

The Drowned Priest

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Prologue

Secure behind the parapets of Winchester Cathedral, high above the Rose Window, a pair of peregrine falcons look down as the early spring sun warms the city streets. Like the citizens below, they have simple needs. To eat, to mate, to breed, to pass their genes into future generations. And in that short existence, they seek some semblance of pleasure. The rich, plump meat of a pigeon breast or the soapy copper taste of the fresh blood of a baby rabbit. The satisfaction of regurgitating a church mouse's liver into a chick's craving beak. The lazy circles in a summer thermal and then the thrilling swoop to lift a basking trout from the Abbey fishpond. The moment of procreation. The peregrines do all of these without conscious thought, living and acting in the moment, as they had always done. They know nothing of, and care even less about, the human concerns below. The idea of mortgages, a new Mercedes, Council Tax, voting for your MP, a round of golf and a quiet pint are as alien to the peregrines as the bottom of the Atlantic. Yet, had the birds been able to see inside the human minds below them, they would have found a much more familiar world formed of urgent desires and often split blood, and mere existence was the only prize.

The Well beneath the Cathedral, May 2015

Canon Peter moved closer to the South Transept wall as the intermittent drizzle of the last ten minutes started to intensify. Above him, the tower of Winchester Cathedral rose into the early morning darkness. Anya was late. In a moment, the rain was sheeting down and the gargoyles above him gurgled in glee as they spouted the rain onto the stones below. Peter's Canterbury cap, a square hat of limp cloth with sharp corners, did little to keep him dry, as the water simply ran off it and down the collar of his cassock. He wondered for a moment if he should have been a Roman Catholic – then he would have had the benefit of the broad brimmed cappello romano and would not be feeling quite so damp. It was far from the first time he questioned his past decisions. Not about Anya – there he knew with absolute certainty he had done the right thing. But other matters– his failure with Charlotte, his uncertain contract with God, his desire to achieve something, somewhere in his life. Now he had the opportunity to put at least some of these things right.

Finally, Anya was there with him, like some ghost, blown in by the squall.

'Sorry, you must be soaked,' she said.

'It doesn't matter. I'll be going swimming in a few moments.'

'I can't believe we're really going through with this.'

Although the wind was blowing her long blond hair across her face, and she was peering at him through the rain, he could see the concern in her face.

'I think we have to. I don't know what will happen. But I think if we choose to believe it work, then it will. The manuscript told us what we must do, and in faith, that it is what we must do.'

They hugged each other, wordlessly. Peter thought back twenty years to when she had been a child. Then, as an orphan, he had brought her back from Yugoslavia. Seeing her grow up, he had almost become a second father to her, as she blossomed into a strong-willed, independent woman. Now he risked leaving her for good. She would be able to survive without him, but he wondered whether he could survive without her. But he was determined to follow the instructions in the letter.

He handed her the bag with his towels and a range of spare clothes and then unlocked the Chancel door. She followed him through. To the right was the Lady Chapel and in front of them the Retrochoir. He turned left, towards the base of the South Transept tower. He felt they should perhaps tiptoe or take their shoes off, but there was no one to hear their footsteps on the worn flagstones. Well, no one but the bones of assorted Anglo-Saxon and mediaeval kings, and the souls of their subjects. At the base of the tower, another key opened a studded oak door. A spiral of stone steps invited them down into the darkness of the crypt.

‘There’s a torch in the bag,’ he said. ‘I don’t want to use the lights. Even at this time of night there could be someone outside.’

‘Okay.’

She handed him the torch.

After they had descended a dozen steps the staircase opened out onto a small dais.

‘This is as far as you go,’ he said.

He slowly swept the torch beam into the distance.

‘It’s beautiful,’ she whispered.

In front of them was a clear, pool of still water. Thick stone arches rose out of the water, vaulting across the ceiling. The torch light flickered over the surface of the pool.

‘I’ve never seen it this deep before,’ he said. ‘In the summer it dries out and you can walk on the crypt floor, but now there must three or four feet of water – ‘

‘Stop, shine the torch back over there – I think I saw something!’

Peter swept the torch beam toward the back of the crypt. A tall figure appeared out of the blackness; a figure made of lead, soldered at its joints, smooth and broken, matte in finish yet gently glowing in the dull light. By some hidden mechanism, the water in the pool was being drawn up and overflowing from its cupped hands, flickering and sparkling in the torchlight. It appeared transcendental, but without any relation to religion. The figure seemed to stand like a perpetual sentry entombed under the stone mass of the cathedral. Guarding, but guarding what? They stood, absorbed by their thoughts for a moment. Then Peter handed Anya the torch, and he discarded his robes.

Unclothed, he sat on the edge of the dais and swung his legs into the water, sending ripples like messengers to explore the distant corners of the pool. They made him think of the journey he was about to make. He wondered, if like the ripples, he too would simply vanish into the dark. He eased forward, then pushed off into a breaststroke, resisting the temptation to submerge fully under the dark, subterranean water. The water was cool, cold even, but he felt warm, as if the cathedral was welcoming him into its viscera. Maybe the cathedral had lived for such a long time, at such a slow pace, that it did not need the hot warmth of human blood to pump life through its stony veins. He felt his heartbeat slow, his limbs becoming sluggish. He was becoming leaden like the silent statue, as he contemplated the water that passed through his fingers in each stroke. Barely moving, he reached the limit of the torch’s beam. Almost lifeless, his body followed his thoughts as he drifted into the distant darkness at the pool’s far edge.

‘Peter, are you alright?’

He heard her call from the edge of the pool but could do nothing to respond.

‘Peter.... PETER!’

He was secured in the cathedral’s embrace. Slipping away, into an eternal sleep,

becoming another soul, a vassal to the bones of the ancient kings and queens, lying in their caskets in the Nave above. But there was pain too, a sharp, stabbing pain in his knee. In the fog in his brain he realised he was floating over the well. His knee had struck the protective railing, erected to stop careless tourists or their children from falling into the well in the dry season, but now hidden in the depths of the pool. This was what he had come for. With sudden clarity he filled his lungs and reached down, grasped the railing's edge and pulled himself down, through the clear, cool water and into the dark, black hole that was the mouth of the well.

* * *

Not for the first time, Father Hugh Longfellow looked up from the cloisters of his Benedictine Priory at the adjacent Norman Cathedral, and wondered in whose praise the stone masons had toiled. God or man? The tower, placed at the centre of the cruciform plan, seemingly reached up to beckon an Almighty presence. Father Hugh indeed thought it a spectacular, awe-some sight and had often said so to his friend and colleague, the master stone-mason Rufus Elinwinson. In private though, Father Hugh also allowed himself to see the cathedral in a different light – a symbol of the Norman yoke thrust upon the neck of English liberty. The new building loomed over the adjacent Anglo-Saxon minster, like a falcon standing over its prey. The fabric of the old Minster would soon be broken down, stone by stone and reused to form a retrochoir in the new Norman Nave. Father Hugh's Priory, once the companion of the old Minster, would now have a new, but less friendly partner. The business of religion and worship would still go on, in more or less the same way, but like the manors, lands and forests in the surrounding diocese, the reins of power would now be held in Norman hands. The dispossessed English, be they abbots or earls, would be no more. Father Hugh sighed. He knew his time was coming to an end. He still had hope though. Hope perhaps in the next generation. A generation that would apparently

adopt the new Norman ways, only to rise up at the opportune moment. Until then the old ways must be preserved.

Father Hugh turned round to see his novice, Will Wickham approach, ready for his evening instruction. Unlike Father Hugh, whose substantial beard was turning white, Will was clean-shaven in the Norman fashion, and did not yet wear the Benedictine tonsure. Nor did he have the black woollen cloth scapula worn by Father Hugh, nor its substantial cowl. Instead, he wore a simple grey woollen cassock, to mark his novice status.

‘Follow me,’ instructed Father Hugh.

They walked in single file, Father Hugh leading, past the refectory, through the cloisters and then to the priory dormitory. Here, Father Hugh led Will through a side door and into the Father’s cell, a prerogative earned from more than 30 years of seniority in the Benedictine order. The privilege brought little benefits though and had the distinct disadvantage that in winter he no longer had the shared body warmth in the adjacent dormitory to keep him warm at night. The room contained an oak chest and a rough table with two stools. Close to the window, there was a simple writing lectern, placed where the light would fall. A dozen quilled feathers were tied together in a bundle on the shelf under the lectern’s inclined top. To the right of the writing top, two ink horns were fastened to the side of the lectern. A couple of bolsters, leaking straw, formed a crude bed in a corner. A small yew cross stood in a small alcove.

‘Sit,’ said Father Hugh, placing the bundle of cloth he had been carrying on the table.

Will dutifully sat and said nothing. There was a long pause. Father Hugh was considering the wisdom of his next move. He trusted Will as much as he trusted anyone. Will’s grandfather had been the Earl of Wickham and had fallen at Hastings nearly 30 years before. Will’s father held the Earldom for less than a decade before he, too had been brought down by the Normans. Now his son had a Norman name and no land or title – plenty of

reason for Will to help Father Hugh with his plan.

Father Hugh gestured at the bundle.

‘Unwrap it.’

Will dutifully did so.

‘In the name of the blessed Mary!’ he exclaimed.

The contents of the bundle belied its coarse cloth wrapping. Will had only seen gold once before, the previous year when the Norman Cathedral had been consecrated. Here though, there was gold, silver and precious stones in abundance. Amber and amethyst encrusted a fine gold cross, while in the centre of the blanket gold with diamonds, rubies, emeralds, sapphires, enamel and pearls adorned a regal gold crown. But it was the silver chalice that sat partly hidden in the folds of the cloth that most fascinated Will. He looked at Father Hugh:

‘May I touch them?’

‘By all means. You will be among kings and princes.’

Will paused, uneasy about this unexpected promotion, then slowly uncovered the chalice and raised it in front of him. The silver was worn with use, but Will could still see the decoration around the rim. The motif was the five senses, each depicted several times over, with kings, princes, abbots, saints, warriors, monks and plain men in various poses. In the centre of the bowl of the chalice an engraved figure kneeled with clasped hands, in silent, penitent supplication. No matter which way Will rotated the chalice, the eyes of the figure looked directly back at the drinker.

‘Many of the kings of Wessex and of England wore this crown at their coronation, and drank from that chalice. More than rest now in the Minster. These are the lifeblood of the English, this is our past, our heritage. It is in our promise to those who have gone before to hold and cherish these things, in readiness for a new time. They were hidden in the grave of

Saint Æthelwold after Harold's fall at Hastings. But the Minster will soon be no more. It is our responsibility now to keep them safe.'

'Tell me what I must do, master,' said Will, his gaze still fixed on the chalice

* * *

The February full moon shone down on the two churches as two figures flitted from shadow to shadow. Each breath they took hung around them, frozen like white smoke in the cold air. Then they were inside the cathedral. The moonlight filtering through the crude glass in the southern windows was enough for them to find their way to the entrance to the crypt. As ever, Father Hugh led the way. Will followed, carrying the cloth bundle, now waterproofed with candle wax and tallow and sealed in a leather firkin. Father Hugh reached into his cassock and drew out a short, stump candle and a simple wooden candleholder.

'Here, light this at the altar,' he said.

'Shall I say a prayer, master?'

'Two.'

Will was quickly back, the flickering candle throwing its shadows up the stone walls around them. In a moment they were down in the crypt. The winter rains had flooded the water meadows in the Cathedral grounds outside and the water was a foot deep in the crypt. Father Hugh quickly slipped off his cassock, took the leather parcel, and a lead weight manufactured from an off-cut of flashing from the new roof, and strode out into the water. He left the dim glow of the candlelight behind and the darkness gradually enveloped him. At the distant end of the crypt, he could just make out the low circular stone wall marking the well's position.

He intoned:

Send thy light, O Lord, into the dark places of our hearts. In thy love, discover to us the snares set by our enemy in the hours of night, that, saved by thy protection in soul and body, we may deserve again to see the morning light. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

After one brief look back at Will he stepped over the wall and sank into the depths.

* * *

Peter swam down and down and down, and then he was no longer swimming, but drawn down by an unseen current, further and further into the arteries of the cathedral. He could feel, no, he could hear the pulse in his head as his lungs started to burn. The cool, clear water was turning red in front of his eyes, even when he screwed his eyelids tightly shut. The cathedral caressed and held him in its embrace as he lost consciousness.

* * *

Anya continued to shine the torch into the distant recesses of the pool after Peter disappeared. The disturbance caused by his descent had long died away but the reflections of the beam on the arched roof of the crypt were still dancing, dappled shadows. After a moment, she realised that the water falling from the leaden statue's hands was sending out a sequence of regular, ever-expanding ripples across the surface of the pool. The figure's hands seemed now to be cupped in supplication, as if it was praying. She was increasingly anxious and wondered if she too should pray. Peter had been gone for several minutes. She did not know quite how long, but she was increasingly sure he could not have held his breath for all that time.

* * *

Wet. Cold. A dim light. Peter was floating again, now relaxed both in mind and body. For a moment, his eyes would not focus. Then, he gradually began to perceive the stone arches vaulting over his head. He was still in the crypt. But a strangely different crypt, now crowded with lead and stone caskets, carefully arranged on stone columns rising out of the water. Peter realised he was not really floating but more lying on the stone floor of the crypt. It was now only covered with six inches of water. He rolled onto his side and looked into the distance for the source of the light.

* * *

Father Hugh felt as if something was burning the linings of his lungs. Even with the lead weight of the leather package he had not been able to reach the bottom of the well. He had tried to grasp the brickwork of the well with his one free hand and push himself down. But the water beneath seemed to be somehow holding him up, supporting and caressing him, showing him, directing him back upwards. His breath exhausted, he dropped the leather package, and allowed himself to be borne back to the surface.

* * *

Peter could see a candle dimly burning in the distance, set down on the floor. As he stood up, he saw that he was beside the well. The protective railings had vanished and now a small stone wall marked the well. Other things were different too. For one thing he was naked. He reached up and touched his face only to discover a luxuriant beard. His hands were no longer smooth and white – now they were larger, rougher, stained with soil, with dirt under each fingernail. He looked into the distance again and saw a thin, clean-shaven man in a grey cassock crouched by the candle. Easing himself up, he started through the water towards the light...

* * *

Borne up by the cool water, Father Hugh floated on his back over the well mouth. He was still light-headed and gasping for breath, his vision blurred by the water and lack of oxygen. It took him a moment to realise that something had changed in the crypt. Then he realised the water was much deeper now – he hadn't been able to float freely in the pool before. The light was brighter too – and he could hear a woman's voice in the distance, calling:

‘Peter – PETER – is that you? Are you alright?’

He rolled onto his front and tried to put his feet down. How deep was the pool? He found he could stand, half in and half out of the water. As he turned towards the voice, he

stumbled and nearly fell back as a tall man appeared to loom out of the shadows. He thought the figure was accusing him, clasping its hands forward, pointed at his naked body. But it did not speak, nor did it move. He looked towards the light, beyond the immobile apparition, and saw a woman, standing on a stone platform, holding up a dazzling lantern. She was beckoning him towards her. He felt dazed, unsure how the crypt could have changed in such a short time. As he skirted the leaden figure, he intoned:

*In martyrio martyrum,
In uirtute iustorum
In formis spiritalibus,
In diuinis sermonibus,
In benedictionibus,
Deus tuarum protege me.*

The figure remained unmoved, immobile, continuing its fixed stare towards an unseen horizon. Beyond the figure, the woman pointed at a bag containing a cassock and several towels.

‘Benedicite! You are welcome here,’ she said, averting her eyes from his naked body.

‘Dry and clothe yourself, Father Hugh, and then I will explain.’

* * *

As Peter reached the figure by the candle the enormity of his task became apparent. He had no idea who this person was. Indeed, he had no idea who anyone was in this new world. He had certainly been told about Anglo-Saxons, Normans, monks and abbots, barons, vassals, jesters, peasants and knights in secondary school. But this was hardly adequate preparation for actually meeting them. Mostly though he remembered being told that life in medieval England would have probably been dirty, dangerous and short.

‘Pæs sy þam Halgan þonc’. The figure by the candle had not spoken. The words had instead come from Peter’s mouth, simply and smoothly flowing, as if they were familiar

friends. He instinctively knew they meant ‘Let there be thanks to God’. The figure, who was now handing him a rough habit, replied, ‘Amen’, and Peter knew this was Will, his novice, whose father had died for an Anglo-Saxon cause. Peter was not quite sure how he knew this, but it was a certainty in his mind, just as he knew that the sacristy bell would soon call them to matins.

‘The crown is now safe from our Norman friends, Will. But it must not languish there forever, so our task is not yet done.’

These are my words, Peter thought. But how can this be me speaking? Surely these Anglo-Saxon words are those of Father Hugh? I can feel his presence, yet here I stand, with the thoughts of a 20th century man, but I feel the rough weave of his cassock as rub myself dry. I sense Hugh’s presence yet I now own this body. I have his knowledge through my thoughts. Or maybe he is still here and merely allowing me a presence in his body. Yet Peter felt calm, almost serene, though the rough cloth of the cassock rubbed his wet body. He shivered, not from fear, but from the cold February night.

‘Come, Will, let us return to the Priory. We will go to the calfectory. Let us warm our bones before Nocturns.’

Peter knew that from the autumn equinox until Good Friday, a fire was kept burning in the warming house, or calfectory. Or rather, Father Hugh knew that. When it was cold and wet, the monks gathered to do their work in the calfectory. It was the ideal place for preparing ink or greasing boots since the fire helped soften the pig grease. Even bloodletting was sometimes carried out there. But in the dead of night it would be empty, a good place for Peter to dry out.

* * *

Father Hugh thought he might be dreaming. Or perhaps he was dying and God was calling him. His body had changed. It no longer had the sinewed muscles from the long hard

manual labour of the monastery fields, nor did his hands have the callouses of manual toil. His short hair, shaven chin, and smooth, white, unblemished skin were a strange and foreign land, to be explored with amazement and curiosity and interest as he dried himself. His body was much younger, no longer stooped from his labour. Was this heaven, then? Had God blessed him with a new, more youthful, more vital body?

The bag contained undergarments made of a cloth he did not recognise, but they were close fitting and comfortable. Father Hugh recalled the Rule of Saint Benedict forbade monks from wearing underclothes in their monastery but also made it clear that monks must, for modesty, wear underwear while out in public. The cassock too was unfamiliar and although austere, it was strangely luxurious to his touch. As he dressed, he looked around. This seemed to be something like the Cathedral crypt, so maybe he was at least close to his monastery. But somehow, he felt he was also very far away. There were strange shoes in the bag, made of a type of a leather or animal skin that Father Hugh had never seen before. There were even stranger socks, unlike the tights he would always use when travelling. He wished he had his simple leather strapped sandals as he fumbled to tie the tiny strings that closed the shoes around his feet. Finally, when he was dressed, the woman turned, picked up the bag, and said,

‘Come, Father Hugh, I must show you something. And then we must pray.’

As Father Hugh heard the words, he realised that the woman was not speaking Anglo-Saxon. Nor was it French and it certainly was not Latin. But he certainly understood it, although he could not understand why. It had a certain familiar rhythm and sound. Deep below his conscious thought, he sensed a knowledge of this language, a language that was not his, and indeed a memory that was not his either. He asked,

‘Is this Heaven? Where has my Lord brought me?’

The woman seemed an unlikely angel to Father Hugh. Yet, she seemed an equally

unlikely demon. But even in his uncertainty, in these oddly familiar surroundings, he felt quite calm, quite unperturbed. He sensed the memory that was deep in his mind was quite familiar with this place, and at peace with these surroundings and that the woman was in some way part of that memory.

‘This is your Winchester cathedral, Father Hugh. It is a gateway to salvation, and equally a defence against the abyss. But it is also my cathedral too. My name is Anya. This is a place you already know, but also will soon become a future part of you. I cannot explain completely, but you should know that you are here for a purpose. The body you inhabit, is not yours to keep. You must return soon. It is your fate that you must dive into the well again.’

The Cathedral Priory, February 1093

The dimly apparent consciousness of Father Hugh that lay at the back of his thoughts told Peter that even though the monks were now asleep in the dormitory, they would be awake shortly. In accordance with the Rule of St Benedict, the monks made a threefold division of their time, giving a third of the day to liturgical devotion, a third to the practice of reading and contemplation and a third to acts of humility such as manual labour and the maintenance of the monastery and its facilities. While *Opus Dei*, the element of the day given to God, was rigorously structured around the seven Canonical Hours of Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, Nones, Compline and Nocturn, the actual times of these celebrations varied from summer to winter, for the monks day was measured by the sun. The monks did regularly rise at two in the morning to attend Nocturn. Sometimes the failure of the sacristan, Brother Alwin to stay awake and summon them to service had led to a somewhat tardy service. Peter did not think that God would have minded that much. Or was that Father Hugh's feelings that Peter was experiencing? In any case, two years ago, Brother Alwin had been given the custody of a wondrous new device, a water clock that sounded a bell on every second hour and the punctuality of Nocturn had greatly improved. That was until the cold north winds of January had brought snow and ice to the cloisters, and the water reservoir for the clock had frozen. Peter wondered what Hugh would be making of the simple electronic wristwatch he had left with his clothes. The version of Hugh that Peter could feel somewhere at the back of his mind had only knowledge of the twelfth century. But what would happen when Peter and Hugh returned to their respective bodies? Would they be able to remember what they had seen and done in each other's centuries? Peter did not want to consider that puzzle yet. He

simply wanted to avoid any attention, to appear to be Hugh, to write and hide the manuscript, and then to return to the pool to return to his own world.

Will had been dutifully silent as they had walked to the calfectory, and Peter had been sunk in his inner thoughts. But now, warmed by the embers of the remaining fire, Will was becoming restless.

‘Father, you said our task is not yet done. But surely the crown is now safe in the well?’

Peter knew he could not tell Will the true and future story of the crown. But he needed Will’s help, both to keep the secret of the crown and the secret of the well itself. He found the words that Hugh would say. Maybe even it was Hugh saying them.

‘Yes, Will, it is safe. No Norman hand draws water from that well, nor will they. The spring that feeds the well has done so from before the Angles, before even the Romans. That well was the baptism water of many past English worriers, maybe even Arthur Pendragon himself. Such a spring will not suit the Normans in their high Catholic ways. Only when the true English rise again will people seek its waters again. Until then, we must keep the secret safe. We must find a way to pass our secret on until a new generation can rise again, to take back what we have lost and to cherish our nation once more.’

‘How will we do that, Master?’

‘For the moment, you must go back to the dormitory - it must be close to the time for Nocturne, and if you are missed by the other initiates, then you will have some explaining to do.’

‘I can always say I had been in the reredorter. Last night Brother Edmund’s cabbage stew might put anyone there.’

Peter puzzled over the word ‘*reredorter*’ for a second or two, thinking it a rather French term for the steadfastly Anglo-Saxon Will to use, but then, from Father Hugh’s memory, he heard an echo: ‘necessaries’. Clearly, it was a privy of some sort.

‘Well, in either case, we must not be missed. Go now, and we will proceed further at your morning instruction.’ Again Father Hugh was telling Peter that he and Will would meet for half an hour’s study after Sext, nominally the sixth hour of the day but closer perhaps to noon, in the shorter days of February.

For the next stage of his plan, Peter knew he must find quill, ink and manuscript. All of these would be in the scriptorium. But that could wait until later. For the moment, he must return to his cell in preparation for Nocturn. Then sleep, at least until dawn.

* * *

Despite his best efforts, Peter had not slept before Nocturne, nor indeed after. The cloister bell had summoned him to Nocturne, and he had let Father Hugh’s body tread its well-known steps to the Priory Church, where the brothers assembled in the dim light of a single candle. The service was recited by memory as no manuscript could possibly be read in the gloom. Peter found it strangely calming. He had expected to be anxious, concerned that he might easily do something wrong, that would be seen as out of place by the other monks and that would reveal that he was not the Father Hugh that they all knew. But the years of tradition and repetition embedded in Father Hugh’s memory guided him, without Peter consciously thinking.

The following morning had been a sequence of revelations to Peter. At Lauds, just after dawn, he was able to see the whole congregation in the Priory Church. Peter had imagined from his research in the 20th century cathedral library that there would be twenty or thirty monks, maybe forty at most. But there were many more than that, more than he could discretely count. Perhaps as much as sixty. As the congregation worked their way through a new chant and set of antiphons, psalms and lessons, Father Hugh’s memory gradually identified the Sacrist, Father Ealdræd, a short, red-faced man, with a ready frown and firm but unmusical voice. A grizzled, bent-over monk was Brother Aloysius, the cellarer, in charge

of the stores and supplies. Brother Edmund, the Cook, seemed in contrast to being almost a boy, with a small, round face and the smooth skin of youth, though his ample stomach seemed to suggest his devotion to God might not yet have overcome his secular training. There were many more: Chamberlain, Guest Master, Almoner, Infirmarer, Herbalist, Cantor, the Master of the Novices and then the main body of Cloister Monks - these were the ordinary monks who did most of the manual labour. Then there were noviciates in training to become monks but still participants at the services of the Hours. However, Peter could see no sign of anyone that might be the Abbot, and presumed that he was travelling. In many ways, Peter suspected the Abbot must have to do just what a modern Arch Deacon or Bishop had to, to build alliances, to reinforce friendships, to lobby and to demand, to press the flesh and smooch his allays and his enemies. Though Peter did not think that smooching probably had an Anglo-Saxon equivalent. Not an enviable job. Within his monastery, the abbot was the father of the community, having to combine the lion with the lamb and to be both responsible for maintaining discipline and offering consolation and advice. He had to instil fear and command obedience but also provide comfort and care for his flock, to defend them from the outside world, yet also use that outside world to assure the future success of the monastery. If the fabric of the monastery could not be maintained, the monks could not continue in their glorious worship of God. Some monasteries, such as this one, had come into possession of large amounts of land. Running it profitably was the abbot's prime secular responsibility. Mismanagement would lead to debt or loss of land, while a prosperous Abbot would be seen to be following the path of virtue.

Peter knew from his readings that most of the monastery's day-to-day work was the Prior's responsibility. If the Abbot was not present, then surely the Prior must be in attendance at the Chapter meeting. Peter could not conjure up an image of the Prior from Father Hugh's memory. He sensed there was something odd about the Prior, something he

could not quite bring into his consciousness. But then, despite the cold atmosphere of the church, and the way the stone flags of the church floor had been drawing the warmth out of his body, he felt a hot flush. He could not imagine the face of the Prior because he himself was the Prior. It was Father Hugh's responsibility to deal with the daily confusion of the monastery, to supervise the myriad jobs of winemaking, brewing, bee-keeping, animal and equine husbandry, growing fruit & vegetables, harvesting, milling, fishing, falconry and even carpentry. And, of course, there were innumerable manuscripts to be copied. Admittedly the other obedientiaries were directly in charge of these activities, but it was Father Hugh's responsibility to see that they all came together. And to maintain the chapter books that accounted for expenditure and income. How on earth would he be able to do that without making a mistake, without revealing that he was not Father Hugh but an inept imposter? Of course, the monks had all taken a vow of silence, so they were generally not allowed to speak at all in such places as the church kitchen, refectory or dormitory. Surely that would help. And much of the day would be taken up with the celebration of the seven Canonical Hours. But Peter could not imagine that he could spend even a day in Father Hugh's body without some difficult question arising that would test his disguise. He was brought out of his reverie by a realisation that Brother Godric, in his role as Cantor, was drawing the service to an end with a final prayer.

As the monks dispersed from the Church, Peter was not sure what he should do next. Should he return to his cell? He did not think there would be any breakfast - he had read that the Benedictine had only one meal a day in winter, and there did not seem to be a general movement towards the refectory. Most of the monks were walking, in solemn silence, to the other, eastern cloister. Peter followed their general movement. Recalling his reading from a month ago (or was it a millennium?), Peter knew that the monks would meet daily in the Chapter House. The meeting had a rigid structure. Celebrations of Martyrs who had died on

that day. Prayers for the dead, and of course, with special mention of those who had been benefactors of the monastery. The central pillar of the meeting was the reading aloud of a chapter of the Rule of St Benedict. Then the monks were allocated their weekly duties, and other administrative issues were addressed. Finally, if there were any disciplinary issues, these were dealt with. How would he deal with all of this? He had no idea. He was sure; even if he was not found out, it would be apparent to the monks that the Father Hugh that stood before them was not the Father Hugh that they knew. Maybe he would appear to them to be ill, or just a little strangely confused. Or perhaps they would think his apparent loss of memory and incompetency in the role of Prior was some sort of possession. And if he was labelled as being possessed by monks in twelfth century England then that could lead to Well, he was not quite sure, but he was certain it would be bad. Could he return to the well and his own time before he had to lead the Chapter meeting? It seemed an impossibility. Was there some way to create a diversion? The ridiculous idea of perhaps starting a small fire. But where would he find the materials at such short notice? And surely he could not do that undetected. Could he feign a temporary illness? Or was there perhaps a sub-Prior that he could pass? In any case, he had not yet created the letter that would tell his future self to dive into the well in the first place, nor hidden it in a way that his future self could find it. And if he failed to do that, how then could the whole chain of events that had brought him to the 12th century even start? But it was too late now to do anything but follow the gathering monks into the Chapter House.

Peter was the last to enter. Perhaps, he thought, that was appropriate, being Prior. It certainly made it easier to work out his place in the gathering. There were stone benches along the walls where monks sat, heads bowed. The windows of the Chapter House were high up, presumably to prevent anyone passing by from seeing the proceedings, and the early morning light illuminated the room surprising well. At the centre of the back wall, there was

a small raised dais, with a wooden bench either side. In the centre of the dais was an oak seat with an embroidered panel, showing the cross, set into its high back. Since that was the only remaining seat, Peter walked forward, trying carefully to show the dignity of a Prior, and sat down. He had no idea what to do next. Chapter House meetings in the cathedral in Winchester in 2015 were quite different to this. For one thing there, were women present, and certainly no vow of silence. And of course there was inexhaustible tea and biscuits; a simple thing, but something quite unimaginable to the monks in front of him.

One of the monks from the wooden bench on his right had stood up, and was now looking at him. Father Hugh's subconscious told Peter that this was Father Wilfrith, the armarius. It seemed to Peter that Father Wilfrith was waiting for some indication in some way. Peter inclined his head slightly, in assent, as a faint suggestion from Father Hugh's memory surfaced in Peter's mind. The armarius was responsible for seeing that all monks had devotional books to read. Every monk was required to read and reflect on a religious text as part of their contemplations. The armarius also kept the keys to the armoured chests used to store the monastery's most valuable manuscripts. Like all the obedientiaries he also had specific liturgical duties as well, holding the lantern aloft when the abbot read in service and approving all material to be read aloud in church, chapter, and refectory. Here it seemed that he had the responsibility of reading the prayers of the dead. Father Wilfrith moved forward, open a ledger manuscript book on the lectern at the front of the dais and began reading. Peter began to relax. Maybe he could survive this meeting after all.

When Father Wilfrith had finished, he put the ledger manuscript to one side, leaving a more ornate, leather-bound manuscript on the lectern. This must be the daily reading of a rule from the Rule of St Benedict, thought Peter. But then Father Wilfrith retired to his side bench and sat down. Peter surreptitiously looked around for the next reader, but all the monks had their heads bowed down. Realising it might be the Prior's responsibility, he

decided to wait a little more, and then he would stand and read from the book on the lectern. Though, he had no idea what he would read. Perhaps he could feign a moment of memory loss, and a monk would help him. No, there was no movement amongst the monks. He must be responsible for reading the daily rule - after all, that seemed appropriate for a Prior. He stood and walked slowly to the lectern and opened the book. The manuscript was written on fine vellum, and the Latin text was illuminated in red and blue lettering. Which part should he read? How could he find the appropriate section? Perhaps it was his choice? He let the book fall open at a random page. It seemed providential - it described St Benedictine's instructions for the accommodation of visiting monks. Peter looked at the assembly and said:

‘With the Lord’s guidance, may He show us how to live together, how to receive our distant brothers. May the Lord guide us to lead strong and holy monastic lives and in love and humility follow the Rule of St Benedict.’

Reading from the manuscript, he intoned:

A visiting monk from far away will perhaps present himself and wish to stay as a guest in the monastery. Provided that he is content with the life as he finds it, and do not perchance by his lavishness disturb the monastery, he shall be received, for as long a time as he desires. If, indeed, he would find fault with anything, or expose it, reasonably, and with the humility of charity, the Abbot shall discuss it prudently lest perchance God has sent him for this very thing. But if he have been found gossipy and contumacious in the time of his sojourn as guest, it shall be said to him, honestly, that he must depart. If he does not go, let two stout monks, in the name of God, explain the matter to him. The abbot must, however, take care never to receive into the community a monk from another known monastery, unless the monk's abbot consents and sends a letter of recommendation, since it is written: Never do to another what you do not want done to yourself.

The congregation were clearly familiar with this precept, as immediately Peter had finished the last sentence, they responded,

‘God is always with us. Amen.’

Feeling relieved that he had managed to produce something acceptable, he returned to his

seat. He wondered what the monks would have thought had he arrived according to St Benedict's rule with a letter of recommendation from his Bishop. The idea of a laser-jet printed letter would no doubt have astonished the monks. But it seemed, he was accepted for the moment. He smiled briefly to himself, thinking he must be careful not to let his lavishness disturb the monastery.

The meeting was not over, however. Now, Brother Edmund and Brother Aloysius had started a discussion as to how much beer remained in the monastery cellar and when to start a fresh cycle of brewing. There seemed no part for Father Hugh in this, so Peter remained quiet. Then, Brother Ealhhere, the almoner, asked if extra bread might be baked this week since the winter's coldest weather was now upon the country and the need in the poor was at its greatest. Brother Aloysius was of the opinion that there might be enough flour in the monastery store to do this until the March moon, and, looking at Peter, asked,

'Shall we share our bounty in this way, Father?'

Peter knew he could hardly say no. But what was the proper form of reply?

'Let us, in the Lord's name, make it so.'

That seemed to satisfy Brother Ealhhere. But Peter was feeling increasingly nervous. How would the meeting end? Would he, as Prior, have to give some signal? All the monks were now seated, back to their contemplative posture, with heads bowed. Should he say something? But what on earth was the formula for ending a Chapter meeting? Once again, he had no idea. Nothing surfaced from the depths of Father Hugh's memory either. He was just about to improvise when the cantor, Brother Godric rose to his feet. The entire congregation joined him, Peter quickly rising too. Brother Godric's intonation was precise and firm as he chanted:

'Lord Jesus, you have given us the consolation of the truth. Lord have mercy.'

The congregation, in turn, responded:

‘Lord Jesus, you are the good shepherd, leading us into everlasting life. Lord have mercy.’

‘Amen.’

At this point, the meeting appeared to Peter to have ended. The monks remain standing in dignified silence. Peter realised after a moment that he, as Prior, probably must be the first to leave. Though the monks’ lives focused on the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, it seemed that obedience took a superior position in the hierarchy of the order. Despite his elevated status, he felt uncomfortable and vulnerable and was glad to have survived this ordeal and to be able to make his way back to his cell.

* * *

At noon came the office of Sext and the midday meal, which was a simple vegetable stew with bread, and a surprisingly good but weak beer. Eaten in silence, Peter found it far less stressful than the morning’s devotional services. He had not expected the monks to drink alcohol but quickly realised it would probably be much healthier than drinking the local water, particularly as the monastery was situated on the water meadows next to the river and probably received the drainage from most of the town. But then, the well in the Cathedral crypt had seemed clean and fresh. His thoughts turned to his plan for the afternoon. If it was successful, he would be once again enveloped in the well’s clear, cool waters and then back in the safety of his own time.

* * *

Will, dutiful as ever, was waiting for him outside of Father Hugh’s cell, ready for his afternoon instruction.

‘Come, Will - today we have a writing task to complete. But first, I want you to fetch me the book that Father Wilfrith gave you to read for this month’s contemplation. Also, bring me an inkhorn from the scriptorium - make sure it contains some good, strong fresh black

ink.'

While Peter was waiting for Will to return, he prepared his writing tools. He untied the bundle of quills and selected a couple of promising looking ones. They were from the right wing of the bird, probably a goose, he thought, as Peter was left-handed. He had practised sharpening quills with Anya a week before, so all he needed now was a sharp knife. He felt in his cassock pockets. Nothing, only a small collection of keys, fastened securely to the cassock linking with a small chain. There was no knife on the lectern, or visible anywhere in the simple cell. Perhaps he should have asked Will to bring one from the scriptorium. But surely, if Father Hugh had a writing lectern in his cell, then he must have the necessary writing tools. The only reason he had sent Will for the fresh inkhorn, was Peter knew that ink was diluted with gum arabic, and that had to be boiled before the ink could be made. He could not see Father Hugh doing that in his cell. The only place Peter had not looked was in the chest in the corner of the cell. He tried the first key from the chain in his pocket in the chest's lock. To his relief, it worked. There were a surprising number of things inside.

The chest contained several leather-bound manuscripts. There was a second cassock, some undergarments, a pair of socks and a hose, a very worn pair of sandals, a pair of strong leather boots that laced up to the knee, a scapular, possibly for working in the fields, a few small sheets of vellum, some leather fragments, thread and needle, two candles and not only a knife, but a sharpening stone too. This seemed to Peter to be a great deal for a monk to own, given the Benedictine vows of obedience, stability and poverty. But then, these were not Father Hugh's possessions at all - they were owned by the monastery, just like every other material object used by the monastery. They were locked away not because of the monks' desires to own these things but because the monastery was a busy place with many secular visitors. Peter was glad to see the vellum, another thing he had forgotten in his anxiety.

By the time Will returned, Peter had managed to sharpen three quills. Now he would find

out if the manuscript writing he had practised with Anya would bear fruit. He only had two pieces of vellum, so he could not really afford to make a mistake. Peter took the inkhorn from Will and attached it to the left side of the lectern. Then, spreading a piece of the vellum on the lectern's surface, he dipped his quill in the ink and started to write. As he wrote he thought of the many times that he and Anya had puzzled over the meaning of the letter, and how something they had found in the 21st century, had been created by Peter's actions in the 12th. Anya had asked what would happen if Peter did not dive in the well? Then the letter they held in their hands would never have been created. But Peter had replied - we must have faith, the letter is here with us, in the 21st century. So my future is determined - I will dive in the well, and I will write the letter. Anya had remained unconvinced. Peter too had had his doubts, but he said, there are many things that exist because we can touch and feel them. But there are other things that we choose to believe in, that we can't touch and feel, but they do exist nevertheless. That is how faith worked. And he had believed in the letter, and so he had dived the well. And, so far his faith had been rewarded - what had chosen to believe had somehow become a reality. At least he believed it was real, for here he was, in a 12th century Benedictine monastery, now writing in Anglo-Saxon, the instructions he would follow a thousand years in the future. He finished the letter and waited for a moment for the ink to dry.

‘Now, Will, we must make sure that this letter is neither read by our enemies nor by our friends. So we must find a very good hiding place for it.’

‘But surely there can be no point in writing such a strange letter, Master.’

‘Ah, it will be read. But not for many years. We are sending a message to our descendants. For the present our kingdom is under the heel of the Normans. But we must prepare for a new kingdom. That is why the crown of the English must be preserved until a new English king can arise, greater than Alfred, even greater than Æthelstan. Then the land

can be returned to its true owners.’

Peter felt sick as he said that. He knew he was lying, and he felt that Father Hugh must somehow know too. It was wrong for Peter to lie, and it was wrong for Peter, in Father Hugh’s body, to make Father Hugh lie too. There would be no new Anglo-Saxon kingdom. True, the Normans would give way to new kings and kingdoms, but there would never be an English kingdom of Mercia again. But he could say nothing else. The letter had to be written and then secreted somewhere where it could be found in the distant future. If the letter was not hidden and then found again, then the Peter in the future would never know to dive in the well. And what then? How would the Peter, here, standing in 1093 in Father Hugh’s body, get back to Anya? He sat on the stool by the table, trying to steady his nerves.

‘Bring me the book and the knife, Will’.

Will did so.

‘We must find a way of hiding the letter in the leather covers of this book. See here, the binding is weak along this bottom edge. I think if we make a slit here, then the letter can be slid inside, between the cover and its backing. Here, this is a task for younger, more nimble hands than mine.’

Peter gave Will the knife and placed the book, pages down on the table. Will carefully incised a small cut, where Peter indicated.

‘A little longer, then let us see if the letter will fit.’

Will cut a little more, then brought the manuscript letter and carefully slid it into the opening. He pressed the edge of the letter inside the cover with the point of Father Hugh’s knife. The letter was entirely hidden. Only the question of closing the slit remained, but that could not be done without glue, and for that, they would need to go to the scriptorium when the copyists had finished their work for the day.

‘That is enough for the moment,’ said Peter. ‘Place the book in the chest, with the other

things. We must complete the job tonight.’

The bell for Nones rang as Will closed the chest lid. Peter stood and locked the chest, and they left the cell.

* * *

Just as it had on the previous night, the February full moon shone down on the Anglo Saxon and the Norman cathedrals as two figures flitted from shadow to shadow. It was the hour before Matins. Peter and Will had closed the cover of Will’s book using glue from the scriptorium. One of Father Hugh’s keys had fitted the scriptorium lock, and it had been easy to find the glue, as the scriptorium’s windows, though small and high up to prevent intruders, flooded the room with moonlight. But they had to use a candle to warm the glue before it was sticky enough to use. In the moonlight, the repair seemed invisible. Peter instructed Will to return the book, as usual, at the end of the contemplative month. Now, Peter thought, there is only one simple thing to do. But one that requires a great faith. Not in God, but in whatever mysterious force controlled the well. He must dive again if he was ever to see Anya again.

As before, Peter led the way. As they entered, the moonlight lit the cathedral nave, but the darkness on the steps into the crypt made Peter pause. Will, however, had thoughtfully brought the candle stump and wooden holder they had used the night before.’

Shall I say a prayer and light a candle?’ asked Will.

‘Yes’, said Peter, ‘we will both say a prayer for each other.’

So they retraced their steps and lit the candle from the one already burning at the altar.

They knelt and in silent prayer, sought the support of their God.

Moments later, they were in the crypt. The floods in the water meadows outside the Cathedral grounds had receded somewhat, and the water was only a few inches deep on the crypt. Peter quickly slipped off his cassock and sandals and strode out into the water. He left

the dim glow of the candlelight behind, and the darkness gradually enveloped him. At the distant end of the crypt, he could just make out the low circular stone wall marking the well's position. He heard himself speak, and although the words seemed familiar, he did not consciously form the sentences.

Send thy light, O Lord, into the dark places of our hearts. In thy love, discover to us the snares set by our enemy in the hours of night, that, saved by thy protection in soul and body, we may deserve again to see the morning light. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

After one brief look back at Will, he stepped over the wall and sank into the depths.

St Alfred's, September 1982

Driven by the October easterlies, on a dull Monday afternoon, the rain sheeted down under grey skies. It fell with unwavering determination onto the equally grey Warren Drive, on the edge of the Winnall trading estate in the northeast corner of Winchester. At number 23 Peter looked out of his bedsit window, wondering how the others in his undergraduate year were faring. In reality, his room was much more bed than sit. A faded pine single bed was pushed up against one wall and occupied a good portion of the room, while a matching wardrobe, which apparently needed a little help to remain upright, lent against the opposite wall, tilted back by small third wall, a 1960's gas fire hissed quietly next to a meter which also supplied a single gas ring. Peter had never seen such a fire before and was convinced it had seen many more birthdays than he had. And the fire certainly seemed to be wearing its age rather less well than wedges under its front legs. Next to the meter there was a small sink. A tiny cupboard above contained exactly one plate, one cereal bowl and a single saucepan. A few pieces of cutlery concluded the inventory. The room's contents were completed by the table and the chair at which Peter was sitting. They seemed somehow familiar to Peter, and after a moment, he realised they were made of the same veneered plywood he had seen in a TV program showing what life had been like after the second world war.

He could hear the murmur of the landlady's TV in the sitting room below through the thin carpet on the floor. He wondered if that room was as meanly furnished as his, but he did not think he would ever find out. She had made it clear that morning, on his short introduction to the house, that he was expected to remain in his room and only make the briefest of sorties to the bathroom or his shelf in the fridge.

The raindrops continued to beat a rhythmic tattoo on the window. He looked out at his bicycle, checking that it was still chained to the railings that separated the well-tended garden from the road. He considered an escape into college, but the sodden saddle and the thought of the twenty-minute ride in the rain quickly dissuaded him. Besides, he knew no-one who actually had rooms in the college and, considering the particularly steep streets of Winchester, that journey seemed too much of a hill to climb, at least for the moment.

He found he had been holding his breath as he pondered his isolation. He exhaled with a deep sigh and turned to the first chapter of 'The Geography of European Agriculture.' His studying only lasted a moment as he kept recalling his headmaster's words,

'Go to University, my lad. You should try for Queens - best college in Cambridge, I had a tremendous time there when I was demobbed! Hardly went to a lecture, spent most of my time on the river – when I wasn't in an eight, I'd be punting up to Grantchester. Of course, that's the advantage of a Classics degree – you'll probably have to put in an appearance at least a few of your lectures if you're doing engineering.'

Well, Peter had tried for Cambridge – and even done quite well in the entrance exam. He knew that though he had messed up the subsequent interview. It was the first time he had been away from home on his own. He put it down to nerves, mostly. It had been a complicated train journey, with three changes, and he was late as he had had trouble finding the college. Then, slightly overawed by sitting in front of two college Fellows, each wearing gowns, and offering him sherry, he was totally silent when asked:

'If the second law of thermodynamics says that you can't unscramble scrambled eggs, what would you have for breakfast if you wanted to increase your entropy?'

Perhaps it was not surprising then, he thought, that he had abandoned doing Natural Sciences and had settled for Environmental Sciences at King Alfred's College in Winchester. The college originally specialised in teacher training and had only just started expanding to

provide 'proper' degrees under the supervision of nearby Southampton University. Maybe the need to fill their extra places was the reason he had got in. He was really only there because his friend John had already applied to St Alfred's to do Geography. Peter was not sure he wanted to be a teacher. Maybe he would look for a job in TV? But first he would have to get through the next three years.

A pity I didn't know the College was strapped for money, Peter thought. If I had, I would have known that St Alfred's had yet to complete the funding of its expansion and had found it expedient to place its first-year intake in various lodgings and bedsits provided by the more permanent residents of the town. Maybe I'll just drop the idea of a degree. But, what then? If only my surname had begun with F instead of G. Then I would be next to John in the allocation list - with a bit of luck we could have ended up in the same house.

'Bugger!' he said, biting his lip. He put another 50p in the gas meter and started to make some toast.

Fresher's Week, September 1982

The following morning, Peter cycled the two and a half miles into College. His route took him out of Winnall and over the river and then along Friarsgate though he could not see any evidence of a Friar or Gate, just a drab set of 1970s office buildings and a multi-storey car park. The only hint of the historical past of Winchester were the narrow city roads in the one-way system in the city centre. These seemed more suitable for medieval carts than the stationary bus that Peter dodged around as he turned into Jewry Street. With its mixture of banks and estate agents this seemed a perfect example of 20th century commercialness. The *Introduction to Winchester* pamphlet the College had sent him a few weeks ago had led Peter to expect a much more historic atmosphere. The leaflet had extolled several attractions: a castle and a cathedral, Roman Walls, King Arthur's table - indeed, all sorts of distractions from modern life. All Peter saw, however, were the traffic lights at the top of the High Street, and the road to the College rising up the hill in front of him.

As he struggled up the hill, wishing he had more than three gears on his bicycle, Peter passed the Westgate. This was a quite impressive structure, two stories high, with thick stone walls and an arching gateway. It had clearly been part of the original city walls as a vestige of those walls remained. The gatehouse was no longer in use, as it was too narrow for modern traffic, so the road simply sidestepped it and carried on up the hill. The last stage of Peter's journey was up the Romsey Road. On the left were the Royal Green Jackets Rifles Peninsula Barracks, the West Hill cemetery and the Royal Hampshire County Hospital. On the right was the county Police Headquarters and then Her Majesty's Prison Winchester. The rest of that part of Romsey Road were a couple of pubs and a battered Victorian terrace that

had been converted into student digs. Peter thought that it seemed that just about every aspect of the seedier side of human life was represented in that short stretch of road. There was all you needed to be born, educated, fall from grace into drink and crime, die and then be buried. Where, he wondered, was the world of Romans, King Arthur, the medieval Cathedral and genteel world of Jane Austen the College had promised in its advertisement?

Just past the prison, and sweating heavily from his exertions, he turned into the grounds of King Alfred College, dismounted and locked his bike into a bicycle rack. He turned and looked back down the way he had come. He was now a couple of hundred feet above the city. The cathedral was now clearly visible, framed by the hospital and prison. Beyond, on the far side of the river, St Catherine's Hill rose, marking the western end of the South Downs.

He turned back and walked towards the Edwardian brick buildings of the campus, in search of the Registration office. He found it in the first building he came to. The sign above the office read *Wisdom-ond-lar*. A translation was given in brackets underneath: *Wisdom and Knowledge*. If I had the knowledge of how hilly this place was, thought Peter, then I would have had the wisdom to apply somewhere else. It seemed a foreign country compared to the flat expanses of his childhood Norfolk.

Compared to other institutions such as Southampton University, the College only had a few hundred students in each year, so the registration process was neither streamlined nor quick. It took the whole morning for Peter to sign in, collect his welcome pack, book list and timetable and find out that he had to attend introductory sessions that afternoon with the rest of the students on his course. There was also the important matter of registering his bank details so that he could collect his grant check. The University paid his landlady directly, but he still would need cash for food and books and anything else he thought he needed and could afford. Fortunately, he had a little cash in his pocket from his summer job, until the

grant actually came through.

As he left the offices, wondering if he could find a sandwich for lunch, he heard a voice cry out behind him:

‘Hey, Peter, long time no see!’

It was John, the main reason he had ended up in Winchester.

‘How’s it going, man?’ John asked. ‘You coming to the pub for lunch?’

‘Well, I was thinking of just getting a sandwich.’

‘Come on, man. You’re a student now. Time to start living it up. You know, spending that grant. Meeting some chicks. Plenty of time to study later. Come and join us.’

John was with half a dozen other students. John’s father had been in a minor rock band in the 60s and John had been brought up in a mixture of booze and hippie culture. At school he had eschewed the punk culture of the late 70s, preferring to stick to the music of bands like the Grateful Dead, and The Byrds and Janis Joplin. Peter had admired this independence of nature, thinking John was mature and individual for not following the crowd. But, now John was in regulation student denims, his long hair, beard and habitual afghan coat gone, looking no different from the rest of his group.

‘Yeah, okay, why not?’ said Peter.

They went down the Romsey Road to the St James Tavern. It seemed that a lot of students had had the same idea, so they ended up standing in the car park, trying to balance a sandwich or a pork pie in one hand and pint of beer in the other. Peter just had an orange juice - he wanted to keep a clear head for the afternoon sessions. One member of the group loudly announced:

‘There are forty five pubs in Winchester. I reckon I can do them all this year. That’d be an achievement.’

‘Yeah,’ said John. ‘But that’s only one a week. That doesn’t sound that hard. If we put

our minds to it, we could them all before Xmas. Four a week. Piss-easy. That'd be a proper job.'

Peter didn't like to say it was really four and half pubs a week. And in any case, he didn't really fancy drinking his way through College. He'd seen enough of what drink had done to his father, in the years before he died. Just thinking about it made him feel a mixture of sadness and guilt. He knew he had a chance to do better, and that he ought to be grasping this opportunity with both hands, an opportunity that his parents had never had. Yet here he was standing in a car park, talking about pub crawls.

'I'm going back now - I'm going to have a look around the campus before the introductory session,' he said to John.

'Okay. You always were a bit of a swot. You coming to the Fresher's Fayre tomorrow?'

'Yeah,' said Peter, wondering if he really wanted to try out for the rugby team or join the University tiddlywinks society. But maybe there would be a more sensible club to join - he probably ought to go and see. Otherwise what was the point of him being at University at all?

'Yeah, I'll see you tomorrow,' he said and set off back up the hill.

* * *

The following morning Peter had to wait in his digs for the extra packages of clothes and other essentials he had sent himself by parcel post. On Sunday he had brought his bike and a big rucksack of stuff but that was all he been able to carry on on his train journey from Norfolk. The rest he had sent by parcel post. The postman's van did not arrive until lunchtime, so it was not until early afternoon that Peter was back on Campus. The Fresher's Fayre was being held in the Sports Hall. It turned out to be two long rows of tables, with posters blue-tacked onto the walls behind them, with one or two representatives of each society or club, lolling on benches behind the tables. Peter walked down the first row.

Rugby, football, lacrosse, cricket, netball, swimming, table tennis, basketball, softball - the list of team sports seemed endless. These had little attraction, though. Just two trips up the hill to the College had convinced Peter that he would have no trouble keeping fit, and he could not see himself running around in the mud of a sports field with a lot of other sweaty bodies. The second row seemed to focus on the more esoteric societies. At one table, an impressively convincing Orc swung a thoroughly dangerous spiked ball attached to a leather-bound shaft around his head, and declaimed at Peter:

‘Shall ye enjoin the Tower of Cirith Ungol? Stand fast, human, and measure your mettle against the army of Sauron!’

Peter looked at the poster behind the Orc to see that this was the Dungeons and Dragons War Gamers Society. With a polite smile, he raised his right hand, pointed with his first and second fingers at the Orc, and brought his thumb down smartly on top of them. The Orc looked annoyed but then laughed and said:

‘You got me. But no modern technology allowed here. Probably best to join the Cinema society if Clint Eastwood’s your thing. Let me give a leaflet anyway, just in case you want to come back and take on a proper fight.’

Peter smiled back silently and took the leaflet.

The next few tables were less engaging but even more eccentric - Peter quickly decided he had no interest in them. He certainly did not want to get accosted to participate in Hopscotch, Tea Drinking or Punning. They all had a strong air of student cliquiness. He thought back to the previous day’s drink in the pub car park. There the students had been gathered in their groups, each apparently starting to form their own social clubs, forming their own cliques. Each starting to set a membership fee, just like the societies in the Sports Hall. There seemed to him that there was a hint of desperation in the way everyone around him were throwing themselves into their expectations of student life. He felt he ought to be

making a similar effort, joining in the exuberance and embracing his new student life. But somehow he really did not want to mess about playing at being Orcs.

There were only two tables left. The first was the Ball Room Dancing society. Peter quite liked the idea of this. He had never been confident with girls, but maybe this was a way to meet some. In the pub car park there had been a couple of girls in John's group. But he had not said anything to them. He didn't really know how to start. Maybe a dancing class would be different. There would be a defined agenda and a shared activity. There would not have to be any complicated introductions. He would not have to explain about himself, he would be there for an obvious reason. They could just get on with the dancing and see what happened. The more he thought about it, it seemed like a good plan. There was no one at the table, but there was a list for people who wanted to sign up. There were all already about a dozen entries. Perfect, thought Peter. There was however no pen, and in his rush to leave his digs, Peter found he had not put one in his rucksack. He looked across at the last table. It was the Horse Riding Society. Sitting behind the table was a tall, lissom girl, in jeans and an oversized jumper. She was engrossed in reading a magazine. After a moment of standing in front of her stand, Peter said:

'Er, hello. I wonder if I could borrow a biro?'

The girl looked up. Peter was immediately struck by the blueness of her eyes. Were they cornflower blue? Or a violet-blue. Or maybe sapphire? He could not quite decide. The girl had started to frown though.

'There you go,' she said, waving the biro she had been holding out for the last few seconds. 'Do you have much riding experience?'

'Um, not really.' She was still frowning. He realised he hadn't taken the pen. 'No, it's not something I'd ever considered doing. Isn't it rather expensive - all that posh riding stuff and things?' He finally took the pen.

‘No, not at all. This would do fine.’ She gestured at what she was wearing. ‘Having a waterproof, though, would be a good thing if it’s raining. Of course, you’re sitting on a warm horse so that helps dry you out anyway. And the Riding School will lend you a hard hat. All you need are some tough shoes, with a decent heel.’

Peter looked blank. The girl smiled.

‘You need a proper heel, to stop your feet slipping through the stirrup if you fall off. Otherwise, you can get dragged behind the horse.’

Peter was not quite sure how to politely extract himself from the conversation. He didn’t like the idea of being thrown about on top of a potentially uncontrollable animal. Ballroom dancing seemed much safer - he doubted that getting dragged behind your partner would be a common problem on the dance floor. But the girl was very chatty, and she was still smiling at him. Perhaps he should consider joining the Riding club instead. She seemed rather attractive but then he thought of being out on a wet day on a damp horse and he started to move back to the Ballroom Dancing table.

‘There are lessons for all standards. And they’re subsidised - it’s just two pounds for an hour’s session. The riding school is out at Sparsholt. And it’s not just riding. We have lots of socials such as bowling, and social nights. There’s a trip to Exmoor too apparently - riding across the moors. I’m not sure I only just joined myself though I had a pony when I went to senior school. I think it’s going to be a great antidote to being stuck in a lecture theatre or the library during term time. Judy, the girl who was looking after the stand wanted to go and sign up for the Drama club, so I said I’d stand in. She’ll probably be back in a minute.’

Peter was a little overwhelmed by all this information. The girl seemed so straightforward, so confidently in charge, even though she apparently was a first-year like himself. He had no idea where Sparsholt was, nor did he really know what she meant by senior school. It sounded much posher than the comprehensive he had gone to. But she

made the club sound like it would be fun. She even made the unknown difficulties of learning to ride sound like it would be easy. He really ought to take the plunge and join something - but what? The safety and convenience of the ballroom dance floor, or the adventure of the wide open countryside? Across the room, he could see the Orc had been joined by a Troll. Thinking that Clint Eastwood would never have been seen ballroom dancing, Peter carefully wrote his details on the joining list.

‘When does it start?’

‘The first session is next Wednesday - it’s the same for all the sports - the Uni doesn’t schedule any lectures on Wednesday afternoons so we can all go and do healthy stuff.’

‘Oh, I see. And how does everyone get to the stables?’

‘Here’s the leaflet with the club details. I gather there’s a minibus we use. But look, there’s a Horsey Happy Hour in the Union tonight, for new and old club members. Yeah, I know, it’s a terrible name. But come along and Judy will be there I think to explain it all. You can pay your subscription at the first meeting.’

‘Okay, yes, I guess I’ll do that then. Thanks. I’ll perhaps see you there.’

Peter was halfway to the door when he realised he hadn’t asked the girl’s name.

Exmoor, Easter 1983

Blue. So many blues. That's all Peter remembered later. Not only the pale, washed watercolour blue of the evening sky that quickly deepened into ultramarine as dusk fell across the moor, or the cold chilled blue of their breath in the April air as they bathed in the valley stream, washing the mud and sweat off, scrubbing the day's efforts from their bodies. No, it was mostly the deep, azure blue of her costume, the silvery cobalt shadows in her hair, the dark cherry blue of the bruises on her right thigh, where she had ridden under an unseen oak bough in the woods and the cornflower blue of her irises, with their little flecks of steely blue determination. All these remained as burnished prizes in his memory. These, and his recollection of the kingfishers they had seen earlier, flashing and flaunting their blues and browns as they darted and dipped over the water, a thrilling, ephemeral moment of colour. They had ridden across the moors, and deep amongst the valley woods and chalk streams – the viridian and emerald greens, the burnt umbers and siennas would fade in future memories into distant greys – until only the blues, so many blues remained.

Each of the three days in that trip had the same simple rhythm. They camped in the farmer's field. His wife ran the Riding School, and clearly wore the trousers, as they never saw the farmer. The wife's three teenage daughters were up with the sun, and out into the fields to bring in the horses. Really they were Exmoor ponies, but their stocky build and sure-footed stance made them ideal trekking mounts. The group's day started with a bowl of cornflakes or bread and jam and then dealing with the chores - the need to brush the mud out of the horses' coats, pick out their hooves, and tack them up. Next, a morning's ride over the moors and back to the farm. Ham or cheese with bread bought in the village shop, washed

down with beer or coke. Then another few hours of riding until they were tired, and the horses were glad to amble back, have their tack removed, and be turned out into their field with a bucket of horse nuts and a net of hay. Only then, for the riders, was there the thought of a splash under the farmer's hose, or a swim in the local river. But they always finished in the village pub.

'What would you like then – a dry cider?' he asked.

'Yes, please.'

When he brought the drinks, Charlotte had taken her windproof off and was sitting on a bench next to the fire. The rest of the group were still milling around the bar. There was no table to put the drinks on, so she held them, cider and bitter in each hand, while he took his gilet off. As he sat down next to her, and she still had her hands full of glasses, he leant across and kissed her. She did not pull away, but she did not respond either. Maybe he saw her cheeks flush, or perhaps it was just the fire.

'What was that for?' she said.

'Was that a bad thing to do?'

'Just unexpected. Maybe even surprising.'

'Maybe I should surprise you more.'

'Maybe you should.'

He felt he had said something, or done something important, but he could not decide what. The kiss was something, but there was something more. He thought he could taste a hint of candy floss in the brief kiss, sweet, but melted and gone as soon as it reached his tongue.

He realised she was still looking at him, waiting.

'It was your swimming costume – it was so blue.'

'What?'

‘I don’t know – when we were swimming in the river - it seemed such an achingly, wonderful blue.’

‘Blue,’ he said again, and then was silent. In truth, he was a bit surprised he had kissed her too. The idea had been in his mind for most of the day. But then a kiss was an easy message, there and gone in the moment. Putting something into words, that needed a lot more effort.

He thought back to the afternoon, when the group had ridden in single file along the bridle paths that wound through the woods at the river’s edge. She was leading, as she often did. He followed, admiring the curve of her shoulder, watching the gentle sway of her body, as it moved in harmony with the rhythm of the horse. He had realised then he wanted to kiss her. It was rather a novel feeling and he quite liked it.

They had come in a group of a dozen largely insolvent students, loftily calling themselves the University Riding Club’s Official Easter tour, underwriting the cost from the University’s Social Club’s coffers with some traditionally dubious student accounting. Even then, they had had to borrow tents from the University Officer Training Corps. The weekend had been quite a success until on the third morning he had thought it would be fun to see what would happen if he encouraged one of the farmer’s geese into the girls’ tent. He knew it was out of character for him to do something so spontaneous. So stupid in fact. But he felt different away from the College. Here there were no lectures, no essay deadlines. The farm routine was driven more by the weather and the season than the clock. He did it without thinking, an idea borne and executed in the moment. There was a gratifying burst of frantic honking, hissing and barking from the goose. But then he realised he had not fully thought the plan through. An equally loud squeal came from the tent.

‘Where did that bloody goose come from? That bastard has shat all over my sleeping bag!’

Well, that was a bit unfortunate, he thought, a bit unlucky really – it should have been okay - a one in four chance with four girls in the tent – hard luck it happened to be her sleeping bag. He kept a low profile for a day or so. It was only on the last afternoon of the trip that he decided he wanted to kiss her. He was fairly sure she did not know he was responsible for the goose. No one had actually seen him do it – and as he told himself, the goose was not going to grass him up. Smiling at the thought of a blabbermouth goose, he was abruptly brought back to the present as he realised she was still waiting for him to say something.

‘I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking.’

‘Look, Peter, you just can’t go around doing things that like. Most people won’t understand. You’ll get into trouble - they won’t be as tolerant as me.’

Peter did not really think she was being that tolerant. But this was the first time he had kissed a girl. It was a puzzle he could not quite see how to unlock. Perhaps a kiss was not such an easy message to deliver after all. The others had finished at the bar and were coming across to join them. He looked away from other as the others crowded round.

A couple of hours later, they were all walking back to the farm, a slightly straggling group of seven, mostly thinking about the day’s ride. Not drunk by any means, they were too tired from the day to have any energy left for the heavy sessions that some of them put in during term time, but just comfortably happy. Except for Peter. He was still thinking about the kiss and what he should have done. If only he knew what that was. Perhaps it was the drink, or perhaps it was just his frustration, but seeing Charlotte ten yards ahead, he quickened his stride.

‘Look, I’m really sorry about earlier on. I didn’t mean to upset you.’

‘No, I know you didn’t.’

‘It’s just I didn’t know what to do. So it just sort of happened.’

They walked in silence for a moment. Surely, she must like him a little. They had chatted several times before the holiday. He had learnt her father had a furniture factory, and she was quite determined to become a teacher. He had not told her much about his family background, but only how, after his disastrous attempt applying for Engineering at Cambridge, he came to be doing Environmental Sciences at Winchester, and how he did not mind really, as he had no real idea what he wanted to do. She was curious that he had the breadth of appropriate grades to change subjects, but he simply said he'd always found exams pretty easy, whatever the subject. He told her he thought maybe he should have done English instead, since she made it sound so interesting. These conversations continued quite companionably throughout the weekend, mostly about nothing in particular. The horses, her enthusiasm for her English course, his equal lack of enthusiasm for his course, her desire to teach eventually, his uncertainty about what he wanted to do, the fact that Tom, the self-appointed camp cook, always burnt the bacon at breakfast.

'I just thought you were so lovely. I just didn't know what to do.' He paused. 'I'm sorry, - so what should I have done, then?'

'Good grief. For one thing, you can stop apologising all the time!'

Peter thought she might have stamped her foot as she said that. But then, he did not see how she could have done, without breaking stride.

'Is that how you are going to teach your students?'

He was surprised as soon as he said it. He thought she was surprised too, as she had stopped to face him. Peter noticed that her eyebrows just met and the tip of her nose turned up as she frowned - he rather liked it. They both stood facing one another. Then she laughed.

'Okay, fair enough, you got me.'

They started walking again. After a couple of moments of silence, Peter said:

‘Come on then, teacher.’

‘Kissing’s not exactly a standard curriculum item. Maybe I can give you an example. You know that book we were talking about at lunchtime - Far From the Madding Crowd?’

‘Yeah, I remember it from ‘O’ level.’

‘Well, you know how Bathsheba can’t make her mind up. She’s got three suitors, and she makes a mess with all three. There’s Gabriel Oak - he’s the skilful, hardworking one she should have. But they are both too proud. She doesn’t get it on with him till the end of the book.’

‘Yes’, said Peter, ‘and there’s the other guy - I forget his name, the one with the big house and all the land - he’s been married before, he’s never going to get anywhere with her, he’s just all wealth and material stuff. She knows in her heart she should not go for him but she tries to anyway. I’m not sure how this is helping really.’

But Charlotte ignored his interruption.

‘And there’s Sergeant Troy,’ she said, ‘flashing his sword around, dazzling her, bemusing her, ready to seduce her. And he might too, until she realises what he is - that he thinks that ‘If you treat them right, you are lost’. And then he loses all his charms.’

Peter still was not sure what Charlotte was getting at.

‘But it’s Gabriel that gets her in the end. Sorry, are you saying that I should be a shepherd then?’

‘No, don’t be silly - of course not. I’m saying you should decide who you are going to be, for good or bad - and then be that person. And stop saying, sorry. Don’t be anyone else. Be Peter.’

‘Oh.’

They walked on in silence, as Peter tried to digest this. Is she is saying I should just be myself? he thought. And then if I’m the right person, it will all be alright. And I did want to

kiss her; that would definitely be me being myself. So maybe she is saying I should do it again? He decided to find out.

Can I kiss you again?'

'Maybe. But one kiss a night is enough.'

She held out her hand, so they walked on hand in hand.

After a moment, he said:

'I wasn't going to tell you, but that was me with the goose in the tent.'

'I know. I hope you're going to say you're sorry'

'But a moment ago, you just told me not to!'

She laughed and turned and kissed him.

The following morning, Peter was up first, helping the farmer's wife's daughters fetch the horses in from the field, putting halters through their head collars and leading them up the lane. He did not think of the daughters as being farmer's daughters. They were always the farmer's wife's daughters. Somehow the farmer was always in the background, but never seen. The whole farm seemed to be run by women. Seventeen, sixteen and fourteen, the daughters were full of life, entirely self-assured, confident with the horses, confident with their life in the countryside, no apparent need for father or any sort of man. They seemed not to have a thought of anything outside the farm. Peter was tempted to ask if they thought they would ever want to leave that world. Then he recalled he had seen the eldest daughter in the pub last night - laughing and chatting in a group, her arm around a tall youth with jeans, wellingtons and a threadbare jumper. So maybe they had plans to leave after all.

They led the horses up the lane past the campsite and tied them up in the stalls in the stables. After pulling the horses' rugs off, and bringing a morning feed out of the barn, they brushed the night's mud out of the horses' coats and mains. His breath misted in the cold morning air as his brushing revealed the subtle mixes of dark reds, browns and coppers of

their coats glimmering in the early morning sun. He realised he had been wrong about the daughters. It was only the horses that really belonged here, despite the care the humans gave them. They merely tolerated the humans. The horses could survive, indeed had survived for many millenia, across the moors in the valleys. It was the humans that in fact needed the horses. But more strongly, the humans needed each other, needed to reach other, to seek other places to find each other.

She was cooking bacon and eggs as he came up to the tent.

‘How, do you fancy getting together with a couple of the others in the summer term and looking for a house to share for next year?’ said Peter. ‘I’m fed up with being stuck out in my digs in the wilderness of Winnall.’

The Coffee Shop, January 1984

Despite the black coffee on the table in front of him, Peter's mouth was dry. He looked up for the ninth or tenth time, and finally saw Charlotte walking across the courtyard outside the college coffee shop. She waved when she saw him. A moment later, a lemon and ginger tea in hand, she sat down next to him.

'Hi there,' she said. 'How was the lecture on the population and politics of the Baltics?'

'It was an absolute thriller – I spent most of the time reading the paper in the back row. Callingham had done Estonia, Latvia and was half-way across the Polish border before she spotted it and made me put it away.'

Charlotte smiled in sympathy and sipped her tea. They sat in silence for a moment Peter was looking down at his mug and had clasped his hands on his lap. He was slowly rubbing one thumb on top of the other. She knew that meant Peter wanted to say something, but she had learnt that it was best to wait for him to bring it up in his own time.

Eventually he made a start:

'There's something I've been thinking I would like to say.'

'Well so long as it's not a litany of Balkan population stats, then I'm all ears. Or was it something from today's paper?'

'No, nothing like that. A bit more serious, I think. I'm not sure you'll like it though.'

Good grief, she thought. Surely, he's not dumping me? That would be a turn up for the books...

'Go on, then,' she said.

Peter drew a crumpled piece of paper out of his jacket pocket and read:

How should I espresso my love for you?
Should I melt your frosty look in my cappuccino
or cup the warmth of your steamy Arabica
and then bury my nose in your heady aroma?

Let me drink the creamy froth of your latte.
Enraptured, my tongue savours the way
your liquid smacks my lips
and I taste the sweetness of your hips.

Your caffeine fizzles and jolts in my veins
as a tsunami of heat carouses in my brain.
A thirst, now quenched, will soon restart
and desire will regrow while we are apart.

He saw her cheek flush. He took it as a sign of encouragement and started to reach for her hand.

‘Peter, that is so ridiculously needy – give yourself some self-respect. You’re like a spaniel, sitting there with big round eyes, tongue out, desperate for a kind word or a biscuit.’

He let his hand drop back onto his lap. She was right of course. All of his life he had been in need. What was wrong with him? Why wasn’t it working with Charlotte? They had been sharing a flat for 6 months now. Well more of a large bedsit. The first few months it had been all ‘pasta and passion’ evenings, sharing a large pizza from Pizza Express and washing it down with cheap Italian wine, or maybe an unauthentic lasagne with cider in the Baker’s Arms with and then walking home to share a bed. As time went on, they had gradually fallen into a comfortable, companionable, efficient partnership - studying together, sharing a sausage casserole, increasingly sober as their exams approached. Had he just become a convenience to her until she was ready to move on? She was right though, he did need the relationship with her, or at least some sort of relationship with someone. He could not think of what to say in reply.

‘If you feel like that, I’d better go,’ he said. But he did not move. She pursed her lips as if

she was about to say something but she remained silent. Instead of getting up, he reached across and grasped her hand.

‘Why did we stop having sex, do you think?’

‘Wow, that came out of the blue. I don’t know. Maybe we just became friends?’ she said.

‘Is that what we are now?’

‘I think it just gradually faded away,’ she said, releasing her hand. ‘And then when you’re sharing the same flat and you’re not having sex, then you’re no different from any other couple of people that are friends. Once you stop having sex with someone, they stop being the one special person in your life, they become just like the hundreds of other people in your life.’

‘You know it wasn’t really just me that stopped the sex. Not really,’ he said. ‘I seem to recall being quite keen at the time. You were too as I recall.’

‘Yes, I do remember that. But it wasn’t really the physical stuff that I started worrying about – it was when you gave me flowers and I didn’t like the showiness of it, or when we held hands in the street, or when you gave me that miniature bicycle necklace. I don’t think I wanted that sort of relationship.’

‘I never quite knew how to show – well, you know....’

They were both silent.

‘I saw a pair of kingfishers today, down by the City Mill,’ he said, eventually. ‘They were nesting upstream, in the riverbank just underneath the big oak. They caught my eye and made me think. Two little birds – one moment they were perched on a branch, then they were rushing here and there, hurtling along the stream as if their life depended on it. I wondered what they were thinking – why did they choose that moment to fly off downstream? Why not wait a little longer and go upstream? How could they possibly know what would be best?’

‘I don’t think they do know. They just look for fish. And if they can’t see any, then the fly to another perch and look again. Fish, nest, raise their young. They just are – well, what they are – happy, responding just in the here and now.’

He wished he too could be a kingfisher.

The Mille Pine, June 1985

The cool darkness of the crypt settled around Peter as he thought back on the night's events.

With their courses over he and Charlotte had arranged to have one final meal together.

‘Let's push the boat out,’ he said, ‘and go to that new Italian in Great Minster street.’

‘Okay, that sounds good. I quite fancy some posh pasta – I doubt I'll be getting much of that for the next year – might as well make the most of it while I can.’

She had arranged a six-month VSO placement in Mali, teaching Maths and English to eight- to ten-year-olds. After that she was going to take a few months travelling down to Cape Town, in a converted Bedford truck with a dozen ex-students and would be adventurers before she came back to a mundane job in a bank. Peter was staying in Winchester, so that he could complete his teaching certificate. The meal would be a going away celebration. He did not really feel like celebrating though.

He had enjoyed those last eighteen months, sharing the flat, and their lives. There had been plenty of pasta then, but the pasta and passion meals had faded away. He thought she would see it as a tidy endpoint. After her time in Africa, he expected that if they did meet in future, then things would be different, they would somehow be strangers again. He desperately did not want that to happen. If only he could have joined her on the Bedford truck. But he needed a job, he needed to complete his teaching certificate. And Africa seemed a million miles away.

The evening had started well. The Mille Pine provided a suitably Italian menu: tonno con fagioli, cannelloni or spaghetti alla vongole, zabaglione. Perhaps too much wine. Certainly too much honesty. If only he hadn't given her that present.

‘I’d really like you to take this on your trip,’ he said, as he gave her a small, neatly wrapped package.

‘Thank you – how cute – such tiny elephants,’ she said, as she slowly removed the wrappings to reveal a small red, leather box. A small jewellery box. *A watch*, she thought. *Or some jewellery. Or perhaps something less practical, more romantic, even reckless and ill-judged....*

‘Oh, I really don’t think....,’ she said and then stopped as he took the box out of her hands and opened it to reveal a small brass compass.

‘Just keep going south – if you start seeing penguins then you’ve gone too far.’

‘That is such a nice thing, so thoughtful, and, well, so really nice,’ she said. She put her arms around him and gave him a squeeze, ready to accept a kiss. But as she closed her eyes and waited, he pulled away.

‘I can’t believe it,’ he said. ‘Look, the wretched thing is broken! North is that way, but the needle is pointing the other way.’

‘I don’t understand,’ she said.

‘They’ve screwed it up - painted the wrong end of the needle red,’ he replied. He wanted her to carry it and think of him. But it was useless.

She said something like it didn’t matter really – it was a kind thought, but he did not need to give her a present at all, really.

He looked at her for a moment and then slowly reached into his pocket, saying

‘Well, actually, that was not my first choice – I did have an alternative and, er....’

At this point he gave her a very similar sized box, again wrapped in elephant paper.

‘Wow, that was good contingency planning then ... what is it?’ she said, trying to lighten the tone and knowing that he would be pleased that she recognised his effort.

Maybe another survival aid, she thought, or maybe a Swiss Army knife perhaps, or a

portable mosquito net, that would be useful, or

‘Oh. I’m sorry...,’ was all she could say as she gave him back the ring.

* * *

The cool darkness of the crypt seemed to Peter like a soft cocoon as he laid down, trying to find a comfortable position on the hard stone flagstones. He had left the restaurant an hour before, telling Charlotte he needed fresh air, to go for a walk, that he would see her later. In truth the thought of returning to the flat was too much to bear. He had wandered around, staying away from the High Street and emptying restaurants, looking for somewhere to sit and think. Across the green he saw there was light behind the stained-glass windows of the cathedral, and he was drawn, moth like, towards it. As he approached, he could hear a faint thread of organ music, drifting back towards him, on the late night breeze. Finding himself in front of the great West door, he tried the wrought iron handle. No luck, it was firmly shut. The music continued, growing in volume as it seemed to swell towards a conclusion. Then it stopped in mid phrase. *Just like tonight*, Peter thought. The music restarted and stumbled again. Then the same phrase was played again, slowly this time. And then again, a little faster, as if the organist was educating their finger muscles. Eventually, the music flowed at full speed and continued seamlessly on. Practice makes perfect, he thought, definitely unlike tonight. I wonder if there is a side door open, though. Maybe I could go in and sit down.

He clambered over the waist high fence that kept the public out of the area immediately surrounding the cathedral and starting walking along the North Walls. There was no obvious way into the building until he had worked his way round to east side of the north transept. Here he found a path that led from the Dean’s House to a small door let into the Cathedral wall. He gently tried the wrought iron handle, and the door swung back. He slipped inside, quietly shutting the door behind him, even though the music was now reaching a final crescendo. To his left, a stone stairway led downwards. The music stopped. The organist has

finished his practice – or he will have soon, Peter thought. He descended the stairs and found himself in a vaulted space, faintly lit by the moonlight from a few windows along the north wall. *This must be the crypt he thought, there should be bones or coffins or some such.* But there were none. *Ah, well, this is good a place to spend the night – if I get locked in, I can probably sneak out when they open up tomorrow.*

The Crypt, June 1985

It was still dark when Peter woke from a fitful sleep. The flagstones were hard and cold and their dense bleakness had seeped through his thin clothes, chilling his bones. The physical discomfort that had woken him matched the memories of the previous evening. The full moon shone through the high windows of the crypt, turning the warm browns of the sandstone to shades of grey. Peter thought he had woken into a monochrome world. He stood slowly, waiting as some semblance of feeling replaced the numbness in his limbs. It was not enough. He needed to walk, to stretch, to pump the blood through his veins. He climbed the stairs back up into the north apse. The silence of the vast space seemed even deeper in the slivers of moonlight that found their way through the cathedral windows. After a moment, Peter realised the cathedral was not completely quiet. In the distance, he could hear a deep, resonant voice. It seemed to come from his left, somewhere on the other side of the cathedral. As he walked toward it, he gradually started to make out individual words, though he could still not make out the meaning.

Yfel biddan êow, hâlgian Ælfheah ac forþi god ys hihtan on drihtan, and eadige ealle þa þe truwiap on hine, mid gebance and mid lichaman, and gode and þe nyþerastreht mid eadmodre estfulnessse milde mundbyrde þine sancte pater

He entered the south transept. But the voice was behind him now. He turned and saw a small chapel set into the chantry wall. A single candle threw an erratic light on a cloaked figure kneeling before a simple altar, surmounted by a wooden cross. Peter was surprised to see that the chapel walls were painted with bright colours, which stood out even in the dim moonlight. The figure continued its prayers:

Rogamus autem ego sanctus Alfritham. Sed quia bonum est sperare in domino et

beati omnis qui confidunt in illum, mente et corpore, et domino et tibi prostratus supplicii devotione piam paternitatem tuam sancte pater. Amen

Although the words still made no sense to Peter, he recognised the rhythms and sounds – it was Latin, of course. He heard the figure speak again:

I beseech thee, St Alfrith. But because it is good to have joyous expectation in the Lord, and blessed are all those who trust in him, with thoughts and with body, prostrated – a supplicant with humble devotion to you in the conscientious parenthood of your holy father. Amen.

The figure appeared to have finished. The cathedral was silent again, a deep silence, in which neither Peter nor the figure seemed to want to move. Although there was no sound in his ears, Peter heard the deep, resonant voice say:

It is the night of the wolf moon. January's full moon is named after the howling of hungry wolves lamenting the scarcity of food in midwinter.

The figure stood and beckoned to Peter. Peter did not move, and although he could now see that it was man with a substantial greying beard, he still could not make out the face. The figure beckoned again, then turned back to the altar and knelt as before. Peter slowly walked towards the figure, who gestured that Peter should kneel beside him. Although the man's lips did not move, Peter heard the man speak:

Come and join me, my son.

Peter found he was kneeling, although he had no recollection of doing so. He clasped his hands in the manner of the other figure. The voice spoke again:

The garden is twice hidden. Encircled by trees and shrubs, rhododendrons, camellias, larch and birch, it is also sunken, a coffin's depth below. A subtle path meanders through the undergrowth leading the visitor from the bright lawn into the gloom to find an arbour, crouched close to a carp pool. The clean, fresh, green smell of the lawn cannot follow you - here the aroma is of damp leaves, moss and decay. Onside the sunken garden, the summer sun has lost its power and fails to warm the grey sandstone flags under your feet. The birds have fallen silent, held under the spell of the white noise of a waterfall feeding the pool.

A dead carp floats on the surface of the pool, horizontal, mouth open and eyes wide but dull. You sit on an oak bench in the arbour. It bends softly under your weight and you pick some of the fibres out of its slats. They feel clammy, cold and wet, the decay staining your skin as you crumble the wood between finger and thumb. The taste of the air reminds you of a dark cellar, catching the back of your throat, making you cough with a dry hack. You look expectantly into the dark browns and verdant greens, half expecting to see the black eyes of a rat or maybe worse looking back at you. This is a good place; a place to bury our thoughts in the rough brown soil.

The voice fell silent, but Peter did not feel inclined to move. He did not understand the meaning of the words he had just heard, but he felt untroubled by his uncertainty. He felt a calm, serenity, a sureness, a sense that he would understand in time. Although he could not yet articulate these feelings he felt he would understand them, and the words of the monk in time. Is this what faith is? he wondered. He was warm now, and his limbs felt relaxed and supple. Although he felt entirely at peace, he also felt in some way sensitive, prepared, as if he was a camera, primed to capture an image from a single flash of illumination. The figure spoke again, and Peter found himself speaking too, somehow joining the modern language of his words with the ancient English in his ears:

Fæder ure þu pe eart on
heofonum,

si þin nama gehalgod,

to becume þin rice,

gewruþe ðin willa,

on eorðan swa swa on
heofonum,

une gedæghwamlidan half syle
us todæg,

and forgyf us ure gyltas,

Our Father, who art in heaven,

Hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come.

Thy will be done

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses

as we forgive those who trespass against
us.

swa swa we forgyfað urum
gyltendum,

and ne gelæd þu us on
costnunge,

ac alys us of yfele soþlice.

And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

Amen.

As he stood, the figure laid a hand on Peter's shoulder as if in encouragement, and then softly, silently walked away into the distant darkness.

* * *

When Peter awoke again, the soft yellow light of the summer dawn had already lit the sandstone walls of the crypt for more than an hour. The flagstones felt hard and cold underneath him, but his limbs felt supple and refreshed. The events in the restaurant from the night before seemed like a dream. Had the figure also been an extension of that dream? He tried hard to reform the image of the figure in his mind. All he could recall was a man, if that was what he was, in a rough cloth habit, and a deep cowl. He had never seen the monk's face.

The House in Parchment Street, 2010

The postman was glad he was on Round 17. It was his favourite for a number of reasons. First, it was in the centre of Winchester, not far from the sorting office. So no need to take a van, just a letter trolley and not even a long walk. Second, he could step into the 'Little Toastie' for a quick cuppa or even a fried egg sandwich. But most of all he liked the mix of houses he delivered to. He liked to speculate over the fate and aspirations of the generations of different occupants of each house. Often, he was allocated the outlying districts, new building estates or little suburbs of retirement bungalows. There was little history in those places. But here in the centre of Winchester, inside the plan of the Roman walls, there was plenty of variation and interest to keep him occupied as he walked from door to door. A few Georgian mansions were jostled by later Victorian terraced upstarts. Half a dozen pubs, each dating back hundreds of years vied with a similar number of Churches for the accolade of the oldest building in that part of the city, though everyone doubted the Royal Oak's claim. Maybe there still were fragments of the original building, dating from 1002, when it was a residence of Queen Emma. But it was debatable it was a brewhouse until the 1630s and only by 1677 was it known as the Royal Oak. And after all, there were dozens of Royal Oaks across England, all claiming dubious royal association, so why would you believe what they said?

Parchment Street was one of his favourite parts of the round. He had read about its history in the little museum set into the west wall of the city. Some days he thought he could smell the barrels of boiling leathers, goat, deer and pigskin and picture the figures hunched over stretched skins, scraping away the remnants of the animal's flesh. Of course, those

days were long gone, and the original buildings were now replaced by terrace of Victorian back to backs. A Methodist Church, now occupied by the Salvation Army added sobriety to the street, and gently competed with Oxfam, a little further along the street. A few other shops provided Antique clocks, books, paintings, sculptures and jewellery. It would be possible to live your whole life without leaving Parchment Street, he thought, apart from the occasional trip to Sainsbury's fifty yards away to refill your larder. He rather fancied that lifestyle.

In number 15, Rachel Johnston heard the flap of the letterbox go 'thuck' as the post arrived. She looked down, wondering whether to finish her slightly burned toast and half cold cup of tea or fetch the post. It hardly seemed worth bothering, it would only be a bill or some unwelcome advertising flyer. Before her husband had died, she would have been interested in new curtains or sofas, or maybe even an offer to re-mortgage her house ostensibly hidden behind the suggestion of a holiday or a new kitchen. But now she did not need or want anything. The post did seem mildly more interesting than her burnt toast though, so she gathered her dressing gown around her, and went to see what had arrived.

There was just one letter. An airmail letter addressed in a hand that she did not recognise. It had clearly had an eventful journey as the address was partially smudged, perhaps by a short dip in a roadside pool. She brought it back to the breakfast table, glancing across at the mantelpiece clock. Nine thirty. Maybe she should do the breakfast dishes first, to make the moment of opening the letter last a little longer. Or maybe even get dressed first. Well I've got nothing much on this morning, she thought - smiling wryly to herself at the double meaning. She looked at the letter again and decided she would get dressed first, then do the washing up, then open the letter.

She showered, and then dressed. As she was brushing her hair, she felt her curiosity rising, so when she went downstairs, she just pushed the dirty dishes into the sink, adding a

new layer over last night's take-away, and turned her attention back to the letter. Looking at the envelope, she could not see any return address. The handwriting still looked unfamiliar. She could not quite make out her name, amongst the splodges on the address. It read 'Ms *ohns*n, 1* Parch**ent St, Winchest**, Hampshire, SO21 9XD. The writer had not used her first name, or even an initial. The only clue was a Canadian postmark advertising 'Ski Alberta, the BIG outdoors.' She sat down when she saw this, momentarily saddened, thinking of her own past skiing trips to the Alps with her husband. Finally, there was nothing left to do but to open the letter. She started reading:

My Dear Daughter

I am struggling over how to begin this letter to someone I hope will let me back into her life. I say, "back into" because once we shared the most intimate of connections, when I was carrying you. How I wish I could take you back - in my arms. How I wish I could kiss that squishy cheek and then freeze the moment to last forever. How I wish I could look into your deep blue eyes and touch that soft, soft skin. I know those moments are gone now, gone forever, but I want you to know that what I did, I did out of love for you, even though it was the most awful thing a mother could do. For that I am deeply sorry. I think about you every day and I hope you can feel my love. I worry that your life has not been a good one. I pray that it has, but whatever happened, I hope you will let me know you now.

You probably want to know why you came to be adopted - I hate even writing those words. I will say little about your father. It was early summer 1991, and I was a Romanian refugee in Yugoslavia. He was a soldier, an officer. It lasted a little more than a month, but he left me pregnant, and alone. I won't tell you the story of the following months, but I was determined to keep you safe, to bring one fragment of joy out of the anger and hate around me.

I remember that the lily of the valley was in bloom in the Convent garden - its perfume filled the room in the where you were born, at around 11 am in the morning on April 30, 1992. Whenever I smell that perfume now, it reminds me of that day. You weighed less than two kilograms, so they took you away to the incubator immediately. I asked the priest to baptise you Anya. As I'm sure you know, Anya means 'resurrection.' You were my hope for the future. It is my sorrow and shame that I never saw you again.

There is much more to tell you. I hope one day you will let me do so in person. For a

long time, I felt I did not have the right to search for you - I even hoped that one day you might find me. But then I thought maybe we were both waiting. So that is why I have written, hoping you will want to know me.

I know that nothing can be done about the years that have passed, but I hope that in some way, whatever way you like, we can have a future together. I don't want to step in place of your adopted family, interrupt your life or cause any problems for you. I simply want to know you. I want you to know that however you respond, or even if you choose not to respond, that I loved you the day you were born and will continue to love you always in my heart.

*Katerina,
your other mother who has never forgotten you.*

She let the air rush out of her lungs in a little gasp. She took off her glasses and started using the tablecloth to clean them. She had not expected it to be such an important letter. She held her glasses up in front of her and squinted through them to check they were now clear, but she must have dropped a bit of butter on the tablecloth earlier, as the left-hand lens was now almost opaque. She fetched a paper kitchen towel from beside the sink and tried again. It was better this time and now she could clearly see the photograph of her husband on the mantelpiece. How young he looked. It had been taken just before they were married. She recalled how they had thought then that they had plenty of time. Time for skiing trips, time for summer holidays on the Med, time to work and save for a bigger house, plenty of time for a family. But for some reason it had never happened, there was always some reason to put it off, some reason to say, 'next year....' And then he was gone, a cut from a rusty nail, dug up when weeding the back garden, festered for a week, and the septicaemia killed him in forty-eight hours. She had all the time in the world after that – but then she no longer needed it.

She picked the letter up and read it again. Who was Anya? Rachel had been alone in this house since Peter left. That had been ten years ago. No, nearly fifteen. What had she

done for those years? She could not think. The previous occupant had lived in the house since the war. Finally and reluctantly he had gone into Nursing Home in one of the large houses on Chilbolton Avenue, long after the house had become too much for him. That's why the house was so run down and neglected when she moved in with Peter - and the only reason they could afford it. So there had never been an Anya at number 15. Rachel looked at the smudged address on the envelope. Maybe it was meant for number 25? Or number 35 – no, wait – there wasn't a number 35, the terrace only went as far as 28 or 29. And the surname. That could be her name, Johnston, or maybe Johnson or maybe even Robson. She could not think of anyone living in Parchment Street with any of those names. But then, socialising with the neighbours was not one of her strong points. Well, maybe now was the time to meet a few more people. She would take the letter and go and knock on a few doors and see what she could find.

Genesis Document

Can one travel in time without breaking the laws of physics? As a professional engineer, I know that this is fundamentally impossible. Of course, that has not prevented me from enjoying many entertaining time travel novels - H.G Wells's *The Time Traveller*, Terry Nation's *Dr Who*, Daphne Du Maurier's *The House on the Strand*, Diane Gabalon's *The Outlander* to name just a few. I was always happy to allow their authors to break various scientific laws in exchange for a great yarn. But I still felt a little offended by the ways these stories ignored the various practical difficulties of time travel. For example, if someone sitting in a chair at home was translated back in time by a month, would they still be sitting in the same chair? What if the chair was only manufactured two weeks ago? Given that the earth would be at a different orbital position in the past would that person also have to move in space? I wanted to write a historical novel incorporating time travel, that would not break the laws of physics. To do this I conceived a mechanism of time travel within the supernatural well in the cathedral crypt that only exchanged the consciousness of two humans in different eras rather than moving physical matter in time and space. This was the genesis of my novel, *The Drowned Priest*.

At this point, you might think I wanted to write a science fiction novel. This, however, was not the case. I wanted to write a story about ordinary people living ordinary lives who had extraordinary experiences as a consequence of exposure to time travel. I wanted to write a story that includes historical, romantic, fantastic and adventure elements to explore themes of love, belonging and how good and bad are often simply a matter of perspective. Time travel was simply a tool to put my characters in a situation where their true humanity was

revealed. In doing so, I also wanted to make the reader consider their own struggles for love and belonging and how it seems inevitable that the larger social, political and religious organisations they live within are often corrupted by individuals seeking personal power.

I wanted to write in a moderately literary voice, where the choice of prose style is not just a vehicle for telling the story but is also a source of enjoyment to the reader. An example of this is the novel's short prologue, in which a god-like narrator comments, from the perspective of the nesting peregrine falcons high up on the cathedral, on the nature of the human society in the city below. This is a relatively static opening, and peer reviews have suggested removing it. Although I can see the validity of this argument, I feel resistant to cutting the prologue sets the tone for my novel and helps the reader understand this is not a straightforward action thriller in the style of, say Lee Child.

I also wanted to use a strong sense of place as a counterpoint to Peter's feelings of not belonging and his difficulties with intimacy. The novel is set in Winchester, largely because the story makes use of the well in the cathedral crypt as a time transport mechanism and Winchester has a fabulous cathedral. I chose to send Peter back to 1093, when the original Saxon cathedral was being demolished, and a new Norman cathedral was being built, as another way of showing the lack of permanence in any human endeavour. The Norman cathedral was built on unreliable foundations (the nearby river waterlogs the ground) and is a metaphor for the dubious nature of principles and morals of society.

I have been researching several topics for this novel. As I live in Winchester, the historical background of the cathedral and city is easily accessible to me by research in local libraries and museums. Researching the religious aspect of my story has been more difficult. I am an atheist, and my personal view is that religion has probably done more harm than good over the years. Although Peter does have some doubts about the religious faith he finds in his twenties, he does still become a Canon at the cathedral, and much of his motivation is

driven by a desire to find a place to belong (perhaps in the Church) and most of all, to do some 'good' in his life. Making his transition into the Church plausible is probably the biggest challenge I have writing the story, as while I feel entirely sympathetic to Peter's general aims and desires, the path he chooses is not one I would feel comfortable with. I expect to learn something about myself, therefore as well as Peter as the story unfolds. In part of the novel, Peter illegally rescues Anya, an orphan, from the Serbian civil war. Providing a detailed account of this would involve a great deal of research. To avoid this, I plan to summarise this part of the story in flashback using Peter's reflections on how his actions in rescuing Anya have had both good and bad outcomes. This means the novel can concentrate on the single location of Winchester, albeit in two different centuries.

At this stage, some problems inevitably remain. I feel I have made a decent fist of structure, tone, themes, plot, setting, and description in the first draft. My remaining concerns focus on writing convincingly natural dialogue, avoiding inappropriate changes of point of view, and controlling the build-up of tension through appropriate pacing. Developing dialogue skills and controlling point of view is rather like learning to play a musical instrument. You must practice hard, study other accomplished practitioners, e.g. Darwin (2016) and Bingham (2022), listen carefully to what you produce and invite review from others. The MMU forums and tutorials have been beneficial in this respect. I have also examined the dialogue used by a number of the authors in the Novel Reading modules for good dialogue practice, e.g. Highsmith (1999) and Spark (2012), as well as studied the recommendations of other authors (Runcie and Enright, 2022). Pacing is perhaps a more intangible skill to learn, but it requires control of structure over several pages or chapters. I have found Scrivener (Literature and Latte, 2022) to be a useful tool to outline and try various sequences of scenes and plot details, before writing the full work in final detail. While such tools do help, perhaps a time machine would be the most desirable tool in

meeting the manuscript deadline.

[1083 words]

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