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**Letting the Winter In:  
Myth Revision and the Winter Solstice in Fantasy Fiction**

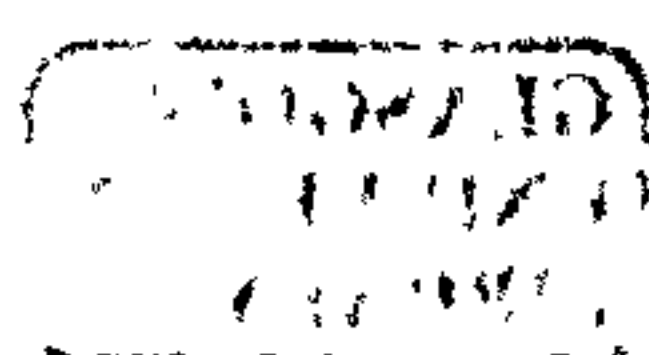
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***Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy***

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***Submitted October 2007***

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## Abstract

### Letting the Winter In: Myth-Revision and the Winter Solstice in Fantasy Fiction

This is a Creative Writing thesis, which incorporates both critical writing and my own novel, *Cold City*.

The thesis explores 'myth-revision' in selected works of Fantasy fiction. Myth-revision is defined as the retelling of traditional legends, folk-tales and other familiar stories in such a way as to change the story's implied ideology. (For example, Angela Carter's 'The Company of Wolves' revises 'Red Riding Hood' into a feminist tale of female sexuality and empowerment.) Myth-revision, the thesis argues, has become a significant trend in Fantasy fiction in the last three decades, and is notable in the works of Terry Pratchett, Neil Gaiman and Philip Pullman. Despite its incorporation of supernatural elements, myth-revision is an agnostic or even atheistic phenomenon, which takes power from deities and gives it to mortal humans instead. As such it represents a rebellion against the 'Founding Fathers' of Fantasy, writers such as Tolkien or CS Lewis, whose works stress the rightful superiority of divine figures. The thesis pays particular attention to how the myths surrounding the Winter Solstice are revised in this kind of fiction.

#### Part One

Part One consists of my novel *Cold City*, with appropriate annotations.

#### Part Two

**Chapter One** compares and contrasts Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* with CS Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*. It argues that Pullman's sequence of children's novels is an anti-Narnia, which revises CS Lewis's conservative Christian allegory into one supporting Pullman's secular humanist viewpoint.

**Chapter Two** explores myth-revision in Elizabeth Hand's novel of adult Fantasy, *Winterlong*. It examines how Hand 'revises' the Hellenic myth of the god Dionysos, especially as it is related in Euripides' tragedy *The Bacchae*. The chapter argues that by blending the Dionysos legends with those of Winter Solstice, Hand takes power from the god and places it into human hands, and revises a Greek tragedy into a story with a comedic ending.

**Chapter Three** examines the use of 'Ragnarok' – the ancient Norse myth of the end of the world – in *Cold City*. It discusses how, as in *Winterlong*, the beliefs of the Winter Solstice enable Ragnarok to be revised and the end of the world averted.

## Acknowledgements

With thanks to my supervisor Willy Maley, for years of support and guidance,

To Lesley Mount for the thoughts on wolves,

To Farah Mendlesohn for her sharp-eyed criticism of the *Winterlong* chapter,

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# Contents

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Part One: Cold City: a novel</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Prologue</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Slipping</b>	<b>11</b>
One	12
Two	22
Three	30
Four	38
Five	42
Six	50
<b>City of Wolves</b>	<b>58</b>
Seven	59
Eight	70
Nine	77
Ten	80
Eleven	85
Twelve	92
<b>The Harline Centre</b>	<b>110</b>
Thirteen	111
Fourteen	120
Fifteen	129
Sixteen	135
Seventeen	140
Eighteen	145
Nineteen	163
<b>The White Palace</b>	<b>172</b>
Twenty	173
Twenty-One	189
Twenty-Two	213
<b>Ragnarok</b>	<b>221</b>
Twenty-Three	222
Twenty-Four	259
<b>Epilogue</b>	<b>284</b>

<b>Part Two: Letting the Winter In: Myth Revision and the Winter Solstice in Fantasy Fiction</b>	<b>291</b>
<b>Abbreviations</b>	<b>292</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>294</b>
<b>1) Reversing the Myth: CS Lewis's <i>The Chronicles of Narnia</i> versus Philip Pullman's <i>His Dark Materials</i></b>	<b>305</b>
Absolute Rule: Images of God	308
The Devil's Party	315
Forbidden Fruit: Sex and Defiance in the Garden of Eden	320
Childhood and Adulthood	323
The Worlds of the Dead	328
In Conclusion	334
<b>2) Who Will Let the Winter In? Reinventing the Myth of Dionysos in Elizabeth Hand's <i>Winterlong</i></b>	<b>336</b>
Dionysos as 'Pharmakon'	338
Call Nothing Natural: Sex in <i>Winterlong</i>	340
Baal and Anat	343
Gender-Bending in <i>Winterlong</i>	344
Intoxication and Unreliable Narrators	346
Made in Our Image: Shaping the God	348
Who Will Let the Winter In? Death, Rebirth and the Winter Solstice	350
In Conclusion	356
<b>3) Revising Ragnarok: Rewriting Norse Myth in <i>Cold City</i></b>	<b>357</b>
The End of the World in Ice: Ragnarok, Nuclear Winter and the Apocalypse	358
Escaping to Hell: Madness & Unreliability	363
Is the Cold World real?	366
'Travelling to Narnia in your fucking sleep' : Transition Between Worlds	367
A Spell of Winter: Winter Magic and Writing <i>Cold City</i>	372
Letting the Winter In: the Winter Solstice in <i>Cold City</i>	376
In Conclusion	382
<b>Appendix: 'Ragnarok'</b>	<b>386</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>390</b>

## **Part One: *Cold City*: a novel**

That legend much discredited,  
of the following of the sledges,  
let us test it in the Cairngorms,  
in the winter playgrounds with their merry cries,  
in the white paths through the forest.  
It would be good to get not a few scalps  
to crawl with fear when they hear  
that eerie arctic song  
as one by one the muzzles  
lift and open in the dark,  
and the dark is long.

'Wolf'  
Edwin Morgan<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Morgan, p.83.

## Prologue

Axe-time, sword-time, shields are sundered,  
Wind-time, wolf-time, ere the world falls.

*The Poetic Edda*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 'Voluspo: the Wise-Woman's Prophecy'. Bellows, *The Poetic Edda*, p.20.

Two years ago my Dad died. Jamie was in bits about it. He was only twenty-two. Mum, less understandably, was in a worse state than Jamie. Some guilt thing, probably.

I dealt with all the practicalities. I seemed to be coping well.

Then, three weeks after his funeral, I saw my Dad walking along the pedestrian precinct on Argyle Street. It was a Saturday, so the place was mobbed; but it was him all right. He had his back to me, but then he glanced to one side and I saw his profile. I'd have known him anywhere.

As soon as I recognised him, I felt something tear inside me. It was quite a gentle sensation, as if a membrane had been punctured but was still holding. I stopped walking and watched my Dad. He was heading for a tall building at the end of the pedestrian precinct – a tower of clean blonde sandstone. There is, of course, no sandstone tower on Argyle Street.

I thought, matter-of-factly: *I'm looking into a different world.*

Then a huge man loomed up and bumped into me. By the time he was out of the way my Dad and the new building were both gone.

Calmly, I caught the underground to my GP's surgery. Then I sat in the packed waiting room and cried, until the doctor saw me. She was kind; we talked about stress and grief and coping. She gave me a sick line and a prescription. I went home, and didn't leave my flat for the next fortnight.

It didn't happen again. I thought I didn't have to worry any more.

But that's not true.

Ever since Lewis left, I've been feeling cold. Not chilly, not draughty: *cold*. Like the door's blown open in an Arctic wind. No-one else ever feels it.

Lately, it's begun to happen when I'm falling asleep. I jerk awake – I can't let myself sink into that kind of cold, I won't survive! That's been going on for months.

But it's only now – sitting at my desk, the fax burbling behind me – that I understand how bad this is. Someone is clattering up a ladder before me – Christmas garlands waft down to the floor. Someone else is saying *a day late, it's bad luck!* I can't remember who these people are.

I am looking out of the window, which only moments ago was streaming with rain. Now it's piled high with snow. Only the top pane is clear; but I can see that the blizzard is still coming down. It's a whiteout.

The membrane inside me rips open, like burnt but still-living skin, from top to bottom. And I know that something, now, is going to come through.





## Part One

### *Slipping*

Freezing dusk is closing  
Like a slow trap of steel  
On trees and roads and hills and all  
That can no longer feel.

...

Moonlight freezes the shaggy world  
Like a mammoth of ice -  
The past and the future  
Are the jaws of a steel vice.

'The Warm and the Cold'  
Ted Hughes<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> 'Ted Hughes', Poetry Connection.

## One

I'm wringing wet by the time I get to Bowies. The rain is still bouncing off the pavements, and of course I left my umbrella behind with my coat. My long skirt is plastered against my skin. My office shoes are waterlogged. I always change before I come to Bowies, but tonight I haven't. I should be freezing, but I'm not. I push through the heavy doors.

The lobby has changed from black to white and gold. The walls have been panelled with ivory and swathed with white netting. The nets have scooped up dozens of fake gold rings, glass tiaras, paper flowers and hearts. On the side wall is a DV panel, an animate, showing firstly two men in tuxedos; then there's the top-to-toe ripple, and then the same couple naked but for top hats over their cocks. The pink bust of Mozart has vanished from its podium, and been replaced by a shiny plastic wedding cake topped with two miniature grooms. The lobby is stuffy, and smells of dope and cigarettes. Downstairs the music pounds.

It's too bright. I stand there blinking, until something dunts into my back. I try to step back out of the way, and tread on a foot. Even so a voice murmurs 'sorry', and two bodies ease past me. The two young guys in cropped jackets glance over their shoulders, one with a polite half-smile for the soaking freak who just trod on him, and turn quickly away to the cash desk.

I hear voices and laughter, the discreet beeping of the creditor. I'm not listening to any of it; I'm staring at the white netting, how it loops and drapes across the creamy background, and I can't figure it out at all. A voice is saying, 'Hi? Hello?' and I'm thinking: fishing nets? Then it comes to me: 'Bride's veils', I say.

'Sorry?'

I look round. The two young guys are gone, and the guy at the desk is staring at me. I point at the walls. 'They're bride's veils.'

'That's right.' He is staring all the harder now. 'Is it just yourself?'

'What?'

'Are you by yourself?' His voice is loud and careful.

'Oh, yes, sorry.' I'm wasting his time. 'Yes, just the one please.'

'You know it's mostly guys tonight?'

'Yes, I know.'

He shrugs: he thinks I'm an idiot. I step up meekly to the desk, press my thumb to the two-inch screen on the creditor. He watches me warily the whole time, but when the beep comes he nods. 'That's you now, Ms...' He glances down at his monitor, and smiles. 'Pherson? You Jamie Pherson's sister?'

I nod. My stomach suddenly knots: 'He is in tonight, isn't he?'

'Aye, he's down there.' The smile broadening, he nods towards the basement steps. 'Tell him Jake says hi, yeah?'

'Sure.' I head for the stairs, towards the pulsing beat. I know the way, but I still place my feet on the running lights sunk into the floor. How stupid, I think, but it makes no difference. Stepping carefully on each strip of electric blue, and trailing my hand down the already sticky chrome banister, I head down into the silvery flashing light. A horde of guys are heading up, just dark shuffling bodies and blue-white faces. The faces turn to me, floating moons, cool and curious. One says 'Hi!' so I suppose I must know him. No doubt he'll tell the others, *Jamie's big sister. Real fag-hag. No life of her own...* I keep walking down.

Once, when I'd lost my phone and was retracing the previous night's steps, I saw Bowies in the daytime. It was a small, shabby basement. The light was nicotine-yellow. The walls were painted black. It smelled of stale sweat, stale alcohol and stale puke. The walls were close and the ceiling was low. I left quickly.

But now, of course, it's vast. The dancefloor is a heaving mass swept by spotlights. Beyond the floor there are no walls, just a fading into darkness. As I step round the corner the beat resolves itself into a tune. It's a fusion mix of 'Get Me to the Church On Time'; over the superfast salsa a Cockney voice squawks *Get me to the church! Get me to the church!* again and again. It's silly, and the dancers are laughing, though you can't hear them. White teeth shine. I can see now why the light is silver: the giant screen is showing black-and-white. Cary Grant, in a grey morning-suit, is marrying Clark Gable in a black tux. They kiss before the altar; the guests cheer and throw confetti. Clark and Cary melt, seamlessly, into Kevin Costner in silver-grey buckskins (wasn't that movie in colour?) snogging Christian Slater in a flowered headdress. Then a young Brad Pitt and Taylor Greene, beneath the desert sun. Then Kermit the Frog in a veil, kissing the Great Gonzo. The laughter is audible now.

I step down onto the dancefloor.

Mistake. A forest of bobbing heads all around me. Some of them have something white and triangular on their heads. Bodies bumping and crushing, elbows in my ribs and heavy boots on my toes. Smooth male faces glancing down, always down, and looking away. There's no air. I start to push through them, towards the quiet zone. I can't get them



to move. Suddenly I imagine them panicking, running from a fire, trampling me down. I start barging, shoving against sweaty arms and muscled backs. A DM connects with my shin, perhaps on purpose, and for a moment I'm going to fall. But I don't. I get to the edge of the floor and up the three steps into the quiet zone.

As soon as I pass under the ceiling mufflers I can hear my breathing. I'm gasping like I've been running uphill. The alcove is lined with couches like big pouty lips; the light is brighter here, so you can almost see the stains on the red velvet. A couple are already sitting on one of the couches, or rather one's on the couch and the other one's sitting on his partner; they're both fully dressed but there's a fair bit of rubbing and moaning going on. Normally I'd take the hint and fuck off, but tonight I just sit as far away from them as possible. I'm not going out there again.

I scan the crowd in front of me. It's useless – any one of those spiky-haired heads could be Jamie. The music changes to something much different, New Primal I think, a slower beat but much heavier. The screen shifts to colour, to writhing flesh tones. It's New Primal all right, and it's *that* video. I watch them, the young Indian singer pressed between the ebony Zulu man and the albino woman. The woman turns to the camera, stretching up to show pallid nipples and white underarm hair. Her pink eyes look blank, traumatised. I recall I used to like this video. But now the three of them look like a knot of snakes. In time with the beat, an ache starts to pulse behind my eyes.

The couple on the other couch disentangle themselves and head off, hand-in-hand, shooting me disapproving looks. I avoid their eyes. I'm going to sit here for a while. My soaking skirt is lukewarm, not uncomfortable so long as I don't move. I can close my eyes.

But now there's someone waving and climbing out of the dancefloor towards me. Someone who seems to be dressed in black liquid. Someone crowned in a white triangle. I blink rapidly a few times, but I don't recognise Carl until he flings himself down beside me. 'How're you doing, hen?'

I nod, wondering bemusedly what's different about him. Dark eyes. Healthy tan from Christmas in Florida. Lantern jaw that's never going to look boyish no matter what he does. Wet-look black vest that I always tell him looks tacky, to which he smugly retorts that he's never had any complaints. Glossy black hair, topped by a cardboard triangle trailing white ribbons... 'Carl,' I say, 'what the fuck have you got on your head?'

'Oh, this?' He pulls it off and gives it to me. 'They're giving them out. It's a wedding thingmy, what d'you call them?'

'Tiara?' Sure enough, there's a pattern of pearls stencilled on the cardboard, and the ribbons are fine white netting.

'That's the one. Here, try it.' He leans over to put it on my head, steadying himself with a hand on my knee, then recoiling in surprise. 'Christ, Sue, you're soaking!'

'It's raining out there. No,' I bat the cardboard tiara aside, 'I don't want it.'

I spoke sharply, but he doesn't seem to notice. 'Suit yourself.' The music has changed again, to Iggy Pop. The screen's showing a very young Ewan McGregor running up Edinburgh High Street. Carl laughs, but he's ignoring the screen and looking at the dancefloor. 'Look at him go,' he says.

I follow his eyes, and there's Jamie. He's jumping up and down in the crush, grinning like a fool. He's wearing jeans and a plain T-shirt. He's surrounded by guys in designer gear and skimpy vests and make-up, and they can't look at anyone but him. One of them's putting a wedding tiara on his head; he knocks it away, he hates any kind of drag. Another guy's tapping him on the shoulder, pointing up at Ewan McGregor and back at Jamie; we can't hear him but it's obviously, *You look just like him!* That's not going to get the poor bastard anywhere; Jamie's been combing men out of his fashionable buzz-cut ever since he came out, and he hears the Ewan McGregor line every other night of the week. Carl laughs again. I say, 'I don't know where he gets the energy.'

'He's fizzed to the tits,' Carl says, but he's still smiling. He lifts an arm and waves, pointing downwards at me. Jamie spots me, and starts pushing through the mass, smiling and waving. I watch him, my baby brother, and suddenly I'm about to cry. I wait, but by the time Jamie's bounding up the steps, the feeling has passed.

'Suze!' I'm wrapped in a sweaty hug. I cling on to him a little too long. Usually, he would notice – but when he pulls away I see that his pupils are tiny dots. He slides onto the couch, so he's sandwiched between me and Carl. 'Suze-Sue! I didn't know you were coming tonight!'

'I just thought I'd come by,' I say.

'S'great, that's great...' He looks down at where his denimed thigh presses against my skirt, and looks almost comically puzzled. 'You're all wet.'

The crying feeling again. 'I got caught in the rain, Jamie. I, I walked home from work.'

'How come?'

Carl chimes in, 'Did you have a bad day?'

'I walked out,' I say. I don't think they catch it, and Jamie is busy anyway, rummaging through his pockets. 'Here,' he's saying, 'I know what'll cheer you up. Ah shit...' He leans away from me, presses his face into Carl's neck and says in a stage whisper, 'Got any more Sherbet?'



'You've had it all, you greedy fuck.' Carl is stroking his short brown hair. Jamie settles back against his hand. 'Sorry, it's away,' he says to me. He puts an arm around me and pulls me against him. He is very warm. We all sit like that, just for a moment.

But Jamie's restless. He sees the cardboard tiara lying beside me, and snatches it up. 'Isn't it great, Suzey?'

'What is?'

'I can get married. We can get married. You knew that didn't you, Suze?'

Carl interrupts, 'She was there when Stonewall rang. God, you're out of it, aren't you?' He's still smiling. I look over at him; Carl's eyes are almost black, so it's only now I notice that his pupils are almost as tiny as Jamie's.

Jamie's nodding. 'Oh yeah, so she was. So we can get married. Eh? We don't have to go to California or Wales or anywhere fuckin weird. We can walk into the marriage rooms at Park Circus and say, We want to get married. None of this partnership crap. Get us married right fuckin now. And they'll need to do it.'

'Katie would be spitting teeth,' I say. I don't know why I said it. It really was mean. There's a moment's silence; but then Carl laughs. 'Can I tell her?'

Jamie chimes in, 'Can I tell her mum?' They both howl with laughter. I try to join in. Then Jamie twists around suddenly, plops the cardboard tiara on Carl's head. 'What do you think?'

'It's not my colour,' Carl says. But he's looking right into Jamie's eyes, suddenly very serious.

'I mean it.' Jamie is serious now too. 'What about it?'

'You know what I think,' Carl says. I realise this is an old conversation, one that's been running awhile, and I never had a clue it existed. I realise I should be a long way away at this moment.

'I think the same,' Jamie says. Slowly and carefully, he takes his partner's hand and looks into his eyes. 'Will you marry me?'

'Yes,' Carl says. 'I will.'

Within minutes the whole room knows. Gay clubs have the privacy of a beehive. Someone on the dancefloor spots the jubilation going on in the quiet zone; he approaches, the news is blurted out, and next thing we know the DJ's made an announcement.

In the chaos that breaks out, I am glad. Jamie and Carl are surrounded by the congratulation and envy they deserve. I am glad, I'm truly glad; Carl will take care of Jamie now, better than I can, or than I ever have. He doesn't need me now. Amidst all the hugging and kissing and crying I could cry a little too, but I don't.

The DJ puts on 'Going to the Chapel of Love'. With a happy yell, the whole place rushes to the dancefloor. And suddenly, for me it's too much. It's too loud, too airless. I go looking for Carl and Jamie.

They're on the dancefloor, right in the middle, wrapped around each other. I watch for a moment. I want to go to them and say, *I'm sick, please, take me home with you, let me stay, don't leave me alone...* But of course I can't. I can't even catch Jamie's eye, and that's only right and proper.

So I head for the stairs. I'll just slip away, I think. I begin placing my feet on the lights on the floor, blocking them out, one by one.

As I let myself in I hear a murmur of voices. I think: there's someone in my flat. I stand, still clutching the key in the lock, and for a moment I feel

*- something trying to get through something cold something -*

dizzy. But that's the draught, I tell myself, the draught from the close behind me.<sup>4</sup>

And the voices are from the TV. I let the door slam and wander into the kitchen-living room.

It's chilly, and it stinks of rubbish. I switch on the central heating, think briefly about emptying the bin, and then flop onto the couch. I kick off my wet shoes; and that's all the movement I seem able to make. Rainwater is actually running from my hair, seeping from my clothes into the tan-linen upholstery – I should do something about it, but then who cares? It's not my couch. I stare at the TV instead.

It's *Newsweek* – people in dark suits quarrelling across a black glass table. Matthew McLean is shouting down the rest: '*... a sacrament between a man and a woman, Sonia. It's right there in black and white. You can't pick and choose which Bible texts you...*' Sonia McCall is looking at him with distaste, but he still gets to rattle on.

My eye is caught by the scratch at the top of the four-by-three screen. Fuck it, the TV isn't mine either. Nor are the brown-and-white walls. The whole ugly place was rented as a stopgap after I split up with Lewis. Two years later I'm still here.

Not for much longer, though. I press the Mute button and the people on the screen jabber and point silently. No, not for much longer, because without a salary I won't be paying the rent. And then what – Mum? She won't like that. Jamie and Carl? – just married and big sister's crashing in the spare room? Don't think so.

---

<sup>4</sup> A glimpse of the Cold world: the broken syntax and structure belongs to both Fantasy and the literature of mental illness. See Part Two, Chapter Three, 'Escaping to Hell'.



I sit and listen to the rain spattering against the window. My heart is hammering. My stomach knots. Outside, a woman's voice shrieks in protest. I can't make out what she says.

The clock says 11.13. I decide: I am going to get some sleep. I stand up and start peeling off my sopping clothes – I should hang them up, but I just chuck them away from me, so they go splat on the kitchen lino. I shuffle through to the bedroom, look in the drawers, look in the overflowing wash basket and pull out a huge pair of pyjamas. I pull them on, and, because I'm not paying attention, catch an accidental glimpse of myself in the full-length mirror.

I look nasty. My hair hangs in long wet straggles. My face is pasty, pulled into a tight-lipped frown, although I don't feel like I'm frowning. My body is hunched; my hands are clasped together, arthritically. I don't look into my own eyes.

Hell with it. I sit on the edge of the bed, pull the big white chemist's bag out of the bedside drawer and tip my little pharmacopoeia onto the duvet. I locate the pack of yellow sleeping-pills and pop out two. It says only one, but what the fuck. The anti-depressant pack rattles accusingly – did I forget it again this morning? I add it to the pile, knock the whole lot back. I think of going to get some water, but I just crawl between the sweaty sheets and switch out the light. The glowing bedside numbers say 11.30.

I lie there, and my heart is still hammering, so hard I can hear it. Strips of streetlight lie across the bed. I can still hear the rain. It's only rain, it's not snow. It's all right. I can sleep.

At 11.34 I switch on the light, get up and blow-dry my hair. Without any conditioner it crackles, and starts to smell scorched. I switch off the noisy dryer; my next-door neighbour is thumping on the wall. I go back to bed and switch off the light.

At 11.44 I switch on the light, get up and go to the kitchen. I take a carton of milk from the fridge, sniff it, take a drink. I leave the carton on the worktop, go back to bed. Take another pill, just a relaxant, not one of the biggies. Switch off the light.

At 11.57 I roll onto my back, and start taking slow, deliberate breaths. The counsellor told me this is how to relax. Breathe in... breathe out. My heartbeat doesn't change.

I will sleep. I haven't slept right through for weeks. But tonight's the night. It must be – I'm shattered.

Maybe this is it. Drifting. Yes. Sleep. At last –

*- cold it's cold it's -*

Falling. It's dark. I'm freezing. Not chilly, not goosebumps. Freezing. Arctic.

I won't survive.

I start awake. I used to sit bolt upright, but I'm too tired now. My hand claws for the lamp – yellow light.

It's 12.30.

Can't survive the cold – but I realise now, I can't survive like this either. My heart will seize up. Miserable tears begin to trickle down my face. My heart's like something alive, trying to get out. It will burst.

Fumbling in the dark, into the paper bag. A blister pack – almost empty. Find a fresh one. Big pills, good. Press out a handful. Cram them in, swallow.

Turn my back on the clock. Curl up tight. Tears run over the bridge of my nose, join with others. Pillow actually soaked.

Oh please, sweet Jesus, let me sleep, just for once. I don't care anymore. Please God. Just sleep.

And then... the heart begins to slow. Quietening. Oh thank you. I'm sinking into the mattress.

Oh God thank you.

Oh God thank

'Oh shit, Suzey!'

Light. Hurts. Cheek on damp pillow.

Voice loud too close. 'Carl, Carl, oh fuck, get in here!'

Open eyes, just a bit. Jamie, white face looming over me. Shut up, Jamie.

Another voice: quieter, thank God. Calm. It's Carl. 'Go and call an ambulance.'

'Oh Christ, she's not –'

'She's not, she's breathing. Go and call nine nine nine.'

Carl's face, huge. Voice, too loud: 'Suzey? It's okay. You're okay. Stay awake with me, okay?'

Jamie, far away, yelling something. Carl says 'Back in a minute' and then he's gone.

Good. Close eyes. Back to sleep. Back to

'HELLO! HELLO! What's her first name, son? SUSAN! CAN YE HEAR ME!  
SUSAN!'

A man's voice. So loud it hurts. 'Leave me be,' I say.

'WHEN DID YE TAKE THEM! SUSAN! HOW LONG'S IT SINCE YE TOOK THEM?'

I'm awake now. Moving bodies. Clattering metal. Whisking of nylon on nylon. Open my eyes a bit further – eye-watering green. Huge bearded face. 'WHEN DID YE TAKE THEM, SUSAN? DO YE KNOW?'

I should know this... but it's gone. 'Don't know...'

'Give her it anyway. Stand back there, son. Two – three – ' Cold hands are under me. Before I can even protest, I'm lifted, swung, dumped onto something padded. I'm wheeling rapidly through my flat. Something's in my mouth, hard plastic between my teeth, and cold liquid squirts down my throat.

I swallow, and immediately I'm throwing up. I can't control it. The rest of my body could be dead and my stomach would still be cramping. There's a plastic tub under my mouth – I see bright yellow stuff, smell it, and I'm retching again.

We trundle out into the close. I've never felt so terrible. 'Jamie,' I'm howling, 'Jamie!'

'I'm here.' But I'm hoisted in the air, and he's whisked away. Some detached part of me is impressed; these paramedic guys, they're speedy all right. We're down the stairs, past opening doors and staring neighbours, then out to rain and wind, then bumping into light and warmth again. Then slam, and revving engines, and we're off.

Sirens begin to shriek overhead. Someone takes the plastic tub away, and I get a mouthful of clean air. But then the man's voice says 'Check airways' and gloved fingers are thrusting into my mouth. Of course, I start to puke again. 'Jamie,' I wail.

'I'm here.' He's sitting opposite. His face is grey. 'You're going to be okay –'

'Make them leave me alone, Jamie –'

'It's okay, it's okay.'

'It's not fucking okay.' The bearded face is looming towards me again, and I scream 'Fuck off!'

'She's conscious.' The ambulance stops jouncing and the doors are flung open. Good, I'm conscious so they're letting me off. But outside hands are reaching and I'm out into the chilly wind

*- something it's dark and I'm cold and it's soft and something –*

and then into warmth and bright light. I'm on a trolley. I'm bowling along, fluorescent lights flashing past. Then I'm stopped – curtains are swishing around me.

Faces peer down. One of them is Beardie. '...ten cc's. Think we got most of it out.'

'Fucking turned my stomach out,' I say. Laughter. Beardie goes. Middle-aged female face close to mine. 'Okay, Susan, we

*- dark cold dark cold dark cold dark -*

*Still dark. Still cold. On my back. Streetlight slanting across the bed. Movement beside me.*



*'Oh shit, Suzey!' Jamie. Light. Hurts. I'm in my own bed. Pillow sticky and dry. Susan? Still with us?' Light. Female face. Stethoscope dangling. 'Keep your eyes open, pet. Louise, is that the - Susan, can you look at me?'*

*Obediently I look  
- cold dark cold -*

*'Somebody help me!' Jamie. Arms under my knees and my shoulders: carrying me. I'm being bounced around, I can't move.*

*I open my eyes to the close walls. It's very cold. Jamie's voice is raw and hoarse. 'Can somebody fucking help me!'*

*into this light? Can you look? Susan?' Warm. Pinpoint of light.*

*I try hard to look. This time I feel it happen. A sinking, not painful. I hear someone say, she's going, as the chill seeps in –*

*Streetlamps. I'm outside. Warm arms still around me. In the distance, a siren wailing. I am eased down into absolute cold.*

*I open my eyes properly. I'm lying in snow. Icy needles prick my face – I realise tiny flakes are landing there. I'm lying in a deep bed of powdery snow. It hurts. The cold hurts.*

*Then I'm hoisted just above the snow, and supported on someone's knees. Arms pull me against a warm body. My face presses against something nylon: a coat.*

*Jamie's face hangs over mine. He has long hair. It straggles over his face, like mine does. He is crying. 'Suzey, oh God, Suzey, please, wake up!'*

*I realise he has carried me down the stairs. All alone. Where's Carl – gone for the ambulance? The siren is still very distant.*

*Sobs shake his body and mine. There are streaks of ice, like snail's trails, down his cheeks. His tears have frozen. 'Stay with me, Suzey. Don't leave me. Don't leave me –'*

*'I'm sorry, Jamie,' I say. I spoke loudly, but he has to put his ear to my mouth. 'I'm sorry –'*

*And then I'm falling. A cry from Jamie, and he's gone.*

*Darkness. Cold that numbs and turns you to nothing.*

*There is still sound. The howling of wolves. A shrieking wind.*

*And a voice. Raj Chaudhury's voice, saying: 'The end of the world. Ragnarok. The end of the world.'*

*And then, nothing.*



## Two

The ice-cream van is coming up the drive. We can hear it through the pine trees. It can probably be heard in the village, jingling 'Waltzing Mathilda' like the loudest music box in the world, terrifying the sheep in the fields that surround the hospital.

As usual, it causes a stir in the common-room. It's the most exciting thing that happens all day, apart from visiting-hour, and visiting-hour can be something of a mixed blessing. But no-one ever comes away in tears from an encounter with a Bounty, not unless they're here for an eating disorder. People are standing, rummaging in pockets and looping handbags over their arms, heading for the door with something like enthusiasm. The dressed people are, anyway. Us dressing-gowns watch enviously, those of us not goggling at 'Neighbours' or staring at the walls.

I half-turn in my chair so I can look out of the window. The glass is white and opaque. I wipe it with my hand – the condensation is cold, so I use my terrycloth sleeve instead. Through the clear space I see the ice-cream van bounce over the speed-bump into the carpark. A crowd has already formed in the doorway. As the van comes to a stop and the jingle is choked off, the crowd surges forward like refugees going for the food-truck, then remembers itself and forms a straggling queue. Suddenly a woman in a pink dressing-gown emerges from the hospital doorway and trots briskly towards the front of the line. A nurse leaves the queue, waving at her pal to keep her place; she catches the woman's arm and steers her back inside.

'Nice try,' I mumble. I sympathise, and not just because I want some chocolate. I know it's cold out there – I can see feet stamping, arms wrapped around chests – but the winter sun is bright and the ground-frost is sparkling. It's the outside world. I turn to the only person in the room who's fully dressed. 'Sharon,' I say, 'I want my clothes.'

Nurse Bailey keeps her eyes on the telly. She's always in the common-room after lunchtime; she's a daytime TV addict. 'When Doctor says you can have them, Suzey,' she says.

I watch her. She is small and slight, pale in her white uniform. Last week I saw her face down a huge angry bruiser of a woman, who was screaming about God-knows-what; Sharon didn't move a muscle. I know she's not going to give way to me, but still I say: 'When's *that* going to be?'

'I don't know.'

I turn away and stare out of the window. I feel like I've been sitting here in my nightie my whole fucking life. I don't say or do anything, but suddenly Sharon's talking to me again. 'Who's your doctor, Suzey?'

'Dr Martin.'

'When are you seeing her next?'

'Today.' I turn to look at the telly, where identical blonde teenagers are shopping for vests. 'Not till three.'

'Why don't you go along and wait outside? She might see you early.'

I snort: I've waited in that corridor before. 'Only if the guy before me's died.'

Sharon's looking at me earnestly. 'Nobody dies in here, Suzey.'

Oh for God's sake. I stand up. 'I'll go and wait.'

Dr Martin always sits with her back to the window. When you're in the chair before her desk, you have to squint to look at her. Not that she makes much eye contact anyway. She's a broad woman, fifty-ish, with grey bobbed hair that swings in front of her face when she leans over to write. She writes a lot, especially when you're talking. She spent all my first session flicking through a prescription drugs handbook, before finally writing a script and sticking it in my file. She says very little.

I settle down in front of her, smoothing my nightshirt over my knees, and trying to tuck my bare ankles behind the folds of my bath-robe (Dr Martin's office is draughty). Right, I think, this time I'm really going to tell her how I feel. At the moment she's flicking through the pages of my file; before I can speak she says, 'How are you getting along on the Prozac?'

I'm not feeling one bit different. 'All right, I suppose...' She nods and writes: I think, is that it? 'I don't – feel any better.'

'It's only been a week.' Scribble, scribble. 'Are you sleeping any better?'

'Yes.' At least there's that – after my nightly horse-tablet, I don't know a thing until lights-on at half six. 'Yes, a lot better.'

'Any waking?'

'No. It's great, it's really great to sleep again...'

She's flicking through the file. 'Good. We'll look at taking you off the sleeping-pill then.'

I don't believe I'm hearing this. 'But then I won't sleep anymore.'

'The sleeping-pill isn't designed as a long-term option. As the Prozac starts to work you'll feel a sedative effect - '

I'm getting panicky. 'But I'm not feeling it. I'm not feeling anything!'

She looks at me for a moment. 'All right. We'll keep the sleeping pills in place for a while longer. Now...' she flips back through the notes again, '... can you tell me about the day you took the overdose? You were at work for part of the day, weren't you?'

'That's right. I – left early.'

'Why is that?'

I stare at the surface of her desk. 'I don't know. I just wanted to get out.'

Long silence. 'Do you like your job?'

'It's okay. It's a job. You know,' I laugh, 'it's inside. No heavy lifting...'

I am horrified, because tears have started to leak from my eyes. I grab a tissue from the box on the desk, and dab them away. After another, even longer silence, Dr Martin says: 'You said you went to visit someone that day? Your – ' rustle of notes ' – your brother?'

I shake my head. 'His boyfriend. He works in the same building as me. But he wasn't in.'

'So what did you do?'

'It's not really important.'

'Please tell me anyway.'

So I tell her...

Earth Sciences is on the top floor of the University.

There is a lift, a rickety metal cage; you can see out on every side, and through the floor down into the drop. Lately, I've been taking the stairs.

I'm gasping by the time I reach Carl's office. He isn't there. I stand for a moment, not knowing what to do.

After a while I think to try the Department Office. This room is empty too, and the monitor is switched off; the secretary must have gone for lunch. I stop for a moment to get my breathing under control, and to look around.

I like this room. It catches the sun; it's still bright at the moment, in spite of the rain pattering against the windows. The windows themselves are small, but you can see half of Glasgow spread out below: the red and blonde sandstone, the grey concrete office blocks, the dull glint of the river. It's like being in a tower.



The room is pleasingly cluttered. The walls are covered with posters of the Wild Wolf Program, the Department's pride and joy. There is a gorgeous – and by now quite famous – colour print of the Monument at Glencoe, with a grey wolf peering around it at the camera. Then there are a mass of maps and Greenpeace brochures, all the way around the office.

Except for the right-hand wall. I actually jump, as if someone previously unseen is standing there. There is a large painting there, new, and unlike anything else on the wall.

Most of the canvas is black. In the centre is a bright circle, yellow-white. The sun, I realise: a winter sun. The sun is surrounded by black cloud. Here and there are hints of pale grey sky, but you know the cloud is closing in on them fast. The cloud almost moves.

I walk over to the painting. With every step it becomes more diffuse. When I am right in front of it, the picture has dispersed; the sun is swirls of ivory, and the cloud is a mass of tiny black dots. Pointillism – that's the word, I think. The canvas is set in a narrow frame of pale smooth wood. A word is stencilled on the frame: *Ragnarok*.

I step back from the painting; the sun and the cloud begin to reform. I go to the very centre of the room, close my eyes for a moment and look again.

I see it now. The black cloud has formed into the head of a wolf. The wolf's jaws hold the sun, like a ball. It is about to bite down.<sup>5</sup>

I don't know how long I stand there. But I jump when the office door creaks open. A man comes in. I know everyone in this Department, but I've never seen this man before in my life.

He's tall and skinny, the type who can never get trousers that reach past his ankles. He is Indian or Pakistani. About forty. Black hair, shot through with white. His skin is quite pale, though that might just be the grey rainy light. His face is angular and unsmiling. His eyes are huge. I'm reminded of an eagle. He is staring at me. 'Can I help you?'

An English accent: quite pukka. Finally my brain kicks into gear – a visiting lecturer. I heard the girls talking about him. Some of them think he's sexy. 'I'm just looking at the picture,' I say.

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<sup>5</sup> Then the children of the old giantess in Iron Wood will have their say: the wolf Skoll will seize the sun between his jaws and swallow her -- he will spatter Asgard with gore; and his brother Hati will catch the moon and mangle him.

'Ragnarok', Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Penguin Book of Norse Myths* (p.173)

A giant wolf swallowing the sun is the first major event of Ragnarok, the end of the world. The wolf in Raj's picture takes the form of a cloud; Ragnarok and nuclear winter (in which thick clouds will block out the sun) are one and the same to Raj.

Note: there are three giant wolves in the Ragnarok myth: Skoll who swallows the sun, Hati who swallows the moon, and Fenris (or Fenrir) who burns the earth and kills Odin. For the sake of convenience, I have conflated the three, and *Cold City's* 'Great Wolf' is always Fenris. One planet-sized wolf is quite enough for any novel.

'Ah.' He smiles, a crooked little smile. 'What do you think of it?'

I look at the painting. The mouth, about to close. 'It's horrible.'

'Oh. Oh. Do you really think so?'

Something, finally, is getting through to me. 'Who... I mean...' Oh shit. 'You didn't paint it, did you?'

'Actually I did. And thank you.'

'What?'

'It is horrible. You're right. It's meant to be horrible. It's the end of the world.' He smiles again, more broadly. 'Raj Chaudhury.'

'Sorry?'

'That's me.' He's holding out his hand. 'I'm Raj Chaudhury.'

'Oh! Oh. Suzey Pherson.' We shake. 'I work downstairs...'

I can't help it; I'm still staring at the painting. 'Ragnarok. Is that - ?'

After a moment he says, 'It's an ancient myth. The Vikings believed that the world would end with a great winter. Then the gods would die, and a great wolf would swallow up the sun. Then all life would end.'<sup>6</sup>

Any minute now, it could move. Any minute. I hear him say softly, 'Suzey, are you all right?'

I look up at him, and realise I'm still gripping his hand. Then there's a movement, in the corner of my eye. It's moving. It's biting down.

'I have to go,' I say. I pull away and bolt for the door. He says something, but I can't stop. I scramble out into the corridor. I don't look back.

Dr Martin is scribbling like a fury. I'm thinking, what the hell did I tell her that for? I can't read upside down, but I can just imagine; *paranoid, hallucinating, thinks a giant wolf's going to munch up the world like a chew-toy...* I'm going to be here till I'm drawing my pension. 'It was just a painting,' I say lamely.

Dr Martin looks up as if she's surprised I'm still here. 'Would you like your clothes back?'

'What – oh, yes. That would be great.'

I half-expect her to say *Well you can't have them! Hahahaha!!* but she nods. 'I'll tell the nurses to get them tomorrow. Now – ' - glance at the watch - 'I'm seeing you again in two days, aren't I?'

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix, 'Ragnarok'.

In another minute I'm out in the corridor again. I hold Dr Martin's door open for a plump girl in a blue velour bathrobe, who mutters 'here goes nothing' and then pulls the door shut behind her. I stand there, looking up and down the white and mint-blue corridor, wondering how the hell I'm ever going to say what I really mean to that woman.

There's nothing else to do, so I wander back to the common-room, where it's nearly time for *Trisha*.

I meet the plump girl later, in the drugs queue. 'You getting your clothes back soon?' she asks.

'Tomorrow.'

'You're lucky.' She pulls her bathrobe tighter around her as we shuffle forward a little further. We were slow off the mark this evening – even the geriatrics are ahead of us. The girl is winding a strand of bottle-red hair around her finger. 'I'm Shaz, by the way,' she says.

'Hi.' At visiting time I overheard Shaz's Burberry-clad parents addressing her as 'Sian', but I don't comment. 'I'm Suzey.'

'Hi.' We move a little closer together. She must be five years younger than me, but in a ward full of menopausal women and pensioners, it's good to find someone else still in their twenties. I feel less of a freak. Shaz may have an ulterior motive, though, because she asks, 'Was that your boyfriend visiting you today?'

'No, my brother.'

'He's a total honey, isn't he?' I shrug, and wait – sure enough, 'Has he got a girlfriend?'

'No. A boyfriend.'

'Fuck.' A tut from the queue in front of us. Shaz raises her voice and lowers her accent, 'Ah'll just need tae rip off all ma clothes and jump him then, won't I?'

'He really is gay, Shaz.'

'Naebody's that gay.'

I think she's overestimating her charms – Shaz is more than a little plump... and I think perhaps she knows it. So I smile and say, 'He'll never know what's hit him.'

She laughs. 'Comes to see ye a lot, doesn't he?'

'He's been here every day.' My eyes are starting to prickle, so I add hurriedly, 'Must be you he's after, though. He'll want to get into your dressing-gown.'

'Aye. It's the velour. Drives 'em wild.'



By this time I'm at the front. The sour-faced night sister is standing in front of me, ready to throw herself on the medication trolley should some drug-crazed pensioner make a lunge for it. A pleasant-looking student nurse is leafing through the clipboard of notes – she smiles and holds out a tiny paper cup, which rattles. 'Susan Pherson? There you go.'

I'm about to knock the whole lot back, when I realise something's missing. A capsule, two small green tablets... where's the big yellow one? 'What about my sleeping pill?'

The student rustles through the clipboard. 'Doctor's taken you off the sleeping pill, Susan.'

'No.' My heart's starting to thump. 'She was thinking about it, but she didn't do it.'

The sister takes the clipboard from the student. 'Dr Martin's stopped the sleeping pills, Susan.'

'She changed her mind.'

'We've got to go by what's on the notes –'

I'm thinking, If I just explain, they'll understand... 'Yes, but she changed her mind. She did, I heard her.'

'We'll check with her tomorrow.' They don't believe me, of course they don't. 'Just take those ones just now –'

'But they're not enough.' My voice has risen to a wail. I can hear it, but I don't care. 'I need the sleeping pill. I won't sleep without it.'

'It's only for the one night –'

'Why don't you phone Dr Martin?'

'Don't be silly.'

'Why not? It's only ten o'clock.'

'We can't do that, Susan.' The student is smiling, holding out the cup. 'Just take these other ones, they'll make you –'

I go to take the cup, but I'm so shaky I knock it out of her hand. 'You *can't* just leave me like that. You *can't*.' I look to Shaz, who tries to smile supportively, although her eyes are wide. I turn back to the nurses – surely if I'm reasonable... 'Please. You don't know what it's like. It's like freezing to death –'

The sister has taken my arm. She is very strong. She is leading me away. 'You're all right, Susan.'

'No, wait, I'm just telling you –'

There's another nurse beside me now – someone smiling and large. 'You're fine. Just lie down...'

We're at my bed. My stuff – cards and chocolate – on the locker. Staring faces at the other beds. They're making me sit down. I tell them, 'It's like dying. It feels like dying.'

'You're not dying, Susan.' Curtains swish around me. I'm lying on my stomach. The large nurse is trying to get my nightie up. 'We're just going to give you a wee jag, okay? It'll help you sleep.'

I pause. Draught around my backside. 'Is it the same stuff?'

'Aye, it's the same.' Needle sinking into my buttock; I yelp, more from indignity than pain. Nursie's saying, 'There now, you're all right...'

The lights go out, and I'm sinking.

The nurse was lying. Whatever she gave me, it wasn't the same stuff as my sleeping-pill. I shriek at her *You liar*, but I make no sound.

I am falling. There is no light. I can't make a sound – but I can hear. The wind is whistling. There's another sound – a child's voice, shrieking. Somewhere there is a siren.

And then the cold comes.

I'm dying. They've given me too much, and I'm dying.

Cold. Cold...

... the cold is painful. It's stabbing me in the ribs. It's chopping at my fingers and toes. It's shaking me.

If it hurts that much, I must be alive. As soon as I realise that, the light starts to come back. It's flesh-pink.

My eyes are closed, but the light is shining right through.

Finally, I open my eyes. They sting and water, the light is so bright. And it's an absolute, glaring white.

I haven't focused yet, and I don't want to. When I breathe out, mistiness puffs in front of my eyes. The white light is not dying down. It could make you blind.

I know what this light means. When I closed my eyes, it was a mild, rainy winter's night. But now, long before my eyes clear of tears, I know it is daytime, and I know I am looking out on a landscape of deep and heavy snow.

### Three

This wind is like icy water. I duck my head against the cold and the glare, and find I'm wearing my good wool coat, although the wind goes through me as if I were still in my bathrobe. I stare down stupidly at myself. Just below my knees I recognise the tops of my red high-heeled boots – the tops are all I can see, because I am standing up to my calves in snow.

I can hear children screeching somewhere up ahead. But I am not ready to look up yet. Instead, I bend and scoop up a freezing handful of snow. It doesn't clump in my hand; it is a fine dry powder, and it trickles away through my fingers. It doesn't chill my bare skin; it stabs. I wipe my hand on my coat, and find it already dusted with ice. Hastily I turn out my pockets, scattering tissues, and find my thin leather gloves. Gratefully I pull them on; they make a difference.

I have to look up now.

I raise my head. My eyes are still watering, but I can see a little more. I'm looking out over a cityscape rounded and blurred by a thick snowfall. The sky is white and low. I can still hear the children, but I can't see another person anywhere.

Before me is a road which rises sharply to a blind summit. Concrete pillars run down the middle and support an arching roof, which might have been meant to give shelter, although the drifts are just as thick under there. The road is seamed on either side by a low wall topped with a railing. Beyond the railings, the world ends.

I'm reminded of something - there used to be a fashion for picture-postcards of Glasgow, so heavily filtered and coloured you couldn't tell what the view was meant to be. I recall staring at one silver-tinted image for a good five seconds before the shape of the Necropolis hill leapt into focus. That's what happens now. Suddenly, I know I'm standing looking out over the Bells footbridge, over the river to the South Side.<sup>7</sup> I turn around and look up; sure enough, the hotel towers over me, its mirror walls reflecting the pewter sky. Reassured, I turn back to the view of the South, and realise that the Media Park is gone.

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<sup>7</sup> Suzey crosses a lot of bridges in *Cold City*; they usually mark her crossing from one world into another. They serve a similar function in myth and folklore, marking the transition between earth and the world of the dead, or between our world and the divine country. For example, Bifrost, the 'trembling bridge', joins the human world and the abode of the Viking gods. Similarly, bridges appear frequently in Fantasy fiction. Ian Banks' *The Bridge* tells of a man in a coma, suspended on the 'bridge' between life and death. Sarah Zettel's *Camelot's Honour* (London: HarperCollins, 2005) features a bridge which on Midsummer's Eve leads to the land of Faerie (and so is wisely avoided by the human characters).



The science centre, the Needle – all gone. Just gaping spaces in the skyline, like missing teeth, and the empty ground smoothed over with white.

No – it's a trick of the light, or of the snow. I look away. Suddenly I think my hair must be soaked right through, because my scalp is freezing. But of course, I'm not wet at all – there's no moisture here, apart from my watering eyes, and I realise now it's not the light that's making them stream. They're struggling not to dry out. I'm pulling dry air into my lungs, and they are starting to ache.

I can't stay here.

A single track of floundering footprints descends from the summit of the bridge and stops at my feet. I lift a foot – skidding a little as I balance on one leg – twist around and lower it into the nearest print. It fits. I realise my face is freezing; I pause to pull up my hood as far forward as it will go, and pull my collar tight so I'm looking out through a snorkel. Then, high-stepping like a stork, I start to place my feet into the tracks and make my way out onto the bridge.

An icy wind sideswipes me, and I skid. The spike-heeled boots have no grip; I bought them for pubbing and clubbing, not walking on ice. I teeter whenever I lift a foot. I try wading for a couple of steps, and immediately cold begins to trickle through the side zips. I go back to picking 'em up and putting 'em down – I start humming to get into a rhythm, *In his master's steps he trod, where the snow lay printed...* I must sound like a fucking maniac. I keep my tunnel vision pointed at my feet.

The prints aren't an exact match, I realise now – the heel's different. It doesn't matter, though, because of course I know where I can go. Riverside Road is only five minutes away. I pull my mobile out of my pocket; I'm halfway through thumbing in the number, which I know by heart, when I notice the capital letters on the screen: NO SIGNAL. Well, doesn't matter. Mum will be in, of course she will. Relief makes me warmer.

There is a screech, then a stream of childish swearing mixed with laughter. I am abruptly aware that the children's voices seem to be coming from my right-hand side. This is impossible, of course, because I am now halfway across the Clyde. It must be some trick of acoustics, and I don't want to lift my head to the cold just to track down these damned kids. Until I realise that the cursing voice – now sobbing between obscenities – is getting closer. Is now right underneath me.

I wade to the railing – more freezing water seeps through to my ankles, but I hardly notice. I see that the river has been covered over. It's been surfaced with snow for as far as I can see, past the white-topped cranes and on to the heavy horizon. It is blotched here and there with dirty yellow. I look down; there is a wide yellow space below me, where small figures slide and scream.



Of course, I am looking straight down on a clearing made in the snow-cover. Off-white walls surround the wide arena. For a moment I think there is something disproportionate about the children playing there – they are too bulky, like apes. But then I realise they are just bundled up against the cold, so heavily that if they fall they will hardly feel it. Fluorescent anoraks are pulled tight over jumpers and fleeces, scarves are wrapped around oversized hats and ski-masks. A boy – age and sex is indeterminable under the parka, but the still-sobbing voice is young and male – comes sliding out from under the bridge and cannons into two of his pals, bringing them down. The others jeer and throw snowballs, which they have to pack very tight.

I am looking at the grubby marbled surface they are sliding on. For a while I've been thinking of some artificial flooring, didn't the council do that one year, with part of the river, just like that film with the dance-floor over the pool...? But I can't get away from it any more.

The river is frozen over.

For a moment I stare at the kids, thinking I should find their parents, the ice could crack any minute... But I can see it won't. It is thick and solid. The temperate Clyde, which has only ever frosted along its shallowest banks, is sealed over with ice.

I realise I am shivering badly. My gloved hands are gripping the railings as if they too have frozen solid. I wonder for a second if the leather has frozen onto the metal, if I'll be able to pull away... of course I can, but my hands are clumsy paws in the thin leather, almost numb.

I have to move.

Wading now, I push on towards the river bank. My boots are full of slush, and my feet are soon as awkward as my hands. I cling to the railing like an old woman. I don't care; I must get inside, I must get to my Mum's.

The tracks join with a footpath on the bank; to my relief, someone has cleared a narrow trench down the middle. I stop for a moment to look back. The skyline is iced like a Christmas cake, but mercifully familiar: the mirror-hotel and the waterfront flats, and beyond that the black towers of Glasgow University. As I watch, white flecks begin to swirl before my eyes, and for a moment the view is a snowglobe, pretty and harmless.

But the flecks are getting thicker. I have to get going. I turn, and the empty space that should be the Media Park is right before me. It's a wasteland. Then a thick flurry whirls before me, like the prelude to a migraine, and I can't tell what I'm seeing anymore.

I realise I am whimpering. I make myself stop. I turn left and begin shuffling along the trench.

There is a broad dark figure heading toward me. Another of the ape-people, an adult. A man, I think, but in the Scott-of-the-Antarctic jacket it's hard to tell. We're on a slow but

sure collision course in the narrow pathway. When the figure's a few yards away I try to step sideways out of the way; my feet skid, and I'm down in the thick soft snow.

A great padded mitten grabs my hand and hauls me to my feet. I'm hazily aware of massive boots, waterproof trousers and a parka – I'm half-expecting the face to be Inuit. But the guy's eyebrows are blonde, and his cheeks are red and chapped. 'Y'allright, hen?' he says.

I mumble something and disengage my hand. The man is staring in amazement at my thin coat and ridiculous boots. I turn and shuffle away, the adrenaline from the fall pushing me on, but I keep my feet as flat as I can. Behind me the guy shouts, 'You get home, hen, okay?' but I don't look back.

By the time I turn into Riverside Road I'm walking through a blizzard. The row of neat terraced houses usually cuts off the wind-chill from the river, but I can feel no difference now. Generally, I dawdle up this street – but not today. And today my emotions are far from mixed; I just want to get inside. I can actually feel the snot in my nose setting hard. My throat is parched.

Another Eskimo figure, a woman this time, is waddling by on the other side of the road. She stops to stare – her gloved hand lifts to point at me. Her high urgent voice is familiar – a neighbour – but I don't stop. We can discuss my crappy dress sense later, I think; besides, I'm nearly there.

At last, I come to the end of the terrace, Number 48. I realise that the front windows are dark. I dig my hands deep into my pockets; no keys.

I hear myself sob; but then realise that the windows are dark because the curtains are drawn. Vaguely, I wonder why she's pulled the curtains in the middle of the day, but at the same time I'm hurrying round the back. I try the back door. It sticks; I shove, quite ready to break it down if needs be, but it gives way and I stumble into the kitchen.

It's warm. The gas oven is going. I slam the door and rush to huddle against the oven door. It's not till then that I look around and realise how wrong all this is.

My mother's kitchen – my kitchen and Jamie's once, and long before that my father's too - is as I remember it from childhood. The same dingy paint – the same wallpaper printed with kettles and pots. Gone is the fresh turquoise-and-terracotta paintwork I helped her apply just last year. Gone is the breakfast bar – the old wooden table is back in place. I have tracked melting snow onto the old lemon-tinted lino – which is now nicotine-yellow.

It's as it was when we were teenagers – but even shabbier, even older. And it's dark. As I stare around, bemused, I realise the windows have been covered with thick red cloth, stuck all around with masking tape. Why the hell has she put up blackout curtains?

What's going on here?



At that moment the door is shoved clumsily open from the bottom, as if a pet is pushing its way through. A tiny girl – not even two years old – falls into the kitchen. I think she must be plump, but then I realise, yet again, it's just clothes – a thick woolly jumper, and a second pair of leggings tight as a sausage-skin over the first. The kid has fine dark curls – they look familiar.

The child sees me, and squeals. She launches herself at me; I kneel down just in time to catch her. She is a warm, solid armful. She is shrieking, 'Anny too! Anny too!'

'Hi,' I say faintly. She's trying to plant wet kisses on my cheek; I hold her back so I can look at her. I find I'm looking into familiar eyes: wide and grey-blue – Jamie's eyes, my eyes. I have never seen this kid before in my life.

'Anny too! Mumma, anny too!' Now she's squirming away from me, rushing to the kitchen door. There's a woman standing there, in a long skirt and a shapeless fleece. Loose black curls fall to her shoulders. The woman's hands are over her mouth. Her face is like whey. 'Oh my God,' she's saying, 'oh my God.'

It's Katie. I stand up to face her. The last time I saw Katie was my final afternoon at work. The last time I saw her in this kitchen was the day she slapped my brother's face, called him a filthy pervert and rushed out in tears. She swore then she'd never be back. Now here she is. 'What the hell are you doing here?' I say.

She makes a sound like a scream against her hands. The child is jumping up at her, pointing at me and still yelling 'Mumma, anny too!' but Katie doesn't seem to know she's there. I say, 'Is this your kid?'

Then an old woman appears behind her. I blink; it's my mother. The last time I saw her she'd just been to the salon to get her roots done; but now her hair is white. My mother had her eyes sorted five years ago – but now she's staring at me through her old glasses. She is wearing thick cord trousers and a fleece like Katie's. As she looks at me her face is going grey.

'Mum,' I say, looking from her to Katie to the kid and back, 'what's going on?'  
And that's when the screaming starts.

Apparently, I have been dead for two weeks.

I'm installed in the living-room, in front of the gas fire, which is on full. My wet coat and boots have been spirited away; I'm wearing two fleeces, thick cords and two pairs of socks. I'm wrapped in my old blue-flowered duvet, which I thought had been thrown away.

I'm still cold. The air nips my face.



Low voices from the kitchen: Mum's, still sobbing a little, and the doctor's, slow and calm. There's the occasional shriek from the child - who tried to get into the living-room with me but was hauled away – cut off by a sharp word from Katie. I can't hear what they're saying. But then I've heard it already.

*We cremated you last week*, Katie said to me, while my mother was crying down the phone to Dr Spencer. I laughed, but Katie wasn't smiling. *We thought it was you*. Then Mum came back in, and clung to me again, and cried and cried.

I sat there, numb, as if I was never going to thaw. I actually felt relieved when Dr Spencer showed up, although I haven't been pleased to see the old bastard since he refused me the Pill when I was sixteen. You had to hand it to him, though: within ten minutes of my mother telling him her dead daughter was sitting in her living-room, he was knocking on the door; and the shocked look was gone from his dour face within seconds. 'It's yourself,' he said.

'So it would seem,' I said.

'Where have you been for a fortnight?'

'In the mental hospital. Out in Lanarkshire.'

He nodded, and turned to Mum and Katie, who were hovering in the doorway as if afraid to cross the threshold. 'There must have been a mix-up,' he said, 'in Accident and Emergency.'

Mum said, 'But we identified her...' but Dr Spencer was already leading her away into the kitchen, murmuring about your eyes playing tricks when you're under stress, and no doubt rummaging in his bag for something nice and strong. I was left alone in this room.

It's different too. Last year, my Mum bought a leather Chesterfield-type suite; but the chair I'm sitting on is dark green fabric. The walls are ivory sponged with dark orange, at least as far as I can tell by the yellow overhead light. The windows have been covered with thick velvet, which is taped all around; draught excluders, made from old tights stuffed with more old tights, have been wedged along the bottom. There is not a chink of daylight to let in a draught – but the cold breathes in anyway, passing through the thick velvet as if it were handkerchief cotton. I pull the duvet up to my chin.

The mantelpiece is lined with framed pictures of pink babies and meringue wedding frocks. Mum's never gone in for that kind of portrait gallery, but here they all are. One of them, a wedding one, is bothering me slightly, but I don't know why. I'm not curious enough to leave my duvet and investigate. The wind is screaming outside.

Footsteps scramble past the window, as if they're running to escape the wind. I hear the back door bang. There's more murmuring in the kitchen, and babbling from the kid. The

footsteps pass through it and the door bursts open. Another Arctic explorer – then he pushes back the hood, and it's Jamie.

His hair is long. I saw him earlier today, at visiting-time, and he'd had it cut in to the wood. But now it's straggling around his face, the same length as mine. And I remember watching the tears freeze on his cheeks as I lay in the snow. 'Jamie – ' I say.

He's already kneeling beside me, his head on my shoulder, holding me so tight it hurts. 'Suzey. Suzey.'

'I don't know what's happened, Jamie,' I say.

'I don't care,' he says. 'I don't care.'

We sit like that for quite a while.

'The ambulance couldn't get through,' he says, at last. I push his head off my shoulder so I can see him. He doesn't look like he's talking to me. 'They said it was because the ambulance couldn't get through. But I didn't leave in time. I stayed on...'

His face is pale. Light brown hair trails around it. I can't take my eyes off it. 'How did you do that to your hair?'

There's a scratching at the door. The little girl bursts through, looking like she's just escaped and she's making the most of it. She's yelling, 'Da da da da da da!' She launches herself at Jamie, who catches her expertly and heaves her onto his lap. At the same time he's saying, to me, 'What's that about my hair?'

I'm watching as he hoists her to his shoulder, fending her off absently as she grabs at his nose. 'Jamie,' I say, 'who's this kid?'

Now he's staring. He looks afraid of me. 'What?'

'I don't know. I don't know who she is.' I start to cry, helplessly. 'Jamie. I really don't know. Who is she?'

He's nodding, gripping my hand. 'It's all right. It must be... amnesia or something. I'll get the doctor. No,' as the child starts climbing towards me, 'leave Auntie Sue alone just now – '

The kid shrieks in protest. 'Dadda!'

I stand up abruptly. I grab the wedding picture from the mantelpiece. A big puffy dress almost fills the frame. Katie's head, crowned with flowers, sticks out the top. She is smiling. Beside her, standing carefully away from her skirts, is Jamie. With long hair. In a kilt. Holding her hand. Jamie.

I start to laugh. Jamie's reaching out to me. I hold out the photo. 'Katie?' I'm saying, 'Katie?' It's a great joke. Any minute now he'll be laughing too.

But he doesn't. He's trying to take the picture away from me. His face is deadly serious, but it's still framed by that silly long hair. I laugh and laugh and laugh.

The door opens. The doctor's coming in. He's opening his bag.



## Four

The dining-room is full of afternoon light like chilly gold. No tears or quarrelling; I'm surrounded by low, almost musical voices. All in all, it's a beautiful day, and I'm thinking: My God, you two really need to lighten up. 'It's okay, really,' I say, again. 'It's fine.'

Carl, at least, attempts a smile. 'So he was like totally straight?'

'Straight. Married. To *Katie*, no less.' I laugh. People at the next table glance at me. The nurse leaning in the corner looks over. No laughing at visiting time! I laugh again. 'Talk about your worst nightmare.'

The main room is full today. All the tables have a little group huddled round them, murmuring. By the window is Shaz, orange hair blazing in the sun, listening solemnly to her posh parents. She catches my eye; I smile and wave, but she looks away, with only the briefest of glances at Jamie. I can hardly blame her – my brother is looking at me like I've only got six months to live. 'God Almighty,' he says. 'What was that stuff?'

'I don't know. A sleeping potion! Temazepam? Hey, they're giving me free jellies!'

'They don't inject Temazepam anymore.'

'Aye well, you'd know.'

He doesn't smile. 'I'll ask the nurse about it.'

'She'll not give you any, Jamie.'

Still not a flicker. And this from the guy who's been off his face on something every other weekend for the past five years. 'God, Jamie, it's all right. I got a jag in the bum and had a wee dream, that's all.'

'It's not a wee dream if it seems that real.'

'It is if it's a wee trippy dream. And I feel fine now.' That's true. I feel better today than I have in months. Lighter. 'I'm really starting to feel better now.'

Carl's nodding. 'Anti-depressants're starting to kick in,' he says, with a sidelong glance at Jamie. Translation: *Side-effects. Weird, but they'll wear off soon.* I let it pass; whatever keeps them happy. And Jamie is looking slightly relieved: 'And the doctor didn't seem to think it was anything to worry about?'

'She didn't seem worried at all.' Dr Martin wouldn't look worried if I turned into the Human Fly on top of her desk, but I'm not about to tell him that. 'It's just drugs. Weird drugs. That's all.'

The electronic bell – the type that always makes you think you should be running off to double Maths – starts to ring. Some of the visitors stiffen their shoulders and keep talking; some are on their feet and have their coats on by the time the ringing stops. Today, Jamie is one of the latter. Carl looks up at him in surprise, but I decide to be forgiving. Hell, these two have a life of their own; and besides, I've spotted the pink Hallmark envelope sticking out of Jamie's coat pocket. 'Is that for me? Gimme!'

'Oh, yeah.' He passes it across. 'It was dropped by the flat when we were out, I don't know who it's –'

'It's from Lewis.' The envelope says *To Suzey*, although if I didn't know the writing so well I would never have guessed. I laugh. 'I always said he should have been a doctor. His writing's worse than my shrink's.'

I'm still laughing, but Jamie and Carl are dithering over me like I've collapsed into tears. 'Want us to take it back?' Jamie says. 'I'll tell him to fuck off if you want.'

'My hero. No, it's okay.' I hug them one after the other. Jamie, who seemed desperate to escape a minute ago, goes for a second bear-hug and won't let go. He's a funny creature. I probably shouldn't have told him any of this - I wasn't going to; but today it just seems too funny to keep to myself. 'Go on,' I say, 'it's past chucking-out time. Better run, they'll lock you in with the other loonies.'

'Are you going to be okay?' His voice is muffled.

'Aye, I'll be fine. I'm off to see my dealer now anyway.' He stiffens again. 'I mean the doctor? Who gives me the nice drugs? It's a joke, Jamie?'

Finally, a smile. And then they're gone.

The room is quiet now. I sit down and tear open the pink envelope.

There's no writing on the front of the card. Just a cartoon cat in a hospital bed, a giant thermometer sticking out of its mouth. I open the card. The printing says *Get Well Soon*. Under that, in black biro, is scribbled: *from Lewis*.

I laugh a little. I think: *a man of few words*. I wish I'd opened the card while Jamie and Carl were still here; then I could have said it. I say it anyway: 'A man of few words'. It echoes a little in the empty room.

I put the card back in the envelope. Now it's time for my appointment.

Dr Martin is writing up her last patient's notes. She says 'Good afternoon' into the other patient's file. I flop down into the chair; well, I guess I'll just start without her. 'Good afternoon to you too,' I say. 'Yes, I'm still feeling better, thank you so much for asking.'

She glances up. 'How did you sleep last night?'

'Oh, not bad. No-one rammed a needle in my arse, anyway.'



She stabs a full-stop into the file, snaps it shut and opens up another: mine, presumably. She reads for a moment. 'Any more vivid dreams?'

I burst out laughing. 'Did you really have to look that up in my notes just there? D'you have that many patients who travel to Narnia in their fucking sleep? Do you just think, Ooo, there goes another one? Better tick that one off on Susan's list of psycho symptoms?'

She's writing again. 'How do you feel today, Susan?'

I nearly fall off my chair. 'I'm sorry. I could've sworn you said "how do you feel". But you'd never say that, would you? I must be hallucinating again, mustn't I?' I squint at the page – I'm getting better at reading upside-down – and burst out laughing again. 'Does that say "manic"?''

She glances up again. 'How *do* you feel, Susan?'

I point at her. 'Do you know what you are?' She won't say *What*, so I carry on: 'You are a person of few words. A person of few words. I think I've found you a new friend. Isn't that nice?' I'm still gripping the pink envelope; my thumb's made a smudge out of *Suzey*. I pull out the card and skite it across the desk. 'Here. Want it for the file?'

She looks at it, looks at me. I don't wait for her, what's the point? 'That's from Lewis. Remember Lewis? I'm sure I told you about him. Maybe that was a vivid dream as well. No? He's the one who said we'd either get married or murder each other. We couldn't understand couples who split up and then said *Let's be friends*. One of us would have to emigrate. We always said so.'

Dr Martin is looking steadily at me now. I realise I'm still pointing, at the card now. 'Get Well Soon,' I say. My head is starting to hurt. 'From Lewis. This is after five years, you understand. Get Well Soon From Lewis. Beautiful, isn't it?'

*Suzey, wake up*

Someone's calling me outside. But Dr Martin doesn't want me to answer, or even turn my head, because she's thrown something at me. Or maybe she just got up and stuck it in my forehead while I wasn't looking. What is it, a pen? I can feel it sinking in, painful. Cold.

*Suze, can you hear me*

I gape at Dr Martin. She's looking straight into my eyes. A chair screeches on the floor, and she's gone. There's nothing but light.

The light has dimmed to a dull yellow. I'm lying on my back. My face is cold, but the rest of my body is sweaty; I'm wrapped in fabric, tight as a parcel. I think: God, they've got me in a straightjacket.

'Suzey, are you getting up?'

My mother's face is hanging over me. She looks tired, annoyed, and old. Her hair is white. She says, 'Are you going in to work today or not?'

I'm in my old single bed at my mother's house. I realise I'm wearing two layers of pyjamas. The bedcovers – a sheet, blanket and two duvets – are tucked in tight.

I struggle to sit up. My old flowered curtains are drawn. There's blackout behind them – but it must have come loose, because there's line of white light at the far side. Bright light. Snow light.

'Suzey,' my mother's saying, 'do you hear me?'

Once again I burst out laughing. 'And we're back,' I say.



## Five

I am disappointed by my office. It's no different at all. Really, I thought I could do better than that.

The drug must be wearing off, at last.

I'm a little confused about the time-frame, but I think it's been one week since I came back from the dead. Today is my first day back at work. Earlier this morning, I intended to skive off – what's the point of having the trippiest dream of your life if all you do in it is go to work? I was planning on doing nothing but sitting around the house and congratulating myself on my creative imagination. This was mostly because of the little girl.

Apparently, my mother watches her during the day, so she came tumbling through the back door while I was eating cornflakes in watery milk. Jamie floundered in after her, clumsy in what were presumably snowshoes, but looked like tennis rackets. Katie was right behind him. The sight of them together was still pretty bizarre to me, but the kid was pulling at my hand for attention, so without thinking I scooped her up onto my knee.

I'm apprehensive around small children, usually – they stare at you too hard, and I'm always afraid I'll drop them – but this one seemed different. She knelt up on my lap, straddling my leg; with any other kid I'd be afraid it looked like some sort of child-molestation and make her turn round, but I wasn't uncomfortable at all. Of course, I remembered, she was different. She was a perfect composite of Jamie and Katie; or rather, her hair was from Katie's side, but in every other way she was ours. Our family's colouring – our eyes, in miniature, beaming back at me.

She could have been mine. And really, she was mine. Didn't I invent her? 'Hiya, beautiful,' I said. 'You're just gorgeous, aren't you?'

She giggled, and then gave me a slobbery kiss on the lips. I resisted the temptation to wipe my mouth, it might have upset her. I could hear the other three adults laughing around the table. We were a family; and here was the next generation to prove it. Stroking back the fine dark curls I said absently, 'What's her name?'

Silence. I looked up. Katie was staring at the table, Jamie looked worried, and my mother looked as if she didn't know whether to shout at me or cry. I felt chilly suddenly. This was a dream – they were meant to laugh with me. Or at least turn into monsters or something. This just wasn't right. 'I, I don't remember,' I found myself saying. 'It's amnesia? The doctor said...?'

After a moment Jamie said, 'Her name's Claire.'

'Claiwey!' yelled the kid, shoving at me. Pissed off because she wasn't the centre of attention anymore. I smiled down at her, but then I heard Katie say sharply, 'I think you'd better stay at home today, Suzey, don't you?'

I was about to agree, until I saw a single tear begin to creep down my mother's face. She looked like she didn't even know it was there. I'd never seen her look like that in all my life. 'No,' I said, 'I'm going in to work.'

So that's where I went.

I pause in the middle of unzipping my parka, and look around. The Registry is not much different at all. It's noisier; the silent laser printers are gone, and old dot-matrixes are rattling out streams of paper. The room seems dingy, like it hasn't been painted in a while, but that might just be the snow piling up against the windows. The windows bother me, for some reason, so I look away, and find that my colleagues are all staring at me.

They're no different, that's for sure. Their heavy clothes look like they came from a jumble sale, but these people dress like that anyway. Except for Sara, the office trainee. I realise she's not there. Nor is her desk.

I look around for Katie, but she's disappeared. Just gone to the loo or something, of course – I know she's in the building, she walked here with me. Jamie came part of the way with us. He doesn't work in the Terence Higgins place here, but then I suppose he wouldn't. I thought for a while he must work beside me and Katie, and I remember laughing about how twee that would be. But I wish he was here now.

Hugh Munroe is in front of me. He is smiling, but his eyes are wide. 'Susan,' he's saying, 'welcome back. We were glad to hear that, um, rumours of your death were greatly exaggerated.'

'What?'

'Sorry.' His laugh is nervous. 'You know, Mark Twain – "rumours of my death have been greatly exaggerated"...?'

I stare at him. 'I've never read any Mark Twain.'

'Oh, well, it doesn't –'

'How could I know that? I've never heard it before.'

'It doesn't matter, Susan –'

'Excuse me.' I hurry out of the room. The parka is so huge I can hardly move; the air is cold, but I still wrench down the zip and let the coat drop to the floor. I'm making for the stairs. I'm thinking, nonsensically: *Carl. I'll go and see Carl.*

I'm staring at the door to Carl's office. I don't know what to do. On the way up here I met two people who told me rumours of my death had been greatly exaggerated (in future I'm avoiding the English Lit department) but that's not what's bothering me. The door is locked, but that's not it either. What's worrying me is that the name on the door is *Dr Albert Hughes*. Carl's name is gone.

I've wandered twice round the department, checking all the doors. No sign of Carl at all.

I'm thinking: there is no way I would write Carl out of my dream world. No way.

So, he must be around somewhere. Perhaps Earth Sciences has been expanded into another building? Yes, that must be it. The secretary will tell me where he is. I hurry along to the departmental office.

The office is empty. It's drab and colourless. One corner has been partitioned off by a bank of filing cabinets. The secretary's neat workstation has been replaced by an oversized desk topped with a yellowish computer screen; the printer is even more geriatric than the ones downstairs. Worst of all, the colour posters and anime's have been replaced by yards of printout, clustered around two maps of the British Isles. The only colour left in this room is in the thick bands traced around the coastlines; in the first map the tracing is red – in the second it's blue.

The white snow-light throws the window arch into sharp relief. There's something about this window, too... I wander over and look out. From here, you can see most of the University. Clearly the sandblasting schemes haven't happened here - the place looks more Gormenghast than ever, black under its icing of snow. Beyond the clock-tower I can see the motorway, usually a river of cars at this time of day, now a crawling line behind a snow-plough. Frigid air breathes over me as if I were outside; I realise the window, like the ones in the Registry, has never been double-glazed –

'Can I help you?'

'Christ!' I jump about a foot in the air. Dazzled by the light, I peer into the corner. Someone is sitting at a desk in the corner walled off by cabinets. While I'm frantically reviewing my actions over the past few minutes (any arse-scratching/farting/nose-picking? no, thank God), the someone is standing and coming towards me. 'Sorry', he's saying.

It's Raj Chaudhury. He's wearing a brown, East-European type suit. He's thinner, and his smile looks slightly carnivorous. 'Sorry,' he says again. 'It's Suzey, isn't it? Suzey... McPherson? You were declared dead?'

'It's Pherson.' I'm still cross about being startled. 'And yes, rumours of my death have been greatly exaggerated. I was just... missing.'

I wait for the curious stare, but he just nods. 'I'm glad to hear it.'



An awkward silence stretches out. 'Er – I'm looking for Dr Trainor?'

'Who?'

'Carl Trainor? He works here...' Oh God, not the blank look again... 'He's maybe in another building? Or off campus or something?'

'I don't think so...' I must look close to tears, because he adds hastily, 'but I'll check.' He goes to the secretary's PC and taps a couple of keys. I perch on a wooden chair behind him, so I can watch the monitor. I'm expecting to see the AIM system's bright red screen – instead, after a sequence of painful grinding noises, up pops a version of Windows I haven't seen since I was twelve. Raj doesn't seem to find anything amiss; he just clicks on an icon marked STAFF and says, 'What's the full name?'

As I spell it he types the name into a text-box, waits for the computer to catch up then hits *Search*. 'It'll take a little while,' he says. And by God he's not kidding. After a full minute I notice a blue band not so much inching as millimetre-ing its way across the bottom of the screen. More awkward silence – so I let my eyes wander around the room, across the printouts and the maps, to Raj's cramped little space behind the filing cabinets. I'm pleased to notice the Wild-Wolf photo, although crowded in by yet more printout, is hanging above his desk. 'I love that picture,' I say.

He looked surprised again, but this time pleased as well. 'I'm glad to hear it. I thought I was the only one.'

I remember hundreds of people admiring that picture. I say carefully, 'Wouldn't it get much better light over there somewhere?' I wave a hand towards the place I last saw the picture, now covered by the blue-rimmed map.

He smiles, rather bitterly. 'Yes it would. But of course that would mean the Department standing by its principles rather than pandering to lunatic beliefs. I am *allowed* to keep the picture so long as I hide it if the press come round.'

I have no idea what he's talking about, but I'm not risking that blank stare again. While the computer chugs away, I stare at the rest of the wall in Raj's little space. Close to the wolf photo, mostly hidden by a filing cabinet, there's the pale wood side of a picture frame. 'So you've got the Ragnarok one hidden away too?' I say.

'What?'

Shit, oh shit. 'The, um – the painting – ' I push my chair back so I can point it out, but mostly so I can retreat from the stare he's giving me. Now I can see some of the painting itself, solid black lines of various heights. It's a charcoal drawing of the University. 'Oh,' I say, 'sorry. I'm thinking of something else – '

'How do you know about that?'

'About what?'



'My painting.' He's still staring straight into my face. '*Ragnarok*. The great wolf devouring the sun – yes? That's what you've seen?'

I'm thinking: maybe he's put it in an art gallery or something? 'Yes – maybe I've...'

'The painting has never been out of my flat,' Raj says. 'No-one has seen it.'

'It must have been a different one.' This is getting too much. He's way too close to me. 'Maybe it's a popular subject –'

'I assure you it isn't.'

There's a beep from the computer. The screen says *C(ARL) TRAINOR: NOT FOUND*. Raj's hand lands on my arm. 'Suzey,' says, 'how can you have seen my picture?'

I pull away, standing so quickly I hear the chair tip over behind me. 'Get off me. Do you think I fucking broke into your house or something?'

'No, I don't –'

'Just leave me alone!' Heading for the door, I stumble over the chair and bark my shin, hard. It hurts. Dreams aren't meant to hurt.

'Suzey!' He's coming after me.

I want to wake up now. I fling open the door. I step out into the University corridor. I can still hear Raj behind me, so I slam the door.

'I want to wake up now,' I say. But I don't. 'Wake up, wake up, wake up –' I'm leaning over the banister. The drop is trying to pull me in. I straighten up.

I hear the door open behind me. Raj says, 'You should come back inside.'

I think about going back to the Registry, and turn and follow Raj back into his office. He leaves the door open and takes care to sit a few yards away, as if I were a skittish cat. I feel colossally stupid. I should go home... yes, home to my staring family who think I'm the walking dead...

To my mortification, I'm starting to cry. 'Sorry,' I croak.

'It's all right.' It doesn't seem to be all right, though – he's up and turning his back to me. But no, he's clicking on an ancient kettle, pouring, setting a mug down in front of me. I take a sip – hot sweet tea, perfect for shock and distress. I start to cry even harder. 'I feel so bad,' I wail. I sound like Clairey, but I don't care. 'If this is a dream, why does it feel so *bad*?'

'If what is a dream?'

'This.' So I tell him. The hospital, the snow, Jamie, everything. Like the tears, it seems it has to come out.

When I'm done there's a pause, filled only by the tick of the cooling kettle. I'm trying to mop up my face with a soggy tissue. Then Raj says, carefully, 'So – you come from another world?'

I burst into (rather snotty) laughter. He looks so serious. Why does everyone have to humour me? 'You sound just like my shrink. *And my brother, and my mother.* Why can't you just say *Christ you're a loony* and have done with it?'

'And there's been no change?' He doesn't seem to hear. 'Nothing?'

'You mean,' I wave a hand at the snow piled on the window-ledge, 'this? No.'

'And no flooding. No warming. Nothing like that?'

'Well, there's been floods. A couple of years ago Paisley Road was blocked off at the —'

'But no encroachment. No flooding of coastal towns...?'

'That's *happened?* Where?'

'Coastal areas. Largs. Places like that. The streets fill up in the high season.' He's waving a hand impatiently. I'm still reeling from the image of Largs as Venice of the North; I don't catch what he says next. 'Sorry, what?'

'The Gulf Stream.' He's looking at the two maps of Britain on the wall. 'Is it still intact?'

I'm having a memory of a Geography class, staring at the back of Alison McGuire's neck in catatonic boredom, cringing at the teacher's wild-eyed enthusiasm, but catching just one phrase. *The Gulf Stream. The 'hot tap' of the British Isles....* Then Graham Wilson farted loudly and the moment was passed. Now I look up at the two versions of Britain: one outlined in warm red, the other in cold blue.

It is, I realise, a before-and-after picture.

We are as far North as Canada or Siberia: and now our hot tap has been well and truly turned off. 'What happened?' I whisper.

'I can direct you to entire conferences on the subject.'

'So you don't know either?'

'I have my theories.'

'Like what?' I'm going for a light tone of voice, but I'm still looking at the snow beyond the window, and the word comes out sounding savage. 'Ragnarok?'

He smiles, shaking his head. 'Ragnarok is eternal darkness. This would be Fimbul-winter. The time of terrible winter.'

I laugh. 'Aren't you meant to be all rational and scientific about this sort of stuff?'

'Aren't you meant to be dead?'

Touché. 'I'm not dead, though, am I. I'm just *ill*. I'm just *deluded*.'

He's looking careful again. 'I don't want to contradict anything you've been told. I'm not a doctor.'

'You're doing a lot better than my doctor.' You're talking, for a start. 'So what do you think? Am I a loony or what?'

He regards me for a moment. 'Yes,' he says at last. 'You are a deeply disturbed young woman, Suzey.'

There's another long pause. And then we both burst out laughing. I pick up a handful of paperclips and throw them at him. 'You evil bastard.'

'Sorry.'

'Sorry's not good enough. Put the kettle on and I'll maybe forgive you.'

Good as gold, he heads off for the kettle. I stretch out on my seat, getting comfy, absurdly reassured to have met someone even more insane than I am.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This scene addresses the question of the cause of climate change in the Cold World: an issue which is never actually resolved. Originally, I intended to provide a concrete answer; but bizarre things began to happen when I tried to write the scene. This is the original:

He doesn't seem to hear. 'Do you mean March the second didn't happen? At all?'

'What?'

'So it didn't happen. For you. It really didn't happen.'

'Are you going to start speaking English anytime soon?'

He leans forward. 'Have you never heard of the Kursk?'

I blink. At last, something familiar – but completely irrelevant. 'The Kursk?'

He nods. I've just confirmed something for him. 'The Kursk,' he says, 'it was a nuclear submarine. Ex-Soviet. There was an *encounter*, ' his voice drips sarcasm, 'with a U.S. warship. In the North Sea –'

'I *know* all that.' I'm hardly likely to forget – the news was full of it for months. Mum thought there'd be a war over it. 'What's that got to do with it?'

'So it did happen with you?' He looks mildly pissed off – I've spoiled his theory. 'March the second, the switch, all of it?'

'The *what*?'

'Ah.' He's nodding again. 'The Kursk was destroyed, Suzey. Collided with an iceberg. Or blown up by the American warship. Ten years ago.'

I'm casting my mind back, trying to recall what kind of lying dictatorship was running Raj's country a decade ago. 'It wasn't destroyed, Raj. It was a near miss, that's all.'

'That's what happened where you were.'

Finally, I'm getting it. I'm remembering all the *what-if* stories in the papers, the ones Mum didn't want us to read. I'm thinking of a nuclear blast, close to the frozen Pole. 'But,' I say, 'shouldn't there be floods, or, or global warming, or something?'

'The explosion disrupted the Gulf Stream.' He's gazing at the wall – at the two maps of Britain, one outlined with red, the other with blue. 'The Gulf Stream was the hot tap of Europe. Without it, we have the same climate as Siberia. We have...' He gestures towards the window, his cubicle, the picture frame.

'Ragnarok,' I say.

I wrote this with *no conscious memory* of the real-life Kursk disaster. When I found out I took it as an omen, and decided to leave the cause of the Big Freeze mysterious.

The wisdom of this decision was confirmed by a later attempt to 'clarify' the dialogue:

I'm casting my mind back, trying to recall what kind of lying dictatorship was running Raj's country a decade ago. 'It wasn't destroyed, Raj. It was a near miss, that's all.'

'That's what happened where *you* were.'

'Do you mean... there was a nuclear blast? Next to the Pole?'



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'Exactly.'

'But that means that...'

'The explosion disrupted the Gulf Stream.' He's gazing at the wall – at the two maps of Britain, one outlined with red, the other with blue. 'The Gulf Stream was the hot tap of Europe. Without it, we have the same climate as Siberia. We have...' He gestures towards the window, his cubicle, the picture frame. 'And that means –'

'Ragnarok,' I say.

Please note: I am deeply ashamed of ever having written these lines.

## Six

I ask to go home early; Jamie's office runs a bus to the south side to get the workers home, and I reckon I could do with a lift. Everyone agrees, smiling brightly, although I was away from my desk half the morning talking to Raj – they didn't even ask where I was. 'You get off home,' Hugh says. 'Take care of yourself.'

In other words: Fuck off and be weird somewhere else. Well, I daresay the novelty of working with Lady Lazarus will wear off eventually. And of course, what's the point in being offended by a dream? So I pile on the heavy clothes and make my escape.

It's barely four o'clock, but it's already dark. The streetlights are on, but every second one isn't working. The steps outside the Uni aren't lit at all, so I hurry down, clinging to the banister, and cross the footbridge over the frozen burn at a brisk trot. By the time I emerge onto the (comparatively) well-lit street, the snow has stopped, but the Arctic wind immediately swoops me up again; I have to cower in a doorway while I wrap my scarf around my nose and mouth. Jamie's office is only five minutes from here usually, but after ten minutes I'm only halfway there.

I don't like this. It's much too real. The cold is much too real; it hurts, it stings, I can hardly breathe. The wind roars and shoves like a bully, sending me thumping into a wall. A little cry escapes me, but the huddled figures scurrying past pay no attention; in these conditions you don't lift your face to the wind for anything less than a dying scream. Every street feels a mile long.

I'm near a familiar shop: Ali's. I duck inside. I want a newspaper anyway. The shop is much the same as I recall: shelves of beans, biscuits, shoe-polish, nails, bleach, and everything else you can think of. The only difference is the counter has been moved to the back; I remember it being right by the door, but that's obviously too cold. Even at the back, Ali is wearing a thick fleece, a scarf and fingerless gloves, and is rubbing his hands together vigorously. He nods to me: 'All right?'

I unwind enough facial wrapping to answer him. 'Hi, have you got a *Herald*?'

He shakes his head. 'Only the *Standard*.' He points to a tabloid-sized newspaper, the only one on the counter. I've never heard of it. I turn it towards me, and the headline almost jumps off the page: SAVAGED. Under that is: *Second Wolf Cult Killing*.

"Second"?' I say, without thinking.

He nods. 'Aye. Another one. Terrible, isn't it?'

I scan down the article. *Body of a young woman... mutilated... unidentifiable... experts confirm: 'torn apart by wolves'*. 'I didn't think wolves really did stuff like that,' I say. 'No' just the wolves but, was it?'

I scan further. *Skin painted with strange symbols... runes... occult... 'human sacrifice'...* Christ, that's sick. How could I possibly come up with stuff...?

But I give myself a shake: no self-analysis while the guy's waiting for his money. I dig out some coins and pick up the paper. Clumsy in my huge mittens, I catch it by the turned-up corner, so that the first page flutters open. I glance at page two, see a photo... and groan. Him, of all people...

Matthew McLean. Evangelist and all-round queer-basher. His bluff, no-nonsense Scottish face is gazing seriously into the camera, above the less-than-no-nonsense caption: *Reverend McLean: condemns 'work of Satan'*. 'God Almighty,' I say. 'Don't tell me that bampot's here as well.'

'Aye, he's everywhere.' Ali doesn't seem too thrilled either. 'He's got his own column now, did you know?'

'A column?' Sure enough, under the photo it says: *comment: page 15*. I turn to 15 - there's the same picture, under the banner *VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS*. It's more than a column: this supposedly 'wilderness' voice has nearly half a page to itself. It says:

### **Sacrificed to Satan Another Life Lost to *Odin***

Our city grieves for another young life lost: *thrown to the wolves*.

There can be no doubt - this young woman met a terrible death at the hands of *Odinists*, cultists devoted to the worship of the so-called god *Odin*.

*Odin* was the 'god' of the Vikings. He was worshipped in bloodthirsty rituals of perverted sex and mass human sacrifice, often involving *children*.

*Odin's* followers believed they would gain magical powers by carrying out these murders. *They still believe it today*.

Make no mistake - the priests and wizards of *Odin* are among us again.

Decent people of all faiths have always rejected *Odinism*. Only the wicked are attracted to this cult - among them Hitler and his Nazi thugs. The Fascists were encouraged to worship *Odin*, using *Odin's* symbols, the wolf and the raven.

Yet now *Odinists* claim they have the 'right to worship' this devil 'god'. And many foolish people would like us to turn a blind eye in the name of *tolerance*.

But the people of Scotland are wiser than this. We know that such cruelty is not the work of a 'god', but of *Satan*.

*Odin* is, therefore, none other than *the Devil himself*.

So I say to you: be vigilant and guard your children. The cult of *Odin* is very real. *And it will kill again.*<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The 'Wolf-cult' is (loosely) based on 'Odinism', a modern belief-system revering the old Norse gods. Contrary to what McLean says here, its tenets are not Fascistic, and there is no suggestion that modern Odinism involves human or animal sacrifice of any kind.



***Be sober, be watchful: your adversary the Devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8)<sup>10</sup>***

'That's *journalism*?' I say.

Ali shrugs. 'So they tell me.'

'But it's nonsense. Magic powers from Odin. Does anyone actually believe this stuff?'

Ali taps the front page, under *Wolf Cult*. 'They believe it,' he says.

'We don't know that.' But suddenly I don't want to walk home alone, and not just because of the cold. 'Och, anyway, I'd better be off.'

'Safe home.'

I head off back into the cold, moving quicker this time.

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Odinists in modern times do not practise elaborate rituals, such as animal sacrifices, that were common in olden days; it would be neither legal nor necessary to do so... [T]he form of sacrifice practised by modern Odinists is the libation of mead, accounts of which have been recorded in the literature.

Odinist Fellowship Website

<sup>10</sup> The style of this article – especially the Biblical habit of italicizing key nouns and phrases – is based on articles from various religious websites. The original sites tend to capitalize words rather than italicizing them - but I felt that in McLean's article, this would cause confusion between key words and headlines.

Example from 'End Times':

This report will shock many. Most will think that it could not be true. I say "Oh yes it IS". I have known of these matters for a number of years. I have not written on it, because it is so shocking. It is NOW TIME, maybe past time, to wake people up as to what is really going on in this "Christian Nation".

**And he cried mightily with a strong voice, saying, Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of EVERY foul spirit, and a cage of EVERY unclean and hateful bird.**

There is NOTHING of wickedness that is NOT in our midst. The "Human Sacrifices" are not just being done by low life dim wits, but reaches ALL OF THE WAY TO THE TOP!!! Our leaders are NOT nice guys with wonderful intents. They are SATAN WORSHIPPERS, and their intents are of the depths of EVIL CONTINUALLY!!!

And, oh yes, "God Bless America", and "Pledge Allegiance" to this nation's Satanic Determination to bring forth the anti-Messiah's NWO.

'The End Times: The Report of Human Sacrifices and the Coming 'Martial Law"  
[http://www.mequiar.addr.com/human\\_sacrifices.htm](http://www.mequiar.addr.com/human_sacrifices.htm). Accessed 5 October 2004.

Jamie's not in his office. Even though the rest of the bus passengers are. 'You've just missed him,' the receptionist says. She's giving me the wide-eyed stare I'm coming to recognise. Without thinking, I dip into my pocket for my mobile; but by the time I've read the *NO SIGNAL* display, I've already remembered that Jamie – like most people - doesn't even carry his phone any more. The receptionist's eyes are wider than ever. I put the useless mobile back in my pocket and hurry outside again.

Breathing in warm wool I stick my head out and look up and down the street; sure enough, there's the back of a familiar parka receding downhill. I expose my face again and yell 'Jamie,' but I haven't a hope against the wind. I cover up and set off after him.

The going's not too bad here – the snow's been shovelled to one side, so despite the two-foot bank of brown slush to my right, the pavement is pretty clear. I could walk quite quickly if I didn't have to lean into the wind like a stupid mime. As it is I can just keep up with Jamie – he's used to this I suppose. When I have to pull down the scarf to breathe (and I'm trying not to, believe me) I call him again, but he still doesn't turn.

Where the hell is he going, anyway? Now he's heading down Gibson Street – it's not on the way home. He slides down the last few feet, dodges round a slush-bank and hurries across the road. I follow gingerly, trying to grip the icy path with my toes (through my boots and three pairs of socks). By the time I cross Gibson Street he's turning left onto the bottom of University Avenue, and by the time I've struggled up there he's heading for Kelvin Way, through the park.

God, he's not off for a fumble in the park, is he...? But then I remember – Katie, the meringue wedding dress, Clairey, all that. Besides, I can't imagine anyone being desperate enough to fumble out here. It'd snap off. The park is unlit as usual, but when I pass under a broken street-light I can see a faint glow from the drifts of white. There don't seem to be as many trees as usual – the wind sweeps white powder before it like a desert storm. I pull down my scarf, drag in a lung-full of cold and scream '*Jamie!!*' Still not a thing – that hood must be bloody sound-proofed. And now the snot in my nose is freezing, thanks very much Jamie. I swaddle up again and hurry after him.

He's turning off to the right now. Up ahead, looking lopsided with only one wing spotlight, is Kelvingrove museum. I follow, although I'm now thinking seriously about going for that bus. He can't be going to the museum, it shuts at five. And right now I want to be inside somewhere – anywhere with heating. Jamie is walking up the middle of the road now, along the narrow cleared track. Ignoring the possibility of cars, I follow him.



By the time Jamie is climbing the steps to the main door, I can see lights on inside. The glass door swings out and two bundled-up figures emerge – I wonder briefly if Jamie is here to meet them, but he passes them without a glance and they set off in the opposite direction. Jamie catches the glass door before it shuts, drags it open and disappears inside. Half-running – even if I fall on my arse it can't hurt as much as this freezing gale – I follow.

I catch a whiff of stale piss even before the door has swung shut behind me. Of course I don't care. The place smells like a laundry basket, but it's still warm. I pause for a moment, pull down my scarf and push back my hood. The light is dimmer than I recall it, yellower. The museum looks dingy. Then I realise why – it hasn't been renovated. The shiny twenty-first century hallway is gone. We're back with the fusty, dusty Victorian sepia.

I'll bet they've even got the stuffed animals back. I look around: no sign of the nightmares of taxidermy, thank God. But the marble floor-tiles are dull, stained with brown watery footprints. I cross to the middle of the great hallway, and look up. The upstairs galleries are in darkness; I'm sure I see a movement, but it may just be shadow. I look around, but Jamie has disappeared.

Canteen sounds – plates rattling, steam hissing – are echoing around the great hallway. Also footsteps – a man in a dull Council-green overcoat emerges from the right. He is middle-aged, frowning, perpetually annoyed. He sees me and looks suspicious, but this must be his usual expression because he nods to me. Now two men, one forty-ish, one younger, appear from the left. They are wearing heavy coats, tightening scarves and hoods as they pass. They ignore the other man and me. Cold buffets me as they go out. Council-coat watches them go, *tshhh*-ing angrily between his teeth. He catches my eye and shakes his head. Whatever's pissing him off, he wants to talk about it. I smile hastily and head off towards the café.

I go through Natural History, past the model dinosaurs and tatty stuffed animals. I'm wondering what on earth would induce Jamie to come here, he's never liked it (Dad dragged us here on one of his 'access' Sundays, but when we laughed at the scary dinosaurs and cried about the bullet-holes in the stuffed deer, he vowed never again). I emerge outside the café, at the foot of the grand staircase. Its sweeping effect is rather spoiled by the metal concertina'd barriers along the first step. No art appreciation tonight, it seems. I go into the café.

The funky metal sculptures are all gone. The small round tables are chipped and bashed. Two youngish women in blue sweatshirts are moving between them. The less-than-fresh smell is getting stronger. It all seems to be coming from a man sitting near the door – he is of indeterminate age, with straggly dun-coloured hair and darkish clothing. He is



mumbling into a mug of weak tea. I look around the room – everyone seated is shabby, filthy, differences of age and sex and colour erased. Someone I can't see is crying loudly.

Now one of the sweatshirted women is approaching me. She is very young. She is wearing the superbright smile of someone who's gone right through feeling harassed and out the other side. 'Hi!' she says, 'would you like to come in?'

'Er, no –'

'Are you sure? Would you not like a wee cuppy tea?'

'No, I'm just looking for somebody...'

'Aye?' Someone starts bellowing on the other side of the room. The girl makes a mock-tragic face as if an infant is crying over a dropped toy. 'Oh dear... best get on, eh?'

'Aye...' I hurry off and leave her to it. Back through the dinosaur room, and out, this time, at the foot of a side staircase. There's a barrier here too, but it's been moved forward at one side. No-one's around. I step through and start to climb.

The first-floor gallery lights are still out. The overhead light makes striped shadows on the floor. I move in close to the wall, trying to move softly in my heavy boots, and follow the corridor until I come to a pair of glass doors. They are closed but not locked. From inside I can hear small animal sounds, unmistakable. I nod to myself and start to move away.

'RIGHT!!' Halfway down the stairs, I jump so hard I nearly fall down the rest of them. Yellow light glares out through the glass doors. The voice comes again, 'YE DIRTY FUCKIN' BASTARDS!!'

I back away. I'm aware of movement, and faint rustling, along the gallery, and with near-miraculous speed another door opens and two figures are out and hurrying away. Then on the other side of the balcony, three more slipping downstairs. Then ten yards up the corridor, more glass doors swing back and four more men emerge. The first one's a Bowie's regular – we nod to each other quite calmly before he goes down the stairs three at a time. Then two more come out – and the first one's Jamie.

He sees me and stops dead. The man behind him, a younger guy in a red quilted coat, puts his hand on Jamie's shoulder to push him aside. The brightly-lit doors beside me are flung open, and out comes Council-coat, roaring about GETTING THE FUCKIN POLIS ON YE! His face is bright red. He sees the three of us and he stops dead too. Jamie and the other guy are staring at him. They are both a lot taller and younger than he is.

I grab Jamie's arm, smile my brightest smile and trill, 'It's okay! They're with me!' Before Council-coat can answer I get hold of the red-quilted sleeve and start dragging both of them away. 'C'mon, youze two, downstairs now! Let's go and get a cuppy tea!'

All three of us clatter downstairs, with DIRTY WEE BASTARTS! echoing after us. I'm giggling by the time I reach the bottom, but they aren't. We all go straight outside with our coats still undone, and the cold shocks me into silence. The guy in the red jacket pulls away from my hand and bolts as if I were the polis. Jamie sets off in the other direction; I stop to do up my coat, but he grabs me, hard enough to hurt, and pulls me away.

I remember this place as a wine bar. It's changed to (or, presumably, stayed as) a spit-and-sawdust. Actually I like it this way. There's an old-fashioned snug, with wooden booths; and you can get a whisky-and-water for less than a month's salary. I make a start on my second one and smile up at Jamie as he squeezes into the corner booth opposite me. He looks as if he's been sick, and he throws back his whisky in one.

But still, I can't help giggling again. 'I should've known,' I say. 'You. Mr Heterosexual. Don't think so, somehow.'

He's watching me warily. 'I'm not getting the lecture, then?'

'What lecture?'

He laughs shortly. 'The think-of-your-wife-and-child one, for a start.'

'I never said that.' God, was I really such a weirdo, in this world? 'I didn't say that, did I?'

'Maybe not. But you should've.'

'Look.' I lean in, whispering. 'You're gay. You can't help that. You're not going to change that.'

'I love her,' he says very quietly.

'You love Clairey?'

'I love *Katie*.' Does he mean it? He looks like he does. 'And Claire. I love them. You'll not say anything?'

'Course not.' We're quiet for a long time. I'm thinking: Katie. Well. Maybe kids do change things. 'Aye well,' I sigh, 'I suppose what she doesn't know willnae hurt her.'

He doesn't say anything. But there's something, a flicker... 'Jamie – what? You're being careful, aren't you?'

I meant it as careful-discreet, not trying to get off with her brother or anything... but he keeps staring down into his empty glass. 'Jamie,' I say at last, 'you're using condoms, aren't you?'

'...When I can get them.'

It's just occurred to me: I've never seen a machine in the toilets here. Never. 'Jesus Christ, Jamie!'

'I keep her safe,' he says fiercely, 'I'm not stupid...'

'What about *you* being safe?' He doesn't answer. I take his hand. It's still cold. 'Jamie. Promise me. You won't take risks with those guys. You know what I mean.'

'I don't,' he says softly. 'I don't fuck every one of them, y'know. Or I only do it when I've a condom.'

I think he really believes that. I try to believe it too. But tears are still coming to my eyes. But that's all right – we've been drinking and that means you can do stuff like that. 'I couldn't stand it here without you,' I say. 'I couldn't bear to lose you.'

He takes my hand. We sit like that for quite a while.



## Part Two

### *City of Wolves*

**In Scotland, you can't believe how strong the homosexuals are. It's just unbelievable... (Scotland) could go right back to the darkness very easily.**

Pat Robertson<sup>11</sup>

**Bolt and bar the shutter,  
For the foul winds blow:  
Our minds are at their best this night,  
And I seem to know  
That everything outside us is  
*Mad as the mist and snow.***

**'Mad as the Mist and Snow'  
WB Yeats<sup>12</sup>**

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<sup>11</sup> *700 Club*, Christian Broadcasting Network, May 18 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Yeats, p.316.

## Seven

A fugue state.<sup>13</sup>

That's what I've been going into, apparently. No-one's told me so, and Dr Martin is as close-mouthed as ever. But the nurses and the med students suffer from the common delusion that mental illness damages the hearing; they'll talk about my 'case' right in front of me. They shuffle through acres of clip-board paper, reading out phrases: Dissociation Disorder - Derealization – Identity Disorder. Partial Amnesia.

And Fugue State.

I don't mind. The word has a pleasant sound. Fugue. Fyoooooogue. I tell Dr Martin so; she just looks at me like I'm a lab rat. So I ask her direct: 'What does fugue state mean anyway?'

She is surprised into a straight answer. 'Blackouts. Periods of functional amnesia. But that isn't necessarily what's happening to you.'

'Then what is happening to me?'

She doesn't answer, of course. Because she has no idea. How could she? This morning I'm here in the late winter sunshine. Yesterday I was wading home through heavy snow. I laugh to think just how little idea she has.

Then suddenly she says, 'A consultant will be visiting us over the next few weeks. Mister Lisbon.' That's how she says it: *Mister* Lisbon, with an undertone of reverence. 'Has anyone mentioned it to you?'

They have. The med students practically fall to their knees at the mention of him. The *Top Man for the district*, they told me: you could hear the capital letters. 'When's he coming?' I ask Dr Martin.

'We don't know.' She sounds faintly pained. 'He favours surprise visits.'

They said that too. *Turns up out of the blue. You never know the minute...* 'Does he want to talk to me?'

'I suspect you're the reason he's coming, Suzey.'

'That's very flattering. I'll practice my curtsy.'

She doesn't smile. 'Do I have your permission to discuss your case with him?'

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<sup>13</sup> **Dissociative Fugue.** In this condition, amnesia is present, but in addition the person may travel extensive distances and end up in a different place, city or even a different country without any memory of how they got there... If the person is seen during this period, they may have assumed a different identity, having forgotten their real identity and where they live. Sometimes this "fugue" (a word meaning rapid travel) may be triggered by a personal trauma.

Ottawa Anxiety and Trauma Clinic

The 'fugue' state of mind is therefore another good narrative device for destabilizing reality and triggering transition to another world.

'Do you need my permission?'

'Of course.'

I shrug. 'All right. And I'll try to be here.'

'You'll be here, Suzey.'

I laugh at her confidence. 'You have no idea. I could be miles away.'

She looks at me for a long moment. Then she starts to write again. 'I'm increasing your medication, Suzey. We'll get you feeling more settled.'

I'm still laughing about this when I'm out in the corridor.

That night a new pill appears in my white paper cup. I sneak a look at the bottle – it's called Clozaril.<sup>14</sup>

The nurses say they don't know what it's for.

I don't mind. I just close my eyes and sleep...

... and wake up standing in deep snow.

I'm just outside the University, although it must be a lot later than five o'clock. More like seven or eight. Perhaps I've been working late – or seeing Raj. My immediate past is wide open. I laugh, and slide all the way down the hill like a kid.

Better get home, though.

I decide to make my way via the Clydeside. River Street actually leads away from the river; not the quickest way, but it's snowploughed twice a day so it's easier underfoot. And almost all of the streetlights work. I find the small pass through the range of ploughed snow on the kerbside, and step through gingerly onto the almost-black road.

Now I'm exposed to the cold that comes off the river. Strange how something frozen solid can breathe out cold like this. My nose and cheeks begin to ache instantly. I stop, and rewrap my scarf – a moment's touch of ice on my bare throat, then it's covered again - securely over my mouth and nose. The smell of wool is suffocating, but I figure I can do my breathing later. Unfortunately I can't cover my eyes, so I lower my head and push through the cold as if I were fighting against a gale, although the night is still.

After a minute my lungs are starting to hitch, so I tug the scarf slightly away from my face and drag in the air as fast as possible, hoping to heat it up by the time it reaches my

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<sup>14</sup> An anti-psychotic drug, used to prevent hallucinations and delusions. I considered having someone say archly, 'There you go, Suzey, that'll stop you seeing things that aren't there,' but thankfully I thought better of it.



mouth. I succeed, partially. Then I carry on, clumping along the icy tarmac and thinking warm grateful thoughts about the thick gripping soles of my boots. In another few minutes I have to do the coming-up-for-air thing again; then I retie my scarf.

All this of course I do without raising my eyes. A pale shape comes into my line of vision, trotting towards me, no more than ten yards away.

I stop dead. It stops too, and looks at me. There is no way this is a dog. The legs are too long. Its eyes are pale, the shade indeterminate under the cold street-lighting, but not a dog's warm chocolate-brown. I'm recalling seeing wolves before, loping around their enclosure in the zoo. They were well cared-for, but they still looked thin. There was raw meat on the ground but still they circled, moving easily in a pack, eyes bright and tongues lolling. Their fur was short and sleek.

But the wolf in front of me is shaggy as a bear, dark grey about its head and flanks, white all down its lanky legs. It's carrying something, some light-coloured fabric –

It's holding a baby in its mouth.

I hear myself make a whimpering noise. There is warmth spreading between my legs, and some distant part of me wishing I'd gone back for a pee before I left the Uni. But of course that doesn't matter. The baby is half-wrapped in a blanket. The wolf has hold of it by the leg. There is nothing behind me but a mound of snow and then a blank wall. The wolf is still looking at me. Shakes its head just a little, to get a better grip, its jaws make a gnashing sound. There is a horrible cry, *Maaaa-maaa!* Now I hear myself scream, high-pitched and girly, not my voice at all.

The wolf leaps backwards on all fours, like a lamb. The baby clatters to the ground, the blanket falls across its twisted legs. The wolf turns and canters away. It pauses, glances back at me once more, then turns toward the river and disappears through the bank of snow.

I don't want to look at what's on the ground in front of me. I concentrate on getting out my mobile, fumbling till I switch it on – still *NO SIGNAL*, but that's alright, I'll run. I'll turn and run, I'll get help... Then there's another *Maaaa-maaa!* So I look. Yellow curls, rosebud smiling lips. Eyes closed. Flowery frock with one sleeve torn off, so the join between the arm and shoulder is visible. I step forward, grasp the plastic arm and lift; there's an obliging *Maaaa-maaa!* and a click as the blue eyes roll open.

'Oh thank fuck. Oh fuck's sake...' My voice trails off into laughter. I look up the road after the wolf. 'You stupid fucker. What did you want a doll for, for God's sake? Christmas present?'

The road remains empty. Still holding the doll, I go to where the wolf disappeared into the snow-bank. There's a dip in the snow, and beyond that a broken place in the wall. I climb over and look out over the river. After a moment I can make out a grey shape moving

across the ice. The wolf stops and looks back at me, resentfully, or so it seems. 'What the fuck did you think you were doing?' I call after it. It ducks its head and carries on, disappearing into the darkness on the North side of the river.

I realise I'm still warm and squishy. I've pissed myself. I stop laughing. Very fucking heroic, Suzey. When I get home I'll have to go straight upstairs before anyone sees me. My legs are still shaking. Shit, crap, fuck, hell...

It takes a long time to walk home.

Fortunately, when I fall through the door, there's no-one in the kitchen but Clair. She sees the doll I'm still clutching and her eyes widen with childish greed. 'Dowwy!'

'Dolly,' I agree, shoving the doll into her grasping little hands, and fleeing upstairs as she disappears into the living-room. I hear Mum call hello, but I don't stop. I make it to the bathroom and lock the door before I hear Katie's shriek from downstairs. She must have found the teeth-marks in her daughter's new toy. But I ignore her, strip off my bottom layer of clothes, throw them into the bath and wrap a threadbare towel around my middle. Only then, with voices calling my name and footsteps on the stairs, do I let myself sit down hard on the floor and start shaking.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> This scene shows a realistic version of a wolf – a wild animal which shies away from human contact. It forms a contrast with the human idea of 'Wolf', the personification of ferocious savagery. In Norse mythology the wolf is the Beast, the sun-devouring monster of the Apocalypse.



Next morning I wake up with a jump. Something was chasing me in my dream, but I've already forgotten what.

I look up and find I'm still in my own single bed, staring at my old Queen Amidala poster. The tip of my nose is still freezing. I squint at my alarm clock; it's half-ten on a Saturday morning, and I'm looking forward to another wonderful day washing in cold water and staring out at the snow. Only one thing for it. I'm going back to sleep.

No luck. My face is freezing, my bladder is full and my stomach's empty. I reach out from under the covers, drag my tracksuit trousers under the duvet and struggle into them. My fleece and dressing-gown are too far away; so it's up into that bracing air, pile on as many clothes I can find and make a run for the bathroom. Hop and skip across the floor tiles, bare as little flesh as possible to do my business – it's like pulling down your pants on an ice-rink - then dry and cover up and, finally, hurry downstairs into the warmth of the kitchen.

I can hear Katie's voice in the living-room. Doesn't she ever go home? While I'm buttering the toast there's the usual Eric Morcambe scrabbling-about at the bottom of the curtains, and Clairey emerges, holding the doll by its punctured leg. When she's sure I'm watching she cradles it in her arms and starts rocking it rather violently, crooning '*baby baby, baby baby, baby baby...*' 'Hiya wee mummy,' I say.

She giggles happily. 'Baby!'

'Is that your baby?'

'Ma baby!'

'She's a lovely baby.' Right, that's my conversation exhausted. 'Come and we'll go into the living room and show Mummy and Granny?'

'Yeh!' Off she goes. I follow, looking down at her dark silky head; once again feeling absurdly pleased with myself, as if I've gotten a wild animal to trust me. She barges into the room ahead of me and rushes across to my mother, who is sitting by the fireside with, not to put too fine a point on it, a face like fizz. Clairey must see this, because she veers off towards Katie, who is sitting opposite staring into the fire. Bad move: as soon as Katie sees her, she grabs hold of the doll and starts tugging. 'No! Leave it! Dirty!'

Clairey shrieks as the doll is pulled away from her. Then there's that three-second silence while she sucks gallons of air into her lungs, and then – 'WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH-AH-AAAAAH!!!!' My God, you could tape it and use it as a fire-bell. My mother speaks over the howling to me. 'Oh *there* you are...'



I know this voice – it means she thought of something to say to me hours ago, while I was ‘still in my lazy bed’, and I wasn’t clairvoyant enough to hear her in my dreams. ‘Forgot the toast,’ I call, go back to the kitchen and wait till the kettle’s boiled.

When I finally go back, we’re at the stage of heart-rending sobs and reaching pathetically towards the high shelf where the doll has been deposited. A tear-stained face is turned to me beseechingly – ‘*Bay-beeeeeeeee!*’ - I look at Katie but she’s just staring at the fire again. ‘I’ll wash the damn doll for you, if you like,’ I say, as pleasantly as I can manage.

Katie gets up, takes the doll and thrusts it at Claire – ‘*Here!*’ – and sits back down again. In the sudden silence, I realise I’ve walked into an Atmosphere. My mother is glaring at me. ‘I don’t suppose *you’ve* seen your brother?’

What, in the kitchen? No, better keep that one to myself. ‘No, I’ve not. Why?’

‘*Why? Why do you think?*’

Oh, my God. I lift Claire onto my lap, to cover a moment’s silence. ‘How should I know?’

‘Cause he’s bugged off. Again.’ I keep very quiet. ‘Since first thing this morning. Not a word since.’

‘He’ll not have gone far,’ says Katie, apologetically.

‘That’s nothing to do with it. This is getting beyond a joke.’

‘He works hard. He’s allowed to meet up with his pals at the weekend.’

There didn’t seem to be anything weighted about that statement. I relax a little. Besides, she’s probably right, he wouldn’t go off cottaging in the morning, would he? Mum’s still talking: ‘Don’t keep making excuses for him. This isn’t nineteen-canteen. He’s to take the burden off you once in a while.’

She looks to me as if for confirmation. I get the sudden impression that this conversation happens regularly; and what’s more, it’s usually three-sided. ‘Well, he does work hard,’ I mumble.

They both look at me in surprise. What the hell do usually say to them? Whose side do I take? ‘But... it’s still not right though...’

I trail off. I’ve always assumed Katie was one of the old school of Glaswegian females, who expect their menfolk to come and go like cats. But now there are tears in her eyes, and I haven’t been so shocked since I saw their wedding-picture. ‘I just wish I knew where he went,’ she whispers.

I get very busy straightening Clairey’s clothes. After a while I hear my mum say, ‘He’ll need to pull his socks up, that’s all.’

‘I’ll have a word with him,’ I say.

Surprise again; but this time, from Katie, a smile. 'Thanks. He'll take it coming from you.'

'I'm his big sister,' I say jovially, 'he'll not dare do anything else.'

We all laugh a little. Then Katie, smiling and a bit embarrassed, mutters something about the kettle and goes out. I start rebuttoning Claire's cardigan, although it doesn't need it. Mum's eyes are drilling into my head, but I'm not going to look up. I wonder just what she knows –

'Oh God!' Katie's voice makes us all jump. She's still out in the hall. I think: she's found a condom in his coat pocket. Then I remember Jamie's not here, so his coat can't be either – and when Katie comes back in, she's pointing to the newspaper in her hand. 'Look!'

She holds it out to me. Clairey slides off my lap, apprehends the paper for a second before it's whipped away. 'Doggy!'

It's the *Standard*. I take it reluctantly, already feeling the oily newsprint rubbing off on my fingers. On the front page is a picture of a snarling wolf, with blood clumsily CGI'd all over its teeth. And – oh, hell...

*WOLF SNATCHES BABY. Glasgow woman: 'I Heard Cry from the Jaws of Death'.*

'What?' Mum's already looking over my shoulder, but I still read aloud: *Reports flooded in last night of a wolf seen prowling the streets – CARRYING A BABY.*

*Three women saw the horrific sight while crossing Bells Bridge. A huge WOLF - with a helpless infant DANGLING FROM ITS JAWS.*

*'I heard her cry out', sobbed Kelly McGuire, 23. 'It will stay with me as long as I live...'*

After this I skim. *A tiny pink dress... no missing babes reported as yet but phone lines... police asking for... please call...* until finally I get to the hotline number. 'Is the phone working?' I say to Mum. 'See us it over, then...'

An hour later and the morning has become a lot more interesting. There are two police cars outside. The neighbours have given up curtain-twitching and are standing in their open doorways to gawp, apparently oblivious to the cold. Four huge policemen, with crackling radios and uniform snow-jackets, are in our living-room. Three of them are happily ensconced on the couch drinking tea, their unsubtle hints about the 'cold day' having been taken. The other one is picking up the doll: 'This the victim?'

'Don't tell me,' I say. 'I shouldn't have moved the body?'

'S'all right,' he's wagging a finger through the largest toothmark, 'we'll get the guy on his dental records.' We are all in a very jolly mood. Mum and Katie are smiling. Even Clairey, who happily exchanged the doll for a shot of the policeman's radio, is giggling, playing



peek-a-boo and generally flirting outrageously with these four strange men. I think, that's our girl.

Then the door bangs open and Jamie is there, white in the face. The polis go quiet and look at him, like terriers who think he's going to run. 'It's okay, everyone's fine,' says Katie, and then we're all explaining and reassuring. A few minutes later he's in a chair with Claire on his lap, saying, 'the polis cars. I don't know what I thought', and everything's fine. But the party's over; the polis are draining their mugs and heading for the door. We cluster in the hallway to wave bye-bye, chattering in the cold.

There are other people outside, waiting to come in. One of the cops calls over his shoulder: 'Press is here.'

Finally they're gone. Most of them looked like their mums didn't know they're out anyway – apparently this story doesn't merit the senior journos. They perked up when they heard how I 'faced down' the wolf, though. They wanted pictures; I insisted on nipping upstairs to change first, and while I was there I switched on the electric fire, both bars. Then I stood around holding up the 'baby' and sticking my fingers through the holes in its plastic leg while they snapped away. 'This going to be on the front page?' I asked.

Maybe, they all said. Not likely, I thought. But the guy from the *Herald* was smirking at the guy from the *Standard*. So it might get a good few columns in the *Herald*, if only to piss off the *Standard*, which was apparently the only rag to lead on the baby-eating wolf thing. Anyway, at last they've all gone, leaving us all looking at each other in the sudden silence.

Katie goes into the kitchen, and we can all hear the water gushing into the kettle. Works every time: within seconds, Jamie's off for a piss. When I hear the bathroom door closing, I head upstairs – I can hear Claire trying to follow me, but my mum's luring her back with sweeties. I wait in my room, which is now tolerably warm because of the electric fire. When Jamie emerges I call softly, 'Can I have a word?'

He follows me into the room, glancing from me to the stairs and back again. He's guessing that the womenfolk have manipulated him – he's a little annoyed, but he's smiling. For some reason this pisses me off. 'I need to speak to you,' I begin, closing the door behind him.

When he hears my tone the smile vanishes. He sits down hard on the edge of the bed. 'What...?'



'It's all right, it's nothing to do with that.' I'm not speaking loudly, but he's looking wildly at the door as if he expects someone to be pressed up against it with a glass. 'It's okay,' I add, 'I had the polis sweep for bugs while they were here.'

Smiles again. 'So what is it?'

'It's about your wife.' Once more, it's harsher than I intended.

'What about her?' He's being harsh back.

'She's wants to spend a bit of time with you, that's what. Where the hell were you?'

His face has gone very cold. 'I thought you said you were okay about this.'

'What, so you *were* out trolling? First thing on a Saturday?' I laugh a little. 'You horny wee so-and-so!'

He just stares at me. 'So this is the talk after all?'

'No... it's a talk, that's all - '

'So I should be thinking of my wife and child, shouldn't I?'

'Well, yes. Katie's upset.'

'Oh, yeah, that's right. I'll just change my whole fucking nature overnight, shall I?'

'That's not what I'm saying - '

'Oh, is it not?'

'No, it's not.' What the fuck is he yelling at me for? 'Don't pull that gay martyr shit on me -'

'Ssh!'

I lower my voice. 'If you're going to have a wife then treat her like one. I don't want her crying in my living-room every other day because her husband won't - '

'Crying?'

'Yes, crying.'

He sits forward, rubbing his forehead with his thumbs the way I do when I've a headache coming on. 'Aye well. I'll talk to her.'

'She just wants you around a bit more. She's stuck with a kid all the time, it's not fair.'

'I know.'

The thumbs are still rubbing away. After a moment I say, 'Is there no way you can just... I mean, it's not right. Wouldn't it be better if you started telling folk about it?'

He gives me a look of astonishment, almost pity. 'No. It wouldn't.'

'Look.' I'm not giving up yet. 'You told me something once. While you were coming out - '

'This is in your other world, is it?'

'As a matter of fact, yes. Don't interrupt. You told me it's better to be hated for what you are, than loved for what you're not.'

A long pause. Then: 'That's the stupidest fucking thing I ever heard, Suzey.'

'Well you said it.'

'No I didn't.'

'Och anyway. You know what I mean.' He's smirking slightly, which is annoying, but at least it's a smile. 'Will you think about it?'

'I don't need to think about it.' He really is smiling now. 'I'm not getting loved for what I'm not. I love my wife and I love my daughter. Being – ' he glances at the door ' - being bisexual's got nothing to do with it.'

*Bisexual?* I give up. If he wants to be King of Denial, that's up to him. I suppose there are worse ways to live. 'Okay,' I say, 'let's get downstairs before they think I've killed you.'

He stays sitting down, not meeting my eyes. I wait. Eventually he says, 'I can't help it. I really can't.'

'Yeah, I know.'

'Okay.' That seems to cover everything. After a moment he gets up and gives me a hug. Then we hear footsteps on the stairs, and he lets go and opens the door. Katie is just stepping onto the top landing. She smiles nervously and indicates she's going into the bathroom, which she would never do if she actually was going in there. Jamie stops her and puts his arms around her, murmuring something and drawing her close. I squeeze past them and go downstairs.

At the bottom I meet Clairey, who's clambering determinedly upwards. I say, 'Come we'll go and see Granny?'

She shakes her head. 'Mumma!'

'Leave Mummy just now.'

'Mumma. Mumma, *Mumma!!*'

She's trying to push past me. In desperation I say, 'Want to come and play outside?'

She stops. 'Side?'

'Side,' I confirm. 'Go on, away and put your wellies on...'

It takes a lot of running and giggling, but I finally get her suited up and out the back door. Before I close the door I look back longingly into the nice warm kitchen; I'm freezing my arse off so those two can have their tender moment together, they'd better bloody appreciate it... But Clairey is pulling at my trouser leg. 'Anny Too!'

I turn around: the garden is a pure white page of undisturbed snow. I'd intended a quick run around the house, then back in as soon as possible... oh, what the hell. 'Watch this,' I tell Clairey; then I turn and lie down gingerly on my back, and sweep my arms and legs along as far as they'll go. 'Snow angels!'



I do it twice, then I try to show her how; but she just keeps flinging herself on top of me and giggling. Then she wades off into the deeper snow, her little jester-hat bobbing - she looks like a tiny Viking.

Then she disappears. Even the hat is gone. I flounder after her - good grief, where has she... but there she is, wheeling her arms around to push off the snow, looking up at me and laughing.

As I haul her out she struggles out of her topmost fleece, letting it fall as she runs back towards the door. She doesn't go in, though - she flings herself full-length into the snow between my two angels. As she scrambles out again she whips off her hat and throws it down, all the time looking me in eye and giggling. Ah - a challenge. I pick up the hat and chase her in and out of the snow angels, growling like a grizzly bear.

By now the light's starting to fade. So I get a candle out of the kitchen and set it up in the snow; then roll up a dozen profiterole-sized snowballs, and build a circular tower around the candle. 'Watch this,' I tell her, trying to hold her back so she doesn't kick the whole thing over. 'Snow lantern.'<sup>16</sup>

Then I light the candle (on the fourth match - she keeps blowing them out) and sit back. The tower glows in the twilight, pale and gold. In the chinks between the snowballs we can see the little flame wobbling. Claire makes a cooing sound like a pigeon. I ask, 'Pretty?'

'Pitty!'

'That's a snow lantern.'

'No lantah!'

'Close enough.' While she's distracted I try to put the hat back on her. She brushes it off impatiently; I give up after a couple of goes. She doesn't seem bothered by the cold anyway. I watch her for a moment - the pale clear skin an adult would kill for, set off by dark hair and lashes - the eyes dark grey in the firelight, bright and fearless, as she looks at the shadows beyond the lantern and laughs. And why shouldn't she? This is her world. 'Come on, snow-baby,' I say. 'Let's get you inside before you freeze.'

She twists out of my grip and scuttles off, still giggling. Obviously I'll freeze a lot sooner than she will. Fortunately the back door now opens a crack, and Katie's voice calls: 'Clairey?'

'Mumma Mumma!' Off she goes, with me trailing gratefully behind. She pushes through the crack of the door, yelling, 'Mumma, no lantah! Dadda! No lantah!'

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<sup>16</sup> The snow lantern comes from Tove Jansson's *Moominland Midwinter* (p. 24), Suzey's favourite book from childhood (and mine). In the first draft of this scene, Suzey reads *Moominland* to Claire, but the scene became too drawn-out and unfortunately had to be cut down for the sake of story dynamics.



'Snow lantern,' I translate, following her in. Katie and Jamie are standing together; his arm is around her shoulder as she bends to pick up Clairey. He meets my eye and smiles. Katie straightens up as I close the door, and she smiles too: she is so beautiful it makes me stop and stare. She says to the wriggling bundle in her arms, 'Were you playing out with Aunty Sue?'

'Yeh!'

'That was awful nice of Aunty Sue, wasn't it?' She leans into Jamie; he puts his free arm under hers, so that they're both holding Clairey. If these three got any more adorable they could be on a Christmas card. Clairey is pulling at Jamie's fleece and pointing to the door. 'Lantah! Dadda!'

'Yes, it's lovely, isn't it?'

She's getting more insistent. 'No lantah, Dadda! Side!'

'No, it's getting a bit late now, pet –'

The bottom lip is starting to tremble. 'Side, Dadda! Siiiide...'

Jamie sighs, and starts looking around for his boots. I give him Clairey's hat. 'All yours, Daddy.' Then I retreat, gratefully, into the living-room.

## Eight

The University Refectory is a high-roofed, draughty old hall. It is, according to the University handbook, steeped in history; at the moment it just looks steeped in dust. The long windows are boarded up except for the top arches; white daylight illuminates only the ceiling, so the yellow lights are shining down dimly. The cheap tables seat four at most, but here and there have been dragged together to seat eight, ten, sixteen. A few students are grouped around them, feet up on the chairs opposite to keep their ankles out of the floor-level draught. A long counter stands at the back: through the door behind it come steam, echoes of pots and pans, some laughter.

I get a table near the counter, where it's warm. The table's wobbly, and half my watery coffee ends up in the saucer; I tip it back in hastily, not because I want to drink the foul stuff, but because I've got both hands clutched around the cup for warmth. I take away

one hand long enough to pick up the tiny, solid-looking scone I've just bought, and have a bite: heavy, and tastes of rhubarb. It's going to sit on my stomach like lead.

I'm going to damn well sit here and eat it, though. It's my tea break; they've sent me to take it early, and I'm not hurrying back. The office isn't busy this time of year, but everyone's been bitching at each other all morning. Despite my efforts to be nice to Katie, she's been a torn-faced cow since I got in. I stare into space. They can damn well kill each other without me for a while.

The door squeals horribly as someone comes in. It's Raj Chaudhury. I wave; he smiles, collects a cup of even more watery tea, and heads towards me. The floorboards creak and squeal. The students look up, although the floor made just as much noise when they came in. He points at the seat beside me: 'May I join you?'

'Please.' He sits in the creaky chair as I cut the scone in two and offer him half. 'I wanted a chocolate biscuit, but they haven't got any.'

'Chocolate is harder to get hold of these days.'

I groan. 'This really is hell. Some scone, then?'

'Maybe not.' He watches me take another rhubarby nibble. 'How are you today? Apart from risking serious indigestion?'

'Okay. Have you seen the paper?'

'No.' He watches me fish out the *Standard*. 'I'm sorry, I thought you meant a newspaper.'

'You're not a fan, then?'

'A delightful work of fiction.' He flattens his palm against the headline; lifts his hand, shows me the inky smuts. 'A newspaper that gets you dirty just reading it. The irony is often noted. But not often enough, in my opinion.'

'How often would that be?'

'Every day, I suppose.'

'So they should just put *we are dirty bastards* under the title?'

'Those would be the first honest words they've ever printed.'

I love this guy. He's posh *and* crazy. 'Look at this,' I say, pointing out the small unobtrusive article on page eight: *Wolf Baby 'Only a Doll'*. The text gives only the bare facts, and there's no picture. But Raj catches on fast. 'A "local woman"? Is that you?'

'Yup.'

He reads the article. 'Wolves are timid creatures,' he says at last. 'It was probably more afraid than you were.'

I wouldn't put money on that, but I just say: 'I thought they were all up in the Highlands somewhere. God knows what the thing was doing round here.'

'They're scavengers. At least in winter. They live on scraps and rubbish.'

'And folk with occult symbols written all over them.'

He grimaces. 'I take it you mean the so-called Odinists.'

'That's the ones.' I wait till he's got a mouthful of tea and add innocently, 'though I always thought that had something to do with masturbation.'

He chokes. 'That's *Onanism*. Not Odinism...' he sees me grinning, 'as you're well aware. Do you often entertain colleagues just to make fun of them?'

He's smiling, though. The skin around his eyes crinkles up when he smiles. I say, 'Most of my colleagues aren't nearly enough fun.'

'I'm happy I amuse you.'

We smile at each other for a moment: then it starts to feel awkward. I drop my eyes, try to think of something to say... my eyes land on a familiar picture in the paper. 'He must be disappointed,' I say.

'Who?'

'Him.' I show him the photo of Matthew McLean. 'Baby-eating wolves would be right up his street. Did you read his thing on the horrors of paganism? According to him it's an Odinist tradition to throw human sacrifices to packs of wolves.'

'Ridiculous,' says Raj.

'Isn't it.'

'They hung their sacrifices from trees, they didn't give them to wolves.'<sup>17</sup>

It's my turn to choke. He looks smug. I scowl at him. 'Not funny.'

But I still don't want to go back to the office.

I have to in the end, though.

When I come in the whole Registry has gone quiet. Everyone's staring fixedly at their screens or their desks: no-one looks up as I go to my seat. Ellen, the woman who sits opposite me, glances at me and smiles wanly, without meeting my eyes.

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<sup>17</sup> In the holy grove at Upsala men and animals were sacrificed by being hanged upon the sacred trees. The human victims dedicated to Odin were regularly put to death by hanging or by a combination of hanging and stabbing, the man being strung up to a tree or a gallows and then wounded with a spear.

Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, Chapter XXXVI, p.412.

Modern Odinism involves no blood sacrifice, but ancient practices appear to have been much less benign. Tacitus and Adam of Bremen both report this form of human sacrifice (see *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 'Germanic Religion and Mythology', and University of Pittsburgh website, 'The Heathen Temple at Uppsala'). The (strikingly Christ-like) mode of killing was intended to imitate Odin's self-sacrifice - Odin hanged himself from the Yggdrasil, the World Tree, to gain divine wisdom.



I'm about to say something when someone's standing beside me. Katie. 'You've to go on through to see Hugh, Suzey,' she says. She won't look me in the eye either.

I look up; Hugh Munroe is standing in the doorway of his office. He nods at me. I turn to Katie: she goes to say something then changes her mind. So I get up and head over to Hugh's office, threading my way through people who won't look up at me.

Hugh closes the door behind me and retreats behind his desk. There's already someone there, in a chair beside his; a middle-aged woman who looks familiar. She gives me a reserved smile. 'Please sit down, Suzey.'

There's a chair in front of the desk; I sit. Hugh clears his throat. 'Suzey, do you know Hannah Bradbury? From Personnel?'

I nod hello. 'What's going on, Hugh?' I say. Although by now I think I've guessed. I grip my hands together in my lap so they won't get shaky.

Hugh clears his throat again. 'Suzey. We know you've been ill lately. We sympathize. But I'm sorry to have to tell you that we have to let you go.'

'But...' It's a dream, I shouldn't even care. But my eyes are starting to prickle. '...I've been ill. It's not my fault, is it?'

'No, of course not – ' Hugh begins, but Hannah cuts in. 'We do sympathise, Suzey. But your work hasn't been up to standard – '

'Since when?' I stare at Hugh, who has the decency to look abashed. 'Since you came back,' he says, 'from your time, uh...'

'Being dead?'

'Since you were away.'

'You never said anything.'

'Well.' He looks at the desk. 'Nevertheless...'

Hannah breaks in again, quite gently. 'You're having these health problems, Suzey. This work is demanding and we don't think you should be under that kind of pressure.'

'So you're putting me on sick leave, then?'

'The work needs to get done, Suzey.' Hugh again. 'I'm sorry.'

I take a deep breath. 'If there's a problem with my work you should have said something. You didn't. There's meant to be verbal warning then written warning. Isn't there?' I look at Hannah.

She shakes her head. 'I'm sorry.'

'Look. Now I know there's a problem I can do something about it. You should have said...'

'We're sorry, Suzey.'

I look from one to the other. They're not going to budge. My eyes are starting to fill up now, but these bastards aren't going to see me cry. I get up, steadying myself against the back of the chair. 'You've not heard the end of this,' I say, although it comes out squeaky and pitiful. So I take another deep breath, and walk out. Behind me Hannah calls out, 'We hope you feel better soon – ' before I slam the door behind me.

I go to my desk without looking left or right. I can tell that some people are actually looking at me now, but I don't meet their eyes. I pack all my stuff together, the comb and biscuits in the desk drawer, the pictures stuck to my tiny space on the wall. It seems to take ages. I'm trying to cram everything into my handbag, but it keeps falling out. After a while someone puts a plastic bag in front of me; I don't look up to see who it was, but I throw all the junk into it anyway.

Then it's time. I've worked with these people for five years, I should say something... but I've got to get out. 'Bye,' I say. Several voices reply, a hand reaches out. If I take it I really will burst into tears. 'Cheerio,' I whisper, and leave. On the way I see Hugh and Hannah standing in the doorway with Katie. I don't acknowledge them, just let the door swing shut behind me.

It doesn't close all the way. Katie's right behind me. 'I'm awful sorry, Suzey,' she says. 'Please don't – '

'Did you know about this?'

'I... I knew it might happen, but I wasn't sure – '

'You weren't *sure*?'

'I mean, I didn't think it would all come to a head so quickly.'

'Unbelievable.' I start struggling into my outdoor clothes. 'Fucking unbelievable. Well, I'm not letting them away with this. I'll go to the union. I'll go to the law, they can't just sack me cause my face doesn't fit any more...'

But I can tell from the look of disgusting pity on her face that they can do just that. 'Hell with it,' I say, and head for the door.

'Don't run off.' Katie tries to catch at my arm.

'I'm not going to vandalise anything. You don't have to march me off the premises.'

'That's not it. I just want to see you get home okay...'

'Why? So no-one gets sued if I jump off a bridge?'

'Please, Suzey,' she says. She's crossed her arms across her chest; I realize she's standing out in the chilly hallway without even a jacket on. 'Just go on back in,' I say. 'I'm fine.'

I leave before she can answer.

As I stomp away from the main gates I come to a decision: fuck the lot of them. Fire me? Just saved me the bother of walking. It was a shitty job anyway. Time for something better. I'll show them...

I was heading for home, but I abruptly change direction. Strike while the iron's hot, I think. Off to the job center.

The job center is packed.

I've to stand in the queue, which loops back on itself around the notice-boards, so that no-one has to stand outside in the cold. Even so there's a blast of freezing air every time the door opens. Everyone in the queue keeps their outdoor clothes half-on. Snow stamped from boots makes slushy brown puddles on the floor. At the end of the queue, the notice-boards block the view of the counter; people stand on tip-toe every so often to see how fast the counter staff are working. Or maybe just to gaze in rapturous envy at the employed people, in their blessed job-full state.

As I wait, I read the cards posted on the boards. Although there aren't many of them. And they all want some expertise I haven't got – plumbing, electronics, childcare. No admin or clerical. Maybe there'll be some later on, I say to myself, ignoring the churning in my stomach.

We get to another notice-board. Nothing.

The guy in front of me is looking over a piece of paper. His CV, I realize. I don't even have one... but cheer up, girl, you can get one. This one looks well laid-out, you can copy it. I read over the guy's shoulder. My eye is drawn to 'Education'.

The guy's got a degree. A good one, a 2:1 Honours from Glasgow Uni. And he's still queuing up in a job center. Beside me, with my barely-completed HND. And *he's* having bother finding a job...

I leave my place in the queue and rush out into the hallway. A sign points to *Toilets* – I make a run for the Ladies. It's cold and grubby-looking, and the smell of piss competes with the stink of industrial-strength toilet cleaner. But it's empty.

My head hurts. I lean over the sink and rest my forehead against the cold mirror. I think: Right. Enough. This isn't fun any more.

Time to wake up.

I shut my eyes, and dunt my forehead gently against the glass. Make the headache worse, that's it. Trauma, that'll trigger it. Dunt that head again. And yes, breathe in those fumes, everything helps.

*Wake up. Wake up.*



The toilet-cleaner smell is chokingly strong. It makes me queasy. The room is a fridge, chilly white tiles and cracked sinks. Yes.

Time to go back. *Wake up...*

I open my eyes. There's just gloom, darkness with light around the edge.

I close my eyes again, screwing them tight shut. Count to ten. Slowly open them again.

Still gloom fading into light. I lift my head. I know what I'm going to see: there's no closing out that smell. But I look anyway, into my own reflected face, with its gaping mouth and pallid skin. The mirror has left a red mark on my forehead.

I'm still in the Ladies beside the packed job center. Still here.

I start to cry properly. I want to go home. I don't want to be here. It's not real.

But I can still see and smell this squalid little room, and there is *no way* it doesn't exist.

I still feel fired. And I cannot believe for one minute that this feeling isn't real.

This is it. I'm stuck here.

I start to cry. After a while the door creaks open – a woman looks in at me, mumbles an apology and withdraws again.

I lean against the sink, and cry and cry.

## Nine

I've discovered another reason my niece is wonderful: my mother can't have full-blown connaptions in her presence. She bounces Claire on her knee and hisses to me over the top of her head, 'What d'you mean, *sacked*? What did you do?'

'Nothing.'

'They can't just sack you for nothing. Didn't you tell them you were ill?'

'Of course I did. They said my work hadn't been up to scratch since I got back.'

Wrong thing to say. 'That's all that skiving off you've been doing. Always all over the place talking to God-knows-who. Well, you'll just have to say you'll try harder.'

'I've already said that.'

'You can't just sit here and do nothing, you know. My pension won't cover it. You'll just have to pull your socks up, Suzey –'

'Oh for Christ's sake –'

'Don't speak to me like that.'

'They kicked me out after a few days. They didn't give me any warning. They sacked me 'cause I'm *weird*, all right?'

Her lips tighten: she doesn't believe me. Claire has stopped messing around with Mum's blouse buttons and is watching us, owl-eyed, her thumb firmly corked in her mouth. Mum says, 'I think you should phone them.'

'What the hell do you want me to say?'

'Just say what's happened.'

'They *know* what –' We both jump as an electronic bell rings. Claire says excitedly, 'Teffylone!'

I pick it up, glad for the break in conversation. 'Hello?'

A young female voice, friendly and businesslike. 'Hello, is that Susan Pherson?'

'Yes.'

'This is Shelley Fisher. I'm calling on behalf of Anita Black?'

'Who?'

'Anita Black.' A note of surprise. 'From the *Glasgow Standard*?'

Mum's frantically mouthing *Is it them?* I wave her away. 'We've already got a subscription, thanks.'

A moment's incredulous silence: then a laugh. Obviously I'm just having a wee joke. 'So anyway. Anita would like to do an interview with you. Would you be able to come in today?'

'An interview?' I'm getting further behind every minute. 'What for?'

'Because of you with that wolf?' She's speaking slowly and clearly now. 'The wolf you chased away? Anita would love to talk to you about it.'

'Hang on.' I put my hand over the mouthpiece, even though I know it never properly muffles the sound. I whisper to Mum, 'Anita Black? Heard of her?'

Mum's nodding vigorously. I speak into the phone again. 'Well. I'm not sure about this. I mean, ' I laugh, 'would I get paid or anything?'

'Of course.'

'Um... how much?'

'The usual fee.' She names a figure. It's as much as I make in two months. When I can speak again I say, 'Well, okay then. Yes, I'll do it.'

'Great. Two o'clock today?'

'Yes. Fine.'

'At the *Standard* Building? You know it?'

'Um, I'll find it.'

'See you then.'

'Okay. Bye.' I hang up. Mum says immediately, 'What? What?'

I sit back, feeling my shoulders relax. The blessed state of solvency; temporary, but good enough for today. 'I'm going to be in the paper,' I say.

'Again? What for?'

'The wolf thing.'

'What else could you tell them about that?'

'Don't know. Don't care. D'you want to hear what they're paying me?'

I tell her. Her eyes go as big as Clairey's.

Later, when Mum and Clairey are upstairs doing something related to toilet-training (I don't want to know), I call the University switchboard. It rings and rings. Just when I'm starting to think they've got some software that blocks calls from ex-employees, it gets answered. And for once, they put me straight through, and he answers on the second ring. 'Earth Sciences.'

'Raj,' I say, 'you're going to hate me.'

'Suzey. Why would I do that?'

'I'm going to be in the *Standard*. But what can you expect from an unemployed waster like me?'

'Pardon?'

So I tell him. Afterward he says, 'I'm sorry.'



'About the job, or the *Standard*?'

'Both, actually.'

'Aye, well. Pride goes out the window when you're skint.'

'I know. I'm sorry.'

There's a pause. At last he says, 'Although the interview could work to your advantage, of course.'

'Oh?'

'Tell the reporter the University fired you while you were still in shock. After meeting the wolf. Bad publicity for the University.'

'You think they might offer me my job back?'

'It's possible.'

I sigh happily. 'I was hoping you'd say that.'

'You'd already thought of it?'

'Yes. But I wanted a second opinion. Plus it's a bit sneaky, isn't it?'

He sounds amused. 'So you wanted the affirmation of another sneaky person?'

'Yup. You've encouraged me now. I can say it was peer pressure. Really, though... wouldn't I get done for libel or something?'

'Just tell the reporter what happened. Look brave and tragic. People will fill in the blanks themselves.'

I laugh. 'D'you think I can do brave and tragic?'

'Suzey,' he says, 'you've come back from the dead. What can't you do?'

'Yes. Yes, I suppose so. Look, are you okay to have this conversation on the University line? No-one can listen in or anything?'

'You're right. Next time we'll meet in the park by the duck-pond. Exchange identical briefcases.'

'You're mental, you are. And I should know.'

When we're finished laughing, there's a pause. 'Well,' I say at last, 'I'll let you get on.'

'Yes.' He hesitates for a moment, but then just says: 'Goodbye, then. Let me know how you get on.'

'Bye.'

'Bye.'

## Ten

The lobby of the *Standard* building is smart and shiny. I let the heavy door whisper shut, and already the cold outside is just a memory. The walls are a tasteful cream, decorated with large framed photographs: black-and-white shots of politicians, colorful pictures of children, landscapes, grinning celebrities and waving royals. Against the far wall is a long reception desk. Above it hangs a huge heraldic-looking sign: the *Glasgow Standard* logo traced in gold and purple. Wrapped around are the smaller gilded words of a motto: TELL THE TRUTH • AND SHAME THE DEVIL. I cross the lobby, already overheated and clumsy, my wet heavy boots shlup-shlupping on the polished floor.

A heavily made-up receptionist is looking down a list of computer print-out, and does not appear to see me. Like hell – I've worked in places like this, and I know fine she's just de-prioritised me because my clothes don't look expensive. 'Excuse me,' I say loudly, 'I've an appointment with Anita Black.'

She looks at me like she doubts it; but checks her list anyway. 'Name?'

'Susan Pherson.' Even upside-down, I can see my name on the print-out; I lean over the desk and point to it, probably because I know how annoying that is. 'Just there, see?'

I get a killer stare with a big smile under it. 'Office 114. Tenth floor. Lift's just round to your left.'

I take off my parka in the lift, but I'm still struggling to pull my fleece over my head when the doors ping open on Level 10. A slim, smartly dressed young woman is waiting there; she smiles at me. 'Hi, is it Suzey?'

'Yes.' I step out of the lift before the doors close, still trying to extricate myself from my fleece. 'Anita?'

She smiles as if I've made a joke. 'No, I'm her PA. I'm Shelley. I'll take you to Anita now.'

She ushers me along thickly-carpeted corridors, then – pausing, thankfully, to help me out of my fleece – taps respectfully on a door, and ushers me inside.

It's a big corner office, with almost wall-to-wall windows. As if the snow-glare from outside isn't enough, the office too is white. White carpets and walls – desk of pale pine, chairs upholstered in white. And a white being coming towards me: 'Suzey? Hi! Anita!'<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> There are probably lots of journalists with Anita Black's charm, chameleon qualities and lack of ethics, but I was probably thinking of the changeable and unscrupulous Rita Skeeter from *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*.

I blink rapidly till my eyes adjust. The woman extending her hand is tall and slim, with dark-blond hair. Thirty-something: immaculately dressed in a linen shirt and slacks the colour of vanilla ice-cream. Large dark eyes – coral lipstick matched by a wisp of silk scarf around her neck. I'm acutely aware of my bulky clothes, my tousled hair and my red, un-made-up face. 'Hi,' I mumble, taking her hand.

Her grip is strong and surprisingly bony. But her smile is sympathetic; she waves towards a set of low chairs around a small coffee-table, and turns tactfully away while I rake my fingers through my hair. 'Coffee?' she says.

I agree readily, having already spotted the filter-coffee machine in the corner. Soon she's handing me a white cup of something dark and wonderful; I can't help inhaling over it and saying, '*Real* coffee.'

'Nothing like it, is there,' she agrees. She settles into the chair opposite, and we both sip in silence. For a moment I consider asking if she'll give me half the fee in coffee grounds... but no, let's be serious. 'So,' I say.

She smiles. 'So. I'm glad you're here, Suzey. I've been wanting to meet you since I heard about you and that wolf.' She leans back, comfortable in her super-expensive outfit. 'I mean, weren't you terrified?'

'Yes, I was.' I'm leaving out the part about wetting myself. 'I thought for a moment it was a real baby.'

'So what did you do?'

I shrug. 'I just stood there looking at it.'

'And what did it do?'

'It looked back.' Afraid I sound like some monosyllabic teenager, I add, 'It was strange. Then it dropped the doll and I realized it wasn't actually a baby...'

'Then what?'

'It turned around and went off. It went down onto the river... I think I shouted something after it. I wasn't... you know.'

'You shouted after it?'

'Well, yes.' Now she's going to ask me what I said, and I can't –

'So you made eye contact with it. You faced it down, and then you shouted, and off it went?'

'No, I don't think so. I think it was running off anyway...'

She's nodding, and writing in a notebook on her lap. 'Do you think that's why it didn't attack you?'

'Sorry?'

'Do you think it didn't attack you because you faced it down? Drove it off?'



'I don't know. Isn't that what you're supposed to do? I mean – they don't really *want* to attack people, do they?'

She looks up at me. 'They've killed two people in the last three months, Suzey. Didn't you think about that?'

'No, I didn't.' But I'm thinking it now... 'I didn't think about it at all.'

'I'd have been terrified. You're very brave, Suzey.'

'No. I'm really not.'

'You are. You've had even more than that to deal with lately, haven't you?'

'Yes. Oh, yes...'

'And your family too?' I nod but say nothing, so she adds: 'They thought they'd lost you, didn't they? For quite a while?'

'Two weeks.' I haven't given this enough thought. They went through all that...

Her voice is very gentle. 'What happened, Suzey?'

'They thought I was dead. They were called in to identify someone and they thought it was me. The body must've been... damaged or something.' The lies sound feeble. 'I came back a fortnight later, and I walked in through the door...' I go through it all: Clairey, the screaming, all that - omitting to mention that I had no idea who the little girl actually was. 'But it was just a mistake,' I end. 'Just a terrible mix-up.'

'Where were you all that time?'

'In the hospital. Wood Valley. You know, the one near Livingston?'

'I know it. But they say you weren't there, Suzey.'

I look up. She still looks sympathetic - but very, very alert. 'What?' I say.

'The hospital. They say you weren't there. They've never heard of you.'

'That's not true.' My face starts to feel hot. God, why didn't I see this coming? 'Of course I was there. I was there for two weeks. Where else would I be?'

'That's what I'm asking.' She smiles a little, to take the sting out of it. 'Were you at a friend's house? A boyfriend's? Did you meet someone? Suzey?'

I look her in the eye, and realize she's checked. Everyone I might have been with – everywhere I might have gone. 'I was somewhere else. I don't know how I got here. I just opened my eyes and there was... just white light. Light. Another world. And now everything's different - '

I look up and meet her eye. She's nodding kindly; but her face is very eager, almost hungry. 'But that's silly,' I say loudly, waving a hand to dismiss the confused ramblings of a psychiatric patient. 'I was in Wood Valley. I don't know why they'd say I wasn't. Perhaps it's something to do with patient confidentiality...' No, shut up – ignorance is my best defence here. 'It's just a mix-up. I suppose.'

'A mix-up.'

'Yes.'

'Like your being declared dead.'

'Of course.' I meet her eyes and smile. 'What else could it be?'

A slow smile, much less warm than her previous ones, spreads across her face.

'You're a fascinating person, Suzey.'

'Thanks. So are you.'

She laughs, and the moment's passed. On with the interview – checking my birthdate, family, details, blah blah blah. Inconsequential blether over another two cups of that heavenly coffee. 'So what are your plans for the future?' she says at last.

God – the whole point of this, and I nearly forgot. 'I'm not sure. I've just lost my job, you see.'

'Oh?'

'Yes. The University asked me to leave.'

'They fired you?'

'Yes.'

'What for?'

'Well, it's a bit – awkward for them.' I take a deep breath. 'I tend to weird people out. You know. What with coming back from the dead and all.' That's certainly true. I go for a self-deprecating smile. 'Can't blame them, I suppose.'

Actually I blame them quite considerably, but I don't say so. Anita is scribbling away at her notepad. 'Do you weird a lot of people out?'

'Just about everyone. Except...' I'm about to say Raj, but bite the words back. 'My family. You know.' I watch her writing. 'Don't I weird you out?'

She smiles, still staring down at the notepad. 'It takes an awful lot to weird me out, Miss Pherson.'

Then she's on her feet, hand outstretched. Clearly the interview is over. 'Thanks again for coming in, Suzey. If you just go down to the fourth floor, the photographer should be ready for you.'

'You want another picture of me?'

'Of course.'

'Oh, but...' My hand goes to my shiny face, my deranged hair. 'I'm not really, you know...'

She smiles - rather pityingly, I think. 'Shelley will lend you a hairbrush and some make-up. Goodbye, Suzey.'

A moment later she's closing the door behind me. Shelley the secretary is behind her desk. I dither, wondering which would be more humiliating – looking like a baglady in the paper, or begging this glamorous girl for a comb and some lipstick. I decide I can't look into a camera in this state, so I have to have to ask Shelley. She clearly doesn't like it, but when I tell her Anita said so she hands over the goods without a word.

Shelley's skin is darker than mine; her make-up bag is full of reds and browns and plum tones. I settle for some powder, eye-shadow and a tiny smear of lipstick. Then off for my photo, still looking distinctly unglamorous. God almighty, this had better be worth it.



## Eleven

Next day, I'm up a lot earlier. Even so, I have to compete with my mother in the race to grab the *Standard* from the doormat. 'Is it in?' she demands as I scoop up the paper a moment before her. 'Can you see it?'

'Put the kettle on first,' I say severely. We make tea in record time, trying not to peek – it's like Christmas morning. Eventually we get settled on the couch, and paw through the inky pages until my picture is staring out at us.

We stare back at it. It's not the me I'm used to seeing in the bathroom mirror - amazing what photo software can do. My eyes are large, outlined by slightly smudged make-up; there's no redness in my cheeks, and my lips are just a shade darker than my whitened skin. I look pale and remote, almost ethereal. I quite like the look, but Mum says, 'You might've smiled for the camera.'

'I did. For most of the pictures.' But we're already onto our next surprise: the headline. 'BACK FROM THE DEAD: MIRACULOUS RETURN OF WOLF-WHISPERER SUSIE'. 'What on earth does that mean?' Mum demands, but I'm already reading on:

Susie Pherson, the Glasgow girl who faced down a savage wolf, has returned from the dead.

Susie (29) was last week praised for driving off a huge male wolf which she believed to be holding a baby in its jaws. 'There was only one thing to do,' Susie said yesterday. 'I looked it in the eye and shouted right in its face.'

The wolf turned tail and fled.

Thankfully, the tot was only a doll. 'I was so relieved,' Susie said. 'I have a little niece. For all I knew it could have been her.'

'That's absolute garbage,' I say, but Mum shushes me. I read on:

Praise for Susie's courage flooded in yesterday. Dr David Cunningham, of Edinburgh Zoo, added: 'She did the right thing. Wolves are cowards – chances are they'll run if you stand up to them. But it was still very brave.'

But that's just half the story.

Susie has returned from the dead.

In an exclusive *Standard* interview, Susie revealed that she was believed dead for two weeks.

'There was a mix-up,' she explains. 'The hospital got the wrong person.'

'My family thought I was dead for over a fortnight. I just can't imagine the pain they were in.'

So where was Susie all this time? 'I don't know,' she confesses. 'It was like another world. There was white light everywhere. Then I was back home.'

Authorities are baffled as to Susie's whereabouts for those two weeks. No witnesses have come forward. In current temperatures, it's unlikely she could have survived sleeping rough.

Susie herself is stumped. 'I can't explain it. I just know it was a miracle.'

Sadly, the future is not rosy for this remarkable girl. 'I just lost my job at St Mungo's University,' she explains. 'I suppose they were just weirded out. Anyone would be.'

But she is still in good spirits. 'I'm back home with my family. And that's all that matters.'

I look up. Praise for my courage is still conspicuously failing to flood in. 'What a load of absolute *crap*,' I say.

Mum's staring at me. 'You didn't tell me any of this.'

'Because it's lies, Mum. I never said any of it.'

The phone rings, making us both jump. I grab it. 'Hello?'

A soft, deep voice is singing. 'Who's afraid of the big bad wolf, the big bad wolf, the --'

'That's not very funny.'

'Tra-la la la la --'

'Raj!'

'Sorry.'

'You've seen it then.' I try to ignore Mum, who's mouthing *Who's Raj?* at me. 'What were you doing reading the *Standard*, Mr Brainy?'

'I told you, I enjoy Scottish fiction as much as anyone.'

'D'you reckon Personnel will have seen it?'

'I should think so. I've just sent them a copy.'

'You're an absolute star, Raj.'

'Of course I am.' There's a pause. Then in the background: a door opening, voices.

Raj says, 'My students are here. I have to go.'

'Me too. I have to go and tell my mother who you are,' I glare at Mum, 'before she actually explodes with curiosity.'

'Goodbye then.'

'Bye, Raj...'

Dear Sister and Fellow Scot,

**Come unto Him, all ye that labour, and He will give you rest**

***Matthew 11:28***

I am happy to invite you to the *Spirit Fire* conference and assembly this February.

*Spirit Fire* will draw together good Christians from all over the globe. For three days, we will praise God and thank Him for His great goodness. Together we will pray for His righteousness to rule the world once more, sweeping away the false gospel that is bringing our country to its knees: the gospel of so-called 'tolerance', a creed of politically-correct lies, permissiveness and perversion.

We will call upon sinners to come to Him, before these, the Last Days, should finally draw to a close and His Kingdom comes. Therefore we will baptize those who have lived in Godlessness and wickedness, so that they may be whiter than snow and fit to meet their Maker. 'The Shepherd rejoices in the Lost Lamb that is found.'

Our programme of events will include:

- 'Come out from among them, and be ye separate' (*II Cor. 6:17*). Living a Christful life in a Christless world.
- Restoring the family in Scotland
- The power of prayer
- Healing of broken sexuality
- 'Suffer the little children to come to Me.' (*Mark 10:14*) Protecting children in a time of wickedness.

*Spirit Fire* will be held in the Glencoe Lodge, from February 12 –16. I very much hope you will be able to join us. You are welcome to bring a friend or family member.

May you live in Christ, and He in you,

With best wishes,

Matthew McLean

pp. Kerry McLean<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Like McLean's earlier article, his letter draws its style and vocabulary from various religious websites. The phrase 'Healing of broken sexuality' is taken from the website 'Gates of Hope'.



Dear Brother and Fellow Scot,

Thank you for your letter and your invitation, which I accept wholeheartedly. How wonderful to hear that the scourge of tolerance and religious freedom may some day be banished from our shores.

Re. Bringing someone else: as a non-Christian, I naturally despise my entire family and so will be unable to bring a family member. However, one of my two live-in lovers may be able to attend. My male lover, as a God-fearing person, rightly shuns men like you, who openly flout God's law by cutting off their forelocks and wearing more than one type of fabric at a time.

My lesbian lover, however, will be delighted to come along. As a practicing medium and Wiccan, she accepts the validity of all religions, and so will happily submit to being patronized and reviled by fuckwitted bigots who

'Now you're just being childish, Suzey,' Mum says.

Jamie's laughing, though (Katie hasn't arrived yet, you can tell). 'Read the rest of it, Suze.'

'That's all I've done.'

'Good.' Mum's gone tight-lipped. 'You're not going to send it, are you?'

I sigh. 'Probably not.' I tear it out of my notebook, and crumple it up together with McLean's letter. I've had a few dotty letters over the past couple of days, most of them kindly, badly-spelled and written on cheap Basildon Bond. But McLean's letter is on heavy parchment notepaper; it's a good solid weight to throw, and I hit the waste-paper basket first time. 'That's the nicest notepaper I've ever chucked out.'

'You're not planning on going then?' Mum says.

'Course I'm not. The man's off his head.'

Mum shrugs. 'It's meant to be a really nice place to stay, that's all.'

'What is?'

'The Glencoe Lodge. It's his hotel.'

'Is it actually *in* Glencoe?'

'I think so.'

'I'm definitely not going then.'

'I thought you liked Glencoe.'

'I do.' But it still gives me the creeps. 'In summertime. With normal people. Not people like *him*.'

She sighs. 'Please yourself. You always do.'

Before I can think of a suitable retort, we hear the back door opening. Then Clairey shouting: 'Ganna!'

'Granny's in here, pet,' Mum shouts.

'Ganna, Ganna!' For a small person she's got a big voice. She bursts in, half-out of her coat, clutching her wooly hat in a small mittened paw. Katie is behind her, trying to get her outdoor clothes off; but Clairey escapes, running in delighted confusion between the three of us: 'Ganna! Dadda! Anny Too!'

I swing her up onto my knee. 'Hi, Clairey-bear.'

'Anny Too!' She stands up on my knee, face close to mine, and starts bouncing up and down. By the time I've persuaded her to stop doing that, and to get her coat and boots and gloves off, Katie is comfortably settled beside me on the couch, a copy of the *Standard* on her knee. We've declared a truce, she and I, although to be honest I'd still rather she was sitting on the other side of the room. Jamie's gone to put the kettle on; Clairey's rushed through to watch him, still lively, but she'll probably settle down for a sleep soon. All in all, we're set for another riveting Saturday of sitting here doing absolutely nothing. If anyone else is bored by our scintillating weekends, they've never shown it. I see a flash of colour in Katie's newspaper and ask, for the sake of doing something, 'What's that?'

'Did you not hear about that?' She turns the paper towards me. 'Isn't it terrible?'

The picture takes up most of the front page. It's a young boy; he really is the most beautiful boy I've ever seen. His skin is golden. His fair curls make a halo. There is a shine to him – this may have been added by the *Standard's* CGI software, but I don't think it was much of an exaggeration. He is *Peter Balfour (12)*. He was *discovered by a man walking to work* yesterday, in Moss Park. The headline says simply: **RAPED AND MURDERED.**<sup>20</sup>

I've got the gist of it already, so I look away. Katie, however, is reading aloud in suitably horrified tones. What does she think we are, illiterate? I squirm away from her slightly. Katie drones on: *early hours of this morning, wearing only a T-shirt...* 'Do we need to hear all this?' I snap.

'I'm listening,' retorts my mother.

'Can't you just read it yourself - '

'Just hush.'

Jamie comes through with the tea, Clairey bouncing at his heels. I'd hoped her presence would get the subject changed, but Katie's turning to the next page. More pictures – a grim-looking suit before the police logo, a stunned couple pallid in the flashbulbs; a park in the snow. Katie reads aloud: *Moss Park, a notorious gay hang-out...* 'Is it?' I say, and

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<sup>20</sup> Peter Balfour's murder parallels one of the trigger-events of Ragnarok: the murder of Balder and the furious revenge of the gods. See Part Two, Chapter Three, 'The End of the World in Ice'.

come within an *instant* of looking at Jamie. I look at the page instead, and scan it quickly... *Gay scene... cottaging... cover of darkness... male partners...* Katie flips to the next page, savagely. 'They should be fucking shot,' she says.

'Who?'

She looks up in surprise. 'Them.' Her hand stabs angrily at the paper. 'Fuckin animals.'

'Katie,' Jamie says, glancing at Clairey.

Katie waves her hand dismissively. 'She's not listening. Just look at that poor wee boy. Hanging's too good for them.'

I should leave this but... 'Just who are we talking about here?'

Jamie cuts in. 'We're talking about paedophiles, Suzey.' He's giving me a shut-up look.

'Paedophiles. Fuckin monsters more like.' Katie is declaring indignantly. My mum, who usually won't have swearing in the house, much less in front of Clairey, is nodding solemnly. 'Do they know who it is yet?'

Katie checks a different column. '*A man in a red parka jacket and dark trousers was seen acting suspiciously...*'

'What's *acting suspiciously*?' I want to know.

'He was *loitering in the area in spite of sub-zero temperatures.*'

'They've just said it was a cottaging park – now they think "loitering" is suspicious?'

'Read it your bloody self then.' Katie slaps the paper onto my knee. She scoops Clairey up onto her lap, apparently just so she can clutch her child theatrically to her breast. Any minute now it's going to be *when you're a mother yourself you'll understand*. I pick up my teacup and stomp off into the kitchen. It's dark and it's cold. For a moment I am small, walking home in the dark, and a hand reaches for me... Then I snap on the lights.

In a minute Jamie joins me. 'You okay?'

'Course I am. I didn't even know the kid.' I switch on the kettle. When it's roaring good and loud, I murmur, 'It's going to be hard on you for a while, isn't it?'

'I'll keep my head down.' He is matter-of-fact and grim, a soldier anticipating action. 'They'll get someone for it soon.'

'The right someone?'

'Probably not.'

'You just stay out of it then.'

The kettle is whistling by now. I pour the water into the cups. 'We'd better get back to the weep-in,' I say, nodding towards the living-room.

'You're a hard-hearted cow,' he says, smiling.



'Don't tell me – I can't understand because I'm not a father?'

'Behave.' He ruffles my hair as if I were Clairey. 'And don't worry. I'll be good.'

## Twelve

The phone rings on Monday morning. I'm up and tottering around, but far from wide awake: not a morning person. Mum's not here – she's gone with Clairey to the shops. It's a bright, clear day, but almost painfully cold, so I don't suppose they'll be long. In Mum's absence, however, I'm defiantly wearing my dressing-gown; she gets pissed off seeing me wear it after ten in the morning. Unemployed people don't get to wear dressing-gowns after half-eight – after that we have to switch to hair-shirts, presumably. So when I pick up the phone I'm not exactly alert. 'Hullo?'

'Can I speak to Susan Pherson, please?'

A businesslike female voice. I wake up a little more. 'Speaking.'

'Ah, hello, Susan. It's Hannah Bradbury here, from the University Personnel office.'

Now I'm wide awake. 'Yes, hello.'

'Susan, a position has opened up here, and I wonder if you might consider it.'

A position? 'Is it my old job?'

'I'm afraid not. Registry Services have been streamlined now, so that position no longer exists.'

*Streamlined.* Of course. 'How many other folk got sacked?'

'There have been some voluntary redundancies. Susan, the job we have in mind for you is a Document Assistant. You'll be keying and preparing electronic documents for the University as a whole.'

'You mean a typist?'

'Of electronic documents, yes.'

'So I'd be typing onto a word processor?'

'It would involve that, yes.' An edge is creeping into her voice. 'You'd also be formatting and proofing documents.'

'So I'd be typing with the spell-checker on?'

'If you're not interested, Susan...'

I sigh. 'All right, all right. I'm interested. Who would I be working for?'

'For the University as a whole.'

I have a surreal image of the University building leaning over my shoulder while I type. 'I mean who would I report to? Where would I be based?'

'You would report to the Head of Admin Services. And we would lend you a machine so you could work from home.'

'From home.'

'Yes. Many of our staff are taking that option these days. It's much easier for them not to travel every day in this weather, as I'm sure you understand.'

And that means you don't have to heat an office for them, or insure them against accidents. It means you'll get lots of mums who can't get childcare; they'll work from home, do lots of hours, and not complain because they can't get anything else. And also, in this rather specialized case, you get Suzey the Walking Dead to stay well out of normal folks' sight. Oh, yes, I understand all right. 'How much does it pay?' I say.

She names a figure: an hourly rate. 'That's not enough,' I say.

'That's all I'm authorized to offer.'

'It's less than my old job. *And* with no holidays or sick time.'

'That's what the job pays, Susan.'

I say nothing for a long time, hoping she'll fill in the silence. She doesn't. 'All right,' I say at last. 'I'll take it.'

'Good.' Bright and breezy again. 'If you could come by within the next few days to sign the forms and pick up the laptop.'

'I'll come today,' I say.

The computer is about the size – and weight – of a hod of bricks. When I set it down, the cheap Refectory table creaks alarmingly. 'Look at this thing,' I say. 'It's meant to be a laptop. If I put it on my lap I'd break both legs.'

Raj peers at it. 'Primitive.'

'I'll say.' I collapse into my chair with a sigh. 'Ach, at least it means I've got a job.'

He pours from the teapot, and hands me a cup of vaguely-brownish hot milky water. 'I'm sorry you didn't get your old job back.'

'Aye, well. It's the same all over, isn't it.'

'In this University, certainly.'

Something in the way he says it... 'Are they making more cuts?'

'Probably.'

'Is your job safe?'

'I'm not sure. But then no-one is.'

I swirl my tea around the cup for a moment. 'What would you do if...'

'I'd go back down south. Where my family is.'



It occurs to me that he knows my personal life better than I know his. 'Where are you from? Originally?'

He looks pained. 'My family came from near New Delhi three generations ago - 'I meant where in England, you twit.'

'Ah.' He raises his eyebrows. 'Don't you want to talk about my glorious Indian heritage?'

'Do you?'

'As a matter of fact, no.'

'Don't then.'

He's quiet for a moment, then says: 'My father's father was a Hindu who married a Christian. My father was an agnostic Indian who married a Methodist Englishwoman. I have more heritage than I know what to do with.' He sets down his cup. 'To answer your question: Islington.'

'Well,' I say. 'I hope you don't have to go back there. I mean because of the job. Not Islington, I don't even know the place, it's probably very nice.'

'I know what you mean.' He smiles. His eyes are dark hazel, shading through to honey. 'Anyway. Since we're discussing traditions, would you like to come to Fire and Ice this weekend?'

'Fire and... ?'

'Fire and Ice. The festival in Kelvingrove Park. Fireworks, stalls, hyperactive children... The usual.'

Never heard of it. 'How long's that been going?'

'Three years now.'

'Not really a tradition, then.'

'Of course it is. Just a very new one.'

I laugh. 'I suppose they've got to start somewhere.'

'So would you like to come?'

'Love to.'

There is no snowfall on Saturday; the cold is bright and crystalline. So I'm hardly going to get lost en route to Kelvingrove Park. Raj, however, still insists on coming to collect me, even though it's miles out of his way.

I was apprehensive about it. My mother is prejudiced: prejudiced, that is, against any man I choose to go out with. Dad had moved out by the time I started dating, so Mum took on the fatherly role of growling at any rogue males who came to the house. And of course tonight, just before Raj was due to arrive, Jamie appeared for a 'surprise' visit on some ridiculous pretext which completely failed to disguise how much his nose was bothering him.

Raj, however, is a big hit. Respectful without being grovelly; shook hands with Jamie, offered to help Mum make the tea, casually mentioned his brainy university job so Mum would be assured of his Prospects. All the while reassuring them I'd be escorted - and protected from murderers, rapists, Odinists and ravening wolves - every moment I was outside the house.

It takes ages to get away. But at last we're heading down the path, with Mum waving from the window and Jamie smirking knowingly after us. 'Sorry about that,' I tell Raj.

'Don't worry. They were just looking after you.'

'I'd rather they didn't, to be honest.'

<sup>21</sup>All in all, the Park is already busy when we get there. Last time I saw Kelvingrove, it was darkened tundra – now all the street-lights are on, and there's a fiery glow in the distance.

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<sup>21</sup> Against the northern winter, the only antidote is society, interconnectedness with others. (Peter Davidson, *The Idea of North*, p. 68.)

This scene is meant to show the positive side of winter, the beauty and exhilaration of snow and ice. I made sure this was experienced at a social gathering, since company is our way of surviving winter. Embodiments of winter tend to be solitary figures: the Snow Queen lives alone in her ice palace, Skadi the frost-giantess leaves her husband to return alone to the snowy mountains. The Wendigo, the demonic spirit of Northern wastelands, is found in the most deserted places; those it possesses commit the ultimate antisocial sin – cannibalism – and so become outcasts.

The coldest and longest nights are our most intensely social time, as is evident in the way we celebrate midwinter festivals like Christmas and New Year: we send greeting cards to people we'll never see again, so that no-one will be forgotten; we try to 'get round' everyone in the family on Christmas Day; we sing against letting 'auld acquaintance being forgot' at the New Year. The colder the air outside, the warmer the gathering inside.

'The 'Fire and Ice' festival is therefore a much more light-hearted version of the Feast of Winterlong. The pagan beliefs of the organizers are probably not shared by anyone else there; but there is food and drink and music and fireworks, and so the Midwinter criteria are met. There is also the sacrifice. 'Fire and Ice' abounds with icons - the ice-sculpture of the Madonna, the statue of the Lady, the Ice King on his throne. Two of these are burning: 'flames wash' around the statue, giving her the look of 'a martyred saint'; and the Ice King, the effigy of 'Old Man Winter', is consumed on the bonfire. Old Man Winter is therefore the sacrificed Midwinter god, the spirit of winter; the god and the Gaping One. In a specifically Norse context, he represents Hod: Balder's brother who is sometimes

Within the main gate, fairy lights have been looped from tree to tree overhead, so we walk in under strings of glowing plastic icicles. The paths have been cleared, and lined on both sides with banks of grubby orange slush.

Raj and I walk to the top of the slope, our feet crunching on the grit. I breathe in fairground smells: oily machinery, frying onions, candy-floss. Kids run past, waving bright green glow tubes. At the top of the slope I stop, look at the park and have to laugh. It's like Blackpool on ice. The stone soldier on the Boer War memorial has a burning torch strapped to his head. Tinny loudspeakers belt out *Dancing Queen*. Covered stalls line the path down to the memorial, thronging with happed-up humanity. I catch a smell I haven't picked up before - like hot fruit mixed with dental anaesthetic. 'Do you smell what I smell?'

Raj sniffs. 'Mulled wine?'

'Lemme at it.' We dive down into the crowd. It's less chilly surrounded by so many warm bodies, and many have boldly undone top buttons, although we are all still puffing like dragons in the freezing air. Kids are doing lightsabre effects with glow tubes, making fluorescent blurs in red, green and blue. We wind our way through, past stalls of wooden carvings, cheap plastic toys, suspicious-looking hot dogs and warm Bovril. When I get left behind, held up by a large mother telling off her kids, Raj reaches back and takes my hand.

Then, before I can think about this, we are at the hot drinks stall, so he has to let go. Soon we're both gripping a polystyrene cup of mulled wine. 'I love this stuff,' I say, swigging a hot bitter mouthful. 'Very warming, don't you think?'

'Magma in a cup,' agrees Raj, taking a sip and wincing only slightly. We're strolling close together, side by side in the crowd; our knuckles bump casually together a couple of times before he takes my hand again. I leave it there.

'Look at this.' Raj is steering me downhill to the river, where it's quieter and less child-infested. The lights here are white, and shining through what looks like a row of glass pillars. We get closer, Raj drawing me through the crowds of tall people. I find I'm looking at a giant crystal ornament - Cinderella's coach, five feet high. An ice sculpture: opaque white

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regarded as a god of winter. Hod, who is blind, is tricked into killing Balder with a dart made of the midwinter symbol mistletoe. Balder can therefore be perceived as the god of summer, killed by a winter deity. (See 'The Journal of Germanic Mythology and Folklore', Issue 3, p. 12.

<http://www.jgmf.org/issues/JGMFIssue3.pdf> . Accessed 2 August 2006.)

The Old Man Winter figure might be based on several midwinter bogeymen, an ice giant or Jack Frost. I based his appearance on the Judder-man, the spike-haired Grimmsian soul-stealer from the Metz advertising campaign ('Beware the Judderman, my dear, when the moon is fat: sharp of tongue and spindle-limbed he is, and cunning...')

See: [http://www.glassworks.co.uk/search\\_archive/jobs/metz\\_judderman/](http://www.glassworks.co.uk/search_archive/jobs/metz_judderman/)  
Accessed 2 February 2006.



wheels, pumpkin-shaped body of clear ice. Cold radiates off it. The sculptor is still at work, on his hands and knees, scraping lightly at the head of the single ice horse.

We stroll slowly from sculpture to sculpture. A crystal swan: a ballet dancer: a fairy-tale archway of spun glass. A six-foot goddess, or Blessed Virgin, with a sapphire heart. We coo and exclaim with the rest of the crowd. The sculptors, smoothing and tending their creations, smile indulgently.

After a while, the food smells draw us back uphill again. Agnetha urges us to *Take a Chance on Me*. Raj and I buy hot doughnuts, straight from the fryer and smothered in sugar, and we wander further into the park. The Kelvingrove fountain, vandalised and dry for so long, has found a new lease of life; not in water, but fire. It is strung about with more fairy lights, yellow ones shaped like flames - some of them have failed already, but more than enough are still working to pick out the fountain's blue-and-gold Zodiac mosaics. The crowning statue, the Lady of the Lake, shares her plinth with another fiery torch. Her torch is larger than the Boer soldier's, though, as tall as the bronze Excalibur in her hand. The flames wash around her long skirts; she looks like a martyred saint. I walk on, towing Raj behind me.

We come to the edge of the crowd, and find crash barriers, with no lights beyond. I can make out a small hillock, in the empty space where the old playground used to be. After a moment's squinting, I realize it's an unlit bonfire, about twenty feet high. I move forward for a better look, and catch the eye of a security guard beyond the crash barrier. He smiles, but it's clear I'm not going any further. I drain off the last of the mulled wine and turn to Raj: 'Do you know when they're going to light - '

There's a squeal of feedback from the loudspeakers, and *Super Trooper* comes to an abrupt halt. On cue, everyone turns and looks back the way we came in; small children are hoisted onto parents' shoulders, and there's a drunken cheer from a group of blokes beside us. In the distance is a blaring sound like car-horns; it resolves itself into the blatt of trumpets. Under it is a deep thunder. As I stand on my tip-toes, trying in vain to look over the heads around me, I realize it's drumming. 'What's going on?' I yell, tugging Raj's sleeve like a five-year-old, 'I can't see.'

'It's coming this way. Don't worry.' Raj glances surreptitiously behind us. The security man has been joined by three others; they're holding one of the crash barriers, waiting for their cue to push it aside. Others are moving the crowd back from the main pathway. People are trying casually to move in front of us. No chance. I grab Raj's arm and we slide to the very edge of the road.

I can see the drummers coming now. Twenty or so women, all with drums of different sizes. They step in time and swing from side to side in unison, like a marching band. The

all-percussion sound is primeval, it goes straight to the feet - everyone is moving with the rhythm, kids hopping up and down, the drunk guys beside us waving their arms in the air. I step on the spot a little, still holding Raj's arm, taking the opportunity to bump gently against him from time to time. He takes his arm back, and wraps it round my shoulders. I put my arms around his waist, or rather around his coat; somewhere under the duvet-thickness padding, there's warmth.

The drummers are almost past us now. Behind them comes something white and glittery. It's a moving platform, a float. I can soon see it very clearly: a Santa's-grotto of white paper icicles, sparkly frost and frozen green stalagmites. In the center stands a huge throne fit for a Snow Queen, molded from plastic snow and topped with jagged crystal. The figure in the throne is nothing like Santa: a tall, skinny Nosferatu-like creature, dressed in stark purplish-white. Not a real person, thank God: just a dummy, with blue skin, a white beard and dark hollow eyes. Its hair has been twirled up into two devil-horns. Its blue papier-mâché hands, complete with foot-long silver fingernails, grip the arms of the throne. As the figure is wheeled past, children hide their faces in their mother's coats; I don't blame them. 'What the hell's that?'

'Jack Frost.' Raj smiles down at me. His face is flushed from the wine. 'Old Man Winter.'

'Of course it is.' I start to giggle. My face is probably flushed too. 'What are you on about?'

'Old Man Winter. We burn him on the big fire, and that makes the winter go away.' He's using a mock-serious, sing-song voice. It's the funniest thing I've ever heard. While I'm giggling helplessly into his shoulder, the float comes to a halt beside us. The float is actually a cart, pulled by four people whose heavy coats are draped with red batik-print scarves. The two men at the back each carry a long bronze-coloured horn – the trumpets, I guess. Before them are a smallish man with a ginger goatee, and a woman with round glasses and a desperately earnest expression. She's with a theatre company, I think; I remember her in a production of *Hamlet* where the set consisted entirely of boxes (it was a lot more effective than you'd think). Now she, along with her ginger-bearded sidekick, clambers onto the float, heavy boots thudding on the wooden flooring. They both reach behind the throne, and pull out a swathe of heavy fabric. A long cloak of plush purple, trimmed with white fake fur, and covered in pieces of paper.

As they pull the cloak around Jack Frost's skinny shoulders, I realise the papers are newspaper cuttings with big shock-quotes headlines. *Winter storms worst ever... Pensioners freeze... Blizzards shut down motorway...* Dozens of them, stapled onto the dark fabric. The crowd cheers as the ginger man reaches behind the throne again, and produces a large

papier mache torch topped with papier mache flames. He pauses for a moment, while children are being maneuvered to the front row; then his voice, deep and fruity and bigger than he is, rings out: 'What do we do with Old Man Winter?'

His three companions cry, 'Send him on!'<sup>22</sup>

Ginger waves the fake flame over our heads. Hands grab for it, but he's too quick. 'Who's all sick of winter? Who's all sick of the cold?'

Voices shout *me, me!*, and it's not just the kids. He waves the torch at them again. 'Who's all had enough of slipping when you walk? Who's all had enough of the phones being down? Who's fed up of corned beef in a tin?'

*Me, me!* We're all shouting it now, me and Raj included. Our man cups a hand around his ear, pantomiming deafness. 'What? Nobody?'

*Me! Me! Me!* We laugh, but we get louder. Some folk are punching the air like it's a rock concert. Torch-man nods theatrically. 'Ahhh. So what'll we do with him?' Gesturing at the king in his newspaper cloak, 'Shall we... leave him alone?'

*No, no!* The other three shout, 'Send him on!' but the yells drown them out. The man on the float puts his hands to his face in deep thought. 'Shall we... elect him to the Scottish parliament?' Laughter mingles with *Send him on!* 'Shall we...' he leans over towards the kids around the base of the float, '... send him for a week at Disneyland?' Outraged squeals of *nooooo!* drown out everything else. 'I know. Shall we... chuck him on a bonfire?'

'*Yaaayyy!*' We roar in approval. The threesome starts to chant, 'Old Man Winter! Send him on! Old Man Winter! Send him on!' Float-man proffers his papier mache torch to the front row. 'Who wants to set fire to the bastard?'

A dozen little hands reach for the torch. One of the drunk guys grabs it, but he's misjudged the general mood; one of his friends says disgustedly, 'Gie the poor cunt his fuckin torch back,' and the papier mache cone is returned to the owner. Small hands grab for it; after some intense discussion, Ginger-beard points to someone, and a small girl in a pink snowsuit is hoisted onto the float. Stage struck, she has to let the man guide her hand; the plaster flames are touched into the ice-King's torso. At the same moment there is a flare of sparks as three sparklers, previously hidden in the icy crown, fizz into life. The little girl

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<sup>22</sup> A homage to Elizabeth Hand's *Winterlong*. 'Send her on,' is the ritual response to 'Who will let the Winter in?' Both are spoken at the Masque of Winterlong, on the night of the Solstice, to mark the return of spring:

*'Send her on!'*

Beside me Miss Scarlet cried out, pulling the domino from her face to show her flashing eyes, her mouth bared in a snarl. 'Send her on, her power is broken, we light the end of Winterlong!'*(Winterlong, p.411)*

See Part Two, Chapter Two, 'Who Will Let the Winter In?'



starts to howl in fright, and is handed down from the float to her waiting mother. The mother's indignant protests are drowned out when we all start to cheer like maniacs.

The people on the float hoist the throne into the air, carrying it like a sedan chair. They're still chanting, and we pick up the mantra: 'Old Man winter! Send him on! Old Man Winter! Send him on!', except the drunk guys, who are shouting 'Old Man Winter! Get tae fuck!' The security guards pull back the barriers; one of them does a hand-twirling bow as the throne is borne past. From behind us, painfully close to my ear, comes a long nasal blast from the trumpets. The drumming recommences as the Ice King, lolling from side to side like a hopeless drunk, is carried to the bonfire.

The bearers begin their slow, awkward climb to the top – wooden steps have been built into the pyre just for this, but it still looks like tricky going. At last they place the throne triumphantly at the summit, adjust His Majesty's robe and crown, then back away down the steps, kow-towing as they go.

Once they get to the bottom, though, they go into the scuttling run of someone retreating from a lit firework. The drumming changes again - it's a slow drum-roll, swelling as more and more join in. Someone starts to count down loudly, *Ten! Nine!* and everyone joins in. *Seven! Six!* I'm doing it as well, although I have no idea what I'm counting down to. Now we've started to clap - *Four! Three! TWO! ONE!! Woooooohhoo!!*

We all start whooping like it's Hogmanay. A moment later there's a series of cap-gun bangs, which make a lot of people shriek even though we were expecting it, and there are lots of little fires nestling amidst the stacked timbers. They grow and join up quickly; I can smell petroleum. Sparks swarm upwards, and some of them settle on the throne's paper icicles. The icicles catch; so do the stalagmites behind them; so does Old Man Winter himself. A moment later the throne is sheathed in flame, and the blackened figure on it is curling forward, collapsing in on itself.

As it does, however, something shoots up from the Ice King's crown and explodes into white stars over our heads. At this cue, more rockets go sizzling skywards and burst into blue and red sparks. I can just see where they're coming from - a dark hut a hundred yards beyond the fire - but it looks for all the world as if the ice crown has launched itself into the sky. More fireworks follow, squealing and bursting like a gunshot, scattering yellow sparks.

I lean back against Raj, pulling his arm around my waist. I love fireworks; I love to hear a crowd watching fireworks, actually going *ooooh* and *aaaaah* as if they'd never seen anything like it. More rockets, green and white and red. Somewhere on ground level, on the other side of the crowd, is a golden light and a crackling: a Catherine wheel.

In front of us a short dull post erupts into silver rain. I pretend to be startled a couple of times, and Raj's arm tightens around me.

At last there's a series of sky bursts, chrysanthemums of every colour, one right after the other. Then a huge explosion of sparks with a noise like a cannon. Unquestionably, the finale. Applause, whistling and cheering breaks out. No one emerges to take a curtain-call, however - there's only the King, now all but disintegrated on his skeletal throne. Being so close to the fire is getting uncomfortable, and we begin to turn away.

Raj and I walk back towards the gates, cold air in our faces, the heat of the fire still on our backs. I link arms, smile up at him. 'So all that sends the winter away, does it?'

'Spring is on the way now,' he agrees.

'Wouldn't it be on the way anyway?'

'Better safe than sorry.'

I giggle, hug his arm against me. 'Old Man Winter. Bet you've painted a picture of him. Getting barbecued, of course.'

'Funny you should say that.'

'Where's that one on display? Your office? The University creche?'

'No, it's in my flat.'

We fall silent. I'll wait for him to speak. Play it cool, Suzey... oh, what the hell. 'Better go and have a look at it then, hadn't we?'

He lives on a tenement street a mile away, close to a tiny park. The streetlights are all working, so we can cross the park itself. Only one part is in darkness: a group of trees around a pond. A nickname comes to me: the Drowning Pond. It brings back memories of newspaper items: a child lost falling through the ice, a man lost trying to save her. A dog falling through, drowning with the owner who went in after it. It makes me shiver; Raj puts an arm around me.

He lives on the third floor, in a one-bedroom flat that's as much an artist's studio as a home. Canvases and sketchbooks lean against the living-room wall; a wooden easel is stashed behind the couch. He must have to rearrange the entire room if he's going to paint – unless of course he's just tidied up because he was hoping I'd come back with him. I smile over at him, and he smiles back: 'Coffee?'

'Yes please.'

While he's in the kitchen I inspect the paintings. It wasn't a case of come-and-see-my-etchings when he invited me here – the whole flat's an art gallery. Every wall carries five or six pictures. I'd assumed all his art would be as monochrome as the pictures I've seen,

but almost all these are in colour. They seem purely abstract until you've looked for a while; then landscapes and figures stand out. There's a tree with golden leaves, and black roots snaking across the ground; a figure in crimson, holding an apple; a rainbow made purely of ice colours – chilly blues and greens, arctic white. The rainbow is cracked in several places.<sup>23</sup> There's also what looks like a waterfall of warm turquoise, surrounded by snow; a female figure, with hair about my colour, bends over the jewel-toned water. There's a word on the picture-frame: *Winterburna*.

Raj has just come in, carrying two mugs. I ask over my shoulder, 'What's *Winterburna*?'

'A winter stream. A stream that only flows in winter. Milk?'

'Sorry?'

'Do you take milk?'

'Oh. Yes please.'

He goes out again. I should probably offer to help, but my attention's been caught by a large picture hanging over the gas fireplace. It's a swirl of gorgeous colour: spring-green merging with emerald, russet melting into gold. A band of white encloses the colours like an eggshell. I do the stepping-back-and-forth thing, and slowly I begin to see them: two figures, hand in hand, with forest green all around them. One figure is tall, shoulders broader than hips. The other smaller, shoulders narrower – slight curve of a breast as she turns a little to one side. A man and a woman, crowned in golden flame. The man has a halo of white-yellow curls; the woman's tawny hair falls to her waist. Within the outline of gold and green their shapes and their faces are blank. But you can tell they are gazing, raptly, at the leaf-green all around them.

I'm aware of Raj hovering behind me. I look over my shoulder and say, 'Who are the – ' I'm about to say *Hitler Youth*, but his face is serious, so I substitute 'these two?'

'Lif and Lifthrasir.' He's gazing at the picture, speaking half to himself. 'The two survivors of Ragnarok. The new Adam and Eve.'<sup>24</sup> He goes on staring for quite a while; and I watch him, wondering why a dark man should dream of such sugar-blondenness. At last he smiles. 'Sentimental, I suppose.'

'Oh, yeah. Six billion folk in the world and only two survive. It's a real fairy tale.'

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<sup>23</sup> The subjects of Raj's paintings are drawn from Norse myth. The tree with 'golden leaves' and 'black roots' is Yggdrasil, the World Tree. The 'crimson figure' carrying an apple is the goddess Idun, keeper of the apples of eternal youth. The rainbow of 'ice colours' is the Asgard bridge, Bifrost, at Ragnarok; it has frozen in the cold of Fimbulwinter, and cracked under the giants' feet. (See Appendix, 'Ragnarok'.)

<sup>24</sup> Lif and Lifthrasir emerging from the shelter of the World Tree. (See Appendix, 'Ragnarok'.)



'You're a very cynical person, Suzey.' He's still smiling. 'See if you like these any better.'

He talks me through the small square pictures: a fleshy mass of arms and legs ('the time of wickedness, when mothers will seduce their sons and brothers bed with sisters'), a red mass of severed arms and legs ('the time of warfare, when fathers will slaughter sons and brothers will be drenched in one another's blood') and a pale-grey ship apparently covered in scales ('the ship made from dead men's fingernails').<sup>25</sup> By the end I'm giggling uncontrollably. Still looking at the finger-nail picture he says, 'Do you think I'm so funny, Suzey?'

I'm not fooled. I'm standing behind him, but I can hear the smile in his voice. I wrap one arm around his waist and the other around his shoulder and hug him to me. I rest my forehead on his shoulder; the top of my head scarcely reaches the nape of his neck. I whisper into his hair: 'You *are* funny. I wish you'd forget about the end of the world, just for once.'

'Do you, now?' He lifts his arm across my shoulders so I'm drawn around to face him. 'And what should I be thinking about instead?'

'I can think of a couple of things.'

'And so can I.' His breath is warm on my cheek. 'You can drink the coffee I made you, for one thing.'

'Oh.' Shit, I'm making an arse of myself. 'Oh, okay –'

*That's* when he kisses me.

Sex is different here. Most of it takes place under blankets, in semi-darkness. Well-lit, movie-type sex – all bare limbs, beads of sweat, flimsy white sheets – doesn't happen in arctic climates with inadequate central heating. There's a lot more burrowing and nuzzling under covers. A lot more giggling. A lot more clinging together for warmth.

Or we keep most of our clothes on. There is an art to this. There should be a whole Karma Sutra of clothed sex. How much has to come off? How many shirt buttons have to be undone, before a hand can slide through to bare skin? Can we manage by just pushing everything aside, and sliding into place fully dressed? I catch a glimpse of this in the mirror - we look ravenous, as if we just couldn't wait.

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<sup>25</sup>The first two pictures illustrate the events preceding Ragnarok. The ship of 'dead men's fingernails' is Naglfar, which carries Loki and the 'ghastly crew of Hel' towards the last battle. Raj's captions are taken directly from Crossley-Holland's account. (See Crossley-Holland, *Norse Myths*, pg 173).

We try different rooms – the living-room is warmer, more freedom. But we always end up back under the blankets, whispering and laughing and crying out in the darkness, where the world begins and ends in the wide, covered bed.

'The Pole Star. See? Follow the farthest stars of the Dipper.'

'Where?'

'Up there.'

'No, is it really?'

'Cheeky girl.' He prods me in the ribs, or rather through the three layers of clothing around them. 'Directly above us. Look.'

I squint upwards. The sky has a generous freckling of stars, but I still can't make out any patterns. 'No, I can't see it.'

He sighs. 'I know. It's the light pollution. Keep looking, your eyes'll adjust.'

I keep looking, leaning back into him. He's directly behind me; I take his hands and pull them around my waist, giggling as he obligingly meshes his fingers together: 'You're my human seatbelt. And my back-warmer, all in one.'

'All part of the service.'

I tip my head back onto his shoulder. I've still got one hand on the guardrail in front of me, though – Raj's apartment block has a flat roof, but it's still slippery underfoot. Raj places one heavily-gloved hand on top of mine; then, daringly, he peels off his top-glove and slides his fingers under my quilted mitten, so there's only a thin layer of wool between my wrist and his fingertips. You wouldn't believe how sexy it feels. 'Hey, doesn't this count as unsafe sex?'

'You wish. Can you see it yet?'

I open my mouth to say something obvious - but then, yes, I *do* see something. I point upwards, tracing a faint blur of lighter sky. 'Is that it? The Milky Way?'

'That's it. Bifrost. The rainbow bridge to Asgard. The home of the gods.'

I look at it. It looks like a streak of polish against glass – nothing god-like about it. Raj, however, is off again: 'At Ragnarok the gods cross the bridge to fight the dark forces. The end comes, and the bridge breaks.'

'The gods are overweight?'

'No. Behave.' But he leans forward to nuzzle against my nose. Eskimo kisses: a real kiss might make us stick together. But it's enough – skin against skin, warm breath. I

look out over the lights of the city; there aren't that many of them, really, but I find myself wishing them away, just for a moment, if that would make him happy...

This is getting scary. I've just met him. It's not real... I have a moment's vertigo, grab at the railing. He catches me, both hands around my waist, solid and secure. 'Are you okay?'

'Aye, fine.' The moment's passed. 'Can we go inside now?' I have to add the most un-erotic line ever. 'I've got to call my mum.'



We finally go to sleep exhausted, curled around one another in our nest of blankets.

I'm very tired. But even so, as soon as I fall asleep I'm awake again.

I'm sitting upright. My clothes are thin and light. My neck isn't wrapped up; but the air is warm against my skin, almost stuffy.

I can hear distant voices, the heavy clatter of the drugs trolley. Close by, the quiet murmur of the TV. I am sitting quite comfortably, sunk into upholstery, my hands gripping something soft.

After a moment I open my eyes. I'm back in the hospital.

I sit for a moment, heart thumping, trying to adjust. The common room is in semi-darkness. It's restful on the eyes. Slowly I look around. I'm sitting in one of the armchairs, facing the TV. Behind me are two of the geriatric dressing-gowns, who never speak and never move if they can help it. In the next chair is a man in a suit. I've never seen him before.

I'm trying to examine him out of the corner of my eye – then I think, fuck it. Being mad has to give me some license. I turn to look at him directly. He's not paying attention anyway – he's watching TV. He's in his fifties – he has an Einstein hairdo, white and sticking up all over. He is wearing a nice suit, expensive. He doesn't look at me but says absently, 'Don't mind me, I'm just watching this.'

I look at the TV. The screen has gone orange and red. A terracotta desert; a pink sky. A silvery metal bug, flying a tiny Stars-and-Stripes, hobbles determinedly across the sand. I wonder why it bothers – surely one part of Mars is much like another? The thing isn't stopping, though. The horizon is jagged with chocolate-coloured hills; perhaps it's making for them.

'Look at that,' the man in the next chair is saying. 'A different world. Imagine it.'

I laugh. He seems genuine, but I'm getting wise by now. Acting casual, appearing to be interested in the subject's delusions... the shrink's equivalent of a chat-up line. And it is a very nice suit... 'Mister Lisbon,' I say, 'I presume.'

He turns to me. His eyes are bright blue. 'How do you know I'm not another patient?'

'Your pyjamas are a bit fancy, aren't they?'

He actually laughs. 'And you're Susan Pherson. They told me you were clever.'

Too clever to fall for *that*. 'Dr Martin says you're an expert on my kind of problem. But she hasn't actually told me what my kind of problem is. So,' I stare at him, 'what are you an expert on?'

He shrugs. 'What my colleagues tend to call Dissociative Disorders.'

'And what do you tend to call them?'

'Generally I call them Dissociative Disorders. But not in every case.'

'Not in my case?'

'No. Not in your case.'

'Then what?'

He's watching the screen again. It's gone black and silver; an astronaut is bouncing around the surface of the Moon. After a moment he says, 'A very particular form of fugue-state. Do you know what *fugue* means?'

'Blackouts.'

'No. It means *rapid travel*. And that's what you do. You travel to different worlds. Don't you?'

I nod. I lean towards him, conspiratorially. 'Do you know what we all really hate in here?'

'What's that?'

'Folk pretending to believe us when they think we're talking shite.'

He smiles, still looking at the TV. 'I don't think you're talking shite.'

'Oh, please.'

'I don't.' He looks straight at me, unsmiling. He really is good at this. 'So do you? Travel to different worlds?'

'It's in my file. Look it up.'

'I already did.' I wait. After a moment he says, 'Are you familiar with the idea of alternate realities?'

'No. I've been living in a fucking cave my whole life. Of course I'm familiar with it.'

'Do you believe it?'

'... I don't know.'

'Do you believe that different realities can intersect?'

'I don't *know*.'

He's looking at me. 'Can I tell you about something that happened to me?'

I laugh shortly. 'That's a new one...'

'Can I tell you?'

'Yes.'

He turns back to the screen, but he doesn't seem focused on it. 'My wife,' he says, 'died four years ago. She was in a car accident. I believed I was coping well.' I wait. 'A month after the funeral, I saw her in the garden. Our back garden.'

A long pause. 'I shut my eyes and turned away. The next day I started a course of medication. One I'd always prescribed for hallucination disorders. An anti-psychotic, similar to the one you take. I took the medication for several months. It didn't work.'

He is whispering now. I whisper too: 'Did you see her again?'

'Frequently. Mostly in the garden. But also in the street outside. In the hospital. Always with her back turned.'

'Did you tell anyone?'

'Not at first. I tried different drugs, stronger ones. But after six months I was seeing her every two or three days. I'd stopped working. I was afraid to leave the house. Then I told a colleague, an old friend of mine.'

'What did he say?'

'He told me to speak to her.' I wait again. 'Speak to her. See what happened.'

'And did you?'

'Yes.' Longer pause. 'I saw her in the garden. I went outside. I said her name, and she turned around and looked at me. She looked surprised.'

The silence stretches. He laughs shortly: 'Then I tripped over a loose flagstone. I'd always meant to fix the damn thing. By the time I looked up again, she was gone. I never saw her again.'

He turns back to the TV. So do I. We're earthbound again; women in suits arguing in a studio.

I'm thinking: he's lying. Don't fall for it. But I say, 'I can't control it. Going to the other place. This place, it's... it's not all bad. Not at all, but...'

'But...?'

'But there's something wrong there. Really wrong. But I can't stop myself going there.'

'If you can't stop it, you'll have to go along with it.'

My voice is savage: 'Is that the best you can do?'

'Dr Martin will keep trying new treatments. Something will work in the end. But you know very well you can't just make this go away. Go along with it. See what happens. What else can you do?'

He's on his feet, holding out his hand. 'I'll check on you, Suzey. Good luck.'

I shake his hand, and then he's gone. The night-nurse appears at the door. She looks irritable, not at all impressed that the great Mister Lisbon has just walked past her. 'Bed-time, Suzey,' she says.

I wake up spooned against Raj's back. It sounds like there's a blizzard outside; but it's nice and cosy in our cocoon of quilts and blankets, just like I'd never left.



So it was probably just a dream, then. Relieved, I settle down next to him to sleep.  
Yes - just a dream.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> I am not certain if the encounter with Mister Lisbon is 'just a dream'. If so, it may be a dream within a dream: since the nurse does not react to the godlike presence of 'the great Mister Lisbon', it may be that he is not there at all, but is another dream or vision or figment of Suzey's imagination.

Mister Lisbon illustrates the nebulous nature of Suzey's reality; he also persuades her to accept this uncertainty. This is an important narrative function, because the plot requires Suzey to accept the reality of the Cold World, or at least to treat it as real. Whatever he is, he is necessary: the bridge between one stage of the narrative and the next. He is an archetype, a wise older man helping the young hero(ine) move forward on his or her journey.

If pressed to give him a specific identity, I would suggest – given *Cold City's* Norse context – that he is Odin, king of the Viking gods. Odin is given to appearing amongst mortals while in disguise, to share stories or receive hospitality (in the Volsung saga, or in the Poetic Edda tale 'The Ballad of Grimnir'). Odin is, however, more likely to stir up trouble – the sword he leaves behind in the Volsung saga triggers a terrible war – than to offer kindly advice, as Mister Lisbon does here. (Nor is it easy to imagine the perennially horny Odin discovering a woman in her nightclothes and offering nothing *but* advice.) If Mister Lisbon is a Norse figure, then, he might well be Loki the trickster: the god of pretense, illusion and story, the only Norse being not confined utterly to one version of what is real. Not always the malevolent force of Ragnarok, Loki delights in altering perceptions, and is therefore the perfect *genius loci* of Suzey's flight between worlds.

Mister Lisbon may, of course, just be the visiting doctor. It's true that not many consultants roam hospital corridors at night while most of their patients are asleep; but that might be the secret of his eccentric brilliance. Sometimes a psychiatrist is just a psychiatrist.

## Part Three

### *The Harline Centre*

**Come then all of you, come closer, form a circle,  
Join hands and make believe that joined  
Hands will keep away the wolves of water  
Who howl along our coast. And be it assumed  
That no one hears them among the talk and laughter.**

**'Wolves'  
Louis MacNeice<sup>27</sup>**

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<sup>27</sup> Poem Hunter.com.

## Thirteen

It's our anniversary. Two weeks today.

I pounce on Raj as he tries to escape from the flat. 'It's our anniversary, did you know?'

'Is it?'

'Two weeks since our first shag.'

'That's very romantic.'

'Isn't it. Want to celebrate?'

'I really do have to go.' But he still lets his case fall to the floor. 'Are you trying to make me miss my train?'

'Get a later one.' I've already unzipped his coat. 'Blame it on the snow.'

'That's what everyone says.'

Now it's the buttons on his jacket. 'Okay, blame it on your insatiable girlfriend.'

'That would be very wrong of me.' He's using his serious voice. It's all deep and drawling. 'Very – ' the coat drops to the floor, '- very – ' the jacket follows, ' – very – ' shirt buttons pop, ' – wrong...'

He misses the next three trains. But I have to let him go eventually.

I make my way home via Kelvingrove Park. The sun is out; the park is blue-white and sparkling. The pines are Christmassy, and the holly bushes still have some red berries. I walk along the cleared path, looking down the smooth white slope at the frozen river. A man on skis whizzes past, white breath trailing behind him.

On my other side are steeper slopes. I can see the long shallow runway where kids have been sledging; it's covered with a sheet of fresh snow. On impulse I clamber up to the top of the slide, until I'm looking down the runway. It looks like a ski-jump. Before I lose my nerve, I dig out the black bin-bag I can see poking through the top layer of powdery snow; then I take off my back-pack, settle my bum onto the bin-bag, and push out onto the hill.

The gradient grabs me, and I'm hurtling down. Rattling over bumps and dips – gaining speed, the white world whirling around me. My own scream trailing behind like a banner. Then there's a cliff coming up, white-grey, I'm going too fast, oh no, too fast –

Then I'm headlong into the bank of swept snow at the foot of the hill. An unpleasant moment when my eyes, nose and mouth are choked with snow – then I climb, spitting and laughing, out onto the path. A woman and a small boy are walking past – he points



excitedly, she just stares and smiles. I smile back, and go clambering up the hill again, with the bin-bag.

Just look at me. It's only been two weeks, and I'm already like something out of *It's a Wonderful Life*. What a sap. Jamie's going to laugh at me.

I'm still going to have another go, though.

It's evening by the time I get home. A strong wind has gotten up. I'm glad to fall through the back door into the warm kitchen.

The wind is howling so loud I don't even hear the yelling till the door is closed. An old woman's hoarse voice, bellowing. A second voice, high and protesting – my mother's.

I hurry out of the kitchen and burst through the living-room door.

Three figures turn towards me. Jamie, in the chair by the fire, his face just lifting from his hands. My mother, standing to one side of him. Standing over Jamie is a white-haired woman I don't know. All three have stopped in place; they look like a freeze-frame from a soap opera. I laugh in spite of myself. 'What's going on?'

The woman looks at me sideways, like a bird. 'Do you think this is funny, lady?'

I know her now. Irene: Katie's mother. Although I remember her with dark-brown hair... a moment's dizziness, which I shake off determinedly. 'Mum, what's she doing here?'

'I'll tell you what I'm fucking doing here, shall I?' Her scarlet, pop-eyed face has turned to me. It's usually smooth and rather pretty, although the last time I saw it, it was rather like this. 'I'm here to tell this fucking perverted bastard he's not part of my family any more. He's to fucking keep away from us.'

Mum is hissing to me, 'I've been trying to get hold of you all day...'

Part of her family...? But then of course, he is. She's his wife's mother. I look at Jamie, whose head is in his hands again. 'Jamie, what's going on?'

'I'll fucking tell you,' says guess who, 'he's a bloody pervert and he's been caught at it. My daughter's at home now crying her eyes out...'

I'm watching in amazement. I've seen this scene before. Irene fancies herself, I suspect, as an enraged mother tigress; the day Katie rushed out of our kitchen in tears, Irene was round a few hours later. We didn't let her in, so she had to do this whole foul-mouthed routine from the other side of the living-room window. She was still out there, honking like a foghorn, when the police arrived. We all laughed about it, I remember. But no-one's laughing now. 'All right,' I tell her, 'you've said your bit, you can go home now.'

I might have been talking to myself: ‘...not a part of my family any more. Stay away from us! Do you hear me! You *disgusting wee bastard* – ‘

She's leaning over Jamie's bowed head as if she's about to start clawing at his scalp. I manoeuvre in between the two of them, trying not to make contact with her or she'll go for me. ‘You leave him alone.’

For a moment I think her eyes are going to pop right out of their sockets. ‘You're just going to let him away with this.’ Her voice is rising to a breathless shriek. ‘Fucking *child-molester* and you don't fucking care! Fucking pervert *bastard*...’

Her voice screeches out into a mute shaking. Good, maybe she's about to pass out right here on the hearthrug. I ask my Mum again, ‘What's happened?’

‘He got *arrested* - ,’ She takes a deep breath, goes on in her Sunday-best voice, ‘Your brother was arrested. He's been accused of having sex with a young boy.’

A *boy*? ‘Jamie,’ I say, ‘how old was he?’

Jamie whispers, ‘Nineteen’.

Now I do burst out laughing. ‘*Nineteen*? Christ, had he still his nappies on?’ But Jamie and Mum are staring at me. After a moment Jamie says, ‘I thought he was over twenty-one. I really did.’

Twenty-one? Oh, shit. Oh *shit*... But Irene's off again – ‘fucking child-molester. Don't you come near her again. Do you hear me? Thank fuck she wasnae a boy. But you come near her and I'll fucking kill you – ‘

Jamie's on his feet, and I realise she's not talking about Katie – she's talking about Claire. ‘She's my daughter – ‘

‘Not any more she's not. You keep away from me.’ All three of us are leaning towards her now. Mum's trying to catch hold of her arm: ‘He'd *never* hurt Claire, he'd *never* – ‘ Irene retreats to the door. ‘You just stay away from us,’ and then she's gone.

‘She's full of shite,’ I say to Jamie. ‘She can't stop you seeing Claire.’

‘I'm being done for *child-molesting*,’ he shouts into my face, then sits back down and starts rubbing at his eyes.

And now my mother's screaming too. She's swatting at his head with the palms of her hands. ‘How could you be so *stupid*, you *stupid*, you *stupid* – ‘

‘Mum, leave him alone. The guy was nineteen. He's not done anything wrong.’

‘This is his *wife*. This is his *child*.’ She collapses onto the sofa. ‘I don't know what to do. I don't know what I'll...’

I go and put the kettle on.

‘All right,’ I say, one round of tea-and-gin later. Disgusting, but at least we've all stopped shaking. ‘Never mind what the old cow said. Tomorrow we'll get a lawyer. It'll get

sorted out.' Mum draws breath but I talk over her, 'There are people you can see for this. We'll find someone Jamie can see. These things happen more than people think'.

'Really?' They don't believe me, but they want to.

'Really.' I nod, trying to maintain my confidence. After all, hasn't it happened to us before?

Jamie says he's going to bed soon after.

I find him sitting on the single bed, looking dazedly around his old bedroom. I remember Mum redecorating when Jamie had been with Carl a full year and obviously wasn't about to come home – but this is the old wallpaper, a dingy yellow, spotted with blue-tack. One poster has survived: a black-and-white of Marilyn Monroe, smiling and holding down her skirt. Under Marilyn's feet are a stack of boxes, a tennis racket and an old Hoover. Jamie is staring at them as if he doesn't know what they are. 'Try and get some sleep,' I tell him.

He nods. He's wearing nylon striped pyjamas, like Dad used to have – they might even be Dad's. No sweatshirt or socks. He must be freezing, but still he makes no move to get into bed. After a moment I say, 'I'm perishing. Can I come in with you?'

He nods again, and this time gets under the pile of coats and thin duvets. I switch off the light and get in. It's a squash; I haven't shared a single bed with him in years. I remember when he was small enough to sleep in the curl of my stomach. Now my toes are level with his shins and my nose is against his slightly greasy hair, and we're as close as sardines. I put my free arm around him, and he takes my hand. My other arm is trapped against the mattress, and I'm going to have pins and needles soon, but for now it's just good to be warm. Getting sleepy, I mutter, 'We haven't done this since you came out.'

He is silent, although I know he's not asleep, and I realise what I've said. 'Oh, shit. Forget I said that.'

After a moment he says quietly, 'That was in your other world, was it?'

'Yeah. Sorry.'

Another pause; I wait. At last he says, 'How did I do it?'

I remember lying in a warm room, whispering bedtime stories into his fine baby hair. Using the same tone, I start to murmur, 'You'd just turned twenty. You'd started going out on the scene, but you were still engaged to Katie. You told me you loved her, but you'd stopped having sex with her because she was stressed out planning the wedding. Everyone kept saying you were in total denial, but you never listened.'



'Then a whole bunch of us went through to the Pride Day in Edinburgh. It was the biggest ever. Archie Garry led it. We took over the whole city, they even flew the rainbow flag over the Castle.'

He laughs softly. 'Aye, right.'

'No, they did. A bunch of neds tried to pull it down, but the polis chased them off. And in the evening we all went to Step We Gaily, in the concert hall –'

' "Step We Gaily" ...?'

'The Pride ceilidh. Yes, I know. Anyway, we were doing the Dashing White Sergeant and you started saying, "I'm gay. I've got to tell her. I'm gay." I thought you were just drunk. But you went to see her next day and you told her.'

'What happened?'

'You just saw what happened. Oh, how could you, you're a pervert, blah-de-blah. Irene had total connaptions.' But we left her out in the garden, I think. She never got past the door. 'Tears and threats –'

'And is Katie all right now?'

'God yes, she's fine. She's got a boyfriend. She asks about you sometimes. She's perfectly happy –'

'She's not a single mother, though,' his voice rises, 'is she?'

'Shoosh, you'll wake Mum.' We lie in silence for a while, listening to the tiny creaks of a settling house, and the arctic howl of the wind. I stare at the pale hovering shape of Marilyn. At last he whispers, 'You awake?'

'Yeah.'

'What about the – coming out then?'

'After Katie, it was fine. You were worried about Mum but she said she'd known for years. Davie was a bit off with you at first, but he came round okay.'

'What about Clive?'

'Clive?'

'Yeah, did he take it badly?'

'Clive *Miller*?'

'Yes. Was he... oh what, are you trying to tell me *Clive* is –'

'Clive came out when he was fifteen, Jamie.'

He's starting to laugh. 'He's got a photo of this beautiful Swedish girl –'

'Don't tell me - lives in Sweden, no-one's ever met her?'

'He plays rugby.'

'I know he does. He's living with the Scrum Half.'

'You're making this up.'

'I'm not. Honestly, Jamie, he spends his free time making reanime porn movies. He showed a Disney one at you and Carl's flatwarming. It had Mickey Mouse fisting Goofy. I thought you were going to die laughing.'

By this time we're both giggling into the pillow like kids after lights-out. My arm's gone to sleep but I'm not about to move, because for the first time in hours I'm warm enough. Besides, Jamie is now asking tentatively, 'This Carl guy. You say he's...?'

'He's your fiance.'

I feel him flinch. 'Don't take the piss.'

'I'm not. You've lived with him for two years. Now you're going to marry him.'

Another silence. 'What's he like?'

'He's great. He looks after you. He loves you.'

'Is he sexy?'

'Course he is. You can't keep your hands off each other.'

'Do we live in a nice house?'

Their flat is like a squat with good hi-fi, but I say: 'It's perfect. A work of art.'

'How did I meet - Carl?'

'At Bowie's. On a Saturday night.' I'm whispering again. 'He was sitting with a bunch of guys in the quiet zone. You knew one of them. You went to say hi. You sat next to Carl. And that was it. An hour later you went home with him, and you never really left.'

He's whispering too. 'Did I live with someone before him?'

'God no. You were never with anyone more than a month.'

'But Carl's different.'

'He's too good to let go. That's what you said. Too good to let go.'

'I want that.' It sounds like he's crying again. 'I want to find someone like that.'

'You will. It's difficult now, I know it is. But you'll be happier than you thought you ever could be.'

He squeezes my hand, very hard. 'You're a great sister, Suzey.'

'It's okay.'

'Don't leave me again, Suzey. Don't leave me alone.'

'I won't. I promise.'

Finally, his breath is slowing and deepening. I wait a long moment, murmuring 'It's okay, you're okay' into his hair. He starts to snore quietly. And at last I let myself drift towards sleep, even though I know I could easily be breaking my promise, just a moment after it was made.

I open my eyes onto weak daylight. It's early. The wall before me is pale with dark spots and stains. My nose is freezing. Experimentally, I pull the duvet below my chin and breathe out. The air mists.

I'm still here.

I've turned over; now Jamie is lying against my back, his arm around my stomach. He is still snoring gently. I wonder if that's what has woken me, until I realise there is, unmistakably, an early-morning erection pressed against the base of my spine. I try to shift away and find I'm on the edge of the mattress as it is. It's no big deal, I tell myself, he's fast asleep and what's more it's freezing out there... oh shit. Shit, shit, shit. I'm muttering *bloody single beds* as I slide out into the icy air.

Jamie mumbles and pulls the covers around him. Thanks a lot, I think. But then it's probably just as well I'm up. Mum gets freaked out about the bed-sharing thing, better if she doesn't notice. Chittering, I run downstairs.

Mum is sitting beside the fire, also modelling a track-suit-and-bathrobe ensemble. 'Kettle's just boiled,' she says without looking up. I go into the kitchen and find she's left the old teabag in a mug for me, with a splash of watery milk. I make the tea, sneaking in a spoon-tip of sugar, then hurry back through. The living-room is warm and pleasantly musty. I'm reminded of my gran's house, the flowery wallpaper and the china Whimsies gleaming in the yellow light. I pull the footstool up to the fire and perch there, hands cupped around the hot mug. Mum and I sit for a moment without speaking.

Finally she says, still staring down at the hearthrug: 'Is your brother still asleep?'

So she *has* noticed. 'Aye, he's out of it,' I say. I'm waiting for a sharp comment, but she just nods. After a moment I say, 'What did the polis say he's to do?'

'He'll get a summons.'

'They'll probably just drop the charges then.' She looks at me, not at all convinced. 'They cannae lock up everyone, just for that.'

She looks at the floor again. After a moment she hands something to me, a picture done in jewel blues and greens. A postcard of an impossibly white beach and green jungle and blue sea and sky. It says *Greetings From Melbourne* in curly script. 'It's from your Uncle Jim,' Mum says, not before I've turned it over and read the whole message: 'Hope to see you soon'. Mum's brother is not one for small-talk. I say, 'Is he coming out to see us?'

She laughs sharply. 'Why would he want to come here?'

'Because we're here.'

'No. He wants me to go out there.'

'Are you going to go?' She nods. I have a horrible feeling I can see where this is going. But I still ask: 'How long for?'



'For good.' Before I can speak she hurries on, 'It's much better out there. You can get a chance. There's jobs, they need people –'

'You're just going to swan off and leave us?'

'Of course I'm not. You and Jamie can come too. Make a fresh start –'

'What about Claire? What're we going to do, abduct her?'

'We'll never get to see Claire again.' Her voice is flat and harsh. 'They'll never let him near her.'

'... But, but they'll let you. You're her gran... you've not...'

'Aye, they'll maybe bring her here once a fortnight. With a social worker. To watch us.'

'No they –'

'Yes they *will*, Suzey.'

I'm shaking my head. 'Jamie'll not go off and leave her like that.'

'He'll need to. He'll get over it. He's young.'

'For God's sake, Mum!'

'He's made this bloody mess! Why couldn't he just... stay at home! With his wife and his child! If he wanted them that much!'

She's started to cry. Her hands are trembling as they rake through her white hair. This is not right. She's supposed to be brown-haired, active, plotting yet another sunshine holiday with her glamour-granny mates. Not sitting here, an old woman, fretting over her fucked-up kids, hunched over a one-bar fire that can't even hope to keep her warm. I go and perch on the arm of her chair, awkwardly, take one of her icy hands and start rubbing it.

'Mum, it's okay. We'll sort something out.'

'He'll have to come out there with me. They don't care about – stuff like that out there.' But, I think, they might care about a criminal record... I say nothing, though, and she carries on: 'It'll be warm. We can go out in the country.' I have an image of the three of us on horseback, wearing stetsons and galloping across a rolling plain, and I smile in spite of myself. 'Your Uncle Jim'll put us up till we find our feet.'

'It sounds lovely.'

She looks at me, fiercely. She knows when I'm humouring her. 'It'll give you a chance, Suzey. You're young. There's nothing for young folk here.'

'I know. But...'

'Aye well, just think about it.' Then we hear shuffling upstairs, the toilet flushing and making the pipes clang. We're sitting innocently in opposite chairs, looking composed, by the time Jamie makes his appearance.

He's dressed and he's combing his hair, although he looks ill and he won't meet Mum's eye. 'I'm going in to work,' he says.

'You sure?' I say.

'May as well.'

Mum nods. 'Best to get on with it.' She looks pointedly at me: 'You've got stuff to get on with as well, haven't you?'

'I'm going to the library today.'

Mum makes a tutting 'all right for some' noise, but gets up to go to the kitchen. We can hear the kettle boiling – she'll be making a tea for us all - but Jamie gets his coat, gives me a wan smile and goes out without another word.

## Fourteen

I'm not at the library long. I actually don't need to be there at all – I've just managed to persuade Mum I have to, so I can get out of the house for a sanity break once in a while. Also the library has a phone that's almost permanently working. I get in the queue.

I've got to call Raj's number three times until I catch his phone working too. It's just his answer message. I'd expected that, he was going to be in Edinburgh for one night at least. But hearing his voice, all clipped and impersonal, I realise I how much I was hoping he'd still be around. At the beep I mumble incoherently, then spend ages figuring out how to erase the message and start again, while the queue coughs and shuffles impatiently behind me. In the end I just say: *Call me when you get in*, nothing too intense.

I spend a few more minutes at the library's leaflet table. Rows of A5 coloured sheets, with catchy little headlines – *Depression, the Facts – Hypothermia, the Silent Killer – Ibrox Mother and Toddler Group* – and cheap clip-art pictures. I finally find one that looks promising – *The Harline Centre, Gay & Lesbian Support Centre*. They're in one of the Infirmary buildings, I know the place – surely they can put us in touch with someone. I pocket the leaflet, feeling slightly better; then I choose some clever-looking grammar and spelling textbooks (my laptop checks these things, but Mum doesn't know that) and set off home.

I work till just after lunchtime – books and papers spread out on the coffee table, Mum reading in her chair by the fire, domestic peace for once – when Jamie reappears. The sky is starting to look inky, so perhaps his office has closed early... but one look at him tells me that's not what it is. His face is grey, the way it looked when he broke his arm ten years ago. He's clutching a rolled-up newspaper, which he passes to me without a word. It's the *Standard*, I unroll it to the front page –

MIRACLE GIRL'S BROTHER CAUGHT WITH BOY. It's the second headline, but it's big enough. There's a picture of Jamie – it's a Jamie-but-not-Jamie, looking older, furtive, sweaty. Under the picture it says *Indecent behaviour*. 'Sweet Jesus,' I say.

Jamie slumps onto the couch. 'The age is halfway down,' he says. 'You can hardly even see it.'



I look halfway down the column, where the text is a lot smaller. It says: *aged 19*, in letters small enough to miss completely. I scan the bigger print above it: he's right. No mention of the age there at all. 'Jesus *Christ*,' I say.

'Mum?' Jamie's voice is sharp. Mum must have stood up, because he's caught hold of her arm and is lowering her gently back into her chair. Her hands are fluttering. Her eyes are leaking tears. 'Oh, God,' she's saying. 'Oh, God...'

I fetch water, then whisky – which she doesn't touch – then a cardigan to put around her. Jamie sits on the arm of the chair, holding her hand and talking firmly. 'It's okay. You're fine. Don't worry. I'll sort it. It's all right...'

His voice is calm, determined, man-of-the-house. She looks up at him beseechingly. 'But... what'll you do? What'll you do?'

'I'll get a lawyer.'

'Oh... yes... a lawyer... '

'Mum,' I say softly, 'do you want go and lie down for a while?'

She doesn't move – overwrought or not, she knows fine we'll start laying plans in her absence, and she wants to be in on it. 'A lawyer... that'll cost you, won't it?'

'We can get one through this centre,' I say, as confidently as possible. I pull out the Harline Centre leaflet. She takes it, looking slightly reassured – it's got a leaflet, so it must be a proper organization, with people who know what they're doing. 'Oh, good, then –'

We hear footsteps on the path outside. Voices – men, at least two or three of them. Mum's hands start fluttering again. 'I'll get it,' I say, and head for the door.

As I reach for the front door handle, it's already started to turn. The door starts to swing inwards; I grab it and yank it towards me, making the man outside stumble inwards slightly. He looks up at me and smiles, completely unabashed. 'Suzey,' he says.

I've never seen this guy before. I step forward to block the doorway; I'm already blinking in the snow-light when a lightning-flash goes off in my face. It's a camera. An anorak'd man, standing just behind the doorstepper, is taking pictures of me. Beside him are two more guys in parkas; one has a black box balanced on his shoulder, while the other is shoving something metal and alarmingly phallic-looking into my face. I blink a couple more times. It's a microphone, of course – the other man has a camcorder on his shoulder. But I'm no less confused. Meanwhile the first man is still chatting like I'm an old pal: 'Suzey, how do you feel?'

'What?'

'How are you feeling? How are your family holding up? What do you say to the charges?'

He's serious now, grave but sympathetic. I'm beginning to think I do recognize him after all. 'Are you with the *Standard*?'

'That's right, Suzey. Is Jamie admitting the charges, Suzey?'

'You should be bloody ashamed of yourselves.'

'I see it's very distressing for you, Suzey. Can you tell us how you feel?'

'The guy was *nineteen*. He wasn't a boy. He was a man, for God's sake -.'

'So Jamie was with him then?'

'Well...'

I take a step back, although he hasn't pushed forward. 'I mean – no.' I take a deep breath. 'My brother's done nothing wrong. Nothing.'

'So you're saying he's innocent?'

'I'm saying he's done nothing – yes, he's innocent. Now go away, would you? My Mum's not well.'

'What's wrong – ' he begins, but I slam the door in his face. While I'm turning the deadbolt and attaching the chain, he's knocking on the door, still calling: 'What's wrong with your Mum, Suzey? Does she not keep well? Has the doctor been –'

I escape into the living room and shut the door. It's a lot darker in here now – Jamie has been putting the blackout in place. Now he and Mum are staring at me. I don't want to meet their eyes – so I start crashing about, looking for the phone. 'Where's the damn thing gone now?'

'Who do you want to call?' says Mum, faintly.

'Anita Black. She's high-up in that place. She'll get this stupid story put right –'

'Look at the article, Suzey,' Jamie says.

I've still got the *Standard* clutched in my hand. I look again at the front page, although I know from Jamie's tone what I'm going to see. It says: *story by Anita Black*.

Beyond the blackout curtains, the reporter starts to tap on the window. I throw the paper at the curtain. It doesn't help much.

<sup>28</sup>We spend hours like that, sitting in the gloom behind the curtains. Footsteps go up and down the path; the doorbell rings, hands rap on the door or the window. Voices travel round

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<sup>28</sup> The lynch-mob scene parallels the anger of the gods after Balder's murder. The gods inflict their vengeance largely upon the innocent; in the absence of the guilty Loki, they scapegoat others in his place. Hod, Balder's brother tricked into causing Balder's death, is put to death; a dwarf called Lit who does not appear sufficiently grief-stricken – we are told he has 'lost all interest in the proceedings' at Balder's funeral – is kicked into the burning pyre. (Crossley-Holland, p.157-8). When Loki is eventually captured, his family are made to suffer with him: one of his sons is turned into a wolf and kills his own brother, whose entrails are then used to bind Loki. Loki's own punishment, to be chained and eternally tormented by venom dripping onto his face, rebounds upon his wife, Sigyn; she must sit

the side of the house; we lock the back door. We don't say much to each other. The house seems very small, the air very close.

I get out the ancient lap-top and get on with the typing. I make a lot of mistakes. The doorbell rings, and keeps on ringing – someone's leaning on the button. Jamie slams out into the hallway; there's a wrenching sound as he pulls the doorbell unit out of the wall. Mum makes a soft protesting sound, but smothers it before Jamie comes back in.

There's a brisk, peremptory knocking at the door. It sounds official – might be the police. I ease back the curtains and peer out. Another flash in my face – it's just another one of those shutter-happy morons, getting impatient and (I hope) very cold. Before I close the curtains I notice a group of people on the pavement; our friend the doorstepper is holding the microphone towards them, and one woman is talking earnestly into it. They're neighbours; the woman lives just across the street. A man, I think he lives four doors down, is staring at the house. I meet his disgusted gaze for a moment; then I retreat behind the curtains. 'Just another one,' I say.

'They'll get cold and go away, surely,' says Mum. 'Before too much longer.'

We agree that they will. At least I do. Jamie just gets up and goes quietly upstairs. After a moment we hear his feet overhead; he's making sure the blackout curtains are in place. 'Well,' I say. Jamie's feet upstairs, going from room to room. 'Well,' I say again, for want of anything else. 'I'll start making the dinner.'

There's a dull sliver of daylight around the kitchen window; I fix the curtain and snap on the lights. It gives the room a clinical look, but at least it's bright. I put the mince on to brown, throw in the onion powder. I'll cook it in lots of gravy, almost a mince soup – that way you can swallow it straight down, and won't have to bite on the gristle. I drain, add water, a corner of precious stock cube... no, fuck it - I put in the whole cube. I bang pots and pans and cupboard doors, it's almost soothing. Then a little paprika, and the room starts to smell warm and spicy.

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beside him eternally, catching the worst of the venom in a bowl. (Crossley-Holland, p.171-2.) This grotesque punishment destroys any of the good-humoured trickster left in Loki; when he escapes, it is as an Apocalyptic destroyer, the instigator of Ragnarok.

I see in this a parable of public anger, 'recreational' grief and the creation of scapegoats. I have tried to capture some of this view in the chapter. Peter Balfour's murderer has not been found, so violence is turned onto those not in public favour: homosexuals (and those who don't seem to be showing the proper grief). This response is heavily politicized. The demonstration may have been deliberately organized: the banners and placards seem too professional for an impromptu lynch-mob to have assembled on the spur of the moment. Capital will certainly be made out of Peter's death – people like Jamie and his family will suffer, support for movements like McLean's will grow, and the country is one step closer to a devastating war.



I'm just about to open the cans of spuds when Jamie comes in. He checks the back door is locked, then pushes a chair against it for good measure. He perches on the edge of another chair. After a while he says, 'I'm going to go away for a while.'

I didn't expect that. 'Where?'

He shrugs.

I start thinking through a list of his options. Any friends likely to take him in...? But they're mostly Katie's friends too - all his gay contacts are casual. A flat of his own? That'll take ages, if it happens at all. A job outside the city? Where? Doing what? Won't he have to stay put anyway, for the police and everything? 'Jamie,' I say, 'I can't think where you'd go.'

'It doesn't matter - '

'Of course it *matters* - '

'You and Mum don't need all this crap - '

'Och don't be daft. We don't *need* to be worrying about you out in this weather.' Shit, I've burnt the mince now. 'Open the spuds, would you? If you're going to be running away from home you can have your dinner first.'

After a moment, he opens the tins of boiled spuds and lets them thunk onto the bottom of the pan, brine splashing around them. 'See,' I say, 'where else are you going to get such fancy cooking?'

'I'm serious, Suzey - '

There's a loud thud from the front of the house, and a little shriek from Mum. We both run for the living-room. Mum is standing staring at the curtain, one hand over her heart as if she's pledging allegiance; it would be comical if it weren't for the shock on her face. 'I think they threw something,' she says.

There's another loud bang on the window - no sound of breaking glass, thank God - and a much fainter thud as something hits the outside wall. They're chucking things, the bastards. 'Right, that's it.' I start towards the front door. 'This is - '

'*Don't.*' Jamie grabs my arm, hard. 'Don't open it.'

Mum takes my hand. The three of us stand for a moment, very close together, in the gloomy room. We can hear loud voices outside, singing, or chanting. 'Mum,' I say at last, 'call the polis.'

'What are you going to - ' But I'm disentangling myself from them, heading for the stairs. The window in the front bedroom, that'll be best. I rip off the masking tape holding the floral drapes in place. Daylight hits my face; an hour ago it would have dazzled me, but now it's gray. Small flecks of snow whirl past as I wrench the window open - it sticks, hasn't been opened for months - and stick my head out into the icy air.

In our front garden, and the pavement and road beyond, is a mass of people. Flashguns pop occasionally, and the phallic microphone is being waved over someone's head; but most of the crowd aren't carrying, or talking into, any cameras. They're carrying placards, white banners on sticks, which they're jabbing at the sky to the rhythm of their chanting. My gaze falls on two young-ish women, who are nodding to one another and almost smiling, but not quite. One of them is carrying a banner – a placard, reading *PERVERTS OUT*.

And this is what they're all chanting. '*PER-VERTS OUT! PER-VERTS OUT!*' A few of the men, the ones without placards, are punching the air. I find myself trying to read all the other painted slogans: NO BEASTS HERE, and SAVE OUR SONS, and SHAME! SHAME! SHAME! One of the signs stands above the rest like a holy icon, with a picture of a blonde halo'd saint. It's Peter Balfour, with his golden curls and angel smile. Around his image is: GIVE ME JUSTICE.

'Holy fucking *Christ*.' Jamie is beside me, looking out. His voice is just a high cracked whisper; but immediately, dozens of white faces are raised towards us. Jamie pulls me back, away from the great roar of voices; he slams the window as missiles bang against it. The glass cracks. Jamie is dragging me towards the door. 'Move, Suzey!'

'They broke our window,' I say, stupidly. Jamie takes no notice, pulls me down the stairs, so fast I'm scared we'll fall. Mum is waiting for us at the bottom, clinging to the banister. Behind the thin front door the crowd bellows; something like a giant's fist hits the door, and again, and again.

'I couldn't get the polis,' Mum says, gesturing towards the living room and the useless phone. Her face is white, but her voice is bizarrely calm. 'Somebody out there will, though –'

The letterbox rattles – the insulation is yanked out. Gray daylight is eclipsed by firelight; there is a stink of petrol as a piece of cloth, already wrapped in flames, is rammed through and tumbles towards the doormat. Mum and I shriek in unison – outside another woman echoes us. The doormat ignites like thatch; but Jamie has already grabbed the nearest jacket, a wool greatcoat, from the wall, and thrown it over the mat. He starts stamping down the coat; there's more rattling from the letterbox. 'Jamie,' I scream, 'get back!'

Something else pokes through; a long piece of wood. It's the blunt end of a garden broom or rake. It jabs ineffectively at Jamie, looking so stupid I laugh, my voice shrill and unrecognisable. The stick starts poking towards me; with it, through the letterbox, comes a man's voice - the crowd's voice, a stream of grunts and guttural threats, *fuckin pervert, fuckin kill ye...* Jamie gets hold of the broom handle and yanks it in, hard – there's a satisfying

grunt from outside and Jamie stumbles away from the door, still gripping the handle. Jamie has started to yell too – ‘Fuckin CUNTS! Ma MOTHER’S IN HERE! Ma SISTER’S IN HERE! Fuckin BASTARDS - !’

‘Get your coat on and get out.’ My mother’s voice again, still calm. ‘Quick. Round the back. Go on!’

I realize we’re both clinging to her hands as if we were five years old again. There’s another thunderous boom from the door. I think I can hear them round the side now. Mum is propelling me firmly into the kitchen, towards the back door. I badly want to just open the door and run – but I have to wait for Jamie, who comes in carrying great slippery armfuls of our coats and waterproofs and boots. Mum won’t let us go any further until we’re in our boots and our parkas.

Then she opens the door. She’s not wearing her outdoor clothes. ‘Go on then,’ she says.

Jamie’s staring at her. ‘Mum?’

‘I’m going to stay and have a word. I’m not running.’

‘Mum, for God’s sake!’

‘They’re not after me.’

She goes back inside. By the time I’ve tied my bootlaces we can hear her voice upstairs, high-pitched and querulous: *‘Here! What d’ye think you’re doing! Go away and leave us alone – ’*

There’s movement in the corner of my eye. Someone is climbing over our back fence. It’s the man from four doors down. He pauses, one leg on either side of the fence, when he sees me. He’s lived here about three years; he always acknowledges me, and other well-kent faces, with a nod and a smile, which I always return. So that, surreally, is what we do now. Someone – Jamie – barrels past me towards him. The man, smiles gone, shouts out a warning, but a moment later Jamie has grabbed hold of his ankle and hauled him so far onto our side that he topples sidelong into our snow-covered garden. Jamie is still holding the broomstick; the man’s face shows, for a moment, the standard amazement of a bigot discovering that poofs are not soft. I don’t look at what happens next, although the corner of my eye sees redness flying, and I hear a crack followed by a bellow of pain and rage. I’m already scrambling up the lumpy snowdrift that covers the compost heap; from there I can haul myself up onto the fence. There’s no-one in the back lane beyond. But I can still hear them, somewhere. *‘Jamie!’*

He’s beside me. ‘Mum – ’

I look back; the door is closed, Mum’s nowhere in sight. *‘Jamie, come on!’*



We both tumble into the lane. I land awkwardly, banging my knee and shoulder. The snow is falling faster and thicker now. We see them appear at the other end of the lane, indistinct shapes, some in vivid colours. There's nothing human in them now. We get up and run. Jamie holds me by the wrist, pulling me along, faster than I could go alone. Our feet should slip but they don't. I lose track of where we are. I can't hear anything behind us or ahead of us. We just run and run.

At last Jamie slows down; I slow too, realizing all my momentum for God-knows how long has come from him. I look back. There's no sign of anyone but us. My hood is down, and that's bad, because my face and hair are damp with sweat; but I don't pull it up until I've had a good look around; made sure they're gone.

And they have. The snow has, for the moment, almost stopped. The sun has even come out; but the sky ahead of us is a deep charcoal gray, and the sunlight is the livid yellow that comes before a storm. We're standing on Bell's Bridge, the footbridge connecting the South Side with the North. Jamie is looking back the way we came. There's nothing to be seen, but we can hear sirens. 'Mum,' he says.

I look back too. 'There's no smoke.' He looks at me, stricken. I turn him back round. 'There's no smoke. They didn't put the place on fire.'

'The siren –'

'It's polis, Jamie, not the fire brigade.' I think: *it might be an ambulance*, but I don't say so. 'Just the polis.'

'But – oh, God, Suzey –'

'She'll be fine.'

'We should... do you think we should –'

He's going to say *Go back*. 'We'll need to get going. We can go to that Harline place, remember? It's at the Infirmary.'

'Aye. Okay.'

The snow is falling thicker again. A north-west wind sweeps down the river, pushing us sideways into the barrier. It's impossible to stay here. I spare a quick look back over my shoulder towards my mother's house, and I smile a little, remembering her standing firm in her hallway against the howling barbarians. She'll be fine, of course; how could she not be?

The Western is not far from here, but it's a long walk in a blizzard. I hold Jamie's hand to pull him along – after the momentum of our escape he has just stopped, like run-down clockwork. Before long we have scarcely ten yards' visibility – it hurts too much to raise our eyes to the stinging snow in any case. I follow pavements, huddling into doorways to scan the world for anything like a landmark. I end up gripping Jamie's arm by the wrist

instead of the hand; I make him do the same. It's all too easy to imagine him just slipping away, back the way we came, into the screaming white throat of the storm.

## Fifteen

We fall in through the glass doors, and I've never been so glad to be in a hospital in my life. The blizzard is trying to push the door open again, still making that deranged eeeeeee sound. A woman's voice bawls to *shut the door!* but I don't need telling – I put my shoulder into it and bang the door to. The shrieking is muffled slightly. Against the darkness the snow whirls so fast it's a blur.

I pause to stomp the worst of the snow from my boots. There are plenty of melting footprints on the lino, but I have never seen an A & E on Saturday night with so few casualties in it. People must have decided to bleed to death in the comfort of their own homes. Or perhaps the ambulances just couldn't get through... no, we're not going to think about that. There's a pay-phone near the door, unbroken as it turns out. I put in my last change and call Raj, to leave another message... but I can't get through, not even to the answer machine.

I hang up and look around for Jamie. He's standing exactly where I left him, staring into space. I realise that if these people don't help us, we won't have anywhere to go. I take his arm and haul him over to the desk.

A nurse in a thick blue fleece stares at us impatiently. I can't remember what this fucking place is called. I start digging about in my pockets. The leaflet is gone. Fell out in the snow, when I was too scared to think of anything but staying on the path and hanging on to Jamie, who in this state could just wander off into the blizzard... But in my last pocket I find the squashed pink leaflet. The nurse sees it and nods, her face softening a little. 'First floor, pet, come out the lift and go right round to the left.'

I thank her, pathetically grateful for this scrap of kindness. The lift is broken so we plod up the stairs. The yellowing corridors are windowless, harshly lit but warmer. We pass signs for UROLOGY and GENITO-URINARY MEDICINE, but nothing for the Harline Centre. We keep bearing left, though, and come eventually to a blank door with a copy of the pink leaflet sellotaped to it. I try the door, half-expecting to have to knock and give a password, but it's unlocked.

A small waiting-room, windowless and smelling slightly of feet. Alternate posters of smiling couples – two men, then two women, then men again – line the walls, advertising God-knows-what. Coffee-table with torn magazines, surrounded by banks of scruffy airport-



lounge seating. Two young men seated in the corner, talking in intense low voices. Another guy nearby, older, with red-rimmed eyes, although he doesn't seem to be crying. All three look up, a moment at me, a moment longer at Jamie, then look away again.

Opposite the door is a reception counter, behind which a large, short-haired woman is watching us closely. When we've closed the door behind us, she goes straight back to studying her paperwork; and I just know she and I are not going to get along. 'Yes?' she says loudly before we're halfway to the desk, presumably wanting us to shout out our problems to the whole room. I wait until we're at the counter and have unwrapped my scarf before I go to answer. And then I realise I haven't a clue what I'm going to say. 'We need to speak to someone,' I eventually manage, looking at the door behind the woman and hoping there's someone else behind it.

She produces a clipboard with a tied-on pen and a badly-photocopied form, which she pushes towards us. 'The counsellors are with people just now. You can wait, but you might need to come back tomorrow.'

I'm starting to feel sick. 'We can't do that. We've no place to stay.'

'We don't arrange accommodation.' She sounds like she's saying there's no sugar for our tea. When we don't answer she looks up at me. Her wide, flat face is expressionless. She really doesn't give a shit. She's going to put us out in the blizzard and her ugly face is still going to look like that. I don't know what to do. I don't –

'We nearly got burned out of our house.' Jamie's voice is quiet but carrying. 'They only didn't burn it cause my mum was in it. We're gonny sit here till somebody sees us.'

I expect her to call Security, but she looks hard at Jamie. Silence has fallen behind us. I glance back; the two young guys are watching us wide-eyed. The older guy just shakes his head a little. 'You go in ahead of us, son,' he says. He looks at the other two for assent; they nod vigorously. I'm suddenly in tears. 'Thanks,' I say.

'You're all right, hen.'

Before we've even taken our coats off, an older man in a duffel comes through the door behind reception, nods goodbye to the woman and leaves. With no sign of rancour, she shows us in.

We find ourselves in a tiny office, surrounded by posters and black-and-white prints of muscular men. The counsellor has his back to us, closing and locking a small filing cabinet. 'Come in and sit down,' he says. I honestly do not recognise him until I hear his voice, because his short hair is iron-grey.

His hair is supposed to be black: I remember him getting it done. I laugh out loud. 'Why didn't I think of this? Where else would you be?'

He looks at me blankly. 'Sorry?'

'Nothing.' Jamie is looking just as blank. I hold out a hand. 'Jamie, this is Carl.'

Jamie stares at him. 'Carl?'

Carl looks back, warily. 'Have we met?'

I laugh again. 'In a manner of speaking.'

Carl's nodding, still looking at Jamie. 'You do look familiar.'

Not much of a chat-up line, but we've all got to start somewhere. 'I'm Suzey,' I say.

Carl turns his attention to me. His face is paler than I remember it, more lined. He looks older. The eyes are just the same, though: and at the moment they're staring at me. 'I know you as well, don't I?'

My God. Does he really know? How can he... 'Yes. Yes, you do. Carl...'

He nods to himself suddenly; reaches into a drawer of his desk and pulls out a newspaper. It's the *Standard*. 'I thought so. Jamie... Pherson?'

Jamie nods. Carl skim-reads through the article, frowning; although he manages a smile when he glances up at me. 'And you must be Miracle Girl.'

'That's me. My super-powers aren't up to much, but.'

'So I see.'

Carl keeps on scanning down the page. It seems to take ages. When he turns to page two, Jamie says: 'We've had to run out the house. There was a whole fuckin mob of them. My mum's still in the house. Are you going to fuckin do something?'

Carl just watches him till he finishes speaking. 'Finished?' He turns the phone on his desk towards us. 'Call your mother.'

Jamie grabs the phone and dials. He holds the receiver against his ear. For a long time. 'It's ringing out,' he says at last.

'She'll be okay,' I say.

Jamie nods, still clutching the phone to his ear. Eventually I have to take it from him and hand it back to Carl. Carl breaks the connection, making Jamie wince, and starts dialing. 'I'm calling the local polis,' he says. For a paranoid moment I wonder if we should run for it. But he means the south side polis, Mum's local station. 'Hello, Carl Trainor at the Harline Centre... yes, at the Infirmary... could I speak to DS Thompson please... aye, I'll hold on...'

He waits, and I whisper to Jamie. 'She really will be okay. They won't – do anything. You know. To her. It really will be –'

Jamie waves me into silence – the call is being wrapped up. 'Ask him to call back as soon as he can, please. Appreciate it. Aye. Okay, bye.' Hangs up. 'They're calling back. Once they've got someone who knows about the situation.'

Jamie's knuckles are white on the arms of the chair. 'You mean they hadn't noticed the lynch mob till you pointed it out?'

Carl doesn't respond to this. 'So what's your situation now?'

I decide to get in first. 'We had to get out of the house. There was a big crowd of people. They had banners and stuff. They were banging on the door. You know. To break it down.'

He's nodding, taking notes. 'Then what?'

'My Mum. She said she'd stay behind and talk to them. Then we ran away, we had to. They came after us.'

'Did you get hurt at all?'

'We didn't. That bastard coming over the fence did though.' I look at Jamie. 'I hope you broke his fucking teeth –'

Jamie's hissing at me to be quiet, but Carl's got the idea. 'You hit one of them?' he says sharply.

'He had to. No I won't *shoosh*. He was shouting for the rest of them -'

'And he attacked you,' Carl is saying firmly, still writing. He looks at Jamie. 'He was going for your sister. You were protecting her. That how it was?'

'Aye,' says Jamie, 'that was it.'

Carl nods. 'Okay. Now. Do you have any friends you could –'

Jamie and I both jump as the phone rings. Carl picks it up. 'Harline Centre for... yes. Yes, just a minute.' He holds the receiver out to Jamie. 'It's for you.'

Jamie's hand closes tightly over mine. He takes the receiver. 'Hello? ...*Mum?* Mum, is that you? Aye, I'm fine... aye, she's here, she's fine... Are you okay?'

I wedge my head next to his, so my ear's right by the receiver. I still can't make out the words, but it's her voice all right. I yell, 'Are you all right?'

Jamie's crying now. 'Aye, that was her. We're both fine, Mum. I'm so sorry... Mum, I don't know what to...'

I prise the phone away from him. 'Mum, are you okay? Where are you?'

'I'm okay.' Her voice is high and quavering, more like my grandmother's than my mother's. 'I'm at Betty Campbell's.' One of her cronies a few streets over. 'The police brought me here. I told them about the Centre thing you were talking about, and they got the number for me. They've been very good -'

'But you're all right? You didn't – get hurt?'

'No, no. And the house is fine. They say I've not to go back there just now, but I don't think that's right. All my things are there.'

'Don't go back to the house, Mum. Stay at Betty's.'



'Oh, Suzey, I don't know about that. Those people are all away now... '

'Don't go back tonight, Mum. Don't.' I look up at Carl and say loudly into the receiver, 'The counsellor here's saying not to go back, Mum.'

'Oh... really? The counsellor says so?'

'That's what he says. Here, ask him.' I hold out the phone to Carl. After a moment's bemusement, Carl takes the receiver and puts on an impressively official voice. 'Hello, Mrs Pherson... no, I think your daughter's quite right. You should stay put for just now. At least until it's light. Yes, that's right... Yes, we're looking after them here, they'll be fine. Mrs Pherson, could you put the police on for a minute? Yes, I'll tell them... You're welcome... Bye now...' a more normal voice, 'Carl Trainor at the Harline Centre. Who am I speaking to, please...?'

He gets passed around a lot. Suddenly finding I can breathe again, I sit up straight and look around the room. Arty postcards of topless men. Slightly tatty posters for Pride Week, for GlasGay, even one for Gay Christian Scotland. Pinned to that one is a sheet of thick parchment paper, which looks vaguely familiar. Rainbows everywhere, a bit faded in the dull light. Photos of Carl with friends, mostly male, grinning into the camera. I don't know any of them.

'... right. Bye. Thanks.' He clearly means *thanks for nothing*, but his tone is polite. He puts the phone down. I say, 'Thanks for speaking to our Mum.'

'No problem. Right.' He looks over the pad he's been scribbling in. 'I asked those guys to contact your local polis, to let them know you've not done a bunk. They didn't give a shit, however, so I'll call myself in the morning. Then we'll see what's what. Have you got a lawyer?' Jamie shakes his head. 'There's one attached to the Centre. I'll call him tomorrow too.'

'Do you think they'll drop the charges?' I ask.

'Probably.' He pauses. 'Probably. You'll need to speak to the lawyer. But first things first. Where are you going to be staying?'

We both stare blankly at him. After a moment he repeats carefully, 'Where can you stay? Are there any friends or family who can put you up for a couple of days?'

'Well... no,' I say. 'That's why we're here.'

He doesn't believe us. 'No-one at all?'

'Well, there's my boyfriend. After tonight, I mean, he's away tonight. But after that, for a wee while maybe...'

'No-one else?'

I'm getting annoyed. 'Listen, he's just out the closet and I've been dead for a fortnight. How many mates do you think we've got?'

'Then I don't know what to – '

'Suze,' says Jamie, 'did you pick up any money before we went out?'

'No.' I stare at him. 'Did you?'

'No.'

I turn back to Carl. 'We'll sit in the waiting-room all night.'

'You can't – '

'We'll have to. There's nowhere else. I'll leave a message with my boyfriend, he'll be back in the morning. We'll be gone first thing, okay?'

He looks at us for a long time, then sighs. 'Call your boyfriend, then. It's nine for an outside line.'

I grab the phone before he can change his mind. For a moment of panic I can't remember his number... but then I get it. It goes straight into his voice. I take a couple of deep breaths, then say as calmly as I can, 'Raj, we've had a bit of bother. We're at this Centre now. In the Infirmary. It's the Harline Centre – hang on, the number's – '

'Suzey?'

'Raj?'

'It's me, Suzey – '

'You're there? I mean – you're at home?'

'The conference is off. The roads are too bad... Suzey, what's happened? Where are you? Suzey?'

Suddenly I'm crying. Big, hiccupping sobs like a child. 'Oh... Raj... Oh God, I can't tell you...'

We have to walk. Carl gave us bus fare but the buses aren't running. It takes nearly an hour. I don't care.

The flat is cosy. There's a big pile of pillows and quilts on the couch for Jamie. I fall into Raj's arms and do a lot more sobbing, and he doesn't let go. Jamie sits on the couch staring at the floor.

## Sixteen

Three days later and we're out of clean clothes. The polis retrieved the house's 'valuables' for us; unfortunately that meant the telly, the laptop, and nothing else. So I'm determined.

I'm going back in.

The sun is bright but heatless. I'm floundering through a night's heavy snowfall – it's over the top of my boots. Finally I reach the narrow pavement – there are two-foot banks of snow on either side, but the pavement itself has been swept and gritted. They take care of things like that on this street - never know when a lynch-mob might have to get through in a hurry.

I plod along, following the crescent, keeping my head down. In the corner of my eye, I see movement in ground-floor windows as I pass: my presence has been noted. I'd hoped at least some of these arseholes would have jobs to go to during the day, but apparently not. If I look up, the figure at the window is always turning away.

Across the road from our house, three men are standing. They might have been there for a while, or they might just have strolled out onto the pavement. They are standing, casually, beside the break in the snow-bank that leads out into the road. One of them lives across the street from us. As I draw level with them, he says, in a cheerful voice, 'Where's the woofter then?'

'Piss off.'

They all go *Ooooo-ooo!* as I step out into the road. My parka brushes briefly against the nearest man. One of them says something I don't catch, and they all laugh. I don't look round, I won't give them the satisfaction. I cross the road.

Our garden is white and smooth. All those trampling feet must have left a slushy mess last night, but the blizzard has covered it completely. I have to push through the fine powdery snow – it takes an effort, so I don't register immediately that there's something different about the house. Across the outside wall are some daubs of blue paint – presumably they once spelled out words, but now they've smeared and run. These fucking stupid neds, they can't even do graffiti properly. But that's not the main difference: it's that the windows and doors now seem to be made of brown wood, with stripes of alternating yellow and black.



I blink a couple of times and realize what I'm seeing. The doors and windows are boarded up. Across the Hurry Brothers' stamped trademark are strips of police tape. I try to peer under the boards, but they're fixed on securely, so I can't see if the windows are actually broken or if the cops have just sealed them up. I turn my attention to the front door.

There's a metal bar across the door, with a large padlock attached. I rattle at it a couple of times, but it's secure. From across the road comes a falsetto squeak, probably meant to represent a female voice: 'Oh, let me in! Let me in!' More laughter.

I wonder about the back door. Presumably that'll be boarded up too – but perhaps not so securely. It's round the back, and the garden's fenced off; the polis might have just left it locked.

But if I go round the back, those three might follow me. At the moment the whole street can see us; but round there is the high fence, and the quiet lane beyond. I might be able to get into the house. Or I might not.

I don't dare try it. My eyes sting with tears. Those bastards. I just don't dare.

I turn abruptly and walk back up the path. I think one of them says something, but I'm already wrapping my scarf around my head so my ears are muffled. I look out at the world through a tunnel of dark wool. I hear the footsteps and the whisk of waterproof material a second later than I might have otherwise. It's the neighbour, crossing into my path, still grinning cheerfully. He holds out a hand as if he's hailing a taxi. 'Whoah, whoah, wait till I talk to ye –'

I jump clumsily away from him, floundering sideways through the bank of snow. I stumble and feel a lot of snow go into my boots, but I keep walking quickly: parallel to the path, even though I'm walking across other folk's gardens. The neighbour keeps pace, laughing: I'm being silly and unreasonable. 'Aaaw, come on, hen –'

I keep going. I'm still crossing other people's front gardens – the dividing line between pavement and lawn might be buried under two feet of snow, but it still matters. It'll be getting noticed. After a few more paces the neighbour-man stops and falls behind out of sight. He shouts something after me, something with no laughter in it, and I try not to hear what it is. No-one else comes outside, although I hear a front window being rapped indignantly as I cross in front of it.

I don't get back onto the pavement until I'm round the corner, and into the main street. It's comparatively crowded, and no-one seems to know who I am. Traffic is crawling past – but at least it's moving. A grimy bus chugs past; I realize it goes near Raj's place. I was going to walk back, but I think I've changed my mind. I run for the bus.

I spend half an hour in the crowded steamy warmth of the bus. I stare at the filthy window, straining to make out landmarks beyond it, and trying not to cry. I'm not entirely

successful at either. The woman opposite stares at me mutely all the way. In the end, I'm glad to escape into the cold; at least the air's fresh.

In another minute I'm letting myself into Raj's flat – he's had keys cut for both of us – and the air's not quite so fresh again. Jamie's been in permanent residence on the couch for three days, and the living-room is starting to smell a bit lived-in. He's in his daytime position now: sitting up on the couch, dressed, with the quilts shoved behind the couch for later. He looks up at me with the unconvincing half-smile he uses as a greeting these days; then his attention sharpens as he sees my face. 'What's wrong?'

'Nothing.'

'Have you been crying?'

'No, no.' I wave away this ridiculous suggestion. 'Just the cold nipping my eyes. Want a cup of tea?' This last is called over my shoulder as I go back into the hall towards the kitchen: I'm just taking off my coat and putting the kettle on, that's all. Not hiding till I can wash my face, not at all.

I can hear Raj moving about in the tiny kitchen – there's no hiding in a one-bedroom flat – and I squeeze in next to him, pushing the door half-closed behind me. He looks up and smiles, automatically lifting another mug from the cupboard. 'Tea?'

He's wearing his academic cardigan, a huge dark red wooly creation that no-one outside a university could possibly find stylish. I wrap my arms around him and sink my face into the warm scratchy wool. 'Tea in a minute,' I mumble.

He puts his arms around me and bear-hugs until my ribs creak. Then he lifts my face up towards him. 'What's up?'

'Nothing. Idiots. Back at Mum's house.'

'You went round there?'

'I needed my clothes.'

'Don't go round there alone, Suzey. If you must go I'll come with you.'

I imagine those three men watching us walking up that street – a white girl hand-in-hand with a half-Indian guy with an English accent. A few days ago I wouldn't have thought twice about it. Not now. Those utter, utter *cunts*. 'Maybe if I leave it a day or two –'

'No. Don't go on your own, ever –'

'I *know*, I know. Stupid. I won't do it again. Okay?'

'Okay.' He hugs me again, mumbling into the top of my head. 'Just be careful. I don't know what I'd do without you.'

I start to tear up again. What *he'd* do without *me*? 'You'd get your house back,' I whisper.

'I don't want my house back.' The kettle starts whistling, so he has to turn away. 'Anyhow, the situation has to improve now.' When he gets no response, he looks up and clocks my blank expression. 'The charges...?' He points through to the living-room. 'Didn't he say...?'

'No, he... just a minute.' I go through to the living-room. Jamie is staring into space, but I know he must have heard at least some of that. 'Got anything to tell me?' I say.

He nods. 'They've dropped the charges.'

'Oh, thank God.' I sit down hard. 'Have you told Mum?'

'No, not yet.' I just look at him. 'I've just found out myself,' he adds, slightly defensively.

He still makes no move for the phone. I take a deep breath, then reach over and take his hand. 'Jamie,' I say, 'this is good. This means things are going to be better. Doesn't it?'

He's nodding vigorously. 'Aye. Aye. It does.' The half-smile again: still not convincing. 'Course it does.'

And that's it. 'I'll call Mum then, shall I?' I say. It comes out sharper than I meant it to. Jamie just shrugs. 'If you want,' he says.

So I do. Mum cries with relief, then wants to speak to Jamie. His voice is calm and upbeat, reassuring; if you couldn't see his blank face it would be utterly convincing. Then Mum wants me again: 'Do you think we can go home now?' she says.

'No, Mum. Not just yet.'

'But I need some of my things –'

'No, Mum.'

The three of us spend the night in front of the telly. I'm already behind on the typing, so I have to work through the evening. I keep getting distracted by the telly and making typos, but there's no other room warm enough to work in. Besides, I'd rather keep an eye on Jamie, although there's no sensible point to it – he just sits and stares, motionless. He doesn't even react when McLean appears on the news, yapping on about immorality; eventually it's Raj who changes the channel.

Raj and I go to bed early, leaving Jamie the living-room to himself. You'd think my sex life would be more active since I'm now shackled up with my boyfriend; hasn't turned out that way, though. We're too aware that every cough and creak is fully audible all over the flat. And I'm tired. I just want to get some sleep.

I'm suddenly wide awake. Raj mutters and turns over in his sleep. I half-sit up to see over him, at the clock; it's half two in the morning.



I'm freezing. I must have had my arms outside the covers. As I burrow under the cosy and slightly whiffy duvet, I notice a seam of light under the bedroom door. It's coming from the living-room; Jamie's still awake.

I wonder if I ought to go through. I find myself remembering when we were kids, and he'd wake up crying; I'd get him out of his cot and take him into bed with me. It always seemed to happen when Mum and Dad were yelling at each other downstairs, although according to Mum I did it all the time. Leave your brother alone, she'd say. You're disturbing him. Let him be.

I listen now, but I can't hear anything. Maybe he's reading, or he's just fallen asleep with the light on. I'll leave him be.

Besides, it's freezing. I squeeze up next to Raj, as close as I can get. Still, it takes me ages to heat up. I must be coming down with something. I just can't seem to get warm these days.

## Seventeen

'Ah,' says Carl, 'if it isn't Miracle Girl.'

He closes the office door, flicks on the kettle on the way back to his desk. 'How are you?'

'I'm fine.' I slide into a chair. 'It's the Boy Wonder I'm worried about.'

'Your brother?'

'Yes.'

'How's he bearing up?'

'He's...' I don't know how to answer. Jamie gives no outside signs of being in trouble. It's just that... 'He's just not right.'

Without having to ask, Carl pushes a mug of tea across the desk. 'Big shock for him. It's normal to be withdrawn.'

I wrap my hands thankfully around the cup. It's freezing in here. 'I just don't know what to do for him.'

'What you're already doing. Just be there.'

'I don't know if that's going to be enough.' It's dark in here, too. The window's uncovered, but the afternoon sky is too grey to be of any help. 'Could you stick the light on?'

Carl looks surprised, but he does it. 'Are *you* all right, Suzey?'

'Fine. Might be going down with a cold, that's all.'

He doesn't look convinced, but he doesn't press it. 'Are you still all right living where you are?'

*No, I think. I've been with Raj less than a month. I can still count the number of times we've had sex. But he's already stuck with me and my problem family. It's not good...*

'Yes, I suppose so. But my Mum phones me every day asking if she can go home. What do you think... should we just go back? Tough it out?'

'No.' He doesn't hesitate. 'Stay where you are.'

I knew he was going to say that. 'Have you heard anything from the lawyer?'

'Nothing new. But he thinks the chance of gaining access is much higher now. Now that the charges have been dropped.'

'Shouldn't it mean he should automatically gain access? Since there's no criminal record or anything?'

'Yes, it should.' He looks me in the eye for a moment. 'But it doesn't.'

I nod. We sit in silence for a while. I look out at the charcoal-grey sky. 'It's so dark.'

'Heavy snowfall coming.'

'It's not just that. It's like...' the words are out of my mouth before I know I'm thinking them, '... like spring's not coming.'

'It's just a heavy cloud covering.'

'The days feel like they're not getting longer –'

'They are getting longer. Don't be melodramatic. It's just thick cloud.'

His voice is firm, but there's something... I look at him closely. 'Sorry. Silly of me.'

'It's all right. Times are tough. We've got to keep a grip.'

He keeps his face expressionless. But I know him, even if he doesn't know me: and that was a prepared speech. 'Have you heard other folk talking like this?'

'Folk always talk like this.' He waves his hand towards the waiting-room and the shell-shocked people in it. 'S'daft. Superstition.'

His hand rises briefly towards his collar, drops immediately back onto the desk. But the movement draws my eye to something on the collar. A pin or a badge. It's a small white enamel dove, with an olive branch in its beak. The olive branch is rainbow striped.

I look up at Carl, and my attention is caught by the Gay Christian Scotland poster behind his head. It's further caught by the attached sheet of parchment paper, which I've finally recognized.

Several pennies have just dropped loudly in my head. I'm so taken aback I don't know which one to deal with first. 'Carl,' I say eventually, 'are you - religious?'

'Yes.' He stares back defensively. 'I'm a gay Christian. Do you have a problem with that?'

'No.' But shouldn't *he*? 'But after all the Church has... you know. The persecutions... How can you be a *Christian*?'

He looks angry for a moment: then shrugs. 'I don't know. I just am.'

'But you've always said religion was nonsense, delusions and... you –' But was that him? Was it someone else? I feel light for a moment, as if my blood sugar's dropping. I can't remember... 'Was it you?'

'Are you all right?'

His voice is sharp. I look up; and the moment's passed. 'Yes. I'm fine. It wasn't you who said that, was it?'

'No.'

'Okay. But what about -' I point to the sheet of parchment stuck to the poster. 'That's from McLean. You can't be going to that thing of his. Are you?'



'How do you know what that is?'

His voice is cold – he thinks I've been spying, reading over his shoulder. Luckily I've got the perfect reply. 'Because I've got one too.'

Now it's his turn to look astonished. 'You're going as well?'

'I've been invited. I'm not *going*. You mean you are?'

'Yes, I am.'

'Why? I mean – why did they ask you? You're gay. You did tell them, didn't you?'

'I told them.' He smiles grimly. 'As far as they're concerned I'm *struggling with my broken sexuality*. I have to attend meetings with the Intercessors. They're going to pray for me to have purely *natural* urges. I've to be *willing to change*.'

'And are you?'

'Of course I'm not.'

'Then why the hell are you going?'

'Because there'll be a lot of people there who think they can't be gay and a Christian. And I can tell them otherwise.'

'You're going to try to *convert* them?'

'Yes. I suppose so.'

I stare at him. 'Carl,' I say, 'they'll crucify you.'

The smile again. 'Then I'll be in good company, won't I?'

'They'll crucify you upside down just for saying that. And *don't* tell me if someone got crucified upside down, I don't want to know. They will *hurt you*, Carl, don't you have any idea what these people are like?'

He looks at me sadly. He's going to do a speech, I just know it, he's going to talk about standing up to be counted... but in the end he just says, 'Well, I'm going anyway.'

And there's nothing more to say. 'Be careful.'

'I will.'

I look out of the window again. The clouds are thicker, I swear it. There's no sign of the sun. And once again words are coming out of my mouth. 'They say the Last Days are coming,' I say.

'People always say that.' His voice is firm. But he glances involuntarily at the waiting-room again. Gay scenes are big on New Age stuff: tarot cards and palmistry and horoscopes and all that. I wonder what the cards and the planets have been saying lately. 'You've heard that one before as well, haven't you?'

He looks at me levelly. 'What are you, a mind reader?'

'I'm Miracle Girl, remember?' I stand up. 'I'll head off now. Good luck in Glencoe. Try not to get massacred, won't you?'

'I don't think that's very wise of him.'

Raj is the master of the understatement. I settle down on the couch between him and Jamie. 'That's putting it very mildly.'

'They must think he's going to repent. When they find out he's not...'

'That's what I said.'

'He's aff his fucking heid,' says Jamie. We look at him in faint surprise. He doesn't speak much at the moment - we've got used to talking over his head as if he were a child. 'He's brave, though,' I say.

'He's fuckin nuts.' Jamie sounds thoroughly disgusted. 'A Christian. Jesus Christ.'

He hasn't noticed the irony, and I decide not to point it out to him. 'Well, there are gay Christians...'

'They'll nail him up.'

I've been hoping to hear some kind of concern or interest in his voice: but there's nothing. No more than Carl had for him. 'Well. I hope he'll be all right.'

Jamie just grunts. I shut my eyes and squeeze up next to Raj. The laptop screen keeps going dim on me, so by now I've got a permanent headache. And I'm cold. 'It's bloody freezing,' I mumble.

Raj's hand presses against my forehead. 'Actually, you're warm.'

Oh, great. I am coming down with something. I make a decision: fuck it. The world can turn without me for a while. 'Think I'll go and lie down for a bit.'

Jamie does look up now, surprised. 'Are you okay?'

That's all we ever seem to say to each other these days: *are you okay? are you all right?* 'Think I'm getting a cold, that's all. Night-night.' I get up, kiss their foreheads one after the other. 'If Mum calls, I'm asleep. And no, she still can't go home yet.'

I escape before they can make a fuss about it. The bedroom really is freezing, I can almost see my breath in front of me. I put on the tracksuit I sleep in: then I put on another layer of clothes, with gloves, and extra socks, and a scarf around my head. I crawl under the covers and shut my eyes.

I don't know if I've been asleep or not. If I have, it wasn't for long – Raj isn't here yet. But I'm hot now. I peel off gloves, scarf, extra tracksuit trousers. Extra socks.

Now the other socks too. I'm warm. It's a good warmth, like being in a tepid shower. Pleasant, rinsing the worries away.

And it's light. I haven't opened my eyes yet; but I can tell I'm in a room of glorious sunlight, and the air is warm. I can move freely; my clothes aren't thick and constricting, but light and loose.

There's a smell; a clean smell. Raj and Jamie must be cleaning the house – seems a strange thing to do at this time of night. They must be doing the bedroom, too – the smell's that strong. Can't they leave it till I'm awake, for God's sake? 'Do it in the morning,' I mumble.

No reply. There are muffled voices, too. They must have the telly on...

...No, it's not that.

I know what I'm going to find when I open my eyes.

I'm somewhere else.



## Eighteen

<sup>29</sup>It seems that I'm walking.

I know this only because I can feel my feet on the floor. My eyes are still closed – the light pressing on my eyelids is bright. Something is gripping my elbow on either side. I can hear echoing voices, and a hissing sound, like hailstones on a roof.

I ease open my eyes. Daylight: bright but with a rippling quality, pearly-grey. I must be underwater, bobbing along the bottom of the sea. Perhaps, if I tried, I could take big floaty steps like an astronaut on the moon. The thought makes me smile.

'Suzey?' The voice is at my right elbow; a young female voice, pleasant. 'Suzey, are you with us?'

I blink a few times. White spots slide down my vision for a second, but they soon clear, to reveal a face looking at me from my right shoulder. A woman with a white paper cap thing on her head... a nurse's hat. I think I know her, but I can't remember her name. Why's she so close, are we marching in formation...? No – she's holding onto my elbow. She smiles at me. 'Morning.'

I mumble acknowledgement and look to my left. I can feel another hand on my elbow - but for the moment all I can see is the aqueous light. It's brighter on this side. We must be open to the elements... no, it's glass. Windows, from floor to ceiling. The light's pouring down it in waves... but again, no.

It's rain.

I stop dead. 'I'm back in the hospital,' I say.

The woman says something but I ignore her. I'm looking at the rain. Water. Warm water. Early spring rain. 'Water,' I say. 'Spring rain.'

Someone blots out the light: the person on my left has stepped forward. I look up into a big smiling face. 'Hiya, Suzey,' it says.

I'm wearing light clothes – pyjamas and a bathrobe – and I'm not cold. 'It's getting warmer here,' I say.

The man squeezes my elbow gently in reply. A name comes to me. 'You're Charlie.'

The smile broadens. 'You're with us today.' He exchanges a pleased look with the girl on my left, who adds: 'How are you feeling, Suzey?'

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<sup>29</sup> Back in the 'Warm' World of the psychiatric hospital.

I blink at her. '...Kirsty?'

'No, Suzey. I'm Sharon.'

I shake my head, still trying to figure out why there's so much light, so much glass... Ah – a corridor. A walkway between two buildings. A whiff of carbolic: the overboiled scent of bulk catering. Hospital smells.

We've reached double doors. Charlie shoves one open, still holding my elbow, while Kirsty – no, Sharon – hands me through. 'There we go,' she says, as if I were very old or very young. 'Not far now.'

'Where are we going?'

Charlie answers. 'You've got a visitor, hen.'

I whisper, 'Is it Raj?'

But, as I almost completely expected, he looks blank. 'Don't know him, Suzey.'

Kirsty adds, 'It's a woman to see you.'

A room opens up in front of me. Big, full of tables, one side top-to-toe windows. The dining-hall. Some of the tables are occupied; people peeling off wet raincoats, talking across tabletops to people in indoor clothes or dressing-gowns. I know some of the indoors people, but I can't quite think of their names. Charlie and Sharon are steering me towards the windows; a small but spiteful gust of wind spatters the glass with raindrops, making my two bodyguards flinch. 'Nasty out there,' Kirsty says. 'They say we're to have snow.'

I laugh about this till I realize the hands on my arms have tightened slightly. I relax, follow them meekly, let them install me at a small table across from a woman in a grey wool coat. I've no idea who she is. I say to Charlie, childishly, 'Can I have a drink of water?'

'Course, hen.' He smiles at the woman as he departs. She smiles back, shrugging off the coat and revealing an emerald shirt that brings out the green in her eyes. I know her now.

It's Katie. Her hair is shorter, just past her jawline – she's running her fingers through it to dry it, although it's only a little damp. Similarly the coat has just a sprinkling of raindrops across the shoulders. She must have come in a car: on her way to work. Yes, I think I remember now – Katie with smart clothes and a car. She's smiling at me, nervously. 'Hi,' she says. 'How do you feel?'

I carry on staring at her. She clears her throat and clasps her hands on the table-top. 'Everyone's been asking for you,' she says. Her eyes keep darting from my face to her hands, to the window, to the floor. 'Did you get our card?'

The light is blotted out again: Charlie the human eclipse is at my shoulder, setting down two paper cups full of water. 'Everything okay?' he says.

'Fine.' I take a drink, but my voice still comes out as a croak. 'She's just come to fire me.'

'No.' Katie looks shocked. 'No, of course I haven't.'

'What did you come for, then?'

'I've come to tell you your job's *safe*, Suzey.' She's smiling. 'It's been to the review. They've extended your sick leave.' Failing to get a smile out of me, she looks at Charlie. 'They've given the clearance for another full year.'

'There you go, Suzey, eh?' Charlie's voice is hearty, but he makes no move to go away. He's heard my tone of voice, and he's no fool. I force myself to smile. 'Well, that's good,' I say.

Katie is encouraged. 'You can come back as soon as you're feeling better.'

'It's a load off my mind, right enough.' I must sound suitably humble, because Charlie pats my hand and walks away. Katie has to look at me again. 'So... how's the food in here?'

I'm taking a long moment to look at her. I'm thinking: *I know what you're capable of. I know what you are.* I'm almost pleased to get this opportunity. 'Have you seen my brother lately, Katie?'

'No.' She sits back, startled. 'No, I haven't. How's he getting on?'

'Fine. He's getting married, did you hear?'

'Oh. Married. To a... I mean, is he –'

'To a man, yes. And yes, he's still a poof. Disgusting, isn't it?'

'I hope he's very happy,' she says stiffly.

'Oh do you?'

'Of course I do.'

'Oh right. That's why you slapped him about the face, then? When he told you he was gay. That's why you called him a, what was it now, a "stinking pervert"? That's why, is it?'

'That was ages ago.'

'And that makes all the difference, does it?'

'I haven't come to talk about this –'

'So it was just fine for your bitch of a mother to stand around screaming abuse at him, was it?'

Her lips pursed at 'bitch of a mother' - now she's pulling her handbag-strap onto her shoulder. 'I don't want to listen to this.'

'Oh boo-hoo, poor you. You'd let those fuckers tear him apart, wouldn't you? You'd have sat there looking fucking holy and let them take him apart. Just to get back at him.'

She's getting to her feet. 'Suzey, I've no idea what you're on about.'



I'm on my feet too. I'm aware we're attracting attention, but I'm not letting her go. 'Don't talk shit at me. I know you, I know what you'd - '

'I'll see you again, Suzey.' Her voice is calm and clipped. 'I hope you feel better soon.'

She doesn't get to be calm about this. 'Christ, I'm glad he's gay. Least it got him the fuck away from you.'

Her face is suddenly inches from mine. Her cheeks are flaming red. 'You're pathetic, you know that? You're obsessed with your own brother. You'd fuck him yourself if you could. You make me *sick*.'

I'm grabbing for her, trying to get her face. But there's a band of steel around my waist, lifting me off my feet. Charlie's voice in my ear says, 'No you don't.' My chair goes flying, there are shrieks all around me. I'm kicking Charlie's shins, punching at his arms; but he still hauls me off easily, and I am still being pulled away from her. So I just scream at her, *you bitch! You BITCH! Fucking CUNT!*

Now there are hands grabbing my arms. Nurses, male and female, whisk me towards the door. One nurse has stayed behind, her hand on Katie's arm. *She* has lost all her colour, but is calm. As they drag me out, she very slowly and deliberately turns her back.

Then I'm out in the corridor, and these damn people are still hanging onto me. 'Get the hell off me,' I snarl.

'Don't think so, Suzey.' Charlie's voice is kind but exasperated, a father with a fractious two-year-old. 'Just going to get you calmed down, eh?'

'I'm calm. I'm *calm*. I'm sorry I hit you, Charlie. Please let me go.'

We're at the door to my dormitory now. Kirsty is pulling back the curtains around my bed. 'We can't let you go for people like that, Suzey,' she says, sadly.

'I'm not going to go for her. I'm not, but did you hear her?' I'm suddenly crying, sobbing, I sound like Claire. 'Did you hear what she said, did you...'

'I know, Suzey, I know...'

This time the needle goes in my arm. I scream, because it's so cold, they're injecting me with ice, it's freezing –

And I'm in darkness again.

<sup>30</sup>Aching pressure on my hands and knees. Within seconds it goes from an ache to a stinging pain. I'm kneeling down. The ground is stone, freezing stone.

The wind is squealing and roaring around me. My ears hurt; I put my hands over them, but my fingers ache so badly I have to tuck them inside my clothes. That lets a stab of cold in. I open my eyes.

Black and grey shapes: an abstract pattern, meaning nothing. I'm in semi-darkness, like the last minutes of twilight. I shift around to see a little more; there's a wall beside me. I cower up against it.

I'm wearing my scarf, I realize; I pull it up over my head, wrapping it around my ears, mouth and nose. In the seconds it takes to do this, my fingers are numb – I'm wearing gloves, thin woollen ones, but they might as well not be there. My feet are stinging too – my boots aren't making a lot of difference. I'm wearing my thick coat, but the cold soaks through like icy water.

I might as well be naked. I think: the killing cold.

The abstract blacks and greys have become recognizable: steps, leading upwards. Something before that – a pair of railings, one on either side of a short pathway leading to the steps. A bridge, I think. The railings lean over drunkenly on one side, like candlewax melted then hardened again. The scene is familiar somehow, but I don't hang around to think about it. I uncurl from my fetal crouch, wincing as the cold finds my back and stomach, and scuttle to the staircase. My boot skites straight off the first step; I have to catch at the metal banister, crying out as my chilled knee hits the step and my hand grabs the frozen metal. The surface of the step is ice, knobby ice an inch or two thick.

I look up; the whole staircase is the same, flash-frozen in a flood of dirty water. I get a firm grip on the banister – it freezes my hands, but it won't be for long, not long – and I start hauling myself up the stairs. But my feet slip as if the surface were oiled. After four steps I sit down, and start bum-shuffling backwards up the staircase. I let go of the frozen banister as often as I dare. My hands hurt so much. I stop whimpering and start crying out; I still can't hear myself over the bellowing wind.

I finally crawl over the top step into the path of the wind. If I'd been standing, it would have thrown me back down the stairs. As it is, I scramble sideways until I'm off the slick of ice and onto something firmer. The twilight is a little brighter now; I can see the ground a few inches from my face. It's black earth, hard as stone. Set into its surface, like metal in a rock-

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<sup>30</sup> This scene is set not in the Cold World, but in a second alternate reality (marked by Suzey's crossing of another bridge). This world has been destroyed by nuclear attack followed by nuclear winter; or as Raj sees it, by Ragnarok.

(See Part Two, Chapter Three, 'The End of the World in Ice: Ragnarok, Nuclear Winter and the Apocalypse')

face, are strands of pallid green: blades of grass, a lot of them. This used to be a lawn. I lift my head.

It's the University. Even in the dull gloaming, the clock-tower is unmistakable. Something about the outline is different though. I stare at it stupidly for a moment – *what's wrong with this picture?* – before I realize the western wing is missing. Or rather, judging by the rubble strewn around the empty space, it has been knocked down like a sandcastle. I look back at the clock-tower. The clock says half past ten. The minute hand is still moving.

The wind is scouring my face. I get up, rewrapping my scarf to cover as much as possible. At the base of the eastern wing, still intact, is the archway leading to the quads. That should be out of the wind. I lean headlong into the gale and struggle forward.

Something dull-red is in the middle of the University driveway, blocking my path. I have to peer at it for a moment; then I realize it's a car, turned completely upside-down and sitting neatly on its roof. All the windows have been blasted out. A few feet away the slick of ice runs past the lawn and down the steps. Beyond the car is what looks like a small frozen pond – a crater, I decide, filled to the brim with ice. There is a fluttering movement at the edge – something blue. Fabric.

A sleeve.

I make a small whimper of relief. There's someone here. I struggle over to the crater, calling out a greeting. It's a dark-haired man; he's in the crater, his head and shoulders above the edge, as if he's reclining in a Jacuzzi. I get closer, and slow down; I stop ten feet away from him. I remember seeing my grandfather in his coffin, and my father after that; I know what I'm looking at. This man, lacking an undertaker's care, is gaping at the sky – his eyes are still open. From the chest downwards, he is encased in grubby and uneven ice. There are glints of ice on his cheeks, frozen tears or raindrops or condensation.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *Cold City's* icy dystopian setting makes comparisons with Dante's Ninth Circle inevitable: this is the most obvious example. Literary hells, in defiance of the maxim, are quite often 'frozen over', and are all the more excruciating for it. The *Inferno's* most wretched souls are encased up to the neck in solid ice, unable to wipe their frozen tears away:

I turned and saw, stretched out before my face  
And 'neath my feet, a lake so bound with ice,  
It did not look like water but like glass...

So, wedged in ice to the point at which appear  
The hues of shame, livid, and with their teeth  
Chattering like storks, the dismal shades stood here.

Their heads were bowed toward the ice beneath,  
Their eyes attest their grief; their mouths proclaim  
The bitter airs that through that dungeon breathe.

(*Inferno*, Canto 32, lines 22-4, 34-9. p. 271-2)



It feels unkind to leave him there. But the cold hurts too much. I hurry towards the archway.

The gloom of the quads is disorientating; black walls, white snow. The wind obviously does get in, although it can't sweep the snow away completely as it does outside; there is a ski-slope of white against the south wall, up to the second-floor windows. But I manage to find a sheltered doorway. I huddle there for a moment, looking back through the archway. From here I should be able to see the lights of the city, covering the Clyde valley.

There's just a dark, empty space.

I look up at the sky. It's a uniform dark gray - no black of night. The wind, which should have driven off the heaviest overcast, has no effect on the flat near-darkness. The wind seems to howl and scream in protest; I can almost hear voices in it, shrieking across the sky.

This is daytime. The clock showed half ten in the morning.

This is not my world.

My stomach is starting to cramp. My lungs are tightening, and my muscles ache. It's the cold, passing through skin and flesh like fog. *Chilled*, I think idiotically, *to the bone*. I imagine bones, polished blue-white and laid bare to the gray sky.

Sobbing, I run around the quad, tugging on the heavy wooden doors. All locked. I try the windows, one after the other – shut tight. I shove at the thick leaded glass, then thump it; it doesn't even crack. I wail as I run, 'Hello! Anyone here! Please...'

There's a scraping noise overhead. Snow is shoved off a window-ledge, lands powdery around me. Movement – a head leans out. A voice whispers, 'Hello...?'

It can't be... 'Raj?'

A long pause. Then: 'Who's there?'

It is. 'Raj! Oh love, it's me! Raj, let me in, please!'

'...Suzey?'

'Yes, it's me! Let me in, quick! Come down and open the door, Raj, please, I'm freezing!'

He mutters something. Then a bit louder. 'Window. Right under here. There.'

I tug at the handle of the window. It doesn't budge, but this time I don't move onto the next one. After three more tries, it judders in its frame, then creaks open.

I'm climbing inside when I catch a movement in the corner of my eye. Something gray against the white banks of snow. A wolf, shaggy coat and skinny legs, head turning from side to side. It sees me teetering on the window-ledge; its eyes meet mine and an instant later it's sprinting towards me. I scramble in, shrieking, and slam and lock the window behind me.

Then I run for the stairs, and I don't stop until the top floor. Mournful howls follow me all the way.

There is flickering light under the door of Raj's office. I can smell smoke. I burst in, slamming and locking the door behind me.

The room is smoky, and stinks of sweat and piss and vomit. But there is a fire, in the middle of the floor, and nothing else matters. I fall to my knees in front of it, the cramps already subsiding. 'Raj,' I say. 'Oh thank God, thank –'

Raj comes out from behind the screen. His voice is a whisper. 'Suzey...'

His face and head are red, bloody... No. There are sores like burns all over his face. Oh, his *hair*... his hair is missing at the front. His scalp is bare and red-raw right back to his ears. As he comes slowly towards me I can smell him; dried puke, unwashed crotch, and a coppery smell like blood. I stand up and take a couple of steps back, but he staggers and almost falls, so I catch hold of him.

'So it's true,' he mutters. He's heavy, so I ease us both down to the floor. He's roasting; for a moment that feels wonderful, but then I realize he's burning up. 'You're not well, Raj,' I say stupidly.

'You've come back,' he says. He rests in my arms for a moment; then sits bolt upright again. 'It's true, then. They're coming back.'

'Lie down, pet,' I say. 'You're not well.'

I don't think he heard me. 'The dead come back. The world ends. It's Ragnarok.'

'Stay there.' I go to the window and push it open, bracing myself against the blast of the cold. There's still a little snow on the window-sill; I scoop it up. Then I spot motion, far below me, gray on white. Wolves are milling about the quad. There are too many to count. One of them looks up, seems to see me, and raises its muzzle in a high-pitched howl. The others join in, high and low voices harmonizing. I slam the window and hurry back to the fire.

Raj sits calmly for a moment, letting me dab his fiery skin with half-melted snow. But then he reaches past me to grab a stack of papers. I think he's going to throw them on the fire, but instead he stacks them neatly, and slots them carefully into a metal box beside him. I peer at it in the smoky firelight; it's a small safe. 'What are you *doing*?' I say.

'Recording it.' He seems surprised by the question. 'For the people who come after.'

'What people?'

'The people of the new world. The dead rise, and the world ends. Then the new world comes about.'

'With the dead in it?'

'No.' He looks at me sadly. 'No, the dead go back to being dead. You and I stay dead, Suzey.'

I've started to cry, helpless shivery sobs. 'We're not dead, Raj.'

'Yes,' he says, 'we are. I saw you die, Suzey. You died in the second blast. In the firestorm. The firestorm. Don't you remember?'

'Stop it, please...'

'I'm sorry, Suzey...' He puts his arms around me. He stinks, and I can't bear to look at his ruined face. But his voice is soft, and for a moment the mania is gone. Then he pulls away abruptly, and picks up more papers. He waves them under my nose. 'This is how it happened,' he says. 'See?'

I look. On top of the bundle is an old newspaper cutting; a picture of a beautiful 12-year-old boy, with a halo of golden curls. The headline shrieks: *KILL THE MURDERING BEASTS*. 'That's Peter Balfour,' I say.

'No.' Raj is shaking his head vigorously. 'No, it's Balder. *Balder*. The beautiful one, the beloved of the gods. He is murdered. The gods will have their revenge. That's how it begins. Then. *This*.'

He produces another paper cutting. His voice has become quite mild, as if he's back in the lecture-hall. But his eyes are rabid. 'Him. The Destroyer.'

I look. Dozens of cuttings; all by Matthew McLean. I scan them. *CRUSH THESE BEASTS... MURDERING SCUM... Wipe Out the Perverts...*

Then: *FAITH OF OUR FATHERS... Return to DECENCY and COMMON SENSE... ZERO TOLERANCE...*

Then: *MAD MULLAHS... our Jewish brothers... GOD'S COUNTRY... BOMB THREATS... held to ransom by violent fanatics?... We Say: Teach Them a Lesson... STRIKE NOW...*

Then nothing.

'He started a war,' I whisper.

Raj's eyes are losing focus. 'The great sword blazes like the sun,' he says. 'The serpent spews poison over all the earth. The sky cracks open, and the earth burns. Then ashes, only ashes.'

'Raj –'

'Fenrir.' His voice is hoarse now, and weak. He's staring at McLean's picture. 'The Great Wolf. The one who swallows up the sun. The end of the world. Ragnarok.'<sup>32</sup>

He's lying down, his head resting in my lap. He chokes, spits out thin watery vomit. 'Suzey.'

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<sup>32</sup> For Raj's conflation of nuclear war with Ragnarok, see Part Two, Chapter Three, 'The End of the World in Ice'.



'Raj, please.' The fire is dying down. The cold and the dark are pressing all around me. 'Raj, don't, stay with me, please!'

'It's all right, Suzey. All right. All right...'

'Raj, oh God, don't –'

He lets out a great sigh, all the air rushing out of him –

'Raj! *Raj!*

Not moving, not moving, he can't be –

'*Raj Raj oh Christ no, don't leave me! No! No!*

The wolf-cries rising outside –

'*Raj! No! No! No...*'

'Suzey!'

'*Oh God Raj! Come back, please, please!*

'Suzey, wake up!'

It's his voice. 'Raj? Raj?'

'Wake up, Suzey!'

My arms are around him. He's warm.

'Open your eyes, Suzey.'

I open them. Raj is leaning over me. His hair is against my face. I reach up to his face – I won't believe it till I touch him. But it's true. I hold his healthy, sore-less face in both hands, and I start to cry.

'Christ, Suzey, what's wrong?' Another voice: Jamie. 'What's wrong with her?'

'Just a nightmare. Hush, Suzey, calm down...'

Finally I look up. We're in our bedroom, Raj's bedroom. Warm and safe, and not (very) smelly. Raj is in bed beside me. The single-bulb light is on, although there are slivers of dull daylight around the blackout curtains. Raj is holding onto me as if I'm about to have a seizure. Jamie is standing in the doorway, wearing pyjamas and suffering from serious bed-head. 'Suze, are you okay?'

'No,' I whisper.

Raj looks at Jamie. 'She's freezing. She needs a hot drink.' Jamie, looking relieved to have something to do, disappears towards the kitchen.

Half an hour later I'm sitting up in bed, trying to drink hot sweet tea with whiskey in it. My teeth keep hitting the side of the mug; Raj has his hand under mine to stop the drink slopping onto the covers. I can't stop shaking, or stammering 'I saw it. Rag- Ragnarok. It was so ruh-ruh-*real* -'

'Shh. It's okay –'

'It's *not okay*.'

It takes a while, but I manage to tell them everything about it. Especially McLean. The Destroyer.

Jamie's face has gone white. 'Jesus Christ. He's going to *do that*?'

'No.' Raj's voice is sharp. 'Not here. If it happened at all, it happened somewhere else. Not here.'

'But it could happen here –'

'It would already have happened here, if it was going to.'

I'm remembering his red-raw face, his cracked voice whispering *Balder...* 'But you said it was inevitable –'

'I didn't say that. *He* said it.' He waves his hand, looking faintly exasperated. 'Everything happens somewhere. Parallel worlds. We've been over this, Suzey –'

'You didn't see it.' I pull away from him, and scramble over to the window. I yank the blackouts aside, so hard they come adrift from two of the curtain-rings. Early morning daylight appears, dull and grey; it's not enough. 'You can't imagine it, *you didn't see it, you don't know* –'

'No, I don't. I'm sorry, Suzey. Hush now...'

He takes me in his arms again. I look over his shoulder at Jamie. Jamie's face has gone grey. He looks like *he* could imagine it.

I won't let Raj put the blackout curtains back up. So he gets dressed in the bathroom. He comes back into the bedroom combing his hair; I watch him search for his watch, tie, wallet. Then he bends over me and puts a hand on my forehead. 'Your temperature's down,' he says. 'Are you tired?'

'A bit. Are you going out?'

'I have to go into the office. Get some sleep while I'm out.'

'No,' I say immediately.

'Try. The fever's gone now. You need to rest.'

He smiles down at me, but he looks exhausted. I realize I've spent much of this morning telling him what he'd look like when he died. No wonder he wants to get out. 'All right, I'll try.'

He bends down and kisses my forehead. 'Jamie will be here.'

'I know.'

I hear the front door close. I lie down and shut my eyes, just to rest them. No chance of falling asleep – not with the room full of daylight. I'll just rest.

I hear Jamie come and stand in the doorway. He doesn't speak. I probably should say something, reassure him. And I will, in a minute. If he doesn't say anything first.

But he doesn't. I let out a long, long breath. I think he says something, but I'm probably wrong.

I really am very, very tired.



I hear the front door close again. Footsteps in the hallway.

I open my eyes. It's still daylight, but it's different. Without looking out I can tell it's afternoon. I've been asleep for hours.

Keys jingle in the hall; then the footsteps go into the living-room, accompanied by the unzipping and unfastening of a coat. Then a cough: it's Raj. I call, 'In here.'

The bedroom door creaks – Raj looks in and smiles. 'Hi,' he says. 'Did you sleep?'

'I must've done.' I sit up. 'What time is it?'

'Just after two.' He sits on the bed beside me, and puts a hand on my forehead.

'Your temperature's still down. How do you feel?'

'Okay.' I do feel much better. I swing my legs out of bed. 'I'm getting up.'

He's watching me carefully. 'Did you have a dream, or...'

'No, nothing.'

'All right.' He gets up to go. As he's on the way out I notice something; no background noise. In this flat you can hear everyone breathing, and I can only hear myself and Raj. 'Where's Jamie?'

Raj calls back, 'Gone out.'

'Where?'

'For a walk, apparently.'

That sounds hopeful. He's scarcely been out of the flat since he got here. I pull on some clothes and follow Raj into the living-room. 'Do him good to get out,' I say. 'Some fresh air.'

'Absolutely.'

I flop down onto the sofa. 'And it gives us a bit of time to ourselves.'

Raj sits beside me, squeezing up close. 'That never crossed my mind.'

'Like hell it didn't.' I haven't washed, and I feel pretty disgusting, but Raj doesn't seem to mind. 'You probably gave him a fiver to go to the pictures, you randy bugger.'

'I didn't.' He starts nuzzling into my neck. 'But I'll keep it in mind.'

I pull him up close. 'How long've we got?'

'Mm?'

'How long did Jamie say he'd be?'

'He didn't. He left a note.'

The moment goes cold. 'A note?'

'Yes, a note. What's wrong?'

'Where is it?'

'What?'

'The note. I'm sorry, pet. Where's the note?'

He sighs, points to the mantelpiece. 'It's there. Suzey –'

'I'm sorry. Just a minute.' There's a piece of lined paper propped up on the mantelpiece: I grab it. 'I know it's nuts, I've just got to –'

*Dear Suzey (and Raj) –*

*I've just gone out for a walk. I've been thinking about things. I think I know a way to put all this right. Don't worry. Love, Jamie.*

'Oh God,' I say.

'What?' Irritation is starting to creep into Raj's voice. 'What is it?'

'Didn't you read this?'

'Yes. Of course I... Suzey, you don't think he –'

'I don't know.' I'm already sitting upright, pushing my feet into my boots. 'I'm sure it's nothing.'

He's looking at the paper again. 'It's just an ordinary note.'

He's right, of course. I pause... but it's no use. 'I know. I'll just feel better if I find him.'

I've finished lacing the boots up, and make a dive for the hallway. Raj makes no move to follow – he's finally fed up indulging me. Can't blame him, I suppose. I start struggling into my coat – and then Raj is there, putting his coat on. 'If it'll set your mind at rest.'

'Thanks.'

'That's the only reason. There's no danger.'

'I know.' I'm already out of the flat, taking the stairs two at a time. I burst out of the close door and out into the street.

The sky is a swirl of grays, bright and dark. I squint through my watering eyes: just the street, piles of mucky snow along the roadside. Cleared pathways that show no footprints. A bundled-up figure is walking away. I shout, 'Jamie!'

Raj emerges from the close, almost bumping into me. The bundled figure is already turning to stare at me – it's not Jamie. I turn to Raj: 'Do you have any idea when he went out? Any at all?'

'No. How could I? Suzey, you need to put warmer clothes on.'

I realize I've forgotten to put on my waterproof trousers – I'm wearing leggings and track-suit bottoms and that's all. I already feel like my legs are bare, but I say, 'I'm fine. We won't be long. Come on.'

I make my way up the street, looking out for someone to ask. There's no-one about, though – these days people just stay inside, and keep warm. Which is what we should be doing. Nevertheless I shuffle diagonally across the intersection, with Raj behind me. It takes ages, but no cars come along. People don't just drive about any more.

They don't just go for walks, either. I look up towards the canopy at the far end of the street. 'Maybe he went to the corner shop,' I say.

'He doesn't have any money.'

Not there, then. Where could he go without money? I look towards the other end of the street, where the snow-cover is almost pristine and the black trees are laden with bundles of white. 'The park,' I say. 'He might be there.'

Raj frowns. 'Why would he go to the park...?'

'Not for the reason you're thinking.' I've already set off for the park, but I manage a smile over my shoulder. 'Sex-mad, you are. It's freezing out here.'

'I'm a man. I can't help it.' He makes a grab for my underdressed and chilly rear end. But I keep walking. 'We'll just have a quick look,' I say, 'then we'll go back.'

There's an exasperated sigh behind me; I ignore it and keep going. It's not a big park, it won't take long. He might be sliding down the hill, or under the trees by the –

By the pond.

I start to run, although I can't get above a jog. There's no need anyway. If he is in the park, and he probably won't be, he's probably just walking or throwing snowballs or something. If he's there at all – more likely he's gone to see Carl, or even Mum. Yes, that'll be it.

Raj shouts something – I'm leaving him behind. 'Come on,' I yell over my shoulder. I have to do another diagonal crossing to reach the park gates; I pause on the kerb while a big 4-by-4 dawdles past. Raj catches up with me. 'What's the hurry?'

'No hurry. I'm just cold.' It's started to snow again, tiny flakes blasted in a spitefully cold wind. 'Come on.'

We shuffle across and through the park gates. The paths haven't been cleared, and immediately we're wading. To the left, the clean snow has been churned underfoot - a wandering line of footprints, large and small, human and canine, leads up the slope, although there's no sign of life there now. To the right, a single line of footprints leads toward the trees around the pond. They're human, adult and male.

Raj says, 'Are those his?' I've already begun to run. By the third step my momentum has gone; the snow is up to my knees, I have to push through. My thin trousers and leggings are already soaked through – I may as well be wading through icy water. I try to step into the



footprints, but you can't lift your feet that high when you're running. So I'm back to struggling through untouched snow. 'Jamie! Jamie!'

Raj is calling something behind me. I plough onwards. Running through snow is like running through treacle, or glue. I'm panting for breath already; my muscles are aching with fatigue or with cold. I'm running against the wind; tiny flecks of white spin into my face, sting my eyes.

I collapse against the first tree I come to. This is silly, silly, silly. I'll wait for Raj – I look back at him struggling behind in my tracks. He'll say I'm daft. When Jamie comes home, he'll say I'm daft. *You're off your chump, Suzey*, he'll say. Yes. So I'll just walk through the trees, have a look at the ice – the empty and unbroken ice – and then I'll go home and get warm. That's all there is to it.

I make my way through the trees, clambering through drifts, pulling up my hood when an overladen branch dumps its snowload on me. Too late – it's down the back of my neck. It'll take me ages to warm up now. I hurry past the last tree, out into the open again.

The pond is in an open space. Its paths are completely covered. A few poles stand around the perimeter; on top, lifebelts are gaudy orange under their little wooden snowcapped roofs. The pond itself has been cleared of snow, perhaps for safety. The footprints stop there.

The pond is a smooth unbroken sheet of ice. Someone is standing on it, towards the far side but still close to the center. They're wearing a parka, but the hood's down. Light brown hair is blowing about in the freezing wind.

It's Jamie. He gives no sign of seeing me. I start to scream, '*Jamie! Jamie!*'

He takes no notice – I don't think he can hear me above the wind. He just stands still, looking down at the ice. I stumble over to the nearest lifebelt, wrenching it off its wooden board. There's a rope attached to the pole; I tug at it, and it holds. Clutching the lifebelt, I take a step onto the ice.

I think I hear it creak; but above the wind I can't be sure. I fill my aching lungs and scream, '*JAMIE!*'

His head lifts, turns towards me. He stares at me for a moment – I can't see his expression from this distance – then he takes a few step towards me. He's heading across the center of the pond. '*No!*' I shriek, waving him away, backwards. '*Not that way, Jamie, no! No!*'

He keeps going. He's in the center now. The world is full of shrieking, mine and the wind's. I can't hear the ice. Jamie's feet rise and fall. The snow whirls and I can't see.

Then Raj is behind me. 'What's the matter with –'

This breaks my paralysis. I thrust the lifebelt into his hands. 'Throw it! Throw it to him!'

'What's –'

*'Throw it, for Christ's sake throw it!'*

Raj throws it. It's lightweight, just a doughnut of light plastic; it can't compete with the wind, just skims and lands halfway between us and Jamie. Jamie is past the center now. Apparently bemused, he stops to look at the lifebelt. Then he bends to pick it up. Swinging it from one hand, he starts towards us again.

I pick up the rope, wrap it a couple of times around my arm, then step out onto the ice again. A few steps further, feet skidding. Another one. Jamie is now only yards away from me. He looks at me, confused. I stretch out my free hand. 'Here! Take it!'

He does. I propel myself backward, feet hitting the ice sharply. Raj is behind me – I reach back and he grabs my hand. I shout at him to pull, and he does.

I'm off the ice. I've got Jamie's hand. I pull him onto the path.

Jamie still looks bemused. Checking again that I'm completely off the ice, I put myself between him and the pond. I take a couple of deep, shuddering breaths. And then I'm yelling again. 'Oh *Christ*, Jamie, don't you dare! *Don't you dare!* Jesus *Christ!*'

All the time he's just gaping at me. 'Suzey? What's...'

'Oh you little sod, how could you... what about Mum, it's –'

'Suzey.' Raj's voice cuts in. 'What's wrong?'

'What's *wrong?* Didn't you see him out there?'

'Yes, I saw him. What's wrong?'

He looks stern, but otherwise as bemused as Jamie. It starts to occur to me that this is not how you'd expect either of them to look, given the circumstances. 'He was on the ice,' I say.

'Yes. He was. And...?'

'It could have broken. It's the Drowning Pond. People have – gone under the ice, you know. I remember it. They drowned...'

'Suzey,' Jamie says. 'The ice is a foot thick.'

I just gape at him. He steps back onto the pond; when I start to reach towards him, he stamps his foot. Not a sound or a movement. The ice is like a sheet of marble. 'See? Solid.'

'Oh. But – I remember... people falling through it – it's...'

I look from one to the other. Jamie's starting to smile. 'You're a daft besom, Suzey,' he says.

I rally a bit. 'But what was I meant to think? That note. What were we meant to think it was about?'

Raj gallantly doesn't point out that I was the only one who thought that. Jamie looks serious. 'Christ, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that.'

'Then what the hell did you mean?'

'I've made up my mind.' He's very serious now. 'I know what I'm going to do. If you'll help me.'

'Of course I will.'

'I'm going to go to McLean's Glencoe thing. I'll take your place, Suzey. I'm going to tell them I'm repenting of my wicked ways. Penitent sinner, good publicity. Hey presto.' He makes a conjuring gesture. 'I get Claire back. Maybe Katie as well.'

There is a long silence. Raj eventually says, 'You two are just as mad as each other.'

I get in before Jamie does. 'Jamie, that's the stupidest thing I've ever heard.'

'But Suze –'

'No! Now I'm bloody cold and I'm bloody soaked, and I'm going home! And so are you. And put your hood up.'

He doesn't move. 'I need this, Suzey.'

Raj cuts in again. 'You'll both catch hypothermia if you don't get indoors soon.'

Jamie still doesn't move. Eventually I say, 'We'll talk about it inside, all right?'

'All right.' He nods. I've just realized how wet and freezing I am. Raj steers me towards home, and Jamie follows.



## Nineteen

I hold out half an hour before I agree. I tried saying I don't know the number, but he found it in the phone book. Then I pointed out I threw out the invitation letter – he said he'll ask for another one. Then he made me look at a picture of Claire – and that was the end of it. 'Fine. Phone them then. Have my place and good luck to you.'

Jamie makes a dive for the phone. I catch Raj's eye and we both shake our heads, like parents. They'll probably tell him no, in any case. Perhaps he won't even be able to get through... but no. 'Hello, my name's James Pherson, it's about the *Spirit Fire* event...'

I listen while he gets passed around, repeating the same story over and over. They're obviously trying to put him off, but he's not giving up. Eventually he puts his hand over the mouthpiece and whispers, 'They're putting me onto Kerry.'

'Kerry?'

'McLean's daughter,' Raj murmurs, as Jamie turns abruptly back to the phone: 'Hi, Miss McLean? Hello, Jamie Pherson here, Susan Pherson's brother... I need to ask you something...'

And so on, with maximum little-boy-lost charm. Women usually soften pretty quickly when he does that – but judging by his responses, Kerry McLean is made of harder stuff. 'No, but... you see, she can't – aye, I see... Look, I'll tell you what it really is...'

And then off into the penitent sinner story. *Madness... my wife and daughter... so sorry...* I listen, wondering if she can possibly be buying this. Sounds unconvincing as hell to me. And right enough, Jamie's face is soon tripping him – and it's not part of the act. Then, while still speaking to Kerry, he's looking up at me. 'Yes, I understand. Look, could she... yes, she's here. Would you like a word?'

He holds out the phone, hand over the mouthpiece again. 'She won't let me go without you.'

'You know what the answer is, then, don't you?'

'Just speak to her, Suzey. Please.'

I sigh, and take the phone. 'Hello, Miss McLean?'

'Susan Pherson?' Her voice is deep for a woman's, and not at all warm. 'Miss Pherson, I explained the situation to your brother. He can attend as your guest, but not in his own right.'

'But if I'm not going, there'll be an empty place, won't there?'

'It's not that simple. Mr McLean himself compiled the list. I can't approve anyone who isn't on it.'

'But that doesn't make any sense.'

'I'm sorry.'

She's not about to budge. I think – okay, I'll say I'm going, then take a sickie in the morning. 'All right then. I'll come.'

'That's good. Then you can sign your guest in.' She's way ahead of me. 'All guests have to be signed in by invited delegates.'

I spend long moment looking at Jamie's pleading face. 'Then I really will be there.'

'Then we'll look forward to seeing you. I'll pass you on to our Travel Co-ordinator, to arrange your journey.' And then I'm on hold. I hang up – travel is the least of my worries just now. 'Well,' I say to my two astonished menfolk, 'I'm off to see the God-botherers.'

'This is a bad idea, Suzey,' Raj says.

'Probably.'

Jamie is trying to hide his delight. 'If you really feel bad about this, Suze, we'll forget it.'

'It'll be fine.'

He flings his arms around me. 'Thank you, Suzey.'

'It's okay. Just start swotting up on your Bible, you're going to need it.'

He lets me go, and starts to notice the heavy silence coming from the other side of the room. So he makes himself scarce, ostentatiously putting a magazine under his arm and disappearing towards the bathroom. When the door closes Raj says, 'It's a bad idea.'

'I don't have much choice, do I? It'll give him a chance.'

'I don't want you to do this.'

'Don't tell me what to – ' I stop, take a deep breath. 'Look, it's just a few days in the country, all right? Nice hotel, good food – '

'Fanatical people. Whose beliefs you're going to mock.'

'We're not mocking anybody. And if it gets too bad we'll just take off and get a B&B, okay? We're not going to the North Pole.'

He goes to say something – but just sighs. 'Yes, you're right.' He smiles. 'I suppose I just don't like letting you out of my sight.'

'Would it make you feel any better if you came too?' I suddenly realize this would make me feel a lot better. 'If we could manage it?'

He looks up in surprise. 'Actually, yes, it would. But you're restricted to one guest.'

'I know someone I can ask about that,' I say.

<sup>33</sup>Carl looks at me steadily across the desk. He must've heard some unlikely things in this office, because he seems only mildly surprised. 'You want me to go away for the weekend with your boyfriend?'

'With me *and* my boyfriend, actually. And my brother.'

'That's the best offer I've had in a while, Suzey, but the answer's still no.'

'Are you already taking someone?'

A snort of laughter answers that one. 'No-one I know is masochistic enough.'

'Except us. At least you wouldn't be on your own.'

'I'd rather be.'

'That's not fair.'

'Do you really think I can condone what your brother's going to do?'

'He's got to do it. It's his kid. Wouldn't you?'

He pauses. 'I still can't condone it.'

'It's not Jamie you'd be condoning. It's Raj. He thinks this is a terrible idea as well.'

'So why is he going?'

*The Great Wolf.* Raj's voice, the voice of my fever dream, comes back to me. *The Destroyer.* 'He's scared for me,' I say.

'What's he scared of?'

He still looks composed. But there's still that something... 'Do you think McLean is dangerous?'

'Yes.' His answer is immediate. 'Unquestionably.'

'Does he scare you?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'It's obvious, surely. He wants to set up a reactionary state, a climate of sexual repression –'

'No. I mean *why does he scare you?*'

'I don't know what you mean.'

But he does know. 'He scares me, Carl. And I'll tell you why.'

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<sup>33</sup> This scene demonstrates the knowingness of myth-revision; Suzey and Carl recognize what kind of story they are 'in'. As they are aware, the story's premise after this point – our four heroes travel to McLean's isolated lair to stop him destroying the world – has unavoidable shades of *Austin Powers*. Rather than trying in vain to conceal this, I have foregrounded the story's more melodramatic aspects. See Part Two, Chapter Three, 'The Winter Solstice in *Cold City*'.



So I tell him. Different worlds, fimbulwinter. Raj dying, and whispering about the *Destroyer*. Ragnarok. All the way through Carl watches me levelly. He keeps his face still and unreadable. At last he says slowly, 'Do you truly believe that?'

'I'm not...' I realise I don't entirely believe it, not anymore. It was a fever-dream; it happened yesterday, but it already seems like a long time ago. 'I'm not certain...'

'Because if it *is* true...'

I sigh. 'It's all right Carl, you don't have to humour me. Just forget it.'

He carries on as if he hasn't heard. 'If that were true, then we *have* to go.'

'What? Why?'

He's still not listening. 'He must be up to something. We could catch him at something. Something he'd only say to the faithful...'

'Carl –'

'There must be a weakness. Drugs. Women. Some of the papers have it in for him, they'd print it –'

'Carl!'

'What?'

'Do you mean we should spy on him?'

He frowns. 'Someone's got to stop him, Suzey.'

'Stop him.'

'Yes.'

'Us? *We're* to stop him?'

'Well, yes...'

'So let me get this straight. We go up there. We spy on him. We catch him selling government secrets or something.' I don't think I can actually say this. 'And we put a stop to him. And we... save the world?'

'Well –'

We stare at each other for a moment. And then we collapse laughing. I have to hang onto the edge of the desk so I don't fall off my chair. 'So d'you reckon he's got a doomsday device in the basement?' I say when I can speak again. 'Guarded by killer robots?'

'I thought giant sharks, actually,' he says, and we both laugh till we cry.

Eventually we have to pull ourselves together. 'Okay, seriously,' Carl says. 'We'll go. And we'll try. Can't hurt to try, can it?'

He looks rather plaintive. 'No, it can't hurt,' I say. 'But Raj is coming too, yes?'

'Why not. But I don't have to share a room with him, do I?'

'No. He'll be sharing with me.'

He raises his eyebrows. 'Will he? You're not married.'

'Tough. He's sharing with me. You might have to share with Jamie, though.'

'That won't be happening.'

'Oh, don't get on your high horse. It'll be a twin room –'

'It's not that. He's a repentant sinner, if you remember. And I'm...' the humorless smile is back, 'I'm a *moral danger*, aren't I?'

'Bollocks to that. I'll phone them.' Laughter has made me bold. 'If they can't manage the sleeping arrangements we won't go. Read out the number, would you?'

I'd expected some holy space-cadet to pick up the phone – but it's a proper receptionist, briskly pleasant. 'McLean Associates, how may I help you?'

'Hello.' I'm slightly taken aback. 'Um, my name's Suzey Pherson, I was on earlier –'

'Oh, Miss Pherson.' Pleasant turns straight into warm and respectful. 'Just a moment, I'll put you through to Mr McLean.'

That can't be right. She must mean his secretary, or assistant or something –

'Hello? Susan?'

A male voice, rugged and affable. My God, it's him. 'Yes. Is that – Mr McLean?'

'Aye, that's me. You were speaking to Kerry earlier?'

'Well, yes. It's about my brother, you see... he's...'

'He wants to come to us.'

'Well, yes. You see, he's... lost his family. Because of something he –'

'Aye, I read about it. And he wants to come and repent. That's marvellous, Susan, that's truly marvellous.'

'Oh. So he can come?'

'Of course.'

'Even if I can't make it?'

'You have to be there too, Susan.'

The statement is absolutely final. 'All right,' I say after a moment. 'We'll both be there.'

'I look forward to meeting you. Both of you. Goodbye till then, Susan.'

'Er, wait. Please.' I'm stuttering like an idiot here. 'I mean – can I bring another guest as well?'

'Who is it?'

'It's, um...' I look away so I don't have to meet Carl's eyes. 'It's my... fiancé.'

'Aye? Congratulations. Aye, he can come as well.'

'And we've to share a room,' I blurt out. I feel like defiant teenager. 'I mean – we'll have a double room.'

There's a silence. Then a deep, warm laugh. 'Aye, we can arrange that. Just tell him to make an honest woman of you soon, eh?'

'Er, yes.'

'And I want an invite to the wedding, okay?'

'Sure. Okay.'

And then he's gone. 'Well,' I say to Carl. 'I think we're in.'

'I heard.' He's looking at me shrewdly. 'He's keen on your brother being there, then?'

'Seems to be. Doesn't seem too fussed about premarital nooky, either.'

Carl snorts. 'I wonder what he'd do if they put that in the *Standard*?'

'He'd probably say *I would have gotten away with it too, if it wasn't for you meddling kids.*'

That sets us off again. After a while, though, we get a grip. Carl has a waiting-room full of people. And I've got to go home and tell Raj we're getting married.

If Raj's eyebrows were raised any higher they'd be on top of his head. 'This is all so sudden, Suzey,' he says.

'Oh, give over. He wouldn't let us in if we weren't engaged at least. '

'Did you ask?'

'No.' I'm avoiding his eyes. I'm afraid he'll look horrified at the very mention of the e-word. I'm also afraid he won't. 'Of course I didn't ask. Be a bit obvious, wouldn't it?'

'I suppose it would.'

'I'll go to the Barras at the weekend. Get a cheap ring.'

'Fine.'

'And I asked Carl about the travel arrangements. We get the bus to Crianlarich. Then the hotel will send transport for us.'

'They'll have to send a team of huskies. The roads will be blocked solid this time of year.'

'I think they'll send a Snowcat.'

'Yes, that makes sense.'

I hover over him. We'll have to make the conversation quick – Jamie's tactfully hiding in the bathroom again, but he can't stay there all night. 'Are you really okay about doing this?'

'I'm fine.' He smiles, pats the sofa beside him. 'I over-reacted. I'm sorry.'



I curl up beside him. 'We'll stay in a posh hotel for three days, and we'll keep our mouths shut. Can't be that difficult. Even for me,' I add, before he does.

The toilet flushes: Jamie starts coughing loudly, to indicate he's on the way back and we'd better put on anything we might happen to have taken off in the meantime. Raj says quickly: 'Do you think he can act well enough to pull this off?'

'Why not. He's been doing it half his life.'

<sup>34</sup>And there's nothing left to do but wait. Buy bus tickets. Arrange time off. Pack – we send Mum back to the house (with a police escort) to get clothes and suitcases. She's happy we're going. She thinks getting Churched will put us both right. She sounds dazed, acts confused; looks older than ever.

We read the Bible, as much as we can. It makes me dizzy; all that beauty, all that kindness, all that spite. Jamie memorizes a few relevant passages about mercy and repentance. Raj, bookworm that he is, has already read the whole thing: we agree he'll do the talking, if it comes to it.

And we dream, or at least I do.

I dream I'm standing at the Pass of Glencoe on a sunlit day, watching as a darkness opens up from the valley floor to the sky. It fills the width of the Glen exactly, like the great glacier that carved out the valley in the first place. Near the shadow's crest, above the tallest peaks of the valley, two red lights move, and fire dances and spits.

The shadow begins to move down the Glen. I can't see them, but I understand there are people in its path; they're trying to scramble to safety, but the slopes are much too steep. They fall back and are consumed. The darkness roars, and a wet stinking gale blasts up the glen, plucking up trees and cottages. I can see more detail now: a line of bone-white where the shadow touches the ground, and another just below the red flames. Above that the darkness has an outline, like a bat's head, with two pointed ears.

I am looking into the mouth of a great wolf. Its jaws gape wide, the lower scraping along the ground, the upper touching the sky. Drool runs from the white teeth and falls in floods to the ground. The creature snorts like a bull, and flames shoot from its nostrils. The red lights are its blank feral eyes. They fix onto me; they've seen me. The darkness grows and grows as the wolf leaps –

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<sup>34</sup> Suzey's dream is based on the events of Ragnarok:

Fenrir's slavering mouth will gape wide open, so wide that his lower jaw scrapes against the ground and his upper jaw presses against the sky; it would gape still wider if there were more room. Flames will dance in Fenrir's eyes and leap from his nostrils.  
(Crossly-Holland, *Norse Myths*, p.174)

- and then I wake up. Raj doesn't stir, he's a sound sleeper. I coory up against him and go back to sleep.

I have the same dream twice.

But on the third night, it ends differently.

The wolf leaps as before... and then I'm somewhere else. It's warm and stuffy. There's a smell of disinfectant. I'm lying down, with a quilt over me – I'm in bed. I open my eyes.

I'm in my room at the hospital. The windows are dark: it must be late at night. It's very quiet.

Beside me is a pool of light: a bedside lamp, angled downwards to soften the glare. Someone is sitting beside the bed, someone with dark clothes and white hair. 'Hello, Suzey.'

It's Mister Lisbon. I speak to him: my voice is hoarse. 'Help me,' I say.

'Help you how?'

'Stop this. Stop all this that's happening.'

'I can't.'

'Tell me how I can stop it.'

He shakes his head sadly. 'You can't stop it either.'

'He's going to make the world end,' I whisper.

'Yes.' He bends closer to me. The light makes his hair a bright corona. 'Yes.'

'Help me stop it.'

'It has to happen.' A draught has caught his hair. It moves, sways, brightens: turns into silvery flame. He whispers, 'You can't change that. Everything happens somewhere.'

'But not here,' I say.

My eyes are blurring. He melts into cold white light. But his voice is clearer than ever. 'It has to happen somewhere.'

'Not here,' I say. 'Not to us. Not here. NOT HERE!'

- and then I wake up.

Raj stirs, makes a questioning noise. 'Just a dream,' I mumble. He grunts and puts an arm round me, asleep again a moment later. I nod off too.

I don't mention any of this to Raj or Jamie. It's just a dream, it doesn't bother me. And if they dream, they don't tell me about it.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Mr Lisbon, again, might be real, or a hallucination, or a vision. His celestial corona of hair suggests he might be a god or an angel. Most importantly, he is once again a narrative bridging device between one phase of the story and the next.

And so the day comes.

The four of us are standing outside Crianlarich station; or what we assume is Crianlarich station, since the whole village is covered in snow. Landmarks are blurred. It's just a vast expanse of eye-watering white. The bus has long since gone, back to the comparative shelter of the city. A north wind is treating our huge parkas as if they're not there.

We shuffle closer together. The emptiness is freakish: I assume Crianlarich is still actually inhabited, although our only clues are a few thin wisps of chimney smoke. The warm smell of woodsmoke makes us lonelier than ever; we shuffle even closer. 'It's supposed to be here by now,' says Jamie.

No-one bothers to answer. I'm entertaining the fantasy of staying here. Burrowing under the snow until we find someone who'll let us stay with them; staying in one of these snug little hobbit-holes until the spring comes, or at least the next bus back to the city. Raj seems to be reading my mind: 'If nothing happens soon, we'll have to get rooms for the night.'

But a few minutes later, something does happen. A high-pitched nasal buzzing, getting louder. By the time it deepens into a noisy, droning engine, we can see something acid-yellow, edging towards us down the north road. It soon resolves itself into a kind of minibus on tank-tracks: a Snowcat. It coasts easily down the icy road, and into the village.

The driver sees us and lifts his hand, bringing the Cat to a smooth and expert halt. We gather up our small battered suitcases and hurry towards it, our apprehension overpowered by the urge to get into the warm. Even so, I find myself hanging back, dazzled by the Cat's fluorescent yellow. Carl looks over and catches my eye. 'Off to Castle Dracula, then, Suzey?'

'Ready when you are, Van Helsing.' I follow them onto the Snowcat. And so we set off, off to Glencoe; off to save the world.



## Part 4

### *The White Palace*

**This, all this beauty blooming,  
This, all this freshness fuming,  
Give God while worth consuming.**

**'Morning Midday And Evening Sacrifice'  
Gerard Manley Hopkins<sup>36</sup>**

**Flurries of snow rolled through the hall, a bitter wind sent a thousand candles guttering.**

**'Who will let the Winter in?' cried a voice from the shadows.**

**No reply; only the wind rushing through the room.**

**'Who will let the Winter in?' the voice repeated.**

**Adonia stood, the blast ruffling the fillet of leaves in her hair. 'Not I!'**

*Winterlong*  
Elizabeth Hand<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Bartleby.com.

<sup>37</sup> Hand, *Winterlong*, p.410.

## Twenty

The sun comes out as we approach Rannoch Moor. There's a leaden sky in the distance, but the moor is white and sparkling. The Snowcat's windows are tinted, very discreetly, so we can enjoy the view without being painfully dazzled. Snow is very pretty when you're not actually out in it. It's hard to believe I'm looking at a landscape that could kill you in two hours flat.

The cabin is insulated to luxury standards. The engine is nothing but a peaceful hum, the sense of movement negligible. The air is still and just a little too warm. The tundra outside passes like a fairy-tale movie, harmless and sweet.

We are unused to such sensory deprivation. Opposite me, Carl is yawning hugely. I rest my head against Raj's shoulder and close my eyes. The Snowcat rocks me, very gently.

A change. It's been there a while, I just haven't noticed. I'm still warm, the air a little stuffy. My bum's gone numb, as if the upholstery's been taken from the seat. Slight bleach-y smell, not unpleasant. But no more hum, no more rocking. We've stopped. Voices around, with a bit of echo... echo, in the cabin? I start to open my eyes.

The light is golden, and still bright. I close my eyes again. I hear Jamie murmur, 'Look at her eyes,' then louder – 'Suzey?' And then another voice, 'Suzey? Suzey?' It's my mother. I open my eyes.

Three faces, close up. Jamie, with short hair, and Carl with black hair, and my mother, with brown hair. Did we double back to Glasgow to get her...? Ah, no. It's a dream. A figure in white is coming up behind them; now another face appears. A nurse – Sharon? Kirsty? – speaking to me. 'Suzey, love? Can you hear me? Suzey?'

'Suzey?' My mother is crying, just a bit. But she looks well. Jamie's arm is around her shoulders, and Carl is pressed close to him. They are holding one another up. They all look well, tired maybe, but well. There is colour in their cheeks that doesn't come from the light.

Now they are smiling, in response to my smile. They are as they ought to be. They'll be all right. The nurse is speaking, but I ignore her. I am sitting in a hard chair but I am rocking, just a little. I have so much to say to these three, but something is pressing into my

cheek and I have no time. 'Goodbye now,' I whisper, and the light blazes up and I hear my mother's voice rising sharply... and then the golden light is gone. The pressure on my cheek shifts slightly. Someone close by is snoring.

I open my eyes, and lift my cheek from Raj's shoulder. White light, background hum. Now it's Raj's face smiling down at me. 'Hello sleepyhead,' he says.<sup>38</sup>

Carl is snoring opposite me, Jamie sitting with his eyes closed. I sit up, a little queasy from the oh-so-slight movement of the Snowcat. 'What did I miss?'

'Scenery.' Raj nods to the forward window.

Mountains rise from the flat moor ahead of us, white and steel-grey. They are painfully bright in the sunshine. They do not sparkle, and they are not pretty. We are coming up on Glencoe.

The road curves and we can see down the approach to the glen. I know it because I can see the shape of the Great Shepherd on our left. The ground-level landmarks are gone, blanketed in white. I'm confused: shouldn't the King's House be on the right? Is it further on in, or is it that slightly larger white bump in the wilderness? And shouldn't the ski centre be there on the Lesser Shepherd – there, where there's nothing but snow?

There are two scraps of colour against the snow – one blue and one red. They're moving, fluttering. My vision shifts and I'm looking at a building – long and low and white, resting comfortably at the top of the slope where the ski centre used to be. There are glints of azure – picture windows. Flags rise above it. I can't believe now that I didn't see it.

There is a change in the tone of the motor. We're slowing down. I switch my gaze to ground level; we're coming up on a gateway. The sledge tracks we've been following turn into it – only a few lighter impressions carry on into Glencoe proper. The gateway is flanked by two eight-foot Celtic crosses – probably poured concrete, but still impressive. To one side is a shorter stone monolith, inscribed, in curly calligraphied script, with: *Wayfinder Ski and Leisure Centre*. The monolith is capped with snow – I realise suddenly that the crosses are not. 'Is this it?' I say, my voice shakier than I'd like.

'This is it.' The driver is already steering us between the crosses, into a broad driveway that curves up into a forest of evergreens. Jamie makes a derisive sound in his throat: I turn to follow his gaze. He's looking back at the crosses - I just have time to see the discrete wires running up the back of each one. 'Do they heat those crosses to keep the snow off?' Jamie says.

'It's for the floodlights.' The driver sounds slightly offended. 'They're lit up at night.'

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<sup>38</sup> Suzey's 'dream' is another narrative bridging device, committing the plot to the events of the Cold World. The narrative does not return to the Warm World until the end of the final chapter.



Jamie snorts but doesn't reply. We are plunged into dark green, pleasant after the glare. The pines are iced with white. The Christmas-card view is marred only slightly by the steel poles that line the driveway on either side – they are each crowned like a lighthouse with dull red glass. The driver flicks on the headlights, making the glass tops flash scarlet, like glaring eyes. I'm quite glad when the road rises out of the woods and back into the white.

The route has been carefully planned for effect: we take the slow curve out of the pines, and we're looking up at the Centre. I don't know what I'd been expecting – a fake St Paul's Cathedral, maybe, or a ten-foot neon Jesus – but it wasn't this. It looks like a Rennie Mackintosh: curved and elegant, and white against the winter-blue sky, for all the world like the Hill House. The main part of the building is oblong, with simple Deco designs on either side of the entrance. To right and left of the oblong, and seemingly behind it too, are round white structures like castle turrets. It ought to look absurd, but it doesn't. It fits snugly, almost humbly, into the lie of the land, but it draws the eye as the land never could. Flags are flying from the turrets: a saltire, and a red banner marked with a golden cross. 'Holy shit,' I say. 'It's Camelot.'

The driver laughs about this for the next five minutes, which is what it takes to follow the gentle rise of the driveway up to the main entrance. At one point the road loops around the other side of the hill, and we see the tops of cable-car towers and machinery, with some fluorescent-clad figures shuffling towards them. Then we're back at the front again, pulling up beside the gold-and-glass doors. Two men in matching red-and-gold parkas emerge; while we're still struggling to our feet and massaging our numb backsides, the driver has already opened the boot and the parka men are loading our luggage onto a trolley.

I climb out, catching the driver's chivalrous hand as I stagger slightly. The air is sharp but I inhale it gratefully. My eyes water slightly – I've gotten used to the tinted glass – so for a moment Glencoe is just a big bright blur. But when they clear I can see little difference. The peaks are outlined sharply against the blue sky – but the slopes, and the valley floor, are muffled with snow. There's no way of telling what's under there. The only movement is a tiny hornet-striped Snowcat, inching its way along - presumably - the road. When it disappears behind a bank of white, there is nothing. I could be looking at a landscape on Pluto - even from a mountaintop, there's only rock and ice as far as I can see.

'It's this way, Miss.' The parka-men are looking at me in concern; plainly they're not going to be happy until everyone is inside. I follow the baggage-trolley towards the doors, leaving the others to sort out the driver's tip – judging by the revving of engines I hear a minute later, the man was not impressed. Then the automatic doors clunk shut behind us, cutting off any outdoor sounds. We're in a broad corridor leading to slowly-revolving doors.

The corridor is fairly plain – obviously part of an air-lock system to keep out the cold. Above the doors, a sign in gold lettering reads:

### Welcome to Wayfinder

*'Come unto Him, all ye that labour, and He shall give you rest'*

'Here goes nothing,' I murmur to Raj, and we step into the revolving doors and the lobby of McLean's hotel.

More Rennie Mackintosh – sky-blue carpets and warm polished wood. Straight ahead is the long curved reception desk, where people in navy suit-jackets smile out at the world. They murmur to a mass of people in fluorescent anoraks who throng around the desk. It's crowded, but still quiet – we can hear breathy Enya music in the background. To one side, sheets of water ripple down a marble slope into a raised pond. Raj and I, unable to get any closer to the desk, perch on the low wall, peering past the water-lilies to the large golden fish. I dabble my fingers in the water, watching one of the fish rising lazily towards me. 'It's not much of a supervillain's lair, this, is it?'

Raj follows my gaze. 'Apart from the piranhas, you mean?' Then he chortles to himself as I leap about a foot in the air. The fish breaks the surface with its round toothless mouth. 'Bastard,' I say, flicking the water on my hands at Raj, 'you'd better behave. I only brought you here to have someone to fornicate with.'

'Your sister can't take a joke,' Raj says over my shoulder. Jamie's there, looking like he can't take one either. But this isn't a pleasure-holiday, after all. 'Let's get checked in,' he says.

Soon I'm leaning over the polished reception-desk, feeling like a scruff compared to the staff on the other side. Their dark blue jackets look like Armani, although surely they can't be. One of the girls, badged as *Shona*, smiles up at us; a pretty face with a light dusting of make-up, red hair partially cloaking the discreet head-set running from ear to mouth. 'Sorry to keep you,' she says, sounding genuinely sorry. 'How can I help you?'

'Pherson? Four people?' She nods pleasantly and, without making any adjustments I can see, starts murmuring into the mike. I crane over the desk, half expecting to see her rambling insanely at nothing but her shoes; but a screen flashes into life, letters scrolling across it. After a few more seconds I add, 'One might be under Trainor?'

Another pleasant nod. A few moments later she hits a key: found it. Extra respect comes into her voice. 'That's four single rooms for three nights?'



'Two singles and one double,' I say defiantly, edging towards Raj. Again, Shona doesn't turn a hair. 'Two singles and one double,' she says, in a voice that means she's talking to the mike – and apparently the mike can tell this, because more letters flow across the screen. There's a low beep, and paper begins to roll out of a letter-box slot on the desk.<sup>39</sup> Shona detaches it, tucks it into a white folder she's just produced from under the desk, and hands it to us. 'Welcome to Wayfinder. Please come with me, and I'll show you around.'

She comes out from behind the counter. Other guests at the desk look at us with mild envy – seems this five-star treatment is not for everyone. Too surprised to resist, we allow our bags and coats to be spirited away, and follow Shona for the grand tour. There's the lounge – Scots baronial, with leather sofas and the smell of woodsmoke, and 'high tea to be served from four to six o'clock'; and the dining-room, where waiters in white linen aprons are laying out gleaming silverware on white linen tablecloths. There's the gym, where athletic-looking people are pounding away on scary-looking equipment, goggling at anime screens to stave off the boredom. There's the sauna and steam rooms, and an outside Jacuzzi that can seat about twelve. 'And this – ' with the air of someone showing off the Mona Lisa – 'is the swim-centre'.

We follow her towards sounds of splashing and shouting, out into dazzling light. We are on a balcony, in a huge room of glass – there are spotlights in the ceiling, and through the steamed-up panes comes the glare of the snow. Around us, weary-looking adults are sipping cappuccinos; below lies a vast network of pools, fountains, rapids and waterfalls, all seething with children. Flumes coil around the walls – a particularly hair-raising one actually loops outside the building before dropping its shrieking occupants into a plunge-pool. One pool laps right up against the glass; through the condensation I can see heads bobbing about outside. At that moment a klaxon sounds; the shrieking gets louder, and half the main pool's occupants start splashing towards the deep end, while the other half make for the shallows. The pool humps up in the middle as if a whale is breaching, and within a minute there are five-foot waves dashing against the deep end.

The squealing reaches an ear-popping crescendo. I watch a young man and woman, probably the only adults not there to stop kids drowning themselves, clamber out of the main pool looking pissed off. The man speaks to a pool attendant, pointing to a pair of glass doors. Beyond the doors is a floor of glass... no: it's another pool. A grown-up, rectangular pool with lane-lines on the bottom; unlit, calm and empty. The pool attendant is smiling at the young couple, but still shaking his head: no entry.

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<sup>39</sup> I was determine to make McLean's organization very high-tech, demolishing some of Suzey's stereotyped perceptions of evangelicals as primitivists.



I look at Shona: 'Why don't they open up that pool?'

'That's the baptismal pool,' she says. 'It has to be prepared a few days in advance. Purified, you know.'

'Purified?' Does she mean as in cleaned, or... But she's already moving us on, perhaps sensing awkward questions in the air. 'I'll just show you the ski-slopes, then I'll leave you to yourselves.'

We don't need to go outside to see the slopes. She takes us to an observation deck on the top floor, its north wall one huge pane of glass. We are looking down over the slopes. We watch the hive-activity of the skiers, clinging to the ski-pulls, turning round and stamping at the top, then off down the slope, then stamping off to the pulls again. The peak of the Shepherd towers over them, but they don't seem worried. Shona has already launched into her spiel: '...from the beginner to the most advanced. The slopes are regularly maintained, and pre-avalanched<sup>40</sup> every night. Instructors are always on hand to help you. Do you have any questions?'

Three of us are muttering polite no's – but Jamie speaks up. 'When does all the Spirit Fire stuff get going?'

'This evening, after dinner.' Her smile broadens considerably. 'You must be looking forward to it.'

Raj says, 'Do the staff get to go?'

'Oh yes. It'll be great.' She looks younger now, excited. The professional voice is gone. 'I just think it's so great. The faith that made our country's coming back. It's – hopeful, you know?'

Although it was Raj who asked, she's still looking at Jamie. Probably thinking: *he's here with just his sister and his pals...* 'I'll see you there then?'

Jamie says levelly, 'I should think so. I'm the chief penitent.'

'Oh, right.' A small nervous laugh; she sways slightly, as if she wants to back away from him. 'That's good, that's really good...' Deep breath – now she's hearty and professional. 'Well, if you've no more questions...'

We don't. Shona flees. We go to find our rooms.

Our room is large and tasteful and warm. The carpet is cream-coloured, and soft as cotton wool. I run out of the bathroom in my scanties, and turn around with arms outstretched. 'Look!'

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<sup>40</sup> That is, avalanches are deliberately triggered by explosives to clear the slopes. See <http://www.avalanche.org>, 'Avalanche Terms: Artificial Control'.

Raj, sprawled on the orgy-sized bed, is already looking. I do another twirl. 'No goosebumps!'

'I can see a couple of big ones.'

'You're getting a big bump yourself, you dirty bugger.' But I'm conscious suddenly of my flabby midriff and off-white knickers. Winter sunlight fills the room, stark and unforgiving. I scurry over to the bed and sit astride him, pulling the top sheet over my legs, although I'm far from cold – the warmth makes me feel summer-ish, languid. 'Have you seen the size of that bath?'

He's started running his hands lazily up and down my bare thighs. 'Lots of incentives to sin here, don't you think?'

'You're telling me.' I start to unbutton his shirt, peeling back the fabric and kissing the bare skin inside. 'A shame Jamie and Carl aren't together, they'd love a bath like that.'

The hands pause. 'That's not an image I want in my head right now, Suzey.'

I giggle into his chest. 'Aw. Did I make your goosebump go away?' I do some exploratory groping. 'No, still there... ooh, it's getting bigger now...shame on you, thinking those thoughts in a house of God...'

I thought this teasing foreplay would go on for hours, but abruptly he pulls my face up to his and rolls half on top of me. I loosen my bra, and pull his shirt off over his head – there's a fair bit of escapologist's fumbling on both sides, but he doesn't smile about it. He's already raising my hips to pull off my pants. I murmur, although I know the glass is tinted and there's only the mountain outside, 'Should we close the blinds...?'

'I want to see you.'

We've never done this before, had nothing to cover us. We've seen each other piecemeal, in faint light and under blankets. It's almost frightening. We're both too pale, too flabby and wrinkly – a long way from movie sex, and that doesn't matter. When he murmurs 'Is it all right now? The Pill...?' I know I should tell him to get a condom anyway. I also know I'm not going to do it. So I say yes, yes and he pushes into me, and there's nothing between us at all.

Afterwards we lie tracing fingertips along slippery skin. I sink my fingers into his damp hair and kiss his sweaty forehead. He kisses my neck and says, 'I love you, Suzey.'

'I love you too.' Tears come to my eyes. We lie wrapped around each other, in the humid warmth, for a long time.

While he's in the loo, I turn my back on the window and pull the sheet up to my shoulders. It makes a little tent; I feel bizarrely reassured by it. I drag over the Spirit Fire brochure. I

haven't seen such quality paper in a while – a white eggshell finish, with a gold embossed cross. I'm looking for the timetable sheet as the bathroom door opens, and Raj climbs smiling into the sheet-house. 'Can I come in?'

'If you don't want to rush off to...' I check the sheet, '*The Scottish Family – Endangered Species.*'

'I'll pass.'

'How about...?' The next item is in a Crayola-type font, indicating that Family Fun is to be perpetuated. Which should clear all those kids out of the swim centre... 'Come on, let's go downstairs for a bit.'

He glances at the sheet and raises his eyebrows. 'You want to go to *Puppet Theatre's Daniel in the Lion's Den?*'

'Only if they're holding it in the Jacuzzi.' I find my bra squashed up under a pillow, and start to turn it right-way-out. Raj whisks it away from me. 'Hey!'

He holds it at arm's length, so I have to climb over him to get it. 'We haven't tried the bath yet,' he says.

'It's not a Jacuzzi. Not even we can fart that much.'

'We can try something else...'

'Just give me it.' My voice is sharper than I meant it to be. He gives me the bra. There's a silence as I struggle into it. Eventually I say, 'We should go and find Jamie.'

'Why?'

'See if he's okay.'

'Why wouldn't he be?'

'... I don't know. I'm just worried. That's all.'

'We'll keep an eye on him.' He pulls me into a hug; it can't be comfortable for him. He keeps kissing my face, working round to my neck. He's pressed up against me – I should be annoyed, him only thinking about one thing. But I start kissing his shoulder, then touching my teeth onto his skin, working downwards.

Clearly we're not going downstairs. This time I'll close the blinds.

I squeeze into my Red Dress for dinner. It's flapper-style, all sequins and fringing. I got it for my eighteenth birthday – it's been lurking at the back of Mum's wardrobe since my nineteenth, in the feeble hope I'd get back into it some day. God knows why Mum picked it up when she went back to the house. But I'm glad she did, because now I can actually do up the zip, which represents such a triumph I hardly care about my bulgy bum and stomach. Might be a bit much for God-fearing company, mind, I should probably tone it down... to hell



with it. I slap on red lip-gloss to match, and pull my hair severely back from my face, frowning at myself in the mirror. 'Is this too much?'

Raj comes up behind me in the mirror, and slides his hands across the silky fabric pulled tight over my hips. 'Very scarlet woman,' he breathes into my ear, and starts kissing round to the back of my neck. I disengage, giggling, before he finds *that* spot just above my spine, and we end up missing dinner altogether. 'Come on. I need to refuel first.'

He tuts. 'Weak and feeble woman.'

We find Carl and Jamie in the lounge outside the dining room. They're looking glum, although Jamie smiles when he sees me. 'Hey, it's the Red Dress!'

Carl surrenders his chair for me, which I've never known him to do (perhaps he's afraid the dress will split if I have to climb over him to a free seat). 'You look lovely, Suzey.'

Jamie's in nostalgia mode. 'All my pals used to fancy you something rotten in that dress. Derek Dale spent my whole fourteenth birthday trying to get a look down your cleavage.'

'How nice.' I lower myself into the chair. 'What about a drink for the Whore of Babylon, then?'

The glum faces are back. 'The place is dry. Apart from wine with dinner.'

'Now are you glad we didn't miss dinner?' I say to Raj. He smiles at me sidelong and casually rests a hand on my knee; his thumb just touches my dress's sparkly hem, which has ridden up considerably since I sat down. I look around to see if I'm in danger of being stoned to death. Most of the other women are in regulation Scotswoman-on-a-night-out uniform (the suit you wear to the office, but with a colourful blouse and more make-up); but there are a few other slinky dresses about, although I'm the only one to have plumped for houri-red. The people at the next table are getting to their feet – for a moment I think they're protesting the sight of Raj's creeping fingers on my nyloned thigh. But then I hear the double-doors creaking back – the dining-room is open. 'Shall we?' I say.

'Oh aye.' Jamie is already on his feet. He adds in a murmur, 'This is not a place you want to do sober.'

As I follow him into the dining-room, teetering only slightly in my heels, I realise I disagree. So far everything seems... well, normal. I take Raj's arm, using this as an excuse to press up against him; he reaches across with his other hand, ostensibly to squeeze my fingers, actually to cop an extremely unsubtle feel of my boob. We couldn't look less like a respectable husband and wife if we tried. But no-one's turning a hair.

We end up seated with a pleasant-looking couple with soft American accents. They are Mark and Sandra. They are obviously very much married, and Sandra is wearing a floral print dress; but they don't seem horrified by us. The four men bond by arguing over the wine

list (my three know bugger all about wine, but it's a guy thing) – Sandra and I bond by rolling our eyes heavenwards about it. The males don't even notice when the wine waiter returns, so I say, 'What's the cheapest wine on the menu?'

My menfolk look exasperated, but the waiter laughs. 'The three house wines are complimentary.'

'I'll have the sparkling,' I say immediately.

'How many glasses for the sparkling?'

'Just give her a straw,' says Jamie, rather sourly. But he cheers up when the red arrives. Meanwhile we're eavesdropping on a monologue coming from the next table, which bears out one of my expectations: a honking American voice declares its Christian right to bear arms, apparently to use on the IRS. Mark and Sandra are squirming. 'We're not all like that,' they mouth across the table to us.

Then the double doors are flung open; someone outside must be holding them, they don't swing shut. And in strides McLean. He looks orange under the lights – but his suit is dark and well-cut, and he moves well. He is at the head of a procession; more men in nice suits, women in elegant dresses, and, a step behind the great man himself, daughter Kerry. She is heavy-built; she would be an inch or two taller than her father if she stood up straight, rather than walking with slumped shoulders and bowed head, as if she wanted to disappear behind him. But she doesn't have to worry here – all eyes are well and truly on McLean. Applause breaks out; people he passes reach out to him, clapping his shoulder or offering hands to shake. He shakes them, he claps shoulders in return, but he still moves quickly to the top table.

The suits and dresses settle around him, like a bridal party. The man himself remains standing until they're all seated. Misunderstanding, a few people around us clasp their hands and go to bow their heads. McLean smiles, motioning them down. 'Sit for just now,' he says. He is using his accent, the Glaswegian tones warm and earthy (but slowed down so the Americans can understand). 'My dad always said, Don't thank the Lord for your food till it's sitting in front of ye.'

The room loves this. The top table people laugh, too, if not quite so heartily. One of the women, a beautifully slim brunette in a black sheath-dress, flicks back her hair a little as she laughs... she looks almost like...

'Shit,' I hear Carl say. I'm already on my feet. There's a glug as my glass topples, a flurry of napkins around the table. She glances towards the disturbance, half-smiles, looks away. She hasn't even fucking recognised us.

Raj has caught hold of my wrist. I hear Raj's voice muttering, 'Is that Anita Black?'

She looks like a natural brunette; but then she looked like a natural blonde when I saw her last. She's smoothing out her immaculate designer dress, her head half-inclined toward the suited man whispering into her shoulder; she smiles gracefully at whatever he says, but her vision slides sideways to inspect me again. I'm no-one she recognises – just a woman in a cheap red dress, probably drunk. I take a half-step backwards, just to regain my balance, but Raj's hand tightens on my arm. I'm about to shove it away when Jamie catches my elbow. 'It's all right,' he says.

It's not all right, but I can't balance with both of them tugging at me: I sit down hard. Anita's gaze leaves me and settles on Jamie; her interest is suddenly sharp. Jamie turns deliberately away. Carl, ever the diplomat, is smiling at Mark and Sandra, who are trying to fade into the wallpaper. 'Not one of our best friends,' he says.

'Who is she?' says Sandra.

'She's a lying fucking bitch.' My voice comes out hoarse and slurred.

'A journalist,' translates Raj. This gets a laugh. Raj tries to squeeze my hand under the table, but it's too close to the place his thumb gripped me. It's going to bruise. I yank my hand away. I don't want to look at him. Carl is saying something calm and reasonable, involving 'lies' and 'defamation', to Mark and Sandra; under cover of this Raj mutters, 'It's a press thing. She was bound to be here.'

'I'm going to say something to her.'

'That's not going to do any good.'

I nod. I'll forgive him, even for that patronising tone – because once I'd have said the same thing. But of course, it *would* do some good. It would stop the woman who destroyed my brother's life from sitting there laughing without a care in the world. Just for a moment, it would wipe the smile off her fucking face. Jamie, who had kept his gaze on his plate, now lifts his eyes to mine, and I know he's thinking the same thing. But he shakes his head slightly: I've to back off.

So I look at Raj's concerned face and I smile. A waiter is beside me, covering the stain with a white cloth, setting another glass in front of me and pouring out the bubbly. Delicious smells waft across the room. The food has arrived.

And oh my God, what food. A delicate broth seasoned to perfection; warm bread to go with it. A tangy sorbet. Then the main course: beef so tender it falls apart under the fork; spicy chicken made entirely from breast meat; and fish, white and boneless. The four of us swap around a lot. Other than that we scarcely raise our heads. Mark and Sandra watch us with amused sympathy. 'Can't talk,' says Carl in his best Homer Simpson voice, 'eating.'

They laugh again. I'm now full enough to feel slightly mortified by our starving-European act; but then the dessert arrives. Orange bread-and-butter pudding, or



profiteroles. When I've finished mopping up the decorative cocoa-powder with my last bite of choux pastry, the embarrassment creeps back in again. Only one thing to do about that: I pull the empty bottle out of the water at the bottom of the ice-bucket, and wave it at a passing wine-waiter. Two minutes later he's back with more ice and a new bottle. 'More fizz, anyone?'

They all say yes – looks like I don't have to crash the dignity barrier all on my own. I look around the room; a few diners are drinking Coke and looking tight-lipped at those who aren't, but most of the tables have alcohol on them. McLean himself is on the red wine. We could be at any social gathering, anywhere.

Eventually the coffee comes around, dark and nutty and strong. I have two cups, and the warm, fluffy feeling in my head subsides a little. There are chocolate mints in gold foil; I watch Jamie absently put a few in his pocket, for Clare, then slowly take them out again. I put a hand on his arm, but before I can speak there's the musical ting of a knife tapped against glass. McLean is getting to his feet.

Conversation starts to subside; chairs are scraped around so everyone can see the top table. McLean starts to speak before we're all settled, confidently, knowing his voice will hush us. 'Brothers and sisters,' he says, 'let us pray.'

We bow our heads. Furtively I keep my eyes half-open. McLean waits a beat and then: 'We thank you God, for bringing us together this evening. We thank you God, for this good fellowship.' He speaks well. His voice seems to be everywhere at once, although I don't see a microphone in front of him. 'We thank you God, for this good food. And we thank you God, for the freedom to meet here in your name.'

A few muted cries of *Amen* around the room. McLean carries on smoothly: 'We thank you God, for the liberty to speak this prayer: *Our Father, which art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name...*'

The audience joins in. I can hear Raj and Carl – they're word-perfect. I mumble along, waiting for their prompt for the bits I've forgotten. Jamie stays silent. I'm still looking out through my eyelashes. The light is trembling. It seems to be fading out. But no – the light beside the top table is bright, and getting brighter. '*For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory...*'

There's stirring round about me – seems I'm not the only one peeking. '*For ever and ever... Amen.*'

At last we get to look. There is a cross made of light against the far wall. It must be on a screen, but I can't see any controls. The room lights are now all but out. McLean's voice again stills the muttering. 'The Lord says to us – People of Scotland, why have you

turned away from the Cross? Why have you abandoned the faith that built your country? Why have you turned away from the truth that sets you free?

A few more *Amen*'s. McLean's voice carries on like a recording. The light from the cross is almost blinding now. 'People of Scotland – how long will you listen to the counsels of despair? How long will you hear the doctrines of political correctness, which are empty at their heart?' More muttered agreement. Someone nearby says *Yes!* I hear a tiny clicking sound, but in an instant it's gone. McLean's voice has become sorrowful. 'People of Scotland – why do you despise your own folk? For two thousand years the men and women of Scotland have come to the Cross. For two thousand years!'

Something is passing through the table beside me. A trick of the light – no. There is an arm, insubstantial as mist. A figure in a long skirt. She is *passing right through me*. I hear myself cry out. There are other cries around the room. People are shrinking back in alarm. Around them, and through them, wraith figures are walking slowly to the golden light of the Cross. And there's McLean's voice: 'Since the days of Columba they have come to the Cross. They have forsworn pagan darkness and turned their faces to the light...'

Raj nudges me; points upward. Tiny projector lights are tracking across the ceiling, converging on the illuminated cross. From each projector the beam of a spotlight, invisible until you know it's there, reaches down to a ghostly figure. I realise I'm perched on the edge of my seat, so I make myself sit back, although I still flinch when a phantom in a monk's robe flits in front of me. There are more monks, and men carrying spears, and women in rough plaids. They walk into the light and disappear.

'At the time of the Bruce they came to the Cross. When our nation was born they gave thanks to the Cross...'

An armoured knight walks calmly through Carl, who laughs nervously in the gloom. Knights, ladies, peasants... the clothes keep changing, but the people keep coming. Now it's Renaissance, men in tights, women in Gloriana gowns. Puritan women, then men in frock-coats and wigs. It's speeding up now: top hats and bustles, soldiers, flappers; soldiers again, and civilians carrying gas-masks. 'In peace they gave thanks to the Cross. In war the Cross was their shield. In good times and bad they turned their hearts to the Cross...'

They're moving fast, as if a tape is being fast-forwarded. I have a brief glimpse of long hippy hair, women in pinstripe... then they are rushing into the light, and the light is so bright I have to turn away and cover my eyes –

A whirring sound ceases, which I wasn't aware of before. And we are in darkness.

Then low light, increasing slowly. I open my eyes – a negative-image cross swims in front of me. But then it clears, and the room lights are coming back on, gradually. The Cross is gone. People are turning in their seats, exclaiming. Mark and Sandra are smiling at us

indulgently – presumably such technology is everyday stuff where they come from. I look at the top table, where Anita Black seems to be making notes. But my attention is caught by McLean, who leans forwards slightly, resting his elbows on the table as if he were weary. The hubbub is dying down. Everyone waits for McLean to speak.

He smiles, a little sadly. He says: 'Brothers and sisters, walk always to the light. The final days are at hand. Where will you turn, when the darkness comes forever?'

No-one speaks. McLean smiles again, raises his hands in blessing. 'Go forth in peace. May the blessing of the Lord go with you.'

He steps down from the table as applause erupts. His entourage hurry to follow. The audience is cheering; some are on their feet, weeping. McLean passes between them, holding out his hands so they can touch him. He takes a detour between the tables. He is soon in front of the four of us.

He looks down at us. His gaze goes from me to Jamie and back. His eyes are blank, like a doll's. I see nothing in them.

Late in the night I wake with a jump. The room is dark. I'm facing the luminous alarm-clock – it's 2.15. I'm wide awake.

My heart is thumping. I'm boiling. I've thrashed off all the covers in my sleep, but it doesn't help. Raj's arms are wrapped around me; we're both soaked with sweat. It's like cuddling in a sauna. We've always fallen asleep in each other's arms, rolled together in the centre of Raj's beaten-up bed. Seems this romantic stuff only works in a cold climate. I struggle out of his grip. He makes a startled sound, but I murmur 'Going to the loo,' and he grunts and turns his back.

When I'm out of bed the warmth is pleasant. I'm naked, but I can stroll unhurriedly into the bathroom and linger as long as I like. I mustn't get used to this – in two more nights we'll have to leave, and everything will be back to normal. It's a depressing thought. I'm more awake than ever now – my heart's still hammering.

Of course – the coffee. I'm not used to the real good any more. Well, it'll be ages before I can get back to sleep. I switch on the mirror-light, and leave the bathroom door open a crack, so I can ferret around the bedroom looking for my jeans and sweatshirt. When I'm decent I kiss Raj's sweaty forehead; 'Going for a walk', I whisper. He mumbles but doesn't wake.

The corridors are deserted. Seems all the good Christian folk are abed. But no, I hear laughter – it's coming from the reception area. The night staff, no doubt getting a bit stir-crazy as night staff generally do. I could go down there, but I can't face all the concern



and offers of milk and polite conversation I'd get. Insomnia is a solitary business. I set off for the observation lounge. From somewhere comes a muted crash – like thunder, although the night is clear. The night staff must have dropped something.

None of the lamps are on in the observation room. Beyond the barely-there picture glass, a near-full moon is ringed in sepia. It shines off the mountains, turning them lunar white. The more I look, the more stars appear, bright and sharp. After a few moments, to the amazement of my city-dweller's heart, I can see quite well.

There's a slight movement from the black leather seats. I'm startled, but am not surprised when I see who it is. Caffeine intolerance runs in our family. 'Can't sleep either?' I say.

Jamie shakes his head, moving up so I can plonk myself on the couch beside him. 'Dynamite woke me.'

'Eh?'

'Dynamite. They're bringing down the avalanches.'

I look out at the Great Shepherd. It seems very close. 'They're *what?*'

'Controlled avalanching. They divert them away from the hotel.' He's watching me in amusement. 'How did you think they did it?'

'I didn't think about it.' And I'm not too happy to be thinking about it now. 'So somebody goes out there at night and does it? That's his job? Official avalancher?'

'Aye, I suppose.'

He looks very muted about it. Generally, his masculine love of watching big explosions would have his nose pressed up to the glass like a five-year-old. 'You okay?' I say.

'Fine.' He studies me. 'You?'

'Yeah, okay.'

He smiles. 'You really like him,' a nod in the general direction of my room and the sleeping Raj, 'don't you?'

'Yeah.' The guilt is back – my brother's going through a life-crisis and all I can think about is podging my boyfriend. 'Picked the wrong time to get all loved-up, though, didn't we?'

'You get it while you can.' He's looking dead serious again.

'D'you like him?'

'Yes. He's a good guy.' And there's no *but* coming after. My family like him. I'm torn between joy and terror. If only we could get Jamie sorted... but then Jamie and I never could get synchronised. Since we were teenagers, one of us was happy in love, the other

was miserable. I resist the temptation to say something about Carl. Instead I say, 'Do you still want to be here?'

'Not much choice.'

'We could just go home.'

'No.'

'You're going to do it then? Get baptised, all that?'

'Not much choice,' he says again.

'Then what?'

He shrugs. He was like this as a kid, the exasperating little sod – when it really matters, he won't tell me a damn thing. 'We'll see what's what,' he says.

'Aye. Things'll be better.' He's playing their holy-holy game, it's got to make a difference.

A boom makes me jump out of my skin. It echoes and echoes, all around the mountains. A white chunk of the Great Shepherd detaches itself, and slithers down the western slope. It crumbles to powder as it goes. It slides out of sight; there's another boom, and clouds of white puff into the air like smoke. The echoes are everywhere.

Jamie gets up. 'I'm off to bed,' he says.

## Twenty-One

The next day comes too bright and too early. By the time the four of us meet, bleary-eyed, at the breakfast table, we can already hear loud cheerful music from the main hall. The simple beat is thumping through the floor, reinforced by clapping, singing and the occasional shout of joy. Even the waiters are looking alarmed.

We meet up with Mark and Sandra, or rather we meet up with their son: a small dark-haired boy who sees his parents smile at us, and takes this as an invitation to come hurtling over. 'Whatcha doin?'

I'm currently trying to mainline a mug of coffee. 'Having our breakfast,' I say shortly.

'Neddy.' Sandra has come to apprehend him. She and Mark look slightly the worse too. 'Don't disturb these people.'

'We're going to the swimming-pool,' Neddy informs us.

Sandra sighs. Mark says sternly, 'No, we're not. We're going on the Snowcat, remember? We're going to see Glencoe.'

Neddy pouts. 'But I don't wanna. I don't *wanna*.'

Jamie says casually, 'You don't want to see where all those people stuck swords in each other?'

Neddy's eyes go big. 'Swords?'

'And knives. And guns.' Jamie nods sagely over his coffee. 'They all jumped out of bed and tried to kill each other.'

'And they were like, *urgh, urgh!*' Neddy starts miming wild sword-blows, nearly knocking over the milk jug. 'And they went, *Aaah, don't stab me, aaaaaaah...*'

'That's right, that's what they did.' Sandra is tugging him away. 'Come on now.'

Neddy points at Jamie. 'Can he come?'

'No. I expect he wants to go to the big prayer-meeting,' says Sandra, wistfully. 'He doesn't have wild little boys to look after.'

Jamie's already on his feet, the rest of us not far behind. 'We'll come to Glencoe,' he says, the rest of us nodding vigorously.

Ten minutes later, we're suited up and heading outside. Behind us, I can hear doors being pushed back, and excited conversation. Ahead of me, Neddy is swinging between his father's hand and Jamie's, tugging to make them go faster; I pick up speed.



A young woman is waiting for us beside the Snowcat. She is slight and blonde, no older than Shona but more serious-looking. The badge on her red-and-gold parka says *Emma*. She smiles at the boy. 'Hiya, Neddy.' A slight Aberdeen accent. Coming for a trip with me?

'I wanna see the swords!'

'It's a long story,' his father sighs as we pile into the snowmobile.

At the bottom of the drive, between the two Celtic crosses, we don't follow the well-sledged road back to Glasgow; instead we turn left, into the very faint tracks towards Glencoe. But after a few yards we turn again, to the right. We are heading towards the big white bump I thought I recognised. 'Is that the King's House?'

Emma, peering over the wheel, nods. 'It's shut just now.'

'You mean *shut* shut, or just...'

'No, it opens in the summer. For folk doing the West Highland Way.'

'It's a hotel,' I explain to Mark and Sandra. 'It used to be a cattle-drover's inn.'

'It sold cheap alcohol to foolish men,' Emma says, tartly. 'They got drunk, and then they were just put out in the snow to die. It was a dreadful place.'

She's going to be a laugh a minute. I watch the hotel go past; there's snow halfway up the walls, and snow heavy on the roof. You'd hardly know there was a building there. We cross the small bridge – the river too is nearly hidden, frozen solid then smothered in snow. We turn left, to the North-West, and start trundling uphill.

For a while Emma keeps up a commentary, all mountain names and geological data, which I ignore. Neddy is climbing all over us, particularly Jamie, who is making up lurid tales of past bloodshed for him ('...and they found the head right over *there*, where that big rock is...'). Then, from Emma's monologue, I pick up: '...and over there is Jacob's Ladder.' She's pointing North. I look for some new building or structure, see nothing. 'What's Jacob's Ladder?'

'It's a steep mountain pass into the Glen. The West Highland Way goes over it.'

'That's the Devil's Staircase,' says Raj.

Emma frowns, glances at Neddy. Seems we can't use the D-word. 'Mr McLean's renamed it,' she says.

There's a pause. 'How can he rename it?' Raj says at last.

'It's a bad name. It's not a good name to use.'

'That's hardly up to him.'

'It's a wicked name,' she insists. 'The men who drank at the inn called it that. They were wicked and foolish - '

'It's the Devil's Staircase.' Raj is getting angry: his voice is taking on that Alan Rickman drawl. Ooh, sexy. I wriggle a bit closer to him, but he doesn't notice. Carl says soothingly, 'He can call it what he wants, surely. Doesn't make it official.'

'It is official,' Emma retorts. 'Or it will be soon. Mr McLean's filed the new name with the council. They agree with him. Why should it be called - *that* - just because a few drunks fell down it?'

'That's not the only reason. Invaders used the Staircase to enter the Glen. Reinforcements for the Massacre came down it. The name is a warning.'

Emma shrugs. 'Well.' The conversation is over, as far as she's concerned. But Raj has other ideas. 'Do you know what it was called before "the Devil's Staircase"?'

'No.'

'Nor do I. Nor does anyone.'

Awkward silence. Then Neddy, who is climbing up Jamie to see through the window, demands, 'Are we going to see the swords now?'

'Give those two another minute,' says Jamie. We laugh. Raj smiles a little. Emma doesn't, although she might just be distracted by the road ahead. We bump down an incline and turn right. We're now on the valley floor.

Sleigh-tracks stretch ahead of us; looking through the windshield I can see another Snowcat, a blob of bright yellow, some miles in front. Beyond is blue sky – the only place the sky is visible. From the side windows I see only sunlit white. I press my nose against the glass, squinting upwards; a peak is just visible. Glencoe is narrow and very deep. I watch a waterfall go past – a column of ice – and I realise I'll be glad when we get there.

I turn my attention back to the conversation. Sandra and Carl, with every semblance of enthusiasm, are studying crumpled copies of the Wayfinder programme. 'I'm going to *What Difference Does Prayer Make?*,' Sandra is saying. 'Then the Zionist thing. Where is it – *God's Country*. That one.'

There's a faint note of distaste in her voice. Carl is emboldened to ask, 'Are you a Zionist yourself?'

'Not the way Israel is going about it. I don't think it can be right to wage war in the Holy Land.'

'How can we *not* wage war?' This is from Emma. 'How can we call ourselves Christians and just let the Holy Land be defiled?'

'Doesn't war defile it?' There's an edge to Sandra's voice now. 'Do you want to see guns in the streets of Bethlehem?'

'I don't want to see godless men destroying Bethlehem.'

I'm recalling news footage, of men calling on Allah and waving machine-guns. 'I'd hardly call the Palestinians godless,' I say.

Emma's shaking her head. Probably speechless at my blasphemy. 'Mr McLean can explain it a lot better than I can,' she says.

'And with better special effects,' adds Carl. We laugh again. Emma turns away, looking huffy. Sandra smiles at Carl. 'So what events are you going to?'

Carl doesn't have to look at the paper. '*Loving the Sinner, Hating the Sin – The Pretend Family – and the Intercessors for Britain* thing.'

The common theme could scarcely be more obvious. 'Oh,' says Sandra. 'Do you – have pastoral care of someone who's homosexual?'

We all watch Carl. After a moment he says, 'No. I'm a gay Christian.'

'Oh,' says Sandra, 'oh.' She looks to her husband for help – Mark is buttoning up Neddy's jacket, and keeping his eyes on the task. Sandra says helplessly, 'I didn't know...'

'Does that bother you?' Carl says, quite gently.

'Well. It's not for me to judge.' Sandra tries on a smile that's a little too small. Emma has gone quiet, facing forwards – the back of her head looks stiff. 'I don't know much about it,' Sandra finally volunteers. 'Is that why you're going to the Intercessors? You want to...'

'Change?' Carl shakes his head. 'No. We believe that God made us this way, and that's good enough for us.' Sandra gives another tiny smile and lowers her eyes. There's a pause. Then Carl – who's the type that can't leave a sore spot alone – says, 'We're hoping other Christians can find it in their hearts to support us.'

Emma makes a small incredulous sound. If she says anything I'm going to lamp her one with my backpack, driver or not. But she doesn't, and it's Mark who breaks the silence. 'There's no-one without sin,' he says stolidly.

'But he doesn't think it *is* a sin,' says Jamie, then looks at Carl. 'Do you?'

After a moment Carl says, 'Perhaps it is. No-one can live without sin. We just hope God understands this is the best we can be.'

'Oh, Carl,' I say. Jamie is looking at him with utter contempt. Carl's eyes rest on him a moment, coolly, then flick away.

Sandra, bless her, has spotted Jamie's disdain but misinterpreted the reason for it. 'We are all sinners,' she tells him reproachfully. 'We shouldn't judge.' She adds to Carl, 'We'll pray for you.'

'Thank you,' says Carl, apparently quite sincerely.

This is getting much too strange for me. The cabin suddenly seems to have gotten a lot smaller, and as we travel on in awkward silence - even Neddy has gone quiet, looking warily from one adult to another - I decide that staring out of the window is by far my smartest



option. The landscape to the south is still bare as can be; by now I can see there's something missing. 'Where's the Visitors' Centre?'

'In the village,' says Emma, shortly.

'No, it's way before the village. Over there.'

'Oh. The old centre. Avalanche got it.' We all stare at her aghast. Hastily she adds, 'That was before they put the new system in. It's all pre-avalanched now. Computerised.'

'Computerised avalanches?'

'Same software they use for air-traffic control,' she says, firmly. 'It's failsafe. There's a thing about it in the new Centre.'

We are not much reassured. But by now the end is in sight - we have swung around a corner and the world opens up. We're looking at flat ground: Loch Leven, frozen over. Either it's been cleared, or the wind naturally sweeps the snow away, because we're looking onto the gunmetal surface of the ice. The islands are clear too – I can see dark rock, and even a dab of green. 'Look,' I say. 'That's the Island of Kings. That's the graveyard of the clan chieftains. Look, Neddy, that's where they used to bury the kings when they died.'

'Did they get killed in a battle?'

'Mostly. Or they got murdered.'

'Or they fell off a mountain,' Jamie chips in, 'and got squished. Or they got the plague, and they had big runny sores all over, and they all burst all at once, like BANG!'

This pleasant history lesson tides us over into Glencoe village. At least, I assume it's the village – but all the cottages and hotels seem to have been replaced by giant cuckoo-clocks. Alpine chalets – all dark wood, gingerbread trimmings and high, pointed roofs. Some of them are about five stories high. 'You took a wrong turn,' I say to Emma, 'we're in Switzerland.'

'They're holiday cottages. Popular in the summer.'

'Doesn't anyone actually live here?'

'A few. Folk who work in the shops and the Centre.' She is now steering us towards one of the biggest buildings, a long and over-decorated structure like the Burgomaster's house in a fairy-tale. Half-a-dozen snowmobiles, of various sizes and florescent colours, are parked outside. A muffled figure on skis zips past, stopping expertly right outside the building's wooden double-doors. Our snowmobile shudders to a halt beside the closest vehicle. 'This is us,' says Emma. 'Visitors' Centre.'

We wrap ourselves up to the minimum level; we are no more than ten yards from the door. Emma pulls down the Snowcat's step and waits to hand us all down to the ground. Neddy, wriggling and protesting, is swept up in his father's arms and carried at a run into the centre, his mother close behind. Emma smiles for the three of them, but the expression

becomes fixed as the four of us clamber out. I'm the last; while I'm still in the lea of the Snowcat I turn back to look at her. She is staring after Carl with an expression of furious distaste. I step into her line of vision and catch her eye. She shrugs slightly, and turns away to close the doors. I follow the others.

As I walk away from the Snowcat a gust of wind hits, cold but endurable. There is woodsmoke in it, and pine trees. I find I don't particularly want to go into the Visitors' Centre, but I trudge after the others. I'm not properly dressed to stay outdoors anyway. The skier is now in the doorway, stripping off skis and outer clothing with obviously practised ease. The profile is now recognisably female. She is looping her arms through the straps of a rucksack, and shouldering the skis. The face peeping from the Eskimo-parka is young and nut-brown, with a sparkling nose-stud and a flyaway strand of bright pink hair. I hold the door open so she can manoeuvre the skis inside; she smiles, and thanks me in a Cockney accent.

Inside there's the usual air-lock system of a short corridor followed by more doors. We stamp the snow off our boots and pass into the inner sanctum; and we find ourselves staring at a red mountain. The lobby is not large, and the picture takes up most of the wall. It's the Great Shepherd, in a red summer sunset. I watch for a moment – but it's a photograph, it's not going to change. There are faint wisps in the air before it – a trickling water-feature, with dry ice clinging to its surface. There is background music, something electronic, with a soaring treble and a tolling bell. I hear the words over the syrupy backing track – *My restless soul will never sleep, I am Maclain...* and in spite of myself I feel the hairs rise on the back of my neck.

Then a vision in tartan comes clomping into sight. A large red-haired man in a full plaid, complete with white lacy cravat, cockade hat, and enormous badger-skin sporran, has emerged to greet us. 'Welcome to Glencoe,' he booms.

Mark, Sandra and Neddy are staring at him in delight. Clearly the rest of us Scots – in our jeans and baseball shirts – have been a big disappointment to them. Plaid Man beams at them; his only overtly modern feature is a plastic name-badge reading *Rory*. 'I hope you enjoy your stay,' he says in a pleasant east-coast accent. 'Would you like me to show you around the Centre?' His smile gets even wider when he looks at Sandra, who has gone a bit pink and giggly – your first sight of a good-looking man in a kilt can get you that way. So Neddy speaks up for her: 'We wanna see the swords. And the battles. Guys getting killed.'

'Aye, well, you're in the right place for that.' He points up a side corridor; there's a calligraphy'd sign reading *The Massacre of Glencoe*. We can hear tinny recorded voices, and the background rumble of fairground carriages. Clearly this is not just an exhibit, but a ride. 'Think we'll have a coffee just now,' I say as Neddy rushes whooping towards the

noises. Rory turns to the four of us; he meets our stony gaze and has the grace to look embarrassed. 'Café's that way,' he says.

The café has a spectacular view of the Loch and the mountains beyond; white morning light streams through the large windows. Needless to say we commandeer the table furthest from the sunshine. We have little competition; there are only half-a-dozen people in the place. We buy coffee and packets of shortbread from the gloomy-looking woman behind the counter – I ask how business is. 'Quiet,' she says. 'Since the ski-centre opened at Ballachulish.'

I recall seeing pictures of the Ballachulish place: all-inclusive, with nice big bars and no religion required. This little Visitor's Centre just won't be able to compete. Soon the only winter population of Glencoe will be McLean and his people. Almost pleadingly I say, 'Does no-one actually live here any more?'

'Oh aye.' She gives me a look of offended pride. 'Some of us are still here. In the old part, round the back of these...' She waves a hand distastefully at the gingerbread roofs we can see from the window, '... chalets. And there's other folk sometimes. But they come and go.'

I wonder briefly where they come and go from, unless they live in igloos - there are no other homes to be seen for miles around. But coffee calls. I was last in the queue, but even so I'm only a minute behind the others; so I'm startled to see Carl get to his feet, pouring the last of his coffee down his throat. 'See you later,' he says to me, and makes for the door.

I hiss to Jamie and Raj: 'Where's he off to?'

Raj looks surprised by the question. 'Toilet, I assume.'

There are toilets at the other end of the café, but Carl's heading out the main doors. I dither, watching him leave. 'Do you think he's okay?'

They shrug. I sit down, still watching the door. 'Maybe someone should go after him?'

'He'll be fine.' Raj is smiling at me. 'Stop trying to save the whole world, Suzey.'

This is annoying, especially when Jamie smiles in agreement. Patronising gits. I protest, 'He might be upset. You should've seen the look that poisonous bitch gave him outside.'

Jamie shrugs again. 'Should've kept his mouth shut.'

This is not like Jamie. Not like *my* Jamie. But this *is* my Jamie, look at him – he's there, stirring his coffee the way Jamie does. It's him. Today he's just... not himself. I can't cope with all this today - my mind is too fuzzy, the light is too bright. A headache is starting behind my eyes. 'Better lay off the booze tonight,' I say.



We all agree that we should (which of course doesn't mean we will). Eventually, with two mugs of coffee slopping about in my belly, I propose making a move – we set off to see what other wonders the Centre has in store.

Next to the café is the shop. I go to work with a will, searching for something buyable. It's pretty much what you'd expect: woolly jumpers, racks of postcards, tins of tablet, fridge-magnets shaped like haggis. Behind the counter, a tweedy woman is bending over a discreet CD player – an operatic tenor starts warbling that his Heart's in the Highlands. I poke about amongst the 'novelties' – dollies in kilts, stuffed Nessies, tea-towels with the Selkirk Grace printed on them, Saltire T-shirts, and posters telling outrageous lies about 'The Unique Tartans of the Clans'. Nothing I'd buy even in my most deranged shopping frenzy. But the back of the shop opens out into a larger hall, marked 'Local Artists and Craftsmen'. I hurry through, trailed by Raj and Jamie.

<sup>41</sup>The hall is large. Perhaps in the right season it's a busy marketplace; but at the moment there are only half-a-dozen stalls, with just a handful of shoppers inspecting them. One of the stalls is hung about with paintings, mostly winter landscapes, all in white and azure; Carl is there, pointing to a small picture which the stall-holder is lifting down for him. Raj goes over for a look. Jamie and I wander on, past selections of fleeces, walking-boots, pewter quaiches, novelty stone chess-sets and silver jewellery. Jamie spots a second-hand book-stall and makes for that; I'm about to follow him when I spot the red-anoraked figure of our driver. Emma is strolling towards the stall at the end – but then she steps back, scowling, and turns deliberately away. That's good enough for me. I walk past her expression of outraged virtue to check out the end stall.

The stall is rather shabby-looking: I wonder vaguely if the Centre knows it's here. It's festooned with Indian cotton clothing – wide muslin skirts and tie-dyed tops. There are colourful posters, ethnic-looking jewellery, candles and joss sticks. Also – and this is probably what put Emma in such a snit – little statues of Buddha and Ganesha, sitting neatly on top of books with titles like *The Wheel of Karma* and *The Goddess Within*. The stall-holder is setting out some small wooden carvings; she is now wearing a long muslin shirt, with no trace of her ski-ing gear, but her pink hair is unmistakable. With Emma's glare burning into my back, I give the girl a big happy smile and point to the carvings. 'What are those?'

She pushes some of the carvings forwards. They are crudely done, but now I can see them more clearly I can hazard a fair guess about what they are. The girl says anyway:

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<sup>41</sup> This scene introduces a set of 'myths' competing with McLean's religious beliefs. Odinism has become blended with the legends surrounding the Massacre of Glencoe.


'They're fertility symbols. This is the Phallus of Odin – this is the Yoni of the Great Goddess Freya. See?'

I can see all right. Resisting the evil urge to call Emma back over, I point gingerly to one that's vaguely T-shaped; if this is also the Phallus of Odin, Odin needs to get to a doctor quick. 'Is that one a fertility symbol too?'

'No, that Thor's Hammer.' I bite back a smutty joke; the girl is speaking very earnestly. 'It's a symbol of power and strength. Power against evil.'

'I could use some of that.' Behind the carvings are air-brushed pictures of large blonde warriors in tiny fur loin-cloths; at the front are pendants, polished stones on long black cords. Each stone is marked with a different symbol. 'Runes?' I say. She nods. I ask, 'What do they mean?'

'You just pick one. And that one's yours.'<sup>42</sup>

I study them. The symbols are all straight lines and corners – no circles, no curves at all. They were not made to be written on paper, but scratched onto wood and stone. I choose one that looks like an S: .<sup>43</sup> 'What's this one?'

'Yggdrasil.' She's smiling: evidently this is a good one. 'The World Tree. It goes up into the heavens and down into the underworld. It's the Life of the World.'

'What're you up to?' Raj has come up behind me.

'Choosing my own rune.' I add to the stallholder, 'Don't let him do it, he'll cheat. He knows about this stuff.'

She considers this quite seriously. 'You choose for him, then.'


I pick the closest thing to an R: .<sup>44</sup> 'That means the Road,' she says.


Unexpectedly, she reaches up and places it round his neck like a medal. 'You're a traveller. This will bring you luck.'

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<sup>42</sup> Rune-stones are generally used for divination. This method of using them (to define personal qualities) is, as far as I am aware, a fabrication (or a 'revision' for plot purposes).

The runes and their definitions (below) are taken from the 'Anglo-Saxon Rune Poem', translated by Bruce Dickins (quoted in [http://www.sunnyway.com/runes/rune\\_poems.html](http://www.sunnyway.com/runes/rune_poems.html). Accessed 5 May 2007). I have also drawn on the imaginative (if somewhat fanciful) interpretations in Dee's *Rune Wisdom*, as well as Wikipedia's page on the Elder Futhark ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elder\\_Futhark](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elder_Futhark). Accessed 1 June 2007). The result is a somewhat muddled version of historical rune-lore, but since that muddle is reflected in the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century practice of rune divination, I feel justified in using this 'revised' version.

<sup>43</sup>  - 'Eoh', meaning 'Yew-tree'. 'The yew is a tree with rough bark, hard and fast in the earth, supported by its roots, a guardian of flame and a joy upon an estate.' As Wikipedia notes, it is 'sometimes associated with the World tree Yggdrasil,' the Tree of Life. It ties in with Suzey's protective, life-saving role later in the novel.

<sup>44</sup>  - 'Rad', meaning 'ride, journey': 'he who traverses the high-roads on the back of a stout horse'. It seems a fitting symbol for Raj, not just because it matches his initial, but because he never seems to belong in any one place: a wanderer looking for home.



It's a good sales technique - Raj thanks her solemnly and leaves the pendant on. Moreover her gesture has attracted attention: Carl is coming over to see what's going on, and Jamie is following at a distance. There isn't a rune that looks like a C, so Carl plumps for something completely different: **ᚱ**.<sup>45</sup> 'Humanity,' she tells him. 'Company, friendship.'

So far so good. I turn to Jamie. 'Your go.'

'No,' he's already turning away, 'you're fine.'

'Come on.' I've already checked the price, they're dirt-cheap. 'I'll treat you.'

'You can buy me a book then.' He's already halfway to the book-stall.

Miserable little sod. 'Sorry,' I say to the stallholder. 'I'll pick him one.' I study the spiky little symbols, but my inspiration seems to have deserted me. 'Can't you just tell me what they mean?'

She's watching Jamie, a thoughtful frown on her face. 'What does he *need*?' she says.

Now it's getting silly. 'Lots of things. Things he can't have, mostly.'

She nods, and picks up a pendant marked with a slanting F: **ᚦ**.<sup>46</sup> 'The ash tree,' she says. 'Endurance.'

'Endurance it is.' I'm getting out my purse. 'How much do I owe you?'

But she's picking up a roll of manuscript paper, and unfurling it in front of me. 'Would you like one of these as well?'

The short answer is no. No-one in their right mind would want one. The girl adds, with the ruthlessness of the small shopkeeper, 'It's by a local artist.'

Politely, we bend down for a closer look. The top half of the page is a drawing, obviously done by hand and then inexpertly photocopied. It shows a large-breasted woman kneeling and holding up her hands in supplication. She has huge goggle-eyes, the kind you see in really disturbing Polish animation. Beside her kneels what looks like a midget – probably meant to be a child – also goggle-eyed and pleading. They are in a doorway – beside them lies the corpse of a man, in a puddle of bright red. Over the woman and child stands another mass of scarlet: a Redcoat soldier, leering down the woman's cleavage as he prepares to run her through with a bayonet.

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<sup>45</sup> **ᚱ** - 'Mann', meaning humanity – 'the joyous man is dear to his kinsmen' (in, as Wikipedia notes, 'the gender-neutral sense'). It seems the most apt symbol for Carl, the most humane character in the novel.

<sup>46</sup> **ᚦ** - 'Æsc', the Ash-Tree. 'With its sturdy trunk it offers a stubborn resistance, though attacked by many a man.' The symbol of endurance seems an appropriate rune for Jamie, who suffers and survives so much anguish in the course of the novel.



Under the picture is some shaky calligraphy: *The Unclean Sacrifice*. The stallholder unrolls the paper all the way, and we are treated to the rest of the words:

*Unclean blood is spilled on the Hearth  
Blood of Host, blood of Guest!  
Blood of sacrifice, blood of life  
Turns to poison, soaks into the Earth.  
The Earth is cursed!  
The Earth turns against us!  
Gods of our Fathers, tell us  
What sacrifice can cleanse this Earth again?<sup>47</sup>*

Some folk shouldn't be allowed to watch 'The Wicker Man'. The poet's name is scrawled along the bottom: *Seamus Maclain*. 'Maclain?' I ask, 'Isn't that...'

'The old chieftains of the Glen.' The girl is smiling proudly. 'Seamus is their direct descendant.' She has blushed slightly – she likes saying his name. 'This is his homeland. He's going to reclaim his heritage.'

'So he lives in the village, does he?'

'No.' She's deadly serious again. 'Not yet, anyway. It's unlucky to live in the Glen. Since the Massacre, you know? They were guests, and they murdered their hosts. It was a terrible breach of Highland law –'

This is going to turn into a history lesson. 'So why won't he live there now? Does he think it's haunted or something?'

'Seamus says it's cursed.' Her voice is firm. 'He says it'll have to be purified before anyone can live there.'<sup>48</sup>

Behind me, Jamie says loudly: 'I think that's our lift now.' Sure enough, Emma is making for the door. Gratefully, I settle up, adding one of Seamus's manuscripts to the bag. Then I smile nicely and flee, the others close behind me. When we're out of earshot I say, 'Is everyone we meet here going to be fucking nuts?'

'The weekend's young,' says Raj. We follow Emma out into another corridor. We keep a distance; she's pretending she hasn't seen us anyway. She opens the swing door at

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<sup>47</sup> The poor quality of this poem is, I would like to stress, completely intentional.

<sup>48</sup> The Massacre of Glencoe is surrounded by myth and myth-revision. It has been 'revised' from a historical account to a national legend. As well as the great fiction that the Massacre was devised by the Campbells, other legends and folk-tales cluster around it: stories of government soldiers warning or sparing their MacDonald hosts; together with accounts of supernatural phenomena like the Second Sight and visions of the 'Giant Man' (a portent of death). ( See John Prebble's *Glencoe*, London: Penguin 1968, p. 205-8)

This is our introduction to Seamus Mclain: an arch-reviser who has redesigned his whole identity. He has further 'revised' the myth of the Massacre, into a tale of pagan mysticism and sacrifice.

the end, and goes into the wisps of dry ice and the hooting pan-pipes: the lobby. She doesn't make for the front door, however, but carries on through the café door – we hear Neddy's overenthusiastic yells of greeting. Clearly we're not leaving just yet.

As soon as the café door swings shut behind her, Jamie says in a low voice, 'Could you please not offer to buy me Odinist symbols while the holy folk are listening?'

'Eh?'

He points to the rune-stone pendant around my neck. 'Those things.'

'Are they Odinist symbols?'

'Of course they are.'

'Folkloric symbols,' Raj interjects, 'I would have said.'

'Well they're not going to say that, are they?'

He's really annoyed. 'Fine.' I hold up my hands. 'No more shopping for Satanic artifacts. So d'you want to get another cup of tea, or –'

But Raj is already halfway down a side corridor. 'Let's have a look at this,' he calls back, in a casual voice that means he's really interested. 'Just for a minute.'

We follow him. The short corridor ends in a door, and on the door is a plaque: a square piece of artificial ice, so convincing I have to poke at it before I believe it's only crystalline plastic. Scratched on the surface are blue-black letters: *SCACS - Taming the White Dragon*. 'Have they got a crack problem round here?' I mutter. No-one dignifies this with an answer, so I follow the others inside. The room is dimly lit; in the centre is a long table covered with something pale. There's nothing I can –

'Avalanches!'

'Shit!' I barge backwards into Jamie. He sets me upright, pats me on the shoulder. 'You should cut down on the caffeine, Suze.'

I ignore him – like *he* didn't jump – and watch blue-white light flicker into life on every wall. Four huge anime screens are flashing up identical shots of a snowy mountain. The camera is flying, looking down, watching a helicopter's shadow ripple across the peak below. Suddenly there's a change; some of the whiteness is moving. Sparkling vapour rises as a chunk of mountainside heads for the valley floor, spilling all over the black line of the road.

'Responsible for over 200 deaths a year in the US alone...' It's that voice again: female, American, mellifluous, slightly smug. It flows from discreet wall-mounted speakers in each corner of the room. 'Avalanches are as deadly as earthquakes, and just as destructive. To those who live in their paths, they are the White Dragon – lethal, unstoppable, and above all, unpredictable.'

There's a *but* coming on... 'Unpredictable, that is, until now.' The shot changes: techy men leaning over a computer. 'The Safety-Critical Avalanche Control System – or



SCACS for short – has brought the White Dragon under human control. A network of sensors, spanning all hazard areas, measure snowpack conditions and stop potential avalanches before they start.<sup>49</sup> Shot of a long metal post on a laboratory table, surrounded by a spaghetti of wires, crowned with a blue light. ‘Each sensor can use a small charge to trigger fluffing of light unstable snow – ‘

‘Fluffing?’ I echo.

‘Sluffing,’ corrects Raj.<sup>50</sup> On the screen, one of the metal posts is half-buried in snow; it emits a sharp *crack* and snow obediently tumbles away down a slope. The slide breaks harmlessly around the ankles of a ski-suited man, who turns to the camera and grins.

I’ve suddenly realised I’m the only one watching this. Jamie and Carl are examining the flat screens, talking admiringly about pixel-flow and scart ports and God knows what all. Raj is looking at the table - I wander over there. The pallor I saw from the door turns out to be a model – a range of tiny winter mountains. It’s a miniature Glencoe, cute as a doll’s-house, highly detailed. Its peaks and flanks are covered with a network of little blue lights. They are particularly concentrated in the places I’d always assumed to be frozen river-beds – long straight pathways slicing through the forests, all the way down to the valley floor. I poke at one of the blue lights. ‘This’ll be SCACS, then?’

‘This is it,’ he agrees, not lifting his eyes from the model. A rumbling sound begins to fill the room, as if an earthquake is about to shake the tiny Glen. But it’s coming from the screen; I look up to see an earth-bound shot of a boiling white cloud flowing downhill like a river. Tiny dark-green splinters appear before it: pine trees. There is just time to see them snap before they are engulfed. Cut to another shot: a moving wall of grey ice, darkening quickly, falling on the camera like a tidal wave. ‘This system’s safe, isn’t it?’ I say to Raj.

‘It’s safe enough.’

‘How safe’s *that*?’

‘It’s safe.’ He smiles. ‘McLean wouldn’t let his American guests go through it otherwise. Their lawyers are too good.’

Good point. ‘We’d best stick with Mark and Sandra then. I don’t fancy our chances with Emma if – ‘

The door opens. Emma’s head appears. ‘We ought to be going now,’ she says. ‘The weather’s changing.’

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<sup>49</sup> As far as I am aware, SCACS is purely fictional and is based on no existing system.

<sup>50</sup> ‘Sluffing’ or ‘sloughing’: a small, harmless avalanche, often triggered artificially (as it is here) to forestall larger and more dangerous slides. See Avalanche.Org, <http://www.avalanche.org/~moonstone/biblio%20&%20gloss/AVALANCHE%20TERMS.htm#sluff>. Accessed 4 June 2007.



Emma was right. The sun is still bright, but the landscape has dulled. Clouds are coming in from the north, grey-white and bloated. The four of us follow Neddy, listening to his loud complaints as he is marched smartly across the car-park by his mother. 'I wanna toy. You said. You said...' Sandra takes no notice and bundles him into the Snowcat. Mark, who's following us on board, says with a fatherly grimace, 'We didn't have time to visit the gift shop.' Jamie winces in sympathy.

As soon as we're all aboard, Emma starts reversing the Snowcat. 'Put your seatbelts on, please,' she says over her shoulder. She didn't tell us to do this on the way here. Naturally, it goes down like a lead balloon with Neddy: 'I don't wanna wear that.' We look tactfully away as Sandra fights to get the lap-strap around him. The clouds seem even lower over the Visitors' Centre, and tinged with sepia. The Centre door opens; there's a flare of bright pink as the stallholder sticks her head out. She's still there, studying the sky, as we leave the village and the Centre slides out of sight.

We trundle along in silence, tracing the road around the Pap of Glencoe (wonder what McLean's going to re-christen *that*) at the western edge of the Glen. I say silence, but of course one of us is still making enough noise for everyone: 'It's too tight. You're hurting me! You're *mean!*' Sandra is starting to look grim-faced, and it's a relief to everyone when she clicks the belt into place and sits back. 'Wow,' she says in that loud hearty voice that means whining children are being ignored. 'Got a real storm coming.'

I follow her gaze, through the windscreen ahead. Not that I have to. I don't know if it's the clouds, or the mountainside cutting off the sun, but all of a sudden it's like a lid has come down. The white slopes have lost their sparkle. We're in the Glen now. 'Yeah,' says Mark over the grizzling from the far corner, 'gonna be a blizzard.'

'No, it's just a wee squall.' Emma is actually smiling; she takes a Scot's perverse pride in our crappy weather. 'We'll be back long before it starts. Don't worry.'

I wasn't worrying. Should I be? I look at Raj. He smiles back, puts his arm around my shoulders. Is he trying to reassure me...? Oh get a grip, woman. I smile at Neddy, who is drumming his heels angrily against his seat. 'Did you see the swords then, Neddy?'

'No!'

'You did too,' says Mark. 'You liked them.'

'I hate them.'

'Neddy,' say both parents in unison.

'Did you not see them cutting that guy's head off?' says Jamie.

A slight pause, but... 'No! Go away!'

'Neddy!'

He sits back, still mumbling, and starts kicking the chair again. My eyes are starting to ache; I close them, listening to Neddy's drumming feet, wishing the little turd a hundred miles away. You wouldn't catch our Clairey behaving like this... I open my eyes gingerly. The sun hasn't come out again. It should make the white mountain-sides easier on my sore eyes. But it doesn't: there's a lividity to the grey snowfields, a nasty glow that clashes with the iodine tint to the clouds behind us.

I shut my eyes again. A grey after-image squirms behind my eyelids. My stomach curls queasily, and pain sinks into my right temple. Oh great – a headache *and* travel-sickness. That's all I need...

'Ned.' Sandra's voice. 'Leave that alone.'

There's a clinking sound. I prise open my eyes; Neddy is fiddling with his seat belt fastening. He's meeting Sandra's gaze, apprehensive but defiant. Mark says sternly: 'You heard your mother. Leave it.'

Neddy's fingers keep working. 'Don't want to...'

'Edward Gray you leave that alone and you SIT RIGHT! Do it NOW!' Sandra's using the mother-voice, the one that can't be disobeyed; the adults have sat up straight before we know what we're doing. Neddy drops the seat-belt and bursts into tears. Sandra sighs and looks at Mark – a mother's place is in the wrong. I would sympathise, if I wasn't starting to feel like absolute shit. There's an air-con nozzle set into the roof – the irony of having to use air-con in a snowmobile is not lost on me, but right now I don't give a damn. I pull it down and start breathing in great gasps. Raj says, 'Are you okay?'

'Just a bit queasy...' I direct the wonderful cold air onto my throbbing eyes. Oh, bliss... I hear Mark say, 'Be quiet now, Neddy. The lady's sick.'

The sobs stop abruptly. I move the nozzle down to my mouth, and see Neddy is watching me with interest. 'Is she gonna barf?'

'Yes.' My stomach has settled a little, so I'm able to add, 'I'll barf all over you.'

'And you'll be all *bluuuuuurgh! Uuuuugh!*' He starts making explosion noises, for no obvious reason, and giggling happily. Then there's a change in the sound – for a confused instant I think it's Neddy, but in fact it's the snowmobile's engine, slowing down. 'It's okay,' I say to Emma, 'I'm not really going to be sick.'

'Aye, I ken.' Her Aberdeen accent comes through more strongly now she's distracted; she's hunched over the wheel, eyes dead ahead as if she's driving through a pea-souper. We all look through the windscreen. On the road ahead, as far as we can see, the tracks we've been following are gone. The snow looks fresh and untidy. The drone of the engine changes key as we start to cross it.

After a moment Sandra says in bewilderment, 'Has it been snowing here?'



Our driver mumbles into the wheel. 'Naw, it's just a bit sluffin.'

Carl translates, 'It's just a bit of sluffing. Some loose snow come down from the mountains.'

'Oh. Oh, okay.' We all look at one another. No-one's going to use the A-word. Eventually Raj says, 'The SCACS system does it three or four times a day. It's a computerised system. It's used for clearing the slopes. It's routine.'

The confident professor voice works (as does that wonderful euphemism 'clearing the slopes'). Sandra looks reassured. But then she didn't see Raj back in the Visitor's Centre, bending over the SCACS lights on the miniature Glencoe, checking and checking as if he suspected something wrong. I watch him now. It's never occurred to me before, how poker-faced he is. Nothing would show if he didn't want it to. He sees me watching, smiles, tries to pull me close for a hug; but I disentangle myself, mumbling about not feeling well; I want to keep my hands free, my feet on the floor. I want to be ready.

There's a change in the note of the engine. We're past the sluffing, back in the tracks again. We're speeding up. But the engine is loud. Surely it wasn't that loud before? No-one else seems to have noticed. They're smiling. 'Home soon,' I hear someone say.

I've got to get a grip here. I stare out of the window at the white slopes – there's still something about them that hurts the eyes, but I'm going to look anyway. There will be no boiling cloud. No tidal wave. 200, the voiceover said; but that's out of hundreds of thousands. The likelihood is a million to one - more!

But of course, that's exactly what they would have thought. Every one of the 200. All sitting here like me, all watching the roulette wheel spin. Someone has to be double-zero. Why not me?

An impact. I hear myself cry out. Dark grey is all around us. The engine is slowing down. Emma's voice, slightly annoyed. 'Everyone okay?'

We've just entered the pass of Glencoe. The road runs through a massive formation of rock; the passage is cut as neat and smooth as a slice of birthday cake. Now we're slowing – stopped. 'Had a wee bump there,' says Emma. 'Just going to check everything's okay...'

The sides of the rock tower over us. I can see white above us, leaning, ready to topple over the edge. And then I know. 'Keep going,' I say.

'I'll not be a minute –'

'It's going to come down.'

She's shaking her head – she thinks I've misunderstood. 'No, it's okay –'



'For Christ's sake get moving.' This is not my voice, hoarse and ugly. But somewhere beyond I can hear it coming: the cloud, the tidal wave. The White Dragon. 'It's going to come down! Move! Fucking move!'

'Get going,' says Raj. That seems to decide it. She starts the engine. It revs, once, twice. Catches, and we lurch forward. Sandra shrieks as the rock jumps at us. Then we're going, but not fast enough. I can hear the roaring. Flecks of white are whirling before my eyes.

Then we burst through into daylight. The roaring is only half as loud, the echo must have been trapped in the Pass. The snowmobile charges on, flinging us around as we take corners much too fast. And at last we're out in the air. Glen Etive to the right - Rannoch Moor before us, flat and wide open.

When the Celtic crosses come into view, I call 'Stop.' Emma slams on the brakes at once. Before we're completely halted, I'm out of my seat-belt and opening the door. I'm out into the glorious fresh cold straight from the moor. Specks of white whirl before me, but I can still see the Glen.

I will see it when it comes. I can hear it now, the roaring. Here it comes –

The white specks whirl into a blur, more like TV interference than falling snow. The roar is replaced by a squealing whine. I'm on my knees in the snow. I shut my eyes. I start to retch.

The vomiting goes on for a while.

It stops quite suddenly. A hand is wiping my face gently. Another is holding my arm so I don't fall. I open my eyes at last.

The pale specks are still squirming in front of my eyes. There is a strong smell, like fruit, sweet but wholesome. I feel stronger. I look up.

Their faces are a blur. I can't see what they're wearing, but there's a suggestion of leather, sheepskin, fur. But they are veiled and swathed in gold. As they bend towards me I reach for the shining fabric, and feel hair.

'Suze? Feel better now?' It's Raj's voice, at my ear. I look sideways for a second – he's beside me, holding me up. I look forward again. The squirming spots have cleared a little. Holding my elbow is Mark, splashes of vomit down his coat. In front of my face is Emma.

She's looking very annoyed. My puke-stained fingers are holding onto her hair.<sup>51</sup>

'Oh,' I say, weakly. I pull my hand away. 'Sorry.'

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<sup>51</sup> A migraine attack allows a glimpse of the supernatural. The visual disturbances – the 'whirling white flecks' which represent snow – are based on my own experiences of migraine. The olfactory hallucination – the 'sweet' smell of oranges – is based on a friend's experience. See Part Two, Chapter Three, 'Travelling to Narnia in your fucking sleep': Transition Between Worlds'.

She goes on glaring at me. 'What in the name...?'

I look around. Seven pairs of eyes staring at me in varying degrees of concern, shock and disgust. I look beyond Mark into Glencoe. No rumbling, no rising vapour... in short: no avalanche. 'Oh,' I say again.

Emma's voice is blaring in my face. 'D'you think you're bloody funny? Was that your idea of a bloody joke?'

'Leave her alone.' It's Jamie's voice. 'She's not well.'

I protest feebly, 'It wasn't like that...' But Emma's still going. 'We could all've got killed!'

'Then we'd go straight to heaven, wouldn't we.' He takes my hand. 'Up you get, Suzey.'

Emma looks like she'd going to explode. She's drawing breath to speak, but Raj cuts her off. 'The storm's coming. Let's get indoors.' He hoists me to my feet, and I lean into him gratefully. Jamie takes my other elbow. 'All right, sis?'

'I saw it. I really saw it...' But no-one's listening. Mark opens the snowmobile door, giving me that big hearty smile you give to the deranged or mentally challenged. 'Feeling better?'

Actually I am – the nausea's gone and the headache has dulled. I flop into a seat, feeling weak and empty. When Emma bangs the door I hardly flinch. When we're all aboard she drives off, muttering something, but it's under her breath. Good – all the easier to ignore her. I look around the awkwardly smiling faces. 'I saw something white coming down. I really did.' I'm getting a bit indignant here. 'I'm sorry. But I thought I was saving our lives.'

Carl is frowning slightly. 'Did you have a headache before you were sick?'

'Yes. Why?'

'What did you see? Little white dots?'

'Yes.'

'Did you hear anything? A roaring noise?'

'Yes.'

'Have you ever had a migraine before?'

'I think so, but...'

Now Sandra is nodding. 'Oh, yeah, my sister gets those. Her vision's shot to heck for hours. And you had one once, didn't you, babe?'

Mark's nodding. 'I saw spots in front of my eyes.' He gives me a kindly smile. 'It was very frightening.'

This is getting annoying. 'That's not what it was.'



'You can get all kinds of symptoms with them.' Carl is nodding sagely to himself. What is he, a migraine counsellor? 'Really weird stuff. Tinnitus. Losing half your vision. Smelling oranges.'

'...Oranges?' The protest dies in my throat. I remember the figures, the golden hair, and the sweet wholesome smell of... 'Fruit. I did think I smelled some – but that was after the...'

Carl's still nodding. 'It can be very real.'

I put my hands over my face, ostensibly to rub my sore eyes, but really because I don't want to look at anyone. I can feel my face flushing. Oh, kill me now... 'Sorry,' I mumble. 'I'm really sorry.'

Lots of *it's okay's*. Sandra's voice, sympathetic: 'You thought you were saving us all.' After a pause she adds, 'Thank you.'

They all echo *Thank you*. Now I *really* want the ground to swallow me up. I look out of the window, feigning a deep interest in the Celtic crosses as we drive between them. I finally notice what's odd about this picture; I can't hear Neddy. I look around – but he's still there, holding his father's hand staring at me wide-eyed. 'Okay, Neddy?' I say weakly.

He nods dumbly. Mark says, 'We thought for a minute there you had Second Sight, Suzey. The gift of prophecy. Aren't people from around here supposed to have it?'

'My Gran's from the Highlands.' I'm trying to salvage my dignity here. 'Maybe I've inherited a bit of it.'

Jamie bursts out laughing. 'You've inherited the ability to look at Glencoe in winter-time and see snow? You're a regular Highland Seer, Suzey.'

'Fuck off.'

Carl chips in, 'It must be the Sixth Sense. *"I see avalanches..."*'

'Fuck off.'

Everyone's laughing now (except Emma, naturally) in spite of my bad language. Bastards. I close my eyes, try to look ill, and pray for death to come quickly. Or at least to get out of this bloody snowmobile.

The last one, anyhow, comes quickly. We pile out. No-one helps me out, the unsympathetic bastards (I can walk well enough on my own, but that's hardly the point). The other passengers are still grinning; but it takes a lot more than that to put a smile on Emma's face. 'I'll need to report this,' she snaps.

'Who to?' I snap back. 'Jesus?'

'You've no business here with decent folk.' She looks from me to Carl and then to Jamie. 'None of you.' She slams back into the snowmobile. We step back quickly as it revs



away, and make our way indoors. Once in the warmth, the smell starts to rise, and I'm conscious of the puke-stains on Mark's jacket. 'I'm really sorry,' I say.

At this point Neddy comes back to life. 'That was cool. Can we go back again?'

Now even I'm laughing. We draw close to one another; we have Been Through Something together. 'Say bye-bye now,' says Sandra, taking hold of his hand.

'Awww!'

But Mommy stands firm. 'You'll see everyone again later. Say bye-bye for now.'

As a delaying tactic, Neddy insists on throwing an arm round each of us in turn.

Sandra keeps hold of his other hand.

Carl is last in line for the one-armed hug. Sandra's smile remains in place. She doesn't pull Neddy away. But she rocks back onto one foot, the one farthest from Neddy - as you'd do with a child looking out of a window, or over a drop. Ready to pull him back. I don't think she even knows she's doing it. Then the little family are leaving; Carl sighs, smiles goodbye to us and sets off in the opposite direction. Jamie watches them all go, nodding as if something has just been confirmed to him. 'See you later on,' he says, and then he's gone too.

I look up pleadingly at Raj. 'Please put me in a nice hot bath.'

'Excellent idea.'

I don't think there's anything in the world as wonderful as hot water. I'm floating in a mass of Vanilla-and-Ginger-scented bubbles: movie bubbles, the type that don't melt away in seconds. There's even a waterproof pillow supporting my neck. I lie back, fragrant steam rising into my face, and try to turn the tap on with my toes. Can't quite do it. 'Slave!' I bellow.

'Did you say something?' Raj sticks his head around the door. 'Are you okay?'

'No. I'm too weak to sit up. Turn the hot tap on, would you?'

He bends down, reaching towards the tap, but grabs instead at my toes. 'Time to get out,' he says as I squeal and wriggle away, 'you're going pink and wrinkly.'

'So?'

'You'll look like a hippo.'

'Wouldn't mind being a hippo. Spend your whole life floating in warm water.' I wallow about a bit to illustrate the point. 'There's loads of food, and you're too big for anything else to fuck with.'

He makes another grab for my foot, like a fisherman tickling trout. 'You'd be very ugly.'

'Not to other hippos. Ow, stop it. You're getting your sleeve all wet. Take your clothes off if you're going to do that.'

He raises his eyebrows at me. 'You are feeling better, aren't you?'

'Better enough for some things.'

'Good.' He gets up briskly. 'Then you're well enough to come down to dinner. It starts in fifteen minutes.'

'Can't we get room service?'

'No.'

I pout. 'I want room service.'

'It's not included in the bill.'

'Oh, all right.' I haul myself upright, staggering as I have to support my own weight again. The life of a hippo looks pretty good to me right now. 'I'm not getting pushed up, though.'

Ten minutes later, in baggy jeans and not a wisp of make-up, I'm following Raj into the lobby. A smell of roast potatoes wafts from the dining-room. My stomach starts to growl. I spot Jamie on the other side of the lobby, looking at the notice-board with his back to us. I call his name but he doesn't turn. Cloth-ears. Steering around a group of guests who are looking affronted about something or other, I make my way across to him.

I recognise the cutting on the board before I'm close enough to read the headline. Even the layout is imprinted on my mind. This is a good-quality copy, probably downloaded rather than photocopied. You can see Jamie's face very clearly. And the headline is pin-sharp: *MIRACLE GIRL'S BROTHER CAUGHT WITH BOY.*

Jamie turns to me, looking as if he's going to throw up. He's clutching a fistful of crumpled papers; he unfolds them, and they all have the picture and the headline. 'They were in all the lifts,' he says.

I look around the lobby – no sign of any others. 'Do you think there's more?'

'I don't know.'

I can hear voices behind us. I pull the paper off the notice-board. 'We'll go and look.'

Jamie's shaking his head, looking over his shoulder. Another group of people are heading for the dining-room. They're murmuring to each other, and staring at Jamie. One of the men steps towards Jamie, but a woman grabs his arm and pulls him away. I can't hear her, but I can see what she's saying: *not worth it.* They disappear into the dining-room.

I jump as someone tugs at the paper in my hand: but it's Raj, and behind him is Carl. Raj exclaims softly when he sees the cutting, but Carl doesn't even look at it. 'Those things are all over the place,' he says. 'There's one in the dining-room.' He looks at Jamie. 'You'd better stay out of sight.'

**'No.'**

**I take Jamie's arm. 'Come on. Let's go back up to the room.'**

**He disentangles himself and heads for the dining-room. 'No. I'm going for my dinner.'**

**'Jamie!' But he's going inside. I run after him, Raj and Carl close behind. In the doorway, Raj stops and catches my arm. 'Go back up to the room, Suzey. We'll get him out.'**

**'No you won't.' I follow Jamie in. The dining-room is brighter than I remember it, and bigger. Almost every table is occupied. Jamie is walking straight down the central aisle. As he passes each table, heads swivel; people lean together and whisper like conspirators. The chatter of conversation lowers to a muttering hiss. Jamie keeps walking.**

**I follow him. Raj and Carl are close behind; I hear Raj swear quietly when Jamie selects a table close to the central aisle, right beside the top table. An elderly couple are already sitting there; when Jamie smiles at them and sits down, they get up and walk away. I manoeuvre my way around them, and sit next to Jamie. 'Jamie,' I whisper, 'what do you think you're doing?'**

**He pours himself some water, his hand shaking slightly. 'I'm being a penitent,' he says, 'remember?'**

**Raj and Carl are behind us. Neither is sitting. Raj has his hand on my shoulder, and is leaning across to whisper to Jamie. 'We shouldn't be here. Let's go.'**

**Jamie shrugs. 'Go if you want.' He glances sideways. At the nearby tables, everyone is looking at him. Their faces are flat and ugly under the yellow light.**

**'You're putting your sister in danger,' Raj snarls. Jamie looks at me, shock dawning. 'Suzey, go on upstairs,' he says.**

**'Fuck off, Jamie.' I've just noticed another newspaper cutting. It's pinned to the edge of the top table, right by McLean's seat. I notice too that there are no doors at the back of this hall, not even a fire exit. Behind us, someone has really begun to hiss like a snake. The sound rises as more and more join in.**

**The doors open at the far end of the hall. The McLean procession enters: the guards, the rich suits, the posh frocks, the daughter, and finally the wondrous Presence himself. The hissing stops – God forbid McLean should think it's directed at him. But people are turning to him, speaking avidly, pointing at our table. Some even stand up and reach out for McLean. His bodyguards are there in an instant; but McLean steps between them, catches the supplicant's hand and pats it, says a few soothing words before he passes by.**

**As he reaches his place at the centre of the table, one of the waitresses is unpinning the printout. Before she can spirit it away, however, McLean holds out his hand for it. He**



stands behind his chair to look it over. The rest of the top table hover indecisively; those who haven't sat down remain standing, those who have perch on the edge of their seats ready to spring up again. McLean takes his time; once he looks up and scans the room, his eyes resting for a moment on Jamie, but then he goes back to studying the paper. The whole room is watching him.

Finally he puts the cutting down in front of Kerry, making a small sit-down gesture. Kerry sinks into her chair, the rest of the table following suit. McLean, however, is still standing. He steeples his hands in front of his face, apparently deep in thought, and closes his eyes as if what he sees hurts them. Finally he says:

'There's a matter in this room that's abhorrent to me, brothers and sisters. I'll speak of it now, before we break our bread.'

He pauses. There's a soft clink as a waiter emerges from the kitchen carrying a tray of prawn cocktails. Kerry waves him back furiously. Most of the audience doesn't notice; nor does McLean. At last he says:

'I've been reading a book by a man called Dante. A man who lived over 700 years ago. He lived in violent times my friends. Wars. Murders. Dissent, grief, sorrow. Crooked politicians. A bloated and corrupt church peddling false doctrine for profit.' Some mumblings at the back. 'Oh yes. And I ask you, my friends. Were Dante's times worse than ours? Has anything changed?'

Shaking heads all around. Various cries of *no! nu!, s'just the same!*. McLean pauses like an auctioneer waiting for bids. Finally he says: 'You think nothing's changed? Well, I'll tell you. Times have changed, brothers and sisters. And they have changed for the worse.'

'That's right, my friends, we are the worst off. Do you know why? Because Dante was allowed to speak of God's truth. Dante knew there was no God but Christ - and he said so. He knew there was no way to find God except through the holy Gospels of Jesus Christ - and he said so. He didn't have to look Muslims in the face and tell them their false prophet Muhammad would win them a place in God's house. He didn't have to listen to the rubbish of the chattering classes, and allow them to tell young people that their pick'n'mix approach to God's laws would win them his favour. And he knew about sin, my friends. Oh yes. He was no saint, he was a sinner like the rest of this. But he knew that's what he was.'

'There was something he didn't know. He didn't know about *alternative families*. He didn't know about *valid lifestyle choices*. He didn't know that. But he knew one simple thing - that a life of sodomy, dress it up how you like, would lead you straight to the fires of hell.'

'Dante set all this down for us. He wrote a book and he called it *Inferno*, to warn us where our *alternative lifestyles* lead us: straight to Hell. And he showed us those men in Hell, and he laid bare their sin for them. There was no more talk of *love*, or *gender-bending*,

to cover over their unnatural sin. No more lies about their *right to sexuality* while they abuse young boys. They will walk through torrents of flame. They will no longer be able to mock the holy state of matrimony. Their heads will be twisted around, so they can spend the rest of eternity contemplating the male buttocks they loved so well in this life. They will scratch and claw at the foul diseases on their skin. And the shit they loved to sink into in this life - well, they'll be immersed in it for the rest of time.<sup>52</sup>

'There's one among us this evening who has committed those sins, brothers and sisters. By his own admission, he has done all these things and more. You all know who he is. And shall I tell you what disgusts me, my friends? What's so abhorrent to me?

'That all of you think you can *pass judgement upon him*.' His bellow echoes across the room. 'You wish to cast out this young man. He has come to us hoping to change his ways, and you presume to think this can't be done? Oh ye of little faith. I tell you, there is more rejoicing in Heaven over one lost sheep returned to the fold than in a hundred who have never strayed.' He's coming out from behind the top table. His voice doesn't fade; he wasn't using a microphone in the first place. He stands behind Jamie's chair, and rests his hands on Jamie's shoulders. Jamie flinches but keeps still. McLean goes on declaiming over his head:

'This young man was dead, but by the grace of the Holy Spirit he will come back to life. Will you help him? Will your prayers raise him above the filth into the kingdom of the Lord? Or will you pass by on the other side?'

A chorus of *no, no!* McLean stands back from Jamie's chair, and holds out his arms to him. 'Come here, son.' Without hesitation, Jamie stands and throws himself into his arms. Clapping and cheering arises as they hold the embrace, slapping each other's backs so it looks suitably manly. Eventually McLean stands back, and gently steers Jamie back into his seat. I hear McLean murmuring, *God bless you son. We'll get your family back.* Tears come to Jamie's eyes.

Now McLean turns to me. If he tries to hug me, I'm going to kick him. But he takes both my hands and smiles at me. 'You've stuck by him. God bless you.' There are tears in his eyes too. I can't believe this is the same man we saw last night.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> As Carl observes later, McLean is misquoting (or revising) Dante. The torments he lists are not inflicted on homosexuals, but on Flatterers (immersed in excrement), Liars (foul diseases), Soothsayers (heads twisted round) respectively. Homosexuals – considered lesser 'sinners' than these three – run on hot sand under a rain of fire. See Dante, *Inferno*, Cantos XV - XVI, XVIII, XX and XXIX – XXX.

<sup>53</sup> This scene casts McLean in a comparatively sympathetic light (although it is, of course, very much comparative). His mood swings are linked to his incipient medical condition: see Chapter Twenty-Three.



## Twenty-Two

It's hard getting up again next morning. Not that we'd had a late night: we called it quits just after dinner. People (mostly women) kept coming up to Jamie to congratulate him, and make a big show of shaking his hand. But there were some (mostly men, though not all) who spent all night growling in the background, watching us with incredulous rage. Even Jamie agreed we should disappear for a while. The four of us spent hours in me and Raj's room, flicking through all the TV channels and not talking much. At one point Carl piped up, out of the blue: 'He's talking crap anyway. It's not the Sodomites who get thrown in the pool of shit. It's the Flatterers.' We all looked at him. 'In Dante's *Inferno*.'

'The man's a stupid bastard.' Raj was indignant. He's an academic, to whom textual inaccuracy constitutes fraud. 'He's got all those fools hanging on every word, and he can't even read the bloody book.'

'What about the itchy people?' I ask Carl.

'Liars, I think. Or it might be usurers. People who lend money for profit.'<sup>54</sup>

'Like those investment banker types he was sitting with?'

'He's an irony-free zone all right.' We laugh. We are cleverer than he is; we can go back to feeling superior. It's a comfort, but not a large one.

When Carl and Jamie were gone, Raj and I carried on staring at the TV. Sleep wasn't about to come any time soon.

The light in the dining-room is pallid. Outside the snow is falling thickly, and the wind is building up. We are heading for a blizzard.

Jamie is sitting at a table in the middle of the room. He's not about to skulk in corners; I don't know whether to be proud or exasperated. Sitting beside him is a youngish man with a strained and lined face. He is speaking earnestly to Jamie, his hands waving and

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<sup>54</sup> The 'itchy people' in *Inferno* are Liars: 'Usurers' sit on burning sand beside the pit of Fraud. (Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XVII). Again, Dante considers this 'sin' – lending money for profit – worse than homosexuality; Dante usually portrays financial 'sins' as more reprehensible than sexual ones. McLean, in his 'revised' account of *Inferno*, conveniently neglects to mention that his 'merchant banker' companions would have attracted more of Dante's disdain than a practising homosexual.



fluttering on the table-top. Sometimes his fingers brush Jamie's wrist, and then he jumps back as if he's had a shock of static. Jamie is listening to him gravely, nodding occasionally.

The young man sees us coming, and jumps up as if he expects us to tip him out of his chair. He says something to Jamie, then gives me a wan smile as he hurries past. 'Don't tell me,' I say, sitting down. 'He's here to Pray Out the Gay?'

'Aye. He's with the Intercessors.'<sup>55</sup> Jamie lowers his voice. 'Poor bastard.'

I need coffee. I look around for a waitress, and see them all standing in a huddle by the door. They are talking to a woman with a blonde pony-tail; it takes me a moment to recognise our driver without the red parka and the sour expression, but it's Emma all right. She and the waitresses look up and stare right at me, as if I've just dropped through the ceiling. One of the waitresses hurries over to fill my cup. She asks if there is anything she can get me, anything at all? Bewildered, I tell her I'm fine.

'What's the matter with these people now?' I grumble to Raj. He's not listening - he's watching Emma, who is moving from table to table speaking quietly to all the diners. Eventually she gets to us. 'Are you feeling better?' she asks me. She seems genuinely concerned. I am highly suspicious. 'Is there something we should know about?' I demand.

'We're just telling everyone,' she drops her voice a little bit, 'the road's blocked just now. There's been an avalanche.'

I set my cup down, carefully, although it still spills into the saucer. 'Where?'

'On the southbound road. Just the other side of the rise.'

'But not in Glencoe itself? Not where... I thought it would be?'

'No. But not far off.' She actually smiles, and then goes to speak to another table. All the diners listen intently; some of them turn to stare at me.

I realise I've been holding my breath. I let it out with a gasp. 'She had me going for a minute there.'

'What's up?' Carl has just appeared; sensitive to atmospheres, he looks around warily.

'There's been an avalanche - no, don't look like that, it wasn't in the Glen. It was south of here.'

'But they still think you...'

'Yes, that's just what they think.' I glance around the room. 'I'm going to get burnt at the stake here.'

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<sup>55</sup> The title of this organisation was suggested by 'Intercessors for Britain', an extreme Right-wing Christian organisation which opposed the abolition of Clause 28. See 'Eden: a World of Christian Resources', [http://www.eden.co.uk/directory/intercessors\\_for\\_britain\\_03583.html](http://www.eden.co.uk/directory/intercessors_for_britain_03583.html).

'Actually, I don't think you are.' Raj is looking around too. 'You're here as Miracle Girl, if you remember. I think your status has just been enhanced.'

I follow his eye. People look back and smile, or just gaze in something approaching awe. 'This is getting silly,' I say, feeling just a tiny bit creeped out. 'They must have millions of avalanches around here.'

'But what about the SCACS...' Jamie murmurs.

'It goes onto half-function at night,' says Raj. 'And even on full it couldn't cope with the snow-load it got yesterday. Even the sluffing would be big enough to cover the road.'

'So the road home's blocked?' says Carl.

'Effectively.'

There's a silence. 'Well, we're not going till tomorrow anyway,' I say.

The others agree. We listen to the howling outside.

Jamie pushes back his plate. 'I'm off to get ready,' he says.

<sup>56</sup>The baptism is at noon. It is scheduled to take place in the glass-roofed Olympic pool, under 'God's good sunlight'. But by five to twelve the staff are flicking on the fluorescents. We are in near-twilight: beyond every window is dull grey-white. The blizzard has taken hold.

Raj and I are shown to our seats. The storm is roaring and pounding at the glass all around us. Carl, very sensibly, has decided to give the ceremony a miss. He said he was going to the cinema on the basement level; like every sane creature on a day like this, he has gone to ground. I avoid looking out of the windows - the snowflakes are swarming too much like the migraine spots I saw yesterday. 'I could see this far enough today,' I say.

Raj just grunts. Too obvious to deserve comment, I suppose. If Jamie didn't feel obliged to go through with this farce, I wouldn't be within a hundred miles of it. He seems to be doing OK though: he's sitting amongst the other penitents in the front row, smiling and chatting to the woman beside him. It looks like some bizarre graduation ceremony: all the penitents are wearing white gowns like choirboys' surplices. It says a great deal about my brother's natural appearance that he actually looks good in it. Mr Pray-Out-the-Gay is leaning over his shoulder, laughing uproariously at something Jamie's just said.

Indeed, everyone but Raj and I seems to be in holiday mood. All around us are the people we've been seeing over the past couple of days, all wearing their best clothes and

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<sup>56</sup> This scene illustrates the blending of different end-of-the-world scenarios. The holocaust Suzey sees is a nuclear firestorm, Biblical Armageddon and Ragnarok all at once. McLean of course perceives the world's destruction as a holy and necessary sacrifice.



their biggest smiles. They keep glancing at the double doors beside the shallow end of the pool, as if they expect Elvis to walk out.

Raj leans over to me, pitching his voice below the level of excited chatter that fills the room. 'Can you smell that?'

I inhale. I had thought the woman beside me was wearing too much perfume, but he's right: the heavy floral scent is filling the room. 'Is that incense?'

He nods. 'Attar of roses, I believe.'

I look around. There's nothing obviously smoking or burning - but an air-conditioning vent is right beside me. 'Bit papist for our man, isn't it?'

Raj grins. 'Do you think he knows Dante was a Catholic?'

'I'll give you twenty quid if you'll tell him.' We giggle, but quietly. The storm squeals, and thumps on the window pane just a few yards away. I shut up, feeling chastened. Jamie turns around and smiles up at me.

The double doors slam back; enter two men in suits, pushing down the floor-level bolts so the doors stay open. The audience breaks into applause. Out comes Kerry, all alone: no money-men today. Music starts to come through the speakers, the rhythm surprisingly fast and heavy. And finally, Elvis himself: McLean, wearing a blue Gandalf robe over his suit. It ought to look silly, but he knows how to carry it. Then everyone around us is on their feet, clapping and cheering. McLean takes a microphone from Kerry, and says to us: 'Sing.'

So we do. Raj and I mumble along - everyone else seems to know the words. But the tune is annoyingly catchy, and by the second chorus we're joining in. *Immortal love, eternal love, let us sing of his immortal love...* Actually, this is quite fun.

The song finishes and we sit down, although half the crowd are ready to leap up again. McLean gives us just enough time to settle. Then he clasps his hands around a microphone and says, 'Let us pray.' He then proceeds to shout the Lord's Prayer at us. I automatically half-shut my eyes and bow my head, squinting sideways at the woman beside me. She keeps her face raised and her hands far apart, swaying slightly as she recites along with McLean.

As soon as McLean says amen, the music starts again. It's slower this time, a swayalong. We all jump to our feet. Again, the words are easy: *Shine, Jesus, Shine, Be My Sun in All My Days...* People are lifting their faces and hands to the sky, smiling although the storm still howls around them. I feel a touch on my hand: the woman next to me has taken my hand, and raised it to the roof with her own. We sway together.

The music ends. We sit down; embarrassed, I pull away my hand and avoid the eyes of the woman beside me. The room is warm and humid - the floral scent is getting heavier,



mixing unpleasantly with the chlorine smell from the pool. It's making me feel queasy. I look around, trying to gauge what will happen next; if we're having another sing-song, I'm nipping out to the bog.

But no. The crowd has gone quiet, focusing on McLean. He moves to the front of the pool, pausing before the broad steps that lead down into the water. Perhaps he gives some cue I haven't noticed, because a stir goes through the white-robed people in the front row. McLean's timing is immaculate: when the whole room is hanging on his words, he begins to speak.

'Let us welcome our brothers and sisters into the ranks of the saved. Rejoice for them. Their names will be written into the Book of Life, on this, the very eve of the world's destruction.'

Music begins to play in the background. It has a slow, pulsing beat. For a surreal moment, I think it's *We Will Rock You*. People around us start to clap and to murmur very quietly: *Jesus help us, Jesus save us...* McLean's voice rises over them. 'Make no mistake about it. The end is coming. The day of God's anger is at hand.'

*Amens* and *Hallelujahs* from all round the hall. A few people in the row in front of me are swaying. McLean's voice takes on a sing-song rhythm. 'No use waiting till next year to repent. The Lord God is coming, my friends, and he is coming now. He is ready to put them in his wine press, the wicked, the faithless, the worshippers of false gods. The blood of millions shall be poured forth onto the Earth.'

More swaying now. 'And what will they do then? The fornicators, the adulterers, and the whoremongers? Where will they hide? Who will save them? No one. One third of the Earth will be destroyed, and they will be of that number!

'So come forward, and be saved.' He walks into the pool, ignoring the water that rises almost to his waist. 'Come forward. Cling to the Branch of David, Our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>57</sup> Come and accept his salvation.' He looks at the white-robed people, and opens his arms to them. 'Come forward, and be spared the fire!'

Hotel staff are moving into position, one at the poolside, one half way down the steps and one beside McLean. A middle-aged woman comes forward, tugging at her white surplice, and steps gingerly into the water. As McLean reaches out to receive her, someone behind me starts to speak rapidly in what sounds like German. McLean takes the woman in his arms like a dance partner, and dips her once under the water, murmuring to her. She comes up spluttering, but by the time the staff have handed her back on to dry land, she is

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<sup>57</sup> As in Norse mythology – which venerates the Tree of Life – the language of trees ('branch' of David rather than 'descendant') is associated with refuge, sanctuary and salvation.

smiling joyfully. As another woman is coming forward, two more voices have begun to babble.

'Blessed are you.' McLean dips one after another with practised ease. 'Blessed are you who repent, for the wicked will not repent. The unbelievers will see one-third of the Earth destroyed, but they will not believe. The liars and the blasphemers will see, but they will lie and blaspheme all the more. And the Lord will come, and the Lord will spew them out of his mouth.'

The heat is getting unbearable. I struggle out of my jumper. I must have bumped the woman beside me, because she says something. 'Sorry,' I mutter.

She's oblivious to me. Her eyes are half-closed. She's saying something over and over, something like *Ach an toka, ach an toka oh...*<sup>58</sup> It's gibberish. The man beside her, and the one behind them, are doing the same. It's nonsense, but it's said as if it might save their lives. Their voices are loud and harsh. A headache starts to burrow its way into my temple.

'Tongues.' It's Raj. I look at him. His head is haloed by whirling white: the blizzard outside. 'They're speaking in tongues,' he says. His voice seems to come from a long way off.

But McLean's voice is everywhere around me. 'And the final third will see, and they will not repent. They are the molesters and the befoulers of the body. All the murderers, the abortionists, the rapists, and the sodomites. All those who drink the wine of violence. All those who wallow in their own uncleanness. All those who befoul the Holy Land with their filthy steps. So I say to you - put on the white garments of innocence. Come forward and be saved.'

Jamie is rising from the front row. Unaccustomed to his robes, he shifts his arms a little as he steps forward; the sleeves lift like white wings. The babbling around me seems to grow louder as he steps into the pool. McLean reaches up to him, looking more like the penitent himself. I think there are tears in his eyes. 'Blessed are you,' he says quietly, as Jamie steps down to stand before him, his waterlogged sleeves trailing behind. The staff member moves closer. McLean takes Jamie in his arms, and ducks him under the water.

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<sup>58</sup> To create the 'speaking in tongues' (glossolalia) dialogue, I drew on this description of the phenomenon:

'[The] native language of the speaker was a pretty good predictor of the kinds of sounds that would occur in glossolalia; one general pattern was that sounds perceived as generally marking "foreign" speech (whatever that may mean) would occur, while sounds perceived as typical of the native language would not... On the other hand, truly exotic sounds - those not typical of the native language, but that don't happen to be familiar to speakers of the language - would tend not to occur: American English speakers don't produce clicks in their glossolalia.' (Religious Tolerance. Org, 'Speaking in Tongues: Scientific Studies').

I came up with 'words' I thought would sound foreign to a Scottish speaker (but not *too* foreign).



A needle-point pain sinks into my aching temple. I feel something happen in there, as if a blister has popped. Tears flood my eyes. I screw them shut, and then open them -  
- and they open *wide*, wider than ever before. And I can see –  
- a light so bright, unbearable. And utter silence.

And then the light is gone. Jamie and McLean are gone. Now more light is coming. Red light, and then the wind, bellowing like the storm but so much more –

Screams all around and now the windows shatter, obliterated. A plume of fire curls through the broken wall and over the pool. The mountains outside are all fire. The sky is fire it's rushing down it's coming it's coming for me OH GOD NO NO GOD NO

Singing, clapping, smells of chlorine and roses. I open my eyes again. Raj's face in front of mine. He's saying something but I can't hear. And again the needle in my head, something coming loose. I close my eyes and open them again and -  
*Twilight. Cold. Snow gusting through the ruined wall. Settling on the surface of the pool. The pool is dirty chlorinated ice. Things are caught in it, chair-seats and metal girders and other things I will not let myself see. Caught like amber in the ice.*

*I shut my eyes.*

Chanting. McLean's voice. Splashing, echoes. Smell of chlorine, and attar of roses.

There are hands on me: gentle hands, lifting and laying me down, tucking something soft under my head. Voices of strangers, calm and soothing. Familiar voices too: Raj, and Jamie.

I open my eyes. They're both looking down at me, looking worried. Jamie is soaking wet but not at all drowned. Behind him are a dozen more soggy penitents, gazing at me with open-mouthed awe. Raj is ordering them back, talking about 'letting her breathe'. Jamie leans in close to me. 'Suzey? Are you okay?' he says softly.

'I saw fire,' I whisper back. 'I saw ice.'

There's a disturbance in the ranks, and then McLean is looking down at me, his face uncomfortably close. 'You saw the flames of God's anger,' he says. 'Hallelujah.'

'You want it to happen,' I say.

He ignores me completely. He's placed one hand on Jamie's shoulder, one hand on mine. 'You are blessed. The one who repents, and the one who sees. Both of you. You'll eat with me tonight.'

Then he's gone. I hear his voice bellowing, filling the room. 'A vision has been given us today, brothers and sisters. Rejoice, for the time of the Lord is at hand...'



'Please get me away from here,' I say to Jamie and Raj. They hoist me to my feet and half-carry me out of the room, as a hundred gabbling prayers rise to drown out the storm.

## Part 5

### *Ragnarok*

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,  
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,  
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight  
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

'Do not go gentle into that good night'  
Dylan Thomas<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Gardner, *New Oxford Book of English Verse*, p.942.

## Twenty-Three

I wake with late-afternoon sunshine in my eyes.

I check the clock: I've been asleep for a couple of hours. I'm in our room, wrapped in a cover in the middle of the enormous bed. I remember lying down and closing my eyes, just to rest them. I'm on my own - Raj has obviously found the company of his comatose girlfriend less than thrilling, and gone walkabout. I unravel myself from the fur coverlet, and pad over to the window.

The storm is gone. The snow-cover is fresh and sparkling, and the sky is an innocent blue. The sun is westering, and will soon turn gold. Something gilded gleams on the window-ledge: a wicker basket, covered in cellophane and tied with honey-coloured ribbons. Under the wrapping I can see jars and bottles nestling in shredded paper. They carry a logo, discreet but recognisable: Aztec Gold. Nice stuff, very expensive.

A card is taped to the basket's handle. It says: *With Compliments. Please join us for dinner tonight.* Then a pair of short, incomprehensible squiggles, the last of which is probably *McLean*. I'm assuming the first one is *Kerry*, unless her daddy makes a habit of giving toiletries to strange women. There's Gold for Hair, Coffee Gold and Goddess Bath-Milk: in other words shampoo, body-lotion and bubble-bath. I pick up the basket and head for the bathroom.

The Bath Milk isn't bubbly; it just leaves a golden sheen on the surface of the water. It smells of spice and roses. I lie back into it, massaging the Gold for Hair into my scalp. It's rich and creamy, and shot through with gold. I haven't blonded my hair in ages - this stuff isn't going to lighten it, but it does promise *deep sparkling highlights*, and at Aztec Gold prices you can expect it to deliver. It's been on a good few minutes now, so I scrunch up my knees and let my head sink into the warm water.

When I surface again I hear Raj's key in the door. 'I'm in here,' I shout, trying to sluice shampoo out of my ears.

The bathroom door opens. It's Jamie. I'm still sprawled in the bath with my arms and legs akimbo. 'Oh,' I say. 'I thought you were...'

'Sorry. He gave me the key... Just come to see if you're okay.'



'Oh, okay.' I manoeuvre myself around so I'm lying on my belly, forearms resting on the end of the bath he's beside. My face is getting hot, but that's just the warm water. 'Yes, I'm fine.'

I'm hoping he'll go and sit on the toilet seat, but instead he perches on the side of the bath. And why shouldn't he - he's seen me in the scud loads of times. Get a grip, girl.

'Where's Raj gone?' I say.

'He went to check on the weather. Wanted to see if the road was open.'

'Does he think it might be?' I realise that I want the road to be open. I want it quite a lot. 'Could we go home tonight?'

He frowns. 'Do you want to?'

I shrug, trying to look more casual than I feel. 'They're all fucking psychos here, Jamie.'

'I've still to see this through, Suzey.'

'You've seen it through.'

He's shaking his head. 'I've got to stay on.' He looks at me. 'Do you need to leave?'

'I'm not leaving you here on your own.'

'I'm being serious.'

'So am I!'

He smiles. 'Thanks, Suze.' He slides off the side of the bath and kneels down on the floor, his forearms resting next to mine. He still smells slightly of chlorine. 'I can't get by without you. Never could.'

'You'd manage.'

'No, I wouldn't. Even when we were kids. You used to come and get me out of my cot when I was crying, remember? When mum and dad were chucking stuff at each other.'

'I used to take you into bed with me.' I can't believe he remembers this – he was so young. 'I think half the time it was me that woke you up. It was me that was upset, not you.'

We're eye to eye now. Even now, I can't get over how alike our eyes are. It's like looking in a mirror. Now he brings up his hand and brushes a lock of wet hair away from my face. 'Soapy,' he says. 'Don't want it in your eyes.'

'Jamie...' I don't know what I'm going to say. But it comes out: 'What is it? What's wrong? What are you going to do here?'

He holds my gaze for a long moment, moving closer until our faces are nearly touching. Then he rocks back on his heels, slaps his knees and gets to his feet. 'Getting cramp,' he says, breezily.

'Aye, and I'm getting cold.' I make a shoo-ing motion at him. 'Go and wait through there.' I don't want Raj to come and see him in here with me. I don't know why – Raj

wouldn't get freaked out, he's nothing like Lewis. But I still don't want him to see. Jamie goes obediently through to the main room, closing the door behind him.

By the time Raj gets back, I'm fully-clothed and sitting on the couch towelling my hair. Jamie is lying on the bed reading a magazine. Raj, of course, doesn't turn a hair - unlike Lewis, who never seemed to think my brother should be around me without making a formal appointment. I shouldn't even be thinking this stuff; all that claptrap about sin and guilt must be getting to me. 'Did you check the road?' I ask Raj.

He nods. 'We're not going anywhere tonight.'

I glance at the window: blue skies and golden light. 'The weather looks clear enough.'

'The snow-plough turned back at Crianlarich. There are avalanche warnings all along the south road.' He flops down beside me, and looks at me hard. 'How are you feeling?'

'Fine thanks.'

'Are you going to the doctor when we get back?'

'I don't think that will help, love.'

'He could give you something for the headaches, anyway.'

I laugh, not very happily. 'How about the visions of the end of the world?'

'Is that what you saw?' He's not laughing.

I hear paper rustling: Jamie has lowered the magazine to watch me. I shrug.

'McLean wants it to happen.'

'That doesn't mean he'll do it. It doesn't mean he *can* do it.'

'But it's possible.'

'Anything's possible. If there are an infinite number of worlds, everything happens somewhere.' He's looking at me seriously. 'It still makes the odds here miniscule. We talked about this, remember.'

I nod, humouring him. All the while remembering the blast shattering the glass walls of the swimming pool, and the sound of the fire coming behind it. 'Anyway,' I say, 'only one more night.'

'Thank God.' He lays his arm along the back of the couch; I rest my head in the crook of his elbow. Behind us comes the slap of the magazine on the duvet-cover, and the thump of Jamie's feet as he slides off the bed and heads for the door. 'We're not chasing you out,' I tell him hurriedly.

'You're fine. Just going for a kip before dinner.' He pauses in the doorway. 'Are we dressing up tonight?'

'Don't know. Do you want to?'

'Might as well.'

'I'll put my dress on, then.'

He smiles. 'See you down there.' He pulls the door shut behind him, but I can still hear him heading off to the right; his room is downstairs on the left. As the footsteps fade Raj is already sliding along the couch so he's pressed up against me. He starts twining a lock of my hair around his finger. It tugs a little. 'Your hair's all shiny,' he says.

'Aztec Gold.'

'Pardon?'

'It's Aztec Gold. You know, bath-oil and stuff? It was in the basket Kerry sent.'

He buries his face in my hair. 'And why would Kerry McLean want to get you shiny all over?'

'I'm sure I don't know.'

'I think I do.' He starts kissing down the side of my neck. I sit still, and let him slide his hands under my T-shirt and up to my breasts. After a moment he looks up at me, frowning, and says: 'No?'

'Sorry. Not in the mood.'

'It's all right.'

I know it is. But I keep quiet, resting my forehead against him. That feels nice. But he sighs and stands up, retrieves the TV Guide and starts flicking through the pages. So I lay my head back and close my eyes. I wish I could fall asleep again, but I've never felt more wide-awake in my life. God, I wish it was this time tomorrow, and we were home. If the weather holds, that is... 'What will we do if the roads are closed tomorrow?'

'Stay here, I suppose.'

'I can't stay here another night.'

'What the hell d'you want me to do about it?' he snaps. 'Do you think I control the weather?'

'Oh. Oh, how nice. I wouldn't fuck you, and now you're in a bad mood.'

He looks startled. 'It's not like that. '

'Aye, whatever you say.'

Silence. I know he's warming up to something - I shut my eyes and wait. At last he says, 'I don't like how your brother's behaving.'

I don't like it either, but I'm not telling him that. 'Not much I can do about it.'

'I just don't want you getting caught up in it. '

I look at him. He seems sincere. 'Well, ' I say, 'it's just for the one more night.'

'Do you trust him, Suzey?'

Now it's my turn to be startled. Trust Jamie? It's like asking if I trust gravity. 'What's that meant to mean?'



'I don't know.' He sighs; he looks like I feel. 'I don't know.'

There are a hundred retorts to that. But all of a sudden, I just can't be bothered. 'One more night,' I say.

He looks like he's going to answer, so I pick up the remote and turn the TV on. I channel-hop until I find *The Simpsons*. We watch that for a while, laughing in all the right places. We don't speak much.

I spend ages on my make-up. I use a lot of blusher so my face looks sharper, and trace smoky grey around my eyes. I outline my lips before I fill them in, so my mouth looks painted-on. Then I fasten my hair up, and step back a little from the mirror; it hardly looks like my face any more, which was exactly the effect I was going for. The neckline looks bare, and I didn't bring any pendants with me; so I put on the rune-stone, doubling up the long black cord so it sits on my neck as a choker.

Raj has been lying on the bed watching the whole performance; I can see him in the big mirror, although I pretend to be too taken up with face-painting to notice him. When I put on the rune-stone he says, 'It's not a good idea to wear that.'

I shrug. He's probably right, but I just can't seem to care any more. 'I've not got any other necklaces.'

Raj doesn't answer. Clearly there's something wrong – he wants me to ask what, but I'm just not going to. I concentrate on struggling into my tights without laddering them, then on slithering into my red dress. The bed creaks as he gets to his feet; he zips up the dress and starts fiddling with the hook-and-eye at the top. Then he says, 'Would you like to stay in and get room service tonight?'

I start looking for my shoes. 'Could you not have said that before I got dressed up?'

'I thought you might feel like staying in.'

'Well I don't.' I find my high-heels and perch on the bed to put them on. Even with my eyes on the fiddly strap, I can feel him staring at me. After a moment he says, 'Are you feeling all right?'

'I feel fine.' And I do, surprisingly enough. I don't know what's going to happen, but I can't seem to get worried about it. What could I do about it anyway? Raj is about to say something else, but I cut in - 'I'm ready. Shall we go?'

Jamie and Carl are already in the bar. Two young-ish women are on either side of Jamie, smiling and laughing with him. Carl is sitting off to the side. The two girls are leaving as we approach, blushing and looking rather coy - I half-expect to see them ask for his autograph. Jamie smiles benevolently after them. He has made himself look good tonight;

he's wearing a blue shirt the colour of his eyes, open at the neck to show the rune-stone pendant. Although he's turned the pendant round, so all you can see is blank polished stone.<sup>60</sup> When I sit down beside him I catch a scent like wood-smoke and spices, and see the sheen of gold in his hair. 'Aztec *pour homme*?' I ask.

He nods. 'Did he send you a basket too?'

'He?' Raj does not sound pleased. I say to Jamie, 'I thought it said *Kerry*?'

'Mine didn't.'

I look at Carl. There doesn't appear to be anything golden about him, but I ask anyway: 'Did you get one?'

He shakes his head. 'Maybe you had to be at his mass dooking session. I hear you crashed out again, Suzey? Or did you just fake a seizure to escape the toxic levels of bullshit?'

Jamie hisses at him to shut up, although there's no-one within earshot. 'No,' I tell Carl, 'I just crashed out. But I'm OK now.'

He's watching me, with his counsellor's face on. 'Are you sure?'

God, not him as well. Jamie answers for me: 'She's doing fine, aren't you, sis?'

'Fine.' People are moving towards the dining room. 'Are we going in, then?'

We follow the rest of the flock into the dining room. There's a holiday atmosphere, laughter and smiles all around; seems the baptism really hit the spot for these people. We auto-pilot to the table we were at last night. Before we can sit down, a smiling girl in the hotel's uniform appears at my elbow. 'Would you like to come with me, please?'

She's awful small for a bouncer... but she sees my blank face and adds, 'You're going to be joining Mr McLean tonight?'

Jamie's nodding. 'That's right.' He's already moving towards the top table.

We start to follow him. The girl's voice cuts in, anxiously: 'No, it's just the two of you. Just the two Phersons? Mr and Miss Pherson?'

'I think you'll find there are four in our party,' says Raj. He sounds incredibly pompous.

'It's just for tonight.' Jamie's hand is on my elbow. 'I'll bring her right back.'

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<sup>60</sup> Jamie has probably turned the rune-stone round simply to conceal the (pagan-looking) rune symbol from McLean's faithful. He is, however, now showing the Blank Rune, 'Wyrð' ('Fate'). The Blank Rune does not appear in the old Germanic rune poems; it may have been invented in the 1980's purely for the purposes of rune-stone divination, and so tends to produce great annoyance in more purist scholars of historical rune-lore (see 'The So-Called Blank Rune', [http://www.sunnyway.com/runes/blank\\_rune.html](http://www.sunnyway.com/runes/blank_rune.html)). New Age practitioners – like Seamus Maclain and his followers – generally accept its validity, however, and the strength of that belief seems to me to give the Blank Rune a significance of its own. At any rate, 'Wyrð' ('Fate') denotes the inevitability of fate and the uselessness of free will: a bad omen for the evening's events, which are indeed about to spiral seriously out of control. See Dee, *Rune Wisdom*, p.58-9.



Raj glares at him. I don't believe he's going to make a big fuss about this. 'See you in a bit,' I say, and follow Jamie.

The top table is slightly raised; my heels click on the low step. The light seems brighter and hotter up here - it's like walking out on stage. The waitress is drawing out our chairs, one on either side of the centre seat. A small calligraphy'd sign, *Miss S Pherson*, sits beside my dessert-fork. I slide into my seat, trying to stop my skirt riding up; the waitress shakes out a napkin and drapes it across my lap.

I look out across the room, only to find that everyone is looking at us. For a bowel-cramping moment I think I'm meant to be doing a speech. I look at Jamie, who is nodding gravely to various people in the audience, apparently unfazed by the limelight. I glance across at Raj; he catches my eye and gives me a weak smile. This is ridiculous, I'm going to go and sit with him... But before I can even lift the napkin from my knee, the doors are flung back and McLean makes his entrance.

The audience starts to clap and stamp as if the Beatles have just walked in. McLean lifts his arms in acknowledgement as he strides to the top table. His usual retinue trail after him: Kerry, the bodyguards, the suits and the cocktail-dresses. Doesn't he go anywhere on his own? I have a sudden image of him crammed into a toilet cubicle with his two bodyguards, while Kerry waits outside the door and the frocks hover beside the urinals. Hastily I turn a laugh into a cough.

I must still be grinning, though, when McLean arrives at his seat: he says to one of the suits, 'That's a lovely smile to be sitting next to. No,' as the suit tries playfully to sit beside me, 'that's my seat. Got to be some perks to being the boss.' He smiles as he says it, although he looks rather sad; I can't help returning the smile, even while reflecting that the man's mood-swings are borderline schizophrenic. And sure enough, he looks up at a hovering shadow I've taken to be the waitress, and his expression turns to one of slight irritation. Kerry is standing at my elbow, glaring; I realise this is her usual seat. I pick up my place-card. 'If there's been a mistake...'

'No, no.' McLean pats my forearm to keep me where I am, and jerks his head towards the end of the table. Kerry goes to a seat there, slump-shouldered like a large unhappy child. She has to stand aside for a figure in flowing white: Anita Black, willowy and perfect as ever. She fixes a professional smile on me; I look away. I hear her say, 'Hello, Suzey,' but I don't turn my head. She flits on, glancing at the name-cards, and finally settles into the seat beside Jamie. I hold my breath; but he just nods to her, and that seems to be that.

McLean, having just sat down, now stands again; the whole room, responding to some cue I must have failed to notice, stands too. It's time to mumble the Lord's Prayer



again. When we're done McLean stays standing, eyes still closed, lips still moving inaudibly. Everyone watches him. After a minute he opens his eyes, claps his hands together and sits down, rubbing his palms together as he nods to the head waiter lurking at the back of the hall. There is puzzled silence for a moment, but then laughter - Mr McLean must be having a wee joke (although he isn't smiling). People take their seats and the meal begins.

There's no wine list tonight, at least for the top table; bottles wrapped in black foil just arrive in front of us, and soon corks are popping like Hogmanay. I don't know if it's champagne or just sparkling white, and I'm not going to show my ignorance by asking. But it's very, very good, crisp and dry and cold. I've knocked back half a glass before I know what I'm doing; I try to catch Raj's eye and toast him with the rest, but he's talking to someone else and not looking my way. Beside me McLean says, 'Is it good?'

He's talking to me. I've got a mouthful of wine and can only nod vigorously in reply. He laughs. 'I see you're not a teetotaller, Susan.'

I look at his half empty glass. 'Neither are you.'

He laughs again. 'Our Lord himself drank wine, after all.'

'Not in five-star hotels he didn't.'

'He visited inns and rich houses, Susan. Do you think he had no care for the wealthy?'

I'm not getting into this. 'I don't really know.'

'You should know, Susan. He came for all of us. He said to us, ask and you shall receive. He told us to shine like the City on the Hill. Our deeds must be seen, and our words must be heard - '

Saved by the bell: there's a crash of dishes at the back of the hall. The waiters are bringing out the main course, and they've had a slight collision. McLean gestures impatiently to Kerry - she jumps up, still chewing her last mouthful of food, and hurries to the scene of the accident. I say to him, 'You treat your daughter like shit, do you know that?'

I can't quite believe that came out of my mouth. I'm afraid to look at him. But he says very quietly, 'Do I?' He is watching Kerry harangue the waiters, and he looks like he's about to cry. 'She's my one and only, you know,' he says. 'She's all I've got in the world.'

'You're not that bad,' I mumble. 'It's maybe just the way you come across...'

'I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to her.'

'Well... I'm sure she knows that...' He's actually dabbing at his eyes. Beside him, Jamie and Anita Black are both watching him intently. Jamie gives me an enquiring look; I shrug. Beyond them, I can see Kerry hurrying towards her father; all the blood seemed to have drained from her face. But before she reaches him, he's giving a beaming smile to the

people at the table in front of us, who have been watching him nervously. 'Sometimes the Spirit just moves you that way, eh? Praise God for it.'

Now they're beaming too. McLean looks tenderly at Kerry. 'Come and get your dinner, pet. Don't let it get cold.'

Kerry goes back to her seat. She does not look reassured.

All night, the bubbly keeps on coming. By the time the coffee and mints are going around, I should be absolutely shitfaced. But I just feel mildly relaxed. The booze must be doing something though, because I've been talking to McLean for most of the evening, and I don't want to stab him with the fish-knife. It may just be comparative, of course – I tried to open conversation with the suit on my other side, but he addressed all his responses into my cleavage. I frosted him out during the soup course, and now he's gazing deep into the tits of the woman on his other side. My bonhomie towards McLean might, of course, be no more than the general atmosphere; everyone I can see is looking blissed-out, although whether it's the wine or the Holy Spirit I've no idea. Except for Raj and Carl, that is, who are staring at the table like a pair of wallflowers. I lift my hand to wave, but then there's a tap on my arm.

'So Susan.' It's McLean. 'Our next mission meeting will be in a fortnight, in Edinburgh. Can I count on you to be there?'

He says it like asking is a mere formality. 'You can tell me something first,' I say, looking out over those good Christians who yesterday were ready to lynch my brother. 'What is it about your God of Love that makes you all such cunts?'

He looks at me for a long while. My face starts to burn and I have to look away. 'You're a silly wee lassie,' he says at last.

'They were going to hurt my brother. Call themselves Christians!'

'You're a silly wee lassie.' He sets down his coffee cup. 'But I'll save your soul yet. He turns to Jamie. 'You'll join us for drinks upstairs, James?'

Jamie turns around quickly. I realise he must have been whispering to Anita Black. He looks a little bit guilty - if I didn't know better I'd say they were... Oh, Suzey, get a *grip*. He's nodding to McLean's question: 'Yes, great.'

'Good.' McLean pushes back his chair. The Emperor has arisen; everyone at the table scrambles to their feet. I stay put, and only partly because the champagne has turned my legs to rubber. I meet McLean's gaze defiantly - to my annoyance he just looks amused. 'Would you care to join us, Miss Pherson?'

I've got a hundred smart retorts to that. Before I can pick one, Jamie takes my elbow and hoists me to my feet. 'Come on, Suze, upsadaisy.'



'I'm not going.'

'Come and keep me company. Please?' he says softly. Then louder, 'Not used to the high-heels, eh? Take my arm.'

Well, he's probably right. Why miss out on good bubbly? I let him steer me after McLean. I look back over my shoulder, and catch Raj's eye; he's looking at me, angry and bewildered. What a fuss, I'm only going to a wee party. I mouth, *Back in a wee while*. He shakes his head and starts to say something, but by this time McLean's entourage is in the way. Then we're out of the hall, crossing the lobby, and going through a door marked *Private*.

Beyond is a short corridor; at the end is a lift. There's only one button, which has a keyhole set into it. McLean inserts the key, and turns it; sound of rumbling machinery. At this point I realise there's only four of us; only Kerry, and the two bodyguards, are still following. 'Where are the others?' I say.

'Said they were going to the bar first.' Jamie doesn't seem at all bothered by any of this. He's now carrying a small cardboard box: a disposable camera, the kind you can buy in the shop. I don't remember him buying one - God, I must be drunker than I thought. He's now holding the camera up to his eye: 'Say cheese.'

One of the bodyguards reaches out for the camera, but McLean waves him away. He smirks into the lens; he's the only one smiling when the shutter clicks. The lift arrives, and we pile in.

The door takes a while to close. The lift is tiny - the sign claims it can take *up to 8 persons*, but the lift seems to have its doubts. I can't say I blame it; I'm trying to stand so I don't have make contact with anyone but Jamie, but I still end up wedged against Kerry. We all seem to be sweating too much and wearing too much perfume. The control panel has only two buttons: *Ground* and *Apartment*. McLean hammers a few more times on *Apartment* and at last we begin to move. This building only has four floors, but this is taking ages. There is no floor-counter to stare at, so I pretend to study the back of my hand. No one speaks.

<sup>61</sup>At last the doors open and we escape gratefully into a short corridor. There are only two doors: a fire-escape and, at the far end, double doors with large stainless-steel

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<sup>61</sup> This is a crucial scene, not one that was easy to write. I had originally imagined McLean's fatal flaw as sexual – he lusts after both Suzey and Jamie – but I rejected this as too clichéd. The hypocritically lustful preacher has become a tired literary figure, and – in this case at least – a not entirely convincing one; McLean could hardly have maintained his saintly image by constantly indulging in casual sex with near-strangers like Suzey and Jamie. Besides, I've always felt that the McLean character should be sincere in his beliefs, fanatical rather than simply dishonest; if only because fanatics are so much more disturbing.



handles. McLean grasps one handle, pressing his thumb against the surface; the door beeps and clicks, and swings open. He stands back and waves us through.

It's like walking into a different building. I have to blink a couple of times, coming from the whites and azures of the rest of the hotel, because the room is red. There are other shades – the walls are pale, and the fittings are dark brown. But it's the wine-red carpet that draws the eye. It's all of one vast piece, and it carries on uninterrupted through a half-open door by the window, under something large and shadowed that might be a four-poster bed. It's so thick my heels sink into it as I step gingerly across the threshold into McLean's apartment. I imagine Carl intoning, in his best Bela Lugosi voice, '*Enter freely and of your own vill...*'<sup>62</sup> It's not as funny as it should be.

'Sit down, James, Susan.' McLean is pointing us towards an earth-brown sofa draped with red throws, in front of an elaborate mahogany fireplace. The sofa is a four-seater, and the mantelpiece is over five feet tall, but they both look petite; this has to be the largest private room I've ever seen. The walls are fresh vanilla-white (the shade that goes yellow if you can't afford to repaint it every six months, although I guess that's not a problem here). There is a dining-room table and chairs, and a writing desk, all of the same brown-black polished wood as the fireplace. After the bright Deco lines of the rest of the hotel, it's all rather dark and lumpen. And just to tip the whole thing over into parody: sepia paintings adorn the walls, showing misty hillsides and stags at bay. 'Did you choose the décor yourself?' I ask McLean.

'Yes.' For the first time he looks at me with surprise. 'How did you know?'

'It's just so *you*.'

He stares me down again. Jamie breaks it up by squeezing past us; I assume he's making for the colossal TV and sound-system on the other side of the room. But he seems to have other needs at the moment: 'Which is the, er...'

Kerry points to a door and he goes through it, briefly revealing a bathroom fit for a Roman emperor. McLean is waving me towards the couch. 'Sit down, Susan.'

The couch is surprisingly comfortable, although I have to yank my hemline down firmly so my skirt doesn't ride all the way up. I'm still showing a fair bit of leg though; Kerry eyes me dubiously. 'Dad,' she begins, but McLean is already speaking, to the Men in Black: 'You can go now.' They leave quickly.

'Dad,' Kerry says again. McLean looks at her, apparently surprised she's still there. 'You don't have to hang about,' he says, quite kindly.

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<sup>62</sup> This, of course, is the phrase with which Dracula invites Jonathan Harker into his castle. Stoker, *Dracula*, p.25.

'Dad, you promised you'd speak to Mr and Mrs Sinclair tonight. They'll be waiting for you.'

'I'll see them tomorrow. Tell them to come along after breakfast.'

Kerry stays put, twisting a bracelet round and round her wrist. She clearly wants me to piss off so she can talk to him, but short of hiding in the bedroom there's nowhere for me to go. 'But Dad, we promised them...'

'I said tell them to come after breakfast.'

She's still not moving. At this point Jamie emerges from the bathroom; Kerry sees the camera swinging from his wrist, and says shrilly: 'You put that away. You don't take any pictures in Mr McLean's private rooms, do you hear me?'

Jamie sets the camera down on the mantelpiece, and holds up his hands in a don't-shoot-me gesture. McLean says coldly, 'Kerry, go downstairs and see to our guests.'

'Dad, I've told you before. You've to think how this looks, you can't just - '

'You silly wee bitch, will you get OUT!'

As soon as voices are raised, the door opens and one of the bodyguards looks in. Kerry is already hurrying for the door. She pushes past the man, sniffing and dabbing at her eyes. The guard, showing no surprise, pulls the door shut after her.

'So much for *she's your one and only*,' I snap. But my voice comes out shrill and girly; the dark room seems to soak up sound. McLean smiles, and says to Jamie, 'She's a fierce one, your sister.'

I glare at Jamie, daring him to smile back. But he's already saying, quite seriously, 'She's had to be.'

'Aye. We live in a wicked world.' He bends to the fireplace, which I'd assumed was real; there's a shiny brass poker-stand beside it. But now there's a faint click, and flames leap up instantly. The poker must be purely decorative: how naff, I tell myself. McLean straightens up casually, like a magician after an easy trick. 'The end is coming, thank the Lord. We must be ready. Thank the Lord you're here. What do you want to drink?'

It takes me a moment to realise the last question wasn't spiritual. 'Do you have any more of that bubbly?'

'Bubbly for the lady. And for you, James? A single malt?'

'Don't you have anything harder?'

I elbow him in the ribs; he pays no attention. He and McLean lock gazes. McLean says after a moment, 'I'll have no drugs around me, James. Drugs are destroying the Scottish way of life. They are poisoning our people.'

'And alcohol isn't?'



'Alcohol is allowed to us. Christ showed us the way. It's the water of life.' He's pouring whisky into three thick crystal glasses, apparently forgetting I asked for wine. 'It was given to us as the blood of His redemption. The blood of Christ. Drink.'

I take a tiny sip. I'm not keen on whisky, but this has a nice peaty smell, and it warms my mouth. Jamie drinks his, but McLean is still talking: 'Drink, and make yourselves full of Christ. When the end comes you will be spared. But your task will not be easy. You must make ready.'

I mouth 'Task?' at Jamie, who shrugs. McLean doesn't seem to notice: 'You must cleanse yourselves. Only then can you throw off the Adamic curse and live as Man was meant to live, in wisdom and innocence - ' His face is reddening, and a fleck of spittle flies from his mouth. A ring-tone sounds from his chest; he grabs a mobile phone from inside his jacket. ' – with eternal Paradise as your home.' His voice clicks back to calm and businesslike. 'Matthew McLean. Yes?'

We hear a mumbling, vaguely female voice on the phone, and then a burst of static. McLean cranks his voice up a few decibels. 'Hello? Yes. Have you spoken to my daughter... Hello? Wait. It's the signal. The SIGNAL.' I'm awed by the fact that his mobile works at all, but McLean just looks annoyed. Getting to his feet, he puts his hand over the phone mouthpiece and says to us, 'Excuse me,' while heading for his bedroom.

Before he's even closed the door, Jamie is saying, 'Come and see this bathroom,' and tugging at my arm. I follow him, curious – he's never been excited by interior design, so this lavvy must really be spectacular. And so it is: all white and terracotta, with blue-jewelled mosaics set into the walls and floor. Massive bath, separate shower-unit and a bidet. And for that final touch of kitsch: gilded dolphin taps and handles. 'Wow,' I say, 'Bet he designed this too –'

'Listen to me.' Jamie grabs me by the shoulders and turns me to face him. 'There's a web-cam inside the camera I put down. We're filming.'

I stare at him stupidly. 'But it's just a disposable...'

'There's a web-cam inside it, Suzey. Anita Black gave it to me. No, *listen*. She knows he's not squeaky-clean but they've nothing to go on. We've got to get him doing something, saying something. Anything.'

'But... ' He must mistake my idiotic stammering for anger, because he goes on: 'I'm sorry I had to bring you, Suze, but he wouldn't see me without you. He wants to speak to us both together.'

'What for?'



'Fuck knows. You've seen him, he's off his head. He got to be on something. He's got pills in the cabinet there but they're all prescription. But there's got to be something about him – sherbet or Angel Dust, or sex –'

'Jesus *Christ*, Jamie!'

'For fuck's sake, Suzey.' He's horrified. 'I'm not going to let him touch you.'

'Well that's fucking good of you!' I'm out of here. But my heels skid on the shiny floor, and Jamie's still holding onto me. 'Please, Suzey. Just ten minutes. You can go anytime –'

The bedroom door opens in the other room. McLean's voice bellows, '...Tomorrow morning. Good *night*.'

' – I'll do the talking. Please. Suzey, please.'

'We'll not get Claire back,' I whisper.

From the sitting-room, footsteps. Then: 'Hello? James...?'

Jamie's face is pinched and frozen. 'We'll not get her back anyway, Suzey.'

'Susan...? James!'

My brother's face is like ice. Like the baptismal pool. After the fire. 'All right,' I say.

McLean bursts in. But by this time Jamie is on his knees beside the bidet, making a fountain leap three feet in the air. He looks like a slum-kid who's got the top off a fire hydrant. His shirt-front is soaking; he looks up at McLean with an impish grin that could bring half of Bowie's to their knees. 'I always wanted one of these,' he says.

McLean smiles, looking him briefly up and down. 'Come back through now,' he says softly.

'I need the loo,' I tell them. I lock the door behind them and lean heavily on the sink, my heels skidding slightly on the wet floor. I look up and catch an unexpected look at myself in the mirror – still red-lipped and Kohl-eyed, but the rest of my face is pale. The right side of my hair's come adrift and is hanging over my ear, so I spend a good few minutes taking out the grips and tying it up into a neat pony-tail, rather surprised that this makes me feel slightly better. I should be in an advert - *when I'm trying to incriminate a top Christian evangelist, I just don't have time for problem hair!* I shove my knuckles in my mouth to stop myself laughing out loud.

A giggle creeps out anyway. I turn the taps on full to mask the sound. That reminds me... *in the cabinet there*, that's what he said. I prise open the medicine cabinet, hoping the running water will drown out the click of the door. It's not a typical hotel cabinet – it's full, of razors and shaving-foam and shampoo and men's scent, all expensive brands. There's a

brown-glass medicine bottle, too; it says *MEMANTINE*.<sup>63</sup> That rings a bell, I'm sure I've heard of this stuff... but the bottle is discreet and says nothing more. I ease the door shut.

Now I've got to go back out there. After a couple of deep calming breaths (which do fuck-all good) I go back into McLean's living-room. I can feel my face flushing - I don't dare look at McLean. Fortunately he seems to be listening intently to Jamie, who's saying: '... how these people think. They'll say if drugs were available to Jesus, how do we know he wouldn't have taken them? That's what they'll ask us.'

They've both made considerable inroads into their whisky. I sit beside Jamie, and without comment he passes me my glass, which now contains a triple measure. I try to look at nothing in particular. The brightly-packaged camera is burning a hole in the corner of my eye. I almost wish he hadn't told me about it. I take a large gulp of whisky – the stuff's not so bad, actually – and try to tune back into the conversation.

'... because drugs are the Devil's tools. The wretched infidel use them in their false ceremonies to their false gods. The Devil comes to them and takes possession of them, and they are given over to lechery and the corruption of innocents. The Lord is not in these wicked substances, James. They are things of Satan. They summon the Devil to come among the wretched sinners, and turn their meeting-places into a Hell on earth – '

'I know all that. How are you going to convince them *you* know it? You've never touched anything harder than *this* – ' he waves the glass of whisky. 'They'll laugh in your face.'

'*You* will convince them, James. Tell them that before you were born again, you were just as they were.'

'They'll still know you sent me. Holier-than-thou McLean. What's the worst thing you've ever done? Taken your library books back late?'

'I have sinned like every other man.'

Jamie laughs. 'With all due respect, I don't think you have. These men have sinned in ways you couldn't imagine. They think if they approach you you'll be disgusted by them. How am I going to convince them you won't?'

'I welcome all lost souls into the fold of our Church, I was also a sinner – '

'What did you do?'

I'm carefully studying the toe of my shoe, not meeting anyone's eye. But I look up in surprise when McLean laughs aloud. 'When His forgiveness is granted to us, James, the darkness of the past is forgotten,' he says. 'I walked apart from the path of the Lord. That's all that need be said.'

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<sup>63</sup> A drug used to treat Alzheimer's.



He's not taking the bait. I wish I could kick Jamie on the shin, but we're both in full view of McLean. Jamie persists anyway, 'They're just going to say we're out of touch. Young people have all these pressures nowadays.' He looks to me for back-up. 'They'll want to do sex and drugs just because their pals are doing it.'

'Peer-pressure,' I mumble. I couldn't sound less convincing if I tried. But McLean is nodding; apparently, like most middle-aged parents, he's prepared to swallow this crap wholesale. 'You'll show them the way,' he insists. 'Both of you. You're God's chosen.'

'But you don't understand the temptation these –'

'Enough now.' He holds up a hand for silence. 'This is for another day. I didn't ask you here just to talk about sin. Yes, Susan,' he smiles at my open-mouthed expression, 'I do have other topics of conversation.'

'Like what?'

He smiles again, but the wistful expression is back. 'A man can't have his mind on God all the time. I'm glad for your company.'

Jamie says slowly, 'So what do you do, when you're not thinking about God?'

His voice sounds horribly fake to me. I go back to staring at the toe of my shoe. I hear McLean say, 'I haven't much time now. It's up to me to make things right.' I look up and find him gazing at me. 'You know how special your sister is, don't you, James? You're very lucky.'

'I know I am.'

'And you yourself. Just as special.' He's looking misty-eyed. 'I'm lucky to see you both here.'

This is useless. The only headline we're going to get out of this is *Man Drinks Whisky and Talks Shite*. I shift forward in my seat, preparing to climb to my spiky-heeled feet. 'Well, I think I'll –'

But McLean is jumping to his feet; he takes the camera off the mantelpiece. He swings round to face the two of us. 'Say cheese!'

We grin obediently. The shutter clicks. McLean turns the camera over, flicks a speck of dust from the lens then tosses the camera back to Jamie. Now Jamie's getting up, winding the camera on. 'Now you,' he says to McLean. 'Come on Suze, you get in as well.' I stand up, not very smoothly; whisky and heels are a bad combination. I brace myself for a big sweaty hug, but he just stands beside me and places a hand on my shoulder, like a Dad in a formal portrait. After the shutter has clicked he hands me back down onto the couch, catching my elbow lightly when I wobble. If Anita's hoping for a shot of him groping my arse, she's onto plums: he acts like a perfect gentleman. I take the camera and wave Jamie and McLean closer together. 'Now you two,' I say.



I watch through the lens as they shuffle together. Same deal with McLean: he stands upright, with an avuncular hand on Jamie's shoulder. I push the button and the shutter clicks; there's a very faint whirring sound, but otherwise nothing to suggest this isn't an ordinary disposable.

I'm beginning to wonder if Anita Black's been having Jamie on. Do you even get decent web-cams this small? I give the thing back to Jamie; he sits close beside me, so he can reach across me and place the camera oh-so casually on the arm of the couch. Anita's got him convinced, that's for sure; but then Anita tells lies for a living. I take another glug of whisky. Miraculously, another glass appears in front of my face; McLean has made me another triple. Well, waste not want not. 'Cheers,' I say.

He raises his glass silently and we drink. I'm beginning to feel rather warm and fuzzy; perhaps Jamie is too, he's gone quiet. McLean is silent too. He's watching us with what looks for all the world like paternal affection. For some bizarre reason I'm reminded of my great-grandad, who used to watch seven-year-old Suzey lugging two-year-old Jamie about, and say seriously: *That's your brother. You look after him. That's your brother.* I ask McLean, 'Is everything okay?'

He nods absently; I'm not sure if he heard me. Suddenly he sits up straight, sets his glass down on the hearth and looks at us earnestly. 'I'm glad the two of you came to see me,' he says. 'I'll give you all the help any man can. But you must be strong. Your life won't be easy.' He looks directly at Jamie. 'Your wife and daughter won't come back to you.'

I protest, shocked in spite of myself, 'You said you'd get them back.' I sound like Neddy. 'You said you'd help!'

'They won't come back.'

'You promised to help me,' Jamie says quietly. His voice shakes slightly. I take his hand. 'You promised me.'

'I will. But it will make no difference. Your wife and her family have hardened their hearts against you.'

'If you think that why did you ask me here?'

McLean raises his eyebrows. 'To baptise you into the faith. Is that not why you came?'

Jamie says nothing. McLean nods, as if something has been confirmed. 'I see it was not. A publicity stunt, then. To win over your wife.'

'It wasn't just...'

'But it hasn't worked.' McLean takes a casual sip of his whisky, sets it back down again. 'She knows about your baptism. But when you phoned she wouldn't speak to you.'

I grip Jamie's hand; he looks like he's going to jump off the couch. He's not putting this on. 'Checking up on me, were you? Getting one of your wee slaves to listen in at the switchboard?'

'I don't need to listen. I've seen it before. She wouldn't talk to you. She hung up on you. She wouldn't even let you speak to your child.'

Jamie sits forward, one hand raking through his hair. After a while I say, 'Jamie? Did you phone Katie?'

'I could hear Claire in the background,' he says. 'She wouldn't put her on.'

I put my arm around his shoulders. I realise how used I must be to Raj's solid and calming bulk - Jamie feels thin and agitated, like a fretful child. 'She's a miserable torn-faced bitch,' I say.

'Crudely put, Susan,' McLean sounds amused, 'but basically true. I've seen the type too often. She has hardened her heart. Whatever the law tells her to do, she won't let you see your daughter again.' Jamie is rubbing at his eyes; McLean's tone softens. 'I understand why you lied to get here. But it will do you no good.'

Jamie begins to sob. I've never seen him cry this way as an adult, not even when Dad died. I put my arms around him; he clings to me, burying his face in my shoulder. He's shaking as if he's having a seizure - I brace myself to try and hold him steady, but of course he's bigger than me now and we're both shaking. I pat his back, murmur soothing nonsense: 'It's okay, you're all right, it's okay...'

McLean says over this, 'Now do you see the - '

'Shut up, will you,' I snap. McLean sits back, smiling as if I'd said something beautiful. I turn away from him. I'm trying to be stolid and supportive, but I'm too warm and full of whisky, and I can't stop thinking about the candle and the snow-lantern and the fearless child. So I cry too.

McLean waits until the sobbing is past, although we stay hugged together. I'm more muzzy-headed than I was before. I have an oddly numb sensation, like pins-and-needles, and I can scarcely tell where I end and Jamie begins. I shake my head slightly - the feeling passes, leaving only a slight headache and the resolution never to drink whisky again. But now McLean says: 'I'm sorry for your grief, James. And I'm sorry you felt you had to lie to come to me. But you're here now. As you were meant to be.'

Jamie looks up. I take the opportunity to close my eyes and lean my forehead against his shoulder; the warmth and darkness are soothing. Jamie's saying, 'What the fuck are you on about now?'



'I'm telling you to close your foul mouth and listen to what God is telling you. Your wife has turned against you. The men you've been with have vanished away. Who has always been with you and always will?'

'Let me guess. Jesus?'

'You're a fool.' He speaks matter-of-factly. I look up to protest; but McLean is already smiling at me. 'You see?' he says, to Jamie.

'See what?'

'See who fights to defend you. Even when you don't deserve it.' Jamie goes to say something, but McLean has already turned to me. His voice is gentle. 'And you, Susan. No, it's Suzey, isn't it? Suzey, then. You've not had much luck either, have you? No husband. Some boyfriends, but they never quite stay the distance, do they?'

'That's not right.' It takes a moment to get the words out. 'I'm with Raj now...'

'Oh yes. I saw him downstairs... Not happy, was he? He objected to you spending time with your brother and not with him, isn't that right?'

'Yes...but –'

'So why do you think he'll be any different from the others?'

'You shut your mouth,' Jamie says, savagely. Feeling tears coming, I turn away and bury my face in his shoulder. His arm tightens around me. He smells of clean sweat and cotton and Aztec Gold.

'Forgive me.' McLean's voice is gentle. 'But it's time to open your eyes. You may love other people, but those loves will fail. Parents will die, children will leave you - lovers will come and go. Who will you depend upon? Who have you ever had to depend upon, but each other?'

I keep my face pressed into Jamie's shoulder. I feel like I never want to turn away again. I can feel his breath in my hair. McLean's soft voice goes on: 'Your path will not be easy. I wish I had more time to guide you. But the end will come soon. The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. An Age of Gold awaits you, but first you must see everything you think you love destroyed.'

A little sob goes out of me. Jamie holds me tighter, and begins very gently to stroke my hair. I'm trembling now. What's wrong with me? It must be the whisky. Yes, that's it, there must be something in the whisky... But still I don't move. And still the voice goes on: 'I knew it when I saw your pictures. Your faces. The two who escape death and become one. A new Adam and Eve, needing no marriage because they are already one flesh.'<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> McLean, in his confusion, is conflating the Christian post-Apocalypse Promised Land and the Norse post-Ragnarok Age of Gold. He imagines Suzey and Jamie as the new 'Adam and Eve'; but there is no mention in Christian literature (to the best of my knowledge) of a 'new' Adam and Eve. The



It's the whisky, the whisky. I'm afraid to open my eyes. But McLean must know this, for he says: 'Don't be afraid. James, look at your sister. She's yours, and you are hers. Look at her.'

Jamie's hand is under my chin, gently lifting my face. At last I open my eyes. And I have to laugh, just a little - because my brother's face is beautiful, and it is also my own. My eyes, my bones. A lock of gilded hair trails across his cheek; I smooth it back behind his ear, smiling because I can feel an identical lock brushing my own skin. 'We're the same,' I whisper. 'We're just the same...'

McLean's voice is an murmur. 'That's right. There is no shame here. There is only what - '

'Shut up,' Jamie says without looking at him. An obedient silence falls. I blink away a stray tear; Jamie kisses it away from my cheek, and follows the track upwards, kisses across my eyes, my forehead. His cheek grazes mine, very slightly.

I take his hand, meshing my fingers through his. Mine is smaller, a bit slimmer; but the pale colour, the long fingers and square nails - the same. I lift up our twined hands to show him - he smiles. Is that my smile? Then I understand, suddenly, what Raj and Lewis and all the rest have seen, why they have all tried to make me laugh, why they kept coming back again. I mirror that smile, and lean forward to kiss it.

Then I can't move my head away. His hand is behind my neck, very very gently, and I couldn't move away for all the world. I shut my eyes and sink both my hands into his hair; it feels and smells just like mine.

McLean says something in the corner. I don't know what it was and I don't care. I can't think of anything but his tongue touching my lips. I twine my arms around him and pull him close, licking and tasting his tongue as we fall together. And it's all right, because he's mine, my own image. His hand slides down my flank. A whimper escapes from me. He leans back slightly, and his hand skims down my neck, across my breast, down to my belly, and then back to my chin and my neck.

I gasp and open my eyes. He is so close, all I can see is one blue eye, and my own reflected in it, and his caught in that, and my own, and - <sup>65</sup>

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Promised Land – at least according to the Vision of St Paul - will be occupied by the righteous born before Armageddon. There is no suggestion of repopulation by a new matriarch and patriarch. (See 'St Paul's Apocalypse', *Visions of Heaven and Hell Before Dante*, edited by Eileen Gardiner: New York, Italica Press Inc, 1989. p. 28-9).

McLean's image is closer to Lif and Lifthrasir, the two human survivors of Ragnarok.

<sup>65</sup> The brother-sister incest theme is, given the works of most influence on *Cold City*, almost inevitable. McLean sees the siblings as Lif and Lifthrasir: no mention is made of the blood-relationship between these two, but the similarity of the names has always made me see them as brother and sister. It was

CRACK

- painful white light, and something breaks in my head. I try to open my eyes - I'm at the other end of the couch, Jamie's reaching out to me. But pain corkscrews through my skull, and I close my eyes again, pressing both hands over my left temple to make it stop.<sup>66</sup> I hear myself whimper.

'Suzey!' Jamie's voice is blaring in my ear; the pain flares up again, and I shove him away. His voice comes again, softer and more distant. 'Suzey, can you hear me? Suzey?' 'What's she doing?' It's McLean. He sounds irritated. 'What's the matter with her?' 'Suze, are you all right?'

I ignore them both, rubbing my hands over my temple, reassuring myself it's still in one piece. The pain dulls to an ache, and at last I prise open my eyes. Jamie beside me, McLean in the background. I don't look at either one of them, but try to stand up. My silly heels skid on the carpet and I sit back down again.

'Stay where you are.' McLean sounds annoyed now. Jamie takes my arm; I claw at his hand, and he pulls away with a cry of surprise. I get up under my own steam and stand there, swaying. Jamie's trying to catch hold of my arm again. 'Suzey, I'm so sorry, please -'

'Get off me.' I pull away and make for the door; but then Jamie is in front of me again. 'Wait, please, Suzey...'

He's crying again. I realise I am so fucking sick of watching him cry. I slap his face as hard as I can, twice, once on each tear-stained cheek. The slaps are loud, and seem to echo: they bring us all up short. Jamie stares at me, red marks blooming on his face. 'I'm going,' I tell him.

'Sit down.' McLean again. 'Listen to me -'

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also influenced by the incestuous elements of Zoe Strachan's *Negative Space* (London: Picador, 2003).

The strongest and most obvious inspiration was, however, *Winterlong*. *Winterlong*'s brother-sister incest is, like *Cold City*'s, based upon a kind of narcissism: the attraction not of the Other, but of the self. For Wendy and Raphael, as for Suzey and Jamie, the eroticism of the encounter stems from completion, from locating the missing 'other half':

'Wendy?' [Raphael] asked, so softly that I almost could not hear him. He reached one hand to touch me, his fingers sliding from my wrist to my arm... 'You're just like me.' He pulled me closer, until our faces almost touched... To see him like this, to touch him for the first time; to realize that it was true, that all these years there had been this other part of me... He stroked my face, took my hand, lifted it so that I could see our fingers entwined and the same thin wrists, the same broken nails and slender fingers, then pulling back my sleeve to show me my arm, his arm, the veins like new young vines and their patterns both the same...

'You are so beautiful, he whispered. And staring at him I nodded, and murmured his name; because it was so.

(*Winterlong*, p. 430)

<sup>66</sup> Possibly the beginning of the electro-convulsive therapy Suzey receives back in the 'Warm' World (see later note on ECT) as well as an escape from an intolerable situation.



'Fuck off, you old pervert.' I head for the door again. Jamie follows a few steps behind. McLean is still in the way. 'If you walk away now, your lives are forfeit. All human life is –'

'We're not being in your wee fairy-tale, all right? Get the fuck out of the –'

'*You listen to me!*' It's a high-pitched shriek, almost feminine. I'd expected him to shout and roar, but this stops me in my tracks. '*Don't you dare walk away from me, lady!*'

His face is going red. His eyes are on me, furious. He takes a half-step towards me, and I step back, bumping hard into Jamie. McLean turns his baleful look on him: 'And you! You'll not defy me in my own home! *Sit down like I telt ye!*'

'Go around him,' Jamie says, steering me towards the other end of the couch. As we start to back away he follows us. 'Did you hear me, boy?'

'We're going now,' Jamie says, 'so get out the way.'

McLean's eyes seem to bulge out of his head. He takes a couple of clumsy steps towards us. His face is nearly purple and his hands are clenched at his side; he looks like a giant toddler throwing a tantrum. '*Don't speak to me like that! Don't you speak to your father like that! You'll be sorry! You'll be punished!*'

He stops, rubbing at his eyes. After a moment I murmur, 'Could you just calm down –'

'Shut your mouth! You cheeky wee bitch! What did I do to get the pair of you! Ungrateful wee bastards... wicked... you'll be punished...'

He's winding down, like a clock. He sits down heavily in his chair, knocking the remains of his whisky flying. Great fat tears begin to roll down his cheeks. 'Wicked. Pair o' ye. I gave you everything you've got...'

He's sobbing by now. His nose is running and he does nothing about it. And I've finally remembered: *Memantine. The brown glass bottle beside Grandpa's bed.* I say, 'Mr McLean?' No answer: just another sob.

'Jesus Christ.' Jamie is staring at the man in the chair, appalled. 'What's he on?'

'Be quiet.' I go to McLean, who has now lowered his face into his hands. *My mother crying; Grandpa Charlie asking who she is...* I pull the throw around McLean's shoulders. 'It's Alzheimer's.'

McLean lifts his snotty face to me. 'Kerry? You'll stay with me?'

'Hush, you're okay.' I find a hanky in his jacket pocket, and wipe up his face as best I can. 'You'll be okay.'

I put a hand on his forehead, to soothe rather than to check for a temperature. But he pulls away, suspicious. 'You're not my Kerry.'

'Shall we get Kerry for you –'



He's on his feet. 'You bitch. You came to rob me. Where's my DAUGHTER!' The shriek is gone: he's bellowing again, the force of it driving me back. 'WHERE IS SHE! WHERE IS SHE!'

The door opens and the bodyguards stare in at us. McLean swings round to face them: 'WHERE IS SHE!'

'You'd best get Kerry,' I tell them. 'He's not very well.' I brush past them into the corridor: after a moment Jamie is behind me. The guards stare at us, then turn and go inside. McLean's indistinct bawling follows me down the corridor.<sup>67</sup>

The lift is still waiting; as soon as I push the button the doors open. I fall inside and hammer on the Ground button; the doors are closing when Jamie steps inside. 'Suzey,' he says.

'Shut up.' I lean my aching head against the cool metal wall. The lift's motion buzzes through my skull. The floor bounces as we reach the Ground, and I stagger slightly – in the corner of my eye I see Jamie reaching for me, so I pound on the exit button until the doors open and I can make my escape.

The lobby is busy. I lower my head and let my hair swing over my face, then plough through the crowd. My feet are numb and clumsy, and I don't think it's just the shoes; I stumble into other bodies, ignoring their protests. The main lift is just going up; I push in, just in time, but I know he's still behind me. So I shut my eyes. An American voice says, *Honey, are you okay?* But I ignore it; Jamie is mumbling some answer to it when I reach my floor.

'Suze, are you all right?' He follows me along the corridor. I reach my door, and realise I don't have a key. I start pounding on it: 'Raj? Raj!'

Just as I realise the door is on the snib, Raj opens it. He looks annoyed until he sees me. He's a calm man, impassive; so his face just goes very still. I fall against him, hiding my face in his shoulder. He holds me tightly, muttering: *What happened?* But I shake my head. After a moment he lifts me into a bear-hug and half-carries me inside.

Carl is rising from the TV chair. 'Good God, what happened to you?'

'It's my head,' I whisper, as Raj sets me down on the edge of the bed. The ache is still throbbing, and my stomach is starting to clench again. I'm shivering; Raj wraps the fur coverlet around me. Carl comes over to peer at me: 'Is it another migraine? What's –'

'Suzey, look at me.' I look obediently into Raj's face. He smooths my hair back gently. 'Is this like the time in the Snowcat? Are you seeing things?' I mouth *No*, it hurts to shake my head. 'Hearing anything?' *No*. 'Can you tell me what happened?'

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<sup>67</sup> The form of McLean's dementia – temper followed by childish helplessness – was inspired by Philip Pullman's portrayal of the death of Authority. See Part Two, Chapter One, 'Absolute Rule: Images of God'.

That's the last thing in the world I can tell him. When I don't respond he looks to one side; Jamie's voice answers him. 'I think McLean gave us something. In the whisky.'

Raj stares at him. 'What did he do?'

'Nothing. I mean, he didn't... lay a hand on her. It wasn't like that.' I look up at him now; he's pushing his hair back from his face. The back of his hand is bloody, with at least three long gashes. I feel Raj gently turning over my right hand; there are specks of blood under my nails. I pull my hand away, hide it inside the other. Raj is staring at Jamie again. 'So what happened?'

'The guy's aff his heid. You wouldn't believe it. He kept giving us this whisky - '

'I said *what happened?*'

I flinch away from him. Jamie says angrily, 'Christ, deafen her why don't you?'

Carl's voice cuts in, low and calm. 'Jamie. You think you were doped? Did you lose consciousness at all?'

'No.'

'Are you sure?'

'Aye, I'm sure.'

'Was Suzey alone with him at any point?'

'No. No, she wasn't.'

'All right.' This is good news: he pauses to let it sink in. 'Suzey, pet, how d'you feel?'

'Okay,' I whisper. I do feel a little better, now everyone's stopped shouting. Raj tucks the fur cover around me more securely. Carl says, 'Did you see McLean mixing your drink, Suzey?'

'No, I didn't.' Of course. It was the whisky, something in the whisky. That's all it was. 'I didn't see any of it.'

'Jamie, did you see?'

'No, he had his back to me the whole time.'

I add, 'He didn't give me what I asked for. I asked for bubbly.' He drugged us. That's all it was. Oh, thank God, it was just the drugs. 'He made us both have the whisky.'

Raj is looking at Jamie's hand. 'So how did you - '

There is a tiny sound behind us, the creak of a floorboard perhaps, and we all turn sharply. The movement makes me clutch at my head. The door is open - we left it on the snib, after all - and Anita Black is a few steps inside the room. She is watching us eagerly. 'McLean put something in your drinks? Did he try to touch you?'

Raj is already on his feet. 'This is a private room.'

'Did he say anything to you?'

'Get out!'

Anita pushes the door closed, clicking the snib so it shuts and locks. She smiles up at Raj. 'I'm sorry, but I have an appointment with Mr Pherson. Jamie? Did it work?'

I look directly at Jamie. He looks sick and tired. The disposable camera is looped around his wrist; he must have picked it up when we made our escape. 'I don't know if it worked,' he says.

Anita frowns. 'You didn't get anything?'

'I'm not sure –'

'Jamie,' I whisper.

Jamie looks at me. 'No,' he says after a moment. 'I didn't get anything.'

'Nothing at all? He didn't do *anything*?'

'Just talked a lot of religious stuff. Nothing he wouldn't have said downstairs.'

Anita stares at him for a long moment. 'Well,' she says at last, sounding very ungracious. 'I'll have my camera back then.'

Jamie un-loops the camera from his wrist, and starts tearing off the bright cardboard covering. 'What are you doing?' snaps Anita.

'Taking the disk out.' He pulls the last of the cardboard off the small black oblong. Carl, eyes widening with technophilia, leans closer for a better look. Jamie thumbs one of the buttons and a tiny disk pops out. 'Unless you think the *Standard* wants a two-hour conversation on the Book of Deuteronomy.'

'Just give me the camera,' she snaps. Jamie pockets the disk carefully, and gives Anita the webcam. She turns on her heel and marches towards the door.

Carl frowns. 'You know that thing copies everything onto the hard-drive?' he says to Jamie.

Anita breaks into a run. Jamie swears and goes after her. She is out of the door when he grabs her by the arm and hauls her back in. Jamie slams the door and leans against it. It all takes about three seconds. Raj finally breaks an amazed silence and says, 'What the hell is going on?'

Anita is furious. 'That's assault! That's assault! Get out of my way!'

'It's the Tenstar edition,' Carl is explaining to Raj, sounding impressed. 'Automatic imprinting on everything it records. Costs a packet –'

Jamie doesn't move. 'Wipe the hard drive, Anita.'

'- you can make it straight-to-Web if you -'

'It's a web-camera?' Raj raises his voice above the quarrelling. 'You were recording McLean? Without his knowledge?'

Anita glares at him. 'I think you'll find it's perfectly legal -'



All I can think is: *Straight-to-Web...* 'It didn't broadcast,' I blurt out, 'did it? I mean, it wasn't going out live?'

I shut up as I realise how much my voice was shaking. Everyone is looking at me. Anita says shrewdly, 'What happened, Suzey?'

'Nothing.'

'It was the drugging, wasn't it? That's what you were talking about?'

'I don't know. I mean it was nothing.' I turn to Raj for support, but he's staring at me too. 'It's not worth bothering about.'

'We'll see about that, won't we?' She clicks something on the camera. McLean's voice, tinny and distant: *...those loves will fail. Parents will die, children will leave you, lovers will come and go...* Light flashes against Anita's hands: a tiny screen comes to life.

'*Jamie!*' I cry. Jamie lunges at the camera - she steps back from him, but collides with Raj. He takes the camera from her. 'Switch it off,' I beg him.

He doesn't switch it off. *Who will you depend upon?* Jamie reaches for the camera; Raj shoves him away. Jamie sits down on the bed, and hides his face in his hands. *Who have you ever had to depend upon, but each other?* Raj is watching the screen.

I run into the bathroom, and lock the door. But I can still hear something: a murmur, a voice. So I go to the sink and turn both taps on full, scattering the objects around them: toothbrushes, handwash, Raj's razor. The gushing water masks the other sounds, but I press my hands over my ears as I kneel on the wet tiled floor and hang my head over the toilet. But nothing comes up. I kneel there gaping for a second; eventually I start to cry.

The sobs are high-pitched and wailing. I've never heard myself make such noises before. They echo around the tiled walls. I'm starting to feel rather impressed with myself. The sobs echo and echo - I sound like a roomfull of crying babies. And all on my own! I giggle a little. I should be on the stage!

There, that's better - I'm laughing now, although it doesn't sound much different from the crying. But you've got to laugh, haven't you. I laugh again, though not so loudly - the gushing tapwater drowns it out. It sounds like a waterfall; no - a cataract. That's a better word! Even if everything else is fucked, I can still come up with the right word! And I'm okay in here. Kneeling on the hard floor, elbows on the toilet bowl, smelling whatever flowery-clean substance has turned the waterspot blue. The door is locked. Could be worse.

Could be worse. Would be better, in fact, if my skin wasn't getting so itchy. Everywhere Jamie put his hands is getting itchy. He must have had hand-cream on or something. I'm scratching at myself, my arms and neck and the tops of my breasts; I look, and red weals are coming up now. Christ, I must be getting eczema. What the hell did Jamie

have on his hands? It can't be Aztec Gold, it must be some cheap stuff, something chemical. Nasty, very nasty. I scratch and scratch; it's not getting any better.

This is stupid. I pull myself to my feet, grabbing at the sides of the sink. I switch off the hot tap and wait for the water to run cold. Then I start slapping water against my arms and neck and breasts. Nice. I start rinsing, letting the icy water run across my reddened skin. The front of my dress is getting soaked, but I don't care - got to get the stuff off, can't let it get worse.

Eventually I stop. It must be off by now. Now I need something to put on it. I look around the top of the sink. Aztec Gold moisturising lotion, no doubt loaded with perfumes and preservatives; no thank you. Toothpaste, that's what I need. Full of menthol, very cooling... but doesn't it have salt in it? As an abrasive? I'm sure I heard that somewhere... So toothpaste is out. God, what does that leave me with?

There's the razor, of course.

I make myself pause; mustn't be hasty. There are faint sounds beyond the door, but the water is still gushing. I look at Raj's razor, closed up neatly inside its black casing. I know how sharp he keeps it. I could just peel off the top layer of skin. Just the irritated part. If I was careful it wouldn't even draw blood... No, that's silly. I'm not peeling potatoes; of course there'll be blood.

I open up the razor, and rinse it under the cold water. There's no need, of course - he keeps it clean, and very very sharp. It would draw blood, but not very much of it. And blood might be good, now I think about it; it would wash out the irritants.

The whole business would hurt, of course. But as much as this rash? I don't think so.

So come on, Suzey - just get on with it. Don't let this get any worse. I look at myself in the mirror. My eyes must be cloudy from all that crying, because I see only a haze of red. Clothes and face and skin, blazing and inflamed. And of course it will get worse. I put the razor's edge to my neck.

And then I'm cold. Cold all over. Oh wonderful, wonderful... I reach out to embrace it and fall into it. There is a sharp pain in my knees, and then I am immersed in the cold, I am

*Walking, walking. Every step forward pushes through knee-high snow. It's dark - there is only faint moonlight, making the ground blue-white. The others are round about me, I can hear them pushing through the snow. Someone is struggling badly. The air is sharp with woodsmoke and pine-needles and ice.*

*And it's cold. The inflammation is gone, and with it the relief. Now it's the frozen air that hurts. My clothes are too thin. The snow is inside my shoes. I look ahead and I see no lights, nothing, and my clothes are too thin... Oh no, no...*

*The pain in my temple throbs, once. I shut my eyes and I feel a change.*



The change comes in a single smooth movement, like a stop-watch clicking over one second. The pain and the fear are gone. I open my eyes...

*I am up above now, looking down. Now she is walking through the snow; not me. She is frightened and in pain. Jamie and Carl and Raj walk beside her. I know that this Suzey has not felt her brother's hands on her. Things were different with her. I know what she remembers. She was lucky: her McLean burst into tears and wet himself, a minute after her Jamie told her about the camera.*

She is me. But she is not me; she has gone on ahead. They got to her quicker, men came and<sup>68</sup>

I am on my knees. They hurt a little, and they are wet. I am not cold, just chilly. The cold tap gushes near my face.

I pull myself up slowly. I am still in the bathroom. I am quite chilled. How long have I been kneeling there? I look at myself in the mirror - wet red dress, wet brownish hair, and wet peely-wally skin, striped and blotched with scratch-marks. They sting a little - I've drawn blood here and there - but the burning has gone out of them.

I shut off the tap. Now I can hear raised voices in the next room. I pull a huge fleecy bath-sheet off the towel-heater, wrap it around myself, and finally open the bathroom door.

'... have to understand, it's not just...' Anita's voice trails off. She is still facing the door; Jamie is still standing in front of it. Carl is sitting calmly on the edge of the bed, watching them like the Chair of a debate. They're all looking at me now. Jamie says, 'Jesus fuck, Suzey.'

There's no sign of Raj. I hobble over to the bed - after all that's happened I'm still wearing these stupid shoes. I sit down next to Carl, and tug the things off, not caring if the straps break. Of course I have to take one arm out of the bath-towel to do it; while I'm still bent over, a be-ringed hand - with a camera strap looped around the wrist - reaches down to touch the abraded skin. I slap the hand away. 'Piss off, Anita.'

'I understand. You don't want to be touched. Jamie, do you see this? Look what's happened to your sister because of that man.' Her voice quivers with righteous indignation - it might even be real. 'Are you just going to let him get away with it?'

Jamie kneels down in front of me. For a moment I think he's going to kiss my feet. 'I'm sorry, Suzey.'

'Where's Raj?' I whisper.

'I don't know. He went out. I told him it was my fault. Suzey, I'm so sorry.'

'It's okay. '

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<sup>68</sup> Suzey is looking into two other worlds: once again, the transference is fuelled by intense distress. See Part Two, Chapter Three, 'Escaping to Hell'.



'It's not okay. I don't know –'

Carl says loudly, 'Are you not staying, Anita?'

'Shit!' Jamie scrambles to his feet; the black disk falls out of his pocket and lands by my discarded shoes. Anita is actually opening the door when he slams it, pushing her back into the room and leaning against the door. He grabs her arm and pulls off the camera. 'Give me it.'

'I'll get Security onto you!'

'Aye, you do that.' He turns the camera over, stabs at a button. 'How do you wipe this thing?'

'Don't you *dare!*'

Carl frowns. 'You want to wipe it?'

'Fucking right I do. Don't worry,' he says to me, 'I'll erase all of it.'

'It's what we came here for.' Jamie is glaring at him, but Carl persists. 'We wanted evidence on him. And we've got it.'

'We're not using this.'

'We're not going to get another chance.'

'I'm not getting Suzey into this!'

'Then why the hell did you bring her here?'

Anita cuts in, her voice smooth again. 'All right, Jamie, I hear what you're saying. You want Suzey kept out of this. That's fine. We can edit the film. We can edit her out. You too, if you like.'

'... All right. Do the edit, then. Let's see it.'

'I can't do it *here.*' She sounds tired. 'The camera can't support editing software. It's only a portable.'

'So what do you need?'

'I need to take it back to Glasgow. I know,' as he goes to interrupt, 'I know. I know you don't trust me. But this is too important. You know it is.' She looks at each of us in turn: she holds my gaze for a long time. 'You have to take a chance on me. All of you. You have to.'

There's a long silence. At last Jamie shakes his head and says, 'You must think we were born fucking yesterday, Anita.'

'But I promise you.' She sounds indignant. 'I'll give you my word. You can record it if you like. I *will* do the edits.'

Carl laughs. 'Of course you will. You'll make them just the way your proprietor wants them. And since your proprietor is in Mr McLean's of golf club, I don't think he'll be in a hurry to lead with *him*. These two now,' he nods to me and Jamie, 'they'd be front page material, wouldn't they?'

Now she laughs. 'How could I show them without showing McLean?'

'With your lovely editing software, Anita. You can lift out McLean and drop in anyone you want. Who were you thinking of, I wonder? Raj? Or me? Or just some anonymous old perv who likes watching sisters and brothers at it?'

I rest my face in my hands. I hear Jamie say sharply, 'Shut it. I'm wiping this now.'

'Listen, Jamie.' She is starting to sound desperate. 'I don't have any interest in you or your sister. People won't care about that. They will care about McLean. That's the only story worth running.'

'Don't let her leave here with that recording.' Carl's voice is rising too. 'She'll use it on you. Or she'll just wipe the whole thing, and we'll have nothing to –'

'Let me show you how I'll cut it, Jamie. You're not agreeing on anything. Just look.'

After a moment Jamie sighs. 'Fine. Show me.'

Quiet. I raise my head. Jamie and Anita are by the door, peering down at the camera in Jamie's hand. She starts murmuring a commentary - *we'll lose that, don't worry, but keep this part...* I stop listening. I look at Carl, who smiles. 'How're you doing, hen?'

'Did Raj say where he was going?'

'I think he just went for a walk. He'll be back.'

'I fucked up, Carl,' I whisper.

He shrugs. 'Everyone fucks up.'

Strangely, I feel slightly better. I watch Jamie and Anita for a while. They're whispering. Jamie now has his arms folded; he's shaking his head. 'He's going to wipe it, isn't he,' I say.

'Aye. Don't worry.' I glance at Carl sharply; but he's not being sarcastic. He's watching the two of them now - when he sees my head turn he looks at me again, and grins. 'It'll be all right.'

But I know him better than he thinks I do. While he was watching Jamie make his big refusal, he looked sick to his stomach. I say, 'It wouldn't make that much difference anyway, Carl.'

'Probably not.'

'I mean, if he's in that guy's golf-club and everything. He knows too many people.'

'Aye.'

'And it's fakeable anyway.'

'Aye, I know.' He sighs, then bends down and picks up the disk. I watch him sit up, casually turning it over in his hand. From the doorway Jamie says sharply: 'Take that off him, Suzey.'

'Christ, I wasn't going to...' He spreads his hands wide, all indignant innocence. But he doesn't give me the disk. I whisk it away from him, getting another scowl that's just a bit too theatrical. I stare him out, wondering if he really would do it... He looks away first. Yes: he'd do it. I wrap both hands round the disk. 'Need to find something else for your website, Carl.'

'That's not the point.'

He has the nerve to sound annoyed with me. I clutch the disk tighter. 'Piss off. You've no right.'

He shrugs. He can look as self-righteous as he wants; it's not him on that fucking recording. I glance down at the disk in my clenched hands, and feel a tiny button click under my fingertip. A faint green light on my fingers; there's a tiny line of text on the side of the disk. It's point-projection; when I open my fingers a little more, the words expand beyond the thin black strip of the disk. I can read them now; they say, SEND STRAIGHT TO WEB? Y/N.

Jamie and Anita are still arguing in the background. I tip my cupped hands sideways, so Carl can see the text on the disk. His eyes widen; a second later he remembers to look serious, but before that it's pure gadget-loving awe. Seems the web-cam is even more advanced than he thought.

The disk itself can transmit straight to the Web.

Well; it makes no difference. I'm not sending it. I stare defiantly at Carl. He gazes levelly back.

I don't give a shit. This is too much. No-one could do this. No-one could ask it of me.

Jamie and Anita's conversation has faded out completely. Carl sits like a statue and looks at me. I'm remembering the frozen pool beneath the shattered windows. It's not going to happen. If it is, there's nothing I can do. *This won't make any difference.*

I remember Raj, in his devastated office with the wolves howling outside. White-faced and stinking. *Balder... not Balfour, Balder... Ragnarok...*

So what. It won't make that much difference. I also remember Raj saying: *It doesn't mean it's going to happen.* That's what he'd say if he were here: doesn't mean it's going to happen. Don't be stupid. Destroy the disk. It doesn't mean anything's going to happen.

But I saw it. I can't disbelieve it, however I try. I saw it.

I shut my eyes and take a deep breath. I'm hoping for another 'episode'; something to take me away from this. But when I open my eyes, there's Carl watching me, Jamie and Anita's voices buzzing away in the background. Nothing's changed.

I find the small black button on the disk, and press it.



The screen blanks. I've deleted it... but no, another sentence. **STRAIGHT TO WEB – ARE YOU SURE? Y/N**. This time it's defaulted the *No* option. I fiddle around until *Yes* is highlighted, then push the button.

The door opens, barging into Jamie and Anita. They fall back, protesting. Raj's voice snaps at them to move. I look at the text: it's gone red. **THIS WILL TRANSMIT FILE DIRECT TO WEB. ARE YOU SURE? Y/N**. Raj, Jamie and Anita are exclaiming in annoyance at one another. I look at Carl; he nods slightly.

I find **YES** and push it.

The display goes blank: then there's green text, flashing. **STRAIGHT-TO-WEB TRANSMISSION COMPLETE**. Raj slams the door behind him. He looks over at me, but doesn't meet my eyes. If he's shocked by my scratches he doesn't show it. He turns his attention instead to Jamie and Anita. 'What the fuck are you doing?'

'We're editing the film.' Anita's voice is calm and soothing. 'We're taking Suzey and Jamie out of it –'

'I've not agreed to anything,' Jamie interjects.

'I know, I'm just showing what –'

Raj pulls the webcam out of Jamie's hand. Jamie, taken by surprise, steps back as Raj wrenches the back off the camera. Plastic snaps and metal pieces fall to the floor. Anita grabs at him angrily – he shoves her, hard, so she slams back against the wall. She protests shrilly - *Give me that! Bastard!* - as Raj drags the disk out of the camera and tries to crush it in his fist.

It's too tough, though. I look down and poke at the disk in my hands – no, these things are pretty sturdy. Raj is crossing the room and picking up a heavy lamp – Anita is hanging onto his arm, still shrieking. I realise the green script is still flashing: **STRAIGHT-TO-WEB TRANSMISSION COMPLETE**. It sounds like something out of *Thunderbirds*. I start giggling in spite of myself, pushing my fingers into my mouth to try to stop.

Instant silence. I look up to see Raj and Anita frozen in a tableau: Raj fending off Anita with one hand, with the other lifting the lamp, ready to fall on the disk. He's frowning at me. 'What? What did you do?'

Carl gently takes the disk from my hands, and holds it up for them to see. 'It's gone to the Web already.' He speaks slowly and clearly. 'It's gone direct to the public forums.'

'How much of it?' Anita snaps.

'All of it.'

'It's *uncut*?'

'That's right.'

There's a long silence. Then Jamie blurts out, 'Why in God's name...?'

'Because he's insane.' Carl's voice begins to rise. 'Because he's taking us back to the Stone Age. Because he wants to start a new Crusade in the Gulf. Because he's trying to START a FUCKING WAR. Why the FUCK DO YOU THINK?'

'You stupid prick,' wails Anita. 'He's going to sue you. He's going –'

'I did it,' I say. My voice is high and shaking. 'It wasn't Carl. I sent it.'

Anita hardly pauses. 'Do you know how fakeable that material is? He'll take us all for every penny we've –'

Raj drops the lamp and gets hold of Anita instead. While she shrieks and protests, he marches her to the door like a bouncer and shoves her out, throwing the remains of the camera after her. He slams the door and locks it, ignoring the pounding and indistinct yelling from the other side. Then he swings round and heads towards me, his hands outstretched.

I scramble sideways. But he's not going for me at all. The blow catches Carl on the jaw; Carl lashes out at his chest. After that it's just thumping and swearing and pounding. I have to crawl over the bed to get away from them, hearing my dress give somewhere at the seams as I land in an undignified heap on the other side. 'Stop it! Raj, *stop it!*'

And he stops, as suddenly as he started. He turns his back on Carl and sits down heavily on the bed. Carl, who has blood on his face, goes after him and keeps on hitting. 'Carl, *don't,*' I wail; Jamie puts a hand on his shoulder and Carl allows himself to be pulled back. Raj ignores them both and puts his head in his hands.

I go to him, kneeling down to look up at his face. 'Raj,' I say.

He keeps his head in his hands. 'Raj, please.' I'm starting to cry again. 'Please.'

He lowers his hands, and stares somewhere to the side of my head. 'Do you know,' he says hoarsely. 'Do you know what you've -'

We both jump as there's a pounding on the door, so hard it rattles the door on its hinges. This is definitely not Anita. 'Ah, shit,' sighs Jamie, heading for the door. Before he can open it, there's a scrabbling at the handle, and the lock clicks open. Men in red-and-gold uniform pour in. Four of them; two more outside.

Jamie's waiting to meet them. 'It's okay. They've stopped.' He nods at Raj and Carl. 'Sorry for the trouble. They're off to bed now –'

The men push past him. One of them opens my suitcase and flings it on the bed. Another opens the wardrobe and starts throwing clothes towards the suitcase, while number three – our driver, I now notice – goes into the bathroom. The fourth stands near the doorway, eyes flicking from Raj and I to Carl and Jamie.

Raj finds his voice. 'What do you think you're doing?'



'You're leaving.' Number Four looks down at me, checking out the cleavage and torn nylons with obvious contempt. Jamie goes to speak but the man's expression shuts him up. 'Youze two an all. Get your stuff. I'll gie you five minutes.'

Carl shoves Jamie towards the door and they go. I watch the driver emerge from the bathroom and throw my spongebag into the case, without meeting my eye. I return my attention to Number Four: 'Where are we going?'

The man shrugs. Two of his colleagues are closing the case - clothes are sticking out on either side. 'I've still got stuff in the drawer,' I protest.

They ignore me. One of them picks up the case; Number Four snaps his fingers at us. 'Up.'

We get to our feet. I'll give him fucking *up*... 'You're way out of line here—'

'Leave it,' Raj says in an undertone.

'That's right.' The man jerks a thumb towards the door. 'Leave it.'

In much less than five minutes, they've marched us down to the lobby. Carl and Jamie are there already, carrying half-empty bags. Carl's nose is still bloody, but he's ignoring it; his eyes are on the doorway to the bar and the dining-room. Even from here we can hear the voices. A man's voice, high-pitched and railing: not McLean's. And a crowd-voice, growling agreement; getting louder and angrier every moment.

Number Four says: 'That's them all now.' His deferential tone makes me look up; Kerry is crossing the lobby. Her face is white and her eyes are red-raw. She stops in front of me, towering over me. 'You little hoor. What did you do to him? The state he's in... what did you do to him?'

I realise she hasn't seen the recording yet. 'I didn't do anything to him. I'm sorry, Kerry, your Dad's just not right —'

There's a quick movement and something bashes into the side of my head. I clamp my hands over my temple just before the pain hits. Tears sting my eyes and I hear a cry coming out of my mouth. I back away against Raj as Kerry comes for me, hand raised for another blow, bellowing in my face. 'You FILTHY WEE HOOR! Don't you SPEAK ABOUT HIM! DON'T YOU DARE!'

'He's not right.' I try some bellowing of my own. 'He's fucking senile and you know it!'

She hits me again, on my cheek, and again on the top of my head. I keep my arms over my face and my throbbing temple. Then something tightens painfully around my throat — she's got hold of my rune-pendant. 'You WITCH! Filthy wee WITCH!' Raj is trying to prise her fingers away; but she just clutches the stone in her fist, trying to push it into my face



while the cord throttles me. 'With your WITCH SIGN! *WHAT DID YE DO TAE HIM? WITCH!*'

Masculine arms are trying to pull us apart – Raj, Jamie and Carl, then the security men – and at last she has to let me go. As I stagger back she keeps on screaming, spit and snot flying as she curses and sobs: '*Bitch... lying cow... after all he's done...*'

Abruptly she goes quiet. We follow her gaze; people have emerged silently from the dining-room. They're watching Kerry, with tears in their eyes. And they're watching us, and they want to hurt us, very badly.

Kerry goes to speak, but Number Four cuts in: 'Right, miss. They're on their way out.'

We are being marched towards the main door. Jamie and Carl are supporting me, one on each side. Behind us the mob is grumbling; I look back and see Sandra, standing in the middle with her hand over her mouth. Then we're gone, through the first doors; they clunk shut behind us. The crowd-noise is gone; but now there's the cold.

We're still marching onwards. Carl says, his voice shaking slightly, 'Where are you taking us?'

'Out.'

I hear myself whimper. Raj says, 'I think you'll find this constitutes manslaughter.'

'*Ay think you'll find.*' He's putting on a la-di-da voice. One of his men laughs.

'*Constitutes maaaahslaught-ah...* Keep walking. Move!' Jamie has twisted away from them and is facing them, back to the door. Carl joins him. They're both terrified. Number Four is reaching for something on his belt, a baton. The others are doing the same. There are six of them.

I push Raj's arm away and let myself slide to my knees. 'Please,' I whisper. I'm crying and shivering. My face is snotty and my red dress is torn. But still... 'Please...'

They're all looking down at me now, eyes moving over my legs and breasts. One of them says something I don't catch, and the rest laugh. Jamie shifts behind me, but a look from the leader makes him stop. I ignore him; I look from one face to another, and find what I'm looking for: troubled eyes that won't meet mine. The driver, the one who collected us from Crianlarich. 'Please don't,' I say, looking at him this time. 'Please help us...'

The driver shuffles his feet. 'They're right enough. Might be a manslaughter charge.'

'Whit?' The leader glares at him.

The driver looks even more uncomfortable. 'I'm just saying. I mean.' He gestures towards me. 'She's not going to last outside.'

Another comment at the back, and more laughter. I hold my breath; but no reaction from Jamie. And this time the leader's not laughing. 'Fuck's sake...' He looks back towards into the lobby, then heaves a sigh. 'Right youze. Move.'

He produces a card, and swipes it through a wall-panel disguised as a decorative plaque. A door opens, to a grey service corridor. The man grabs my arm and hauls me to my feet, his knuckles pressing against the side of my boob. He drags me through the door.

The corridor is even colder than the lobby. The concrete floor numbs my stocking'd feet; I push away from the man who's holding me, trying to keep his boots away from my toes. He takes no notice, just pulls me along to the fire-door at the end. I can hear footsteps clattering behind me; voices, Raj's then Carl's, but I can't make out what they're saying. My temple aches where Kerry hit me, and there's a nasal squealing sound in my ear. We crash through the fire doors, making me wince, and emerge onto a concrete stairwell, leading down.

We descend. He's on the side with the railing, I have to brace one hand against the wall. Echoes all around, boots on concrete. Someone says something – Carl, I think – but I can't hear what it is, and no-one offers a reply. I don't dare turn around.

At last, the bottom of the stairs. There's a security door with a control panel, thick and bulky compared to the one upstairs. Number Four, without letting go of my arm, swipes his card and punches in some numbers. The door unlocks itself. We shove through it into a high, echoing space in complete darkness.

Number Four pauses, groping about on the wall beside the door. The men behind him pile into his back, earning a growled 'fucking *watch*'; they wait meekly behind until he finds what he's after, and snaps on the lights. Fluorescents flicker into life.

We're in an underground car-park. There are two Snowcats under tailored plastic covers; a couple of cars, and a land-rover. The man finally lets go of my arm; Raj, Jamie and Carl are pushed through the door behind me, and I go to stand among them, catching hold of the nearest – Carl – before I fall. Number Four takes a key out of his pocket and throws it to one of his men. 'Get them the rover,' he says.

The man tries to catch the key but misses; while he's scrabbling around on the ground the man beside him says, 'What d'you say?'

Number Four glares at them. If I wasn't terrified I'd find it funny: the guy wants to be movie-soldier, but he clearly just can't get the help. 'Get the keys for the fucking land-rover! Out the office!'

'Fuck didn't you say so?' The man with the key hurries off, grumbling; he lets himself into a windowed unit in the corner. I use the respite to close my eyes; pain is still pulsing in my temple, and my ear is still whining. Raj says, sharply and too loudly, 'Suzey?' I open my eyes and whisper, 'I'm okay - ', but before he can reply we're on the move again. We're marched over to the land-rover.



The rover looks nearly new, and has snow-tyres fitted – but beside the bulk of the Snowcats, it's small and fragile. The man from the office comes hurrying over, keys jingling in his hand. Number Four grabs them and pushes the button; the land-rover's doors click open. Then Number Four hands the keys to the nearest person: Raj. 'Get moving.'

Raj was looking into my eyes – must be a good sign – but he looks up abruptly; then frowns at the land-rover. 'We'll need a Snowcat.'

'Oh you will, will you? Get in or you're walking!'

'Get in.' Carl is already opening the driver's door. I notice there are drops of sweat on his forehead, like tiny glass beads. 'I'll drive –'

'Get in the back,' Raj says, to me. He pushes past Carl into the driver's seat. I climb into the back seat, with Jamie following; the security men bundle the suitcases in after us. Raj is already revving the engines as Carl gets into the passenger-seat beside him. Number Four still has the driver's door open: 'Leave it where we can pick it up. Call me tomorrow. If you don't I'll get the polis on you.'

He slams the door and slaps his palm against the roof, twice. 'Lock the doors,' says Carl. Raj fumbles across the control-panel; the central locking clicks. Carl relaxes visibly. 'Thank God... start moving, though...'

Jamie says, 'Can we get the heating on back here?' Raj ignores both of them, craning around to look at me. 'Suzey, are you all right?'

'It's a headache. I'm okay. Raj, let's go, *please*.' There's another slap on the roof, close to my ear – it stabs into my head like a toothpick. Number Four is looking through the window at Raj, yelling something we can't hear and gesticulating towards the far wall. A huge metal door has been cranked open; two security men are beside it, stamping their feet against the cold and waving us outside.

Raj turns around again. We move off, bumping and jerking around until he figures out the gears. The security men are sarcastically waving us off; I see one mouth *Bon Voyage!*, getting a laugh. Then we're outside.



## Twenty-Four

The world gets brighter. One of the hotel floodlights is planted on the other side of the car-park, making my eyes water. Floodlit snowflakes whirl past the windows. The car bumps over a sleeping-policeman, and trundles past the hotel's main entrance onto the long curving driveway.

By this time, my breath is puffing out in front of me; the rover is no more proof against the cold than a biscuit-tin. 'Put the heating on,' I wail. Raj flicks a switch, and air comes roaring in; it's still cold. 'Take a minute to heat up,' he says, eyes already ahead.

My suitcase is half on the seat, half on Jamie; I tug at the handle, although my hands are already chilled and aching. Jamie gets the idea – he starts pulling out a jumper, socks, hiking trousers. I put them on as he gives them to me, one on top of the other. Where it's awkward – I'm stiff with cold, and it hurts to move my head – Jamie helps me, tugging up my socks, pulling the jumper over my head as if I'm four years old.

Then he looks for his own suitcase; he has to put on the internal light to do it, because we've left the spotlights behind. Raj switches on the headlights; beyond the white is looming dark green, the pine trees. Carl is reaching back for his clothes – the suitcase won't go between the front seats, so Jamie is passing him clothing like an aid-worker. Raj is still in his suit and must be freezing; but he keeps driving. I find a car-rug behind the back seat; 'Put that over you,' I say, timidly, passing the rug between the seats. Carl drapes the rug over Raj's lap; Raj doesn't take his hands off the wheel, but I see him studying me in the mirror.

The headlights intensify, but our side-vision darkens; we're in the pine-forest. Red eyes wink at us – the reflector poles. I find myself wondering if the designer had a taste for the Gothic. Raj slows down even more until we emerge from the trees; 'Put the light out,' he says, and Jamie switches off the internal light without arguing.

There are two more lights at the bottom of the hill. Something tall and black stands against each one – after rubbing my eyes for a moment I realise they are the Celtic crosses at the main entrance. They really are floodlit at night. Raj slows to a stop just before them, with no slipping – the rover has snow-tyres. Raj puts the brake on, but leaves the engine running as he struggles into the clothes Jamie hands to him.

Carl lets out a long breath, scanning the road ahead. 'Any suggestions where we're going?'

Raj gives up on getting into his waterproofs without standing on the clutch. 'The South road's still blocked.' He releases the handbrake, and we roll between the painful light of the crosses into the main road. 'We'll have to go to Glencoe village.'

Carl stares at him. 'We'd have to go through the Glen.'

'I know. It's safe.' Raj is already turning left. 'The SCAACS is on.'

'You said it went on half-function at night.'

'It does.' We bump over something; the ditch, I think, invisible in the snow. I clamp my hands over my aching head again; when I look up Raj is watching me in the mirror. He looks worried, but he speaks calmly to Carl: 'Half-function's still enough.'

'It was half-function on the south road!'

'That was a much bigger snow-load. It'll be fine.'

We're going forward into the Glen, fitting neatly into previous tyre-tracks, which are filling up but still clearly visible. The ride gets smoother, thank God. But Carl's still shaking his head. 'We should go to the King's House.'

Raj doesn't bother to reply, so I pipe up: 'It's shut for the winter.'

Carl gives me a look of kindly condescension. 'We can get in through one of the windows. They'll have firewood. Tinned food maybe. We can last till tomorrow.'

Raj says something quietly. I didn't hear it all, but it had the word 'hospital' in it. Carl turns to stare at me. At last he says, 'You doing okay, Suzey?'

'I'm fine.' *Hospital...?* 'I bumped my head. It was just a bump on the head!' I look to Jamie. But it's too dark, I can't see his face. 'Jamie, tell them, I'm fine!'

'Aye, I know. You're fine.' He sounds a bit shaky. But that's natural enough, considering what's just happened to us. 'We'll just get it checked, okay?'

Raj cuts in, calm and soothing. 'It's minor concussion at worst. But the sooner it's caught, the shorter the recuperation time.'

That doesn't sound right... but then Raj doesn't tell lies. No, it must be right. Carl is still looking back at the King's House: 'I still say we should wait till morning.'

The car starts to slow. There's just a faint sensation of brakes labouring. I brace myself; we come to a stop. Raj reaches over Carl and opens his door; the light goes on, and the cold comes howling in. Raj snarls, 'Then get out. Go and wait till morning.'

Carl hesitates. Tiny freezing snowflakes speckle my face. Jamie cries out, 'For fuck's sake shut the door!'

Swearing under his breath, Carl shuts the door. Raj releases the brake and we're off again.

Something looms up against the side windows, and there's a muffled rattling under our feet: the metal bridge, left behind as soon as it appeared. Raj slows down and flicks on the windscreen-wipers, although they're hardly needed. 'Put your seatbelts on,' he says. Everyone obeys. Raj makes a few one-handed grabs at the belt-buckle beside his ear; each time he has to put his hand back on the wheel before he can pull out the belt. 'Carl,' I say,



'help him.' Carl reaches over but pulls back, shrugging – he can't reach without getting between Raj and the windscreen. 'I'll get it in a minute,' Raj says; my concern is rewarded with a brief smile in the driver's mirror.

Ahead are the Snowcat tracks, grey on white. From the passenger window, there's nothing but light flecks of snow – until I've looked for a minute, and then there's dark blue snow-light from the slopes, very close. We're in the Glen proper now. I take Jamie's hand. He flinches slightly; in the dim light I can see dark lines on the back of his hand, where I scratched him. I feel faintly surprised the scratches are still there. I keep my fingertips away from them.

The cabin is warming up now. I loosen my top buttons and zips, although my feet are still cold. I peer ahead, hoping to spot a landmark. Instead, I see little green lights - two chains of them, exactly parallel – springing into life in front of me. I close my eyes and wonder if I dare take another look; but then Jamie says, 'Are any of youze seeing green fairy-lights?'

Raj and Carl both let out a laugh. 'It's the snow-poles,' Raj says. 'They're motion-sensitive.'

I've no idea what he's talking about. I watch the nearest pair of lights rush towards us; then we've gone between them, leaving them behind. I take a good look at the next pair; the metal snow-poles, which line the road like lamp-posts, are each topped with a gaudy emerald light. Up ahead, another few pairs light up. I turn my head gingerly to look through the back window; four distant lights wink out. 'The road's well marked,' I say. Everyone nods kindly as I state the blindingly obvious. 'Be there soon,' says Jamie.

The snowfall is lightening; the flakes are drifting almost vertically beyond the windshield. There's no wind – so why can I still hear it howling? Then another note joins in, and the sound is unmistakable. Wolves. 'Good God,' says Carl, peering out of his window. 'I thought they only sounded like that in the films.'

'Can you see them?' Jamie is pressed up against his window, as if we're in a safari park. 'Is that them down there?'

I close my eyes, feeling sick. I'm remembering something – dark walls, fire, something horrible to do with Raj. A nightmare, probably, but... Jamie turns to me in surprise, and I realise my grip on his hand must have tightened. 'It's all right, Suze. They're not going to catch us up.'

'I know.'

Carl chips in, 'They're big fearties anyway. More scared of us than we are of them.'

I know that too, but... 'Are all the doors locked?'

Carl smiles. 'And they definitely can't work car door handles –'



**'Can we just lock the fucking doors!'**

Shouting was a bad idea. I press my hands over my aching eyes. Raj's voice says soothingly, 'The doors are locked, Suzey. It's all right. We're nearly there.'

We're nothing of the kind. I can still hear the howling. 'Put the radio on, would you?'

Carl pokes at a couple of buttons; then static bursts out of six different speakers. A deep voice buzzes in the background – Carl pushes a few more buttons to no effect, then reverts to the low-tech method and starts turning the dial. The voice becomes comprehensible – it's giving the shipping forecast. Carl dials on through further static.

He's just found some crackly Gaelic singing when I notice something weird about the green lights up ahead. They're going straight up into the air, as if we're supposed to take off like Chitty Chitty Bang Bang. But then the headlights pick out sheer rock. The lights are marking the entrance to the Pass. Raj is already slowing down; he steers us carefully between the vertical lights into the chasm.

It's darker in the Pass. I hadn't realised how much snow-light the slopes were giving us. But then green light flickers into life – the emerald-glass lamps are set into the rock-face, every two feet, on either side of the road. We look garish and sickly in the glare. The Gaelic singing turns back into static.

We crawl along. The road has narrowed into a single-track; snowdrifts, shouldered aside by the morning snowplough, stand four or five feet high on either side. Even so, I'm wishing Raj would go faster. The engine seems a lot louder.

The radio gives a burst of static, making me jump. Carl turns it down. Now we can hear the squeal of the windscreen-wipers, and even the muffled creak of the tyres on the snow. The tracks we're following are filling up fast.

I keep my eyes ahead. I am not going to grip Jamie's hand tighter. I'm not going to be worried. I had a migraine yesterday, when we came through here. I saw nothing. Nothing at all.

But still Raj doesn't go faster. I shut my eyes. I hear nothing...

'Suzey!'

It's Jamie. His face is pale. 'Suzey?'

'What?'

'Still with us?' His face is losing its pallor – in fact everything is, because the green light is fading. There is faint blue-white beyond the windows again. Emerald lamps start to go past again, not bright enough to compete with the snow-light.

We're out of the Pass. 'Jesus, Jamie,' I say. 'Don't do that!'

'I was just checking you were still –'

'I'm still here! I'm still with you! God's sake, you scared me half to death!'

'I'm sorry, Suzey,' he says humbly.

I sigh, and take his hand again. We go on in silence. After a moment Carl turns the Gaelic back up – a female voice, unaccompanied, solemn and pure. It's hypnotic – I watch the green lights ahead of us, one pair goes by and another comes on, one goes by another comes on, one goes by...

Raj's voice cuts in: 'Switch that off. Try and find the weather station.'

It's fairly obvious what the weather's going to do, but Carl starts dialling through the stations. Raj doesn't take his eyes off the tracks ahead of us – they're now nearly full. 'Find the roads report,' he says.

'Which road?'

'The one to Fort William.'

Static buzzes and pops. Carl homes in eagerly on an official-sounding voice, then curses mildly when it turns out to be in Gaelic. On and on the static goes, as the tracks become just a shadowy hint in the headlights.

I sit back, telling myself it doesn't matter. The rover's tyres are good, and we can't lose the road with the pole-lights. The green lights go past, the radio buzzes. I think a good few minutes have gone past – but I'm not sure – when Carl's search is rewarded. A Highland accent, in English – a male voice, level and pleasant. '*... And in other news today...*'

The unmistakable sound of serious radio. 'They'll do a report soon,' says Carl. Raj nods.

Green lights go past, green lights ahead. The soft voice lulls me even more. The snowfall is lighter now. I keep thinking I can see through it, beyond the headlights and beyond the dozen-or-so green dots; I see blue shapes, perhaps the sky, perhaps the frozen loch beyond.

The radio voice is talking about roads around Aberdeen. I can feel myself nodding off. We can't be far off now.

And sure enough: suddenly there are a hundred green dots, tracing the road far ahead, lighting us home –

The snow-poles. They're all lit up.

Movement. They're sensing *movement*...

Raj twists around to look through the back window – at the same time the accelerator roars as he floors it, and we're flattened back into our seats. We're hurtling into the snow-covered tracks, faster and faster – I can see the speedometer climbing to forty, fifty, surely we're going to skid, I yell at Raj to stop it but he doesn't. Carl is shouting angrily, I can't hear



him over the engine, and Raj is shouting back *the lights it's vibration the lights...* Carl stabs at the control panel and the calm radio voice disappears.

Now we can hear it. A sound like thunder, everywhere, coming from all directions at once. Raj has to turn back, I'm screaming at him to turn around, don't go on toward the green lights because they show where it's coming. But Carl is shouting too, telling him to keep going, faster faster, he can't hear me for Carl, I've got to tell him to turn round. My hand is gripping Jamie's locking tighter and tighter, if we hang on we've got to hang on –

Raj's voice wails *Oh, God, no* and his hand is reaching back towards me. White is rushing up to the window beside me, and I'm trying to get away and Jamie's pulling my arm but the straps are holding me there. And there's a noise like a fist landing and we're turning over, going much too fast, flipping like a fairground ride. Shaken from side to side until I'm deaf can only hear screaming, me screaming and Jamie and

PAIN in my head and now black

Darkness. Warm. Bit fusty. Smell of burnt rubber. I'm tilted over to one side. Feels like all my blood's draining that way. My head hurts on that side too, and the tilt isn't helping.

I try to sit straight, but there are straps holding me. I tug at them and my fingers go *wheech* down the shiny surface. It occurs to me my eyes aren't open. So I open them, and the shining blue whiteness comes in.

The straps are just my seatbelt. I'm inside the Rover, which is tipped over slightly, like a rollercoaster frozen just before the twist. There are mumbling voices around me – the others are starting to stir. I'm still inside the Rover, but there is cold air, and something pricking my face like silver needles. I realise I'm looking straight upwards, even at this drunken tilt, into the outside world; tiny snowflakes are touching down on my face.

I trace along my seatbelt and release the catch, bracing my hand against the door. I peer up at the opening. The sunroof is half-open. I plant both feet in the footwell and push myself up towards it. My head twinges, in two places – one where Kerry's blow landed, the other in my left temple, exactly opposite. The pain throbs twice, then fades – the two spots are balancing each other out.<sup>69</sup> I reach up into the open air. The sunroof looks warped and buckled – as soon as my fingers touch it, it slides away. It clatters off the side of the car, and makes a strangely muted thump on the ground outside.

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<sup>69</sup> The sensation on both temples corresponds to Suzey's electro-convulsive therapy in the 'Warm' world. ECT involves placing electrodes on either side of the head. See Mental Health Foundation, <http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/html/content/ect.cfm> Accessed 4 January 2006.



Someone mutters something, but I don't catch it. I hoist myself up through the hole, clambering up the seat-back in front of me, and swing myself outside. I am bathed in cold. I don't mind. I find my footing on the roof, and straighten up.

Snowflakes feather my face. We are still facing forward, towards the end of the Glen. Behind is a smooth new slope, trailing off across the back-seat windows of the Rover. The sun-roof has slipped to the foot of the slope like a small toboggan.

All around is the Glen, in darkness. But the darkness is blue-white; and I can see. I get my footing on the car roof, then look all around. I move my head slowly, so I miss nothing.

And all the worlds turn with me.

All the possibilities. I can see them. I laugh aloud as I realise I can see them all, methodically, one after the other - like the turning of a slide carousel. Click, and the snow is falling more heavily; click, and there's no snow-fall whatsoever. Here, the green light-poles ahead of us are bent and broken; here, they're standing straight, here a few are winking on and off.

I close my eyes, and I can still see my worlds. I know there must be others behind me, where the Rover is not in front of the new avalanche-slope, but inside it. But those are not my concern. The possibilities have narrowed down. I face into the ones ahead.

I find I am not pulled into them. I don't have to live them. I can just look at them and know them, while they wheel all around me like dancers in a reel. I lift my arms and laugh again, because I thought they could trap me, but they are free and possible, these futures, and each of them is mine.

Someone says my name. I look down; Jamie's pallid face is peering up through the hole. 'Suze, are you okay?'

'Fine.' I tear myself away from the patterns of the snowclouds overhead. I kneel down gingerly - I've just realised I'm still in stocking-soles. 'Are you all right?'

'Aye. Aye. Oh, Jesus Christ, Suze. Fuck...'

I think: Raj. His seat-belt. Did he put his seat-belt on? I bend over, moving Jamie's face to one side. I think I can hear someone crying. Raj is bent over the steering-wheel. I can't see his face. But his hand suddenly grabs at the dashboard, twisting, and twisting again. He's turning the ignition. 'Fuck,' he's saying, 'fuck fuck fuck...'

His seat-belt is on. I suddenly remember him reaching backwards, towards me, or so I thought. 'Okay, sweetheart?' I say.

He looks up. His face is pale but unmarked. He blinks hard when he sees me. 'What are you doing up there?'

I laugh aloud again. All the other worlds, all the times he didn't reach the seat-belt in time, or didn't think to go for it at all... they all slip away behind me, and I let them go.

'Looking at you down there,' I say.

'Oh. Right –'

Jamie's voice says sharply, 'You okay?'

He's not talking to me or to Raj. I crane further into the hole so I can see the passenger seat.

Carl is very much alive. His chest is heaving, as if he can't get enough oxygen. His face is plastered with tears. His right hand is hovering over his left arm, which hangs straight at his side. 'Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God...' he's saying.

'Is it your arm?' says Jamie, reaching towards it. Carl howls and slaps his hand away. 'For fuck's sake! Oh Christ! Oh God...'

Yellow light flashes on: a shock to my eyes after the blue-white darkness. Raj has found the cabin-light, and the three men are looking more assured – although the grey tinge to Carl's face is not a good sight for anyone. He's looking at his arm, which looks strangely twisted, and swallowing hard. 'Fuck...'

'It's broken,' Jamie says.

'Oh, d'you think?' Carl glares at him. 'What else d'you think? Have we been in a car-crash maybe? Have we been in a fucking *avalanche* maybe?'

Raj cuts in. 'We should make a move. Come on.'

Jamie nods, and reaches up to me. 'Get back in, Suzey, we're leaving.'

But Raj is shaking his head. 'The engine's gone. We're walking.'

Everyone stares at the world beyond the car windows. In the yellow light, the windows are black. 'We can't walk it,' says Jamie.

'We've got the clothes,' I say. 'We can wrap up.'

'Aye, but...' He looks at Carl. Carl has started to tremble. His good hand shakes so much he's had to lift it away from the injured one.

Raj shakes his head. 'It's not that far.'

'We'll send someone back for you,' Jamie tells him. Carl nods.

'You can't stay here.' Raj catches my eye; we both know what he's saying. 'The engine's knackered. There's no heat.'

'I can wrap up.'

'It's not enough.'

'Aye it will be.' Carl is shrinking back from him. I know what he means. The car is enclosed. The light is on. It seems so *safe*. 'I'll keep the door shut.'

'It won't be enough. You know that.'



'Thought you said it wasn't far?' He's shaking even harder now. 'Thought you said you wouldn't be long?'

I shut my eyes. I watch the possibilities... 'Carl,' I say.

'You going to spend all your time arguing? Move. Go on. Leave me –'

'Carl.' I'm still on the roof. I swing my legs around and slide down the side-doors like a chute. The snow is solid; I have to steady myself on the handle as I brush away snow and prise open Carl's door. 'Carl,' I say, leaning in and putting my face close to his. 'Carl, pet, you'll *die*. You will.'

He stares at me. I wipe some of the tears off his face before they freeze. 'Carl. Please.'

After a moment he nods. Then his eyes widen. 'Suzey, you've nothing on your feet.'

I look down; I'm still in my socks. I'd hardly even noticed. 'We'd all best get our shoes on, then,' I say.

We struggle into the rest of our clothes. Carl sits stiff-legged like a child so I can put his boots on for him. When the cases are empty, we survey one another. Raj's boots are missing. So is Jamie's coat. Without a word we all strip off jerseys and socks. A minute later Jamie is happed up in fleeces, and Raj is shoving on his dress shoes over four layers of wool. The shoes go on easily, so the socks can't be thick enough, but we haven't got any more.

Jamie, already shivering, goes to help Carl out of the car; I follow him. With perfect comic timing our feet skate out from under us, and we slide in unison down the glass-hard snow to land in a heap at the bottom. In other circumstances it would have been fun. Jamie's not amused, though – 'Ow, fuck!'

'Watch out,' Raj calls down helpfully, 'the snow packs solid after an avalanche.'<sup>70</sup>

'You don't fucking say,' Jamie mutters, pulling me to my feet. Somehow we haul ourselves back up the natural chute to the car. We manage to ease Carl onto his bum in the doorway, and then out on the snow. He goes into a slow slide, feet bumping against the broken sun-roof, but manages to keep his arm steady.

Jamie and I sit down and toboggan after him. Raj, however, tries to plant his thin-soled shoes on the ice and goes into a standing slide, arms windmilling frantically. Somehow he stays on his feet till the bottom; then I grab his arms and pull him away from Carl, until our feet sink into soft snow again. 'That's you now,' I say.

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<sup>70</sup> 'When avalanches come to a stop and debris begins to pile up, the snow can set as hard as cement.' National Snow and Ice Data Center, <http://nsidc.org/snow/avalanche/>. Accessed 4 June 2007.



'Thanks. I can – ' He stops dead. His back is to the light from the Rover – I can't make out his expression. 'Suzey, let me see you ...' He turns me slightly into the light. He's staring into my eyes, and he's not being romantic. 'What is it?' I say.

'One of your pupils is dilated – ' Then he collects himself. 'But it's alright, it's just the light. Of course your eyes would be dilated...'<sup>71</sup>

'We have to go, Raj,' I say.

He nods, puts his arm around me. 'Come on.'

Jamie has managed to get Carl on his feet and on stable ground. Carl is holding his damaged arm as far away from his body as possible. We all look at it. 'We should put it in a splint,' Jamie says.

I nod, then realise I've got no idea how to do this. I look hopefully at Raj, only to find him looking hopefully at me. Same with Jamie. I look at Carl – 'Do you know how to...'

'No.'

Another moment. The wind shrieks. I sigh, and take hold of Carl's good arm. 'Let's start walking,' I say.

We set off, four abreast across the road. The green lights spring into life on either side; at least we can't lose our way. There is no sound but the crunching of feet in the powdery snow. It's up to our knees, so we have to do that high-stepping walk like a heron. But still, it feels good to be moving again; getting somewhere.

Another set of green lights; another. And another. My calf muscles are starting to tug painfully. With each step my feet are lifting lower, skimming the surface of the snow and then further and further down. Eventually I'm just pushing through with my knees. The others are doing the same... but just before I can say it, Raj stops. 'Wait. Go in single file, in my footprints.'

I look down at his indoor shoes. 'Not in those. I'll go first in my boots.'

Raj smiles slightly, his face greeny-pale in the light from the poles. 'My feet aren't going to fit in your footprints, Suzey.'

Before we can start an argument, Jamie steps forward. 'I'll go first.' He ploughs on ahead of us, waddling slightly in his quadruple layers of fleece. His breath steams out behind. We follow, Raj bringing up the rear; we can't let Carl be at the back.

And so we go on. More green lights, slightly skewed to one side. Crunching feet in the snow. Shivering breath. Carl making a tiny noise whenever one foot goes down – he doesn't know he's doing it. I step from the knee, place the boot down, step, down. My

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<sup>71</sup> <sup>71</sup> Suzey's eyes are, as in a migraine, 'peeled': both sensitized and damaged. See Part Two, Chapter Three, "Travelling to Narnia in your fucking sleep" : Transition Between Worlds'.

calves are aching already, but it could just be the cold. I keep my eye on Jamie's back, black against the green-tinted snow.

At last the new lights blink on ahead. I give a little cheer, my breath pluming out in front of me. No-one responds. Jamie ploughs on. I think back to the view in the Snowcat's windscreen – how long was the road ahead? The village seemed so near. How many lights?

We're still on the second set of lights. I look into the distance, trying to spot the dark grey bulk of the loch. But there's nothing but black and cold green-white. The eye makes no sense of it: I'm seeing flaring grey shadows everywhere, around Jamie up ahead, on the slopes to either side.

I recall dozens of lights: no, hundreds. The village is not near at all.

I realise the high-pitched howling I can hear behind us has been going for some time. My city-dweller's ears have been processing it as background noise, sirens maybe. No-one else gives any sign of hearing it, but we're suddenly walking faster. Carl is whimpering now, but he doesn't complain.

At last, over the howling, comes a sharp yelp, seeming much closer. Jamie turns abruptly and looks back. There's nothing to see, but our cosy state of denial has been broken. 'Where are they?' Jamie says.

We all look back into the shifting darkness. No-one volunteers an answer. Eventually Raj says, 'Ignore them. They don't prey on humans.'

When no-one moves Raj snaps, 'Keep going.' So we do. But we keep looking over our shoulders – at the next green lights I just turn around and start walking backwards. I can't take my eyes from the road, the short gloomy corridor before the sickly light ends. Carl is several paces behind me. Raj is further away still. His back is to the darkness.

'Stop,' I say. The wolves' howling echoes all around; they could be anywhere, everywhere. I come to a halt, grabbing Jamie's arm so he can't disappear into the shadows ahead. 'Just a minute,' I say. The other three are frowning, ready to argue. 'Let me think a minute,' I say, and shut my eyes.

I watch the possibilities turn. This time there's a sensation in my head, a tiny crack as if a blister has burst. I ignore it, and look. I know that somewhere, we must have set out earlier. I find the somewhere, and watch the consequences run.

Darkness and laboured breath. Our voices, high with fear. Once with screaming – I let that one go instantly. Worlds with blizzards, even worlds with rain. And then...

One with firelight.

Abruptly I'm back. The men are clustered round me, speaking urgently. But there's another pop in my head and I can't quite hear them. So I shout, 'This way. Come on.'



I head off the road, away from the lights. Raj and Jamie shout in unison, 'Suzey!' I ignore them. After a moment's clambering in a deep drift, I find the way: the old road. I reach out, and my hand closes around cold iron – a metal post by the roadside. There is a red reflector on top. I grip the post and wait for the others.

I have to call to them in the end. They are floundering; their eyes aren't adjusting to the dark as well as mine are. By the time they've caught up, swearing and gasping with fright, I can make out the twisting line of the old road. The light is faint and blue-white: starlight, I suppose. I reach out to stop Raj crashing into me. He grabs me by the arm like I'm under arrest. 'Jesus *Christ*, Suzey!'

'I know a place,' I say. 'It's not far. Here. Take hold.' I take his hand. 'Jamie, take his other hand. Carl, I'll hold onto you – no, that's your bad arm, pet, I'm on your other side.' I watch them blunder about, like moles in sunlight, forming the human chain. The wolves howl and yip, close or far-off, I can't tell.

At last my men-folk are looking about as if they're actually taking something in. I say, 'Have you adjusted yet?'

'A bit,' Jamie admits, suspiciously. 'Where the hell are you going?'

'I know somewhere.' I set off, heading uphill. Jamie and Raj are about to protest, but I keep going, and Carl lets me lead him without a word. So they follow. I have to lean forward and take long steps: my right arm is stretched out behind me, holding Raj's hand, while my left hand clings to Carl. I squeeze Carl's good elbow: 'Doing alright there?' I whisper.

'Fair to middling.' His breathing has calmed slightly. It feels better to be going uphill, leaving the wolves below; not logical, but true. 'What's this then, a short-cut?'

'More scenic, don't you think?'

'The other way had more light.'

'Aye. But green light makes me look so pasty.' I tug Raj's hand: he tugs back, in encouragement or annoyance. We keep climbing. I grab onto an iron pole every time I pass one, hauling myself up a little further. Raj and Jamie follow suit behind me. Jamie is at the back now; I don't have to turn around to know he keeps looking over his shoulder. My shins are pushing through the snow, as are Carl's beside me; the pain has been forgotten now.

We walk into deeper shadow: pines, lining the road on either side.

Then, there is a sheen of yellow light on the road ahead. I say nothing, in case it's my imagination. But a dozen steps later, Carl cries out: 'D'you see it?'

'Oh thank Christ.' I'm still holding Raj's hand; I feel the tension go out of it. 'Is it a house?'



Carl's shaking his head. 'A fire.' We're almost running now. The glow, orange now, is just over the next rise. Feeling like I'm towing all three of them, I make a mammoth lunge and stagger to the top of the hill.

It's a bonfire, about a quarter-mile away. It is small from here, a bright patch in a field of darkness. But it is bright; painfully bright. Tears flood my eyes, and firelight fills the world in front of me. I can still feel my hand holding Carl's arm; but then comes the *pop* in my head, and that's gone too. I see nothing but a haze of gold.

The light softens. The world is framed by the dark green of the pines. The gold is shaping itself into two figures. Two people, a man and a woman. They step forward, still haloed in tawny light.

They are made of everything golden. Bright blonde hair, his to his shoulders, hers to her waist. Full-length clothing edged with fur, white or ruddy-brown. He is broad-shouldered, she is slender; they have the same fine, delicately-tanned features, and the blue eyes of a Botticelli angel. They can't be more than eighteen years old. They are staring at me as if I just popped out of the ground in front of them.

Lif and Lifthrasir. The new Adam and Eve. Viking, Christian, whatever. When the rest of us are gone, they will inherit the earth; they will usher in the Age of Gold.<sup>72</sup>

I look at them for a long time, this blonde breeding pair for whose sake we are all meant to die. They are to have their golden world - but without my niece, and my brother, and my lover, and all the rest of us who are too young or too old or too dark or too gay to qualify. I come to a decision. 'Beat it,' I say to those wide summer-blue eyes.

And they're gone. It's dark again, but for the splash of firelight ahead. My hand is gripping Carl's elbow again. He doesn't seem to have noticed a thing. "Come on," I say.

It's uphill - the fire gets bigger, but very slowly. The light is interrupted by still black shapes: people, standing around the fire. A voice comes to us, carrying a quarter-mile in the still black air. A male voice, yodelling up and down in a prayer, or a recitation. I had been wondering whether to call out or not, but now it seems best not to interrupt. The others behind me are silent too.

When we're about ten yards away, Raj pulls us quietly to a stop. We can see the people in the firelight quite well from here - we're still in darkness, so they haven't seen us. Right in my line of vision is a young woman. In the firelight, a copper torque gleams around her neck; her red hair streams over a long shawl, held in place with cloak-pin. Under the shawl is a dark-coloured kagoul which reaches almost to her knees. Matching waterproof trousers are tucked securely into hiking boots. Beside the girl is a young man in a parka; a plaid crosses his chest and gathers around his waist in a bulky kilt. He too is wearing

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<sup>72</sup> Lif and Lifthrasir, as prefigured in Suzey's migraine 'vision' of the avalanche.

trousers and boots. His hair is long and knotted into a plait. A green beanie hat is jammed down over his ears. Like the girl beside him, he has silvery tears on his cheeks.

The others I can't see clearly; but all around the fire are gleams of fluorescent nylon, and silhouettes of thick wool and fur. Most of these people are Jamie's age or younger, although, after a while, I can make out a few lined faces and some greying hair. Most are wiping their eyes. They are staring into the fire, or at their feet, or gazing in the direction of the loud chanting voice.

The speaker is a step back from the rest of the circle, and seems to be raised slightly higher. My view is blocked by a large sheepskin-clad man in front of me. I can see, however, that the speaker is flanked by two women, each holding a torch. Not a flashlight-torch: a wooden stem topped with oily flame. One woman, who looks about my age, holds the torch awkwardly; she has to steady her elbow with her other hand, and keeps jumping when the flame sways towards her hair. She looks as if she's noticed the absurdity of holding a torch over a large bonfire, but she's not saying anything about it.

The other girl, however, is different. Perfectly composed, she holds her torch aloft one-handed; her face is pale and solemn. It's the pink-haired girl from the stall at the Visitors' Centre. She's wearing a long cloak with a bright scarf knotted at her neck. Her hair, secured by a string of red beads across her forehead, has gone fuchsia-red in the firelight; it should seem absurdly incongruous, but it just adds to her tribal image. She looks like a warrior queen. She is staring straight ahead; as I watch, her gaze becomes proud and fierce as it shifts to the man beside her.

I step sideways to get him into my sights. He is still reciting, in what I assume is Gaelic, declaiming over a long covered sledge at his feet. His voice is almost painfully loud now. He is tall, and broad across the shoulders. His skin is very pale, but his beard and long hair are dark, with glints of silver. His eyes, I think, are blue, or pale grey. He is very handsome; no wonder the pink-haired girl beside him looks so possessive. He is wearing a deep red cloak that goes well with his dark hair; and an elaborately draped plaid in a winter-green tartan. Under it his legs are bare. He doesn't seem to mind the cold at all.

His voice, which is surprisingly high, lifts at the end of a line. I jump as the others murmur a response. It sounds like *Hear us*. I try harder to tune in. The man either stops speaking Gaelic, or starts speaking English a lot more clearly; because I can now make out what he is saying:



*Hear us, mighty Freya! Hear our call, mother of Earth! Accept our brother into your embrace! We give him not to you, pale Galilean! We return him to the Tree of Life! Fenris, send your children! He gives himself to you!*<sup>73</sup>

As if at a signal, two men detach themselves from the circle and approach the sledge at his feet. There are a few quiet sobs around the circle as they lift back the covers to reveal a man. He is lying on a broad plank that fits neatly onto the sledge. He is utterly still. His face is tattooed with symbols, runes and spirals; apart from the black tattoos, he is so bloodless he looks grey even in the firelight. His eyes are slightly open, and dull. His mouth gapes.

The two men draw back all the coverings. The man on the sledge is naked: pale as a fish except for his dark pubic hair, and the network of tattoos all over his body. No, not tattoos, I realise, spotting the tiniest smudge in the complex design of interconnected runes and Celtic knotwork: ink, possibly henna. The painted man is a canvas of painstaking and temporary art. Even in this terrible cold, he doesn't react to being uncovered.

Two more men now step forward. All four stoop to lift the plank and its burden onto their shoulders. Like pallbearers, they shuffle into place and start taking slow measured steps outside the circle. More sobs and sniffles follow them, along with the ringing voice of the dark man:

*We give him to you, Freya, Mother of Earth! He is a clean offering! He is yours! He is yours!*

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<sup>73</sup> Seamus Mclain has created his own brand of religion, combining Celtic and Nordic mythology in the spirit of New Age fiction like Marion Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*. Like Bradley's characters, Seamus and his followers assume that all goddesses are one Goddess, and that paganism is entirely benign and has been viciously misrepresented by patriarchal Christianity: an image dismissed by Elizabeth Hand as 'benign... toothless female empowerment' (see Introduction). The same kind of wishful thinking appears in Seamus's calling on the Norse goddess Freya purely in her kindly role as Earth Mother, ignoring Freya's more bloodthirsty aspect as goddess of war (according to the Poetic Edda, Freya claims half the dead for her own: *Grimnismol* 14). The ritual feeding of corpses to wolves is also one of Seamus's fabrications; as far as I know, it has no counterpart in actual Norse religious practice. Seamus incorporates a great deal of 'modern' neo-paganism in his rituals: 'pale Galilean' is of course from Swinburne's 'Hymn to Proserpine':

Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean; the world has grown gray from thy breath;  
We have drunken of things Lethean, and fed on the fullness of death.

(Algernon Charles Swinburne: *Selected Poems*.  
Manchester: Carcanet Press Ltd, 1982. p. 58)

Swinburne's poem represents the more modern and romanticized version of paganism which Seamus prefers. The explicitly gory scenes of animal sacrifice which abound in actual pagan literature, such as the *Odyssey*, are conspicuous by their absence in both Swinburne's verse and Seamus's perceptions. Seamus (alias Simon Carter) is an arch-reviser, who reinvents faith and history to suit himself.



Now the pink-haired girl steps forward, and takes her place at the front of this procession. The other woman follows behind, although she is now crying and her torch is waving around dangerously; another woman comes forward with a quiet angry word, and takes the torch from her. The pink-haired girl ignores all this. Her steady torch leads the four men about twenty yards from the firelight. Abruptly she stops, bends over, and starts making a sweeping motion with her free arm, as if she were wiping crumbs from a table. Powdery snow is swept away. Underneath is a dark grey surface: a rock, wide and almost flat.

When the rock is clear, she steps back and holds the torch high. The four men walk forward, and set the board down. One man slips; the head of the naked man lolls to one side. The pink-haired girl speaks sharply; the clumsy man carefully turns the face away from the firelight. The two men bow to the man on the rock; then they make their way back to the circle, hurrying as if retreating from a lit firework.

The girl ignores them. She bends low over the still figure, still holding the torch above her head. A curtain of her hair falls forward to touch the man's cheek; for a moment his bloodless face blushes fiery pink. Then she drops a kiss on his forehead, straightens up, and makes her way unhurriedly back to the bonfire. As the torchlight moves away, the rock and the man on it fade into darkness.

Behind me, Jamie exclaims quietly. Then something cannons into the back of my leg, making me stumble. There are shapes all around, brushing against us at hip-height. There is a thick musky smell; my hand touches stiff warm fur. Raj and I grab each other for balance, as if we were waist-deep in a fast river. As the wolves rush past us there are a couple of muted gasps from the group at the bonfire; their circle contracts as they take a step closer to the fire.

The wolves ignore them as they did us. They are making for the rock where the naked man lies. By the fireside, the dark man's voice sounds out, shrill and excited and incomprehensible. The grey and brown of the wolves' pelts fade into shadow-grey, but we can still see them moving. One of them leaps lightly above the writhing mass onto the rock. Another one quickly follows, and another.

Snarling and tearing noises begin. There are a couple of shrieks from the circle, followed by sharp admonitions. Behind me, either Jamie or Carl is being loudly sick. Over it all the dark man's voice goes triumphantly on and on. I catch the word *Fennis* occasionally, but that's it. I say, to Raj, 'Fennis?'

'The wolf-god.'

'Thought so.' We both sound bizarrely calm, but then I'm figuring something out.

'Those wolf-deaths,' I say. 'The man and the woman.'

'Yes.'

'D'you think anyone ever did a post-mortem on them?'

He's way ahead of me. 'Not a very thorough one, it seems.'

'No.' You find a body torn to pieces by wolves. Who's going to check if the poor sod was dead to begin with?

Something clamps around my arm and nearly pulls me over backwards. It's Jamie. 'Suzey, move, come on – oh Christ –'

'It's all right.'

He's not listening. Beyond him, Carl is staggering away. Jamie is still trying to drag me away: 'Move, Suzey, *run* -'

'Jamie, it's okay.' I hiss over his shoulder at the slowly fleeing figure, 'Carl, you pratt, the guy was dead already, will you get back here before you fucking fall?'

I realise the chanting has stopped. I turn. They're all staring at us. Someone says *what the...* very softly; other than that there's just the snarling and gnashing sounds from the wolves. Jamie, Raj and I draw closer together. For a moment no-one moves. Then the pink-haired girl detaches herself from the group. She strides over to us, still carrying the torch, and raises it above our heads. It narrowly misses Jamie's hair – he pushes her arm away. 'Watch out, will you?'

The dark-haired man leaves the fireside and comes to stand beside her. The others follow, fanning out and then closing in around us. The leader looks from one of us to the other. He speaks, very quietly. 'You interrupted our ceremony.'

'We didn't mean to,' says Jamie.

The man steps forward, looming over us. 'You have no right.' His voice is quivering. '*No right.*'

'We're sorry.' Raj is keeping his voice calm. 'We're trying to get to the village. There was an avalanche.' Tiny gasps from the circle around us. Encouraged, Raj keeps talking. 'It tipped our car over. We need to call an ambulance –'

'Seamus.' One of the other men is looking behind us. 'There's another one there.' The leader looks too, then gestures. 'Get him.' The man, with two others, heads off into the dark. Carl stops and waits for them, then lets them escort him back without a word. We accept him into our huddle, and the circle closes around us again. Raj indicates Carl's helplessly dangling arm: 'He's injured. Please. We need help.'

'I've seen them before.' The pink-haired girl leans forward to stare at us. 'They came to the Visitors' Centre.' The temperature of her voice drops abruptly. 'They're with *him*. McLean.'

There is a long silence. Jamie finally says, 'We're not with him. He's thrown us out. We're not like him.' He turns to the girl. 'We bought your stuff, remember?'



The leader – Seamus – turns away abruptly and paces back to the fire. The others watch him, waiting. I can hear Carl's breath heaving – he is crying quietly. They're crowding all around us, making the air stuffy; I feel warm, dizzy. At last Seamus says, over his shoulder, 'You people will never leave us in peace, will you?'

Raj tries to break in. 'We didn't intend to be here –'

'Spies, now? He's sending spies? To our brother's FUNERAL?' He turns, backlit by the fire. He points at us accusingly. It's a corny gesture, but no-one's laughing. 'We will stop him. Brothers and sisters, he has silenced us too long. We will STOP HIM.'

I have to do this. There's no other way. I close my eyes, let the dizziness come. My knees give way and I feel myself falling, hands grabbing me and holding me up. Then I'm looking. All the possibilities.

This time I'm looking *back*. I feel something give way inside my head, with an almost audible *crack*, something very final. But I can't stop now. I'm thinking: Seamus. I'm focussing on his face. I must have known him somewhere. I mean, look at him. He's gorgeous, self-obsessed and out of his mind. Just my type. Somewhere...

There. Got him.


Seamus Maclain. Otherwise known as Simon Carter. Born and bred in Kent, of wealthy, lapsed-Catholic parents. He has rejected everything about them – their money, their lack of spirituality, their accent. Years ago, he moved to the north of Scotland, learned Gaelic, and finally found something Real.

Thus – Seamus Maclain, long-lost Chieftain of Glencoe.

I know he cries sometimes, in bed at night. I can remember holding him, soothing him. He feels his mother was always distant, cold; I remember meeting the woman and finding her quite likeable, but not having the heart to tell him so. I remember his poems and his sketches, dominated by pale-skinned women with red or golden hair. I remember the little shrine in his bedroom, consecrated to Freya or Ceridwen or Isis – the Great Mother. The Goddess within.

I am back in the snow, held up by Raj and Jamie. I push them gently away - I must stand up straight. I pull the scarves from my head and neck, and let my coat fall open, ignoring the cold. The rune-stone has gotten tangled, so I work it round into its proper place. I let my eyes lock with Seamus's, and smile. I walk towards him. I know how I must look to him: golden lights in my hair, the deep red shimmer of the dress, the symbol of the Tree of Life around my neck.<sup>74</sup> 'We're not your enemies, Seamus Maclain,' I say.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> The Tree of Life rune – , 'Eoh' - counteracts Jamie's wearing of 'Wyrd', the Blank Rune imposing the inevitability of Fate: the Tree preserves life and makes survival possible against the odds. (See notes to pages 206 and 237.) 'Eoh' may also be associated with optimism, the rebirth of the future



His eyes have widened, but his answer is still curt. 'You're with McLean.'

'We've destroyed McLean.'

He smiles, sarcastically. 'Have you, now?'

'Shall I show you how?'

'By all means.'

The pink-haired girl cuts in. 'Don't listen to these people. They've profaned our sacrifice!'

'The children of Fenris still feed.' He gestures towards the chomping sounds by the rock.

'But the ceremony. It's for the Glen! The land needs the sacrifice!'

I say, as confidently as I can, 'The land's already taken the sacrifice. It took your brother. The avalanche took him.' I'm thinking: I must be right. What else could have killed him around here? They're all looking at me. Surely I'm right... surely...

Then the pink-haired girl says, 'It wasn't in the Glen. It was to the east. Not in the Glen itself...' But even she doesn't sound sure of herself. Everyone is wide-eyed now. Seamus half-bows to me, somehow managing not to look ridiculous. 'Show us,' he says.

I turn to Carl. 'Show them the film.'

'I can't.'

I can feel the eyes on the back of my neck. 'What?'

'It won't work.'

'What?'

'It's just a disk.' Carl digs in his pocket, produces the disk. 'It doesn't have a screen, you can't see anything.'

I sigh, and turn back to Seamus. 'We can't show it here.' The pink-haired girl makes a scornful noise, and begins muttering something to the man beside her. I do my best to talk over her: 'We need a viewer. A camera. A mobile?'

Slowly, Seamus reaches under his cloak and produces a mobile phone. It's small, silvery and very snappy-looking. I remember that about him now – no matter how primitivist he might be, he's still to have his gadgets. I want to laugh, but instead I thank him gravely, and pass the phone to Carl. 'Show them it,' I say.

The four of us stand back while they're watching, clustered around the tiny screen. We say nothing. We can hear McLean's voice: *James, look at your sister. She's yours, and*

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from the remains of the past, and can denote 'the firm, positive influence of a strong-willed, decisive woman': an apt symbol for Suzey at this moment. Dee, *Rune Wisdom*, p.34-5.

<sup>75</sup> Suzey 'becoming' the goddess. See Part Two, Chapter Three, 'The Winter Solstice in *Cold City*'.

*you are hers...* I won't meet anyone's eye. It's still too warm – my head begins to hurt, in both temples.

When it's over, however, I force myself to look Seamus in the eye. I know round about are looks of disgust – but it's only the leader that matters. 'That's on the public domain by now,' I say. 'McLean's finished.'

Seamus is looking from me to Jamie and back; he looks awed, nearly afraid. Then he smiles: an open and sunny smile, as if we've just declared a public holiday. 'Well done,' he says. To his group he says, 'These people are our friends. They will come with us.'

I feel Raj relax beside me. I breathe in deep with relief. But it seems only fear was keeping me upright; because down I go, as if someone has cut the strings, down into the cold.

*Bump*, and I'm awake. I'm lying down. Under my head is a metallic scraping sound, like huge ice-skates. I'm moving. There are voices around me.

Against my right cheek there is something warm and textured. I open my eyes carefully. My head is tilted over to the side, and pillowed on fur. Beyond that I can see the legs of someone walking beside me – the figure is bulky and dark and could be anyone. Beyond the figure is a smooth floor of dull silvery glass.

It's the Loch, of course. I'm lying on the sledge, and they're pulling me across the Loch. I am covered in a thick rug, warm but smelly. I feel strange – not in pain but fragile. I shut my eyes and carefully turn face-up; there's a sensation of warm liquid trickling inside my head, unpleasant but not painful. After a moment I open my eyes; onto a jeweller's-shop window of black and sparkling white.

I've always thought the night sky would be dark, away from the lights of the city. And I've always thought of the stars in constellations, a join-the-dots with big spaces in between. I laugh now, to see how wrong I was. Every inch of the sky is shining. We are sliding along, dark figures on the dull ice, and above us is a ceiling of light.

Now I see a glowing band, powdered diamond wiped across the pole. It's the Milky Way, at last. I laugh again and reach up, my fingers tracing the line above me. Faint silvery mist wafts over me. It's frozen breath. Then Raj, his face blue-white, is looking down at me. 'Suzey?'

'Look, love.' I close my fingers, catching the band of stars in my hand. 'It's the Asgard bridge. Do you see it?'<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> The Asgard Bridge, broken at Ragnarok, is intact: Ragnarok has been averted. See Appendix, 'Ragnarok'.



'I see it.'

'I never knew.' All this time, huddling in cities. I never saw. 'I didn't know, Raj.'

'It's all right, Suzey. We're going back with these people. They have a radio...

Suzey? Can you

*Suzey?* There's a bump. The motion has stopped. Raj is still leaning over me. The background behind him is now dark, not gleaming ice. We're on land. Raj says, 'Suzey, stay with me. Stay awake for me now. *Suzey?*'

I try to nod, but I can't move my head. Not painful – I just can't move it. So I whisper yes. He takes my hand, then lets go, backs off, as dark shapes surround me. There's a *hup!* and then I'm airborne. Not a smooth ride like the sledge, just four guys bumping along. I'm on a stretcher.

There are trees and rocks all around us, so I can't see much. Then lamplight opens up in front of us, and we head towards it.

Another face peering down at me. Seamus, looking suitably reverent. 'You're on our island now,' he says.

'The Island of Chieftans,' I say. Seamus looks pleased. 'You have nothing to worry about now,' he says.

And of course he's right. The possibilities have narrowed down, and down, and down again. There are very few possible futures left for me now.

We are indoors now. It's warm and stuffy. Smelly too, woodsmoke and urine and manly sweat. The walls are dark and curved, it's an earthen igloo, set among the tombs of the Maclain Chiefs. I am lowered into place on something that creaks but holds steady, and it's soft. A camp-bed, maybe.

There's a mechanical squawking somewhere. I look around and see Raj bent over a microphone, before dark green whisks in front of him. A curtain. Jamie has pulled it around me, that's what it is. He kneels over me. 'Suzey,' he says. His voice is bright but he is crying. His hand grips mine. 'Suzey, you're going to be okay. They're sending the air ambulance, okay?'

I can hear Raj's voice behind him: '... right side of the head. The pupil's blown. Yes... several times, yes...' Jamie talks more loudly to mask it. 'Just stay awake, Suzey, talk to me, Suzey?'

I shut my eyes for a moment. More possibilities are slipping away. Fewer of them, with every second that passes. I shouldn't look. Don't look. Don't

*Suzey!* Raj, loud voice. He's there now. Jamie's beside him, wiping his eyes. At the foot of my bed is Carl, arm bandaged, watching me, scared. Voices beyond the curtain, men, women; loud then soft, fading in and out. Warm trickling inside my head again.



'Raj,' I say. Loudly, to rise over a surge of background chatter. But Raj has to bend in to hear. 'Raj,' I say. 'I love you. I'm sorry.'

He takes my other hand. He's crying now. 'I love you, Suzey. I –'

No time. 'Jamie,' I say. 'I love you. Listen. Carl. You too.'

'Suzey.' Raj's voice again, jerks me back. 'Stay with us, Suzey. The helicopter's coming. Can you hear it?'

I can hear it. Blades beating the air. I have a thought and smile about it: angel wings! But no, no more time. 'Listen. You three. You look after each other. Promise. Promise.'

'I promise,' says Raj.

'Promise,' says Jamie.

'I promise,' says Carl.

Not enough. There's more to say. Jamie has to go with Mum to Australia. Raj, Raj has to. Do. And Carl. Voices all around me, I can't think. Is that Raj? Is he crying? No, is it a

siren, no can't be. Smell sweat and boiled food. Dark and warm. Jamie? They've let go my hands!

'Suzey! Suzey!'

Is there only one left now? *Suzey!*

Voices going, quiet now, volume turning down and down. *Wolves and Suzey!* and something water running

sharp scent of snow, clean fresh

haar-frost – like vinegar!

who's this now Mum tell him he's got to Raj too

warm dark Raj! Jamie where what about Claire help I can't I can't

dark and warm and warm







smell disinfectant. Mild. Hear liquid running. Pattering.

Low mechanical hum. Voices, moving around in the air above me. Women's voices. A rustle of polythene.

Warm air. Stuffy, but clean. Under me is soft, a mattress. I can feel my own breathing, make my arms move a little. Twitch my toes. My head feels strange, as if an iron clamp has just been removed. Temples throbbing.<sup>77</sup>

Gingerly, I open my eyes a little. The light's bright, fluorescent. No, it's daylight. The voices continue to murmur around me, fading away, coming back. I hear the squeak of rubber soles.

Finally I look. The ceiling is institutional off-white. A hospital ceiling, no question about it. I turn my head slightly, down the off-white wall and the daringly bright blue picture-rail. More light. I have to squint a moment to make out the window. Beyond the glass is dull daylight.

Rain is pattering down the glass. Rain.

My view is blocked by green hospital scrubs. The young woman in them looks down at me and smiles. Then she walks away, saying something I don't catch.

Heavier shoes approach. A head looms over me; hair a grey bob, face flat and impassive. White doctor's coat.

It's Doctor Martin. She scrutinises my face for a moment, then nods to herself.

'Ah, Suzey,' she says. 'There you are.'

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<sup>77</sup> Electrodes have just been removed after electro-convulsive therapy.

## ***Epilogue***

**We think we know ourselves, but all we know  
Is: love surprises us. It's like when sunlight flings  
A sudden shaft that lights up glamorous the rain  
Across a Glasgow street – or when Botanic Spring's  
First crisp, dry breath turns February air champagne.**

**'Epithalamion'  
Liz Lochhead<sup>78</sup>**

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<sup>78</sup> Lochhead & MacGregor, *Handfast*, p.45.

It's official: Glasgow is City of Love.

Park Circus shines. The curving terraces are blonde sandstone and dove-grey granite, bright in the May sunshine; the central ring of garden is green within the black railings. Each lamp-post holds a long, rose-red banner, printed with the white heart logo of the Wedding Capital of Scotland. Parked cars have been banished, although the Rolls-Royces and limos just don't stop coming, and there's still a trail of manure where the horse-drawn carriage passed by. A grey Daimler with a V of white ribbon across the bonnet noses into place outside the black-and-gold railings of the Marriage Suites.

I stop to watch. The Daimler is empty except for the driver, so it's picking up, not dropping off. Nevertheless, there is a stir among the group around the far exit; placards are stabbed into the air, and a few step forward before the two policemen move tactfully in front of them. A few words drift across the Circle – *shame! Blasphemy!* and one male voice roaring about the DESECRATION of GOD'S WILL!!

I make a mental note for next week: hire a piper. If that doesn't drown the fuckers out, nothing will.

If I can get a piper, of course. According to the admin woman in the Marriage Suites, you can't get a hotel room, a restaurant table, a hired car, a hired kilt, or even a bunch of flowers in this city, for love nor money. The city must be coining it in. Glasgow has taken gay marriage to its large, tolerant and thoroughly venal heart. Thank God all our arrangements were done weeks ago; the prices must be going through the roof.

The gold and glass doors of the Marriage Suites are flung back. Two more policemen emerge; they take their places at the bottom of the steps. One fixes me with a hard stare until I back off to a safe distance. Meantime, people in suits and flowery dresses are spilling out onto the pavement. They gather round the foot of the steps like paparazzi, and are soon rewarded by the emergence of two women in ice-cream-coloured suits. The smaller, in strawberry-pink, is laughing and holding a bouquet of yellow roses; the other, larger and dressed in mint-green, looks pleased but slightly embarrassed. It's the woman I saw in the Harline Centre. She doesn't have a bouquet. A little girl in a bridesmaid's dress skips around them, clutching a second yellow-rose bouquet (mystery solved), and looking like she'd fight to the death to keep hold of it. Cameras start clicking; the crowd cheers and flings confetti; a uniformed doorman shouts *no confetti, no confetti!!*, but the crowd keeps throwing it anyway. What's he going to do, un-marry them?

I check my watch as the newlyweds descend the steps to the Daimler. It's half past two; so in exactly seven days, Jamie and Carl, in kilts and heather buttonholes, will emerge



from those gilded doors, married. Only seven days. I finalized the arrangements with the Marriage Suites today. I'm glad to be out and about; I've just been released from the nut-hatch, and I'm still the sanest person in that house. Mum's up to high doh about the threats; Jamie's up to high doh generally. 'I don't know how to do this,' he says. 'I don't even know what to call him. Is he my husband? Am I his husband? What do I do?'

'You love him,' I tell him sternly, 'so you marry him. Simple as that.'

Now the Daimler is leaving, and a black Rolls is taking its place. I can't stand around here forever. I make my way to the exit at the far end of the Circus. On the other side of the road, the placard-bearers are grouped around a trestle-table plastered with garish-looking posters. A banner identifies them as *Scottish Family Protection*. I feel like turning back to the other exit, but I'm nearly past now. I'm deliberately not catching anyone's eye, although I can feel them watching me.

'Scuse me dear!'

One of the men is hailing me. He was the one roaring about DESECRATION, although his voice is at normal level now. For an awful moment I think it's McLean. But it's just a shortish man with a red face and an expression of outraged decency. He's waving a clipboard at me. I must look suitably heterosexual in my plain jeans and shirt. The man steps out into the middle of the road, past the policeman beside him. 'Would you like to sign our petition dear! Save the Scottish family!'

Scottish Family Protection... which ones are they now? Oh yes – they condemned the threats against gay wedding parties, especially the ones about throwing acid; but they understood the *frustration* such people must feel. I've got something for this guy, and it's not my signature. I step out to meet him, digging in my bag – producing a pen in one hand, and making a tightly closed fist with the other.

He's smiling now. 'Sign here please dear. It's a disgrace. These people get to do what they like. Just there dear...'

He thrusts the clipboard at me. I raise my fist and reach up over his head. He steps back, probably expecting me to hit him. I open my hand and let pink and white confetti spill all over him. Most of it goes onto the clipboard. I smile at him, then turn and walk away. He starts bellowing behind me, something about WEE BITCH! But I keep going, waving toodle-oo over my shoulder, not looking back.

I pass one of the policemen. He winks at me. I keep walking.

I am happy to be back in my city.

When I reach Woodlands Road, I stop and wait. I've never seen this road so busy. The traffic is crawling; every tenth car is decked out in ribbons or has flowers in the back window. The pavements throng with plaids, morning-suits and silk dresses. The cafés, gone

daringly Continental on the first warm day of the year, have put tables outside; pedestrians have to tightrope-walk along the kerb to get around them. No-one seems to mind. I see a pair of forty-something men, in matching suits and button-holes, walking hand-in-hand around a table of laughing women; the women apologize and try to squeeze up, but the men just wave and walk on.

I stop on the corner, and let them all mill around me. So many accents and languages: English, Irish, French, Italian, some I can't identify. The gay people of Europe, accustomed to having their rights clawed back at a moment's notice, have seized the day with a vengeance. Whenever Mum gets too worked up about the threats, I tell her there's safety in numbers. So, when the school blazers start to go past, I have to retreat uphill a little to see the kids' faces.

I should stop doing this. At least I've stopped lurking around the school gates at four o'clock – that could have been very awkward to explain. But he must live around here – he walks up Woodlands Road every weekday. So whenever I'm in the West End at this time, I wait.

And there he is.

Peter Balfour. The first time I saw that face it was in the paper, haloed with golden curls; the picture itself was surrounded by a black border, and headlines screaming about his rape and murder. But here he is. He slouches along, a bag over his shoulder, pushing and laughing with his friends. A few weeks ago, he had his hair cut short.

I look at him and feel, yet again, that there must be something I should do. But what? He's passed the appointed day of his murder. I've been scouring the papers every day, but it seems no other boy has died in his place. Should I try to warn him? Or the police? What could I possibly say?

So I watch him going past. Without the curls, his short hair looks darker – it makes his face longer and thinner. I watch him thump a friend's shoulder, and shout something insulting. His angelic beauty is gone.

I am reassured by this. He is no god's beloved now: he is as plain and ordinary as the rest of us. I think he'll be alright.<sup>79</sup>

I'm still a little uneasy, though. I climb up the grassy slope a little, till I'm leaning against a tree. But that's worse – I'm in the shadow, and it's cold. I don't like to feel the temperature drop. I step out into the sun again, and stand for a few minutes. I breathe very deeply, and I don't shut my eyes.

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<sup>79</sup> Glasgow City of Love is a (qualified) counterpart of the post-Ragnarok Golden Age. The god Balder is brought back to life in the Golden Age: so his counterpart, Peter Balfour, is alive here. See Appendix, 'Ragnarok'.



I've tried to make sense of what's happened to me. Before I left the hospital, I tried to pin down Dr Martin. No joy, of course. Three months after ordering the ECT and getting my brain fried, she just looked up at me one day and said, 'You can go home now, if you like.'

Of course I wasn't complaining – when the order of release comes through, you don't ask too many questions. But still, I dithered in the doorway. 'So,' I said. 'Is it likely to come back?'

'If it does, come and see me.'

'Is that *it*?' She looked up in faint surprise. I kept on, 'I mean, is that the best you can do? *It's just one of those things?* What if I, I just wander off again like that?'

'Then I'll bring you back,' she said. 'I did it before.'

I didn't know whether to be reassured or not. 'So, is that it? Is that *all*?'

She thought for a moment. 'That's all.' She stood up and extended her hand across the desk. After a firm handshake and a faint smile she added, 'Goodbye, Suzey. I hope I don't see you again.'

I stand for a moment more in the sunshine, watching another wedding party go past. Two young guys, arm-in-arm, lead a procession of whooping friends and rather stunned-looking parents. One of the mothers has pursed-up lips like a cat's arse, although the man next to her looks happy enough. The young couple are wearing gorgeous buttonholes, white roses surrounded by dark green leaves. I think, maybe we should change the buttonholes? Heather's so ordinary. I could check the florists. I'd have to talk to Jamie, of course, and soon. I should go straight home now...

No. No more putting off what I've got to do. Do it *now*.

I set off before I can lose my nerve again. I push gently across the stream of people, until I emerge into the network of quiet back-streets. Soon I'm crossing the little foot-bridge, and facing the crumbling old steps. I have a quick image of these steps thick with ice – but it's gone in a second. I take a deep breath and climb the stairs to St Mungo's.

I pause at the top, bracing myself for another flashback. But the university just looks pleasantly grubby in the sunshine. A few students lounging around on the grass; the gargoyles leering at them from the guttering overhead. Same dark-gold lettering over the doorway. Same seventies-nightmare 'modern' doors underneath.

I go around the back way, to keep as far from the Registry as possible. I'm on sick-leave, but I still don't want to see any of them yet. So I creep furtively to the back of the main building, to the ancient lift.

I've gotten this far a couple of times; once last week, once the week before. Both times I chickened out. This time, however, I get in, close the rattling gates, and push the button before I have time to think about it. The lift grinds into life, and up I go.



The motion makes my stomach lurch... who am I kidding, it's not the lift. I feel hot and cold, as if I'm ill. I think: I don't want to see him. Ever. I can just turn around... ah, but I can't. I miss him so much I ache for him: this man who scarcely knows I'm alive.

And it's not just him, of course. What if he doesn't like stargazing? What if he doesn't have that poker face, that way of looking sidelong at things he doesn't like? What will it mean, if the man I know doesn't exist? What will it mean if he does?

Because if he does exist... then somewhere my brother is an outcast and an exile. If he does, then somewhere the world ends in ice.

But if he doesn't exist... then I am just an over-imaginative nutter; and my niece's feet have never walked the earth.

The lift reaches the top floor. I cross the hallway. His name is on the door. *I can just leave, I can...* no. Without knocking, I open the door and walk in.

I stop bewildered, not recalling what I'm supposed to see. Charts, photos, printout, paintings...? I make myself look, and find the wall plastered with pictures of wolves. It's the Wild Wolf project, in pride of place. There's the picture of the wolf peeping out from behind the war memorial. It used to make me go *awwww* – it doesn't anymore.

I'm remembering now – if those pictures are there, then behind me is the painting of the wolf swallowing the sun. I turn. A painting is there, but it's not the wolf one. It's much bigger, and done in shades of orange and gold. At the center is a white blankness.

I wait for a moment, letting the colours and whiteness sink in. Then I see it. A human figure, standing with arms spread wide. Waves of fiery colour radiate from it. Traced around the figure is a thin aura of pale gold.<sup>80</sup>

A creak of a chair, and footsteps. He won't surprise me this time. 'Raj,' I call.

He emerges from behind the screen. His hair is collar-length, pushed back behind his ears. He's wearing a dark suit, properly tailored so he looks tall instead of gangly, graceful instead of awkward. He looks so good. He could have any woman he wanted. He's looking at me with a polite expression that could break my heart. 'Hello...?'

'Hi, Raj.' I gesture at the painting, and notice how it makes the whole wall brighter, as if it were done in fluorescents. I can't help but smile. 'I love this.'

He starts to smile too. 'It's Suzey,' he says, 'isn't it?'

'Oh yes,' I say. 'It's me.'

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<sup>80</sup> Based on the William Blake painting 'Glad Day'.

**THE END**

## **Part Two: Letting the Winter In: Myth Revision and the Winter Solstice in Fantasy Fiction**



## Abbreviations

<i>CoN</i>	<i>The Chronicles of Narnia</i>
<i>NL</i>	<i>Northern Lights</i>
<i>SK</i>	<i>The Subtle Knife</i>
<i>AS</i>	<i>The Amber Spyglass</i>
<i>W</i>	<i>Winterlong</i>
<i>CC</i>	<i>Cold City</i>

**Letting the Winter In:  
Myth Revision and the Winter Solstice in Fantasy Fiction**

Flurries of snow rolled through the hall, a bitter wind sent a thousand candles guttering.  
'Who will let the Winter in?' cried a voice from the shadows.  
No reply; only the wind rushing through the room.  
'Who will let the Winter in?' the voice repeated.  
Adonia stood, the blast ruffling the fillet of leaves in her hair. 'Not I!'

*Winterlong*<sup>81</sup>  
Elizabeth Hand

On this day we shut out Nothing!

'Pause,' says a low voice. "Nothing? Think!"

'On Christmas Day, we will shut out from our fireside, Nothing.'

'Not the shadow of a vast City where the withered leaves are lying deep?' the voice replies. 'Not the shadow that darkens the whole globe? Not the shadow of the City of the Dead?'

Not even that. Of all days in the year, we will turn our faces towards that City upon Christmas Day.... City of the Dead, in the blessed name wherein we are gathered together at this time, and in the Presence that is here among us according to the promise, we will receive, and not dismiss, thy people...

'What Christmas Is as We Grow Older'<sup>82</sup>  
Charles Dickens

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<sup>81</sup> Hand, *Winterlong*, p.410.

<sup>82</sup> Dickens, *Works*, p.28.

## Introduction

### Revising the PhD: Writing a Creative Writing Thesis

Ours is a highly individualized culture, with a great faith in the work of art as a unique one-off, and the artist as an original, a godlike and inspired creator of unique one-offs. But fairy tales are not like that, nor are their makers. Who first invented meatballs? In what country? Is there a definitive recipe for potato soup? Think in terms of the domestic arts. 'This is how / make potato soup.'

Angela Carter<sup>83</sup>

For things to stay the same  
they must keep changing.  
Ruth Fainlight<sup>84</sup>

Although the Creative Writing PhD presents unique challenges, it is like any other doctoral thesis in at least one respect: the finished product can depart drastically from the original plan. This thesis represents a departure not from the genre discussed – Fantasy and Fantastic literature<sup>85</sup> – but from the specific focus within that genre. The finished product concentrates on the revisionist use of mythic elements within Fantasy fiction. The original proposal, however – titled 'Through the Back of the Wardrobe' - focused on the mode of transition between the real world and the imaginary: the passage through the looking-glass, the trip through the wardrobe from the English Home Counties into Narnia.

Such a transition, from the 'real' world to a 'secondary' world, can be placed into one of two categories. The first is simple and straightforward, involving passage through a clearly

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<sup>83</sup> Carter, *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales*, p. xii.

<sup>84</sup> 'The Law'. Fainlight, *Moon Wheels*, p.92.

<sup>85</sup> The Fantasy genre is notoriously difficult to define. Brian Attebery described Fantasy as a "fuzzy set"... a set which cannot be defined by its boundaries but which *can* be understood by significant examples of what best represents it'. For the purpose of this thesis, I have adopted a broad church definition of the Fantasy genre: that is, any text which involves some element of magic or the supernatural. A useful summation appears in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*:

A fantasy text is a self-coherent narrative which, when set in our reality, tells a story which is impossible in the world as we perceive it... when set in an otherworld or secondary world, that otherworld will be impossible, but stories set there will be possible *in the otherworld's terms*.

Both quotes: Clute & Grant, *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, p.viii.



defined and physical entranceway: jumping into a magic pool in *The Magician's Nephew*, or crashing through the illusionary barrier to Platform Nine-and-Three-Quarters in Rowling's 'Harry Potter' series. These transitions are mechanistic and involve physical movement on the character's part; Philip Pullman's 'subtle knife' is in the everyday sense unsubtle, cutting door-shaped apertures into parallel worlds:

[Will] touched, withdrew, touched again to make sure, and then did as the old man had said, and cut sideways with the silver edge... Lyra was on her feet already, speechless, because there in the middle of the dusty little room was a window... a gap in mid-air through which they could see another world.

Philip Pullman, *The Subtle Knife*<sup>86</sup>

Above all, the reality of both the transition and the secondary world is unquestionable. Usually described in an authoritative third-person narration, these journeys pass through clearly-defined boundaries into a secondary world which is treated as infallibly real. When Lucy, child-hero of CS Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, travels through the wardrobe into Narnia, we know that Narnia is every bit as real as the wardrobe; Lucy's siblings may doubt her story, but the reader does not.

The second kind of transition is much less clear-cut. It involves a transfer which is more a state of mind than a physical journey. The protagonist perceives a different world, but the reality of this 'world' is indeterminable to the reader. Such transitions are often related in the first person, or at least in a more intimate and less 'godlike' third person. The protagonist may be an unreliable narrator, made untrustworthy by any number of mind-disturbing factors: mental illness, drug use, shock or concussion. The transition often involves no movement, no mechanistic process, no controllable factors whatsoever; the protagonist will simply find him- or herself in a 'world' with no borders, no entrances or exits, no rules and no certainties. Even his or her identity can become uncertain; the psyche splits, forming a different self for the different world, as Clare Beckett, the main character of Lisa Tuttle's *Lost Futures*, discovers:

'Go on,' said the man across the table.

She stared at him, confused. The lighting suddenly seemed wrong, far too bright. She might have been sitting on a stage, unable to see the audience watching

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<sup>86</sup> Pullman, *The Subtle Knife*, p.193-4.

in the darkness beyond, unable to see anything but this table, their two glasses, and this man who was playing the part of an old boyfriend. And what was her part? Who was she?

'Clare?'

That was her middle name. She was Lucy Clare Beckett. But which one?

Lisa Tuttle, *Lost Futures*<sup>87</sup>

Clare shifts between parallel dimensions in her sleep; the morning after this encounter she wakes as Professor L.C. Beckett – and wakes again thereafter as Lucy Clare, to whom Professor Beckett is no more than a dream. Uncertainties abound in this type of transition, which is more a drug-induced 'trip' than a physical journey.

Traveling between worlds is still a part of my finished thesis, but this concept is no longer the central one. This is largely because my original supposition was that the straightforward transfer between worlds occurs primarily in children's Fantasy, whereas the more complex state-of-mind transition is a feature of Fantasy for adults. A few months' research, however, soon showed that this theory does not entirely hold water. In the first place, there are difficulties in dividing Fantasy texts into 'for children' or 'for adults': the genre seems to span the generation gap, and the works of authors like Tolkien, Philip Pullman or Terry Pratchett have proved impossible to categorize according to age. (Witness their availability in two types of covers: colours and cartoons for children, but sleek tasteful black, the new 'plain brown cover', for adults who want to read them on the bus without embarrassment.)

Even assuming we can divide Fantasy into adults' or children's literature, however, I quickly discovered that transitions in adults' books are not invariably complex, and transitions in children's books are often not at all simple. In Stephen King's and Peter Straub's *The Talisman*, a novel whose X-rated gruesomeness would place it firmly in the grown-up section of any bookshop, traveling from our world to the Territories is as easy as drinking a magic potion:

'Okay,' Jack said suddenly. 'Okay, if it's what you need me to do.'

He raised the bottle again, and before he could have any second or third thoughts, he drank...

'Speedy –'

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<sup>87</sup> Tuttle, *Lost Futures*, p.61.

He opened his eyes, and further words died in his throat... Speedy was gone. The graceful arcs of the roller coaster against the sky were gone. Boardwalk Avenue was gone.

He was someplace else now. He was –  
'In the Territories,' Jack whispered.

Stephen King & Peter Straub, *The Talisman*<sup>88</sup>

On the other hand, traveling between worlds in children's fiction is often less straightforward. Alan Garner's *Elidor* is certainly a children's novel, published by Harper Collins' Children's Books imprint; reaching the parallel world of Elidor, however, is a trippy and uncertain experience:

The air took up the fiddle's note. It was the sound Roland had heard upstairs, but now it was louder, building waves that jarred the church, and went through Roland's body until he felt that he was threaded on the sound.

' – Please! – '

'Now! Open the door!'

'I can't! It's locked!'

'Open it! There is little time!'

'But – '

'Now!'

Roland stumbled to the door, grasped the iron handle and pulled with all his weight. The door opened, and he ran out on to the cobbles of the street, head down, driven by the noise.

But he never reached the far pavement, for the cobbles were moving under him. He turned. The outline of the church rippled in the air, and vanished. He was standing among boulders on a sea shore, and the music died into the crash of breakers, and the long fall of surf.

Alan Garner, *Elidor*<sup>89</sup>

The disorientation and sensory overload of this passage casts doubt on Roland's experience; it has the livid brightness of a migraine hallucination, something not quite real but not wholly illusionary. The transfer to Elidor is not achieved by the mechanistic means of opening a door and stepping through – Roland has tried this already, and failed – but by the altering of the character's consciousness, producing the confused and synesthetic perception of being 'threaded on sound'. *Elidor*'s crossing-over is much more complex than the transfer

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<sup>88</sup> King & Straub, *The Talisman*, p.54.

<sup>89</sup> Garner, *Elidor*, p.23.



in the adult *Talisman*; subtle transitions like these persuaded me, before too long, to abandon my original conception. I had expected exceptions, of course, but too many exceptions now began to arise. I discovered magic-realism novels for under-sixteens, like David Almond's *Secret Heart* or *Kit's Wilderness*, in which characters slip dreamily in and out of not-quite-dream worlds; I encountered the simplest kind of magic portal, 'a door-shaped hole in the wall', in adult books such as Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere*.<sup>90</sup> The division, I realized, could no longer be made. Subtle transferences happen in children's fiction, and unsubtle ones happen in grown-up books: grown-up books which, like the edgy urban *Neverwhere*, cannot necessarily be dismissed as childishly simple. When this theory collapsed, so did the major part of my argument; and so I concluded that transitions to imaginary worlds, while interesting and revealing, do not constitute a broad enough or enlightening enough basis for a full-length thesis.

Fortunately for my peace of mind, another theme had begun to arise. The Fantasy genre is firmly based upon myth and folklore; without traditional tales, our substantial 'myth kitty' of legends and fairy stories, the genre could not exist. The genre does not simply retell these tales verbatim, however; it reinvents, reconstitutes and redefines familiar material into something both recognizably archaic and strikingly new. This process of 'myth-revision' came to be my thesis' central and overarching theme: Fantasy's revision of mythic stories, by which familiar stories are reinvented to produce a different outcome.

Within this kind of literature, characters caught up in familiar 'stories' – Biblical, Classical, mythical or literary – can use their knowledge of such stories to change the outcome. A knowing and postmodern phenomenon, its aim is largely to empower humans over traditionally all-powerful and supernatural forces: God, or gods, or Fate. It is therefore, despite its magical or supernatural elements, an agnostic or atheistic trend: a form of 'magic atheism', favoring secular humanism over religion, and unstructured spirituality over Church doctrine. It demolishes hierarchies of male and female, god and mortal, adult and child; it is politicized, challenging concepts of rightful authority, and therefore represents an opposition to the conservative 'Founding Fathers' of the Fantasy genre.

Chapter One compares one of the great Founding Fathers with his newly-arisen Great Adversary: respectively, CS Lewis and Philip Pullman. The chapter argues that Philip Pullman's trilogy *His Dark Materials* is a 'revision' of CS Lewis's sequence of novels, *The Chronicles of Narnia*; the same Biblical events are re-enacted, but their ideology is

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<sup>90</sup> Gaiman, *Neverwhere*, p.323.

completely reversed. Thus the Fall of Adam and Eve is presented by Lewis as the source of all earthly evil; and by Pullman as the source of world-saving love.

Lewis and Pullman are gifts to the literary critic in at least one sense: the consistency, in each author, between his stated ideology and the ideology implied in his fiction. For example, *The Chronicles of Narnia* shows the Fall as disastrous: a lust for forbidden knowledge which allows 'evil' to enter the uncorrupted Narnia (see Chapter One, 'Forbidden Fruit'). This tallies with Lewis's view of lapsed humanity as a 'spoiled species', 'Fallen' into the pride and self-will which form the roots of our 'problem of pain'.<sup>91</sup> *His Dark Materials*, on the other hand, represents the Fall as a 'happy' one; the Fall does not 'spoil' the characters but exalts them, turning them into 'the true image of what human beings always could be, once they had come into their inheritance'.<sup>92</sup> This coincides exactly with Pullman's other descriptions of the Fall, in which 'the prohibition on the knowledge of good and evil' is no more than 'an expression of jealous cruelty', and 'the gaining of such knowledge' is therefore 'an act of virtue': a Fall to be 'celebrated and not deplored'.<sup>93</sup>

In the face of such consistency the critic is less troubled by anxieties of narrative voice, perceived ideology and the other pitfalls involved in trying to claim what the text or the author 'means' to convey. These anxieties cannot be lost altogether – Blake claimed that Milton was 'of the Devil's party', but was quick to add that he 'did not know it'<sup>94</sup> - yet they are greatly alleviated by authors prepared to make such unqualified expressions of belief as, 'I am of the Devil's party, and I know it.'<sup>95</sup>

As this example suggests, both the *Chronicles* and *His Dark Materials* are, in a sense, a 'revision' of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Helpfully, both Lewis and Pullman have written introductions to Milton's epic poem, both expressing great love and admiration for the work. Their perceptions of the poem's 'moral', however, are both absolute and antithetical. Other critics, like John Carey, may regard the 'Satan question' – the issue of whether or not the reader is to sympathise with Milton's Satan – as 'insolubly ambivalent';<sup>96</sup> Lewis and Pullman, however, both seem to find the question entirely soluble. Lewis dismisses Satan as

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<sup>91</sup> 'Our present condition, then, is explained by the fact that we are members of a spoiled species.' Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, p.67.

<sup>92</sup> Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass*, p.497.

<sup>93</sup> Pullman, Introduction to *Paradise Lost*, p.10.

<sup>94</sup> 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell'. Blake, *The Works of William Blake*, p.180.

<sup>95</sup> Vulliamy, 'Author Angers Bible Belt'.

<sup>96</sup> 'Milton's Satan'. Carey, p.161.



ludicrous, 'more a Lie than a Liar,'<sup>97</sup> while Pullman, as we have seen, paraphrases Blake by claiming, 'I am of the Devil's party and I know it'. This opposition persists throughout Lewis's and Pullman's depictions of major Miltonic characters and issues: God, the Serpent in the Garden, Satan's followers, Adam and Eve, innocence and experience.

When we deal with these issues, with Milton and Blake and who was of what 'party', we are potentially opening the floodgates; without strict attention, centuries of debate and deliberation can pour into a thesis to which they are not, strictly speaking, entirely relevant. I have tried therefore to keep in mind that, when this chapter touches on Milton, it is not with the intention of offering any new reading of *Paradise Lost*, or of expressing an opinion on this vexed critical question; this is beyond the scope of a single chapter. The intention is to compare Lewis's and Pullman's opposed readings of Milton, as conveyed by *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *His Dark Materials* respectively, and to fit these readings into the larger ideological context of the two sequences. I will also suggest that Pullman's determination to oppose Lewis has unwittingly incurred collusion: that his anti-Narnia is as didactic as Lewis's Narnia – and that, as one reviewer noted, the 'preach factor' is unacceptably high in both.<sup>98</sup>

The 'preach factor', it can be claimed with confidence, is not high in Elizabeth Hand's *Winterlong*. A casual glance through the novel's litany of orgies, child prostitutes and death-cults might suggest that no sense of morality exists here at all. This is, as I will demonstrate, untrue – a 'casual' glance through *Winterlong* could only be highly misleading - but the ideology in this work of adult Fantasy is undoubtedly slippery. No straightforward and strongly-held beliefs emerge from the author's other works to assist the reader; Elizabeth Hand is more likely to call for 'balance' than to lay claim to extreme opinions. It is therefore difficult to find an antithetical text, a work that reverses *Winterlong* as *His Dark Materials* reverses *The Chronicles of Narnia*; Hand's novel has no polarized good-and-evil characters, no God and Satan to be swapped around at will. It deals instead with a divine figure who is an ideological paradox, a god whose nature incorporates both good and evil: the Classical deity of wine and revel, Dionysos.

There are of course many mythic stories of Dionysos, or Bacchus; some, like Aristophanes' *The Frogs*, depict him as a mellow and buffoonish figure, a god of dinner-parties and sensible drinking. Hand, however, bases her fictional deity – whom I call, for the

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<sup>97</sup>Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, p.97.

<sup>98</sup> Revolution SF Web forum.



sake of convenience, the 'New Dionysos' - on the god of Euripides' *The Bacchae*. Euripides' tragedy shows Dionysos at his wildest, most charismatic, most vital and most dangerous; he is accompanied by his troupe of wild women, the Maenads, whom he drives into a homicidal frenzy against their menfolk, so that a young man can be sacrificed in the god's place. Chapter Two demonstrates how the New Dionysos possesses all these qualities. In most respects the New Dionysos is not an inversion of Euripides' mad and feral god, but a twin: if anything, the amplification of his Hellenic prototype rather than its opposite. Moral inversion can make no difference to a morally ambiguous character; Dionysos revised is Dionysos still: still good and bad, and still a god.

The theme of the sacrificed and sacrificing god appears time and time again in Elizabeth Hand's work: in *Waking the Moon*, *Black Light*, *Mortal Love* and in short stories like 'The Bacchae'. In all of these, Hand retains the Dionysiac element of human sacrifice; or more specifically, of the sacrifice of young men by women. This is the center of a controversy that surrounds Hand's work. When sexualized murders occur in fiction, they are generally committed by male characters upon female victims; in thousands of crime novels, men kill women because they are women. In Elizabeth Hand's work, however, people slain for their gender are almost always male. This has produced an uncomfortable and sometimes hostile critical reaction. 'The Bacchae' was voted *Interzone's* 'most hated story of the year',<sup>99</sup> and 'Justice' also 'annoyed readers': Hand states, 'A man of my acquaintance read it in manuscript and was so enraged by it that he didn't talk to me for two days'.<sup>100</sup> *Waking the Moon* was attacked as 'too feminist, too gynocratic' (although others, as Hand herself notes, felt that 'it didn't take things far enough'). Hand revises myths, but she does not sentimentalize them; she writes Fantasy, but her novels refuse to indulge rose-tinted fantasies of wholly benevolent paganism:

There was a lot of empty-headed New Age goddess stuff going on at that time. We don't really know what went on in ancient goddess-worshipping cultures, but I'm pretty sure it was not this benign, kind of toothless female empowerment that we saw back then in the 1990s goddess movement.<sup>101</sup>

Hand's frequent portrayal of male sacrifice has led some to suppose that she condones it, and has provoked accusations of militant feminism on one side, goddess-

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<sup>99</sup> Author's note to her short story 'The Bacchae'. Hand, *Last Summer at Mars Hill*, p.205.

<sup>100</sup> Note to 'Justice'. Hand, *Last Summer at Mars Hill*, p.119.

<sup>101</sup> Morgan, *Strange Horizons*.

slurring anti-feminism on the other. Both these perspectives fail to recognize the importance of 'balance' in Hand's work, on retaining the morally ambiguous quality of the mythic figures she portrays. Both sets of critics respond to the god as if he were Jehovah or Satan - a figure to be praised absolutely or utterly censured – rather than Dionysos, who is good and evil at one and the same time. Nor do one-sided criticisms deal with the importance of individual female choice in Hand's novels; the author claims 'don't be a victim' as her personal mantra, and this is reflected in her protagonist's refusal to carry out the mythic roles ascribed to them.<sup>102</sup> The Maenad, the sacrificing female – (in *Winterlong*, as in *Waking the Moon* and *Black Light*) is not a blind instrument of the god, a victim as surely as the one to be sacrificed; rather, she is an independent being who can exercise a personal and moral choice, in defiance of the divine will of the god.

Hand's 'revision' of *The Bacchae* must therefore be much more subtle and complex than Pullman's simpler 'inversion' of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. She achieves this by blending the Dionysos myth with the network of legends surrounding the Winter Solstice. Dionysos, traditionally a being associated with warmth, with green leaves and alfresco living, is now a being of the cold; he is at the height of his power at a time when 'anything goes.'

Chapter Two, therefore, shows how *Winterlong* revises a mythic story by blending it with another myth; or by locating the elements common to both. Intertextuality is indispensable to a myth-revision text like *Winterlong*, which requires its reader to tune into a plethora of hints and allusions: Classical mythology, Celtic fairy lore, Dickens' Christmas books, and Disney films like *Pinocchio*. Myth revision is a knowing genre, a modern and postmodernist phenomenon aimed at readers familiar with everything from Shakespeare to Scooby-Doo. 'High' and 'low' culture are, like *Winterlong*'s New Dionysos, 'all one'.

Chapter Three deals with the myth-revision process in my own novel, *Cold City*. *Cold City* is an alternate-world fantasy; the main protagonist, Suzey Pherson, moves between two versions of near-future Scotland, one of which is ice-bound after the failure of the Gulf Stream. This world, the 'Cold World', is heading for the end of the world in ice and fire, the Apocalypse of Norse mythology: Ragnarok. *Cold City* is therefore (amongst other things) a revision of the Ragnarok myth, just as *His Dark Materials* is a reinvention of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and *Winterlong* of the legend of Dionysos.

It was more challenging to write about my own 'reinvention', however, than it was to discuss Elizabeth Hand's and Philip Pullman's. There are difficulties in writing about one's own fiction with the same objectivity and attention to detail with which we tackle the work of

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<sup>102</sup> Soren, Interview with Elizabeth Hand.



other authors. It involves abandoning the coyness and preciousness of fiction writers: the idle and evasive remarks like 'I was just inspired', or 'how should I know what it's about, I only wrote it'. I do not deny that writers are often unaware of the effects they create, nor that they cannot be expected to remember why they wrote each individual sentence. But 'the Muse made me do it' is not a good enough defense for a doctoral thesis. Nor can we respond as Philip Pullman once replied (very wearily) to yet another criticism of *His Dark Materials*: 'If you're writing a novel, especially a long story of thirteen hundred pages, there are always going to be things you wish you'd done differently. Artistic perfection is not achievable in anything much over the length of a sonnet.'<sup>103</sup> Coming from Philip Pullman, an author with scores of awards and millions of readers, this shrugging-off of faults might be charming; a PhD student, however, knows that the exam board will not be so easily pleased.

In Chapter Three, then, I had the task of tracing the connections between *Cold City* and the rest of the myth-revision sub-genre. It helped to ask myself why, although my original proposal planned to incorporate several short stories as well as extracts from the novel, the final submission omitted the stories so as to include as much of *Cold City* as possible. The simple and practical reason – that the novel was planned as a work of 60,000 words, but eventually weighed in at 100,000 and so requires greater representation – is not the whole answer to this question. My short stories certainly include episodes of myth-revision; several, like 'Goldilocks' or 'Walking on Knives', are revised versions of fairy-tales, while 'The Death of Columba' and 'Joe Orton's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*' rewrite (respectively) medieval church legend and Shakespearean comedy.<sup>104</sup>

I began to feel, however, that these stories were just dress rehearsals: not as short stories in their own right, but as treatments of myth. Fairy tales, much as I adored them (and still do), had begun to seem brief and limited – the death of a medieval saint, and a string of comic confusions in Fairyland, lacked the scope and the depth of the myth to which my attention had now turned. *Cold City* deals with the Viking legend of the end of the world, 'Ragnarok' – the 'fate of the gods', the annihilation of humans and immortals alike. This mythic story resonates, like no other I have ever encountered, in its stoical acceptance of this world's ultimate reality – the one C.S. Lewis tackled so controversially at the end of *The Chronicles of Narnia* – that we all, eventually, have to die. Ragnarok involves no Rapture, no heavenly afterlife from which to contemplate the destruction of the unworthy, no indestructible God to shield us from the agonies of the Apocalypse. The gods will die along

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<sup>103</sup> Spanner, 'Heat and Dust'.

<sup>104</sup> See McSporrán, bibliography.



with the rest of us; we will, as Tom Lehrer sang, 'all go together when we go' in this most democratic of Armageddons.<sup>105</sup>

Ragnarok's grim equality creates a great consensus of opinion. There are Christians today who eagerly anticipate the end of this world and their entry into the next; but there are no accounts of ancient Norsemen looking forward to Ragnarok. No-one, good or evil, divine or mortal, wants it to happen. There might be a golden new world afterwards, much like the Christian Promised Land; but only two humans, spared purely for breeding purposes, will be permitted to occupy it. A handful of warriors will remain in Valhalla: ever ready for a new battle which, in a perfect world, can surely never come. Everyone else, the vast majority of the human race, however virtuous or innocent, will be dispatched to the gloom of the Nordic Underworld.

Ragnarok is therefore a paradox. It is fated, and so cannot be avoided, yet it is the epitome of what *must* be avoided. This is the narrow opening through which the revision process can enter. Suzey Pherson, confined in psychiatric care, dreams of the fiery Armageddon which is fated in both Christian and pagan doctrine. Like Wendy in *Winterlong*, she tries to avert the Apocalypse by tapping into the paradoxical associations of the Winter Solstice. Like Wendy, she tries to evade the inevitable. But what, after all, can there possibly be to lose?

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<sup>105</sup> 'And we will all go together when we go  
What a comforting thought that is to know.  
Universal bereavement, an inspiring achievement  
Yes, we will all go together when we go.'  
Lehrer, 'We'll All Go Together When We Go'.

## 1) Reversing the Myth: CS Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* versus Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*

The original Archangel, or possessor of the command of the Heavenly Host, is call'd the Devil or Satan, and his children are call'd Sin and Death.

But in the book of Job, Milton's Messiah is called Satan.

For this history has been adopted by both parties.

*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*<sup>106</sup>

William Blake

The genres of Fantasy and the Fantastic could not exist without myth, legend and folklore. Without the Anglo-Saxon sagas there would be no *Lord of the Rings*; without medieval Arthurian legends there would be no *Once and Future King* or *Mists of Avalon*; without folk-tales of the undead there would be no *Dracula*. When we imagine the magical or supernatural, we reach back in time, to our oldest beliefs and most ancient stories.

Rich as these stories are, there is an occupational hazard in using them, as Philip Larkin has noted:

As a guiding principle I believe that every poem must be its own sole freshly created universe, and therefore have no belief in 'tradition' or a common myth-kitty . . . To me the whole of the ancient world, the whole of classical and biblical mythology, means very little, and I think that using them today not only fills poems full of dead spots but dodges the poet's duty to be original.<sup>107</sup>

The 'duty' of originality is a hard one, in a genre based upon a 'myth-kitty' of set stories with familiar outcomes. Yet trying to change these stories, especially in an attempt to make the characters more appealing or to ensure a feel-good outcome, can lead to spectacular failure; turning a tragic ending into a comedic one is tricky to accomplish. For example, the King Lear story passes through various mutations, most largely credible, before it leads to Shakespeare's version;<sup>108</sup> the Nahum Tate rewrite of *King Lear*, however, in which

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<sup>106</sup> Blake, p.179.

<sup>107</sup> Larkin, p.69.

<sup>108</sup> In Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, for example (p. 81 onwards).



Lear and Cordelia survive and Cordelia marries Edgar, depends upon a highly contrived nick-of-time rescue to bring about its happy ending.<sup>109</sup> Even the usually pliant Arthurian legends fail to impress in *First Knight*, a film condemned for its 'idiotic Hollywood ending' in which Lancelot and Guinevere fall in love but do not commit adultery, so that when Arthur dies he peacefully leaves the nation in their hands.<sup>110</sup> Many Fantasy writers, therefore, tend to settle for updated retellings with only minor adaptations: for example, Melvyn Burgess's futuristic version of the Volsung saga, *Bloodtide*, uses genetic mutation and cyborg technology to enact the same events.

Such retellings can be powerful, especially when aimed at child readers who are less likely to be familiar with the original tales. Other writers, however, use mythic stories differently. They rewrite the tales and change the outcome, while still remaining within the parameters of the original. The tale is not simply discarded; rather, it is made to function in a different way. In Alan Garner's *The Owl Service*, for example, the vengeful spirit of Blodwedd, the woman created from flowers then turned into an owl in the *Mabinogion*, is placated by allowing her to transform back into peaceful flowers. This is achieved not by magical power or trickery, but by a change of heart on the part of the story's teenage characters. When forgiveness takes the place of hatred, Blodwedd, who will 'use what she finds' in those around her, becomes flowers again.<sup>111</sup>

This particular kind of myth-revision is becoming a major feature of Fantasy writing. Myth-revision is an anti-fatalistic phenomenon, emphasizing the empowerment and responsibility of the individual, since the revision process is often brought about by one character choosing to change the role he or she plays in the drama. It is also an atheistic concept; Divine Will is not inevitable, but can be thwarted by human intervention (and, in many cases, ought to be thwarted). In Terry Pratchett's and Neil Gaiman's *Good Omens*, for example, the final battle between Heaven and Hell is forestalled when the child Antichrist – who is, after all, half-human – decides he would rather go home and play with his friends instead. This kind of knowing and paradoxical revisionism is typical of the myth-busting genre.

Any system of myth, legend or folktale can be revised in this type of Fantasy. Wherever there is a familiar story – even a comparatively recent one – it can be inverted and rewritten. Gregory Maguire's *Wicked*, for example, rewrites *The Wizard of Oz* to show us a

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<sup>109</sup>Tate, *The History of King Lear*.

<sup>110</sup>'One of the most shoddy Camelot stories to date... Add to this an idiotic Hollywood ending, and *First Knight* turns out to be a mess of the first order'. Berardinelli.

<sup>111</sup> Garner, *The Owl Service*, p.155.



not-quite-so-Wicked Witch of the West. Fairy-tale revisionism is still going from strength to strength; from Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* to the *Shrek* films, rewritten fairy-tales invert misogynistic and xenophobic principles by having princesses reject princes and marry the wolf or the ogre instead. Any pantheon of gods can also be employed: the Celtic deities of Ian McDonald, the Egyptians of Tanith Lee, the Norse gods of Neil Gaiman.

The myth-revision genre is at its boldest and most controversial, however, when it deals not merely with the gods, but with God. When rewriting the stories of Christ, Moses or Mohammed, the author is, of course, altering a 'myth' which for millions is not a mere 'myth' at all. Islamic and Judeo-Christian elements – angels, devils, visions of Heaven or Hell – have always abounded in Fantasy; the blockbusting popularity of *The Da Vinci Code* suggests that readers are now prepared to consider heavily 'revised' versions of Christianity, at least in fiction. When it comes to attacking or rejecting religion itself, however, most writers choose to tread very carefully indeed.

There is, however, one very notable exception. Philip Pullman's trilogy *His Dark Materials* retells Biblical events, but reverses the ideological interpretation traditionally placed upon them. Inspired by his own readings of Milton and Blake, Pullman has his child characters re-enact the rebellion of Satan against God, the temptation in the Garden of Eden, and the Fall of Man; in *His Dark Materials*, however, Satan is a freedom-fighter against a tyrannical God, and the Fall is a glorious coming-of-age which restores life to a dying world.

These concepts, of course, are not new. William Blake, as Pullman observes, covered the same ground two hundred years ago.<sup>112</sup> Their inclusion in a work of children's fiction, however, is ground-breaking, especially in a work prepared to describe Christianity as 'a very powerful and convincing mistake.'<sup>113</sup> *His Dark Materials* has, unsurprisingly, met with a great deal of controversy: it has been described as 'leadenly politically correct';<sup>114</sup> as 'reductive and contemptuous' and dependent upon narrative 'absurdities';<sup>115</sup> as 'anti-religious tub-thumping'; or, in one memorable Amazon review, 'as beautiful as a cobra, and about as welcome in the house'.<sup>116</sup> It represents myth-busting at its most outspoken.

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<sup>112</sup> Pullman says: 'Blake once wrote of Milton that he was a "true poet, and of the Devil's party, without knowing it". I am of the Devil's party, and I know it.' Vulliamy.

<sup>113</sup> Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass*, p.464.

<sup>114</sup> Hitchens.

<sup>115</sup> Both Alan Jacobs. Quoted in Hunt & Lenz, p.157-8.

<sup>116</sup> Amazon.com. Customer Reviews.

The controversy around Pullman is not entirely based on *His Dark Materials* alone. Pullman is famous – or infamous – for his attack on another sequence of children's Fantasy novels: CS Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In his 1998 Guardian article 'The Dark Side of Narnia', Pullman described the *Chronicles* as 'racist', 'misogynistic', 'sneering', 'reactionary', 'vile and poisonous'. He went on to accuse Lewis's 'powerful seductive narrative voice' of peddling 'propaganda in the service of a life-hating ideology'.<sup>117</sup>

It is striking that the sequence Pullman loathes deals with the same themes as his own. Both are works of allegorical Fantasy. Both relate the adventures of a group of bold English schoolchildren who stumble onto a system of magical worlds: in itself a common trope in children's Fantasy, from Lewis Carroll's *Alice* to JK Rowling's *Harry Potter*. Where Rowling contents herself with generalised conflicts between good and evil, however, Lewis's and Pullman's agendas are rather more high-concept. Lewis, like Pullman, re-enacts Satan's rebellion and the Fall of Man. Both deal with the themes of Milton's *Paradise Lost* - but Pullman is, as we shall see, very much 'of the Devil's party'.

Pullman, therefore, is not just 'revising' the Bible; he is revising *The Chronicles of Narnia*, inverting all its ideological values. In this, *His Dark Materials* is an all-but complete illustration of the myth-revision process. As critics like Burton Hatlen have pointed out, Pullman has – consciously or otherwise – created an 'inverted homage' to Lewis's world: an 'anti-Narnia', in which Lewis's villains are good (and his 'good guys' bad), Lewis's sins are virtues (and his virtues sins), and Lewis's Heaven is a Dante-esque Hell.<sup>118</sup>

## **Absolute Rule: Images of God**

For this reader at least, it's difficult to warm to a God who watches complacently while his forces suffer terrible punishment, deliberately waiting before letting his Son rout the enemy so as to make his triumph seem more splendid... That's not divinity: it's public relations.

Introduction to *Paradise Lost*<sup>119</sup>  
Philip Pullman

Many of those who say they dislike Milton's God only mean that they dislike God.  
*Preface to Paradise Lost*<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Pullman, 'The Dark Side of Narnia'.

<sup>118</sup> Burton Hatlen, 'Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, a Challenge to the Fantasies of JRR Tolkien and CS Lewis, with an Epilogue on Pullman's Neo-Romantic Reading of *Paradise Lost*'. Lenz & Scott, p.82.

<sup>119</sup> Pullman, Introduction to *Paradise Lost*, note to Book 6, p.167.



Perhaps the most striking contrast is between the two depictions of the God who wields absolute power over his subjects. In both *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *His Dark Materials*, the child-characters meet, face-to-face, the deity of their own system of worlds: Lewis's Aslan, and Pullman's 'Authority'.

Aslan and Authority are, as the A-names suggest, the Alpha males of their respective worlds, and they do not share power with their subjects. Otherwise, however, they are as different as any two deities could possibly be. In Aslan, Lewis, presents us with a benign dictator, established throughout as utterly sympathetic, good and true. Narnia's child-characters instinctively recognise his benevolence; they experience 'that strange feeling – like the first signs of spring, like good news' (*Chronicles of Narnia*, p.146), merely at the sound of his name. Aslan loves those he rules, and empathises with them in their suffering; Digory, whose mother is terminally ill, feels Aslan 'must really be sorrier about his Mother than he was himself.' (*CoN*, p.83). Aslan is even prepared to die for his subjects, sacrificing himself to save the repentant traitor Edmund.

Pullman's Authority, on the other hand, is created to be utterly unsympathetic, wicked and false. He is a caricature of the Old Testament Jehovah: jealous, vindictive and proud, reminiscent of two other 'revised' versions of the traditional Christian God, Blake's 'Father of jealousy' Nobodaddy<sup>121</sup> and the Demiurge of Gnostic tradition.<sup>122</sup> The Authority imprisons every dead soul in the hellish Underworld; his Church is a 'permanent Inquisition' (*The Amber Spyglass*, p.393) which commits all the atrocities of the auto-da-fé. The Authority's forces practise what in the universe of *His Dark Materials* is the ultimate cruelty: the process known as 'intercision', the severing of the psychic link between a human and his or her companion animal-spirit, known as the 'daemon'. The daemon represents the life-force, the part of oneself one leaves behind at death; there is 'no passage to the land of the dead' for one who still has a daemon (*AS*, p.296). Daemons also represent sexuality; they take their final shape at the first sexual experience, 'having felt a lover's hands on them' (*AS*, p.528). Thus intercision constitutes both castration (or clitorodectomy) and lobotomy. The law of

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<sup>120</sup> Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, p. 130.

<sup>121</sup> 'To Nobodaddy'. Blake, *Works*, p. 93.

<sup>122</sup> 'The Demiurge... This is Jehovah, the God of the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament). He is portrayed as the creator of the earth and its life forms. He is viewed by Gnostics as fundamentally evil, jealous, rigid, lacking in compassion, and prone to genocide.' 'Gnostic Beliefs', Religious Tolerance.Org.



Authority's Church is the 'life-hating ideology' that Pullman perceives in *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

In this, we have found an area in which *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *His Dark Materials* share common ideological ground: the somewhat Presbyterian view that a true god requires no Church to make intercession between himself and his subjects. Priests are shown as contemptible in both these works. In Narnia, there is only one 'priest' of Aslan: a talking ape called 'Shift' (*CoN*, p.669 onwards), who turns out to be a fake. Pullman's priests are life-hating zealots, whose cold-bloodedness is indicated by the forms of their daemons: non-mammals such as frogs, lizards and beetles (*AS*, p.69, 73 & 80). They form a sharp contrast with the warm-blooded mammalian daemons, which tend to be owned by sympathetic characters (like Will and Lyra) or by characters capable of redemption; the wicked Mrs Coulter, for example, has a golden-furred monkey, whose warm colouring hints at the passionate self-sacrifice she will eventually make to save her daughter.

While Aslan inspires his beloved people against the false priest, however, Pullman's Authority contacts his subjects only through the medium of his cold-blooded priests and their Church. Once, like Aslan, Authority 'walked in the garden and spoke' with humanity (*AS*, p.344); but he is now remote and redundant, and delegates his power to his tyrannical regent, Metatron. Authority is neither omniscient nor omnipresent – by the time the child-heroes encounter him, he is 'demented and powerless' and has 'no will of his own' (*AS*, p.431 & 432).

In both books, closely bound up with issues of God's goodness are issues of God's absolute right to rule. Throughout the *Chronicles of Narnia*, Lewis stresses the legitimacy of Aslan's godhood, capitalising him as 'the Lion'. Aslan's Christlike qualities are, of course, numerous: he is omniscient and omnipresent; he is immortal, rising from the dead after his sacrifice on the Stone Table; he takes physical form and walks among his people, appearing to them frequently and in person. Narnia itself recognises Aslan as its king; the White Witch's false winter starts to dissolve as soon as he sets foot on Narnian soil (*CoN*, p.163 onwards). Above all, Aslan rules Narnia because he is its Creator; as readers we can be certain of this, because we witness the Creation for ourselves:

The Lion opened his mouth... and the deepest, wildest voice they had ever heard was saying:

'Narnia, Narnia, Narnia, awake. Love. Think. Speak. Be walking trees. Be talking beasts. Be divine waters.'

*Chronicles of Narnia*, p.70

'Authority', however, is no Creator. He is once again reminiscent of the Gnostic Demiurge, a merely *semi*-divine being who 'hubristically declares himself the only existing God'.<sup>123</sup> The Demiurge, however, did indeed create angels, humans and the physical universe, unaware that the spirit he placed in them came from beings higher than himself: he has the partial defense of ignorance. At this point, however, Pullman parts company with Gnostic thought: as one who condemns as 'life-hating' the desire to transcend the physical, Pullman refuses to portray the physical universe as the terminally flawed creation of a corrupt Demiurge. Authority, therefore, is not ignorant, but simply dishonest; he had no part in the Creation, and knows very well that he did not, as the rebel-angel Balthamos explains:

The Authority, God, the Creator, the Lord, Yahweh, El, Adonai, the King, the Father, the Almighty – those were all names he gave himself. He was never the creator. He was an angel like ourselves... The first angels condensed out of Dust, and the Authority was the first of all. He told those who came after him that he had created them, but it was a lie.

*The Amber Spyglass*, p.33-34

The issue of Creator is a crucial one for Lewis and Pullman, as for Milton before them. Indeed, the disagreement between Lewis's position and Pullman's can be illustrated by the dispute between Milton's law-abiding angel Abdiel and the rebellious Satan; Abdiel describes God's right to rule as stemming directly from his status as Creator:

Shalt thou give law to God, shalt thou dispute  
With him the points of liberty, who made  
Thee what thou art, and formed the powers of heaven  
Such as he pleased, and circumscribed their being?  
*Paradise Lost*<sup>124</sup>

Satan retorts by denying, as Pullman's Balthamos does, that God was the Creator at all:

...who saw  
When this creation was? rememb'rest thou  
Thy making, while the maker gave thee being?  
We know no time when we were not as now;  
Know none before us, self-begot, self-raised

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<sup>123</sup> 'Gnosticism', The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

<sup>124</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 5, lines 822-5, p.162.



By our own quickening power.  
*Paradise Lost*<sup>125</sup>

Lewis sees in Satan's reply 'the heresy which is at the root of his whole predicament'; an expression of the 'doom of Nonsense' which Lewis believes characterises Satanic revolt, the claim that he (Satan) "'just grew" like Topsy or a turnip'.<sup>126</sup> Philip Pullman does not comment directly on the Satan/Abdiel quarrel in his introduction to *Paradise Lost*, but his lying Authority, claiming to be the Creator of beings who, like himself, are simply 'structures' or 'complexifications' of Dust, is surely response enough. Lewis, like Abdiel, perceives a true God and a true Creator; Pullman, like Satan, sees a jumped-up angel who obtains tyrannical power by lying about his Creator status. The two authors only 'agree' in that, like Satan or Abdiel, neither queries a Creator's entitlement to absolute power in the first place. The Gnostic position – acknowledgement of the Creator, followed by transcendence beyond his Creation<sup>127</sup> – is not addressed in either of these works.

The Creator issue does illustrate, however, how diametrically opposed Lewis and Pullman are in their readings of *Paradise Lost*, as expressed in both their fiction and their criticism. They disagree not in matters of comprehension, but in implied ideology. CS Lewis's statement about FR Leavis could also apply to Philip Pullman: the two do not 'see different things when we look at *Paradise Lost*. He sees and hates the very same that I see and love. Hence the disagreement between us tends to escape from the realm of literary criticism. We differ not about the nature of Milton's poetry, but about the nature of man, or even the nature of joy itself.'<sup>128</sup> The opposition between Lewis and Pullman is purely ideological: it is, as one Lewis website suggests, a space where 'two worldviews collide'.<sup>129</sup>

The Authority, then, is not the Creator, and is not omnipotent; nor is he immortal. Both Aslan and Authority die in the course of their respective fictions. Yet for Aslan - as for all the righteous in Narnia - death appears to have very little sting. When faced with a very

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<sup>125</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 5, lines 856-861, p.163.

<sup>126</sup> Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, p.97-8.

<sup>127</sup> 'Before gaining *gnosis*, the candidate worshipped the demiurge, mistaking him for the true God: now... the candidate indicates that he has been released from the demiurge's power... [H]e addresses the demiurge, declaring his independence, serving notice that he no longer belongs to the demiurge's sphere of authority and judgement, but to what transcends it.' Pagels, p.37.

<sup>128</sup> Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, p. 134.

<sup>129</sup> Richard James, Cumberland River Lamppost'.



healthy Prince Caspian, Aslan assures his companions: 'He has died. Most people have, you know. Even I have.' (CoN, p.662) In one of the *Chronicles*' most celebrated moments, Aslan, Christ-like, submits himself to death by sacrifice to atone for Edmund's sin, in accordance with the 'Deep Magic from the Dawn of Time'. He is shaved like Samson, then knifed to death on the Stone Table, while his watching companions 'cried till they could cry no more' (CoN, p.182). Later the same day, however, the Table cracks in two, and Aslan is restored to life again, in accordance with the 'Deeper Magic from Before the Dawn of Time':

There, shining in the sunrise, larger than they had seen him before, shaking his mane (for it had apparently grown again) stood Aslan himself.

'...Oh, Aslan!' cried Lucy, and both girls flung themselves upon him and covered him with kisses.

*Chronicles of Narnia*, p.184–185

Pullman, who is prepared at least to acknowledge that Christianity is 'a very good story',<sup>130</sup> deplores what he regards as 'the colossal impertinence, to put it mildly, of hijacking the emotions that are evoked by the story of the Crucifixion and Resurrection in order to boost the reader's concern about Aslan'.<sup>131</sup> It is interesting to note, however, how Lewis depicts Christianity as, in itself, a story rewritten. The 'Deep Magic' – representing Old Testament law – cannot be put aside: for sin there must be an atoning sacrifice. Yet the 'Deeper Magic' – the New Testament revelation of Christ's martyrdom and resurrection – fulfils the 'Deep Magic' and allows life to be perpetuated. The fact that the 'new' story is derived from one much older (*Before the Dawn of Time*) is not uncommon in myth-busting Fantasy; as we shall see, *Wintertong's* Wendy redefines herself as an ancient goddess, Anat, to help gain control over the much younger Dionysos. Lewis's Christianity is a revised myth, the New Testament redefining the Old; a 'testament' is, after all, a declaration of someone's story.

The death of Pullman's Authority is myth-busting of a different and harsher kind. In *His Dark Materials*, 'God' – Jehovah, Yahweh, the Lord – is not a god at all; he is a pathetic joke-figure, no more god-like than Lewis's phoney Aslan, the donkey Puzzle. Lyra and Will find Authority on a battlefield, and have no idea who he is. This scene is the reader's only glimpse of the Authority; and it shows a Wizard-of-Oz figure, far from 'great and terrible', but

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<sup>130</sup> Spanner, 'Heat and Dust'.

<sup>131</sup> Pullman, 'The Dark Side of Narnia'.

a pitiful fake. The Authority, unlike Aslan in his humility, has clung to his worldly power and his life; he is now painfully old and enfeebled, giving 'the impression of terrifying decrepitude, of a face sunken in wrinkles, of trembling hands and a mumbling mouth' (AS, p.416). Now, mindless and senile, he is not only capable of death, but welcoming of it:

Between them [Will and Lyra] helped the ancient of days out of his crystal cell; it wasn't hard, for he was as light as paper, and he would have followed them anywhere, having no will of his own, and responding to simple kindness like a flower to the sun. But in the open air there was nothing to stop the wind from damaging him, and to their dismay his form began to loosen and dissolve. Only a few moments later he had vanished completely, and their last impression was of those eyes, blinking in wonder, and a sigh of the most profound and exhausted relief.

Then he was gone: a mystery dissolving in mystery. It had all taken less than a minute, and Will turned back at once to [his comrade] the fallen chevalier.

*The Amber Spyglass, p.432*

There was no self-sacrifice by the Authority, and now he has no glorious resurrection. The watching children pity him, but they certainly don't 'cry till they could cry no more'; nor does anyone else. His demise is pitiful, final and long overdue.

The allegorical contrast between the two Gods is strong, even heavy-handed. Aslan is a vibrant god who shrugs off death, to the joy of his loving young subjects: a God of what Lewis sees as a passionate living faith. Authority is senile and redundant, unrecognised and unlamented by the young people around him: the God of a dying religion. Pullman casts Jehovah as an irrelevant sky-god, who fades like Ouranos and Kronos because, as Karen Armstrong notes, he is no longer 'primarily concerned with humanity'.<sup>132</sup> He is the outmoded bogeyman of Pullman's anti-authoritarian atheism, worthless next to the human beings he once claimed to rule.

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<sup>132</sup> Armstrong, p.22.

## The Devil's Party

The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels and God, and at liberty when of Devils and Hell, is because he was a true Poet, and of the Devil's party without knowing it.

William Blake<sup>133</sup>

I am of the Devil's party, and I know it.

Philip Pullman<sup>134</sup>

Each of the two God-figures – Authority and Aslan alike – must have his opposite number: his seditious Lucifer. The villainous White Witch, the 'false Queen' of Narnia, is Aslan's Great Adversary, the rebellious Satan of Narnia. Like Authority, an angel pretending to be God, she usurps power by pretending to be what she is not; that is, human:

'That's what I don't understand, Mr Beaver,' said Peter. 'I mean isn't the Witch herself human?'

'She'd like us to believe it,' said Mr Beaver, 'and it's on that that she bases her claim to be Queen. But she's no Daughter of Eve. She comes of... your father Adam's first wife, her they called Lilith. And she was one of the Jinn... No, no, there isn't a drop of real human blood in the Witch.'

*Chronicles of Narnia*, p.147

In Hebraic legend, Lilith was banished from Eden for refusing to 'lie under' Adam.<sup>135</sup> George MacDonald, whose work greatly influenced Lewis's,<sup>136</sup> shows her in *Lilith* as a vampiric child-murderer who will not humble herself before the 'proper' authority of her husband and her God. The White Witch, therefore, represents not only the first mortal to rebel against divine authority, but also the first woman to rebel against masculine authority.

In Narnia, this is not held to be an admirable thing. In Lewis's imaginary country, a rebellious female is not just wicked but literally inhuman, a daughter of Lilith and therefore a

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<sup>133</sup> 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell'. Blake, p. 180.

<sup>134</sup> Vulliamy.

<sup>135</sup> Adam tried to make Lilith lie beneath him during sexual intercourse. Lilith would not meet this demand of male dominance. She cursed Adam and hurried to her home by the Red Sea. 'Lilith,' *Encyclopaedia Mythica*.

<sup>136</sup> 'What it actually did to me was to convert, even to baptise... my imagination.' Lewis, Introduction to *Lilith*, p. xi.



Jinn. Like Milton's Garden of Eden, Narnia was created as a hierarchy – Aslan places humans above Beasts, and males above females.<sup>137</sup> Aslan approves only 'Daughters of Eve' to be Queens of Narnia; apart from the Witch and her fellow descendant of Lilith, the equally cruel and wrongful Queen of the Underland, no Queen ever rules in Aslan's country without a High King to outrank her. A Queen who tries to rule without a King is effectively rebelling against God, and so the White Witch, who rules alone, can only be a usurper. In Lewis's fantasy of the great Christian struggle, the image of Lilith looms as large as that of Satan, if not larger still.<sup>138</sup>

The White Witch therefore, as both Lilith and Satan, has a double dose of what Lewis has described as the 'Great Sin': Pride, through which 'the devil became the devil... the complete anti-God state of mind'<sup>139</sup>. Lewis shows his abhorrence of such pride by making his 'rebel', the White Witch, not only doubly unsympathetic but doubly unnatural. In her female Pride she is inhuman, a 'Jinn'; in her mortal Pride she is undead, a vampire-like immortal whose skin is 'deadly white, white as salt' (CoN, p.93). In Lewis's system, it is she who is cold-blooded - she who contrasts with the warm-blooded lion Aslan, who is described throughout the book as 'golden' (CoN, p.79 &175), like the monkey-daemon of Pullman's Mrs Coulter.

Lewis's White Witch is reminiscent of Andersen's Snow-Queen, associated always with the cold and the sterile. Those who displease her are not just imprisoned, but frozen: turned into statues. She keeps Narnia locked in a perpetual and unnatural winter. This is a common trope in Fantasy literature; a state of protracted and artificial winter, like 'Fimbul-winter', the three-year winter that precedes Ragnarok, the Norse Apocalypse. This type of winter is to be distinguished from the 'natural' season of winter, which gives way naturally to spring; the Witch's winter is clearly a Fimbul-winter, however, since it keeps Narnia in the condition most terrible to a child reader - 'always winter and never Christmas' (CoN, p.159) – thereby forestalling the Winter Solstice and the advent of spring. Accordingly, the Witch hates and fears Christmas, deploring its 'gluttony', 'waste' and 'self-indulgence' (CoN, p.163). Lewis here indulges in a little myth-revising of his own; his version of Lilith is not the

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<sup>137</sup> 'You shall rule and name all these creatures' – Aslan to the (human) 'first King' of Narnia. (Lewis, *Chronicles of Narnia*, p.81). Aslan's first council consists of: 'the chief Dwarf... the River-God... Oak... the He-Owl, and both the Ravens and the Bull-Elephant' (p.72): apart from one of the Ravens, all male.

<sup>138</sup> I have explored the influence of Lilith more thoroughly in 'Daughters of Lilith: Witches and Wicked Women in *The Chronicles of Narnia*'. See McSporrán, bibliography.

<sup>139</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p.100.

promiscuous reveller of Hebrew legend, but a puritanical killjoy reminiscent of Pullman's 'life-hating' priests.

Pullman, too, has his Ice-Witch, queen of a wintry landscape. Both the Witch and the landscape, as we have now come to expect, are the moral antitheses of Lewis's versions. Pullman's Ice-Witch is Serafina Pekkala, ruler of a clan of (mostly benign) witches. Serafina Pekkala is a queen, but is as close to a democratic ruler as a queen may be; she rules by the consent - or the request - of her people. Unlike the White Witch, Serafina regards assuming authority as a matter of duty; she shows little love of power or prestige, and would have remained with her human lover if not summoned home after the death of her mother. 'So I left,' she says, 'as I had to' (*NL*, p.315). Serafina helps Lyra and the other children escape the terrible fate of intercision, which marks her out as an enemy of the 'life-hating' Church; she remains Lyra's friend and supporter throughout *His Dark Materials*.

In Serafina, secular revisionism dovetails with feminist revisionism. As a Witch, she is unacceptable to Lewis's system because she encroaches upon divine powers; as a queen (a queen in her own right, not the consort of a king), she encroaches upon earthly powers which, in the *Chronicles*, are the preserve of men. Yet she is both an effective ruler and a highly moral being: one of 'the good guys'. She is a benevolent Witch-Queen: in Lewis's scheme, a contradiction in terms.

Like the White Witch, Serafina is a 'Witch of the North', always associated with ice and snow; she represents not an unnatural 'Fimbul-winter', however, but the natural and exhilarating cold of the Polar North. Snow, ice and winter landscapes are ascribed moral values in both Lewis's and Pullman's works. Throughout the *Chronicles*, Narnia is shown as pleasantly warm; harsh weather, as far as we are shown, occurs outside Narnia, in the hot deserts of Calormen, or at least in the wild, stormy 'North' of Narnia (where the Witches come from). We see ice and snow in Narnia only when the White Witch infects it with her unnatural 'Northern' presence (Lewis is perhaps remembering that Milton's Satan assembled his rebellious troops at 'the limits of the north' of heaven).<sup>140</sup>

Pullman's snowy North, however, is natural and glorious, the home of the Aurora Borealis, the gateway to a new world. Like the White Witch, Serafina Pekkala is the spirit of her own particular wild and wintry land, but 'wild and wintry' is shown here in highly positive terms: Pekkala's voice is 'so like the high wild singing of the Aurora itself that Lyra could hardly hear the sense for the sweet sound of it' (*NL*, p.303). The White Witch's 'winter' melts into fecund spring at the arrival of Aslan; but when Serafina's ice and snow melts, this is the mark of terrible environmental damage, leaving the world 'bare and black' (*AS*, p.39). Snow,

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<sup>140</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 5, line 755, p.160.



ice and 'the North' can be powerful metaphors, as we shall see in later chapters; they can also be invested with distinct moral values, although – as these two works prove – these values can easily be inverted.

Serafina Pekkala may care little for assuming power; the White Witch, however, will have the crown at any cost. Her over-ambition makes her ludicrous, as Lewis believed Milton's Satan to be. When Satan says 'Better to reign in hell, than serve in heaven',<sup>141</sup> Lewis responds: 'it fails to be roaring farce only because it spells agony'.<sup>142</sup> Similarly, the White Witch was once Empress of another world, until she wiped out her own people rather than let anyone else rule them, thereby giving herself nothing and no-one to rule (*CoN*, p.41). For Lewis, revolt against the divine will is not only wicked, it is foolish to the point of being risible. Ultimately, therefore, the White Witch's pride must come before a fall. She loses her battle for possession of Narnia, and, as a daughter of Lilith, can hope for no mercy from the vengeful Aslan:

[Aslan] flung himself upon the White Witch. Lucy saw her face lifted towards him for one second with an expression of terror and amazement. Then the Lion and the Witch had rolled over together but with the Witch underneath.

*Chronicles of Narnia*, p.191

And so, at the moment of her death, Lilith is returned to her 'place'; underneath a male. Divine masculine authority is restored; terrifying female rebellion has been crushed, at least for today.

The depiction of Satan in *His Dark Materials* is rather more complex. Rebellion against Authority can only be seen as justified, since his reign is so entirely oppressive and cruel. Pullman's unequivocal statement of support for Milton's Satan - 'I am of the Devil's party, and I know it' - suggests his support for his own 'Satan' will be equally single-minded. We might therefore expect Pullman's representation of Satan to be entirely sympathetic, a complete antithesis to Lewis's White Witch.

Pullman's representation of the Devil's party, however, is rather more ambiguous. His Satan is not one person but three. John Carey notes that Milton's Satan is a 'trimorph', a single being assembled from three separate figures: 'an Archangel, before and during the war in heaven; a Prince of Devils in the council in hell; a serpent-tempter in the garden.'<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 1, line 263, p.24.

<sup>142</sup> Lewis, *Preface to Paradise Lost*, p.103.

<sup>143</sup> Carey, 'Milton's Satan', p.162.



Pullman separates the three roles into three different characters; his rebellious Trinity is two-thirds female, mirroring the Witch-dominated 'Devil's party' created by Lewis. The role of Archangel is filled by the female angel Xaphania: the first heavenly rebel, who defies both masculine and divine authority and is therefore, like the White Witch, Satan and Lilith in one. Yet she is as blessed as the White Witch is cursed. She appears to Will and Lyra as an unfallen Lucifer, shining with 'the light of another world' (AS, p.519). Just as Narnia's child-heroes instinctively recognise Aslan's benevolence, Will and Lyra can tell at a glance that Xaphania is 'compassionate' enough to 'know them to their hearts' (AS p.519). Pullman stresses the legitimacy of revolt against both divine dominance and male dominance by depicting Xaphania as, in the more everyday sense, thoroughly 'angelic'.

The masculine member of the rebellious Trinity is, however, in some respects demonic. Lord Asriel, the instigator and leader of rebellion on Earth – who therefore fulfils the role of 'Prince of Devils' - is often far from 'compassionate'. He too has the magnificence of the fallen Lucifer: after tearing open the barrier between worlds, he appears, like Xaphania, haloed, 'with the light of the other world shining around his head' (NL, p.396). This celestial image, however, is at least semi-ironic: the otherworldly light has been obtained only by serious damage to the heavens themselves. Asriel does not embody heavenly glory, like Xaphania, but has acquired it by violent means. He is reminiscent in this of Lewis's perception of Milton's Satan, of a would-be usurper whose attempts to 'steal heaven' can only lead to 'agony'.

Asriel is also 'Satanic' in his disregard for others. His daemon, his companion spirit-animal, is a leopard; and Asriel himself is often figured as a pitiless feline, 'proud and beautiful and deadly' (NL, p.377). His name hints at his capacity for ruthlessness: Azrael is the Koran's angel of death, who severs the soul from the body. Asriel mirrors his hated opponents in one very striking way: he too is a child-killer, who sacrifices his daughter's friend Roger to gain power to open the breach between worlds.

Even more tellingly, Asriel kills the child in the same way the Authority's Church kills children - by intercision - cutting the psychic link between the boy and his daemon. Like his namesake, Lord Asriel severs the link between the soul and the body, with no sign of regret or remorse; we are told that Roger was 'crying and pleading, begging, sobbing, and Lord Asriel took no notice except to knock him to the ground'. (NL, p.391) In *The Devil's Account*, Hugh Rayment-Pickard strongly criticises Pullman for glossing over Asriel's murder of Roger 'without any kind of moral comment'; Rayment-Pickard suggests that the spectacle of the sky opening is a deliberate 'misdirection of our attention', designed to downplay Asriel's guilt and

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'encourage us to admire' him throughout the rest of the book.<sup>144</sup> It is certainly true that the narrative never specifically invites us to censure Asriel. Such an invitation, however, would surely be unnecessary. We require no narrative prompting to condemn the cold-blooded killing of a child, especially when its method mirrors so precisely the techniques of the hateful Church. Pullman's depiction of Asriel's nobler side is not an attempt to whitewash, but to counterbalance; Asriel has an important and heroic role to play later, and such a role cannot credibly be filled by someone utterly without redeeming features. Yet in spite of these balancing factors - and in spite of the 'distracting' heavenly lightshow overhead - the image of Asriel killing the 'crying, sobbing' Roger is not one the reader will be quick to forget.

Asriel himself offers no excuse for his behaviour. If called to account he might, like Milton's Satan wreaking destruction on Adam and Eve, claim that 'necessity, the tyrant's plea, excused his devilish deeds'.<sup>145</sup> Indeed, his splitting of the sky is essential to beginning the rebellion against Authority, and so his motives are not entirely selfish; Asriel does in fact have the potential for redemption, as his possession of a mammalian 'warm-blooded' daemon suggests. He is eventually redeemed by submitting to self-sacrifice for his cause; his final fate, however - falling eternally into the infinite abyss, as Milton's Satan falls into the 'vast vacuity' of Chaos and but for chance 'to this hour Down had been falling'<sup>146</sup> - smacks chillingly of damnation.

Asriel and the White Witch, therefore, are not complete opposites; indeed, in their cold glamour, aristocratic arrogance and apparent disregard for innocent life, they are strikingly similar. The character of Lord Asriel is established and foregrounded chiefly in *Northern Lights*, the first and most morally ambiguous volume of the trilogy (and, perhaps, the least 'preachy'); he takes on many of the good/bad qualities of that first book.

The third member of the 'Trinity' - the 'serpent-tempter in the garden' - could hardly be more different. The female scientist, Mary Malone, is entirely benevolent and well-meaning, but enters the conflict inadvertently and with no real idea of how to proceed. It is by fate or by accident, therefore, that she ends up assuming the role of Serpent in Pullman's reconstruction of the Fall.

## Forbidden Fruit: Sex and Defiance in the Garden of Eden

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<sup>144</sup> Rayment-Pickard, p.41-43.

<sup>145</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 4, line 393-4, p.116.

<sup>146</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 2, line 932, p.71.



'What is the Fall?' The Fall is simply and solely Disobedience – doing what you have been told not to do: and it results from Pride – from being too big for your boots, forgetting your place, thinking that you are God.

*Preface to Paradise Lost*<sup>147</sup>  
CS Lewis

Suppose that the prohibition on the knowledge of good and evil were an expression of jealous cruelty, and the gaining of such knowledge an act of virtue? Suppose the Fall should be celebrated and not deplored?

*Introduction to Paradise Lost*<sup>148</sup>  
Philip Pullman

Both Lewis and Pullman, having established their respective Gods and Great Adversaries, turn to the Miltonic themes of the Fall. Neither writer appears to suffer from the dilemma of Milton's Adam, who hesitates between lamenting the loss of innocence and rejoicing in the greater Grace of sinful man redeemed: 'full of doubt I stand, Whether I should repent me now of sin... or rejoice Much more, that much more good thereof shall spring'.<sup>149</sup> Lewis and Pullman both know precisely which response they prefer; and, predictably, Pullman's evaluation of the events in the Garden of Eden is almost diametrically opposed to Lewis's. Pullman sees the 'Happy Fall' of awakened love and understanding, while Lewis portrays the rash presumption that first brings evil, in the shape of the White Witch, into Narnia.

Interestingly, Narnia's presumptuous Fall stems not from female defiance but from male recklessness. Digory is 'wild with curiosity' to ring the bell that rouses the Witch; his girl-companion, Polly, warns against it in vain (*CoN*, p.35-36). Digory is more circumspect later, however, when the Witch plays both serpent and Eve. Although the Fall has technically occurred already – evil, in the shape of the Witch, has already entered Narnia – Digory faces another temptation, with more obviously Fall-related imagery, in the orchard of Aslan's apples. Satan-like, the Witch has entered the orchard-paradise illicitly, climbing in 'over the wall'; she offers Digory the forbidden apple of 'knowledge that would have made you happy all your life' (*CoN*, p.93). When this tactic fails she becomes Eve, speaking 'sweetly', promising that she and he will 'live for ever and be king and queen of this whole world': 'Your Father need never know,' she whispers (p.94), the capital F suggesting that not just an earthly father is to be defied.

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<sup>147</sup> Lewis, *Preface to Paradise Lost*, p.70-71.

<sup>148</sup> Pullman, introduction to *Paradise Lost*, p.10.

<sup>149</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 12, lines 473-6, p.364.



This time, however, Digory remains unsexed. Although he will admit in old age that 'he had never in all his life known a woman so beautiful' as the Witch (CoN, p.34), at the moment he has no trouble resisting this handsome (if terrifying) older woman. Lewis revises the myth of the Fall by making his 'Adam' - Digory - a child, unswayed by lustful thoughts, and therefore immune to the sexual temptations of a new 'Eve' (the Witch). The only temptation that even gives Digory pause is the prospect of a cure for his sick mother; he soon rejects even this, remembering, like a good boy, that 'Mother herself... wouldn't like it - awfully strict about keeping promises - and not stealing - and all that sort of thing.' (CoN, p.94). Digory remains asexual, and so triumphs where the grown-up Adam failed. Childish, asexual innocence is a powerful force for good in Narnia; Digory's resistance guarantees that the childhood of Narnia itself - the 'long, bright morning' of its early existence (p.84) - will be untroubled by the Witch and her dangerous, grown-up powers.

Pullman's portrayal of the Fall is very different from Lewis's; it is similar in surface details, but entirely different in substance and outcome. It is a 'Happy Fall', the gaining not of sin but of wisdom. Once again we have the garden, and the tempting fruit of sexuality; once again we have an adult woman as the Tempter: the ex-nun Mary Malone. Mary's 'temptation' consists of telling Lyra and Will the story of how she herself was 'tempted' when, at the age of twelve, she fell in love with a boy who gave her marzipan:

He took a bit of marzipan and he just gently put it in my mouth... and I fell in love with him just for that, for the gentle way he touched my lips with the marzipan.  
*The Amber Spyglass, p.467*

Mary's words show the two adolescents a new way to relate to one another:

Then Lyra took one of those little red fruits. With a fast-beating heart, she turned to him and said, "Will..."

And she lifted the fruit gently to his mouth.

She could see from his eyes that he knew at once what she meant, and that he was too joyful to speak.

*The Amber Spyglass, p.491-2*

Interestingly, the stage production of *His Dark Materials* omits the Mary Malone character (with Pullman's approval) and replaces her with Serafina Pekkala. The theme of 'temptation through storytelling' - telling the children an autobiographical tale of first love - is retained; instead of Mary's tale of the boy and the marzipan, however, we have a reprise of

Serafina's story about her love for Farder Coram (first related in *Northern Lights*, p.314-5).<sup>150</sup> The parallels between *His Dark Materials* and the *Chronicles* are even further increased: in both cases, the resident ice-witch (the White Witch and Serafina respectively) doubles up as the Serpent in the Garden. Serafina meets the criteria for 'Tempter' so thoroughly that the reader wonders if the Mary character is necessary at all; both are adult, sexually experienced women who have rejected the doctrines of God and the Church. Whether the role is played by Mary or by Serafina, however, Pullman's Serpent, as a knowledgeable female, is also Sophia, the Gnostic embodiment of Wisdom; she engineers the 'Happy Fall' in order to bring wisdom, not misery, to humanity.<sup>151</sup>

As in the *Chronicles*, Pullman's 'Fall' is seen as the passage from childhood to adulthood, in the form of sexual awakening. Unlike Digory, however, the child-heroes Lyra and Will do not resist their new sexuality. They fall in love, passing happily from innocence into experience. This is the salvation of their world, not its ruination; their new love pulls the life-force known as 'Dust' back from its destruction:

[Mary] nearly put the spyglass to her eye, but held back, and returned it to her pocket. There was no need for the glass; she knew what she would see; [Will and Lyra] would seem to be made of living gold. They would seem the true image of what human beings always could be, once they had come into their inheritance.

The Dust pouring down from the stars had found a living home again, and these children-no-longer-children, saturated with love, were the cause of it all.

*The Amber Spyglass*, p.497

## Childhood and Adulthood

Critics who treat *adult* as a term of approval, instead of as a merely descriptive term, cannot be adult themselves. To be concerned about being grown up, to admire the

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<sup>150</sup> When we cut the character of Mary Malone, Philip said, 'That's fine, but you've lost something important about the books, which is the theme of temptation, and temptation through storytelling.' ...Nick Hytner said, 'I know what we can do, Serafina can carry that theme forward.' There's a beautiful story which Serafina tells about her love affair with Farder Coram many years earlier... And Philip said, 'Yes, and a reprise of the story about the fruit can lead into the temptation.'

Butler, p.82.

<sup>151</sup> Gnostics regarded the serpent in the Garden of Eden as a heroic figure because it wanted to help humanity free itself of the chains of Yaldabaoth [the Demiurge]: After the Demiurge comes to rule over the physical world, Sophia sends a message by way of the Serpent. She gives gnosis [wisdom or enlightenment] to the humans this way.

'Gnosticism', Wikipedia Free Encyclopedia.



grown up because it is grown up, to blush at the suspicion of being childish; these things are the marks of childhood and adolescence.

CS Lewis<sup>152</sup>

Susan... is undergoing a transition from one phase of her life to another. Lewis didn't approve of that... He was frightened and appalled at the notion of wanting to grow up. Susan, who did want to grow up, and who might have been the most interesting character in the whole cycle if she'd been allowed to, is a Cinderella in a story where the Ugly Sisters win.

Philip Pullman<sup>153</sup>

In his construction of a 'Happy Fall', Pullman insists – not for the first or last time - that adulthood, the state of being 'no-longer-children', is far more interesting and worthwhile than that of childhood. Dust forms only a faint 'golden haze' around children, stronger than that around inanimate objects 'though not by much'; around adults, however, 'the golden sparkles were much stronger, and the currents they moved in more settled and powerful'. (AS, p. 243-4). Pullman regards Lewis's depiction of childhood perfection as a distasteful throwback to Victorian sentimentalism:

I hate the Narnia books, and I hate them with deep and bitter passion, with their view of childhood as a golden age from which sexuality and adulthood are a falling away. I was looking at old copies of *Punch*, when it was infused by AA Milne's influence - all those beautifully drawn pictures of cutie little children that would never grow up, being sweetie little things to their mummies and daddies.

Philip Pullman<sup>154</sup>

Pullman echoes the misgivings of Jacqueline Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan*, which regards the denial of children's sexuality as primarily about 'holding off any possible challenge to our own'.<sup>155</sup> For Pullman, as for Rose, childhood non-sexuality as 'blessedness' is a construction, more about arrested development than ideological superiority.

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<sup>152</sup> Lewis, 'On Three Ways of Writing for Children'. *Of This and Other Worlds*, p.59.

<sup>153</sup> Pullman, 'The Dark Side of Narnia'.

<sup>154</sup> Spanner, 'Heat and Dust'.

<sup>155</sup> Rose, p.4.



Sexuality is indeed not much to be found in the *Chronicles*, which clearly depicts childhood as the more magical state. Narnia is, in the literal sense, a world for children. The four Pevensie children cannot return when they become 'too old' (presumably, although we are never told explicitly, when they reach adolescence); Aslan tells them 'you must begin to come close to your own world now' (p.540). Susan Pevensie, the only sibling not seen to pass into the heaven of 'Aslan's country', is condemned as 'a jolly sight too keen on being grown-up' by the other 'friends of Narnia'; her fondness for the trappings of adult womanhood, 'nylons and lipstick and invitations', is treated with contempt (CoN, p.741).

The ostensible reason for Susan's exclusion – a vexed literary question dubbed by Neil Gaiman 'the problem of Susan'<sup>156</sup> - is that she has lost her faith: that she regards Aslan and Narnia as part of a 'funny game' she and her siblings played as children. This argument is questionable, however, in two ways. Firstly, it is highly improbable that Susan would lose her faith after witnessing Aslan's martyrdom and resurrection; as John Goldthwaite observes, 'it is preposterous to think that anyone would turn apostate who had visited another world and there actually met Christ in the flesh, much less witnessed his crucifixion, wept over him... and seen him rise from the dead. Lewis would have us believe of this Mary Magdalene that she sloughed it all off shortly thereafter for some lipstick and a pair of nylons.'<sup>157</sup> Secondly, Susan does not need faith to believe in Narnia in the first place; she has been there several times, and needs only memory to be sure of its existence. Why Lewis is so determined to banish Susan is therefore a 'problem' indeed. Perhaps the grown-up, lipsticked Susan, who is considered by Shasta 'the most beautiful lady he had ever seen' (CoN, p.233), is dangerously suggestive of the most beautiful woman known to Digory 'in all his life': the tall, seductive, red-mouthed White Witch. Perhaps it takes no more than this resemblance to Narnia's Witches – Lilith's daughters, creatures who are powerful, sexual, very much female and very much grown-up – to shut Susan out of Lewis's childish and male-dominated Paradise.<sup>158</sup>

Lewis is absolute in his depiction of childhood as blessed, because for him this is not a 'construction', but – literally - gospel truth. Lewis has stated, 'We have been told on high authority that in the moral sphere they [children] are probably at least as wise as we'.<sup>159</sup> He is drawing of course on the words of Christ: 'Suffer the little children to come unto me and

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<sup>156</sup> Gaiman, 'The Problem of Susan'.

<sup>157</sup> Goldthwaite, p.236.

<sup>158</sup> For more on the parallels between Susan and the Witches, see again my article 'Daughters of Lilith'. *Revisiting Narnia*, p.191-204.

<sup>159</sup> Lewis, *Of This and Other Worlds*, p.69.

forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of God. Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein' (Mark 10, 14-15). Pullman, although he regards Christ as a 'moral genius', responds to this passage boldly (or arrogantly) with the statement: 'He [Christ] wasn't right all the time'.<sup>160</sup>

Whatever its author's stated views, however, *His Dark Materials'* depiction of childhood is somewhat conflicted. Lyra's and Will's experience of adulthood seems singularly lacking in magic. Their daemons' permanent adult forms – a pine martin and a large cat respectively – are unglamorous compared to Asriel's snow-leopard or Mrs Coulter's golden monkey. Lyra's natural talent for reading the alethiometer deserts her; to regain it will require a lifetime of study. Xaphania stresses the superiority of ability gained by effort, but Lyra does not seem convinced:

'But your reading will be even better then, after a lifetime of thought and effort, because it will come from conscious understanding. Grace attained like that is deeper and fuller than grace that comes freely, and furthermore, once you've gained it, it will never leave you.'

'You mean a *full* lifetime, don't you?' Lyra whispered. 'A whole long life? Not... not just... a few years...'

*The Amber Spyglass*, p.520

Adulthood is represented as a matter of patience, duty and hard work; Lyra and Will must learn to be 'patient instead of hasty, and cheerful instead of surly, and above all... keep their minds open and free and curious.' (AS, p.520). In Lyra's and Will's adult state, however, there is little hint of anything mystical, magical or even joyful: anything that would seem to warrant the 'living gold' of the extra attendant Dust. Like Lyra, Will must put aside his talismanic object of power: the 'Subtle Knife', the dagger that can cut through the barrier between worlds. Thereby the exploration of travelling between worlds – which has created the drama, wonder and character development on which the whole book has been based – is brought to an abrupt end. The justification for the breaking of the Knife - the fact that it creates the soul-sucking Spectres, and allows the life-force Dust to drain out of the universe (AS, p. 512 & 515) - appears abruptly at the close of the series, with no previous hint that this is the case. Moreover, the fact that the angels can 'take care of the Spectres' – that is, destroy them (AS, p.522) – seems to make the Knife's destruction unnecessary.

Most terribly for Lyra and Will, the love that averted Armageddon cannot be permitted to last. Lyra and Will cannot visit each other between worlds, since the Knife will no longer

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<sup>160</sup> Spanner, 'Heat and Dust'.

allow them to travel; now we are informed that they must separate, and return to their birth-worlds. The justification for this seems even more contrived than that of the new no-travel policy: that daemons wither and die if kept too long from their own worlds, as John Parry explains:

'I walked out of my own world by accident, and couldn't find the way back. I did many things and learned a great deal in the world I found myself in, but ten years after I arrived there, I was mortally sick.

And this is the reason for all those things: your daemon can only live its full life in the world it was born in. Elsewhere it will eventually sicken and die... We have to build the republic of heaven where we are, because for us there is no elsewhere.'

*The Amber Spyglass*, p.381-382

This claim of 'mortal sickness' is not entirely consistent with our previous encounters with John Parry; in *The Subtle Knife*, although he claims that his 'heart is diseased' (p.224), he is still a powerful shaman capable of raising a huge storm: hardly the actions of a man at death's door. Pullman, however, is determined to keep the children in their own worlds; the possibilities of travel, emigration and other excitements are not conducive to building the 'Republic of Heaven' in the here and now.

In this, Pullman is striving to incorporate his own stated agenda into the novel. His child characters are to become the builders of his own dream, sidestepping the need for religion by making a heaven on Earth:

The kingdom of heaven promised us certain things: it promised us happiness and a sense of purpose and a sense of having a place in the universe, of having a role and a destiny that were noble and splendid... I don't think I will continue to live after I'm dead, so if I am to achieve these things I must try to bring them about – and encourage other people to bring them about – on earth, in a republic in which we are all free and equal – and responsible – citizens.<sup>161</sup>

These reasons are in themselves highly worthy; few would argue, moreover, with Pullman's portrayal of adulthood as a time of greater focus, less excitement and necessary limiting of future options. In a novel of strict realism, this sober acceptance of duty might be unproblematic. No matter how hard he tries, however, or how much he insists, Pullman has difficulty representing adulthood as the more fascinating or more blessed time. *His Dark*

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<sup>161</sup> Spanner, 'Heat and Dust'.



*Materials* revels in exploration, discovery and adventure; the prospect of replacing these things with 'hard work' and staying at home seems unlikely to appeal to a child reader (or an adult one). Forcing oneself to be 'cheerful' is a disappointing substitute for the world-saving, 'living gold' of Will's and Lyra's lost love.

Pullman's blueprint for a 'Republic of Heaven' may, therefore, be a more salutary lesson for young readers, but, despite the author's best efforts, it cannot be made more inspiring than the adventures the rest of the series relates. The sense of anticlimax, or even what Sarah Johnson calls the 'crash of bathos'<sup>162</sup>, cannot be ignored. It may be that Pullman is more drawn to a Lewis-like vision of childhood glory, 'supernaturalist' though it may be, than he can bring himself to admit.

### The Worlds of the Dead

The Ghost made a sound something between a sob and a snarl. 'I wish I'd never been born,' it said. 'What are we born for?'

'For infinite happiness,' said the Spirit. 'You can step out into it at any moment.'  
*The Great Divorce*<sup>163</sup>  
CS Lewis

... My dwelling haply may not please  
Like this fair Paradise, your sense, yet such  
Accept your maker's work; he gave it me,  
Which I as freely give; hell shall unfold,  
To entertain you two, her widest gates,  
And send forth all her kings; there will be room,  
Not like these narrow limits, to receive,  
Your numerous offspring; if no better place,  
Thank him who puts me loath to this revenge  
On you who wrong me not...

*Paradise Lost*<sup>164</sup>

Aslan and Authority both prefer the state of childhood for their followers; how the childish state is depicted and valued, however, is quite different. Their respective Worlds of the Dead are, if anything, even more opposed. Once again in the *Chronicles of Namia*, we see Aslan

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<sup>162</sup> Johnson, 'On the Dark Edge of Imagination'.

<sup>163</sup> Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, p. 61.

<sup>164</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 4, lines 378-387, p.116.

as emphatically Christlike, separating the dead into the damned and the saved. The Apocalypse, the end of the world averted by Lyra and Will in *His Dark Materials*, is not forestalled in Lewis's world; in *The Last Battle* Aslan calls all the creatures of Narnia before him at the day of judgment:

They all looked straight in [Aslan's] face... And when some looked, the expression of their faces changed terribly – it was fear and hatred... And all the creatures who looked at Aslan in that way swerved to their right, *his left*, and disappeared into his huge black shadow... The children never saw them again. I don't know what became of them. But the others looked in the face of Aslan and loved him, though some of them were very frightened at the same time. And all these came in at the Door, in on *Aslan's right*.

*Chronicles of Narnia*, p.751. My italics.

This of course is a direct allusion to the gospel of Matthew (25), which predicts that Christ will 'separate [the dead souls] one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left' (verses 32-3). Just as the sheep on Christ's right are 'blessed', and called to '[our] Father's kingdom', so those on Aslan's right follow him 'Further up and further in' (CoN, p.755 onwards) to Aslan's country. The fate of those who go into the shadow on Aslan's left is not specified; it almost certainly represents damnation, however, since the 'cursed' goats on Christ's left are dispatched to the 'everlasting fire'.

The criterion for judgment here, however, is rather different. In the Biblical case one is saved or damned by how one treats one's fellow man: Christ says, 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me' (verse 40). In Narnia, however, what matters is whether or not one loves Aslan. Susan Pevensie, who, as we have seen, has inexplicably swapped her childish love of Aslan for lipstick and nylons, is conspicuous by her absence at Aslan's day of judgment; like those who go into Aslan's 'deep dark shadow', she is never seen again. (Lewis later assured readers that 'perhaps she will get to Aslan's country in the end', but stressed that she would have 'to mend' – presumably, to stop being 'silly' and 'conceited' and regain her devotion to Aslan – before this would be possible.<sup>165</sup>)

Lewis's sleight-of-hand makes human charity and Christianity one and the same thing. Every character of goodwill recognises Aslan as the true deity, or comes to recognise him as such in time. The noble Emeth, a Tash-worshipper whose goodness is nevertheless

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<sup>165</sup> Quoted in *The Narnian*, Jacobs, p.260.

obvious to all, loves Aslan on first sight, believing 'it is better to see the Lion and die than to be Tisroc of the world and live and not to have seen him' (CoN, p.756). Aslan assures Emeth that he rewards all good deeds, even those done in the name of Tash: 'I take to me the services which thou hast done to him' (CoN, p.757).

One might expect, then, to find as many righteous Calormenes in Aslan's afterlife as we find members of the Narnian faithful. However, when a crowd of Narnians – the child-characters and assorted talking Beasts – stumble across Emeth, they find him sitting in solitude, like 'Saladin, aloof, alone' in Dante's Circle of Virtuous Heathen.<sup>166</sup> It can of course be argued that the other Calormenes are elsewhere in Aslan's vast kingdom, somewhere 'further up and further in'. But Emeth in his conspicuous solitude – a Tash-lover among Aslanites, a single brown face amongst the white – creates a striking impression of uniqueness, of an exception that proves the rule. Emeth and Aravis – who has become a Narnian and a follower of Aslan, and can therefore best be imagined as a baptised convert, perhaps a redeemed Queen of Sheba – are the only Calormenes we discover in Aslan's version of Paradise. Aslan is Christ, and the *Chronicles'* heaven is decidedly Christian.

Aslan is both God and goodness; the only other god-figure in the *Chronicles* is the demonic Tash, and if his followers (like Emeth) behave decently, it is in spite of Tash rather than by his teaching or example. Aslan's acceptance of virtuous non-believers may be an interesting qualification of the *Chronicles'* Christian message, but it should never be taken as a departure from Lewis's insistence on Christ-Aslan as the only God and the only source of righteousness and truth.

Whatever we may think of Aslan or his judgment, however, he does at least deliver what he promises. He tells the children, 'When you meet me here [in Narnia] again, you will have come to stay' (CoN, p.662); this is exactly what takes place in the closing chapter of the *Chronicles*. The Authority too promises to 'separate out the sinners and the righteous' (AS, p.264), and to grant the faithful 'eternity in the company of saints and angels praising the Almighty, in a state of bliss' (AS, p.335). This, however, turns out to be a lie. The Afterlife is the same for everyone, and is by no means blissful:

[Will and Lyra] found themselves on a great plain that extended far ahead into the mist. The light by which they saw was a dull self-luminescence that seemed to exist everywhere equally, so that there were no true shadows and no true light, and everything was the same dingy colour.

Standing on the floor of this huge space were adults and children... 'Ghosts,' [Lyra] whispered. 'This is where they all are, everyone that's ever died...'

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<sup>166</sup>Dante, *Inferno*, Canto IV, line 129, p.94.



... They had as much substance as fog, poor things... They crammed forward, light and lifeless, to warm themselves at the flowing blood and the strong-beating hearts of the two travellers.

*The Amber Spyglass*, p.309 –311

Authority's World of the Dead is highly reminiscent of Hades, the 'shadows and dark solitudes' of the Greco-Roman Underworld.<sup>167</sup> The dead have become the 'drifting, listless spirits' encountered by Odysseus; they are irresistibly drawn to the faintest signs of earthly vitality - Lyra's and Will's 'flowing blood' and 'strong-beating hearts' – just as the 'shambling, shiftless dead' flock towards Odysseus's blood sacrifice.<sup>168</sup> Authority's Underworld also recalls Dante's Limbo, where the unbaptised exist without pain but also without joy, denied the salvation of Christian faith.<sup>169</sup> Even Christian faith, however, is no salvation here; Lyra and Will meet the ghost of a young woman 'who had died as a martyr centuries before', who tells them:

When we were alive, they told us that when we died we'd go to heaven. And they said that heaven was a place of joy and glory... [but] the land of the dead isn't a place of reward or a place of punishment. It's a place of nothing. The good come here as well as the wicked, and all of us languish in this gloom for ever, with no hope of freedom, or joy, or sleep or rest or peace.

*The Amber Spyglass*, p.335-6

The souls, like the unburied dead of the *Aeneid*, are 'deprived of death's fulfilment': detained to years of waiting, unable to pass on to their natural and final place in the afterlife. The souls of the *Aeneid*, however, can cross over after a hundred years; the Authority's imprisonment is eternal. There can be little doubt that the Authority himself – rather than his Church – has personally consigned humanity to this eternal Limbo. The dead are tormented by Harpies, who tell the children: 'Thousands of years ago, when the first ghosts came down here, *the Authority* gave us the power to see the worst in every one' (AS, p.331; my italics). The Harpies take on the role of Virgil's Rhadamanthus or Dante's Infernal judge Minos, who hear confessions of wrongdoing – but they condemn the good and evil alike, not just the

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<sup>167</sup>Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Book 6, line 268, p.164.

<sup>168</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book 11, lines 33, 49, 55. p. 251.

<sup>169</sup> Dante, *Inferno*, Canto IV.

'wrongdoers' of Tartarus or the Inferno.<sup>170</sup> The soul's good deeds are now irrelevant, and all hope is to be abandoned.

Indeed, the Afterlife of *His Dark Materials* is more of a response to Dante than to Milton. It is Dante's *Divine Comedy* – particularly the *Inferno* - which is revised; and once more this revision is performed in the spirit of arch-reviser William Blake, whose illustrations challenged Dante's concepts of sinfulness, and who is said to have claimed: 'Dante saw devils where I see none – I see only good'.<sup>171</sup> As Blake depicted those who defy Dante's God – Capaneus, or Vanni Fucci – as heroic and dignified figures, so those who defy the Authority's will are not 'devils' but saviours. Far from having 'abandoned all hope', the spirits of the 'damned' are willing to follow Lyra and Will into the upper world; only devout and 'zealous' monks, the Contemplatives placed in the Heaven of Saturn by Dante, are left behind in Hell (AS, p.336).

Thus the qualifications for salvation in Dante's work are unworldly: those who disregarded the world, like the souls of the Contemplatives in *Paradiso*, are allotted the highest places in Heaven. Under Lyra's and Will's revision of the Afterlife, however, a full appreciation of the world is the prime requisite for escaping the Underworld. The Harpies will still sit in judgment, but the criteria have altered – the Harpies will demand to hear not sins, but an account of an earthly life fully lived:

We have the right to refuse to guide them [out of the Underworld] if they lie, or if they hold anything back, or if they have nothing to tell us. If they live in the world, they *should* see and touch and hear and love and learn things.

*The Amber Spyglass*, p.334

Pullman, like Milton, rejects 'cloistered virtue', the shirking of trial and effort which produces not the whiteness of purity but only a blank 'excremental whiteness'.<sup>172</sup> Pullman shares this contempt for fence-sitting with Dante, who despises the 'Futile' - those who did nothing either good or bad, the 'scum who'd never lived'<sup>173</sup> - more than those who have

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<sup>170</sup> See *Inferno*, Canto V, and *The Aeneid*, Book 6, line 566-9.

<sup>171</sup> 'In 1825, [Blake] told the journalist Henry Crabb Robinson that "Dante saw devils where I see none – I see only good"'. Tate Gallery website.

<sup>172</sup> Milton, *Areopagitica*, p.20.

<sup>173</sup> Dante, *Inferno*, Canto III, line 64, p. 87.

actually sinned. Pullman's 'Futile', together with 'zealots' too blind to admit that their Heaven is in fact Hell, will now be the sole occupants of the Authority's Hades.

Pullman's determination to exclude the lukewarm, however, has made his method of sorting morally questionable. Those who have committed what we would generally see as great evil – the Hitlers, the Pol Pohts – will now, in theory, receive the same treatment as the virtuous, if they can truthfully relate their life stories (and the autobiography of Pol Poht should, unfortunately, make for an interesting 'story'). Even this scenario, however, is better than the gratuitous imprisonment inflicted by the Authority, whom Pullman paints as a bogeyman far worse than Dante's God, who at least (like Aslan) rewards his faithful in Paradise.

In *His Dark Materials* escaping Hell is not brought about by Christ, but by Lyra and Will; it is entirely in keeping with Pullman's sensibilities that Divine love should be shown as wanting by simple human kindness. Lyra and Will perform their own mass revised 'Harrowing of Hell' by simply cutting a hole in the ceiling and releasing all the souls, good and evil alike. The dead escape into the world above, gazing 'with delight and wonder as the first stars they had seen for centuries shone through into their poor starved eyes' (AS, p.382), just as Dante escaped Hell and 'came forth, to look once more upon the stars'.<sup>174</sup>

In ordaining the permanent realm of the dead, Pullman conflates the *Inferno* with *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. The dead do not just 'see' the stars, they rise to them, merging with particles of the life-force Dust; they are, like Dante about to depart from Purgatory to Heaven, 'pure and prepared to leap up to the stars'.<sup>175</sup> Lee Scoresby's ascent is described in distinctly heavenly terms:

The last little scrap of the consciousness that had been the aeronaut Lee Scoresby floated upwards, just as his great balloon had done so many times. Untroubled by the flares and the bursting shells, deaf to the explosions and the shouts and cries of anger and warning and pain, conscious only of his movement upwards, the last of Lee Scoresby passed through the heavy clouds and came out under the brilliant stars, where the atoms of his beloved daemon Hester were waiting for him.

*The Amber Spyglass*, p.440

The Underworld is transformed from Hell to Purgatory, a brief time of suffering followed by ascent to heaven: which is, as in *Paradiso*, represented by the stars. Pullman may well be making an atheist or agnostic point – but his ecstatic vision of the merging of

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<sup>174</sup> Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XXXIV, line 139, p.289.

<sup>175</sup> Dante, *Purgatory*, Canto XXXIII, line 145, p.335.



conscious into everything that is good and vital is, in its essence, much the same as Dante's epiphany of 'the love that moves the sun and the other stars'.<sup>176</sup> It is perhaps strange that, although Lewis's work deals with divine matters, his *Afterlife* is shown as a distinctly Earthly Paradise; whereas Pullman, who dreams of a Republic of Heaven on Earth, presents us with a starry Heaven that is truly celestial.

## In Conclusion

The Vision of Christ that thou dost see  
Is my vision's greatest enemy...

Thine loves the same world that mine hates;  
Thy heaven doors are my hell gates...

Both read the Bible day and night,  
But thou read'st black where I read white.  
'The Everlasting Gospel'<sup>177</sup>  
William Blake

It seems, therefore, that Lewis and Pullman simply cannot be reconciled. Their views on God are as disparate as their readings of Milton, and neither is much disposed to acknowledge that a widely differing view might be as legitimate as his own. They sometimes agree on what a god *should* be – close to his subjects, a true Creator – but on depicting a god as he *is*, they are poles apart. Indeed, perhaps Pullman does not wish to be reconciled, but has created (consciously or otherwise) an anti-Narnia, designed to oppose Lewis's creation on almost every ideological point.

Yet ironically, this will to oppose has created similarity. Neither Lewis nor Pullman leave any room for ambiguity in their presentation of the Godhead; only a wicked fool could hate Lewis's Aslan, and only a wicked fool could love Pullman's Authority. Ideology is, in both works, unsubtle and absolute. This lack of grey shading in the black-and-white is the source of deep dissatisfaction to many readers – as the Web forum *RevolutionSF* suggests, 'the preach factor' is equally high in both.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Dante, *Paradise*, Canto XXXIII, line 145, p. 347.

<sup>177</sup> Blake, *Works*, p.110.

<sup>178</sup> Revolution SF Web forum.

Perhaps the only way to enjoy both these works, then, is to accept that Lewis and Pullman have each taken full advantage of one of the Fantasy genre's conventions: 'my world, my rules'. When in Narnia we must think like a 'Mere Christian'; when in the worlds of *His Dark Materials* we must embrace Pullman's brand of spiritual humanism. Both philosophies – and both works – reflect a yearning for the advent of a Golden Age, in which the worldly and the divine become perfectly aligned: Lewis's Kingdom of God, Pullman's Republic of Heaven. However, the political gulf between them – the Kingdom versus the Republic – is too wide for many readers to cross; and perhaps Pullman, the great anti-Narnian, the mischievous member of 'the Devil's party', has purposely made them irreconcilable. It seems inevitable, therefore, that the debate over these two fantasy sequences will indeed remain a space where 'two worldviews collide'.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Richard James, 'The Cumberland River Lamppost'.

## 2) Who Will Let the Winter In? Reinventing the Myth of Dionysos in Elizabeth Hand's *Winterlong*

'Good' repetition is always haunted or contaminated by 'bad' repetition, and so much the better and so much the worse for it. The *pharmakon* will always be apprehended as both antidote *and* poison.

'The Rhetoric of Drugs'<sup>180</sup>  
Derrida

You shall recognise Dionysos... who proves himself at last a god most terrible, for all his gentleness to man.

*The Bacchae*<sup>181</sup>  
Euripides

The power of myth-revision is clear in Philip Pullman's fiction. In it, however, we also see one of its pitfalls. Pullman's determination to oppose Lewis's work has, ironically, exposed many similarities. In both *His Dark Materials* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, morality is black and white and ideology is unsubtle. Complexities of identity are almost non-existent; the third-person narration leaves no doubt as to what is going on, and who is really who.

This is, of course, not necessarily a problem; there is no law against clearly defined narratives or principles in fiction. It could be argued that such clear certainties are important in a work aimed at children or young teenagers; although this is a guideline rather than a rule, as we see in children's books like Alan Garner's *Red Shift* or David Almond's *Kit's Wilderness*, works in which the nature of reality and morality are ceaselessly challenged. Nevertheless, in children's writing associated with issues of religion, both Lewis and Pullman appear to think strong moral guidelines should be laid down.

Other writers of Fantasy, especially Fantasy aimed at adults, approach myth-revision differently. They do not simply invert the story, but reinvent it altogether. This is the process that occurs in Elizabeth Hand's novel *Winterlong* (1990). Since it is an 'adult' novel, *Winterlong* is free to explore 'adult situations': issues of sexuality and violence; intoxication and altered states of reality; and ideological complexities and uncertainties. Hand's choice of

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<sup>180</sup> Derrida, 'The Rhetoric of Drugs', p.235.

<sup>181</sup> Euripides, p.222.



a myth to revise, and a god to recreate, makes this licence almost infinite; her myth-figure is the Classical god of wine, intoxication and ecstasy: Dionysos.

Dionysos is a figure of paradox. When he manifests himself in fiction, it is often as a comic character; from Aristophanes' *Frogs* to Disney's *Fantasia*, he appears as 'a mere genial tippler,'<sup>182</sup> good-natured, silly, and thoroughly harmless. He has another side, however, which is much darker: he is also the powerful and dangerous figure who dominates Euripides' tragedy *The Bacchae*, as the feral spirit of ecstatic intoxication, who drives mortals into frenzies of uncontrolled revelry and madness.

Dionysos is also highly adaptable. CS Lewis, in an ingenious piece of myth-adaptation, even manages to incorporate him into *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In *Prince Caspian*, he is summoned by Aslan to lead a wild 'Romp' of woodland spirits:

One was a youth, dressed only in a fawn-skin, with vine-leaves wreathed in his curly hair. His face would have been almost too pretty for a boy's, if it had not looked so extremely wild... There were a lot of girls with him, as wild as he.  
*The Chronicles of Narnia*, p.388

In the child-world of Narnia, the grapes are unfermented, and the games that ensue are non-sexual. Something of the lawless ecstasy of the Bacchanal remains, however (enough, at any rate, for 'Balaam's Ass' website to brand Lewis 'the Devil's Wisest Fool' and accuse him of showing a 'Bacchanalian orgy... for your kids to mimic in their play'<sup>183</sup>). This (actually non-orgiastic) Bacchanal is carefully supervised by Christ-Aslan, however, enabling the children (and the child reader) to 'flirt' with a pagan being from a safe distance.

Even so, the child-characters, usually so bold and adventurous, are wary. Afterwards they remark that they 'wouldn't have felt safe with Bacchus and all his wild girls' if Aslan weren't there to keep an eye on things. They add that Dionysos is 'a chap who might do anything - absolutely anything' (CoN, p.388-9).

The children are right to be cautious. Dionysos was the most contradictory of gods, representing comedy and tragedy, salvation and destruction, life and death. His ceremonies were ecstatic and uncontrolled revels; his devout worshippers used music, alcohol and drugs to reach a state of sexual (and sometimes homicidal) frenzy. This X-rated version of Dionysos is the myth Elizabeth Hand revises in *Winterlong* – not the 'genial tippler' Dionysos, but the seductive and anarchic god of *The Bacchae*. Hand blends Greek myth with science-

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<sup>182</sup> 'Dionysus', David Langford. Clute & Grant, p.272.

<sup>183</sup> van Nattan, 'CS Lewis: the Devil's Wisest Fool'.

fiction tropes such as genetic mutation, neurological experimentation and psychic empathy to create a New Dionysos: one more beautiful, intense and dangerous than his Classical predecessor. In his presence, boundaries are blurred, and opposites conflated: male and female, god and mortal, even life and death are 'all one' to him. There is no safe Christ-figure here to keep him under control. He is, indeed, capable of 'absolutely anything'.

### Dionysos as 'Pharmakon'

I call upon loud-roaring and reveling Dionysos,  
primeval, two-natured, thrice-born, Bacchic lord,  
savage, ineffable, secretive, two-horned and two-shaped.  
Ivy-covered, bull-faced, warlike, howling, pure.

*The Orphic Hymns*<sup>184</sup>

At his conception the earthly was touched by the splendor of divine heaven... He who was born in this way is not only the exultant god, the god who brings man joy. He is the suffering and dying god, the god of tragic contrast. And the inner force of this dual reality is so great that he appears among men like a storm... Life becomes suddenly an ecstasy – an ecstasy of blessedness, but an ecstasy, no less, of terror.

*Dionysus: Myth and Cult*<sup>185</sup>

Walter F Otto

As we have seen, the 'gods' of Lewis and Pullman can be characterised in black-and-white terms: either good or bad, mortal or immortal, true or false, male or female. Whatever spectrum we use to define them, they are at one extreme or the other. Dionysos, however - both as the Hellenic deity and as *Winterlong's* 'New Dionysos' – is characterised by the blending of polar opposites. Classical Dionysos is 'the wild spirit of antithesis and paradox, of immediate presence and complete remoteness, of bliss and horror, of infinite vitality and the cruelest destruction.'<sup>186</sup> In *The Bacchae* he is both 'gentle' and 'terrible'; both a masculine horned god and an 'effeminate foreigner' (*The Bacchae*, p.199); he is both the god himself and the mortal priest who embodies him. *Winterlong's* New Dionysos is as contradictory as his Classical counterpart, if not more so. He is both the gentle Baal and the

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<sup>184</sup> *The Orphic Hymns* (Translator not credited: possibly Apostolos N. Athanassakis). Temenos website.

<sup>185</sup> Otto, p.78.

<sup>186</sup> Otto, p.136.



Gaping One, Death; both the god and the sacrifice, 'the eternal victim and He who holds the knife' (*Winterlong*, p.431).

So contradictory is he, in fact, that we are never definitively told what exactly he *is*, or to which genre he truly belongs. He is at once a neurological phenomenon – a 'hypostate', or 'emergent secondary personality' (*W*, p.42) - and a supernatural presence - something 'invoked' through 'witchcraft', a god or 'demon' (*W*, p.135). In him, two entirely separate qualities have been made inseparable; a different kind of 'story', a Cyberpunk tale of synaptic experimentation, has been integrated with a Classical legend. This is underlined throughout *Winterlong* by the blending of two distinct forms of discourse: medical science (or Science-Fiction pseudo-science), and magical myth (or supernatural Fantasy). Wendy cannot help but use both when she describes what Dr Harrow has done:

She and her twin brother played at – at witchcraft. They invoked something, and – it came... [S]he had this – hypostate – dormant inside of her all that time. When she did my neural implants fourteen years ago, I think the engrams were stronger than anyone ever knew. She patterned me without really knowing it was there, that memory, without *me* knowing. And nothing happened until I was the same age she was when they woke it, and then it – it manifested itself.

*Winterlong*, p.126

Dionysos therefore represents Derrida's *pharmakon*, the drug which is both poison and cure:<sup>187</sup> a conflation of binary opposites. The world of *Winterlong* is the ideal environment for him: the novel is set in the apparently self-contradictory 'City of Trees', a post-Apocalyptic Washington which is half urban sprawl, half lush jungle.

The god of this mutated garden is 'all one', both life and death. This indeterminacy cannot be 'solved', only accepted; and accepted it must be, to 'play along' with the savage and 'topsy-turvy' games of the Solstice festival. *Winterlong's* characters (and readers) are not allowed to take sides, separating the 'bad' god from the 'good'. They must witness dozens of conflated opposites, in both their gods and their City – male/female, life/death, god/mortal, sibling/lover, medicine/poison, to name just a few – to prepare them for this acceptance. At first, however, the shock of undecidability can be too much to grasp, as Raphael discovers; during his first encounter with the New Dionysos, he is forced to face his own 'unnatural' desire: the blending of eroticism and death:

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<sup>187</sup> In Greek, *pharmakon* means both cure and poison. Like the English word 'drug', it has good and bad aspects... the *pharmakon* is UNDECIDABLE, inhabiting both the curative and the poisonous. Collins & Mayblin, p.29.



But even as his beauty roused me I saw the livid horror seething within his eyes, the corruption and utter madness that he expelled as unconsciously as I breathed air... And then I did scream, and begged him to take back that knowledge and vision, the awful counterpoint to my soaring dream.

*Winterlong*, p.151

### Call Nothing Natural: Sex in *Winterlong*

Let nothing be called natural  
In an age of bloody confusion  
Ordered disorder, planned caprice,  
And dehumanized humanity, lest all things  
Be held unalterable.

Bertolt Brecht<sup>188</sup>

Was Jesus born of a Virgin pure  
With narrow soul and looks demure?  
If He intended to take on sin  
The Mother should an harlot been,  
Just such a one as Magdalen,  
With seven devils in her pen.

'The Everlasting Gospel'<sup>189</sup>  
William Blake

Sex and eroticism are ambiguous and multifaceted in *Winterlong*. The sexual quality of the Dionysos story - the Bacchanal 'orgy' so carefully excluded from *The Chronicles of Namia* - is very much in evidence here. In *Winterlong*, everyone and everything is sexual, and that sexuality is dangerous. Even the vegetation is both seductive and predatory: inhabitants of the City of Trees are 'lured to their deaths... by sighing hyacinths with the eyes of women', and the carnivorous tree '*betulamia*' (*W*, p.120) seduces its victims like the vampiric 'lamia'. The forests are a Dionysian dream-world, beautiful and deadly as the god himself; some flowers, like the snapping white blossoms emitting 'jasmine-scented steam', seduce by scent alone (*W*, p.113). In this they recall Dionysos' equation with the panther, a creature believed to attract its prey with its beautiful odour; one of the god's epithets, the (splendidly Austin Powers-ish) title 'Perfumed Panther', suggests his camp but powerful allure.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Brecht, 'The Exception and the Rule'.

<sup>189</sup> Blake, *Works*, p.115.

<sup>190</sup> Detienne, p.38.

Amongst the citizens, sex is not usually so lethal; few sexual taboos, however, are observed. Both child sexuality and prostitution are widely practiced, and are seen as unproblematic; Raphael takes it for granted that 'Patrons preferred the youngest children' (*W*, p.55). Nor is he troubled by overtones of incest; sexual contact with his adoptive uncle, Miramar, is an affirmation of mutual affection, not a betrayal (*W*, p.68). Half the City's population are 'Paphians', prostitutes attached to courtesan houses; the Paphians' religious ceremonies involve regular orgies which the whole City attends. The annual 'Butterfly Ball', held in honour of the breeding sambar moth's 'brief transit from chrysalis to shattered husk', embodies all the aspects of the Bacchic revel – life and death, intoxication and beauty, eroticism and cruelty:

A rush of scent – jasmine, ylang-ylang, *carcasse d'amour*, sandalwood and galingale; the heady reek of opiated cedar burning in copper braziers... Below us the marble floors flickered beneath seething waves of masquers in butterfly garb. Senators and Curators threaded their way cautiously through the room, holding the trailing sleeves of their sober habits above the ground. The black domino of a Persian malefeants with her whip pied the pastel train of a score of moth-winged children trying very hard to perform the steps of a salacious maxixe. High overhead the ceiling seemed to dance as well, as thousands of courting sambars wafted in the dim vault and macaws and brilliant finches chased the poor exhausted amoretts above the ballroom floor.

*Winterlong*, p.170 – 1

Sex in *Winterlong* is almost completely anarchic, even more so than in *The Bacchae*, in which transgressive sexuality is at least restricted to adults. Hand's characters, however, seem unaffected by any religious, legal or personal restrictions, including anxieties about what is sexually 'natural'. In this, *Winterlong* abides by Brecht's maxim: 'Let nothing be called natural... lest all things be held unalterable'.<sup>191</sup> Aspects of this can be disturbing: sexual contact with children, for example, or use of dangerous drugs, or extreme sado-masochism. As we shall see, the New Dionysos is a god of the Winter Solstice; his followers live in a perpetual state not just of Bacchanalia, but also of Saturnalia, the Roman midwinter celebrations in which 'darker passions find a vent'.<sup>192</sup> Hand presents us with a vision of truly amoral and anarchic sexuality, not a misty-eyed dream of 'free love'. This aspect of the Dionysos myth has been not revised, but amplified.

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<sup>191</sup> Brecht, 'The Exception and the Rule'.

<sup>192</sup> Frazer, Chapter LVIII, Part 3, p. 675.



It would seem then that in this respect *Winterlong* agrees with the *Chronicles*, showing sexuality as frightening and dangerous. Courtesan orgies seem a long way from the glorious sexual awakening of Will and Lyra, transformed by sexual love into the 'living gold' which restores their dying world to life. Once again, when we compare Lewis and Pullman, we are given an either/or paradigm: Lewis's children reject sexuality so they can keep faith with their god (Aslan), while Pullman's children embrace sexuality but reject the teachings of their god (Authority). God and sex cannot coexist. Hand, however, will not allow faith and sex to be so easily divided. The City's orgies are also acts of devout worship. Just as the Maenads' celebrations honoured Dionysos, the Paphians' revels are dedicated to their goddess, the Magdalene, the Great Mother goddess. The Magdalene is a conflation of another pair of polar opposites: Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary. Her gospels are the erotic 'Duties of Pleasure', and yet her chapel images originally represented the Virgin, as Raphael describes:

Swathed in smoke from the blackened brazier, the pale contours of Her face had been smoothed to an eyeless plane by the impressions of thousands of small hands over the centuries. To stay awake I counted the stars painted upon her blue robe and wondered how many years it had been since She was made. Hundreds, perhaps. Miramar and Doctor Foster maintained that ours was the oldest of all the Magdalenes upon the Hill Magdalena Ardent. It was brought there from the ruined Shrine in the northeast part of the City, in the first years of the Second Ascension.

*Winterlong*, p.57

The virgin has become the prostitute, but this is no fall from grace; the sacred and the sexual are 'all one' in *Winterlong*, and the highest form of holy service is prostitution. This Courtesan Goddess is adored by all the Paphians, especially children, as the 'thousands of small hands' would suggest. The Magdalene is a Christ-figure, a martyr; Raphael has a vision in which 'She bled from wounds in her hands and feet. The shining stars upon Her robe turned to tears of blood' (p. 59). She is the sister and lover of Dionysos, and also his opposite; when he becomes Death she becomes his great 'Enemy', 'Hope' (p. 392).

Until *Winterlong's* climactic scenes, however, this goddess of 'Hope' remains passive. While Dionysos roams the City, mindlessly violent, destructive and seductive, the Magdalene stays motionless on her altar, weeping and bleeding. The two form caricatures of their respective genders, the aggressive all-conquering male, and the static unassertive female. At first the Magdalene seems little more than the plaster saint which represents her: lovable, but not equipped to empower her people in the bloody battle to come.



Fortunately, however, the Magdalene is not entirely the meek and mild Christian saint. She is also identified with another goddess: the Hebraic deity Anat.

## Baal and Anat

The next great joy of Mary Anne  
It were the joy of eight:  
To see her own son little Jack  
Go down again to Fate;  
Go down again to Fate and drink  
Death deeper nor the sea.  
Euoi! Euoi! Io! Euoi!  
Through all Eternity!

*Thursbitch*<sup>193</sup>  
Alan Garner

He is in no way a weakling but a warrior and a hero who triumphs... But his manhood celebrates its sublimest victory in the arms of the perfect woman.

*Dionysus: Myth and Cult*<sup>194</sup>  
Walter F Otto

In Anat, Hand has intertwined yet another myth with that of Dionysos. Anat was the sister and wife of the Ancient Hebrew deity, Baal. Baal is killed by Mot, god of death, drought and sterility; Anat realises she cannot survive without her beloved brother/lover:

She lifts up her voice and cries:  
'Baal's dead! – what becomes of our people?  
What becomes of the earth?  
After Baal I'll descend into earth.'

*Winterlong*, p. 432<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Garner, *Thursbitch*, p.5.

<sup>194</sup> Otto, p.175.

<sup>195</sup> A paraphrase of :

[She] lifts up her voice and cries:  
'Baal's dead! What becomes of the people?  
Dagon's Son – What of the masses?  
After Baal I'll descend into earth.'

*Poems About Baal and Anat*, Pritchard.

Anat's response, unlike that of the Virgin at the foot of the Cross, is not restricted to passive lamentation. Anat is an active figure, one of the Neolithic Earth Goddesses identified by Karen Armstrong as 'a symbol of female heroism, in myths that speak ultimately of balance and restored harmony.'<sup>196</sup> Anat hunts down and destroys Mot/Death, thereby restoring her brother to life. Her incestuous love, which would be considered 'unnatural' in most cultures, is powerful and benevolent enough to overcome Death itself. 'Calling nothing natural' in sexuality, then, can be a vital and liberating force. Indeed, taboo-busting and conflation of opposites proves essential during the feast of Winterlong itself, at which anything goes and nothing is 'held unalterable'.

Baal, of course, has been demonised within our culture; he appears in the Old Testament as a false and cruel god (1 Kings 18: 17 – 40), and his name has been corrupted into 'Beelzebub'. There is little to suggest, however, that he was viewed so negatively in his own time; indeed, he is shown as a deity of storms and rain (and therefore of fecundity), and the enemy of the god of Death (Mot).<sup>197</sup> Like Lewis's creation of 'Deeper Magic from Before the Dawn of Time', Hand has accomplished a piece of myth-revision by reaching back in time to an even earlier legend. She draws upon the earlier version of the myth to turn 'Beelzebub' from a demon back into the benign Baal, and thereby to create a much gentler version of Dionysos. Dionysos, with his traditional following of deranged Maenads, is famous not for being stabilised by his contact with women but for making them (as Lewis observes) 'as wild as he'.

Hand's New Dionysos, however, is partly Baal, who forms a loving and stable relationship with his sister-wife Anat. Baal is the passive partner in the legend, the victim of Mot/Death – Anat takes on the active and aggressive role by rescuing Baal 'cleaving' and 'grinding' the Death-God into oblivion. The Dionysos story, a death-tragedy as Euripides portrays it, can now be seen as a triumphant tale of victory over Death: and the power of life and death passes from a masculine god to a female.

### Gender-Bending in *Winterlong*

...A magician with golden hair  
Flowing in scented ringlets, his face flushed with wine,  
His eyes lit with the charm of Aphrodite.  
*The Bacchae*<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Armstrong, p.50.

<sup>197</sup> See History Net.

<sup>198</sup> Euripides, lines 34-36, p.199.

I am all the daughters of my father's house,  
And all the brothers too.

*Twelfth Night*, Act II Scene 4

This reversal of sex-roles is in itself typically Dionysian. Tales of Classical Dionysos, especially *The Bacchae*, are notable for their gender-bending; the god himself is described as 'effeminate', and surrounds himself with female worshippers who appropriate the 'masculine' roles of hunter/warriors. In the City of Trees, Wendy takes on a male persona, Aidan, to escape discovery. She joins a troupe of actors and plays Viola, heroine of *Twelfth Night*, who has also disguised herself to avoid being 'delivered to the world'. A change of gender confers a complete change of identity on both Wendy and Viola, and proves far more effective than any same-sex disguise. On the Shakespearian stage, of course, 'Viola' would have been a boy pretending to be a girl disguised as a boy; Wendy is now 'a girl disguised as a boy disguised as a girl travelling incognito' as a boy (*W*, p.209). *Winterlong's* gender complications are even more convoluted than those of *The Bacchae* or of *Twelfth Night*, a play delighting in inversions and topsy-turvy of all kinds.

In both *The Bacchae* and *Twelfth Night*, however, these gender inversions are seen as short-term and problematic, even bestial. The Maenads are savage and deluded in their 'masculinity', mistaking their young king for a lion; Viola thinks herself a 'poor monster' for being caught between genders. Androgyny is an 'unnatural' state in these two dramas, unsustainable outside the brief topsy-turvy world of the Bacchic rite or the Solstice festival; when normal life reasserts itself, both Viola and the Maenads revert to their traditional female roles.

Wendy, however, who has already happily accepted the oxymoronic label of 'sacred monster', shows no discomfort in her role as 'Aidan'; she is content to play both male and female, onstage and off. In the Saturnalian City of Trees, being caught between male and female is neither problematic nor temporary; there are 'three sexes' (p.124), the third being 'gynander' or hermaphrodite (p.176). The 'natural' binary opposition of male and female – an essential part of so many stories – is no longer natural, and is therefore 'avoidable'. Gender is not just inverted, but blended and mutable, a state of mind rather than a biological absolute.



## Intoxication and Unreliable Narrators

In those centuries when the Greek body flourished and the Greek soul bubbled over with life, perhaps there were endemic raptures, visions, and hallucinations which entire communities, entire cultural bodies, shared... What if it was clearly lunacy, to use a saying from Plato, which brought the greatest blessings throughout Hellas?

*The Birth of Tragedy*<sup>199</sup>  
Friedrich Nietzsche

In the same drink which has within it the power to free, to comfort, and to bring bliss, there slumbers also the madness of the god of horror.

*Dionysus: Myth and Cult*<sup>200</sup>  
Walter F Otto

In *Winterlong*, however, almost anything might be a 'state of mind' rather than a firmly determined fact. Intoxication and uncertainties of perception abound. Unlike Euripides's Maenads, sober and rational citizens before the god possesses them, the inhabitants of the City of Trees were well and truly 'under the influence' long before the arrival of Dionysos. They exist in a state of perpetual Saturnalia, permanent intoxication; they are therefore doubly attractive to Dionysos, since, as Nietzsche notes, the Dionysian state is 'most immediately understandable to us in the analogy of *intoxication*'.<sup>201</sup> The worship of Classical Dionysos involved the use of alcohol, opiates and other plant-based substances: as Kerényi describes it, 'nature overpowering the mind and hurrying it out of a clear self-consciousness'.<sup>202</sup>

Similarly, Hand's characters use 'candicaine' – an easy-to-swallow form of cocaine. Its name suggests 'candy-cane', and the drug is described in terms of an innocuous confection; it comes in 'straws' and is kept by one character in a 'fluted parfait glass' (*W*, p.9). This hints at how liberally it is used – it is, quite literally, consumed as casually as candy.

As for alcohol, the preferred tippable of the New Dionysiac is not wine, but 'absinthium': absinthe. Absinthe, of course, has a myth all of its own: it is equated not just with drunkenness but with artistic genius, madness, hallucinations and visions. Its myth is

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<sup>199</sup> Nietzsche, p. 6.

<sup>200</sup> Otto, p.150.

<sup>201</sup> Nietzsche, p.17.

<sup>202</sup> Karl Otfried Müller, *Ancient Art and Its Remains; or a Manual of the Archaeology of Art* (translated by J. Leitch, London: 1850) Quoted in: Kerényi, p.27.

illustrated perfectly by *Moulin Rouge*, in which the film's decadent artist characters experience an absinthe-induced (and thoroughly Dionysian) vision: the 'Green Fairy' on the bottle comes to life, dances sexily and sings with the voice of a man, before morphing into a kind of malevolent Tinkerbell and dragging the naïve young hero down into the sensual excesses of the Moulin Rouge itself. Hand incorporates this myth into *Winterlong* by making the New Dionysos a god of absinthe rather than wine. The signature colour of the New Dionysos is the electric green of absinthe; the god's awakening is signalled by a patch of 'bright turquoise' on Wendy's brain-scan (*W*, p.29), and his eyes are the intense shade of precious stones, 'emeralds' (*W*, p.350) or 'beryls' (p.40) rather than the softer colour of grapes. His eyes are also compared to 'cyanogen', a poisonous gas, to remind us that absinthe's principle ingredient – wormwood – is a powerful toxin. The 'myth' of absinthe is used to intensify the glamour and the danger of the already 'wild' Dionysos.

Drink and drugs, however, are not the only mind-altering factors here. *Winterlong* is characterised by protagonists 'intoxicated' - and thereby made untrustworthy - by altered mental states. Unlike the confident, third-person narrations of *His Dark Materials* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the first-person storytellers of *Winterlong* - Wendy and Raphael - are highly unreliable. Wendy has been 'neurologically augmented' by the research facility, and is given to trances, blackouts and visions; Raphael not only uses recreational drugs, but is easily sent into a dream-state by church incense or by the perfume of carnivorous plants. When Lewis tells us that the child-characters can see Aslan, we accept this without question; when a heavily-drugged Raphael says he can see Dionysos, however, we cannot be so sure. All accounts and memories offered in *Winterlong* are doubtful: Dr Harrow's recollections of her brother are made questionable by grief and the passage of time, and the skeletal Dr Silverthorn speaks from the brink of death. Amongst all characters there are numerous episodes of blocked or distorted perception: fainting, blackouts, intoxication, seizures, fugue-states, mania and homicidal rage. Everyone is 'on' something, and all stories are rendered uncertain; neither the characters nor the readers are permitted a firm grasp of reality.

Many of these episodes, however, are not just empty hallucinations; they represent the opening of the third eye, perception of a different sort. The 'visions' of Euripides' Maenads are entirely false, given by the Classical Dionysos to mislead and punish; but *Winterlong's* 'unnatural' states-of-mind can transcend into supernatural visions. Raphael dreams prophetically of a 'demonic girl whose eyes burned in a face that mirrored [his] own' (*W*, p.149), prefiguring his climactic encounter with his sister Wendy, who is of course his 'mirror image'. The dream gives way to one of Dionysos in his entirety, life and death at once; the truth that Raphael must come to grasp if he is to survive. But Raphael, still unable to accept the *pharmakon*, closes off his senses altogether:



'No,' he whispered... 'You must learn: it is all one, Raphael. It is all one...'  
At these words I fainted. When I woke he was gone.

*Winterlong*, p.151

In one way, these uncertain visions give the god a great power: he can enter our dreams and take on their form. In another respect, however, this uncertainty is an essential ingredient of mortal empowerment, and is the key to Hand's form of myth-revision. Reality in *Winterlong* is never fixed; perception then becomes the only reality. Characters exist in a state of dream-time, in which anything can be altered, including one's own identity: including the gods themselves.

### **Made in Our Image: Shaping the God**

I call upon you, blessed, many-named and frenzied Bacchos,  
bull-horned Nysian redeemer, god of the wine-press, conceived in fire.

*The Orphic Hymns*<sup>203</sup>

Woe unto him that striveth with his Maker... Shall the clay say to him that fashioneth  
it, What makest thou?

Isaiah 45:9

Unlike the Classical Dionysos, who changed form only at his own pleasure, the New Dionysos is moulded by the perceptions of mortals. In *Winterlong*, the human mind unconsciously 'shapes' the divine; 'Man' makes 'God' in his own image. Dr Harrow and her brother Aidan perceive the god as the benign Baal, brother and lover of Anat, and are inspired to set aside taboos and become lovers. After their separation and Aidan's suicide, however, Dr Harrow unwittingly moulds Baal into Dionysos 'the Boy in the Tree': a god of beauty and madness, whose eroticism leads to death. This episode is reminiscent of Alan Garner's *The Owl Service*, in which teenage anger dictates that the goddess will come not as forgiving flowers but as vengeful owls: 'Why must she see owls and not flowers?... She is coming, and will use what she finds, and you have only hate in you'.<sup>204</sup> Emma, who 'has only

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<sup>203</sup> *The Orphic Hymns*.

<sup>204</sup> Garner, *The Owl Service*, p.153.



**grief' in her, gives Dionysos the form he will take throughout the novel; shaped entirely by a human psyche, Dionysos is passed along like a virus to Wendy and to the City of Trees. A human can exert power over a god – the belief in the absolute authority of the Divine is challenged.**

**The god needs humanity not just for his shape, but for his strength, and for his very existence. Dionysos is parasitic, unable to travel to a new place without his human carrier, Wendy. Hand underlines the persistence and tenacity of beliefs and mythic stories by making her god a stowaway in Wendy's subconscious, much as Neil Gaiman's expatriate god, Odin, in *American Gods*, rides 'piggy-back' in a believer's mind to reach the new world:**

**'When the people came to America they brought us with them... We rode here in their minds, and we took root'.<sup>205</sup>**

**Once in place, the New Dionysos is still dependent on human agency. Having obtained his form from Dr Harrow, and his strength and freedom from Wendy, he now requires human worshippers for his sustenance: 'with joy and blood-hunger and a thirst for worship', he begins to 'seek and find' devotees 'as surely as a flower seeks sunlight and rain' (*W*, p.151,115). He is once again parasitical, forced to draw his nourishment from human faith, as Gaiman's Odin is also compelled to do:**

**'Our true believers passed on, or stopped believing, and we were left, lost and scared and dispossessed, only what little smidgens of worship or belief we could find.'<sup>206</sup>**

**This trope is also employed by Terry Pratchett, whose 'small gods' are even more dependent:**

**There are billions of gods in the world. They swarm as thick as herring roe. Most of them are too small to see and never get worshipped... Because what they lack is *belief*.<sup>207</sup>**

**The parasite-god is an atheistic and humanist development in Fantasy, representing something of a rebellion against more conservative works, in which Man is dependant on**

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<sup>205</sup> Gaiman, *American Gods*, p.107.

<sup>206</sup> Gaiman, *American Gods*, p. 107.

<sup>207</sup> Pratchett, *Small Gods*, p.11.

God. The idea that Lewis's Aslan or Tolkien's Valar require human faith in order to exist is patently absurd. The New Dionysos, however, needs mortal worship to sustain him 'as a flower needs sunshine and rain'. He soon finds plenty of worshippers amongst the devout and superstitious Paphians; they identify him as Baal, the god who 'wakes Death, but his sister Anat saves him' (*W*, p.127). He is thus given the potential to be reshaped yet again, to become – or to be turned into - the gentle Baal rather than the increasingly dangerous Dionysos. This will occur when Wendy transforms herself into Anat: a mortal becoming divine under the unique, topsy-turvy influence of the Winter Solstice.

### **Who Will Let the Winter In? Death, Rebirth and the Winter Solstice**

On this day we shut out Nothing!

'Pause,' says a low voice. 'Nothing? Think!'

'On Christmas Day, we will shut out from our fireside, Nothing.'

'Not the shadow of a vast City where the withered leaves are lying deep?' the voice replies. 'Not the shadow that darkens the whole globe? Not the shadow of the City of the Dead?'

Not even that.

'What Christmas Is as We Grow Older'<sup>208</sup>  
Charles Dickens

But the god himself is not merely touched and seized by the ghostly spirit of the abyss. He, himself, is the monstrous creature which lives in the depths. From its mask it looks out at man and sends him reeling with the ambiguity of nearness and remoteness, of life and death in one.

*Dionysus: Myth and Cult*<sup>209</sup>  
Walter F Otto

In Classical legends, Dionysos is not a god much associated with winter. Although he may have been worshipped at many different times of the year, he is most closely associated with agricultural festivals, especially the sowing-time 'Eleusinian Mysteries', in early autumn.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Dickens, *Works*, p.28.

<sup>209</sup> Otto, p.140.

<sup>210</sup> The rites... had originally been instituted in Eleusis by Persephone's mother, Demeter. Dionysus was also much honored. The festival at Eleusis, known as the Greater Mysteries, was celebrated in the early fall, at sowing time.  
The Columbia Encyclopedia.

Similarly, *The Bacchae*, although its season is unspecified, is not a winter's tale; it takes place amongst an abundance of flowers and leafy oak-trees.

The New Dionysos, however, is a god of the Winter Solstice. He has been reshaped by the beliefs of his worshippers: the Paphians who reverence him as Baal regard the Longest Night as the focal point of the year, the time of their most sacred celebration, the 'Masque of Baal and Anat'. This repositioning is thematically vital. Gone is the mellowness of the September celebrations, and in its place is the savage, anarchic revelry of the Longest Night.

Winter Solstice celebrations are, of course, common to many cultures; there is a widespread perception of this time of year as special and uncanny. The time of the Solstice is, as Angela Carter says, 'the hinge of the year when things do not fit together as well as they should';<sup>211</sup> Carter was writing of Christmas Eve, but the same principle operates in other belief-systems. Hand therefore draws on many traditions of Solstice myth, Christian, Hebraic, neo-pagan and literary, to create the New Dionysos' midwinter rite; all these traditions contain elements of mysticism, transformation, death and rebirth. The feast of Winterlong is, however, modeled on a celebration drawn from the same Classical tradition as Dionysos himself: the Roman Saturnalia.

The Saturnalia was a December festival, initially dedicated to Saturn but later expanded to honour other gods with whom Saturn could be equated, Dionysos and Baal among them.<sup>212</sup> Seneca marvelled that in Rome there appeared to be '*some real difference* between the days devoted to Saturn and those for transacting business'.<sup>213</sup> It was an event characterised, as James George Frazer observes, by temporary 'license'; a time of 'extravagant mirth and jollity' and abandonment of the 'customary restraints of law and morality', with the temporary abolition of 'the distinction between the free and the servile'.<sup>214</sup> A mock king – or 'Lord of Misrule' – was chosen to oversee this 'license', which took the form of 'topsy-turvy' – that is, inversion of the social order:

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<sup>211</sup> Carter, 'The Company of Wolves', p.214.

<sup>212</sup> By the third century CE, there were many religions and spiritual mysteries being followed within the Roman Empire. Many, if not most, celebrated the birth of their god-man near the time of the solstice. Emperor Aurelian (270 to 275 CE) blended a number of Pagan solstice celebrations of the nativity of such god-men/saviors as Appolo (sic), Attis, Baal, Dionysus, Helios, Hercules, Horus, Mithra, Osiris, Perseus, and Theseus into a single festival called the '*Birthday of the Unconquered Sun*' on DEC-25.  
'Winter Solstice', Religious Tolerance.

<sup>213</sup> Seneca (the Younger), *Epistolae*. My italics.

<sup>214</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, (Chapter LVIII, Part 3) p.675 & 676.



The usual was suspended during the Saturnalia... masquerading and change of dress between the sexes occurred... social distinctions not only were not observed, but often reversed, as in the instance of masters serving their servants... speech and action... were to some extent unbridled.<sup>215</sup>

Dionysos, the god who 'could do just about anything', is in *Winterlong* at his most powerful on the night when 'just about anything' could happen. The options are not all happy and harmless, reflecting the much darker side of the merriment of the Saturnalia. The 'mock king', a representative of the god, ruled for a set period of time, but was then sacrificed:

[A] king, Saturn, was elected and permitted great license before and during the festival, only to die at its close.<sup>216</sup>

Hand draws on all these associations – the revelry, the topsy-turvy and the sacrifice – to create the feast of Winterlong. Moreover, the characters are aware of these associations; they know what story they are supposed to be re-enacting, and so are able to revise it to suit themselves.

Since Dionysos is now a god of the Winter Solstice, he becomes increasingly savage as the nights grown longer and the Solstice approaches. Raphael's association with the cannibalistic lazars, who worship him as 'Lord of Dogs', modifies the 'version' of Dionysos he personifies; the god is no longer Dionysos Dendrites, spirit of the forest, but Dionysos 'Zagreus' (the Hunter) or 'Omadios' (the one who feeds on raw flesh).<sup>217</sup> When Raphael at last appears at the Masque of Winterlong, it is as 'The Gaping One': Dionysos as Death, the earth that swallowed up Persephone, and the grave that will swallow all humanity.<sup>218</sup> He also represents the Lord of Misrule; he is not content to be 'king for a day', however, but intends to make his rule permanent:

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<sup>215</sup> 'Saturnalia'. Leach, p.974.

<sup>216</sup> 'Saturnalia'. Leach, p.974-5.

<sup>217</sup> 'Book of Epithets', *Temenos* website.

<sup>218</sup> The poet of the Homeric Hymn has a meadow 'gape' to receive Kore -- the same word that formed an epithet of Dionysos, the 'Gaping One'.

Harline, 'What is Done by the Two in Darkness'.

'All the City of Trees is here tonight, and Winter is tired of wandering... There is no end to it. The Lord of Misrule will not be overthrown this time.'

*Winterlong*, p.411

Death is supposed to be satisfied with the sacrificed Lord of Misrule, and leave the other revellers unscathed. The ensuing massacre at the Feast demonstrates how seriously Raphael is rewriting the ceremony of the Saturnalia, and revising the myth of the Winter Solstice. The Solstice is supposed to mark the end of winter, the return of the light – but 'Winter is tired of wandering', and will not move along to make way for spring. Raphael, like Lewis's White Witch, is imposing a Fimbulwinter – an endless, unnatural winter - by disrupting the Solstice ritual. The Witch's fake winter cannot be broken until Father Christmas has put in an appearance; the City of Trees is heading for Armageddon because the Lord of Misrule – who also identifies himself as 'Winter' - refuses to be 'sent on'. This is entirely unnatural; but, as we have seen, nothing can be 'called natural' or unnatural in the City of Trees, particularly on the topsy-turvy night of the Solstice. Moreover, the Fimbulwinter here is more serious than the White Witch's, which at least can grow no worse; in *Winterlong*, as in the Ragnarok myth, Fimbulwinter symbolizes and precedes the Apocalypse. The Longest Night represents mass death, the swallowing of all life by the Gaping One.

The Winter Solstice, however, is also a pharmakon: it brings both life and death. Raphael may have rewritten the Saturnalia, but the plethora of other myths and fables surrounding the Longest Night can also come into play. Wendy, who understands even better than Raphael which story they are 'in', counteracts the Saturnalia sacrifice myth with the tale of Anat. She performs 'The Masque of Baal and Anat'. It is play-acting, but theatre was sacred in the cult of Dionysos,<sup>219</sup> and the Midwinter has topsy-turvy'd pretence into reality. The Baal and Anat myth is now made to form an equivalent to Lewis's 'Deeper Magic from Before the Dawn of Time': it is a story in which neither the god nor the sacrifice die, but rather Death itself. Just as Anat destroys Mot, the god of death and sterility, to resurrect Baal, so Wendy spares Raphael's life and turns instead upon the castrated death-cult leader Tastannin, who tries to use atomic weapons to destroy the City of Trees beyond all hope of regeneration.

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<sup>219</sup> The tragedy was a religious ceremony, enacted not so much on the boards as in the souls of the spectators.

Jose Ortega y Gasset, Meditaciones del Quijote. Kerenyi, p.315.

Wendy's assumption of divine status draws upon another Midwinter myth: the Christian belief in the Incarnation, the god made flesh. The approaching 'Apocalypse' can be revised into that word's older meaning: divine revelation. Wendy, a female in the story of Dionysos, is supposed to play a Maenad: a human female who, obedient to the requirements of the god, the 'maenad's Dionysus' (*W*, p.435), carries out the sacrifice. Raphael is simultaneously the god and the reviled scapegoat, and Wendy hears the dead call out for his blood:

And I saw all of them, Emma and Aidan, Gligor and Merle and Anna, Dr. Silverthorn and Toby Rhymer... With them shrilled the voices of the lazars like wounds bleeding song, all of them crying out to me... And the song they sang had only one note and one sound and one word, and the word they sang was Death; the song they sang was Supplication to slay him there where he lay with his white throat awaiting the knife, his eyes shut against the blade.

*Winterlong*, p.436

The Solstice, however, wipes away the distinction between 'the free and the servile': the mortal Maenad is not compelled to obey the god. Moreover, the mortal and the god can now merge into one; Wendy, who has a multitude of Solstice myths to draw upon, chooses the Incarnation myth, and takes on the persona of a god, or rather a goddess. Faith is strength to a divine being in *Winterlong*; the Paphians believe not just in a god, but in a goddess, a symbol of life and hope who is, ultimately, the stronger of the two. Wendy now embodies the goddess, in both good and evil aspect, and must make a choice. Like Alison in *The Owl Service*, who can be gentle 'flowers' or savage 'owls', she can determine the course of the drama simply by changing herself. Like Dickens' Scrooge, who is recognised by Raphael as 'a man redeemed by ghosts', she is empowered by Solstice magic to rewrite her story by changing her actions. If she pursues revenge, she will renew the cycle of death by becoming the destructive female principle: '*Kali is your name, and Athena; and Morgan and Mayuel; Clytemnestra and Artemis and Hecate!*' (*W*, p.436).

Wendy however chooses forgiveness, becoming a goddess of harmony and conciliation: 'I am Anat, the consort of my brother Baal... I am the Magdalene' (*W*, p.436). By the rules of the Solstice, someone or something must die. And yet, also by the rules of the Solstice, Wendy can perform the ultimate 'topsy-turvy': the destruction of Death itself. Outside the paradoxical, anarchic and 'unnatural' world of *Winterlong*, the death of Death could not be imagined, let alone accomplished. But nothing is here 'held unalterable', and so a mortal woman can assume the power of a masculine god and bring about the Solstice



miracle: the incarnation of the divine in human form, the destruction of Death, the redemption of the sinner and the salvation of her City.

Once more, the divine forces are malleable; they submit to the shaping power of the human. Moreover, the mortal is obliged to intervene, to avert chaos and destruction; the human influence seen as wiser and more compassionate than the divine, impressing a conscience upon an otherwise amoral force. It would seem, therefore, that *Winterlong* supports the atheistic stance taken by *His Dark Materials*: the rejection of an omnipotent, changeless, moralistic and patriarchal Deity like Lewis's Aslan. Indeed, on the surface, New Dionysos might appear to anticipate Philip Pullman's tyrannical and worthless Authority, or Fantasy's other anti-Aslans like Pratchett's buffoon-god 'the invisible god F'rum, generally considered unable, should he have a backside, to find it with both hands, should he have hands'.<sup>220</sup> Gaiman's 'American Gods', petty crooks and swindlers, could also be added to this procession of 'Wizard-of-Oz' fraudster deities who should be brought down to size as quickly as possible.

But *Winterlong* refuses to be absolute, and the New Dionysos remains slippery. He can be cruel, but he is not hated; he and his consort the Magdalene are not just slavishly obeyed, but loved. He may decline and become redundant; but he has been resurrected once in the City of Trees, and presumably he could rise again. He is parasitical, but he still has something vital to give; he remains the 'Liberator', the essential escape from workaday life into the surreal and sublime.

The New Dionysos, then, is not simply a hollow figure of patriarchal authority. He is perhaps a force of nature, similar to the divine force of *The Owl Service*, a neutral power given 'a thinking mind' by human worshippers<sup>221</sup>. He is malleable, and submits almost humbly to the needs and desires of others. And yet despite this supreme adaptability, and however his worshippers may 'construct' him, he retains some distinct and defining attributes: he is something to do with vegetation, something to do with intoxication, something that dies at the Solstice and is reborn. Savage, drunken and sexual, he appears to be an adult version of the leaf-clad Narnian 'wild boy' summoned by Aslan. Yet under the spell of *Winterlong*, the New Dionysos is less like the boy and more like Aslan himself: the 'King of the wood',<sup>222</sup> the willing sacrifice, the resurrected Christ; the god who truly can do 'absolutely anything'.

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<sup>220</sup> Pratchett, *Small Gods*, p. 238.

<sup>221</sup> Garner, *The Owl Service*, p. 135.

<sup>222</sup> Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, p. 146.

## In Conclusion

The next great joy of Mary Anne  
It were the joy of nine:  
To see her own son Little Jack  
Pluck up the bilberry fine;  
Pluck up the bilberry fine to give  
Himself to thee and me.  
Euoi! Euoi! Io! Euoi!  
Through all Eternity.

*Thursbitch*<sup>223</sup>  
Alan Garner

*Winterlong* walks a very fine line between psychological SF and mythopoeic fantasy. It is possible to see it as a supernatural drama of the return of old gods, or a tale of the power of belief augmented by psycho-neural experimentation. Hand never gives us cut-and-dried answers, only overgrown questions. Her narrators are made unreliable by all kinds of drugs, damage and delirium – their visions may be real, or mere hallucinations. Hand imbues this novel with what is, as much as the theme of intoxication, the essence of Dionysos - the blurring of boundaries. Rigidly defined taboos – against prostitution, child sexuality, and incest – collapse in the imaginative space of *Winterlong*, and there are no sharp lines to separate male and female, god and human, dream and reality. The New Dionysos is the soul of indeterminacy; he is just as he describes himself: 'all one'.

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<sup>223</sup> Garner, *Thursbitch*, p.153.

### 3) Revising Ragnarok: Rewriting Norse Myth in *Cold City*

The principal task of the Church in these parts, as I see it, is to reinterpret Fate to those fate-ridden tribes of the north. It is true: the actions of men and nations seem to be prompted, rounded, sealed by a somber inscrutable world-will. Our sagas are obsessed with it. Love and heroism and feasting are enacted in a wintry light: all enter at last the solstice, the heart of darkness...

*Magnus*<sup>224</sup>  
George MacKay Brown

Indeterminacy allows Elizabeth Hand to revise the Dionysos story – or at least the tale related in *The Bacchae* – from a tragedy to a comedy. In Euripides' version – as in similar mythic accounts of the Saturnalia – the god-substitute must die, and so the tale can only be a tragedy. If no-one dies but Death itself, however, the outcome becomes positive and hopeful; it is therefore comedic in Dante's sense, in that it 'begins with sundry adverse conditions, but ends happily'.<sup>225</sup>

It is a more daunting task, however, to revise a myth in which everyone, gods and humans, is fated to die: the ultimate tragedy.<sup>226</sup> *Cold City* is, at least in some respects, an attempt to do this; it sets out to revise the myth of 'Ragnarok': the Norse legend of the end of the world.

*Cold City* was originally conceived as a work of fairly hard-SF futurism. The mythic elements, in my earliest imaginings, were to take second place to factual details of how a new Ice Age would affect urban life, agriculture, and the political and economic scene of Scotland. My original intentions turned out to be irrelevant, however, as novelists' early plans often are. After years of writing (relatively controllable) short stories, this came as a shock to me; I have read a great deal of myth-revising literature, but no-one ever told me how much the myths revise *themselves* in the process of being written. I am thankful for it now, however: a novel, after all, is not a modern studies lecture. I did feel slightly embarrassed, though, by how quickly my thoughts on population crisis and industrial decline were squeezed out by an ancient story about the earth ending in ice and fire.

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<sup>224</sup> Brown, *Magnus*, p.33.

<sup>225</sup> Dante, 'Letter to Can Grande'.

<sup>226</sup> 'Tragedy at the beginning is admirable and placid, but at the end or issue is foul and horrible.' Dante, 'Letter to Can Grande'.



## The End of the World in Ice: Ragnarok, Nuclear Winter and the Apocalypse

Some say the world will end in fire;  
Some say in ice.  
From what I've tasted of desire  
I hold with those who favor fire.  
But if it had to perish twice,  
I think I know enough of hate  
To know that for destruction ice  
Is also great  
And would suffice.

'Fire and Ice'<sup>227</sup>  
Robert Frost

As Apocalypse legends go, Ragnarok is a singularly chilly one. It begins with the murder of Balder, most beautiful and beloved of the gods, by the morally blank Loki. The other gods, in their agonies of grief, want Loki to suffer even more than they do; they chain him up for eternity, with acid venom dripping onto his bare skin.

At the end of the world, after a three-year unnatural winter known as Fimbulwinter, Loki escapes and summons the gods of the Underworld. They march against the sky-gods. A fiery sword cracks the celestial bridge; a giant serpent pollutes the world with venom; a giant wolf swallows the sun and moon. The sky gods clash with them on the earth; all the gods, good or bad, fall in battle. The world burns, and at last sinks into the sea.<sup>228</sup>

The role of humanity in all this seems to be that of passive victim. Over the years we have come to call the sky-gods 'good', and assume that they are fighting the forces of evil on our behalf.<sup>229</sup> This may be a later, Christian modification to the stories; this would not be surprising, since our major sources of the Ragnarok myth were written by Christians.<sup>230</sup> Or perhaps it simply constitutes wishful thinking, because there is no mention, even by these Christian authors, that either set of gods have any thought for humanity at all. The great

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<sup>227</sup> Robert Frost, 'Fire and Ice'. Bartleby.com.

<sup>228</sup> For a full account of the legend see Appendix, 'Ragnarok'.

<sup>229</sup> For example: Ragnarok is defined as 'the day of the great battle between the gods and the forces of evil... the final battle of the world in which the forces of good and evil valiantly fight out their predetermined one-sided battle on the plains of Vigrid'. Leach, p.919.

<sup>230</sup> The sources include 'Voluspo' in the *Poetic Edda* (Bellows, p.1-27), and 'Gylfaginning' in Snorri Sturluson's *(Prose) Edda* (Sturluson, p.7-58).

powers fight; the rest of us are collateral damage. Moreover, no special status is to be accorded to believers when Ragnarok comes; there is no Rapture, no Promised Land: no Hell for the wicked, no Heaven for the innocent. Young or old, good or evil, pious or worldly, our fates will all be the same: the final conflagration, and then 'men, women and children' will go to the Underworld together. As Crossley-Holland puts it:

The Einherjar will die, men and women and children in Midgard will die, elves and dwarfs will die, giants will die, monsters and creatures of the underworld will die, birds and animals will die. The sun will be dark and there will be no stars in the sky. The earth will sink into the sea.<sup>231</sup>

Of the whole human race there will be only two survivors, a man called Lif and a woman called Lifthrasir. Once more we see the strange amorality of the Ragnarok legend, in that there is no sense that these two are chosen for their piety, or their virtue, or even that they are 'chosen' at all; they have simply been lucky enough to find the best hiding-place inside the World Tree. They represent, therefore, not so much Noah and his family – chosen to survive the great destruction because of their righteousness – as one of the pairs of animals Noah stored in the Ark. A breeding-pair, 'Life' and 'Bearer-of-Life': biological survival, nothing more.

They have, at least, a new world to biologically survive in. It will be a wondrous place, a place of gold-roofed buildings, good people, and only the nicest resurrected gods (Balder, but not Odin or Thor, and definitely not Loki). Here at least there is some Afterlife sorting, the evil winnowed out from among the good. The golden beings can look down from their golden houses into the Underworld, where serpents will drool rivers of poison, dragons will suck on corpses and all manner of *Inferno*-esque gruesomeness will be visited upon murderers, oath-breakers and philanderers.

The 'new world' chapter may also be a later Christian overlay;<sup>232</sup> the combination of golden gods above and rivers of blood below certainly implies this. The Heaven/Hell polarity does not altogether ring true compared with the amoral character of the rest of the story, or indeed with the Norse gods themselves. It seemed to me, at least at first, an essentially Northern European myth: the product of a pragmatic mindset which accepts cold seas, icy

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<sup>231</sup> Crossley-Holland, p.175.

<sup>232</sup> For example: 'There would be a few survivors, both human and divine, who would populate a new world, to start the cycle anew. .. Scholars are divided on the question whether this is a later addition to the myth that betrays Christian influence.' 'Kids' Net Encyclopedia'.

mountains and winter hunger with unruffled stoicism. Cold has no meaning, no essentially good or evil properties - cold is just the way things are.

In *Cold City*, Ragnarok becomes conflated with another great religious death-wish: the Judeo-Christian Apocalypse. Unlike Ragnarok, this Armageddon is, by some of its believers, not just stoically accepted but actively wished for; the sooner the world is ended, the unbelievers disposed of and the faithful transported to Paradise, the better. Trying to prevent this Apocalypse is not just pointless, like trying to avert the 'fated' Ragnarok; it is wicked, a blasphemous attempt to interfere with the will of God. Here we see a much clearer example of what Philip Pullman perceives as the 'life-hating ideology' of CS Lewis's Narnia novels: the conviction that earthly life is an unpleasant dream, the 'Shadowlands' as Lewis describes it, from which we must wake into the true existence.<sup>233</sup>

As the end of the world occurs in *Cold City*, however, it is not so pleasant and pain-free. It is accomplished by mass nuclear strike and its subsequent nuclear winter: the end of the world in fire and ice. Nuclear winter, as Carl Sagan described it, would constitute the ultimate Fimbul-winter, complete with the freezing of the earth and the blotting-out of the sun:

In the baseline case, the amount of sunlight at the ground was reduced to a few percent of normal... an unbroken and deadly gloom would persist for weeks... Land temperatures... dropped to minus 250 Celsius (minus 13 degrees Fahrenheit) and stayed below freezing for months...

Many species of plants and animals would become extinct. Vast numbers of surviving humans would starve to death... And there seems to be a real possibility of the extinction of the human species.<sup>234</sup>

The atomic scenario - with its fire and ice, its amorality and its unselective culling of good and evil alike - recalls Ragnarok rather than the Biblical Apocalypse. In *Cold City*, Suzey Pherson stumbles into another parallel world in which nuclear holocaust has already occurred, and nuclear winter begun. That world's 'version' of Raj Chaudhury is able to describe the nuclear catastrophe in terms of the Norse myth:

'This is how it happened,' he says. 'See?'

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<sup>233</sup> 'There was a real railway accident,' Aslan said softly. "Your father and mother and all of you are – as you used to call it in the Shadowlands – dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning.'

*Chronicles of Narnia*, p.767

<sup>234</sup> Sagan, 'The Nuclear Winter'.



I look. On top of the bundle is an old newspaper cutting; a picture of a beautiful 12-year-old boy, with a halo of golden curls. The headline shrieks: *KILL THE MURDERING BEASTS*. 'That's Peter Balfour,' I say.

'No.' Raj is shaking his head vigorously. 'No, it's Balder. *Balder*. The beautiful one, the beloved of the gods. He is murdered. The gods will have their revenge. That's how it begins. Then. *This*.'

He produces another paper cutting. His voice has become quite mild, as if he's back in the lecture-hall. But his eyes are rabid. 'Him. The Destroyer.'

I look. Dozens of cuttings; all by Matthew McLean. I scan them. *CRUSH THESE BEASTS... MURDERING SCUM... Wipe Out the Perverts...*

Then: *FAITH OF OUR FATHERS... Return to DECENCY and COMMON SENSE... ZERO TOLERANCE...*

Then: *MAD MULLAHS... our Jewish brothers... GOD'S COUNTRY... BOMB THREATS... held to ransom by violent fanatics?... We Say: Teach Them a Lesson... STRIKE NOW...*

Then nothing.

'He started a war,' I whisper.

Raj's eyes are losing focus. 'The great sword blazes like the sun,' he says. 'The serpent spews poison over all the earth. The sky cracks open, and the earth burns. Then ashes, only ashes.'

'Raj –'

'Fenrir.' His voice is hoarse now, and weak. He's staring at McLean's picture. 'The Great Wolf. The one who swallows up the sun. The end of the world. Ragnarok.'

*Cold City, Chapter Eighteen p.159-160*<sup>235</sup>

Supernatural monsters are easily transmuted into man-made weaponry. Surt's fiery sword, 'blazing like the sun itself', becomes the blinding flash of detonation; the giant serpent's venom is fallout, and the cracking of the Asgard bridge the destruction of the ozone layer; the 'earth burns' in the nuclear firestorm. McLean becomes both Loki and the giant wolf Fenrir, the two great Destroyers. In the nuclear scenario, there is no golden world afterwards: just another Fimbul-winter, much more terrible than the first.

A tiny minority of humans will find adequate shelter below ground, deep in the earth: deep in the 'World Tree'. The rest may try to hide away, but it will do them no good; every region will become 'furnaces – places of raging flame, swirling smoke, ashes, only ashes'. A few will survive, but for the rest of us our fate is clear; in the man-made Armageddon, as at Ragnarok, 'men, women and children will die, birds and animals will die'.

Survivors may emerge, but a post-nuclear 'golden age' is clearly out of the question. This link between nuclear and divine holocaust, therefore, probably reinforced my tendency to disbelieve in the Norsemen's post-Ragnarok Heaven-on-Earth. Even if the golden ending is purely wishful thinking, however, we can well understand why it is there. Nuclear

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<sup>235</sup> All page numbers and references to *Cold City* refer to this volume.

devastation would be brought about by human stupidity – and so, in theory at least, could be averted by human wisdom. Ragnarok, however, is ordained by Fate and brought about by divine figures who do not seem to care if humans live or die.

No wonder the Norsemen imagined golden worlds. It could not have been easy to live with a group of deities who, whether you were good or evil, would think nothing of watching you being shoveled into Hades willy-nilly, along with your kids, your enemies, the worst people you've heard of, and then the best on top of them. Gods, moreover, who knew the whole thing was going to happen and wouldn't lift a finger to stop it – who would actually rush out to meet it. The legend tells us that Odin knows every detail of what's to come, but makes no effort to stop it. It's Fate: the word 'Ragnarok', often translated as 'Twilight of the Gods', is more properly understood as '*Fate of the Gods*'.<sup>236</sup> Ragnarok has, as it were, their name on it; the gods believe there is nothing they can do to prevent it.

My response as a reader is always to wonder what would happen if they tried. When the call to battle comes - as they know it will - why don't they all just stay in bed? Perhaps this is too much to expect of the epic-sized machismo of a typical Norse god. But why, I always find myself wondering, can't they try to change *something*, if only the details of the combat? Their fatalism has turned the gods into automata, will-less beings running through a set programme like clockwork toys. *Odin, we are told, will make straight for the wolf Fenrir.* We are forced to wonder why he doesn't confront another adversary, Loki perhaps. *Freyr, who has loaned his sword to his manservant, is to be killed by Surt, ruing the day that he gave his own good sword to his servant Skirnir.* The solution to this is too obvious to require stating. Why don't they do something? After all, how could they possibly make things worse by trying?

But they won't: to do so might look cowardly, might suggest they are afraid to die. Dignity is all. This is not precisely the 'life-hating ideology' Philip Pullman detests – there is no eagerness in the Norse gods for death, no perception that their Afterlife will be infinitely better than life on Earth. Yet their behaviour is curiously passive; the male gods set out to meet their appointed deaths, while the goddesses, as far as we are told, do nothing at all – they sit at home in Asgard, waiting for the fire to consume them, watching their menfolk die.

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<sup>236</sup> The word [Ragnarok] is a compound. Its first element, *ragna-*, is the possessive plural of the word *reginn* which we have seen used of the gods as organizing powers. The second part, *-rok*, means literally 'marvels, fate, doom'. Thus the compound literally means 'fate/wonders of the gods', but quite early the second element became confused with the word *rokkr*, 'twilight'; hence Wagner's *Gotterdammerung*, 'twilight of the gods'.

Page, p. 217.

No Anat rises to save them. The most powerful beings in the universe will perish without lifting a hand to save themselves or those they love.

The plot of *Cold City* was devised in opposition to both the passive submission to fate, and the welcoming of destruction. The world doesn't have to end – and even if it does, you don't have to go quietly.

*Cold City's* main characters oppose the better-off-dead scenario, and try to rewrite the story in which they find themselves. They have no particular faith in a Pullman-esque Heaven on Earth; they just don't want to die today, thank you, nor do they want any of the people they love to die either. It is not a glorious dream to offer in place of Lewis's heavenly Kingdom, or even Pullman's enlightened Republic. It constitutes little, really, other than 'not going gentle', other than postponing the inevitable.

But postponing the inevitable, as Terry Pratchett says, is what life *is*.<sup>237</sup> And there is some satisfaction to be had from puncturing the arrogance of those who presume to know, in absolute terms, just if, when and how God will choose to bring the Apocalypse about.

In *Cold City* as in *Winterlong*, averting Armageddon depends on casting doubt upon what is real. The main character, Suzey Pherson, can alter a predetermined myth by choosing to assume a different role, and by playing the part of a goddess. Like Dionysos, she is able to draw on the faith of others, and on her own status as one returned from the dead: someone who can do 'just about anything'.

## Escaping to Hell: Madness & Unreliability

This one looked at the window  
As though it were a wall,  
This one saw things that were not there,  
This one things that were,  
And this one cried No No No No  
All day long.

'Counting the Mad'<sup>238</sup>  
Donald Justice

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<sup>237</sup> "YOU'RE ONLY PUTTING OFF THE INEVITABLE," he [Death] said.  
"That's what being alive is all about."  
Pratchett, *Sourcery*, p.12.

<sup>238</sup> Justice, 'Counting the Mad'.



Suzey, the sole first-person narrator of *Cold City*, is even more unreliable than *Winterlong's* Wendy or Raphael. She too is 'under the influence', but not of alcohol, recreational drugs or incense. Suzey's intoxicant is mental illness, and/or the medication prescribed to her, and/or the hospital in which she resides. As with any other psychiatric inpatient, she has no sure way of knowing which of these three factors are responsible for her 'condition'. Hospital staff will inevitably blame an 'illness' that the patient came in carrying, like a bad cold. Many of the patients will insist that the drugs, or confinement in a hospital, or both, have driven them from sane to crazy: that their 'disease' is, as Gilbert and Gubar describe it, a 'dis-ease', a natural despair response to a desperate situation.<sup>239</sup> It is impossible to say; any change in the sufferer's state of mind may be attributable to any combination of these three principles.

For Suzey, the potential uncertainty factor is high. In this she resembles the protagonists of *Winterlong*, who have also been displaced from their familiar surroundings – the lab in Wendy's case, House Miramar in Raphael's – and placed in a more troubling environment (the anarchic and unsettling City of Trees). For Suzey, Wendy and Raphael, mind-altering chemicals - whether absinthium or anti-depressants – increase the sense of surrealism and the acute susceptibility to visions. Perhaps most crucially, Suzey's highly unusual state of mind is like that of the separated twins Wendy and Raphael: always feeling there is 'another half' out there somewhere, an empty place that only she can fill.

By comparing these three, then, we can see how the literature of mental illness and the Fantasy genre can be combined. At first glance, the two literary forms may seem like strange bedfellows (the Narnia novels meet *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*), but in fact they can be highly compatible. Fantasy thrives on uncertainty, altered perception, and surrealism; these factors are also crucial to Janice Galloway's novel, in which the disjointed narrative reflects the protagonist's mental breakdown:

And I had forgotten what I had to say. I knew if I opened my mouth something terrible would dribble out like the tea, gush down the front of my shirt, over her shoes and cover the carpet like

like

like

She sucked her teeth and leaned closer, whispering.

Janice Galloway, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> Gilbert & Gubar, p.51.

<sup>240</sup> Galloway, p.22.

*Cold City* uses a similarly irregular, first-person style to convey Suzey's earliest glimpses of the Cold world:

As I let myself in I hear a murmur of voices. I think: there's someone in my flat. I stand, still clutching the key in the lock, and for a moment I feel  
- something trying to get through something cold something –  
dizzy. But that's the draught, I tell myself, the draught from the close behind me.

*Cold City*, Chapter One p.17

Suzey's unusual state of mind, however, might serve a fairly straightforward function: a wish to escape. The consultant Mister Lisbon believes Suzey's condition is a form of 'fugue state', in which the 'fugitive' flees from a situation and an identity which have become intolerable. In this insanity-as-escape theme, *Cold City* aligns itself with other parallel-world fantasies such as Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Sian Hayton's *The Governors* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*. All feature female characters who escape into parallel worlds which may or may not be elaborate delusions; all examine issues of female mental illness, and how it is defined and responded to, and how much the medical profession should intervene for the woman's 'own good'. Piercy's Connie and Gilman's unnamed Narrator are both caught in Suzey's 'matrix' of state of mind, medicinal intervention and place of confinement or treatment: Connie has been sent to a psychiatric hospital and medicated after claiming to travel to parallel realities, whereas Gilman's Narrator has been confined in the attic and dosed with 'phosphates' for post-natal depression.

Both Piercy and Gilman show the place of 'treatment' as a prison, designed to aggravate any mental illness or distress the patient may actually have. The women 'escape' not so much from inner conflict as from bodily incarceration. In Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, *The Yellow Wallpaper* is described as the archetypal novel of female enclosure both mental and physical: 'a striking story of female confinement and escape, a paradigmatic tale which (like *Jane Eyre*) seems to tell *the* story that all literary women would tell if they could speak their "speechless woe."<sup>241</sup> The 'treatment' of Connie and Gilman's Narrator is in fact no more therapeutically sound than that administered to the first Mrs Rochester; it is imprisonment only, the hiding away of inconvenient and 'dis-eased' women, 'madwomen in the attic' to be kept out of sight and out of mind.

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<sup>241</sup> Gilbert & Gubar, p.89.

Suzey's relationship with the hospital is, however, more ambiguous. Her 'flights' begin long before her stay there, so cannot be blamed entirely on the hospital. The treatment she receives is heavy-handed, but it does seem to produce results: the electro-convulsive therapy has a role in her eventual return. The hospital is a complex phenomenon in the literature of women's 'madness'. In the late-Twentieth and early-Twenty-First centuries – marking, perhaps, some improvement in psychiatric treatment - novels such as *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* and Joanne Greenburg's *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* show hospitals as relatively benign and helpful: more so, at least, than the imprisoning attic. The centre of treatment can be a refuge as well as a place of torment, a monastic cell as much as a prison cell. For the novelist Jenny Diski, psychiatric hospitals are 'places of safety', 'convents for escapees from life';<sup>242</sup> environments conducive to a meditative peace that is almost mystical:

The silence and absence of the place where depression puts you [ie the hospital] brings the possibility of getting close to contentment... I found it was possible after a time to achieve a kind of joy totally disconnected from the world.

Jenny Diski, *Skating to Antarctica*<sup>243</sup>

For Suzey, then, the distress-hospital-medication paradigm is not easily reduced to its component parts. The hospital may not be the environment from which she seeks to escape, but rather the first step in a flight to another, whiter and cleaner destination: the Cold world.

### Is the Cold World real?

Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away.

Philip K. Dick<sup>244</sup>

There is, of course, another explanation for Suzey's trips to another reality: the supernatural explanation, in which Suzey's Cold world is in fact literally 'real'. *Cold City* never answers

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<sup>242</sup> Diski, *Skating to Antarctica*, p.236.

<sup>243</sup> Diski, *Skating to Antarctica*, p.236-237.

<sup>244</sup> Dick, 'How to Build a Universe That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later'.



the implied question – does Suzey truly travel to another world, or is this pure delusion? The question goes unanswered because I do not know the answer myself; and so I have kept the narrative on the tightrope of Todorov's 'Fantastic', the moment of uncertainty between defining a strange event as natural (that is, an illusion or hallucination) or as supernatural.<sup>245</sup>

This is, of course, annoying. When writers create ambiguous endings, and then protest that they 'simply don't have the answers,' I tend to suspect them of an undue lack of confidence in their ability to lead the reader (readers who have made it to the end of the book have, after all, accepted the author's 'answers' so far. Why should they respond to the conclusion any differently?). It grieved me somewhat, therefore, to leave my conclusion inconclusive; I feel, however, that this was the only option. All the story is channelled through Suzey's perception – since Suzey herself cannot know one way or the other, neither can the reader.

Uncertainty may be frustrating; but in *Cold City*, uncertainty, intoxication and narrator unreliability serve a vital function: the transition from one world to another. More so even than in *Winterlong*, reality is a state of mind; Suzey's 'uncertainty' may have transported her, and the reader, to an entirely different world.

## **'Travelling to Narnia in your fucking sleep' : Transition Between Worlds**

The room was suddenly rich and the great bay-window was  
Spawning snow and pink rose against it  
Soundlessly collateral and incompatible:  
World is suddener than we fancy it.

'Snow'<sup>246</sup>  
Louis MacNeice

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<sup>245</sup> In a world which is indeed our world... there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is a victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality - but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. Either the devil is an illusion, an imaginary being; or else he really exists, precisely like other living beings – with this reservation, that we encounter him infrequently.

The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting and apparently supernatural event.

Todorov, p.25.

<sup>246</sup> 'Louis MacNeice', Poetry Connection.

In *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *His Dark Materials*, as in *Cold City*, characters move frequently between parallel worlds. For Lewis's and Pullman's protagonists, the transition is usually straightforward and mechanistic, involving physical movement and clearly defined portals. The transition of Pullman's characters is (literally) clear-cut: Will cuts his way through to other worlds with the 'subtle knife'. Similarly, Narnia can be reached by jumping into magical pools or putting on enchanted rings, or by simply walking through the back of a cupboard. Two short paragraphs after stepping into the wardrobe, Lucy emerges into Narnia:

And then she saw that there was a light ahead of her; not a few inches away where the back of the wardrobe ought to have been, but a long way off. Something cold and soft was falling on her. A moment later she found that she was standing in the middle of a wood at night-time with snow under her feet and snowflakes falling through the air.

*Chronicles of Narnia*, p.113

Suzey's transition, however, is more 'subtle', and depends upon destabilising perceptions. Suzey herself describes her experiences in the Cold world as a 'trippy dream'; her expeditions to parallel worlds are 'trips' in both senses of the word, both the journey and the altered consciousness. *Cold City's* narrative style is at its most disjointed, and its syntax, punctuation and grammar at their most broken, when Suzey is in transition between worlds:

'She's conscious.' The ambulance stops jouncing and the doors are flung open. Good, I'm conscious so they're letting me off. But outside hands are reaching and I'm out into the chilly wind

- *something it's dark and I'm cold and it's soft and something –*  
and then into warmth and bright light. I'm on a trolley. I'm bowling along, fluorescent lights flashing past. Then I'm stopped – curtains are swishing around me. Faces peer down. One of them is Beardie. '...ten cc's. Think we got most of it out.'

'Fucking turned my stomach out,' I say. Laughter. Beardie goes. Middle-aged female face close to mine. 'Okay, Susan, we

- *dark cold dark cold dark cold dark -*

Still dark. Still cold. On my back. Streetlight slanting across the bed.

Movement beside me.

'Oh shit, Suzey!' Jamie. Light. Hurts. I'm in my own bed. Pillow sticky and dry  
Susan? Still with us?'

*Cold City*, Chapter One p.21

The contrast with Lewis's smooth style and third-person detachment is striking. It is the discourse of mental illness, of *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*. Within the Fantasy genre, Suzey's shift to another world is described not like Lucy's orderly transition to Narnia, but like the visions/hallucinations of *Winterlong*. Suzey does not go to the new world: it comes to her, like an intoxicant, surreally and with its own acute physical sensations; just, in fact, as Dionysos appears to Wendy:

The rush comes on, my heat hammers as though I have received a crystal pulse of adrenaline.... My mouth fills with bitter liquid, a taste like hot copper. Through the air cascades the scent of apple blossom.

And He is there... a shimmering figure like something made of motes of light. The torches shine right through Him... Waves of light ripple in the air before my face.  
*Winterlong*, p. 346

The shift in Wendy's perceptions is underscored here by a shift in narrative tense, from the past to the present. The present-tense narration serves the same function as it does in both *Cold City* and *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*: it heightens immediacy, lowers detachment and increases danger (in a present-tense narrative, even the narrator can be killed off).

This particular encounter, with its emphasis on taste and scent as much as on sight and sound, recalls the symptoms of a migraine headache. As a narrative device for smoothing the transition between worlds, the migraine is very useful. Migraine attacks distort perception to an almost unparalleled degree; hallucinations of all five senses can be involved. The novelist Hilary Mantel associates migraines with uncertainties of what is 'real'; her episodes trigger apparent visions of the supernatural:

About eleven o'clock, I see a flickering on the staircase. The air is still; then it moves. I raise my head. The air is still again. I know it is my stepfather's ghost coming down...

It may be, of course, that the flicker against the banister was nothing more than the warning of a migraine attack. It's at the left-hand side of my body that visions manifest; it's my left eye that is peeled. I don't know whether, at such vulnerable times, I see more than is there; or if things are there, that I don't normally see.

Hilary Mantel, *Giving Up the Ghost*<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>247</sup> Mantel, p.1-2.



For Mantel, as for *Winterlong's* Wendy, these changes of perception may not be meaningless hallucinations, but glimpses into a supernatural world. The near-mystical qualities of the migraine are apparent in the medical language describing it: disturbances of perception are referred to collectively as the 'aura'; specifically visual distortions are known as 'fortification spectra' hallucinations, which appear as 'irregular, colored, shimmering, edged, scintillating crescents, developing close to the center of the visual field'. Oliver Sacks equates the visions of St. Hildegarde with these 'spectral' disturbances of sight.<sup>248</sup> As Mantel notes, the migraine-affected eye is 'peeled': a word carrying the sense both of damage and of heightened perception. Accordingly, Suzey's premonition of an avalanche is accompanied by a migraine, in which visual distortions are conflated with falling snow:

I can hear the roaring. Flecks of white are whirling before my eyes...  
I will see it when it comes. I can hear it now, the roaring. Here it comes –  
The white specks whirl into a blur, more like TV interference than falling snow.  
The roar is replaced by a squealing whine. I'm on my knees in the snow. I shut my eyes. I start to retch.

*Cold City*, Chapter Twenty-One p.214

The premonition is followed by a vision of Lif and Lifthrasir, accompanied by another migraine phenomenon: olfactory hallucination. The golden couple appear, like a medieval vision of the divine, in a cloud of beautiful fragrance:<sup>249</sup>

A hand is wiping my face gently. Another is holding my arms so I don't fall. I open my eyes at last.

The pale specks are still squirming in front of my eyes. There is a strong smell, like fruit, sweet but wholesome. I feel stronger. I look up.

Their faces are a blur. I can't see what they're wearing, but there's a suggestion of leather, sheepskin, fur. But they are veiled and swathed in gold. As they bend towards me I reach for the shining fabric, and feel hair.

*Cold City*, Chapter Twenty-One p.214

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<sup>248</sup> See: [http://www.biotechhealth.com/clinic/health\\_conditions/migraine.htm](http://www.biotechhealth.com/clinic/health_conditions/migraine.htm) and <http://www.meldrum.demon.co.uk/migraine/faq1.html>  
Both accessed 14 July 2005.

<sup>249</sup> The Holy Grail, for example, is accompanied by 'fragrance as though all the spices of the earth had been spilled abroad'. Matarasso, p.44.

Divine or otherwise, these experiences are uncontrollable. Lucy chooses to walk through the wardrobe, and chooses when to return. Wendy, however, does not choose to encounter Dionysos. Similarly, Suzey is pulled between parallel worlds, under the influence of factors likely to blur of certainty and perception: a migraine, violent argument, electro-convulsive therapy. She cannot stop the transitions, nor can she induce them voluntarily:

My head hurts. I lean over the sink and rest my forehead against the cold mirror. I think: Right. Enough. This isn't fun any more.

Time to wake up.

I shut my eyes, and dunt my forehead gently against the glass. Make the headache worse, that's it. Trauma, that'll trigger it. Dunt that head again. And yes, breathe in those fumes, everything helps.

*Wake up. Wake up.*

The toilet-cleaner smell is chokingly strong. It makes me queasy. The room is a fridge, chilly white tiles and cracked sinks. Yes.

Time to go back. *Wake up...*

I open my eyes. There's just gloom, darkness with light around the edge.

I close my eyes again, screwing them tight shut. Count to ten. Slowly open them again.

Still gloom fading into light. I lift my head. I know what I'm going to see: there's no closing out that smell. But I look anyway, into my own reflected face, with its gaping mouth and pallid skin. The mirror has left a red mark on my forehead.

I'm still in the Ladies beside the packed job center. Still here.

I start to cry properly. I want to go home.

*Cold City, Chapter Eight p.78*

Suzey cannot escape from the Cold world, any more than Connie can remain in her preferred alternate reality without assistance:

Suddenly she was slipping back into her drugged real body in real time... She felt a slackening through her, that beginning to slip out of her connection with Luciente, back to the asylum. For an instant she breathed the stifling heat of the closed isolation room, she smelled its stale fecal smell, its smell of caged and fearful bodies. She fought like a swimmer going down. She cast a soundless appeal toward Luciente: Help me! For a long nauseated moment she blurred over and she was no place, lost, terrified.

Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Piercy, p.125-126.

Connie, like Suzey, cannot control even this basic aspect of her life: where to be. This particular type of Fantasy, conflating female madness and parallel worlds, deals not just with escape but with helplessness: helplessness in the face of the mind's own disturbance, in the face of the drugs which alter that mind, in the face of the place and people trying to treat or control that disturbance. It is generally a feminist phenomenon, examining the disparity between how women 'ought' to feel and how they actually do, and how these transgressive emotions are 'corrected'. The parallel world, therefore, can be both a refuge and yet another negation of free will.

If the parallel world lies within the mind, however, it can therefore be manipulated. Suzey, like Wendy, will eventually find a way to use the uncertainty principle to her own advantage: to gain empowerment by a change of identity, fuelled by the beliefs of those around her. Suzey, like Wendy, will gain control by reaching for the essentially uncontrollable: the myths of Midwinter.

### **A Spell of Winter: Winter Magic and Writing *Cold City***

And the don in me set forth  
How the landscape of the north  
Had educed the saga style  
Plodding forward mile by mile.

And the don in you replied  
That the North begins inside.

'Postscript to Iceland – for WH Auden'<sup>251</sup>  
Louis MacNeice

When I've read something I read it one more time.  
Then I think about snow and how to be alone...  
You must tell me how you describe things without seeing other houses and with  
no one getting in the way.  
I want to know how to write about snow.  
*A Winter Book*<sup>252</sup>  
Tove Jansson

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<sup>251</sup> MacNeice, p.73.

<sup>252</sup> Jansson, *A Winter Book*, p.171-3.



*Cold City* is, quite obviously, a winter's tale. This is the case partly for personal reasons: my tastes in reading and writing were formed at an early age by a minor skin condition. I was a pallid child who managed to spring from a family of bronzed brunettes; I spent most of my summers skulking indoors with my nose in a book, while everyone else was in the garden getting a sun-tan. The books were usually snow-stories like *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *Moominland Midwinter* or *The Snow Queen*. I liked winter: my low-pigmented eyes stung and watered in summer sunshine, but in winter I could open my eyes wide.

It was inevitable, then, that my first novel would be a story of snow and ice. This compulsion to write winter's tales was reinforced by a winter in Chicago, when a North American blizzard taught me the difference between reading about heavy-duty snow and actually being out in it. It's impossible to describe the appearance of a storm like that, since you cannot look at it: the wind drives needles of snow into your eyes, so you keep them turned submissively downwards. You don't make eye contact with a blizzard. You can't breathe, because you have to keep your mouth and nose covered, or they will be flayed by the storm. The lack of vision is over-compensated by excess of sound: the wind roars, and squeals, and barks. People and buildings disappear: streetlights are diffused, sepia, blurred by whirling specks of white.

Such experiences lend themselves readily to myth and fantasy. I was familiar, in a scholarly sense, with the local Native American legend of the Windigo, the demonic spirit of snow and wild places; but in the blizzards I understood it. The Windigo comes in a storm, shrieking like the wind, and it was suddenly all too easy to visualize.<sup>253</sup> I couldn't lift my eyes from the pavement, and now I didn't want to. I went home out of the bullying storm, and watched the snow through the double-glazing, and was glad to live in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

This then is a part of *Cold City's* basis in deep snow: a personal liking. This liking may be personal, but is not at all exclusive. Francis Spufford's account of the Scott mission, *I May Be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination*, suggests that frozen landscapes have a particular appeal to English hearts and minds, representing the 'sublime' of 'great though terrible' experiences'.<sup>254</sup> I am not English, but a Scottish writer cannot ignore the influence of English writing. Nor it would seem could at least one Irish writer: 'ice' is certainly part of the imagination of CS Lewis (who spent most of his adult life in England, but was nevertheless born and bred in Northern Ireland). *The Chronicles of Narnia* were first inspired by wintry images and concepts; the first signs of Lewis's great Christian allegory appeared

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<sup>253</sup> Usually high winds and blizzards accompany the windigo in its travels. It is said that the scream of a windigo will paralyze a man, preventing him from protecting himself.  
James R Stevens, 'Stories of the Windigo'. Colombo, p.193.

<sup>254</sup> Spufford, p.18.

when its author was still an atheist, and featured a being from pagan myth. Narnia, as we have seen, is usually pleasantly warm, but Lewis's sequence began with images of snow:

The *Lion [the Witch and the Wardrobe]* all began with a picture of a Faun carrying an umbrella and parcels in a snowy wood. This picture had been in my mind since I was about sixteen. Then one day, when I was about forty, I said to myself: 'Let's try to make a story about it'.

CS Lewis<sup>255</sup>

After the Faun came an image of 'a queen on a sledge': the White Witch (probably inspired, consciously or otherwise, by Andersen's *Snow Queen*). Then – and only then – came the 'magnificent lion', Aslan. Lewis admits that 'at first there wasn't even anything Christian about them':<sup>256</sup> just the snow, the evocative images of cold, whiteness and mystery.

Wintry landscapes also cast their spell on the 'English imagination' of Philip Pullman. Like the Narnia novels, *His Dark Materials* began not with any religious agenda, but – as Pullman told his audience at the 2001 Edinburgh Book Festival - with 'a little girl who went North'. The capital N was audible; he didn't mean the North of Britain. He meant the Arctic, the land of Polar ice; or more specifically the 'Idea of North', the cold, enchanted country of which Serafina Pekkala is the *genius loci*. Long before Lyra reaches the North or meets Serafina, she thrills at the sense of 'something far beyond, and never suspected... the same deep thrill she'd felt all her life on hearing the word North'.<sup>257</sup> As Peter Davidson notes, the North is a 'place of extremes that is also a place of wonders: of the "fox fire", the aurora in the winter sky... of legendary magicians and heroes'.<sup>258</sup> No distinction is drawn between natural and supernatural wonders; the North, like winter and the Solstice, is an imaginative space outside of political or religious ideology, a place in which anything goes: a state of mind which, as MacNeice's poem suggests, 'begins inside'.

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<sup>255</sup> 'It All Began With a Picture...'. Lewis, *Of This and Other Worlds*, p.79.

<sup>256</sup> Everything began with images; a faun carrying an umbrella, a queen on a sledge, a magnificent lion. At first there wasn't even anything Christian about them; that element pushed itself in of its own accord.  
'Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to be Said'. Lewis, *Of This and Other Worlds*, p. 72-73.

<sup>257</sup> Pullman, *Northern Lights*, p. 134.

<sup>258</sup> Davidson, p.9.

Polar landscapes can also appear as a place of refuge, of peace after insanity. For the 'dis-eased' woman, as Gilbert and Gubar suggest, the cold whiteness of the Poles implies a kind of serenity: the 'androgynous wholeness, autonomy, self-sufficiency' of the 'snow maiden'.<sup>259</sup> The 'snow maiden', the woman at home both in ice and in her own company, is often depicted as monstrous in her rejection of marriage, children and family 'warmth'. Andersen's *Snow Queen*, Lilith-like, abducts boy-children; Lewis's demonic White Witch is, as we have seen, constantly associated with the cold and the barren. According to Kevin Crossley-Holland, the frost giantess Skadi, who leaves her husband to return to her beloved mountain home, takes 'injury and death' wherever she goes, having 'frozen again' after rejecting her husband's warming touch.<sup>260</sup> Both these quotes seem to be Crossley-Holland's inventions; they do not appear in the *Prose Edda*, which Crossley-Holland refers to as the 'only source' for the myth.<sup>261</sup> The *Edda* merely describes Skadi as a hunter of wild animals - which, in the gung-ho context of the *Edda*, is hardly enough to mark her out as the 'bringer of injury and death'. She has rejected family life, however, and this is enough to make her 'a figure of death' in Crossley-Holland's modern version of the tale.

Yet the coldness and sterility of the ice-woman can be ideologically revised. 'Sterility' prevents offspring, but also blocks infection. Snowy landscapes are clean; the Northern sea captain William Scoresby (possibly the inspiration for Pullman's intrepid aeronaut Lee Scoresby) observed that the 'antiseptical (sic) property of frost is rather remarkable'.<sup>262</sup> This revision of female sterility is a feminist and an individualist phenomenon, valuing the preservation of a woman's life over her child-bearing function. The sterility of the ice-woman, shocking to the masculine imaginations of Andersen, Lewis and Crossley-Holland, is celebrated by female writers concerned with its protection against both disease and dis-ease. In the female – and English - imagination of Jenny Diski, the state of cool white solitude brings peace and so is profoundly to be desired; 'I am not entirely content,' she tells us in the opening sentence of her autobiography, 'with the degree of whiteness in my life.'<sup>263</sup> The Poles, like Diski's all-white bedroom with its 'icy mirrors', are equated with the longed-for 'white oblivion' of the psychiatric hospital:

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<sup>259</sup> Gilbert & Gubar, p.617.

<sup>260</sup> Crossley-Holland, p.47.

<sup>261</sup> Crossley-Holland, p.195.

<sup>262</sup> Spufford, p.8.

<sup>263</sup> Diski, p.1.



Sometimes, if I sat through the pain, I got to a place of absolute peace and quiet... I wanted to be unavailable and in that place without the pain. I still want it. It is coloured white and filled with singing silence. It is an endless ice rink. It is antarctic.  
Jenny Diski, *Skating to Antarctica*<sup>264</sup>

Despite my encounter with a shrieking blizzard, I still find it easy to agree with her, to equate snow with peace and calm. A snowy landscape is a pure monastic white, a temporary absence of the dirt underneath. It is simple, having only one colour, and it presents us with a simple course of action: to keep warm, to stay alive. It is the intersection of the Fantasy genre and the literature of mental illness. As we have already seen, the psychiatric hospital is the first step towards Suzey's other reality; the antiseptic whiteness of the hospital could be the gateway to only one kind of world: one of ice and snow.

### Letting the Winter In: the Winter Solstice in *Cold City*

Yet in thy dark streets shineth  
The everlasting light:  
The hopes and fears of all the years  
Are met in thee tonight.

'O Little Town of Bethlehem'<sup>265</sup>  
Philips Brooks

It seemed to me that *Cold City's* Apocalyptic theme, like that of *Winterlong*, could only be tackled properly with the qualities of the Winter Solstice. The novel is not set at the actual date of the Solstice, in late December; the action begins in early January, and concludes in late February. In a sense, however, this whole period is an extended solstice; the natural solstice is the first step towards the coming of spring, but in *Cold City* spring is not about to return. *Cold City* is set, in other words, at the beginning of Fimbul-winter, the three-year winter that precedes Ragnarok:

[Carl and I] sit in silence for a while. I look out at the charcoal-grey sky. 'It's so dark.'  
'Heavy snowfall coming.'  
'It's not just that. It's like...' the words are out of my mouth before I know I'm  
thinking them, '... like spring's not coming.'  
'It's just a heavy cloud covering.'

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<sup>264</sup> Diski, p.236-237.

<sup>265</sup> Brooks, 'O Little Town of Bethlehem'.

'The days feel like they're not getting longer –'  
'They are getting longer. Don't be melodramatic. It's just thick cloud.'  
His voice is firm, but there's something... I look at him closely. 'Sorry. Silly of me.'

'It's all right. Times are tough. We've got to keep a grip.'  
He keeps his face expressionless. But I know him, even if he doesn't know me: and that was a prepared speech.

*Cold City, Chapter Nineteen p.147*

As in *Winterlong*, 'Winter is tired of wandering', and there will be 'no end to it. The Lord of Misrule will not be overthrown this time.' The part of 'Lord of Misrule' is played in *Cold City* by the evangelist McLean, who exemplifies Pullman's 'life-hating ideology' by trying to accelerate the end of this world so that the golden age of the next can begin:

There's a disturbance in the ranks, and then McLean is looking down at me, his face uncomfortably close. 'You saw the flames of God's anger,' he says. 'Hallelujah.'

'You want it to happen,' I say.

He ignores me completely. He's placed one hand on Jamie's shoulder, one hand on mine. 'You are blessed. The one who repents, and the one who sees. Both of you. You'll eat with me tonight.'

Then he's gone. I hear his voice bellowing, filling the room. 'A vision has been given us today, brothers and sisters. Rejoice, for the time of the Lord is at hand...'

*Cold City, Chapter Twenty-Two p.230*

McLean plays the part of Angel of Death in the Christian Apocalypse; he is also identified by Raj as the 'Destroyer' of Ragnarok, Loki and the Great Wolf combined:

Raj's eyes are losing focus. 'The great sword blazes like the sun,' he says. 'The serpent spews poison over all the earth. The sky cracks open, and the earth burns. Then ashes, only ashes.'

'Raj –'

'Fenrir.' His voice is hoarse now, and weak. He's staring at McLean's picture. 'The Great Wolf. The one who swallows up the sun. The end of the world. Ragnarok.'

*Cold City, Chapter Eighteen p.160*

The author must be cautious in creating such a character, which can easily lapse into pantomime villainy, given to fanatical rants and creative sadism. When a writer invents someone whose nickname is 'The Great Wolf', or 'The Destroyer', a touch of the Gothic will inevitably creep into the narrative. Since comparisons with popular baddies seemed unavoidable, *Cold City* foregrounds McLean's Bond-villain characteristics rather than try in vain to disguise them, as demonstrated in this exchange between Suzey and Carl:

'So let me get this straight. We go up there. We spy on him. We catch him selling government secrets or something.' I don't think I can actually say this. 'And we put a stop to him. And we... save the world?'

'Well –'

We stare at each other for a moment. And then we collapse laughing. I have to hang onto the edge of the desk so I don't fall off my chair. 'So d'you reckon he's got a doomsday device in the basement?' I say when I can speak again. 'Guarded by killer robots?'

'I thought giant sharks, actually,' he says, and we both laugh till we cry.

*Cold City*, Chapter Nineteen p.173

This ironic awareness of genre does not, however, ward off McLean's potential danger, as Suzey is forced to admit:

I step gingerly across the threshold into McLean's apartment. I imagine Carl intoning, in his best Bela Lugosi voice, '*Enter freely and of your own vill...*' It's not as funny as it should be.

*Cold City*, Chapter Twenty-Three p.242

As with Pullman's Authority, McLean's villainous stature is undercut by the final revelation of his true state. Suzey ironically describes McLean as Tolkien's wizard 'Gandalf', but discovers he is more comparable to the Wizard of Oz; like Philip Pullman's Authority, 'crying like a baby' in the remains of his crystal chariot, McLean is in the 'alternate state' of dementia:

McLean's eyes seem to bulge out of his head. He takes a couple of clumsy steps towards [Jamie and me]. His face is nearly purple and his hands are clenched at his side; he looks like a giant toddler throwing a tantrum. '*Don't speak to me like that! Don't you speak to your father like that! You'll be sorry! You'll be punished!*'... He's winding down, like a clock. He sits down heavily in his chair, knocking the remains of



his whisky flying. Great fat tears begin to roll down his cheeks. 'Wicked. Pair o' ye. I gave you everything you've got...'

He's sobbing by now. His nose is running and he does nothing about it. And I've finally remembered: *Memantine. The brown glass bottle beside Grandpa's bed.* I say, 'Mr McLean?' No answer: just another sob.

'Jesus Christ.' Jamie is staring at the man in the chair, appalled. 'What's he on?'

'Be quiet.' I go to McLean, who has now lowered his face into his hands. *My mother crying; Grandpa Charlie asking who she is...* I pull the throw around McLean's shoulders. 'It's Alzheimer's.'

McLean lifts his snotty face to me. 'Kerry? You'll stay with me?'

*Cold City, Chapter Twenty-Three p.254*

The Lord of Misrule cannot even rule himself. Nor can he play the part of the incarnate divinity: that role falls to Suzey.

Like Wendy personating Anat, Suzey has to play the part of a goddess to win over the wolf-cultists. Like Wendy, she draws upon the beliefs of those around her – particularly the cult leader, Seamus, a devotee of the Great Goddess. Like the worshippers of Winterlong, Seamus believes in the New Age concept that all goddesses are one:

I remember [Seamus's] poems and his sketches, dominated by pale-skinned women with red or golden hair. I remember the little shrine in his bedroom, consecrated to Freya or Ceridwen or Isis – the Great Mother. The Goddess within.

*Cold City, Chapter Twenty-Four p.290*

Suzey now personates a goddess, just as Wendy becomes Anat:

I pull the scarves from my head and neck, and let my coat fall open, ignoring the cold. The rune-stone has gotten tangled, so I work it round into its proper place. I let my eyes lock with Seamus's, and smile. I walk towards him. I know how I must look to him: golden lights in my hair, the deep red shimmer of the dress, the symbol of the Tree of Life around my neck. 'We're not your enemies, Seamus Maclain,' I say.

*Cold City, Chapter Twenty-Four p.290-1*

This is, of course, play-acting: Suzey play-acts the part of goddess, just as Wendy performs the part of Anat in the *Masque*. The divine influence they assume is not 'real', but crude roleplaying. At the Winter Solstice, however, the line between roleplay and reality is blurred. In the Midwinter rituals, the one who personates the god becomes the god; and the

wolf-cultists, Odinists who despise Christianity and embrace neo-paganism, believe implicitly in the special properties of the Solstice.

For Suzey, as for Wendy, this potential for divine incarnation is supremely anti-fatalistic. It is a moment of choice, of empowerment: a way out of the helplessness of mental illness, and the fated end of Ragnarok. Wendy rewrites the 'script' she is given, becoming the forgiving goddess and thereby averting the seemingly unavoidable Apocalypse; Suzey revises Ragnarok, rejecting the coming of Lif and Lifthrasir:

The light softens. The world is framed by the dark green of the pines. The gold is shaping itself into two figures. Two people, a man and a woman. They step forward, still haloed in tawny light...

Lif and Lifthrasir. The new Adam and Eve. Viking, Christian, whatever. When the rest of us are gone, they will inherit the earth; they will usher in the Age of Gold.

I look at them for a long time, this blonde breeding pair for whose sake we are all meant to die. They are to have their golden world - but without my niece, and my brother, and my lover, and all the rest of us who are too young or too old or too dark or too gay to qualify. I come to a decision. 'Beat it,' I say to those wide summer-blue eyes.

And they're gone.

*Cold City, Chapter Twenty-Four p.285*

Without Lif and Lifthrasir, the new world part of the legend has been revised; Suzey is determined that everyone, no matter how 'young, old, dark or gay', should be around to experience whatever comes next.

As *Winterlong* turns the Dionysos legend into a winter's tale, Ragnarok has now been realigned as a Solstice phenomenon, answerable to the 'rules' of the Longest Night. By these rules, however, the light will not return without the sacrifice of the god-substitute. There is no male divine figure, however, so Suzey's death is required to make the ritual complete; her 'godlike' awareness of other worlds has caused too much damage:

I have to do this. There's no other way. I close my eyes, let the dizziness come. My knees give way and I feel myself falling, hands grabbing me and holding me up. Then I'm looking. All the possibilities.

This time I'm looking back. I feel something give way inside my head, with an almost audible *crack*, something very final. But I can't stop now.

*Cold City, Chapter Twenty-Four p.290*

The willing sacrifice, however, as in *Winterlong*, leads to the death of death. Like Aslan, dying only to be resurrected, Suzey reawakens – and unlike Pullman's Christian martyr, she wakes into a better world, the one she calls home:

I have to squint a moment to make out the window. Beyond the glass is dull daylight.  
Rain is pattering down the glass. Rain...  
Heavier shoes approach. A head looms over me; hair a grey bob, face flat and impassive. White doctor's coat.  
It's Doctor Martin. She scrutinises my face for a moment, then nods to herself.  
'Ah, Suzey,' she says. 'There you are.'

*Cold City*, Chapter Twenty-Four p.298

Ragnarok is aborted: the goddess does not wait passively for the end, but fights against fate and brings about a change. As in George MacKay Brown's *Magnus*, blending Christian and pagan Solstice traditions breaks the inevitability of fate and triumphs over death:

Love and heroism and feasting are enacted in a wintry light: all enter at last the solstice, the heart of darkness... But we who stand at the altars of Christ see history across a broken tomb. Time for us is refreshed with perpetual dewfall and bird-song. April is the beginning and end of the circle, and the point of renewal.

George MacKay Brown, *Magnus*<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> Brown, p.33.



## In Conclusion

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,  
Because their words had forked no lightning they  
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright  
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

'Do not go gentle into that good night'<sup>267</sup>  
Dylan Thomas

*Cold City* is a revision of the myth of Ragnarok. The process of writing *Cold City* has, however, revised that myth for me. I have been compelled to change my perception of the story's 'golden world' ending; the vision of a new and better earth rising from the destruction no longer seems to me contrived and unnatural. It may not, after all, be a later Christian overlay at all; as Crossley-Holland suggests, this Icelandic myth grew up in settings of ice and fire, in volcanic countries accustomed to both catastrophic destruction and the rising of new and fertile ground, and so would lead naturally to tales of devastation followed by rebirth.

Even if this aspect of the myth is a Christian addition, the blending of paganism with Christianity can add to and enrich both. CS Lewis knew this when he preceded the return of Christ-Aslan with the return of Christmas and the Solstice: when he allowed Dionysos his 'Romp' with the blessing of Aslan. Elizabeth Hand understood it when she repositioned Dionysos as a Solstice god, allowing the Incarnation to overthrow Death; Philip Pullman grasped it, consciously or otherwise, when his child-characters 'harrowed Hell' and returned the spirits of the dead to the starry heavens, and when their love brought a dying world back to life. And I myself knew it, unconsciously, when I had Suzey (who is superficially as un-Christlike as Hand's Dionysos or Pullman's Lyra) perform a loving self-sacrifice which redeems the world from destruction. As George MacKay Brown shows in *Magnus*, the two systems of faith may be seamlessly interwoven; pagan faith combined with Christian hope can, 'even under our cold northern sun', even in the Apocalyptic chill of the end of world, weave 'a garment of immortal beauty'.<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Gardner, p.942.

<sup>268</sup> Brown, p.34.



And is our life here, at the best, so constituted that, pausing as we advance at such a noticeable mile-stone in the track as this great birthday, we look back on the things that never were, as naturally and full as gravely as on the things that have been and are gone, or have been and still are? If it be so, and so it seems to be, must we come to the conclusion that life is little better than a dream, and little worth the loves and strivings that we crowd into it?

No! Far be such miscalled philosophy from us, dear Reader, on Christmas Day! ...Be all ungentleness and harm excluded from the temples of the Household Gods, but be those remembrances admitted with tender encouragement! They are of the time and all its comforting and peaceful reassurances; and of the history that re-united even upon earth the living and the dead.

Charles Dickens,  
'What Christmas Is as We Grow Older'<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> Dickens, *Works*, p.28.





## Appendix: 'Ragnarok'

# **'Ragnarok'**

## ***The Norse legend of the End of the World***

**Sources: 'Voluspo' in the *Poetic Edda* (Bellows, p.1-27), 'Gylfaginning' in Snorri Sturluson's *(Prose) Edda* (Sturluson, p.7-58).**

### **The Death of Balder and the Binding of Loki**

The god Loki brings about the death of Balder, the best and most beautiful of the gods. Loki tricks Balder's brother Hodur, who is blind, into shooting him with an arrow made of mistletoe, the only substance that can harm Balder.

The gods put Hodur to death, and bind Loki in a cave, where a snake drips acid on him. He will stay there until the world's end.

### **The Beginning of the End**

Ragnarok is preceded by cataclysmic events. Firstly, war and sexual immorality will grip the earth: fathers will kill sons; mothers will seduce their sons, and brothers bed with sisters. This will last for three years.

Then Fimbul-winter – a great and unnatural winter – will descend. The sun will be unable to reach the earth, and winter will merge into winter with no summer in between. Fimbul-winter will last another three years.

### **Ragnarok: 'The Fate of the Gods'**

Ragnarok begins with the destruction of the sun, moon and stars, which are devoured by giant wolves. The earth quakes and Loki breaks free from his bonds. The gods, the warriors in Valhalla and the dead in Hel arise and prepare for battle.

Floods and tidal waves break over the shore as the great serpent Jormungand rises from the deep. A ship made from dead men's fingernails, crewed by Loki, the giants and the forces of Hel, is carried inshore to the battlefield Vigrid.

Jormungand and the wolf Fenrir begin the earth's destruction:

Fenrir's slavering mouth will gape wide open, so wide that his lower jaw scrapes against the ground and his upper jaw presses against the sky; it would gape still wider if there were more room. Flames will dance in Fenrir's eyes and leap from his



nostrils. With each breath, meanwhile, Jormungand will spew venom; all the earth and the sky will be splashed and stained with his poison.

Kevin Crossley-Holland, *Norse Myths*, p.175

The fire-giants converge on Vigrid. They destroy the sky as they go, trampling the rainbow bridge Bifrost which leads to Asgard (the home of the sky-gods). Bifrost cracks and breaks under the giants' feet.

The sky-gods and the heroes of Valhalla descend to Vigrid. The World Tree, Yggdrasil, shakes as battle commences. Thor kills Jormungand, but is fatally wounded in the process. Loki and Heimdall slaughter one another. Odin, king of the gods, is devoured by Fenrir; he is avenged by his son Vidar, however, who tears Fenrir's jaws apart.

The fire-giant Surt then begins to use his flaming sword indiscriminately, scattering fire over all the worlds and destroying every living creature:

Asgard and Midgard and Jotunheim and Niflheim will become furnaces -- places of raging flame, swirling smoke, ashes, only ashes. The nine worlds will burn and the gods will die. The Einherjar will die, men and women and children in Midgard will die, elves and dwarfs will die, giants will die, monsters and creatures of the underworld will die, birds and animals will die.

Crossley-Holland, p.176

Finally, floods overwhelm the land, and the earth sinks into the sea.

### **The Golden Age**

A new world rises out of the ocean. It is a paradise, peaceful, beautiful and abounding with food. A new sun and moon rise.

Balder returns, with his brother Hod and other benevolent gods. They build halls made of gold, and live there in peace. Other halls arise, most of which are occupied by good people. In the underworld, however, an infernal hall running with snakes' venom houses oath-breakers, murderers and philanderers, and a dragon sucks blood from the bodies of the dead.

A man and a woman, who survived Ragnarok by hiding within the World Tree, emerge into the new world. These two, called Líf and Lífthrasir<sup>270</sup>, will repopulate the earth and begin the cycle again:

Líf and Lífthrasir will have children. Their children will bear children. There will be life and new life, life everywhere on earth. That was the end; and this is the beginning.  
Crossley-Holland, p.176

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<sup>270</sup> Icelandic. *Líf* to live, live on, remain; *Lífthrasir* tough, hard to kill [from *thrasir* sturdy one]. Therefore, 'Life' and 'Survival', 'Continuation', or 'Bearer-of-Life'.  
See: <http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/etgloss/la-li.htm>

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