

Orange Sound

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(Chapters 1 – 10)

“The world is deep: deeper than day can comprehend”

Friedrich Nietzsche in “Thus Spake Zarathustra”.

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Struggling against the near-horizontal, freezing-cold rain, Karen Hill walked down Dean Street towards the place where she usually caught her taxi home. Holding her gaze downwards, she ignored the occasional leering and commenting from passing drunks. The fact that she was wearing a very short skirt and an absurdly small top did not go unnoticed by many of these ale-addled minds. It was late on a Friday evening, in mid November, in the north eastern English city of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. There were many people in the city centre starting to make their way home after a night of drinking and socialising. Karen, who had recently turned twenty years of age, was mildly affected by the four bottles of alcoholic soda that she had consumed that evening. As a result, she felt

slightly euphoric, and began thinking about the Christmas shopping trip that had been planned with friends for the following day.

After about five minutes into her walk home, the rain began to pour down even more heavily. Karen hunched up her shoulders, and with a noticeable scowl on her face, began to walk faster down the long sloping street that had a taxi rank at its end. It was as if she felt that having a bearing like this could somehow lessen the effect on her of the rain, the wind and the cold. The inadequacy of her clothing, however, was beginning to take its toll. Together with countless other young people in this city, she had insisted on dressing as if it was a balmy summer's evening. They had all agreed to this pretence, and to dress otherwise, even on a night like this, would be to invite peer derision. The men wore short-sleeved shirts or tee shirts, and women wore light or short dresses together with summer tops. But now, rain-lashed and engulfed by the numbing coldness, Karen began to feel miserable.

The temperature hovered slightly above two degrees Celsius, but it actually felt very much colder because of the dampness that imbued the night air. A dampness that seemed not only to come from the falling rain, but which also seemed to rise up from beneath the wet glistening pavement stones, and to exude from the cold stone walls of the splendid Georgian buildings which ran uninterrupted down Dean Street.

In the yellow rain-strewn light surrounding the street lamps, she could see further down the street a group of young men eating takeaway food near to the entrance of an Indian restaurant. Steam could be seen coming out of their opened Styrofoam packages of ethnically contorted food. The group ate voraciously, no doubt to satisfy a beer-induced hunger, and peppered their late supper with succinct but loud conversation delivered in the local Geordie dialect. Karen decided to cross over to the other side of the street to avoid them. The street was wide and she passed by on the other side without ever being noticed. Even the rain was not able to dampen out the aroma of curry that drifted across the street. This evening, however, she did not feel like buying anything to eat, and just wanted to get home as quickly as possible. Her arms, legs and face were now anaesthetised with the cold, and her body was so soaked with the rain that the top she was wearing had nearly become translucent.

Soon, she approached a part of Dean Street where there was an old stone staircase, called Dog-Leap Stairs, which led up to ruins of the city's ancient defensive walls built nearly one thousand years ago. This part of the street was relatively quiet, and was even more so because of the foul weather and the fact that it was now rather late. Despite the distraction of her extreme discomfort, Karen managed to recall that her great grandfather had once owned the old shop that stood at the foot of this staircase. He had been a cobbler, but the building was now a shop selling storage chests and suitcases called The Cargo Cult. There had once been direct access to this part of the street from the river Tyne, which now lay some fifty yards away. The staircase had become known

as Dog-Leap Stairs because apparently dogs were apt to leap on to the staircase from docking sea vessels. The recollection of this fact was the last thing Karen Hill ever thought. She never saw her murderer, and never felt the lurking presence as she passed by the staircase. It was all over in an instant. And she never heard a voice call out from some point nearby shortly afterwards: “Snaz, are you there? I’m back again. Come on, we’ve only got ten minutes to catch it.”

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Wet Rain Hill is a small village in the north east of England. It is situated roughly five miles east of the Northumbrian market town of Hexham, and about eighteen miles west of the city of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The village is built on top of a relatively large hill, and represents a perfect vantage from which the windswept and rain-fed beauty of the surrounding landscape can be seen. Vestiges of Hadrian’s Wall, also known as the Roman Wall, can be seen to the north just beyond the Tyne Valley. This wall, built around two thousand years ago, marked for a time the northernmost boundary of Roman Britain. Most of the stones used in the original wall, however, have long since been removed and recycled into the many dry stone walls, which for centuries have been used as lines of demarcation in this agricultural landscape. Land used for grazing sheep and cattle together with ploughed arable land combine to form a patchwork of field colours and textures.

The layout of Wet Rain Hill is much like any other of the picturesque and quiet villages in this area. It has a wide main street, simply called Main Street, along which most of the original village dwellings lie. These include a sprinkling of small stone cottages and a few larger stone houses. On the north side of Main Street there is also a public house called the Blackbird, together with a general store and a post office. In between the Blackbird and the general store lies the small village green and war memorial. Visible behind a stone wall at the back of the village green and accessible only via a lich gate situated on Church Lane lying slightly further to the west and running approximately northwards off Main Street, is the village church of St George's. The church lies almost in the middle of a large graveyard, surrounded for the most part by a stone wall. Sections of the church, including the belfry, date at least as far back as the early seventeenth century and possibly even earlier. The village church was the scene of a recorded clash between the Scottish Covenanters and King Charles 1's Royalist forces during the First English Civil War of the early 1640's.

On the south side of Main Street, together with a row of stone cottages, is a small school building that is still in use as the village primary school. The oldest part of the school, as indicated by a stone inscription above the main doorway, dates back to sixteen forty-nine, the year of King Charles 1's execution. To the rear of the school there is a large yard surrounded by an imposing tall stone wall. This wall serves to protect the children playing in the yard from the cold winds that sweep across the land for most of

the year. It also blocks the view down to the foot of the southern side of the hill, stretching for roughly one mile. This particular hillside is locally referred to as Wet Rain Hill, though strictly speaking the name also applies to the entire hill on which the village is built. The southern aspect of the hill would seem to be thus named because, given the slight declination of the village towards the south, much of the surface rainwater drains down this part of the hill into the valley below. A small stream, or burn as they are called in northern England and Scotland, called Liz's Burn flows through this valley. One explanation for the name is that the word Liz is used in reference to a woman's name. But as to whom the Elizabeth in question might be, or why she had this modest flow of water named after her, is not known and not recorded anywhere. Liz's Burn then runs into the river Tyne, which flows eastward, through the city of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, into the North Sea.

Apart from providing the name for the village, another notable feature of Wet Rain Hill is a large, almost anvil-shaped, sandstone crag protruding from its side. This large rocky outcrop is situated nearly at the foot of the hill close to Liz's Burn. It is known as Liz's Rock, and stands alone, a relic of the glacial activity that gouged out the valley and the surrounding countryside during the last ice age. Carved patterns in the form of concentric circles, cup-shaped depressions and a series of chiselled markings are found on its upper and relatively flat surface. These ancient man-made markings are thought to be around five thousand years old. It has been suggested that they may represent some form of primitive Neolithic pictograms or script, though this has not yet

been established; their meaning has long been lost in the mists of time. What has been established, however, is that to produce the markings would have required a great deal of skill, patience and motivation. The markings were very important for some people in the past, and had great significance and meaning for them.

Liz's Rock represents one of the three significant features of the village and the hill mentioned in most tourist guidebooks. The second feature is a deep cave or pothole on Wet Rain Hill, just above Liz's Burn, called Bell Hollow. It has been given the name Bell Hollow according to one tradition because some villagers during the First English Civil War of 1642 to 1646, motivated perhaps by the religious tides of the period, tried to hide the village church bell inside the cave. By the same tradition, it is said that the cave accepted the bell so to speak, but because of its depth and inaccessibility, never returned it. Innumerable efforts to locate and retrieve the bell were, it seems, not successful. For over one hundred and fifty years, the church of St George's was without a large bell in its belfry until a new one was cast and installed in the early nineteenth century. This same bell is the one currently in the village church. The church of St George's, and its replacement bell, represents the third significant feature mentioned in most tourist guidebooks.

That Bell Hollow is a dangerous place to enter is emphasised by a prominent warning sign placed by the local council around the cave entrance on the north bank of Liz's Burn. The sign points out the dangers of approaching too close to Bell Hollow, and

strongly advises against using the cave for potholing explorations. The sign explains that Bell Hollow is known to consist of a main chamber approximately two-hundred-and-seventy metres in depth falling vertically with an average diameter of about four metres. At least one smaller subterranean passageway, and occasional underground stream, is believed to branch out from the chamber at a lower depth. The cave is generally considered to be an anomalous feature of the landscape, and its geological mode of formation is not yet fully understood. Apart from the extreme danger and difficulty of trying to enter the cave, the sign also warns of the risk of drowning inside the cave as a result of sudden flooding. On those days that it rains, which a cynical observer might consider to be every other day in this part of the world, the proximity of the entrance of Bell Hollow to Liz's Burn leaves it particularly exposed to over spill and hence flooding. For this reason especially, Bell Hollow remains unexplored and largely unknown; neglected even by the most foolhardy.

The entrance to Bell Hollow is visible from across the opposite side of Liz's Burn. It is possible to ford the burn at several places or to use a small wooden footbridge near to Bell Hollow. Standing high up on the other bank, the entrance to Bell Hollow resembles a dark unblinking eye gazing upwards to the top of the opposite hill, known locally as Menzie's Hill. Lying on Menzie's Hill, approximately two miles south of the village, is a deserted and derelict dry stone shepherd's hut, referred to accordingly as Menzie's Hut. The eponymous Menzie was a local shepherd who, slightly more than a century ago, tended his sheep on the surrounding hills. Menzie apparently went mad and

abandoned his home and possessions, including the sheep in his charge, and fled the area never to be seen again. And such was the impact on the local imagination of the shepherd's abrupt and mysterious departure that the old name of the hill, Scaly Peak, was forgotten and the hill renamed after him. From the top of Menzie's Hill, looking northwards, the village of Wet Rain Hill stands out against the backdrop of the Cheviot Hills where at some point decided by man England meets Scotland.

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It was late in the afternoon on a blustery Saturday afternoon in mid November. The clocks in the village of Wet Rain Hill had not yet reached five, but the day had already yielded to nightfall. Following the heavy rain that had fallen much of the previous night, strong winds had arrived earlier in the morning like an extreme antidote. All visible traces of the rainfall in the village had now been blown away. And the buildings, the leafless trees and the few people on the streets reeled under the onslaught of the wind.

“Not bad. Not bad at all,” remarked Detective Sergeant Alan Crawford, sitting watching the soccer-results being announced on television. “Better than last week's performance, anyway,” he said, commenting on the favourite local team's performance to his son who was also watching beside him. David Crawford nodded in agreement and

continued viewing the results. “And at least they didn’t loose again,” added Alan Crawford.

“But Sunderland won!” noted his son with artificial bitterness, referring to Newcastle United’s local rivals. “No! I don’t go in for this rivalry; they’re both local teams and I’m glad to see both of them do well,” countered his father. Checking the soccer results was a ritual they followed most Saturday evenings during the soccer season.

They were sitting in the cottage belonging to Alan Crawford’s mother, situated next to the primary school on Main Street. Together with his wife and son, Alan Crawford visited his mother every weekend, except for the occasions when his work schedule did not allow for it. His mother, Elsie Crawford, was seventy-nine years of age and had lived in Wet Rain Hill first as a child, and after living elsewhere for most of her adult life, had returned to the village around five years ago. She had decided to buy the old stone cottage, which was up for sale at the time she was looking to move back into the village, the moment she first set eyes upon it. The cottage faced onto Main Street, whilst from the back there was a splendid view of both Wet Rain Hill and Menzie’s Hill. It had a living room, which led off into a small kitchen at the side. The original cottage bedroom and bathroom opened onto the living room. The cottage also had two extra, relatively modern, dormer bedrooms built into the roof, accessed by a wooden staircase that led up from a small hallway by the front door. It was in these dormer bedrooms that Alan Crawford and his family stayed during their weekend visits. Elsie Crawford preferred to use the bedroom downstairs in order to avoid the stairs during the night. She

was still agile and in good health, particularly for a woman of her age; but of course she was no longer the same young girl who had once played on and run down Wet Rain Hill.

The afternoon television sports programme finished and was followed by the early evening national news. Following this, there was a local news programme that began with the report of a murder of a young woman in Newcastle-upon-Tyne the previous night. Alan Crawford shook his head in dismay on hearing this news. He worked for Durham Constabulary: the police force that covered the county directly to the south of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. But he was sure to know some of the people who would be involved in the murder investigation. “God what a shame,” sighed Rhoda, Alan Crawford’s wife. “A young girl, not much older than you are, David.”

“Will they catch him?” asked David looking at his father.

“I suppose that they will catch him eventually,” replied Alan Crawford. “But these murder cases can sometimes drag on for years. It’s getting better, nevertheless, with the use of new technology such as DNA testing and the increasing exchange of information between different police forces over the Internet. It’s much easier to solve these cases, however, when the suspect knew the victim, which is in the majority of cases. Otherwise it’s old-fashioned detective work, eyewitnesses, clues and the like. Of course, some of our eyewitnesses these days are not human. There are security cameras posted all over the city. Some are put there by the police as a very effective crime prevention measure, whilst others are private security cameras that the police can also use. In fact, the centre

of Newcastle-upon-Tyne is at the moment the most closely monitored city centre in all of Britain.”

“But haven’t all these security measures just pushed the crime elsewhere?” suggested his wife.

“Yes, I suppose so. There is some evidence that crime rates in rural places, away from the conurbation, have increased, especially in relatively isolated places such as...”

“Don’t say Wet Rain Hill!” interrupted his mother. “You wouldn’t want to frighten me, staying here all by myself during the week, would you?”

“No mother, I wasn’t going to say Wet Rain Hill in particular, just rural Northumberland in general. This is particularly true for the crimes of house breaking when the premises are unoccupied. But thankfully, violent crime, including murder, is very rare. And did you know that England has one of the lowest murder rates in the world, including in comparison to France and Germany? Believe me, I don’t think you have anything to worry about here, mother. Nothing remarkable ever happens in Wet Rain Hill anymore.”

“Well I hope so. But mind you, I was speaking to Esther Williams at church last week, and she reckons that someone has taken her cat.”

“How does she know that it’s been stolen?” asked David, appearing slightly amused by this particular example of rural crime. “Maybe it just got bored and ran away,” he suggested. “That cat certainly wouldn’t run away,” contended Elsie Crawford. “She’s had it for years. And besides, she told me that another friend of hers who lives in the Forestry Flats also lost her cat recently.” The Forestry Flats was a small local-authority housing estate situated in the village and located behind the northern part of Main Street, not far

from the village church of St George's. The forestry commission had originally built the homes for their workers over half a century ago. "How many cat owners are there in the village?" asked Alan Crawford.

"I'm not sure, but there won't be many cats left at this rate," responded his mother, adding: "Maybe it's something you could get the police to look into, Alan."

"Well, if it turns out that there is a problem, kids being cruel to animals, or something like that, I could get on to my colleagues in the Hexham Constabulary about it, and maybe they can get the RSPCA involved," suggested Alan Crawford.

"Or ask them to keep a look out for any would-be cat burglars, or should I say cat thieves!" his son said, grinning.

"No jokes either, please, about it raining cats and dogs last night," added Alan Crawford.

"Come on, let's eat. Everything is ready and the tea is made," interrupted his wife.

The Crawford family sat around a table at the back of the cottage living room taking their meal. Thick wool curtains were drawn over the patio doors, which led out into the back garden. The cottage was centrally heated. Most of the windows were double-glazed; the patio doors, however, were not. The coldness outside penetrated the cottage more easily at this point, with whispers of cold air finding unseen gaps around the edges of the windowpanes. The patio doors rattled and shook as the wind blustered and howled. The conversation at the meal table ranged once again over the previously discussed topics: the soccer results, the murder the previous evening in the city and the disappearance of some cats in the village.

When staying in the village at weekends, Alan Crawford and his wife usually visited the Blackbird public house across the road for a few drinks on a Saturday evening. They were just about to get up from the table in order to start getting ready to go out, when a knock was heard at the cottage door. At first, it was thought that it might just be the wind, which seemed to be growing increasingly more ferocious by the minute. But the knocking persisted, and appeared to be deliberate. It was Alan Crawford who eventually stood up and went to the door. As he opened the door, a strong gust of wind suddenly seized it and attempted to push him back against the coat hangers attached to the wall behind. "Alan, we're really sorry to bother you, but we wanted to catch you just before you went out," exclaimed a familiar voice from the doorstep. It was Jack Hume from the cottage next door. Standing with him was his beautiful, pleasant and ever-smiling Thai wife, Nok. "Please come in, both of you!" ordered Alan Crawford enthusiastically. "Glad to see you both," he added, as they entered into the warmth of the cottage. Jack and Nok Hume gave a collective sigh of relief when the door was finally closed behind them. "What a night!" exclaimed Jack Hume.

"Terrible, isn't it?" agreed Alan Crawford. "I just hope this wind doesn't take any tiles off the roofs. Can I take your coat, Nok?" he added. Even for the short distance of a few yards from her home to Elsie Crawford's cottage, Nok Hume needed to be wrapped up warmly. She had only been in Britain for about three months and had even found summer to be at times unbearably cold. Autumn in Northumberland was indeed beautiful, with the ever-changing brown hues of the trees and fields. But an outsider, especially one from

considerably warmer climes, could surely never get used to the unrelenting cold and dampness and could not but be perturbed at the looming prospect of even more severe weather during the winter months.

Nok Hume retrieved four small packages from her evidently large pockets before handing over her coat to Alan Crawford. The two guests were then led into the living room. The rest of the Crawford family had already heard the sound of the familiar voices in the hallway. Elsie Crawford beamed with delight when Nok Hume appeared in the living room, and immediately went forward to greet her with a warm hug. “How are you, flower?” she asked. “It’s lovely to see you.”

“I’m very well, thank you. I hope we not disturb you,” replied Nok in her perfectly understandable, but grammatically imperfect English. “Not at all; how can you ever disturb me, petal?” replied Elsie Crawford. “And Jack, it’s wonderful to see you as well! Isn’t there a terrible gale blowing outside? But at least it’s not raining again. Then again, on second thoughts, I think that I might after all prefer the rain; especially if this wind starts removing tiles off the roofs.”

“It is extraordinarily bad,” agreed Jack Hume. “We even found it an effort to walk the few yards from next door. But these cottages have withstood a fair few onslaughts from the British weather in their time, I dare say, and they are still standing. Let’s hope that tonight proves to be no exception.”

Jack Hume was a balding and pleasant featured man of almost indeterminate age. He could be aged anywhere from thirty-five years to fifty-five years of age. In fact, his age was exactly in the middle of that range: he was forty-five years old. His wife, Nok, was evidently younger than he was. And based on appearance, it might similarly be difficult to precisely determine her age. In fact, she was twenty-nine. Though, she could still easily pass for someone who had not yet reached twenty-one years of age.

Room was made for the visitors to sit on the large sofa facing the gas fire in the living room. The gas fire beamed warmth across the room from within an old slate fireplace, which at one time had burned wood and coal. Without being prompted, David reduced the sound volume on the television set, and shifted his position to an old oak armchair that had once belonged to his grandfather who had died nearly six years ago. This diminution in sound from the television appeared to amplify, or emphasise, the noise of the wind raging outside the cottage. Not only could the wind be heard impressing itself upon the windows and doors of the cottage, but it also howled rather eerily down the old chimney shaft.

But before anyone had the chance to make any comments about the gale blowing outside, Nok Hume handed one of the packages that she had brought to each of her four hosts. "It's something from my country, Thailand" she explained. "I hope you like it," she added hopefully. "Oh you shouldn't have bothered, sweetheart," protested Elsie Crawford receiving her gift. "Nevertheless, pet, it's very kind of you."

“It’s to express our thanks for the help you gave us,” explained Jack Hume.

“Yes, you help us last week. You help us a lot” explained Nok, referring to the help given one week ago to the Humes in unloading and unpacking the tea chests of belongings that had arrived by delivery van at their cottage. The shipment had arrived from Thailand six weeks later than had been originally promised, and the Humes were now pursuing an explanation from the shipping company for the lateness in delivery. “No need to say thank you,” responded Alan Crawford. “We are the ones who should be thanking both of you for being such wonderful neighbours to Elsie. We appreciate that very much.”

“Yes, lovely people,” added Elsie Crawford in response to her son’s comments. “I really couldn’t ask for better and kinder neighbours.” Nok Hume’s face flushed slightly at this complement.

Alan Crawford was the first of the four recipients to remove the wrapping paper. “Why this is very nice; a silk tie from Thailand! I shall certainly wear this tonight,” he declared, placing the tie against his chest. “And thank you very much as well! This is really beautiful,” said Rhoda Crawford, unfurling a brightly coloured Thai raw silk shawl. “This will also be worn tonight. But really, both of you shouldn’t have gone to all this trouble for us. Christmas seems to have come rather early.”

Elsie Crawford received a similarly styled Thai shawl and expressed her thanks by giving Nok another warm embrace. David was the last person to open his present. It turned out to be one of the most unusual presents he had ever received. At first, he wasn’t

quite sure what to make of the small stuffed crocodile he was now holding, measuring no more than one foot in length. “Thank you very much, both of you,” he said, as he ran his hand over its hard, squat, and scaly body and tail. He turned the reptile so that it eyed him straight in the face. The raised eyes were dark and soulless like obsidian glass. Its jaw was fixed in a permanent gape, revealing a set of numerous white razor-sharp teeth and a fleshy white interior that was the mouth. All of this gave the impression that the crocodile was smiling at him, albeit rather unpleasantly. “Don’t worry David, it’s not an endangered species,” announced Jack Hume. “Thousands like it are reared in crocodile farms in Thailand for their meat. The Chinese enjoy crocodile meat because they believe it will make them strong and fearless just like a crocodile. We packed it together with the rest of our stuff that came last week. In fact, its mother is next door.”

“The crocodile’s mother?” queried David.

“Well not really its mother,” corrected Nok Hume. “You saw last week, David, the wooden carvings that we shipped over from Thailand. You remember that one of them was a big crocodile?”

“Yes, I remember it. Anyway, once again, it’s great. I really appreciate it. Thanks very much,” he responded. He had noticed that there were traces of a fine white dust or powder lodged between its scales. And in a slightly exaggerated gesture of concern for the sheen of the reptile’s skin, and also perhaps wishing to further demonstrate his appreciation of the gift, he licked his index finger several times and polished the scaly specimen as if it was in fact a crocodile shoe.

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Later that same evening, Alan Crawford sat together with his wife in the Blackbird public house. They had managed to brave the strong winds and to make the short journey down Main Street on foot. At a table in the corner of the main lounge of the public house, with a pint of his favourite Cuthbert's ale, he recalled what Jack Hume had said to him earlier in the evening. Not long after the Humes had finished distributing their gifts, two essentially separate conversations had developed in the cottage living room. One of these involved Alan Crawford and Jack Hume, and the other the ladies. Nok Hume had occasionally turned aside to speak to David, probably because it took a great deal of concentration on her part to follow in detail what was being said by the ladies spoken in what was not always standard English, not to mention the speed of the delivery. David Crawford, for his part, had sat mainly in silence watching the television.

"I don't know if you overheard, dear, but whilst you ladies were talking amongst yourselves, Jack Hume had something rather interesting to say to me," said Alan Crawford.

"Oh, what was that?" inquired his wife.

"Basically, he told me that he was worried about Nok's safety."

"Nok's safety; what's happened?" responded Rhoda Crawford. But before her husband had a chance to reply, she continued: "Alan, this village is not on your beat. We come here to visit your mother, and that's all. We like it here because you don't have to be a

detective sergeant or a policeman. There's no one here to bother or observe us. We can go out for a drink, just like we are doing now, without worrying if there is some undesirable in the vicinity who recognises you or knows you. You know how difficult it is for a copper and his wife to have a decent social life. We all care about Nok, but if there's a problem, Jack should get the local police force in Hexham involved with it."

"Steady on, dear! If you will listen, he doesn't want me to do anything. He just asked for some advice."

"Advice about what?"

"Well, apparently there's a man in the village who's been giving Nok some, we could say, unwelcome attention. In fact, it's the strange character my mother has mentioned to me a few times before. He moved into the village about a couple of months ago, and lives in a small rented flat just before the Forestry Flats, on Church Lane. My mother saw him snooping around behind her cottage a few days ago. Well, apparently Nok also saw him behind the Humes' cottage last night. Naturally, she was very scared."

"What was he doing?"

"He was just hanging around, as if he wanted to see inside the cottage. And it's not the first time this has happened, either. Jack also told me that on one occasion, this character came into their takeaway when only Nok was around, and said some strange things."

About two months ago, Jack and Nok Hume had opened a small Thai takeaway restaurant in the village. It was located in a small enclosure of shops within the Forestry Flats. The same premises had previously been used as a Chinese takeaway, but the

Humes had taken out a new lease, and after some minor renovations had opened a takeaway restaurant called the Siam Kitchen. The menu they offered included traditional Thai dishes such as Thai green curry and Tom Yam Gung. In addition, they offered the perennial local favourite Asian dish: chips with spicy gravy sauce. The takeaway restaurant was only open in the evenings except on Saturdays when it was also open at lunchtime. Despite the smallness of the village, it was thought that the restaurant could still operate as a viable business because in addition to the villagers, there was extra custom from visitors, particularly people with cars living in the nearby villages and homesteads. To assist them, the Humes had recently employed an assistant and a cook, effectively relieving themselves from the day to day responsibilities for food preparation.

Alan Crawford took a drink from his pint of Cuthbert's ale and then continued: "I saw him last weekend across the road from the Humes' cottage. He was observing them taking delivery of their shipment from Thailand."

"I didn't notice him when we were helping the Humes," commented his wife.

"He was only there for a few minutes," explained Alan Crawford. "I made a point of stopping what I was doing in order to glare at him. As soon as he saw that I had noticed him lingering, he walked away up Church Lane to presumably where he lives."

"You were being a copper as usual!" accused his wife.

"But he didn't give the appearance of being particularly fazed by my noticing him. I don't think he knows that I'm a copper. I thought perhaps he was just being nosy, and I didn't think anything of it at the time."

“What sort of advice does Jack Hume want from you, Alan?”

“He just asked me about the laws on stalking. It’s something that’s often in the news these days, particularly with regard to celebrities. But of course the law doesn’t just apply to celebrities. I asked Jack if this character, let’s call him Mr X because none of us know his real name, had said anything to Nok in the way of threats or even racial abuse.”

“And had he?”

“No, he hadn’t. But there was something slightly unusual about the language he used.”

“Language?” queried Rhoda Crawford.

“Yes, language; you see, he spoke to Nok in fluent Thai.”

“He spoke in Thai! How come a weirdo like that can speak Thai?”

“I’ve no idea. Maybe he spent some time working there, just like Jack did.”

“Wasn’t it just a greeting, something perhaps that he had memorised from a holiday phrase book?” asked Rhoda Crawford, before continuing: “Because, funny enough, I just read in a newspaper last week that at an international forum the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, astonished the Thai Prime Minister by asking in perfect Thai where the toilet was! Apparently the Blairs spent their honeymoon in Bangkok, and Tony Blair could still remember how to ask that question in Thai.”

“Well, this character didn’t ask Nok where the toilet was. He asked her: when was she going to start selling Crocodile soup?”

“Crocodile soup!”

“Yes, crocodile soup. You remember what Jack said earlier in the evening about the Chinese in Thailand enjoying that particular delicacy? Anyway, Nok said that Mr X’s

spoken Thai was more than merely good: it was, in fact, excellent. Jack went on to explain to me that Thai is an extremely difficult language for a non-Thai to learn to speak, or more precisely, to pronounce correctly. Speaking that language fluently and correctly is, by any means, a tremendous achievement. Something about having to get the tones exactly right when you pronounce the words. What seems to us to be the same word, but pronounced with a slight change in intonation, renders a completely different meaning. Nok said that he spoke the language almost like a native speaker, or at least like someone who had resided in Thailand for a very long time.”

“Is that all he said on that occasion: asking when Nok was going to start selling crocodile soup?” asked Rhoda Crawford.

“He also made a few other incidental comments in Thai, about how pretty she was and the like. But he seemed to think that his comment about the crocodile soup was particularly funny, because as he was finally leaving the restaurant he laughed and mentioned that in future he would be calling round for some Crocodile soup.”

“How did Nok respond?” asked Rhoda Crawford.

“According to Jack, she just dismissed it as a crude double entendre. But before he left the restaurant, she asked him how come he could speak such good Thai; suggesting that perhaps because he had a Thai wife or had once lived in Thailand. But he never answered her question in a meaningful way, and instead only made a joke about it being a gift from God or Buddha. His impudence aside, you might expect that someone who could speak her native tongue so well would impress Nok. But according to Jack, she felt very bad

about her encounter with him. Using a Thai idiom, she explained that she felt that this Mr X had a black heart.”

It was nearly nine thirty, and the Blackbird public house was so full that it was now standing room only. Every time someone entered through the main door at the front, an unwelcome gust of cold air swept through the establishment. Amongst the crowd in the pub, Alan Crawford noticed the vicar from St George’s pushing his way towards the bar. The vicar was wearing a leather bomber jacket, which Alan Crawford found slightly incongruous given his profession. It had been a few years since Alan Crawford had set foot in the village church. Even then, he had only gone as a sightseer, particularly interested to see the church belfry famous for the absence of the original church bell removed during the First English Civil War. He had on other occasions walked around the church graveyard and read some of the inscriptions on the ancient headstones that lent forwards as if they themselves were also finally about to fall over and die. At the time, he had thought that the condition of the stones was a sort of metaphor for the second stage of someone’s death: when there is a total obliteration of even the record of that person’s existence.

He recognised the vicar because there had been occasions when the vicar had called round at his mother’s cottage. His mother was a regular churchgoer, but Alan Crawford was not at all religious; at least, not so in the normally accepted or ritualistic understanding of the word. This had something to do with his feelings about the presence

of evil in the world. Because of his job as a policeman, particularly as a detective sergeant, there were occasions when he had to come face to face with something that was perhaps best described simply as evil, albeit manifested through the deeds of men. If there was an omnipotent God, a master of the universe capable of controlling all things, he could not understand why there had to be evil in the world.

Alan Crawford's musings were interrupted by a further question from his wife. "Alan, has this Mr X, as you call him, ever spoken to Jack? After all Jack worked in Thailand for many years. That's where he met Nok."

"No, he's never spoken to Jack. And moreover, Jack can't speak Thai very well."

"But presumably they can both speak English!"

"What I meant was that Mr X has never in Jack's presence struck up a conversation with Nok in Thai, or in any other language for that matter. Apparently when Jack and Nok were both working in the takeaway restaurant, before they employed the new assistant and cook, Mr X's behaviour was restrained or normal whenever he came in to buy something."

"So Jack didn't ask him any questions along the lines of how come he could speak Thai or what he did for a living in the village?" asked Rhoda Crawford.

"No. There were other people in the takeaway at the time, and Jack said that it didn't feel appropriate. The few words that were exchanged only related to the food being ordered."

"So, Jack suspects that this Mr X has taken an unwelcome fancy to his wife. And given that this Mr X has perhaps lived in Thailand before and can speak the language, this is

probably the real reason for his interest in Nok. Apart from the fact that she is obviously a very attractive lady,” summarised Rhoda Crawford, before adding: “If I was Jack, I would go and have a private word with this rat bag, and tell him to back off.” Alan Crawford nodded in agreement with his wife’s words. He then picked up his now three-quarters empty glass and took a large draught. “By the way, how old would you say was this Mr X?” asked Rhoda Crawford.

“He seems to be in his late thirties to early forties.”

“And no one in the village has any idea what he is doing here?”

“No. The landlord doesn’t live in the village. Maybe he’s unemployed, or an author, or is running an internet business from his small flat. Who knows?”

The vicar had by now returned from the bar with a pint of beer. He had taken up a position by one of the pillars in the main lounge, and looked slightly awkward standing alone. Alan Crawford continued: “Taking a fancy to his wife is one thing, albeit unwelcome, but prowling outside their house in the dark like a peeping Tom is altogether more sinister. Goodness knows what his intentions are. Obviously Jack is very worried about Nok’s safety, particularly when he is not around. I told him that at the moment there wasn’t much we could do, but that if they caught him prowling again they should call the police without hesitation. I’ll also give the same advice to my mother. The local constabulary might be able to do something that will frighten this character off.”

Alan Crawford drained off the remainder of his beer, and his wife similarly finished her glass of rum-and-Coke. On his way to the bar to buy another round of drinks, Alan Crawford passed by the vicar who nodded at him in recognition. Alan Crawford responded with a nod and a smile. He then had to push his way through a group of about ten young men in their late teens or early twenties who were standing drinking near to the bar. He guessed that most of them were from the Forestry Flats in the village. Alan Crawford cringed at the banality and obscenity of their conversation. He overheard a remark about the vicar being a 'poof waiting for his boyfriend'. When this remark was followed up by one of the group mincing in the general direction of the vicar, the whole group erupted in hysterical laughter. As he waited for his drinks to be served, Alan Crawford wondered whether he should exercise his authority as a policeman. The vicar was now standing with his back to the group. Alan Crawford was unsure as to whether the vicar was unaware of what was happening or had simply chosen to ignore it. By the time Alan Crawford had paid for his drinks, the loutish group seemed to have moved on to another topic of conversation. Alan Crawford decided to say nothing and moved away from the bar carrying his drinks.

On returning back to his seat, Alan Crawford mentioned to his wife that the vicar was standing alone looking somewhat out of place in the pub. She immediately suggested that they invite him over to their table. Alan Crawford was reluctant at first, because he didn't want to get into an embarrassing conversation on the reasons why he didn't go to church or what he thought about God. But he also felt some sympathy, especially after

what he had just witnessed at the bar. And after catching the vicar's eye once again, he relented and beckoned to him to come over and join them, which he did with alacrity. "Good evening Mrs Crawford and good evening Mr Crawford," said the vicar pulling up a chair to the Crawford's table. He was slightly built, almost gaunt, and appeared to be aged somewhere between thirty and forty years. He had long, unkempt hair, which he unconsciously ran his hands through after sitting down. "Good evening," responded Alan Crawford and his wife, more or less in unison. Then Alan Crawford started the conversation: "I'm sorry vicar, but I must confess that I've forgotten your name, even though we've been introduced at my mother's place on a few occasions."

"Oh, it's Geoffrey, Geoffrey Adams," replied the vicar.

"Yes, sorry, I recall it now. I'm Alan, as you may already know, and this is my wife, Rhoda."

"Yes, your mother often mentions the both of you; she thinks the world of you. I think she's a wonderful lady. I do hope she's fine."

"She is indeed very well, thank you. She's back at the cottage watching television with my son," said Alan Crawford.

"Is she coming to the service tomorrow morning?" asked the vicar smiling. Alan Crawford gripped the beer glass he was holding even more tightly. He was convinced that the reason why the Crawford family didn't attend church was also sure to be questioned. "As far as I know, vicar, she is going to church tomorrow," replied Alan Crawford taking another sip of his pint and bracing himself for what he thought was the inevitable. But it didn't come. Instead, the vicar made a general comment about the

rowdy group standing at the bar. Alan Crawford agreed that their behaviour was unacceptable, but did not mention specifically what he had overheard a few minutes earlier. He wasn't sure whether the vicar had raised the subject because it was considered a suitable topic of conversation for a policeman or because he expected Alan Crawford to go over to the bar and sort them out. Rhoda Crawford, however, seemed to both sense and to resent that her husband was close to being corralled into acting the policeman. But before Alan Crawford could respond further to the vicar's line of conversation, his wife blurted out what sounded in the situation like a rather silly question. "Do you like Thai or Chinese food, Mr Adams?"

The vicar arched his eyebrows and smiled, before replying: "Are you referring specifically to our village takeaway, Mrs Crawford?"

"I meant Asian food in general. But since you've mentioned it, have you ever been to the Siam Kitchen?" asked Rhoda Crawford.

"Well, I do like Asian food. I enjoy Indian curries and Chinese dishes, particularly sweet and sour dishes; all of which I occasionally enjoy cooking myself. But I'm not really into the idea of takeaway food. I'm in no way, of course, decrying the cuisine on offer by the lovely couple, namely your mother's neighbours, who manage the takeaway in the village. I should add, however, that I do have a slight problem with the Monosodium Glutamate, which I believe most Chinese takeaways use in their dishes. It makes everything taste great, but it has some unwelcome side effects," explained the vicar.

"So you haven't been to the Siam kitchen yet?" Rhoda Crawford asked the vicar again.

“Not yet; but maybe I’ll make an exception and try it tonight. That is if I can manage not to get blown down the street by the wind, and if I can make a special request not to have any MSG added,” he replied.

“Now that you mention it, I must ask Jack about this MSG stuff,” stated Alan Crawford. “I’ve heard some bad things about it. The Humes, however, are no longer preparing the food themselves in the takeaway. They’ve now employed some staff to take care of that.”

There was a brief lull in the conversation. Everyone sat pensively, as if searching either for a suitable addendum to the current topic of conversation or for a new subject that they could broach. It was the vicar who broke the silence: “Actually MSG is probably the least of their problems with regard to what some people in the village say is going into the dishes.”

“What do you mean?” asked Alan Crawford, surprised by the vicar’s words.

“Oh, it’s something I’ve picked up from some members of my congregation,” replied Geoffrey Adams. “The Hume couple have become the victims of some rather malicious gossip regarding the disappearance of cats in the village.”

“Jesus, not that old chestnut again!” growled Alan Crawford, temporarily forgetting the inappropriateness of using religious oaths in his present company. “I just heard about the disappearance of cats in the village from my mother tonight. But she didn’t mention that there were any rumours linking the disappearances with the Hume’s takeaway. I suppose it’s just that she didn’t want to give them any credence. She knows that the Humes are not likely to substitute pork and chicken for cat meat.”

“I’m sure the Humes are not stealing the cats,” emphasized the vicar. “But whoever is responsible is apparently not just stealing cats. Sheep from fields around the village have also been going missing in significant numbers according to an article I read last week in the Hexham Courant newspaper. It quoted a sheep farmer from one of the outlying homesteads who complained that he had lost ten sheep alone in the past month grazing on Wet Rain Hill and Menzie’s Hill.”

“What were we just saying earlier this evening, Alan, about crime now being displaced into rural areas?” noted Rhoda Crawford. Her husband responded with a wry smile of acknowledgement.

The vicar continued: “The newspaper article reminded us how, in times past, sheep rustling had been a big problem in this part of the world: the borders between England and Scotland. And now it looks like history is repeating itself again.”

“Hopefully, we won’t have history repeating itself in other respects. After all, we don’t want the village church to be occupied again by Scottish zealots,” said Alan Crawford in an attempt at levity, referring to an event that had apparently occurred during the First English Civil War. But once again, Alan Crawford became conscious that he may have said something not suitable for the company of a vicar. Geoffrey Adams, however, just smiled and made a comment about not having any plans to hide the current church bell down Bell Hollow.

The conversation swung back to the Humes. Rhoda Crawford remarked how difficult it must have been for Nok Hume to come and live in the village. It was a move

that represented a drastic change in culture, not to mention a severe change in climate. The unpleasant rumours surrounding the Humes would surely compound these difficulties. Rhoda Crawford was also mindful of the problem the Humes had been experiencing with the strange newcomer to the village, but chose not mention this. On a more positive note, she noted that most people seemed to have come to accept the Humes as very much part of the village. Many people in the village spoke of Nok's evident warmth and charm. Alan Crawford mentioned that his mother thought the world of her, and had come to regard her almost as a daughter. In return, Nok had done a lot to assist old Mrs Crawford. She lent a helping hand whenever necessary, and had even begun to introduce Mrs Crawford to Thai cooking, which the latter had taken up with enthusiasm.

The topic of conversation then moved onto the less weighty issue of the day's soccer results. In the midst of this, Alan Crawford happened to notice a figure hastily entering the pub, and gently drew his wife's attention to the fact by gently nudging her leg. The Crawfords concealed their interest in this new arrival from the vicar who was sitting with his back to the door, and was not able to see the comings-and-goings from the pub without turning around. Mr X. was visible standing just inside the entrance of the pub. He appeared shocked and disoriented, and seemed to look straight through the crowded bar as if he was transfixed and still viewing something that had previously passed before his eyes. "I believe it's our man: Mr X. Let's see if I can get a good look at this fellow," thought Alan Crawford to himself. "Please excuse me a moment," he

announced, standing up from the table and giving the impression that he wished to visit the gents’.

**** (5) ****

David Crawford and his grandmother sat together watching television. The programme they were watching was a drama based on the events in a hospital somewhere in London. There were several threads to the storyline, but the main thing seemed to be that there were a lot of agitated and unstable people in the hospital. This included the doctors and nurses who worked there, and the patients and their family members who visited them. There was also an obvious attempt in the drama to educate the viewers against certain evil practices; these included visiting the accident and emergencies department with a minor ailment, and taking illicit drugs. The possible consequences of both these actions were exemplified with considerable effect in the drama. Strangely enough, David was beginning to feel not quite himself. He didn’t exactly feel unwell: it was just that something was not quite right. His head felt slightly lighter than normal. He considered the possibility that he might be going down with the flu. Some of his friends had been absent from the sixth-form college he attended for over a week with this ailment. There was also the possibility that it might be the result of the almost overwhelming warmth and stuffiness of the cottage living room. His grandmother needed extra warmth because of her age, and so the gas fire was as usual turned up to its maximum level.

When the episode of the drama they had been watching ended, his grandmother went to the kitchen. She reappeared again about five minutes later with two mugs of hot chocolate. “You look a bit flushed, pet. Is the fire too hot for you?” she inquired with concern in her voice. “No, I’m okay Gran. Thanks,” he replied, taking one of the mugs of hot chocolate from her. He knew that his grandmother would prioritise his comfort above hers if he indicated that the room was indeed too hot. Besides, he could go and stand in the kitchen for a few minutes to cool off, and open the kitchen door to clear his head. In the meantime, he blew across the surface of the steamy, creamy hot chocolate and then took a sip. His grandmother sat back down and glanced at the evening news that was now on the television. For her, the news these days seemed to cover mainly incomprehensible events in far-off locations. Apart from the fact that the events were invariably distressing, the places in which many of them took place seemed so totally alien and unrecognisable. Where were these places when she was younger? Were people actually living peaceably in Kosovo, or in East Timor, or in any of the other current hot spots all those years ago when she was still a young woman? Or did these places and their tormented inhabitants just suddenly appear one day as if out of nowhere, possibly sometime after the introduction of decimalization? The international news was followed by the local news, which once again had an item on the murder of the young woman in Newcastle-upon-Tyne the previous night. This reminded her that terrible things also happened to innocent people much nearer home. On the report, the police appealed for witnesses to come forward. The police admitted that they had nothing much to go on so far. Police security

cameras did not cover the relatively secluded part of the city where the murder had apparently taken place. They did, however, have some grainy footage of her walking alone down Dean Street. After a few moments, the young woman stepped out of the range of the security cameras and then no doubt in a few terrible moments more stepped off the world. Elsie Crawford sighed and felt consumed by grief. She also felt angry and helpless. Then she looked at her grandson and wondered what type of world he would eventually live in when she had gone.

In an attempt to lighten up her mood, she decided to speak to her grandson. "It's strange that Paul Jackson hasn't come over to see you this evening," she pointed out, referring to a friend of her grandson who lived in the cottage directly across the road. "Yes, I thought he might drop by," replied David. "Maybe he's gone out with some other friends." This was his indirect way of saying that Paul Jackson had gone out with his girlfriend. At seventeen years of age, Paul Jackson was one year older than David Crawford. "I expect I'll see him tomorrow," he added.

"I can't imagine him walking around the village on a night like this. Listen to that wind!" commented his grandmother, as the windows in the cottage shuddered under the strain of a particularly strong gust. "Why don't you give him a call? Invite him over here, if you wish. You can both watch 'Match of the Day' later on," she suggested, referring to the popular television programme that covered the highlights of the day's main soccer matches. Right on cue, as if part of a contrived scene in a stage play, there was a sudden

knock on the front door of the cottage. “That’s probably him,” David said, standing up to answer the door.

“Hello, Paul,” said Elsie Crawford as Paul Jackson entered the living room. “Are you okay pet? You look upset,” she said noticing the uncharacteristically serious expression on his face. “I’m okay, thanks, Mrs Crawford,” answered Paul Jackson, and then added: “But my cat, Katy, is missing. We haven’t seen her for three days. When she didn’t return last night we were concerned. But not turning up today means that surely something is seriously wrong with her.”

“Wow, that is weird!” hollered David. “And the funny thing is we were just talking earlier this evening about the disappearance of cats from the village.” He now felt that the malaise he had experienced earlier in the evening begin to lift. This seemed to follow the breath of cold fresh air taken when answering the door. Yes, he now definitely felt much better, maybe even slightly elated. But surely this could not be attributed to some sort of schadenfreude at hearing of his friend’s distress. Perhaps he was just galvanized by the excitement of realising that there was evidently a real mystery in the village; even if it was perhaps, at least to a non cat-owner, a relatively trivial one.

David’s grandmother, however, nodded as if acknowledging some awful truth. She once again mentioned the case of her friend’s missing cat, without recounting the spiteful remarks that had been made about the cats possibly being used as meat by the Thai takeaway. Her friend’s remarks on this matter had annoyed and upset her, and she

didn't want to be a party to the rumours now spreading around the village. Elsie Crawford knew that Jack and Nok Hume couldn't possibly have had anything to do with these disappearances. It was probably some youths from the Forestry Flats playing cruel pranks. Then suddenly, a childhood memory pushed its way unexpectedly into her consciousness. The recollection was both profound and slightly disconcerting. It was something that was not part of those thoughts and experiences frequently recalled because of their importance and links with the present. Nor was it one of those strange and unimportant memories that for some unfathomable reason the mind sees fit to retain and recycle for evermore. This was a package of events and feelings experienced, stored and then almost lost. She was a young girl again in the village of Wet Rain Hill and her cat, her darling little cat, with its insatiable appetite for salmon and trout heads was missing. It had been missing for a whole day. She was crying and sobbing uncontrollably as she walked around the village calling out its name: "Katy, Katy ... Katy". Yes, strangely she had also called her cat Katy rather than something like: Kitty. She had wanted her cat to be known by a less common appellation. Then she was lying in bed at night trying to come to terms with this new and unwelcome emotion: profound sadness. Her parents had promised to get her a new cat, which was surely a sign that they thought her cat would never return home again. She never did see Katy again.

"Gran, are you okay?" boomed a young, familiar and anxious voice.

"Yes, I'm okay. Don't worry about me, pet," she replied, bringing herself back to the present. "Just now, you looked so strange. Are you sure everything is okay Gran?" asked

her grandson with concern. "Everything is fine. I was just thinking about the cat, that's all," she replied. Then she turned to Paul Jackson, and asked: "Aren't you staying Paul?" She was referring to the fact that he had still not taken off his coat. "I was only going to stay for a couple of minutes Mrs Crawford," he replied. "I need to continue looking for Katy. I've only looked around the village, including the graveyard because she sometimes plays in there. I think I'll go and have a wander down Wet Rain Hill."

"It's no ...," she was going to say that it was no use, but then she said: "It's no night to be wandering around the hill. You'll get blown away." Paul Jackson smiled at her, but did not otherwise respond. Then he pulled out a torch from the inside of his pocket and began to fidget with it. This indicated that, despite Mrs Crawford's advice and the foul weather outside, he did intend to continue his search for his missing cat. "What a poor thing," sighed Elsie Crawford. This was a statement that could apply either to the cat or to Paul Jackson. "Gran, I'm going out to help Paul look for his cat. I need to clear my head as well. Don't worry, we'll stay near to the cottage," said David going out to the hallway to collect his coat. His grandmother looked concerned. "Why don't you just look over into Wet Rain Hill from the garden at the back? Paul has a torch," she suggested as he reappeared with his coat. "You don't need to go charging down the hill in the dark tonight." The sudden recollection that she had seen a figure snooping around the back of the cottages a few days ago increased her anxiety. "And David, please only stay out for five or ten minutes. What will your father and mother say to me if anything happens to you?" she asked.

“Nothing is going to happen, Gran. We’re only looking for a cat, not an escaped convict!” said her grandson in reassuring tones. “And besides, just as Dad said this evening, nothing ever happens in Wet Rain Hill anymore.”

“Except the disappearance of its cats,” countered Elsie Crawford.

As he opened the door and stepped out from the kitchen into the darkness of the garden at the back of the cottage, David had the sensation of crossing a threshold into a different realm. For a start, there was an abrupt change in the temperature. The cloying heat of the cottage was replaced by the raw coldness of the night. The cottage itself and the stone wall surrounding the garden seemed to have little or no effect in offering any form of shelter from the wind. The turbulence of the night air made him momentarily gasp for breath. It was like wading into a deep, tempestuous and invisible ocean. The wind tried furiously to wrest the door from his grip and to send it crashing back into his companion’s face. David held onto the door handle with all his strength until the burden was taken over by his friend coming behind him. Then the two young men struggled along the short garden path towards the wall, which faced onto the hill. A myriad of stars peppered the bible black moonless night sky above.

Leaning forwards on the stone garden wall, they gazed into the darkness that engulfed the hillside before them. All that could be seen in the distance were isolated spots of light coming from a few homesteads to the east and west, or lights from the occasional vehicle on Boldlaw Road to the west. For a while, they did not speak to each

other, and only listened to the strange tune that was being played this particular evening by the wind. Everything above the ground seemed to be vibrating, shuddering, clashing, hissing and whistling. An empty overturned metal bucket waltzed erratically around the small patio in one corner of the garden; only its weight preventing it from lifting itself over the wall and fleeing down the hill.

Paul Jackson took out his torch and shone it down the hillside. The beam illuminated tufts of grass amidst bare patches of rocky earth nearby the cottage. The steep curvature of the hill created a horizon, below which, the torchlight could not reach. As he swept the beam to the left, a group of sheep was caught by it huddled up against the high stone wall of the village school next door. Startled by the torchlight, their shallow caprine eyes gazed back in fear and incomprehension at the source. Then the sheep jostled each other in panic and eventually shuffled away out of sight. Paul Jackson then directed the beam to the right towards that part of the hill behind the Humes' cottage. Almost immediately, a light came on in the kitchen at the back of the cottage. "Switch it off," gasped David. "They'll think someone's snooping around their cottage again." Paul Jackson switched off his torch. Unlike the living room at the back of the Humes' cottage, the curtains in the kitchen were not drawn. Nok Hume could be seen taking something from the refrigerator. She evidently, however, could not see the two figures leaning over the garden wall next door. A few moments later the kitchen light was switched off and the sound of the audience laughing on the television programme the Humes were watching could be heard as Nok Hume returned back into the living room of her cottage.

“It’s hopeless, isn’t it?” gulped Paul Jackson, barely audible as the wind grabbed his words and scrambled them into the valley below. “There’s no way we’re going to find her out there tonight.” David responded with a non-committal nod of his head. There was no gate leading out from the garden onto the hill, only a ledge in the form of a large flat stone projecting out from both sides of the wall that made climbing over it easier. Paul Jackson stepped up onto this ledge and switched on his torch again. Then he clambered completely onto the top of the stone wall and began shining his torch down the hill. From this elevated position, he was able to see further down the hill than before. But for some reason, David felt slightly irritated by this manoeuvre. Perhaps it was because he felt that his friend was being slightly presumptuous in clambering around property that was not his own. And maybe it was also because he didn’t like being looked down upon, not to mention being left in the dark.

“Wow, you should see this, Dave! Liz’s Rock really looks weird there in the distance,” Paul Jackson said turning towards David. At that very moment, the torch beam strayed slightly from its original direction and for an instant caught something moving down the hill. Only David was looking in that direction and only he saw it. Frozen, he was unable to respond to his friend’s comments in any meaningful way. Instead, he stood in a trance trying to come to terms with what he had apparently just seen on the hill. It was either the most remarkable trick his imagination had ever played on him, or it was something that absolutely did not fit into the world or scheme of things that he had been

living in up to that very moment. He was just about to try to communicate to Paul Jackson about what he had just seen when something else distracted the both of them. It was the sound of someone shouting. “What the hell is going on?” exclaimed Paul Jackson, using his torch to search the darkness for the source of the noise. Cries of hysteria, of terror, were borne out of the darkness by the wind. For a few seconds the torch beam could not locate anything moving on the hill, then suddenly Paul Jackson yelled out: “Look Dave, it’s that weird guy who’s lives alone in Church Lane!”

A figure could be seen running along the hill from the general direction of Liz’s Rock towards Boldlaw Road. He was evidently unconcerned by the torchlight emanating from somewhere above him. His clearly had other more pressing concerns at present. Nothing, however, could be seen following him on the hill. As far as they could see, he was alone, and eventually ran to a point someway down the hill where he reached the dry stone wall dividing Wet Rain Hill from Boldlaw Road. Then, he flung himself over the wall onto the road and disappeared from sight.

“Please don’t tell my Gran that we’ve seen someone snooping around out there; it’ll frighten her to death,” demanded David Crawford in a firm but hushed tone, as they both returned back into the kitchen a few minutes later. “I won’t say a word,” agreed Paul Jackson, and then he continued: “but I think this guy must be some sort of pervert: a peeping Tom.”

“Well, I overheard this evening that some guy in the village has got the hots for Nok next door, and he has been making a nuisance of himself,” said David. “I wouldn’t be surprised if that was him.”

“Crikey! But I’d like to know why he is running around screaming and shouting like someone demented. He’s not going to get much peeping done at that rate. I reckon he must have been high on LSD or something like that.”

“I don’t know. Maybe he saw something that scared him,” suggested David thoughtfully. He decided not to mention to his friend anything about what he believed he had seen moments before.

“Anyway, please, not a word,” pleaded David once again as they both entered the living room. The television program: ‘Match of the Day’ had already begun.

** (6) **

David Crawford slept poorly that night. The little sleep he managed to get was filled with strange and violent dreams. In one of them, he was chased by a pack of preternatural cats across the slopes of Wet Rain Hill. Then, in a manner possible only within the terrible logic of a nightmare, the fearsome cats were transmogrified into a pack of fast-moving jaw-snapping crocodiles. Racing across the inclines of Wet Rain Hill, exhausted and terrified, he struggled to flee from the terrible reptilian horde that pursued him. But as he sensed that the creatures were close on his heels he found himself, oblivious of the unrealistic discontinuity in his situation, suddenly standing in the

graveyard of St George's church helping his friend Paul Jackson look for his lost cat. The cat then appeared before them, standing by an old moss-covered gravestone. But when Paul Jackson approached this spot to try to retrieve the cat, the earth around the gravestone opened up and swallowed him screaming into its depths. His last memory of this alternative ontological realm was that of fleeing in blind panic from the graveyard, out through the lich gate onto Church Lane, only to encounter an equally hysterical Mr X running towards him.

Sunday morning was bright and bitterly cold. The high winds had now completely died down. David Crawford awoke with a start. His heart pounded, and his body was convulsed with pain: a residue of the terror of his nightmare. It seemed to take several minutes for these feelings to finally subside. He lay in bed thinking about what he could have possibly seen the previous evening. These thoughts simultaneously terrified and fascinated him. But even now, so soon after the event, it had already begun to feel much less real. The boundary between reality and imagination or dreams had become confused and indistinct.

The Crawford family took Sunday lunch just after noon, which was their usual time. There was, however, one change to the normal proceedings on this day. Professor Brock, who owned the cottage situated one up from of the village school, had been invited to have lunch with them. He did not normally reside in the village and usually only spent weekends in Wet Rain Hill. For the rest of the time he stayed in Durham,

which was about a forty-minute drive away by car. Professor Brock was a professor of archaeology at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. He was in his mid-fifties, and had lived alone ever since his wife died in a freak accident in their home three years ago. It was not long after that time that Professor Brock had bought his cottage in the village. He had stated at the time that the visits to the cottage gave him an opportunity to recover from his sudden bereavement. Moreover, the location of the village of Wet Rain Hill gave him a base from which he could carry out some archaeological research in the area.

Professor Brock's local archaeological interest was the gathering of evidence about the settlements that had been at Wet Rain Hill in prehistoric times. Predating the village's medieval origins, and like many similar highpoints in the surrounding countryside, there was some evidence that the hill would have been used by the Romans as a hilltop fort around two thousand years ago. At an earlier date, around two thousand five hundred years ago, there was a strong likelihood that the hill would have been an iron-age fort. Once again, this supposition could be supported by comparison with similar hilltop settlements in the region. But what particularly interested Professor Brock were the inhabitants of Wet Rain Hill stretching even further back into prehistory. The markings on Liz's Rock were evidence of stone-age inhabitants living around five thousand years ago. But non-monument-building nomadic tribes were known to be active in Northumberland as far back as at least eight thousand years ago. Shortly after this time, relatively speaking, the ice sheets of the last great ice age had withdrawn from Britain.

The local press had simplified and popularised some of Professor Brocks' work on the prehistory of the region. Consequently, he was well on his way to becoming something of a minor local celebrity. Television and local radio appearances were becoming increasingly frequent for him. There was, however, one aspect of his work considered by some to be rather controversial. It was also probably one reason why the local press had picked up on him and his work in the first place. Within the discipline or science of archaeology, he had become an expert in the study of the use of hallucinogenic substances by prehistoric man. His work emphasised their use in ancient shamanistic ceremonies, and the role that they may have even played in the evolution of human intelligence. Some popularised presentations of his work had conjured up silly descriptions of cavemen getting high whilst eating magic mushrooms and drinking deer urine. He had also been criticised because some people believed that if not advocating then at least he was glorifying the use of drugs. These were charges that he vehemently denied, countering them by saying that they were simple-minded and offensive.

In his most recent research, which had not yet been reported by the press, he had been involved in something much less controversial. He had been making an attempt to decipher and interpret the ancient markings on Liz's Rock. He had recently published a research paper on this subject in a respected scientific journal. In this research paper, he had postulated that the markings on Liz's Rock were inextricably linked to the presence of Bell Hollow nearby. He had also suggested that there would need to be an exploration of this cave in order to obtain a further understanding of the ancient markings. In fact,

Professor Brock had made plans to organise a university expedition to the cave. This would be the first recorded exploration of Bell Hollow, at least in modern times.

Professor Brock had taken lunch with the Crawfords at the cottage on several occasions before. Although he was an academic, he did not appear to have the arrogance and overweening sense of self-importance that some of his kind possess. He was willing, and able, to express his work clearly to non-experts without being patronising or abstruse. He originated from the north east of England, and had what is generally known as a working-class background. After passing through the English comprehensive system, he had gone on to study anthropology and archaeology at the University of Durham, which was a world-renowned centre for this subject. The University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne where he now worked had in fact, up until it gained its independence in nineteen sixty-three, been a college of the University of Durham. Further graduate study at the University of Durham had resulted in Samuel Nazarene Brock obtaining a Ph.D. in anthropology and archaeology. The title of his research thesis was Sacrificial Murder in pre-Roman Britain. His later pioneering work in the study of the use and role of hallucinogens in pre-historic society had earned him the title of professor.

As usual, the conversation at the Sunday lunch table ranged over a variety of disparate subjects. The local football results were discussed at first. And then the murder of the young women in Newcastle-upon-Tyne was mentioned. Professor Brock explained that he had first heard of the murder on the radio when driving to Wet Rain Hill on

Saturday morning. He was naturally shocked and slightly concerned for the safety of his students who were approximately the same age as the victim, and who also liked to socialise in the city centre. Following the subject of the murder, recent happenings in the village were discussed, particularly the disappearance of cats and sheep. Alan Crawford, however, did not feel it was appropriate to mention the rumours circulating the village connecting the Humes' takeaway with the disappearance of the cats. He did not initiate any discussion of the individual, known by the Crawford family as simply Mr X. Elsie Crawford made no mention of the fact that she had seen a stranger prowling nearby her cottage. And neither Alan Crawford nor his son mentioned their observations from the previous evening. David, however, had already told his father late last night how he and Paul Jackson had seen Mr X frantically running and screaming across the hill. Alan Crawford had already connected this with Mr X's arrival in the Blackbird public house the previous evening in a distressed state.

Then out of a mixture of politeness and genuine interest, Alan Crawford turned the conversation towards Professor Brock's work. Professor Brock mentioned his latest research concerning Liz's Rock, which had been accomplished mostly on his weekend trips to Wet Rain Hill. Alan Crawford asked Professor Brock to explain in layman's terms how he generally went about his work. Professor Brock began by trying to draw similarities between his modus operandi and that of a detective at a crime scene. Evidence had to be sought, gathered and sifted through meticulously. Great care had to be taken to ensure that something apparently insignificant and irrelevant, but which was in

fact vital to a complete understanding, was not overlooked or discarded. Considering the analogy between archaeology and detective work, Alan Crawford interrupted Professor Brock to suggest that perhaps one major difference, however, was the lack of eyewitnesses. Witting or unwitting, crimes often had eyewitnesses. In pre-historical research, however, there would seem to be no credible eyewitnesses to speak of; no written records or testimonies. Professor Brock agreed, and pointed out that this was in fact the very definition of prehistory: namely, that which relates to the period before written records. He then explained that despite all these difficulties it was still possible to make some progress in this field. New technology and computers had brought particularly new and exciting possibilities for this work. Computers could tirelessly and faultlessly process and analyse data. Mathematical algorithms could be used to crack codes and translate languages. Images of objects could be enhanced and improved. Samples of materials could be digitally sniffed and identified. A variety of possible historical scenarios could be modelled and simulated. Records could be compared and exchanged over the Internet, and so on. The list of possibilities was forever expanding. Alan Crawford pointed out that much of what the professor had just said could also now be applied to police work and crime solving. The use of computers and new technology had also revolutionised the world of crime solving.

“And as in the case of solving a crime, establishing a motive is also important in my work,” said Professor Brock, as desert was being served.

“But in the case of some crimes surely the motive is not always apparent,” remarked Rhoda Crawford. “Take for example the senseless murder of that poor girl on Friday evening. The murderer gained nothing. He was simply evil, and was probably high on drugs as well.” Professor Brock nodded gravely in response to these comments. It was possibly the mention of drugs and the controversy surrounding this subject in connection with his work that made him momentarily hesitate. He had often repeated and emphasised that he himself had never ever used any drugs: soft or hard. And that despite his insight into the subject, the closest he had ever come to directly experiencing the effects of such drugs had been to read Thomas De Quincey’s nineteenth-century classic: *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*. Eventually, Professor Brock replied grimly: “I think you’ll find there’s probably a motive of sorts there as well. However base it may be.”

Alan Crawford steered the discussion away from the murder and back towards Professor Brock’s work. “What would you say was the motive in the case of the markings on Liz’s Rock?” he asked.

“Primarily, the motivation I would say was religious. Compared to us, the people who made the markings and carvings on Liz’s Rock had a very different mental outlook on the world in which they found themselves. The world of dreams, of trances and of visions would have been to them a real and undifferentiated part of their existence. They would have seen and felt spirits all around them, in the rocks and trees, in the streams and rivers, and in the animals they hunted such as deer and goats. The spirits of the dead would

return in dreams and trances to advise, warn or chastise them. We generally use the term shamanism to classify this type of early religion. Some people in the group or tribe, the shamans, would have been regarded as having special powers that gave them access to the spirit world. In my opinion, the markings on Liz's Rock appear to be an attempt to communicate with the spirit in the rock," answered Professor Brock.

"And they must have truly believed that there was a big spirit in Liz's rock to do all that work on it," suggested Alan Crawford.

"Yes, indeed. And they may have gone to all that trouble, because they were either asking for a very big favour or they had a very big problem. I believe that they were, in effect, asking the rock to move onto the top of Bell Hollow. They wanted to block the entrance of Bell Hollow, but didn't have the manpower or the technology to move the huge stone. They believed that moving it would offer them the protection they were seeking," explained the professor.

"But protection from what?" asked Alan Crawford.

"I don't know for sure. But clearly they were seeking protection from something they perceived to be potentially baleful or harmful. Maybe it was from something they thought was causing sickness or disease to the people in the area. There are other possible explanations as well. Maybe they wanted protection from unhappy spirits of the departed. Or maybe they were seeking protection from unfriendly strangers or wild animals that were making incursions into their territory to steal food and animals. But based on my study of the markings, whatever was the cause of their fear had I believe a definite link with Bell Hollow."

There was a brief pause in the conversation at this point. Alan Crawford was tempted to interject a mildly jocular remark, but decided that to do so would be unbecoming. It was his son who, instead, uttered more or less the same remark that he had in mind. “The Stone Age inhabitants of Wet Rain Hill were probably tired of having all their cats disappear. And probably supposed that they were jumping down Bell Hollow,” said David, very conscious that fortunately Paul Jackson wasn’t around to hear this slightly cruel joke. “Well, I can certainly rule cats out of the picture,” said Professor Brock responding quickly with a degree of earnestness that might not have been expected in the circumstances. “You see, the first domestic cat didn’t appear in Britain until after the first Crusades to the Middle East about nine hundred years ago. But sheep were domesticated thousands of years earlier, and they may have been kept by, as you put it, the Stone Age inhabitants of Wet Rain Hill. So, it may have been the case that they were indeed loosing their sheep down Bell Hollow.”

Elsie Crawford, who had been listening quietly to the discussion, asked to be excused from the table in order to go into the kitchen. The professor thanked and complimented her on the delicious lunch before continuing: “Anyway, I hope to do some exploration of Bell Hollow sometime early next year with a team from my university. This might give us some extra insight. It would be really exciting if proof of a link between Liz’s Rock and Bell Hollow could be established. There’s also the exciting

prospect of finding something of archaeological interest in Bell Hollow: maybe bones, animal and human, as well as tools.”

“Finding the old church bell would be something,” suggested David.

“Yes, it would. Finding the church bell from St George’s would be something of a coup. But I’m also hoping for something more ancient than that.”

After desert had been eaten, Professor Brock together with Alan Crawford and his son remained sitting at the table. In the cottage, the division of labour on the occasion of Sunday lunches still followed traditional lines: Rhoda Crawford had now joined Elsie Crawford in the kitchen in order to wash the dishes and clean up. Continuing the discussion, Alan Crawford broached the subject of drugs, specifically Stone Age drugs. He was well aware of the effects that the taking of certain types of drugs had on some people nowadays. It started with a desire to escape for a brief period of time into an alternative, perhaps ecstatic, state of reality, whether it was simply a pleasurable high or something akin to the Stone Age shaman entering the alternative realm of the spirits. This was inevitably followed by a return to the humdrum reality of everyday life. But for some, the urge to return again and again to this altered state was compelling. Inconveniently, this addiction needed to be financed, and crime would invariably be the financier. Within this diabolical spiral of cause and effect, the drugs themselves would make people more willing to take risks in the thefts and robberies that they carried out, and would even make some more unconscionable in the use of violence to perpetrate these crimes.

“The substances these ancient shamans used to enter into the realm of the spirits would have included some of the plants, shrubs, tree barks, and fungi growing naturally around them,” explained Professor Brock. “It is perhaps a surprise for many people to learn that several common or garden plants and herbs can cause extreme hallucinogenic effects when prepared and taken in the right way; for example, certain types of sage or mint. The ancient botanists would have learned this by trial and error over time.”

“And what about deer pee: is it true they drank that?” asked David gleefully.

“Yes, there probably is some truth in it. But the deer urine would only be effective if the deer had been nibbling on certain mushrooms and plants beforehand and had then processed their constituents.”

“Don’t tell me they found that one out by trial and error,” said Alan Crawford smirking.

“Well, now you understand why Santa Clause’s reindeer were able to fly,” said the professor laughing. He continued: “The substances would not have been as socially destabilising as they are nowadays. Knowledge of these substances would have been held only by a select few: the Shamans, as I mentioned before. Their usage would have been also restricted to this select group. The revelations that these substances were capable of producing would have been too much for those that did not have the special knowledge to interpret them correctly. Anyone taking these substances would enter a world where they could see, hear and smell things that were not accessible to others. They would also be able to glimpse usually hidden aspects of apparently inanimate objects. For example, a

simple stick lying on the ground when seen through these new eyes might become a giant snake, or a rock a giant salamander lizard.”

“Hence the name Liz’s Rock?” suggested David seizing on this allusion, and then added:

“Maybe the rock on Wet Rain Hill had a tendency to turn into a lizard in the eyes of someone under the influence of such a drug.”

Professor Brock paused for a moment, and then responded with a smile: “I wasn’t specifically referring to Liz’s rock in that final example. Interesting, however, you made that link, David. But if Liz is indeed an abbreviation of Lizard, which I believe is itself an English word with Latin roots, the current name of the rock couldn’t possibly have originated from the period in question. This was a time when a long forgotten language would have been used, one that could have had no connection whatsoever with the relatively modern language of Latin, brought to these islands by the Romans about two thousand years ago. It could be argued, however, that the underlying meaning of the name may have been preserved. Perhaps it was called something equivalent to Liz’s or Lizard’s rock in some long lost ancient tongue, and this name was effectively translated at various times and carried down through the ages. In my opinion, that would be unlikely in this case, because over the ages such an association of the rock with a lizard would have required a constant reinforcement of the idea. For example, people in this area would still have had to have seen a lizard in the rock during the Middle Ages when shamanistic practices or the use of hallucinogens were far from the norm. I believe that Liz, simply as the diminutive of the name Elizabeth, has been suggested as the most likely source of the rock’s name. Nevertheless, David, I agree with the approach of

looking for meaning and explanation in the names of things and places. Sometimes familiarity with a particular name dulls our perception to this principle. I have a colleague who has lived for a few years in a town called Morpeth, which is just north of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The name had always struck him as rather curious, until one day he found out that Morpeth was in fact a contraction of Murder Path. This was a reference to the place's reputation in the past as a dangerous spot for highwaymen and brigands. The past history of the town, or the surrounding area, was in fact encapsulated in its name."

Elsie and Rhoda Crawford reappeared from the kitchen after completing their chores. Overhearing the tail end of Professor Brock's discussion on the significance of place names, Rhoda Crawford asked about the background to the name of the village of Wet Rain Hill. But before the professor could respond to this, Elsie provided the generally accepted reason, explaining how the inclination of the land meant that a large amount of the rainwater falling onto the village drained down the hill behind her cottage into Liz's Burn. This particular hillside was the actual Wet Rain Hill. The name of the village followed straight from this.

"How long have you lived in Wet Rain Hill, Mrs Crawford?" asked the professor. "Oh, well I lived here as a child, but not in this same cottage. Then when I got married, I moved out with my husband to Hexham. That was where Alan was born and brought up. Then, five years ago I moved back into the village and into this cottage. So my life started in this village, and I dare say that it will end in this village as well," replied Elsie

Crawford. “You must have some fond memories about life in the village. What was it like living here as a child?” continued the professor.

“It was wonderful. My father was a forester, and my mother was a domestic servant. I know that life was sometimes difficult for my parents, but life for me as a child in Wet Rain Hill was simply wonderful. I remember that we seemed to have such warm summers. There were hills to run down, streams to ford and trees to climb. And even for a girl, so many adventures to be had. As children, we used to imagine that witches and warlocks lived in Bell Hollow. I can still remember looking down with fascination into the darkness of the cave, and wondering where it ended. I can also particularly recall one day, whilst playing with friends that we thought we heard a noise coming out of the cave. It was like a groan coming from deep within the earth. Then screaming with terror and perhaps some excitement as well, we ran as quickly as we could back up the hill to the safety of the village. My parents were furious with me because they had repeatedly warned me against playing beside the cave. They told me that if I fell inside the cave I would never be able to see them again. That really scared me. But as a child, of course, I was naturally very curious about things. In addition, we were all aware of the story of Menzie, the shepherd, who had gone mad up on the hill opposite to Wet Rain Hill. At that time, there were one or two old people still alive in the village who had known him. They said he had gone mad because one day, whilst tending his sheep, he heard something in Bell Hollow. And after having gone to investigate, thinking perhaps that someone had fallen into the cave, he had seen something terrible either inside the cave or coming out

of it. Anyway, that's what they say. One old lady said that Menzie must have seen Old Nick, the Devil himself, coming up from hell," recounted the old lady.

"Did you ever see anything odd, Gran?" asked David urgently.

"No. I never saw Old Nick or anything else. Nor did anyone I knew personally see anything odd. And as far as I know, the shepherd who eventually replaced Menzie on the hill never saw anything strange. He certainly never ran away, and spent all of his remaining life in the village. Though he didn't stay in Menzie's Hut, but lived somewhere in the village instead."

"What about the bell, Elsie, which is supposedly still in Bell Hollow. Were there any particular stories about it?" asked Rhoda.

"The generally accepted tale, as you perhaps already know, is that the villagers tried to hide it there during the First English Civil War," explained Elise. "There is a picture in one of the stained glass windows in St George's church showing the villagers lowering a bell into the cave using ropes and pulleys. But no one is really sure why they needed to hide the church bell in the cave. Maybe they considered it to be precious, and didn't want one side or the other in the civil war to take it. I can't ever recall, however, coming across a similar story like this one taking place anywhere else in England. But now that I think of it, I can also remember hearing a tale that in fact gave an alternative explanation as to why the bell was placed inside Bell Hollow. In this particular story, the villagers had actually used the church bell as a large sacred object in order to ward off the Devil, whom they believed lived in Bell Hollow. I was reminded of this when I listened to what Professor Brock said just before lunch about Liz's Rock. It strikes me that what those

people might have been trying to do thousands of years ago sounds very similar to what the villagers were trying to do a few hundred years ago; that is if this tale is in fact true. By placing the church bell inside Bell Hollow, the villagers believed they could block the Devil's very passage out from hell. They were trying to protect themselves from what they imagined to be an evil influence."

"That's a very interesting parallel, Mrs Crawford. I wasn't aware of that interpretation, but I'm very glad to have heard it," responded the professor, genuinely impressed by what he had just heard. He then continued: "I made the point earlier that the mental world of the people who made the markings on Liz's Rock was very different to ours. Something similar can be said of the people who lived during the religious convulsions of the seventeenth century. They saw and interpreted things very differently to what we do now. They were deeply superstitious, and dare I say it, very parochial. For them, it would not be beyond the bounds of possibility that the Devil lived in Wet Rain Hill. Or at least that he took a sojourn there."

Professor Brock looked at his watch, and after thanking the Crawfords once again for the enjoyable lunch and discussion, explained that he would have to return back to his cottage in order to attend to some work he had brought with him for the weekend. But just before the professor left, David Crawford managed to insert one further question into the proceedings: "Professor Brock, if someone living in these parts thousands of years ago saw a crocodile, how do you think would they describe it?"

The professor hesitated for a moment, slightly confused by the question, which seemed on the face of it to be something of a non sequitur. But he responded: “I would be surprised, David, if someone in ancient Britain had ever seen a crocodile, especially just after the last ice age, long before the Romans came. After all, crocodiles are cold-blooded reptiles, and don’t live in these climes. Their metabolism needs warmth and sunshine, so it wouldn’t happen. But if by whatever reason they managed to see one, I suppose they would think it was like a lizard; a giant lizard, certainly.”

“And people living around the seventeenth century?” asked David.

“The same, I suppose: a lizard. For them, it would be the nearest approximation that they could call upon,” replied the professor. “Are you suggesting that ‘Crocodile Rock or Croc Rock’ would have been a more apt name?” he added smiling whilst forming a mental picture of Elton John, dressed flamboyantly and wearing over-sized spectacles, uproariously singing and playing his song bearing the same name on the hill behind the cottage. David Crawford smiled politely, but made no reply.

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The scope of the investigation into the murder of the young women that had taken place the previous week in Newcastle-upon-Tyne had widened. The Durham Constabulary were now also involved. The location, where the victim’s had been found, was within ten minutes’ walk of the city’s Central Railway Station. Film footage taken from security cameras showing passengers arriving at the station to catch late-evening

trains was examined for possible clues. Apart from local trains running at the time, there was also a train running late in the evening to London's King Cross Station that made a scheduled stop at Durham station approximately fifteen minutes after departure from Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Two figures immediately stood out from the other passengers waiting to board this particular train, in that they appeared to run into the station just before the train departed, and only managed to board with seconds to spare. It was not possible, however, to immediately make what would be easily identifiable photo-fits of the two figures from the rather grainy footage. Alan Crawford had been assigned to examine the film taken from a security camera at Durham station on the evening in question. Unfortunately, the security camera at Durham turned out to be faulty, and so provided no useful record of activity at that station. It was therefore impossible to determine from the available film alone if the two people in question had used the London service to make the relatively short train journey to Durham, or whether they had travelled further south. Examining film records from all stations en-route, including the train's destination, King's Cross, would be a formidable task; if it was at all possible. Considerable effort in tracing and interviewing the passengers on the train would be required to this end. The film taken at Newcastle-upon-Tyne's Central Railway Station would also need to be enhanced if the two figures were to become recognisable to anyone. And even then, this might turn out to be a false lead. By Wednesday afternoon, because of other commitments, Detective Sergeant Alan Crawford was no longer even partly involved in the murder case.

Throughout the week, Alan Crawford had kept Jack Hume's concerns about the man he referred to as Mr X in mind. He was also slightly worried about the safety of his own mother. But up to now, Mr X had not actually broken any laws. The closest he had come to doing anything that could invite the attention of the police was to be seen late in the evening behind the cottages at the top of Wet Rain Hill. Elsie Crawford had been told that she must inform the police if Mr X. was seen acting suspiciously again. Before returning home on Wednesday evening, Alan Crawford decided to talk to a contact in the Northumbrian Police Force in Hexham. He made a telephone call and asked for information about crimes or anything unusual that had been reported in Wet Rain Hill recently. In making the inquiry, he gave the impression that it might be connected with the murder investigation with which he had had some brief involvement. His Hexham contact promised to make some inquiries for him, saying he would call back in around half-an-hour.

Twenty-five minutes later, Alan Crawford received his return telephone call. His contact said that one thing out of the ordinary, but apparently only trivial, was that the police had been repeatedly receiving calls from a couple of villagers. The callers were beginning to be regarded as something of a nuisance because they were trying to involve the police in the disappearance of their pet cats, and had been told that this was not something precious police time could be spent upon. Slightly more seriously, the Northumbrian police force had increased their vigilance in the area around Wet Rain Hill in an effort to solve the reported cases of sheep rustling. One farmer living in an isolated

farm about two miles outside the village had reported loosing several sheep recently. However, no other significant crimes at all had been reported in the village itself for at least the past three months.

Alan Crawford asked for one more favour. Before leaving the village on Sunday evening and returning home, he had made a point of noting down the address of Mr X's flat. He asked his contact if he could find out anything about the person who lived in Flat 2B, Church Lane. A few minutes later, thinking that if at all anything he would not get any information until the following day, Alan Crawford was all set to go home when his telephone rang again. He was told that following a new development, which his contact had not been aware of during the previous call, Hexham police were now themselves interested in the occupant of Flat 2B, Church Lane, Wet Rain Hill.

Hexham police had suddenly become interested in the resident of Flat 2B, Church lane, after being contacted by his landlord concerning his disappearance. The landlord had arrived at the premises earlier in the afternoon to make a spot check, only to find that his tenant was not at home. Claiming that he had not planned to enter the flat without the permission of his tenant, but after looking inside through a window, the landlord had been disturbed by what he had seen. Chairs were overturned, and what looked like the remains of a meal was strewn all over the floor. And even though it was mid afternoon at the time, many of the lights had been left turned on. Following this observation, the landlord had let himself into the flat using his own key, and began looking around. The

tenant was nowhere to be seen, but there were indications that he had left the flat in a hurry and perhaps in an agitated state. In the only bedroom, dressing table draws were pulled out and lying on the floor. Dirty clothes lay scattered around. The bathroom was also in a terrible condition. Parts of the floors and walls were splattered with vomit. The landlord had also noticed a small polythene bag partially filled with some kind of white powder lying in the washbasin. It was at this point that he had called the police.

The downstairs flat, converted from one floor of an original two-storey house, had been let out to a man who went by the name of William Avon. The landlord owned several properties in the region, most of them in the city of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. And because of his experience in letting out properties to overseas students in the city, he had a habit of asking for photocopies of all his tenant's passports. The photocopy of Avon's passport revealed that he was aged forty-three years. The passport in question was a replacement passport, issued by the British Embassy in Bangkok over two years ago. Avon had not been able to provide a previous address within the United Kingdom for the past ten years to his landlord, and had explained that he had lived in Thailand during this period. The departure stamp on his passport from Bangkok Airport revealed that he had left Thailand and presumably entered the United Kingdom around two-and-a-half months ago. His passport also revealed non-tourist visa stamps that gave him permission to remain in Thailand legally up to the time of his departure. There was, however, no indication in the passport of his occupation or profession in Thailand. Also, the section in the back of his passport for providing emergency contacts had been left empty.

After surveying the flat and removing the polythene bag found in the washbasin for analysis, the police had made some initial inquiries with the neighbours. William Avon's immediate neighbour in the flat above was an elderly lady. She was asked if she had seen him recently, and had replied that she had not done so since last week but remembered hearing him inside his flat very late on the previous Saturday evening. He had been heard speaking very loudly, even shouting, but she hadn't heard any other people in the flat. The neighbour thought that Avon might have been on the telephone at the time. Later, she could recall hearing doors being clashed and what sounded like furniture being knocked over. This type of thing had never happened before, and she had supposed he was drunk. Normally, he was reasonably quiet and quite reserved, generally keeping himself to himself. The neighbour eventually fell asleep that night, and since then hadn't heard anything more from him. Similar stories emerged from the few other neighbours who were in at the time the police made their inquiries in the late afternoon.

Alan Crawford now felt that it was his duty to disclose to the Hexham police what he knew about the tenant of Flat 2B, Church Lane. He mentioned that William Avon had been observed behaving suspiciously on Wet Rain Hill. He also explained how his mother's next-door neighbours were particularly anxious about Avon's behaviour. Finally, Detective Crawford told Hexham police that he himself had seen Avon late on Saturday evening entering the Blackbird public house in Wet Rain Hill in what appeared to be a distressed state.

At home that evening, Alan Crawford telephoned his mother in Wet Rain Hill. He wanted to check if everything was okay. She confirmed that everything was fine. He confirmed with her that the family would be visiting at the weekend as usual. After this, he telephoned Jack Hume, and told him about William Avon and the circumstances surrounding his disappearance from the flat in Church Lane. And with the understanding that the information was confidential, he also told Jack Hume that a polythene bag filled with what was suspected to be an illicit substance had been removed from the flat for analysis by the police laboratories. It appeared to be that Avon was a user of drugs, and a social misfit who may have formed some interest in Jack Hume's wife because of the Thailand connection. In Alan Crawford's mind, nevertheless, it seemed to be a disturbing coincidence that Avon had been in Thailand when the Humes had lived there, and that after they had moved, he had effectively followed them back to Wet Rain Hill.

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December finally arrived. Night seemed to be almost continuous, interrupted begrudgingly by a few hours of cold grey daylight. Icy rains fell. Easterly winds blew across the stark dormant landscape where two thousand years ago men from warmer lands had been here to witness this lowest ebb of the seasons. Cursing and complaining, they had stamped their feet to keep warm on the ramparts of the hilltop fort. They had watched vigilantly over this northern frontier of civilisation, searching for any signs of

the approach of their implacable foes. Foes who, apparently against the normal run of nature, thrived in this damp and chilled land. Off duty, these soldiers of Rome had warmed their hands over campfires and had written letters back home to loved ones. They had told of how much they missed the comforts and pleasures of home, and of how they counted the days to the time when they could leave this alien and uncomfortable outpost of the known world. Some also spoke of their fears of a strange cave situated down the hill from the fort and within sight of the great rock that the Brigantes called the Table of the Lizards. A cave rumoured to be an entrance to the lower world: the darkened place where Pluto ruled over the shades of the dead.

Back in the present, in the season of darkness, the countdown had begun to the celebration of that ancient festival of light. Christmas decorations of every description, and degrees of garishness, could be seen in almost every home in the village of Wet Rain Hill. Doorways, windows and even gardens were decorated. A large Christmas tree with large bulbous fairy lights had been placed on the village green. The village church notice board was covered with a poster that laid claim to this festival of light. ‘Thank God for Christmas’ said the poster. But even the guardians of the hilltop fort would have recognised aspects of what was taking place. This had been, after all, originally their festival of light and of feasting, which they called Saturnalia, after Saturn, father of Pluto.

Flat 2B, Church Lane, Wet Rain Hill, however, was devoid of Christmas decorations. It stood cold and empty. Its former occupant had not been seen or heard of

since his disappearance about two weeks earlier. The white powder in the polythene bag taken from the flat by the police had now been analysed, and had been found to be an extremely potent and as yet unnamed hallucinogen made from types of plant fungus. The hallucinogen was similar in many respects to the commonly known Lysergic Acid Diethylamide, or LSD. It was known that such types of drugs were generally not physiologically addictive and usually not a drug of choice for dealers. Nevertheless, given the extraordinary potency of the drug, the police were still concerned about finding it in rural Northumberland.

Efforts by the police were underway to find William Avon. The possibility that he had left the country, and even returned to Thailand, was being considered. The British embassy in Bangkok had been contacted, and had agreed to approach the Thai immigration authorities to see if they could check their records for his entry into the country. But on a national scale of criminal investigation, and even more so on an international scale, the search was considered a matter of relatively low priority. The tracing of terrorists, murderers, swindlers, child-molesters and the whole motley bunch of miscreants who flit back and forth across international borders had a higher priority. And even when the relevant authorities were eventually motivated into action, there could be no doubt that the procedure would take some time.

In the period leading up to Christmas, the Crawford family continued to make their weekend visits to Elsie Crawford's cottage in Wet Rain Hill. And every Saturday

evening, David Crawford made a point of spending some time in his grandmother's garden looking down Wet Rain Hill. But he never saw or heard again anything out of the ordinary. He had never confided with anyone the strange sighting from the previous month. Within the relatively short time that had elapsed, he had even begun to view what he thought he had seen as perhaps no more than a figment of the imagination. But in his dreams, mostly unremembered on waking, the image he had seen would once more pass before his eyes. On one occasion whilst asleep in his grandmother's cottage, he awoke suddenly as if from a nightmare. And switching on his bedside lamp, the first thing he noticed was the stuffed crocodile Nok Hume had given to him as a present. It was poised on top of the small wardrobe in his dormer bedroom. Its squat scaly form provided ample inspiration for every manner of imagined horrors in the stillness of the night and the partial illumination of the bedroom. On that particular occasion, he got out of bed and had reached up and pushed the crocodile away out of sight.

Christmas day finally arrived. For the first time in about twenty years there was truly a white Christmas. A deep soft white blanket of snow had covered the village and the surrounding hills. Low in the sky, the sun shone bright but cold. The Crawfords ate a hearty traditional Christmas lunch together in the cottage. Because he lived alone, Professor Brock had been asked to join them for Christmas lunch, but had declined the invitation. Instead, he had stayed in Durham for Christmas with a friend.

After lunch, Jack and Nok Hume briefly visited the Crawfords to exchange Christmas gifts. For Nok Hume, the concept of Christmas was something with which she was vaguely familiar. It was, however, essentially a Western tradition that lay well outside her cultural framework. She enjoyed the evident high spirits and heightened sense of friendliness found in people. But the festivities were something that she could really only relate to as an observer and not as a participant. For her, there was no emotional involvement. Christmas brought no rekindling of childhood nostalgia, except that in some respects it reminded her of a corresponding festival from her own cultural and religious background. As a result, it engendered in her a deep and almost despairing sadness at the fact that she was currently separated from her parents, her younger sister and her former friends.

Whilst everyone else was busy talking in good cheer, Nok Hume walked over to the patio doors in Elsie Crawford's cottage and pushed her face against the cold glass. She gazed out onto the snow-covered hills behind the cottage. In the rapidly failing light of late afternoon, the view resembled that of the landscape of an alien planet whose desolate surface was sparingly warmed by a dim and distant sun. Up until a few days ago, she had never encountered snow first hand, though she had long wanted to do so. And now it enveloped and even seemed to define the world in which she found herself. Everything was all so very strange.

Later that evening, David Crawford went across the road to visit Paul Jackson. They exchanged gifts and laughed when they discovered they had given each other gift tokens for exactly the same value and from exactly the same shop. David indicated that he could only stay for a short while. Paul Jackson's girlfriend, Wendy, had also called by. She sat watching the television. David accepted a glass of sherry from Paul Jackson's mother, and proceeded to drink it quickly. The rather quick consumption of the drink had the opposite effect to that which he had intended, which was to finish quickly so that he could leave quickly. Before he had the chance to say that he would now be on his way, Paul Jackson's mother had produced another glass of sherry. She had noted that he evidently had a liking for the spirit. He sipped the second glass of sherry much more slowly. Eventually, he found himself drawn into a conversation with Paul Jackson's girlfriend. They talked about her favourite subjects, which were the supernatural and the unexplained. Holding a dialogue, however, with Wendy Newton was not easy. She was the type of person who tended not to listen and had the habit of talking over her interlocutor. Paul Jackson, as well as his parents, showed no particular interest in what Wendy Newton said; they had probably heard it all before. Instead, they remained absorbed in watching the television. David felt rather irritated by the fact that he wasn't able to manoeuvre himself out of his predicament. And so, for about half-an-hour, as Wendy Newton rode her hobbyhorse, he nodded perfunctorily, making several unsuccessful attempts to break into the monologue.

She had already covered a diverse range of topics, including the efficacy of pyramids as pencil-sharpeners and the truth behind alien abductions, by the time she moved onto the strange experience of her grandmother. As if to back up the story, she produced from her handbag a piece of paper. At this point, Paul Jackson appeared to take some interest in what his girlfriend was saying. “And this is what my grandmother saw in the graveyard of St George’s last month,” she said handing a folded piece of paper to David. He opened it up and saw upon it a pencil sketch. An icy heat spread through his body. He said nothing as he looked at the sketch, and after a while handed it back to her. “Her grandmother lives in the Forestry Flats,” explained Paul Jackson.

“He’s already seen it,” said Ms Newton gesturing towards her boyfriend.

“Seen what?” gasped David nervously. Wendy Newton looked at David with a mixture of surprise and incomprehension. It was Paul Jackson who spoke next. “I saw her grandmother’s sketch a couple of weeks ago. Cool isn’t it! She used to work as a graphic artist, didn’t she, Wend?”

“That’s right. In fact, she used to design Christmas cards.”

Paul Jackson grinned. “I’m sure she never put anything like that on one of her Christmas cards,” he said.

“I believe that she did see something strange. Anyway, I think it’s important to have some mystery in our lives,” responded Wendy Newton.

“The disappearance of my cat was enough mystery for me,” said Paul Jackson.

“Well, there you have it. Maybe this explains why your cat went missing,” suggested Wendy Newton. “Isn’t she scared?” asked David.

“My grandmother scared? Not really. You see she has Alzheimer’s disease. Bless her. She’s probably already forgotten. My parents are at her house right now. We had Christmas dinner together today.”

“What about the time when she first saw it?” asked David. Wendy Newton looked at him with renewed interest, evidently impressed by the fact that he seemed to be taking the whole matter rather seriously. “I’m not sure if she was scared at the time, but I’m sure I would be,” responded Ms Newton with sufficient flippancy that suggested, in all truth, she herself didn’t take the matter too seriously.

“Show him the others,” said Paul Jackson. Wendy Newton pulled some more pieces of paper from out of her handbag. The additional sketches she produced all represented Christmas scenes, but with a difference. On one of the drawings, Father Christmas wore a traditional jovial grin, and carried with him a sack overflowing with skulls and bones instead of the usual toys. In another scene, he was standing nonchalantly by his sleigh watching his reindeer being devoured by a crocodile. And a third scene showed church bells being rung by a grinning crocodile bell-ringer standing upright on longish hind legs, pulling at the bell-ropes with human-like hands on its forelimbs. This representation was similar to that on a wall poster designed for children that he had seen in the waiting room of a dentist’s surgery, where a cartoon crocodile stood upright displaying an immaculate set of white teeth whilst holding onto a giant toothbrush. David finally commented that the drawings were impressive, and handed them all back except for the scene with the crocodile campanologist. He asked Wendy Newton if he could borrow it for a few days in order to make a photocopy.

Across Church Lane, only a few minutes' walk through the church graveyard, the vicar Geoffrey Adams was settling down in front of the television in the vicarage with a glass of Irish whiskey. Both the Christmas Eve and the Christmas morning services had been rather poorly attended. There was usually an upsurge in the number of people attending church services around Christmas time, but this year the turnout had been generally rather disappointing. Nevertheless, the sermon and the nativity play had gone without a hitch. Now he could relax. His mother, who was visiting him from Morpeth, passed him a chocolate-coated raisin from a box on her lap and commented about the celebrity who was currently on television. "He's that local lad: Jimmy Nail. Sang that song 'Crocodile Shoes', and made all those detective stories." Geoffrey Adams nodded his head in casual acknowledgement. After a fleeting thought about the oddity of such a surname and a mental picture of the singer wearing some form of reptilian footwear, his thoughts somehow wandered to consideration of the Thai lady, Nok Hume, who lived on Main Street. He had studied comparative religion at college, and supposed that as she came from Thailand, she was probably a Buddhist. The majority of Thais, after all, were Buddhist. What did she, he wondered, make of Christmas? Neither she nor her husband had ever attended one of his church services. If the Thai lady had been present at church, he would certainly have noticed her. After the conversation with Detective Sergeant Alan Crawford in the Blackbird public house last month, he had started to notice her in the village even more. He considered her to be quite the most beautiful woman in the village,

if not the county. Then he checked himself before his thoughts ran any further in that direction.

Receiving one more chocolate-coated raisin from his mother, Geoffrey Adams attempted to sublimate his thoughts. He began to wonder if it would be possible to convert Nok Hume to Christianity. It was surely something less controversial or problematic than say converting a Moslem to Christianity. Buddhism was a passive religion, which traditionally made no strenuous efforts at proselytising non-Buddhists, and in some respects could be considered to be more of a philosophy than a religion given the lack of explicit references in its teachings to some type of godhead. Maybe next week he would push through her door one of his new glossy pamphlets showing Christ on the cross, explaining how his crucifixion represented mankind's victory over death. But on second thoughts, he wasn't sure if she would be able to read English sufficiently well enough to understand the pamphlet in detail. Moreover, he would feel uneasy trying to explain the argument in person on her doorstep. Then he thought that maybe he could just invite her to one of the ladies' functions at the church, and get her involved that way. But once again, his thoughts about Nok started to drift in a decidedly un-clerical direction. "More tea vicar?" asked his mother, rescuing him momentarily. She often used this well-worn joke to indicate that she was going into the kitchen to put on the kettle. In response, he held up his unfinished glass of Irish whiskey. "I'm fine, thanks," he announced as his thoughts drifted back to Nok Hume.

Jack Hume poured himself a glass of Scotch whisky. He had received a bottle of whisky as a Christmas present from the Humes. Nok Hume was sitting on the sofa and had been watching television, but was now looking at her husband with the glass of spirit in his hand. As far as she could recall, she had never seen him drink whisky before. “It’s Christmas,” he said by way of offering an explanation and perhaps an excuse. She smiled, and returned her gaze to the television set. The programme was supposed to be a Christmas ghost story, but much to her disappointment half-an-hour had passed and there still hadn’t been any appearance by a ghost: only gusts of wind in corridors, doors being closed by unseen forces and mysterious footsteps in the darkness. If this had been a Thai ghost story, she thought to herself, the ghost would by now have already made numerous appearances hovering in the air and doubtless frightening some people to death.

Jack Hume walked over to the back of the living room with his glass of whisky. Standing by the patio doors were the two large wooden carvings that had been shipped from Thailand. Before returning home from Thailand, he had overseen the packing of the carvings together with the rest of their belongings and had made the arrangements for their transportation. Jack Hume had arrived in Britain about one month before the arrival of Nok Hume. She had been forced to wait in Bangkok until her visa application to enter the United Kingdom had been processed by the British Embassy. During this month, he had been able to prepare the cottage for habitation and had begun the work of opening the Siam Kitchen Thai takeaway in the village.

Jack Hume picked up a long piece of tinsel from the Christmas tree that stood nearby. He then whimsically tied one end of the tinsel around the head of the large wooden carving of a Siamese cat sitting upright. The other end, he placed around the head of a large wooden carving of a crocodile standing unnaturally upright with its front legs outstretched like hands. Nok Hume looked over at him once again, and saw that what he had done was to imitate the Thai wedding tradition where the bride and groom are joined together by a thread to represent the union or binding together of two people in matrimony. They had done exactly the same thing at their wedding. “They are now married,” she said smiling, acknowledging the symbolism. “Now they can be happy,” she added.

David Crawford had now returned to his grandmother’s cottage and was helping to put the refuse out in the back yard when he happened to glance next door. The Humes had not yet closed their curtains. The snow lying on the small lawn and patio in their garden glistened under the light from inside the living room. He noticed the two wooden carvings standing prominently behind the patio doors. On this Christmas evening, a Siamese cat and a crocodile stood gazing out over Wet Rain Hill.

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The Huntsman is an upmarket pub located in the basement of the Landmark Plaza, one of the many modern hotel and shopping centre tower complexes along

Bangkok's busy Sukhumvit Road. Many of the pub's clientele were Americans and Europeans working in Bangkok. In addition, prosperous Thai businessmen and businesswomen also frequented the bar together with foreign tourists perhaps staying in the towering luxury hotel situated above it. The Huntsman was fitted out and furnished exactly like a traditional British pub. On one side there was a row of sturdy wooden tables and upholstered benches, separated by partitions topped with framed semicircular stained-glass windowpanes. The remaining perimeter space, with the exception of a small stage used by musical performers, was taken up with large easy chairs and low wooden tables. The walls were decorated with framed old black-and-white photographs representing people and events in Britain from the early part of the Twentieth Century. The bar area was located in the centre, and was surrounded by an almost continuous table surface, punctuated by wooden pillars stretching up to about half the height of the ceiling. Here, people sat on high stools, and some gazed up at a television set suspended above the bar. Showing on the television was a live football match from England. The sound on the television had been turned down. The resident Filipino band was just about to begin playing their first song for the last set of the evening. The time was just before ten thirty on a Saturday evening in mid-January.

At one of the partitioned tables in the pub, Mr William Avon sat opposite the managing director of the Lucky Bird Export Company of Bangkok, Thailand. The company's founder and managing director, Mr Somchai Tantaratana, was what is referred to in Thailand as a Chinese Thai. He was in his mid fifties, and relatively light-

skinned. He was perhaps more reserved and not so easily given to smiling as the majority of Thais. In fact, the ease and frequency with which most Thais were able to smile had earned the country the well-deserved epithet: the Land of Smiles. On this evening, however, even Mr Somchai Tantaratana was allowing himself the luxury of something approaching a smile. His seat was facing the stage where the Filipino group was about to perform. Like many of the other Thais in the pub, Somchai Tantaratana was rather fascinated by the attractive female Filipino singer. Partly, this was because in many respects she looked quite similar to a Thai lady. It was only when she spoke English with a characteristic Filipino accent, Hispanic-sounding and quite distinct from the singsong tonal Thai rendition of the language, that any doubt could be removed. In addition, the Filipino national psyche is also very different from the Thai. The historical, cultural and religious backgrounds of the two countries are completely different, with Thailand a predominantly Buddhist country and the Philippines, Roman Catholic. Somchai clapped his hands enthusiastically when the Filipino singer announced that the band was about to perform the song known popularly as theme tune from the film Titanic. He continued clapping as the plaintive opening chords of the song rang out.

Avon grimaced at what he perceived to be a lack of sophistication in the musical taste of his companion, but Somchai either did not notice or paid no heed. The loudness of the music now made talking at the table difficult. Looking around in his seat, he noticed the photographs hanging on the wall near to him. One particular photograph caught his eye. It was of two schoolboys standing together in the backyard of a terraced

house in London, and was dated nineteen thirty. He was struck, however, not so much by the shabbily dressed and tousle-haired subjects of the photograph, but by the quality of the light in the background. The photograph had been taken late in the afternoon sometime in autumn, as evidenced by a solitary bare tree in the distance. Only in the Northern Hemisphere, in autumn, could one witness such a grey melancholic fading of the day. In tropical Southeast Asia, in contrast, night fell almost instantaneously. The days were almost exactly the same length throughout the year. In his mind, there was no dramatic distinction between the seasons, at least not in the same sense that there were in Britain. There was a hot season, an even hotter season and a hot season with rain. Each day was more or less indistinguishable from the rest. There was nothing really to mark the passage of time, and it was easy to fall under the illusion that time was standing still. He seemed only to experience the passage of time during his occasional trips back to Britain. Otherwise, he felt as if he had been frozen in time during what had actually been a stay of more or less ten years in Thailand.

Most of the expatriates that lived and worked in Thailand, even if for lengthy periods of time, were usually never able to learn to speak the Thai language properly. It was a tonal language that was extremely difficult to learn without a prolonged and sustained effort. And if they could learn to speak some Thai, then it would usually only be sufficient for simple conversation, or to use the much used and generally applicable Thai expression: Mai pen rai. Which is often translated into English as: “It doesn’t matter” or: “It’s not important” or even: “You’re welcome.” But perhaps a more

insightful rendition of its sense would be something along the lines of: “It won’t be very important in the long run, in fact it will be meaningless in the long run, so lets not vex or concern ourselves too much with it right now.”

William Avon, however, was an exception to this general rule regarding the mastery of the Thai language. He could both speak the language fluently, and could also read the Sanskrit-derived characters in which the language was written. Admittedly, he had put some effort into learning the language after he came to Thailand ten years ago to teach English at a technical college, but this process had also been assisted by what seemed to be an almost innate ability for the language. The ability to speak both Thai and English fluently had made him a potentially very useful employee. Consequently, he no longer taught English, and had for the past year-and-a-half worked as an agent for the Lucky Bird Export Company of Bangkok.

The Lucky Bird Export Company of Bangkok was a very mysterious entity. For one thing, the wealth it appeared to generate would not appear to be commensurate with the level of services it offered. In addition, the name of the Company would not appear to correspond to the type of services that it proffered: The Company was not at all involved in the exporting of goods. In reality, the Company was involved mainly in overseeing the shipping of personal possessions from Thailand to destinations all over the world, particularly to Europe, and especially to Britain, Germany and Scandinavia. Most of its clients were foreigners who had spent some time living and working in Thailand, and

who, for whatever reason, wished to move back again to their country of origin. In this business, it was Avon's job to seek out potential customers, and to persuade them, either directly or through an intermediary, to use the services of the Lucky Bird Export Company. His ability to speak Thai fluently was a considerable boon in this respect, as many of the company's prospective customers would be returning back home with a Thai spouse.

Somchai clapped his hands appreciatively when the Filipino band finished the song. He then took a sip from the pint beer glass containing imported dark Irish Stout, a speciality of the Huntsman pub, which he had been nursing for the duration of the performance. Avon was drinking Thai 'Singha' beer. Somchai used the brief pause in the entertainment to say a few words to him. "You know, William, I have been England many time on business. But always, I only go London. This first time I will have been to the North England," he said in his Thai-modified English, noticeable for its begrudging use of prepositions. "Oh, you'll love it. It's really wild," replied Avon with a smirk on his face.

"A long time has passed, nearly two month. We should have done this earlier. Or rather, you should have done it. But it seem that your bad habit got in the way," continued Somchai. "I don't have a bad habit," objected Avon. "You know that the stuff I take, I mean took, wasn't addictive. It's not heroin or anything like that. I just got in a bad way because of where the stuff took me. It disturbed me a little; shook me up. But anyway,

I'm over it now; recovered from it completely and ready to finish off this job once and for all.”

“I already said many time, William, that we have the business of selling goods, not using them. You see how dangerous these drugs are?”

“Well I can assure you after the fright I got last November that I won't be using those goods again. I've never experienced a trip like that one. It really freaked me out; scared the living daylights of me. I'll never be able to understand how realistic it seemed to be at the time. Most times, there is still some part of me that seems to know that whenever I'm on a trip, whatever it is that I'm seeing, hearing, smelling or touching, it just isn't real. For example I once smoked something, sage I believe it was, which took me right back to my old grandmother's house the way it was about thirty years ago. The old furniture, the smell of cooking coming from the kitchen, the old clock ticking loudly on the mantel piece, a dog barking in the street outside: everything exactly the way it was. I could walk around the room, touch things, and look at my grandmother wearing her shawl, standing in the room. But I didn't freak out then and say: “Shit, I'm stuck in 1970.” I knew that in a while it would all dissolve before my eyes, and that even though I might then find myself somewhere else removed from the here-and-now, I would eventually find myself back in the present.”

“But this time you got really scared, and you run back to Thailand,” observed Somchai.

“You know everything was going to plan. I had been observing the Humes for a while. I knew what time they and their neighbours usually went to bed. I also knew that the Humes didn't yet have an alarm system fitted in the cottage. In fact, I was all set to lay

my hands on those damned wooden animals and complete the job, but then everything went to pieces. I'd only taken a sniff of the stuff to give me some extra strength and courage."

"Seems like you got the opposite," remarked Somchai in Thai.

"Yeah, I've never ran so fast in my life. After scrambling up a dark rocky hill, clambering over a stone wall, and running along a dark country road towards the village, I eventually ended up in the local pub. Not so much to get a drink, but to be reassured by the sight of real people," explained Avon, unconscious of the fact that he had switched back again to using English.

After some delay sorting out song requests from the audience, The Filipino group eventually began the second song of their final performance for the evening: a rendition of Elton John's Crocodile Rock. Somchai had not entirely understood what Avon had just said. "What you mean?" he asked, raising his voice so that he could be heard above a string of la-la-la's from the Filipino singer. "I mean that I pity anybody that has a lick of that stuff," explained Avon in Thai, similarly raising his voice to be heard.

"Tell me again, where are you getting this stuff from?" asked Avon during the next brief interlude in the entertainment. Somchai looked around the room before leaning forward and whispering: "I have a contact on the Thai-Burmese border. He is someone high up in the Thai military. He has a contact on the Burmese side, also a military man. This Burmese gets his supplies from a member of the Karen hill tribes. They manufacture

the drug, which if you translate directly into English is called ‘Orange Sound’, from fungus found on jungle plants. But it’s a secret recipe, and they won’t tell anyone what it is.”

“So, it’s a bit like Colonel Saunder’s secret recipe for Kentucky fried chicken,” said Avon sarcastically in English. Somchai looked at him with incomprehension, and then said: “I must go and make a telephone call to my wife. Please excuse me for a moment. It’s too noisy in here for me to use my mobile.”

“Yeah, too much orange sound,” muttered Avon quickly under his breath as Somchai walked away from the table. He immediately felt pleased at the multiplicity and obscurity of this pun. For it had connotations not only both with noise and the name of a well-known mobile telephone company, but more significantly perhaps, it also made an oblique reference to the Malay/Indonesian word ‘orang’ meaning ‘man’, as used in ‘Orang Utang’, meaning ‘man of the jungle’. He also recalled that the novelist Anthony Burgess, a speaker of Malay and who coincidentally had himself once worked in the Far East as an English teacher, had also played with the word ‘orang’ in the title of his famous novel ‘A Clockwork Orange’, a similarly obscure pun intended to mean: ‘A Clockwork Man’.

After musing briefly on what seemed like a strange, if ineffable, connection between himself and something else, he also realised that the statement: ‘Too much orange sound’ was more than a mere pun: it seemed to neatly and literally describe the

cause of the problem on his last visit to England. He smiled, and whimsically said to himself. “Orange sound: the sound of man”.

Somchai Tantaratana returned a few minutes later. “Come on William, let’s go somewhere else to eat,” he urged. After paying the bill, the two men left the hotel bar together. Once outside the comfort of the air-conditioned environment of the Landmark Plaza, it only took a few minutes before the warmth and humidity of the night began to be felt by both men. They laboured up the steps of one of the many pedestrian footbridges crossing Sukhumvit Road. Walking was by far the quickest mode of transportation. Beneath them, the road traffic was still very busy; even though it was now well after eleven in the evening. Car horns sounded, motorcycle engines roared, and public buses produced clouds of choking black exhaust smoke from their diesel engines each time they managed to shunt forwards. A continuous line of traffic trailed for as far as the eye could see along the road. Above their heads, a sky train rumbled to a halt at Nana station on the raised track of the city’s ultra modern public railway system. Around them, the air was filled with the pulsating cacophony of music emanating from the many so-called entertainment establishments in the area. Their gaudy neon lights, together with the lights from the myriad of tall buildings and skyscrapers in this gigantic city, conspired with the noxious traffic fumes, to block out any view of the stars in the night sky.

At ground level, the hundreds of stall-holders along Sukhumvit Road, who sold all types of goods, including clothing, shoes, watches and electronic equipment, all of

uncertain provenance, were completing their efforts to pack up for the evening. The streets, however, still thronged with tourists and members of Bangkok's vast army of demimondaine, as well as with homeward-bound office and shop workers. It was eleven-fifteen by the time William Avon and Somchai Tantaratana reached the Kentucky fried chicken restaurant located at the entrance to the huge Ambassador Hotel complex, also on Sukhumvit Road. The fast food outlet had not been Avon's choice as a suitable place to dine, and he wondered whether his earlier quip concerning Colonel Saunder's secret recipe had prompted the idea in Somchai's head as a mild form of revenge. On the way, Somchai had informed him that another employee of the Lucky Bird Export Company would be meeting them later at the restaurant.

In the restaurant, Avon decided not to order anything to eat. Instead, he sat down holding only a Styrofoam cup of hot coffee. Somchai ordered some fried chicken, which in a few minutes he was eating voraciously. The restaurant still had a number of customers, even though it was very nearly closing time. A young assistant was aggressively mopping the floor, whilst another was clearing tables. There were a number of Caucasian men, or 'Farangs' as they are referred to by Thais, paired up and sitting with Thai women at several tables in the restaurant. The men looked, on the whole, to be above fifty years of age, or in one or two cases, even older, whilst most of the women looked considerably younger.

The person they were waiting for still hadn't arrived by the time Somchai finished his last piece of fried chicken and had slung the picked bones back into the cardboard meal container. He then began to clean trapped pieces of meat from his teeth using one end of the plastic stirring-spatula supplied with his companion's coffee. During this unprepossessing activity, he began speaking to Avon in Thai. "You know, William, you fled back here to Thailand from Britain; a journey of over seven thousand miles. It took me three weeks before I could get any real sense out of you. I paid for you to see a traditional healer, and then a doctor, a psychiatrist in fact. They diagnosed you as suffering from stress. But is it really so stressful working for me?"

"Why do you ask? Are you going to fire me?" asked Avon staring across the restaurant at a woman who had suddenly begun smiling at him without any prompting. He noticed that she had been sitting with the Caucasian man who was now standing up and washing his hands in a basin located on the wall of the restaurant. There was a mirror directly above the wash basin, and in it he caught glimpses of the man's face; it was severely pockmarked. He understood the nature of the relationship between the man and the women, and did not feel inclined to respond to her smiles. Somchai answered Avon's question in Thai: "No, William, I'm not going to fire you, even though I was very angry with you at the time. But we have worked together for one-and-a-half years, and I've come to trust you. It is true that you made a mess of this particular job, but I'm sure we can still rectify the situation. Having said that, I do hope that our lovely couple in England haven't found out yet that there is something interesting packed inside their oversized Thai ornaments."

“I’m sure they haven’t. I’ve been monitoring the local press in that part of the world on the Internet, and there has been no mention of anything being discovered in Wet Rain Hill,” responded Avon, also in Thai. “Except of course maybe in your apartment, which you left in such a rush,” Somchai reminded him.

“True. But I’m sure they’ve already written me off as a casual drug user, or at worst, a small dealer. The main thing is that there is nothing to link me to the Humes.”

“I believe you, William, but nevertheless I no longer wish to take any unnecessary risks.”

Somchai’s remark perturbed Avon. He half expected at any moment to see an assassin burst into the restaurant in the style of a Hollywood gangster movie, and for his employer to reiterate that he wasn’t going to fire him; instead he was going to murder him. Murder related to unsatisfactory business dealings was not uncommon in Bangkok. This unease increased at the sight of the man with the pockmarked face returning to his seat, who, as he sat down at the table with his Thai lady friend, seemed to glare malevolently across the room.

“There are no risks. As I said, they don’t know I work for the company that shipped their belongings out to Britain. They never saw me in Thailand. All the business in this case was handled by John Wakes,” Avon pointed out. John Wakes was the person who it was planned would join them shortly in the fried chicken establishment. Like Avon, he was an Englishman. He had joined the Lucky Bird Export Company five months ago, and had managed to persuade the Humes to use the company for their move

back to Britain. He had overseen the removal of their belongings from their home. Then, once the Humes' belongings had been secured in the Company's holding area in Bangkok, Avon had managed what was known euphemistically as the additional packaging. This was an extra service of which the customers were naturally unaware. The company had the services of some corrupt Thai customs officials who ensured that the crates were not inspected during their shipping from Thailand. It was this stage of the operation in Thailand that carried the highest risk for the company. This was because if on arrival at their destination overseas, the crates were opened and inspected by customs and excise, then the company could always plead ignorance and claim that it was their customer who had had the criminal intent.

Once this particular shipment had left Thailand, William Avon had travelled to Britain and awaited its arrival. British customs and excise controls were so strict, however, that it was impossible to get access to such shipments until they had been cleared. A legitimate and wholly unsuspecting third-party company was used for the final delivery within Britain. From the point of view of the Lucky Bird Export Company, the final stage of their service generally involved burglarising the customers' homes in order to reclaim the additional items that had been shipped secretly. This same modus operandi was to have been used in the case of the Humes' shipment, and it was Avon who should have carried out this particular burglary.

Somchai began explaining to Avon, in Thai, his intended safeguards. “Since I am going to Britain with you this time, and because I wouldn’t want to see you arrested on arrival in London’s Heathrow airport, I have arranged a new identity for you. You will get a new passport obtained with the help of a friend that works in the British Embassy on Wireless Road here in Bangkok. Moreover, the passport has a legitimate Thai visa stamp, so that you won’t have to explain a blank passport to the immigration officer at Bangkok’s Don Muang Airport when you leave Thailand. The visa stamp was provided with the help of another friend in the Thai Immigration Office.”

“When will I be having the plastic surgery?” asked Avon sarcastically.

“No need to change your face. I used one of the passport photographs you once provided me with. Only a change of name has taken place.”

“And my new name is?”

“Your new name is John Wakes.”

“John Wakes!” exclaimed Avon. “What does John think about that?”

“He doesn’t mind. He will arrive any minute now with your new passport. And by the way, it is a replacement passport and not one that has been newly issued. It was easier for my friend in the British Embassy to produce a replacement passport from existing records than to create a completely new and fictitious identity. John still has his original passport, which remains valid. If he needs to leave Thailand quickly before we return here, then he can use one of the land border points into Malaysia, for example, and fly out from there. The system is not computerised at the land crossings, so unlike at Don Muang Airport, the immigration officials will not notice that John Wakes has apparently left the country

two times without a single re-entry in between. So you see, William, your new identity has been completely taken care of.”

“Well, it seems that anything can be taken care of in this country if you are ready to pay the right price for it,” said Avon looking across at the man with the pockmarked face and his lady friend, who were now holding hands. It was evident that the man was extremely self-conscious about his facial disfigurement. He had placed a hand over the lower half of his face in an attempt to partly cover it.

A short time later, Avon saw John Wakes enter the restaurant. One of the assistants mopping the floor also saw him and immediately called out: “Sorry sir, closed now.” Before noticing William Avon and Somchai Tantaratana sitting in the corner, Wakes halted momentarily and turned towards the direction of the voice. Then he noticed the man with the pockmarked face. In a voice that was sufficiently loud to make everyone in the restaurant look over, he yelled out: “Bloody hell, Snaz. What are you doing here in Bangkok?”

**** (10) ****

February had arrived, but the days were still short and the nights still long. Nok Hume was spending her first night alone in the cottage. Her husband had departed earlier in the day for Saudi Arabia, where he was going to work for six weeks on a lucrative short-term contract that involved carrying out inspections for a major oil company on

pipelines near Jeddah. At first, Nok had not been enthusiastic about her husband taking this work, but had finally agreed that the extra money would be most welcomed. It would help finance, amongst other things, a holiday for both of them to Thailand later in the year. She was very much looking forward to seeing her family in Thailand once again.

The idea of being left alone in the cottage had been at first a little scary for Nok. She had initially considered travelling with her husband to Saudi Arabia, but had eventually come around to the view that it would be difficult for her to stay in that ultra-conservative desert kingdom, even for a short time.

In staying at home by herself, there was thankfully one less thing for Nok to worry about; namely that the strange Thai-speaking ‘farang’ was no longer in the village. He had vanished from Wet Rain Hill, and was not thought likely to return. Something else that made her feel better was that the majority of villagers now behaved in a very friendly manner towards her. The Humes were no longer significantly affected by the unpleasant rumours concerning the disappearance of cats in the village. This matter seemed to have vanished from the minds of most people. The Siam Kitchen takeaway restaurant business had been handed over the previous week as a going concern to an Asian family from Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and the Humes had managed to make some money from this deal.

Nok had also noticed that the vicar from the village church had become particularly warm towards her. He had shown great interest in learning about Lord Buddha and about Thai culture. Though at times, she felt uncomfortable about his evident desire to get her to attend one of his church services.

Then, of course, there was her neighbour: Elsie Crawford. For the few months that Nok Hume had lived in the village, she had grown close to Elsie Crawford. Indeed, she had come to regard the kind old lady as if she was her own grandmother. On hearing that Jack Hume was going to be away for some time, Elsie Crawford had promised to keep Nok company, and to help her in any way that she could. Nok had been invited to drop in next door at any time for a talk, or to watch television together. Elsie Crawford had even offered her the use of one of the unoccupied bedrooms in the cottage, in case she was scared of staying alone in her own cottage. Nok had not, however, taken up this offer.

It was late on a Friday night. Nok Hume looked at the illuminated face of her bedside alarm clock. The time was five minutes before midnight. She began thinking about her husband, who would by now have already arrived in Saudi Arabia. The change in her circumstances was making it difficult for her to fall asleep this night. Finally, however, she drifted off to sleep.

Some time later, she was suddenly awoken. The bedside clock revealed that it was now 2:20 a.m. She lay for a moment trying to collect her thoughts; briefly unable to understand why her husband wasn't in bed beside her. Then the realisation that she was alone in the cottage dawned upon her. She also quickly realised that there was something else: she had been disturbed from her sleep by noises in the cottage. The noises were coming from the living room; from the other side of her bedroom door. There was the sound of furniture being moved and dragged across the parquet floor. Shocked, she immediately sat up in bed. A wave of paralysing terror swept through her body. She could also hear, coming from beyond her bedroom door, sounds resembling a series of hisses. Not being able to imagine what could possibly produce such ghastly sounds, Nok Hume struggled to compose herself and to suppress the urge to scream out in terror. She pinched herself to confirm that she wasn't just experiencing a terrible nightmare. Her heart pounded remorselessly. She took hold of the Lord Buddha medallion around her neck and quietly muttered a prayer, pleading for strength, protection and safe deliverance from this terrible situation.

A short time later, she reached over to take the mobile telephone lying on the bedside table, and with trembling hands switched it on. To her horror, the telephone gave two very loud bleeps as it registered a network connection. Instantly, the noise in the living room stopped completely and everything fell quiet. Feeling unable to use the mobile telephone in the terrifying silence, she lay clutching it with her head pushed back firmly against the headboard of the bed. After a pause lasting several seconds, the noises

in the living room resumed once again. For several minutes she listened, not moving, and hardly daring to breathe. Finally, there was what sounded like the crash of a chair falling over, and then everything went silent. The silence continued; a heavy silence, which felt almost as terrible as the commotion that had preceded it. She continued to lie motionless, her hands now grasped tightly together under the bedclothes. The steady pounding rhythm of her over-worked heart resounded in her ears like rapid wave-falls on a beach. Each heartbeat marked the passage of time. Seconds and then minutes passed. Nothing happened. Silence remained sovereign. Then, a sharp ray of light from the illuminated face of her alarm clock caught the medallion she was wearing. Looking down, she saw that Lord Buddha was serene. His countenance remained benevolent and unperturbed. She clasped the medallion tightly and said quietly: “Khorp Khun Ka”: “Thank you”.

The time was 2:40 a.m. Nok Hume now felt brave enough to climb out of bed. She crept over to the window in her bedroom, facing onto Main Street, and unlocked and unbolted it. Using all her strength, she tried to push the sash window upwards. The frame screeched and momentarily stuck partly open, before finally yielding completely. The rush of cold night made her shudder. She was able to climb through the window and out onto the front driveway of the cottage. Wearing only her nightdress, and still in bare feet, she ran across the small garden at the front, hardly daring to look around. Arriving at Elsie Crawford’s front door, she began to knock on it frantically whilst shouting the old lady’s name through the small letterbox.

The tumult at her front door quickly awakened Elsie Crawford. Moments later she opened the door, sure from the sound of the voice that it was Nok Hume. At the same time, lights went on in the Jackson's cottage across the road. Nok had evidently also been heard across the road. Elsie Crawford immediately brought her into the living room and tried to establish what had happened. In no time, Paul Jackson's father, Stanley Jackson, had also appeared on the scene. He knocked briefly at the unclosed door and, still wearing his dressing gown, entered Elsie Crawford's living room.

"She heard some intruders inside her cottage," explained Elsie Crawford.

"Have you called the police?" asked Stanley Jackson.

"I'll do that now," responded Elsie picking up her telephone.

"Meanwhile, I'll have a look around the back," announced Stanley Jackson.

"Don't do that. I think dangerous," said Nok looking terrified.

"Don't go there in the dark by yourself, Stanley. Just have a look from over this side," said Mrs Crawford, pointing towards the garden at the back of her cottage. Then she turned towards Nok and tried to comfort her. "Don't worry pet, you're safe now. Everything's going to be fine."

The previous day had been bright and cloudless, and now the night was bitterly cold and still. From where he was standing in Elsie Crawford's garden, partly illuminated by the light from the cottage behind him, Stanley Jackson could see that the glass in both patio doors at the back of the Humes' cottage had been completely broken. The patio

doors, however, remained closed. He looked and listened carefully for any indications of those responsible for this deed. But the garden, like the hillside behind it, was silent and still. Then his son suddenly appeared by his side. “What happened, Dad?” asked Paul Jackson breathlessly. “I heard you going out of the house, and followed you across. Mrs Crawford just mentioned something about intruders next door.”

“A break-in, I’m sure” replied Jackson senior. “I’m not sure what, if anything at all, is missing. But I bet both the video and television have gone. Thieving scumbags, they make me sick. People work hard for what they buy, and then these blighters think they can come and help themselves to anything they like.” Stanley Jackson’s face frowned. “Can you catch that awful smell, Paul? I’ve never smelt anything like that before; it’s rank.”

“Yes, I can smell it,” confirmed his son, noticeably twitching his nostrils. “Doesn’t it smell a bit like an animal house in the zoo?”

A few minutes later a police car arrived in front of the Humes’ cottage. Elsie Crawford heard it pull up, and went to the door to invite the police into her cottage. There were two police officers: a man and a woman. Elsie brought them into her cottage and explained the situation. The male officer was then directed through the kitchen and into the garden at the back where Stanley and Paul Jackson were looking over into the Humes’ cottage. The woman officer remained in the living room with Nok. After trying to give Nok some reassurance about the situation, the woman officer began taking down details in a notepad about the incident.

Outside in the garden, the officer told the Jacksons to remain where they were for the moment. He then climbed over the low wall dividing the two gardens. Using a flashlight, he first carefully inspected the area around the patio doors, speaking into his walkie-talkie as he looked. “This is PC Edminson, at 1 Main Street, in the village of Wet Rain Hill, reporting a forced entry into the said premises. Perpetrators appear to have fled the scene. It is very likely that we are looking at an attempted or actual theft. I’m also noting a very pungent and unusual smell coming from the premises. Requesting backup, over.” A squelched, and to the ears of those on the other side of the wall, indistinct reply came back over the walkie-talkie. Then the officer carefully entered the dark living room of the cottage, stepping through the opening of one of the patio doors, taking care to avoid the small, jagged and potentially lethal, shards of glass that still remained attached to the inside of the frame. The beam of his flashlight could be seen moving around the room. Suddenly, he cried out from inside: “What the on earth is this?”

A few seconds later, the officer had apparently located and switched on the light in the Humes’ living room. Then peering out through the opening in one of the patio doors, he called out to Stanley Jackson and his son: “Please tell WPC Johnson and the young lady who lives here that I’m sorry, but that they will both need to come here to have a look. There something in here I don’t understand. We also need to know if anything is missing from the cottage.”

A short while later, Stanley and Paul Jackson crossed over into the neighbouring garden together with Nok Hume and WPC Johnson. They were warned to take great care of the broken glass lying on the floor as they entered the living room. It had not been possible to enter through the front door of the cottage, because it remained locked and Nok Hume's key was still inside.

The strange animal odour was even more apparent inside the living room. As they entered, Stanley Jackson and his son noticed the large wooden carving standing by the side of PC Edminson at the far end of the room; its presence dominated everything. Although the Jacksons were not familiar with the layout of the room, it was apparent that the sofa had been pushed forward from its usual position, and now stood hard up against the mantelpiece. A table had been pushed back against the wall on the opposite side, and two chairs lay overturned. It was as if a passageway had been created in the centre of the room so that something could move through the space created. The television set and video recorder had not been removed, and appeared to be undamaged.

The first thing Nok noticed as she entered the room behind the Jacksons was that the wooden carving of the Siamese cat and the carving of the upright crocodile were no longer behind the patio doors. Then she cried out, shocked at the sight of the carving of the crocodile in its altered location. It now stood gazing out onto Main Street, towards the steeple of St George's church, with a ghastly object stuck between its jaws: the partially

skeletal remains of a dead cat. The curtains that had covered the nearby window had been pulled off the runner and lay in a heap on the floor.

“I’m sorry, dear,” apologised the PC Edminson looking at the object beside him.

“We’ll come to this one in a minute. But is there anything that is missing?”

Nok looked around the room in a state of incomprehension. “My Siamese cat carving has gone. It was together with my crocodile statue by the doors here,” she said pointing to the patio doors behind her.

“And nothing else missing apart from that?” asked the same officer, before adding: “And can you be sure about, for example, credit cards, bank books and so on?”

“No. Everything valuable, I keep in downstairs bedroom,” explained Nok, pointing towards her locked bedroom door.

“Was there an attempt to enter your bedroom?”

“No. They never tried to open the door. But I think they hear me when I switch on my mobile telephone.”

“Did you hear any voices?”

“No voices.”

“So you have no idea how many people there were in here?”

“No idea. But there were some strange noises.”

“Strange noises; like what, dear?” asked WPC Johnson.

“Something like a snake; a big snake,” she replied with evident conviction.

“A hissing sound?” asked WPC Johnson. Nok was not familiar with the word, but guessed the meaning from its onomatopoeic qualities.

“Yes,” she confirmed.

“It looks like this whole thing involves one or two people with very sick minds,” suggested WPC Johnson, gazing at the carving of the crocodile with the dead cat in its jaws. “Sorry to push you on this, Mrs Hume, but do you have any idea why anyone would do something like this?” asked PC Edminson. Nok shook her head; she didn’t know. “I think I might have an idea what this means,” offered Stanley Jackson. “It’s possibly a sick joke directed at Nok, and has some connection with the spate of disappearing cats we had lately in the village. There were some nasty and of course baseless rumours that somehow Nok and her husband were responsible for the disappearances, and that they were using the cat meat in their takeaway. That’s my interpretation of this.”

“So we might be looking for someone local. This is just a small village. Any ideas who you think could be responsible?” asked PC Edminson.

“There was that strange guy who once lived in Church Lane,” said Paul Jackson looking at Nok. Paul and Nok had never really spoken to each other before except just to say hello. Nok clearly understood the reference, but remained silent. “But he’s not in the village any more. He disappeared about two months ago,” added Paul Jackson.

The carcass of the dead cat hanging from the mouth of the wooden crocodile made for very unpleasant viewing. It also seemed to have been taken for granted that it

was the source of the evil smell that lingered in the room. With its matted dirty fur, exposed patches of bone on both its abdomen and skull, severely decayed shrivelled face and empty eye sockets, the carcass hung precariously from the carving. The slightest disturbance and it would surely drop onto the floor. Looking at the dead cat, Paul Jackson noticed that there was something familiar wrapped around its neck. He moved closer, and immediately recognised the identification tag from his missing cat, Katy. “It’s my cat, Katy, which went missing last November,” he cried out in astonishment. Everyone watched in stunned silence as Paul Jackson, covering his nose and mouth, took hold of the identification tag and confirmed that the cat was his.

Two more police officers finally arrived on the scene. A thorough check was made of the whole cottage. At the point of entry, the glass in both of the patio doors had been shattered, but no attempt appeared to have been made to force open the locks. The doors remained both closed and locked. The thieves had entered the living room, and had removed the carving of the Siamese cat without opening the doors. “And you never heard the sound of the glass being broken?” asked one of the newly arrived officers.

Nok shook her head. “No. Mrs Crawford didn’t hear anything either.”

“Coming straight through the glass seems to make some sense if they supposed that the doors would be alarmed,” suggested PC Edminson.

“Which it isn’t,” observed Stanley Jackson. “And all this mischief for a wooden carving and just to do something like that,” he added, pointing to the carving of the crocodile. PC Edminson shook his head in despair. He was now standing by the patio doors. Bending

down, he partially lifted up a large shard of glass, about a metre in length. “The glass is fairly thick and strong. It would have required the application of a considerable force to break through it,” he suggested.

“Judging by the largeness of all the pieces of glass, the force must have been applied quickly and over a large area in each of the doors. It couldn’t have been done with something like a hammer, which would have produced some smaller pieces from the point of impact,” added Stanley Jackson. The large shards of glass lay on top of a thick rug covering the area of the parquet floor immediately behind the patio doors.

“Are you an expert on glass?” asked PC Edminson.

“I work in the hardware business. I know something about it,” replied Stanley Jackson.

“What do you think managed to smash this glass then?” asked PC Edminson.

“Something big, heavy and fast-moving,” replied Stanley Jackson.

“Such as?”

“I have absolutely no idea. But the glass was knocked out, and then it must have fallen relatively quietly onto the rug behind. Some further fragmentation may have occurred when the glass was subsequently trodden on.”

After completing their investigation, the police finally left. They had promised to keep Nok informed of any progress they made in finding out who was responsible. Even though the incident was bizarre and disturbing, it was a fact that the break-in could not be considered sufficiently serious to warrant the use of a large amount of police time. There would be no photographers recording the scene of the crime, and no forensic scientists in

white suits dusting down the door frames and glass shards for possible fingerprints or traces of those responsible.

It was three thirty in the morning when Stanley Jackson went across the road to his home and returned with a toolbox and two wooden panels of approximately the right dimensions for blocking up the patio doors. It was about half-an-hour later by the time he had finished the job of fitting the panels in place. Then, Stanley Jackson finally removed the body of the dead cat from the jaws of the wooden crocodile, and took it home to be buried. Elsie insisted that Nok spend what remained of the night sleeping in her spare bedroom. It was an offer that Nok Hume readily accepted in the circumstances. Even though deeply exhausted by the night's events, Nok was understandably not able to fall asleep immediately. But just as there were the first indications that morning was approaching, such as the sound of a car passing through the village, Nok finally drifted off to asleep.

During her sleep, Nok had one of the most powerful and vivid dreams she had ever experienced. She dreamt that that she was in a large oceanarium, with a huge clear acrylic window that allowed visitors to see fish and other marine life from beneath the surface of the ocean. The daylight that penetrated the depths illuminated a hitherto unseen and strange world. Seaweed and other aquatic plants swayed in turbulent ocean currents that churned up sand, pebbles and sediment on the seabed. Fish of all sizes, types and colours swam in the diffuse aquamarine light. Then she saw what resembled

a child suddenly appear and swim right up to the window of the oceanarium. Treading water, and apparently breathing effortlessly as if the sea was its natural environment, it peered through the window at her. The long black hair of the feral sea child drifted upwards in the water. Its nakedness was only partially concealed by the strands of seaweed wrapping themselves around its body. The sea child's face was expressionless, presenting dark eyes powered by an intelligence that did not seem to be human. It made no attempt to communicate, and just continued to tread water and to watch through the window of the oceanarium. Then the sea child suddenly turned and swam away, vanishing into the huge expanse of ocean that lay beyond. Nok marvelled at what she had just witnessed, and for the first time looked around the oceanarium to see if any of the other visitors had witnessed the sea child. But they had evidently not. No one was paying any attention to her section of the window. Then she awoke, and for a few seconds lay in bed convinced of the reality of her dream. Only after the effects of the dream had begun to fade was she able to recall the events of the previous night.

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