

*BRANWEN KELLOW: A NOVEL AND CRITICAL REFLECTION ON
UNRELIABLE NARRATIVE IN LONG FORM FICTION*

Thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
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by

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PART 1 of 2: BRANWEN KELLOW: A NOVEL

ABSTRACT

This is a Creative Writing PhD, composed of a novel, *Branwen Kellow* (approximately 84,200 words) and a Critical Reflection (approximately 23,000 words) with appendices (approx. 8,000 words).

The novel tells the story of a professional psychic who believes himself to be the only honest medium in the world. He is drawn into the search for a young woman who has gone missing several years previously, and consequently into a crisis that forces him to re-define himself and his past.

The Critical Reflection explores the production of a literary text in which the writer seeks deliberately, but not overtly, to emphasise the inherent unreliability and artificiality of narrative. It is divided into three sections.

In the Introduction I consider the nature of Creative Writing as research.

The second section is an account of how I wrote my novel. I consider the three key elements of the process: planning and research, developing a narrative structure and controlling style. Throughout this part of the commentary, there is a particular focus on textual ‘reality’ and how one’s awareness of the future reader might affect the act of writing.

Finally, in the section titled ‘Looking Further’, I discuss an additional piece of small-scale questionnaire research I undertook, inspired by my own experience of writing a novel.

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To my wife, Frances Rippin. Reading three drafts was the least of it. For the rest, mere thanks are hopelessly insufficient. They're all I can offer here, though. I hope they'll do.

BRANWEN KELLOW

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The frost makes a flower,
The dew makes a star,
The dead bell,
The dead bell.

Somebody's done for.

Sylvia Plath: *Death and Co.*

PART 1: THE DRAMA, NOT THE DETAILS

February 2010, New Theatre, Manchester: *Showbiz*

‘When I was thirteen, I saw a boy disappear.’

No ‘Good evening’, no ‘Hello Manchester’. Christopher had decided to go straight in tonight. It was a statement of intent. And then, as always, the rest of the Stevie Lightwood story, so familiar it almost told itself. Word followed word in unconscious order, like cattle through a gate. He remembered his resolution to stop flapping his hands about so much, and clasped them behind his back.

‘Has anyone here attended a psychic show before?’

A few murmurs of assent rumbled through the crowd. He scanned the faces in front of him and focused his attention on this or that detail—a twisted nose, a baseball cap, a need.

‘Tonight is going to be a little different,’ he told them. ‘For a start, unlike most of the mediums you’ll see doing the rounds, I can’t *always* promise results. I’ve no idea why—just, occasionally, I can’t get through, or they can’t. Nothing I can do about it. If that should happen you’ll all get a refund—and free tickets to my next show. Believe me, it’s worth coming back for.’

Fair warning. Why, after all, expect reliability from the Dead?

‘One more thing. They’re only people—like you and me. And I’m willing to bet some of them were awkward buggers when they were alive, weren’t they?’ A pause, to allow the audience the warmth of a little laughter. ‘What I’m saying is they have no reason to lie, nothing to lose by being honest. And I won’t censor their messages. I can’t. So I’m asking you to think hard for a moment. Did you really come to hear the truth?’

He let that sink in, before the kicker.

‘My manager is standing at the top of the steps near the exit. If you’d rather leave now, he’ll give you your money back. In cash.’

Rob Grice raised a hand in salutation as the crowd turned to look at him. Two of them stood to accept the offer of escape. That was good. Well worth refunding a couple of tickets to cement the rest. They went, we stayed. Together.

Just before he escorted the two deserters through the exit, Rob caught Christopher’s eye and winked. Not professional—even if nobody *was* looking in that

direction now. A lapse like that, spotted by even a single person, could ruin everything. It wasn't acceptable. It would seem like collusion, charlatanry.

'Thank you for your patience,' Christopher said. 'And now I have to ask you to be completely silent.' He unclasped his hands behind his back, relaxed his muscles and felt his weight find its own most comfortable distribution. 'I'm going to close my eyes while I get into a receptive state.'

That was the cue for the sound guy. Gentle, abstract music filled the auditorium. Pushing aside the temptation to weaken the moment with a joke—to say *wake me up if I start snoring*—Christopher let himself tumble into the dark.

Then Stevie, to keep him from falling. One sleeve torn from his blazer.

#

Christopher opened his eyes and checked his watch. Four minutes. That would have felt like a long time to the waiting audience. Nevertheless, the mood in the theatre was quietly fertile. He fixed his gaze on a blonde woman, early forties, in the middle of Row J, and made a side-hand gesture so she could be sure he was speaking directly to her.

'Stevie's brought someone to me. This person coming through. It's—it's a man. He's called Philip. Is that right madam? Is that a name you recognise? Yes? OK, just raise your arm, could you, please? So we can get a microphone to you.'

But the overweight usher in charge of that section hadn't been properly briefed. Instead of passing the radio mic hand-to-hand along the row, he tried to carry it to her, squeezing his way through the audience. Some of the people in his path had pulled in their knees to let him by; others were beginning to stand up. Amusement, unwanted and uncontrolled, began to ripple around the room. Rob Grice, just back from giving out the refunds, sprinted down the steps to deal with the problem. Unfortunately he was on the wrong side of the theatre. From the far end of the row he gesticulated crossly at the usher, who seemed to conclude that Rob wanted him to speed up, and so pressed on harder.

Christopher saw he would have to correct this situation himself, before it escalated into hilarity. Careful to keep the annoyance out of his voice, he said, 'What Mr Grice is trying to tell you is that if you'll just give the microphone to someone, they can pass it along.'

The usher stood in confusion for a moment, until the woman nearest him took the initiative, plucked the mic out of his hand and gave it to her neighbour. It had almost reached its destination before the man grasped what had happened and headed awkwardly back to the aisle.

After that sideshow Christopher expected he'd need to work at winning the crowd back, but it was over and they'd forgotten it. Audiences were so obedient these days, since the newspaper column, the occasional TV appearances. Trust, it seemed, arrived in the room first. Waited for him there.

At least the woman had the microphone now. Christopher said, 'Could you tell me your name, madam?'

'Claudia.' The single word revealed a West Midlands accent. Birmingham maybe. Stronger. Wolverhampton.

For a panicky second he forgot the man's name he'd said before. Then he had it again. Philip. And was Philip her brother? Her father? Husband. Normally Christopher would inflect his opener as a question, but after the absurdity with the usher, he needed to show them all, and himself, how good he could be at this. He made it a statement.

'—Philip was your husband.'

'That's right,' Claudia said, and Christopher raised his hand to suppress a flutter of applause. 'Now, Claudia. Your husband, Philip. I think you lost him quite recently? How long has it been?'

'Three months, Chris.'

The young man in the next seat was taller than her, but with similar pudgy features: a shapeless nose and fine, almost invisible eyebrows. Her teenage son. His white T shirt said *fuck you, I won't do what you tell me*. He held his mother's hand.

'Three months,' Christopher said. 'That is recent, isn't it? I'm so sorry. And it was sudden too. An accident—'

'At work.' Desperate to keep him right, she seized that tiniest of pauses and interrupted him with the very words he'd been about to use himself.

Nobody really believes in this, he thought.

'Claudia, do you have something you want to ask your late husband?'

She swallowed, readied herself. Even at this distance, he could see her shaking. She said, 'Does he still love me? Is he waiting for me—over there?'

'Are you sure you want the answer to that question, Claudia?'

She couldn't reply. There was too much at stake. Her son leaned across to speak into the microphone.

'Tell her. She wants to know.'

Christopher looked to Claudia for confirmation.

'Please,' she said.

Was this right? He was committed to it now. 'Philip doesn't love you. He never loved you. But he *is* sorry. He's sorry for everything he did, Claudia, and he's glad he's dead because that means he can't hurt you anymore. He wants you to forget him. You're only forty-three. You can still have a happy life—you only have to choose to.'

He couldn't make out her response. Her son was grinning.

'Claudia, I need to move on to some other people now. But before I do, please tell me—was I right to pass along that message? I know it's upset you.'

She said, 'You told me the truth, Chris.'

Though he held up both hands, this time the crowd wouldn't stop applauding.

#

Next morning he called Berry from his hotel room. There was no leaving it any longer. Holding the mobile in one hand, he set about packing his case with the other. He and Rob had to leave early to get to Sheffield in time for tonight's gig.

She answered on the third ring. Slow enough to sound as if she hadn't particularly been waiting for his call, quick enough not to risk him ringing off.

'I thought you'd have called yesterday,' she said.

'Sorry. I meant to talk to you after the show, but I must have just crashed out.' In fact he'd been drinking in the hotel bar with Rob Grice until two in the morning.

'It's fine.' She left a little silence so he'd know it wasn't. 'How's this month's column coming?'

'I'll hit the deadline.'

This time the silence lasted so long he thought she might have been cut off. 'Hello?' he said.

'I was just asking, Chris. I wasn't checking up on you.'

'I didn't mean to sound hostile. The column's almost ready.'

'Well. Good.'

Lies on lies. The column wasn't even started. Berry *had* been checking up on him, though, and it *had* made him hostile.

'Anyway,' he said, 'that sounds like Rob at the door. We're off to Sheffield now. I'd better go.'

He switched off his phone and dumped it in the case with his clothes. Something needed to be done about him and Berry. When he thought about their relationship, he had no nouns any more, only adjectives: uncomfortable, unsustainable, confusing. Worst of all, she had never said she believed in him, and he knew that meant she didn't.

March 2010, Barton: *Martha*

The woman wouldn't make her move until the shop cleared. She was smart, middle aged, businesslike. From the way she browsed the novels, as if nothing particular had caught her interest, Martha guessed she intended to buy something embarrassing. Self-help perhaps, or erotica.

Five other customers had come and gone from Garland's Books in the last half hour. Only Mr Clarke remained now, struggling with his walking stick while he piled up a stack of adventure stories from the Children's section. He tottered over to the counter, and deposited the books in front of Martha. She closed the Penguin *Tom Jones* she had been pretending to read.

'Would you recommend any of these for a twelve-year old?' Mr Clarke asked. 'My grandson's keen on Alex Rider, but he's had all those.'

Martha picked out the first volume in another teenage spy series. It was one she'd enjoyed herself when she was that age, though at twenty-four she was beginning to lose confidence in her advice on kids' literature. Mr Clarke paid for the book and left the other half dozen on the counter.

As soon as the old man exited, the remaining customer seized her moment. She swept up four novelettes from the Erotic Romance shelf and strode towards Martha with them. Right then, however, the door opened again. Before it had a chance to close, she had dumped her books in the recipe section and barged out, shoving her way past the man who was on his way in.

He turned and addressed the woman's retreating back. 'Cheers, love.'

As he came towards her, Martha saw he was older than he had first appeared, with a sallow, wrinkled face and long hair of a suspiciously even blackness. His square shoulder bag and long leather coat were both black too. In a Northern accent she couldn't locate precisely, he said, 'See you've a bit of publicity in the window. Local events and that? Think you'd have room for this?'

He unrolled an advertisement for *A Psychic Evening with Christopher Longley*. This was one of those posters that could be used anywhere the performer happened to be playing, with space left at the bottom for dates, times and places. Someone had added next Saturday at 7.30PM in blue marker pen, and the name of a local hotel—the Belvoir.

Between these details and the title of the show, a dramatically lit photograph dominated the poster. It depicted, she supposed, Christopher Longley, the man with whom one was being invited to share *A Psychic Evening*. Longley looked to be in his late thirties, with a bland, pleasant appearance, and in the photograph he was trying his best to appear meaningful. He held out his hands, fingers spread and curled like he was conjuring up spirits. His stare, direct into the camera and out at the viewer, must be intended as a challenge. But Martha detected something unconvincing, or rather something unconvinced, in it.

She said, 'I'm afraid the owner has a strict policy about ads. Arts and Literature only.'

'Ah. Look here, though.' The man pointed out where the poster said Christopher Longley was a *Sunday Beacon* columnist, and the author of *Living with the Dead: An Autobiography*. 'Literature, see? Maybe you've even got his book in here?'

'I doubt it.'

'Anyway, let's check, shall we?' He went off to the Biography and Autobiography section. Several times during his theatrical search of the shelves he positioned himself to obscure her view.

'There we are!' He returned to the counter, holding the book in his left hand and offering her his right. 'Name's Robert Grice. Mr Longley's artistic representative and so forth.' The threat of a handshake was further misdirection. She didn't take it.

'Could I see that, please?' she said.

He held up the paperback. It was similar to the poster, clumsily designed, with a front cover image of Christopher Longley holding his chin and gazing off somewhere out of the frame.

‘May I?’ Martha asked.

Grice surrendered *Living with the Dead* to her. The weight gave it away. No real book was this heavy in the hand, but it was typical of a self-publisher to waste money on dense, expensive paper. Next to the optimistic cover price, a Gothic R and G formed the logo of ‘Robert Grice Publishing Ltd’. People styling themselves ‘local author’ sometimes came into Garlands asking if she could give shelf space to a few books like this, on sale or return. Martha was under firm instructions from Malcolm Garland—always refuse.

‘Reckon it’s easy to forget the odd title, even in a little shop like this,’ Grice said. ‘Anyway, if Mr Longley’s book’s good enough for your shelves, his poster’s good enough for your window, right?’

‘You’re welcome to leave it with me. I’ll ask Mr Garland. But truthfully—’ She let the rest hang until Grice picked it up.

‘Maybe I’ll take it elsewhere.’ He was about to return the poster to his bag when he remembered Martha still had the autobiography. ‘I can put that back where it come from if you like,’ he said.

She glanced at his bag, making sure he knew she understood exactly what ‘put it back where it come from’ meant.

‘I’ll do it myself. I’ve all these to replace in a minute.’ Martha indicated the stack Mr Clarke had left behind, and she flipped through the pages of *Living with the Dead*. ‘Looks like this might be interesting.’

‘Yeah, you should give it a read,’ he said. ‘Actually, I may as well leave you the poster for now—I’ve got plenty. I’ll pop in tomorrow and take it back if your boss isn’t keen.’

Ten minutes after Grice left the shop, the middle-aged woman returned to retrieve her genteel pornography. She avoided eye contact and paid cash, the exact amount already counted out in a compartment of her purse so there was no need to wait for change.

Just after midday, Christopher stood where he had arranged to meet Rob, in the middle of Barton, outside *The Chicken and Robot*. He had chosen a position clear of the smokers' cluster near the pub door. Although it was two years since he had given up, the aroma of cigarettes still brought a nostalgic ache to his lungs.

Across the road, a bus pulled away from the stop and revealed a barber's, *Antonelli's Gents' Styling*. Someone was busy inside putting a familiar poster in the window. Moments later the shop door opened and Rob came out. He ignored the pedestrian lights a few yards off and dodged the traffic to join Christopher.

'Nice geezer, that barber,' he said. 'Remembered me from the old days.' Back when he was managing indie bands in the 1990s, Rob had often brought them to play at the nearby university. He scowled at the pub sign. '*Chicken and fuckin' Robot*. Used to be the *Anchor*. Probably been all ponced up.'

They went in. Christopher thought at first that Rob had been wrong. There was no evidence of modernization here. The interior must be around 1979 vintage—brown corduroy, brown wood, brown carpet. Then he realised it was all too new, too clean, and most of all too consistent, to be authentic. *When You're In Love with a Beautiful Woman* drifted out of the jukebox. Two excitable young men, students he guessed, were taking turns on a *Space Invaders* machine. They completed a level, and chorused the onscreen text in faux alien voices.

'Well done, Earthling, this time you win. Now do battle with our super forces.'

At their table, Rob spotted a leaflet in the menu stand, titled *The Chicken and Robot Experience*. He picked it up.

'This says they've totally refitted the place to match photos taken here on New Years' Eve 1979. Why would you want to do that?'

'Irony.'

'Oh. Irony.' Rob scowled around at the pub's largely under-30 clientele, and read aloud from the leaflet. "In honour of the supertastic seventies, we offer our signature dish—our favourite decade's authentic pub grub experience, tweaked for modern-day tastes." Fucking hell. "Free-range, cornfed chicken, braised in Thai spices and served in a basket". I am aghast.'

Christopher went to the bar. The man serving had a 1970s footballer haircut—chestnut, shoulder-length with a thick fringe. It was almost certainly a wig. Christopher asked for two pints of lager, two of the updated Chicken-in-a-Baskets and

two bags of peanuts. The barman set the lagers to pour and, without turning around, fished out the nuts from a box behind him.

‘Shouldn’t I choose from over there?’ Christopher indicated the cardboard display at the back, on which packets of peanuts obscured the image of a topless young woman. The idea, he remembered, was that men would buy the snacks to reveal the saucy photograph. Thirty years ago it would have been offensive. The sexism seemed charmingly innocent now.

‘Sorry, they aren’t for sale. Decoration only. That display’s an antique, mate. Them nuts is older than my Mum. The whole thing’s been varnished. Look.’ The barman knocked it with a knuckle to prove his point.

Back at the table, Rob had set up a miniature factory, his rolling machine at the centre, a pile of tobacco on one side, and a growing stack of tight cigarettes on the other.

As he handed Rob his beer, Christopher said, ‘I was thinking, in the summer holidays I might have Lucy join us for a while. Now we’re getting decent accommodation, and I’ve got the car.’

‘Yeah, man. Let’s have the anklebiter along for a few gigs. Help you keep contact and that.’ Rob had three children himself—from two broken marriages. He didn’t mention them often.

‘I’ll need to clear it with Jacqueline,’ Christopher said.

They raised their drinks.

‘To ex-wives,’ Rob said.

‘To him that is able to keep us from falling.’

Rob collected up his cigarettes and stowed them in his tobacco tin. ‘For Ron and Justin,’ he said. *Later on and just in case*. His favourite joke, it hadn’t been funny to begin with, and there had been many times since. ‘How old is she now, your Lucy?’

‘Fourteen.’

‘Tricky age. She met wossername yet?’

‘Once or twice.’ Christopher didn’t want to talk about Berry—not in general, and definitely not with Rob, who had strong views on the subject. He washed down a few peanuts with a mouthful of lager. ‘How’d you do this morning?’

‘Got posters in a lot of local shops, chatted to a few people. You should draw a decent crowd on Saturday.’

Christopher felt the alcohol hitting his system. It had been some time since he had eaten anything.

‘How many of those posters have we got left, Rob? Because—’

‘About a thousand.’

He sighed. ‘You know I wanted a new design. You should have asked before you had them done again.’

‘I got the printer to add a bit about your column in the *Beacon*, didn’t I?’

‘That isn’t all I wanted changing.’

‘They work fine, Chris. When you’re promoting these hotel gigs you don’t want anything too stylish. People have to smell what you’re selling.’

‘Fucking showbiz. Don’t you know I’m an artist?’ They both laughed at that, though not for quite the same reasons. Christopher decided it was time to push the point. ‘Anyway, I thought we’d moved on from hotel gigs now.’

‘Yeah. Well, it’s all money and profile, ain’t it? You can’t pick and choose just yet. Give it another year, maybe, and we can go to theatres exclusively.’

Christopher was coming around to Berry’s view that these low-status venues did his reputation no good at all. And he was growing sick of Rob’s illogical approach to organising the tour. Some weeks they bounced from town to town, criss-crossing the country and covering thousands of miles to and fro, leaving him exhausted and frustrated. Then there would be fallow periods, up to a month with nothing to do but potter around his apartment and try to write his column.

The barman arrived with their food—lumps of chicken floating in slimy white sauce. To stop it leaking out between the warps and wefts, each little basket was lined with thick polythene.

Christopher said, ‘Any problems getting the posters out today? Anybody turn you down?’

Rob prodded at the meat with his fork. ‘Don’t matter, does it? Plenty took them.’ But he knew what Christopher was after, and he conceded. ‘All right. What do you expect? Wine bar, vegetarian restaurant, bookshop. All that shit *she*’s so keen on. They’re not interested. Never will be.’

‘It’s not just Berry. I’d like to pull in that audience myself, Rob. That’s why I wanted to rework the posters.’

‘Yeah, yeah. Tailored marketing solutions to penetrate a more sophisticated demographic. Aren’t we doing well enough, Chris? Just because that one introduced

you to some fuckbuddy of hers at the *Sunday Beacon* don't mean she gets *all* the credit. I mean, do you want to swap all these full houses we're getting for a handful of fucking social workers and whatnot?'

'Course not,' Christopher said. Except, he thought, what if that handful of social workers were just a little less *easy*?

Rob had evidently decided his parody of Berry's business jargon had won him the battle. The manager flipped open his notebook and proceeded to the business of the day. 'I'm off to the radio station this afternoon. Got to organise your spot for tomorrow. So you'll have to do the local press without me. *Barton and District Messenger*. They're sending some woman called Daisy Cross over to the hotel. Be nice to her, Chris. Always be nice to reporters. And no slagging off Toni Webster.'

#

Christopher drove back to the Belvoir two hours before he was due to meet the journalist and parked his new Mercedes convertible next to his manager's black Transit van. Rob had negotiated them Bed, Breakfast and Parking for four nights in advance of the show on the promise that he and Christopher would be 'doing promotional work in the area'. So far that had consisted of Rob putting up posters while Christopher amused himself in the town and the hotel.

'It's a holiday, enjoy it,' the manager had said when Christopher complained of feeling both unproductive and fraudulent. 'You're a successful man now. Like it says in the bible—to them what has shall be given more.'

'I don't think that's how it goes.'

'It's how it is. You've got to learn to be satisfied, mate.'

He generally found it was easier to follow that advice when he was busy, so he was glad of tomorrow's radio spot and this interview today. And Rob was right about one thing: with audiences growing and money finally coming in, Christopher really ought to be grateful. He shouldn't forget what he owed Rob either. Of course as a tour manager, the man was barely adequate, and he had no business sense at all, but perhaps that was why he had stuck by Christopher almost from the start, committed himself to a performer whose act had shown neither profit nor promise for the first two years. Berry would just have to understand—loyalty had to be rewarded. Anyway, taking everything into account, it wasn't too difficult to service the debt for now.

Christopher had the Mercedes, and could drive himself in luxury from one badly-organised gig to the next. No more tension headaches brought on by the racket of the ancient Transit's engine; no more of Rob's terrifying, dope-influenced driving.

He went to his room. Yesterday its characterlessness had wearied him. Now, having elected to be positive about everything, he welcomed its pleasant, inoffensive cleanliness. He should call Berry, he thought, for PR guidance—but perhaps it would be better later, after the interview, when he could tell her how it had gone. Instead, he lay on the bed, picked up the TV remote and flipped through the stations until he found The Psychic Channel. They were showing an episode of *The Waiting Room*: Toni Webster's regular daytime show, and even though it was guaranteed to kill off his newly-minted optimism, he couldn't keep from watching.

He had just missed the titles. This was the bit at the start where Toni sat on a high stool in a TV studio. Her neat white Everywoman blouse and blue skirt could have belonged to any office worker, any department store assistant, or, and this was the point, any receptionist. It was a repeat. He had seen this one before.

Toni was saying, '—a lovely man, truly lovely. But that's enough of my showbiz gossip! Now then, my loves, it's time to see who's in the Waiting Room today.' Music began, and an animated graphic filled the screen—a closed door on which, to banish any possible confusion, a frosted glass panel was labelled *The Waiting Room*.

These days, Toni's calling card idea was that there was a room between Heaven and Earth, where the Dead came and waited to be reintroduced to the Living. It was not a metaphor. As envisaged by Toni and reconstructed by the animator, the Waiting Room consisted of a long, rectangular interior, full of chairs laid out in rows. Each chair was occupied by a person, marked out by some distinguishing feature: a man with a black beard, a girl with a punkish hairdo; and, because no sorrow was so raw that Toni would not make money from it, a crib.

The music built to a joyous crescendo and the camera closed in on one of the cartoon figures, an old fellow holding a walking stick across his lap. That image crossfaded into a real photograph of a man in his eighties, sitting in a mobility scooter. It looked like the picture had been taken in a formal garden, perhaps on a family visit to some stately home or other. A caption appeared:

EUSTACE ROGER O'BANNON

1925-2003

KNOWN AS GERRY

Back on screen, Toni gazed upwards, focusing on the air above the heads of the audience. 'I'm seeing through now. Goodness, it's busy today. So many of you with loved ones in the waiting room. I'm not—Oh, I hear an older gentleman. His voice is coming through. Sometimes, you know, it's the quiet ones you hear the loudest. Yes, my love, yes, I hear you. Oh—he's gone.' A disappointed *aah* from somewhere in the crowd. 'But he'd something important—I'm sure. I'll—I'll try to get him back—'

As she spoke, a series of audience shots filled the screen. Christopher observed them with professional curiosity. Some watched the clairvoyant; others followed her upward gaze. They strained into the firmament, desperate to see what she saw, hear what she heard; maybe believing that they did, just about, glimpse the shadows on the other side of the veil.

'Now then,' she said. 'There's a *lot* of energy in the studio today. Do you know, I really feel like one of you here *has the gift yourself*, and that's wonderful, it's like an amplifier. That person, you know who you are, don't you? Please, channel your powers through mine. Let's see if we can do it together. Oh, thank you—'

Clever. All of them thinking, it's me, Toni it's me. I'll channel my powers through yours.

The camera was back on the clairvoyant. She said, 'I hear you, darling. What's your name? Right—Right—' and she shifted her attention from the empty air to the audience.

'I have an older gentleman coming through. He's in the waiting room. His name is—oh, you'll need to speak up, dear. I think he's had problems with his lungs. All gone now, but sometimes what we've suffered in life does echo on the other side. His name is er—Gerard? *Gerald* is it? No, it's Gerry. Gerry, yes—but he's saying it was short for *Roger*. Is that right? Is there someone here who's lost an elderly chap of that name? Roger?'

The camera was on the audience. A man in his sixties raised his hand. He was already crying.

'And wasn't Roger his *middle* name, my love? He never did like his first name, did he?'

‘That’s right. His first name was Eustace.’

‘Well, I can see why he wouldn’t have been so keen on *that*. And he wasn’t your father, was he? He was—your uncle, wasn’t he? Uncle Gerry?’

‘Yes. Yes. That’s right!’

Applause. Close-up on Toni. ‘The coins,’ she said. ‘You’re worried about some coins? Is that right, my love?’

Cut to Uncle Gerry’s nephew, nodding.

‘You should sell them. That’s what he says. You should sell those coins.’

Some hot reading, obviously, for a spectacular opening. Now she moved on to others in the audience and into the cold reading stuff: Barnum statements, random guesses—and, easiest of all to get away with, future predictions.

‘There’s something around you now, a problem concerning a younger person, is that right? A child? A teenager. That’s it. It’s your daughter? Your niece. Yes, that’s right. And this problem, it’s upsetting, isn’t it, my love? I know what it is, but we won’t say here, that’s best isn’t it? But it’s medical, isn’t it—well, medical in a sense, if you know what I mean. All right, I can see a man from another country is involved in all this. Can you think who that might be—No? Well, perhaps that’s because you’ve not met him yet. He’ll be coming into your life in a month or so. He’s—he’s from Portugal. He’ll help deal with your niece’s trouble.’

Christopher made himself switch off the TV. Nothing survived unless there was a need for it, he thought. Maybe Toni Webster, stuffing herself with the profits of loss and misery, served a purpose, like the maggots doctors sometimes introduced to a gangrenous wound. If that was so, what, then, was he, with his honesty? The only *genuinely psychic* psychic. What use was that?

He regarded the switched-off TV screen. Half-lit and half shadowed, his reflected face emerged from glossy darkness, exactly as it did on the posters. Christopher reproduced the pose: his right hand cradled his chin between the forefinger and thumb; his left hand extended in a beckoning motion, as if he were calling the Dead to him.

‘Christopher J Longley,’ he said, adopting an absurd bass voice. ‘All the rest are charlatans. Accept no substitute for... Christopher J Longley, Britain’s only authentic medium.’

He lay back on the bed and closed his eyes, not intending to sleep. Fucking lying fucking Toni fucking Webster he thought. His hand settled absently on his cock.

An hour later, the ringing of the hotel telephone woke him from a dream about his father's funeral. He picked up the receiver.

'Mr Longley?' It was Marie from the front desk.

'Speaking. I assume the journalist from the *Messenger* has arrived?'

'Gosh. It's almost like you're psychic.'

Marie had been making variants on this joke ever since Christopher arrived.

'Thank you,' he said. 'Can you tell him I'll be down in five minutes?'

'I'll tell *her* you'll be down in five minutes.'

Of course, Rob had told him it was a woman. Maisy something?

'Thanks.'

'Didn't do so well that time, did you?'

After he hung up, Christopher decided he wanted to look serious, for the photographs. So he put on a black turtleneck and his glasses. He was glad Rob wasn't there.

#

'Daisy Cross,' she said, saving him from the embarrassment of calling her Maisy.

'Sorry I'm late. Accident on the ring road. But maybe you knew that already?'

The reporter giggled. She was young, blonde and obviously low-status—perhaps an intern. Remembering how important it was to be nice to the Press, Christopher laughed too. This gushing, toothy, Daddy's princess persona might be a front. Reporters had their tricks, their ways of getting you to talk, even hacks on papers like the *Barton and District Messenger*.

Abruptly, she put her hand to her mouth. 'God, I'm sorry. I bet you get that sort of thing all the time.'

'Well, you're not the first. Actually, I quite like it in a way. I suppose it means people recognise me for what I do.' *Actually, quite, in a way, I suppose.* The words were out of his mouth; there was no recalling them, and he had made things worse.

She said, 'Anyway, I don't really imagine you'd be getting psychic updates on the traffic news.'

'Well, that would be pretty tiresome.' *Never be negative about anything.* Too late, Berry's PR advice echoed in his memory, and he scrambled for another topic. Daisy wasn't accompanied by a photographer, he noticed.

‘So, will you be taking your own pictures?’

‘I believe your manager’s already provided some.’

Of course he had. More of those ludicrous shots from the same session as the poster.

‘I see,’ Christopher tried to keep the dissatisfaction out of his voice, but Daisy heard it anyway.

She said, ‘I could call the office if you like. Ask them to send a photographer. Might take a while—’ In the tailing off of that sentence, he heard her abandon hope. Clearly she had begun to think of him as someone difficult, as a person who had to be placated, and he found himself slipping peevishly into that role. It was her job, the interviewer’s, to keep him feeling comfortable. Why should he feel responsible for her?

They were going to do the interview in the Function Room, the same space in which Christopher was to perform on Saturday evening. A suitable location, he thought, for the kind of halfwits and no-hopers who’d be turning up for the show. During the short walk they lapsed into silence, and he searched for a way to salvage things.

‘It’s only vanity,’ he said when they reached the double doors of the Function Room. ‘I’ve lost weight since that photoshoot. Anyway, this is where it’ll all be happening on Saturday.’

He invited her through with an extravagant gesture, hoping to create some feeling of theatre. But the Function Room was merely an opened-out version of the corridor they had just exited: bland, polite, designed for wedding receptions, birthday parties and business conventions. The oval tables and the distances between them had been calculated by computer, to provide maximum capacity without compromising either the customers’ space or the free movement of the serving staff. Christopher knew all this because the hotel owner had told him about it the first day he and Rob were there. During their tour of the premises, he had drawn their attention to many such clever details in the Hotel’s design. He seemed oddly proud—as if paying for ideas were the same as coming up with them oneself.

‘Hmm. Hard to imagine the spirits converging here,’ Daisy said.

Christopher thought he’d try being playful. ‘Appearances can deceive. This is actually a rather spiritual location. Many ley lines converge at this exact point. And as

a local, you'll probably know that The Belvoir Hotel was built on the site of an ancient Celtic burial ground. This very room stands over the barrow of a Cornish King.'

'Gracious! I never... Oh.'

They both laughed. This time his was genuine. He had slipped by accident into being himself. Perhaps Daisy wasn't such a spoilt brat after all, and maybe she was smart enough to understand how different Christopher was from other so-called psychics. Despite Rob's warning, he allowed himself a few unflattering remarks about Toni Webster, which Daisy said she probably wouldn't be able to use. For legal reasons.

'This business has a bad reputation,' he told her. 'It's difficult for a man like me, because I'm approaching it with honesty. And actually, it's a lot harder to take that route than it is to play the game like the others do.'

'So, out of your fellow mediums, which ones would you say were truly gifted? I mean, who would you call genuine?'

'Who'd I call genuine among my fellow mediums?'

'Based on your professional opinion, yes.'

'None of them.'

That had the desired effect. She took a moment to process the idea, and then said, 'You think you're the *only* honest one?'

'I've never seen another medium who wasn't either self-deluding or working a scam.'

'But surely there would have to be—I mean if one person has a real gift, there must be others?'

'I'm not saying there aren't. I've never come across one I believed, that's all.'

She smiled. He saw she'd seen the point, and that he'd been right to suspect there was more to her than his first impression.

'OK. If all the rest are fraudulent—?'

'What makes *me* so special?'

'What makes *you* so special? Exactly.'

'No idea,' he said.

She switched direction, asked about his career. He told her about the awfulness of the early days.

'So, there comes one especially grim evening in Cardiff—pissing with rain, of course. I astonish the audience at the Spiritualist Church with my unearthly powers.'

Three people there were. Four if you count the bloke's dog. Afterwards, we go to a burger bar, and I get completely hammered on gin, which I sneak into my Sprite from a bottle while we dine. Finally we repair to our suite. The night finishes with me and Rob sharing a twin room in this grubby—this *filthy* boarding house.'

She was drawn in by his self-deprecation. He said, 'You know how you get kind of clear-headed at three in the morning, no matter how drunk you were earlier? It was three in the morning when I felt my self-belief die. I called my publicist the next day, to tell her I was going to jack it in. But before I could speak, she said she'd got me a job writing a column in the *Beacon*. That was the moment that changed my life.'

When Daisy was packing away her voice recorder, he offered her two free seats at Saturday's show.

'My colleague Callum Busfield does the reviews,' she said. 'I think your manager's seen to that already.'

'Well, these are for you. And, you know, your boyfriend or whoever.'

Daisy took the tickets, but he doubted she would come. After she was gone, he thought about the story he'd told her. It was in his autobiography of course. He remembered when he was writing that part, he'd had trouble deciding whether to say the boarding house had twin beds or a double. A double was more vivid and awkward but twins were more believable somehow. Actually he couldn't remember if they'd even had a room at all. Back then he and Rob would often sleep in the van to save on costs.

Anyway, every performer knew the truth was in the drama, not the details. He realised something else too, though: Rob might have stuck by him, but he'd never done him much good. Things had been building awfully slowly before Berry landed the column. Imperceptibly so.

#

For the rest of the afternoon the bookshop attracted few customers. Martha ate her sandwiches and picked up *Living with the Dead*, expecting to find it crass and silly, but it was better than she expected. After she had read about Stevie Lightwood's disappearance, she decided she would put up Longley's poster after all. Malcolm wouldn't be back until next week. If she took it down again on Saturday evening he

would never know. She stuck it in the window, incongruous between advertisements for a season of baroque music and a reading by a prizewinning American poet.

At quarter to six, as she left the shop, she found Rob Grice standing outside.

‘I was just passing by and I thought I’d look in,’ he said. ‘Boss agreed after all, then? Do I owe you anything?’

‘No.’ Martha replied, ‘we don’t charge for posters in the window. And Mr Garland’s in London actually, at a conference until next week. I made an executive decision.’

‘Anyway, thanks for putting it up.’

She saw he was about to recognise her. People still did—mostly because of what had happened to Branwen, but sometimes even now because of *The Wool Queen of Cornwall*.

‘I hope it attracts some interest for your Mr Longley. Well, goodbye, then,’ she said, and waited for him to go, then took the opposite direction. She hoped he hadn’t noticed *Living with the Dead* at the top of her bag.

From Living with the Dead by Christopher Longley – Chapter 2

Three times in a single minute Gran said, ‘If you want to take Sherry out you’ll have to wear the snorkel.’

There was no point telling her I hadn’t even been thinking about the dog. No point saying I’d be too hot in the snorkel either. She wasn’t going to shut up about it. I’d seen that stupid idea behind the glass of her eyes all morning—bashing its head over and over against the inside like a bluebottle. Now it had broken through. Anyway, I had nothing much else to do, so I fastened the lead on the dog and headed out towards the coast.

Along the way through the Estate I had to get past Kelvin and Liam. They were trying to catch a cat and tie a firework to its tail.

‘Puss, Puss, Puss,’ Kelvin called. He brandished an open tin of Whiskas while Liam waited at his side, ready to pounce with the banger and a ball of string. The animal kept its distance. Cats didn’t reach adulthood on Lamington Meadows without learning to be wary of teenage boys.

Since leaving school the previous Easter, Kelvin and Liam had filled their days with various forms of low-level troublemaking. Today, it looked like the cat was taking up all their attention, but experience told me that if they decided I was a more interesting target, my afternoon could turn very unpleasant indeed. So I watched them out of the corner of my eye, focused ahead, and threw as much of a swagger into my gait as I could manage—what with Sherry gagging and retching at the far end of the leash. Three turns of the leather throttled my wrist. Perhaps, I thought, the dog might make the bullies think twice about trying anything, even though they could probably tell how stupid and soft she was. I unzipped my snorkel coat, hoping to mimic the gunslingers' dusters I'd seen in Spaghetti Westerns. Its blue plastic outer and its orange lining flapped behind me in the breeze.

A cigarette might improve the effect, I thought. I flipped open the box inside my pocket, and my thumb counted nine left. That meant careful rations until the weekend. Too few to waste on trying to look hard. I turned the corner, out of their sight, and stopped, thinking perhaps they'd been waiting until I let my guard down. Were they running after me? I listened for footsteps, but there were none.

Gran had said I must never undo Sherry's leash, in case she ran under a car, or just took herself off. But I'd learned that if you freed the dog, she revealed her natural obedience. Pack instinct or something. When I released the metal clip from her collar, she stood still and attentive, just as if she had been trained. I walked on, and she caught up to trot companionably at my side.

Fifteen minutes later, we were out of Lamington Meadows. We dawdled, the dog and I, along the country road that connected Sheepwash town to a string of coastal villages. There was an acrid taste in the air, chemical fertiliser off the fields around. Something caught Sherry's attention and she ran to investigate. I let her go then called her back, glad after all that I'd gone along with Gran's suggestion. I felt good to be out of the house, away from the old woman's fretting; to be on my own and clearing my mind.

I stopped, bent and grabbed Sherry's collar while a petrol tanker thundered by on its way to the new Texaco outside the next village. Then we crossed the road to enter Rat Lane.

High hedges on either side kept the pathway a shaded half-secret. If you didn't know where to look, you'd mistake it for nothing more than the boundary between a couple of fields. Some kids said a crashed Messerschmitt pilot haunted Rat Lane.

Others claimed a Victorian farmer had taken his pitchfork to his family, vanished into the fog and still prowled the path. Adults warned you not to go there alone for fear of lurking strangers—men, women even, who would do unspeakable things to you and then discard your ruined corpse in the hedge. I didn't believe any of it. Still, I kept the dog close all the way.

As I climbed over the stile where the path ended, I heard the waves, saw the greyish-blue ribbon of sea between the land and sky ahead of me. If I turned left now, I could make my way through the fishing village of Bradwell and down to its pebble beach. Sherry veered in that direction, ears up, remembering the gulls she could chase around the shingles; the putrefying crabs and stranded jellyfish; all the briny stinks of the coast. Not this time, though. It sounded like the tide was in. I couldn't be sure, but nor did I feel like wasting a long walk only to find the beach underwater. Instead, I turned right and headed along the clifftop path toward the chemical factory. I could trespass through the Fisherman's Bay Caravan Park and take a circular route home. That way I wouldn't have to cross paths with Kelvin and Liam again.

A scent trail the dog was following led her too close to the edge. I called her to me, nervous because these high, soft sandstone cliffs were prone to falling away. Every hundred yards, a sign reminded me of it in bold red script: DANGER: CRUMBLING CLIFFS, illustrated by a pictogram of earth giving way and an unwary walker plummeting to his death. The wind kept changing direction. Right now it was blowing in cold and wet from the sea. Reluctantly, I zipped up my coat.

#

I met my cousin Stevie halfway along the Parathorpe fence—two high layers of barbed wire that ran parallel with the clifftop path for nearly a mile. Far behind the fence stood the Parathorpe Chemical factory, its buildings like lab equipment arranged for an experiment—orbs, cones, tubes and chimneys all tangled in shiny metal piping. Parathorpe Ltd made agricultural compounds there, or drugs, and the company had built it on the coast so any foul gases would drift safely out to sea on the prevailing winds. Today the air smelled fresh, despite a steady gurgle from the factory's belly. I didn't much like this part of the path, closed in between the unscalable barrier and the cliff edge. There was only forwards and backwards here.

Ahead of me, Stevie Lightwood sat in the long grass. Though it was half term break, and he didn't even go to school most of the time, he was wearing his blazer. For some reason, the entire left sleeve was missing and his arm was bare, apart from the protruding shoulder of a green tee shirt.

Stevie was contemplating a narrow column of rock that rose from the water about eight feet away from the cliff edge, a great earthen peg, hammered into the sea. At its base, black saltwater boiled around rocks slick with foam and algae, and its top was a roughly circular platform, grass-covered, level with the cliffs from which it had been cut away.

I made the dog sit, and went straight to business.

'That's called a stack,' I told Stevie. I liked Geography, paid attention in the lessons. It pleased me to share this knowledge now. 'The sea wears the cliff away on either side. Then it forms an arch. Then the top of the arch falls in and that's what you're left with. The stack.'

He didn't reply.

It seemed like a good idea to keep talking. Something about this situation worried me.

'These cliffs are soft,' I said. 'You get new stacks round them all the time. They don't last long, though. I bet some seagull could bring that one there down just landing on it.'

'Uhu?' said Stevie. His black, unkempt hair blew across his eyes. He pushed it back and wiped his nose on his hand. 'Gotta cig?' I handed over one of my precious nine but did not take one myself. He produced a plastic lighter. The breeze wouldn't let the spark catch the gas, no matter how hard he spun the wheel against the flint. I found my matchbox in the other pocket. With the drawer halfway out, I struck a match, then quickly dipped it into the open cardboard sleeve. Sheltered, the flame kept burning.

'That's clever,' said Stevie. He lit his fag on it.

'My Dad taught me.' I lifted the match and the wind extinguished it. 'What are you doing out here?'

'Me Auntie's over from Ireland but we got no room at ours, so she's staying at Fisherman's Bay. Mam's there at the caravan—talking and having cups of tea and that. Boring it is. She's Dad's sister,' he added, so I could work out the family connections for myself.

Theresa, my mother, had died when I was a baby. Stevie's mum, Maureen, was her sister. According to Gran, Theresa had been an angel, unique among the common, rough Lightwoods. She had to have been—why otherwise would my dad have looked at her? Maureen, on the other hand, was true to family type and a trollop. She'd messed about with Stevie's dad, a married man, and in Gran's book she'd got everything she deserved

He returned his attention to the stack. 'You reckon that might fall down?'

I had exaggerated. It still had a couple of years in it. 'It's too far,' I said, acknowledging we both knew what Stevie was planning. I realised too why he hadn't already made the jump. He had been waiting for a witness. Afterwards, whichever way it ended, someone had to take home the news.

He flicked his half-finished cigarette over the cliff edge. It blew back and landed on the grass just in front of his feet with a little explosion of sparks. He crushed the ember into the earth under his shoe, walked as far away from the cliff as he could, right up to the Parathorpe fence, turned and adopted a starting-blocks position. I pushed my hands deep into the pockets of the snorkel, knuckles hard against the cloth, breath held, distracting myself from the nausea I suddenly felt. The dog whined quietly at my side.

Stevie ran. A loping, confident stride that allowed no possibility of failure. He jumped, scissor-legged to begin, from the tip of the cliff. In the air now, he drew his feet together, a little ahead of the rest of his body, let momentum pull him across the space in a smooth, magnetic line. Time stopped, but Stevie kept moving through it. He landed at the stack's nearest edge and stumbled forward. Then he was safe on the centre of the platform. He sat, claiming this land as his.

'You coming over?' he called.

I ruffled the fur on Sherry's head. 'Can't, I've got the dog.'

'Scared, then?'

I was. And I was not ashamed to be. 'Jump back across,' I shouted.

We both realised at the same time. The top of the stack measured perhaps five feet across from one crumbling edge to the other. Getting across had required a long run-up, and now Stevie had to make the return leap from little more than a standing start. It wasn't possible.

Stevie had promised he'd stay where he was while I ran to the caravan site to find help, but I knew his patience wouldn't last long. I slipped off my coat as I ran, left it in the long grass. The dog bounded along by my side, understanding only the game. Ahead now, I saw where the barbed wire fence turned a corner and Parathorpe Chemical ended. I had reached the start of the caravan site, its own tall, wooden fence blocking off any view of the factory from the holidaymakers within.

With no chance of finding Stevie's Mum and aunt among the hundreds of caravans, I decided to search for someone official. I ran through the park gates, past the sign that said 'Residents and Guests Only', and headed for the cluster of white-painted buildings at the centre.

The club was closed, the amusement arcade supervised by an unfriendly teenage boy, not much older than me. In the shop I found a woman busy serving two scrawny, serious-looking children. They had the same coarse blond hair as each other, and such similar faces that they must certainly be brother and sister—perhaps even twins. I waited for a minute while they agonized over the sweets.

'Scuse me,' I said.

'Just a moment, love. These two are first. Here—no dogs!'

'Yeah, I know—sorry—it's not—I don't want to buy nothing. I'll take her out, miss. Only I've got to talk to someone.' Adrenaline and running too fast had muddled me. I felt cold on the outside and hot on the inside. Surely the woman could see something serious was wrong.

She was solid, businesslike. 'What is it? You lost your parents?'

'Is there a warden or something?' I said. 'My cousin's stuck out there on a stack. I think—I think he's might be killed unless someone gets him off of it.'

The little boy started crying. The girl's thumb was in her mouth.

'You two come back later,' said the shopkeeper, as she pulled a bunch of keys from the pocket of her apron and locked the till. 'We better see Charlie. He's the site manager.'

She stepped unevenly out from behind the counter, and I saw the calliper around her left leg. I followed as she shepherded the boy and girl out of the shop. While I tied Sherry's leash to a metal ring embedded in the wall, she locked the door. We left the children petting the dog and she led me down a side path between two caravans.

‘How far is it?’ I asked. She was moving as briskly and purposefully as she could. I wondered if it hurt every time she landed so heavily on her bowed limb.

‘It’s just up here, in the office. I’ll go in and talk to him, all right?’

The office turned out to be a large caravan, indistinguishable on the outside from all the others. I would never have found it on my own. The shopkeeper climbed its metal steps and disappeared inside. While I waited for someone to come out, I tried not to think about what Stevie would be doing now. Was he pacing circles around the tiny platform? Perhaps he’d already run out of patience and launched himself back toward the cliff. I felt a hollow open out in my guts as I imagined Stevie falling right at that moment, his body breaking on the rocks.

A fat, bald, red-faced, man appeared at the caravan door. Charlie the manager, in a blue tracksuit. He scowled down from the top of the steps.

‘What’s this about, then?’

‘It’s my cousin, Mister. He’s jumped across from the cliff out there onto a stack, and he can’t get back.

‘Well that’s a stupid thing to do. Are you two boys staying on the site?’

‘Stevie’s Auntie is—she’s in a caravan,’ I said.

‘All right. Where’s this feller trapped, then?’

I gave the clearest account I could of the stack’s location. The site manager put his head into the caravan and told the shopkeeper to call the coastguard. Then he came down the metal steps to talk to me.

‘Reckon they’ll need a ‘copter for this job. D’you know which caravan his folks are in?’

‘No, mister. It’s his Auntie staying here. From Ireland.’

‘Irish lady? I think I know the one. And this boy out on the stack, he’s called Stevie?’

I nodded. ‘I’m scared he might try and jump back.’

‘Right. We should tell him to stay put, eh? Tell you what. You run to your mate and make sure he doesn’t try anything till the coastguards get there. I’ll go and find his folks.’

I left the dog tied up outside the shop and ran back along the clifftop path. On the way I retrieved my coat from the long grass and bundled it under my arm. I began to feel good about what had happened. Now it would be exciting to see the coastguards at work in their helicopter. As I ran, I imagined my hair blown about in the mechanical storm, the thrum of the blades, the great snarling engine. Its belly would open to spill out a rope ladder, and a rescuer would climb down, shrouded in protective clothing, anonymous under his helmet. A strong hand in a thick glove would reach out to take Stevie by the wrist and lift him to safety.

And then I would have a story. I imagined myself sealing the newspaper article into an envelope. BOY RESCUED BY COASTGUARD. My father would sit on a metal-framed barracks bed, and tell the other soldiers how his son had acted in a crisis—quickly, sensibly, practically.

Just as long as Stevie hadn't tried to jump back. So far, I'd kept my eyes inland, away from the edge. Now I had reached the point when I had to look towards the stack, and I saw that Stevie was there. He stood exactly where I'd last seen him, over half an hour ago. Moisture hazed the already poor light, blurring the image. I realised I could see Stevie, but Stevie couldn't see me, and an awful premonition swallowed my relief. He might still run out of patience.

'Stevie!' I yelled, waving the snorkel like a flag over my head as I ran.
'Coastguard's comin'!'

At that moment a gust of wind snatched the coat from my hand and carried it all the way to the Parathorpe fence. It splayed there, arms out, and hung against the barbed wire.

'Fuck!'

It was an automatic reaction. I forgot Stevie and the stack, ran across the long grass between the path and the fence, and unsnagged the snorkel. I slid my arms into the coatsleeves, and the polyester lining clung slimily to my sweaty, goosebumped skin. Beneath the scents of salt and fish from the sea, I could smell something rotten—an eggy sewage odour, maybe from the chemical plant, maybe from some nearby outflow pipe. I turned to face the stack. Gulls cawed and bickered around it. And Stevie was gone.

Horrible as it was, I forced myself to look down between the cliff and the stack, but I could see no sign of a body. A few shreds of bladderwrack clung miserably to the sharp rocks below me. I watched the weed being pulled around by the waves and saw the water was shallow there. Too shallow to submerge a boy's body. Stevie had not fallen, wasn't on the stack. There was only one explanation: he must have got back across. When the coat blew away and I'd been distracted, he must have jumped across the gap. While I was unsnagging it from the fence and putting it on, he must have landed safely and hidden himself. He must be somewhere nearby.

'Stevie!' There was no response. Fury pounded the inside of my chest as I imagined my cousin suppressing his giggles in some nearby hiding place. After everything I'd done to try and save him. 'You better fucking come out! You fucking better! I'm not joking!'

Nothing. I searched the clifftop for a hollow or a trench he might have rolled into, but found nothing. I began to wonder whether I'd really seen Stevie as I was running back. Maybe he'd jumped to the cliff long before I returned. Most likely, he was now sneaking to the caravan site, where he'd present the adults with his own story about all this. He would be the innocent victim and I, Christopher, the wolf-crier, the villain.

And in the meantime, what was I to do with the situation I'd created? They'd all arrive soon. What would I tell the coastguards in their helicopter? Stevie's Mum and aunt? Charlie the manager? I'd promised them a boy marooned on the stack.

I realised that ever since I'd first seen my cousin on the cliff path, I'd been trapped in a sequence. Maybe it had started before that, even—when I'd dodged the bullies, or when Gran had made me take the dog out. How far back did it go? It didn't matter. All I knew was each step had determined the next, and now a helicopter was coming. There had to be someone to rescue.

I walked over to the fence, to the same place where Stevie had started his run. It occurred to me that the chances of getting across were better if I left the coat behind, so I took it off again, and hung it by its hood over a fencepost. I tightened the laces of my trainers.

Everything converged. The helicopter throbbed in the distant air, far-off and as yet invisible. I took up the starting-blocks position. Then, before I could give myself a chance to think about the stupidity of what I was about to do, I was in motion.

Stevie's run had looked effortless, instinctive; mine felt earthbound. I measured my paces, aimed to launch myself off the very end of the land. Too much thinking, perhaps, but it worked. I kicked off from my strong right leg. The ball of my foot pivoted over the cliff's edge. My heel rose to vertical. I pushed myself into space.

March 2010, Barton: *Showbiz*

Christopher could only ever manage coffee in the morning. Rob, however, liked to make sure he extracted full value from his hotel breakfasts. He returned to the table after his third visit to the buffet, his tray a confusion of black pudding, croissants, cheese, scrambled eggs, toast, cereal and a Danish pastry. 'You remember I told you that bookshop wouldn't take a poster?' he said.

'I remember. Doesn't surprise me in the least.'

The breakfast room was almost empty. Rob and Christopher in the middle; a couple of out-of-season holidaymakers in one corner; some kind of businessman eating alone at the other end. Rob leaned in confidentially.

'Well, *be* surprised, Christopher. The woman put it in the window.'

'Yeah? What kind of bookshop is it?' He imagined a specialist in hokey arcana: books on crystal healing, tarot cards and Aleister Crowley. Plenty of New Agers in Cornwall to keep that type of business going.

'Little posh place off the High Street,' Rob said. 'Very *literary*. Funny thing, though, when I asked yesterday morning, she didn't seem too keen, said she'd have to ask the owner. So I went back in the afternoon, thinking I'd reclaim our poster if they weren't going to use it.'

'Well, you wouldn't want to waste one, would you?'

'She'd already cost us, as it goes. When I was in before, I gave her a free copy of your book—don't worry about why. The point is, she'd put the ad up. Said she'd decided not to bother asking her boss.'

'What changed her mind?'

'Fuck knows. Anyway, I recognised her. Couldn't remember where from at first. Been driving me mad all night, but it's finally come to me. Do you remember that Branwen Kellow?'

'Don't think so.'

‘Back in 2005 or thereabouts. I were in the area at the time myself, tour managing a comedian. There was this couple of twin sisters, teenagers. Branwen and Martha Kellow they were called. Branwen disappeared off a beach. Far as I recall, she never turned up after. It was big news round here, obviously, but it made the nationals too. Tabloids and TV all over it for a couple of weeks. This bird in the bookshop, I reckon it’s the other sister, Martha—the one what got left behind.’

‘Must have passed me by,’ Christopher said.

#

Once a fortnight, Daisy insisted Martha went out with her: to a restaurant, a pub, the theatre. Today they were on their way to the cinema in Exeter, to see something called *In Darkness, Mine*.

They boarded an empty train in Barton at five o’clock. Three stops later the carriage had filled with commuters, the air was hot and stale, and two businessmen had joined their table. Martha became aware of a leg pressing against hers, so she shifted nearer the window and looked pointedly in the man’s direction. He continued scowling at a spreadsheet on his laptop, but she saw him blush a little as he drew his thigh away.

‘This film’s about vampires,’ Daisy said. ‘Handsome ones. Did you read Callum’s review of it last week? Shocking. Wikipedia plot summary for paragraph one, and a rant about the awfulness of Hollywood cinema to fill up the word count. You know, how it *thrives complacently among total absence of competition*. I don’t think he’d even seen the film.’

‘He’s one to talk about lack of competition,’ Martha said. Callum Busfield, the *Messenger*’s chief reporter, was also its restaurant, theatre, film and fiction critic. ‘What’s he left you to do this week?’

‘Couple of giant cheque presentations, a primary school sports day. Um, a Dog Show.’

‘Exciting.’

For a while, she and Daisy slipped into talk of their dissatisfactions—with the *Messenger*, with Barton, with Cornwall in general, with themselves for being here still. In their teens they had been united by the desire to be somewhere else. Yet Daisy

had returned after her degree to a junior reporting job on the *Messenger*, and, because of Branwen, Martha had never left.

Daisy said, ‘Did I tell you? I got to interview a psychic yesterday. Some bloke who’s doing a show at the Belvoir on Saturday.’

‘Christopher Longley? That’s a coincidence. His manager came in the shop and tried to con me into putting a poster up.’ Martha recounted the story of Rob’s hamfisted attempt to mislead her with the autobiography.

‘Oh.’ Daisy dimmed momentarily at the loss of the week’s big news, then brightened as something else occurred to her. ‘Well, if you like, you could see for yourself. He gave me two tickets. I think he might have been trying to come on to me, only he wasn’t awfully good at it. Do you want to go? If you’re worried about getting picked out, we can sit right at the back.’

Martha was about to refuse, then she saw that was what Daisy expected of her.

‘OK,’ she said. ‘Could be interesting.’

#

Two days later, Martha squinted through a glass panel in the door to the Belvoir Hotel’s function room. She and Daisy had arrived an hour early, intending to position themselves somewhere inconspicuous.

‘I’m not sure,’ she said. ‘The lights are low.’ She couldn’t tell whether that was an effort to create some sort of supernatural ambience, or a sign the room wasn’t ready. ‘I think there might be someone moving about in there.’

Daisy said, ‘Why don’t we just go in, Mar?’

The person Martha had seen through the window turned out to be a steward. He was busy setting up the stage area: a semicircular clearing with a single tall chair and a microphone stand.

‘We’re not really open,’ he said.

Daisy waved her press card. ‘*Messenger*—couldn’t we take a seat?’

He looked uncertain. Nobody had given him instructions about the Press. ‘I suppose it’s OK. You mind sitting over there? Out of sight of the door?’

The oval tables had been set out with four chairs each, and spaced so that the performer could walk easily into the audience. Martha could see there was nowhere to hide here. There was a bar at the back of the room.

‘Would it be possible to get a drink?’ she asked the steward.

On account of their press status, he didn’t know whether or not he should charge for the bottle of Bolivian Cabernet.

‘We’ll pay,’ Daisy said. ‘Wouldn’t want to compromise my journalistic integrity.’

Martha poured the wine. ‘Isn’t Callum supposed to be here tonight?’

‘He said it looked crass and exploitative. And there’s football on TV. I’ll have to give him my notes.’

A quarter of an hour later, Rob Grice sauntered in to check the room. He spoke with the steward, pointing out things he wanted doing. Then he caught sight of Martha.

‘Bookshop lady,’ he said. ‘Well, this is a surprise.’

‘Mr Grice,’ Martha replied.

‘And this is your friend?’

‘Journalist friend. Daisy Cross.’

Grice registered recognition of the name. ‘Miss Cross. You interviewed Chris the other day? I’m Robert Grice, Christopher’s manager. Here to write a review, are you?’

Daisy smiled. ‘Good to meet you, Mr Grice.’

#

The rest of the audience began to arrive. Watching them select their tables, Martha supposed it was natural that more of them were older. The longer you lived, the more Dead you had to keep in touch with. About two-thirds were female and most looked working class to her.

‘Not the most sophisticated crowd,’ Daisy murmured.

On the opposite side of the room, a woman looked away guiltily when Martha accidentally caught her eye. A moment later, she was saying something to her companions. *Don’t look, I think it’s Branwen Kellow’s sister—*

A young couple joined their table. They gazed silently at the chair Christopher Longley would soon occupy.

Rob Grice announced over the Public Address that the bar was closing in ten minutes, and Daisy went to buy more drinks. While she was gone, someone tapped

Martha on the shoulder. She turned and caught a damp odour from the man standing behind her. He might have been forty. His doughy, unwell face seemed familiar.

‘Excuse me,’ he said. ‘Is this seat free?’

‘Sorry, no. My friend’s just gone to the bar.’

He shuffled away. Martha watched him mooch around the other tables, looking for a space. Daisy returned with a bottle of spring water for Martha and a double gin for herself.

‘That Grice bloke knows who I am,’ Martha said. ‘I can tell.’

Daisy took a gulp from her glass. ‘I wonder if he’s told Longley. Listen, if you want to go before it starts—’

‘I’m fine. It’s too late anyway.’

Ethereal music began to play. The house lights dropped, and a fierce beam illuminated the stage area, casting long, thin shadows from the chair and the microphone stand. The young couple next to her joined hands above the table.

‘Ladies and Gentlemen,’ Rob Grice’s voice said over the PA. ‘Please welcome Britain’s Premiere Psychic Medium—Mr Christopher Longley!’

Martha could not see where the dough-faced man had gone now. He must have found a seat somewhere. Longley strode in through the applause, took his place on the tall chair and waited until the room was quiet.

‘Twenty-seven years ago, when I was thirteen,’ he said, ‘I saw a boy disappear.’

*From **Living with the Dead** by Christopher Longley: Chapter 3*

I didn’t land on the stack; nor did I fall in the sea. My thighs and belly collided with the side of the outcrop and gravity dragged me down its crumbling surface. I stuck out my arms instinctively, threw myself forward. My chest scraped against the edge, and my weight pulled me down towards the rocks, but I grabbed at grass and it held. The gulls scattered.

I hung there for a few seconds, winded and shaking, before I built up enough strength to haul myself onto the platform. Gasping, I rolled to the middle of the stack. Then I sat and waited for the helicopter.

Far away on the clifftop path a group of three adults approached from the direction of the caravan park—Charlie the manager with Stevie’s Mum and auntie. My coat, hanging over there on the fence-post, twitched in the breeze. I remembered my cigarettes were still in its pocket.

#

The helicopter arrived, as thunderous as I had expected, but my vision of the rescuer and the rope ladder had been wrong. Instead, they dropped down a cradle suspended from a steel cable. I climbed into it. I’d never seen a real helicopter before. Now tons of metal, baffling, unsupported against the sky, held me dangling in nothingness. Light swelled through my muscles.

I had been winched halfway by the time Charlie arrived with the two women. Far below and across the gap, they stood on the cliff path watching the rescue. I wondered what was going on in their minds. Maybe they still thought it was Stevie up here on this dangling perch. In this light, at this distance, it was possible. One of the women yelled something, but I couldn’t make it out above the noise of the helicopter. Then I was inside.

The pilot and the other two men turned out to be more good-humoured than I had feared. They shouted friendly remarks, only just audible above the racket of the engine and the rotors. All of them wore big yellow weatherproof jackets and plastic trousers, but one man, massive and bearded like Captain Haddock from *Tintin*, seemed to be in charge.

‘You’ve been a bit daft,’ Captain Haddock told me. ‘I bet you’ve caused your Mum no end of worry. Now she’s going to have to come out to the station to pick you up, and you’ll be in for it. You know, there’s easier ways to get yourself a ride in a helicopter!’

The real Stevie had probably turned up by now. I imagined him waiting outside his aunt’s caravan, preparing his story, unaware of this extra drama I had created. I thought of the dog and hoped the shopkeeper would remember to look after her. I thought of the snorkel coat, hanging on the fencepost.

At the coastguard station they gave me a chipped mug of tea, a blanket to put over my shoulders and a stack of comics to read. A hook-nosed woman in enormous spectacles brought me a Kit-Kat. She told me my Mum would be here soon. Everyone called me Stevie. I didn’t correct them.

There was nothing to be gained from hurrying the truth along. I liked it here. This big, warm space with its plastic chairs and chipped Formica tables reminded me of the rooms at the Council and the Hospital, where I would sit with Gran sometimes, keeping her calm when she had one of her appointments. Public buildings felt comforting to me, with their bland plasterboard walls in need of repainting; official posters pinned not quite straight or in any particular arrangement; the sense that because the place belonged to nobody it belonged to everyone. My hands cradled the tea, enjoyed its heat through the coarse pottery. All around me, men busied themselves. Their job had been done: they had lifted me from the stack and brought me somewhere safe. They chatted to each other, occasionally caught my eye and asked if I was all right, but I was not of any interest to them.

#

The man who looked like Captain Haddock was the Station Officer, Arthur Collins. He introduced himself when Maureen Lightwood and Stevie's aunt finally arrived. Charlie from the caravan site had driven them there.

I sat mute among a blitz of questions until Collins realised it was doing no good. He took Stevie's Mum and me into his office. Nobody was angry at me, the Station Officer said. It was just very important now to tell the truth. Once I started, it didn't take long to get to the end.

'I saw him out there. My coat blew away, and I had to catch it. When I looked back, he wasn't there anymore. I didn't know where he'd gone, so I—'

What could I say about why I had taken Stevie's place? At the time everything had been so clear and logical, but now it was strange, distant, more like a story half-recalled than a memory.

'—I jumped over to have a look. Then the helicopter came and I got confused. I tried to explain on the way here, but it was too noisy.'

Had I? Was that a lie? I didn't know.

'Oh, God!' Stevie's Mum said.

'Stevie didn't fall—Missus.' I wasn't sure what I should call her. She was my auntie, after all, but I barely knew her. 'He must have jumped over when I wasn't looking.'

Arthur Collins asked, 'How can you be sure, son, if you didn't see?'

‘I looked down between the cliff and the stack. He wasn’t there. There wasn’t hardly any water.’

‘So where do you reckon he went?’

‘Hid, maybe.’

‘Hid? Why would he do that when you’d gone to get help? Didn’t he know we were coming?’

‘I dunno. I shouted, but he might not of heard me. He’d have hid because he’d think it was funny.’

‘He might have,’ said Stevie’s Mum. ‘That would be like our Stevie.’

Collins said, ‘I need to get some men back out. Wait here.’ He left Stevie’s Mum and me together in the office. She didn’t speak, didn’t look at me, but only twitched occasionally, convulsed by dry sobs, spasmodic as hiccups. I felt bad for her. Gran said the rumour was that Stevie’s father, ten years older than her, had taken advantage and got her pregnant at fourteen. He was in prison now, and she was using heroin. That was why Stevie was never at school and always in trouble. She must only be in her mid-twenties, but she had aged badly already. I could see how the thick, white foundation she wore had filled all the creases and pockmarks on her face, and how it crazed on the surface.

Collins returned, but did not come right into the room. He stood, filling the doorway.

‘I don’t think you need worry,’ he said to Stevie’s Mum. ‘This lad reckons he was distracted for a few seconds getting his coat. Looks as if your son jumped back across, like he says. He’s probably hiding somewhere.’ He took a breath. ‘But until the boy turns up, we can’t take any more risks. Better safe than sorry, right? So I’ve sent the chopper out again, and a boat.’

‘It was Stevie in the basket,’ she said. ‘I saw him go up to the helicopter.’

‘I’m afraid not, madam. His cousin here was the one we rescued. We all mistook him for Stevie, didn’t we? Family resemblance, maybe.’

Stevie’s Mum considered me, assessed me. ‘He looks nothing like my boy,’ she said.

The Station Officer didn’t have a proper answer. I saw it in his face. I saw too that the man valued his own authority, didn’t want it questioned.

‘Well, you were some way off, and upset. Easy to make a mistake in those circumstances. Right now we need to concentrate on finding where your son’s got to.’

‘Nothing like him,’ Stevie’s Mum repeated.

#

Neither boat nor helicopter found Stevie Lightwood. He was not at the base of the cliff, nor in the sea, nor anywhere in the surrounding area. Nor did he arrive back at the caravan or at his house, that day or the day after. After half term, Stevie did not appear at any of his classes. Before, when they were doing the register the teachers would call *Stephen Lightwood* and not bother waiting for a reply before they marked him away. Now, it was a different kind of absence. When they reached his name they looked up at the class, paused and skipped to the next kid on the list.

The police interviewed me, because—while nobody liked to think about it, and they were convinced I was telling the truth—they had to rule out foul play. Sometimes kids’ games could turn nasty. It wasn’t unheard of for one of them to kill another. The officers treated me kindly, apart from one constable, who yelled at me about how my *little stunt* had slowed down the search. Later, I heard the sergeant give the man a severe telling off over that.

With no body found, Stevie couldn’t be declared dead, but everyone knew. He had always been a danger to himself. It was expected that longshore drift would eventually dump the corpse somewhere on the coastline. It didn’t. In the end, we stopped counting how long it had been since Stevie had disappeared and started saying he *never turned up*.

There was talk of the supernatural too, of how Stevie had *appeared* to me on the stack and then *vanished*. Of how I’d been *possessed* with something that made me repeat Stevie’s reckless leap across the gap, though it was totally *out of character*. Of how Stevie’s *own mother* had thought she’d seen her son lifted to the helicopter in the rescue cradle.

I preferred the rationalist line taken by the official investigation. Everything that seemed inexplicable about this tragedy could be put down to confusion brought about by panic and desperation. The missing body was in the sea somewhere. Perhaps it would be found one day. After a few months I barely thought of Stevie at all. Looking back now, it seems that I decided to push him out of my mind for most of my teens. It would be a long time before he reappeared in my life.

Erosion continued to break down the cliff until at last the entire path was fenced off for public safety. I had guessed correctly that Stevie's stack would survive no more than a couple of years. It snapped through in the winter of 1985, and deposited its upper section in the water. This pile of broken rock defended the remaining stump for almost a decade, until it was all eventually carried off, exposing the base to attack by the sea once again.

In October 1989 I was nineteen and at Birmingham University. Hundreds of miles away, off the coast by the now abandoned Parathorpe Chemical factory, the sea smashed a free rock into a fixed one, loosened it from its mooring and erased the last vestige of Stevie's stack. I can't say I noticed any cosmic disturbance—not at that moment, and not on a later day when the path itself finally tumbled down, taking the fence and all the signs with it.

March 2010, Barton: *Showbiz*

'Can you lower the light on me, please?' Christopher said, once the Stevie story was done. The young woman on the desk followed her cue, and the spotlight dimmed. He saw the faces of the crowd. Fucking showbiz.

'Ladies and gentlemen, I'll just need a couple of minutes' silence.'

Rob should have known better than to tell him the Kellow woman was here. That must be her, next to Daisy, he thought. It was an interference. Nevertheless, the Dead barged in as soon as he closed his eyes. He didn't open them immediately, though. He needed a few moments to master his disequilibrium.

Best get started. Say whatever comes into your head. Trust it to be true.

'I have a Beryl Jackson with me. I'm looking for her granddaughter.'

At a table near the front, a slab-faced woman raised her hand. He was performing then, inspired by his own power, by the way these specifics, these facts about names and relationships, could thrill the crowd.

There were plenty of Dead. 'Beryl definitely approves of Nathan,' he told the slab-faced woman. 'You've nothing to worry about there.' He told a bricklayer his dead best friend had always known the truth. 'You know, Eddie didn't think any less of you, and he never judged you. But he couldn't talk about it. That's his biggest regret.' He told a gardener about his dead wife. 'Yeah, I'm sorry. What you thought

might have happened with her and your brother? Listen, are you sure you really want me to tell you this—?’

He took the radio microphone off its stand, stepped into the crowd and spoke intimately to people at their tables. To John, a retired farmer, he passed on a message from his son, killed by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan. ‘Forgive them,’ he said, ‘and yourself.’ On any other night, the old man’s tears would have been the turning point of the show. Something was wrong, though, and it had to do with Martha Kellow. Had her presence been spotted by others in the audience? Did a little more disappointment accrue in the room every time Christopher picked out a name other than *Branwen*?

Martha and Daisy were sharing their table with a young man and woman. Brother and sister, he thought first. Then he understood—what accounted for the similarity in their faces was shared misery.

‘I think you lost a child?’

The woman gasped. It must be like drowning, Christopher thought. You would gag for air and feel only water, resistant against the throat.

‘Georgie,’ she said. ‘He was only—’

‘—A baby,’ Christopher interrupted, so everyone would understand he’d known already. He recalled the disgust he had felt at that image of the crib in *The Waiting Room* and shame coursed through him. Still, he pressed on. ‘Georgie was too young to speak, I think?’

The woman shook her head. She and her husband clung tighter to each other’s hands. ‘We’ve heard, when they’re—on the other side—they can talk?’

‘No. I’m sorry.’

The child didn’t even know his own name. Christopher kept that to himself. There was a memory of white surfaces, machine sounds, the seesaw groaning of a respirator. Cold lights. ‘Your son died in the hospital. He never came home, did he?’

‘Does he remember us, Christopher? Is he thinking of us?’

He could see how greedily she’d take any kindness. But he found himself with nothing to offer her.

‘Will we see him again?’ she said.

‘I don’t know about that. Sorry. He *is* at peace. His life was painful, but now he’s at rest.’

Eventually, scattered applause broke in, emphasising the embarrassed silence around itself.

#

During the interval, Christopher escaped to the Day Manager's office, redesignated for tonight as the Green Room, with black paper stuck over the window in the door.

'Ain't going like it should, is it?' Rob said. 'What was all that with the dead fucking baby, Chris?'

He was right, it had been an error to pick that couple out. Reckless.

'You shouldn't have told me about that Kellow woman. It put me off my game. I'll fix it in the second half.'

'Huh, if any of the cunts come back,' Rob said. 'So, you going to talk to her then?'

'Maybe.'

Branwen Kellow had been missing for five years. She was probably dead. Couldn't say that, obviously. Showbiz would require him to tell Martha her sister was alive. So what if in a year's time some dog sniffed out Branwen's corpse in a ditch, or if tomorrow the murderer walked into a police station and confessed? Who would remember then what a touring medium had said about it on a cold night in a Cornish hotel?

Martha would. Christopher would. They were two too many.

Rob said, 'Everyone knows she's here. It's what they're waiting for now.'

'I told you. I'll fix it.'

One day, things would be going so wrong in a show that he'd have to put them right with a lie. It was inevitable. A real lie. Not just Berry's PR misdirections or Rob's bits of stagecraft. The more successful he became, the more depended on him, the closer he became to the others, the Toni Websters.

For now, all he could do was tell himself every time, *Not tonight. Not this time. I'll give up on the truth tomorrow.* And tomorrow he would tell himself the same thing. That way the proper lie would be like Stevie, caught forever halfway between the cliff and the stack, never landing.

#

Meanwhile, having returned to the table with a fresh bottle of wine, Daisy was sharing some of her research into the psychic trade.

‘Cold reading’s the commonest trick.’ she said. ‘It’s like twenty questions. You start vague and then hone in on the truth.’

‘I thought he was really specific,’ Martha said.

‘He was. You’re right. Hardly any questions, and no Barnum statements either.’ Daisy waited for the prompt. Martha decided not to offer it.

‘OK,’ Daisy continued, ‘Since you ask. A Barnum statement sounds as if it’s an insight, but it could apply to anyone. Like when the medium goes, “Oooh, I’m seeing trouble in the chest area”. Which could be all sorts of stuff. Lung disease, breast implants gone whacky, broken rib—’

‘Broken heart,’ Martha said.

‘Even that, at a push, yes. And no specific person mentioned either. So then *you* say, “That’s right, my boss has just cracked his collarbone.” All the real information comes from *you*, but afterwards you forget that bit and just think, “Wow, wasn’t it amazing how that guy knew all about Terry’s accident!”’

‘He told those two their baby died,’ Martha said.

The young couple sharing their table had left at the end of the first half. They wouldn’t be back. Daisy glanced at their empty seats.

‘Yeah. That was creepy,’ she said. ‘So, my guess is he’s hot reading—collecting his information in advance. It’s easier than you’d imagine, especially these days, with everyone on Facebook and everything. He might even have sent some stooge into the audience, to listen in on people’s conversations and report back to him.’

Martha remembered the dough-faced man who had tried to sit at her table.

‘Of course, Longley could be psychic,’ she said. ‘I suppose you can’t totally rule that out.’

‘When I interviewed him, he told me he’d never seen another medium he thought was honest,’ Daisy said. ‘Not one. I don’t know. Maybe he *believes* he’s genuine.’

‘He does come over kind of sincere, in that book of his.’

The lights went down for the second half, and this time he came straight to their table.

‘Are you Martha Kellow?’

She felt Daisy's hand on her arm, and heard her friend whisper: 'Martha, you don't have to—' But she felt thrilled to be chosen at last.

'Yes.'

'Your sister?'

'Branwen, yes.'

'You don't know whether she's alive or not.' Longley's voice was kind and wise. Martha pulled herself out of the eagerness that had briefly overwhelmed her.

'That's quite well-known,' she said. Now she wanted to test him. Couldn't he tell her something that was still secret? Some item Branwen always carried with her? The name she'd given a childhood toy? But by now, Martha could think of no detail about her sister that had not been made public over the years. They had revealed it all, she and her parents, striving to jog someone's memory, make some connection.

The psychic looked into her eyes, his face neutral. You could read any emotion there you wanted. 'I'd like to help you, if I can,' he said. That brought him some applause.

'And can you? Help me?'

'Perhaps. Not right now. Could we talk after the show?' he asked. 'Good. We'll do that. OK, I'm picking up another name—Kathleen Allam.' She realised he had stopped talking to her and was addressing the room again. A man waved from the far side, and the psychic wove off between the tables, talking about Mrs Allam as he went.

When the performance was over, Longley and his manager took position behind a table stacked with copies of *Living with the Dead*. Grice sold the books, Longley chatted to purchasers and signed flyleaves. The line was long and it moved slowly. Meanwhile, Martha and Daisy stayed in their seats.

Daisy asked, 'What do you want to do? Are you going to talk to him?'

'Not sure.'

'I think we should leave. Situations like yours—these people, they exploit grief.'

'Wouldn't it make a fantastic story, though, Daisy?'

'Yes, but—Christ, you don't think I brought you here to—?'

Martha laughed. Sometimes her friend's press instincts were dismal. 'No, Daisy, I don't. Anyway, it looks as though he's forgotten us.'

Longley saw them preparing to leave, excused himself from book signing duties and came over.

‘Sorry. Can’t see myself getting away from this for half an hour at least. All I wanted to say was I’d like to try and help. To talk about it at least.’

Martha was in the middle of putting on her coat. ‘Thanks, only I’m—’

He handed her a business card. ‘Don’t say yes or no right now. To be honest, I need to think about this myself. I’m supposed to go back to London in the morning, but I can easily stay in Barton all day. If you decide you want to talk, give me a ring—you can get me on that mobile number.’

Once he’d left them, Daisy said, ‘You should keep right away from that guy.’

‘Maybe.’

Afterwards, on their way across the hotel carpark, they passed the young couple who had lost their baby, now huddling together for warmth because they were underdressed for the crisp night air. They must have been out here all through the second half, Martha thought, and then she realised the man the couple were talking to was the same dough-faced person who had tried to join their table at the start of the evening. She hadn’t recognised him at first because he was well wrapped-up against the elements now, in one of those plastic weatherproof coats with a fur-trimmed hood.

‘Definitely,’ Martha said. ‘I’m definitely going to call him.’

#

Next morning Christopher asked Reception to arrange a cab for him. He’d decided arriving at the Kellows in his Mercedes might create the wrong impression.

‘You’re that psychic, aren’t you?’ the driver said after a while. ‘You going to help out with looking for Branwen?’

‘I’m not sure. How did you—?’

‘I drove them girls once or twice, after they won that beauty contest. Yeah. So I recognised the address right off. And your picture’s all over town, ain’t it? Put two and two, like.’

‘I see.’

‘It’s a small town.’

‘Beauty contest?’ Christopher said. That new information had taken a while to register.

‘Wool Queen of Cornwall. They only done it for a laugh, but then they won. Nice girls, they was, back then. I hope you can do something for them. Terrible thing to happen to a family. Nobody deserves to go through that, do they?’

#

Martha didn't look to Christopher like the beauty contest type. She was attractively dark and witchy, but not pretty in the way of girls who win pageants. In this light, her eyes looked black.

Mr Kellow sat next to his wife on the sofa. Martha took one armchair, Christopher the other. The parents seemed washed-out, near enough ghosts themselves. Both were somewhere in their fifties: the mother a pallid version of Martha's bony intelligence; the father militarily rigid, blunt-headed with close-cropped grey hair. Mrs Kellow held a red photo album on her knees. He guessed he'd have to look at that soon.

Everything was so neat here. Things matched, formed sets. Occasional tables, a shelf of encyclopaedia volumes. The TV, video player and stereo were all the same brand. The pot from which Mrs Kellow poured Christopher's tea, went with the cups and the milk jug. The prints on the wall were all by the same local artist, all in the same style of frame, as were various family photographs. He could see only one of Martha and Branwen together: a low-quality snapshot of the sisters as cheerful teenagers, sharing a bus seat.

Mrs Kellow caught Christopher's eye. ‘That was the day she disappeared,’ she said, and handed Christopher the photo album.

The early pages were filled with carefully mounted images of the twins' first five years. At that time the girls had been indistinguishable from each other, so that each photograph had to be accompanied by a handwritten label: *Martha (left) and Branwen (right) playing in the park. Twins in pedal car (Branwen driving)*. As the girls grew older, the number of photographs reduced. Holiday snaps, Christmas presents being opened, school portraits. Then there were cut-out articles from the local paper: a review of a school production of *Jesus Christ, Superstar* with Martha as Mary Magdalene; that beauty contest the cab driver had mentioned—*The Wool Queen of Cornwall*—and, confusingly, a picture of Martha with the caption ‘Miss Bertha Winkelman’.

At last, after *Local Twins Gain Oxbridge Places*, he reached the souvenirs of tragedy—a dozen pieces from the coverage of Branwen’s disappearance. This awful record seemed to require some comment, but there could be no comfort, no value in anything Christopher might say right now. He closed the album and looked up at the Kellows.

After a few moments of silence, Mrs Kellow said, ‘From what Martha’s told us, Mr Longley, you seem like a genuine person. And Martin and I would certainly like to thank you for keeping this private, for not—capitalising on her being at your show yesterday.’

She spoke without looking at anyone else in the room. Christopher recognised something of his Gran in Mrs Kellow. It was half sadness; half medication.

‘Ah,’ he said, ‘I’m afraid you’ve overestimated me there, Mrs Kellow. The thing is, I didn’t say anything about Branwen last night because there wasn’t anything *to* say. I only pass on information that comes to me. I don’t choose it.’

Martin Kellow put down his teacup. ‘Well, anyway, thank you for coming to see us—but you need to understand that we’re not big believers in the supernatural.’

‘I see—’ Christopher began, but Mr Kellow had prepared his rebuttal and was not to be deflected until it was done.

‘In any case we aren’t looking for help now,’ he continued. ‘It’s been six years. If she’s—if Branwen’s staying somewhere by her own choice, we can only hope she’ll come back when she’s ready. And if it’s something else—maybe we’re better off not knowing.’

This was not what Christopher had expected. He looked to Martha, who said, ‘Mr Longley, my father’s saying he thinks you’re nothing more than a conjuror. I believe there’s more to you than that.’

The parents had been careful, polite. There was something adolescent about Martha’s insistence on cutting straight through to confrontation. But nobody was quite telling the truth, he could tell. So he allowed the dark to close around the family, let Stevie show him how the room looked to the Dead.

The Kellows were three bright spots of pain. The parents had made what they thought was a rational decision, but the daughter knew neither of them really believed in it. A glossy enough lie could win them over. The truth would be better.

He said, ‘I see. Thank you for your confidence, Martha, but I have to say I totally understand your parents’ point of view. The fact is, no psychic investigator has

ever made a material contribution to solving any police case, ever. They just don't call on people like me.'

Mr Kellow said, 'I'm sure I've seen stories in the news where there's been some success.'

'I'm afraid not, Mr Kellow,' Christopher replied. It was as he had expected. The possibility of hope would not be denied. His best chance was to be honest with them. 'You'll sometimes hear a medium claim they've helped solve a disappearance or found where the thieves have hidden some stolen jewellery, but there's never any truth in it.' He smiled, ruefully he hoped, as he moved into the clinching phase of his argument.

'And worst of all, every so often, some desperate family brings in a medium when it looks like everything else has failed. It's always against the advice of the police, and not once has it ever led to a solution—the main reason being that most professional psychics are completely bogus.'

Martha fixed an angry stare on him. 'In that case, I don't understand what you're doing here.'

'No. I'm not sure either. Except, I know I'm not dishonest, and I'd like to think I can help. Right now, I have no idea how. And Mr and Mrs Kellow, if you're suspicious of my motives, as you have every right to be, if you can't trust me, there's really nowhere we can go.'

'I wouldn't say *suspicious*,' Martin Kellow murmured.

'Listen,' Christopher said, 'We're all unsure about this. I've never been involved in a police case, and this is the first time you've had anything to do with a psychic. Martha, I understand how urgent this must feel to you, but we should leave it for now. You all need to talk about it without me here. And I'm not sure what I can offer you just yet. Could I contact you in a few weeks' time? Once we've all had a chance to think?'

#

'How'd that go?' Rob asked when Christopher got back to the hotel.

'Blowout. No point getting involved.'

Later, during the drive to London, an idea came to him. He decided he would look for some kind of therapist. Someone with whom he could talk all this through,

who could help him make sense of himself, of Stevie. Help him to decide what to do about the Kellow thing. Because all these half-truths to Berry, the lying to Rob, the sneaking around himself, it wasn't right.

PART 2: THE WOOL QUEEN OF CORNWALL

Barton and District Messenger - Friday, August 2nd, 2002

LOCAL TWINS PRANK BEAUTY PAGEANT

Judges fail spot-the-difference test

The top prize in Saturday's 'Wool Queen of Cornwall' contest has been shared between two equally stunning winners—and nobody is more surprised than the judges!

Gorgeous Barton twins, Branwen and Martha Kellow really *pulled the wool* when they signed up for the competition, pretending to be just one young woman by the name of Bertha Winkelman.

'We only wanted to see if we could get away with it. We never expected to win!' said Branwen (16).

'People are always saying they can't tell us apart. So we thought it would be a laugh to pretend we were the same person.'

During the four stages of the one-day competition, the twin beauties took turns to play the part of 'Bertha'.

'It wasn't so difficult to do the walks,' said Martha, who is the younger of the two by a mere 11 minutes. 'The real challenge was the interviews, and chatting with the organisers and the other contestants.'

'We were improvising all the time, making up interests for Bertha, inventing things about her fiancé.'

The highly sought-after first prize in the competition is a contract to model wool creations in next year's knitting patterns and advertising.

‘To be honest, we never expected to get beyond round one. We’re not identical. We were sure someone would notice,’ Branwen said yesterday. ‘When we actually won, we didn’t know what to do. By that stage we were trapped in our own prank.’

The girls owned up immediately after Branwen received the crown.

A spokesman from the Cornish Wool Marketing Group said yesterday, ‘This has caused us quite a few problems. The point of the competition is to find a young woman who embodies Cornish beauty. We take this very seriously indeed, and for the winner it’s a significant opportunity.’

‘These Kellow twins might think they’ve been clever, or funny, but when it comes down to it what they did was an insult to all the other competitors.’

The Wool Queen of Cornwall title and the modelling contract will now go to Deanna Skewes (18) from Swanpool, Truro. Miss Skewes, who was originally awarded second place on Saturday echoed the view of the competition organisers:

‘I’m glad I won, but I’m upset about the way it happened. So many girls work really hard for this. It isn’t right to treat it as a joke.’

The Kellow twins clearly have plenty of brains as well as beauty and cheek. They are set to achieve a string of top grade GCSE results and plan to start five A-Levels each at Barton College in September.

Radio Barton

‘So, which of you two is which?’

Ronnie had installed an extra mirror in the cab, the sort designed for keeping an eye on kids in the back seat, and he used it now to watch the twins fastening their seatbelts.

‘I’m Martha,’ the one on the left said.

He put the taxi into gear and pulled away from the Kellows’ house. ‘So you’ll be Branwen, then?’

‘Nothing gets past you, does it?’ answered the other one.

He’d only been chatting out of politeness—there was no need for her to be rude. But he’d seen this before. The stress of suddenly finding yourself a celebrity, of everyone looking at you, asking you questions all the time. It got to a lot of them, came out in bad manners. Ronnie let it go.

Radio Barton didn’t have its own VIP car. Consequently, whenever anyone worth interviewing turned up, they called Abracabs. Pickup at the railway station, dropoff at the Studios; same in reverse an hour or so later. Nick gave Ronnie most of these jobs, the younger drivers being too prone to showing off—driving too fast, running their mouths: all that sort of thing. Ronnie might not be much older than the others, but he was a safe pair of hands, and he knew how to keep his opinions private. It was the same whether you were ferrying an old lady and her cat to the vet’s or some celeb to an interview on Jessica Welford’s Afternoon Show. You had to be professional.

Not that anyone *properly* famous ever sat in the back of his cab. Radio Barton was hardly the big time, after all. So he’d only ever get temporary celebrities—reality contest winners, small-fry pop stars, actors in fashionable TV shows—the kind everyone would forget within six months. Didn’t stop some of them coming on like they were Angelina Jolie or something, though.

‘You two’ve caused a bit of stir,’ he said. ‘*Sunday Beacon* this week!’

It had only been a paragraph boiled down from Callum Busfield’s article in the *Messenger*. Still, you didn’t see Barton in the national press too often.

Neither girl seemed to think that worth commenting on. Red light ahead. He stopped and took the opportunity to check the twins out more thoroughly. Martha was

looking absentmindedly out of the side window, but Branwen—Branwen’s reflection in the child-mirror—met Ronnie’s eyes. Challenged him to justify himself, grab at something to say.

‘You aren’t identical, are you?’

‘People think we are,’ Martha said, ‘but no.’

‘I can see. I’m surprised you got past the judges, to be honest.’

Branwen laughed—sourly, he thought.

‘Yeah, us too,’ she said, maintaining her disconcerting gaze into the mirror.

Looking at him looking at her. He was glad when the light turned green and he had a reason to return his attention to the road ahead.

They couldn’t have been too sharp, he thought, those contest judges. The girls were attractive, and there was a strong resemblance. But with them sitting next to each other like this you could easily see how different they were. Branwen had something *more* than Martha. Once you’d spotted it, you’d never have any trouble telling them apart.

When they arrived at the radio station, he said, ‘Just so you know, I’ll be here to pick you up and take you home after the interview. My name’s Ronnie. Ronnie Chenoweth.’

‘Hello, Ronnie Ronnie Chenoweth. Pleased to meet you,’ Branwen said. He guessed she’d done a calculation, measured the profit and the loss in being nice to him. No value in pissing off someone you might need assistance from, was there?

She held out her hand between the front seats. He twisted around and shook it. There wasn’t really an alternative. Meanwhile, Martha was out of the car before Branwen had let go of him.

Ronnie watched them pause outside the station door and then enter. By rights he should call in straight away, to tell Nick he’d dropped the Kellow girls off and was available for a couple of fares before the interview was done, but he needed a few minutes to compose himself. Because he wasn’t sure what it was exactly, but something about those girls was *wrong*.

Barton and District Messenger - Saturday, July 9th 2004

TWIN BEAUTIES WIN OXBRIDGE PLACES

Barton's Belles of the Boat Race

Barton College students, Branwen and Martha Kellow, both 18 (pictured above), are glowing with pride as they hold up letters containing offers to study at England's two most prestigious universities: Oxford and Cambridge.

If they seem familiar, it might be because these are the girls who caused a flurry of interest two years ago when they pranked their way as 'Bertha Winkelman' into victory in the Wool Queen of Cornwall competition.

Since gaining an impressive eleven top grades at GCSE, the girls have been making the most of their brains, rather than their looks, studying for 'A' levels at Barton College.

Branwen (left of picture) is slightly older, by 11 minutes, and favours the sciences. She intends to study Chemistry at St Catherine's College, Oxford. Martha is more of an arty type, aiming to tackle English at Girton College Cambridge. And yes, they've promised not to swap places!

The Beach Party

'We're in the paper again,' Branwen said.

She dropped the *Messenger* on the kitchen table. Martha glanced up from what she was writing. The photograph above the article had been taken back in April for the Barton College newsletter. It showed the two of them grinning like idiots, waving their offer letters, and it was embarrassing now.

‘The Principal must have given them that picture,’ Martha said. ‘Someone should have asked our permission.’

Branwen had taken a pint of milk from the fridge. She poured half into a glass and looked unhappily at it. She detested milk.

‘You know that won’t keep you sober,’ Martha said.

Branwen glugged the contents of the glass. ‘Shit. I think I’m going to puke. We don’t really have to go, do we, Mar?’ She was leaning against the sink in front of the window, and the harsh afternoon sunlight made it hard to look at her.

Martha said, ‘Yes we do. We owe it to Greg to be there.’

Gregory Robertson had organised the beach party, to bring together all his friends from college for the last time. After two years of energetic social activity, he would be lucky to pass even one of his three A-levels. He would stay at home while the others left. After this, all his life would be a disappointment to him. Martha thought she could write a poem about Greg. Not *about* him, really, but he could be a starting point for something to do with pointless young hope. Except the idea seemed mean, somehow.

Branwen took a seat at the table opposite her. ‘What are you writing about?’

‘Nothing. Rubbish.’ Among a mess of crossings-out and amendments a fragment remained: *Study of Literature useful only to teach me to write*. This was meant to be a statement of intent, but Martha couldn’t even force it into a satisfactory sentence. She thought the handwriting she’d cultivated over the last couple of years looked good, with its loops and spikes. All that was missing was something to write about. She tore the page methodically into small squares.

Branwen took a bag of crisps from the cupboard and ate them noisily. With her mouth half-full she said, ‘I was thinking I might take a nickname when I go to Oxford. How does *Tippi* sound?’

It sounded absurd, Martha thought. She tried it out, putting on a voice. ‘Tippi Kellow, eh? I suppose it could be all right after a while. Would you pass the salt, Tippi? Where are you going for your holidays, Tippi? Hey, we could try it out tonight at the party—see how people react.’

‘It’s not for here. I’d have thought *you’d* understand.’

Martha saw it was more serious than she’d realised. As usual these days, Branwen was looking for something that would take her away from Barton, from Bertha Winkelman, from herself—maybe from Martha too. But *Tippi*?

‘Names are funny. You have to wear them in,’ she said, thinking of everything else they had worn in since *The Wool Queen*.

The day after their Radio Barton appearance, Branwen had cut her hair and bleached it blond; Martha had left hers long and black. Martha chose dark, simple clothing, and Branwen developed a taste for ostentatious vintage dresses, striped tights, clashing colours. With their different specialisms at college it had been easy for them to fall into separate cliques. Branwen had worked her way through a series of boyfriends, none of whom lasted more than a couple of months; Martha steadfastly turned away all male interest. But still, here they were, twins. Martha angled her notepad up so Branwen couldn’t see what she was writing:

How little of yourself is permanent. How easy it could be to become someone else. How struggling to be an individual makes you into

Into what? Who cared, really? She crossed it out, and tore up that page too.

#

At five that evening they caught the bus out to the beach. Upstairs on the double-decker, they sat behind two boys from college who were also, it turned out, going to Greg’s beach party. It was awkward because the girls only vaguely recognised the boys, and did not know their names. They knew the Kellows, though. Everyone did. Martha gave one of them her phone and asked him to take their picture. After that the boys ran out of conversation that might interest Branwen and Martha, and instead started talking to each other about video games, selfconsciously to begin with, but soon it was as if the Kellows had never been there at all. When the bus reached their stop and the boys prepared to go, Martha and Branwen did not move.

‘We’re meeting friends in town and walking back,’ Branwen lied. ‘We’ll see you on the beach later, maybe.’

Two stops on, the twins disembarked. Branwen was still resisting the party.

‘Let’s get there when it’s dark,’ she said. ‘I don’t feel like seeing that lot in daylight.’ So they took a walk through the narrow streets of the Old Town, where tourist families were still passing away the dead time between the end of the shops and the start of the restaurants.

Inexpert rock music leaking from a bar told Martha it was *Battle of the Bands* tonight. A trio of young men outside the door regarded the girls with the predatory

disinterest of recently-fed lions. She recognised all three of them in the same imprecise way she'd recognised the boys on the bus earlier. This is what happens, she thought, when you spend your whole life in a town. Your mind builds a map of everything.

Neither she nor Branwen had said anything for several minutes. Then, with no preamble, her sister slipped from thinking into speaking.

'There's this, then maybe I can swap to another university for postgrad, then I'll relocate to find a job. But every time there's going to be more I can't leave behind.'

It was the same as that business from earlier about making up a nickname. All to do with the fear of becoming *fixed* that had obsessed Branwen ever since *The Wool Queen*.

Martha said, 'We've always had choices, Bran. We can decide to do what we want.'

'No we can't. That's the thing. Look—I have to go to Uni and study Chemistry because two years ago I chose to do sciences. And I don't mind it, Mar, not particularly—not any more than I'd mind studying anything else. I just can't bear it when my life turns into an equation. Do you understand?'

'Of course,' Martha said, because at that moment it was true—she did understand right now, when they were bullshitting and it didn't matter one way or another. Yet tomorrow it would be important, and then she would find herself completely unable to explain what it was her sister had meant.

#

The twins arrived at the beach party at 9.15. Martha recognised the song playing on the underpowered audio system as 'Drinking at the Dam' from that Smog album everyone was so obsessed with. All that year at college there had been nothing else on the common room CD player.

Thirty-six teenagers sat on the beach and contemplated the sun edging itself into the horizon. The sky burned purple and red.

'A sunset,' Branwen said. '*There's* something you don't see every day.'

Martha whispered, 'You have no poetry in you. Scientist.' But really she agreed, and she was embarrassed by her feelings of superiority. What right did she or Branwen have to think they were better than the others? She thought of the boys from

the bus, whom they had looked down on, sneered at, dismissed; whose names she still couldn't remember. If they were here, they'd be together, because they were the sort who cleaved to each other for security. There was no sign of them.

Gregory Robertson stood warming his back at the fire. He seemed to be the only one not watching the sunset.

'Party's really rocking, Greg,' Branwen said.

'Everyone's having a moment. Don't take the piss, Bran. You want something?' He indicated a plastic box of uncooked sausages and a crate of Mexican beers. 'Sorry, we've run out of limes.'

'No thanks,' Martha said. 'We came equipped.' She and Branwen produced vodka bottles from their bags.

'Woah! Serious liquor!' Greg said. Earlier that afternoon, trying out ideas for her poem, Martha had written that he had 'an exclamation mark personality'. She observed now that his flat cartoonish face made him look like a caricature of himself.

'Can I have a shot?' he said.

Each bottle, in fact, contained one tenth vodka and nine tenths flat lemonade—Martha's idea to help them avoid getting too drunk tonight.

'Best not,' Branwen said, 'we've been drinking straight from the bottle. Too much spitback.'

'I don't mind that. No different from passing a spliff around, is it?'

'Which one of us has herpes,' Martha said, 'is it you or me, Bran?'

He squinted at her. 'Don't believe you.' But he picked up a beer instead.

'So, Greg,' Branwen said, 'how's things with the band?' She was only asking so she could enjoy his failure to impress her. Greg had always been interested in Branwen, and she had never been interested in him. Martha headed towards a group of friends from her History class. Daisy Cross was among them, and Daisy was less of an irritant than most. People had started talking again. The sun hadn't quite disappeared into the horizon, but it had lost their attention now.

Daily Ensign — Thursday July 15th 2004

‘WHERE IS MY WONDERFUL, BRILLIANT SISTER?’

**Heartbroken twin of missing Cornish beauty
creates internet campaign**

Following the disappearance of glamorous A-level student Branwen Kellow (18), her twin sister has recruited the popular music website *Myspace* to the search.

The teenager believes that her new page, called ‘Where is Branwen Kellow?’ can help locate her sister, who was celebrating the end of her exams when she went missing.

Visitors to the site can see recent photos of Branwen, who vanished during a beach party last Saturday night. There are links to videos too, including heart-rending pleas from friends and family.

‘Branwen’s a *Myspace* obsessive,’ said Martha yesterday. ‘She’s always using it to check out new bands. I’m sure that wherever she is, if she has access to a computer, she’ll look in.’

Martha is also hoping that some of Branwen’s favourite ‘indie’ bands, such as ‘The Killers’ and ‘Interpol’, will help draw visitors to her site. Famous groups and solo artists who link to the page as ‘friends’ will, she says, bring her campaign to the eyes of a much wider audience.

At the time of her disappearance, Branwen was preparing to go to Oxford University to begin a degree in Chemistry. Cornish Police believe she may have been feeling secretly overwhelmed by fears about leaving home.

A spokesman said, 'The two sisters are close, and the prospect of separation from Martha could be a factor.'

In one touching video clip uploaded to the Myspace site, Martha, who intends to study English at Cambridge, speaks to her sister directly, and is clearly holding back the tears as she offers these words:

'Maybe you're hiding because you've got freaked out about Uni. It doesn't matter. We can go or not go—Oxford, Cambridge, who cares. Just please come home, Bran. We love you.'

PART 3: THE TALKING CURE

April 2010, London: *McMeekin*

A week after his return from Barton, Christopher stood in the doorway of the psychotherapist's office. Five times he had almost phoned to cancel. He could still walk away, he thought.

'Dr McMeekin?'

'Christopher. Please come in. And do call me Neil.'

The informality discomfited him, though McMeekin's Scottish accent sounded right, and he *looked* like a doctor. Anyway, he looked like someone's idea of a shrink—thin and cadaverous, prematurely balding, spectacles, open necked shirt. He sat behind a vast desk, empty except for a telephone, a tidy stack of yellow paper and an expensive-looking black fountain pen.

All around the walls hung large, simple abstract canvases. There was no sign of the framed professional certificates Christopher had expected. He realised he was measuring this new experience against the clichés of newspaper cartoons. For some reason, he recalled a sketch he had seen on TV as a child—a signwriter mistakenly painting *T. Johnston: The Rapist* where it was meant to be *T. Johnston: Therapist*. Something about this ancient joke struck him as apposite. He struggled to stop his mouth lifting into a smirk.

'Do you prefer to face the engine or the rear?' McMeekin asked, moving smoothly out from behind his desk.

'I'm sorry?'

'Which chair?' In the middle of the office a couple of modern leather seats faced each other over a low coffee table.

'I'll take this one. I like to be able to see out of the window,' Christopher said. In truth, he didn't care much, but it seemed necessary to justify himself. Everything felt so freighted. Had he already been outmanoeuvred?

McMeekin nodded, smiled again and waited while his patient sat. Then, taking the chair opposite, he brandished a slim black device.

'This is a voice recorder,' he said. 'I'd prefer to use it in case we need to—to revisit anything. But if it makes you feel unnatural, I can take written notes instead.'

'It's fine.'

'This is more reliable as a record. Obviously the audio's still bound by doctor-patient confidentiality.'

‘Of course.’ It pleased Christopher that McMeekin had used the word *doctor*. He found he much preferred this admission of formality, of the medical relationship between them, to the sloppiness of ‘call me Neil’.

‘Water?’ McMeekin asked. On a side table a couple of tumblers stood next to a green glass jug in which slices of lemon and fresh ice cubes floated. It looked like a scene set up for a painter.

‘I’m fine, thanks.’

The therapist switched on his recorder. He left a long pause to allow his first real question to build sufficient momentum. Finally, he asked it.

‘What would you say you expect from this, Christopher?’

He riffled possible answers in his mind, slippery and uncooperative as new playing cards.

I want to know if I should try to find Branwen Kellow;

I want to know if this gift I have is real;

I want to know if what I remember about what happened to Stevie is true.

He said none of that. Instead he decided to quibble about the question. ‘Do you mean the outcome?’ he said. ‘Or the process? Or just today’s session?’

‘The outcome. What *outcome* are you hoping for?’

‘That’s a different question, isn’t it?’ Christopher said. ‘You just asked me what I *expected*; now you’re asking what I *hope for*.’ He knew he was arguing for the sake of distraction. Nothing would come of this if he treated it as a game, as a battle. He decided to change tack. ‘I’m sorry. That wasn’t very helpful was it? Do you mind if I have that drink of water after all?’

While McMeekin poured carefully from the jug, his attention focussed on stopping ice cubes splashing into the glass, Christopher glanced out of the window at the sky. It looked simultaneously overcast and cloudless. Fifteen minutes previously when he had walked here from the Tube it had been a bright, utterly clear April morning. This drab view must be an illusion caused by a grey quality in the glass, some treatment that stripped out all the light and colour. ‘Are those windows tinted?’ he asked.

‘Coated,’ McMeekin said, returning to the table with two tumblers of water. ‘To cut out the ultraviolet light. Otherwise it’d get unbearably hot in here. It’s a natural solution. I’ve never really trusted air conditioning. Spoils the view though, doesn’t it?’

Makes it look like it's going to rain all the time. I want to ask, is there something about yourself that you dislike—something you hope I can change?’

The abruptness of this question, as McMeekin must have intended, surprised Christopher into answering without thought.

‘Yes.’

‘But you expect me to fail.’ McMeekin took off his spectacles, held them in both hands and flexed the metal frames. Without putting them back on, he looked at Christopher, steadily and uncritically. ‘You know, I don’t need to wear these all the time. I’m only moderately short-sighted. For driving and the cinema, definitely, but to see anything nearby, I’ve no real need. I wonder why I always wear them with new patients. And why I often continue wearing them with patients I find difficult. I suppose they fit the image. They help me to believe in my role as the psychotherapist, and that makes me more confident the patient will believe in it too. Silly, isn’t it, to depend on a prop?’

McMeekin stopped talking and put the glasses on. Christopher could only bear the ensuing silence a few moments before he too had to fill it with confession.

He said, ‘When I was a kid, there was a boy, about my age. I was—involved in his death. I tried to save him, by going to get help, but I was too late. No, it’s more than that, he didn’t just die. Something weird happened out there. And for the last few years I’ve been haunted by him. You understand? Not haunted by guilt—haunted by *him*.’

The therapist leant forward in his chair. ‘Do you mean you think this boy is a ghost?’

‘Sort of. I can’t *see* anything. I just know he’s here.’

‘Here? Present tense. Would you say he’s here now, in this room?’

‘He’s always with me.’

‘But invisible? So how do you know he’s there?’

‘I don’t see him. Sometimes I think I almost hear him. Like an echo of an echo. I don’t know whether it’s real or not. But once I became aware of it, I realised I’d never known anything else.’

‘And you want to rid yourself of this hallucination?’

‘I don’t think it’s a hallucination. I’d like to understand it better.’ He decided he might as well explain himself properly. ‘Just to be clear, I make my living communicating with the Dead. Stevie’s my—I suppose you could say *point of*

connection.' He waited for McMeekin to say something. Surely that was worth commenting on.

Eventually the psychotherapist said, 'You're a medium?'

'Stage medium. Yes.'

'And this boy Stevie, he's your—spirit guide. Is that the term?'

'That would be the closest thing.'

'I see. I didn't realise a spirit guide could be a person the medium actually *knew*. I mean, aren't they usually Sioux chiefs or ancient Chinese philosophers? Something like that?'

'I can't speak for anyone else. I have Stevie.'

'And you believe him to be real? To be a ghost?'

'Not a ghost exactly. That's part of what I want to figure out.'

'I see. And how do you think you would feel if you were to discover that this Spirit Guide of yours really *is* only a hallucination?'

'I suppose we'll have to see. If that's what we find out.'

'Because, if this is how you make a living—'

'I understand. There are implications. It's a risk I'm prepared to take.'

'And are the people in your life, the people who are important to you, aware you've decided to go into therapy?'

'No. I've told nobody.' It hadn't occurred to him until that moment, but there it was: he had kept this a secret.

'It helps, you know. Not just with the process, but practically. It means you don't have to sneak around or tell lies about what you're doing.'

'I'll think about it.'

'And it's nothing to be ashamed of. Quite the reverse. Telling people about what you're doing can help you accept that. Therapy's going to be part of who you are from now on. I'd advise you to trust at least some of your friends and family with that information'

'I'll definitely consider that,' he said. Trust had nothing to do with it. None of them would understand, certainly not Berry or Rob. Maybe he could have told his daughter, but he'd have to ask her to keep it from her mother and that wouldn't be fair. Anyway, how could he explain to any of them why he'd chosen *now*, the very moment everything had started going well, to risk questioning it all?

#

During the second session, Christopher related the whole Stevie Lightwood story. It was just the same as telling it onstage.

‘He was never found, this boy?’ McMeekin asked.

‘Never. Not his body.’

‘What do you think became of him?’

‘I think—’ In the performance version he never went into much detail about that. It was enough to let the audience think Stevie had been transformed into some kind of a spirit. ‘—I think he and I were fused together. It’s—I can’t totally explain it, but sometimes I’m not sure which of us it was who rode away in that helicopter, or if it was either of us exactly. Does it sound stupid to say there was a moment when I felt the universe change direction?’

McMeekin seemed animated by this suggestion. ‘Why should that sound stupid?’

‘We were two insignificant kids in the middle of nowhere.’

‘Such a strange experience, and so frightening. You’d need to find a meaning in it, wouldn’t you? Some way of making sense out of this incomprehensible event? You know, one strategy for coping with disempowerment is to believe ourselves the centre of forces beyond all understanding—fate and god and so forth. I mean—even the *possibility* that you changed the path of the whole universe—it must feel very powerful.’

‘Are you suggesting I might have invented this whole psychic business just to compensate for not getting back in time to stop Stevie’s death?’

McMeekin adjusted his manner. ‘I’m saying memory can be tricky, that’s all.’

*From **Living with the Dead** by Christopher Longley: Chapter 4*

The poor, more numerous than the rich, are also statistically likely to die much younger. Where I grew up, death was regular and unremarkable—from bad lifestyle, from bad diet, from alcohol-related accidents, from being too frightened to go to the doctor when you find yourself pissing blood one morning.

Traffic killed off quite a few. Once, I remember, a woman from our street took a glancing blow from a bus, and it turned out she wasn't as all right as she looked. She went home to her house and didn't reappear until the paramedics broke in a month later. They carried her out in a zip-up bag on a stretcher. Apparently right after closing the door behind her, she'd dropped down dead in the hall.

So there was plenty of dying, but back then the whole idea of death was just white noise to me. The Dead certainly didn't communicate with me. Or if they were trying, I couldn't hear them. Otherwise, I'd have known about that woman in her hallway. I'd have told someone. Instead, I walked by her door every morning on my way to school, past the paperboy shoving each day's *Daily Mirror* through her letterbox. In the end, the unpaid bill at the newsagents was the only reason she was found, rotting away under a pile of papers and junk mail. Stories like hers were dramatic, but they were routine too, background stuff. The first death to affect me intimately was my father's.

#

The morning after they brought back Dad's body, I came downstairs in my pyjamas and shoes. Sherry had leapt the garden gate and run off weeks ago, so there was no longer any need to protect myself against rogue dogshit squeezing between my bare toes; but when you live with a mentally ill person you have to be on your guard. Once, for example, after she'd woken from a dream of intruders, Gran had got up in the night and set traps in the hall—big shards of broken glass, nearly invisible against the pattern of the carpet. I'd cut my foot pretty badly that time.

She wasn't around right now. She'd either gone out or not yet woken up. I switched on the black-and-white portable TV, and set about rotating the coathanger aerial with one hand, adjusting the dial with the other until I found the kids' programmes. Then I left it blaring away and went to get myself some breakfast.

Though the house was a mess everywhere, the kitchen was the worst. The doors of some of the cupboards had fallen off. Unwashed dishes filled the sink; used plates and cutlery spilled over everywhere else. On the ancient gas cooker stood a pan, half-full of stale lard, in which Gran cooked chips most nights. That was the source of the yellowish layer of grease and dust that had settled on every surface. Sometimes I

scratched through it with a fingernail, interested to see the clean, bright wall tile or worktop beneath.

She must have had cocoa last night. There was a pan on the side with chocolate brown baked into its interior and an empty milk carton next to it. Milk or no milk, Weetabix was all there was. I had tried it with water once. It was revolting. You could eat it dry, though, if you chewed slowly enough.

I selected the cleanest dish and spoon, held them under the hot tap and rubbed with a fingertip to detach the dried-on remains of whatever had been eaten from them. Tinned oxtail soup, I guessed. Gran ate a lot of that. It felt slimy and nauseating at first, then my finger squeaked against the glaze on the china. The skin of dehydrated soup dissolved and sloughed off. There was no tea towel, so I shook the bowl dry and dropped in two Weetabix. At the back of a cupboard that still had both doors, I found a quarter-full jar of strawberry jam, a little old and shrivelled on top but mould-free. I crowned each of the biscuits with a crimson dollop, and took my miserable breakfast to the front room.

Some of the springs on the sofa were broken, and Gran had thrown a rough, scratchy old blanket over the sofa to hide all the stains and threadbare patches. No matter how I shifted around, I couldn't get comfortable. I tried to distract myself by concentrating on the Saturday morning presenters as they chased each other around a fuzzy TV studio, but I couldn't see what was supposed to be so entertaining about adults hurling food at each other. In any case that morning something bigger was on my mind. My father was dead.

He had no record of health problems. Since leaving the army he had kept up regular habits of good diet and exercise. He drank in moderation and didn't smoke. For six months he'd been working on an oil refinery they were building in the north of Scotland. There, high on a scaffold inside the top of a half-finished fractionating column, he died alone. Apparently, when he missed his scheduled break and didn't reply to radio calls, another worker went to check and found him hanging upside down, having spun around on the belt that tethered his waist to the ladder. He was blue-skinned and open-mouthed. They said it might have happened at any time—heart failure due to a genetic irregularity. Nothing could have saved him.

The autopsy delayed things, and it turned out there were many complexities involved in moving a body from northern Scotland down to England. The undertaker, Mr Craighall, organised it all for us, appearing once a day at Gran's with an updated

report. He looked to me like someone in a 1930s film, with his glossy shoes, sharp-creased trousers and his slim, old-fashioned moustache. I could see how distasteful he found Gran's house. He was careful to touch as little as possible. He'd perch at the chair's edge, his feet almost on tiptoe, and turn down every offer Gran made of tea or a slice of cake.

'I appreciate this has been a longer business than you'd want,' he'd said yesterday. 'Now he's home I can get him ready for you. He'll be right for a visit on Monday.' I didn't understand what he meant, but Gran told me afterwards. A corpse in its natural state was unpleasant to see: too much of death about it and not enough of the person. The undertaker would make it into something more like Dad when he was alive. Tomorrow, he'd be finished. Gran and I would go in a taxi, and say goodbye to him.

I finished my cereal. My mouth felt dry, there were bits stuck in my teeth. Over the sound of the TV, I heard a key struggling to turn in the front door lock.

#

Six months previously, Gran had decided she needed new keys cutting. She said the old ones were going to stop working soon, and we would both end up locked out one day. I had tried to tell her the keys were fine, but there was no changing her mind. There never was. She collected them all, insisted I handed over mine too, and together we went to Leeming's Shoe Repairs in town for sixteen new copies, each finished with a brightly coloured rubber cap. Eight reds for the front door, eight yellows for the back.

Leeming was a tall, stooping man with a bald head. I never liked him, but I did like the shop—its cluttered smell of leather and machine oil; the high shelves packed with tight rows of shoes. There were interesting displays of laces, polishes and brushes. Signs on bits of cardboard set out the regulations in a careful, childlike hand. *Repairs not collected after three months will be disposed of.*

Gran gave the old man the keyring, and he slid in a thick amber thumbnail to open it. He wore a string necklace tied to a pair of spectacles that were missing their left arm. With one eye closed, he held the glasses like a magnifying lens and scrutinised the key.

‘Four-nine-four, I reckon,’ he said, and selected one of the blanks from the fifty or so different types hanging on the wall behind him. He measured this anonymous uncut key against the one he had taken from Gran. ‘Four-nine-four,’ Mr Leeming repeated. ‘Don’t see many these nowadays. You live in the Prefabs?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Thought so. Most of ‘em got new doors on now. Must be two year ago, last time I cut a four-nine-four. You been in them Prefabs since they were new?’

‘Me and my husband were about first in. The Queen came and cut the ribbon—Princess Elizabeth, she was then. He passed on, my husband, in sixty-eight. My grandson here, he lives with me now. He’s a good boy.’

‘Him? I thought he was your boyfriend. You can’t be old enough to have such a big lad for a grandson.’

‘Flatterer!’ said Gran. I’d often heard men—old men especially—talking like this to her when she was on an Up: full of energy, wearing makeup and her nicest clothes. Poor diet and cigarettes had kept her thin. She was sixty-six but I suppose she looked fifteen years younger. Of course, it all reversed when a Down collapsed her into miserable, ancient apathy, but at those times she barely left the house.

Old Leeming turned his attention to me. ‘Now, boy, what’s this?’ He was holding up Gran’s old key. I understood tests like this, and I hated them. The way you played was by getting it wrong. Only a subversive, a smart Alec, gave the right answer.

‘A key?’ I said, and waited for the correction.

‘Well, now, that’s what you might use it for. But for me it’s a *jig*. Do you know what a *jig* is, lad?’

I had heard of a jig. Something to do with machinery. ‘I don’t know. I mean, I know it’s a kind of dance, but that’s all.’

With his back to me, he continued talking. ‘I clip this piece of metal here, what you’d call a key, into the machine. Now that key’s the jig. When I put the blank at the other end, and I turn on the machine, it uses the jig, that’s your old key there, to cut the new one here. This machine tracks the jig your Grandma gave me, and the one it makes is a duplicate.’ He turned to face me. ‘Do you follow, boy?’

‘Yes. The machine copies the jig.’

Leeming smiled. ‘See, Grandma,’ he said, ‘every day’s a school day.’

At home, Gran deposited the old set, bound with a rubber band, in a cigar box that was already half-full of assorted keys from historical locks.

‘You should never throw a key away, Christopher,’ she told me. ‘One day it might open something important.’ Then she saw how the mystery of the keys’ multitude of sizes and shapes intrigued me. She took the box back to her bedroom to hide it.

#

For all his talk of precise duplication, none of the new keys Mr Leeming had made were any good. Almost forty years of use had worn the old ones into an exact marriage with the tumblers and they would turn in the lock without causing you a moment’s thought. Their raw new children were inexact, rough-edged. You had to fiddle with the angle, depth and position to get them to work.

‘They’ll wear in,’ Gran had said, six months ago. Now I listened to her frustration at the front door, and wondered how long that wearing-in was going to take. I didn’t go to open it for her, because I knew that would only annoy her further. After five minutes, I heard the door scrape over the mat, then grocery bags hitting the floor. If Gran was out shopping this early, she was most likely on an Up, but I didn’t know yet whether it was the organised, practical sort or the manic kind.

‘Dear me!’ she said as she bustled into the room. ‘Still in your pyjamas, watching this rubbish.’ She switched off the TV. Organised and practical, then.

‘I had to have dry cereal,’ I told her.

‘I bought milk. Get dressed. We’ve cleaning to do before we go and see your Dad’s— to see your Dad tomorrow. *However* did this place get in such a state?’

I went to my room to dress. When I came back, Gran was busy in the kitchen. The dirty dishes were all stacked neatly at the side of the sink, now full of hot water.

She was on her knees, wiping down the interior of a cupboard. ‘I bought new tea towels. They’re in the shopping bag in the hall. I’ll wash up and you can dry and put away.’ I noticed the dog’s bowls were gone. She caught my eye and said, ‘I don’t think Sherry’s coming back. I’ve got rubber gloves. You’d better put them on.’

All that day we cleaned and tidied. She had brought home three carrier-bags of cleaning products, including several bottles of a ferocious-smelling spray called *Grease-Off*. Marvelling at this miracle product’s power to dissolve the yellow kitchen

gunge, Gran enthusiastically sprayed it everywhere else in the house. Wherever it condensed, *Grease-Off* reduced the grime of years to a thin slurry, which we mopped away with j-cloths. I was glad to have the rubber gloves protecting my skin, but I feared the damage the *Grease-Off* mist was wreaking on my lungs.

We had filled the dustbin, so Gran got Clifford from next door to drive bags and boxes of excess rubbish to the tip. Then she asked him to repair several annoyances around the house. He replaced a broken light fitting in the bathroom and stabilised a wobbly table leg in the front room. He nailed the busted springs on the sofa and chairs. He screwed the detached kitchen cupboard doors onto their hinges. Despite his protests, Gran insisted on rewarding him with ten packs of Superkings. I was sure Clifford didn't smoke. Nevertheless he took the cigarettes in the end, and told her he needed to get off to watch the racing.

'Well,' she said when Clifford had gone, 'that's a good start.'

The *Grease-Off*'s chemical odour was fading. I thought about Mr Craighall. If the undertaker ever visited again would he set his feet flat against the vacuumed carpet? Would he plant his backside firmly on the fresh blanket covering the repaired chair; and would he drink tea if he was offered a mug from which bleach had removed all the tannin stains?

#

On Monday, we went to see Dad's body at the undertakers'. Gran had called from a telephone box that morning to book us a taxi. She cooked lunch in the clean kitchen, and we ate together in the front room, at the table with the repaired leg. We washed and dried the dishes, and I put them away in the tidy cupboard. Then we waited in silence for almost thirty minutes until a horn sounded outside the door.

When we came out of the house, the taxi driver already had his window wound down. 'Longley, for Craighall's Funeral Home?'

'That's us,' said Gran.

We sat in the back seat together. Gran stared straight ahead, clutching her handbag in her lap. I had hardly ever been in a car—only perhaps five times in my whole life. I didn't know whether it was motion sickness I felt or the anticipation of seeing my father's corpse.

‘Is it a friend or a relative?’ the driver asked after a while. He was a young man, brown-haired, his face dense with freckles.

‘It’s my son,’ said Gran.

‘Ah. I’m sorry to hear that.’

Gran smiled, ‘No, you don’t understand. My son isn’t dead. He works at Craighall’s. Just started as a junior undertaker there. He’s going to show us around the place today. This here’s his lad—my grandson.’

I could see the young man’s eyes in the driver’s mirror; a flicker as he absorbed the lie.

‘Well, that’s an interesting line of business. I thought it was all kept in the family, passed down like. Father to son.’

‘No, you can study it at college now.’

The driver spun the wheel, taking a corner too hard, throwing me against Gran’s side.

‘I suppose there must be a lot to learn, when you think about it.’

‘Dennis, that’s my son. He’s got all sorts of qualifications. Customer service, law, biology, embalming, coffin-building.’

‘Coffin building? Surely they buy the coffins in?’

I saw Gran’s fingers whiten around her handbag. ‘Places like Craighall’s do, of course. Not the traditional firms. The top funeral homes, they all build their coffins bespoke, made to measure. Craighall’s is just a start for our Dennis. With his qualifications, he’ll be burying royalty one day.’

I think her skill as a liar must have been a gift of her illness. Over the years it had reduced the barrier between reality and imagination to a thin, permeable veil. Truth and fiction passed freely in both directions. She only had to say a thing to believe it.

The driver turned his attention to me. ‘And what do you reckon to your Dad’s line of work, son?’

‘Dunno,’ I said. ‘It’s all right.’ I supposed I wasn’t joining in with Gran’s lie. Dad had a line of work when he was alive. I didn’t have much of an opinion about it.

‘So, will he be showing you—you know—all the aspects in there? I mean that could be scary for a kid, couldn’t it?’

‘Christopher’s a sensible boy,’ Gran said. ‘He knows the Dead aren’t anything to be afraid of.’

After she had paid the young man and he had driven away, she answered the question I hadn't asked. 'No benefit in taxi drivers knowing all our business, Chrissy. We'll get the bus home after.'

The funeral home stood in a large garden behind wrought-iron gates, a tall, old house, Victorian Gothic in dark brick, its sash windows painted green. As we approached the front door, it opened and Mr Craighall stood there to welcome us. His professional way of speaking seemed even more hushed and reverential than usual.

'If you'll follow me, Mrs Longley, Christopher.' He turned and led us down a narrow hallway with a wooden floor. Closed oak doors with brass nameplates on either side alternated with heavy-framed paintings of flowers, bowls of fruit, blue and green landscapes. On the right we passed *Office, Clients' Washroom, and Clients' Parlour*; the three doors on the left were all *Private*.

We paused at the end of the hallway, by the door marked *Chapel of Rest: Foyer*.

'Do you live here, Mr Craighall?' I asked.

'We do. Myself and my family have one half of the house, that side—the other side here is the business.'

'Do you have any children?'

'A girl and a boy. My girl's a bit older than you. The boy's seven.'

I remembered what Gran had said in the taxi about me knowing the Dead were nothing to fear. The truth was I hadn't thought much about it before, but now I did they seemed terrifying to me. What would it be like for Mr Craighall's son, having to grow up in a house full of corpses? Would he play among the bodies? Sit at his father's feet as he pumped the juices out and the formaldehyde in?

We entered a tiny room containing four leather chairs. Directly opposite the door by which we'd entered was another, closed.

'The Chapel of Rest is through there,' said Mr Craighall. 'I'll leave you in a moment. Do sit here as long as you like. Then you can go through once you're ready. If you want to come out for a while, you can wait here in the foyer, or if you need more space there's the larger parlour we passed on the way in. We've toilet facilities and so forth off the hallway, if that's required. Um, there aren't going to be any further visitors, are there, after yourselves?'

'No,' said Gran. 'It's just us and that's it.'

'Right. Well before you go, if you give me a knock at the office, so we'll know. I can get everything tidied up then.'

He left us. Gran sat on one of the leather chairs. I asked her, 'Will there be others in there? Other dead people?'

'No, it'll just be your Dad. We'll go through in a minute. I'm not quite ready.' She rummaged in her bag and found a tissue to blow her nose into.

'What will he look like?' I asked.

'Just himself. As if he's asleep.'

I tried to visualise my father's face. It had been like this every time Dennis had come home—on Army leave, and when he was between jobs in this or that part of the country. When I was younger, I remembered, my father would always bring me some toy. I especially recalled a little plastic man in a deep sea diver's suit, the old-fashioned kind with a spherical helmet and weighted boots. It was a bath toy. There was a rubber pipe attached to it, and you could make the doll rise and fall in the water by blowing down the tube. Recently though there had been no toys, just a five pound note at the end of each visit, pressed awkwardly into my hand in the minutes before he left.

He only ever came for a couple of days, and the visits were a long time apart. A postcard or a letter would arrive, giving us notice; there would be a period of excited anticipation. Then he'd turn up, and he was always changed somehow since the previous visit. A new hairstyle, a moustache, a different way of dressing. Last time, he'd started wearing spectacles.

While he was there, he'd take me to football matches, zoos, once to an art gallery. One time, he turned up on a Norton motorcycle, a relic even then, and took me out for a ride. The helmet he gave me was far too big for a child. It rested heavy on my shoulders; its sweaty interior stank of some man's tobacco breath and its visor was frosted with dirt. I could have seen nothing out of it even if I had been brave enough to open my eyes as I clutched his waist, dazed and intoxicated by petrol fumes, deafened by the two-stroke engine. Afterwards I took off the helmet and vomited onto the ground.

Seeing his coffin on its wheeled trolley for the first time, I was surprised by how tiny it seemed. Too small to contain a real person. Yet my father lay inside it, with his eyes closed. Most of his body was covered with a shiny cloth pinned to the coffin's satin interior. His head and shoulders were visible, looking smaller too than in life. I remembered what Gran had said about the coffins coming in standard sizes, and I wondered if Mr Craighall had done something to the corpse to make it fit. Some

unthinkable violation. I saw he had given my father a shave, combed his hair and dressed him.

Earlier that week, Mr Craighall had asked Gran what Dennis should wear. ‘Not his army uniform,’ she said, because she never liked him in that. She went to the bedroom he used when he came to visit and she found his suit and shiny black shoes. They were the clothes he kept at Gran’s house for weddings and funerals. Looking at him now, in that suit in his coffin, I realised he’d been becoming more and more ordinary to me for a while. And death, this ultimate diminution, seemed like a natural development.

Gran and I stood either side of him. I felt as if I was already remembering the scene, even while it unfolded.

‘It’s cold in here,’ I said.

‘It has to be.’ Gran bent to kiss her dead son briefly on the lips. ‘Do you want to touch him?’

I didn’t.

‘It’ll be the last time. We won’t see him again after this. They’ll fasten the lid down.’

So I put my fingertips against my father’s forehead. It was not like touching a person.

Gran said, ‘He’s done a lovely job. He’s a real artist, Mr Craighall.’

But, whatever Gran’s opinion, the undertaker was not an artist. I thought of the time my father had taken me to the art gallery. I had seen a Henry Moore sculpture that was little more than a few curves in a piece of rock, yet it had seemed as if out of that inanimate slab Moore had cut something that might breathe or turn or moan at any moment. Mr Craighall had done the opposite. He been given the flesh and form of a real human being and made of it only the image of a death preserved. He’d turned my father to stone.

#

Death is always a surprise to us. Not the deaths of strangers, of distant people—those we can understand objectively, like a closed-down business or a broken vacuum cleaner. Understanding only fails us when it’s someone we’ve known well. You can say ‘he’s dead’, ‘she doesn’t exist anymore’, but those are only words substituting for

meaning. You can't imagine the end of another person's identity, because you can't imagine the end of your own. This is why we need priests and undertakers, to bring ritual and order to the incomprehensible.

I wonder what Mr Craighall thought of Gran and me. I suppose we were a kind of insult to his profession. Yet he never showed it. For him, the important thing was always to be unflustered, whatever the client asked for, whatever the client said. So he kept his feelings about the filth and chaos in Gran's prefab to himself. He had a little book in which he recorded the wishes of his clients. I watched as he wrote down all of Gran's lunatic stipulations regarding the funeral. She wished to inform nobody; she did not want my Dad's old army regiment contacted; she preferred not to get in touch with his boyhood friends. No family members, only her grandson. She would not require a death notice in the local newspaper.

'Quite low key, then,' Mr Craighall said. 'And just the one car?'

'No cars. Apart from the hearse. Me and Chrissy'll meet you at the Crem. We'll come on the bus.'

'I see. No cars, hearse only. Mourners arriving by bus.' He said it all aloud as he noted it down. 'And no catering afterwards?'

'That's right. Nothing.'

'Ceremony?'

'The usual one.'

'So you'll be needing the vicar?'

'Of course,' she said, as if he had asked her something peculiar. 'You can't have a funeral without the vicar.'

#

Mr Craighall delivered the body to the chapel at the council crematorium. He, and his assistant Joe, with two other men he was paying by the hour, bore the coffin to the catafalque, and then they retreated to stand together at the back. As expected, there was only Gran and me, in the middle row of the otherwise empty chapel. I was wearing my school shirt and trousers with a black tie Gran had given me. It had probably been Dad's. She, Gran, sat next to me in a plain skirt and blouse. We had to be dressed properly, she had explained. There were prayers but no hymns, and when it came to the eulogy, the vicar had almost nothing to say. Just four sentences:

‘Dennis Longley was much loved by his late wife, Theresa. He will be remembered with love too by his mother, Elizabeth, and his son Christopher. Dennis had served his country with honour as a corporal in the Royal Engineers. He saw conflict in Northern Ireland and during the recent Falklands War.’

The names struck me as strange. *Elizabeth*. Everyone called her Mrs Longley, apart from me. I called her Gran. Naturally, I’d known she had a first name, and perhaps I had also known it was Elizabeth. Still, hearing it now felt weird, as if the priest in his pulpit were talking of someone else.

And this Elizabeth was my father’s mother—again, I had known that, but not consciously. She was a grandmother to me. A mother was something else. My own mother’s name, Theresa: I had heard my father say that sometimes. Elizabeth. Theresa. Dennis. Christopher. The names seemed to be codes, passwords for entry into a world I didn’t understand. And as the curtains closed around my father’s coffin, I imagined a life for myself in which my mother had not died giving birth to me, an alternative self who had not been abandoned to Gran.

It occurred to me that I was an orphan. I tried on that word, finding it old-fashioned, and also, because my father had never really been there, unsuitable. My life was no different than it had been before. There was Gran and there was me.

The vicar said, ‘Unto him that is able to keep us from falling,
And to present us faultless before the presence of his glory
With exceeding joy,
To the only wise God our Saviour,
Be glory and majesty,
Dominion and power,
Both now and ever.’

Perhaps the image of the priest, poised in his little pulpit reminded me of the stack; perhaps it was the words *him that is able to keep us from falling*—but for the first time in months, I thought about Stevie Lightwood. I realised I didn’t know if he had been given a funeral. Without anything to bury or burn, what had *his* mother done to say goodbye to *her* lost son? There must have been something, some ceremony. An empty coffin, perhaps? I imagined it was not my father but Stevie inside this coffin, dressed in a school blazer with a missing sleeve.

Then I remembered the body we had visited at Craighall’s. That unreal thing was in there now, ready to roll off into the fire, as soon as we had gone to catch the

bus home. Dennis was not here, any more than Stevie was. Why had everyone taken all this trouble, shipping my father home from Scotland, embalming him, dressing him in clothes, just so he could be hidden, first in a coffin, then behind a curtain? And all of that in preparation to destroy him in the flames?

Mr Craighall had told us he would deliver the ashes the next day in a tasteful wooden box with a screw-on metal lid, and he had explained that, as far as disposal went, we could do whatever we wanted.

‘Some keep them, some scatter them, some bury them in a favourite place. A body can only be interred in a legally sanctified location—but ashes are sterile. As long as you’re sensible about it, you can deal with them in any way you want.’

‘What are they like?’ I asked.

‘Nothing,’ Mr Craighall said. Then, correcting himself, ‘I mean, nothing like a person. They just look like rough beach sand.’

May 2010, London: *McMeekin*

The night before the third session, to prepare himself to talk about his father’s funeral, he scoured the relevant pages of his autobiography, underlining sentences and reading aloud as if he were preparing for an exam. He felt ready to answer anything, justify anything. But when it came to it McMeekin just let him speak, barely even asking for clarification. Christopher wondered what would happen once he had finally set out the whole story of his life for the therapist in this linear fashion.

A week afterwards he was surprised to discover how easily he could reduce to the barest of facts his aimless time after leaving Sheepwash. There it was in bullet points: three years at Birmingham University to study Social Policy; a job in London selling advertising over the phone; meeting Jacqueline and marrying for reasons neither of them could subsequently explain; eighteen unhappily wedded months; separation while she was pregnant with Lucy; divorce a little later. It all seemed like things that had barely happened at all, or had happened to someone else.

‘I can’t be very detailed,’ he told the therapist. ‘I’ve forgotten a lot about it. There were so many jobs. Sometimes a few days, others a few months. I had to stay as near as I could to my ex-wife and our daughter, so I could maintain contact. She kept

on relocating—I kept on following her. In the end Jacqueline remarried and settled in East Crompton, so I got a job in a hospital there. That one lasted over a year.’

‘A hospital?’ McMeekin asked. You never knew what was going to catch his interest.

‘Just admin. I looked after sale of used X-Rays.’

‘Really? Do people buy those? Whatever for?’

If McMeekin had any proper medical training he’d have known what happened to used X-Ray film. Christopher kept that thought to himself.

‘It’s big business,’ he said, ‘but not for the images. They reclaim the silver from the nitrate in the film. Are you married, Neil?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then next time you’re buying your wife earrings for Christmas, think about how they might once have been a photo of someone’s brain tumour.’

McMeekin looked unmoved by the idea. As usual, he brought the discussion back to Christopher’s history. ‘But this was quite a static time of your life, yes? What would you say was the next major event?’

‘It was around then that I got a call from the mental hospital in Sheepwash, the geriatric ward. Gran was there. She’d fallen down in the supermarket. It turned out to be a stroke. After that she was wrecked—they sat her in a chair and waited for her to die. She was mad to begin with, and while I’d been away there’d been the beginnings of Alzheimer’s. But the stroke fucked her up properly. She was paralyzed all down the left side, ruined her speech centre.’ He might as well admit the whole truth, he thought. ‘I hadn’t been back since going to University. And after the stroke I only went to see her once.’ He hoped he’d be allowed to move on to something else now, but McMeekin’s silence meant further information was required of him.

‘It took her eighteen months to die,’ Christopher said.

Finally McMeekin stirred. ‘How did you feel about that?’

‘I was glad it was over for her. I’ve no idea whether she suffered after the stroke, or how conscious she was of anything, but there was no dignity in it. And I didn’t have any ill will towards her from when I was a kid. It wasn’t easy growing up with her, but she wasn’t to blame for being mad, was she? And she was never cruel, just confused. I grew up in confusion.’

More silence from McMeekin.

Christopher said, ‘I didn’t hate her.’

That seemed to do it. McMeekin said, 'I never suggested that you might have.'

'Well, maybe it was something I needed to tell myself.'

'Maybe it was. And now you have, haven't you? So, you didn't hate her. That's good. But did you love her?'

How clever, how patient the therapist was. Christopher puzzled for a moment until he realised he had a point of comparison. He'd be seeing his daughter this weekend. He weighed his anticipation of Lucy against his memory of Gran.

'No,' he said. 'I didn't love her.'

May 2010, East Crompton: *Family Portrait*

Christopher had waited in the convertible for fifteen minutes, just out of sight of his ex-wife's house. The dashboard clock ticked over to 8:50 AM. It was time. He drove the final two hundred yards and pulled up at the end of the driveway. As he stepped out of the car, he met Maurice, arriving home from his Saturday morning run.

'Hi, Chris.' Maurice leant against the gatepost, sweating and panting, a stocky fifty-year-old black man in shorts and t-shirt. 'Excuse my state, won't you? I'm training for the Marathon. I say *training*—I can't barely do five kilometres! This your new motor?'

The correct form would be to loathe Maurice for supplanting Christopher in the lives of his wife and daughter. For his bourgeois nature and his matey tone. Unfortunately, Maurice was too likable, his kindness too genuine. They went into the house together.

As Maurice opened the door, he called 'Jacs! Elles! Christopher's here!' There was no reply. 'They're probably in the Garden, mate. Just go through. Tell 'em I'm off for a shower, would you?' He ran upstairs, taking several steps at a time, leaving Christopher in the hall, surrounded by the untidy evidence of domestic contentment. Beneath the overburdened coat rack, three umbrellas leant against each other. A huge red and black golfing broly; to its left a smaller one in elegant lavender with a polished willow handle; on its right another in lurid white plastic, decorated with green hearts and blue lips.

On the opposite wall hung a studio photograph of a type that had been fashionable a few years ago. Jacqueline, Lucy and Maurice sat in a white vortex, a

heaven. They floated in this whiteness, three of them barefoot and laughing in leisurewear: a big one, a middle-sized one and a small one. Christopher was irritated that something this kitsch should affect him so much. *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* had been Lucy's favourite story when she was little. He remembered the fun he'd had doing all the voices.

Someone's been eating my porridge, and it's all gone!

Now Christopher was playing Goldilocks himself, he understood what sorrow lay at that story's core. The little girl closed out of the family, sneaking into every room to pretend she belonged. And he recalled a similar emptiness he'd felt when he'd sat with the Kellows. Had he somehow seen his own half-lost daughter in Martha? Or in Branwen?

Jacqueline hadn't been enthusiastic when he'd offered to pick Lucy up this time. Well, it wasn't much of a sacrifice for her to come to London—not when she could drop her daughter off with Christopher then immediately head out to do some shopping, enjoy an art gallery or a cinema visit, maybe meet an old friend. Perhaps she preferred to keep him away for the same reason she had lost interest in talking about his career as soon as it had turned successful. She only ever wanted to see what he was failing at.

He found his way through quiet, sunlit rooms to the already open French window at the back. The garden was long and narrow, sloping downhill away from the house, and carved into broad steps with shrubs planted like a series of walls. From here he could not see where it all ended. Music was playing from concealed speakers somewhere and he recognised the cod-oriental tune.

Tourists swarm to see your face;

Confucius has a puzzling grace...

Jacqueline sat at a small table under a pergola, her fingers poised over the keyboard of a MacBook, not typing. Unaware of Christopher she sang along under her breath,

Disorientated, you enter in,

Unleashing scent of wild jasmine...

Something had absorbed her completely, or she would surely have sensed his presence. He was only just outside her line of vision. Seeing her like this, in profile, unconscious of being watched, he thought about the way age had intensified her. Her skin had lost the plushness of youth, her long black hair was drier, with alien grey strands lying at uncooperative angles. But her bone structure was more evident, the tough lines of her jaw and cheekbones, the masculine nose. She had been unhappy with herself when she was young, because she wasn't pretty—everything was too long or too bold. Christopher had seen the woman she would become. Now he couldn't tell whether or not he regretted having lost her.

He wasn't sure what to do. If he spoke, he would startle her, making a dreadful beginning to the encounter, but the longer he stood watching, the creepier it became. Eventually Maurice would finish his shower and join them in the garden. It would surely test the man's generosity of spirit to find his wife's ex-husband apparently locked in silent contemplation of her neck. Christopher was about to break the deadlock and say something when he heard his daughter's voice.

'Hey, Dad!'

She was waving to him from a tree, far down the garden. He could see she was on some kind of platform up there, accessed by a ladder. Jacqueline glanced up from her computer and gave him a flat smile. She looked back at the screen, clicked the touchpad and the music stopped abruptly. 'Good journey?'

'Yes,' he said. 'I hope I didn't interrupt.'

'It's fine. I was just keeping busy while I waited for you.'

He was on time, but she had to imply he'd done something wrong. Christopher wished he could talk to Jacqueline as he used to, when what you said simply meant what you said. In these drab exchanges nothing meant anything, and yet even the most innocuous sentence could be a nail bomb, packed with unstated recriminations. He was tired of it. He wondered how she'd react if he told her about his treatment with McMeekin. Would she see it as weakness or a threat? She'd think it was all about her, of course.

In the distance, Lucy skipped lightly down the ladder from the tree and made her way up the garden towards them.

'This is nice,' he said to Jacqueline. 'I never thought you had much interest in gardening.'

‘I don’t. It was like this when we bought the place. We pay an old guy to come in once a fortnight. Listen, do you want—I don’t know—a coffee or something?’

He looked for Lucy. She had disappeared temporarily behind the shrubbery.

‘Better not,’ he said.

#

While Jacqueline was seeing Christopher and Lucy to the door, past the umbrellas and the barefoot family portrait, Maurice came downstairs, towelling his hair. He wasn’t wearing shoes or socks. The bright blue shirt and chinos he now wore exactly duplicated his image in the photograph.

Jacqueline, predatory as ever, followed Christopher’s glance. ‘You’ve got to admit it’s realistic, don’t you? Maurice has seven of those shirts, all the same.’

Her husband laughed. He laughed a lot, Maurice. ‘It’s true,’ he said. ‘I have seven shirts this colour. What can I say? It’s my favourite shirt. A hint of his African accent resurfaced. He had been born in Kenya and sent to boarding school in England when he was eleven. These days he affected a blokeish Estuary.

Christopher looked back at the portrait, and he saw something else in it. Lucy and Maurice were genuinely laughing, but Jacqueline was faking. Some marriages were ground away by disagreement, others by compliance. He imagined her meeting up with another man for dinner and sex, maybe in London, after she had dropped Lucy off with her father. And why was this idea so unpleasant, he wondered. His own residual jealousy, or the cruelty to her ingenuous, good-hearted husband?

Maurice and Jacqueline followed them out onto the driveway. Would they wave him off like grandparents after a family visit? The etiquette hadn’t been established for this situation. And, he realised, as if that weren’t bad enough, now they would also have to talk about the car, which his daughter had not seen yet. In London, they used public transport all the time. He had not really wanted her to see the convertible.

‘Ooh,’ Lucy said, ‘is that yours? It’s nice!’

‘Certainly beats the Volvo,’ Maurice added, meaning the reliable brown estate Christopher had driven for five years previously.

Jacqueline pursed her lips. ‘How very—’

He could tell she thought the car vulgar, and she was right, but she was avoiding the word out of delicacy. Then she completed the remark, and he saw she had merely been looking for the proper adjective to damn him properly.

‘—eligible.’

Thinking affectionately of the Brown Volvo, Christopher hoisted his daughter’s bags into the boot. ‘I don’t know about cars,’ he said. ‘My PR chose this one for me.’

Lucy said, ‘That’s Berry. I told you about her, didn’t I?’

‘Indeed you did,’ replied her mother, signalling that it was time to move on.

His daughter sat in the front seat, fastened her safety belt and jiggled against the leather, enjoying the luxury of the convertible much more than Christopher ever could. Depressed by the whole encounter, he started the engine and pulled away. The car was the worst of it. Somehow it embodied everything that had gone wrong. Until yesterday he’d not even known how to put the top down. He had to look it up in the manual, anticipating it would be the first thing she asked him to do.

Was it the success he couldn’t live with, he wondered. Had that sent him to McMeekin, to Martha Kellow? Perhaps it was that simple: guilt over this new affluence, this having more than he could spend. In the old days it was all gone before he had earned it, or at best would be sitting in wait of some lurking necessity. Now he had the kind of wealth that could be at work generating more of itself. His accountant had figured out some tax calculation so that buying the convertible had made no difference to his money at all—though it had cost slightly more than the amount Gran had left behind when she died, on which he’d lived for two years. It was obscene, really. Part of him thought he should simply give away the excess, but it was an impulse he never got around to seeing through. Money, when you had it, turned out to be too boring and too ugly to think about.

Nevertheless, and he was ashamed to acknowledge it, he’d wanted Maurice and Jacqueline to see the Mercedes. He had hoped they would notice his new expensive clothing and his handmade shoes. He had even half-wished Berry had come along so Jacqueline could see what sort of woman he was with these days. They were weak, nonsensical impulses. The failure of his marriage had left him with a subcutaneous layer of idiocy. What was she supposed to think? *Now look at the car he’s got; look at how his young, attractive girlfriend is so much younger and more attractive than me. And the clothes this exotic creature has dressed him in—why, if I had only known this was the man I was giving up! What a fool I was to divorce him!* All he had achieved,

would ever achieve, was to escalate his ex-wife's completely reasonable contempt for him.

He realised he had not spoken since he and Lucy had driven away from the house, had not even thought about his daughter. Something else to be ashamed of. This was turning out to be a wonderful day.

'So, how's school?' he asked.

'Can we have the roof down?' she said.

'Why not?' He pressed a button, confident because he had practised that it would work. And it did.

#

They dropped off Lucy's things at his flat and took the Tube into the City. In the Charing Cross Starbucks, they both had skinny lattes (coffee drinking was now, apparently, something his daughter did). These days, the best strategy was to let her choose where they went. She tolerated his occasional misjudgements—the wrong show, the wrong kind of animated film, the wrong place to eat, the no-longer-appropriate birthday present—but he could tell when he'd got it wrong and it hurt him. He'd rather get it right if he could.

She said, 'I thought we could go to a gallery today. Mum says there's a conceptual art exhibition I should see at Tate Modern.'

'Conceptual?' He was displeased to think of Jacqueline steering the visit.

'Would that be all right?' Lucy asked.

'I'm sure it'll be interesting. And I've never been to Tate Modern.'

'Dad! That's shocking!'

'Well, I've got you to educate me, haven't I?'

He hoped their relationship was changing because she was growing up, though he feared it was because she didn't quite see him in the role of father any more. And he couldn't blame her—Maurice had been doing most of the paternal work for the past six years. So Christopher took what he could. It was pleasant to have the affection and loyalty of this assured young woman, with her forgiveness for his desertion of her childhood unquestioned and unmentioned by either of them.

As he sipped his coffee, in no hurry to start the journey to Southwark, he noticed that a man at a table across the cafe was looking at him. Christopher was not well-

known enough, or distinctive enough, that most people could identify him confidently. But his photograph appeared each month above his *Beacon* column, and he had been on TV a few times. Most likely this man was wrestling with a vague idea that Christopher looked like some famous person, but couldn't quite work out who he was. It happened from time to time now. Christopher acknowledged the gaze with a smile. Some would smile back at that, others look away in embarrassment, and bolder characters might come over to talk. This one just continued staring.

The man was about Christopher's age, unshaven and wearing an ancient green lumberjack shirt. He looked like he might be homeless. If so, he had his own problems to think about. It was solipsistic to imagine that just because someone happened to be looking in his direction, that he, Christopher, was the target of the gaze. Probably the man was focused on the middle distance, on nothing in particular other than his own thoughts.

‘—with you and Berry?’ Lucy was saying.

Christopher returned his attention to his daughter. It was easy enough to fill in the rest of her question, but he wasn't keen to answer it. He said, ‘Sorry, I was distracted. I didn't catch that.’

She smiled broadly, accustomed to his evasiveness regarding Berry. ‘Ooh, were you in one of your *trances*, Dad? Were the ghosts talking to you?’

‘I—No—What do you know about that?’

He had never spoken with his daughter about what he did for a living. He didn't want the question of his authenticity to become a battleground on which she would have to take a side. So he'd just allowed the implication to lie that, like most of her friends' parents, he did the kind of mysterious-yet-uninteresting office-based work that no child would want to investigate. There would come a day when he had to tell her the truth, he had thought, sometime in the future. And now it looked like that day had already passed. Of course, Jacqueline must have said something, and doubtless she had at least *implied* something about fraudulence, if she hadn't stated it outright.

Lucy said, ‘I've seen you doing your thing on YouTube.’

He didn't know what to say. After an awkward few seconds, she continued. ‘Oh, right. Youtube. It's a video website, Dad. Remember how you used to draw pictures on the cave walls when you were young—?’

‘What have you seen, exactly?’

‘You know, stuff. Some ropey mobile phone footage. Not much of it. OK. There’s one with you standing on stage for, like, ages. You’ve got your eyes shut, and everyone’s just *waiting*.’

‘Maybe you can show me this video, back at the flat,’ he said. He’d have to discuss it with her. And the thing about Berry as well.

He was still aware of the staring man, who now picked up his paper cup, drank and put it down again, all without breaking his gaze. Meanwhile, Lucy talked about a project she was doing for her Art GCSE and how helpful it would be for her logbook if she could write about having seen a major retrospective like this one.

‘You OK, Dad?’ she asked.

‘Sorry—yes, I’m fine. There’s a man over there. I think he’s watching us.’

She glanced over her shoulder, but in the wrong direction. ‘Who?’

‘Don’t look,’ he said. ‘He might not be.’

‘What do you reckon? Paedo? Hah! Maybe he thinks *you’re* a Paedo! Maybe he thinks I’m a child prostitute.’

‘Lucy—that’s a horrible—people sometimes recognise me. It’s probably nothing. Shall we just finish these and go to the gallery?’

The man was no longer looking at them. He was reaching under his chair, awkwardly pulling something up. It could be a gun, Christopher thought. Random public shootings were rare. Still, they happened. What if this man were to start blasting? Would Christopher and Lucy be his first victims? And how would Berry handle the PR on that? The psycho and the psychic.

The man was only fishing out his coat. He stood to put it on. Christopher registered the tattiness of the ancient garment, its washed-out colour, the rips in the fabric; saw that it was about a size too small for its owner; noted the style. Of course it was. What else would it be? A snorkel, but not zipped up. Left open like a cape, like the dusters they used to wear in spaghetti westerns. The homeless man put his hand into a pocket and took out a single cigarette, which he clamped between his lips but didn’t light. Then, just before he went, he put up the hood, framing his doughy face with a halo of nylon fur. He looked into Christopher’s eyes, briefly but unambiguously, and then he went.

It was a bright, late-summer day, so they walked to the gallery. At the exhibition they stood in front of a sculpture of a Barbie Doll, seven feet tall, cast in authentic pink plastic, but dressed in Amazonian armour. The scale revealed how improbable the doll's physique was. She had only a single breast, an enormous one. In her right hand she held a sword. In the left she raised aloft a set of severed male genitals. The piece was called *Culture has entered a period of post-feminist discourse: discuss*.

Lucy read aloud from the guidebook. 'In each sculpture in this series, the artist, Xavier Arian, also known as X-AR15, seeks to provide a visual answer to a randomly selected essay question sourced from university websites. Other works in the sequence include: *What is Romanticism? What are the implications of the sustainability agenda for the future of engineering?* and *How might globalisation impact on traditional models of taxation?*'

'Interesting,' Christopher said.

Lucy lowered her eyebrows into a frown as she prepared an opinion. When she was confident the idea could be expressed, she said, 'I think a lot of people like to talk about Art, but they don't know what to say about it. This gives them something to discuss, doesn't it?'

Her smartness made him proud, even if it was exactly Jacqueline's kind of remark.

They moved on to *Explore the proposal that identity is a consumable commodity*. XAR-15 had elected to answer this question with a giant fifty pound note on which the Queen's head had been replaced by a mirror.

He thought about the man in Starbucks. Probably just a mental case. As for the coat, homeless schizophrenics wore what they could find. The world with its billions of people was full of coincidences. Only mugs looked for a pattern in it.

After the gallery Lucy said her baseball boots weren't made for distance and her feet were aching. They took the Tube to Covent Garden, and watched the street entertainers for a while—a fire eater, a magician, a young woman spinning uncountable numbers of hula hoops. He gave Lucy some money to drop in the hula girl's collection. It was after three o'clock when he realised they had missed lunch. Feeling as if he had failed some basic parenting test, he took her to an upmarket burger restaurant where they ate organic ostrich patties in Serbian black bread buns. Over the meal, she suggested they might go to a cinema to see *In Darkness, Mine*.

‘It’s about handsome but tormented dark-haired young vampires finding love and redemption with pale and fragile virgins,’ she said. Her tone was ironic, but she’d already seen it three times. The third time she had taken her mother, who had hated it. Now she wanted Christopher’s opinion.

‘Well,’ he said, seeing the hook under the bait, but nibbling anyway. ‘I’ll make my own mind up, shall I?’

When they arrived, the cinema was about a third-full, mostly of teenage girls. Christopher thought of what his daughter had said earlier about him being mistaken for a paedophile, and he was glad when the house lights went down. *In Darkness, Mine* turned out to be much quieter than he’d expected. Apart from a fight with some werewolves and an exciting chase through the night sky, the characters mainly stood in a series of differently decorated rooms talking about their feelings of alienation.

Afterwards, on the bus back to his flat, he told Lucy he hadn’t quite known what to make of the film, keeping to himself a suspicion that some of his difficulties with the narrative were the result of lapsing occasionally into sleep. She seemed pleased to have the opportunity to explain it.

‘It’s based on this amazing Japanese comic book series,’ she said.

Apparently vampires were popular at the moment, but there were many subgenres and their predominantly teenage fans all disliked each other intensely. One group, the followers of a series of American novels, Lucy found especially idiotic and cultish.

‘They say *IDM* is for emos, which *so* isn’t true. It’s poetic, that’s all. The film’s OK, but it’s got nothing on the books. You should read one, Dad.’

This was about far more than whether he liked or disliked *In Darkness, Mine*. She might have moved on from the series within a few months. The response he gave mightn’t matter at all, or it might resonate with her long afterwards. But there was no risk involved. All he had to do was read some stupid book.

‘OK. I could see they must have cut a lot of stuff out from the original. I’d like to experience the real thing.’

‘Cool, I brought a copy of Volume 1 with me. I can give it you when we get back.’

It felt like a good day after all. He had stopped worrying about the man in the snorkel, and even that morning's awkwardness with Jacqueline seemed less dreadful in retrospect. After they got back to Christopher's flat in Camden, Lucy went to her room to bring him the book. He had time to make them a pot of tea before she returned to the kitchen with her battered copy of *In Darkness, Mine#1: Blood Memorial*. She was also carrying her laptop. He remembered she had wanted to show him that YouTube clip, and the discussion he'd postponed earlier wasn't going to be avoidable now.

While she was waiting for the computer to boot up, he started reading the first few pages of the comic book. The narrative seemed incomprehensible, more like a fractured ending than a beginning.

Seeing his puzzlement, Lucy said, 'It's Manga, Dad. You start at the other end. Look.' She took the book from him and flipped it over. He understood, he had been reading it backwards. Although the text had been translated into English, the paperback retained the original right-to-left Japanese layout, starting at what he'd expected to be the final page. 'Anyway, you can read it later,' she said. 'Look.'

It was a little disappointing to find that a search for videos of *Christopher Longley, psychic*, only yielded four clips. Two of those turned out to be official excerpts promoting his DVD. One had been uploaded by BVPR—Berry Vincent Public Relations, the other by GAM—Grice Artistic Management—each with a link to the online store where the discs could be purchased. How did that compare with Toni Webster's online presence? He should ask at the next Fortnightly Strategy Meeting, he thought.

The other two clips were both recent uploads by the same person, someone called *InTheNameof88*.

'Have you watched all these?' he asked.

'Yeah. I've seen the DVD too. And I've started reading your autobiography.'

Christ, he thought. But he said, 'Do Jacqueline and Maurice know?'

'Mum had to buy them for me. You can only get them online and I don't have a credit card.'

'I wish she'd told me.'

'Yeah, well, it's not like I didn't know. I've seen you on the telly, Dad. You write a column in a national newspaper.'

He had allowed this to happen. Hiding in disingenuousness. He should have talked to her about it sooner, not accepted his own excuse that the moment never seemed right; it was never going to *be* right. Now his cowardice had given Jacqueline the advantage, strategically and morally.

Lucy said, ‘That thing with the boy on the cliff. Is it true?’

He thought of his last meeting with McMeekin, who had almost asked him the same question. What was the honest answer? That he wasn’t certain anymore? That it was complicated?

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘It really happened.’

‘God, that’s so weird.’ She clicked on the thumbnail titled *Psychic talks to my dead Dad—f***k***g amazing!!!!*

‘Well, I’ve been thinking about it a lot recently—’ he began, but his attention was taken by the uploader’s comments, and he realised he knew who *InTheNameof88* must be.

*Wnet 2 c this psychic guy called Chris Longley with my Mum & i didnt xpect any miricles but shes well in2 this sh*t & i thought id film it 2 prove whot tossers these ppl are. No idea how he dose this, i cant see any trix butit is F***KING AMAZING!!!!!! He talks to my Mum and he GETS IT RIGHT. My Dad may be dead but that dosent mean he want a b*****d. I didnt film any more afr this cos your not suposed 2 nad i didn’t wanna get kiked out. I give rspct to the guy cos even if all Others who say they are PSYCHICS mite be lires Chris Longley is 4 real!!!!!!*

It was that gig in Manchester. The woman with the teenage son. That idiot of an usher. Rob failing to sort the problem out. The kid must have been filming on his phone

The footage was fuzzy, wobbly and badly framed. Every so often a distorted crunching overwhelmed the soundtrack as the camera operator shifted in his seat. Christopher heard his own voice over the tinny laptop speakers,

‘This person coming through. It’s—it’s a man. He’s called Philip’

On it went, right up to Claudia saying, ‘You told me the truth, Chris.’ Then it ended abruptly, just as the applause started.

After a moment, maybe to indicate that she was impressed, Lucy said, ‘So, how does this work? Do they talk to you? The spirits?’

‘In a way. Something comes through, messages. I don’t actually hear them speak. It’s not like you’d expect it to be, Lucy. There aren’t any visions or voices. It’s

hard to put into words, you know, and I've tried to a lot of times. The best way I can put it is I just—find myself *knowing* what to say.'

There would be more questions, but he preferred she didn't push this any further right now. He was about to change the subject when he heard the front door opening, and he remembered Berry had her own key.

#

Berry's arrival was difficult but manageable. The question of her status in Christopher's life lurked in the background of their conversation. They talked about Lucy's school, art, music, websites—and it turned out Berry knew all about popular teenage vampire fiction, including the *In Darkness, Mine* series. They ordered pizza and played a board game, *Ticket to Ride*. Berry and his daughter getting on so well was a good thing, he supposed, though it further complicated his feelings about the relationship.

Lucy won the game and threw herself triumphantly back against the sofa.

'Prize for first place is you two have to pack everything away. I'm off to brush my teeth.'

While Lucy was in the bathroom, Berry made her bid. 'Do you think she's giving us an opportunity to go to bed?'

'Maybe.'

When Lucy came out, Christopher was alone, browsing through *In Darkness, Mine #1: Blood Memorial*. His daughter looked meaningfully around the room. 'Is Berry off to—?'

'Her flat. We might see her for lunch tomorrow, though.'

Lucy looked perplexed. 'Well, enjoy the book.'

It was almost midnight. He stayed up reading. He'd like to have something to say about *In Darkness, Mine* before the weekend was over. After an hour he had made it halfway through and he was finding it increasingly difficult to concentrate on the text. The images were beautifully drawn, but he found the book even less engaging than the film. He put it down and went to make himself a coffee.

In the kitchen, a flashing blue light caught his eye. Lucy's laptop, still on the table, had gone into sleep mode. Christopher swept a fingertip over the touchpad

returning the machine to life. Its screen displayed the YouTube page he and Lucy had abandoned when Berry arrived.

He remembered that *InTheNameof88* had uploaded two clips, and so far he had only watched one. The other video was titled *Psychic Gets Into The Zone*. According to the uploader's comment, it showed, *Christopher Longley the start of his act at the NEw Theatre MANHCESTER*. This would be interesting, to see himself as others saw him during the opening meditation.

He saw himself stride onstage, wait for the applause to die down, say, 'When I was thirteen, I saw a boy disappear.'

It was wonderful to begin like that, with no introductions. And the story, now he actually listened to himself tell it, was powerful and pure: the myth of the two boys who became one.

Then his onscreen self was setting up the meditation. He heard himself explain what he was about to do, and saw himself close his eyes. The camera held him steady for sixty seconds. Someone male whispered 'This is shit!' and was shushed by someone female.

The image disappeared in a flurry of movement as the son turned himself around to point the lens at the rows behind him, filming their response to Christopher's silent, inactive stance. A couple of faces in the crowd were familiar: people Christopher remembered he had spoken to later in the performance. Then the camera turned back to the stage, and just as it did so Christopher recognised another face, a person he'd not noticed that night.

He moved the slider back to the point where the youth turned his phone on the crowd. Then he replayed those same few seconds again and again, ten more times. It was frustrating. The man appeared for less than a second. Christopher tried pausing the video, but for some reason that left the image too blurred to make out anything at all. In motion, each time he played it he was more convinced. There, two rows behind the boy with the camera, sat the same man who had been staring at Christopher in the coffee shop this morning. He didn't look homeless. He was wearing a jacket and tie. Unlike everyone else in the frame, he was aware of being filmed. His look, right into the lens, seemed one of expectation and challenge. As if, sitting in that audience several weeks ago, he was already aware that this moment would come, and when it did he would be gazing straight out of the screen, directly into Christopher's eyes.

From Living with the Dead by Christopher Longley: Chapter 5

After the big clean-up that had preceded my father's funeral, I decided to keep the house in order. I developed a nightly routine. Once Gran and I had eaten the meal I'd cooked for us, I'd deal with the kitchen and one other room. Monday lounge, Tuesday hallway and stairs, Wednesday bathroom, Thursday front room. Friday and weekends off. My own bedroom never got messy and Gran's was out of bounds. Occasionally, when she was out with Old Leeming, I looked in there. It wasn't too bad. Dusty everywhere, but relatively tidy.

Sometimes she helped, sometimes she didn't. It depended on her mood. At her worst, she deliberately sabotaged my efforts. She'd lie on the sofa, watching TV and smoking, letting her fag ash fall onto the carpet where I had just vacuumed. Or she would go and walk around the garden, then come back in her dirty shoes and leave tracks all across my just-washed kitchen floor. I knew that when it came down to it she was weaker than me. I simply had to treat her like a child and ignore the bad behaviour. By the time I was sixteen and in my final year at school, I'd worn her down. It had only taken three years. Of course, she was getting older too. Sustaining madness must be awfully hard work, and Gran probably just didn't have the energy for it anymore.

Old Leeming made a difference too. She'd gone back to his shop about a month after Dad's funeral, taking me with her for moral support.

'These keys you cut for me,' she said. 'They're all duds.'

He didn't look too worried. In fact he seemed pleased to see her.

'The four-nine-fours. I remember you coming in for these.'

'They don't work properly.'

'Sometimes a new key needs a while to settle in.'

'It's been seven months.'

'Hmmm.' He took one of the keys from her and squinted at it through that spectacle-lens magnifier of his. 'What about I drive out this afternoon and look at the lock? You're in the prefabs aren't you? Lamington Meadows Estate?'

'Why do you need to do that?' I asked, remembering how the old man had flirted with Gran when we'd come in to have the keys cut.

Leeming scowled at me. ‘Because something funny’s going on here, lad. I made this key from your nana’s original. It ought to be an exact copy, but it doesn’t quite fit the lock. I need to see what’s wrong.’

‘Maybe your machine didn’t follow the *jig* properly.’ I had for some reason become bold.

‘Chrissy, don’t be cheeky,’ said Gran. And then to Old Leeming: ‘His Dad just died. He’s not himself.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that. Your son was it? That’s hard, losing a son. What was the lad called?’

‘Dennis Longley.’

‘You know, I read the obituaries every day. I don’t think I saw that name.’

‘We didn’t put it in the paper. Didn’t see the need. Is it all right, you coming to look at the lock today?’

‘It’s always slow on a Wednesday afternoon. I’ll shut the shop and drive over at about two.’

Gran gave Leeming the address. On the bus back home, I asked her why anyone would be so interested in the obituaries.

‘Nothing peculiar about that,’ she replied. ‘When you get to our age, you need to keep an eye on who’s passed and who’s left, that’s all. People watch out for their old friends going—and their old enemies too of course. It’s nice to see when someone who once did you a bad turn just died. Especially if it says *after a long illness*. I always think that means they’ve suffered first.’

#

Something was off with the lock, he said. Easiest all round to put a new one in. He’d do it for free. I watched and listened from the upstairs landing. Gran had brought out a kitchen chair and was sitting in the hall. She usually kept an eye on tradesmen in the house to stop them trying any sharp practice, but this was different. She looked on Mr Leeming with a kind of minor awe as he unscrewed the old lock and slid a chisel tip under to lever it away. The wood and paint protested, then the mechanism popped off and Leeming caught it adroitly.

‘You never think about a lock being a separate thing,’ Gran said.

‘I suppose not.’ Leeming positioned the new Yale against the door and swiftly pushed in his ratchet driver to tighten the screws one after another. The lock was surrounded by the palimpsest of its larger predecessor—raw wood dotted with empty screw holes, little black-ringed stains, and on the border a thick line showing where layer after layer of paint had butted up against the mechanism.

‘Can’t leave you with a mess like that,’ he told her. ‘I can fill it now and sand around the edge, but it’ll need to dry before it’s painted.’

The job took Mr Leeming five visits. On the second day he primed the bare wood, and on the third he put on undercoat. The day after that he added a top coat of white paint. Finally, he came back to check that everything had ‘settled in properly’. By then he was calling Gran ‘Lizzie’; and afterwards he kept coming around, sometimes finding things to fix up around the house, sometimes just to sit talking with Gran. They started going places together too.

For the most part, Leeming ignored me, though every once in a while he’d be taken with a sense of duty and break into the kind of patronising exchange that adults generally essayed with teenagers. He called me Chris—not Chrissie, like Gran called me; not Longley like the other kids called me (when they called me anything); not Christopher, like the teachers called me. Chris. To me it sounded like a grownup’s name, not a child’s.

‘You courting yet, Chris?’ he asked one time.

‘No.’

‘But you’ve your eye on someone, I bet.’

‘Not really,’ I said, thinking how absurd a question it was. A few boys my age, the confident ones, the outriders, had girlfriends, but in my rubbish second hand clothes, with my well-known-to-be-mental grandmother, I’d have no chance.

On another occasion, Leeming was planting something in Gran’s garden and I was out there too, watching Clifford over the fence. Clifford’s wife had run off the previous month with Mr Nevins from three doors up. By way of compensation or revenge or both, Mrs Nevins had given him her errant husband’s bicycle. Clifford had it upside down on the concrete patio.

‘Nevins paid a lot of money for this,’ he told me cheerfully. ‘But he’s a fat, lazy bastard. Barely ever got on it. Worst thing you can do with a bike is not ride it. Anyway, an hour or so of fixing-up and I can flog it for a good price.’ He rotated the

pedals with one hand and squinted at the back wheel, looking for where it was out of true as it passed through the brakes.

Behind me, Leeming said, 'How's school, Chris?'

I turned around. The old man was on his knees, pulling up weeds.

'What do you mean?' I said.

'How are you getting on? In your lessons?'

'All right.'

I didn't want to discuss that with him. I had a plan. First I had to get decent O-levels, then I would go in the Sixth Form for my A-Levels. After that I could go to University, away from Sheepwash and Gran forever. I worked hard in all my classes—never put up my hand, never drew the attention of teachers, but I completed all my work on time and did it well.

'Don't they have a parents' evening at that school of yours?'

'It was last week,' I lied. 'Gran doesn't like to go.'

'I suppose the school would be in touch if there was anything to worry about. When I was a kid they just used to wallop you, but now they send their letters home, don't they? So your parents can wallop you instead.' Perhaps to reassure me, he added, 'I don't believe in walloping.'

'Gran's never had a letter home about me.'

'Good. See that she doesn't, and we'll all get on fine.'

He washed his hands under the outdoor tap and went indoors. Clifford looked up from Mr Nevins' bike and said, 'That old bugger's got his size nines under the table, hasn't he? Do you think he's aiming to be your new Grandad?'

'Maybe,' I said, not caring much either way. I didn't like Mr Leeming much, but he wasn't a bad man when it came down to it. And any distraction for Gran was welcome.

'They off to their ghost church again tonight?' asked Clifford. He was a practical person, no nonsense.

'Yes.'

'You know it's all bollocks, don't you?'

'Course.'

'Good. Keep that in mind.'

Leeming was a Spiritualist. That was why he always read the Obituaries so keenly. He liked to keep an eye on who had crossed over to the next world. His interest in Gran mostly had an evangelical basis, I think. He used my father's death to bring her into it. For a while, as was her nature with anything that caught her attention, she became utterly immersed in Spiritualism. I remember that whenever he dropped her off after a service, she wouldn't let me get to bed until she had described the entire experience for my benefit.

On one such evening, she told me, 'There was a lady there tonight who could read animals' minds. She did a talk with slides.'

Remembering Sherry, I thought it couldn't be too difficult to read the mind of an animal. A dog's thoughts would be predictable enough: 'Want dinner'; 'Want a shit'; 'What's this smell'? Anyway, I wondered, how would you read the minds of animals—cats, parrots, goldfish? Not in words, surely.

Gran said, 'It's one of them Indian religions. Reincarnation. For people who've done something wrong in another life. It's like purgatory or hell for us. Mind you, it's only *some* animals, not all of them.'

Of course it wasn't all of them. That would be absurd, wouldn't it? Every rat, every cockroach someone's tortured soul. That didn't bear thinking about. It seems to me now that Sheepwash Spiritualist church was a tolerant kind of institution, happy to mix and match its religious traditions into whatever patchwork suited the moment. Here a bit of Buddhism, there a bit of Paganism; here a bit of Catholicism, there a bit of Hinduism.

'One of them Indian religions,' repeated Gran. 'For example, if you kill someone, your punishment might be that you'd come back as a tiger. That was what this lady's talk was about. The zoo got her in to read the tigers' minds because they weren't well.'

'Which zoo was this?' I asked. It was always good to get her to recall details.

'London Zoo. Regent's Park Zoo.' What she couldn't remember she'd happily make up. 'Anyway you'll never guess who one of them tigers turned out to be.' She paused for effect. 'It was Bob Crippen. Him that killed his wife and all those other girls in the 'forties. Hid the bodies all over his house. David Attenborough played him in the film of it. This tiger told her he'd learned his lesson, because of the reincarnation, and he was ever so sorry for what he'd done back when he was that

man. That was why he'd been ill. It's what you call *unfinished business*. He needed her to pass his message on to those girls' families. To apologise.'

'And did she?' I asked.

'Did she what?'

'Pass the message on to the girls' families?'

'I believe so. Yes.'

'And did the tiger get better?'

'He did. And he told her they got a few things wrong in that film too. Details only the police knew about, that weren't in the papers. So that proves it, doesn't it?'

'How had the tiger seen the film?' I asked. And when Gran didn't answer that one, 'Was she Indian then? This lady who could talk to the animals?'

'I don't like Indians. Pakis, anyway. That's the same, isn't it?' said Gran. 'No, she was from Durham. I told you, it's the religion that's Indian. And she couldn't talk to the animals, just read their minds.' Now she'd had a little time to think about it, she added, 'Of course the tiger hadn't seen the film. He *knew* what was in it, that's all. He didn't need to see it. You should be more open-minded, Chrissie.'

I had noticed that Gran's narratives never mentioned what *she* had been told during her evenings at the church. She must have asked many of those mediums whether they could hear the voice of her dead son. And knowing what I now know about the psychic trade, I don't doubt they would have obliged. Gran kept that part of it to herself. Most likely, it was why she didn't encourage me to attend. But Leeming believed in getting them young. He nagged Gran all the time to bring me along to a meeting—nagged and nagged, until in the end she submitted.

The occasion of my first visit to the Spiritualist Church was an appearance by an up-and-coming young psychic, whose name I will need to change because she is still active in the trade and highly influential. Let us call her 'Janet Tyrell'.

Leeming arrived in his car at seven. I sat in the back on my own. Gran rode in the front. Tonight's event was something special: at only eighteen years of age, Janet Tyrell was quite new to mediumship but she had already made a name for herself as a remarkable talent. She was rumoured to have several television offers in hand, following a recent appearance on an early evening chat show in which she had, apparently, astounded the nation.

‘I didn’t see it,’ Gran said. ‘But I heard she told one man in the audience where his late father had hidden his will. It was under a floorboard in the attic. She told him *the exact one*. And this man went home and looked, and there it was.’

‘That’s right,’ Leeming said. ‘And there was a woman who had a secret pet name for her husband they’d never shared with anyone else, not even after he passed over. This Tyrell girl knew what it was right off—snookums or snoopy. Something of that sort.’

There was a lull while they tried to recall other miracles of Janet Tyrell.

‘And you saw this programme, did you, Mr Leeming?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Well, no.’

He drove on in silence.

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Sitting on a wooden chair in the tiny hall of the Spiritualist Church, I reminded myself of Clifford’s view. *It’s all bollocks. Keep that in mind*. At the front a temporary stage had been built of large black-painted plywood cubes. There was a high stool and a little table covered with a cloth, on which stood a bottle of water and a glass. To the left of this arrangement was a Chinese folding screen.

I sat between Gran and Leeming. We were buried in the middle of the audience, which I thought the best place to be, since there would be almost no chance of our being noticed by this Janet Tyrell person, of being asked to take part. That idea struck me as horrible.

‘It’s busy tonight,’ Gran said.

Leeming scowled. ‘Bit of celebrity. Most of this lot are only here because she’s been on the telly.’ Clearly, he preferred the select group of six or seven, which, from the impression I had formed, was normal here. Tonight’s crowd of about fifty had filled the room to capacity, so that even regulars, arriving late, were told they had to stand at the side. Old Leeming tutted to see them remonstrate with Mrs Ridley on the door, and I wasn’t sure at whom his censure was directed: perhaps at Mrs Ridley for her disrespectful treatment of these stalwarts; perhaps at the audience for having colonised the church; perhaps at the regulars themselves for presuming they could arrive whenever they liked. It was probably all three. Old Leeming could be generous with his disapproval.

Mrs Ridley was about fifty. The flower-printed summer dress she'd chosen to wear tonight revealed far more cleavage than she was comfortable with. She kept tugging up the bottom of its neckline, but physics would not be thwarted.

'I can't bring in any more chairs, Annie,' she was saying to a tiny old lady. 'It's fire regulations.'

Annie leaned pointedly on her walking stick. 'Well I can't stand up for the whole time. Do you think if there was going to be a fire I'd not know about it? I'm sensitive to that sort of thing.'

'Sorry Annie, but if there was to be an inspection tonight they wouldn't view precognition as an acceptable safeguard. We've had that debate with them before. You wouldn't want to get us closed down, would you?'

Annie saw her opening and took it. 'Well, of course not.' She raised her eyes towards the ceiling, and said slyly, 'But I'm not getting any message about an impending inspection. Of course I might be wrong.'

This was looking like it could turn into an interesting test of Mrs Ridley's supernatural beliefs, but a man who had been listening to their discussion with some amusement now took pity on her and gave Annie his seat. After that Mrs Ridley scurried off in relief to close the hall door against further intrusion. She dimmed the lights, made her way to the front and climbed clumsily onto the stage. Here she produced a set of cards from her handbag and began to read aloud from them. Her voice was simultaneously flat, high-pitched and terrified. Each time she swapped to the next card, she gulped in a lungful of air to get her through to the end, then repeated the last part to remind herself where she was.

'Ladies and gentlemen, it's lovely to see so many of you here tonight. Obviously our guest this evening has excited a lot of interest—A lot of interest in the world beyond. So, I say welcome to those of you who are new to our church—Who are new to our church and I hope that tonight's event will be a great introduction for you to the wonder and comfort—the wonder and comfort that those who have passed over can bring to those of us left behind.'

She looked up at the audience and improvised a little: 'You might have noticed that there are very many leaflets in the foyer, giving information about Spiritualism. Those are worth a look if you're interested in the world beyond. You'll also find a—a most useful list—that is, a very useful *reading* list of books on the subject. All the books mentioned are available in the Central Library. This list was prepared by our

own Mr Edward Leeming, one of Sheepwash Spiritualist Church's longest-serving members, and a real expert in the field.' I glanced at Old Leeming. Strangely, he did not look pleased by the recognition. His face seemed tight and angry.

'Well, that's my sales pitch over.' Mrs Ridley paused, not realising she hadn't made a joke, but only stated a fact. When no laugh came, she continued. 'So, without further ado, please welcome our guest this evening, Miss Janet Tyrell.'

A young woman stepped out from behind the Chinese screen. She must have been hiding there the whole time, I thought, before the audience began arriving even—what a strange, uncomfortable thing to do.

She didn't look anything special to me. I hadn't known what to expect from a famous psychic, but I'd anticipated someone weirder and stagier than this. Janet Tyrell had a middling sort of face, neither ugly nor especially pretty. I saw girls like her around the estate, in town, all the time, in their stonewashed jeans and fuzzy jumpers. Still, there was something in the way this one stood, in the way she measured the crowd and found it inadequate, that transcended her apparent ordinariness.

'I discovered I had this power,' she was saying, 'when I was just eight years old. I remember it so clearly. We were having a New Year's party at our house, and it was the first time I had been allowed to stay up until midnight, so I was very excited. It was a lovely party, everyone enjoying themselves. When the clock struck twelve there was a great cheer and lots of kissing. But I couldn't understand why one person in the room wasn't joining in, why she wasn't happy like everyone else. Well, eventually, I went up to my mother and I said to her, "Why isn't anyone talking to Señora Escalante?"'

'She asked me what I meant, and I told her— "Señora Escalante's sitting in that chair,' I said, 'by the fire, and she's crying but everybody's ignoring her. Why is that, Mummy?'"

'And my mother looked at me, you know, sizing me up, like a mother will sometimes. Then she said, "You go and talk to her, Janet. You go and talk to Mrs Escalante. Ask her why she's upset." And she told me something I think I'd probably guessed already. She said I was the only person in the room who could even see Señora Escalante. That was why everyone was ignoring her. My mother knew right then, you understand, that I had the sight. It runs in our family, though she wasn't gifted with it herself. In fact it had skipped a couple of generations—'

Janet Tyrell told us how at eight years of age, she had approached the ghost fearlessly, and discovered that Laura Escalante had been killed in the raid on Guernica in 1937. But she was not with her husband and children when she died. Laura had been buying a birthday present for her youngest daughter in a different part of town when the bombers struck. Since then she had wandered the Spirit World, separated from her loved ones, until she chanced upon the young Janet Tyrell. The girl's first ever act as a Medium was reuniting Laura Escalante with her lost family.

Miss Tyrell told the story of the bombing dramatically, bringing out many emotional details. And the scene when Laura finally met her husband and children again in the Spirit World after their long separation caused several people to sob openly. Nevertheless, I noticed she was less than precise when it came to explaining the mechanics of it all. She hardly touched on the business of finding Laura Escalante's late family among the billions of dead; that was just a thing she had done. She was also vague about the reasons why a victim of Operation Rügen would find herself at a party in Stoke forty years after her death. The point of the story, though, was clear: in gratitude for young Janet's help, Laura Escalante now served as the medium's spirit guide. Tonight, she would pick out those among the Departed who had something to say to someone in the audience. I wondered why a woman who had lost her own family for forty years should be any sort of a candidate for that role: especially one who probably spoke only Spanish.

Having established Señora Escalante's credentials, Miss Tyrell progressed quickly to communication with the Dead. 'What's that, Laura?' she said. 'Ladies and gentlemen, she's bringing me someone. I'm getting a name beginning with *S*. A name with an *N* in it.'

Despite everything, I found myself getting sucked in. She was good at this. Stevie, I thought, was properly called Stephen. That had an *S* and an *N*. If she'd said anything more specific, I might have put up my hand. But she took it in the opposite direction, widened the net. 'It could be the *surname* begins with *N*, or a *middle* name? A first name beginning with *S*, definitely, and an *N* somewhere. Yes, lady in the back row?'

From behind me I heard someone say, 'It might be my sister. She passed over quite recently.'

'Your sister?' said Janet Tyrell. 'Let's make sure we're right. What was your sister's name when she was in this world?'

‘Sally.’

‘Ah. Could be—but Laura, what about that letter *N*?—there’s no *N* in Sally is there?’

The woman in the audience said, ‘Her full name was Sally Marie Wistow.’

‘Might not be who we’re looking for right now. No *N*, you see. Unless—I believe she passed over quite recently?’

‘That’s right.’ A little scattering of applause. I looked at Gran. She nodded, impressed by this insight.

‘And Sally died young, yes?’

‘Yes, that’s right. She was about to—’

‘Hold on. I think something important was coming up in her life. Some big event? Am I right?’

‘She was about to get married.’

‘That would be it. Yes. And what’s her fiancé’s surname?’

‘Nixon. He’s called Peter Nixon.’

‘So, after the wedding, she would have been Sally Nixon, yes?’

‘Oh—yes! She would.’

The medium poured herself a glass of water and drank from it.

‘And they were separated by her passing, weren’t they? Because Peter is still with us on this side?’

‘Yes. He’s still alive you mean? Yes he is.’

‘Well then, that explains all that trouble we had about the *N*, doesn’t it? When she passed her name was Sally—Wisham was it?’

‘Sally Wistow.’

‘Yes, as Sally Wistow. But she thinks of herself as Nixon. Because she’s married to Peter now in her heart, even though she never got the chance to have her big day. She’s saying—ooh.’ She chuckled privately. ‘I don’t think I can pass *that* message on, Sally. Sorry, everyone. Sally’s talking about her plans for the wedding night, when it eventually comes along on the other side. I’m afraid I’d be too embarrassed to tell you what she just said. But Peter has a lot to look forward to!’

Laughter and applause filled the room. I laughed too. It was obvious she had guessed and tricked her way to those answers, but it felt good to be part of the group, sharing a feeling. Gran, sitting on my right, was laughing and clapping. I looked to my left, at Leeming, and was surprised to discover that the old man had fallen asleep.

It's all bollocks. Keep that in mind, I told myself again, as Janet Tyrell pulled another initial letter out of the firmament. This time it was a D, and Gran, no doubt thinking of Dennis, raised her hand, but the medium selected someone else. I suspect something in Gran's manner would have discouraged Tyrell from picking her out. Later in the evening, Gran raised her hand for 'a spirit who's passed over in another country' and 'some person who wore a uniform in life.' Janet Tyrell ignored her both times.

The show ended, the medium bowed, accepted her final applause and withdrew behind the Chinese Screen. Mrs Ridley raised the house lights and clambered back onto the stage to close proceedings, but by then half the audience was already up and heading for the door.

Above the sound of chairs scraping, coats being put on and a generalised mumble of post-event chatter, Mrs Ridley tried to remind everyone about the wider purposes of the Spiritualist church, and direct them to the leaflets in the foyer. I saw Mr Leeming was still asleep.

'Tsk,' Gran said, 'Wake him up, Chrissie.'

I shook the old man's shoulder to try and rouse him, to no effect.

May 2010, London: *McMeekin*

Christopher arrived early for his session. The receptionist sent him in, but when he entered the consulting room, there was no sign of McMeekin. Possibly the therapist was out of sight behind his desk, bending over to retrieve something he had dropped. His fountain pen wasn't in its usual place.

'Hello?' Christopher said.

There was no reply.

Christopher looked over at the second door, the one at the back of the office. He had always assumed it was a cupboard, but now he realised it might be a lavatory. It would be embarrassing if the therapist were to emerge from there now, accompanied by the sound of flushing water, drying his hands, an unwanted revelation of McMeekin's ordinary needs.

'Hello?' A little louder this time, but not so loud that the receptionist would hear him at the other end of the short corridor between reception and the consulting room. The feeling that he should not be in here troubled him, that he had got in by

false pretences and she would judge him for it. Ridiculous, he thought. It was her fault entirely. Obviously she'd forgotten McMeekin wasn't back from lunch yet. The right thing to do would be to go back out into reception. On the other hand Christopher had been sent in. He had a right to be here. It would do no harm to sit and wait.

Twenty minutes later, the therapist swept in wearing a long black coat. He was clearly annoyed.

'Sorry,' Christopher said. 'Your receptionist—'

'I know. She realised what she'd done as soon as I got back. Silly girl. She's thoroughly ashamed of herself.' McMeekin laughed and tried to make light of it, but he was aggravated. Christopher saw how important it was to the therapist that their roles were structured, how much ritual and performance there was in each session.

McMeekin must always be seated behind his desk at the start. There must always be the invitation to sit, the choice of positions, the switching on of the voice recorder. Arriving back to find a patient already sitting in the room, uninvited, uncontrolled, this had unsettled him. He went to his desk now, as if he intended, despite everything, to take up his proper starting position. Instead he gripped the back of his swivel chair and leant against it. Something seemed to occur to him. He opened a drawer of the desk, frowned and closed it again.

'So. How are you?' enquired McMeekin: a question he'd not normally ask, and to which he did not appear to require a reply, because immediately he'd spoken he hurried to the door at the back of the room and revealed that there was a cupboard behind it, not a lavatory after all. He hung his outdoor coat in there. It was surprising, Christopher realised, to think of the therapist elsewhere, in a coat. But of course he existed in other places outside this room, like anyone else. Of course, like anyone else, he felt the cold.

All this gave Christopher the advantage for once. He considered what he should talk about today. So far McMeekin had insisted on him simply narrating his life history, but really what did the past matter? He had things *now* that he required help with.

For instance, after four weeks of therapy, he was still no nearer deciding what he was going to do about Branwen Kellow. To offer his help or not. He supposed he had to take the blame for that himself, since he hadn't ever mentioned Martha or Branwen to McMeekin. Somehow he'd hoped the process would cast a sideways light on the problem, that he would find the solution indirectly. Yet, even though no such light had

fallen, it still seemed to him that asking the question outright would move him further from the answer, not closer to it. And now he had something else he'd wanted to discuss—something connected, he thought, though he couldn't see quite where the connection lay.

'Stevie might have survived,' he said. 'I think I might have seen him.'

'Sorry,' McMeekin said. He fished in a pocket and produced the voice recorder. 'Would you mind saying that again after I've—?' He switched on the machine. 'Right. Do carry on, please, Christopher.'

'I think I might have seen Stevie,' he repeated. 'He'd be an adult now, if it was him.'

'Well, yes,' McMeekin said. He had gathered himself a little now. 'He'd be your age, more or less.'

'More. He had three months on me. But in my mind he's a boy of thirteen.'

'And what happened?'

Christopher told him about the coffee shop and the video. About the snorkel coat and the man's disquieting stare. The therapist said nothing. That was his way of taking back control. And as Christopher put the experience into words it became less strange to him. He saw the truth. Those two men could not have been the same person, and neither of them could have been Stevie.

'What's most interesting,' McMeekin said, 'is how much you wanted there to be a real, physical adult Stevie. So much so that you made these strong connections for yourself. You should think about what that means.'

He stood up and went to the window. This wasn't usual. Maybe he was still rattled by Christopher's early arrival.

'Let's park that for now, shall we?' he said, eventually. 'We'll keep going with your memories. Now, after Stevie disappeared, you didn't feel his presence again for many years? Was there a specific *moment* can you tell me, when you reconnected with him?'

Sometimes, Christopher thought, it might be easier and quicker if he just gave McMeekin a copy of *Living with the Dead*.

'Yes. I'd have been twenty-seven—no, twenty-eight. It was after my marriage broke down. My daughter was very young. I was working at the hospital—I think I said?'

‘The X-Rays? I remember. So, during a difficult time for you? When you felt quite marginalised?’

‘I didn’t have friends in the area. And I was alone a lot. Maybe that’s why I got to thinking about Stevie again. How weird it all was. For years I’d just pushed it all out of my mind, but it came back then, and I suppose I started obsessing over it. Other stuff too, from when I was a kid. My Dad’s funeral. That old guy Leeming. And the first time I saw Toni Webster perform. It was all swirling around in my head, bothering me.’

‘How did you deal with that?’

‘I went to a lot of meetings, Spiritualist churches, performing mediums. I didn’t believe in any of it, but it felt like the right thing to be doing. Then I found this peculiar little club in a decommissioned scout hut. East Crompton Spiritual Awareness Group.’

From *Living with the Dead* by Christopher Longley: Chapter 14

I had almost given up on my search for some kind of enlightenment when an internet search turned up ECSAG. These being the early days of the web, there wasn’t a great deal to the site—just a statement of intent.

EAST CROMPTON SPIRITUAL AWARENESS
GROUP.

Our discussion group aims to consider the possibilities of life after death. Strictly non-religious. To meet regularly and discuss issues of supernatural interest from a scientific/parapsychological/ sceptical perspective.

There was a telephone number too. I called it and spoke to Jim Wilbourne, the group’s organiser. From what he told me it seemed this thing he ran was a bit of an oddity, but it wasn’t like anything else I’d tried, and that was a recommendation.

#

I learned later how ECSAG came into being. Apparently, one morning, at the age of fifty-eight, Jim Wilbourne had rolled over, as he always did on waking, to put his arm around his wife Irene, and something felt wrong. She was warm, but unresponsive. The flesh moved in an unfamiliar way over the bones. He realised she wasn't breathing.

Jim was skipper of the Fourth Crompton scouts. After Irene died, however, things started going wrong. He had become morose and uncommunicative, and he organised activities for the boys poorly, if at all. Numbers in the troop diminished. Eventually, the District decided to merge the Fourth Crompton with the more successful Fifth. Jim's fellow scout leaders went to the larger troop's modern hut, which wasn't even called a hut, but a 'centre'. Jim was left behind, and the scruffy old brick shed where the Fourth had met for over thirty years fell into disuse.

In the confused, vague months of his worst grief, Jim only knew one thing for certain. Irene was still with him. He felt her presence constantly. Routine didn't numb the sensation: he walked each morning to his job at the Unemployment Benefit Office, cooked for himself in the microwave and watched TV until he fell asleep, but she was always there.

As a lifelong rationalist and atheist, he had no way to understand these feelings. Obviously, he thought, his continued sense of Irene's presence must be an illusion. He read about the grieving process and waited for this strange perception to evaporate. It didn't.

One evening, for no reason he could later remember, the idea came to him that he might find her old wristwatch and have a battery put in it. Searching through a drawer, he put his hand instead on the keys to the old scout hut. It was a coincidence, of course, but coincidences were sometimes worth acting on, and so he took himself out to the declining industrial estate where the now disused building stood.

He found the hut exactly as he had left it. Even the electricity still worked, as it always had. The supply came in through a jury-rigged overhead cable running from the back of a nearby car mechanic's workshop. Most likely some previous Skipper of the Fourth had made a deal with some previous owner of the workshop; and over the years the arrangement had fallen out of memory. Anyway, there had never been a power bill for the hut; no rates either, and the Scout Association had forgotten it

existed. Jim decided it was his by default now, and he should do something with it. He placed an ad in the local paper.

That was how ECSAG started. By the time I joined, the group consisted of Jim and four other regulars. Franklin was an ex lorry-driver, retired early on a medical pension—although I could see no evidence of illness in Franklin other than a lot of burst capillaries in his big coarse face, and a lot more anger than was good for a person. He had been a member since the very first meeting. Marline and Suresh had joined six months later, and then Cailey, the youngest, had come along a year after that.

#

Even with the address and Jim's directions it took me a long time to find the hut among all the other blackened brick structures. The estate was clearly slipping into wasteland, with flaking wooden signs for plumbers, electrical works, car repairs, it seemed to have been winding down since the 1960s. I couldn't imagine many customers came wandering around all these shabby old concerns, even in the daytime. Now, in the half-light, it seemed impossible to tell which ones were derelict and which were only shut down for the night.

When I eventually reached my destination I was struck by a sense of the sinister. Knocking at the door of the blank-faced old building, I felt like I was applying to enter some hideous conspiracy. Once I was inside, however, the weirdness of the deadlands dissipated. The members of ECSAG were a little odd, I supposed, but they seemed harmless.

I saw right away that the building must once have been a scout hut—a dusty fleur-de-lis symbol painted on the wall, peeked out above a row of bookshelves filled with what looked mainly to be withdrawn-from-circulation library books. They were all on subjects associated with the business of ECSAG: spiritualism, ghost-hunting, parapsychology, telekinesis.

The meeting got going right away. We sat in a circle on uncomfortable plastic chairs. Franklin pursed his lips and blew out into the cold air, producing a thin stream of water vapour.

'Look,' he said, 'ectoplasm.'

Suresh laughed at that. Nobody else did.

‘Sorry about the temperature,’ said Jim. ‘I thought the paraffin heater would be enough. I’ll get something bigger for next time.’

I saw Cailey suppress a shudder. Like everyone else she had kept on her outdoor coat. ‘It’s fine,’ she said. ‘Shall we start? How about introductions, since we have a new person tonight?’

‘Why not?’ said Jim. ‘I’ll go first, shall I? I’m Jim Wilbourne. I’d never really believed much in anything—supernatural. Then my wife died very suddenly. After that I started thinking about those sorts of things a lot more than I had before, but I didn’t, you know, *believe* anything, exactly. That’s why I started this group off, to talk with people openly about it all, but without the mumbo-jumbo. To be open-minded as well as rational.’

The other four sitting in their circle of plastic chairs introduced themselves and recounted their little autobiographies. Each had lost someone. Franklin’s wife, Suresh’s mother, Cailey’s kid brother, Marline’s fiancé. The details varied from person to person, but the story was essentially the same. Maybe it was everyone’s story. Or maybe they’d been telling them to each other for so long now that they had merged into one archetypal narrative. I kept an eye on Jim while they were talking, and I got the feeling that for him in particular the group had settled into being a kind of disappointment. I guessed that by now there was no subject on which he couldn’t predict all the others’ opinions before they spoke.

‘My name’s Christopher,’ I said. ‘I suppose the reason I’m here is that when I was a kid I was involved in the death of another boy, an accident. It’s been a hard thing to live with.’

‘So what happened, exactly?’ asked Franklin.

‘It’s a long story.’

‘Well...’

‘Let’s stick to the agenda,’ said Jim.

Franklin rubbed his upper arms theatrically. ‘We should make coffee. It’ll knock the edge off this cold. Then we can try a bit of table turning.’

#

Over coffee the young Asian man, Suresh, explained to me that most meetings were given over to discussion, but every fourth was devoted to some activity: a séance,

mindreading, psychic healing. They'd had some amazing experiences, he said. Inevitably, however, there were rational explanations.

'Look,' said Suresh. 'Try this.' He produced a pencil and notebook from his pocket, and tore out a page for me. 'I'll see if I can project something into your brain.' As he sketched, he held the notebook so I couldn't see what image he was drawing, then he handed me the pencil.

'It's a simple picture. Just one geometric shape inside another. You know what I mean by a geometric shape, right?'

'Like a parallelogram or a heptagon?'

'Yeah, but don't give yourself something impossible to draw. Two simple geometric shapes, one inside the other. Draw quickly, around three seconds should be enough. The point is to be quick. Just around three seconds to get what's in your head down on the paper.'

I drew my shapes. First a circle, then after half a second's thought I added a triangle inside it.

'Let's have a look then,' said Suresh. 'We'll turn our pictures over simultaneously, on the count of three, shall we? One, two, three!'

I was impressed. Suresh's image was identical to mine, a circle with a triangle tightly fitted inside. Like all poor magicians, however, he was keen to explain away any mystery he had created.

'It's not as impressive as it looks,' he told me. 'There aren't too many options when you think about it – circle, triangle, square, rectangle, and statistically, a circle around a triangle is the most likely choice. But I used trigger words to increase the possibility of you choosing these shapes. Twice I said, "around three seconds". Around – *a round* to make you think of a circle and *three* to make you think of a triangle.'

'Clever.'

'And—do you remember how I said "don't give yourself something impossible to draw"? Everyone knows it's hard to draw a circle freehand, don't they? That's reverse psychology. Oh, and I told you the point was to be quick—*point*, yeah? Like the pointiest of the shapes, which is obviously a triangle.'

'So how come I didn't draw it the other way round? A circle inside a triangle?'

He shook his head. 'Nobody does. Don't know why. I suppose it'd be harder. People go for the easier option mostly.'

It was interesting, if disappointing, to understand how the trick had worked, since it suggested I wasn't much of an individual, and that I hadn't a lot of control over my own thoughts. But what surprised me most was how I had felt when we'd revealed our drawings. It reminded me of when I'd been in the audience at Janet Tyrell's performance. Back then I'd felt the same eagerness to please, the same desire for the trick to go right. And when I saw our pictures were the same, it had given me pleasure, physical tingling of the skin.

I should have had no motivation to help this eager young man achieve his miracle, but there it was. As soon as he'd started the trick, I had felt that it was me, not him being tested. *I* had passed, and it had been a relief.

#

From the shadows at the far end of the hut, Suresh and Franklin dragged out a wobbly-looking square table. We each pulled up a chair.

'All these things work on the same principles,' said Jim. 'Table-turning, Ouija, automatic writing.'

'Don't give it away yet, Jim,' said Franklin.

'It works, no matter what the participants believe.'

'Takes the fun out of it, though,'

'Can we all just rest our fingers very lightly on the table top, please?' said Jim, and he slipped into what sounded like a prepared lecture. 'What we're about to attempt was all the rage in the nineteenth century, although, as with a lot of these so-called psychic phenomena, the Victorians mostly treated table turning as a parlour game rather than a genuinely spiritual experience. So, even after Michael Faraday proved scientifically that it had nothing to do with ghosts, it still remained a popular pursuit. I believe you'll find it's an impressive effect, Christopher.'

Marline said, 'The important thing is to relax.'

'It helps to talk about something else,' added Franklin. 'Christopher, why don't you tell us about this accident when you were a kid?'

I didn't fancy the idea. Now I tell that story every time I perform. But back then it seemed wrong, like it was too intimate a thing to share with strangers.

'Perhaps next time,' I said.

Franklin fluttered his fingertips ostentatiously on the table. ‘In that case, maybe you can share your point of view on a subject we don’t all agree on. Christopher, do you think there’s such a thing as an honest psychic? I’ll tell you now, I don’t.’

By then I had watched a few mediums at work, and as far as I could tell he was right, I hadn’t seen any honest ones. But I guessed this was an attack on Jim, and I felt no desire to be on Franklin’s side.

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘I’ve not seen enough to judge.’

‘Well, I’ve seen a lot of ‘em. I don’t mind admitting there was a few took me in at the start. Now I know better. Jim disagrees though.’

Jim’s voice sounded weary, like he was rehearsing an argument he’d already had too many times before. He said, ‘Not quite. I’d say there’s some who honestly imagine they can contact the Dead. Those ones are misleading themselves, that’s all. They aren’t dishonest as such.’

‘Except it’s so obvious, isn’t it?’ Franklin put on an exaggerated, ethereal voice. ‘*I’m getting a name that begins with J.* Anyone who falls for that is a fucking idiot.’

‘People need comfort,’ said Jim. ‘That doesn’t make them idiots.’

I was about to say what I thought. In my view, the tricks hardly mattered at all. Of course they were obvious. But it wasn’t the tricks the audience believed in—it was the person. There had to be a trustworthy quality about the medium or nobody would be taken in. Franklin could ape the psychics’ methods, but he could never have won over an audience. The bereaved simply wouldn’t trust a man like him with their precious Dead. Franklin was inauthentic. They would know he knew he was lying before he opened his mouth.

But what I was going to say ceased to be of any importance. The table began to move.

#

I don’t remember much about the minutes the table was in motion. I slipped into a trance more or less immediately, and had to find out what had happened from the others.

Jim said afterwards that although he knew there was a scientific explanation for this, he still felt like some paranormal force was at work. Seconds after the first gentle tip, the thing was throwing itself up and down. Its legs slammed against the concrete

floor and its wood creaked and groaned in protestation. No wonder those credulous ladies and gentlemen in their Victorian parlours had been so impressed.

‘Who’s pushing?’ said Franklin. The left side of the table lifted. Instinctively we all stood to follow its movement, kicking our seats back behind us.

Cailey only just kept her footing as she stumbled backwards. ‘This is nuts!’ she said, and her grin dropped into a frown. ‘You OK, Chris?’

My face, she told me later, had suddenly become alien. Its features had slackened and drifted. She said I’d looked like someone else was in there.

The table gave an off-centre roll, forcing us all to follow it with sideways, dancers’ steps, as if we were playing ring-a-roses, then it settled and stopped. We all lifted our fingertips from the surface quickly, afraid it might start up again under its own volition. After a moment not knowing quite what to do, we each retrieved a chair and sat down. I had started to come back out of my trance by then, but everything still felt most peculiar.

Jim looked to me. ‘Recovering?’ he said.

‘I think so. It was—astonishing.’

‘Ideomotor action,’ said Jim. ‘That’s what they call it. We all pushed the table without knowing. You see, you can’t tell the difference between *following* the movement and *causing* it.’ He was back in lecture mode now, comforting himself with rationalism. ‘But the biggest factor in table turning often isn’t the event itself. It’s the participants’ memories you really need to look out for. Afterwards they’ll exaggerate—convince each other it was far more dramatic than it was.’

‘Really?’ said Cailey. ‘Because that seemed pretty dramatic to me.’

‘Oh, they’ll tell you about tables levitating, tables flipping upside down, tables spinning under their fingers like a roulette wheel. People’s hands being thrown off the surface like they’ve had an electric shock. They’ll believe it happened too.’

Marline said, ‘Even so, maybe we need to calm down a bit before we discuss this one.’

Franklin, however, would not let it go. ‘So, what did you mean, Chris? What did you think was so *astonishing*?’

I wasn’t sure. Perhaps if I tried to explain, I thought, it might help make sense of it. I said, ‘I know it was us moving the table. But there was something else. It elevated things. Didn’t you feel that?’

‘Not at all,’ said Franklin. ‘I’ve got no idea what you’re talking about.’

'I felt it,' said Suresh.

Cailey raised a hand, like she was testifying. 'Me too. A kind of slip in the air. You looked really *ill* Chris, though. I was worried you were having a fit.'

'Stress reactions,' said Jim, and he reached for his bag to take out a pad and pen. 'We should make a note.'

I was getting a headache. I put my left palm against my cheek and pressed the fingertips into my temple.

'It's Stevie,' I said, and later on, Jim told me that was when he too had seen another person in my face. Someone reckless and dangerous. Whatever was happening, I found myself possessed by the need to tell the truth, and I turned to Franklin.

'You were fucking her.'

'What—?' said Franklin.

'She was tied up. You had her wearing a mask. She died while you were fucking her. It was only a game. She wants you to know you didn't kill her.'

Franklin stared at me across the table.

'I don't think this is something we ought to be doing,' said Jim.

'It's all right, Jim,' said Franklin. But he stood then, and he asked me, 'Who are you talking about?'

'Your—not your wife. You said your wife died, but she didn't. This woman was called—Vera. She was—didn't you pay her? Yeah, you paid her—to—to wear a mask and let you tie her up while you— You were a regular. She says it wasn't your fault, Franklin. She'd taken something. Someone else's prescri—'

Everyone knew what was going to happen. I did, while I was speaking, but there didn't seem to be anything anyone could do to prevent it. Franklin's fist smashed into my face and knocked me backwards, toppling my seat. If Marline had not caught me as I fell, I would have cracked my head open against the concrete floor.

'Christ, Franklin!' said Cailey.

'I don't know what he's up to, but I'm not having it,' said Franklin.

'Was that true?' asked Suresh. 'What he said?'

'I'm not talking about that.' Franklin's voice was quieter than it had been. Quieter than normal. He left, and did not come back again.

May 2010, London: *McMeekin*

‘He didn’t come back again,’ Christopher said.

McMeekin glanced at the voice recorder, making sure he’d switched it on at the start of the session. ‘What about you? How many more of these meetings did you attend?’

‘A few. Maybe half a dozen. Not many more than that anyway.’

‘Were there further incidents like the one with this man, Franklin?’

‘No. I picked stuff up from the Dead around the others in the group, but I kept it to myself. I left when Gran died. At least, I definitely didn’t go after that, but I might have stopped before then.’

‘Try to remember.’

Christopher focussed the memory. ‘I had already packed it in. Passively, I mean. I’d missed a couple of meetings but I hadn’t been conscious about it.’

‘Tell me about your grandmother’s death.’

‘I said, didn’t I, about her having the stroke? After that she went to hospital. She stayed there until she died. They called to let me know and I went up for the cremation. The same old guy who’d buried my Dad did the arrangements. Craighall. He was close to retirement by then. Told me he was about to sell the firm off to some big national company. Oh, here’s something that might interest you—I had the priest do the whole thing properly, even though it was only me in the chapel. All the rituals, a eulogy. We sang the hymns too, me and him together.’

‘Why?’

‘Out of perversity, I think. I didn’t believe in any of it.’

‘That’s a lot of trouble to go to just out of perversity. And you say this was a landmark for you?’

‘Only because there was—well, I suppose you’d call it an inheritance. Enough to change my life as it turned out. From the house, mainly. I’d assumed it was council property. But apparently Dad had bought it for her in the Eighties, and his insurance had paid off the mortgage. And she’d hoarded a load of money too. I found it in plastic crates when I went to clear the place out. She must have been filling them for years. Just a jumble of fivers, tenners, twenties, crumpled up, torn, but a lot of it.

‘With all that and what I got from selling the house it seemed to me like I had a responsibility to do something. That was when I decided I was going to become a

professional medium. A few weeks later, I met Rob—he's my road manager now—and everything kind of fell into place.'

June 2010, Bristol: *Showbiz*

Rob had booked Christopher into the longest unbroken series of gigs he had ever undertaken. Nights blurred into each other. Many times the theatre he arrived at seemed so familiar he had to check his own itinerary to convince himself he had not already been there this year. Immediately before Christopher went on stage each night, Rob made him say the name of the town he was in five times, a charm against the unforgivable error of publicly forgetting where he was.

'Bristol, Bristol, Bristol, Bristol, Bristol.'

'Nice one. You wouldn't look too psychic if you thought you were in Hull, would you?' Hull was where they had been last night; tomorrow they would boomerang back north to Darlington. Two hundred and sixty miles on the same roads they had just taken south.

'I bet Toni Webster doesn't have to put up with this shit,' Christopher said.

'Toni Webster plays exclusively in venues that seat a thousand plus, and she charges four times what you do for tickets. Toni Webster makes big fucking money. She only needs to do ten gigs a year to earn triple what you do.'

'Well, Toni Webster makes her big fucking money by being a big fucking charlatan.'

'Maybe. Anyway, the last thing you want to be doing is getting yourself riled up about Toni Webster. Not when you're onstage in ninety seconds' time. What town are you in?'

'I told you before, Bristol.'

'Five times.'

'I did it already, Rob.'

'Do it again.'

'Hull. Hull. Hull. Hull. Hull.'

'That ain't funny, Chris. If you do that on stage...'

'Bristolbristolbristolbristolbristolbristolbristolbristolbristolbristol.'

'Good. Time to go.'

And he was out on the stage, reading the audience, drawing down the Dead. But now he was always looking into the crowd for one particular face, and it was never there. He'd tried to return to the YouTube video, hoping actual evidence would fix the explanation in his mind. But by then *InTheNameof88* had closed the account.

Why would he? Perhaps, Christopher thought, there never had been an account, never an *InTheNameof88*, never a video. At least he had watched the first clip with Lucy. He could ask her about it, he supposed, except to do so would pollute her with his confusion. The details didn't matter. Eventually, he hoped, McMeekin would help him get to the truth of things, find what the therapist called a 'narrative'.

Yet he still looked for that face, every night in every audience. Because a narrative was insufficient unless you could learn to believe in it. Christopher had a story: that he had constructed this elaborate fantasy in a barely subconscious attempt to rid himself the ghost of his childhood. But he did not believe it. Those golems—coffee shop man or YouTube man—two people or one, they preoccupied him. Tonight, once again, neither was there. They were never there. He was never there.

#

The gig went well. Stevie was in a mood to be helpful, and Christopher was faultless throughout the evening. Afterwards, he worked with Rob Grice for over an hour behind the stall in the theatre lobby: Rob selling *Living with the Dead* paperbacks and the new *In Performance* DVDs, Christopher appending autograph after autograph to flyleaves and inserts.

After midnight in the hotel bar, he was having a drink with his manager and looking forward to the quiet solitude of his room. They were alone except for a youth doing duty as both barman and, his real job, security-guard. To signify his double-status, he had removed his uniform jacket and cap and rolled up his shirtsleeves. When Christopher and Rob first arrived at 11.30, the young man had been polishing a beer glass that did not really need polishing. Sometime during the last hour he had lost the urge to look like either a barman or a security guard and reverted to what he was: a bored twenty-two year old. Occasionally, he would remember his duties and glance around, but mostly his attention was focused on a handheld games console. Sounds of the racing game he was playing, car engine noises and pulsating music, drifted over and mixed with Rob's voice.

Christopher felt tired. Bored as the kid at the bar. Remembering that *Hei* magazine had come out today, and he had a copy in his bag, he decided to do a little mischief.

‘So, how does it feel to be a style icon?’

‘Ahh, fuck off,’ Rob said. ‘Don’t be a cunt.’

Enjoying his manager’s gruff embarrassment, Christopher persisted: ‘I’m just wondering when you’re going to launch your own clothing label. I mean, I’ve got to be prepared. Once your design career takes off, I suppose I’ll be needing to look for someone to take your place.’

It was unfair to tease him about the interview, which was far from the sort of thing his manager would have pursued for himself. Berry had arranged it.

Rob dressed like a Victorian funeral director, in a three-piece suit that bulged here and there with middle-aged weight; his patent leather winklepickers had been resoled and repaired countless times. His hair, definitely dyed black, was still just about thick enough to back-comb and lacquer into a tangle. This ensemble did exude, Christopher supposed, a variety of dusty charm, and Berry, who understood these things, said it had *graduated from unfashionable to classic*. Rob said he didn’t know what that meant; it was the only way he knew how to dress. Even so, he had been happy to borrow the phrase when talking to a *Hei* magazine journalist last month. They had used it as a pull quote next to a moody black and white photograph of Rob standing in the doorway of a pub.

‘I seem to have graduated from unfashionable to classic,’ Rob Grice.

Three months ago during their fortnightly Strategy Meeting (these were also Berry’s idea) at Grice Management—Rob’s minuscule office above a grocer’s shop in Hackney—Berry told them a contact at *Hei* had offered an interesting opportunity.

‘Me, in the fucking fashion pages?’ Rob had said, unconvinced as always by her PR manoeuvres.

‘It’s not the fashion pages as such,’ she argued. ‘It’s a feature. *Hei, Street Style*—like a pun on ‘High Street’?’

‘Yeah, I get it.’ Rob said,

‘This is a really hip magazine. What they do every month is get some alternative type person, like yourself, Rob, to talk about how they dress. You’d like it. John

Lydon's been in there, Pauline Black, Johnny Marr, Poly Styrene, J. Mascis, Jerry Sadowitz.' Christopher was impressed by the facility with which she reeled off, without notes, this litany of figures from the past, most of whom meant as little to her as they would mean much to Rob. She had done her preparation, he had to give her that. Even so, Rob saw how she was trying to handle him, and he was insulted by it.

'An interview with Sadowitz?' he said. 'Are you sure?'

'Well, that one might have been a profile.'

'If this is all about promoting Chris, why not have them do something about *him*?'

'You're a better candidate. Chris's look is too conventional. Anyway, the *Hei* reader demographic is pretty smart. You don't want to be too direct. But if there's something in the copy like "manager of the radical psychic, Christopher Longley—"

'Radical psychic?' Christopher interjected. He had been thinking about the Kellows—if he were to offer them his help now, how would they respond? Finally the friction between Rob and Berry had annoyed him sufficiently to draw his attention. 'Is that what I am now?'

But she was not to be distracted from her mission. 'The article's about you, Rob, but you'll be a Trojan Horse for Chris.'

'Jesus,' Rob said. But he gave in. He'd suffered the interview and the photoshoot, and the magazine had come out about a week ago. Until now Christopher had not felt like discussing its contents with Rob. Now he looked at it, though, it wasn't nearly as bad as he'd feared. The mean-spirited, sneering tone he had expected from the hipster journalists of *Hei* had not materialised and the grainy monochrome pictures made Rob appear rather better than he did in real life.

'Seriously,' he said. 'It's good. What's this photographer called? I like these shots.'

'Yeah, right. I see.'

'See what?'

'This is about the posters, ain't it?'

It wasn't at all. Though now Christopher thought of it, these cool, urban images were just the sort of thing he'd like in his own publicity. Maybe the article might be what he needed to set some change in motion.

'You brought them up, not me,' he said. 'But what do you think?'

Evidently, Rob understood that Christopher wanted to push him into something. He said, 'I think you need to choose a direction here.'

'Meaning?'

'Her direction, my direction. It's not the same direction.' He waved dismissively at the magazine. 'I can't be doing this. It don't make sense to me. I don't understand what you're chasing.'

'Respectability. I want them to take me seriously.'

The same answer as always, but it wasn't true anymore. Martha Kellow; Berry and Rob; Lucy; McMeekin. Toni Webster, even. They all wove into each other. All the Dead. The man in the snorkel coat too. It was all about Branwen. Decide what to do about her. The rest would follow.

July 2010, London: *McMeekin*

He said, 'I was just thinking about that coating on the glass. You being a psychiatrist—'

'Psychotherapist.'

'Right, sorry... You being a psychotherapist, it occurred to me it might be unhelpful having such a gloomy view out of your office. I assume you deal with a lot of depressives.'

'What about you, Christopher? Do you find it depressing?' McMeekin asked, bringing it back, as Christopher had known he would, to business.

'Everyone's brought down by dull weather, aren't they?'

'You don't seem very positive today.'

'I'm beginning to wonder whether this is doing me any good. I mean, I come here and talk, but nothing much seems to be changing.'

'And in all this talking, would you say you've been honest with me?'

Christopher didn't reply.

'Does that mean no?' McMeekin said.

'I've answered everything you've asked truthfully.'

'So, maybe I haven't found the right question yet. It can take a while, Christopher. This isn't like getting an antibiotic from your GP.'

‘I appreciate that.’

‘Then tell me how you feel about Stevie right now.’

‘Same as always. I have a general sense of his presence wherever I am, every second of every day. It seems real, but not real. I don’t know. I feel—oppressed by him.’

Off came the spectacles. You could tell a lot from body language, the imperfectly suppressed meaning of a gesture. McMeekin folded the glasses. He slipped them into a case he’d taken from the inside pocket of his jacket, returned it there, casually, without looking away from his patient. Maintaining eye contact was important.

The therapist said, ‘OK, that was your immediate response, without thinking about it. Can you try again, please? Describe it for me—this presence you’re talking about. Is it inside or outside your mind?’

Christopher stood up.

‘It’s both. If I do this—’ He turned to face away from McMeekin. ‘—you aren’t gone, and I know you aren’t gone. It’s like that.’ He sat again, embarrassed by his own impulsive melodrama.

McMeekin said. ‘You told me once that when you pass on messages from the Dead, it’s like a translation. Is this the same thing? Have you just found a way of talking about your experience of Stevie, rather than a way of understanding it?’

He was right. All Christopher had was metaphors. He thought of a better one. ‘OK. Do you remember a couple of weeks ago, your receptionist thought you were already back from lunch and let me in by mistake? The office was empty, but I was expecting you to be here. There would be no reason for me to come in here unless you were inside, would there? It was an inconceivable situation. So when I came in, I imagined you must be somewhere here. It felt that way, even though I couldn’t see you. Like you were hiding behind the desk or something.’

Christopher noticed the therapist make a semi-conscious movement. A little lift of the right hand, towards the pocket where he had put his glasses; a motion of barely an inch or two in that direction, and then the impulse was resisted.

McMeekin said, ‘But your perception that I was in the room was wrong, wasn’t it? You came into the office expecting to see me here when in fact I’d not returned from lunch yet. You assumed I must be hiding behind the desk when I was in reality finishing off my sushi at a restaurant some distance away.’

Christopher laughed at the absurd idea of McMeekin cowering behind the desk. ‘When I say *hiding*, I mean *hidden*. I just thought, maybe he’s dropped a pen or something and he’s picking it up off the floor. The thing is, when I came in here the other week, I realised pretty quickly that you weren’t in the room, and in the face of the facts, that sense of your presence disappeared. I’ve tried to make myself feel the same way about Stevie, but it doesn’t work. I can’t find any facts to contradict that feeling of his being there.’

McMeekin poured himself a glass of water. ‘I think perhaps we ought to try hypnosis.’

July 2010, Lincoln: *Berry*

Mostly when he spoke to her it was by telephone from hotel rooms. This time, though it was almost three in the morning, she answered brightly. Cocaine, perhaps. She did a little every now and then.

It took a while for him to work up to it. The conversation drifted along through familiar patterns for a while. There wasn’t anywhere natural for him to bring up what he wanted to say, so in the end he just launched it anyway.

‘I’ve been thinking about this PR thing. There’s a lot of overlap between you and Rob, and that isn’t working out too well, is it?’

Beyond the window were the lights of the town, scattered against the darkness. It seemed like a cold night out there.

She was cautious then. ‘What do you mean?’

He scratched at label stuck to the glass. It said, ‘This window is locked for your safety. Do not attempt to open the catch.’

‘Maybe you and I we shouldn’t work together anymore.’ And then, because something required him to give her a final kick, ‘We’ve never talked about whether or not you believe in me.’

‘With respect, that’s totally unfair, Chris.’ Her voice was steady; she was caging her emotions in the language of the boardroom. ‘How can you imagine I’ve not shown belief in your career? In your potential?’

‘That’s not what I’m saying.’

‘And *us*. I tried to fit into your life I was doing really well with Lucy. She seems to like me, doesn’t she? I don’t know if I fucked up, or whether you got scared, or—.’

Guilt pulled at him. He had missed the possibility that Berry was honestly confused by the way he’d treated her. She might be crying, he thought: not sobbing, just pouring out silent tears at the other end of the phone, and he needed to make her feel better. This overwhelming need to soften the pain he’d caused; it must be what the Dead felt.

Finally, she said, ‘I know you’re a talented, original and unique performer, Chris. That you have the potential to reach an audience far beyond the traditional psychic circuit. But if you’re asking whether I believe there are ghosts around us and you can interpret for them. No. No I don’t.’

He realised she thought he’d known all along. And now she was angry that he’d pushed her into saying it out loud. It was too late to change course. He stuck to the script he’d prepared for this.

‘Berry, I can never reach the audiences you’re trying to connect me with. *Hei* magazine, Channel 4—they’re looking for irony. There *is* no irony in what I do.’

‘Fuck, Chris. *Please!* If you don’t want me to be your PR anymore, just fire me. Don’t make it all about my lack of integrity. And, since we’re finally being honest with each other, if you’re ending our relationship you might have the courtesy to tell me that too.’

‘Well,’ he said. ‘There you are.’

‘No, that’s not all. People who don’t believe and never will—that’s where the potential is. And it has nothing to do with *irony*.’

Quickly, fluently, she laid out her plans for him. His performances should be more theatrical, more scripted. He should challenge the idea of truth, be ambiguous, ambivalent; he should test the limits of rationality. A sophisticated audience would be enraptured with that. All Christopher needed to do was emphasise the right aspects of what he already did. She said, ‘I don’t believe you understand your own thing, Chris, how radical and uncomfortable you could be. This *Britain’s only honest clairvoyant* shit won’t sell to anyone. It’s a brand nobody wants. So finish the tour and then make a decision. You can continue hacking around the country with Rob, doing tiny theatres for the rest of your life. Or you can be successful.’

She hung up. He realised how seriously he'd underestimated her. Doubtless she had been readying herself for this moment, just as he had. It was a strategy. But that didn't mean she was wrong.

He knew then what he would do. It didn't have to be rational. It didn't even have to be honest. He would choose Berry, he would fire Rob, and then he would call the Kellows and offer them his help. He'd let McMeekin try hypnosis too.

August 2010, London: *McMeekin*

'You can close your eyes if you prefer,' McMeekin said.

I'll keep them open, Christopher thought. Probably this would not work. The therapist had told him to try and clear his mind. That wasn't possible, not right now. He thought of how a week ago he'd called the Kellows to offer his help. He'd spoken to Martha, and she had sounded annoyed. Maybe he had left it too long, lost them.

'We'll think about it,' she'd said. 'I'll talk to my parents.'

Then, for some reason, perhaps because his attempt to do the same thing over the phone to Berry had failed, Christopher decided to sack Rob face to face, which had gone down exactly as badly as expected.

'Betrayal, this is, mate. I can't believe you'd—for that fucking *Yoko*.'

He winced, thinking about it. How was he meant to relax with that on his conscience? And Berry was full of plans now. She had all kinds of ideas, and he wasn't sure about any of them.

'Maybe it isn't the right time to be trying this,' he wanted to say. But the light was dim, the room was warm, and the therapist's voice—level, quiet, insistent—wore away his worries, fragment by fragment.

'I want you to choose a memory of a place,' McMeekin was saying.

'Somewhere you went when you were young and you had the most marvellous time. Somewhere you only associate with happy feelings. Can you think of something like that?'

'I can.'

A trestle table in the bright, warm sunshine. Christopher and his father eating pilchard sandwiches out of greaseproof paper, drinking orange squash with too much water in it. The taste of plastic cups.

McMeekin said, 'Imagine you could travel to that place and that time on a downward escalator. It's a wooden one, old fashioned. But this downward escalator is unusual, because you can't see to the bottom of it yet. It just keeps going downwards. You feel warm and comfortable and perfectly happy to be on this journey, on this escalator, which is taking you downwards to a good place; taking you down to one of the best places you've ever been. Imagine that place. Imagine yourself riding that downward escalator. Imagine it taking you there, easily, comfortably. You're looking forward to getting to your destination, but there's no hurry and the journey itself, the journey downwards, is such a pleasure.'

Downwards, downward, downwards, downward. Christopher knew exactly what McMeekin was up to with that repetition. Nevertheless he did feel like closing his eyes after all. The vision of himself on the escalator solidified in the darkness of his mind.

McMeekin said, 'You're riding this escalator, and the air around you feels warm and rich and pleasant. What can you smell, Christopher?'

'I smell honey.' He spoke immediately, so it must be true. But did he smell honey? Did he have the idea he smelled honey? Did he smell the *idea* of honey? The warm, golden aroma wove itself synaesthetically into the purring of the escalator's motors.

'You smell honey, that's right. It's sweet, isn't it, and golden and heavy? Feel how it spreads to every part of you whenever you breathe in. Hold your breath for a second after each inhalation. You feel it like a cloud inside you, filling every space in your body, filling your bones with warmth and your veins with light. And everything is natural and everything is good. And of course, on your right, you can see the other escalator, the one that comes upwards, because for every downward escalator there must be an upward one...'

McMeekin's words and the images in Christopher's mind were the same thing, wound around each other like strands of DNA. Parallel with his own escalator, its upward-moving sister brought other passengers: some close together; some far apart. They didn't behave in the impatient way real people do on a real escalator. None of them were walking or running; all were standing, all submitting to the machine's

inexorable pace. At first they appeared far below Christopher—vague, distant figures, faceless as the tailor’s dummies in a De Chirico painting. Then, as the moving stairway drew the passengers nearer to him, the details began to crystallise. The crude delineators of clothing, physique and hair formed themselves, followed by more personal attributes—a way of carrying themselves, a look in the eye that suggested a thought. Each dummy became more and more an actual person.

McMeekin said, ‘You see faces coming out of the dark. Like petals on a wet, black bough.’

Christopher saw that among this silent crowd of upward travellers were people he recognised. Some were unimportant, figures from his recent life, half-imprinted on his memory by some detail or other. A neighbour with a distinctive moustache, a hotel receptionist with elaborately sculpted fingernails. Others meant more to him: his wife and daughter, his dead father.

‘Let them pass,’ McMeekin warned. ‘Witness them travelling by, but keep your eyes forwards. They are on their journeys, you are on yours.’

And every person he let ascend diminished the weight inside him, left a further space to be filled by that warm glow he’d first thought of as the smell of honey, but which he realised was quite something else. He had forgotten his destination, the picnic in the sunshine. McMeekin’s voice was far behind him. There were fewer and fewer passengers going the other way. Now there were none, and Christopher was alone on his escalator, released from everything in the world.

Then there was one more. A skinny thirteen-year-old boy in scruffy 1980s school uniform. Crimplene tie, mud-stained black trousers, a blazer with one sleeve missing. Unlike the others, Stevie looked directly at Christopher; and Christopher met his gaze.

He opened his eyes onto reality. The office. McMeekin in his chair facing him. The world made dull through the coated windows. Although the lights were low, his eyes still took a while to adjust.

McMeekin said, ‘Have some water.’

The therapist filled a tumbler for his patient. Ice cubes in the jug moved gently around the lemon slices; Christopher heard the clunks as they collided with each other, magnified, separate. He took the glass and sipped.

‘How do you feel?’ McMeekin asked.

‘Good. Odd. Like something different.’ The words he wanted wouldn’t come to him just then. He felt both relaxed and filled with energy. Objects around him, the chairs, the desk, the paintings, and the therapist himself, all looked sharp-edged.

‘I know things,’ Christopher said.

He knew, for example that McMeekin’s spectacles were in the case. The case was in the therapist’s pocket. It didn’t fit the spectacles properly because it wasn’t their case. The end of one leg stuck out. This case belonged to McMeekin’s other pair, the broken pair; the pair he preferred but which he’d snapped yesterday by fiddling with them too much. The receptionist, Julia, had been supposed to take them to the opticians and get them fixed, but she’d forgotten. McMeekin was thinking that really, Julia was something of a luxury. Like the spectacles he didn’t need to wear most of the time, she was a signal to the world that he, Neil McMeekin, was what he said he was. But she was expensive. If he let her go, all he’d need to do was meet his patients himself at the door.

‘Will I be like this forever?’ Christopher asked.

‘It’s a temporary state. You’ll feel normal again quite soon.’ The therapist checked his watch. ‘You say you *know things*?’

‘I saw Stevie. I’ve never seen him before, not like that. It’s true. The Dead are all around us.’

He realised how little he had known before. He’d thought he was connecting to them, but there were so many more of them than anyone could have guessed. This building was full of them. Or he might be slipping into madness. He thought of a case he’d read about recently. In Australia, perhaps. Or Austria. Hypnotizing a patient had triggered full psychosis—ruining the psychiatrist’s career and costing thousands in damages. Had he read that, or had McMeekin? It was difficult to tell who was thinking what.

Then, Christopher said, ‘You had a sister, didn’t you? Her name was Maira. She died young.’

A silence fell between them. McMeekin would soon acknowledge that it was true. But first he had his therapist’s tricks. Answer with a question. ‘And how did you find this out?’

‘Through Stevie.’ He had only a tangential idea what that meant. Stevie was there, and now that he had made himself visible, or Christopher had finally looked in the right place for him, his presence was different from before. The messages were

different. Christopher could see through everything. He could pick out the right noises from the clamour of the Dead. It wasn't hearing exactly; wasn't thinking exactly. Something between. Then he understood. They were no longer separated. Always before, Stevie had been an intermediary, a hand across the gap. Now, at last, he and Christopher were one; their senses combined. He realised he'd felt this all his life, only just out of reach, never knowing. As if he'd jumped towards the stack but been suspended halfway. He had arrived, knew where he should be. If he could only stay here.

But something was wrong in the room. It pulled him back. Against all his desires, Christopher found himself refocussed on the physical world, on McMeekin.

'I don't know what you're—' The therapist was shaking. Anger, tight in his throat, raised the pitch of his voice a semitone. 'This isn't going to work out,' he said. 'You'll need to find someone else. I won't be charging for today's session.'

'I see.' Christopher felt untroubled by this sudden abandonment. It didn't matter. McMeekin was of no more use to him. The Dead were all gone. The world seemed tiresome and ordinary, and all he wanted was to return to the state he'd reached a few moments ago, which had evaporated so swiftly and disappointingly. He no longer had any idea what it was that Maira McMeekin might have intended to say to her brother.

The therapist stood and went back to his desk. He pressed the intercom. 'Julia?' he said, 'Mr Longley is leaving, but there's no need to charge him. We'll be ending his treatment today. Could you bring me a new water tray, please?'

#

After Christopher had gone, McMeekin took a bunch of keys from his pocket and unlocked the bottom desk drawer. He opened it and lifted out a stack of books: five superficially identical, black hardback notebooks, A4 sized; each held shut with a thick elastic band wrapped vertically around the covers. He slid out the third one from the top.

McMeekin had kept journals like this for over a decade. At the end of every day's work, he would pick up his fountain pen, and cover a page or two in rows of precise, black handwriting, enjoying the way the effort of maintaining a horizontal line across the creamy, unruled paper disciplined his thoughts. He never went back to read what he had written. Only the act of setting down the thought was important.

He flipped forward through the pages. What had Longley said about her? Nothing much, but he had known her name, which was uncommon enough to be beyond guesswork, and that she had died young. Here was the entry he was looking for. Centred at the top of the page, underlined as straight as he could do it without a ruler he had written the date: February 3rd 2007. Then the heading, *Maira*. And beneath that were four pages about his sister.

It began, *She should be thirty tomorrow, if she had lived. If a man who had drunk too much at lunchtime had not been in a hurry to get back to work.*

He closed the book. There had been that time his secretary had let Longley into the office alone. Quite possibly this journal had been lying on the table or sitting in the desk drawer, which he did not always remember to lock. Longley must have looked at it then. Obviously he had stored up his information, waiting for the moment of greatest advantage.

It was possible the man genuinely believed in his own so-called psychic ability. That didn't matter. Consciously or unconsciously, he had gone snooping into his therapist's private thoughts and used them against him. It was not forgivable.

Days afterwards, McMeekin settled on the conclusion that he had overreacted after all. Letting it get to him, and dismissing a patient at the first sign of confrontation was unprofessional. Well, it was too late to do anything about that. Sometimes you had to live with your mistakes. There was something else too, now he thought of it. Clearly Longley had found McMeekin's notebooks; of course that had to be the only explanation for his knowing about Maira—but how disappointing to discover that was all there was to it.

October 2010, Barton: *Christopher and Martha*

The Toni Webster Crystal Pendulum is both a beautiful piece of jewellery and a precision-cut psychic instrument. Depending on the wearer's own level of ability and training, the Crystal Pendulum can act as a key to the door between the Earthly Plane and the Beyond.

This craftsman-made natural product comes with full instructions, a five-year guarantee and an individual Certificate of Authenticity, signed by Toni herself. Stocks are limited, so order today to avoid disappointment. Twelve months' low-interest finance available.

Alone in the first-class carriage on the train to Cornwall, Christopher tried to write his article for the *Sunday Beacon*. By way of what he had decided was research, he had just spent fifteen minutes browsing Toni Webster's online store. Here were details of a pay-per-call line on which *a specially written computer programme will select messages from the Spirit World appropriate for each caller*. As well as twenty different DVD titles and two dozen books, the site offered *a full range of spiritual enhancement tools, all carefully selected and endorsed by Toni* and various educational events.

Why not enrol for Weekend Seminars at the Webster Academy in beautiful Dorset, providing thorough training in basic skills for the psychic? Prices are inclusive of assessment, certification and full board.

There is currently a one-year waiting list for these popular seminars. However, a few 'queuebuster' spaces are kept available each month for students with exceptional potential. Extra charges apply. Call the Academy Hotline for details.

Please note that due to the many demands of Miss Webster's schedule, she is not able to teach classes at the Weekend Seminars personally. Course leaders are Elite Graduates, each directly trained by Toni herself.

Christopher clicked the link and discovered that after completing a Seminar, those with *a stronger mediumistic talent* could progress to a special one-month course, leading to Elite Graduate status. Holders of this qualification were licensed by the Academy to train others and to offer individual consultations and readings via email or telephone in Toni Webster's name.

He would have enjoyed devoting this month's six-hundred words to the woman's avarice, but he had learned that his freedom of expression was limited by circumstances. Of course, when Berry had negotiated the job for him, she had not told

the *Beacon* exactly what sort of material he would be providing, and she was skilled at letting people draw the conclusions that suited their expectations.

He should have recognised what he was getting into right at the start, when the Features Editor Giles Moriawetz vetoed his idea for a byline, and ‘Christopher Longley: Britain’s only genuine psychic’ became ‘Christopher Longley’s Psychic Truth’ because it was ‘a bit snappier and essentially the same thing’.

Then, the day he submitted the copy for his first column, an exposé of the cold reading techniques used by three of the most popular mediums on The Psychic Channel, Moriawetz rang him.

‘My fault entirely,’ he explained, ‘I probably wasn’t clear enough about what we were expecting.’

‘So, my article isn’t going to be usable?’

‘No, no, it’ll be fine with a bit of subbing. The thing is though, just for the next one, we were thinking more in terms of stuff the—whatsit—spirits have to say about things in the news—’

The editor kept lapsing into silence mid-sentence. It sounded like he was dividing his attention between the call and some other task. Catching up with emails, probably. Christopher was sure he could hear a keyboard being tapped one-handed in the background.

‘Or, you know,’ Moriawetz continued, ‘anything current affairs-ish. Islamic terrorism, TV shows, child pornography.’

‘Right. I suppose I could have a go at that.’

‘And what would be really great would be—um—could you provide some predictions, do you think?’

‘Like an astrologer?’

Long silence. Definite tapping.

‘Not at all. I understand you’re a serious guy, Chris. We’re thinking you might offer insights into the future for Britain, that kind of idea—’ Tap tap tap. ‘—is that part of your—er—thing?’

‘So, something more like Criswell, then?’ Christopher said.

‘Who, sorry? I don’t know who that is.’

‘The Amazing Criswell. Used to do predictions on American Television in the fifties and sixties. They’d get him on the Johnny Carson Show and laugh at him because he never got anything right.’

Tap tap. Mouseclick (send?) Moriawetz said, ‘I guess he made a living though, this guy?’

Christopher looked for a compromise. ‘I was thinking of doing a column about what it means to be able to put someone in touch with a relative among the Dead. How it helps both sides.’

‘Yeah? Sounds good. Have you by any chance written any of that already?’

‘No, not yet.’

‘Well, given our deadline, we’ll have to go with what we’ve got. But as I say it’ll need some subbing.’

‘Giles, I was told I’d have freedom to write whatever I wanted.’

‘You do, of course you do, within limits. You can’t just throw people’s names around. Don’t get me wrong, I agree with you. That guy Leon Crocker’s obviously a total fake, and I’m sure the others you mention are too. But, to be fair, it’s your word against theirs and you’re all in the same business, basically.’

‘So, this is about libel?’

‘To some extent.’

‘Then what’s the problem?’ Christopher snapped, annoyed that this thirty-five year old in a baseball cap was talking to him like some ingénue.

‘You have to understand these guys you’re having a go at are popular with our readers. People believe in them. In a way, what you’re saying here, it’s the same sort of thing as insulting someone’s religion. You need to see the context, mate. Upsetting the public isn’t what we do.’

The article, when it appeared, had been redacted into total pointlessness. None of the frauds from the Psychic Channel were named, and Christopher’s accusations referred vaguely to ‘dishonest mediums’. According to Moriawetz, even this weaponless assault prompted a flurry of indignant emails and phone calls. The following month Christopher wrote, as promised, about the joy it gave him to help the bereaved and the Dead to communicate with each other. And if that had felt like shameless self-promotion, he had at least to acknowledge its efficacy when his audiences increased nearly fourfold.

For a few columns after that he mined his autobiography and his stock of anecdotes from life on the road—until he ran out of things to write about. There were a couple of weak pieces; Moriawetz began to intimate that perhaps Christopher’s contract ought not to be renewed. So it was that he finally submitted to circumstances,

and in March the *Psychic Truth* column foretold that the upcoming general election would result in a hung parliament. Putting into practice what he had learned from Berry, he allowed the idea that his political sources might reside in the Spirit World to float unstated between the words of the article. Two months afterwards, once events had proved his guess right, he made that hint more overtly. Moriawetz was delighted.

As for Toni Webster, the biggest name in UK psychic performance, she probably had no idea that Christopher Longley even existed. He was certain he wanted to use his column to attack her, at least by implication. Yet the best he could hope for was to become a mosquito to her, and if he succeeded in that she would certainly swat him down with her legal team. Why launch an assault on this woman when the potential costs were so high? Was it about Lucy, who he now knew read the column in the *Beacon*, and whose good opinion he found himself caring about more than anyone's?

He shut down the laptop, thinking he would decide on an alternative subject later. Of course, it would have been interesting to write about what he was about to try with the Kellows, except he had made promises to them that he would not betray. Not yet, anyway he thought, catching sight of his own half-reflection, trapped between the two layers of the double-glazed train window. If he did help them, and they were grateful, surely they would be happy for him to share his part of the story with the world. If he did not help them, there would be nothing to tell.

#

Christopher arrived in Barton at one in the afternoon, went directly to Tourist Information and asked about accommodation. They gave him a five page computer printout and a basic map. In the absence of any detailed guidance, and because he felt like being capricious, he decided that he would go to the thirty-third on the list, which turned out to be a guest house called The Limes. It was a long walk, but he had made his decision and he stuck to it, not even calling in advance, on the assumption that since it was October, and well outside the holiday season, they must surely have vacancies. They did. A vague young woman showed him to his room, all the time giving the impression she was thinking of other things. After she had left him and he

had unpacked as much of his small bag as was necessary he sat on the bed and sent a text message to Martha Kellow.

Arrived OK. See you later. Christopher.

This was like the old days, he thought. He missed Rob Grice. Now that he had clarified matters with Berry the whole business was more grown up certainly, but it was no fun. Or was he already romanticising the past? It was only a month since he had sacked his manager yet how swiftly nostalgia had superimposed itself on the truth. Rob had been juvenile, small-time, out-of-date, disorganised; he made himself remember the hours of unnecessary driving, the shoddy hotel-bar gigs, the hideous promotional material. How much better it was to be transported from one carefully-selected venue to the next by train and taxi, all booked on his behalf. The detestable posters were no more, and a deal to reprint *Living with the Dead* with a real publisher should be cleared soon enough, once the lawyers sorted out Rob's insistence on shared copyright and joint authorship.

Kirsten, the woman Berry had appointed to handle his life on tour, was efficient, reliable and clean. That was all he knew about her. He had no idea how she got to each new town before him or what she was doing when he wasn't there. Always when he arrived, she would take him to some coffee shop, to buy an Americano for herself and an espresso for him. Then she would open up her smart plastic folder of preparations and take charge. An espresso wouldn't have been his choice every time, but that was what he had asked for at their first ever meeting, she had noted it for future reference, and he didn't mind sufficiently to risk the embarrassment of correcting her.

Thinking of it, she reminded Christopher of Alfred Craighall, the undertaker from Sheepwash who had buried his father, and much later his grandmother. The old man might be dead himself by now. Kirsten was a person made of the same material—the sort who took hold of your shambolic life and brought her own sense to it.

Last week, in Uttoxeter, she had produced from that plastic folder an actual letter, handwritten on paper. It was addressed to him c/o Berry Vincent PR and Management, a stamp placed exactly parallel to the edges at the same five millimetre distance around the top and right, as if measured with a ruler.

‘It’s from a Mr Martin Kellow,’ Kirsten told him. The envelope had been opened already, despite being marked STRICTLY PRIVATE – ADDRESSEE ONLY in red ink.

Stuck to the letter, Christopher had found a fluorescent green post-it containing a scrawled message from Berry: *Worth pursuing. But be careful.* The note itself was brief.

Dear Mr Longley,

I apologise for not having got in touch sooner. We have given your offer considerable thought, and, if you are still willing, we would be glad to accept your help.

Yours sincerely,

Martin Kellow

He had called as early as possible. The old man answered the phone but passed it straight to his daughter. Christopher understood. Mr Kellow had not changed his position since they had met, but had given in to Martha’s advocacy.

‘There’s no need to come over to the house,’ she told him. ‘Perhaps we might meet at the bookshop? We close at five.’

It would take him thirty or forty minutes to walk from The Limes. That left him with several hours. He could make a proper start on his article, he thought, but that idea engaged his enthusiasm even less than it usually did. He was in an anxious, unfocussed state of mind, brought on, he realised, by what he had committed himself to when he had finally made his guarded offer of support to the Kellows. He had no routine for this, no procedure to follow. Unlike his performances, unlike being managed by Berry and Kirsten, this required guesswork, instinct. It would be accompanied at every step by the possibility of failure. That made it exciting.

Since his final session with McMeekin, three months previously, he had not tried to return to the state he had reached there. Onstage, he’d found it easy to slip back into the old routine, and it had worked well enough. Too risky, he’d decided, to

give himself over entirely to the Dead in public—and in any case there was something sacrilegious about the idea of using it for showbiz, like it was a trick.

This, though, was an appropriate moment. Because surely it was to help him find his way to such as Branwen that this new degree of his gift had been visited on him. He lay on his back and closed his eyes. The light through the window warmed his face, turned the insides of his eyelids bright and red. It was pleasant but distracting, so he got up and shut the curtains.

He returned to the bed and waited in the dark for the Dead, for Stevie to overtake his senses. Yet it wouldn't work, and he could not let go. He found himself struggling to fall away from himself. Somehow he could not forget where he was.

And then he was on the bed, could hear the traffic from the road outside, knew it had not worked.

There was an armchair in the room. He sat in it and closed his eyes. So far he had held off from repeating the trick McMeekin had taught him, of imagining himself descending a moving staircase. He put himself there now.

Imagine the smell of honey, the empty faces of the people on the upward escalator, each marking a further step into the other world. It was only words, only a story he was telling himself. Because of that, it didn't work. He opened his eyes, rose and drew the curtains.

#

Martha met Christopher at five. At first it seemed to her that he was different from before, less honest. But of course she hardly knew him. They went to a tea shop and talked for a while. In those ordinary surroundings, he dropped his guard, she saw the man from the autobiography again, and she thought she might as well trust him.

He asked her to take him for a walk around the Old Town, reproducing as closely as possible the route Martha and her sister had taken in August 2004. After that they went together to the beach.

Because it was October, sunset was at six—much earlier than it had been on that night, but Christopher said it was more important to observe the conditions than the clock. The sun hung in roughly the same place as when Martha and Branwen had arrived. The cloudless sky progressed from thin fire at the horizon through yellow to lavender, all mirrored in the sea below. Now that they had stopped walking, Martha

realised how cold the air was. Her gloved hands in her pockets, she pulled her coat a little tighter around her.

‘It’s not the same,’ she said.

‘Tell me how it’s different.’

‘There was a party. Forty people or so, and a bonfire over there.’

‘What else?’

‘I think the tide was still going out when we arrived, and it was much further away. It’s coming in now. The sky was more dramatic—big scary clouds, all purple and blue. When we got here, everyone had stopped to look at it. Branwen was taking the piss out of them. I remember, she made a joke about a sunset being something you didn’t see every day.’

The out-of-season beach was empty except for a few evening dog walkers down by the water. One of them, a man, threw a ball out to sea and his big golden labrador swam out to retrieve it. Martha watched its head disappear into an incoming wave and then resurface on the other side.

‘What did you think of her saying that?’ Longley asked.

‘I was cross. She was making out that she—that *we* were better than the others—dismissing their emotion as a cliché. I thought she was being unfair. Clichés aren’t *wrong*; they’re just what people have in common. They were our friends, and they were teenagers getting ready to go to university, saying goodbye to each other. Most of them had lived untroubled lives. It’s hard to find significance when nothing bad has happened to you, so most of what’s important to you is secondhand. I was no different from them. I didn’t imagine I was superior because I’d found it in books and they found it in pop songs and sunsets. Anyway, the sunset wasn’t what it was about. It was about the moment, and that’s what Bran didn’t like. She wanted it to be insignificant. She couldn’t understand why anyone would see it differently.’

‘And you?’

‘I suppose I knew she was right. In ten years, most of us would have forgotten the whole thing. We were all moving on from each other. She liked that too much.’

She felt herself needing to be more honest about this than ever before. It was not only because Longley was her last resort. She was still undecided whether he was psychic or charlatan—but she was sure he understood more than the police could, her parents, Daisy. And she also knew it would be an easy, terrible error to allow herself the illusion of love; especially the love of a disciple for her prophet. To bring herself

out of that feeling she focused her attention on things around her. Far out at sea a ship made a black-paper cut-out against the deepening violet of the water, and she thought how silent and still it seemed from where she stood. On board there would be voices, machinery, the sound of engines and motors, laughter and arguments. The last of the dog walkers was almost at the other end of the beach, heading for the path up the steep slope that led back to proper land. The animal, some kind of small terrier, had been barking constantly the whole time she and Longley had been standing there, a sharp, regular yap, echoing across the bay. The racket of life travelled no more than a few hundred yards before the soundwaves petered out and drowned in the sea.

‘I know my sister is alive,’ Martha said, ‘Bran didn’t want to be fixed, so she removed herself. She’s not dead.’ And she realised she’d been telling herself and everyone else about Bran’s fear of fixity for too long. Now she heard only orthodoxy in her own voice: not truth but explanation. ‘No,’ she said. ‘I believe I’d know if she was dead. But I’ve no idea where she is or why she went, or what happened to her.’

She wanted to ask him if Stevie Lightwood was with him, but somehow it didn’t feel like the sort of thing one should raise, as if the very question could shatter the moment and prevent what might happen. Here, now, was she on the edge of discovering the truth about her sister’s disappearance? Inside the pocket of her coat, she worked off the glove from her left hand. If this was a séance, surely they should link palms. Perhaps picking up that thought, Christopher folded his arms, burying both of his hands into his armpits, and said, only half to Martha, it seemed, ‘If she’s abandoned you all to become someone else, what would be the difference? If she’s gone because she doesn’t want to be here?’

Her perception of him kept shimmering from extraordinary to ordinary and back. The sun was down, completely. The sea was swallowing the shoreline. Evening became night.

‘We should go up to the road before the tide comes in,’ she said.

‘Can you remember the last time you saw her?’ Longley asked. A routine, policeman’s question. She had reformed the memory too often already, interrogated its details hundreds of times. And she was confident it had no more secrets to spill. Still, she told it.

The Beach Party

Martha had been sitting by the flames, talking to some boys she barely knew. They were friends of Greg's, they said. Everyone was a friend of Greg's. By that time she'd given up the charade with the fake vodka and started drinking for real, a little more than was good for her, and maybe she'd had something else too. One of those boys, she'd thought, was worth getting to know better, or would have been if this had been a year ago. And when this idea occurred to her, she decided it was time to see what Branwen was doing.

The tide had been on its way out for a while, and had taken the sea's edge far away from the bonfire. In daytime the surface of the beach would have evaporated under the sun. Moonlight and the receding waves had left a long sheet of wet sand in which a trail of prints, some shod, some barefoot, now led down to the water's edge, where Martha found Branwen with five others. In the time since leaving her sister with Gregory Robertson, it seemed Bran's mood had changed. She was excitedly trying to encourage a competition of some kind. Slightly further inland, they had made a rough sandcastle. Martha couldn't see its details in the darkness, just the shadow of an uneven hill with lumpen outcrops for battlements, more like a burial mound.

'It's perfectly safe,' Branwen was saying. 'Look how calm the sea is.' She had her back to Martha and didn't notice her sister approaching.

The sandcastle wasn't a sandcastle at all; it was a pile of discarded shoes, socks and trousers. All six teenagers were stripped to their underwear from the waist down and their legs were wet from some recent game in the water. Four were female, two male. Martha knew them all. The boys were in relationships with two of the girls—one couple signalled this with proprietorial arms about each other's waists, the other pair whispered to each other and giggled about some private business of their own. She could see that Branwen had brought them all to the limits of their caution and now they were receding. Whatever she wanted them to try next simply wasn't going to happen.

Sam, the girl with her arm around her boyfriend, said, 'There's a current below the surface. An undertow. I don't think it *is* safe. Anyway we've all had too much to drink.'

'Hi, Bran,' Martha said.

Sam's boyfriend unhooked himself from her. 'I'm freezing,' he said, striding towards the pile of discarded clothing. Sam followed suit and so, a second later, did

the others. Martha and Branwen watched them as they awkwardly pulled jeans and socks onto damp, sand-gritted legs, laced up their shoes and at last set off in the direction of the bonfire and the rest of the party, leaving the twins standing by the strand's edge.

‘Did I break the spell?’ Martha asked.

Her sister sighed. ‘I’d lost them already. We were going to have a swimming competition. Who could get furthest out.’

‘That *is* a stupid idea. Six drunk teenagers out in the sea in the middle of the night. You do realise that could go wrong, don’t you? I mean, badly.’

‘I’m not drunk, and neither are they, not properly. But I wasn’t going to go through with it. If they’d actually *agreed*...’ She trailed off.

‘Well?’

‘Well, they were never going to, were they? I knew that. It was a test of how much courage they had. I was interested in how they’d try to wriggle out of it, that’s all. What was Sam’s thing? About currents below the surface. It was quite good, I thought.’

‘Are you getting dressed?’

Branwen’s leggings and boots were still on the sand. Her tee shirt minidress reached almost to her knees. Looking out over the nightblack water she said, ‘Maybe I’ll give it a try on my own.’

Branwen was an excellent swimmer, both in the pool and the sea. But Martha didn’t trust her sister’s state of mind.

‘You should get dressed. We ought to go home. You were right about this party, it’s no good.’

Branwen’s pale features were weirdly blue in the moonlight. She said, ‘I’m fine. Don’t worry, Martha, I’m not going to swim off into the Atlantic. You head back to the party. Chat to Daisy or someone. I want to stay here by myself for a while.’

People afterwards, police, counsellors and others, would ask Martha whether she felt fearful when she agreed to leave her sister by the water’s edge. She didn’t. Branwen had moods, but they were governed by reason. She would never harm herself out of mere sadness. Even so, when Martha was halfway up the beach, making her way to rejoin the party, she looked back and was reassured to see Branwen pulling on her leggings.

That was the last time she spoke to her sister. Martha sat with friends and talked, looking occasionally out towards the sea. After quarter of an hour or so, she saw Branwen coming back from the shore, still barefoot, swinging her boots by their laces from her left hand. After that, the numbers began to decline in proportion to the rate at which the alcohol and weed ran out, but there was plenty of firewood to keep the cold off those who had decided to stay. Several times as the night progressed, she caught sight of her sister: afterwards, neither Martha nor anyone else was able to put these moments into a clear sequence. Was it first that Branwen was in profound conversation with two girls? Second that she was flirting with Gregory Robertson again? Third that she was dancing joyously with several others? And was she dancing to Franz Ferdinand's *Take Me Out* or the Beatles' *Norwegian Wood*? And how long was there between the final sighting and the realisation that her sister was no longer around?

#

Martha woke at about 4.30 with sand in her mouth. Groggily she looked for her sister but was not worried when she could not find her. There was no phone signal down there, so she walked alone up to the top of the slope and tried Branwen's number. When there was no answer, Martha returned to the beach and asked the others who remained if anyone knew where her sister had gone. Only when she got back home at about ten and found that Branwen wasn't there either, did Martha's concern sharpen into fear. At eleven, her father called the police.

October 2010, Barton: *Martha and Christopher*

That was the best she could remember it all. Somewhere in the drink and the weed and the tiredness, Martha had lost her sister and there was no specific moment to which she could tie that hollowing-out. Being on this beach, changed as it was, had reconnected her to the events that had taken place here, to the sense that she should somehow have known. Over the years she'd formed ways of thinking about it, secure from guilt. This moment with Longley had disjointed her from those habits. Unexpected emotion caught in her throat as she said, 'I can't pick out exactly when it

was that she was there and when she wasn't. The two just bleed into each other. Maybe that's why I never believed she was dead.'

It was too dark to see much now and the tidewater was moving in closer to them. They climbed the steps cut into the long slope, away from the beach. Along the road at the top a thin sea-mist formed in the night air. Her face was damp from it. You could see it in the headlamps of passing cars. Martha turned to look back down the pathway to the place on the sand where they had stood a few minutes ago, and she could make out almost nothing there, only the black sand washed by the black water; tiny patches of reflected moonlight shivering wetly in the distance. She and Longley set off towards the town. Martha did not ask him whether he had learned anything beyond what she had told him. He would tell her when he wanted to, she thought, and she was more concerned by an idea that had come to her while they were walking up here.

She said, 'I've been thinking about the correspondences between what happened to you and what happened to me.'

'I suppose there are similarities.'

'Bran and me, we're *both* dead. But—' It was frustrating. She found herself forming the idea as she spoke, but it would not complete itself and she fell silent. They had reached the edge of the town, first passing a few houses, then they were out of the countryside and in the suburbs. Cars crouched on driveways like sphinxes, some alone, some in pairs. Martha saw a young woman at an upstairs window draw the curtains of a child's bedroom; closing a barricade against the endless surrounding darkness.

Christopher said, 'Stevie and I were just cousins, we barely knew each other really. I guess you and Branwen have much more of a connection? You were sisters. More than sisters.'

It seemed desperate of him, to grab at such an obvious, and phoney idea. All that evening, her faith in him had been vacillating. One moment she wanted to believe in him utterly, the next she seemed to see through all of his tricks. 'Don't make too much of that,' she said. 'We were close, certainly. But I've never believed in all that juju about telepathic connections between twins. Having similar genes and growing up together, you think alike, that's all. And you kind of get tired of people going on about it.'

'Sorry.'

‘No. I can see why it’s interesting from the outside. We weren’t immune to it ourselves when we were kids. And we did that whole Bertha Winkelman thing didn’t we? But after that we lost interest.’

They walked a while in silence, then something came back to her.

‘God, I just remembered. Once, I think we were about eleven, we got Daisy to sit with Bran in the kitchen at our house, while I hid upstairs and pushed a needle into different parts of my body. They both had to write down when they felt a sympathetic twinge. Daisy was the control. To make sure it was random, I threw a couple of dice to decide where to shove the needle next. Two was the right calf, three the left buttock—and so on. They sat there in the next room, trying to feel my pain by telepathy, and writing down if they experienced any twinges.’

‘Sounds well thought-out.’

‘That was Bran. She’d looked it all up in the library. Experimental design. Anyway, we’d agreed I’d do it ten times, but I actually only managed to stick myself once—in the foot. It hurt so badly I was nearly sick, and I couldn’t do it again. Bran and Daisy didn’t know, of course. They both felt their ten psychic pains and wrote their lists. There was no consistency in what they felt, but at least Daisy wrote down “foot”. I think it was about fourth on her list. Bran didn’t even do that. So in a way she was the less accurate of our two highly inaccurate test subjects.’

‘How did you feel about that?’

‘It disappointed me, but Bran was delighted.’

‘She liked the empirical evidence?’

Martha noted the interrogatory lilt at the end of what might otherwise have been a flat statement. Was Longley cold-reading: using what he already knew about Branwen to inform his guesses? He seemed determined to disappoint her.

‘That’s not it,’ she said. ‘Bran just doesn’t like answers. Science, stories, history, life and death—she used to say it’s all a frame we build around chaos so we can get by, pretending the world makes sense. Branwen never needed the equation to balance.’

There, she thought. The equation. At least Longley had given her that. But it hurt to think about what it meant. *Branwen divided by Martha minus Branwen equals this*. Whatever *this* was.

Longley asked, ‘If it had been the other way around, if you had gone, how do you think she’d have responded?’

‘I sometimes wonder about that.’ *Martha times Branwen minus Martha equals what?* ‘She’d be loyal to the facts, I suppose. This feeling I’ve got would count for nothing with her. She’d say I’m no more going to *feel* what’s happening to her now than she could feel it when I stuck that needle in my foot. Maybe that’s something I should be grateful for.’ She settled on the soberness of this thought for a moment, then pushed it aside. ‘By any test you want to apply, the likeliest thing is that she’s dead. Except I have this intuition. That and all the things she said and did to suggest she was making a choice to disappear.’

Longley said, ‘If she were here, something else she might say is that the idea only fits with everything *you remember* about her from that night. After she was gone.’

Still she couldn’t make sense of him. At some moments he was only a showman; at others he seemed self-deceiving. Then, as with that remark about the unreliability of her memory, he appeared at times to want to destroy any hint of the paranormal.

She understood now that he had not come to help her but himself. Nevertheless, it had been liberating to talk to him, perhaps because he was a stranger, perhaps because he had made her retrace the night of her sister’s disappearance, because for the moment she felt clearer about it all.

They parted just outside the Old Town. He walked off in the direction of his lodgings and she took a bus home. As she boarded she brought out her purse to pay the driver, and she realised she was still only wearing one glove. She had come close to trusting Longley, but he had lost her. Otherwise, when she told him her story about the experiment with the needle, why had she kept the most important part of it to herself?

#

After leaving Martha at the bus stop, Christopher made his way through the Old Town, choosing turns at random, unconcerned about reaching his destination.

He told himself there was no reason to feel guilty. Hadn’t he made it clear to the Kellows he might not succeed? But now with those low expectations realised he could find no comfort in them. The truth was, he had come back to Cornwall intending to discover what had happened to Branwen, and he had broken his promise.

It wasn't fair. Stevie, Branwen. Something was supposed to bring them together; *he* was supposed to bring them together. Instead, Stevie had vanished, fallen away into nothing again, and Branwen's disappearance remained a mystery. Christopher felt again as he had at thirteen, the first time this happened, wanted once more to yell furiously into the air, *You better fucking come out! You fucking better! I'm not joking!*

He would have liked someone to talk to right now. Berry would say, 'What did you expect?' McMeekin would take off his spectacles and ask, 'Do you think you actively seek out failure?' That was a Barnum statement if ever he'd heard one. And what about Rob Grice? If he were here, he'd say, 'Reckon you got away with it?'

'Fuck knows,' Christopher said aloud: an honest answer to all three of them, but it didn't matter—because Rob wasn't there, and nor was McMeekin and nor was Berry. Christopher had come here on his own, and he had failed on his own.

Alone in the damp night air, he found his sense of direction less and less reliable. He'd thought he was going back to the Limes, but these streets were unfamiliar. As he passed under a streetlamp, he caught sight of the condensation illuminated on his breath and recalled Franklin's joke about ectoplasm, that first time in the shed where ECSAG used to meet.

There was a phrase McMeekin had used when putting him under. He'd said strangers, unfamiliar faces, were *petals on a wet, black bough*. That had something about it. It had stayed with Christopher. Often, looking out into the eager crowd at a performance, it would come back to him: an image of all those unimportant, fragile little selves surrounded by darkness, even in brightest daylight. They clung for a while to the rough surface of the black wood and then the rain washed them away.

He found himself outside a pub on a deserted sidestreet and decided to go in.

#

The Carter's Wheel was livelier than he had expected: its clientele busy with some kind of dominoes tournament. Old men played energetic games at the tables while their wives watched and encouraged them, or chatted to each other, or flirted with the barman. Comfortably invisible, Christopher stood at the bar and drank a pint of strong beer with a whisky in it, followed by another. After that he moved on to straight whiskies, and to consideration of practicalities.

Metaphysics were all very well, but if this Kellow business had severed his connection with Stevie forever, there were business implications. Christopher had a career now. Berry had set him up with a tour—twenty performances booked—starting in two months' time. And she had begun talks with a Cable TV channel about a possible series. The *Sunday Beacon* had renewed his contract. There was the rent on his apartment, the car. What would Lucy think of him if he were to abandon all that, run from every commitment he had made? He could already hear Jacqueline explaining it to her. *He's not a bad man, your dad, but this is the story of his life. Better you find out now than later.*

Jesus.

For that, if nothing else, he needed Stevie back. He had to keep trying. He knocked back a whisky. Maybe Stevie *was* still there, at the fringe of his senses, if he could just pry open the gap. It only required a knack. Okay, he had lost the habit of looking in the right place, at the right angle, but he could find it again. He was sure the possibility of contact remained: a hint of a familiar voice behind the rumble of pub chatter; something tantalising his peripheral vision, just about. Somewhere nearby lay the shiver in the skin; the saltwater smell; the taste of blood in the mouth—if Christopher wanted it enough. He just had to move his head in the right way to reveal Stevie, waiting there, where he had always been. Almost. Almost.

He was trying too hard. He should just stop thinking about it. Let things take their own course. So he swallowed several more whiskies and chatted to the people who came and went from the bar. This bloke who had joined him now seemed especially decent. Christopher bought him a drink; he bought Christopher one in return, and they raised their glasses in a toast. There was the reassurance of a hand on his shoulder.

To him that is able to keep us from falling someone said.

PART 4: IN THE IRON BARN

(i)

Christopher found himself in darkness, lying on his side. A hard surface beneath his left shoulder, another above him, and another an inch off his face. He was inside a coffin, his first thought. But not a coffin. You don't lie in a coffin on your side. He could not roll back or forwards, was wrapped in something—cloth of some kind. The sound of an engine. So he was bundled in cloth inside a vehicle.

He dreamed he was walking along those old clifftops, an adult now, but the softness of the cliffs could still betray him to the water and the rocks, their unforgiving blackness. And in between would be the drop, nothing under his feet but gravity. Fear of high places was not fear of falling; it was fear of temptation. It was fear of jumping.

#

Later. He heard the mumble of a distant radio. He remembered the beach with Martha; he remembered walking around lost in the Old Town; remembered the pub. There had been that man in the bar. What had he looked like?

The vehicle braked, Christopher slid forwards. The top of his head bumped the inside of whatever this was. Not a coffin. His hands felt cold, his trousers cold too. There was a smell of old urine. It must be a while since he had wet himself.

#

Impossible to tell if it was hours later or minutes.

The Dead crowded around him. Fighting each other to be first with their messages. Branwen Kellow was among them, eighteen years old, frozen and soaked from the sea. He was running through a crowd of children, their hands grabbing at his clothes. His power to move his own limbs had evaporated. He breathed the others in like water and they swallowed him into them. They were the Dead and he was with them.

#

Sudden brightness, ferocious and painful after so long in the dark. He wanted to twist his head away but he couldn't move. He was paralysed, like his father's corpse in its

coffin. Above him a shadow. Someone. So, what would it be now? A knife? A hammer? His body consumed by fire?

A voice, half-familiar, said, 'I'm sorry. This must have been a rough trip for you. God, you stink! Have you pissed your pants?'

A hand on the shoulder like before, in the pub, and calm overtook him.

He dreamed a game of Cockeroochie, back when he was eleven. Or he remembered it.

April 1981, Sheepwash: *Cockeroochie*

That breaktime, the schoolyard was understaffed. Too many teachers off with summer colds or busy dealing with problems elsewhere. Eventually, someone noticed the absence of supervision, and a wave of excited disobedience grew as one child passed on the message to another. There could be a game of British Bulldog.

Everyone knew how to play. Patrick Snell took position as first Bulldog—a duty always conferred on the hardest boy in the school. He waited in the painted circle at the centre of the netball pitch. Meanwhile, every other boy and girl congregated at the end of the yard. On a signal—at Christopher's school this was when someone decided to shout Cockeroochie!—the crowd charged from one end to the other, and the bulldog, submerged in a tsunami of children, desperately tried to catch just one of them and hold on. Any amount of violence was acceptable means of retention; any amount of violence was acceptable means of escape. Injuries were common, damage to school uniforms even more so—which was why Cockeroochie was strictly against the rules.

After the first round, the captured child joined Patrick in the centre of the yard, and together they faced the next onslaught. Then exponential mathematics did its work: two bulldogs became four, became eight, became sixteen, became thirty-two.

Normally, Christopher would allow himself to be caught as soon as there were more bulldogs than runners; but, for some reason this time he thought he'd see how long he could stay free. So he dodged and kicked and doubled back on himself, and five rounds later, he had made it to the endgame. It was no surprise that the lone other survivor confronting the wall of savage-faced children was Stevie Lightwood. These rare games of BB and Stevie's intermittent school attendances seemed to coincide

more often than chance should allow—and his unfettered recklessness often brought him victory.

The two boys regarded each other coolly. It was unlikely either of them would reach the other end of the yard this time.

Stevie grinned and said, ‘Butch and Sundance!’

Christopher had seen that film on TV last weekend too, and he didn’t like the reference. He began to hope a teacher would appear or the bell ring for the start of lessons and the game just fade away. As long as Stevie didn’t shout Cockeroochie.

But once BB had started, the staff never came to interfere. It had to be allowed to run its course. All the teachers were smoking in the staffroom, drinking their teas and coffees. Christopher steadied his breath and looked at his watch. Five minutes until the bell. It was inconceivable they could wait that long without making the call.

Still Stevie continued not shouting Cockeroochie. The bulldogs grew restless, but the rules were clear, it had to come from one of the runners. And when the runners were slow to call, the bulldogs had to encourage them. From the middle of the crowd a chant began to rise, rhythmic and accelerating:

Cock-er-oochie ... Cock-er-oochie ... Cock-er-oochie

Cock-er-oochie, Cock-er-oochie, Cock-er-oochie, Cock-er-oochie, Cock-er-oochie

CockeroochieCockeroochieCockeroochieCockeroochieCockeroochieCockeroochieCockeroochieCockeroochieCockeroochieCockeroochie

Christopher gave in.

‘COCKEROOCHIE!’

He was already running as he yelled. There was no point trying to dodge. He crashed into the mass of his peers. In seconds he was swamped, dragged to the ground by the crowd, kicked and punched, pulled and twisted, and finally accepted. It was comforting to disappear again. To let the sea swallow him.

When at last he regained his feet, he saw Stevie Lightwood dancing at the other end of the yard. At first, it seemed that while the horde were occupied with Christopher, Stevie must have passed through them like a ghost, invulnerable and

untouchable. But then Christopher pushed his way closer and saw Stevie had fought his way to victory. He was scratched, bruised and bleeding. And someone had ripped off the left sleeve of his blazer.

(ii)

Awake again in the darkness and the engine noise, the final image persisted from his dream. The lost sleeve. That memory had seemed so real and true. He must have been wrong about Stevie's sleeve being missing that day on the clifftop. Even Stevie, surely, would not have lost the sleeves of two different blazers. So which was it? Which memory had corrupted the other?

The noise stopped. He felt the familiar movement of the vehicle halting. Again, sudden light poured around him, and stung his eyes. A shadow of someone gentled it. He was hopelessly grateful.

'Left you too long that time. Sorry.' The reassurance of a hand on his shoulder.

#

Immediately, or long afterwards, Christopher said to the shadow above him, 'I think I know what happened to the blazer. I don't think it was on the cliff at all.'

He was curled up; knees to his chest, not stretched out straight. This wasn't a coffin he was in, it was the boot of a car.

'Quiet,' Stevie said. 'We'll talk later.'

Except of course it wasn't Stevie. Why would he have thought that? And then a hand on his shoulder, followed by darkness and quiet.

#

Christopher stood on the beach again, but it must be much later, because the tide had gone out. The sky was dark. Someone waited. Far off, by the edge of the sea. He thought at first it might be Branwen, but as he came closer, he realised it was someone male. A man, or a boy perhaps, wearing a faded old blue snorkel coat.

'You're late,' the man said. 'I've been standing here for hours.'

Christopher said, 'I don't understand. Weren't you in the pub?'

‘Must have been someone else. I’ve got one of those faces.’

The man and the boy kept replacing each other. The boy put up the hood of his coat. The man said, ‘It’s a cold night.’

‘I saw you in Manchester in the crowd,’ Christopher told him. ‘On a YouTube video.’

‘I saw you see me. And in London when you were with your daughter in that coffee shop.’

‘That was you, both times?’ Christopher said.

‘And others too,’ the man replied. ‘I’ve been following you for a while.’

The sea washed in over their feet.

‘Shall we see how far we can swim out?’ the boy said.

Christopher closed his eyes and opened them again.

#

The beach hadn’t been real. This *was* real—his heels scraping along the ground, someone dragging him by the armpits. It was a man. Christopher could hear that in the way he gasped from the weight of his burden. The idea formed that he ought to try fighting back, to kick, to gain some purchase, but he seemed to have forgotten how to move his legs.

‘What do you know about *her*?’ the man was saying.

Again, Christopher recognised the voice. Someone from an audience, maybe. During his performances over the last few years he had told hundreds of men and women the truth about their dead friends and relatives. Often the messages he’d passed on had been hurtful, unwanted. He had forgotten most of those people, but any of them might not have forgiven him.

This place smelled of animals. He wanted to look up at the man’s face, to match something to that voice. His neck would not move.

‘Have you been talking to her?’

Christopher didn’t understand the question. And even if he had known how to answer, he would not have been able to. His mouth had gone wrong. He seemed to be observing his own body from a capsule, floating deep inside it.

What was this man asking him now?

‘Has she told you?’

She? Did he mean Martha Kellow? Was there anything Martha had said that would have led to this?

Again, the man said, 'Has she told you?' and something closed around Christopher's ankle. The sound of a handcuff's tightening ratchet.

'You'll get hungry,' the man said, as he left. 'Thirsty too. See if you feel like telling me then.'

#

For hours after that there was only silence and blackness, like a rationalist's idea of death, and it was hard to tell sleep from consciousness. Then at last the drug began to wear off, and the paralysis to fade. But still nothing connected. The dark and his hunger had woven themselves into a vacuum, filled him entirely, unmoored him. His body was shattered into fragments. Hand over here, foot over there. Eyes lost. Lips and tongue mute in the black.

He focused on touch, forced the palm of his right hand to remember its thumb and fingers. Then he set it to searching out the cuff around his ankle. He ran a fingernail under the steel, dug into flesh, and found something wet and warm, blooming on his skin—maybe sweat, maybe blood. That was enough. His nervous system reignited, and he was himself in his body again. Here were his feet, his mouth; his own heart in his chest. Here was his voice: a groan as hunger unravelled itself from the darkness, found its home in his belly, dragged and punched at his gut.

It was like that for some time. Then he noticed that the light had returned. He could see no windows, but sunshine was sneaking in through slits and boltholes in the roof and walls, throwing ruler-straight slats of brightness across the air, so he could see now that the building around him looked like some kind of corrugated iron barn. He had been fastened into the corner of an animal pen, the cuff on his ankle attached to a rusted metal ring, bolted to a low wall. There was sandy earth beneath him.

'Hey!' he shouted. And again, louder. As loud as he could manage.

Somewhere out of sight he heard the clang and scrape of a metal door being opened, then footsteps. The voice said, 'You're awake, then?'

'Yes,' Christopher said. 'Yes, I'm awake.'

'So, has she told you?'

It was the same question as before. *Has she told you?* But this time it was obvious *she* meant not Martha Kellow but her sister. The man thought Christopher had

contacted Branwen; that she had told him the truth about the night she had disappeared—the night, most likely, she had been killed, perhaps right here in this pen. Which, Christopher calculated, meant he would surely die here too.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, struggled against the drug for a few seconds, and then it was as before, and his body was gone from him, or he from it.

#

Darkness fell again in the iron barn, and, conscious but immobile, Christopher had plenty of time to assess his situation. He could almost certainly dismiss any chance of rescue, of random passers-by. This place would be remote: one of those pitiable farms he'd sometimes notice when gazing out of a train window; a distant stone cottage huddled among rusting outhouses and served by no proper road.

The most important thing was not to succumb to panic, not to think he was without options.

From facts, therefore, he moved on to possibilities.

He might be able to free himself from the handcuffs. There was a way to do that, he knew, having once shared a bill with Reg Dixon, an elderly escapologist. Reg used to remove his pair every night, with no key and in plain view of the crowd. Sometimes, audience members would bring in their own sets of cuffs (purchased, Christopher supposed, on the internet) and the Reg would shuck those off just as easily.

Unfortunately Reg was an old pro, and he believed in keeping the secrets of his trade. He'd never shared the handcuff trick with Christopher, though once, after a few drinks, he had told him how to get out of a straitjacket. You needed to dislocate your shoulder. Pop your arm out of the joint. It hurt too, Reg had said, like you wouldn't believe.

That was how the best tricks worked—always a step into the unthinkable; a step beyond anything your audience imagined a person could be prepared to do in pursuit of a mere effect. So, with the stakes here so much higher, what inconceivable method of escape could Christopher come up with? What had his captor not imagined him capable of trying?

There was something. A trick he knew. McMeekin had taught it to him. He shut his eyes, and was thirteen years old.

#

His snorkel coat had just blown out of his hand, spreadeagled itself on the Parathorpe fence. He ran to retrieve it. And when he turned around, his cousin, who he was sure had been standing out on the stack, was gone. Gulls cawed and bickered in the air. Sewage odour filled his nostrils once again. A breeze nudged at his back, encouraging him towards the edge.

All he had to do was jump. The top of the stack was empty. He remembered how it had gone before. The moments of terror, of nothing beneath his feet; of being unmoored from existence. He would empty himself out into silence. Then the earth would crash against his chest, and he'd snatch at the grass. Scrabbling, frantic seconds would race by until he hauled himself to safety. And once he was there, on the top of the stack, he could wait for help to arrive, or not.

Then, as sometimes happens in dreams, the idea of doing something became the act itself, and Christopher found himself at the end of his run, launching himself into space. Except this time it was not the same.

This time, the cliffedge crumbled underfoot, and sucked half the energy out of his leap. This time, the wind changed direction and pushed back at him. This time it turned out the stack was much further out than he had thought.

It was harder than he remembered, but he could still have reached his goal if he had wanted to. If he hadn't been so tired. After all these years of resistance, it turned out all he had ever wanted was to surrender. And he let himself fall at last.

October 2010, Barton: *Martha*

In between customers at Garland's Bookshop, Martha was rereading *Living with the Dead* for the third time. It had become a furtive habit: sour as she felt about whatever Longley's purposes might have been, she couldn't let go of the desire to fathom him. During the evening they had spent together she had at least half-known he'd been trying to cold-read her. Reflecting on it afterwards, she was sure. Yet he had promised nothing; and he had seemed guileless. The morning after, she had decided she was going to ask him straight: what is this? But then a week had passed, and Longley hadn't reappeared.

Daisy Cross had a simple explanation: ‘Con-man’s survival instinct. He must have realised you’d seen through him, and he’s bolted.’

‘I suppose that’s rational,’ Martha said. It was her lunch hour. Daisy had persuaded her to shut the shop for once and try Clarity—a new sandwich bar that had just opened on Barton High Street. The gimmick here was that nearly everything was made of glass. The tea they were drinking from glass cups had arrived accompanied by a glass jug of hot water, with which Daisy topped up the glass teapot. She picked up a spoon and used it to squeeze the bag against the inside of the transparent pot. Martha watched the strands of tannin spread into the watered-down tea, staining its pale amber with their darkness.

‘I’ve been thinking,’ Daisy continued. ‘I might do an investigative piece on this Longley guy. Not for the *Barton and District Messenger*—something freelance I could try and hawk around the nationals. Would you mind?’

Martha poured them each a cup from the refreshed teapot. ‘Would it stop you if I did?’

‘Of course. But if I do write it, you won’t need to be involved.’

‘I really don’t mind,’ she said. After all, it would be good to repay Daisy’s kindness. And it might help her make sense of things. ‘You know I’ve always thought you shouldn’t be satisfied with the *Messenger*. If this is going to help you get out, I’m happy to do whatever I can. So, if you need an interview or anything—’

‘I have his manager’s details. I guess I’ll just start there. If you’re sure.’

‘I’m sure.’ Something popped up in her mind. ‘Daisy, do you remember when Bran and I tried that experiment with the dice and the needle?’

‘Needle? I don’t think I do. What was that about?’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

Daisy was lying, Martha was sure. She wondered why. But then she had lied about it too, to Christopher. She’d changed the ending.

#

She came downstairs and told Branwen she hadn’t been able to stick the needle into herself.

Branwen shoved her pencil and paper into Martha's hands. 'Fine. I'll go and do your part. Since you're too chicken.' She checked her wristwatch. 'I'll start at exactly ten past. Don't mess it up.'

After Branwen had stalked out, Daisy said, 'I don't like this game, Mar.'

'It's not a game,' Martha replied. 'It's an experiment. Concentrate.'

At ten past she had felt a piercing inside her right thigh, like an echo of when she'd pushed the needle into her foot. Shortly afterwards, there was a similar jabbing in her shoulder, and then another in her cheek. She put her hand to that one, and was only a little surprised by the smear of blood it left on her fingertip. She recorded the site of each pain on her list.

When Branwen came downstairs, Daisy was crying. Bran already knew it had been a success. 'See,' she said to Martha. 'You just have to believe in it.'

#

'Grice Artistic Management Limited. Rob Grice speaking. Who's calling, please?'

'Mr Grice? My name's Daisy Cross. We met briefly when Christopher Longley was performing in Barton. I'm a journalist.'

'I remember. You interviewed him, didn't you? Friend of Martha Kellow? What can I do for you?'

'I'm thinking of doing a more substantial article on Mr Longley, and I wondered if it might be possible to arrange an interview.'

'More substantial?'

'More in-depth. It'd be a freelance piece. I'd be looking to get it into one of the Nationals, or a big name magazine.'

'I see. Well, unfortunately I no longer work with Chris. He's now looked after exclusively by Berry Vincent Public Relations.'

'Oh. Do you have contact details?'

'Probably. But listen, this piece you're doing. Is it going to be positive or negative?'

'I couldn't say. I mean—'

'Because my professional relationship with Christopher Longley did not end happily.'

'Ah.'

‘And I can tell you some stuff about how me and him used to run the psychic game when we were working together. If that would interest you.’

(iii)

After he jumped, Christopher fell for a long time through darkness. He would have been happy to fall forever, he thought, with everything flying back up and away from him. It was something like dying.

At last, without any sense of impact, he stopped, and there was ground beneath him again. His first disappointed thought was that he was back in the iron barn. The light was still low. The handcuff still held him around the leg. Then he looked around and realised he was somewhere else.

Instead of the animal pen's earth floor, there was concrete. On top of that an improvised bed, made of a foam sheet, and a sleeping bag with his own coat spread across its top. There was more freedom of movement here, because the other loop of his handcuff was not fixed directly to the wall. Instead it was attached to a chain, about five feet long, fastened with a padlock at its far end to a metal bracket bolted to the brickwork. He tested its strength. There was no way any of it—chain, handcuffs, padlock or bracket—could be broken without some kind of tool. So he was still imprisoned.

He walked as far as he could along the wall to which the chain tethered him. Here he had been provided with a chemical toilet—the telephone-box type you sometimes saw on building sites. He stepped inside the cubicle and urinated.

A white line, perfectly semicircular, had been painted on the floor. Lying flat on his stomach at the fullest extent of his chain, Christopher could only just reach it at any point. This, he realised, represented the safety zone for his captor.

Within the semicircle were several objects: the lavatory; the makeshift bed; a refillable water dispenser of the sort they used in offices, containing a huge, full bottle and a stack of disposable plastic cups. On top of the dispenser stood a square red lunchbox, and on top of that an envelope. Christopher opened it and found a single sheet of lined paper from a spiral notepad, on which a letter had been written in clear, simple print:

Dear Christopher,

Unfortunately I have things to do and I cannot wait with you for the time when you wake up. I will be back soon and then all will be clearer I hope.

Yours

ps do you recognise where you are?????

Christopher looked around. With the lights so low, he had not seen it until now. The shelves with all their hundreds of ex-library books had been removed, and someone had painted over the giant fleur-de-lis on the wall. There were rows and rows of stacked chairs. He was in Jim Wilbourne's old scout hut, the meeting place of the East Crompton Spiritual Awareness Group.

#

He opened the plastic lunchbox and found it contained a banana, an apple and four jam and cheese sandwiches made from pre-sliced white bread. The bread seemed fresh, the banana a little under-ripe. It was the sort of packed lunch you might prepare for a child going on a school trip. Wish fulfilment, he supposed, to have something to eat, clean clothes and a lavatory. He had not forgotten that in the iron barn he had been filthy, his clothing stank of urine and his belly was empty.

Strangely, though, he was not hungry here at all, and he decided to leave the food for now. He had no idea how long it would have to last him, and it was sensible to ration himself. He took a cup of water, sat on the bedroll, removed his shoe and attempted unsuccessfully to wriggle his foot through the cuff round his ankle. Next, he tested every link in the chain and found no weakness; he examined the chemical toilet, the water dispenser and the lunchbox for any part he could break off and use as a tool to pick one of the locks or lever open the cuffs. Nothing seemed suitable, so he hit the side of the cuff against the padlock at the other end of the chain. This, he discovered, actually hurt, as if it were real.

He waited for someone to arrive, but nobody came. He waited for his hunger to return, but it did not. In the end, because it seemed better to do something than nothing, he ate all the sandwiches and fruit from the lunchbox. Afterwards he ran his fingertip around the plastic interior, swept the remaining fragments together into a little pile, and pressed them into a tiny flat cake between finger and thumb. This bland minuscule disc might be the final thing he ever ate. There ought to be some ceremony, he thought.

He remembered Communion from his childhood: the wafer and the water and the wine. Once in a while Gran used to decide some religion was in order and she would take him to church. He had always liked that, even though it was intermittent

and confusing. She went to so many different ones, and there was never a chance to learn the rituals.

‘Body of Christ,’ he said aloud, and laid the bread on his tongue and waited for it to melt, imagining his skeleton, maybe a hundred years later. Not here in the ECSAG hut, but there in the iron barn, out in the world of the flesh. His clean bones would lie in the animal pen, still chained to the wall. Or maybe they would be buried with Branwen Kellow’s. Anyone finding him after such a time would never know about the slow misery of his starvation. How before he died his body had wasted away to nothing, and how afterwards it bloated, putrefied, and was consumed by vermin.

(iv)

He woke and found he had company. The hut was dark. Just beyond the painted line on the floor that marked the limit of his chain, someone had set up a box. A little electric lamp stood on top of it. The lamp clicked on, and its light revealed a man in a snorkel coat, seated on one of the stackable plastic chairs.

‘How are you?’ the man asked. ‘There’s more food, if you’re hungry.’ He wore the hood up, but not zipped all the way out. The light did not reach far, and his face, yellow in the glow, was part visible, part lost in shadow.

‘Please,’ the man said. ‘Eat. Do you have questions? Why you’re here in particular, out of all the places you might have ended up? I bet that’s something you’re wondering about.’

‘No.’

‘Who *I* am?’

‘No.’

‘When I’m going to undo that chain?’

‘I’m sure all that’ll come out when it needs to.’

Christopher stood and went over to the water dispenser, walking carefully to ensure the chain made as little noise as possible on the floor. He wondered if the man in the snorkel coat could see how shaky his hand was as he poured himself a cup. He was trying to remain calm. Whatever this was, it was better than the iron barn, but he was still a captive, and this was still some kind of power game. And he resisted giving the man any other name, certainly not the name they both knew would fit. Not *Stevie*.

‘Well, then,’ Snorkel Coat said. ‘What should we talk about for now?’

Christopher took a sip. ‘How come it’s so warm in here? It was always freezing before.’ And, he thought, in the animal pen, it’s always cold there too.

Snorkel Coat seemed pleased. ‘I wondered if you’d recognise this place. But you know better than most that things sometimes aren’t what they seem. You shouldn’t imagine this isn’t real, you know. That there aren’t consequences to your actions here.’

Christopher picked up a handful of chain links and knocked them against the concrete of the floor. ‘It does *seem* real,’ he said. ‘I’ll give you that.’

Snorkel Coat leant in, almost to the line, almost within reach. ‘Wouldn’t Purgatory feel physical? I’d imagine that would be the point.’

‘And warm?’

‘Well, yes. Being a sub-department of Hell, I should think it would have the benefit of nearby furnaces. Anyway, I wouldn’t want you freezing to death,’ he said. ‘I’m glad you’re here now, and awake. It’s been good to check in with you, but I’m afraid I have to be somewhere else for a while. I’ll be back later.’

‘Don’t go.’ It was out before Christopher could stop himself. The man was already moving to switch off the lamp. In the final seconds of light, Christopher gave in and tried to see Stevie in those pasty, doughy features. Stevie if he had grown up.

It was futile: all he could recall of Stevie was a torn sleeve on a blazer.

Only when the room was dark again, illuminated dimly by the high windows, did he notice the child. Snorkel Coat was accompanied by a boy, who must have been hiding beyond the reach of the light until now. The man seemed to have retreated into the darkness for the moment, because only the boy was visible. He vanished into the darkness, and then returned, rolling up the cable for the lamp, then he picked it up together with the box it had stood on.

When they had gone, the man and the boy, Christopher counted the sound of keys turning in three locks outside.

Of course this was all just fantasy. A means of psychological escape from the horrible reality of the iron barn. But why not choose something more comfortable? And all these details. There was no particular need for them—the three locks, this bruise darkening on his leg. It did make it seem *realler*, somehow.

He tried to remember what Stevie’s face had looked like. He couldn’t.

(v)

There *he* was again, the man in the snorkel coat, sitting on one of the plastic stacking chairs outside the perimeter line. It was night here. The boy shimmered in and out too.

‘Joining us at last?’ the man said.

‘You’ve been dreaming about that iron barn, haven’t you?’ the boy said. ‘Why do you sleep so much? It’s not as if you do any exercise.’

Christopher fiddled with the cuff around his ankle, which had started to chafe.

‘So,’ he said. ‘What should I call you?’

‘What do you think you might call me?’

No point trying to keep it a secret. There were no secrets here. ‘Stevie, I suppose.’

For the first time, the man took down his hood. It was hard to fix on a face, though. He just looked like anyone. ‘How could I be Stevie? Stevie’s a kid, surely. And he’s dead.’

What about that boy, who was here too? Was *he* Stevie? Christopher wondered if he should ask. But, the boy read Christopher’s mind, and shook his head.

‘Keep that to yourself. You’ll only confuse him.’

Might as well admit it, Christopher thought. They would know what was in his mind anyway. And so he said, ‘I’ve been thinking. What if Stevie survived?’

The boy rolled his eyes, but the man was galvanised by this suggestion.

‘Yes, yes, that’ll do for a start,’ he said, as he stood and walked to the far end of the hut. ‘Okay. Let me think for a moment. So, in this scenario, *I’m* Stevie, all grown up after living rough for twenty-seven years, yes?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, let’s think it through. Let’s use our imaginations. I’ll be me, and you can be you. I do my run up and my mighty leap—’ He imitated a smooth slow-motion run for a couple of steps then pantomimed the jump to the stack. Now he pulled an idiot face. ‘Oh dear, I’m trapped. What happens next?’ He scratched his chin in exaggerated bafflement.

Christopher knew how it went. He said, ‘I tell you to stay where you are. I run off to the caravan park to get help.’

‘That’s right.’ Stevie shaded his eyes with his left hand and turned his head with a bobbing motion like he was watching the other boy’s progress along the cliff path. He waved. ‘Bye, Chris, come back soon.’

Now he mimed himself pacing out the distance across the stack, kicking at the grass. Losing patience. He stretched his arms like a child pretending to yawn, sat cross-legged on the floor, looked at an imaginary wristwatch, and addressed the ceiling.

‘Gosh, he’s been ages now. You know what, I don’t think he’s coming back. In fact, it’s my opinion he hasn’t gone to get help at all. I reckon he’s just run off home and left me here. The bastard!’ He stood up. ‘Only one thing to do in this situation—I’m going to have to jump back over to the cliff.’

1983 - *First Try*

Christopher had been far too long. Obviously he had chickened out, run home to his Gran.

Stevie tentatively explored the limits of the stack, crept around the margins, tested the possibility of making even the smallest run before he launched himself. Finally, he planted himself at the edge; he bent his knees, swung his arms and leapt, feet together, back to the clifftop. It wasn’t really all that far away after all. He landed safely, fell to the ground and lay flat there on his belly.

Someone in the distance was running towards him: his cousin, returning after all. Well, he should have been quicker. Stevie saw Christopher’s distraction when the coat blew out of his hands, and an interesting idea occurred to him.

Unseen by the other boy, he crawled rapidly through the long grass to the edge of the Parathorpe factory fence. There was a break in the wire a couple of sections along, not large, but wide enough to wriggle through if you didn’t mind a few cuts. On the other side, the ground dipped unexpectedly, making a hollow where, if Stevie lay on his back, he would be invisible to Christopher. He rolled into it and waited.

#

‘So I lie there quietly. You shout for a bit, get yourself in a state. I think it’s funny. Then you go quiet, and I peek over the top of the hollow, see you decide to take my place, see you rescued by the helicopter, Mum and Auntie all excited, because they think you’re me.’

‘Here’s a thing, though. What you might call an inconsistency in the narrative. You know what they don’t say? They don’t say, “What’s happened to that Christopher kid who was supposed to run back here and tell Stevie to wait?” It’s like they’ve forgotten you exist. Not very nice of them, after all the trouble you’ve taken.

‘Anyway, once the helicopter’s flown away, they go off with that caravan park bloke, don’t they, to drive to the Coastguard Station. I’m all on my own, lying in the hollow. Measuring it all up, the pros and the cons, I decide Sheepwash’s pleasures are exhausted for me now, and I say to myself, “It’s the high road to London for you, old son.” Back I squeeze out through the fence. A few more cuts of course. I find your coat hanging on the barbed wire. Thinking how there’s some cold days and nights ahead, I take it for myself. There’s a box of cigs in the pocket, which is welcome I must say.

‘And that’s when our paths diverge. As you’d probably expect, life for a young man on the streets of London isn’t easy. I have some nasty times, Christopher, growing up, and it’s a miracle I survive. I end up rough and damaged. You wouldn’t recognise me now as the boy you left behind. But let’s skip the horror stories. Just say many years later I see your autobiography somewhere, or a poster for a show. And I find out all about how you’re cashing in on my disappearance.

‘So maybe I think, it’s time this geezer was reminded about who he is. I’ve kept his old blue snorkel as a souvenir. I’ll pop it on and set about my plans. What do you think? How’s that for an explanation?’

‘Not convincing,’ Christopher said.

‘No. I’d have to agree. To be fair, I was only improvising. But yours is no better. Stevie Lightwood, the vanishing boy! I mean, you’ve done well out of it with that psychic act of yours, and you’ve made it as perfect as you can, Christopher, telling it over and over like you have. But just because something fits together all tidy, doesn’t make it true.’

He was right. Christopher’s life turned out to be a jigsaw reassembled by an impatient child—the wrong pieces forced together, regardless of gaps and discontinuities. Chance had formed it into the image of a man chained to a wall. He and Stevie had to take that picture apart and reconstitute it. This was an act of kindness. He wanted to help the man Stevie help him.

He remembered something. Stevie’s sleeve. Maybe it hadn’t been ripped off that day at all. ‘I was wondering whether I’d imagined the whole thing,’ he said.

The man Stevie frowned. 'I doubt that's it,' he said. 'Nobody completely imagines anything.'

'Do you remember playing Cockerachie? British Bulldog. There was the time you got your sleeve ripped off. Maybe I got confused between that and—'

'Be calm,' Stevie said. 'Don't rush it. Just keep trying. Come up with something we can agree on. If you can find that, I'll let you go. And that's not all. I'll tell you what you want to know about Branwen Kellow.'

Christopher had not thought of Branwen, or of Martha here. They belonged in the other place, in the iron barn. 'How would you know—?'

'Don't start looking gift horses in their mouths, Chris. You never asked how I knew before—back when I used to live in your head. Haven't you done well for yourself knowing things you'd no business knowing? Just think, finding Branwen Kellow after all these years—it could make your career. No problem paying your mortgage then. Keep that nice car of yours running too, I should think. No fear of disappointing Lucy with something like that in the bag. Fancy giving it a try? I mean it's not like you have any choice really, is it?

'If I were ever to—'

If I were ever to get out of the iron barn, Christopher had been about to say. But the boy shook his head and stopped him finishing his sentence. And then the man was back.

'If you were ever to what?'

'If I were ever to find the truth,' Christopher said.

'Let's not get carried away. Who knows what the *truth* is Chris? Something we can agree on, that's all I ask. Be patient and we'll get there.'

1983 - *Second Try*

As he had feared he might, Christopher got there just too late to save his cousin. Stevie's patience did not last quite long enough for Christopher to get back to him. Unable to intervene, he watched the other boy make the tiny run across the top of the stack, leap towards the cliff. Drop to the sea.

Too scared to look over the precipice, Christopher lay on his belly, stretched out his arms and curled his fingers around the cliff edge. He pulled his body forwards

then, bit by bit until, finally he could see down to Stevie's twisted shape on the rocks below. Crazy Stevie, victim of his own recklessness. The tide going out. Stevie twitching down there, because he had, however broken he was, survived the fall. Stevie, smashed and bloody crawling away from the sea. There was a tiny stretch of sand down there.

No wonder Christopher had not wanted to remember that sight. No wonder he had lied about it first to everyone else, and then gradually to himself.

#

'Look at you,' Stevie said; the man Stevie on his plastic chair. 'Trying out a new story. But doesn't this one have gaps in it too?'

(vi)

unto him that can remember three slices of time first feet pound the grass he accelerates every step a reduction of hope that he'll stop before the edge every footfall a decision

Over and over, he considered and reconsidered the possibilities, reduced the events to their elements, shuffled the pieces, of which there were so few: Two boys, a dog, a cliff, a stack, the gap between, the drop, a helicopter, a lie.

So few pieces, yet he could make so many different stories from them. And whenever Stevie came, Christopher told him a new one, hoping this time at last he had formed something solid. It kept falling apart, though, into fragments.

to continue in the direction of the jump inevitability grows until he jumps and second hes in the air between edge and stack force of gravity pulling him vertical toward rocks force of momentum pushing him

Sometimes the story in his head was clear. Sentence followed sentence in logical order. Sometimes it rolled out like a movie, as if he was watching himself from outside. Sometimes he saw it happen from his own perspective, sometimes from Stevie's. Every time it was different. And sometimes it all fell apart. Things swirled about like sand in the undercurrents. He couldn't tell now from then. He caught

himself in the midst of half-connected words, not knowing whether he was thinking or speaking.

*horizontal toward stack now no decisions to be made until third and sometimes
Im myself watching*

A spider. He heard it scampering in the dark, and then he saw it, right at the far side of his pen. It was a big one — picked out by the moonlight falling against the low wall. Christopher had not slept. He had been staring absently into the night, his head empty.

‘Hello.’

He said it quietly, just acknowledging the animal’s presence, and as spiders sometimes do, it froze in place. Maybe it had noticed him—some arachnid sense picking up on being watched. That would be a useful sense to have. A bird, or a cat might see it, and it would grasp, in its simple, mechanistic way, that it was in danger. But Christopher doubted a spider’s primitive understanding could distinguish between a predator’s gaze and his harmless interest. It certainly couldn’t know he was prevented from coming anywhere near it by the cuff around his ankle.

He was pleased it had stopped, and not run straight off into some crevice. Something about the mere fact that it was there was a comfort. The sudden appearance of this ordinary, fat spider—providing it did not suddenly grow to an enormous size or start talking to him, surely it was a sign that this part of him was still in the real world. He had been drugged, bundled into a car boot and driven to this place, dislocated from reality, from all the normality, reliability, validity that waited outside the door. But it was real, the spider. And the rest of the world was real too. But then he remembered he had been taken in October. Were there still spiders awake that late in the year?

He looked away for less than a second. When he turned back the creature had gone.

*sometimes Stevie flying and the prayer is in our heads that is unto him who can
keep us from*

(vii)

‘I’ll cut your cock off, how about that?’

Arms somewhere between hurting and numb, Christopher opened his eyes in darkness, and Stevie whispered: ‘I’ll cut your cock off. That’s what he told me.’

Breath hot against his face. The smell of alcohol, the stink of an unwashed body. He could not move. Stevie was holding him down. He was lying on his back. Stevie's face was close to his. He was kneeling on Christopher's arms. Something else was restraining Christopher's feet. Or *someone* else?

'When I first went to London, do you know what they did to me? How I had to get by? Rent boy. Sucking off stinking blokes in toilet cubicles. Married men with their wedding rings on. Sometimes before they went, they'd tell you all about how you needed to get out of this life. Like it was your fault. Sometimes they'd give you a beating afterwards. Sometimes they'd cry and tell you how sorry they were, and then beat you even worse because of it.'

Stevie was drunk. His voice slurring. The drink had released the anger—and with it violence. 'It's always a gamble, y'know, that kind of work. There's this one bloke who really scares me. 'Cause I can see him thinking how can he look his wife in the eye if I'm alive somewhere to remember what he did? So I know something bad's coming my way, just as soon as his dick's safely clear of my teeth. What'll it be? A kick in the head? A knife in the eye? That's when I learn not to think about anything other than the present. Because it's not being dead you fear; it's how you die.'

Stevie's weight went off him, and Christopher suffered an agony of pins and needles until he could move his arms again. Pushing himself up to a sitting position, he saw that Stevie had returned to the area beyond the white line. There was no chair. Stevie was standing, hands in the pockets of the battered old snorkel coat. He looked different: perhaps it was because of the dim moonlight leaking in through the high windows of the old scout hut. The boy was here too. One sleeve gone from his blazer.

'I'm sorry,' Christopher said.

'What are you sorry for, Chris? You were back at Gran's house, growing up.'

'But whatever happened on the clifftop led to everything else. It brought you to that life.'

'Maybe.'

'Isn't that what this is all about? To get me to recognise what I did?'

Stevie walked deliberately along the white line. He pulled the coat close around his body, though it was not cold at all there. 'You never made me jump, did you? Jump or don't jump—that's a decision you can only make for yourself. I mean, I can't say I blame you for the direction my life took. Afterwards.'

Christopher said. 'I don't know what happened that day.'

Stevie stopped pacing. There was approval in his face. ‘Well, that’s progress, isn’t it? Very good. You should probably get some sleep.’

Just before he left, he paused and said, ‘That business about cutting your cock off. Don’t worry about that. I was only trying to get your attention.’ The door closed behind him, and there was the sound of the three keys turning.

He doesn’t lock it when he’s here, Christopher thought. He locks it when he goes, but not when he’s here. If I were free of this chain, I could get away. I wouldn’t even need to take the keys off him. I could just run for the door. If I could be awake when he arrived.

If he could know what it was he would be running into, and what from.

(viii)

The man Stevie brought a boxed pizza with him, and an enormous bottle of Coke. He took a slice for himself and slid the box containing the rest across to Christopher. He produced two plastic tumblers from the pockets of his snorkel coat and set them on the floor before carefully filling each to the brim with cola.

‘Can’t really slide this to you,’ he said. ‘Could you just wait at the back over there, please?’

Christopher stood obediently next to the place where his chain was fastened to the wall, while Stevie leant over the white line into the captive zone and placed the tumbler on the floor.

He took a slice of pizza and bit through cheese into thick tomato sauce, burning the roof of his mouth. It couldn’t have been out of the oven long. There was something outside the door, then. Stevie must have bought the pizza nearby, but the box gave no clues. There was no company name, no telephone number, only *Il Gusto di Italia* and a cartoon of a moustachioed chef. Christopher sipped a little of the coke; tiny effervescences danced out of the surface tension, spraying his face. The bottle had recently been in a refrigerator, he was sure. There was a world outside here. That was worth knowing.

Stevie was watching him closely. In case he had been making his thoughts obvious, Christopher attempted a distraction.

‘I don’t think I could leave now, even if I was free.’

‘We’ll keep the chain on for now, if it’s all the same.’

‘It makes no difference. I couldn’t go from here without the answer.’

Stevie rocked the plastic chair on its two back legs, exactly the way teachers always told him not to when he was a boy. Actually, now he *was* a boy, or the boy had quietly changed places with the man. It was only a conjuring trick.

The boy swung the chair back onto four legs, finished his coke in a single, long draught, and burped, covering his mouth with the back of his hand.

‘Pardon me,’ he said, grinning.

Christopher decided to take a risk. ‘So, what finally happened with that man?’

‘What man?’

‘In the public toilet. When you were afraid. You didn’t finish the story.’

The boy looked blankly at him. ‘I have no idea what you’re talking about.’

(ix)

Christopher woke in the iron barn. His hunger had gone. He wondered if this was the first stage of actual starvation, when the body stops trying to make a person eat, accepts nothing will come and sets about the process of dying. Then his tongue touched a blister in the roof of his mouth, where the hot cheese had burnt him. That wasn’t right. He’d eaten the pizza in the other place. Yet here, next to him on the floor of the animal pen, was the cardboard box. *Il Gusto di Italia* and the chef with the moustache. The empty plastic cola bottle.

The boy appeared, right in his face, startling him.

‘Shush’ the boy said. ‘Come back.’

He fell again into the dark. Back to the other place.

1983 – *Third Try*

An idea came to him.

What if Stevie had fallen on his very first jump? Perhaps it had turned out to be a bigger gap than he realised.

Or it was the opposite. Landing on a platform that was smaller than he had expected, Stevie had skidded on the grass, overshot and ended up in the sea.

He imagined telling this story to the man Stevie.

‘Which was it?’ Stevie would ask him. ‘Did I fall short or did I overshoot?’

‘You overshot.’

It didn’t matter which it was. This is what always happened; Stevie the man, or Stevie the boy would try to trip him up with the unimportant details.

‘No,’ the boy would say, thoughtfully. ‘I didn’t make it. The gap was always too big. I shouldn’t have tried.’

‘Okay then. Yes, I looked over the cliff edge, and you were down there, dead on the rocks. So I ran to the caravan park, but when I got there I couldn’t tell them the truth. So I made up the story about you being trapped on top of the stack.’

‘Why would you do that?’

‘I don’t know. I probably thought I’d get the blame.’

‘Or you might have wanted it to be true—so much that you tried to make it happen, just by telling it that way. Before time had a chance to turn what you’d seen into a fact.’

‘Maybe.’

‘Hey—I think you almost managed it. That moment when you saw me there, do you remember? Just before you lost the coat and looked away? If you’d only had a little more faith, you might have seen it through.’

Could Christopher have realigned the universe—just by telling a lie and believing in it? He remembered he’d once said something similar to McMeekin.

And afterwards, because Christopher had only half-succeeded, Stevie had been trapped between two histories: one where he had jumped and lived; another where he had fallen. A boy who died; a boy who grew up. These two, here, now.

‘I almost did it,’ Christopher said. ‘Maybe if I’d just kept looking at you for a few moments longer. If I hadn’t been distracted by the coat—’

Then he realised something had changed. He had been alone before, planning how he would tell the story to Stevie, and now here Stevie was, listening to him tell it. The idea of the story had *become* the story, and now Stevie sat in his chair beyond the painted boundary, discussing the narrative with him. Somehow the plan and the reality were now same thing.

He was tired. The times when he was here and the times when he was in the other place; the times when he was alone and the times when Stevie was there—it was all confused.

How could he manage to find the truth when his connections were so disordered? Thank God he had Stevie here to redirect him whenever he lost his way.

‘If you hadn’t been distracted by the coat?’

‘What?’

‘If you hadn’t been distracted by the coat, you said.’

‘If I’d focussed, the vision might have solidified. The fall might never have happened.’

The man Stevie interlaced his fingers. ‘Christopher, you can’t change the past by wishing it was different. Time only goes in one direction, and the Dead are the Dead. Nothing can bring any of us back.’

(x)

When he was alone, he’d sometimes lie on the floor and stretch out to touch the white line painted around the furthest limit of his world. It was like the cliff edge. There was Stevie on the other side, but Christopher could not get to him. Also, it was like the borderline between Christopher and the Dead. And it was like the line between the past that was and the past that was not. And the line between the boy and the man, the two Stevies who were never visible at the same time.

Sometimes they would give him clues.

‘Why am I wearing this coat, I wonder?’ the man said.

‘What makes you think there was a chemical plant?’ the boy said. ‘And was it really a cliff?’

‘Was there really a stack?’

Christopher kept trying to find the right story. Sometimes Stevie would let Christopher talk and then leave, saying nothing himself; sometimes he would point out faults: how would the coastguard have known to send the helicopter? Why would you bother taking my place? Wouldn’t the police have asked about that afterwards?

‘It doesn’t matter,’ he told Christopher. ‘We just need to find a story we can agree on.’

‘Then *you* tell *me* the story,’ Christopher said. ‘I’ll see if I agree.’

‘Why were you so interested in the Kellow twins?’ the boy said.

‘I wonder if there was really a dog,’ the man said.

When they were gone, Christopher considered this new idea. Perhaps he had invented the dog to emphasise the loneliness of the child? Or what if the dog was not an addition, but a substitution, a way of making the other boy more distant. What if Christopher and Stevie had been close—not just cousins, but friends?

1983 – *Fourth Try*

Those two boys went everywhere together. They were both, in their different ways, outsiders. Christopher lived with his insane Grandmother, Stephen Lightwood's mum was what they called a smackhead. He spent most of his days avoiding the truant officer. Christopher kept himself to himself, went to school, planned his eventual escape from Sheepwash, from Lamington Meadows, from Gran. Stephen used to come round to Christopher's house all the time, because, crazy as it was there, it was safer than home. Gran would call him 'Stevie'; the same way she called Christopher 'Chrissy'. He liked that.

(xi)

Christopher held onto this beginning, but he stopped himself from thinking it through any more, afraid of tainting the narrative by forming it too perfectly in his mind. If he gave it too much consideration, he'd try to overcome its every inconsistency, become doubtful. Rather than lose faith, he promised himself he would tell it when Stevie came. He'd speak the story aloud so that one event he described would lead to the next, in an unstoppable sequence of cause-and-effect. Until then he would not think about it. He would leave it unattended in a corner, and let it grow into the truth.

He wondered what was happening in the world outside this room. Martha must think he had deserted her. People in his life might have been in touch with each other. Rob, Berry, Lucy, Jacqueline. The police must be looking for him. This was how it felt to be, like Stevie, like Branwen, a missing person, an absence. He slept. He remembered the last time he'd seen Gran.

July 2002, Sheepwash: *Gran*

He pictured the other visitors in reception at the mental hospital. Someone in a yellow jersey. A man with a pony tail. As for the others, he couldn't say. He remembered a woman in her early sixties, well-dressed and precise in her movements. She approached the desk, and spoke in a respectful stage whisper to the receptionist.

'We're here to take my son out for the afternoon. My husband will be here in a moment. He's—'

'Name?'

'Oh—Geraldine Woodford.'

'Your *son's* name.'

'Sorry. Laurence Woodford.'

'What ward is he on?'

'I've that written down—It's the name of a river, I remember that.'

'They're *all* named after rivers.'

'Oh, well that's no help, then, is it? Sorry. Here we are. Coquet. It's Coquet ward.'

The receptionist picked up her telephone receiver and pressed three buttons.

'Laurence Woods. Mother and father.' She replaced the receiver in its cradle and wrote something on a sheet of paper. 'If you take a seat, someone will collect you.'

'*Do* you have any idea how long—?'

'No.'

The double doors opened and a young nurse came in. His hair was dark, and his eyebrows formed a single fat black line. He looked down at the clipboard he was carrying.

'Mr Longley?'

Christopher rose from his seat. 'That's me.'

'Hello, Christopher. Here for your nana, is it?' The childish soubriquet was common in this part of the country, but it jarred. Christopher had never liked it, not even as a boy. And he preferred the receptionist's nastiness to this nurse's cheery familiarity.

'My Grandmother, yes. Elizabeth Longley.'

'I'm Gordon. I work on Wansbeck, that's your nana's ward. If you'll follow me. It's quite a walk, I'm afraid.'

They passed through the double doors, into a long corridor. Much of the hospital was newly built, but this part must be the original Victorian asylum. Brick walls painted pale green. High windows, barred, out of reach.

‘It’s a maze in here,’ the nurse said. ‘Visitors get lost if you don’t guide them. End up in the criminally insane section by mistake. I’m kidding, obviously.’ He switched off his grin. ‘Seriously, though, back in the fifties this is where they used to do all the ECT and the Lobotomies. Terrible stuff. Is this the first time you’ll have seen Lizzie since the stroke?’

‘It is. I live in London.’

‘Her arm’s in a cast at the minute. She tried to stand without her stick last week. Just forgot she needed it. Lucky she fell on the paralysed side.’

‘Lucky,’ Christopher said drily.

‘Better than breaking the arm that still works. You’re her first visitor, you know.’

He didn’t need to be told. Who else was there? The Spiritualist church had been her final exploration of the social world, and she hadn’t gone back after Mr Leeming. ‘I can’t say it gives me much faith,’ she had said. ‘Forty five minutes he was dead in his chair, and that girl never noticed. Doesn’t seem very psychic to me.’

After several turns onto further identical corridors they eventually reached Wansbeck ward. The nurse said: ‘I’ll show you back to Reception afterwards.’

This must be the social area: a large hall, carpeted, in which visitors sat in little clusters with their mothers or grandmothers on old-fashioned armchairs. High, unreachable windows cast their thin light over prints of flower vases, castles and sailing ships. Most of the other visitors were middle-aged. One couple had brought along their teenage daughter. Christopher admired the girl’s sulky refusal to be drawn into the conversation.

Gran sat alone, waiting. She looks half dead, he thought, and the phrase was precisely right. Her left side was lifeless. One dead eye, half a dead mouth. Her left arm encased in white plaster. The first stage of mummification.

He took his place opposite her. ‘Hello, Gran.’

Recognition flickered across the functioning half of her face. There was a bruise on her cheek, probably from the same fall that broke her arm. Had she thrown herself to the ground on purpose? He wouldn’t put it past her.

‘Herro, shon,’ she said. Her tongue, semi-paralysed from the stroke, thickened the laterals and fricatives, but it was clear enough. Although he hadn’t seen her for over a year, he slipped easily into the old habit of interpreting her. *Son* might just mean *young man*. Did she recognise him at all? On top of the familiar insanity, with its routine slyness and concealment, there was now senile dementia and a stroke. Half an hour and I’ll know, he thought.

‘How are you doing, Gran?’

‘Ugh.’

‘Sorry I’ve not been before. I live away now, do you remember?’

She put her thumb to her mouth and bit off a shred of loose, dry skin. ‘Arngy.’

It took a second to work that one out. ‘No, Gran, I’m not in the Army. That was Dennis. I’m Christopher, his son.’

‘Gennish.’ Her face collapsed in sorrow. He guessed that Dennis’s death had come back to her with the awful force of new information. But it was only a moment’s agony, slipping from her attention almost immediately, and she became occupied with her arm in its plaster cast, lifting it with her other hand, letting it fall back into her lap. It was a puzzle to her, this hard, heavy thing.

‘I have a daughter now,’ he told her. ‘That means you’re a great grandma.’

‘Ugh.’

He had brought photographs of Lucy. He took them from his pocket and showed her. She stopped fiddling about with her broken arm and looked at the images: Lucy on the swings in the park; Lucy patting a dog on the nose; Lucy eating a birthday cake; Lucy in Jacqueline’s lap. Puzzlement, Gran’s normal expression now, intensified in her face. Her claw scraped at Jacqueline’s image. ‘Whoshis?’

‘That’s Jacqueline. She’s my wife. For another couple of weeks anyway.’

‘An Chrishy?’ She swept her fingertip clumsily to the picture of Lucy on the roundabout, sending the photograph of Jacqueline to the floor. He was weary already. How did the nurses cope with it all day? He said, ‘No, Gran that’s not Chrissy. *I’m* Chrissy, aren’t I?’

‘Ugh.’

‘This is my daughter, Lucy. She lives with her mum—Jacqueline. I just showed you. Here.’ He retrieved the picture that had fallen and held it up to show her. ‘This one’s Jacqueline. This one’s Lucy.’

Gran fixed him with a scowl. Across the room, the family with the teenage daughter were leaving. He envied them.

‘Ugh.’ Her lips peeled back horribly over her gums as she let loose a string of incomprehensible syllables: ‘Nowheuherrone? Washishame. Eeish.’

Christopher stayed another half an hour, and then Gordon, the nurse with the big black eyebrows, showed him the way out again.

‘Did you see much change in her?’ Gordon asked him.

‘She’s confused,’ he replied. ‘Kept muddling me up with my dad.’ But really, he thought, he couldn’t be certain who she’d imagined he was.

(xii)

Stevie did not come back for a long time. It was difficult to hold on to the new story. Sometimes Christopher knew he had finally hit on the one that would set him free. Sometimes he panicked because he thought he had forgotten it, but it always rolled back to the place he had left it, incompletely formed, ready to make itself in the telling, and he kept it in his vision, holding it, as he had once held that spider, pinned to his attention. The trick was to keep your eye off the details, otherwise the story would start to shudder, fall apart. He wished desperately he had something to write it down with—or on.

He walked the arc at the end of his chain, first one direction, then the other. The walk back was more difficult, because he had to lift his left foot over the chain every step he took. He pushed his face against the rough brick of the wall. He did press-ups on the concrete floor. He did sit-ups on the bed.

When Stevie came back, Christopher would tell it to him. All other possibilities were exhausted. This was what he had needed to do, to think of all the ways it might have happened until all that was left was the answer to the puzzle. If he was wrong this time, it would be the end. He was ready for that now.

Everything depended on remembering the story. But his body wanted only to lie down and sleep, to forget for a while. To die. He knew he would not be able to resist much longer.

He sat on the bed and squeezed his ankle. Sometimes the cuff hurt him. His skin was red and sore. He pushed the fabric of his sock up between the metal and the flesh to ease his discomfort. The cuff had grown looser around his ankle. Eventually, if he

kept starving, he might grow thin enough to slip out of it. He fiddled with the hinge: squeezed, pulled, squeezed, pulled. They were heavy police handcuffs, and there was no way they would succumb to the force of his hands; but there was also the power of his mind. What if there was just a *right way* to pull the hinge, to jerk against the lock, so that the mechanism would simply relax itself.

Christopher had forgotten to keep watching the story. He glanced back at it.

Remember the boys were friends. Remember how close they were.

Unto him that is able to keep me from falli—

And somewhere between Christopher's thought of the lock and his thought of the story, his mind crossed a gap. The handcuff was like one of those wire puzzles you find in a Christmas cracker, the sort that seems impossible to separate until by accident it falls into the right angle, and then with no force whatsoever it slips apart.

#

He looked down at the open cuff, still in his hands, with the interior of the hinge still pressing against his Achilles' tendon. After all his long imprisonment, this sudden liberation perplexed him. It was incomprehensible, and yet there it was: he had sprung the lock simply by fitting his will to it. He let the handcuffs fall to the bed and considered what he would do next.

He needed, he decided, a better command of the terrain; an understanding of the rest of the hut beyond the arc in which he had been living all this time. It was strange when he got to his feet, to be walking unrestricted by the chain, and as he approached the white line on the floor, he wondered whether he would actually be able to cross it.

A simple line of paint on a concrete floor. Crossing it felt no different to any other step he had taken, and each of those steps brought him further into ordinariness. He could see how it had been painted. Stevie must have tied a rope of the correct length to the same anchor point Christopher's chain was locked to. Then, at the other end of this rope he must have fastened a paintbrush to mark the semicircle. It had been done inexpertly. There were wobbles in the line, imperfections and blotches of paint.

The rest of the hut looked the same as always. Empty, apart from the plastic chairs at the back. Christopher lifted off the top seat. He swung it back the right way around, placed it in the man's usual position, facing into Christopher's prison space.

Christopher sat where his captor sat. He imagined Stevie now, chained to the wall. Their positions reversed.

‘What’s the truth?’ he asked.

The imaginary Stevie pulled experimentally at the chain. He said: ‘Truth isn’t a thing, it’s not concrete, or frozen like a fossil. It’s like that stack I got myself trapped on. Time washes away at it, breaks it down into grains, and mixes it with all the other sand. It’s contaminated. You don’t dig it out. All you can do is use the reconstituted rock to build something that reminds you of the truth.’

Clever metaphor, that, from the imaginary Stevie. Everyone was trapped on a crumbling sandstone stack. Time washed away at their memories, or memory washed away at time, like the sea attacking randomly beneath, always looking for the way in. The water found all the weak points, opened them up, until the stack crumbled and collapsed. But there was no such thing as destruction, because after erosion there was transportation, and after that there was deposition. What was pulled apart in one place would always reappear somewhere else; an element of something new. The sand from the stack where Stevie had once stood and the ashes of Christopher’s father might even now be drawn and hustled around each other by the waters, among a billion other sands and grits. In half a million years, they might be blown together around some future desert; in another half million they might lie beneath the accumulated dust and find themselves compressed into new rock. And who then could separate out the truth of what they had once been?

‘You’re not a psychic, you know,’ Stevie said.

Christopher put his hand on his ankle. The cuff was fastened around it again.

‘Do you hear me?’ Stevie said, ‘It’s all bogus. You aren’t a psychic. There’s no such thing. The Dead are dead.’

#

Surely a moment ago Christopher had been free. Now he was cuffed again, and Stevie was in his usual place, sitting on his chair outside the perimeter.

‘Did I go over the line?’ Christopher said

‘What?’

‘Did the handcuff open? Did I go out over the line?’

Stevie squinted at him, like he was diagnosing something. ‘I think you’ve had a dream.’

‘I was over the line. We’d swapped places. You were here, and I was there.’

‘Oh yes, and what happened to your cuff?’

‘Opened.’

‘Just opened? No key?’

Christopher went to the dispenser for water, drank. ‘You’re right, I was dreaming. It’s getting hard to tell the difference in here sometimes.’

Stevie said: ‘So, anyway. I was telling you—’

Suddenly, Christopher remembered. This was what he had been waiting for. Stevie had returned to hear the latest version, the good version. Today was the day Christopher would free himself.

‘I have the story,’ he said.

‘Oh, that. Not today. You’ll have to keep it in mind till next time.’

Christopher sat on the bed again. ‘I’ll probably forget by next time. My mind is—’

‘If you forget it, it was a lie. Don’t worry, Chris, the time is on the way. So, I was telling you about how you aren’t really a psychic. You should give that some thought. I won’t be back for a bit. Business to take care of. You’ll need to pace yourself.’

And he was gone.

(*xiii*)

In the iron barn, Christopher inspected the cuff around his ankle. The raw red skin beneath it had healed.

Then he understood what had happened. The cuff was on the *left* leg. His *left* side was against the wall now. He rolled down his right sock and saw the chafed ring around its now-uncuffed ankle. He touched the injury with a fingertip and felt it sting. Pain: that was truth. Here was evidence that he had been released, and now he was cuffed again. His captor must have decided to swap it to the other leg—an act of kindness because of the chafing.

He remembered something Stevie had said at the start. That there were consequences.

(xiv)

Hours imploded into seconds, and seconds exploded into hours. The order too was inconsistent. Things sometimes went backwards on themselves. What had happened before could just unhappen itself. What had not happened yet sneaked past him, backwards into time past, and pretended it had always been there. He could tell the difference between day and night by the quality of light coming in through cracks and holes in the iron walls. But he might fall asleep for moments and think three nights had passed; he might forget whether it was night or day the last time he had been awake.

He couldn't tell which place he was in. As he'd known they would from the start, they had ceased to be distinct from each other. Now, for instance, he felt the earth of the iron barn beneath him, but his handcuff was attached to the chain. There was no hunger. The animal pen expanded to accommodate the white line.

Was he alone? Impossible to tell. Someone could be with him now—some silent presence, invisible, watching. In this lightlessness, Stevie or the other man might be inches away and Christopher wouldn't know. They too had become more and more alike.

Christopher. He'd found his name, though until he touched it in the dark, he hadn't even realised it was lost. And Christopher remembered too that he had a story to tell, if Stevie had come back.

He peered into the blackness, tried to make out a human form, until it seemed he might bring one into existence simply by searching for it. And there it was. Just a suggestion of something darker than the surrounding dark. He listened for breathing but heard only his own. Still, someone might have returned. Christopher had a story to tell him. It could be the right one this time.

'Is it you?' Christopher's voice was thin. He lowered himself to his hands and knees, ready to start searching, to grope his way around the floor.

At once, a fierce light suffused everything. There was a voice too, but he couldn't hear it properly, because the light roared in his head like noise. Surely the time had arrived when he could tell the story, the truth.

He sat up and made himself squint. Once his eyes stopped watering, he opened them completely, and the light, which so overwhelmed him at first, turned out not to be very strong at all. It was only the same old table lamp on the same old crate. The puddle of yellow it made was enough to illuminate the man in the snorkel coat, who sat as usual on his plastic chair, just beyond the white line that marked the limit of Christopher's chain. He had his hood up, and his doughy face was part visible, part lost in shadow. He might be a boy, might be a man. He was waiting to hear the story.

'I was thirteen,' Christopher said.

He remembered it started with those two bullies, whose faces he could imagine clearly, though their names would not come to him. So he remembered how he'd found his way back to himself before, in the dark. His mind stopped searching, let the names recall themselves. Now the memory twisted at him like a cramp; nevertheless, he held on to it. He spelled out the words in his head. Then, once he was sure he had them, he spoke them aloud.

'Kelvin and Liam.'

But he was alone. There was nobody to hear the rest.

Finally, then he gave in. He had kept his eye on this story for a long time, and it hadn't got away from him, but he was tired now. He had waited and Stevie wasn't coming back. Christopher and the story had been abandoned here. He might as well tell it to himself.

He said, 'Let's say Stephen and Christopher are not just cousins, but friends. Close friends. And as for the dog—let's forget about the dog for the moment.'

1983 – *Final Try*

That morning, Gran had accused Christopher of stealing from her purse, then, after she found the money in a drawer she fell into an excess of apologies and tears because her boy would never forgive her now. Fifteen minutes later, she decided it must have been a trick. Chrissie was always pulling tricks on her these days, since he'd started hanging around with that cousin of his. Chrissie was a good lad. The other one was a good lad, even if his mother was a trollop and a druggie, even if his dad was in jail. They were both good lads. One of them was up to something. They were going out now. They wanted to get away from her, she knew they did.

'You should wear your new coat,' she told Christopher. 'It's cold out.'

#

‘What are you wearing that for?’ Stephen said. ‘Just leave it somewhere. Nobody’s going to nick it, are they?’ Gran had bought the snorkel from the charity shop that week. It was two sizes too big for Christopher.

‘Might rain. Better than *that* anyway,’ Christopher said. Stephen had on his old school blazer over a green tee shirt.

On the way out of Lamington Meadows they passed through a square of struggling open-plan lawns surrounded by low rises built of breeze block and painted dark grey, their communal glass doors embedded with wire mesh for security.

Kelvin and Liam were there, trying to coax a wary housecat into a cardboard box.

#

All the bits and pieces were right. He just needed to stitch them together so they made sense. It was important to leave nothing out. He’d have to find a place for the dog too.

#

Crop-haired, with features too small for his head, like a child’s drawing of the Man in the Moon, Kelvin had left school the previous Easter without taking any exams. The other boy’s features hid behind a mask of ferocious acne. Christopher didn’t know his name. Kelvin held a firework concealed behind his back, as if he were afraid the cat might spot it and have its suspicions confirmed. It stood at a safe distance, interested in their efforts but ready to run if necessary, the way cats are when taunting dogs.

‘Puss, puss, puss... fishy, fishy, fish-fish...’ cooed Kelvin’s friend, waving an open can of catfood. They had made the box into a trap, propped up at one end with a stick tied to a length of string.

Kelvin noticed Christopher and Stephen approaching. ‘Oxfam boys!’ he yelled. ‘Watch out for nits, Liam.’

‘Fuck off.’ Christopher said under his breath, and immediately regretted it. If he’d been heard, there would be consequences. Kelvin had been a bully at school,

back when there were rules and teachers to limit his ambitions. Out here in the world, where there were no parameters, you couldn't know what kind of danger he had turned into.

Acne-face, whose name was evidently Liam, said: 'What are you two doing out? Got bored with licking his granny's fanny?' The insults were routine, half-distracted. It looked as if the older boys were too interested in luring the cat into their trap to be a threat.

Christopher and Stephen walked by in silence. It didn't start going wrong until they were at a safe running distance. Christopher glanced at his cousin in relief, but it wasn't going to be enough for Stephen to get clear and unharmed. And there would be no point trying to stop him: there never was.

Stephen adopted a wheedling, nasal voice. 'Chill-dren! Chill-dren!... Lollipops...' The older boys watched his exaggerated, balletic movements in puzzlement. He was being Robert Helpmann in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, a reference Kelvin and his friend were not likely to pick up. But they understood that he was most likely making fun of them, and that wouldn't do.

'Yer as mental as his granny,' Kelvin said. 'Fuck off, or we'll kick yer head in.'

This was a chance, Christopher thought. He and Stephen were only a distraction from catching the cat. Everyone could still leave. Nobody would get hurt.

'Stephen—' Christopher muttered.

'Pussy cat—Pussy cat—Fish for you—' Stephen cooed in his Child Catcher voice.

Kelvin started running. Christopher and Stephen ran too, but the older boy could sprint. He caught Christopher by the hood of his snorkel coat, brought him down on his back. Christopher twisted and scrambled onto all fours, trying to get away. Kelvin kicked him in the chest, hard enough to lift him off the ground. He lay there unmoving.

Stephen ran at Kelvin then, crashed into the bigger boy, and was caught too. Kelvin grabbed him by the arm and swung him around, left to right, right to left. Liam, who hadn't bothered joining in the pursuit, laughed brainlessly, enjoying the slapstick.

There was a tearing sound, and Stevie stumbled backwards, suddenly free, while Kelvin stood confounded by the torn-off sleeve in his hands. Meanwhile, Christopher

had recovered and was standing up. Kelvin realised he might be fighting both of them on his own in a few seconds.

‘Liam!’ he bellowed. The other boy obeyed the call. Still reluctant to frighten off the cat, he began to stroll across the grass towards the others.

Christopher knew there was no sense trying to run again. They were going to have to fight now, take a beating. He readied himself. But at that moment, Stephen pulled a stone from his blazer pocket. He pitched it hard at Kelvin, and it hit him just above the eye. Kelvin roared in pain and doubled over. He held his forehead in both hands, blood seeping between his fingers. Liam dropped the catfood and ran now. The cat finally turned and scampered off, scaled a nearby fence and vanished into the garden.

‘Chris!’ Stephen yelled. They ran. Kelvin was staggering, blinded by blood in his eyes. Liam was too far away and too slow to keep up. By the time Christopher and Stephen were out of Lamington Meadows, nobody was chasing them.

Once they were off the estate, and Christopher had finished telling Stephen what an idiot he had been, how they wouldn’t be safe ever now from Kelvin and Liam, they fell into giggling about it. Stephen’s blazer was ruined.

‘You could go and ask him for your sleeve,’ Christopher said.

‘We can’t go home that way, can we?’ Stevie replied. ‘We’ll have to go along the cliffs. Cut back through the caravans.’

‘Aye.’

#

Kelvin grabbed Christopher and pushed him to the ground, then was temporarily at a loss as to what he should do next. He held the smaller boy struggling. Stephen was safe, at a distance. Liam strolled over to join in.

‘Let him go,’ Stephen shouted. ‘He never threw any stone!’

Trapped on his front, Christopher could not see anything. The hood of the snorkel covered his head, his face pressed into the grass. He felt them punching his back, knocking the wind from him.

‘Dirty—little—cunt—’ each word punctuated by a blow. They both had him now.

‘I’ve got my knife,’ one of them whispered. ‘We’ll stab you.’

‘Cut his cock off.’

‘We’ll stick this banger up his arse. How’d you fancy that, Oxfam? Blow your guts inside out.’

He felt them trying to get his trousers down, tried to scream or shout, but his face was pushed hard against the soft grass and his mouth filled with mud.

‘Get his belt off,’ one of them said.

He felt a hand push between his belly and the earth, fumbling for the fastening around his waist. They were doing it now, and it was Stevie’s fault.

Somewhere, muffled by the hood of the coat, he heard his cousin’s voice.

‘Let him go, it was me, not him. Let him go.’

But Christopher knew they wouldn’t. It was a familiar moment. Something like it had happened before.

#

‘Wait a moment,’ Stevie said.

Christopher found himself lying on his side on the bed, knees curled against his stomach. He shook his head. It was hard to stay conscious, hard to stay focussed on this story he had to tell.

How long had Stevie been here, sitting in his plastic chair just outside the white line?

The skin inside Christopher’s mouth was dry, his tongue coarse and thick. He turned his head, saw the water dispenser was empty. How long had he been starving; how long parching? He was no longer hungry, no longer thirsty—halfway dead.

‘You missed a bit,’ Stevie said. ‘Christopher and Stephen had got away from the bullies. Then, all of a sudden, they were caught.’

‘They got away in Lamington Meadows. After Stevie threw...’

‘Stephen.’

‘After Stephen threw a stone at Kelvin. Only...’

‘What?’

‘Kelvin and Liam wanted to do something really bad. They hadn’t really given up chasing. They just wanted us—’

‘Christopher and Stephen, you mean?’

‘Right.’

‘This is only a story you’re telling me, remember. Once upon a time there were two boys, cousins called Stephen and Christopher.’

Christopher swallowed. But even saliva had gone. Pain tore through his body. ‘Stevie—I could do with some water.’

‘I’ll get you some when the story’s done.’

‘I don’t know if I can tell it with my mouth so dry.’

‘Course you can. They hadn’t really given up chasing, had they? Boys like that, they don’t give up.’

With an effort, Christopher returned his attention to the story, or the memory, or the dream.

‘So, we got away from them out of the Estate. We thought they’d stopped chasing us, and we headed for the coast. But they were behind us. And then they split up.’

#

All through the estate, and after the Oxfam cousins reached the countryside, Kelvin and Liam kept their distance. Kelvin had stopped bleeding. The front of his shirt was scarlet. Back in Lamington Meadows, before the stone, he would have settled for giving one of the Oxfams a beating. Now his fury had transformed itself into something cold, and he wanted them somewhere secluded so he could teach them a proper lesson.

They had soon given up running, which just went to show how stupid they were—but it was an insult too. How dare they think they were safe? That he would ever have let them get away with what they’d done?

At Rat Lane, he realised the younger boys were going to take the long circular route around the coast, so he stayed behind them, and sent Liam in the other direction, to head them off via that caravan park at Fisherman’s Bay. In one jacket pocket, he still had a firework, a banger, left over from the previous Guy Fawkes’ Night, almost a year ago now. In the other he held the garden twine they had planned to use somehow to tie the explosive to the cat.

Rat Lane was narrow, and there would be nowhere for him to hide if he followed them down there, so he climbed the fence into the farmer’s field and trailed

their voices along the other side of the tall hedge. He could hear them laughing. One of them was impersonating him, or more likely Liam, putting on a stupid, slow-talking bass voice.

If the timing worked out right, he and Liam would trap the Oxfams between them on the clifftops near the chemical factory. That lonely, dangerous spot would be perfect, he thought, for what he wanted to do. As they approached the end of Rat Lane, Kelvin realised he had not considered they might decide to go left there and head for Bradwell, in which case the whole plan would fall apart. If that happened, he would grab one of them, it didn't matter which, and beat him into a rag.

#

'But we turn right, and he keeps following us. It's easy. We never look back.'

'There, you see. All you need to do is tie things up. Don't leave gaps, Christopher. The story has to be complete.'

'Almost there.'

The problem was that as the story grew clearer and clearer to him, everything else turned more and more to confusion, as if the past and the present could not both be true at the same time. Still, in this darkness, it had become easier to dream. How kind Stevie was. His voice gentling the pain, the hunger. And to lie on this bed was to float; was to fall; was not to fall, was him that is able to keep us from fa—Unto him that is, him that is him that is—Keep us from from from from from from. From falling.

#

As soon as we see Liam, we know what's up. There's nowhere to run. He's some way off, but we recognise him. He's walking along the clifftop ahead of us. I realise that if he's on his own, it's because Kelvin's behind, so I turn around, and right enough, there Kelvin is, a similar distance away, approaching too. What we also know is that they've followed us out here because they've got something very bad in mind, something you wouldn't want witnesses to see. Maybe they haven't exactly come up with a plan yet, but they're committed now—they're invested—they'll have to come up with a punishment so awful, it'll justify them pursuing us out to this middle-of-

nowhere place. And because there's two of them, they won't be able to back down. Each is going to need to show the other how monstrous he can be.

Inland, surrounded by tall fences topped with razor wire, is the chemical factory. I scan the grounds desperately, hoping to see someone there, but there's nobody. On the seaward side, there's the drop, the clifftop. It's far too high to risk diving off. And there's the stack.

'See that?' Stevie says. 'If we can jump to it, they'll never follow us.'

'Then what?' I say.

'Fuck knows. But they won't be able to get us. Someone'll be along eventually. Dog walker or summat.'

'What if we fall?'

'We won't fall. It's not as far as it looks.'

'We couldn't get back. It's tiny. We'd have no run-up.'

'Just got to be brave,' Stevie says. 'Like Butch and Sundance.'

He means the bit in that old film when Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid jump off the cliff and survive. Paul Newman and Robert Redford. But all I can think of is how they run out at the end into a hail of bullets from the Bolivian Army. Certain death.

And how is there time for us to debate it like this, with Liam and Kelvin approaching? It's because they're in no hurry, sure as they are that there's nothing we can do to escape. Of course they never imagine we'd be reckless enough to try for the stack. But that's because they have no imagination. Otherwise they'd realise they've reduced our options to that—either we jump for it, or we give in to whatever they've planned for us. It's not a choice, is it? So we run. We take an inland direction first, up to the fence of the Parathorpe Chemical Factory, and then we turn to pelt towards the cliff at a thirty degree angle. This gives us a longer run-up before we leap, but it means the distance to the stack is a little greater. Stevie's convinced he's going to make it. As I run I think about what he said.

It's not as far as it looks

Was it a lie, to convince me of the possibility of what is obviously impossible? It's that thought that stops me. He launches himself into the air, while my run skids to a halt just short of the precipice.

Unto him that is able to keep us from falling a prayer as Stevie flies and I watch from the edge.

Not that prayer. I heard it first at Dad's funeral, a year afterwards. But I pray something like ogodgodihopehemakesitshitfuckcunt. As he crosses that gap in a series of discrete photographic moments, every beat that passes means it's less possible he will fail. I pray, or howl or hope, and maybe it's this that carries him to safety. Maybe I am able to keep him from falling. Anyway, he lands on the stack. And as Kelvin grabs me, or Liam does, or both, I see Stevie safely there.

#

'There you are. Now you've crossed the gap.'

'*You* crossed the gap, you mean?'

'The gap in your story.'

On that rock he couldn't jump to. That was where the truth was. Where Stevie was. But it wasn't too far after all.

#

Kelvin held Christopher in an armlock; Liam was running towards them now, and he had his knife out. A big hunting knife. Stephen stood on the stack. He looked dazed.

It wasn't too far. If he could just free himself from Kelvin before Liam got there, Christopher could jump too. All he needed was another chance. He had given in to fear, but once, that was all. Surely a single failure of nerve would not condemn him. He fought against the bigger boy, twisted, tried to bite, but Kelvin was strong and anticipated every move. Then Liam was there too, and they held Christopher face down on the ground.

'We'll stick this banger up his arse. How'd you fancy that, Oxfam?'

It was Stevie's fault. They wanted Stevie, but they'd make do with Christopher. He could hear Stevie shouting from the safety of the stack.

'Let him go, it was me, not him. Let him go.'

But Christopher knew they wouldn't, because something like this had happened to him at least once already.

The older boys pulled him up to his knees. A fist smashed into Christopher's face. He felt his nose crunch and the resistance drain from him. He could not see properly. Kelvin grabbed his jaw, squeezed and pulled, forcing it open and Liam

stuffed something, some piece of cloth, into Christopher's mouth, jamming it. He blew hard through his nostrils to clear them, in a spray of snot and blood.

'Jump back over,' Kelvin shouted.

What did that mean? Christopher didn't understand.

'Jump back over, Oxfam. We'll let him go.'

They wanted Stephen. Christopher was too easy. Stephen was brave and wild; had thrown the stone at Kelvin, spun to freedom, left his sleeve behind, jumped across to the stack. There was no glory in holding Christopher, no pleasure, not even any point. But if they had to they would see it through with him. He was a consolation prize.

Stephen could jump back. He would save his cousin. And because he was not afraid, he would get through whatever it was Kelvin and Liam intended for him. That was how this would end. In half an hour's time the boys would return home, bloody, surviving. They would have saved each other. Except Stephen was silent, and he did not jump back. Kelvin undid Christopher's snorkel coat, and pulled it off his back. The boy shivered in his t-shirt. Leaving Liam to hold Christopher down on his knees, Kelvin carried the coat up to the cliff edge, bundled it up into as much of a ball as he could, and threw it over the edge. A warning: things, people, could be thrown off. But the air moved strangely there, swirling and twisting between the pillar and the cliff, so that as the snorkel fell, it opened out and an upward gust caught and lifted it like a kite. For a moment, trapped between two draughts, it floated impossibly in front of Stephen. He snatched it from the air and held it tight.

It was an omen, Christopher thought. In his desperate imagination Stephen jumped across, somehow hang-gliding on the coat, to save them both. Christopher took advantage of the bullies' astonishment to twist free and plant a punch of unaccountable power on Kelvin's chin. A couple of *deus ex machina* policemen appeared to remove the bullies, baffled and cowed, from the scene.

All these visions of salvation dimmed into nothingness now, as one inexorable fact after another revealed itself.

'I can't get across,' Stephen shouted. 'There's no run-up here. It's too far.'

Liam was undoing the belt from Christopher's waist. Were they going to do it? What they had said before? Christopher's hands were being forced behind his back now: the leather tightened around his wrists; its buckle dug into his skin. The cloth they had stuffed in his mouth made his jaw ache. Gently, carefully, Kelvin eased

something else in there. He wrapped the twine around it to hold it in place. No matter how terrified Christopher was, no matter how he shook his head or tried to spit or bite, he would not be able to remove this grotesque cigarette, the firework that stuck out between his lips.

‘Fuck! You fuckin’ bastards! You cunts!’ Stephen was yelling. ‘I’ll tell the police.’

Kelvin held up his lighter so that Stephen could see. ‘Last chance, Oxfam.’

Stephen pleaded. ‘I’m stuck here. Jesus, don’t—’

‘Ah well. You had your chance.’

Kelvin flipped the wheel. The gas caught first time, but the wind blew out the flame. Liam gave Christopher a hard kick in the side, to make sure there would be no fight left in him, knocking the boy to the ground. He pulled him back to his feet, while Kelvin, this time cupping the lighter carefully in his hands, brought it to the fuse.

(xv)

‘I remember, I thought it was the sort of thing that happened in cartoons, kids comics—dynamite in the mouth, edge of the cliff. Except the consequences in a cartoon were nothing, a joke. The banger explodes and turns the character’s head black. He plunges to the bottom and a tiny puff of dust appears miles down. Next frame he’s up and running again.’

Stevie did not reply. He reached into the coat and produced a plastic bottle of water, which he rolled across the floor towards Christopher.

‘Thank you.’ But Christopher struggled to break the seal on the cap, and he gave up. He was too weak. Just like the boy Christopher in the story he was trying to tell, he had accepted that he had already left life behind him. How strange it was, though, that he found himself alone here apart from Stevie. Why had all the other Dead deserted him, now he had stepped over into their world?

Stevie came over to him, crossed the white line and sat down on the bed. He opened the bottle, held it gently to Christopher’s lips.

‘I oughtn’t to have let you get so dry. I’m sorry.’

Then Christopher loved him. ‘Is it right?’ he said. ‘The story?’

‘Yes,’ Stevie said, putting an arm around him. ‘Drink a little more.’

‘And I can go soon?’

‘If that’s what you want. Tell me the rest of the story.’

‘Will you stay here? I mean inside the line, while I finish it?’

And the man Stevie held him to keep him from falling. And Christopher told the man Stevie how it had ended on the clifftop. And in return Stevie let him see what had happened to Branwen Kellow.

PART 5: TILL HUMAN VOICES

July 2004, Barton: *Branwen Kellow*

Branwen stayed by the water's edge, listening to the sounds from further up the beach. Conversation, music. All of it inanity. Sooner or later, she thought, some of them would fuck—and later they'd pretend it was the drink that had made them careless. She wouldn't be surprised if Martha and Gregory Robertson settled for each other tonight.

The tide had been going out since they had arrived at the party, but it must have reached its furthest extent by now, and might be coming back in. She watched three waves in succession. The first exhausted itself at the tips of her toes. The next was weaker, and died almost half a metre nearer to the sea. Then a third swept in more aggressively, submerged her feet and backside and erased the saltwater lines left by the previous two.

'So much for empiricism,' she thought, though she knew if she watched longer, a pattern would assert itself and she'd be able to work out the tide's direction. Things made sense only when you looked at them from very far away. Close-up you saw the truth: there were no rules and no patterns. Tide coming in, tide coming out—it was meaningless. If she'd still had an audience, Branwen would be expanding now on an explanation of the relationship between quantum physics and chaos theory. Being alone, she could admit to herself that in truth she knew just enough about those subjects to impress anyone who knew nothing. That would do for Barton, where it was too easy to be the cleverest or the most beautiful.

She wanted very much to swim. It would be perfectly safe to float into these quiet waves for a while. She imagined herself out there: sometimes striking against the waves' direction with her powerful crawl; sometimes swimming with them, adding her own strength to their natural ebb and flow. But she'd promised Martha she wouldn't do that, so she picked up her boots and walked back up to the party.

To remedy Martha's later confusions of memory: first of all Branwen danced joyously to *Take Me Out*, and to several other songs, but by the time someone put on *Norwegian Wood*, she had stopped dancing and was deep in conversation with two girls from her Chemistry class. She did not flirt with Gregory Robertson again. Later, she looked for Gregory and for Martha, but she could see neither of them. Perhaps they were together in some darker part of the beach. By now, at three AM, less than a quarter of the partygoers remained, and those who were left had settled into a quieter phase. Some had found private corners to talk intense teenage nonsense in twos or

threes, some had gone off to places behind the rocks, others dozed companionably. A few sat around what remained of the fire, silently engrossed in the light and warmth of the low flames and listening to the crackle of burning wood. Nobody noticed Branwen leave the party and climb the sloping path to the road.

She thought she would like to look back down at everyone from up there, to emphasise her distance from their triviality. Happily, she anticipated leaving them all behind. All except Martha, of course.

But then she challenged the reflex action of that thought, and gave herself to the surprising truth, that it was Martha she wished to leave more than any of them; the tiresomeness of having constantly to determine herself by her similarity or dissimilarity to this other person. When she went to Oxford, she realised, she would probably not mention her sister to anyone. You only had to say you were a twin and people got all creepy about it, like it was a licence to intrude on all your most personal experiences. Well, she wouldn't let that happen.

At the top, as she had planned, Branwen turned to look back down at the group she was already thinking of as *my previous associates*. She had imagined this moment as a diorama, a great symbolic image of valediction, with each person clearly acting out his or her character. But, bright as the moonlight was, she could hardly identify any of them down there. The only one she thought she could pick out was that girl called Sam who had spoken out against the swimming game. She was walking with her boyfriend. The tide was definitely on its way in. The rest of the partygoers appeared to her as shapes only, shadows against the sand or thrown into relief by the light of the fire. Someone must have put on more wood while she was climbing the slope; the flames burned high again.

She didn't want to return to the party. It wasn't too far to walk into Barton from here, but there would be no buses back to her side of town for several hours. What she really wanted now, she decided, was to get on a train immediately for Oxford, though she had nowhere to stay there and, until her A level results came out, no confirmed place at the university. She had money in a building society account she could use to live on. It would be unforgivable simply to vanish, tempting as that was. But she could let everyone know what she had done. Perhaps she should text Martha. She switched on her phone and began composing the message:

Have decided to go to Oxf

She stopped, thinking of Martha's probable reaction. From a distance, her going off would look like a cry for help. They would imagine they had a duty to intervene. Better keep it to herself until she was established in Oxford. A call tomorrow morning would do the trick, once she'd found a place to stay. There'd be no use then her father driving out to take her home. She could spend the intervening time coming up with a form of words that would convince them she'd made a rational decision—something to do with getting prepared to start her studies.

Down on the beach, Sam and her boyfriend, whose name was Seldon, had walked back from the sea and were leaving the party. Branwen saw them begin to mount the slope. That was a call to action: she did not want them seeing her up here, and certainly felt no desire for an awkward walk to town in their company. Most likely, Sam had called her father for a lift. Perhaps this was him in the car driving towards Branwen along the coastal road, picking her out in its headlights.

It took Sam and Seldon six minutes to reach the top of the slope. They had not noticed Branwen leaving the party; they had not spotted her looking down at them as they had climbed the path to the road. Consequently they were neither expecting to see her at the summit nor surprised she was not there when they arrived. Knowing the party would finish in the early hours of the morning, Sam had arranged to stay at her aunt's house, and so had not called her father to collect her from the beach that night. As she and Seldon walked up towards the coastal road, they did hear a vehicle approach, stop and drive off. It was gone before they had a chance to see it, and by the next day they had both forgotten the car entirely. They told the police the last time they had seen Branwen had been perhaps an hour before they left, between three and four AM. She had been dancing, they both remembered, to some old Beatles song.

#

This was the last gift Stevie gave Christopher. He saw it as she saw it. He danced, he climbed to the top of the slope, he watched the car approach and stop. He felt the surprise of recognition.

'Branwen, isn't it?' the driver said.

It had been years, but she remembered him. From the Wool Queen days.

'Yeah, that's right,' she said, wishing his name would come to her. 'What are you doing out here so late?'

‘Just clocked off. I’m going home.’

‘Could you take me to the railway station? How much would that be?’

‘I’m not working at the minute. But I can give you a ride, yeah.’

A moment of indecision. Should she sit in the back or front seat? She chose the front. It seemed rude to treat him like an employee when he was doing her a favour.

What was his name again?

‘If you’re not working, why did you stop?’ she asked as they pulled away.

‘Thought you might be in trouble,’ he said, ‘out there all on your own. What were you doing, exactly?’

‘I’d been at a party down on the beach. A goodbye thing for everyone from our year.’

‘You’re off to Oxford, aren’t you? I saw something about it in the local paper. Chemistry.’

‘That’s right.’

‘Funny, me passing by after all these years. Bit of a coincidence.’

‘It’s a small town.’

She looked ahead, at the darkness into which he was driving her. Out here there were no streetlights and no traffic. He had the headlamps set high, so that everything their light fell upon was thrown into weirdly illuminated contrast against the surrounding blackness. The long coastal grass glowed pale and feathery. A tree at the side of the road appeared conscious, twisted, threatening, as if the light had revealed a dryad. Some animal at the roadside stared back at her with white unearthly eyes. All she had been thinking about was getting to the station, escaping to Oxford, but now she realised how reckless she had been to take a lift from this man.

She said, ‘They’d just waved me off before you pulled up. There were a load more on their way up to the road. I expect some of them must have seen me get in the car. I bet they’ll be pissed off they had to walk while I get a nice warm lift.’

‘Yeah,’ Ronnie Chenoweth said. ‘I bet they will.’

And after that there was shouting and crashing. More light than it was possible there could ever be. He felt himself rising gently from the earth. There were sirens, voices.

‘Christopher?’ someone said.

I am ascending, he thought. I have been among the Dead. This has been Purgatory and I am purified.

November 2010, Exeter: *Hospital*

He had dreamed he was Branwen, had looked out through her eyes, had felt the suddenness of her realisation that she needed to pretend there were witnesses, hint to Ronnie that someone might remember the make and model and colour of his vehicle. Some or all of the registration plate.

Now he was himself again, wrenched from her memories, awake in the quiet, white interior of a hospital room, with a drip connected to his left arm.

A nurse appeared.

‘Hello,’ she said. ‘Can you hear me, Christopher?’

He slept again, woke again. Sometimes he thought he was back in the ECSAG hut with Stevie, or the Iron Barn where Ronnie had kept him; that the job wasn’t finished. But he had told his story and then he’d been rewarded. There had been consequences, just as the man in the snorkel coat had promised. Freeing himself in one place had brought rescue in the other.

#

Berry was sitting at the side of his bed.

‘Hi,’ she said.

He understood what was necessary. There had been a lapse in the narrative due to unconsciousness. He had to reveal the details. ‘How did they find me?’ he asked.

Berry smiled. She was pleased with herself. She had saved him and there was a debt. ‘About a week after you went to Barton some journalist from there called me to ask for an interview with you.’

‘Daisy Cross. I know her. She interviewed me once already. For the paper there.’

‘She told me about that, but this was for something else. She’d been talking to Rob. I didn’t like her, not even over the phone. Still, press is press, isn’t it? So I told her, “He’s there in Barton. He’s meeting with the Kellows.” She said, “He’s not.” I said “Oh”. And that was when I realised you were missing. So I called the police. They asked a few questions, looked at some CCTV, and that led them to a pub.’

‘The Carter’s Wheel.’

‘And then they figured out where you’d gone after that.’

Everything, it seemed, was lining up neatly and believably. Confident that it would all would make sense in due course, he fell asleep again.

#

For a while he was in and out. Most times when he woke, Berry was there. She told him that when the police had broken in the door and cut him free, he had been starved and thirsty, but nowhere near death. He told her that wasn’t how he remembered it. Doctors took measurements, looked in his eyes with lights; they asked him to do tests. Read these words, say this back to me, can you feel this? What about this? And now?

#

‘Still here?’

‘I’ve been away a few times. You’ve been sleeping a lot. How are you feeling?’

He sat up. ‘I found out what happened to Branwen. We need to tell Martha. The police—’

‘It’s OK,’ Berry said, taking his hand in both of hers. ‘They know. Everyone knows. The guy is—they got him. Don’t worry about it. You were lucky.’

‘He’s a taxi driver. R—R—’ The name wouldn’t come.

‘Ronnie Chenoweth. That’s him. He’s not a danger to anyone now.’

‘Stevie made me—’ he began, but there didn’t seem to be a way to continue. He couldn’t risk asking the proper questions yet. How could Berry know the truth about Branwen, which Stevie had brought to Christopher in a dream? How had this real empirical world found a way to retrieve him from the ECSAG hut? He knew the

answers would tie him back to the narrative of his life, with all its impurities, and its self-serving re-creations.

Chained to that wall, he had found his way to a crisp, clear story, good enough to be the truth—Stevie had brought him to it. And now he could already feel it eroding. He had to move fast or his assurance would fail again, and he would be once more in thrall to the inconsistency and unreliability of memory. He had to repeat the whole thing aloud to Berry, before it crumbled completely.

‘I jumped,’ he said. ‘And I took his place.’

‘That’s the way you’ve always told it.’

‘It was different. There were two older boys. They were going to hurt us.’

He told her the first part. How Christopher and Stephen had angered Kelvin and Liam, how they thought they had got away. How they found that Kelvin had followed them and Liam had run around in the other direction.

‘We were trapped between them,’ he said. ‘That was why we had to jump.’

Then he told her the rest.

‘I don’t want anyone else to know,’ he said afterwards .

‘It can’t matter now, I suppose. I mean, it hasn’t anything to do with Branwen Kellow or Ronnie Chenoweth, does it? This is just something private to you, I guess. What about Lucy? Will you tell her?’

‘I don’t think so. I can’t see what good it would do.’

Berry sat quietly for a while.

‘And you’re sure?’ she said. ‘I mean, you’re sure that’s what happened?’

‘I think so.’

#

He would wake in the dark, or else in daylight. Being here in hospital felt like quarantine—an airlock that was partly a continuation of his imprisonment; partly the settling in of clear, indisputable reality. They offered him counselling. He said he didn’t want it.

Berry came with Lucy. Seeing his daughter, he realised he was relieved.

‘I’m glad you’re safe,’ he said to her, though she had never been in any danger, as far as he knew.

‘You mean *you’re* safe, Dad,’ she replied.

‘That too.’

Nurses came and went, some bright and cheerful, others dour; all businesslike in their different ways.

He took himself by slow steps to the lavatory on his own, wheeling the saline drip alongside him on its trolley, and was surprised to find a uniformed policewoman sitting outside his room.

‘There was a problem with reporters,’ she told him. ‘Seems to have quietened down now.’

#

A day later two detectives visited him, a male and a female. The man, DS Helyer, was pug-faced with waxy, pockmarked skin, and he asked the questions. The woman, DC Bligh, wrote in a notebook.

‘You understand who was keeping you imprisoned, don’t you sir?’ Helyer said.

‘I think so. It was that taxi driver. Ronnie Chenoweth.’

‘And do you have any idea why he might have wanted to do this to you? Had you had any previous dealings with him?’

Christopher answered without thinking. ‘He’s the man who abducted Branwen Kellow, isn’t he? I met him once—twice. He drove me out to the Kellows’ house when I first went to meet the family.’

Bligh wrote a note in her book. ‘I see,’ Helyer said. ‘We weren’t aware of that. Now, when we were here last time, you mentioned another man. Someone working with Chenoweth. Could you tell us a bit more about him?’

‘Last time?’ Christopher had no memory of having met Helyer and Bligh before.

‘You weren’t all that clear, sir. It was quite soon after you were brought in. Too soon, we realised pretty quickly. But you were saying something about a chap called Steve?’

‘Stevie? Stevie Lightwood?’

‘That was it.’

‘No. Stevie was my—you know what I do for a living?’

‘Some kind of medium, yes?’

‘Yes. It’s complicated, but Stevie was my cousin. He disappeared when we were kids. Fell off a cliff, we all thought. A few months back, I started to wonder if he

might be still alive after all, might have grown up and been alive all these years. I kept seeing someone I thought could be him, but that wasn't real. I guess I was going through something. Not a breakdown, but—I went into therapy for a while to deal with it. And when I was—locked up in that place—I sort of slipped into a state where I could speak to him. I mean, I don't know if it was just a psychological thing or something more than that.'

'Something from what you lot call *Spirit*, like?'

'That's not a term I feel comfortable with myself. But something of the sort, yes.'

'And this would be the lad who got himself stuck on a sea stack in eighty-three?' The detective evidently knew more than he had been pretending to. He would have been talking to Martha, of course, and to Berry.

'That's him,' Christopher said.

'Well, don't keep anything back just because it seems crazy, sir. You've had a terrible experience, and your—er—perceptions were likely a bit messed up. Even so, you might have seen or heard things that could help us with the enquiry.'

'I don't think Stevie's anything you'd need to investigate.'

'Still, why don't you just describe what happened, as far as you can tell? This person who you saw on several occasions during your captivity, this bloke who you called "Stevie", what did he look like?' Obviously, the detective was trying to establish whether there had *really* been an accomplice there. Someone Christopher in his fevered state had mistaken for Stevie.

'I don't know. A lot of the time he had his hood up. But as I say, he wasn't really there, not physically. It was like I escaped to somewhere else, some other plane. I mean, it was just a hallucination, really, a trick to help myself survive.'

Helyer was not to be put off. 'And this snorkel coat he wore was your main reason for believing he might be Stevie Lightwood?' He was looking to tie this up. Christopher decided to let him select the parts of the story he needed. Playing the psychic should do it, given Helyer's unsuccessful efforts to suppress his scepticism.

'Stevie's not just my missing cousin,' Christopher said, 'He's my spirit guide. He connects me to the Dead. He showed me what happened to Branwen. Then I saw her get in the car with Ronnie Chenoweth.'

That did the trick. He could see it in the way the detective looked him directly in the eye. The sand swirled around them, reforming itself into something real enough to believe in.

‘Do you think Ronnie told you all that himself, maybe? About what he’d done?’

‘No. I saw it happen. I had a kind of vision.’

‘And what did you see in this *vision*, Mr Longley?’ Christopher could hear what he wanted in Helyer’s voice—the detective had filled the word *vision* with all the contempt he’d tried to keep out of *spirit* earlier in the conversation. Crossness at this supernatural mumbo jumbo had boiled away his carefully constructed effort at tolerance. Christopher didn’t need to lie to get Helyer to leave him alone. He just had to persist with the truth.

‘I saw Branwen walk up from the beach and get in Chenoweth’s car,’ he said. ‘Then I saw them drive away. She realised she’d made a terrible mistake, but it was too late.’

‘I see. And after that?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘And you’re telling me Chenoweth didn’t talk to you about *any* of this?’

‘No. He said nothing to me about Branwen. Naturally, I guessed whoever had taken me must be the same person who’d taken her, but Ronnie kept out of my sight, and he hardly spoke to me the whole time he had me there. I never knew it was him until the end. Until Stevie showed me.’

Helyer finally abandoned this line of questioning. ‘As far as we can tell, there wasn’t anyone else involved,’ he said. ‘Chenoweth was on his own when he took you. Several of the regulars in the Carter’s Wheel saw him and you leaving together, but you seemed quite a bit drunker than what you should have done after a couple of pints. You recall any of that, Mr Longley?’

‘Vaguely,’ Christopher said. It had been such a long time ago, that night in the bar.

‘We reckon he dropped Roofies—Rohypnol that is—in your beer, to get you co-operating, like. There’s no CCTV on that street, but we think after leaving the pub, he must have walked you to his taxi and shoved you in the boot. Then he drove you out to his farm.’

‘Chenoweth had a farm?’

‘Well, it’s called a farm. Ronnie didn’t *farm* anything. His parents used to run a small dairy herd, and a few pigs. They’re both dead now. Farm’s gone to rack and ruin. He put you in the old pigsty, chained you to the wall and kept you off your head on whatever drugs he could pick up from dealers in town—more roofies, LSD, magic mushrooms, Ketamine, a dose of heroin now and again—just mixing it all up. I’d say it’s a miracle your brain isn’t total fudge. Plus he hardly fed you at all. So this hallucination, or whatever it was you had about, *whatsisname*—’

‘Stevie.’

‘It’s not surprising. You must have been all over the place.’

‘I see.’

If it made things easier, they could all be drug-induced fantasies: the ECSAG hut, the search for the truth about the stack, the man and the boy. That would do for the police. Normality would heal over the damage. Christopher kept to himself the fragments that did not fit. Scar tissue. By now he had learned that there was never a perfect story—only convenience, compromise, only making the best of things. He resisted a sudden temptation to break his own covenant and tell this detective what he’d learned about his own past, about how it had finished up on the clifftop. Time to finish this off.

‘I suppose Chenoweth saw me as some sort of threat to his secret?’ he said.

‘And that was why he took me. To get me away from Martha.’

Helyer laughed at that, not kindly. ‘We think he was scared you was all ready to track him down, sir—you know, with the old psychic powers and that.’

It occurred to Christopher that he did not know what Helyer had found out from Ronnie. And then he saw in a flash of red what had been waiting for the police when they broke into the farmhouse. It only lasted a moment, but it was enough.

‘So, have you interviewed Chenoweth?’ he asked, though he knew the answer already. The kidnapper had kept all his secrets.

Helyer raised himself a little in his chair, readying himself to enjoy what he imagined would be a *coup de theatre*.

‘Interviewed? We’d have a job, sir,’ he said. ‘Chenoweth killed himself. Lay down on the sofa in the farmhouse and cut his own throat two days before we found you. Soaked that thing in blood, he did.’

‘I see,’ Christopher said.

The officer taking notes, Bligh, spoke for the first time. ‘Thought you might have known,’ she said. ‘Sensed it, like.’

Helyer gave her a cautionary look.

Christopher could not tell if she was goading him or not. ‘No,’ he said, ‘I had no idea he was dead.’ He swallowed hard and prepared himself to ask the final necessary question. ‘What about Branwen Kellow?’

‘We’re digging in the grounds.’ Helyer replied. ‘No sign of a body yet. But her clothes were in the house. So, yeah. It looks like you solved the case, Mr Longley. Congratulations.’

February 2011, London: *Recovery*

Christopher lay awake in his bed. Berry slept serenely by him. He listened to her breathing, no longer surprised, after three months living together, at how happy it made him to have her here. Since returning home to London, his sleep had often been disturbed. His doctor said that was to be expected after the trauma, and his system would gradually re-acustom itself to normality.

What Christopher did not mention to the doctor, or anyone else, was that when he woke, he’d often find the boy or the man watching over him. They were nothing to be afraid of, though, and would usually vanish quickly enough. So it did not trouble him now that the man in the snorkel coat was sitting in the chair at the end of the bed, though there was a melancholy about him that Christopher had never noticed before. Tonight, the man took a little longer than usual to fade out.

Once he was gone, Christopher wondered about the times he’d seen him before—with Lucy in the coffee shop; at the gig in Manchester. Had there been other times, even before those? Had the man in the snorkel coat sat in every audience Christopher had ever played to? Had he been at ECSAG? Had anyone else seen him? Had he always been in Christopher’s peripheral vision? It felt as if he might have been—but now it was too late to ask.

April 2012, London: *Showbiz*

They would believe anything: belief was easy. Toni Webster knew her trick was to inspire love. Hence thirty years practice had honed her impeccable, her *fucking* impeccable smile. She had to admit though, once you hit this scale technology certainly helped. To her left and right, enormous video screens re-presented the smile in high definition for the benefit of those in the most distant seats. The more people felt it, the truer it was.

Suspended on its crane above the audience, a robot camera dollied in at her, swept left and circled the stage. Yesterday she'd watched a practice run for this shot. During the technical rehearsal, the producer had called her over to look at the monitor. Even over empty chairs, it had been fucking spectacular. Shooting in across the heads of the crowd, it would be even better.

She kept on smiling while she ran through the blocking in her mind. She didn't like to wear an earpiece. Some people, those fuckers, would call that evidence of cheating. As planned, Camera Three glided towards her from the right, into medium close-up, and Toni spoke to both audiences—the one in the studio and the one who would be watching on TV in two weeks' time.

'Good Evening,' she said, though it was 10 AM. This would go out at 7.30. Laurence the floor manager had already explained about that to the studio audience. 'Welcome to our new home. What do you think of it?'

As per their instructions the crowd whooped and cheered and applauded, while Toni laughed indulgently towards Camera Five. After the designated twelve seconds, two runners made 'quieten down' gestures at the left and right of the stage. The crowd obeyed, and the studio was calm again.

'Ladies and gentlemen, this is *The Waiting Room* with me, Toni Webster. We've relocated to larger premises, but I promise you it's the same show it always was. My mission is still to bring comfort and reassurance to those of you who have lost someone. That's me. That's what I'm all about.'

Smile, warm applause.

'Now, there are a couple of changes to the—oh, what's it called, Laurence?'

Offstage, Laurence shouted, in mock irritation, 'The format!'

'Oh yes, the format.' She addressed Camera Two directly. 'Laurence is our dashing Floor Manager, by the way. He's lovely isn't he, ladies?'

A few appreciative hoots from the studio audience. That bit seemed to have gone convincingly enough. She checked the autocue and picked up her place in the script.

‘I expect you’re wondering about the extra chair I have here. Well, this series we’ve decided to bring in some of the country’s most talented psychics to chat with me. In the coming weeks, I’ll be meeting Leon Crocker (short applause) Janine Ridgeway (short applause) and Wendy Hutchings (short applause).’

Free airtime, she thought, for the competition, for fuckers she either detested or knew nothing about. Gavin the producer had insisted on this segment. Toni wasn’t convinced.

‘But tonight, my first ever guest on *The Waiting Room* is someone extra special, a gentleman who really made the news a couple of years ago as the psychic who caught the murderer Ronald Chenoweth. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Mr Christopher Longley.’

She joined the applause as Longley entered from stage left and took his place in the empty chair. The overhead camera swooped around again, dramatizing his arrival for the folks at home.

Longley fell into the unknown category. Apparently a couple of years ago, some family in Cornwall had employed him to find their missing daughter, and he’d succeeded. At least, he’d found the guy who’d abducted and murdered this poor girl, though the actual body had never turned up. Still, even that much success in a police case was a fucking miracle. She wondered how he’d pulled it off.

The studio audience had quietened. Toni glanced back at the autocue.

‘Good evening, Christopher. And thank you for being my first ever guest on the show.’

‘Well,’ Longley said, ‘I’m your first *living* guest.’ Laughter from the crowd. That was off script. Of course he was a performer. If he made her compete for the fucking audience, she would have to win. The thought wearied her. For now, she surrendered and laughed too.

Longley said, ‘It’s an honour to be here, Toni. With Britain’s greatest psychic.’

‘Ah, you’re too kind, Christopher,’ she replied, ‘but thank you.’

Toni hadn’t rehearsed this conversation herself. She only knew the opening and a few details about Longley, but Gavin had assured her the guy would know what to

say. A researcher had gone through it all with him in advance, checked his answers to the prepared questions.

‘And this new studio. Amazing. Maybe you should retitl the show *Ghost Factor*.’

He was back on script now. Nothing to worry about. She looked him over, found him bland and unmemorable. Mostly you could read a lot from a person’s appearance—thinning hair, a scar or two, a stoop, perhaps a barely registered facial tic. With Longley, her eyes slid over the surface. It was like his features were written in another fucking language. For a man who had been chained up in a pigsty, apparently, and starved and drugged for a fortnight, he seemed remarkably composed. He’d had a couple of years to recover, but still.

She looked back at the autocue. ‘And I believe this isn’t the first time we’ve met?’ Wasn’t it? She began to regret not having looked at all the questions.

‘That’s right Toni. You probably don’t remember, but back in—well, let’s not say the year—I was lucky enough to witness an amazing performance by a gifted young medium at the start of her career.’

Toni held up both hands. ‘You hear that, ladies and gentlemen, a *very* young medium. That’s the important part of the story!’

Laughter.

‘Of course,’ Longley said. ‘You were a child at the time, Toni. Nineteen years old. You were the first psychic I’d ever seen. And I have to say you inspired me, you truly did.’

Christ, she thought. That would have been when she was still running the Spanish spirit guide routine. In those days it was all Spiritualist groups in provincial towns. Out in the sticks, where you could even get away with ectoplasm and fucking table turning.

‘I think that’s enough nostalgia, Christopher,’ she said. ‘You have an amazing story to tell, don’t you? But before we talk about how you helped the police bring that terrible man to justice, can you give me some thoughts on this book that’s currently out? You know the one I mean.’

‘Yes I do Toni. It’s called *Fit to Fake the Dead*. A couple of years ago, a woman called Daisy Cross interviewed me for a local paper. I didn’t realise it at the time, but she seems to have rather had it in for me, and now she’s written quite an unsympathetic version of my part in the Kellow case.’

‘It isn’t a very nice book, is it, Christopher?’ Toni said. Soft and maternal.

Something under the man’s bland exterior shifted a little. ‘You can probably tell from the title that Miss Cross isn’t my biggest fan. But to give credit where it’s due, she’s worked hard on her investigation, and she’s found plenty of people with things to say about me.’

‘And who are these people, Christopher?’

‘My ex-wife—’

‘Ah. Those *can* be troublesome!’ A warm murmur of agreement rippled across the audience.

‘There are a few others. She interviewed some members of a discussion group I used to attend, and a therapist I saw for a while when I was struggling to come to terms with my gifts.’

‘Oh dear. Aren’t these people covered by medical confidentiality, Christopher?’

‘Not if you aren’t properly qualified. It turns out this guy had no professional training, and he wasn’t affiliated to any of the governing bodies. You see, as long as you’re careful about what you call yourself, you can set yourself up as a therapist with no controls or limits on you whatsoever. Of course there are frauds in every walk of life, aren’t there? Anyway, these people she’s interviewed for her book, they’ve all in their different ways called me a liar. Oh, and my old road manager too, a chap by the name of Robert Grice, he’s been exceptionally forthright.’ Longley paused to give the audience a moment in which to take in the enormity of that betrayal, before he continued. ‘Toni, you’ll understand how hurtful this sort of thing can be, because you’ve had your own troubles in that direction.’

‘Oh yes,’ she said. ‘Well, let’s not mention the name of the individual in question there. I don’t think he deserves any *more* publicity, do you?’ It annoyed her more than it should, to be reminded of Ellis White, the scumbag private detective who had denounced her to the fucking BBC after taking her money for five years. These bastards, she thought. They all turn on you.

‘You know what I think, Christopher? I think there’s a lot of envy there. The best thing is to ignore them. Rise above, that’s my motto.’

‘That’s excellent advice, Toni. Thank you.’

The audience clapped and cheered, just as if anything either she or Longley had said had actually challenged this journalist’s book. Longley raised his hand to quieten them. The runners at each end of the stage took their cue from him and crossly added

their own exaggerated shushing gestures. Controlling the start and finish of any applause was supposed to be their job.

‘Well,’ Toni said, ‘Let’s not give this nasty little book any more of our attention, shall we? I think what we all really want to hear about is how you helped the police find the murderer Ronald Chenoweth. How did that all start?’

#

There had been the time before, the time during, and now the time afterwards. But it was difficult to tell the difference. The layers slid back and forth across each other, and often Christopher felt as if he were still in the ECSAG hut—guessing what this part might be, narrating his future to the man Stevie.

I get a request to appear on Toni Webster’s show. Berry thinks it’s a good move, careerwise. I’ve given up the ‘only honest psychic’ thing. I just do the act now. They can draw their own conclusions. I don’t even bother to challenge Daisy’s book—Jacqueline’s venom, Franklin’s stupidity, McMeekin’s self-deception, Rob’s lies.

What’s it like? Sitting next to Toni Webster?

The studio. Jesus. This audience, hundreds of them, with all their guilt and their grief. I’ve never been anywhere with so many Dead. I wouldn’t know where to start.

And her?

Toni? She has no idea.

He had been telling a story. Where was he? He realised he had dropped into his old habit of talking about one thing and thinking of another. Luckily, Toni Webster chose that moment to ask a question. Doubtless she felt obliged periodically to remind everyone whose show it was.

‘And this was when you had your vision?’ she said.

‘I was walking back from the beach to my hotel, and it was like I slipped through a gap in time. I saw it all, everything that had happened.’

One-Two—miss-a-few—One-Hundred. Coming, ready or not. That isn’t the whole story, Christopher.

‘Are you saying the murdered girl showed it to you, Christopher? Her spirit?’

‘Yes. I saw it through her eyes. Ronnie—Ronald Chenoweth pulled up in his cab and she got in. She trusted him, you see, because she knew him. He’d driven her around a fair bit at the time of the Wool Queen of Cornwall.’

Toni frowned. ‘Sorry, Christopher, the Wool Queen of Cornwall?’

‘That was a beauty pageant Branwen won when she was sixteen.’

‘I see. And when you had this vision—’

‘Well, both twins won it, really,’ he interrupted. ‘It was a prank. They were testing themselves out—to find how similar they could be—if they could be the same person even—’

Why was he saying that? He didn’t need to go into all that Wool Queen of Cornwall business. Franklin had been right about one thing—people were fucking idiots. They didn’t want to hear the details, which wriggled and strained and were inconsistent, no matter how you tried to complete them.

Then what happens?

I’m already half-pretending, half across the gap. So I stop. In mid-air, I suppose. And I look. I make myself think of the crowd the way I used to—the Living and the Dead—not as a mass, but as a room of individuals. So many petals on the wet black bough. And I look among them for you. For both of you.

Deep in the heart of the audience, he imagined the man Stevie and the boy. They appeared there, neither as faces nor as stars, but as points of equal darkness among the endless dark, like black holes in space, invisible but revealed by the absence around them. A man in a snorkel coat. A boy in a school blazer with a missing sleeve. Both occupying the same moment. Each impossible because of the other.

I hear seagulls fight and caw. I smell cold salt. I fall, and there’s nobody that is able to keep me from falling.

#

Longley had started confidently enough, but then he’d dried. Toni had prompted him, and for a while it seemed she’d put him back on course, until he veered off into some nonsense about Cornish Wool and beauty pageants. Now he’d fallen silent again, was scowling silently at the audience as if into the gates of Hell. Well, thank Christ it was a recording. She’d make the best of it. The whole thing could go in the bin and she would fire Gavin the fucking producer, or whatever other idiot it was who should have found out that the man was a mental case.

‘Christopher,’ she said gently. ‘Is something coming through to you from the spirit world right now?’

‘No. Sorry. I just thought then—’

And he drifted again into silence. Fuck. She should get him off the stage before the punters noticed something was off. Maybe it was too late already.

‘Ladies and Gentlemen, I often think it’s a curse as well as a blessing, this gift we have. Sometimes we psychics—’

But whatever that fugue state had been, Longley snapped out of it. ‘I’m fine, Toni. You can edit that out, yes? And I was talking about Ronnie Chenoweth, wasn’t I? Now, if you were to ask the police, like Daisy Cross did when she was researching her book, they would say I didn’t really catch Chenoweth, so much as blunder into his clutches.’

‘Yes, Christopher. And as we’ve said—’

But there was no stopping him. ‘It’s true, though. I got myself taken prisoner. Chenoweth chained me up in a pigsty and fed me so many drugs I had no idea what was going on. Then he killed himself and left me to starve. Luckily for me, the woman who’s now my wife called the police, and they did some excellent detective work. Otherwise, I’d probably still be there.’

Toni could see it in his eyes. It was worse than madness. Longley had been possessed by sincerity. Of course someone should just have turned off this bastard’s microphone. Afterwards she realised there were all kinds of solutions to a problem like this. But it was a new crew in a new studio with a new format and nobody quite knew what to do, so it continued.

‘But I never finished the other story,’ he said. ‘About seeing you perform all those years ago.’

‘Well, Christopher, we’re almost out of time. But it’s been marvellous tal—’

‘It was in eighty-seven,’ Longley interrupted, ‘in the town of Sheepwash. My grandmother sat on one side of me. On the other was a friend of hers. And the *funniest* thing happened, Toni. Do you know what it was?’

She’d forgotten most of her past performances, but not that one. And looking at him now she realised that Longley hadn’t just been there to witness it, he had been *involved*. The solemn, silent boy shaking the old man’s shoulder to try and wake him. That ranting, howling crone.

Toni jumped nimbly down from her seat and walked offstage, trying not to listen. But she heard.

‘He died,’ Longley crowed. ‘He died right at the beginning of the gig. And you never knew. You called up all your bogus voices and did your horseshit cold-readings for an hour, and there was an actual dead man in the room the whole time. You’d think his spirit might have had something to say, but you never knew, did you, Toni? None of us know.’

By then Toni was offstage. Finally, something was done. Two security men helped Longley down from his chair, and escorted him from the studios. Toni watched from the doorway as they gave him a good kicking in the car park.

‘That woman’s a saint,’ one of them said while Christopher was stumbling to his car afterwards. ‘You treat her with respect, you little shit.’

October 2012, London: *Faking the Dead*

Berry had advised him against adding a ‘contact me’ page to the new website. It would only attract idiots, nutters, she said. But like almost every decision he took these days, opening himself to the public in this way was an act of atonement. He’d thought there would be members of past audiences, wanting to know why he had abandoned them. And there were, but only at first, and not nearly so many as he had anticipated. He explained himself to them as best he could, addressed each email individually, and after six months, satisfied or not, they had moved on.

All he had to deal with now were queries from serious-minded sceptics, including the odd professional academic. Last week a Professor R Lakeman of Critical Theory from Sussex University had asked if he might interview Christopher ‘as an element of my larger interrogation into the sign-dependent (or more accurately sign-*interdependent!*) psycho-social assembly of *soi disant* reality.’ Which reminded him of going to the art exhibition with Lucy on the day he’d spotted Stevie for the first time in the coffee shop. He wondered how Xavier Arian might have realised Professor Lakeman’s ‘larger interrogation’ in sculpture form, before replying to the request with a ‘yes’. Another act of atonement.

Then a message from Martha arrived, and Christopher realised he’d kept the contact page open for her alone. That he owed her more than anyone.

#

Dear Martha,

I’m so glad you got in touch. You overestimate my operation, though: I have no staff these days apart from my wife, Berry who handles my PR (such as it is!) – and she has to fit me in between her more important clients! I certainly don’t have anyone filtering my emails for me.

Of course I understand that what you’ve heard about my new show might be distressing to you. I owe you an explanation, but I can’t do it by email. Perhaps if you were to see the show, we could talk afterwards?

Are you still living in Barton? The current tour doesn’t go very far into the West Country, I’m afraid. I’ve attached the full itinerary. I can arrange complementary tickets, as many as you need, and if you have to travel I can pay for that too. Just let me know.

*With very best wishes,
Christopher*

#

Dear Christopher,

Thank you for replying. I didn't know if you would.

Actually, I left Barton a while ago. I finally made it to university, and I'm in London now, in my second-year of English Lit at UCL. So if you have tickets available, I could easily get to one of the shows you're doing this week in Kennington.

Best,

Martha

#

Even with the houselights down, he could tell the auditorium was at most half-full. He spoke into the darkness.

‘Once upon a time, I made my living telling people I could contact the Dead. They believed me. I believed me too—the evidence seemed so strong. Night after night, I passed on information from beyond the grave to those who had been left behind. What I told my audiences was always true. The things I said, nobody could have known.

‘Then, you know, I looked around me at all the others who were practising my craft, and I could see they weren't like me. I really could communicate with the dead, but the rest of my profession were liars and charlatans, every last one of them. Cruel men and women exploiting the desperation of the bereaved.

‘Because the thing is, we'll give anything, believe anything, accept pretty much any lie in exchange for the illusion that the people we love haven't really gone out of reach forever—that it isn't too late after all, to put right the mistakes we made with them, to atone for the hurt we've caused—or to forgive them for what they've done to us.’

Time for some stagecraft. He said, ‘Let's look at each other. Can we have the house lights up, please?’

As he was every night at this moment, he was struck by the Art Nouveau loveliness of the Kennington Palace, a 1930s cinema, rescued after years of disuse and converted into a theatre. He was only sorry he couldn't do it justice by bringing in more people. The circle had been empty every night of his two-week residency, and the stalls were at their worst yet, with less than a third of the seats occupied. The ushers had done a good job: encouraging the punters to move to the front and concentrate into a single group. Much better than leaving them scattered around.

'As I thought. A select, but unusually intelligent audience.'

They laughed out of a spirit of co-operation. Yesterday the place had been fuller; tomorrow, Friday, would normally draw the biggest crowd of the week. Overall this run should make a profit. Just.

'It's so nice to meet you all,' he told them. 'Now, where was I?' He looked up at the ceiling and mugged remembering what he'd said so far.

'*Previous life*, yadda yadda, *psychic*, blah blah—*fakes and charlatans*. Oh yes. That was it. I was telling you about how all the others were dishonest. How there really didn't seem to be such a thing as what I was claiming to be—a genuine psychic.'

Rapt attention everywhere. His next step was always the same: pick out an attractive woman in the crowd, direct everything he said to her. All the rest would imagine his attention was exclusively theirs. Tonight, though, he knew exactly who he was looking for. He kept his spiel going as he scanned the crowd. The old trick of partitioning his attention into two.

'Naturally I came to the conclusion that I must be the only one of my kind. The sole honest psychic in the whole world. You see there are three kinds of liars. Bad ones, good ones and *really* good ones. And if you want to become a really good liar, the first thing you need to learn is how to lie to yourself.'

Perhaps she hadn't turned up after all. It would be understandable. Or maybe the front of house staff hadn't got his message about her comp ticket. She'd only wanted the one. That was good. It would be easier to be honest with her if she was alone.

He spotted her. Away from the rest of the audience in an otherwise empty block of seats towards the back. She wore her hair shorter now than when he had last seen her in Barton, and for a moment he thought she was her lost sister. Because the empty chairs around her were not empty at all. They were full of the Dead.

#

After the performance, Christopher sat at a table in the foyer behind a stack of his newly-rewritten *Living with the Deads* and fielded questions from a small group of audience members. Martha waved over their heads as she left.

Half an hour later he had sold half a dozen copies of the book, and the last of his interlocutors had left. It took him another fifteen minutes to pack his things into the green room ready for tomorrow's final show of the run. Then, finally, he sent Martha a text to let her know he was on his way and set off towards their rendezvous.

The *Admiral Bullmore* was three streets away from the theatre. Far enough off to avoid audience members enjoying post-performance drinks. These days, outside the immediate vicinity of a show there was no danger of being recognised and interrupted by members of the public. Even Toni Webster's fans, after a brief initial flurry of insults and death threats, had forgotten him.

He found the pub almost empty. Martha sat reading at a corner table, an untouched glass of what looked like lemonade in front of her. She looked up from her book at Christopher's approach. He sat opposite and deployed McMeekin's old trick, waiting silently until social awkwardness forced her to engage him.

She stirred her lemonade absently with its straw, avoiding eye contact. Then, with no introductory chit-chat, she said, 'Okay. So I guess you don't think any of it's real now? That your guide Stevie never existed? That you just found Ronnie Chenoweth by blundering into things?' She sounded calm, but he could hear the underlying anger, a tightness in her throat she couldn't quite control.

'That's how I tell the story in the show,' he said. 'It's not *untrue*, exactly. I'm trying to do the right thing. Did you ever hear about my appearance on Toni Webster's show?'

'Daisy mentioned something.'

He suppressed a twinge of irritation at Daisy Cross's name. On the back of her exposé of Christopher Longley, fake psychic, the journalist had moved on from the Barton Messenger to a features byline at the *Telegraph*. In career terms, she'd gained more from the Kellow case than anyone.

'Toni did an amazing job of redaction on that recording,' he said. 'Not a trace of it anywhere on the internet.'

‘Like it never happened?’

Of course she was wary of him, of anything he might tell her. He laughed deferentially. ‘Like it never happened. I do wish you could see it though. It was quite a moment. I’m rather proud of it. And I so have evidence of sorts. It was how I got these.’ He held up his right hand to show her his index and middle fingers, both brutally and permanently twisted. This demonstration was normally part of the stage performance. Tonight he’d kept it back for Martha alone. Her expression of shock told him he’d made the right decision.

‘God. How did you do that?’

‘A couple of studio security guys beat me up while they were throwing me out. Punishment for confronting Toni. Then, while I was down on the ground one of them stamped on my hand. Several times. Very hard.’

She grimaced at the idea. ‘You should have sued.’

‘I suppose so. But plenty have tried suing Toni Webster and none have succeeded. They ache when it’s going to rain,’ he said, ‘so at least I always know when to take an umbrella.’

Martha sipped at her drink. ‘I’m guessing you haven’t got to the real point of this story yet,’ she said, evidently willing to give him a chance, but not to be manipulated. He had forgotten how smart she was, and how much he’d liked her.

‘Tell me, Martha,’ he said, ‘when you came to me for help, did you really believe I could give it?’

She answered quickly. He guessed it wasn’t the first time she had thought about this question. ‘Maybe not,’ she said. ‘But you were my last resort.’

‘Normal response. You’d suffered a terrible loss. Of course you were willing to overlook the odd illogicality if the alternative was some kind of hope. Back then, *nobody* trusted me. Especially not the people who turned out to my shows. Night after night they’d try to keep me straight, steer me towards the right answers.’

‘Because they were desperate to believe.’

‘But incapable of it. That’s what faith is. It’s not just surviving the absence of evidence, it’s denying anything that contradicts your belief. It’s forcing yourself, despite every rational instinct, to accept something that’s screaming “I am impossible” at you. It’s enabling the lie.’

‘Like a secret conspiracy?’

‘Exactly.’

He left a beat.

‘Except in my case it wasn’t a lie, Martha. I really could do it. And I tried and tried to be truthful, but nobody believed me. Not even after—’

‘After Branwen?’

‘Yeah. Not even after Branwen. So I gave up. I thought, fuck it. I threw my lot in with all the fakers and the liars. Just bullshit. No truth to confuse things. And you would not *believe* the money I made. For those few months I tried being an out-and-out charlatan it was full houses every night.’

‘And then you stopped?’

‘I see now that I went on Toni’s show to test myself. See how dishonest I was willing to be. It turned out I had my limits.’

Martha understood. He felt it, her forgiveness beginning to take shape. She shook her head.

‘So you were psychic before? You’re still psychic?’

‘Yes.’

‘And this act of yours, is—fraudulent? I mean, you’re *pretending* to fake it?’

He nodded.

‘Jesus!’

‘Same old routines, really, just with explanations.’

‘Except the explanations aren’t true.’

‘They would be, if I were any other medium. So they aren’t without truth. They just happen not to be true about me. I find it’s an awful lot easier than trying to be the world’s sole genuine psychic. Back then I was the only honest person in the room. Now I’m the only hypocrite.’

Then he told her the resto of it: about the night Branwen disappeared, how he had seen her leave the beach and get in the car with Ronnie. He explained about the iron barn and about what Stevie really was. It satisfied him to see it all make sense to Martha; all the gaps in her understanding fill themselves in. He saw her guilt over her twin finally lift, because she, Martha, had found Christopher, and he, Christopher, had found Branwen—everything that remained of her. And Martha was not to blame for any of it.

Relief came to Christopher too. He’d thought he had agreed to this meeting out of a sense of debt, some feeling that he owed her the truth about what he was. Now he realised that though he had done her some good, his motives were as selfish as usual.

And afterwards, when they parted for the final time, he knew she would keep his secrets. He had made them hers.

#

Later, standing in a hot, packed Northern Line train on her way home, Martha remembered she had meant to tell Christopher how she'd tried to visit him in the hospital after the police pulled him out of Chenoweth's pigsty. She hadn't known whether she wanted to thank him or confront him. In the end, it didn't matter: the policeman on the door wouldn't let her in. However, a nurse had been coming out of the room, and through a briefly open doorway, Martha had glimpsed the psychic, unconscious in there. A teenage girl sat by the bed. Christopher's daughter, most likely. She looked about sixteen, and she had reminded Martha of Branwen, but back then, what didn't?

After she'd left Longley outside the pub tonight, on her way to the underground, she had been caught in a sudden storm. A stray trickle of water slipped from her hair and ran between her eyes. All around her on the train, body heat and damp air. At Clapham North the carriage disgorged half its passengers. Before an even greater number squeezed in to replace them, she snatched a seat between two newspaper-reading commuters.

She had been right to seek the psychic out. Things had clarified when she'd been with him tonight. Pain had lifted, and now she didn't want to know why, or to worry about whether or not she believed him. She had a copy of Eliot's *Collected Poems* in her bag, and an essay to write. To distract herself, she turned her attention to the *Four Quartets*' gloomy confusions about time and memory and loss:

Except for the point, the still point,
 There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.
 I can only say, *there* we have been: but I cannot say where.
 And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time.

She had been struggling for days with this, circling round and round the illogicalities of the language, getting cross with its archness, its willful obscurity. Now she saw it was enough simply to comprehend the poet's desperation; his search for something unfindable. To allow him that. She underlined the passage and kept reading.

August 2013, Sheepwash: *Family Portrait*

That summer Lucy defied Jacqueline and came on tour with her father. Berry said she would drive them. It was an opportunity to spend time together, to find out what sort of family they might be. Four weeks in, on the way back into England from a gig in Edinburgh, Christopher pointed out a road sign.

‘Sheepwash,’ he said. ‘You know that’s where I grew up, don’t you?’

‘Can we stop there?’ Lucy asked, ‘to see the cliffs?’

Berry said, ‘I’m not sure that’s a good idea.’ But Christopher thought it might be, so they made the detour.

It should not have been a surprise to find that thirty years of erosion had rendered the landscape barely recognisable. Time only went in one direction. The curve where land met air and dropped down to the sea was shallower than he remembered. The view inland too was altered; the chemical factory and the caravan site erased. That whole area was a giant holiday park now. Its owners had reclaimed the cliffs, shored them up and put in a new path. They had installed benches along the way too, so that walkers could rest and look out at the horizon.

Christopher found the spot, or what might be the spot, where the sea stack had been. There was a bench there so he sat on it between Berry on his left and Lucy on his right. It was a bright summer day and the sea was calm.

1983 –*True Story*

Stephen and Christopher had no good choices. They might stand and fight. They might rush at Liam, in the hope of charging him out of the way together, and then running for it.

‘We could jump—onto that,’ Stephen said, tilting his head at the stack.

‘Even if we made it, we’d never be able to jump back,’ Christopher said.

‘There’s no run-up.’

‘So what? They’ll leave us there. It’s better than having the shit kicked out of us.’

It seemed to make sense. The bigger, heavier boys would surely not risk trying to jump over and catch them. So Stephen ran, leapt and, astonishing himself, reached the top of the stack. It was a moment before he realised he was alone out there.

Christopher had stayed where he was. Kelvin and Liam were running now, and would be there in moments.

‘Jump!’ Stephen yelled.

They grabbed Christopher and shoved him to the ground. Out of reach on the stack, Stevie watched hopelessly as they pulled off the coat. Kelvin threw it over the edge, it tumbled halfway down, then the wind saved it from falling—caught it and lifted it like a kite, all the way back to the top. It hovered there, trapped between updraft and downdraft. Stephen snatched it from the air and held it against himself. He waved it above him, a victory flag. Christopher laughed loud—until Liam kicked him hard in the side.

Helpless, Stephen watched Kelvin jam the firework in Christopher’s mouth.

‘Jesus, Kelvin!’ he shouted, ‘Don’t be stupid. You’ll kill him.’

They had tied Christopher’s hands behind his back. He struggled and squirmed, but Liam had him tight.

Kelvin was a bully and a tormentor of small animals, Liam a thug who would do whatever Kelvin said. But to light a banger in another boy’s mouth would be murder, and they were not murderers yet. It would be fun to terrify him, though. When the wind blew out Kelvin’s lighter he made a performance of reigniting it, so they would believe he was serious. But as he brought it close to the fuse, he pressed his thumb over the flame and smothered it.

Stephen saw; Christopher didn’t. In his panic, he must have believed the banger was alight. Kelvin was making a hissing sound between his teeth. Anyone calm could tell it sounded nothing like a burning fuse.

‘It’s not lit, Chris!’ Stephen yelled. But Christopher was beyond hearing anything now. He was in a frenzy, shaking his head to try and throw out the firework. Kelvin and Liam thought it hilarious. Uncontrollable laughter overtook them, and loosened their grip. Christopher tore himself free. In his mind there were only a few seconds left. He ran in the only direction he knew there could be help: towards Stephen.

Kelvin and Liam had fallen backwards in a fit of giggles. Then they saw Christopher heading as fast as he could for the edge, his hands still tied behind his back. The two boys scrambled to their feet to run after him.

‘It’s not lit, you stupid twat!’ Liam yelled. But Christopher was beyond hearing. Stephen had stopped shouting. There was no point. All the possibilities had closed down. He watched the boy launch himself off the cliff.

Even if his hands had been free, Christopher would most likely have failed to reach the stack. His terror had filled him with adrenaline, though, and he got further than might have been expected. About two-thirds of the way. Then he fell.

With a wet thud, mostly lost among the sound of the wind and the sea, Christopher landed on his back against a rock. Stephen and the two bullies peered down to see him broken and strange. Crimson froth spread across the rock behind his head. His eyes looked open. The unlit firework still stuck out of his mouth. He slid down the shining stone, and the water swallowed him.

#

After that, it wasn’t so far from the way he’d always remembered it, from the story he’d told in his book.

The helicopter arrived with Captain Haddock and it carried the boy back to the Coastguard Station.

It took them a while to find his mother, because she was in Fat Charlie’s caravan that afternoon, fucking him on a promise of a free wrap of heroin. Charlie had made good on the deal, and when Maureen turned up at the Station, she was off her head. She sat there in Haddock’s office and looked at Stephen, at her own son, her voice a slurring mess.

‘He looks nothing like my boy,’ she said.

Sometime later, once the police had talked to everyone, and Kelvin and Liam were in the Detention Centre, on remand for manslaughter, Mr Craighall dried out Christopher’s body and buried him in the churchyard.

The day after the funeral, Stephen went around to Gran’s house to see how she was doing.

‘Chrissie,’ she said, when she opened the door. ‘We need to get new keys cut.’

Ending

Here they are on the clifftop still. Christopher, Berry and Lucy. And he has told his daughter the final version of his story. Some Dead drift by. It's turned out he could always see them. They're everywhere—the tricky thing is to spot the difference between them and the Living. These days he doesn't often bother.

'So you're really....?' his daughter says.

'Same as I've been all my life,' he says. 'I'm not a different person, Lucy.'

He has prepared himself to explain why there's no dishonesty in him holding on to the name Christopher Longley. To tell Lucy he remains the father she's always known, and that she herself is who she always believed herself to be. But it seems he won't need to call on any of those arguments, because Lucy accepts the proposition easily.

Maybe she sees that digging into it would only add unwanted alternatives, doubts. And the past, which means so much to Christopher, took place long before she was born. As with all history, it's become no more than a tale. It interests her, but does not mean a great deal compared to the pressing desires of the present and the future.

She looks up and down the clifftop path, out at the water where the ghost of the stack might be.

'And this is where it all happened?' she says.

'If anything happened,' he replies, 'it must have been around here.'

'We could check it out,' Berry suggests. 'There have to be records. Archives.'

He doesn't want to think about that. 'Daisy Cross looked. She reckons there's nothing.'

According to Daisy's book there's no record of any Stevie Lightwood disappearing off a sea stack near Fisherman's Bay in 1983. Berry tells him Daisy was probably searching in the wrong places, for the wrong names. That's true. Because Daisy wouldn't have investigated too carefully, once she'd collected enough evidence to support her own story: of the lying, cheating bogus medium who exploited her friend's terrible loss. Daisy would never have found a record of Stevie's death because Stevie—Stephen Lightwood—never died. Not in the way Christopher had told it all those years.

But Stephen's mother barely noticed whether he was there or not. So he went to Gran's house most days to play at being Christopher. He went to school too, like Christopher would have done, concentrated in lessons like Christopher had, kept himself invisible like Christopher did. To absolve himself for living after his cousin's death, Stephen carried out Christopher's escape plan for him.

There was probably no single moment when he decided it would be easiest just to let himself *be* Christopher. It might have been when he pretended he was Dennis's son at the cremation. It might have been while he sat next to Leeming's corpse at Toni Webster's séance. Or it might have been much later, say when a man punched him on the nose in an East Crompton scout hut. There are still questions beyond his memory, gaps in the story he can't jump across. Even now he hasn't found a way to fit in the dog.

But absence of proof is not disproof. If he were only to look in the right places, the facts would reassemble themselves into something coherent, convincing. Of course they would—they always do. He doesn't need that. Sufficient merely to know the present has created the past. That it always will.

He thinks he recognises a couple of these Dead, wandering around the cliffs, and makes an effort to bring them into focus. Here is Fat Charlie in his shiny tracksuit; here the shopkeeper with the calliper on her leg. Both seem older than he remembers. Then he recalls that the shopkeeper was in the phoney story, not the true one, so he looks away, looks back, and she's not there anymore. The rest are long-drowned fisher folk. No fallen boy among them, not Christopher, not Stevie.

Out at sea, gulls spiral and bicker above the phantom of the long-vanished sandstone column. He tries to imagine its shape, to remember anything not washed away by endless retelling. But there is nothing. He's done with this. In an hour's time, Christopher and Lucy and Berry will have moved on to some other place, like Branwen and Stevie and everyone eventually, and it doesn't matter where.

*BRANWEN KELLOW: A NOVEL AND CRITICAL REFLECTION ON
UNRELIABLE NARRATIVE IN LONG FORM FICTION*

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in

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PART 2 of 2: CRITICAL REFLECTION

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1. INTRODUCTION

The term ‘experimental novel’ often suggests that the writer is seeking to obstruct the path of the reader with deliberate and overt breaches of conventionality. Few nowadays would immediately think of Jane Austen in these terms, and yet she is acknowledged as a groundbreaking, form-defining writer, and was very much a tester of the limitations of fiction. Consider *Emma*.¹ When Austen chose to write ‘a heroine whom no one but myself will much like’² she was carrying out an experiment in characterisation. In that sense, all novelists who step in any way outside slavish genre reproduction are by their nature experimentalists; all their novels are experimental.

Thus, I have read the idea that my PhD should ‘contribute to knowledge’ as an injunction not only to be experimental, but also to account for any experimental aspects of my own novel. My primary aim was to produce a good story, one about a professional medium and the search for a vanished teenager. Telling that story drew me into questions about the nature and limits of the reader’s trust in the storytelling voice. And these are the questions I will be addressing in this commentary.

A writer’s experimentalism may be genetically engineered; a product of conscious choice, as when Austen decided to make Emma Woodhouse unlikeable. In my case, however, it formed organically out of the act of writing, consideration of which leads us into the longstanding custody battle between the writer and the critic.

As an example, here again on *Emma* are Casey Finch and Peter Bowen:

the novel's deployment of free indirect style (which Austen first brought to fruition) has the effect of naturalizing narrative authority by disseminating it among the characters.³

Some might describe a critical reading of this type as arcane. As such, it may inspire questions of intentionality and ownership. If the writer does not intend something, one might wonder how that thing can possibly be in the text. Alternatively, one might ask

¹ Jane Austen (ed. Fiona Stafford), *Emma* (London: Penguin Classics 2003)

² Cited in James Edward Austen-Leigh (ed. Kathryn Sutherland), *A Memoir of Jane Austen: And Other Family Recollections*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.119.

³ Casey Finch and Peter Bowen, “‘The Tittle-Tattle of Highbury’: Gossip and the Free Indirect Style in *Emma*”, *Representations* No 31, Summer 1990 pp. 1-18 (p.3)

if great work is inevitably something beyond the understanding of its own creator. The extreme critical position on this matter was never more strongly put than when Roman Jakobson argued against Nabokov's proposed appointment to Harvard: 'Gentlemen, even if one allows that he is an important writer, are we next to invite an elephant to be Professor of Zoology?'⁴

This is the peevish response of a husband whose wife has suggested her lover should move into the spare room, and no longer much expressed now the writer is a respectable lodger in the academy. Nobody is going to make a public suggestion now that novelists have no dominion over the interpretation and explication of their own work. Nevertheless, tension continues to exist between traditional Literary Studies and the upstart academic discipline of Creative Writing; and crass though it was, there might nevertheless be a little truth behind Jakobson's remark. Admittedly I have not read enough of Austen's letters and marginalia to state this with absolute confidence, but I very much doubt she ever proposed to 'naturalise narrative authority by disseminating it among the characters'⁵. These days, it looks like a valid enough reading. It took a critic, and a wait of one hundred and seventy-five years to express it.

That being the case, we have to ask, did Austen know what she was doing? And did Shakespeare? Did Milton? And so forth. Actually, the latter is an especially pertinent example, given Blake's contention that Milton's genius lay in his *not* knowing what he was doing.⁶ The complex and truthful answer is 'They did know and they didn't.' A novel or a play or an epic poem expands in unpredictable directions. One can never know all the implications of the choices one makes as each word falls into line after the last, which is what Samson Young means when he says, writing is, a hundred hunches, a hundred affronts to your confidence, a hundred decisions, every page.⁷

Creative writers, therefore, tend to articulate their thoughts: not through exegesis but through the work itself. As Jeanette Winterson has written,

⁴ Cited in Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p.303.

⁵ See note 3 above

⁶ Blake asserted in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Plate 6 that 'The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet, and of the Devil's party without knowing it.' (Facsimile ed. New York: Dover Press 2000) p.30.

⁷ Young is the fictional novelist in Martin Amis's *London Fields* (Harmondsworth, Penguin 1989), p60.

The question 'What is your book about?' has always puzzled me. It is about itself and if I could condense it into other words I should not have taken such care to choose the words I did.⁸

Hence, we might argue, creative work is one kind of specialism; criticism quite another. They are not closed shops, since plenty of writers are also literary critics, but their motivations and purposes are different. Perhaps even a writer of genius, such as Austen or Nabokov, is merely 'inspired' (if we take a Romanticist view), or (from a Historicist perspective) is simply the point through which all the politico-cultural forces of the moment are focused; the person who holds the pen while the zeitgeist writes itself onto a page.

It may appear that Jakobson and Winterson are saying much the same thing. However, there is a significant point of difference between their positions. Jakobson presents the novelist as St Matthew in Caravaggio's lost masterpiece: an illiterate, clumsy fisherman, his hand guided by the angel, producing a text he cannot himself begin to explain or interpret.



CARAVAGGIO: *St Matthew and the Angel* 1602⁹

⁸ Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), p165.

⁹ Monochrome photograph of oil on canvas painting, 232 x 183 cm (original destroyed during WWII)

Formerly at Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum, Berlin – image sourced from University of Texas Web Gallery of Art <http://www.wga.hu/> retrieved 12.04.16

On the other hand, Winterson suggests a writer analogous to the painter's second version of the same subject (after the church rejected the first as too disrespectful).



CARAVAGGIO: *The Inspiration of Saint Matthew* 1602¹⁰

Now, St Matthew hears and *interprets* the message. He is neither humbled nor baffled by his inspiration, but an equal partner with the angel. This is Winterson's vision of the artist-communicator or artist-genius who (divinely or otherwise) inspired, condenses form and content into a work so intense, so rich, that it cannot be unwound or explained, but must only be *experienced*.

Jakobson dismissed the artist as a kind of idiot savant, producing works that may be great, but which require for their measurement the critic's intelligence and insight. Winterson reverses that and condemns *any* critical activity; she stakes a claim for Art's superiority over interpretation. She pities the poor critic, still trying hopelessly to restate, decode, or exorcise *Hamlet* after four hundred years, when only

¹⁰ Oil on canvas, 295 x 190 cm; Contarelli Chapel, Church of San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome. Image sourced from WebMuseum Paris: <https://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/caravaggio/> retrieved 12.04.16

Shakespeare's words will ever do. Importantly, Winterson might well concur with Jakobson's suggestion that Nabokov had no business trying to explain *The Brothers Karamazov*, because her argument proposes that Dostoevsky himself would be ill-equipped to take on that task.¹¹

To give primacy, as Jakobson did, to the intellectual value of criticism, to make Art worthless until it is formally understood and interpreted by superior minds, feels somehow unnatural. An elephant, after all, is a wonderful thing with or without zoology. Yet, to acknowledge Art's value is intrinsic, not conferred by the academy, does not render criticism meaningless. The critic can think about texts in rich, complex and profound ways, can make an artwork new. This, as I understand it, was Susan Sontag's idea when she argued the role of the critic should not be to *interpret* art but to reveal its ways of functioning and to celebrate its pleasures.¹²

Sontag's approach could be seen to encourage overlap between academic literary criticism and academic creative writing. However, to oversimplify her line and merely dismiss the interpretation of content would be counterproductive for both disciplines. My discussion here of my own novel's production to some extent follows Marshall McLuhan's notion that the medium is the message.¹³ In other words, I will maintain that form and content are not separable, and so any account of one must include the other—an approach taken in the account of Jane Austen quoted above, where the critics are entirely concerned with the way Austen's narrative voice is woven into the social reality of *Emma*'s world.¹⁴

Although narrative voice is important in my novel, and I touch on it at times, this critical reflection focuses most closely on how the *meanings* of fictional events are revealed via story and plot (terms I define in the course of the discussion). For me, a most important touchstone is the idea that the reader is active in interpreting clues and indicators provided by the writer. Much of my thought about my practice has therefore been influenced by the traditions of reader-response criticism, particularly some of the ideas proposed by Roland Barthes regarding narrative codes.¹⁵ However,

¹¹ This position is not inconsistent with Winterson's position as Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Manchester, where she is concerned with the practice, not the interpretation, of creative work. It is, however, to some extent at least, a polemical stance rather than a credo. Winterson has been on occasion happy to lecture on Shakespeare, for example.

¹² Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (London, Vintage 1994) pp 3-14

¹³ The idea is introduced in: Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge MA, MIT Press 1994) and revisited throughout McLuhan's later work.

¹⁴ See note 3 above

¹⁵ As outlined in Roland Barthes (Trans. Richard Miller), *S/Z* (London, Blackwell, 1990)

I also reject Barthes's position that fiction is evolving towards a 'writerly text'¹⁶ whose task is to be sufficiently 'difficult' that the reader is forced to construct its meanings even at a simply narrative level; an evolution ultimately bringing about the 'Death of the Author'.¹⁷

It seems to me that readers enter the unfamiliar world of a fiction with a mission to make sense of it. Much of the pleasure experienced by readers was well-defined by two of Barthes' five 'codes'. These are the 'hermeneutic code' (that creates an enigma to be solved) and the 'proairetic code' (that helps predict future action).¹⁸ Importantly for the traditionally narrated linear novel, both codes are concerned with the way we understand events in their order of revelation. This is why interpretation remains an essential element of our relationship with fiction. At any point in the unfolding events of a traditional novel, the reader is engaged in interpreting current events, reinterpreting previous events and pre-interpreting those yet to come.

At the centre of my argument, however, is the idea that the reader does not respond only to the text but also to a constructed version of its author. Part of my proposition for *Branwen Kellow* was the idea that behind every story is the reader's sense that its meanings are being orchestrated by someone: by an author who is entirely in control of a fundamental set of 'truths' about the narrative. This person, as fictional as any other character, is problematic for both the reader and the writer. Readers can easily conflate and/or confuse this 'author' with the writer of the book, and as will be clear from the questionnaire responses in Appendix 1, many writers are uncomfortable with that role.

One reason for all this may be a quasi-mystical understanding of the process of creation. No writer, I think, entirely knows at the outset what he or she is about to produce, and it can be comforting, or perhaps useful, to imagine that the book is being formed by a power somehow beyond oneself. However one conceives of it, whether as the outcome of human intelligence and imagination or of the magical interference of the muse, it is usually the case that the text comes clearer and clearer in the process of being written, and can only be properly reckoned with *after it is made*. For me, setting out on a PhD by long-form-fiction, this presented a fundamental problem. My creative

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ Roland Barthes (Trans. Stephen Heath), 'The Death of the Author' in *Image Music Text* (London, Fontana 1977) pp142-148

¹⁸ Roland Barthes (Trans. Richard Miller), *S/Z* (London, Blackwell, 1990)

project was also an academic one, to be packaged as an idea, as a proposal, in advance of my research; but I did not entirely know what it would be.

I had the beginnings of a story I believed was intrinsically strong. Its theme of belief, expressed both in the narrative and through the mechanics of the novel itself, suggested a direction for academic consideration as well as craft problems. The book would be both postmodernist and realist. It would self-contradict, self-reassess, be openly impossible, and yet, through careful handling of plot and point-of-view, I would maintain the reader's trust in the events of the story. The writing *process* I proposed was to focus on the reader's experience of an unreliable narrative 'truth', whilst avoiding nakedly metafictional techniques. This Critical Reflection outlines and evaluates the construction of my novel *Branwen Kellow*, beginning with that proposition. It explores my efforts through drafting and redrafting to create a complex, shifting narrative structure. As I wrote the novel, I became more and more interested in the relationship between the imagined reader of the finished work and its imagined writer. Another element of this Reflection is therefore a consideration of how that relationship might at times drive the creative process and at others form an obstacle to it.

It may be noticed that where my language here is not conditional, it is past-tense. It is far easier here at the end of the process to identify my intentions than it was at the beginning when my greatest concern embarking on Creative Writing research was the creative death inherent in 'pre-criticising' the putative text, or, worse, trying to write a novel in a way that would fulfil the needs of an essay about itself: to make an elephant by guessing what zoology might have to say about it.

All of which is preamble to two questions:

- Why did I elect to write a novel in the context of a university?
- What is the purpose of this critical reflection?

Strictly speaking, the first question is why *continue* with a novel in that context, since my story was already well-begun when I made my application. I had written 40,000 words of a novel that would ultimately run to approximately 84,000.¹⁹ On one hand that was useful, because I had begun to identify *through practice*, what I might put into a PhD proposal. But on the other, why not just finish the thing?

¹⁹ It is important to recognise that having written about half the *number* of words I ended up with is not the same as being half-finished – as my discussion of redrafting and rewriting shows.

There are many reasons. First, there are considerable practical benefits of a Creative PhD as a way of writing a novel, especially a first novel. They may go without saying, but that does not mean they should go unsaid. My supervisor's advice, support, guidance and objective discussion of the story's progress have been invaluable, and I would certainly want to acknowledge the contribution of this 'craft apprenticeship' to anything that is strong about *Branwen Kellow*.

In terms of social context, there is also a structural value to the degree. Even self-funded, a PhD is a curiously modern form of patronage, providing the 'cultural means' for the writer to work. The supervisor/student relationship can 'stand in' for real-world pressures such as contract expectations. The PhD creates deadlines that help to guarantee the production of the work. But perhaps most significantly, being enrolled at a university offers a context of meaning and purpose. I began this project in my late forties, and the PhD explained (to myself and to other people) why I was devoting so many hours to writing a novel, rather than developing my career, doing DIY or getting on with the gardening.

The decision to write *Branwen Kellow* as a PhD made sense for various reasons. My novel's purposes already appeared to be both creative and academic. I did not only want to tell a story, but also to explore the process by which a story of the length and complexity of a novel comes into being. I had a background in the study of fiction. My first and second degrees were in Literature and I had taught English Literature and Film Studies for many years. I had co-written books about auteur theory and the narrative 'language' of cinema, and one of my significant areas of interest was the relationship between writer and reader. I had particular questions about the 'reality' of a fictional world in which a novelist must exist for months or years while a book comes into being. These were all, it seemed to me, directions for practice-based academic enquiry, of novel writing as research, from the point of view of process rather than end product? I had begun to see it as a kind of ethnographic investigation into a peculiarly asocial group: novelists.

To be clear, I am really employing ethnography here as a metaphor, and would certainly not wish to be judged by any social scientist on the robustness of my methodology. As defined in Agar's classic account, the ethnographer is a participant observer who,

eats with the group, relaxes with them, and hopefully comes to understand them. Meanwhile he or she struggles with the interference from his or her own ways of thinking, feeling and acting. Ethnography, whatever else it is, is an experientially rich social science.²⁰

Since novel-writing is not strictly speaking a group activity, and novelists are not exactly a community, my research was not traditionally ethnographic. However, I would say that while writing, every novelist engages in at least three overlapping communities. There is a relationship with other novelists, in the sense of responding to their work and what they have said about it. There are symbolic, imaginative and actual engagements with readers. There is a community of fictional characters. The principal outcome of my research is the novel itself, which represents an image (a particularly ethnographic concept)²¹ of the way novelists experience the world, but does not in itself seek to explain or interpret that experience.

In a Practice-Based PhD, the creative product itself forms the bulk of the contribution to knowledge. A novel that did not previously exist in the world now does. Alongside it, however, this commentary presents (one might say by way of triangulation) a more interpretative, analytical account. Its most important function must be to draw attention to aspects of the novel that imbue it with the seriousness required of any work submitted for a doctorate; to demonstrate that my creative work is rigorous, considered and carefully-researched—as well as being technically complex and attempting some original variants on the conventions of the form.

²⁰ Michael Agar *The Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction to Ethnology* 2nd Ed (Bingley, Emerald Publishing, 2008) p.58

²¹ The ethnographic 'image' is normally visual – a photograph or moving image. See, for example, Sarah Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography: Images, media and representation in research* (London: Sage Publications, 2013). Here I am suggesting that a craft object created by the ethnographer might also operate in that way, since it will embody the symbolic values of the subject community, the cultural practices that led to its creation and the influence of the ethnographer's own cultural background. I would repeat, however, that I am using the idea of ethnography in an imprecise, suggestive and metaphorical way here.

2. THE WRITING PROCESS

(i) Influences

Being the product of a lifetime reading and teaching narratives, *Branwen Kellow* reflects much that I have learned from other fictions, including three I will discuss in later sections of this commentary: *The Testament of Gideon Mack*, *Pincher Martin* and *The Magus*.²² Reflecting further, I see Dennis Potter's screenplay for *The Singing Detective*²³ behind the psychodrama that redeems my protagonist. Similarly, the way I wilfully abandon my characters in the last scene reminds me strongly of Margaret Atwood's Ofred, stepping 'into the darkness within, or else the light,' at the close of *The Handmaid's Tale*.²⁴

All readers have their touchstones—works that for one reason or another have figured more strongly than others in their developing sense of what literature is. These touchstones' impact is not necessarily a consequence of quality. Such works might be canonical; they might be works of genius; they might be minor; they might be barely known. They might even be considered trash. Whatever their provenance, when that reader sets out to write a novel, those remembered—or half-remembered—texts may well become contributors to the creative process, consciously or unconsciously. For example, when Will Self recently took Peter Benchley's *Jaws* as a starting point for his novel *Shark*, he was returning to a text that had resonated with him many years previously—as was William Golding when he rewrote RM Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* as *Lord of the Flies*.²⁵

Notwithstanding previous remarks regarding my resistance to postmodern influences, I want to acknowledge here two novelists whose work is rooted in Postmodernism, both of whom I have been reading all my adult life: Peter Carey and Paul Auster.

²² See section 3 below

²³ Dennis Potter: *The Singing Detective* (London, Faber, 2003)

²⁴ Margaret Atwood: *The Handmaid's Tale* (London, Vintage New Edition, 1996)

²⁵ Peter Benchley: *Jaws* (London, Pan, 2012); Will Self: *Shark* (London, Penguin, 2015); R.M. Ballantyne: *The Coral Island* (London, Puffin, 1986); William Golding: *Lord of the Flies* (London, Faber, 1997)

In novel after novel, from 1985's *Illywhacker*²⁶ onwards, Carey has written about the unreliability of truth—and doing so with a sense that such unreliability matters in ways that transcend its importance to fiction. Carey's interest in truth's slippery nature is coupled with his own identity as an Australian; to his sense that Australia's history, and its relationships first with Europe and then America, make it an inherently dishonest culture. The romantic narrative of his much-loved *Oscar and Lucinda*²⁷ is certainly driven by the stories we tell ourselves and each other to make sense of the world: an idea he also applies to the larger theme of faith. In later fictions Carey continues to investigate the notion of the story as it relates to our grasp of our shared past (in, for example *True History of the Kelly Gang*); or to political corruption and manipulation (*The Unusual life of Tristan Smith* and *Amnesia*)²⁸. And in *Jack Maggs* Carey re-imagines a novel that I often had in mind often as I wrote the *bildungsroman* elements of *Branwen Kellow*—Dickens's *Great Expectations*.²⁹

Carey might be his nation's greatest living novelist. It would be harder to support similar claims for Paul Auster, who, most critics would agree, has been far too prolific for his own good. Nevertheless, he has been capable many times of brilliance. To my mind, his finest novel is *The Music of Chance*³⁰: a strange third-person narrative that mutates as it progresses from realism into fable. Characters are introduced, given empty, purposeless things to do and then abandoned. Its final scene leaves the protagonist, Jim Nashe, driving into the lights of an oncoming vehicle.³¹ In killing himself he also kills his passengers, one of whom, Murks, has probably murdered Nashe's friend, Pozzi. This act of revenge finally gives Nashe's life a purpose, but even as he commits it, we realise neither he nor the reader knows for sure if Pozzi really is dead, or, even if he *is* dead, that Murks was responsible.

There are some similarities between my novel and *The Music of Chance*. Auster and I are both interested in undermining the reader's traditional expectations of narrative – including a refusal to acknowledge any objective diegetic 'truth'. Much more importantly, however, I would argue that our characters' (ultimately futile)

²⁶ Peter Carey: *Illywhacker* (London, Faber, 2014)

²⁷ Peter Carey: *Oscar and Lucinda* (London, Faber, 2011)

²⁸ Peter Carey: *True History of the Kelly Gang* (London, Faber, 2011); Peter Carey: *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* (London, Faber, 1995); Peter Carey: *Amnesia* (London, Faber, 2015)

²⁹ Peter Carey: *Jack Maggs* (London, Faber, 2011); Charles Dickens: *Great Expectations (1867 Edition)* at Project Gutenberg: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1400/1400-h/1400-h.htm> retrieved 31.3.17

³⁰ Paul Auster: *The Music of Chance* (London, Faber, 2014)

³¹ The film version of the book continues into a further scene in which we see Nashe the following morning, having apparently survived the crash, hitchhiking, until he is picked up by Auster himself.

struggle *against* meaninglessness is not typically postmodern. Auster is a Modernist, at least as much as he is a Postmodernist, because his protagonists are so often ennobled by their insistence on holding to whatever slender threads of meaning they can find. This, I think, is why *The Music of Chance* so overtly parallels one of the masterpieces of Modernism, and a text that is absolutely founded in the struggle to hold on to meaning: Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.³² Underlying the influence of Auster on my writing, therefore, is the influence of Modernism on us both.

Ultimately, I do not believe that efforts to undermine narrative 'truth' in my fiction, as with Auster's and Carey's are in themselves postmodernist. The unreliable narrator may be a convention of postmodernist fiction, but its history reaches back at least to 1759 and *Tristram Shandy*.³³

In fact, though unreliability of narration is now almost a *sine qua non* of the postmodern novel, it was previously, for different motives, a common modernist technique, and before that a Gothic one. It is a tool that writers have used for various purposes at various times, rather than one we can use to determine this or that 'movement'. For example, a key modernist novel, Ford Maddox Ford's *The Good Soldier*,³⁴ depicts its events via a narrator, John Dowell, whose probable culpability for several deaths clearly colours his storytelling. And because he is our only source of information, we have to admit we know no more for certain about the events that 'really happened' at the end of the book than we did at the start.

The Good Soldier has been a natural touchstone for me. Although my novel is designed to be more straightforwardly accessible than Ford's, it shares *The Good Soldier*'s refusal to show the 'reality' or 'truth' of diegesis. *The Good Soldier* is also a story that, like mine, fragments its chronology in the service of drama. Finally, Ford's book has always seemed to me to be an important one because its formal

³² Samuel Beckett: *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London, Faber, 1986) pp7-87

³³ Laurence Sterne: *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (Oxford, OUP revised ed, 2009). To multiply the intertextual references, Peter Carey's choice of 'Tristan' for his title character in *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* is generally assumed to be a sideways acknowledgement of Sterne's Tristram. As to the ahistorical argument that Sterne's novel is somehow postmodern itself: Postmodernism is not always easy to define, but part of what makes it identifiable that is by definition a response to Modernism—and Sterne could not have been responding to Modernism in 1759. See Jens Martin Gurr, for example: Postmodernism in the eighteenth century? Enlightenment intellectual contexts and the roots of 21st century concerns in *Tristram Shandy*. In: XVII-XVIII. *Revue de la société d'études anglo-américaines des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*. N°63, 2006. pp. 19-40. Gurr argues convincingly that the 'postmodern "feel" of Sterne's text is ultimately the result of a critical engagement with contemporary [i.e. eighteenth century] discourses and assumptions.'

³⁴ Ford Maddox Ford: *The Good Soldier: a Tale of Passion* (London, Collins Classic, 2016)

experimentalism serves a profoundly emotional (and, once the reader reconstructs it, quite traditional) narrative, based on themes of character and morality. That, too, I have sought to construct in my own novel.

This particularly modernist intention—to retain some kind of moral centre within an unreliable narrative—I sought to signal in the text of *Branwen Kellow* itself by my references to the poets TS Eliot and Ezra Pound. Certainly, *The Waste Land*³⁵ was in my mind as I constructed my series of clashing narrative voices. Like Eliot’s speaker(s), Christopher finds himself on a beach where he can ‘connect nothing with nothing’; he is unable to cope with the discovery that Death has ‘undone so many’ and in the end we find him by the waterside, reaching some kind of peace with himself—even if it ‘passeth understanding’.

More directly, I have Martha reading from the *Four Quartets*³⁶ at the end of her story, and McMeekin quoting from Pound. This phrase, ‘petals on a wet, black bough’ which McMeekin borrows (without acknowledgement) from Pound’s poem ‘In a Station of the Metro’³⁷, is one Christopher finds profoundly affecting, and he recalls it several times afterwards.³⁸

I intended all these references to modernist poetry to emphasise the way characters in my novel look constantly to sustain belief in some kind of cosmic order, despite their overwhelming sense of anomie—that which Eliot describes as ‘fragments I have shored against my ruins’.

Remembering the line from Pound, Christopher thinks

There was a phrase McMeekin had used when putting him under. He’d said strangers, unfamiliar faces, were *petals on a wet, black bough*. That had something about it. It had stayed with Christopher. Often, looking out into the eager crowd at a performance, it would come back to him: an image of all those unimportant, fragile little selves surrounded by darkness, even in brightest daylight. They clung for a

³⁵ TS Eliot: *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London, Faber, 1974) pp61-86

³⁶ Eliot: *Collected Poems*. The lines quoted in the novel are from *Burnt Norton* part II – (p.191)

³⁷ Ezra Pound *Personae* (New York, New Directions, 1990) p111

³⁸ This is a trick I have borrowed from Kate Atkinson’s *Life After Life* (London, Black Swan, 2014) in which the phrase ‘the black bat, night,’ an unacknowledged quotation from Tennyson’s ‘Maude’, echoes over and over as a kind of leitmotif for Death.

while to the rough surface of the black wood and then
the rain washed them away.

My characters rely on the cheap tricks of the stage psychic to help them resist the rain of meaninglessness; Eliot achieved the same effect through High Anglicanism. In both cases, the impulse is modernist. It runs, for example, right through Samuel Beckett: one hears it in the unstoppable voice of the *Not I* speaker and sees it in the shrug of her auditor; it is the cause of the relentless back-and-forth movement of the lone characters in *Footfalls* and *Rockaby*; it is why Krapp miserably insists on revisiting his crumbling memories—just as my protagonist cannot leave his own past behind, but must constantly reconstruct it in the context of the present.³⁹

Elsewhere in this commentary, I have remarked on my novel's core idea being the notion that we sustain our sense of meaning, and our relationships with others, by constructing narratives: particularly narratives of memory and of belief. This too, telling stories and listening to them, is a theme to which Beckett often returns—for example, in this exchange from *Endgame*:

CLOV: I'll leave you.

HAMM: No!

CLOV: What is there to keep me here?

HAMM: The dialogue. (Pause.) I've got on with my story. (Pause.) I've got on with it well. (Pause.

Irritably.) Ask me where I've got to.⁴⁰

Postmodernism, on the other hand, takes a different attitude to the meaninglessness of the world, and of the stories we tell about it. If we contrast Eliot's approach to pre-existing texts with that of Borges, for example, we see very different ideas in operation. Eliot's borrowings in *The Waste Land*, drawn from everywhere in high and low culture, are spoken by characters lost in history and mass society, each trying to find a culture and identity that hold together. To make that point clear, the poem references an irretrievable (and most likely fantasised) golden age of meaning and truth, and it is structured around the myth of the Grail Quest. I do not share Eliot's

³⁹ Beckett *op cit* pp 373-383 (*Not I*); 397-403 (*Footfalls*); 431-442 (*Rockaby*) and 213-224 (*Krapp's Last Tape*)

⁴⁰ Beckett *op cit* p.129

religion, nor his conservatism, nor, for that matter, his Leavisite social pessimism; but what I have always found irresistible about *The Waste Land* is its determination to find some kind of moral, spiritual or cultural centre in the morass, and hold on to it.

By contrast, two of Borges most famous short stories: ‘Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote’; and ‘The Library of Babel’, express a far more typically postmodernist attitude.⁴¹ These witty and sophisticated narratives are above all *academic*. One might argue that they are literary-critical, rather than literary. In place of the modernists’ profound tension between the human need for truth and the mutability of words that ‘slip, slide perish’ Borges finds opportunities for intellectual play, for questions of ‘what if?’ He asks, what if a writer were to set about reproducing *Don Quixote*⁴² word for word in the twentieth century? What if there were a library containing every possible combination of letters? These stories do not merely accept meaninglessness, they celebrate it.

There are, in this account of my novel, obvious connections with the issues Borges raises—given my interest in the reader/writer/author relationship. However, the key difference is that I saw these elements as an aspect of *craft* rather than the content of my story. Such questions were interesting to me as they related to the writer’s practice and identity, but I had no intention of making them overtly present in the reading experience.

Aside from these relatively recent works of literary fiction and poetry, there are two novels that have most affected the structure and approach of *Branwen Kellow*. They are Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations* and Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*: Gothic texts that have exerted a powerful influence on the way I think about fiction.⁴³ Tellingly, they were also among the first texts I *studied* formally (the Dickens for O-Level and the Bronte for A-Level) though I have returned to them many times since. Given that I was writing my novel as a PhD project, I suspect these early experiences of literary criticism have had greater impact on my thought processes than had I merely been writing a novel.

⁴¹ Jorge Luis Borges: *Labyrinths* (London, Penguin Classics, 2000) pp 62-71 (‘Pierre Menard’) and 78-86 (‘The Library of Babel’)

⁴² Miguel de Cervantes (Trans. John Rutherford) *Don Quixote* (London, Penguin Classics, 2003)

⁴³ Dickens *op cit*; Emily Bronte: *Wuthering Heights* Transcribed from the 1910 John Murray ed – Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/768/768-h/768-h.htm> retrieved 31.3.17

My story of Christopher Longley's upbringing falls into the tradition of *bildungsroman*—and as such it has to take account of *Great Expectations*. I certainly had Dickens's Philip Pirrip (Pip) in mind as my protagonist 'wrote' his autobiography. Like Pip, Christopher Longley misinterprets nearly every significant event of his own life. The story he experiences is not the *real* story. In terms of narrative perspective, however, I took a different route from Dickens—or rather I did the reverse. My POV characters are all 'Anti- Pips'. Each of them may well have seen things with much more truth when they originally happened than they now do in recollection.

There are two Pips in *Great Expectations*—the young fool whose story is told and his wise older self, who recounts the tale. The latter is an ironic, rather than unreliable, narrator, reflecting on events from the perspective of experience—and ashamed of his own past behaviour. Nevertheless, looking more closely at Dickens's narrator, it is apparent that although he writes in first person, his handling of the events he describes is often similar to my efforts at 'unreliable third person'. Dickens's version of the free-indirect style is often to have the older (narrating) Pip elide into the younger Pip's more limited point of view, as he does here:

'if I could have settled down and been but half as fond of the forge as I was when I was little, I know it would have been much better for me. You and I and Joe would have wanted nothing then, and Joe and I would perhaps have gone partners when I was out of my time, and I might even have grown up to keep company with you, and we might have sat on this very bank on a fine Sunday, quite different people. I should have been good enough for *you*; shouldn't I, Biddy?'

Biddy sighed as she looked at the ships sailing on, and returned for answer, 'Yes; I am not over-particular.' It scarcely sounded flattering, but I knew she meant well.⁴⁴

The wiser, older Pip, however, remains very much the voice of authority⁴⁵. He leads us to the diegetic 'truth', revealing everything he has failed to see while growing up, and

⁴⁴ Dickens *op cit* Chapter XVII

⁴⁵ See also Section viii 'The Reality Question', below

making himself atone for it. In this too, my novel differs substantially from *Great Expectations*. Christopher is certainly driven by a need to atone, but in doing so he has to commit to new and different dishonesties, rather than finding the solid moral ground Pip does. He has no authority-author to show him where ‘the truth’ lies. The more he looks for it, the less he finds.

Where *Great Expectations* is unified by the reflecting wisdom of the adult Pip, *Wuthering Heights* has more in common with TS Eliot’s Babel in *The Waste Land*. Bronte communicates her story through a series of conflicting first-person voices. I set myself a similar technical challenge in *Branwen Kellow*, shifting my free-indirect perspective between several characters (particularly between Christopher and Martha, but also at times to Daisy, Ronnie, Gran, Stevie, McMeekin).

The half-dozen narrators of *Wuthering Heights* are all in one way or another unreliable. Mr Lockwood, for example, is pompous and lacks insight; Nelly Dean is self-serving, biased and keen to dramatise the story; Catherine Earnshaw is more or less permanently on the edge of madness. Underlying the novel is the possibility, never confirmed, of supernatural events, and the narrative darts back and forth chronologically. Ostensibly this is because of the availability of the different narrators, but Bronte’s true purpose is to sustain dramatic structure. Throughout the book, she asks the reader over and over to look beneath the surface of the storytelling for an underlying reality and, while we can surmise the truth, we can never be entirely sure of it. Here, for example, Heathcliff describes how Cathy’s ghost has tormented him:

the moment I closed my eyes, she was either outside the window, or sliding back the panels, or entering the room, or even resting her darling head on the same pillow as she did when a child; and I must open my lids to see. And so I opened and closed them a hundred times a night—to be always disappointed! It racked me! ... It was a strange way of killing: not by inches, but by fractions of hairbreadths, to beguile me with the spectre of a hope through eighteen years!’⁴⁶

It seems unquestionable that Heathcliff himself *believes* in Cathy’s supernatural presence, but equally, her ‘ghost’ might simply be a psychological phenomenon due to

⁴⁶ Bronte *op cit* Chapter XXIX

his obsession. We cannot know. Moreover, this is not Heathcliff speaking. It is Lockwood's transcription of Nelly's later account of what she heard Heathcliff say. Nelly has a taste for fiction and no time for Heathcliff's excesses of emotion. She may have embroidered his testimony to amplify its drama, or she might be steering us towards scepticism, or both. On the other hand, she might be reporting the encounter verbatim. We do not know. And nor can we be even sure Mr Lockwood has recalled her report accurately.

A comparable moment occurs in my novel when Christopher describes his first fully psychic experience:

'It's Stevie,' I said, and later on, Jim told me that was when he too had seen another person in my face. Someone reckless and dangerous. Whatever was happening, I found myself possessed by the need to tell the truth, and I turned to Franklin.

...

'Your—not your wife. You said your wife died, but she didn't. This woman was called—Vera. She was—didn't you pay her? Yeah, you paid her—to—to wear a mask and let you tie her up while you— You were a regular. She says it wasn't your fault, Franklin. She'd taken something. Someone else's prescri—'

Everyone knew what was going to happen. I did, while I was speaking, but there didn't seem to be anything anyone could do to prevent it. Franklin's fist smashed into my face and knocked me backwards, toppling my seat. If Marline had not caught me as I fell, I would have cracked my head open against the concrete floor.

'Christ, Franklin!' said Cailey.

'I don't know what he's up to, but I'm not having it,' said Franklin.

'Was that true?' asked Suresh. 'What he said?'

‘I’m not talking about that.’ Franklin’s voice was quieter than it had been. Quieter than normal. He left, and did not come back again.

At first sight, this extract from the autobiography seems to confirm Christopher’s psychic abilities, and Stevie’s involvement in them. The presence of named witnesses, and allusions to their testimony (‘later on, Jim told me’) appears to increase the event’s authenticity. Thus, it might be read ‘straight’ as an honest description of what happened. However, it could just as easily be a recollection reconstructed by a man who is now strongly invested in the idea of himself as a psychic – honestly believed, but not true. Or it might be a lie. As in *Wuthering Heights* there is a requirement for the reader to engage in some detective work: to weigh the available evidence and keep an open mind, pending further information: to search, along with the characters, through stories lying inside stories, for a truth that never entirely comes into focus.

As a tyro novelist hoping to form some kind of individual approach, I have naturally drawn on various Creative Writing texts. Elsewhere in this commentary, I have referred to Stephen King’s *On Writing*, to David Michael Kaplan’s *Rewriting*, and to James Wood’s *How Fiction Works* all of which have helped shape the essentials of my writing practice. These are only three among many, many guides to the creative writer available. The guidance such works provide is often repetitive from text to text, and frequently contradictory.

Sometimes it borders on mysticism. Hanif Kureishi’s essay in Karen Stevens’s reader *Writing a First Novel* for example, includes the apparently unhelpful remark that ‘most writers do not entirely understand what they are doing.’⁴⁷ Yet I have found this to be excellent advice, in that my own novel has emerged out of its own internal dynamics, as much as it has been steered by me. The various first-novel experiences described in this collection of essays by writers, editors, publishers all seem to suggest the same thing, that it is *different for everyone*. As Helen Garnons-Williams, an acquiring editor for ten years, writes: there ‘may not be any hard and fast rules to becoming a successful novelist (or indeed a successful publisher) but perhaps this simply means that you have the freedom to make up your own.’⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Hanif Kureishi: ‘Something Given: Reflections on Writing’ in Karen Stevens: *Writing a First Novel: Reflections on the Journey* (London, Palgrave, 2014) p.17

⁴⁸ Helen Garnons-Williams: ‘The Role of the Editor’ in Stevens 2014 *ibid* p.179

In trying to make up my own ‘rules’, I have drawn on much existing fiction, often following the close-reading strategies suggested by Francine Prose in *Reading Like a Writer*.⁴⁹ Prose is especially interested in the nature of the well-turned sentence, and as I have redrafted and redrafted my novel, I have often returned to her account of Hemingway and Carver, in which she remarks that ‘what matters is not complexity or decoration but rather intelligibility, grace, and the fact that the sentence should strike us as the perfect vehicle for expressing what it aims to express’.⁵⁰ I doubt I have always achieved that, but I have aspired to.

Prose also devotes a good deal of her book to her reading of stories in translation from Chekhov and Kleist. This indicates strongly that while her sense of what *style* is has a lot to do with language, it is also founded in the arrangement of content. The long opening sentence of Kleist’s *The Marquise of O—*, she describes as containing,

...more plot and more sheer narrative than many entire novels. Every word is necessary in establishing the setting of the story and the odd situation of its protagonist. The town and our heroine’s name are reduced to initials ... And this clever trick is the first of many that will be used to make the unbelievable seem credible. Because, we’re encouraged to think, if this incredible premise *weren’t* true, why would the writer be at such pains to protect the privacy of the person to whom the embarrassing event has happened? It’s not something one would necessarily do for a character who has just been made up.⁵¹

Prose identifies two elements here that became significant concerns throughout the construction of my novel: the ways in which story and plot manifest themselves in a writer’s style, and the ways in which a novelist can manipulate the reader’s experience of ‘truth’ in a story. For the remainder of this section, I will address how, through the process of multiple redrafts, I sought to address both of these concerns.

⁴⁹ Francine Prose: *Reading Like a Writer* (London, Union Books 2012)

⁵⁰ *Ibid* p55

⁵¹ *Ibid* p110

(ii) 'The Planner' and 'The Pantser'

The internet is, unsurprisingly, replete with advice for budding writers, and in blog after blog, website after website, we find a basic dichotomy: those who carefully outline everything in advance, and those who write 'by the seats of their pants'. One is either a 'planner' or a 'pantser'.⁵²

Like most binary oppositions, this is crude and misleading, and as the novelist and writing teacher Emma Darwin has written, 'it's not a given that "planning" has to come before "drafting"'.⁵³ Still, it seems clear that some writers prefer to define structure and direction before they commit to their narrative; others launch themselves on a book equipped only with a dramatic situation and a heart full of hope. The planners decry the pantsers' risk-taking and carelessness; the pantsers sneer at the planners for straitjacketing their imaginations and not allowing their fictions to develop organically. Planners map; pantsers explore. William Boyd, for instance, is very much a planner:

I will never abandon a novel because I make all of my mistakes before I write one word. I discard my useless subplots and characters before I start - whereas some people spend 18 months on a novel only to abandon it. I spend two years thoroughly thinking it out and nine months to a year writing. But I write with confidence – I never wonder what will happen next.⁵⁴

⁵² See, for example among many others: Jennifer Blanchard: 'From Story Pantser to Story Planner: One Writer's Journey' <http://storyfix.com/from-story-pantser-to-story-planner-one-writer%E2%80%99s-journey> retrieved 16/04/16 and Karris Lynch, 'Pantser or Planner?' at <https://wordserwatercooler.com/2016/03/08/pantser-or-planner/> retrieved 16/04/16

⁵³ Emma Darwin: *This Itch of Writing* Monday 15 October 2012 'Pantsing Forward, Planning Backward'. <http://emmadarwin.typepad.com/thisitchofwriting/2012/10/pantsing-forward-planning-backward.html> retrieved 16/04/16

⁵⁴ 'William Boyd: my advice for budding authors'. Interview in Guardian books blog Tues 15 Sept 2015 <http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2015/sep/15/william-boyd-my-advice-for-budding-authors> retrieved 14/12/15

Contrary to Boyd's advice, I often wondered what would happen next when I was writing my novel; often, indeed, I feared nothing would. But the actual *period of construction* was similar to Boyd's three years, and my book has ended up with an intricate plot—with something that looks, when extracted from the finished product, very like a plan. Either it *appears* a good deal more planned than it actually was, or I did plan, only not in the same way as Boyd.

Zadie Smith might be called a pantsers, since she claims, 'I haven't the slightest idea what the ending is until I get to it'.⁵⁵ But she adopts a subtler idea, one resembling the old debate in the social sciences between structural grand theory and action-based interactive approaches. Her distinction is between 'macro managers' and 'micro-managers'. The former are more concerned with a book's overall shape, the latter are interested primarily in its detail. In my own practice, however, I found micro and macro to be modes of behaviour rather than character definitions. Especially during the first draft, I had a general sense of direction, some distant islands I was swimming towards. There was always some kind of macro plan, but the journey kept shifting its direction. As I worked through successive drafts, however, the macro plan became clearer and clearer, and I 'corrected' my micro-events more and more to accommodate it.

Returning now to my early drafts and notebooks, I rediscover a great deal of material I had forgotten: scenes abandoned, characters fundamentally changed, style manifestly different. And I would estimate that in producing the four numbered drafts of the book, I have written and thrown away enough raw words for at least three novels of the same length. To a writer like Boyd, this would seem wasteful, and yet there is, I would argue, little real difference between *thinking* of an idea then casting it aside and *writing* the idea then casting it aside. In one there is physical evidence of all the 'wasted' thought (though it is not actually wasted at all, but a necessary route to the finished item), but it is the process of thinking, whether it is written or not, that is important. Of course, Boyd is also a much more experienced novelist than I am, and may simply be able to manage the processes of his imagination more efficiently. I suspect this is a thought I will need to return to if I can produce another couple of novels.

⁵⁵ Zadie Smith 'That Crafty Feeling' in *Changing my Mind: Occasional Essays* (London, Hamish Hamilton, 2009) p.99

The metaphor often used for the ‘pantsing’, or unpre-planned, approach is one of *unearthing*. For example, in his influential memoir-cum-how-to-guide, the popular novelist and pantsing advocate Stephen King describes his process thus:

Stories are relics, part of an undiscovered pre-existing world.

The writer’s job is to use the tools in his or her toolbox to get as much of each one out of the ground intact as possible.⁵⁶

The attraction of this idea, I think, is the sense that what emerges from the novelist’s process is natural, unforced, and has a kind of pre-existing integrity. Its problem as a description, however, is that a fossil is static and dead, and a fiction is not. A fiction is either a newly discovered lifeform or it is an intricate machine invented by the writer. Or it is a little of both: something alive *and* something mechanical. The ‘plan’ is the map of the genome or the blueprint for a machine, and it may exist fully before writing begins or once the novel is written—or somewhere between, as John Irving indicates:

Along the way accidents happen, detours get taken—the accidents turn out to be some of the best things. But these are not “divine” accidents; I don’t believe in those. I believe you have constructive accidents en route through a novel only because you have mapped a clear way.⁵⁷

It is important that Irving explains himself in terms of what he does and does not ‘believe in’. In other words, in terms of faith. It seems for many novelists, the next immense, shapeless novel-in-waiting can seem confounding, and that it will continue to mock the writer with its impossibility until one day, by largely incomprehensible means, it ends up finished. Perhaps a ‘method’, that seems to explain how one produced other novels is really only a trick of self-motivation, necessary to convince the writer that this as-yet unformed product will repay the vast energy needed for its

⁵⁶ Stephen King *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (London, Hodder & Staughton, 2010. Kindle Edition). Locations 1868-1871

⁵⁷ ‘John Irving, The Art of Fiction No. 93’ Interviewed by Ron Hansen in *the Paris Review* No. 100, Summer-Fall 1986. <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2757/the-art-of-fiction-no-93-john-irving> Retrieved 14/12/15

creation. Possibly ‘I am a planner’ or ‘I am a pantser’ is just another writer’s superstition, like that described here by Philip Pullman:

I believe that every story is attended by its own sprite, whose voice we embody when we tell the tale, and that we tell it more successfully if we approach the sprite with a certain degree of respect and courtesy ... To the accusation that this is nonsense, that all you need to tell a story is human imagination, I reply ‘Of course, and this is the way my imagination works’.⁵⁸

One’s chosen method does not matter, therefore, as long as the writer *expects* it to work. And as Michelangelo once remarked:

The sculptor arrives at his end by taking away what is superfluous; the painter produces his, by adding the materials which embody the representation to the mind: however, after all, they are both produced by the same intelligence, and the superiority is not worth disputing about since more time may be lost in the discussion than would produce the works themselves.⁵⁹

The following, therefore, is not a schematic for the writing of novels in general. It is a discussion of how my first novel came into existence. I have learned a great deal about the writing of novels through this process, including the essential lesson that as far as the process goes, it does not do to adopt too prescriptive an attitude. Put more academically, a Creative PhD is a *qualitative* research process, and as such should be considered valid rather than reliable. Its outcomes reveal not a generally applicable truth but the intimate workings of an individual event.

⁵⁸ Philip Pullman: Introduction to *Grimm Tales for Young and Old*. (London, Penguin, 2012) p.xx

⁵⁹ Michelangelo Buonarroti: Letter to Benedetto Varchi, translated in Richard Duppa, Quatremère de Quincy *The Lives and Works of Michael Angelo and Raphael* (London, Bell & Daldy, 1872) p.151

(iii) Writing by Palimpsest

One writer I contacted for research had embarked on a PhD in Creative Writing when she was already a successful published novelist. I asked her if researching for the degree had noticeably affected her creative process. Her reply included the following remark:

because I was thinking about the business of storytelling, that aspect of the novel probably did come more to the fore than it would have otherwise, particularly ... [my protagonist's] reflections on the creative process, and on how she, as a professional historian, is hamstrung in her desire to make an imaginative re-creation with her subjects. There was also a subplot about restoring historic buildings, by analogy with the business of writing historical fiction.⁶⁰

This is telling, I think, and it corresponds to my own experience. My protagonist also began symbolically re-enacting my experience as a writer: for example when, starving and exhausted, Christopher has to reconnect with his own physical form:

He focused on touch, forced the palm of his right hand to remember its thumb and fingers. Then he set it to searching out his chain. It stroked and squeezed link after link until it reached the cuff around his ankle. He ran a fingernail under the steel, dug into flesh, and found something wet and warm blooming on his skin—maybe sweat, maybe blood. That was enough. His nervous system reignited, and he was himself in his body again. Here were his feet, his mouth, his own heart in his chest. Here was the other end of his chain, still anchored to the wall. Here was his voice, a groan as the hunger unravelled itself from the darkness, found its home in his belly, dragged and punched at his gut.

⁶⁰ (anonymised) Email – see Appendix 2 for full text.

This, which owes much to the wonderful opening of Ted Hughes' *The Iron Man*,⁶¹ also describes my experience of writing this novel. Starting with only the vaguest idea of what it might be, I gradually found its shape by connecting this to that, feeling my way around its shape, until I could understand what it was. Writing was both an imaginative process and a practical one. Setting down my ideas as a series of constructed incidents forced me to make connections between them and to develop a world out of the materials I had at hand. Those materials included personal experience, observation and research, but also this new imagined reality I was creating: both the book as it was so far written and my increasingly precise sense of its future form. In creative work, I found the ancient principle that 'nothing comes from nothing'⁶² was only partly true. The fictional world had its sources in reality, but was also self-generating. As the practice of writing began interacting with my imagination, my story came from both something and nothing, from somewhere and nowhere.

To begin with, all I had was an idea for a dramatic incident, based on an event from my own childhood. Here, transcribed, is an early entry from my notebook:

*J.A.'s jump from cliff to stack—the realisation once he was there that he might not have enough of a run-up to get back. What this says about his character—reckless, danger-prone + not thinking ahead.*⁶³

A month or so later, I wrote a full outline plan. It pre-echoes the book I eventually wrote, but varies from it in almost every important way:

Premise:

Man, late 40s. Call him Anderson. Has been in therapy for several years due to anger issues, but is successful in some

⁶¹ Ted Hughes *The Iron Man: A Children's Story in Five Nights* (London, Faber and Faber 1986) pp11-18

⁶² Expressed, for instance in Lucretius's poem *De Rerum Natura* thus: 'exordia sumet,/nullam rem e nihilo' ('principal law, nothing comes from nothing')

⁶³ Writer's private notebook. Undated entry, identifiable from context as November or December 2012:

made-up job—providing consultancy to local councils regarding the implementation of whatever fad is currently popular.

What else is he like? Nervous and socially uncertain. Only good when there is a structure. Better at work than at being a person—or only really a person through his work. Two failed marriages. Wealthy. (Estranged kid(s)?)

Starts seeing ghosts. Initially from his own past, then everywhere. Eventually it becomes impossible to identify who is dead and who is alive.

Becomes a successful medium.... —Then what?

Structure

(Act) 1

Establish Anderson's character + background

Introduce key relationships.

—————▶ *Psychotherapist (LASKEY)*

—————▶ *Ex wives*

—————▶ *(Child(ren)???)*

(Head injury) – to take place in Scotland at a very swish private members club gym/swimming pool/sauna—night in hospital then drives home to England

ON THE WAY HOME

First ghost 12 year-old-boy stack jump narration

Ghost reveals (is it true?) that he died attempting to jump back across.

(ACT) 2

Anderson's business is beginning to fall apart..

—more and more ghosts appearing in A's life.

—he moves into the Medium business (with Laskey as agent/manager—whose credentials are maybe less than perfect?) – [Psycho]therapy also becoming less fashionable??

Stage shows



TV shows

*As suddenly as they appeared, the ghosts disappear,
leaving Anderson with two choices END or FAKE.*

(ACT) 3

*Anderson is now faking (though it is uncertain whether
previously he simply had hallucinations)*

Laskey—a problem—goes into a moral decline—drugs...

They continue making money—tv psychic channels etc.

Anderson recognises the moral bankruptcy of his

'business' when Laskey ODs and dies....

(ACT) 4

*Police—against their better judgement—at the insistence
of the family draw A. into an abduction case as a 'consultant'.*

Child has gone missing...

Psychologically fried, he is unable to say no—though

*(a) he is now convinced that his ghosts were always
imaginary*

(b) they have deserted him

*Laskey (the late...) reappears as a vision. Provides A with
'information'. Since he has nothing to trust, he trusts this –Saves
the child? Doesn't save the child – two endings.⁶⁴*

In Zadie Smith's terms, I was macro-planning the novel—although this is hardly even a sketch, compared to the detailed roadmaps proposed by the likes of Boyd and Irving. Notably here, the boy jumping across to the stack into the novel is a significant, but not story-essential, incident. It seems interesting and dramatic, but its purpose is vague. Even so, the plan enabled me to begin writing. Having somewhere I thought I might be going was necessary to my sense of purpose. And it did not matter that, like the cliché of the man lost in the desert, I was stumbling towards a mirage.

In all my previous unsuccessful attempts at writing novels, I had micromanaged the early scenes, hoping the structuring elements would, as Stephen King suggests they do, emerge from cause and effect. In fact, that was also how I wrote the first draft

⁶⁴ Notebook Jan 2014

of *Branwen Kellow*. It only worked this time because this time I had tricked myself into thinking I had a road map. By the time I realised neither the route nor the destination were what I had envisaged, the novel had gathered sufficient momentum to bring itself into being.

I would describe my creative process not as an unearthing but as a palimpsest. The novel appeared gradually, solidifying, coming into focus through repeated erasures and writings-over, as I identified and solved problem after problem—of character and motivation; of story; of plot. Things became clearer and better-connected with each pass.

In *Rewriting*, David Michael Kaplan says this:

You revise for *style* (saying it in the most graceful way, which is often all people think revision is), and you revise for *structure* (saying it in the most coherent and dramatically effective way), and you revise – and here comes the way you might not have thought about it before – for *meaning*, for discovering what you really wanted to say in the first place, what the story's *really* about.⁶⁵

Later, he adds,

Mulling it over. Getting the whole story 'lined up'. I believe the most important steps in revising occur – or should occur – here, *before we begin to write*.⁶⁶

Taken together, these remarks argue that the plan is not an end in itself (as William Boyd seems to believe) but the first in a series of revisions, whose end purpose includes identifying the fundamental reason for the story's existence. That certainly describes my experience writing *Branwen Kellow*.

The novel's rapid evolution is evident in a character timeline, written one month after my initial plan:

⁶⁵ David Michael Kaplan, *Rewriting: a Creative Approach to Writing Fiction* (London, A&C Black 1998) P10

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* p.14

Christopher*Born: 1971**1982: Parents die – goes to live with grandmother**1983: Christopher sees Danny jump etc**(marriage to Jacqueline; birth of daughter)**1999: Psychotherapy – including hypnosis – Christopher learns the technique that will empower his act.**2002 – three years of psychotherapy have done him no good. On a whim he attends a spiritualist meeting**2008 – Christopher is becoming moderately famous as a psychic⁶⁷*

At that time I had written about 20,000 words of the earliest draft, abandoning or reshaping almost everything about the original outline as I went. Having thus discovered the novel's manner of revealing itself, I concluded it would be necessary to force myself ahead with absolute discipline. So I set about the task of adding 1000 words to the novel daily. When I reached 40,000, many essential building blocks were in place. The missing child had become a missing teenage girl. The corrupt therapist/business manager 'Laskey' was now two characters – McMeekin the psychotherapist and Grice the tour manager.

Two months on, I recorded the following breakthrough, ('Danny' is the character I later renamed 'Stevie'):

*Proposed development. 'Danny?' abducts Chris.**A confused sense of who he is—is he the 'real' Danny; is he the spirit guide?**Where does he keep him. Abandoned building? –Jim's old scout hut in East Crompton [Jim is dead by now?]**Is Christopher Christopher? Is Danny Danny? Who really jumped? Whole sequence of childhood events is thrown into question.⁶⁸*

⁶⁷ Notebook Feb 15th 2014

⁶⁸ Notebook April 8th 2014

This, I would say, is the moment at which I found the real narrative. My protagonist was no longer the angry, selfish person I had initially envisaged. He had a clear starting point (the cliff-top leap) and now a clear crisis point (the abduction). Much of what would join up those events, however, was fuzzy at best. I did not know how the abduction would resolve. Nor did I know what had happened to Branwen Kellow, the vanished teenager. Nevertheless, the novel had achieved momentum. I was working out, through trial and error, how to assemble a complex machine.

As I wrote the first draft, I learned to trust the narrative to propose its own solutions. I should be clear that this was not a product of Romantic mysticism, but of the need to create logic, cause-and-effect, in the story, and of chain-reactions as one invention collided with another. In Zadie Smith's terms, the micro would reverberate into the macro. An excellent example, I think, is the character of Mr Leeming.

One Saturday afternoon, I happened to go into an old-fashioned shoe repair shop in Leicester. Because I liked the detail of the location, I made a few notes about it. Then I found an excuse to include it in the story of Christopher's adolescence, inventing a proprietor as I did so. This was very much a micro decision.

Leeming was a tall, stooping man with a bald head. I never liked him, but I did like the shop—its cluttered smell of leather and machine oil; the high shelves packed with tight rows of shoes. There were interesting displays of laces, polishes and brushes. Signs on bits of cardboard set out the regulations in a careful, childlike hand. *Repairs not collected after three months will be disposed of.*

At the point I created Mr Leeming I had no intention of developing him any further. He was only introduced as a bit of local colour for the scene in the shoe repair shop. However, I later realised he could serve much larger purposes. He could become part of a pattern of absent or inadequate father figures; he could be the person who draws Christopher's grandmother into Spiritualism; he could provide a reason for Christopher's special animus against the successful medium Toni Webster. Thus, what had begun as a micro-experiment, a scene about the character in the moment, became a structural keystone.

(iv) Factual Verisimilitude and Research

Finding all the interlocking elements of my protagonist's experiences—causes, effects, motivations, actions—was an imaginative process. Thinking of a reader, I would say it was necessary to create story realism, a sense that everything that happens makes sense. According to Barthes, this is to succumb to the traditional construction of the 'readerly text'. However, I was beginning to conclude that interesting interpretative difficulties do not need to depend on impenetrability of style or deliberate fragmentation of narrative events—the two commonest strategies in modernist fiction for signalling a fiction's seriousness of intent.

At the same time, I needed to construct surface realism—a believable world based on reality.

Since the setting was in Britain during my own lifetime I needed to carry out only occasional contextual research where memory failed me. For example I had to check what social media would have been available and which songs a group of teenagers could have been listening to in summer 2004.

Frequently, I could rely on memory and experience for verisimilitude. For example, I had visited my own grandmother in a long-term geriatric ward at a mental hospital many times after she suffered a debilitating stroke and could describe my protagonist's similar experience with little difficulty. My Beta readers were helpful in identifying where this approach was working and where it was not. For example, in the very first draft I experimented with the idea of setting Christopher's childhood scenes on the Norfolk coast (my intention was to make them less autobiographical). My earliest reader suggested however that neither my shaky sense of geography nor the invented argot I represented in hilarious phonetics were at all convincing. Shifting the scene to an invented town in an unspecified North-East England demonstrated that 'write what you know' is sometimes the best advice—though many aspects of the book still required me to write about things I did not know, and would need to research if they were to function effectively. In particular I knew the various events involving psychic performances would have to ring true.

My approach to this aspect of the research was, put positively, organic—which is another way of saying unsystematic and disorganised. It is important to recognise, however, that in a creative process, chaotic research has the benefit of unpredictability, encouraging unexpected and interesting connections between ideas.

Mostly it was unplanned, and it often went unrecorded, especially when I was following hyperlink to hyperlink. Sometimes it was a response to a specific creative problem, but more often I undertook more generalised background research, immersing myself in the atmosphere of my subject, seeing what interesting details caught my attention, giving myself the confidence to write about the peculiar world of the performing psychic.

To begin with, I knew little. Concerning the techniques and tricks of the psychic trade, I had heard of something called ‘cold reading’ and had seen a couple of news stories in which psychics and faith healers were accused of wearing earpieces onstage so they could be fed information, but I did not know much about the specifics.⁶⁹ Attending a couple of shows gave me insight into the typical atmosphere at events, which I consolidated by browsing the enormous number of extracts available to view on YouTube.⁷⁰ I was especially interested in the ways that different performers managed such a potentially intense emotional situation in an entertainment context.

My account of the definitely phoney psychic Toni Webster owes much to the writings of the sceptic and conjuror James Randi⁷¹ to the classic ‘insider’ account of the trade, M Lamar Keene’s *The Psychic Mafia*⁷² and to a TV documentary by the British magician Derren Brown, fortuitously re-broadcast when I was beginning the book.⁷³ Brown is deeply hostile to the psychic trade. Attending his 2013 stage show *Infamous*⁷⁴ in which he performed openly fake, but nevertheless spectacular ‘psychic readings’ was especially useful as an inspiration for my descriptions of Christopher’s stage performances. In particular, the way that all showmanship, whether the

⁶⁹ See for example, Simon Singh, ‘Is psychic Sally Morgan deluded but essentially harmless?’ *The Guardian* Thursday 16th August 2012 <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2012/aug/16/psychic-sally-morgan-deluded-harmless> (retrieved 24/09/15) and Al Seckel, ‘God’s frequency is 39.17 mhz: the investigation of Peter Popoff’ Originally published in *Science and the Paranormal*, 1987, retrieved from <http://casa.colorado.edu/~dduncan/pseudoscience/PeterPopoff.htm> on 26/04/16. Morgan successfully defended herself in 2013 against allegations in the *Daily Mail* that she used an earpiece to receive information about audience members at her shows. See <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2013/jun/20/daily-mail-libel-damages-tv-psychic> (retrieved 24/04/16). After James Randi exposed Popoff’s fraudulent practices in 1986, the faith healer went bankrupt. He subsequently restarted his career as a faith healer in the late 1990s and continues to practise, offering ‘supernatural debt relief’ for example. See <http://archive.randi.org/site/index.php/swift-blog/1660-popoffs-still-at-it.html> (retrieved 24/04/16)

⁷⁰ See, for example, this extract from *The Three Mediums*. There is a particularly disturbing exchange beginning at 4.21. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hh6tHjtkS2Y> Also this impressive performance from the medium Lisa Williams <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r3ulrwlmcw>

⁷¹ In particular to James Randi, *Flim Flam* (New York, Prometheus Books 1988) and *An Encyclopedia of Claims, Frauds, and Hoaxes of the Occult and Supernatural*, (New York, St Martin’s Press, 1997) as well as the extensive web archive at <http://web.randi.org>

⁷² M Lamar Keene, as told to Allen Spraggett, *The Psychic Mafia* (New York, Prometheus Books, 1997)

⁷³ *Derren Brown Investigates: The Man Who Contacts the Dead* (UK Channel 4, first aired 10 May 2010).

⁷⁴ At DeMontfort Hall, Leicester on June 3rd 2013

performer is honest or not, requires handling of the audience, and the extent to which that might at any moment tip over into something immoral. This is something my protagonist worries about a great deal—here, for instance:

One day, things would be going so wrong in a show that he'd have to put them right with a lie. It was inevitable. A real lie. Not just Berry's PR misdirections or Rob's bits of stagecraft. The more successful he became, the more depended on him, the closer he became to the others, the Toni Websters.

Regarding the psychology of audience belief at psychic events, I found Richard Wiseman's populist account *Paranormality*⁷⁵ extremely useful. It was from there that I learned, for example, how table-turning works. But Wiseman is also very good on the complicity of audiences and subjects in their own deception, a phenomenon that obsesses and angers my protagonist throughout the novel.

At a practical level, I needed to write about Christopher's daily life on tour. For that, I drew on an account by a different kind of performer: the veteran stand-up comedian Richard Herring. He tours extensively, playing mainly smaller theatres and clubs, and has blogged every day for over a decade. In this passage, he describes arriving at a Liverpool venue:

it was all locked up when I got there and I had no number on my sheet. I was now so tired and annoyed that after banging on the doors had resulted in no response I was considering getting in my car and driving home. I was never going to do that of course, but I was flustered and tired and fucked off. This is another reason why next year I will have a tour manager.⁷⁶

Passages like this gave me invaluable insight into the frustrations my protagonist would experience on the road.

To deal convincingly with a more esoteric element of the novel, its treatment of the way we recall traumatic incidents *as narratives*, I needed to research aspects of

⁷⁵ Richard Wiseman *Paranormality* (London, Pan MacMillan, 2012) pp.133-175

⁷⁶ Richard Herring, *Warming Up* Sunday 25th March 2012

<http://www.richardherring.com/warmingup/25/03/2012/index.html> retrieved 28/0416

psychology. I was already interested in Lacan's concept of 'suture'. As Elsaesser and Hagener put it, suture is a metaphor employed in Film Theory to describe,

the force or strength of continuity editing as the technique that not only ensures continuity and the sequential logic of actions, but also as the effect that 'stitches' the viewing subject into the film.⁷⁷

From the point of view of my novel's relationship with its audience, this quasi-psychoanalytical idea seemed important. A novel must have its own equivalent techniques to 'stitch' the reader into the fiction. It was a way to think about the audience's (or reader's) experience of an acknowledged lie (the story) as a kind of 'truth' or 'reality'. However, in considering my protagonist's experiences of memory, it was research psychology that drew my attention. While there is, as far as I am aware, no realistic psychological experience that could compare to Christopher's strange abduction into a liminal Purgatory, the section is partly driven by ideas I drew from studies of so-called Recovered Memory and Flashbulb Memory. My novel is a work of fiction—and I did not feel that I had to be 'correct' in my dealings with psychological concepts, especially in areas like this that are clearly the subject of much debate within the discipline. However, my work's authenticity did depend *for me* on believing that I understood what might be possible in terms of the psychology of memory.

Flashbulb memory is a psychological concept, related to particularly dramatic or shocking events. It suggests that public traumas (such as the 9/11 attacks) and private ones (such as bereavement) can produce especially vivid memories of the moments when they were experienced. Although it was initially assumed that such memories were unusually accurate (in a classic study of individuals' recollections of the J.F. Kennedy assassination⁷⁸) later work suggests that though vivid, they are no more likely to be truthful than 'ordinary' memories. Indeed, some research indicates that the more detailed and precise a memory is, the more likely it is that the individual has

⁷⁷ Thomas Elsaesser and Matt Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* (Abingdon, Routledge 2015) p.102

⁷⁸ Roger Brown and James Kulik 'Flashbulb Memories' in *Cognition* Vol5 Issue 1 (Amsterdam, Elsevier 1977 pp.73-99)

unconsciously fabricated elements in order to build a convincing narrative.⁷⁹ This is particularly relevant to ‘Recovered Memory’, where a subject of psychological treatment or hypnotism, can suddenly ‘remember’ childhood events that had previously been repressed. In fact, as Elizabeth F Loftus and many others demonstrate, such memories can very easily be implanted by a therapist and subsequently become ‘truth’ to the patient:

False memories are constructed by combining actual memories with the content of suggestions received from others. During the process, individuals may forget the source of the information. This is a classic example of source confusion, in which the content and the source become dissociated. [...] Without corroboration, there is little that can be done to help even the most experienced evaluator to differentiate true memories from ones that were suggestively planted.⁸⁰

In my novel, memories have not been planted by the suggestions of another person, but through the protagonist’s own psychological processes. However, he too struggles to differentiate the true memories from the false ones. Ultimately, he needs to accept that truth and memory are compromises.

⁷⁹ See particularly, Eugene Winograd and Ulric Neisser, *Affect and Accuracy in Recall: Studies of ‘Flashbulb’ Memories* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992)

⁸⁰ Elizabeth F Loftus ‘Creating False Memories’ (in *Scientific American* Sept 1977) pp71-75 (p.75)

(v) Narratology and Plot

Terry Eagleton, speaking to budding literary critics, suggests that we,

no longer rate a substantial plot as highly as Aristotle did. In fact, we no longer insist on a plot or narrative at all. Unless we are small children, we are less enamoured of stories than our ancestors.⁸¹

I am going to take issue with this argument. Before that, however, we need to note Eagleton's conflation of the terms 'plot', 'narrative' and 'story' as synonyms, or at least near-synonyms. In traditional literary criticism, and in common usage, that is quite usual. In narratology, and in Creative Writing, however, there have been many attempts to lock these terms to distinct meanings. For example, Bordwell and Thompson state (in relation to film) that, 'The set of *all* the events in a narrative, both the ones explicitly presented, and those the viewer infers, constitutes the **story**'⁸² while the plot includes only those elements explicitly presented, plus external elements that appear in the narrative but do not come from the story world. In a novel, such external elements might include epigraphs and the title of the story. In other words, the story is the narrative as experienced by the characters; the plot is the narrative as experienced by the reader.

However, Bordwell and Thompson's definition of plot has nothing to do with the action of the artist. Like most critics, they approach their film texts not as works in progress but as *faits accomplis*, from the point of view of an audience. Writers are likely to see things in different way. Here, for example, is Stephen King on his objections to plot.

In no case were [...my novels...] plotted, not even to the extent of a single note jotted on a single piece of scrap paper, although some of the stories (*Dolores Claiborne*, for instance) are almost as complex as those you find in murder mysteries.

⁸¹ Terry Eagleton, *How to Read Literature*. (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2014) pp.191-192

⁸² David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* Seventh Edition (New York, McGraw-Hill, 2003) p70

Please remember, however, that there is a huge difference between story and plot. Story is honorable and trustworthy; plot is shifty, and best kept under house arrest.⁸³

In support of King's contention here, consider the work of Agatha Christie. Her unsatisfactory characterisation, over reliance on coincidence and tendency to exposition does seem to demonstrate that focussing on the plot is likely to produce thin stuff.⁸⁴ However, I would also say King's use of the term *plot* is problematic, because it is not in fact plot he objects to, but *plotting*: by which he seems to mean the act of creating a set of interlocking circumstances, then making invented people behave in a way that fulfils the requirements of whatever twist or turn the writer has planned. Conversely, beginning with the actions and reactions of one's characters, may generate a simple narrative or a complex set of events that lock together like a closely plotted novel, but they will do so naturally, organically and believably.

As I have indicated earlier in this commentary, my own novel is complex but, I think, coherent and driven by its characters in action rather than its plot. However, as the drafting process progressed, I found that the business of how to *arrange* the story events to best engage the reader became key. In Bordwell and Thompson's terms, *the selection of what parts of the story to include in the plot, and in what order to present them* was, during my second, third and fourth drafts, a most significant problem.

In *S/Z* Roland Barthes identified five narratological codes.⁸⁵ Two of these define the key motivators of that which I would call plot. The hermeneutic (sometimes called 'enigma') code is the mystery – anything in a narrative that presents a puzzle to the reader; the proairetic (or 'action') code is anything that predicts a future event (a similar idea, that a gun should not appear in Act One unless someone is going to fire it in Act Three, is often apocryphally attributed to Chekhov). These codes determine the forward motion of the reading experience—we might describe them as the

⁸³ Stephen King *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (London, Hodder & Staughton, 2010. Kindle Edition) Kindle Locations 1954-1957).

⁸⁴ For example, Agatha Christie *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (London, Harper, 2003) considered by many enthusiasts to be Christie's masterpiece, but absolutely plot-driven.

⁸⁵ Roland Barthes (Trans. Richard Miller), *S/Z* (London, Blackwell, 1990) pp.18-21. It may seem inappropriate in an account of creative writing to rely upon a theorist who posited the death of the author, especially since I have sought to write a novel that in many ways he would dismiss as merely *lisible*. However, though I might disagree with his conclusions about the novel and its reader, many aspects of his analysis do seem sensible to me.

architectural elements of the writer's craft, and the core of the distinction between 'story' and 'plot'.

Within the general project of this novel, I have been interested in exploring the effects of proairetic and hermeneutic coding and in their relationship with the surface of prose. In other words, in the way a plot interacts with style.

Before I consider the ways in which I addressed plot development, I will need to return to Terry Eagleton's suggestion that any reader's engagement in a narrative is infantile and primitive. His argument proposes that the sophisticated literary reader has grown out of any requirement for plot. Symbolism, politico-historical relevance, philosophical purpose, voice and style, and perhaps above all else character: these are the elements of the novel that really matter. His mistake, I think, is to imagine those elements as meaningful in a way that can be separated from the momentum of the story, as wheat from chaff. Fiction requires forward motion, for the reader to be driven ahead, and for that to occur, there must be risk, mystery, expectation, surprise. Proairetic and Hermeneutic coding, which, as Barthes points out are the only aspects of a text to 'impose their terms according to an irreversible order'.⁸⁶

What, for example, would *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* be without Hardy's careful organisation of the chain of misfortunes that beset Tess Durbeyfield? Her character, and all the symbolic, historico-political readings we can draw from the novel, its philosophical perspectives and the beauties of its style are, in one way or another, woven into the writer's structuring of a tragedy. It seems unquestionable to me that this form, Tragedy, is all about plot: not just the 'what happens?' but the selection and organisation of those events into a relentlessly tightening garrotte around Tess's and the reader's necks.

Consider the scene when all the dairy workers are sent out to comb the meadow in search of the garlic plants that have caused a 'twang' (taint) in the butter. This multivalent event is in part nostalgia for an artisanal, communitarian lifestyle about to be destroyed by mechanisation; and it is in part a foreshadowing. Hardy writes:

It was a most tedious business, not more than half a dozen
shoots of garlic being discoverable in the whole field; yet such
was the herb's pungency that probably one bite of it by one cow

⁸⁶ Barthes, *S/Z* op cit. p.30

had been sufficient to season the whole dairy's produce for the day.⁸⁷

This is a plot promise—that Tess's secret will continue to taint her life (with associated symbols of both maternity and purity implicit in the milk). It is a proairetic code through which Hardy points up not just the story to come, but also his own connection to an Aristotelian tradition of narrative structure: the same one that is defined in Hamlet's near-metafictional account of the tragic form:

these men,
Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,
Being nature's livery, or fortune's star—
Their virtues else—be they as pure as grace,
As infinite as man may undergo—
Shall in the general censure take corruption
From that particular fault.⁸⁸

Hamlet's remark and Hardy's twang in the butter signal the direction in which their plots will proceed. One tiny flaw, one error, will, through remorseless process of cause and effect, expand into the destruction of everything.

For the writer of Tragedy, a form in which Fate, and therefore the development of action, is always a theme, plot is not a distraction or a minor aspect of the fiction; it is the *core of story and of meaning*. Plot, therefore, is not necessarily mere mechanics, but can enact, through the reader's experience of the story, the kind of depth that elevates fiction beyond simple entertainment.

Though I cannot define *Branwen Kellow* as either Tragedy or Comedy in any classical sense, I did know when I embarked on my first draft that plot would be important in my novel. The reader's experience would depend not only on the events I was to construct, but equally significantly on how I organised those events. Partly this was because I wanted the disappearance of Stevie Lightwood, which incites the whole story, to be both dramatically convincing *and* increasingly unreliable. There was also a technical problem in the form of a secondary narrative (Branwen's disappearance

⁸⁷ Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (London, Penguin Classics Kindle Edition 2010) (Kindle Locations 3721-3723).

⁸⁸ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 1:IV (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1947)

and Martha coming to terms with it) that occurs far away from the protagonist and does not involve him until it moves into its own third act. These were all issues of plotting, and, as I will discuss when considering the three distinct structural rewritings of this novel, plot order has been a key writing problem.

(vi) Structural Redrafting

Although the creative process was in some respects one of constant rewriting, I can identify three landmark revision points, which correspond to my whole-numbered ‘drafts’ of the book. Along the way there were many acts of wholesale revision. Mostly these were numbered to one or two decimal places depending on my understanding of the level of significance of the changes I was making. For example, after using the ‘Search’ function in MS word so I could identify (and reconsider) every instance of a ‘said’ speech tag, I raised the draft number from 3.2 to 3.21. Whole numbers were reserved for redrafts that distinctly moved the novel’s structure in a new direction. Of those, there have been five.

The first draft was the process by which I found the story I was telling. After about 50,000 words, I began to struggle. I decided the problem was that I had become overconcerned with structure, worrying too much about how the time scheme was going to work, for example, had become a convenient distraction from the larger problem of not knowing what the ending of my book would be. In an act of faith, therefore, I committed to writing what remained entirely chronologically. This liberated me from problems of structure and let me complete the story by experiencing the unfolding of the narrative exactly as my protagonist did. In other words, I focussed entirely on the writing of the story and forgot about plot entirely – or almost. As the story came together it was sometimes necessary to add essential plot points earlier in the draft. For example, once I had identified Branwen’s abductor in the third act of the novel as Ronnie Chenoweth, I then needed to write earlier scenes in which he appeared, simply to establish his presence more strongly. Mainly, however, I progressed alongside my protagonist into his future in a linear way.

It was obvious to me that this straightforward chronology could not be the final order of the book, and that the time scheme would continue to be a significant challenge to its construction, since it presented two major problems:

1. The story began dramatically enough with the story of Stevie Lightwood’s disappearance off the clifftop, but then continued into a series of anecdotes from Christopher’s adolescence that did not push the narrative forward. It was eighty-four pages before the psychic central character had his first psychic experience, and over a

hundred pages before the Kellow twins appeared. The reader's sense of *story* was underdeveloped.

2. The ending lacked commitment. Wishing to avoid a pat 'tying up' of the novel's threads, to retain a sense of the unreliability of memory, I had abandoned my central character completely.

Following discussion with my supervisor, I set about the second version of the book. Where the first attempt had given primacy to a chronological order of events, this time I looked to generate as dramatically engaging a structure as I could.

This time, though I still began with the disappearance of Stevie Lightwood, I followed that scene by immediately leaping forward twenty years to show Christopher on stage as a performing psychic. Since I had already introduced the idea that Christopher had written an autobiography, it seemed sensible to reconstruct most of those scenes as first-person extracts from that book, and distribute them throughout the text—at points where their relevance to the action in the novel's 'present' of 2010 would be most obvious to the reader.

Before I gave this version to my supervisor, I asked four people to read it. One of these readers had already seen the first draft, and I was interested primarily in her remarks about the differences between the two versions. Of the others, one suggested that the surreal third section had come as too much of a shock after the relatively realist preceding sections whilst the others were positive about that part of the book, and felt this was where the novel really reached its peak of interest. These comments chimed with my increasing feeling that the opening segment on the cliff top took a little too long to roll into action. The solution I proposed was to begin with a flashforward prologue, a scene from the surreal 'kidnapped' section of the book. This would be dramatic, mysterious, and would mean that readers should not be shocked by the shift into surreal psychodrama in the third section.

In solving many of the problems of the first 'Chronological' draft, however, I had created a narrative structure that demanded a great deal of any reader, perhaps too much. On top of a fairly complex plot I had imposed a shattered time structure that began in late 2010, bounced back to 1984, forward to early 2010, forward to mid-2010, back into an autobiographical account of 1986... and so on. It was dramatic but exhausting and confusing.

Following discussion with my supervisor, and with the assessors of my PhD upgrade panel, I rethought this second draft in key ways.

The opening flashforward, I soon decided, was a cheap trick and a lazy one, and did the book no favours. It also meant I began my first chapter with the cliché of a character waking up. The fact, however, that I had even felt the need to attempt such a prologue led me to reconsider my determination to begin a book largely set in 2010 with an event in 1983. Stevie's disappearance needed to be established early, but it was also in effect a flashback, and perhaps one needs to flashback *from somewhere*. Additionally, I have come to distrust the prologue technique, which is these days borrowed by too many prose writers from the methods of Television and Film drama. In those forms, the enigmatic cold-openings employed in the likes of *Breaking Bad*, once an exciting innovation, have quickly become a structural cliché.⁸⁹

It is also quite a long sequence with two separate dramatic 'peaks', and might therefore work better as two separate points of recollection.

I divided the book into four clear segments:

- The Past (everything that occurs before 2010);
- The Story Moment (Several months in 2010 during which Christopher meets Martha and undergoes psychotherapy);
- The Crisis (In which he is kidnapped and must face the truth about his past);
- The Coda (in which he moves into a new life).

Within these events there is an 'A' story and a 'B' story; some of the narrative problems with the book centred on how to integrate these two narratives, which were geographically distant from each other, involved disconnected characters and occurred at different times. The problem of the novel's structure was how to order all these 'blocks' into a sequence that would feel as coherent as the first draft *and* as dramatic as the second.

In my next draft, I made three important changes to the structure, finally arriving at a functioning narrative order for the novel. There have been other significant structural revisions and rewritings since, bringing me to a fifth draft. However, the third draft remains the point at which *Branwen Kellow* found its overall shape, and

⁸⁹ See, for example, the images of a pink teddy bear in a swimming pool that precede four episodes of season 2. The bear's relevance is not revealed until the final episode. *Breaking Bad* season 2 AMC 2009

became a coherent work. Everything since then has been an effort to refine, rather than overhaul, that version of the book.

- First, I structured the whole book around the Story Moment section, beginning with Christopher's appearance onstage. This provides a clear narrative drive from the very start.

- Second, I took the (previously third-person) story of Stevie Lightwood's disappearance and made it into two extracts from Christopher's autobiography. This section which previously began the book now appears as two pieces, read by Martha, interrupted by a several scenes in the Story Moment. This makes these events more obviously mediated, and brings them in line with the other events of Christopher's adolescence.

- Third, I found an outcome for what had really happened on the clifftop when Stevie purportedly vanished that was consistent with the characters and events as I had constructed them. I still retain *some* uncertainty about Christopher's/Stevie's memory, but the ending has a stronger sense of explanation and resolution. This means that the Coda section more effectively fulfils its intended function—which is not to resolve the drama, but to explore the idea that the drama *can be resolved*.

(vii) Reflections on the Third Draft

I hope to have established by this point that plot had become my primary concern in shaping the third draft. Considering this element of the novel also revealed an effect of the academic context when one is writing for a PhD. I would say *effect* rather than *problem*. The academic process has formative influences on what the novel becomes. What is important is that the writer should be conscious of where those influences are beneficial and where they are not. In my case, being embedded in my original plans for the PhD worked for a time against finding the strongest form for my novel. But in the end it was the opportunity to discuss the book in an academic context that led me to an effective way of ordering its events.

What kept me away from my ‘story moment’ structure during draft 2 was certainly *in part* an attachment to the drama and power of the sequence of events at the start of the first draft – Stevie’s disappearance from the cliff. This was my *Enduring Love* balloon scene.⁹⁰ However, I have always felt McEwan’s novel is to some extent shot down by its opening’s high drama. Yet I continued to think this was a structure worth emulating, I think because the opening I had was wedded to my PhD proposal.

Initially, I had set out to investigate the idea that one could write a novel in (to quote myself) ‘clean, realist third-person prose’ that nevertheless explored the possibilities of unreliable narration. By the time I got to the end of the first draft, I had achieved something like that intention, but also established that this was a less interesting question than I had imagined.

In the first and second drafts, true to my PhD intentions, the opening events around Stevie’s disappearance were narrated in straightforward realist prose, third-person, mainly limited. By the end of the book, that narration had been challenged in almost every regard. However, Beta readers of those drafts expressed no problem with having been ‘tricked’ in the first part of the book. Since in the second draft I had largely abandoned the third-person narration of past events, I began to feel that the initial idea of producing an unreliable third person was no longer my main concern. Reflecting on the novel now, however, I see that it was working—but not in quite the way I had anticipated.

⁹⁰ Ian McEwan, *Enduring Love* (London Jonathan Cape Random House, 1997) pp. 1-16

It seemed to me from discussing the first and second drafts with my Beta readers that the linearity of a traditional novel was the prime factor here. **The mode** of an unreliable narration – first, second, third, past, present, whatever, matters much less than **when** it appears in the narrative order.

John Fowles makes this point in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

The only way I can take no part in the fight is to show two versions of it. That leaves me with only one problem: I cannot give both versions at once, yet whichever is the second will seem, so strong is the tyranny of the last chapter, the final, the “real” version.⁹¹

These are the physical processes of the conventionally presented novel, which Salman Rushdie once called ‘the ineluctable Padma-pressures of what-happened-nextism’.⁹² There are postmodernist alternatives – deliberately breaking into the frame with the authorial voice as Calvino or Fowles⁹³ do; BS Johnson’s loose pages and holes cut in the text.⁹⁴ But I was not aiming for metatextual trickery. The project was to try and use the traditional mechanisms of the novel to engage the reader in the story *and* simultaneously to undermine narrative authority.

To achieve this, it needed always to feel like a realist text. Even where it slipped into surrealism in The Crisis section, the novel had to remain bedded in a sense of reality. One reader of my second draft said of this section, ‘It becomes experimental here, but it feels like you’ve earned the experimentation.’ By this, I think he meant that although it is a collapse and in many ways an incoherent experience, The Crisis operates as a revision of the apparent realities I have carefully set up in the first parts of the book.

As James Wood points out, reliable unreliability is a convention of the novel:

⁹¹ John Fowles *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1969) p.417

⁹² Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London, Random House 2011) p.45

⁹³ See Fowles *ibid*; and Italo Calvino (Trans. William Weaver) *If on a Winter's Night, a Traveller* (London, Vintage 1992)

⁹⁴ BS Johnson’s, *The Unfortunates* (London, Picador 1999) was published as a set of loose sections in a box, to be read in any order the reader chooses, apart from the start and finish. His *Albert Angelo* (London Picador, 2013) uses holes in the pages to reveal later action, and in the final section Johnson furiously critiques his own efforts to write a novel.

Even the apparently unreliable narrator is more often than not reliably unreliable. Think of Kazuo Ishiguro's butler in *The Remains of the Day*, or of Bertie Wooster, or even of Humbert Humbert. We know that the narrator is being unreliable because the author is alerting us, through reliable manipulation, to that narrator's unreliability. A process of authorial flagging is going on; the novel teaches us how to read its narrator.⁹⁵

This process of educating the reader into a relationship with the text's unreliability became for me the key to the mechanics of this book, and lay in its division into the four time sections underlying the narrative structure.⁹⁶ Although in the end all the events of the book become questionable, some sections will be read as more questionable than others. The Past is distorted by memory, The Crisis by mental collapse and isolation. These parts of the narrative will be treated by the reader with suspicion. More immediately trustworthy are The Story Moment and The Coda. These events, though narrated (with only one brief, though important, exception) in past tense, appear very much the *social present* of the story, where Christopher's and Martha's experiences happen in a kind of 'now', with other people to validate them. However, as the novel progresses, the linearity Fowles complains about does help create unreliability, since it operates in a way that resembles the passage of time. The further behind us they are, the more moments from that 'now' can shed their initial reliability; and, it would appear, the happier a reader is to distrust them.

The opening scene, for example, is delivered in straight third-person limited, and shows Christopher onstage in Manchester. At this 'now' moment, it seems that we are witnessing reality—from a restricted perspective certainly, but not distorted or untrue. However, Christopher later has to re-evaluate this experience when he comes across a video someone from the audience has posted on YouTube. Then, still further into the narrative, when the video is taken down, he is left with a memory of a recording that no longer exists. Thus the apparently unquestionable realities of the present are revealed to be just as unreliable, and the further they drop behind us into the slippery, mutable past, the more unreliable they become.

⁹⁵ James Wood, *How Fiction Works* (London, Random House) p.7

⁹⁶ See page 36 above.

There are interesting, and, I think, not too fanciful parallels to be drawn here with the process of writing I was going through, and with my research into memory. The palimpsest of writing over and over an idea until it formed a coherent whole, made of layer upon layer on the original story concept certainly echoes the experience of my character as he revises and rewrites all of his memories until they make a kind of sense, and then rewrites himself from a ‘genuine psychic’ into a debunker of psychics. Similarly, the processes of memory are recognised by psychological research to be at least as much defined by narrative structure as they are factually-based:

memories are not of objective external events —“reality”— rather they are of our experience of reality. Our experience is the mind’s nonconscious and conscious construction of reality. Memory details are the product of constructive and attentional processes active during the actual experience and also later during their consolidation in longterm memory when they become integrated with existing autobiographical memory knowledge structures.⁹⁷

In other words, the experience is distorted at the time when it happens by the perception of the subject, and subsequently in memory it is further altered by the addition of physical details that will make it appear more real and of action that will make it more coherent. This sounds a great deal like the writing of a novel. In fiction, the distorting perception is called point-of-view. My protagonist, through the filter of a third person narrator, offers the following imagistic reflection on the relationship between self, memory and narrative:

Everyone was trapped on a crumbling sandstone stack. Time washed away at their memories, or memory washed away at time, like the sea attacking randomly beneath, always looking for the way in. The water found all the weak points, opened them up, until the stack crumbled and collapsed. But there was

⁹⁷ Christine Wells, Catriona M. Morrison & Martin A. Conway ‘Adult recollections of childhood memories: What details can be recalled?’, *The Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 67:7, pp 1249-1261 (2014) (p.1258)

no such thing as destruction, because after erosion there was transportation, and after that there was deposition. What was pulled apart in one place would always reappear somewhere else; an element of something new. The sand from the stack where Stevie had once stood and the ashes of Christopher's father might even now be drawn and hustled around each other by the waters, among a billion other sands and grits. In half a million years, they might be blown together around some future desert; in another half million they might lie beneath the accumulated dust and find themselves compressed into new rock. And who then could separate out the truth of what they had once been?

Throughout my story, this motif of physical erosion and its attendant symbol of the sea stack parallel and reinforce the way that meaning and truth collapse with the passage of time. Here is the novel's final paragraph:

Out at sea, gulls spiral and bicker above the phantom of a collapsed sandstone column. He tries to imagine its shape, to remember anything not washed away by endless retelling. But there is nothing. He's done with this. In an hour's time, Christopher and Lucy and Berry will have moved on to some other place, like Branwen and Stevie and everyone eventually, and it doesn't matter where.

It seemed appropriate, in a story where only 'now' is true, to end by abandoning both the past *and* the future. This scene, called *Ending* is also the only part of the final draft to be written in present tense. My idea was to freeze it at a moment of absolute truth, a permanent present, to make the literary equivalent of such cinematic moments as Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (in a scene referenced explicitly in the novel) running out into a barrage of rifle fire,⁹⁸ or of *Thelma and Louise* frozen in the air above the Grand Canyon.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* [film] dir. by George Roy Hill (USA: Twentieth Century Fox 1969).

⁹⁹ *Thelma and Louise* [film] dir. by Ridley Scott (USA: MGM, 1991)

(viii) The Reality Question: Is Christopher **actually** a psychic?

I should say at this point that the validity or otherwise of practising mediums *in the real world* is not of material importance, and nor are any opinions I might have on that subject. It is perfectly possible that Christopher Longley, the lead character in a story I am writing *might* be a genuine psychic. Equally, however, he might not. The most visible sense of my wearing away at the third-person reliability of the story's previous 'now' concerns Christopher's alleged psychic powers. He is always presented as scrupulously honest and genuinely psychic in the 'now', even, as here, where his loyalty to the truth of his psychic vision has a predictably negative effect on the atmosphere at a performance:

'Georgie was too young to speak, I think?'

The woman shook her head. She and her husband clung tighter to each other's hands. 'We've heard, when they're—on the other side—they can talk?'

'No. I'm sorry.' The child didn't even know his own name. Christopher kept that to himself. There was a memory of white surfaces, machine sounds, the seesaw groaning of a respirator. Cold lights. 'Your son was in the hospital when he died. He never came home, did he?'

'Does he remember us, Christopher? Is he thinking of us?'

He could see how greedily she'd take any kindness he offered her.

'He's peaceful. That's all I can tell you.' It was the best he could do.

'Will we see him again?'

'I don't know about that. Sorry. He *is* at peace. His life was painful, but now he's at rest.'

Eventually, scattered applause broke in, emphasising the embarrassed silence around itself.

There is nothing to suggest anything other than a man struggling with the implications of his gift. However, the close third-person is *so* close that we might be seeing events through Christopher's self-deception, and later in the novel, I can encourage the reader to wonder if Christopher has been unconsciously or semi-consciously faking the whole time.

Rob Grice, his manager says to the journalist Daisy Cross,

'I can tell you some stuff about how he and I used to pull the old psychic routine when we were working together. If that would interest you.'

But Rob is angry at Christopher for sacking him, and has been fairly clearly set up as a dishonest man. Is he lying now, or was he lying then?

And at last, in the scene that should, according to Fowles's idea of linear precedence, carry most weight with the reader, Christopher sees the Dead around him again:

They're everywhere—the tricky thing is picking them out among the Living, and these days he doesn't often bother to try.

The reality or otherwise of his talent has become a banal matter to him, one of several driving concerns that in the end he simply lets go. However, until he reaches this accommodation, the protagonist's questions, 'am I a genuine psychic?' and 'are my memories real?' have been such strong motivators of the story and of his character that it is hardly unfair of the reader to look for definitive answers. In fact, returning to the principal of Chekhov's Gun, that is how a narrative would usually be expected to work – a gun appears, it will need firing at some point; a mystery is posed, it requires a solution. This is why the question, 'Is Christopher really psychic?' came up so frequently with my Beta readers.

Their expectation that I could provide an answer I had not chosen to supply in the book interested me because it pointed to a particular understanding of the nature of an author. According to the reader's perspective, however ambiguous the story, it is

the *narration* that is unreliable, not the world of the story, that which narratologists call diegesis. Unreliable narration is not the actual story, it is a barrier between the reader and diegetic truth. Underlying all the uncertainty, there must be facts, and they will be known to the author. He (me) is the originator of the work, and therefore its final authority. This person I came to call the ‘authority-author’.

I began to wonder if this entirely fictional figure is always necessary to the reader’s process of engaging with the text—is as much a character as anyone who appears in the narrative—and becomes especially important when the text is motivated by any uncertainty. In conversations with everyone who was kind enough to volunteer as a Beta reader, it was clear to me that they were looking for the sort of clarification only the authority-author could give. He (because in my case the authority-author is someone who looks like me and sounds like me) is a kind of vessel containing all the story’s diegetic realities—including the answers to everything the text avoids defining. Because I was writing a first novel and could only understand these phenomena in terms of my current process, I thought it would be valuable to compare notes through a research questionnaire with practising writers at various points in their careers. The outcomes of that questionnaire have informed much of my thought here, and appear in appendix 1.

It appears that when the authority-author wrote *Branwen Kellow*, the events of the book took place in his head in a kind of holistic, fully-visualised manner that was unlike the way the events of the book occurred in my mind while I am writing, or in the minds of any of the writers I surveyed during my research. Unlike me, for example, he is very knowledgeable on the subject of Christopher’s genuineness or otherwise.

I set about the book with the intention that I, its writer, would have no idea whether or not Christopher was genuine, and that the book itself would be equally agnostic. I still do not know. If I were *reading* this novel, I would think Christopher was most likely self-deluding, but that would be because I’d select the evidence from the story that supported my prejudices. Other readers, I know, have read him differently.

(ix) Three Types of Ambiguity

One of the best examples of ambivalence over this question of Christopher's genuineness occurs when he contacts his psychotherapist's dead sister. It is the most intense psychic experience in his life so far:

Christopher could see through everything. He could pick out the right noises from the clamour of the Dead. It wasn't hearing exactly; wasn't thinking exactly. Something between. Then he understood. They were no longer separated. Always before, Stevie had been an intermediary, a hand across the gap. Now, at last, he and Christopher were one; their senses combined. He realised he'd felt this all his life, only just out of reach, never knowing. As if he'd jumped towards the stack but been suspended halfway. He had arrived, knew where he should be. If he could only stay here.

But this account of the experience is undermined immediately afterwards when McMeekin decides that Christopher must have been snooping into his journals and secretly collecting the information. The introduction of this possibility had a strong effect on readers of the first draft, since it cast doubt not only on Christopher's honesty here, but throughout all the earlier parts of the narrative where he has seemed to be genuinely psychic. Consequently in the second draft I modified the ending of the chapter as follows:

Clearly Longley had found McMeekin's notebooks; of course that had to be the only explanation for his knowing about Maira—but how disappointing to discover that was all there was to it.

This is one of only a couple of more overtly metafictional moments in the book: a deliberate acknowledgement of the reader's desire for a novel to provide something fantastical yet absolute, to give us things the world cannot, and for those things to be 'true' within the diegetic reality. It also, I hope, points to a connection between going

to a psychic and reading a novel: each makes sense of the incomprehensible by shaping it into a plot and by adding specificity of detail. And the idea of a novel itself as being a kind of objectified, constructed memory has been underlying my writing practice since the beginning. Its acknowledgement of that objectification finally took three clear forms:

- Within The Story Moment, the immediate and recent past (the ‘now’) is fairly quickly eroded and revised.
- Events from The Past are all presented as mediated.
- Events during The Crisis are clearly unreal

The Coda seeks to draw these three broken versions of reality into cohesion, but ends by admitting that all it can do is compromise, ignore the loose ends of memory and focus instead on the present.

Together with the decay of events within the Story Moment, the mediated nature of The Past, as it exists in the latest draft of my novel creates a more organic and mimetic unreliability. Compared to the cruder unreliability of the entirely third-person first draft, it suggests something that operates more like real memory does: first we experience the present, then when we re-experience it as the past, we begin fitting it into a larger narrative, and finally we mediate it—telling it to others and reshaping it in the process to meet the needs and expectations of whoever might be considered an audience for the memory – oneself, an internalised other, the rest of the world. The core example of this is the story of Stevie’s disappearance, which Christopher constantly rewrites and refines as the opening to his show, but which he is then forced to revise utterly during The Crisis, where finding a ‘true’ version becomes his escape route from imprisonment.

There are, however, many other mediation techniques in the novel. Mostly we access Christopher’s past through extracts from Autobiography, which is unreliable for two principal reasons. It is written from memory and it is designed to construct him as the ‘honest psychic’ he wants to present to the world. In fact, Christopher himself sees the autobiography as a kind of semi-fictional exercise:

It was in his autobiography of course. He remembered when he was writing that part, he’d had trouble deciding whether to say the boarding house had twin beds or a double. A double was more vivid

and awkward but twins were more believable somehow. Actually he couldn't remember if they'd even had a room at all. Back then they would often sleep in the van to save on costs.

Anyway, every performer knew the truth was in the drama, not the details.

The reconstructed memory of the autobiography then becomes a kind of research material for Christopher when he undergoes psychotherapy:

to prepare himself to talk about his father's funeral, he scoured the relevant pages of his autobiography, underlining sentences and reading aloud as if he were preparing for an exam.

This moment follows directly after the autobiography extract dealing with that event has appeared in the text, deliberately leaving the reader to wonder what it is they have just read. Is it Christopher's account to McMeekin; is it the account McMeekin *hears*; is it Martha's reading of the autobiography; is it Christopher's reading and note-taking—or is it 'just' the autobiography itself?

The history of Branwen Kellow is partly told in newspaper cuttings, where news values, not the truth, are of primary concern. Later, Martha begins to narrate the story of the beach party to Christopher before the story slips into third person. And her memory is called into question when Daisy fails to corroborate an anecdote from her childhood she has shared earlier with Christopher.

Something popped up in her mind. 'Daisy, do you remember when Bran and I tried that experiment with the dice and the needle?'

'Needle? I don't think I do. What was that about?'

'It doesn't matter.'

The Crisis, when Christopher is re-experiencing the past, facing up to his own identity and discovering the 'truth', is all narrated in third person. But throughout this section he is in a liminal state, possibly insane, possibly drugged, possibly in a kind of

Purgatory. Afterwards, he has to hand over the experience to the police, who make sense of it for their purposes, but not in a way he finds satisfactory:

Christopher realised he would have to submit to this. Whatever had happened to him, there was going to be a rational, physical explanation. He didn't need to believe it was true, exactly. Or anyway, he didn't have to believe it was the *only* truth. Obviously, he had been in both places at once. He had been in the old ECSAG hut with the man in the snorkel coat. That was too important not to be real. But he had been with Ronnie Chenoweth too. And for now Christopher needed to let this policeman think what he wanted to.

There is, therefore, a constant and very deliberate sense when dealing with the past that the events I am recounting have been filtered through one or more consciousnesses, and that what the reader is experiencing is not the diegetic 'truth' but a version of it, mediated by the needs, wants, desires of characters. Again, I am thinking of the novel as behaving in ways similar to those in which psychological experiments have found actual memory behaves, not as a repository of facts, but as an attempt to marshal fragments into coherence via narrative devices. This is not as straightforwardly unreliable a perspective as the first person narrators of, say, Kazuo Ishiguro, where the purpose of the unreliability is to emphasise the particular distorting obsessions of the narrator. My intention was rather to create a queasy relationship with the past and with the idea of memory, so that the reader's experience of the novel becomes mimetic with the protagonist's dilemma.

(x) The Stylistic Evolution of my Novel

In ‘That Crafty Feeling’, her excellent lecture on the subject of how she writes a novel, Zadie Smith says,

What’s amusing ... is how little confidence you have in your readers when you begin. You spoon-feed them everything. You can’t let a character walk across the room without giving her backstory as she goes. You don’t trust the reader to have a little patience, a little intelligence ... you’re worried that if you don’t mention in the first three pages that Sarah Malone is a social worker with a dead father, this talented reader might not be able to follow you exactly.¹⁰⁰

As a *teacher* of Creative Writing, I constantly seek to move my students away from this tendency to over-explain. ‘Let understanding arise naturally through the action,’ I tell them. And as a *student* of Creative Writing, it has been, through the rewriting of my novel, the most important stylistic development I have undergone during the last three years. To demonstrate this process, I will lay bare the earliest and ugliest drafts of what became my own opening section.

When we start writing, and as Smith’s lecture suggests, even when highly experienced writers start a new project, there is a tendency to do what I call *writing like a reader*. By this, I mean that it is in the process of being read that books come to life, that characters and situations become real to us. Simply, the reader does a lot of the work. This is why extended descriptions and ‘telling’ are generally counterproductive. All the reader needs are the right cues to stimulate the imagination. Our problem as first-draft writers is that we do not know what those cues might be, and we are often teaching ourselves about these characters through the writing process. Also, however, it seems to me, we often retain the mistaken impression that what we have in our heads from all those books we have read is what was put there by the writer. Thus, when we start writing fiction, we try to construct something like the

¹⁰⁰ Zadie Smith ‘That Crafty Feeling’ in *Changing my Mind: Occasional Essays* (London, Hamish Hamilton, 2009) p.106

books we *imagine* we have read, to recreate the joint work reader and writer did together to build not only a fully realised sense of character and place, but also an understanding of meaning and theme. We also forget that making sure the reader ‘gets it right’ is far less important than making sure the reader is engaged—and forget too that the reader is engaged not by being told everything about these aspects of the story but by becoming creatively involved in making his or her own version of them.

When I started this novel I was a highly-trained reader. At the time I considered that an advantage, but I now know it made me a worse writer. There are certainly countless sections of my predraft that show how susceptible I was to ‘writing like a reader’ misapprehensions. Over the process of redrafting, I have sought to rid myself of these tendencies.

As an example I will consider the evolution of the scene that eventually became the novel’s opening, looking in particular at a very early ‘predraft’ version, well before the official first draft, compared with a second draft version (2.3) and the fourth (4.0)

This passage in the predraft version is 413 words long. The 2.3 version reduces that to 136, refining the narration, reducing authorial interference to the minimum and seeking to increase the reader’s immersion in the scene. As regards *things happening*, they are the same in both drafts. What I have removed are almost 300 words of explaining myself to the reader, of writing like a reader.

Here is the opening of the predraft version. There are several superficial differences from later drafts. At this time, I was writing in present tense, Longley was called Anderson, Stevie was called Danny and the scene took place in Birmingham, not Manchester.

VERSION 1 (predraft)

Anderson begins with the story of what happened to Danny, though a good number of the people in the Birmingham New Theatre already know how it goes. It’s the way all of his performances start: this ritual narration to invoke the spirit; a liminal process that positions him where he needs to be.

Bad impulses are evident even in these opening sentences. Mistrust of the reader fills out every detail. And I compound that sin with indirect presentation of action that drains out vividness and immediacy. See, for example, how I open with reported speech. The third major weakness is reliance on abstract language that tries to give the story a veneer of cleverness but really overeggs it and draws attention unnecessarily to the *writing*. Christopher's process is obviously ritual and liminal—there is no need to instruct the reader in this manner. Moreover, if the point is that this is all becoming meaningless to him, this elaborate language works *against* what I am trying to achieve. It creates a sense of portentous ritual rather than just habit. The prose weakens that which it seeks to strengthen.

I can now see how all this fits with a general desire to privilege the narrator over the scene itself. What is made important here is not the event but the writer's explanation of it. The problem is overconcern with *myself*, with the desire to say 'look at me, I'm writing' at every moment. This is what Elmore Leonard means when he says 'If it sounds like writing, I rewrite it'.¹⁰¹ I sought in my second draft version to show off less and draw the reader into the scene more.

VERSION 2 (Draft 2.3)

'Twenty-seven years ago, in 1983,' Christopher said, 'I saw a boy vanish into the air.' He stood centre stage in a Manchester theatre and told the story.

Opening with direct speech transforms narration into action. No longer commenting on and/or explaining everything in sight, I trust my imagined reader to fill in the gaps.

The pattern continues in the next paragraph:

¹⁰¹ Leonard published versions of his '10 rules for writers' in various places. Their first public appearance seems to have been in this New York Times article of July 6th 2001. Elmore Leonard, 'WRITERS ON WRITING; Easy on the Adverbs, Exclamation Points and Especially Hooptedoodle' <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/07/16/arts/writers-writing-easy-adverbs-exclamation-points-especially-hooptedoodle.html> retrieved 24/5/16.

VERSION 1 (predraft)

To achieve the proper incantatory effect, he has to tell it identically every time. This means not only the exact same words, but also the correct intonations, pauses, emphasis, gestures - like he's a recording of himself. Yet, important as it is to tell the story correctly, he no longer needs to concentrate on what he is saying or doing, he's performed it now so many times. The words travel from wherever they're stored in his memory directly to his lips, and they're spoken by his mouth not his mind, while his body makes the necessary movements at the appropriate times without requiring direction. It's not as automatic as breathing, but it is secondary, habitual, like brushing his teeth or tying a shoelace. He's not really listening to himself speak. Instead, over hundreds of performances he's developed the habit of using these moments to scan each new audience; applying the conscious part of his mind to the question, what does this one, this time, need from him?

VERSION 2 (Draft 2.3)

It had become habitual, a secondary act like brushing his teeth or tying a shoelace. While his mouth was speaking, his mind could engage in other preparations. He scanned the audience; applied himself to the question. What did it want? This one, this time.

Simplified considerably. The image is enough, and the intrusive interpreting voice is minimised. The idea is exactly the same, but no longer overstated. At the end, rather than writing wordily in general terms 'he's developed the habit of using these moments to scan each new audience...' I make it an *action* 'He scanned the audience'

and the thought is presented through a free-indirect style that puts the reader more directly into the character's mind.

The scene continues. In the predraft, I relentlessly fill in explanations, details and backstory.

VERSION 1 (predraft)

The contact lenses he's recently started wearing feel dry and coarse against his eyes. He blinks to lubricate them, and his tears briefly blur the scene into a floating, glowing kaleidoscope before he regains his vision. Now sharp, clear, distinct, he doesn't see a crowd; he sees individuals. The auditorium is lit so he can discern every face in the room. They are mainly older than thirty, which is statistically and logically predictable: the older you are, the more likely it is that you will have collected your own Column of the Dead. Most are white — a surprise and slight disappointment in this multicultural city, but he has also learned that what he does crosses over with religion somehow, and every culture has to have its own Shamans. Anderson's constituency is still predominantly among the white working class, with a growing presence from the educated middle. The latter is thanks to the efforts of Berry, his PR. She thinks he has the capacity to broaden his reach beyond the traditional psychic audience, and he judges from the scattering of bespectacled types in Boden clothing that her efforts seem to be having some results.

There are too many important ideas packed explicitly into this. Consequently, telling overwhelms the showing. Some of these ideas – the profile of the audience, his desire to build up more 'middle-class' interest – will appear in other scenes of the novel where they have more of a chance to breathe. Here it is the crowd's desperation that is

the most important thing, so that is what I use to define them – from his (conflicted) perspective. The revised version of the scene focuses on the character’s emotional, immediate responses, because in a scene like this the important thing is the ‘now’, the diegetic moment of the character’s experience.

VERSION 2 (Draft 2.3)

The contact lenses he had recently started wearing felt dry and coarse against his eyes. He blinked to lubricate them, and water briefly blurred the scene into a floating, glowing kaleidoscope. Then his vision cleared, and he saw not a crowd but a room of individuals. The auditorium was lit so he could discern every face in the room. Their need appalled and delighted him.

However, in the end, even this was too much. By the time I reach the fourth draft, at which point I have promoted this part of the narrative to the novel’s opening, it has undergone further substantial rewriting. The whole passage now appears as follows:

VERSION 3 (Draft 4.0)

‘When I was thirteen, I saw a boy disappear.’

No ‘Good evening’, no ‘Hello Manchester’.

Christopher had decided to go straight in tonight. It was a statement of intent. And then, as always, the rest of the Stevie Lightwood story, so familiar it almost told itself. Word followed word in unconscious order, like cattle through a gate. He remembered his resolution to stop flapping his hands about so much, and clasped them behind his back.

‘Has anyone here attended a psychic show before?’

A few murmurs of assent rumbled through the crowd. He scanned the faces in front of him and

focused his attention on this or that detail—a twisted nose, a baseball cap, a need.

There are both subtractions and additions, and overall the description is a little shorter than in draft 2.3. I use more active verbs, and consequently produce greater momentum. His assessment of the crowd is purposeful, rather than reflective—he is looking for the people he will speak to, working on remembering them. Everything here is driven by the character’s wants and needs. After countless rewrites, I was delighted to settle on the pleasing simile of cattle passing through a gate, which concentrates into a sentence the idea of unconscious speech that I had laboured so long to explain to the reader in the first draft.

But the revision is not simply a matter of stylistic polish. There is also a significant element of plot-management here. Because they open the novel, the words ‘I saw a boy disappear’ are now a plot point. In Barthesian terms, they are a hermeneutic code, a riddle. Previous drafts of the book located this passage *after* I had narrated Stevie’s disappearance, and its sole function was to demonstrate how Christopher as a performing psychic made use of his childhood experience. After the reordering of the novel, those phrases now operate to create drama and suspense: they are loaded with much heavier narrative cargo. It is important, therefore, that they are allowed more space, where in the predraft and the second draft they are surrounded by distractions. For example I have erased the whole business with Christopher’s contact lenses.

Those blurring lenses were symbolic. Throughout the book, a series of such portals and windows separate him from the world. This is an important motif, both in terms of Christopher’s psychology (emphasising his inability to connect with any of his own experiences, present or past) and the reader’s relationship with the text, which also blurs and distorts the ‘real’ world of diegesis in the novel. However, now that this is the opening of the story, it seems important to focus on plot and story rather than symbolism and motif. The idea of performance and fakery remains in Christopher’s ‘resolution to stop flapping his hands about so much’, but that is much more embedded in the action.

There are often moments of reflection as the story progresses. I have quoted some of them in this commentary. Many are quite extensive, and they are essential to the book’s exploration of its themes. However, through this apprenticeship, the

writing of my first novel, I have learned that plot, drama, character, conflict and story must come first. Because those are the constituents of the form; they pay the rent for any underlying ideas.

3. LOOKING FURTHER

I began with the idea that, while any serious attempt at writing a novel is always an experiment of some kind, the experimental nature of *Branwen Kellow* should be overt. However, I rejected the Barthesian notion of the *scriptible* (writerly) novel that deliberately renders itself inaccessible so as to force the reader into a struggle with even its surface meaning. My aim instead was to construct a narrative that would draw the reader into its world and its events through superficial adherence to the conventions of realist fiction, but at the same time undermine those conventions by refusing the idea of diegetic truth. Along the way, I became interested in the shadowy figure of the ‘author’, as perceived by both the reader and the writer, since it seemed to me that this imaginary person was the centre of the concept of the ‘true’ version of the narrative—the author/ity who could, if properly pressed, answer any and all questions, settle all debates about the story.

This is not merely a precious self-reflexive project, because it is not only about the way we interact with long-form fiction. It is also relevant to our understanding of the world. There are many belief systems – political, religious, academic, moral, even scientific – that depend on our collusion with narrative frameworks. My psychic protagonist’s struggle is to be honest with an audience who both expect him to be dishonest and actively try to support dishonest behaviour. As here, for example:

‘Three months,’ Christopher said. ‘That is recent, isn’t it? I’m so sorry. And it was sudden too. An accident—’

‘At work.’ Desperate to keep him right, she seized that tiniest of pauses and interrupted him with the very words he’d been about to use himself.

Nobody really believes in this, he thought.

There is an echo here of the life of a novelist, but it is also a very real element of the way performing psychics are allowed to operate, as is amply demonstrated by the following anecdote:

He was getting along in years and his eyesight was not very good. He was having trouble getting his secret peek

at the message before he placed the folded paper to his forehead. So he pulled his blindfold away from his eyes with one hand while he blatantly opened the message with the other.

[...]

I looked at the members of the audience to see how they would react to this obvious display of cheating. [...] To my surprise, not one of them was looking at the speaker. Some were gazing at the ceiling, some were staring at their laps and others had their eyes closed.¹⁰²

It would be easy to dismiss such audiences as unusually credulous. However, the psychology of belief suggests that these behaviours are common throughout human society. Walter Fisher, for example, has built an academic reputation on his argument that narrative, the formation of a story, is the principal way in which humans understand the world, and is especially relied upon in the case of ideas or experiences that we feel are otherwise beyond our understanding—such as complex scientific concepts or sophisticated socio-economic patterns.¹⁰³ Developing these ideas in relation to climate change awareness, George Marshall has pointed out that ‘it is extremely hard for a deeply unengaging narrative based in fact to compete with a compelling narrative based in falsehood.’¹⁰⁴ And the recent national experience around the Brexit Referendum has been described in similar ways by many commentators.

Our appetite for plot—the structuring element of story—is strong in the real world, and it is strong in fiction. If we constantly seek to impose plot on the plotlessness of reality, surely it matters little how plotless a book might appear, the readers will treat it exactly as they treat the rest of experience and extract from it some kind of structured narrative.

¹⁰² Ray Hyman, Foreword to M Lamar Keene and Allen Spraggett *The Psychic Mafia* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1997) p.xiv

¹⁰³ See, for example, Walter R. Fisher "Narrative Rationality and the Logic of Scientific Discourse" in *Argumentation* 8. 1994 pp. 21–32.

¹⁰⁴ George Marshall: *Don't Even Think About It: Why our Brains are Wired to Ignore Climate Change* (New York: Bloomsbury 2014) pp.106-107

As I hope to have shown in the preceding sections, the process of writing this novel was one of gradually imposing order on chaos, of altering the details and events of the world of my book until it made sense. And yet, at the same time I never lost my intention to retain a core of unreliability. What became more and more important was my expectation that the reader would look for consistencies and explanations, for proairetic codes that are fulfilled and hermeneutic codes that are answered, for a sense of the godlike authority-author's *intentionality* explaining all the mysteries of the book. Because perhaps this was what a novel was *for*: to be a kind of zoological garden where the wild world was enclosed into a comprehensible narrative, where the not-sensical and inconsistent were excluded. Here there would be no competing narratives—or if there were, one should only have to choose the ‘correct’ one to solve the novel.

This set of questions led me to ask if I was alone in having such a relationship with the ‘reality’ of my text, and with my imagined reader. Was it something specific to the kind of metafictionally-driven book that I was writing—or to the condition of being a PhD Creative Writing student, pushed into unnatural levels of reflexivity? Did more experienced writers even think of their readers at all? It was at that point that I decided to ask some, through an email questionnaire. The full responses of all the eight writers who agreed to respond to my questions are included as appendix 1 of this commentary.¹⁰⁵

There were interesting responses to my first question, which was,

In what ways do you think of reading during the writing process? For example - do you think of the work as something being read whilst you write? Do you adopt the role of reader yourself?

This promoted a fair amount of consideration of the word-by-word, sentence by sentence, experience of prose: and particularly with reading aloud to pick up such matters as ‘over-used or awkward rhythms and mixed metaphors’ (R1). The fear of having written faulty prose is certainly a strong motivator in the redrafting process, as I have discussed in section (vii) on the stylistic evolution of the novel. I have rewritten some sentences in *Branwen Kellow* well over a hundred times, scoured the text

¹⁰⁵ As a small element of my PhD project, this questionnaire was very small scale, but suggestive. It would perhaps make a useful pilot for a larger study along similar lines.

endlessly for repeat errors and other solecisms, read phrases aloud, agonised over speech tags. This is because good writing is a validation. In the ideology of creative writing, quality of prose is a primary marker of ‘being a writer’. How can a reader trust the text, trust the writer, if the writing is bad? In other words, to write well is to *prove* to the imagined reader that the author is present and in control of this fictive world. It is the bedrock of authority. However, it may also be a symptom of the writer controlling what *can* be controlled because, as R2 said, there is so much that is beyond our purview:

‘the larger transactions that happen between a reader and the work – that sense of living through others, of having your sympathies enlarged – all that is ungraspable to me as the writer; the problem is, as Margaret Atwood once said, the writer knows how the rabbits were smuggled into the hat.’

It is, however, as much a question of what we believe when writing. R2 was troubled by a sense of the writing’s artificiality, and saw the work in technical terms, but R6 considered the processes of reading and writing as near-identical—like St Matthew inspired by the Angel:

For me, it feels as if the story sits in another place, a true place, and I am simply trying to get the story down into words as accurately as I can. So I am as much a reader myself as I am the story's writer.

And in a third perspective, R5 suggests that by imagining a reader, writers can distance themselves beneficially from their work:

I do consciously think of the work being read, yes. However many times I may redraft a work it remains a first draft until another person has read it. The implication of this is in terms of my own validation of the work in that it but barely exists until it is ‘read’ by another. This has a number of implications, I think: it allows me, perhaps, to devolve my ego from the text, making the text function as something to

be read rather than my own construction. Nothing kills a creative work like embedded authorial ego.

The same respondent's reply to Question 2 is illuminating, however. Having accepted the importance of the writer taking reading into account, R5 is nevertheless profoundly hostile to the notion that this reader might have a particular identity. The question was *Do you have a clear sense of an imagined reader for your work? If so, what are his/her characteristics?* – to which R5's answer was:

imagined readers can all fuck off, since by imagined reader one is innately reducing to a demographic

In most cases, the other writers also resisted this notion of the 'ideal reader'. There was a definite tendency, however, to write for one's (often externalised) self and/or for some specific person in the writer's immediate circle, Thus: 'someone like me' (R1); 'myself' 'my spouse' 'my editor' (R2); 'myself' 'my spouse' 'family and friends' (R4) 'myself' (R6) 'Only myself' (R7) 'It's me' (R8).

Certainly this chimed with my own experience. My wife is a voracious consumer of literary fiction and does not herself write. If I was writing for a clearly imagined other, it was for her; and I always intended her to read the first draft before anyone else did. When she eventually took it on, I asked her to report on it chapter-by-chapter, so I could form a clear sense of the story's linear development as a reader would experience it. From the point of view of someone who did not know 'how the rabbits went into the hat', nor indeed had any idea whether the hat contained rabbits, doves or piranha.

In a sense, I now realise, I was asking her not to be the reader of my novel, but to *imagine herself* as the reader of the novel: to read and simultaneously to observe her own experience of reading. This is a difficult enough task to charge anyone with—but especially so when the reader is in a close relationship with the writer and has to find ways to separate the 'personal' from the 'professional'. In response to the questionnaire, R2 discusses significant problems with a similar process:

...over the last two years my marriage has been breaking down and I have found that produced an acute sensitivity to depictions of relationships in the novels and I began to write

very much with my spouse's reactions in mind. Indeed, some of the character interactions were really about what was going on in our lives and made for uncomfortable writing and reading.

This perhaps takes to its apogee the key problem with such readers, whether imagined or real. They know the writer. Thus, my wife was able to identify everything I had drawn from my own experience. But at least she understood clearly how thoroughly I had fictionalised events or situations, and that their presentation in the novel was not an account of my own life, nor a criticism or representation of any real person.

However, other Beta readers were my longstanding friends, and some were determined to strip-mine the text for autobiography. 'Tom', for example, engaged me in a long discussion about whether Stevie Lightwood's disappearance was really a metaphorical account of my youngest brother's suicide. Actually, this was insightful, from a psychoanalytical point of view, and Tom was probably correct to make the connection. However, as an account of the novel, it was far too personally connected to intimate knowledge of the writer to represent an actual reader's engagement.

I do not want to suggest that my Beta readers were without value—far from it. They were all able to a greater or lesser extent to read *Branwen Kellow* as a novel and not simply as an extension of myself, but it would be disingenuous to ignore the truth that personal knowledge of the writer will alter the reader's experience of the book—as will other factors. If you are reading as a teacher of writing, for example, as R5 said in answer to Q6:

Very very rarely when one is reading one's students' work, one simply slips into the passive and reads – just reads – the story. Mostly one is underlining, sighing, drifting off, seeing the repeat errors and so on. In way more than 90% of the work I read, that is the case.

I did hope to avoid problems of personal knowledge with one of my Beta readers. 'Hannah' is a colleague of my wife's, and before she read the third draft of my book I had met her very briefly only once. But even with Hannah's reading, a sense of the personal was to create interference. In this case, it was at a point in the novel where I

had wanted to achieve something like the disturbing ugliness of David Peace's *Red Riding* novels. Consequently things become rather dark—as an extract from the chapter in question will demonstrate:

One man holds my face over the bog while his mate fucks me up the arse. There's still shit in the water—a big, solid log some dirty cunt hasn't bothered to flush away. I keep my eyes open, looking at it because it takes my mind off the pain, and anyway I'm pushing my head back up against this bloke's hand because otherwise he'll shove me right down into the bowl and I'll drown, or worse I'll smother in shit, choke to death on it, and his mate'll finish up in my dead body.¹⁰⁶

For Hannah, this scene was certainly an arresting moment—so much so that she had to leave the book for a few days before finishing it. That, I must say, I regarded as a measure of its success. However, she also asked my wife, 'When you read that bit, did you worry about David's state of mind?' It was a question that had occurred to neither of us.

Contemporary writers sometimes complain that they have to deal with readers a great deal more than their antecedents did. In the current social media-driven age of enhanced public profile, novelists are strongly encouraged by their agents and publishers to market *themselves* rather than 'just the work'. For example, here are two of the questions asked of aspiring authors by one independent publisher:

- are you comfortable with actively collaborating in marketing your title and working with others in the book trade to make your book a success?
- are you happy and able to give public readings, provide interviews and help booksellers with signings and events?¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ This is the version from the third draft. By draft five the scene is less brutally described.

¹⁰⁷ <http://www.saltpublishing.com/pages/submissions> - retrieved 5.2.16 at 13.07PM

Novelists are now routinely expected to appear at Literary festivals and other events, to present themselves to the press for interview and to contribute to broadcast media such as BBC Radio's *Book Club* and *World Book Group*, to have a website, a blog, a Twitter profile. All to engage in explanation and context for their work—to be the authority-author. Many of my respondents felt that such interest in the writer as a kind of celebrity was unworthy and best discouraged:

I just think that it's pointing the reader's attention in the wrong place. (R8)

To me, this is a question of our current culture of fame. I'm not sure readers in previous generations cared very much about Harper Lee as a person. (R6)

don't confuse the contemporary lit fic reader brought up in this age of narcissism with the vast reading general public (R5)

ideally, what I'd like is for a reader not to think primarily of me when reading one of my books, but of the story and characters itself. (R4)

I don't want to be the reader's friend; I just want to enthrall them. (R3)

However, there has long been public interest in the author and not just in the story, as for example Charles Dickens' popular reading tours of extracts from his own novels amply demonstrated from 1853 until his death in 1870.¹⁰⁸ Consider also how interesting J.D. Salinger became when he refused to engage with the public, turning himself into a fascinating puzzle, an enigma code around his own novels.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ See, for example, Claire Tomalin *Charles Dickens: A Life* (London Viking/Penguin, 2011) pp254-400 *passim*

¹⁰⁹ A typical instance appears in a *New York Times* Article from 1992 'Fire Fails to Shake Salinger's Seclusion': <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/10/24/books/fire-fails-to-shake-salinger-s-seclusion.html>

As R1 (and others) suggest, however, this might be part of a more complex relationship than one of mere celebrity:

I think that a story always, by definition, has a teller, and the reader/listener senses that human-ness, ...[We] speak of the “voice” of a narrative ... because that is the human interface between the reader and the events in the story. The voice draws us in on page one, or it should, long before we can care about the characters or the world.

This proposition, that a novel is not just a mechanism but a human experience of communication, and therefore it must have a *teller* is profoundly interesting, and for me a convincing suggestion. As I wrote *Branwen Kellow*, constantly toying with levels of belief, I think underlying all of my thinking, underlying all my experiments in creative practice, was the idea that readers seek the person behind the story for a good reason. Because, however artificial or semi-artificial that identity might be, it makes this made-up story, in which they have contracted to invest a good deal of their time, belief and emotion, *authentic* (another ‘auth’ word).

Early in the process of thinking about the way my novel would operate, I came across this consideration of the ideas of author, authority and authenticity in an essay on *The French Lieutenant's Woman*:

[In Fowles’ earlier novel, *The Magus*] in order to demonstrate to Urfe that his enterprise is, like a novelist’s, fictional, Conchis must destroy the reality of each stage of the godgame before moving on to create a new illusion involving his company of actors. It becomes increasingly difficult for the reader to submit imaginatively to successive illusions inasmuch as he becomes increasingly aware that they will soon be punctured.

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman* on the other hand, the illusionist element does not strain our credulity because its fictionality is exposed in a way that does not require its destruction. ... Rather, the narrator identifies

himself as the author, and accordingly, it is apparent from the start that he does not exist within the confines of his narrative...

Consequently, he can periodically point up the artificial nature of his story without destroying it.¹¹⁰

I had intended that my own project would be an extension of this. With no writer-surrogate controlling the action and no selfconscious narrator to interfere in the action, I nevertheless wanted to undermine my novel's own action. Considering the structure now, however, it occurs to me that *Branwen Kellow* has elements in common with *The Magus*. Fowles' novel impressed me a great deal when I read it in my twenties, and was doubtless somewhere in my subconscious when the plan for *Branwen Kellow* gradually formed itself. Like Nicholas Urfe, Christopher Longley is kidnapped from reality and put through what Fowles describes in his introduction to the revised edition of *The Magus* as a 'heuristic mill'¹¹¹ by a captor of questionable provenance and identity. This structure (my central character forced to readdress reality by an agency beyond his control) also appears often in novels with a strongly theistic drive, such as Golding's *Pincher Martin*¹¹² and James Robertson's *The Testament of Gideon Mack*¹¹³ (in which the forces of interference and redemption are respectively Jesus and Satan). Even more specifically, the idea of a professional psychic whose visions may in reality be the products of mental illness caused by a childhood trauma (whose details also seem highly unreliable in the memory of the protagonist) is explored in Hilary Mantel's *Beyond Black*.¹¹⁴ I only discovered Mantel's novel after I had written my own first draft, and had to make several alterations to my text to remove accidental similarities (including, bizarrely, the presence of a motorcycle and sidecar). Do such crossovers with existing fictions mean my novel is in some way 'of a genre'? Do they reduce its originality of vision or approach? These questions have troubled me in the latter stages of this PHD.

The answer, I think, is both yes and no. Earlier in this essay, considering the experiential sources of *Branwen Kellow* I referred to the ancient principle that

¹¹⁰ Frederick M Holmes: 'The novel, illusion, and reality: the paradox of omniscience in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*' reprinted in Mark Currie, *Metafiction* (London, Longman, 1995)

¹¹¹ John Fowles, *The Magus: a revised version* (London, Pan 1983) p10

¹¹² William Golding, *Pincher Martin*, (London, Faber Modern Classics 2015)

¹¹³ James Robertson, *The Testament of Gideon Mack* (London, Penguin, 2007)

¹¹⁴ Hilary Mantel *Beyond Black* (London, Harper Collins, 2005)

‘nothing comes from nothing’. That is true also of the cultural context of a novel. It is unsurprising that a novel I wrote, especially perhaps one with such overtly metafictional intent, should surface in part out of the fictions I have been immersed in all my life. Moreover, it was my intention that my novel should be accessible and recognisable to the reader as a novel: that it would not aggressively ‘break the form’ or obviously state itself to be an ‘anti-novel’. The presence of tropes recognisable from other novels is not, in those circumstances, a flaw. It is in the particular assembly of these elements and the details of my story that originality may exist, as well as in my conscious approach - especially by the second draft stage – of emphasising the double nature of the author/writer in my process. As Margaret Atwood suggests, a writer is always involved in a particular kind of duplicity:

..how many times have you read in some review or other that a writer has finally found his “voice”? Of course he has done no such thing. Instead he has found a way of writing words down in a manner that creates the *illusion* of a voice.

But deceive us how he may, a writer is not the same thing as a tale-teller.¹¹⁵

Closely tied in with this double identity is the sense of being a 'real writer'. I asked my respondents the following question: *Can you recall a point when you began to see yourself as having the specific role of writer and particularly novelist rather than as a person-who-writes? Is thinking of oneself in this way an important transition?* Whatever their current levels of public success, size of readership, many seemed to find this a worrying idea. To be external validated was certainly important, and connected with the idea of publication:

¹¹⁵ Margaret Atwood, ‘The jekyll hand, the hyde hand, and the slippery double’ in *Negotiating with the Dead: a writer on writing* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2002). Again, to demonstrate the absence of much that is new in the world, I first read this essay quite recently - long after I wrote the introduction to this commentary - and discovered that Atwood refers in it to the same Caravaggio painting I had employed all those months ago as (what imagined to be at the time) a highly original metaphor for the writer’s craft.

I don't think I called myself a novelist in public, as it were, until I was published. It didn't feel like an identity I was entitled to claim until then. (R1)

once I started calling myself a writer (following the publication of my first novel), there was a realisation amongst friends and family that this was a vocation, just like any other. (R3)

Four years now since my last book was published and once again I feel very uneasy claiming such for myself again. (R5)

No, it's more professionally driven. Writers write, authors publish. So it's an aspiration. (R8)

R8's answer is telling. As is this from R7:

we all face a profound creative block in believing in ourselves as a writer or novelist. We're socially conditioned not to assume a status higher than we're entitled to, and creative roles often fall foul of that.

Being the author is an elevated position. To represent oneself as such to readers is difficult. If readers are, as I have suggested, always looking for a confident authority behind the text, it would appear that the real writers are uncomfortable with inhabiting that role. In other words there is a tension between the needs of the two people embarking on the contract of writing and reading a novel.

And yet, one needs to ask, do these writers *really* not consider themselves 'writers', 'authors', 'novelists'? Or is it the public role of writer that is the issue here? Because creating fiction requires massive commitment, and in the first instance there may be no promise of reward. Taking into account research and thinking time as well as the daily hours at my keyboard, my modestly proportioned novel took, I would estimate, about 1000 hours of work just to reach its first draft stage. As I remarked at

the beginning of this account I had the advantage of writing towards a PhD, which created a public and private context for the commitment. For writers who toil to construct that first novel, motivated by only a vague hope it might eventually achieve publication, some kind of self-belief in one's ability to create fiction must be necessary. In other words, however uncomfortable or unworthy a writer might feel about the public label of writer, the private one is, I would say, necessary to doing the work. R1 made that point very clearly:

I think it is an important transition, to call yourself - even privately - a writer. For me it was the moment when I started trying not to fill such time as I could spare from work and children with other things.

And I would say that R2 is clearly writing of *public* discomfort with the role here:

Ok, the truth is I have never felt confident enough to 'inhabit' the role of writer let alone novelist. It still sounds very precious. [...] I'd love to be comfortable describing myself as a writer, I really would. Maybe it is to do with feeling that all the work I have had published I view as a work in progress. Perhaps if I write a book that satisfies me one day I can go with the 'author/novelist' label.

What, then, can I conclude from my experiment in being a novelist? As I suggested at the start, this is qualitative work. As research, it may therefore be considered valid but not reliable. I would also, broadly speaking, support Jeanette Winterson's view that the novel has to be its own conclusion. For all its remaining flaws, *Branwen Kellow* seems to me to be artistically satisfying. It does engage in interesting ways with the problems of belief and identity, both at a fictional and a metafictional level. In that sense, I have satisfied the terms of the project.

I must certainly recognise that every writer's experience is different, because, craft and convention notwithstanding, writing is a matter of personality. We may *do* similar things, but it is, it seems, how we feel about them that makes the biggest difference. Then there is the matter of the writer's public identity. Since I am at the time of writing an unknown writer of an as-yet unpublished first novel, much of my

exploration of that role still has an element of the laboratory about it, and it may be interesting to return to these questions of the sense of truth, authority and the writer's identity should *Branwen Kellow* – or my next novel – find a wider readership.

APPENDIX 1: Questionnaire Responses

To maintain the anonymity of my subjects, I have edited some of these responses slightly, removing titles of books, names and gender-specific language that might help to identify the respondent – for example, replacing ‘husband’ or ‘wife’ with ‘spouse’. I have also corrected obvious typographical errors. The answers are otherwise exactly as supplied.

Question 7(a) included the name of each writer – and has been replaced with [XXXXXXX].

Question 1

In what ways do you think of reading during the writing process?

For example - do you think of the work as *something being read* whilst you write?

Do you adopt the role of reader yourself?

RI. There’s a saying that you write your first draft for yourself, your second for your reader, and your third for your agent, and that’s certainly about right for me. My first draft emerges from me-as-writer, with me-as-reader as a shadowy presence alongside, whispering warnings if it seems to be going really off-beam. Then, once I know what the novel is and is trying to be, comes the work of making the new draft really, really work in that way for the widest range and number of readers. My chief ways of becoming a reader for my own work are 1) drawer time - staying away from it, then coming to it fresh, and b) reading aloud, which has the same effect but quicker.

Because the brain has to make sense of things in order to read them aloud and control tongue and inflection, reading aloud picks up everything from proof-reading and repetitions to over-used or awkward rhythms and mixed metaphors. It’s one of the

most powerful writerly tools I know. And c) my representative readers: my writers' circle, my agent, who has a brilliant editorial eye, and then my actual editor.

R2. I don't think I think of the reading process at all, while I am actually writing. I produce a minimalist outline of the plot and like to see where it takes itself as much as possible. I tend to paint and populate the scene in my head and just write. The only time that I consider the reader is if I am approaching making a political point and then I think about how to couch it as persuasively as possible. If it is going to be a point that thrusts a moment of aporia on a reader then that takes some thought in order to maximise the effect.

R3. I do try to think of what it might be like to read my work, but I think it's probably an impossible task. I will read work back to myself, especially dialogue, and I do constantly wonder if my words and details will have the effect on the reader that I'm hoping for – will they be made appropriately moved, nervous, excited? But the larger transactions that happen between a reader and the work – that sense of living through others, of having your sympathies enlarged – all that is ungraspable to me as the writer; the problem is, as Margaret Atwood once said, the writer knows how the rabbits were smuggled into the hat.

R4. Yes, and over the years, the reading process has become increasingly integrated into my writing process. At first – many years ago – I'd write, and then read what I'd written afterwards. Gradually, this changed to reading each sentence after I'd written it. And now I just do it automatically: every single sentence is read, edited, re-read over and over again; and in that way, reading and writing have become merged over time. I build up stories, in this way, sentence by sentence. I also read everything out loud to myself – though again, this “out-loudness” has just become instinctive as time goes on – because I think that's the most sure way to hear prose, hear awkwardnesses, and smooth them out.

R5. I do consciously think of the work being read, yes. However many times I may redraft a work it remains a first draft until another person has read it. The implication of this is in terms of my own validation of the work in that it but barely exists until it is 'read' by another. This has a number of implications, I think: it allows me, perhaps, to devolve my ego from the text, making the text function as something to be read rather than my own construction. Nothing kills a creative work like embedded

authorial ego. I am also able to be critical, I hope, in terms of what gives the work impetus. It goes back again to ego, to the babies that need killing, if you will. Although I have not always done this – and regret it for my first novel – I now religiously read aloud every section of everything I write. Only then can I truly hear the work and strip from it that which is extraneous. So I am certainly ‘thinking of reading’ during the process, thinking of an author as well, in terms of readability and narrative impetus.

R6. I think of myself as the story's first reader. To me, Salman Rushdie's description in *The Sea of Stories*, where writers simply have access to the 'tap' is the description that most fits my experience as a writer. For me, it feels as if the story sits in another place, a true place, and I am simply trying to get the story down into words as accurately as I can. So I am as much a reader myself as I am the story's writer.

R7. I think more about the words being spoken than read. When I'm writing well it's because I can clearly hear the voice of the narrator, with the thoughts and words of each character woven through that. I don't have to read the work aloud, just reading through with the sounds in mind can be enough. It all has to work on the sentence level, and the voice is a great guide to whether that is the case.

R8. I don't, really. Or if I do, it's internalised as listening to my own voice reading it to myself out loud, as t'were. So yes, I suppose I am my own reader

Question 2

Do you have a clear sense of an imagined reader for your work? If so, what are his/her characteristics?

R1. Basically, someone like me, although the widest possible sense of myself and my tastes. Since I enjoy W G Sebald and Virginia Woolf, but also Robert Harris and Georgette Heyer, that covers a fair range. I'm always trying to write a novel which both a reader's brain *and* their emotions will enjoy.

R2. No clear sense of an imagined reader. I tell the story for myself firstly, and my spouse secondly (reads all the first drafts) and my editor thirdly. Interestingly, over the last two years my marriage has been breaking down and I have found that produced an acute sensitivity to depictions of relationships in the novels and I began to write very much with my spouse's reactions in mind. Indeed, some of the character interactions were really about what was going on in our lives and made for uncomfortable writing and reading. So much so that the most recent book had a pretty grim ending that was all about my domestic situation and bleak world view that entailed. My editor persuaded me to change that. I only tell you this because you have said this will be anonymous and I think it might be of some use to you.

R3. No: the reader in my mind is quite an abstract being, but it is someone who wants to read the story I want to write, as well as being someone whose standards I'm perpetually failing to meet. There's probably a great deal of overlap between this reader and my inner editor.

R4. I think I have "circles" of potential readers. Initially, the reader is myself and my spouse, who's a very strong critic and editor. Everyone needs someone immediately, whose judgement they trust and with whom they can discuss work in progress in detail (without anything being at stake, as it is with publishers or agents). The second circle is family and friends, who know and hopefully enjoy my work. Then there are wider circles: people who like (for example) literary fiction. Above and beyond that, I suppose I don't have an ideal reader in this sense – but I would want my work to be enjoyed by people who don't necessarily choose literary fiction, who don't study

English Literature (for example), who just enjoy reading eclectically. I don't want to be highbrow.

R5. No, they can all fuck off (but see [my answer to Q1] above). I mean imagined readers can all fuck off, since by imagined reader one is innately reducing to a demographic – all of which bear as much or more artifice as they do reality. 'Be clear, be quick – be damned...' I try to ask my students who they might imagine reading their work, okay, I confess it. But I do this so that they may begin to comprehend the genre in which they may or may not be working, or the genres they may be playing with. It is no good pretending one is beyond genre; it is not true. If one is writing within a genre, or using certain of its conventions, but remains blind to that, then one will inevitably fall into its worst clichés. So perhaps an imagined reader may be invoked to that end – but otherwise imagined readers can fuck right off...

R6. While I consider myself the story's first reader, I actually don't think of other readers while I'm writing. I think it can be quite a destructive mental process to dwell on (and get bogged down/distracted by) what other readers are going to think about everything you write.

R7. Only myself. If the story loses my engagement it will almost certainly lose the reader as well. If my emotions aren't moved, I can't expect anyone else's to be. My reader – i.e. me - wants to be drawn in to the narrative and engaged with the characters. As I get more experienced I realise more that this really happens on the sentence level. Every sentence has to be either advancing the story or showing something about character. It only takes a few loose sentences to lose the reader, so I'm scanning continuously as I write. It's the same in non-fiction - does this sentence advance the argument? Every sentence has to work.

R8. Yes. It's me. Readers like me, who look for the same things I look for. With the caveat that that way lies self-indulgence and one must correct for that.

Question 3

Do you imagine your reader in different ways at different stages of writing (for example, while conceiving a fiction idea, when embarking on the first draft, when revising)?

R1. No, I don't think so. My whole process has evolved to try to hold the connection between my original sense of what this novel is, and the same imagined reader-rather-like-me.

R2. Good question. The reader is very much in mind at the planning of an outline for any project. Once the parameters of the target audiences have been thought through the consideration of the reader gives way to the writing and editing process.

R3. I don't think much, if at all, of the reader when I'm conceiving of an idea or a possible story – I think that would be quite dangerous, and perhaps even a kind of censorship. The idea of a reader only comes into play for me once I've got a draft down.

R4. Not necessarily, though I do think that the revision and redrafting process is the time when one has the potential reader's perspective most on one's mind. For example, when I wrote the memoir, the initial draft was huge (70,000 words longer than the final manuscript). This initial draft was primarily for me: I wanted to get everything down. Then I spent a long while hacking at it, deleting (sometimes) whole chapters, to reshape it into something which might be of interest to wider readers. So in that sense, I suppose, a draft sometimes moves through the circles of readership I mentioned above – it starts close to home, and then, with each edit, becomes increasingly aimed at a wider audience.

R5. I think I do given that when I am in my first draft my reader is probably more of a composition studies tutor; later they constitute a literary editor and post-that perhaps a reader of fiction (but see [my answers to Q1 and Q2] above and I direct you particularly to certain expletives offered...)

R6. While I'm writing the first draft, while I'm 'listening' to the story, I don't really think about the reader. But I have found that consideration of the reader has become much more important for me in the editing and rewriting stages, mainly in terms of keeping the story honest. At times it can feel quite easy to manipulate the story a little bit here and there, or manipulate a character so that s/he says or does what you want them to do, or what makes it easier for the plot you have planned. But an important part of the editing process is going back through to check that characters are speaking and acting 'in character', in other words, truthfully. I have tried to set aside the draft and come back to it as a new reader and with other readers in mind in order to revise these bits. And I have listened to actual readers, family and friends who can point out dialogue or scenes which jar and don't seem in keeping with the characters' natures.

R7. Conceiving the story is all about my own imagination and emotion. My imagination brews for a while and then, usually when I'm doing something physical like running, the emotional framework of the story comes in a great rush. It never goes away after that, I can come back to it months or years later and it's still essentially the same. My reader is me, but it's usually me at a younger age when my emotions were most easily excited. A lot of my writing is fantasy, which is really about inciting the rawest possible emotions, so I have to reconnect with the me that was most absorbed in that kind of fiction.

R8. No, I don't think so.

Question 4

Can you recall a point when you began to see yourself as having the specific role of *writer* and particularly *novelist* rather than as a person-who-writes? Is thinking of oneself in this way an important transition?

R1. I think it is an important transition, to call yourself - even privately - a writer. For me it was the moment when I started trying not to fill such time as I could spare from work and children with other things. I didn't turn social invitations down but I didn't court them, my other creative hobbies fell away: everything went on the writing. But I always wrote novels: they were the first thing I tried, so I always thought of myself as a writer-of-novels. Other forms came much later. But I don't think I called myself a novelist in public, as it were, until I was published. It didn't feel like an identity I was entitled to claim until then.

R2. Ok, the truth is I have never felt confident enough to 'inhabit' the role of writer let alone novelist. It still sounds very precious. Outside of a writing context I always define myself in terms of 'former teacher/lecturer'. The truth is that I stopped teaching in 2005 when I found it hard to juggle the two. At the time I was convinced that I was just taking a sabbatical and would return to teaching within a few years. So now now I feel like a frustrated teacher who writes for a hobby. I'd love to be comfortable describing myself as a writer, I really would. Maybe it is to do with feeling that all the work I have had published I view as a work in progress. Perhaps if I write a book that satisfies me one day I can go with the 'author/novelist' label.

R3. Whether I call myself a writer or someone-who-writes makes not one bit of difference to the work. So I don't think it's important to me how I think of myself. However, it did make a difference to the people around me: once I started calling myself a writer (following the publication of my first novel), there was a realisation amongst friends and family that this was a vocation, just like any other.

R4. I have to admit that I don't often (or primarily) use the term "novelist" to describe myself, simply because I've written in so many forms, and wouldn't want to be restricted to any. This is not for some high-flown ideal: it's just that I myself am quite eclectic in my reading, and get easily restless when I think I'm repeating myself. So I call myself a "writer" - which means someone who tries to write in lots of different forms - rather than first and foremost a novelist. I don't quite know which genre I mainly belong to. Perhaps I'll find out in years to come. I also, incidentally, have

some problems with the cultural dominance of the novel form – I don't always feel at home within that world. As for when I started calling myself a “writer”, well, I'd always wanted to be one – but I think it was quite late when I started introducing myself to people as a “writer.” I'd always said “lecturer” before, because it was more readily understandable – and, anyway, that's what pays the bills.

R5. A vital transition. There are two levels to it. First, as I was writing my first novel, my spouse persuaded me that I was not a [xxxxx] who wrote, I was a writer who funded writing through a day job. That was a critical juncture, after which I became wholly bloody-minded in my approach to my writing. But I only felt comfortable calling myself a ‘novelist’ or simply a ‘writer’ after I sold my novel; even until those 25 copies of the hardback arrived through the door; perhaps even when I got on a plane at the invitation of a literary festival to go and discuss it. It needs to be shrugged on. Four years now since my last book was published and once again I feel very uneasy claiming such for myself again. It is a fragile thing. I think about the Nick Cave song ‘We Call Upon the Author to Explain.’ (if you don't know it, listen to it – fantastic. “Who is this great burdensome slaving dog-thing that mediocres my every thought?/I feel like a vacuum cleaner, a complete sucker, it's fucked up and he is a fucker/But what an enormous and encyclopaedic brain/I call upon the author to explain”). There I so much tied up in the notion of novelist in our culture – it is almost the ultimate kudos to achieve in liberal society, it seems at times nowadays (hence the proliferation of the business of creative writing, of course), that there is an inherent ego in stating it. I feel very cool indeed when I find I can look someone in the eyes and say that that is what I am. How long does that last? How long can one continue to claim it after the publication of one's last novel? I ask that rhetorically to give an idea of how fragile and ego-drive it is as a concept to hold for oneself. ‘Writer’ is more wishy-washy. I never actually call myself that, in fact.

R6. Calling oneself a writer seems to be a struggle for all writers, published or not. And I find the same is true for myself. I find I continually struggle to call myself a writer. I do not call myself or think of myself as a novelist, although that I what I am interested in writing and don't think I am a very good short-story writer. As my mother will attest, I have always been too verbose for short-stories!

R7. Yes, it's tremendously important. I've worked widely as a tutor and facilitator, and seen again and again that we all face a profound creative block in believing in ourselves as a writer or novelist. We're socially conditioned not to assume a status higher than we're entitled to, and creative roles often fall foul of that. I grew up with a parent who wrote, so the act itself was normalised for me. Later I was lucky that I began publishing stories as soon as I submitted them, which provided some positive reinforcement for my early identity. By my late 20s that role felt quite natural for me. For me the role is an issue of commitment - I've made a complete personal commitment to writing, and as long as that's true I'll consider myself a writer.

R8. No, it's more professionally driven. Writers write, authors publish. So it's an aspiration. Once published, one's idea of oneself changes a bit, but not – if one is wise – a lot.

Question 5

Given all the craft – the technical business of storytelling, to what extent do you believe in the diegetic world of your own fiction?

R1. Sometimes hugely - I miss my characters if I have to take time away from writing, and I've occasionally dreamt about them. Their world is often very vivid, in that curious way of dreams that some details are almost concrete, and others are absent. Sometimes I don't believe in them at all, in the sense that I can sit back, think about five act structure, work out the next set of crises and resolutions as if they were puppets, or artist's lay figures in a panorama. But once I know what's needed for the story to work, I then have to start believing in them again, to find emotionally and psychologically truthful reasons for them to act as I need them to act. That can only come from some sense of their realness. But the process of writing is always about running two sets of awareness at the same time: an intuitive, readerly involvement in the evocation and experience of the story, and a separate, meta-awareness of how that evocation and experience is made to come about, and how one might in a writerly sense make it come about more strongly.

R2. Interesting. For me the world I create is built on the foundations of the research. I am aware of the compromises I make to create a credible and comprehensible diegesis. I am very aware of the problem of cutting the cloth of historical accuracy to tailor a world view that the reader is happy to wear. Readers may say that they love the 'realism' of my books, but I think they often fail to account for their own subjectivity in this matter, or mine. I get very impatient with authors who insist on the 'realism' of their work, as I do with historians who insist on the 'accuracy' of their narrativisation of the past.

R3. My belief in my world deepens with each draft, each revision. But I'm always aware of the artifice, the scaffolding holding it all up (or Atwood's rabbits, again). That said, it is true for me that the more time that's passed since the novel's writing, the more real the novel's world seems to me.

R4. If by that you mean – how far do I immerse myself in my fictional world, well, I suppose quite a lot, really. I started off as a memoirist – i.e. writer of non-fiction – and my novels are, in many ways, offspring of that non-fictional impulse. To put it another way: my first novel is part-non-fiction. It's based on various real events (which happened to me), historical events and – tangentially – real people I know. There's a strong autobiographical element to it, even though this is far more disguised than in the memoir. For that reason, I suppose I believe a lot in what I write, and the world I create, because it's the one I inhabit. Ironically enough, some people find what I write unrealistic, unbelievable – even though it's really happened.

R5. That is an excellent question. If one is not entirely convinced of that diegesis, then one surely could not sustain the writing of the novel. How it holds together in terms of the story, the characters, the soul – ontology and the rest – simply **MUST** be believed utterly. If you mean the actual world, it sort of glimmers, shimmers into focus and out – partly through one's belief and partly through one's vision as well. That said, I think often the issue with such discourse is that one loses the processual reality (the practice...) of writing a novel. Robbe-Grillet: 'When a writer is asked why he wrote the novel, his only answer can be: in order to find out why I had to write the novel...'
A work of fiction is an interrogation of an issue, of a world issue, a consciousness issue, existential issue – whatever the issue might be. It is not didactic. Anyway, I ramble.

R6. I believe in it Absolutely.

R7. Because stories arrive with me in a rush of inspiration, I believe in them as much as any story I've read. I've experienced them in that way. The writing has to be organic to that for me or it simply doesn't work. I have to hear the voices of the characters telling me the story or it won't transfer to words. I try not to separate the story from the telling, maybe someone will come along later and strip out a dramatic structure for a screenplay, but that's not really my concern. Yes, there are techniques, but they have to be synthesised in to the telling of a story or they're useless. This is an old art and really quite basic. One thing happens after another. A writer friend of mine likes to point out that fiction has a very narrow "bandwidth". Some technique is about trying to force cinematic imagery down the narrow pipe of prose fiction, but it never really works for me.

R8. One is telling a story. No more and no less.

Question 6

Does the reader have to *trust* the writer? (I don't mean the narrative voice, obviously, but the authority, reliability, authenticity and so on, of a writer behind that voice). Do you think you seek to build your readers' trust in the writer of your fiction? How?

RI. Certainly readers want to trust that you are in some way truthful. (Hence the way so many historical novelists add Historical Notes and the like, explaining the outlines of what's historically accurate, and what they've changed or made up.) Even unreliable and inadequate narrators need to be psychologically credible, so the way their telling misrepresents things is in itself truthful - and even so some readers hate them. We are wired to believe things we're told unless we are or have been given reasons not to. But I think it's even more John Gardner's point, in *The Art of Fiction*, that as a writer you first earn the reader's trust by being accurate and truthful in the things they *do* know about. If their experience of the writing is that it's true in this way, then that's what creates the contract between writer and reader of fiction: they agree to forget that none of this ever happened, if in return you will go on being accurate and truthful in how you imagine and evoke the things which are beyond their direct experience. (I find that "agree to forget this never happened" a more useful way of thinking about it than the more common concept of "suspension of disbelief".)

So the trust is built by that accuracy and truthfulness - to the material world, to human psychology.

R2. Yes the reader has to trust the writer, especially with a genre like Historical Fiction. There is an unwritten contract between author and reader that the author will stick broadly to known 'facts'. If the author breaks that contract, and the reader is aware of it, then the work slides into the category of Historical Fantasy. Often though, I have seen authors get away with murder on the more esoteric aspects of history, but since most readers have a lay person's grasp of an era, while thinking they are

knowledgeable, that will happen. Sometimes I am tempted by the urge to deconstruct this process, motivated by Twain's comment that it is always easier to fool people than convince them that they have been fooled. But that would ask a lot of a reader who was buying a work based on their trust that it would be broadly accurate.

R3. As a reader, I want to have faith in the novelist's ability to tell me the truth as they see it and feel it. We all bring our own emotional topography to any novel and readers will sense when a writer is lying, and from that point that novel is dead. If I do seek to build the reader's trust then I do so by making the world of my novel as life-like as I can, and by trying to ensure that my novel remains true to its own laws and logic, that whatever happens in one part of the novel remains honest when weighed and judged against any other part of the work.

R4. I was told by an editor that, with the first novel, I had to signpost that the world the reader was entering at the start was going to be very strange in order to prepare him / her for what was coming. I think the point is that a reader will trust whatever you're telling them as long as the world is consistent, and you provide signs for them to enter – that is, you take them by the hand and lead them through the maze. Style has a lot to do with this, I think: if the style is consistent, readable, enjoyable, then a reader will trust the writer. I think writers also have to beware the post-modern / Brechtian impulse to undermine veracity. Not to say you shouldn't do it – but that, for better or worse, people want immersive experiences in novels.

R5. Yes they must. I learned it in practice through becoming a CW teacher. Very very rarely when one is reading one's students' work, one simply slips into the passive and reads – just reads – the story. Mostly one is underlining, sighing, drifting off, seeing the repeat errors and so on. In way more than 90% of the work I read, that is the case. Authority has to do, I think, with language. With the fit of the language to the subject matter. Because language is illustrative of knowledge of that subject. When does one use 'isn't' and when 'is not' is always interesting, for instance. The author's mastery of appropriate register for the story, if that is the kind of writer they are, of the author's authority of voice per se is critical. It has to do with pace as well as simply language, so perhaps I mean the control of prose. But the control of prose as it fits with the story itself. I do not phrase it that I 'seek to build my reader's trust' – but that is what I am always doing. I write this from the British Library where I am seeking to

learn all there is to know about the oil industry before writing my next novel set within the industry. Students never seem to get the depth of detail required for good writing, the depth of detail that will give one the authority of voice. That author and authority are virtually the same word is, of course, no coincidence.

R6. I think the reader only becomes aware of the writer behind the narrator when the writer has broken the contract...as Stephen King describes about going to see early action films as a child and being appalled when one scene ended with the character careening off a cliff, and in the next film you see a new version where the hero swerves just in time. When the writer somehow isn't able or perhaps isn't willing to work hard enough to see/figure out the truth of a story or character and instead manipulates the character or plot in a way that seems to jar or seems untrue, that is when the reader suddenly comes face-to-face with the writer. Because it is the writer who has intervened on what is otherwise a true story (this is how I see it). If all goes well and the story comes to the page True, then the reader should not be aware of the writer at all.

R7. The reader has to be comfortable spending twenty hours of very intimate time inside the writer's imagination. That's the kind of time we usually only give to close friends and lovers. We all have different tastes in lovers, so there's someone for everyone on that score. But writers need to capture a large number of people, at least for any kind of commercial success. I'm not sure how far you can engineer this. In fact I'm certain you can't. Widely popular writers have an aspect to their personality that allows many people to connect with them. Often, it's a sense of moral certainty. And if we agree with the writer's morality, we might then say that we trust them. Genres of fiction are as much about the different psychological categories that readers and writers fall in to as anything else. It's why genres are so powerful in fiction, and why writers tend to stay within just one or two that suit their personality.

R8. It's probably something that the writer should try to ensure – I suspect that if the reader doesn't trust the writer, then the writer is going to have to work very hard in other areas to keep the reader on board, which will be a distraction from the business of telling the story.

Question 7

Readers construct very clear imaginary novelists in many cases – obviously that happens with writers like Jeanette Winterson or Will Self, who create public myths around themselves and draw attention to a persona in the writing. But I wonder if readers are always looking for the imaginary person-who-made-the-story? Do you think this *is* part of how readers respond to fiction?

And if you were forced to consider such a thing...

a. How do you imagine your imaginary reader imagines the writer [XXXXXXXXX]?

b. Consciously or subconsciously, does that question inform your writing process?

This rather elaborately presented question with its subset of 7a and 7b was answered in various ways. This variety is reflected in the presentation of the answers below.

RI. I think it must be, or they wouldn't like seeing a photo on the cover, and reading the biographical bits. They do want to know how-the-story-came-about, (although that's vastly fed by the media, who would rather have a story about the author and the "non-fiction hook" than they would about the fiction in the book.)

More interestingly, I think that a story always, by definition, has a teller, and the reader/listener senses that human-ness, even if the narrator isn't an opinionated, explicit presence in the narrative, as character or "author", but simply an entirely notional entity conveying the words. But we speak of the "voice" of a narrative (and editors and agents say that's *the* thing they're looking for) because that is the human interface between the reader and the events in the story. The voice draws us in on page one, or it should, long before we can care about the characters or the world.

- a. To be honest, I don't know. I hope as a friendly storyteller: someone you'd like to spend time with, who'd be satisfying, stimulating company, and who'd

show you things you didn't know about and hadn't thought of, but find fascinating and emotionally involving.

- b. No, I don't think about that much as I write, unless you count writing so that a reader wants to go on spending time in my company. But then that's what all writers want!

R2.

- a. I think you are right about some readers. I often wonder about the author behind the text, and have lived long enough to know that only a fool doesn't judge by first appearances. As for me, I am well aware that many readers view me as some kind of professorial history nut and are surprised that I am a Call of Duty and World of Tanks addict.
- b. No. I don't think that is an issue for me.

R3. I don't think it's hard to find the person who made the story. They're there in every sentence. The man or woman is the novel; I think this has to be the case as the novel is just a near-hand version of the writer's brain.

- a. I like to kid myself that I keep myself out of the story, that it's all about the characters, but, of course, that's as much of a posture as anything else, and possibly a more dishonest one than the pose struck by writers who on the face of it are more intrusively involved in their own work. I'm not sure what that means in terms of how an imaginary reader might imagine the writer [XXXXXXXXXX], but I doubt it'd be very flattering.
- b. I don't think I'm concerned with how the reader might imagine me. I don't want to be the reader's friend; I just want to enthrall them.

R4. To be honest, I think that sometimes the author gets in the way: now and then, if you know an author too well, you start hearing their voice everywhere in their narration. I'm not saying you should be faceless as an author – I do lots of public readings, etc. – but that, ideally, what I'd like is for a reader not to think primarily of

me when reading one of my books, but of the story and characters itself. Keats says something similar about poetry. This is especially the case in a novel, which is meant to a stage for DIFFERENT voices – not the writer’s own. Of course, there are exceptions. But even nineteenth-century novels, where the narration can be very intrusive, often clear the way for the characters’ voices to be heard. To put this another way: I don’t think the reader of [my first novel] need think about me (the author) at all. You hear this from time to time from readers – that they loved a particular book, can remember the characters and title and storyline, but can’t recall the author’s name. I think – given the dangerous cult of celebrity in our culture – this is not necessarily a bad thing.

R5. No, not all of them. I’d guess most continue to read Tom Clancy because he delivers what they want, but that is not because he is who he is as a person. It is because he delivers narrative thrills set in glamorous/adventurous environments...and so on. Think of Mills and Boon readers... The problem is ‘readers’ – don’t confuse the contemporary lit fic reader brought up in this age of narcissism with the vast reading general public. Personally there are almost no authors of multiple novels whom I have read right through. A bare handful. Even those I love more than anyone else – Conrad, Cormac McCarthy, Hemingway – I still have a few works outstanding with. Although the fantasy writers I read as a young man I read everything of – without giving two fucks for their personal lives or for the person-who-made-the-story. It is an affectation of the minority, I suspect. People might watch an interview on telly with Stephen King if it came on, but not seek out his life and thought...

[Combined response to 7a and 7b] Truthfully I have been scuppered by becoming an academic at the same time as my first novel came out and before I had written my second. I spent a large part of the writing of the second I suspect (which may explain my earlier rant) imagining my reader as a colleague from English. A disaster. I wanted then, indeed, to be learned, wise, PC, aware of all women’s issues at all times, highly literary and so on. I wanted to be the Nick Cave author. I’m unshrugging that at the moment, and it is not easy to do.

R6. To me, this is a question of our current culture of fame. I'm not sure readers in previous generations cared very much about Harper Lee as a person. They loved *To Kill a Mockingbird*. But now we have journalists moving to be her next door neighbour in order to get the scoop on her life because she's one of the writers who we know least about. But I don't think this is any different than the culture of fame that has grown up around every artistic profession. The only reason I engage with it is because self-publishing now means you also have to have a public persona via social media. But this feels a bit more genuine to me, a bit more anti-establishment because it's just normal average readers connecting with you and although one can dream, most indie-authors are not going to have to worry too much about fame.

R7. I've been dodging committing to a writerly identity for some time now, as far as possible. Primarily because my work still feels molten to me, and I like that and don't want to get stuck in the cooling rock formations of my own words. I've been dodging agents and editors for a few years now, and producing work that I make no effort to try and publish. All of which is to say that yes, the question of who [XXXXXXXXX] the writer is very consciously informs my work. And of course writing has a tremendous influence on my development. Who we are and what we create sit together, they make each other. It would be very easy to get stuck in a creative track that limits that co-growth. At least, that's my belief!

R8. A lot of writers – and critics, and journalists – seek to create myth around writers. I think that this is a mistake and a distraction, but that doesn't make it wrong. I just think that it's pointing the reader's attention in the wrong place. If the writer is openly writing about themselves, fair enough – it just doesn't do much for me when the writer's ego is actually what's being exhibited but is pretending that it's not.

- a. I genuinely have little idea.
- b. Yes. I adopt a self-deprecating tone which I hope will make the reader like me a bit – because (see above) I'm writing for people like me, I know that self-aggrandisement and rampant ego will piss them off. So I get my apologies in first.

APPENDIX 2: Email from questionnaire respondent 18.04.16

Dear David

Nice to hear from you, and I'm so glad my answers were useful. As for the PhD altering the process ... hmmm....

I don't think it did, but my case isn't typical: from my first enquiries at different universities, I'd explained that I wouldn't be able to write any kind of commentary until after the novel was done and dusted: the official and true reason was that I had a contractual deadline for the novel, and had to concentrate on hitting that. The unofficial reason was that I knew that I couldn't stay properly inside the novel so as to write it, and simultaneously stand outside it to watch myself writing it, without being paralysed with self-consciousness. If a university had said that I had to submit a bit of commentary as I went along - many do - then I wouldn't have signed up to the. Luckily [staff at my university] were perfectly happy to work as I needed to work. So I did no formal reflection as I was writing the novel - although of course I did a lot of reflecting in my own head, about how it was going, how to deal with problems, and so on.

But [my novel] was always going to be about one narrator – [xxxxxxx] in the modern day - finding that she wanted to write a novel about the (real, historical) characters in the past [xxxxxxxxx]. And because I was thinking about the business of storytelling, that aspect of the novel probably did come more to the fore than it would have otherwise, particularly in [xxxxxxx], and in [xxxx]'s reflections on the creative process, and on how she, as a professional historian, is hamstrung in her desire to make an imaginative re-creation with her subjects. There was also a sub-plot about restoring historic buildings, by analogy with the business of writing historical fiction.

Hope that helps a bit! And best of luck with finishing the report.

APPENDIX 3: A time scheme of events in *Branwen Kellow***THE PAST**

| | | |
|------|--|-------------|
| 1981 | Cockeroochie | |
| 1983 | Stevie Vanishes/Dies | |
| 1984 | | |
| 1985 | Christopher's father's funeral | |
| 1986 | | |
| 1987 | Christopher attends Toni Webster show | |
| 1988 | BACK STORY 10 Years without detailed narration - goes to university, gets married, daughter born (1994), gets divorced. Follows ex-wife to East Crompton to be nearer child. Temp jobs. Then becomes more and more aware of his sense that Stevie never left him... | |
| 1989 | | |
| 1990 | | |
| 1991 | | |
| 1992 | | |
| 1993 | | |
| 1994 | | |
| 1995 | | |
| 1996 | | |
| 1997 | | |
| 1998 | | |
| 1999 | | |
| 2000 | | |
| 2001 | Breakthrough at ECSAG | |
| 2002 | C. Begins work as performing psychic | |
| | (Same year) Beauty Contest in Cornwall | (‘B’ Story) |
| 2004 | Gran In Hospital (Dies soon after) | |
| | Branwen vanishes | (‘B’ Story) |
| 2005 | Five years without detailed narration. | |
| 2006 | C's career develops. He meets Rob, | |

| | | |
|------|---|--------------------|
| 2007 | then Berry. Writes his autobiography. | |
| 2008 | Meanwhile Martha doesn't go to | (‘B’ Story) |
| 2009 | university, ends up working in a | |
| | bookshop in her home town | |

THE STORY MOMENT - Feb-November 2010

| | | |
|----------|---|---------------------|
| February | Christopher appears onstage in Manchester. First (unseen) appearance of Adult Stevie | |
| | | |
| | | |
| March | Christopher travels to Barton, Performs, meets Martha and her journalist friend Daisy. He is uncertain whether to offer help. He must also choose between Rob and Berry. Second appearance of Adult Stevie. | A+B Stories combine |
| | | |
| | | |
| April | Christopher begins therapy | |
| | | |
| | | |
| May | During a day in London with his daughter, Christopher sees Adult Stevie for the first time. Later, looking at YouTube footage of the stage show from February, he realises the same man was in the audience there. Later he discusses this (possible hallucination) with his therapist. | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| June | On tour, Christopher is moving towards choice between Rob and Berry. He debates whether he should help search for Branwen. | A+B Stories combine |
| | | |
| | | |
| July | McMeekin suggests hypnosis. In a confrontation with Berry, Christopher realises he has to sack Rob and become a grownup. | |
| | | |
| | | |
| August | Christopher has sacked Rob. Under hypnosis, he finds his powers seem to become far stronger. | |
| | | |
| | | |
| (Sept) | Berry completely reorganises C's life. | |
| October | He takes a break, secretly, to visit Martha Kellow and offer his help. The attempt to | A+B Stories combine |
| | | |

| | |
|--|--|
| contact Branwen fails. Christopher, in distress, wanders the streets until he meets Adult Stevie. He blacks out. | |
| | |
| | |
| | |

THE CRISIS - Two weeks in Oct 2010

| | |
|--|---------------------|
| Christopher enters a liminal state in which he appears to be back at the ECSAG hut from 2001, kept prisoner by Adult Stevie. Here, he gradually finds his way to the truth about Stevie's disappearance, and about Branwen Kellow. | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| Meanwhile, he has 'really' been taken prisoner, drugged and confused by Branwen's abductor, Ronnie Chenoweth. C is rescued by the police. Ronnie has killed himself. The Kellow case is solved. | |
| | |
| | A+B Stories combine |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| Martha is confused by these events. She still doesn't know whether C is genuine or not. Daisy Cross decides she will write something attacking Christopher as a fraud. | |
| | |
| | A+B Stories combine |
| | |
| | |
| | |

THE CODA -**2012**

| | |
|--|---------------------|
| Christopher finally confronts Toni Webster. Martha leaves Barton and goes to University in London. Daisy has made her name with the book about Christopher. He has married Berry, and become a debunker of psychic frauds, though he still | |
| | A+B Stories resolve |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |

| | |
|---|--|
| experiences contact with the Dead. He finally reveals the terrible truth about what happened on the clifftop. | |
|---|--|

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