Barthes says:

... to know a foreign (alien) language and yet not to understand it: to perceive the difference in it without ever being recuperated by the superficial sociality of discourse, communication or vulgarity; ...[is to know] the impossibility of our own; to learn the systematics of the inconceivable; to undo our own 'reality' under the effect of other formulations, other syntaxes...⁹

This effectively alienates the reader from the English language and Western symbolism, through the medium of English itself, as Carter does not render the language of the tribe directly. The reader is forced to view a pig as: "A little animal, good to eat"¹⁰ and the circus owner's symbolically-weighted regalia of the Stars and Stripes as: "The upper part of this man's apparel mimics the starry heavens. The lower part, by a system of parallel bars, represents, perhaps... felled trees..."¹¹

The pig, in a society where there are no pigs, is stripped of its symbolism. It no longer stands for greed, for dirtiness, for fecundity, or any other societally-determined value. Likewise, Old Glory is vivisected to the point where it holds no patriotic, military or political resonance. We are forced to view elements of our culture as though we are foreigners. This in itself is a permeation of barriers, an inversion of state, which throws the reader into some confusion. As Teshome Gabriel suggests: "Nomads have thus developed a way of life, and an aesthetic attitude, which defy and critique both the settlement and art inspired by the state."¹² Perhaps we, like Walser, are invited to reconstitute our socio-

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8 Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, pp 12.

9 Barthes, Roland, *Empire of Signs*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982) pp 6.

10 Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, pp 261.

11 *Ibid.*, pp 261.

12 Gabriel, Teshome, 'Thoughts on Nomadic Aesthetics and the Black Independent Cinema', *Blackframes: Critical Perspectives on Black Independent Cinema*, ed. by Cham Mybe and Claire Watkins (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1980) pp 63-64.

politically constituted self by questioning the society and politics that the self is drawn from.

The nomads themselves serve a narrative function, in that they offer a counterpoint to the linear journeys supposedly undertaken by the Western characters. Caren Kaplan suggests: “Paradoxically, the nomad can be seen to be the one who ‘does not move’ in that the nomad’s movements cannot be tracked or linked to a starting or end point.”¹³ The nomads have *always* been moving, and as such, present a challenge to static ideas of land ownership and fixed territories.

The nomads in *Nights at the Circus* are a living example of the life-as-a-journey trope Lakoff and Johnson discuss. Their homes are temporary; their grasp of temporality is, to an outside perspective, primitive and muddled. The nomads live by light and darkness and natural rhythms. This outlines the arbitrariness of Western modes of thought. The hours, minutes and seconds experienced by Fevvers and her comrades as they travel are exposed as culturally proscribed units, as subjective as the idea that there is a definitive beginning or ending to any journey.

In this text, the yearning to travel is a force that can shape the self. It is the recognition of Walser’s own early experience in the face of another child that returns his childhood to him:

...on the face of this child Walser saw an expression of yearning that moved him, and, more than that, stirred his memory, for he recognised that expression, not with his eyes but with his heart; for just one moment he became again the tow-haired urchin who, a quarter-century ago, had gazed at the swelling sails, the belching smokestacks, of the ships that set out from San Francisco Bay towards the four corners of the world.¹⁴

It is not place, but the desire to depart from place that characterises Walser. And from desire, he recalls himself, building himself, bit by bit. In the end, it is Fevvers, and the spread of her wings, who thoroughly restores Walser. Having found her again, the loss he was initially unaware of becomes a constituent part of his new, more complete, self.

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13 Kaplan, Caren, ‘This Question of Moving’, *Questions of Travel, Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (London: Duke University Press, 1996) pp 89.

14 Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, pp 261.

He was as much himself as he ever would be, and yet that ‘self’ would never be the same again for now he knew the meaning of fear as it defines itself in its most violent form, that is, fear of the death of the beloved, of the loss of the beloved, of the loss of love...¹⁵

By comparison, Munford argues that, rather than becoming a transcendent figure, Fevvers is effectively imprisoned in her self-created image: “Within her own iconography”¹⁶ at the end of the novel. But Walser, too late to burst the literal bubble of her virginity, punctures the image of the “intacta”. In opposition to Kundera’s characters who search for and revel in lightness, Walser seems to be happier and more complete in his acceptance of the weightiness of love and the anxiety it brings, and in return helps reconstitute Fevvers: “In the light of his grey eyes, [she] was transformed back into her old self again, without the application of peroxide even.”¹⁷ This is fairy-tale stuff, the prince and princess finding themselves through each other, of transformative love and reunions. But Carter’s text defies such simplicity. Maggie Ann Bowers argues: “A magical realist novel may have important things to relate to the reader about their actual world, but the plot is not structured around this one message as it is in a fable.”¹⁸

Indeed, as we have already discussed, Carter’s novel deliberates gender, class and the symbolic nature of language. Fevvers, the self-described Cockney Venus, makes the acquaintance of scientists, men of state, aristocrats and entrepreneurs, leaping social boundaries as easily as she seems to leap from trapeze to trapeze. Lizzie, the preacher-whore turned radical activist, also revels in mobility. If Fevvers’s return to blondness “as soon as she found peroxide”¹⁹ concerns me as a writer investigating feminist issues, the assertion: “Meanwhile, who cared! And of course her wing would mend...”²⁰ indicates a more positive outcome. Rather than the depressing notion of Fevvers being bound up and imprisoned by a self she has forged into a kind of restrictive social armour, her restoration could be seen as the

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¹⁵ Ibid., pp 292-293.

¹⁶ Munford, Rebecca, ‘Re-vamping the Gothic: Representations of the Gothic Heroine in Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*’, *ParaDoxa: Studies in World Literary Genres* (Vashon: Vol 17. 2002) pp 224.

¹⁷ Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, pp 293.

¹⁸ Bowers, pp 28.

¹⁹ Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, pp 290.

²⁰ Ibid., pp 290.

reclamation of a passport which enables her to continue on her chosen path. It is a passport she does not always need to employ because, sometimes, who cares? Carl Thompson writes:

In many societies, in many periods, restlessness, freedom of movement and a taste for adventure have been attributes and activities conventionally associated with men rather than woman. According to the patriarchal ideology of separate spheres, a woman's proper and preferred location is the home, and women have therefore traditionally been associated with immobility or, as it is sometimes dubbed 'sessility', and with domesticity.²¹

Fevvers, by dint of her physical peculiarities and the image she has built, is freed from sessility. As discussed earlier, other characters within magical realist fiction also subvert this expectation. Villanelle in *The Passion* is an interesting model. Within her home city of Venice, she resists traditionally feminine models of behaviour. She is independent, working as both a casino-based and roving croupier, crossing gender boundaries through her travesty and her masculine-identified features. It is not enough to save her from an abusive marriage. Her physical mobility, crossing geographical borders, is facilitated by her dominating husband:

He clasped me with his terrible hands, with fingertips that had the feel of boils bursting, and asked me if I'd changed my mind about his offer. We could travel the world he said...

...The world is surely wide enough to walk without fear.

We were married without ceremony and set off straight away to France, to Spain, to Constantinople even.²²

But of course, for Villanelle, the world is not wide enough. She tries running away from herself, but fails. She also attempts to flee her husband and his creeping hands, but makes the mistake of returning to Venice where she is promptly caught, tricked into a fixed game of chance and sold into the army. In her role as wife and vivandière, sexually servicing the officers, she travels but remains socially immobile.

²¹ Thompson, pp 169.

²² Winterson, *The Passion*, pp 96-97.

She is transported to Russia, covering geographical ground, but of course the hallmark of true mobility is choice, and in her position as a chattel, she has no choice. In comparison, the Dog Woman of *Sexing the Cherry*, who remains stubbornly located in London, also resists notions of a feminine “place” in society.

He [John Tradescant] said that the sea is so vast no one will ever finish sailing it. That every mapped-out journey contains another journey hidden in its lines...

I pooh-poohed this, for the earth is surely a manageable place made of blood and stone and entirely flat. I believe I could walk from one side to another, had I the inclination.²³

The Dog Woman’s pedestrian view of the world is an inverted archetype of domesticity. The most extensive journey she undertakes is from her Thames-side home to the King’s Garden. She embodies, for the foundling Jordan, the home and hearth. And yet the Dog Woman, gargantuan in size, and grotesque in feature, absolutely resists femininity. The Dog Woman, while remaining rooted to place, is thoroughly radicalised, becoming a staunch and violent royalist. She bites the penis from a would-be abuser. She becomes a location, not just a “home” for Jordan, but in metaphorical terms. She is a “mountain” men are afraid to scale – and therefore as sexual territory, she remains uncolonised.²⁴ The Dog Woman, if she put her mind to it, could quite conceivably walk from one side of the earth to the other. With her elemental strength, she is limited not by male oppression, but by her lack of imagination and, arguably, education. The Dog Woman knows herself, and is content. By contrast:

Jordan becomes a traveller of ‘exotic lands’ whereas his adoptive mother is the ‘archetypal storytelling figure’ who stays at home and comprehends ‘the local tales and traditions’. Dog Woman retains and represents a sense of both traditions, a centring. Even though her sexual persona is ambiguous, she is an extremely masculine presence, and heterosexual, although as Marilyn R.

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²³ Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*, pp 23.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp 34.

Farwell points out, 'only in a technical sense'.²⁵

Jordan the wanderer traverses the geography of the earth and the mind. Little division is drawn between the multi-layered "reality" in the text and his metaphysical travels. Given the fabulous nature of his experiences, it is entirely possible that none of his stories are literal. Indeed, both Jordan and the Dog Woman are revealed to have a modern day ancillaries later in the novel, casting doubt on whether the 16th century sections have any sort of objective reality within the text. Laura Doan argues:

Eschewing realism, Winterson constructs her narrative by exploiting the techniques of postmodern historiographic metafiction (such as inter-textuality, parody, pastiche, self-reflexivity, fragmentation, the rewriting history and frame breaks) as well as its ideology (questioning 'grand narratives', problematizing closure, valorizing instability, suspecting coherence, and so forth) in order to challenge and subvert patriarchal and heterosexist discourses and, ultimately, to facilitate a forceful and positive oppositional critique.²⁶

The journeys that Jordan undertakes vary wildly, from a nation where words take corporeal form, to a city where love is illegal and finally a lone house on an island inhabited by dancers whose movements bring them to a point of ecstatic radiance. Despite the disparity between the "places", imaginative or otherwise, they are linked by a number of concerns. Foremost is Winterson's model of journeys folded in on themselves.

Building on the love-as-journey and life-as-journey metaphors, the next logical step is story-as-journey. Certainly, the traditional tertiary form of both modes lends itself to comparison, with beginning, middle and end roughly analogous to departure, journey and destination. But the confusion of journeys within magical realist texts, and the profusion of narratives and plots, simultaneously complicate and belie this simplistic model. If narrative is an analogue to travel, then the sub-narratives related by different characters in *Sexing the Cherry* are indeed journeys-within-journeys. These allow Winterson to explore a multitude of voices and points of view, as well as present revisionist versions of established myths.

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25 Tew, Philip, 'Wintersonian Masculinities', *Jeanette Winterson, a Contemporary Critical Guide*, ed. by Sonya Andermahr (London: Continuum, 2007) pp 114.

26 Doan, Laura, 'Jeanette Winterson's sexing the postmodern', *The Lesbian Postmodern*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) pp 138.

The most notable of these include transient figures – the legend of the Twelve Dancing Princesses and Artemis the Huntress. According to Jane Robinson, in her introduction to *A Guide to Women Travellers*: “Men’s travel accounts are to do with What and Where, and women’s with How and Why”.²⁷ This is patently untrue in the case of Jordan (although in mitigation, Robinson is describing historical travellers writing biographically rather than a fictional traveller). Jordan is also concerned with Who, When and What Next.

The original myth of the Twelve Dancing Princesses, which includes illicit, unsanctioned journeying, has a number of variants, largely codified by the Brothers Grimm. Regardless of the variants, the core of the tale concerns the disappearance, each night, of the princesses from their bedroom. They return in the morning with their shoes worn out. Their father, anxious to stop the nightly disappearances, makes a number of attempts to confine them (which can be read as a form of enforced sessility). The prince who discovers the secret is rewarded with marriage to the eldest princess.

Winterson’s expansion of the myth is interesting because the princesses, by one means or another, escape and reunite, defying the limitations of the fairytale. In *Sexing the Cherry*, they display a degree of psychological depth and autonomy lacking in the original. Several of the princesses are revealed to be lesbian. This revising of myth challenges the societal assumption of “compulsory heterosexuality” revealed and exploded by critic Adrienne Rich in the 1980s.²⁸

When the princesses are discovered, their “ankles were chained”,²⁹ a concrete depiction of the confines of forced marriage and, possibly, an implicit criticism of the compulsory heterosexuality found in European fairy tales. The youngest of the Twelve Princesses is Fortunata, Jordan’s double, whom he encounters in the mist both as an Other and his own Self. Lucie Armitt explains: “Jordan is blocked from plotting a course into self-awareness by the intrusive presence of a mirror-double... the opening to a later passage, this time narrated by his elusive beloved Fortunata, reveals her to be the reflected

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27 Robinson, Jane, ‘Introduction’, *Wayward Women: A Guide to Women Travellers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) pp xiv.

28 Rich, Adrienne. Her work is expanded in ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’, in *Blood, Bread and Poetry* (New York: Norton, 1986. 23-75). The theory follows that heterosexuality is a model employed by men to guarantee physical access to women’s bodies and reinforce social modes of oppression. It is fulfilled through heteronormativity (the assumption that heterosexuality is the “normal” mode of being while homosexuality is deviant).

29 Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*, pp 99.

‘other half’.”³⁰

Jordan finds his other self in Fortunata, and for a time they are together. Jordan is looking for a form of completeness, and it is entirely possible that he could find this, his full self “...his essential self – a self again clearly distinct from the body...”³¹ when united with his female other. This bi-gendering of a single soul throws the traditional mode of masculine/feminine opposition into doubt, and also questions the biologically determined roles set out for men and women. Fortunata/Jordan represent two different sexes yet both seek freedom and find it. But Fortunata takes for granted his wish to leave, to the point where he finds himself packing his striped bag, and laments: “I wanted her [his mother] to ask me to stay, just as now I want Fortunata to ask me to stay. Why do they not?”³²

This, of course, means Jordan must continue his voyage. But Armitt suggests the text also resists the mode of the melancholic, ultimately unsuccessful/unfulfilled traveller, instead offering a mode in which the protagonist(s) are on a shifting, evolving trajectory.³³ It may be that Fortunata recognises that there is no end to Jordan’s journey.

In finding her, his quest is still not complete. Completion means an end, and a central premise of *Sexing the Cherry* is that there are no definitive endings. If Winterson’s characters are to be read as experiments in feminist theory, with the Dog Woman representing a fixed, militant form of feminism, Jordan instead represents a fluid, adaptable social and political model:

To finish a character is to fix her and, from Jeanette in *Oranges* onwards, her protagonists are always engaged in journeys that remain unfinished. Surely, herein lies a message for feminism, which must, as Sarah Gamble observes, be prepared to ‘adapt to respond to the exigencies of a changing world’.³⁴

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30 Armitt, Lucie, ‘Storytelling and Feminism’, *Jeanette Winterson, a Contemporary Critical Guide*, ed. by Sonya Andermahr (London: Continuum, 2007) pp 19.

31 Roessner, Jeffrey, ‘Writing a history of difference’, *Jeanette Winterson’s Sexing the Cherry and Angela Carter’s Wise Children* (West Chester, Pennsylvania: College Literature, 1997) pp 112.

32 Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*, pp 101.

33 Armitt, pp 19.

34 Ibid., pp 19.

Winterson's roving revisionism in *Sexing the Cherry* is also applied to Greek myth, the cornerstone of much European storytelling. In one version of the tale, Artemis is tricked by her brother Apollo into using her friend/lover during target practice. Apollo believes Orion unworthy of Artemis, and by tricking his sister, he takes responsibility for her reproductive choices. In another version, Artemis poisons Orion in revenge for raping of one of her female followers.

In Winterson's version, Orion rapes Artemis after deciding they would make the ancient-Greco equivalent of a perfect power couple. Artemis, the Olympic pantheon representation of female wildness, independence and self-sufficiency, does not regret the murder, or her isolation, but feels lonely for a time when she had not "been violated".³⁵

Before the rape, she: "Envied men their long-legged freedom to roam the world... knew about the heroes and the home-makers, the great division that made life possible".³⁶ And yet she loves the island she has been granted by her deistic father, and does not wish to leave until she is ready. Her response to the rape is to kill Orion and then simply walk away from the cooling body. The conclusion of the episode is ambiguous. The reader does not know whether Artemis leaves the island she loves to roam the world, whether the rape has desecrated her land as well as her self or whether her departure is final.

But the episode does one thing: it punctures the myth of Orion as a hero and reduces him to a blustering, pompous boor. Even after her violation, Artemis retains her dignity more effectively than the hunter. By conflating her with the raped follower, Artemis is both the survivor of an attack and instigator of revenge. She becomes the heroine, rather than a dupe or victim. Her ambiguous fate, like Jordan's, means she is unfixed, and still able to redeem her "unredeemable" future.³⁷

Helena Grice and Tim Woods write:

...this realization of the self as a part of a narrative, that the 'I' is a position mapped out for us by language and narrative structures, informs our understanding of Winterson's fiction in a number of ways...

...there is a profound consequence to this realization for if it is recognized that

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³⁴ Ibid., pp 19.

³⁵ Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*, pp 134.

³⁶ Ibid., pp 131.

³⁷ Ibid., pp 132.

narratives are now the bases upon which societies and worlds exist; and if one can alter the narrative, and get that alteration accepted, then one can actually alter the world.³⁸

The existence of stories after the proscribed ‘happily ever after’ breaks down traditional narrative modes. By refusing to tie Artemis into a close-ended myth or end Jordan’s journeying, Winterson is opening up a narrative space for change, for reclamation and for radicalisation. This narrative space shapes, informs and reflects geographical spaces within the text, and these geographical spaces in turn shape, inform and reflect narrative space.

Carter, too, takes established myths, deconstructing and reconstructing them in order to reveal the arbitrary nature of our socially constructed “reality”. *Heroes and Villains* is a morally ambiguous text which breaks down the binary opposition between the eponymous concepts. Neither the Professors/Soldiers nor the Barbarians conform to the ideal of hero or the negative, unredeemable figure of the villain.

Marianne, like Eve, Villanelle and the Dog Woman, is, at points, sexually ambivalent, shearing her hair short. On their first meeting, Jewel mistakes her for a boy. Jewel himself bears a curiously feminine name. But when Marianne is bitten by a viper, during their flight from the more regimented Professor/Soldier society, Jewel performs the textual function of masculine hero by sucking the poison from her wound. This is a discomfortingly sexualised operation, as it is both physically intimate and involves the phallic symbol of the snake injecting a fluid into flesh: “...[He] put his mouth against it, sucked out the poison, spat and continued to suck. She clenched and unclenched her fists to feel the extraordinary sensation of his wet mouth against her skin and the pain was terrible.”³⁹

But Marianne is not a weeping damsel, carried to safety by the hero. And Jewel is not a heroic archetype. During their journey she refuses to cry and Jewel refuses to carry her. She wakes in the Barbarian camp, which is quite different to the culture she rejected. There is a marked difference/*différance* between the two cultures: the Barbarian culture replaces sterility with dirt, stasis with movement, permanence with transience and

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38 Grice, Helena and Tim Woods, ‘Winterson’s Dislocated Discourses’, *Jeanette Winterson, a Contemporary Critical Guide*, ed. by Sonya Andermahr, pp 30-31.

39 Carter, *Heroes and Villains*, pp 28.

objective, unsentimental science with subjective, highly emotive but unstructured superstition. The societies inform each other and give each other sociological and semantic meaning, but, although the Barbarian society is different to the Professor society, it is not *better*.

Marianne, therefore, flees again:

... whatever romantic attraction the idea of Barbarians might have held for her as she sat by herself in the white tower, when her father was alive, had entirely evaporated, She was full of pity for them but, more than anything, she wanted to escape, as if somewhere there was still the idea of a home.⁴⁰

To return to the snake bite passage, the sexualisation of the operation, pain and physical proximity, is echoed and inverted during the rape sequence, when Jewel penetrates and injects Marianne with his own venom in order to prevent her escape. His reasoning for the rape is that he fears her, but this information is delivered in such an offhand way the reader is never quite sure whether Jewel is being truthful. More convincing is the announcement: “I’ve got to marry you, haven’t I? That’s why I’ve got to take you back... Swallow you up and incorporate you, see. Dr Donally says. Social psychology. I’ve nailed you on necessity, you poor bitch.”⁴¹

This is far more likely. The ailing, violent, louche and self-possessed Jewel, imperfectly educated by the renegade Professor Dr Donally, shows no real fear toward Marianne, but the society he comes from does. Its members variously refuse eye contact, make superstitious signs, or – a sign of a society with an intrinsic fear of untamed female sexuality⁴² – spread myths of vagina dentate. This is a telling binary to the Professor-society myths of Barbarian rape, where kittens are sewn up in the slashed bellies of their female victims.

In the struggle between the societies, both ideological and physical, sex becomes an apparatus of oppression. In the case of Marianne, who grows to desire Jewel despite his

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40 Ibid., pp 52.

41 Ibid., pp 56.

42 Neumann, Erich, *The Great Mother*, trans by. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press., 1995) pp. 168. Here Neumann, a psychologist, relates a tale where, to overcome the “Terrible Mother”, a hero must break the teeth out of her vagina, and by doing so, make her into a woman.

cruelty, ruthlessness and indifference, the strategy works. While in *Nights at the Circus*, Walser and Fevvers' shared desire (and, as will be discussed below, the desire shared by Eve and Tristessa) is reciprocal and productive, the one-sided desire of Marianne for Jewel is not. She remains with the Barbarians, against her will, marries, against her will, and is diminished.

Carter weaponises sex and gender herself, within her narratives, in an attempt to counter and deconstruct unhelpful, repressive meta-narratives. In *The Passion of New Eve*, her revisionist attack on the patriarchal Biblical myth of Eden is obvious from the title.

This "new" Eve is as much an artificial creation as the "first" Eve. S/he is formed from the body of a man, as the original Eve was formed from Adam's rib. But this time the transformation takes place under the control of Jocasta, a high priestess/surgeon, who wears the name of Oedipus' mother (thereby inverting another classical myth), rather than under the auspices of an Abrahamic, masculine God.

Beulah represents an artificial space constructed in a region described by Elaine Showalter in her theoretical 'wild zone'.⁴³ This is (to paraphrase) a spatial, experiential or metaphysical location outside the reach of male institutions. It is not only uninfluenced by the patriarchy, the patriarchy is unable to even *conceive* of what might lie in the wild zone, and therefore cannot control it. In *The Passion of New Eve*, Beulah is geographically isolated in the desert and ideologically isolated by matriarchal military patrols. It is a space based on female biology and set within rather than atop the earth. Evelyn's transformation takes place in a curiously sterile, womb-like space: "Slick, so lifeless"⁴⁴ and "seamless as an egg",⁴⁵ from which she is "born". In this case the "child" that emerges from Jocasta's artificial womb escapes the mother, and is impregnated by Tristessa rather than Evelyn's extracted seed, negating the dangers of oedipal incest. Eve returns to the womb, but, unlike Oedipus, she emerges from it unblinded.

At first, Evelyn believes the process is a form of vengeance – an inversion of the horrors visited on the female sex by the male, exemplified in his treatment of Leilah/Lilith.

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43 As discussed in 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness,' featured in Chapter 6 of *Critical Inquiry* 8.2, (University of Chicago: Winter, 1981) Showalter admits in this essay that: "There can be no writing or criticism outside of the dominant structure" (pp 201) and that the "concept of the woman's text in the wild zone is a playful abstraction". This is, perhaps, reflected in the failure of the gynocentric Beulah community to maintain their control over Eve/lyn and his/her reproductive autonomy.

44 Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, pp 49.

45 Ibid., pp 51.

For Carter to work this into the narrative raises an interesting point about the division between the sexes. If Evelyn is indeed being punished, either for his actions or the crime of simply being a man, the punishment is an intriguing one. He is condemned to become a woman, taking the form he simultaneously fetishized (in Tristessa) and abused (In Leilah). Of course, the state of being female is not, in itself, a punishment. It is a biological reality. Implicitly, Carter here acknowledges de Beauvoir's famous argument: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman".⁴⁶ Eve/lyn may have a female body, but s/he is not a woman until s/he learns what it is to be a woman. Aside from the dysmorphia caused by the invasive procedures and behavioural reprogramming, much of Evelyn's early horror is caused less by the pain of the cutting (and phallic knife) than the realisation that he has become what he previously victimised.

During Eve/lyn's time in Beulah, s/he is lectured in terms which are unequivocally travel-related: "Proposition one: time is a man, space is a woman".⁴⁷ The proposition, although borrowing from Blake according to Day,⁴⁸ is strongly reminiscent of Soja's notion of unredeemed spatial criticism, where, "[The study of] geography thus also treated space as the domain of the dead – a world of passivity and measurement rather than action and meaning".⁴⁹ Like Castells, whose critical agenda is described briefly in the introduction, Soja calls for a wider study of geography and spatial theory, looking at the ways in which social, political and philosophical schools of thought shape actual and theoretical space, and vice versa.

Previously, he argues, space has been subsumed in favour of time; historicity and teleology has assumed a far greater critical importance than geography, which merely provides a backdrop against which the chronology of history unwinds. In reality, Soja argues, geography is not a passive site. This is visible in the formation of society, in disputed borders between nations and states and in the unequal distribution of resources. It is evident in the way fertile regions, access to water and the military significance of natural features has led to the creation of settlements and states. Soja's ultimate goal is the re-integration of spatial theory into the wider sphere of social criticism. This preoccupation seems to be shared by the denizens of Beulah, if the man/time, woman/space metaphor is sustained. The lecture continues:

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46 De Beauvoir, Simone, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973) pp 301.

47 Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, pp 52.

48 Day, pp 113.

49 Soja, Edward, W., *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989) pp 36-37.

Man lives in historicity: his phallic projectory takes him onwards and upwards—but to where? Where but to the barren sea of infertility, the craters of the moon!

Journey back, journey backwards to the source.⁵⁰

In Beulah, the female experience is championed, privileged and, ultimately, forced on Evelyn, as he is transformed, at least outwardly, into Eve. In Eve/lyn, space and time intersect, but, initially at least, this project is a failure.

The source alluded to in the lecture is, presumably, the womb. But Eve/lyn does not wish to remain at the source, or allow her constructed womb to become the source of a new child. Instead, s/he is born prematurely, running once again into the desert. This time, however, the flight is an attempt to gain reproductive autonomy rather than escape responsibility for his part in Leilah/Lilith's botched abortion. The reconciliation between time and space is only achieved toward the end of the narrative.

In the interim, Eve is discovered by the wives of Zero, the arch-misogynist, who rapes her, smears excrement on his wives' breasts, removes their front teeth to facilitate painless fellatio and rules his household with a strict rota governing sexual relations. The women are all subservient. According to Richard Hobbs:

Zero needs 'woman' as the reference point for his identity. Tristessa... threatens his masculinity by removing woman's essential need for man, he believes. Zero's insecurity manifests itself in the brutal oppression of his wives including Eve, which she must endure, comprehend and ultimately escape to approach the identity she faintly recognizes.⁵¹

In Zero's ranch, Carter provides a microcosm of repressive patriarchy and imposed sessility. Zero himself is sterile, but blames his condition on Tristessa, whom he labels a

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50 Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, pp 53.

51 Hobbs, Richard, *Writing on the Body, Sex, Gender and Identity in the fiction of Jeanette Winterson and Angela Carter* (Nottingham: Pauper's Press, 2004, Kindle edition) Page numbers not available in this e-edition. Chapter 4.

“dyke”, an arch-woman who is (unknown to all at this point in the narrative) actually a man, and therefore on women in general. Crucially, the women, illiterate and primed into jealousy by their violently sexual but infertile master, are complicit in their own subservience, while also engaging in lonely and forbidden physical (but not intellectual or emotional) lesbian acts. In this passage, Carter is criticising not so much Zero, who is a cartoonish, unlikely and wholly grotesque figure (the casual misogyny of the early Evelyn is much more subtle, more insidious and ultimately frightening) but the way in which his wives contribute to their own subjugation: “They loved Zero for his air of authority but only their submission had created that. By himself he would have been nothing.”⁵²

Their enforced poverty, lack of education, lack of organisation and geographical isolation, as well as their inability to unite against or even recognise the nature of their oppressor, is a systemic model of suppression. It is arguably more effective than the threat of Zero’s fully loaded, virile phallic weapons: his guns and his dog.

Small of stature, innately cowardly, outnumbered and impotent, Zero is given his power by his willing prisoners. His terror of lesbianism, echoed by the wider, historical fascination with controlling female sexuality, is not exploited. This highlights the difference between covert, suppressed physical lesbianism and an effective organised, coordinated union of women.

It is also notable that Zero is identified as a nihilistic variety of poet. Although he has given up on textual writing and screams his “poems” into the empty desert, he is still the only functionally literate member of the household, a household where he is afforded his own space while his wives are forced to mutually cohabit in pig filth. They are unable to write their own stories, manoeuvre the narrative as Eve is able, as Fevvers and Lizzie are able, as Marianne in *Heroes and Villains* is able. The inability to create a textual space is directly related to the inability to claim a spatial autonomy within the text, as Margaret R. Higonnet suggests in *Mapping the Text*:

A number of the most suggestive feminist applications of these spatialised theories of literary form connect narrative form to social distribution of space and status. Most start from the premise that female authorship and poetic authority do not coincide, as a result of social prohibitions such as the limits on women’s education, their confinement to “proper” places at “proper” times of

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⁵² Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, pp 99-100.

day, and the taboos on their use of certain language (whether to describe men's bodies or sacred rituals). Thus the texts the critics wish to describe present the poetic results of a contradictory situation of production.⁵³

Therefore it could be argued that even the act of creating a magical realist text, as Carter and Winterson do, is an inherently political action, regardless of the politics discussed within the text. They, and their ex-centric compatriots drawn from marginalised cultures, such as Milan Kundera and Gabriel García Márquez, are claiming political/social space by *writing* textual space.

The calamity of Eve's capture is echoed in the calamity of her escape. Zero's regular ranging in his whirlybird finally reveals Tristessa's hermitage/glass palace, and the wives are packed off by helicopter for the invasion. What follows is a desecration of Tristessa's isolated home, murder, vandalism and a mock wedding in which the newly outed transvestite is married to the transsexual Eve in a mock-ceremony.

As his/her home is destroyed, Tristessa and his/her husband/bride flee in the helicopter, leaving Zero to drown, and crash land in the desert. Eve, again, enters a zone of sterility. But this time she is not alone. Eve and Tristessa:

... peopled this immemorial loneliness with all we had been, or might be, or had dreamed of being, or had thought we were—every modulation of the selves we now projected upon each other's flesh, selves—aspects of being, ideas—that seemed, during our embraces, to be the very essence of our selves; the concentrated essence of being...⁵⁴

She theorises that together they create the great Platonic hermaphrodite, a: “whole and perfect being”⁵⁵ and exhorts that being, or the process of their copulation, to: “Consume me, annihilate me”.⁵⁶ The contradiction of their created selves is reflected in the

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53 Higonnet, Margaret R., 'Mapping the Text', *Reconfigured Spheres: Feminist Exploration of Literary Space*, ed. by Margaret R. Higonnet and Joan Templeton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994) pp 205.

54 Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, pp 148.

55 Ibid., pp 148.

56 Ibid., pp 149.

desire to be subsumed but also to expand, to be everything possible and to be utterly negated at the same time. Even Eve's approach toward orgasm is described in geographical terms – she finds herself: “Moving through a succession of small, panelled, interconnected rooms...”⁵⁷

Like the experience of the female orgasm itself, Eve's visualisations hold a sense of interiority, of moving inward, distinct from the male orgasm, with its outward movement. For all its retrograde associations, this inward journey does not seem to be any less valid than an outward journey, although Carter, tellingly, does not privilege it over and above masculine outwardness. This suggests both modes of movement are interlinked, and, with the fluidity of Tristessa and Eve's physical and psychological identities, perhaps even interchangeable.

Away from the misogynist society set up by Zero and the misandrist city of Beulah, the sterility of the desert is finally defeated. It is in this productive confusion, a state privileging neither masculinity nor femininity, male or female, that Eve is on the verge of yet another departure. And though her journey has not yet met its end point, it may already have engendered other, tangential journey(s) as she has conceived.

There are also examples of abortive journeys within magical realist texts. One of the most striking is the sudden death of Roswitha in *The Tin Drum*⁵⁸ by Günter Grass. The novel, set in the Free City of Danzig, charts the rise of the Nazi Party, the city forming a fixed locale buffeted by the progress of history as it comes under first German, then Russian and finally Polish control. In siting the narrative within Danzig, Grass illustrates how the city (and its physical geography) is shaped by the dominant ideologies of the time – just as Soja argues that geography shapes and is shaped by history, as both a reactive and dynamic space within the text. Despite the narrative largely being set in a given location, the dwarf Roswitha loses her life in the course of a journey. World War Two provides Oskar with mobility. His job is to entertain the troops as part of Bebra's variety act, which sees the dwarfs travel to France and ultimately to the Atlantic Wall, at the advent of the Normandy landings. The devastating sequence, in which Roswitha's path on a coffee-run intersects with the path of a falling shell, is described in understated terms:

Roswitha asked me to get her a cup of coffee. Rather nervous and afraid of

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⁵⁷ Ibid., pp 149.

⁵⁸ Grass, Günter, *The Tin Drum*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976).

missing the truck, I refused. I was even a little rude to her. Thereupon she herself ran over to the field kitchen in her high-heeled shoes, and reached the steaming hot coffee exactly the same time as a shell from a naval gun.⁵⁹

Her death, a product of transit and intersection, takes place during an uncompleted arc of motion. It personalises the damage caused by the Second World War. She is a poignant symbol that some journeys will be cut short by political, ideological and spatial factors beyond the traveller's control. Her death coincides with the arrival of orders for the troupe of entertainers to return to Danzig.

Chapter 3: Destinations

In any narrative there is an element of travel. According to Caren Kaplan: “Readers... always search for a way ‘home’ as they make their way through a wilderness of narrative fragmentation”.¹ Presumably, by the end, the reader has come to a textual “place” they can understand.

Although *Nights at the Circus* leaves its characters in the Siberian wastes, Fevvers’ evocation of London landmarks and her declaration that she will one day return is triumphant. As the Cockney Venus, her self-made identity is very much entwined with the place of her origin. There is no ambiguity as to the location of her home.

In contrast, Kundera’s text is more equivocal. The four central characters, Tomas, Tereza, Sabina and Franz consistently interpret occurrences in radically different ways. For Tereza, the return to Czechoslovakia means she is no longer dependent on Tomas for “everything”, no longer “walking a tightrope” in a foreign land.² But for Tomas, the return is a form of defeat: “Once or twice her breathing turned into mild snores. Tomas felt no compassion. All he felt was the pressure in his stomach and the despair of having returned.”³

This ambivalence is typical of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and echoes the short dictionary of misunderstandings that eventually lead to the rupturing of Franz and Sabrina’s relationship. For Tomas, home is a form of imprisonment. He is reduced to window washing, as the regime will not allow him to practice as a doctor.

Most of the magical realist elements of the text concern the individual psychologies of the characters. It would be difficult to argue that Kundera’s principal goal is to use the genre-form as an effective method for disassembling the regime, symbolically or practically, but movement and magical realism do come into play. The dystopian images of Petrin Hill and Tereza’s nightmares of an emotionally autocratic Tomas forcing women to dance naked in time, facing death by shotgun if they fail, are redolent of firing squads and the mechanisms of oppressive government.

In Sabina, Kundera offers a figure that denies and defies the very idea of “home”.

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 1 Kaplan, pp 40.
 2 Kundera, pp 71.
 3 Ibid., pp 34.

Sabina is the most transient character, and her movements are closely tied to her philosophy – the retreat from weightiness, fleeing from kitsch, and from death. Of the four principal characters, she is the closest to being an in-text nomad, and she is used to actively critique, to reiterate Gabriel, the art and settlement inspired by the state.⁴ For Sabina, movement is linked to the continuation of life:

...Sabina knew she would leave Paris, move on, and on again, because were she to die here they would cover her up with a stone, and in the mind of a woman for whom no place is home the thought of an end to all flight is unbearable.⁵

Through distance, Sabina has gone beyond the reach of the regime, beyond the weightiness of sexual and emotional union, and maintains her lightness of being. This fluidity of place and person, opposed to stagnation and repetition, is echoed in a number of texts, and is a theme explored apocalyptically in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

As Márquez's novel is set largely in Macondo, it provides a geographically static narrative, where the town becomes a crux, a point of confluence between narratives. Macondo makes its first appearance in *Leaf Storm*,⁶ the author's first published novella. In the later compiled English version, Márquez revisits the town in a series of short stories. But there is one journey of particular note within *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and that is the return of José Arcadio Segundo from the site of the banana massacre.

When José Arcadio Segundo came to he was lying face up in the darkness. He realised that he was riding on an endless and silent train and that his head was caked with dried blood and that all his bones ached. He felt an intolerable desire to sleep... only then did he discover he was lying against dead people.⁷

The bodies, all 3,000 of them, represent the oppressed workers at a nearby banana plantation owned by United Fruit. The arrival of the foreign imperialists who set up the

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4 Gabriel, pp 63-64.

5 Kundera, pp 71.

6 Márquez, Gabriel García, *Leaf Storm: and Other Stories* (London: Harper Perennial; Reissue edition, February 1, 2005).

7 Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, pp 312.

plantation is a disaster for the town as, alongside the benefits of modernisation – the introduction of cinema and imports, the population is readily abused by a capitalist-funded militia. This culminates in the army firing on protesters. This echoes a historical event which took place in 1928, when the Columbian government sent in troops to suppress strikers. The demonstrators were protesting working conditions imposed by the real United Fruit Company. Contemporary and retrospective reports give a varying number of victims, from the exacting; “seven”⁸ to the vague; a “handful to 3,000”.⁹

Regardless of its numerical value, a number does not effectively communicate the subjective experience. Through the dramatisation of the massacre, the reader is forced to follow José Arcadio Segundo’s hellish return journey and his increasingly hysterical attempts to convince the citizens of Macondo of the (in-text) truth of the massacre. And by equating the bodies with “rejected bananas”¹⁰ Márquez makes a clear statement condemning the capitalist commodification of human lives.

Subsequently, the strike ringleaders are systematically hunted down and killed while a deluge ensues. Márquez uses his magical realist themes strikingly here. Four years of rain wash away any signs of the massacre, just as it is washed from the collective memory. The torrent ultimately renders the banana plantation unprofitable and drives away the investors, who then leave the town to decay. These images are far more effective than mere statistics.

The novel, which earlier includes a plague of insomnia that gives the entire town of Macondo a form of amnesia, is highly concerned with collective memory and the self-revising nature of a population that would rather forget than resist mass-murder. By manipulating the facts, Márquez actually reaches for an alternative truth, using exaggeration, magical realism and drama to counter the suppressing power of fear and propaganda:

Several hours must have passed since the massacre because the corpses had the same temperature as plaster in autumn and the same consistency of petrified

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⁸ Solanet, pp 28.

⁹ Suggested by a compilation of contemporary communications, ed. by Paul Woolf.

(www.icdc.com/~paulwolf/colombia/santamarta.htm: copyright 2002, retrieved October 2011).

¹⁰ Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, pp 312.

foam that it had, and those who had put them in the car had time to pile them up in the same way in which they transported bunches of bananas... he saw the man corpses, woman corpses, child corpses who would be thrown into the sea like rejected bananas. He recognized only a woman who sold drinks in the square and Colonel Gavilán... ¹¹

It does not matter that Márquez exaggerates the number of dead in order to produce a convincingly grotesque scene. As long as the scene *is* convincing in the space of the text, and believably seared into the mind of the readers, it is successful. It does not matter how many people died, or that they are mostly unrecognisable, as long as it is acknowledged that some people died, and that they were *people*. The power of the scene, magical realist rather than factual, circumvents the impotence José Arcadio Segundo is reduced to as he tries to convince an indifferent population that the massacre actually happened:

He (José Arcadio Segundo) wakes up after the troops fire on the workers in the main square of Macondo to find himself lying on a heap of dead people on a train trundling off to an unknown destination... he jumps off, walks back to Macondo, goes into a woman's house where his wounds are bathed, finds his account of the massacre is not believed... it dawns on us that José Arcadio Segundo may well be a ghost... ¹²

This interpretation is further supported by the executing militia's inability to see him when they break into the untouched, time-resistant space of Melquíades study. Márquez here may be suggesting that magical realism, for all its exaggeration and defiance of fact, provides a far better alternative to a ghost-history, which is factually true but remains unheard and unheeded. The memory may be distorted, but it survives, as Timothy Brennan argues:

... 'memory' – for example in the quasi-journalistic banana massacre episode of Garcia Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* – is what many of these

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¹¹ Ibid., pp 312.

¹² Hart, Stephen M., *Critical Lives: Gabriel Garcia Marquez* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010) pp 91-92.

novels insist on preserving... the novel was thought to oppose the inclination of the storyteller to borrow from the miraculous, which the wholesale success of so-called 'magic realism' (not only in Latin America) has shown to be wrong.¹³

Indeed, so effective is novelistic magical realist expression, it has actually reached out of the textual space to revise history and extra-textual collective memory: "Since 1967, when *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was published, this version has – paradoxically – dwarfed the other accounts".¹⁴ It remains true, however, that the main homecoming in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is actually more of an (attempted) home-making. The first generation of Macondo residents are colonialists, followed in successive waves by the French Prostitutes and the Americans, and, according to Iain Chambers:

...travel implies movement between fixed positions, a site of departure, a point of arrival, the knowledge of an itinerary. It also intimates an eventual return, a potential homecoming. Migrancy, on the contrary, involves a movement in which neither the points of a departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain. It calls for a dwelling in language, in histories, in identities that are constantly subject to mutation. Always in transit, the promise of a homecoming – completing the story, domesticating the detour – becomes an impossibility.¹⁵

Due to the haunting of Prudencio, the first-wave Macondo pioneers are unable to return home. For the successive generations, Macondo is home, according to the definition given by José Arcadio Buendía, who states: "A person does not belong to a place until there is someone dead under the ground".¹⁶

But the citizens fail to establish themselves in the face of capitalist expansion and interference. This is a reflection of the Buendías collective failure to break out of

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13 Brennan, Timothy, 'The National Longing for Form', *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 2004) pp 65.

14 Hart, pp 94.

15 Chambers, Iain, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994) pp 5.

16 Márquez, pp 14.

their emotional “solitude” and their series of tragic, loveless or selfish human engagements. But more than that, when the Western imperialist powers move in, including the banana company, the townspeople are unable to mobilise effectively. The victims of the banana massacre will never be buried “under the ground” – they are “thrown into the sea”.¹⁷

Despite their earlier claim to the land, despite surviving the trials of the insomnia plague and the war between the liberals and conservatives, the people of Macondo effectively become second-class citizens, taking the place in society often occupied by the most recent immigrants. Uprooted and in flux, these are the most vulnerable members of society, buffeted by history. Maggie Ann Bowers argues that Márquez’s spinning, vibrant magical realist writing style is the product of the politics he was surrounded by:

...coming out of the highly traumatized country of Columbia, and writing about long periods of civil unrest... and government brutality known as la violencia (1948-58), his magical realist exuberance is not only a celebration of the diversity of Latin America... but a way to express the excessive violence and confusion of Columbian, and Latin American, politics.¹⁸

It is arguable that both Carter and Winterson also draw on the traumas and brutality visited on women throughout Western history. Unlike Winterson’s text, however, which privileges imagination and plurality of choice, fraying into parallel but independent, open-ended narratives, Márquez’s text spirals into a closed circuit, an inevitable, foreshadowed and inescapable conclusion reflected by the self-reflexivity of the text itself. This narrowing of field echoes the catastrophic outcome of a failed society.

And what would account for the tragicomedy of the self-defeating repetition in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* ...if not the epic assumptions about Latin American history? History was supposed to be going forward. Social ills were allegedly being cured.¹⁹

But social ills are not being cured. The residents of Macondo cannot, like

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17 Ibid., pp 312.

18 Bowers, pp 39.

19 Sommer, Doris, ‘Irresistible Romance’, *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 2004) pp72.

Márquez and fellow magical realist writers Carter and Winterson, write or revise their own mythology. They are instead the victims of an outwardly imposed history, with all the brutality that ensures. Even their personal history is penned by an outsider, Melquíades, and Aureliano II spends much of his time unravelling the secret writings of the philosopher-nomad, only to find they foretell the fall of the Buendía line and the destruction of Macondo. “Home” is swept away in a savage wind at the moment of understanding.

Márquez does not present us with a homely narrative, a marital union and a happy ever after. Instead he illustrates a literally *unheimlich* vision of a household ruined by political abuse, emotional isolation and self-defeat. The new-born child, typically a symbol of rejuvenation and hope, is actually the result of an incestuous union (bearing a pig’s tail, and belatedly proving Ursula, and her attempts to govern her sexual autonomy, correct). The child, a symbol of domesticity, is carried away to be eaten by ants. This intrusion of the uncanny, as described in Freud’s essay *Das Unheimliche*,²⁰ leaves us discomfited, in a state of dissonance, so when the wind comes we are blasted free from the narrative as Macondo is blasted free from the earth and wiped out of history.

Elleke Boehmer suggests magical realism is able to describe: “A world fissured, distorted, and made incredible by cultural displacement”.²¹ Interestingly, *we* are displaced at the end of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. At the end of the novel, we are presented with a blank space, a scrubbed palimpsest. It is a discomfiting, if faint, echo of the experience of those who are displaced. It also issues a challenge: enter into a closed, self-defeating circuit of conflict and oppression, leading to ghost-histories and erasure, or create something new.

Günter Grass, like Márquez and Carpentier, one of the first generation of writers to be strongly associated with the magical realist ‘tag’, is also acutely aware of the power of a problematised ‘homecoming’. This is visible in *The Tin Drum*.

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20 Freud, Sigmund, ‘The Uncanny’, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XVII*, ed and trans. by Strachey, James (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1964). The notion of the Uncanny is that something can simultaneously hold the properties of being both familiar and alien, creating a degree of cognitive dissonance in the viewer. The more direct translation of ‘Unheimlich’ is ‘unhomely’ –particularly apt when discussing space and location.

21 Boehmer, Elleke, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* (Oxford, 1995) pp 235.

Like Henri in *The Passion*, the protagonist Oskar is incarcerated in a mental institution. Unlike Winterson's narrative, however, this is made clear from the very start. Oskar's eventual location is never in dispute. His journey is, in narrative terms, a circular one, but not as circular as he would like. He yearns to return to his grandmother Anna Joljiaczek: "Standing there like a mountain, ready to receive me and my retinue, our journey ended, under her skirts, into the heart of the mountain"²² (again, an indomitable woman is 'mountainous'). But in the closing pages of the text, the narrative begins to break down, its coherence dissolving. Oskar is faced with the possibility of leaving his (enforced) home, his "inevitable discharge",²³ triggering a fast-paced re-iteration of the motifs of the novel.

The narrative begins a familiar spiralling pattern, found both at the end of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and in *Midnight's Children*. Rather than winding down, these magical realist texts appear to gather pace, the motifs appearing to spin faster, like matter approaching the tightest point of a vortex. In *The Tin Drum*, the narrative ends with a scrap of poetry, and it is left ambiguous as to whether the episode is a point of departure, with Oskar facing release or a point of collapse into insanity. By comparison, in *Midnight's Children*, the vortex explodes outwards. Here the narrator Saleem begins to disperse into fragments, the number of which is roughly analogous to the population of India, suggesting an individualisation of collective experience, history and space. Society becomes: "The annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes".²⁴ There is no homecoming or home-making here. The nation-state of India, arbitrarily formed in 1947 and still the site of border-disputes and political tension with Pakistan, dissolves into its constituent parts, the ever-moving, ever-in-transit individual Indian citizen.

Carter and Winterson, too, defy fixed, closed endings, and in doing so defy a tradition of narrative norms. Sara Maitland argues:

Form requires (desires) conclusion, requires tidiness, requires the good ending, and the novel particularly thrives on that requirement; but a radical,

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²² Grass, pp 578.

²³ Ibid., pp 579.

²⁴ Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children*, pp 463.

philosophical claim of feminism is about being-in-engagement and we have not explored enough ways of writing that animating sense into our fictional texts.²⁵

Both authors are exploring ways of writing that invite radical interpretations. As discussed earlier, Winterson refuses to “fix” her heroines (or heroine/hero in the case of Jordan). Jordan’s homecoming in *Sexing the Cherry* is typically inconclusive. He returns to Blackfriars, where the Dog Woman is waiting for him, with his discovery of the pineapple ready for presentation to the king. After being reunited on the shore, they lapse into silence:

On our way back to London Jordan apologised to me for talking so little. ‘It was never my way,’ he said, ‘nor yours either.’ I was perplexed by this since I like to think of myself as a cheerful person, ever ready with some vital conversation. Had not Jordan and myself not talked forever when he was a boy?²⁶

Jordan and the Dog Woman remember home very differently, and it is debatable whose version of ‘home’ is the true one, or if both are true. Jordan tells his mother about the time-compressed language of the Hopi Indians, who have no tenses for past, present or future. To them, all time is now. And yet, despite her physical immobility, the Dog Woman has travelled in time, and home is no longer what it was for either of them. Neighbours and enemies have died, a regime has fallen and been reinstated and the face of London has evolved. This is the gulf that lies between them – time, absence and an insurmountable difference of philosophy.

The end of Winterson’s narrative, like Jordan’s homecoming, leaves many questions unanswered and even unasked. The binary of the Dog Woman’s perspective and Jordan’s is never reconciled. The modern Dog Woman wishes to: “Escape from what? The present?”

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²⁵ Maitland, Sarah, ‘Futures in Feminist Fiction’, *My Guy to Sci-Fi, Genre and Women’s Writing in the Postmodern World*, ed. by Helen Carr (London: Pandora Press, 1989) pp 199.

²⁶ Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*, pp 134.

Yes, from this foreground that blinds me to whatever may be happening in the distance”.²⁷

But Jordan, in the closing paragraphs, argues that the conceptual “glittering city” of the future is a “fake”,²⁸ that the past, the future and the present are constructs of the mind, that the borders between them are non-existent, that according to physics, everything, regardless of value and solidity, is simply “empty space and points of light”.²⁹ Where then can the protagonist escape to?

We are left to decide for ourselves whether this very postmodern concept, the breaking down of borders of time and matter, is freeing, frightening or both. If it is true that, as according to Edward James: “Without the frontier, there is stagnation”,³⁰ Winterson’s conclusion, and by extension the border-blurring effect of postmodernism, is profoundly depressing. If the frontier is a socially-constructed fiction, then we are doomed to stagnation. However, this is contradicted in Jordan’s earlier statement.

As he and his mother sail away from London, blazing in the first flames of the Great Fire, he muses: “Perhaps I am to live, to be complete as she (Fortunata) said I would be”.³¹ In his philosophy, perhaps it is possible to be complete without being contained by boundaries, without being considered “whole”. Winterson’s homecoming, and her novel, ends with a departure, and therefore, with a new beginning.

In *The Passion*, the two protagonists return to Venice, and both find home, but in very different ways. Villanelle glides down the byways of her city, becomes pregnant, becomes an heiress, and is prepared to gamble again. Henri is accused of the murder of the Cook/Villanelle’s husband and, declared insane, is taken to a mad house on San Servolo island. Villanelle has her freedom, and she refuses her old lover’s offer of one last night, guarding her heart. Henri’s fate seems sadder, beset by ghosts (including Napoleon and the malevolent cook) but when he is offered an escape, his response is: “This is my home, I can’t leave. What will mother say?”.³²

Villanelle believes Henri is insane as a result of a dissonance of personality and deed— he is a gentle man traumatised by becoming a killer. Yet the pair still relate their tale

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²⁷ Ibid., pp 126.

²⁸ Ibid., pp 144.

²⁹ Ibid., pp 144.

³⁰ James, Edward, ‘Per ardua ad astra’, Chapter 10, *Voyages & Visions, Toward a Cultural History of Travel*, ed. by Jaś Elsner and Joan Pau Rubiés (New York, Reaktion Books, 1999. 253-271) pp 270.

³¹ Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*, pp 143.

³² Winterson, *The Passion*, pp 149.

in parallel phrases, both separately declaring: “The cities of the interior are vast and do not lie on any map”.³³ This suggests Henri, perhaps, has learned a form of autonomy and self-awareness through Villanelle and his experience on the long march. Henri is willingly imprisoned. He cultivates a garden within the grounds of the asylum, and is, in his way, content. His historic physical home is no longer what it was. His mother is dead, but she has returned to him in a way, and, perhaps, it does not matter that he has populated the cities of his interior with ghosts. Villanelle worries that Henri has “lost himself”³⁴ – the diametric opposite to the traveller’s cliché of ‘finding oneself’, but Henri argues: “I stay here by choice. That means a lot to me”.³⁵ It would be easy to read Henri’s fate as a tragic consequence of imperialist greed, and the misogyny (or general misanthropy) of the Cook. But, typically, the end of Winterson’s novel defies simplistic interpretations, and it is possible Henri is talking about a real, self-created home, rather than consoling both himself and the reader, when he talks about: “[A] room, a garden, company and time for myself. Aren’t these the things people ask for?”.³⁶ He has created a home because he doesn’t want to “see any more of the world”.³⁷ This is simultaneously a retreat, a defeat, a refusal to flee and a victory. Henri *will* create a forest of roses on a barren island.

Likewise, in *Heroes and Villains*, Marianne is faced with a situation where a subjective version of home no longer exists. She is alienated both from the Professor society and the Barbarian society. Her father and Jewel, her only substantial attachments to either population, both die. Although her place of birth still exists, it is no longer her “home”. In the closing pages of *Heroes and Villains*, the Barbarians consider leaving her for the pursuing Soldiers, but Marianne refuses to be left behind. As she refuses, she feels the: “Beginnings of a sense of power”.³⁸

It is at this point in Carter’s morally and politically ambiguous tale that Marianne regains a degree of the autonomy she exercises very briefly on two previous occasions: her split-second decisions to escape from the Professors and then the Barbarians. Here, at last, she begins to grasp a method by which she can gain a degree of agency, in a society less

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33 Ibid., pp 150 and 152.

34 Ibid., pp 150.

35 Ibid., pp 152.

36 Ibid., pp 157.

37 Ibid., pp 152.

38 Carter, *Heroes and Villains*, pp 144.

stratified than the one she left behind.

‘Oh no,’ she said. ‘They won’t get rid of me as easily as that. I shall stay here and frighten them so much they’ll do every single thing I say.’

‘What, will you be Queen?’

‘I’ll be the tiger lady and rule them with an iron rod.’³⁹

Marianne, like Henri, is determined to make her own home. But, while his involves social assimilation and a reshaping of the physical space, in a nomadic tribe, landscaping and terra-forming are irrelevant to Marianne. Instead, she intends to use the power vacuum left by Dr Donally and Jewel to shape the society to her will, to create a structure that will fulfil her needs. Marianne is making a home, although the sham of her marriage to Jewel makes clear she is no home-maker in the traditional, sessile mould.

In contrast, Eve in *The Passion of New Eve* finds an end to (one part) of her journey in a given location; a space that is both physical and metaphysical. Eve first re-encounters Leilah, a creature of flesh, and Sophia, a creature of intellect, united in the form of Lilith, and, is seemingly forgiven for his/her earlier depredations. Lilith/Leilah/Sophia exhibits a form of homosocial sympathy for Eve: “She gently, almost sorrowfully, touched my breasts”⁴⁰ suggesting compassion, and the mutual recognition of the abuses visited on female flesh. Lilith drives Eve through California – on the far side of the North American continent to New York - and guides Eve into the earth:

I emerge in a smaller cave, a cave almost filled by water that was now at blood heat... and this cave was filled with a familiar, dim red light for which I could perceive no source...⁴¹

The imagery here becomes more organic and increasingly loaded with Freudian symbolism. It begins to resemble a womb: “This unheimlich place... the entrance to the former Heim [home] of all human beings”⁴² At first the architecture of the cave is rocky

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³⁹ Ibid., pp 150.

⁴⁰ Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, pp 173.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp 181-182.

⁴² Freud, Sigmund, *The Uncanny*, pp 245.

and inhospitable, and however hard Eve pushes against the rock, Mother seems incontrovertibly far away. Eve's "little spoke of light"⁴³ that she pokes around with, making a phallic symbol of the penetrating nature of her torch, is quenched in the liquids of the cave. She traverses a dangerous, sodden canal, where she is in danger of injury or drowning. At this point, Eve appears to be returning to "the source",⁴⁴ as she was exhorted in an earlier passage of the book. But this time, rather than escaping the womb, she enters willingly. For Carter:

The womb is an imaginative locale and has an imaginative location far away from my belly, beyond my flesh, beyond my house, beyond this city, this society, this economic structure... it lies in an area of psychic metaphysiology suggesting such an anterior primacy of the womb that our poor dissecting tools of reason blunt on its magnitude.⁴⁵

The womb is an internalised version of Elaine Showalter's Wild Zone, a place of potential. It is both a home and point of inevitable departure. According to Freudian theory, the male "death drive"⁴⁶ is an attempt by the male to return to the interiority of the womb. Eve, once male and now female, successfully enters this realm, unlike the ouroboros-like Tristessa, whose self-reflexive sexuality and persona sees his genitalia disappearing up his own anus. Her success likewise contrasts Zero, who, for all his violent nihilism, fails to effectively inhabit a womb even by proxy through impregnation. And Eve is born again, as contractions ripple through the now fleshy tunnels. The process is far more powerful and effective than her premature emergence from Beulah, the synthetic womb. For, in Beulah, Evelyn is artificially implanted against his will, whereas Eve enters the cave willingly, if warily, and is welcomed not by static, man-made material, but by a fluid, muscular drawing, which represents labour and/or orgasm:

Walls of meat and slimy velvet.

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43 Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, pp 180.

44 Ibid., pp 42.

45 Carter, Angela, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History (1979)* (London: Virago Press, 2000) pp 109.

46 The phenomenon, also referred to as "Thanatos", is detailed in: Freud, Sigmund, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (The Standard Edition) trans. by James Strachey (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1961).

Inward.

A visceral yet perfectly rhythmic agitation ripples the walls, which ingest me.
I'm not so scared as once I would have been, to go worming my way through
the warm meat of the insides of the earth...⁴⁷

In this womb, Eve is both co-progenitor, entering consensually, and also the product of gestation. She sees time unfold, reverse evolution, a seismic rewinding of geography and history, until she is faced with the primordial stew. Helen Carr suggests: "History is no longer a movement along the files of time. It is a set of myths inhabiting the present".⁴⁸ Carter's reversal of time is the visual-physical proxy of Eve's realisation that "the word 'duration' was utterly meaningless",⁴⁹ corroborating Carr's assertion. And for Eve, the collapsing of time/space means she recognises "home" while being ejected from it, like a new born baby on the cusp of delivery.

I have come home.

The destination of all journeys is their beginning.

I have not come home. I emitted, at last, a single, frail, inconsolable cry like
that of a new-born child.⁵⁰

Eve calls out to Mama, but there is no answer. Again, the text suggests that every ending contains a beginning, that there is no "home". If the "death drive" is the destructive longing to return to the womb, then Eve has achieved this goal and passed through into life once more. As with Jordan, leaving behind him the burning skyline of a London he will never again see, the text of *New Eve* ends ambiguously. Eve leaves behind the frozen genitals of her frozen life – she acknowledges they "once belonged to Evelyn".⁵¹ This signifies she is, in totality, Eve, whole and female – ready to sail off toward an uncertain future. And openness and uncertainty is inherently political, according to Gemma Lopéz: "Open-endedness, which defies the inevitability of narrative closure, might be deemed a form of ambiguous completion, an ambiguity which, in turn, successfully escapes the

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47 Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, pp 184.

48 Carr, Helen, 'Introduction' from *My Guy to Sci-Fi, Genre and Women's Writing in the Postmodern World*, ed. by Helen Carr (London, Pandora Press, 1989) pp 11.

49 Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, pp 182.

50 Ibid., pp 186.

51 Ibid pp 187.

fixing of any subject positions.”⁵²

Through this process of rebirth, the protagonist’s experiences as both Eve and Evelyn, with their inherent contradictions, are reconciled much as the fleshly Leilah and the intellectual Sophia are reconciled in Lilith. This reconciliation and expulsion from the womb-space offers a freedom missing from the linear male projectory and the regressive retreat to “the source”. Eve is entering a zone where no political structures, matriarchal or patriarchal, misogynist or misandrist, exist. She, a transsexual, gender-fluid being, and her unborn child, who has, as Lilith points out, two mothers and two fathers but only two parents, are presumably free to draw their own conclusions about their identities and their place in the world. She sets sail on an open sea, which offers a geography with no end.

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⁵² Lopéz, Gemma, *Seductions in Narrative: Subjectivity and Desire in the Works of Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson* (New York, Cambria Press, 2007) pp 137.

Chapter 4: Conclusions

Even with a relatively small sample of authors, the manifold perspectives are bewildering in number. It is difficult to argue and even redundant to suggest that these disparate authors, drawn from disparate parts of the world and from disparate backgrounds, are arguing the same political points, or use magical realism or travel, in isolation or together, to criticise or deconstruct the same restrictive or proscriptive modes of thought and behaviour. There are marked differences even within a single writer's canon. The authors are united only by the tools they use. But those tools are powerful. As Salman Rushdie suggests:

...the true location [of the story] is the other great tradition in art, the one in which techniques of comedy, metaphor, heightened imagery, fantasy and so on are used to break down our conventional, habit-dulled certainties about what the world is and has to be. Unreality is the only weapon with which reality can be smashed, so that it may subsequently be reconstructed.¹

A location that has not been encountered exists as a place *in potentia* until it is physically visited. Therefore, an unfamiliar textual location, as found in travel literature (fiction and non-fiction), is always unreal to the reader. Magical realism and its uncoded mingling of the realist and fantastical is likewise unreal, so the writer combining the two narrative modes has a doubly effective weapon. Linda Hutcheon argues:

The centre no longer completely holds. And, from the decentred perspective, the 'marginal' and what I shall be calling the 'ex-centric' (be it in class, race, gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity) take on a new significance in the light of the implied recognition that our culture is not really the homogeneous monolith (that is middle-class, male, heterosexual, white, western) we might have assumed.²

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¹ Rushdie, Salman, *Imaginary Homelands*, pp 122.

² Hutcheon, Linda, 'Theorizing the Postmodern: Toward a Poetics', *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2004) pp 12.

Magical realism and travel fiction have both been instrumental in recognising, revealing and facilitating this decentring of ideology and perspective. It has even made direct allusions to (and attacks on) modern socio-political phenomenon. This is notable in *Sexing the Cherry* when the narrative abruptly shifts to the modern day. In sharp contrast to the whimsy and delicate unrealism of the 17th century portions of the narrative, the only point that approaches magical realism in the modern section is attributed to pollution: “‘The river’s glowing,’ I said. [She replied] ‘It’s the phosphorus, the tests are conclusive.’”³ It is an effective and striking distortion of magical realist motifs. The unreal has impacted on the “real” in a negative and unhealthy way: the pollution should not be “here.”

The socio-political landscape has significantly altered since Carter’s novels were first published in the 1960s, the same decade that provided the setting for Winterson’s semi-autobiographical text *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*.⁴ The aftermath of Stonewall in 1969, coupled with a number of scientific and psychological studies, has led to a more fluid understanding of human sexuality. Since the publication of *Midnight’s Children* in 1980, economic power centres have shifted to the Asian continent. The political landscape of South America has altered, while the Czech Republic and Slovak Republic became autonomous in 1993. This followed the collapse of the Communist regime, known as the Velvet Revolution, in 1989, five years after the publication of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

Mass travel and tourism have become increasingly possible and affordable, while the internet and television enable cheap, easy and almost instantaneous communication across the globe. There are tens of millions of refugees, including those who have been pushed over borders and internally displaced persons within a given country. In 2011 alone, an estimated 4.3 million people became refugees as a result of war or persecution. Eight hundred thousand of these moved across international borders, the highest number in more than a decade.⁵ Conversely, the number of true nomads, as opposed to tourists, is rapidly dropping: “As an ethnic group, Gypsies and Roma have a nomadic heritage but today, 90 per cent of Gypsies and Roma across the world live in houses.”⁶

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4 Winterson, Jeanette, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (London, Vintage, 1991).

5 UN High Commissioner for Refugees, *UNHCR Global Trends 2011* (United States, 2012, <www.unhcr.org/statistics/populationdatabase accessed Feb 19 2013>) pp 2.

6 Manske, Daniela, ‘Gypsies, Roma and Travellers, Mythbuster’, *Amnesty International* bi-monthly magazine (164: November/December, 2010).

This trend is not restricted to this one hereditary group, but is reflected the world over. The surface of the globe has opened up, but variation between cultures is reducing. The world, as always, is in flux. Does this mean that magical realism has become obsolete, or that travel literature, is now unnecessary, except as a form of advertisement? I would suggest otherwise.

If, to quote Rushdie: “To see things plainly, you have to cross a frontier,”⁷ then it is possible that, in an increasingly globalised society, we are facing a reducing number of frontiers, and therefore a reducing number of opportunities to “see things plainly”. There is ample proof that linguistic frontiers are collapsing. Mark Abley, in *Spoken Here: Travels Among Threatened Languages*, suggests that only half of the 6,000 languages spoken today will survive into the next century.⁸ Narindar Saroop writes: “...It has to be recognized that national cultures are tending to break down all over the world with a uniform pop and Coca-Cola extending its grip. This applies, for example, to large sections of youth in the Indian sub-continent.”⁹ In a similar mode, Paul Ricœur complains:

Everywhere throughout the world one finds the same bad movies, the same slot machines, the same plastic or aluminium atrocities, the same twisting of language of propaganda... in order to take part in modern civilization, it is necessary at the same time to take part in scientific, technical and political rationality, something which very often requires the pure and simple abandonment of a whole cultural past.¹⁰

Critics may argue that moves toward a more egalitarian society are happening too slowly, with women and minorities remaining stubbornly unrepresented in government, economic upper echelons and in media. Even a positive critique of modern cultures, focusing on the reordering of social strata and a gradual collapsing of repressive ideological locations for women and subjects ordered by class, caste, race, ability and age, must acknowledge that new hegemonies are being created. I write this with a particular eye on the expanding

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7 Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, pp 125.

8 Abley, Mark, *Spoken Here: Travels Among Threatened Languages* (London: Heinemann, 2003) pp 4.

9 Saroop, Narindar, ‘Freedom and Race’, *In Defence of Freedom*, ed. by Dr K. W. Watkins, (London: Cassell & Co LTD, 1978) pp 121.

10 Ricœur, Paul, ‘Civilisation and National Cultures’, *History and Truth* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1985) pp 276.

and environmental impact of international industry, and the economically distortive effects of multi-national mega corporations. The banana companies have not gone away – indeed United Fruit, the inspiration for the banana plantation massacre sequence, was rebranded as Chiquita Brands in 1984.¹¹

Critics attack magical realism, claiming that the narrative mode reinforces unhelpful stereotypes built around marginal sections of society, thus contributing to the existing model of oppression: “...the term itself, as some critics claim, is grounded in a European perspective, hence assuming that magic, i.e., the irrational, by definition belongs to indigenous/non-European cultures, whereas rationality, and thus the only true reality, is European.”¹²

There are also elements of fatalism detectable in the form. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, which does not function as travel fiction, nevertheless is concerned with magical realism and place. The homecoming of Beloved, revenant or real woman, is the catalyst that drives the narrative. When asked if she will move from the afflicted house, Baby Suggs answers: “What’d be the point? ... Not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negroes’s grief”.¹³ In one sentence Morrison eloquently illustrates the futility of escaping the past in a human geography that is not only steeped in tragedy, but built from it. And yet, perhaps, the communication of this grief offers not only an opportunity for catharsis but also a cultural recognition of human suffering.

As the decades-old feminist struggle to deconstruct a male-centric linguistic system shows, there are inherent problems in every narrative model. I believe, as previously argued, that grasping any voice, any chance to construct a narrative, is better than having no chance at all. It may be there is more effective equipment for levering apart preconceived norms and, if there is, it should be embraced. However, as a literary tool, magical realism should not be discarded just yet. Moreover, magical realism is increasingly breaking out of the third-world literary ghetto. Stephen Slemon writes: “Critics until very recently have been singularly uninterested in applying the concept of

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11 Taylor, Timothy, ‘Evolution of the Banana Multinationals’, *Banana Wars: The Anatomy of a Trade Dispute*, ed. by Timothy Taylor and Timothy Josling. (Oxon: CABI Publishing, 2003. E-book.) pp 79-80.

12 Althans, Katrin, *Darkness Subverted: Aboriginal Gothic in Black Australian Literature and Film* (Bonn: Bonn University Press, 2010) pp 26.

13 Morrison, Toni, *Beloved* (London: Vintage; new edition, Aug 1997) pp 6.

magic realism to texts written in English.”¹⁴ This is changing. The mode is now increasingly used in European and North American settings. As discussed above, some writers are uncomfortable with the application of the term. This is understandable. Once the defining brackets of genre are imposed, writers run the risk of being hemmed in. Althans, paraphrasing Penny Van Toon, warns that: “Minority writers must conform to criteria made up by the majority audience and adhere to editorial guidelines and, even less appealing, tastes set up by white institutions”.¹⁵

Therefore, in response, magical realism has to remain a difficult to define, nebulous term. It is a category that must defy categorisation. It should incorporate new, rational elements and expose their irrational roots or exploit their transcendent capabilities, as Winterson does in *The PowerBook* by intersecting cyberspace and human identity.¹⁶

If, as Homi K. Bhabha suggests in his introduction to *Narration and Narration*: “‘Magical realism’ after the Latin American Boom, becomes the literary language of the emergent post-colonial world”,¹⁷ then that language must continue to be exercised in the face of a new kind of imperialism, one that transcends cultural and geographical boundaries while simultaneously creating increasingly wide economic divisions.

The concerns of critical geography and magical realist texts profoundly overlap, but Soja is not discussing magical realism or travel fiction when he asserts: “This reconstituted critical geography must be attuned to the emancipatory struggles of all those who are peripheralized and oppressed by the specific geography of capitalism (and existing socialism) as well”.¹⁸ However, his list of exploited workers, tyrannized peoples and dominated women are the same subjects depicted in magical realist travel fiction. And in that form, they are depicted in a revisionist, humanising mode, one that “contribute[s] to a radical postmodernism of resistance”.¹⁹

At its best, I believe magical realism, when linked with travel fiction, fulfils Soja’s criteria as an effective form of geographical criticism. This criticism is as necessary now as

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14 Slemmon, Stephen, ‘Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse’, *Magical Realism, Theory, History, Community*, ed. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (London: Duke University Press, 1995) pp 408.

15 Althans, Katrin, *Darkness Subverted: Aboriginal Gothic in Black Australian Literature and Film* (Bonn: Bonn University Press, 2010) pp 22.

16 Winterson, Jeanette, *The Powerbook* (Vintage, 2001).

17 Bhabha, Homi K., ‘Introduction’, *Nation and Narration*, ed., by Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 2004) pp 7.

18 Soja, Edward, W., *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989) pp 74.

19 Ibid., pp 74.

it ever was. A report released in 2011 revealed income inequality in OECD countries is at its highest level for half a century, with the average income of the richest 10% of the population nine times that of the poorest 10% – a ratio of 9 to 1. This division has increased from 7 to 1 in 25 years.²⁰

Tourism, while opening the boundaries between nations, is an activity overwhelmingly carried out by affluent and largely white westerners. The negative environmental and psychological impacts of tourism have been comprehensively studied by anthropologists and other social scientists, who warn against the dangers of commodifying culture and the pressures of transient populations on infrastructures and ecosystems. Travel writing, by way of fetishizing place and: “Creat[ing] ... unreal images... essential for many tourists seeking to escape the blandness of home and work routines” has undoubtedly contributed to this state of affairs.²¹

New narratives are being written by the forces behind these economic hegemonies. These come in the form of myths created by company-sanctioned PR officers and published via media outlets, adverts and insidious viral marketing. The world map is constantly being redrawn in terms of delivery catchment areas, distribution alleys and markets. Society is being divided into (while individuals are being pigeon-holed as members of) sales demographics. These charts and maps, like the charts and maps employed during the expansion of empire: “Actually produce ideological spaces, and in doing so ignore human experiences. Maps have invisible spaces within them, unspoken and unwritten places...”.²²

Magical realism and travel fiction, when not employed to shore up boundaries and Other an unfamiliar culture, do much to fill in those invisible spaces, not with empirical knowledge, but with contradictory, vibrant, critical, revisionist counter narratives created, as Linda Hutcheon says: “In the face of mass culture and a kind of vast global informational village”.²³ Travel literature arguably contributes to mass culture, whether it

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20 Organisation for Economic Co-operation, ‘An Overview of Growing Income Inequalities in OECD Countries: Main Findings’, *Divided We Stand: Why Inequality Keeps Rising* (December 2011. Retrieved January 26 2013, <www.oecd.org/els/soc/dividedwestandwhyinequalitykeepsrising.htm>) pp 22.

21 Shaw, Gareth, and Allan M. Williams, *Critical Issues in Tourism, a Geographical Perspective* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002) pp 202.

22 Grice, Helena, *Jeanette Winterson, a Contemporary Critical Guide*, pp 32.

23 Hutcheon, pp 252.

is hosted online or distributed through the supermarket top 100 bestseller list. It commodifies experience and, arguably, commodifies those minority cultures observed and represented within the text. It is among the many methods of communication that should provide an ideal platform for challenges to master-narratives, but are instead increasingly commandeered *by* those master-narratives. Every day, the world is more comprehensibly mapped, with all that entails. However, the fusion form of magical realist travel fiction goes some way to subverting this problem. I find myself agreeing with Kaisa Boddy when she writes: “If imaginary journeys are now popular, so too are imaginary destinations. If the world is no longer able to provide sufficiently unfamiliar destinations, then the writer must simply invent his own.”²⁴

Magical realism, where the exoticism and distance of destinations are only proscribed by the limits of the author’s imagination, remains a vital force for questioning and revealing the arbitrary partitions set up by those in power in order to retain or gain that power. It offers, invigoratingly, a narrative with which individuals and the spaces they occupy can shape or shatter exterior templates and claim their own contradictory, evolving, autonomous identities.

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24 Boddy, Kaisa. ‘The European Journey in Postwar American Fiction’, *Voyages & Visions, Toward a Cultural History of Travel*, ed. by Jaś Elsner and Joan-Pau Rubiés, (New York: Reaktion Books, 1999. 232-251) pp 249.

Fantastical Journeys: A Fusion Form and Eithe's Journey

A Comparative Report

Why write in a magical realist mode?

I have had an interest in magical realist literature since I discovered Angela Carter more than a decade ago. This interest is in both in the academic significance of the sub-genre and in its potential to entertain. Finely crafted magical realism offers a sideways look at the world, while opening up opportunities to indulge in the fantastical, the gothic, the grotesque, horror, myth, wonder, sex and violence. It allows authors to place a protagonist in an alien situation, to hold up a mirror to the “real” world by turning it into a strange and unexpected textual space, and therefore it also has an allegorical function.

In recent years, many texts that could be located in the magical realist tradition, such as *The Time Traveller's Wife*¹ by Audrey Niffenegger, or *Life of Pi*² by Yann Martel, have achieved critical and commercial success, suggesting the sub-genre is still relevant. However, although characters within the text of *Life of Pi* openly ponder the allegorical nature of the tale, these texts seem to have lost much of the political charge, anger and fire of earlier works by Rushdie, Winterson, Marquez and Carter. I wanted to revisit the form to open up and comment on modern problems such as tourism, geographic and political inequality and gender.

In *Eithe's Way*, the inclusion of the Mirror Staring Man, and his shadow-double Gem, is designed to pose questions about culpability, free will, determinism, interdependence and the power of money and information. The Mirror Staring Man is disembodied, but by manipulating and bankrolling Eithe, he maintains a modicum of power. Her eventual recognition of this and her refusal to be coerced is a pivotal point in her character arc. The phenomenon of his disembodiment and appearance in the mirror acts as a dramatic device, placing both the Mirror Staring Man and Eithe in a situation that has no real-life analogue. Corporeal imprisonment would not have the same allegorical resonance or opportunity for interaction, voyeurism, intimacy, inescapability or frustration.

Mirrors and reflective surfaces have long featured in fiction both as metaphor and narrative device, representing both immovable barriers and traversable, liminal spaces. To my knowledge, there is no direct literary equivalent of the Mirror Staring Man, a modern, non-monstrous figure who displaces an existing reflection. However, together with the mirror-transgressing antics of Alice in *Alice Through the Looking Glass*³, the classical

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1 Niffenegger, Audrey, *The Time Traveller's Wife* (London: Vintage, 2005).

2 Martel, Yann, *Life of Pi – A Novel* (Edinburgh: Cannongate, 2003).

3 Carroll, Lewis, *Through the Looking Glass* (London; Penguin Popular Classics, 2007).

tale of Narcissus and the Witch-Queen's mirror gazing in *Snow White*⁴, I must also reference several mirror-narratives I discovered during the editing process. Carter's short story *Reflections*, featured in *Burning Your Boats*⁵ and China Miéville's novella *The Tain*⁶, were direct influences on my work as it was already at a late stage, but they gave me access to a new mirror-vocabulary.

The consciousness of the Mirror Staring Man, wilful, articulate, accustomed to power and deliberately (and proudly) isolated, is pulled into the tain (the silvered backing) of a mirror. It is a moment of weakness, when, in an effort to escape his self-made situation, he wills himself to detach from his body. He is then rendered (mostly) unable to interact with the physical world and attempts to control Eithe, whose own reflection he displaces. This demonstrates her loose and malleable sense of self, while providing an element of the fantastic, and also a narrative push, as his condition is slowly killing him.

In terms of geography and movement, Eithe and the Mirror Staring Man's location in a non-British setting provides a narrative function. In my critical essay, I referenced Althans, who stated: "...the term [magical realism] itself, as some critics claim, is grounded in a European perspective, hence assuming that magic, i.e., the irrational, by definition belongs to indigenous/non-European cultures, whereas rationality, and thus the only true reality, is European."⁷

By simultaneously siting the narrative in Britain and wider Europe while drawing in magical realist elements, I hoped to address this issue, as the point is valid. Moreover, I wished to address the fact Europe is not a homogenous mass. There are striking differences between the history and geography of the land mass, particularly the divide between east and west. My narrative, which spans the continent, alludes to this. However, although the text is concerned with European political and economic inequality, with Eithe openly criticising the Mirror Staring Man's role in fraud and the banking crisis, and references real-world riots, demonstrations and protests, it does not seek to mystify or "Other" Europe or its inhabitants. Rather than presenting the continent as a foreign space, I wanted to turn my central characters into foreigners. They are removed from safe zone of their language and geographically isolated. Thus, while the geographical space opens out, their social

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4 Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm. *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales* (UK: Wordsworth Library Collection, 2009).

5 Carter, Angela, *Burning Your Boats, Collected Short Stories* (London: Vintage, 1996).

6 Mieville, China, *The Tain* (Hornsea, Yorkshire: PS Publishing, 2002).

7 Althans, Katrin, *Darkness Subverted: Aboriginal Gothic in Black Australian Literature and Film* (Germany: Bonn University Press, 2010) pp 26.

world becomes increasingly claustrophobic, and they become correspondingly more dependent on each other. The narrative effect of movement-across-space is also alienating. By keeping the protagonists moving, all four fall into a state of mutual interdependence. Although Eithe attempts to form relationships with German, French and Macedonian nationals, she is thwarted by the need to keep moving. It is only when Eithe, at the end of the novel, voluntarily casts off her associations that the possibility of crossing cultural horizons becomes a reality. The narrative setting is also designed to prevent the reader becoming “settled” or complacent in terms of space and place.

Using a wider canvass allows distance and geography to become a direct analogy for character development. However, I wished to avoid pathetic fallacy. Rather than bending or re-interpreting geography to demonstrate human emotion, I wanted the geography to contrast or inform their state in a psychologically believable way. Thus, at a point of critical mental turbulence, Eithe floats on a tranquil lake. When she reaches the Aegean Sea, one of the boundaries of classical Europe, she decides to continue alone. The end of the novel and the continent acknowledges possibility of journeying beyond the text.

While the *Mirror Staring Man*'s magical realist nature allowed me to weave analogies about will and determinism, I became aware of a narrative imbalance. The trinity of principal characters, Joe, the *Mirror Staring Man* and Eithe threatened to conform to narrative clichés such as the love-triangle, and left me with one character whose actions were not questioned or contextualised. I believe the introduction of Gemma Imai gave more balance to the gender-split. Her function within the text as a shadowy double to the *Mirror Staring Man* allows the plot to take on a symmetry that is more than just gender tokenism or narrative convenience. Gemma acts as a sounding-board to Joe's increasingly irrational determinism. She provides a counterpoint to Eithe's weakness by appearing as an already-functioning adult female. She introduces the reader to the comatose *Mirror Staring Man* and influences Joe by wearing him down. She is also the only character capable of taking punitive actions against Joe, who would otherwise go unpunished. Cheerful, able and friendly, she is also designed to provide an element of levity, highlighting the inconsistencies and anxieties of the other characters and contrasting their differing but unhealthy mental states. She reacts to a similar quandary faced by the *Mirror Staring Man* in a radically different way.

While Joe's philosophy is based heavily on determinism, the *Mirror Staring Man*'s is based on self-determination. Eithe's philosophy is based on self-abnegation while Gemma

exhibits a balance of all three. She, of all the central characters, is the most centred and the least extreme, and therefore is the one character able to operate comfortably and effectively in ‘reality’. As a self-contained entity, she does not experience a character-arc. This reflects the idea that not all characters need to evolve or “fix” their broken selves; some can be well-adapted and effective - just as some “real world” people are well-adapted and effective without the need for epiphany or painful transition.

The Mirror Staring Man’s arc is one of social awareness rather than self-awareness. He accepts that not everyone can control what is done to them, but they can control what they do to others. I am aware this is a well-trodden path, tackled by authors as illustrious as Dickens (in *A Christmas Carol*)⁹ and populist writers like Nick Hornby (in *About a Boy*)¹⁰ and have attempted to examine the trope in a fresh way. Again, Joe’s final realisation that he has some control and Eithe’s eventual recognition of her autonomy are also nothing new in terms of self-actualising quest narratives – which is where magical realism plays a role in revivifying and freshening the tropes. I set the novel in the present day and employed modern communication such as email, smartphones and texting as I believe these new social paradigms must be incorporated into any text set in contemporary times that seeks to be meaningful. We cannot ignore the significance of new technology, so rather than attempting to use (even more) contrived circumstances to cut off communication and facilitate plot, I decided to employ an ambivalent approach to digital communication. While this technology allows convenient communication across the globe, it also opens up new territories in miscommunication and crime, particularly in the realms of cyber-bullying, impersonation, spying and information-sharing. Far from making contemporary plotting difficult or redundant, digital communication can be used to create greater tension within a narrative.

My novel is the product of a long evolution. In 2008 I began writing a short story, which inspired a flabby, episodic 140,000 word work. This was then substantially edited into a more direct and purposeful text. As I wrote it, I became increasingly aware I wanted to use magical realism to pick apart and criticise unsatisfactory elements of culture and history.

There are many parts of the world where oppressive societal structures still operate

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⁸ Dickens, Charles, *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Writings* (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 2003).

⁹ Hornby, Nick, *About a Boy* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2002).

in ways arguably more brutal and restrictive than in the west, but as I have not thoroughly researched these regimes or ever had personal experience of the depredations, I do not feel qualified to write about them.

However, the banking crisis, the expenses scandals, cuts, exploitation, fraud, corruption and the effects of these on wider society in Europe warrants discussion. As the novel is not located solely in Britain, it does not allow me the scope to examine the situation from every angle, social level, or over an extended timescale, but it is alluded to by most of the major characters and is a root cause of Joe's dissatisfaction, as well as the Mirror Staring Man's predicament. My text is not intended as a polemic, but it is designed to observe possible real-world implications of human despair and powerlessness in the face of world events, and ask questions about the culpability of powerful individuals for the fallout of their decisions. For instance, Eithe is the victim of domestic abuse while Joe's vulnerable mental state is compounded by feelings of helplessness and his redundancy. Since the advent of the global financial crisis, which began in 2007, agencies including Women's Aid and regional police forces have recorded a rise in reports of domestic abuse.¹⁰ Mental health advocacy groups and support organisations like The Samaritans have also reported an increase in male suicides between the ages of 30-40. According to the Office of National Statistics: "The UK suicide rate increased significantly between 2010 and 2011, from 11.1 to 11.8 deaths per 100,000 population".¹¹ This element of the novel is an attempt to reflect this issue on a human level.

I believe magical realism can discuss ideas in ways unavailable in realist texts, and I wished to exploit that. My decision to write with magical realist tropes is not simply based on aesthetics.

The novel and the essay informed each other. My decision to write a novel containing elements of magical realism informed my decision to write an essay on the subject. My reading of critical texts while I edited provided me with a richer awareness of the history and use of magical realism, as well as the ethical implications of travel writing, which I applied retrospectively. Magical realist authors provided me with a vital insight not only into the way the genre has shaped itself, but also what I, as a reader/writer,

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10 "Violence fears over credit crunch", BBC News Wales. (*BBC News Wales*. 25 November 2008. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/7745707.stm>>. Web, retrieved February 13 2013).

11 Office of National Statistics, 'Statistical bulletin: Suicides in the United Kingdom, 2011', (Suicides in the United Kingdom, 2011 <www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/subnational-health4/suicides-in-the-united-kingdom/2011/stb-suicide-bulletin.html>. Web, retrieved January 23 2013).

appreciated, valued or wished to discard. For instance, in an earlier chapter, I employed a similar, detailed and melodramatic language to Angela Carter in her more baroque works, but stripped this out as it threatened to become parody rather than symbolic. Similarly, the confused, bustling polyphonic prose of Gabriel García Márquez and Salman Rushdie, while impressive and certainly a feature of much magical realism, is not suitable for my streamlined and more linear work. Their texts are a tapestry of miracles and marvels, while mine is more of simple plait, a winding-through of one marvellous occurrence which runs through the more mundane reality. While I admire both writers' virtuosity and their ability to generate startling images, I again did not want to approach parody or pastiche in my writing, and therefore opted for a more measured approach.

By the close of the novel, certain narrative threads remain unravelled. The unnamed figures behind the fraud are not confronted. The problems highlighted in broad brushstrokes within the text are not addressed; the economy is not fixed, the inequalities between western and eastern Europe are not reconciled, while the ultimate fates of all four principal characters remain ambiguous. On a macro level, this is partially due to the brevity of the work and partly due to my reluctance to stray too far from the "real" aspects of magical realism (a "fix" happy ending would require an unreasonable suspension of disbelief). On a micro level, I did not, to paraphrase Armit, want to "finish" Eithe or "fix"¹² her, in either sense of the word. Broken people are not fixed; they find ways to live with their brokenness, some more effectively than others. Nor do people live in a "fixed" state – there is always the potential for change. By including completed arcs such as Romilly's familial dispute, Gemma's re-embodiment, the Mirror Staring Man's release and Eithe's self-actualisation, and leaving others open-yet-hopeful, such as Keane's revitalised interest in bringing the unnamed fraudsters to justice, I wished to present a text that offered narrative satisfaction without precluding the potential for a life beyond the story. It is possible to have resolution without an ending.

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12 Armit, Lucie, "Storytelling and Feminism", *Jeanette Winterson, a Contemporary Critical Guide*, ed. by Sonya Andermahr (London, Continuum, 2007. 14-26).

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