



bollington festival 2005
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The Bollington Festival Internet Novel

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FOREWORD

Each chapter of this so-called novel was written by a different author, involving 18 authors in all. Each author had a day to compose their chapter, taking as their starting point the previous chapter (and the narrative strands of its predecessors) when it was published on the Bollington Festival website at around 6pm the previous day. This publishing relay took place during the course of the Bollington Festival 13-30 May 2005. It can and should all be blamed on the indomitable organiser, José Spinks.



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1 December, 2004

Dear _____,

As one of the events for a festival next May in Bollington, Cheshire, we plan to create an Internet Novel with 18 people taking it in turns to write 1,000 words each. The Festival runs for 18 days, from May 13th to 31st. We hope we may be able to persuade you to volunteer to join the writing relay team.

No fee or royalties are on offer but the glory, and fun, could be considerable: each day the latest chapter will be posted on the festival website so that readers around Bollington, and the world, can follow the plot.

We envisage a very few ground rules:

1. The story must begin by White Nancy, the folly that sits on the edge of the ridge that dominates Bollington.
2. The total number of characters running through the story at any one time must be no more than ten.
3. Varieties in writing style are encouraged. Verse is acceptable.
4. Writers are asked not to eradicate all characters with devices such as nuclear holocausts.
5. Plagiarism/parody is possible, provided we infringe nothing.
6. Each chapter has to be completed by 6pm on the predetermined day so that eager readers can devour it on the day of creation.

We have no idea what the finished "book" will be like. We just hope it will be entertaining and that the process of collective creation will be stimulating. Please do agree to join in.

Yours sincerely,

Jose Spinks, pp Festival Literature Subcommittee

CHAPTER ONE

Shivering, Alice huddled more closely into her heavy, woollen garments, rounding her shoulders against the damp. The breeze had picked up, wielding a new, raw edge of dampness. It hadn't been like this when she set off late in the afternoon but she should have known that the Bollington ridge would never be gentle at this time of year; it clung to the Pennines after all. She could expect nothing soft from weather or inhabitants: a cold, grudging climate altogether, she thought. As she hesitated, uncertain of her bearings and what exactly she intended, the woman felt the cold beginning to penetrate the thin leather of shabby shoes that were not at all suitable for rough walking. For a moment she wished she hadn't been tempted to climb the hill but the urge had been so strong. Perhaps it was fanciful but she half thought that the strange white folly had enticed her up the hill.

Just below the summit, she paused for breath in an indentation and looked out across the countryside. The land fell away steeply, studded with rocks and gorse. Sheep huddled in hollows, loners pressed up against dry stone walls and gaunt trees, signalling the chill of the approaching night. Slow-grazing horses loomed in corners of greying fields and sudden, ragged birds sawed the sky. The nearest houses were stacked up against the hillside. They looked as if they had been there for ever, part of the natural landscape, cut from its stones and rising and falling with the waves of the hills.

Further away, snaking across the valley, the village of Bollington was laid out for inspection in resolute, straight streets of uncompromising stone. Three large buildings dominated, each one several stories high and each with a towering chimney. She supposed they were mills of some sort. There was a church, of course, possibly even two from what she could distinguish as the light seeped away, bleeding through dusk into darkness. There were no people about, although smoke curling from many chimneys pointed to their presence. She looked away and continued her climb.

Reaching the strange white building, she trailed her fingers across its uneven surface as if trying to decipher braille but no message entered her head, not clearly, not in words. The most she could have said was that it made her feel a curious mixture of sadness and satisfaction. Somewhere, at the back of her mind she was aware a memory was prowling. Perhaps she would track it down this time.

Her hand chilling, she traced Nancy's whitewashed walls, looking outward while her mind delved inwards. Was it her own memory or the stories of others that made her feel she knew this place? As she circled the folly, a half-remembered playground chant crept into her mind,

keeping time with her steps: 'Gipsy, beggar, Fairy Queen. Name the places that you've been. Gipsy, beggar, Fairy Queen. Name the places that you've been...'

"Evenin'."

She hadn't seen him approaching, nor had any suspicion of company, of being observed. She felt she must appear foolish and snatched away her numbed hand, pretending to rub away an ache.

Before she could gather herself for any reply, however, the man had disappeared, leaving her with nothing more than a sense of his purposeful stride and of being caught at a disadvantage. Where had he come from and where was he going? Surely there were no houses for miles in that direction? She quashed the thought that her playground incantation had summoned him. There was something about this place that invited the imagination to run wild. He was a native here, she was sure. He had definitely looked more at ease than she felt, confident of his way through the encroaching night. She turned away.

Gradually lights were appearing in the valley below her, and she pictured families together, settling in for the night, rehearsing the day's events and looking ahead to the freedom of the weekend. She envied their shared chatter and fireside warmth.

Time to go down. It still wasn't too late to find Church Street.

Fumbling in her pocket, she retrieved the carefully folded letter. It had grown too dark to read but she knew its contents by heart anyway: a single sheet of careful handwriting. Just holding it seemed to give her comfort and new resolution.

Yes, she had resisted making them any promises but now that she had taken all the trouble and expense to come to Bollington, it would be foolish, even cowardly, not to carry it through.

CHAPTER TWO

Her heart still thumping, Nan eased her shoulders back, glanced at her watch and slowly levered herself out of the chair. On the desktop of her computer was a reminder of past summers: the once reassuring outline of Kerridge Hill, White Nancy a small black silhouette against a bleached August sky. Outside, dusk closed in as an unseasonable wind tore at the fragile candles on the horse chestnut in the churchyard opposite. St John's, which had sung the chapters in the Bunting family life for five generations, was now mute: past repair, future uncertain. Her own christening had been entered with crabbed, clerical certitude in the register seventy-two years before. Her brother and his wife in a lower register, flowers fresh on their grave every day these forty-four years. Nan knew that she was the one blessed by a fickle fortune: so she lived her life as a gift, a celebration.

Descending the steep stair with difficulty, she tried to think calmly. Was this mere coincidence? After all, Alice was a common enough name... but all the other parts fitted: it was unsettling. She had often wondered about the unseen hand that guided life's chances. How could it be that this Alice their Alice? If so, did that make her, Nan, nothing more than a literary creation? Her head began to spin.

Rather giddy and breathless, she joined her husband in the front room. "Eh, Jack, love. I've just been reading the first chapter of that internet novel. You know. Part of this Festival do." Without looking up, Jack slowly reassembled his craggy features into that look of doting incomprehension that kept all options open.

"C'mon, Jack. You remember: different authors, one for each chapter, a new one each day?"

"Sounds daft, to me, our Nan."

Before she could respond, Jack warmed to his theme. "And you know what I think? If I fixed to make a keg, and asked a different man to shape each stave, how well would that hold the ale, d'ye think? Festival or no. That computer o' yours, it may be full of all sorts of information, but where's the knowin', eh? It don't change the basic rules of mekin' and fettlin', y'know."

Nan was so astonished by the length of this speech that she was, for a moment, lost for words. But only for a moment. Jack dug in as his wife prepared for the follow-through.

"Jack, listen up. I've not told you the half of it. You'll never believe what it said."

You're right there, thought Jack. Nan, choosing to ignore her husband's expression - a habit that had secured her a long and happy marriage - took up the narrative.

"It says that there's this woman up on the ridge. She's headed this way. And she's remembering that children's song 'Gipsy, beggar, Fairy Queen' that we all used to sing."

"Aye, and what of it?" ventured Jack.

"Well," Nan, despite her anxiety, savoured the moment. "She's called Alice, and she has a letter in her hand. And she's coming to see folk in Church Street."

Before Nan could enjoy the look of stunned surprise that propelled Jack's eyebrows into his shock of white hair, there came a hesitant knock on the front door, hardly audible above the gusts of wind. They looked at each other in dismay. Adversaries no longer, they instinctively felt the bond of shared uncertainty.

"Well, our Jack," whispered Nan. "Are you going to open it or must I?"

Jack Swindells sighed. He unfolded his lanky frame and made for the front door. As he lifted the latch, a gust of wind slammed the door wide. The ceiling lamp inside swung wildly, making a dance macabre of shadows. Jack glanced outside. No-one there. He went out onto the raised stone terrace, and, steadying himself against the old iron railings, looked along the street towards White Nancy, a spectral grey atop the hill. The roadway was deserted. He looked in the other direction. At first he thought that the street there was empty, too. On the point of turning away, he saw a patch of darkness detach itself from the deeper gloom of the churchyard wall, and move swiftly away. A striding man. There was no doubt of it. He called out, his cry snatched away by the wind. There was no answering call, save for the see-saw branches of the churchyard trees.

As he turned to go back into the house, Jack caught the distant strains of West Side Story. The unmistakable notes of 'Tonight' shot the breeze along the valley, and, without warning, dissolved four intervening decades. Jack remembered the film had been showing in the Majestic in Macclesfield. His brother-in-law, George Bunting, had a crush on Natalie Wood and took his wife Ethel to see it, pretending that he was interested in the music. It had been on their way back when the accident happened. Some young drivers, too much to drink. No-one thought much to that in 1961. Just lively youngsters. And deadly consequences.

Nan stood listening in the doorway. He shook his head, as much to dispel the weight of memory as to negate the mysteries that sent a chill to the marrow of a man, this spring night.

Alice picked her way with care down the steep path from the ridge. A pair of jackdaws skidded down the sky, heckling. Some trick of the wind brought to her from the valley below, quite distinctly, the sound of 'You'll never walk alone'. She grimaced at the irony. She suddenly felt a very long way from home. The stars were so different here, for a start. No Southern Cross at this northern crossing.

She thought about the home and the life that she had made for herself in Sydney. A place that welcomed foreigners when she went there two decades earlier, a place that took you as it found you. It had suited her fine then. She had trained, built a career, found a husband, even started a family. Now the mood of the country had changed. Incomers were regarded with suspicion and 'aliens' (it made her think of Mars) were interned behind barbed wire in the Nullabor. The

Britain to which she returned two weeks ago was not much better - it only lacked the desert. Paranoia was a disease, she decided, like chicken 'flu. Virulent, contagious.

Before the Letter arrived, she had successfully turned her back on the past. The past that was Bollington, with all its associations. Then the post brought the ghosts that she had for so long kept at bay through the business of getting on with her life. They crowded in on her, gibbering, fingers all pointing accusation. Sending her on what her kids would call a 'guilt trip'. After all, it wasn't her aunt's fault that both her parents had been killed in that accident over forty years ago. But the little girl then had hated Nan and Jack for their kindness, hated them for trying to be her parents - how could they be? - and above all, she had hated them for being alive. She remembered the burning tears as she gazed savagely across the grave in St John's churchyard, thinking, "Why them? Why not you?" This same church that she had just seen so clearly from the top of the ridge. How was it possible that a place so full of human memories, of countless lives lived, of lives begun, joined and ended, could appear so miniaturised, so... containable from above? Was that how God felt? Steady on, Alice, she told herself. Back to earth, now.

Alice, now the mother, the wife, the district nurse, knew that she had been cruel to leave Bollington like that, and to have sent no word for so long. Time to make amends whilst there was still time. The Letter made it clear that there might not be too much of that left. Taking a deep breath, she eased herself through the style and past the stone water trough, as she began the steep descent of Lord Street. The bulk of St John's loomed out of the darkness ahead. Opposite was the family from whom she had distanced herself so brutally. Whom had she been punishing, she wondered? Would she be received there as an alien?

As her destination neared, she was surprised to find that the ghosts began to lose their power. Ordeal this may be, but it was a necessary exorcism, and it was right: there was a confirmation in every step. Down the stone paved hill she swung, experiencing a lightness of spirit that she hadn't felt for months.

Crackling fireworks split the velvet folds of the night. Distress flares soar and bloom: incandescent, spectacular, short-span lives. The oohs and aahs of an appreciative throng supply an evanescent commentary.

Under the brooding, wounded hill, Nan and Jack sat subdued. They look at each other across the table in their house on Church Street, one in a terrace whose stone winning has left deep scars on the flank of the ridge. Kerridge stone: the best in all of Cheshire.

"Jack, you know she's coming, don't you?"

"Aye, happen she will, our Nan. But ye must put that intothernet nonsense out of your head. It won't be tonight - look, it's gone 10.30 already."

"She knows that I've not long, Jack. There was a madness on her back then. She'll be different now. And there's this unfinished business to attend to. It's what her dad would have wanted."

Nan Swindells pushed the small oblong package across the table towards her husband. Once more that night the accustomed rhythm of their life was to be disturbed. When the knock on the door came this time, it was Nan who went to open it.

CHAPTER THREE

Nan opened the door; her eyes pierced the blue shadows of the night. An icy blast shocked her grey hair, her nostrils inhaled the chilled air and her ears harkened to the booming ado from the marquee on the village cricket ground, erected to accommodate visitors to Bollington Festival. She found it an impossibility to comprehend whom, if anyone, was out there. Was that a moving shadow? Was that a person? Or was it a trick of the blackness?

She called into the street, “Who is it?” It was more of a plaintive plea than a direct question. Again she called, a despondent offering to the god of the Unknown.

“Is anyone there?”

A hundred ears, those of her neighbours and the passers-by (and others who were listening), registered her call, but no one responded.

Father Zadoc McDade reached into the right hand pocket of his Harris Tweed jacket and furtled about until his fingers alighted onto the final Uncle Joe’s Mint Ball he could detect about his person. Deftly denuding it of its cellophane wrapper by means of both his index finger and thumb, he popped it into this mouth and savoured the treacly humbug, rolling the sweet around his mouth before letting it rest inside his left cheek.

Father Zadoc was an enigma. With hair as black as doom and grey eyes that twinkled like the babbling brooks of Connemara in the twilight, he looked at first glance to be in his fifties, or maybe his early sixties. He had a face that enticed a smile from even the most hardened of those countless merchants of doom, and he possessed a melodious voice that had, surely, been woven in gossamer silk by the angels themselves. His actual age was never a topic for discussion but his close acquaintances had heard him speak of his early years when the war to end all wars began in Europe.

He first came to Bollington (or rather nearby Pott Shrigley) when he was a youth. His roots were the mist-blanketed mountains of Eiren’s western shores but the young Zadoc, the seventh son of Ezekiel McDade, a farm labourer and himself a seventh son, had spent a proportion of his life at a palatial mansion on the lush green slopes overlooking Bollington. That elegant hall was now a swish golf club but for many years it served as training ground for the missionaries of the Salesian Brotherhood, a fine band of brothers who possessed earnest wills and valiant hearts. After initial training he was sent to Cuba where he persuaded many of the native islanders to forego the rituals of Voodoo and to follow the Christian path instead. Boosted by his engaging and persuasive techniques his superiors placed him on a cargo boat and sent him

off to Peru where he spent ten years at a seminary in the oxygen-starved mountains. Lengthy sojourns in Tibet and Borneo followed before he returned to Cheshire as a teacher of those who would follow in his footsteps.

His talents were recognised in other ways as well; for his acquired knowledge of the how and why of other beliefs, his unsurpassed awareness of the Mystical Side and his inborn knowledge of the blackness of many people's thoughts and deeds meant his talents were more than a little useful to the brothers. His natural talent was put to use whenever it was required (not that this was often, it must be said, but the world-wide fraternity did encounter some strange events from time to time); he was the number one exponent of the Bell, Book and Candle service – the exorcism; he was the man to lay lost souls to rest and to allow people's hearts and souls to be, once again, serene.

When the college became a golf club he hung up his surplus and retired to nearby Bollington, locally known as the Happy Valley, where he inwardly and proverbially devoured and digested as many books and learned treatise as he could. There was very little he did not read. His large house on Chancery Lane, towering over the village and nestling snugly under Kerridge Hill, accommodated thousands upon thousands of books, most as rare and exceptional as nat's milk.

On this night Father McDade was restless. Even his last Uncle Joe's could not soothe his uneasiness. His keen senses knew that all was not well, but even his well-honed mind, his reasoning and intellect, his psychic gifts, could not pigeonhole just what was amiss.

On the one hand, the village and its inhabitants was a bustle of pleasant diversions, abuzz with zest and enjoyment, but on the other . . .

It troubled him he could not get to the bottom of it and it tormented him even more that it could perhaps mean something grave was about to take place.

There was only thing for it, the retired missionary decided. He would have to track down what was making his mind so solemn and pensive. He rose from the comfort of his leather armchair, placed some coal on the glowing embers of his cosy fire, wrapped a long red scarf around his neck, placed a woollen overcoat about his person and ventured out into the night.

But to where? His natural instincts would lead him, of that he was certain, but as he stepped out into neon-lit Chancery Lane, he was unsure.

Down the lane he walked, passing the bustling Red Lion pub on the corner, and descending the steep hill.

As he made his way, he was aware of the hoot of the short-eared owl, and he glanced at the crescent moon playing peek-a-boo from behind the bustling clouds. A cat ran across his path. Was it a black one, he wondered? Somewhere in the distance a dog barked, and all the time there was the incessant throbbing energy emanating from the villagers' festivities.

It was then that he became aware of a lone figure standing outside a house; a female, strangely attired and with shabby footwear.

She carried a gun in her right hand.

CHAPTER FOUR

*The streams of lovely Nancy divide in three parts,
Where the young men and maidens do meet their sweethearts,
It is drinking of good liquor caused my heart for to sing,
And the noise in yonder village made the rocks for to ring.*

Was it a smoking gun? Best not to find out just now, stray fireworks would mask any noise, and there was no consternation in the street, Church Street had had enough excitement for today. Was it for threat? It certainly would be if Fr. McDade did nothing. During all his worldly travels via the violent trouble spots of Cuba, Borneo, and Pott Shrigley, his faith had never failed and nothing had much disturbed him. Bollington held no terrors. The gun must be a cry for help, albeit a pretty violent one. It would be no use getting the police, they would have their hands full in Macclesfield, something to do with a shortage of pubs for the youngsters, so the council says. Cinema, what cinema? Also the police now have to come from Chester, it takes time and action is needed now.

"Put that thing away, lets talk." Once being a catholic priest, and once a priest always a priest, he had difficulties with women, that was the best he could think of to say. In the Crown Inn they cut an odd sight. Fr. Mc Dade was well known in all his locals, a kindly, friendly figure, going by the names of Father Brown or Zadok the Priest, he was proud to be known by either. The pub was not very full, no eyebrows were raised, many of the highbrows were in Broadway, the rest watching James Bond, or rather the Bond girls, and at the bar discussion was investment opportunities of foreign multi-millionaires, that is football.

The woman told Fr. McDade little, but in the guise of Father Brown he was able to deduce more. She was Bollington born and bred for sure. Certainly in her youth she had done what all the youth did, drink, she knew all the drinking holes, but there were gaps. She didn't know that the Redway Tavern was not mourned or that the Vale was. That the conservative club had moved and called itself the Con Club. You just could not make that up! That the sky was now visible from Queen Street as Oak Bank had gone, and that Bollington was now full of flats. Where had this woman been? Fr. McDade for once had no answer. Manchester, Macclesfield, who knows? Certainly not Prestbury, for her clothes told, if not of poverty then a lack of cash. Where had she come from, he had not a clue? But the biggest question, why?

She offered the information that already earlier today she had been up the hill to see White Nancy, but she did not know even why she had been there. Fr. McDade did not need much sleuthing to realise that Nancy meant something to the woman, was it benign or was it evil? Was it Nancy that had enticed her to Bollington again? Fr. McDade now felt he could help, he was on home ground. He had seen the morthbrood flying earlier in the day, they usually live on Alderley Edge, and when they fly trouble also flies.

Here I must digress a little.

Fr. McDade's house, just up the lane from the Red Lion, is a gaunt stone building looking straight up the hill towards White Nancy. From all the front windows including his bedroom, even from his bed he could see White Nancy. He had plenty of time to ponder, what does it mean? Do you really think a true, proud and patriotic Englishman, one such as Squire Gaskell of Ingersley, would, to celebrate Wellington and the battle of Waterloo, erect on the hill a pepperpot, paint it white, and call it Nancy? Tripe. Of course not, it's far more important than that. Fr. McDade knew of old folk songs which seemed to speak of Nancy, of many old stories, of white horses, of knights seeking the Grail, of the three streams of Nancy which run to the sea, of a white castle encrusted with diamonds shining in the night. Of the thick wooden door, where the youngsters would enter and be dared to close the door, to be rewarded with the names of all the people in the world. And it was true, for on the back of the door was carved the alphabet. He knew all about White Nancy, except exactly what it was.

He believed it was his duty not to turn the woman in to the authorities, that would only lead to another uncaring in the community case, but he must divine her troubles. Displaying all his hangups concerning women he could only ask, "Why don't you come up the hill with me, tomorrow is Saturday?" The woman was keen, which surprised Fr. McDade. "When?" he asked. Even more surprised when she replied, "Now". For the first time that Fr. McDade had noticed, she appeared a little relaxed. Was there here a little help, the first friendly words for a few weeks? The pub and Broadway were emptying, time was called, fireworks had fizzled, lights were going out, except for the Swindells' house just a few doors towards the church where even the door was still ajar, but this meant nothing to Fr. McDade if he even noticed it. They would not be at Nancy's side until near midnight, but this pleased him.

Steeplly up Lord Street, dodging round the carelessly parked Porschs, past Adshead Barn Farm, a different time then where the Methodists first met, and John Wesley didn't preach here. Fr. McDade called in home for his new million candle power torch that would drive the dark spirits away, but he hoped it really wouldn't. Up the quarrymens steps, across Bettys Brew, by the old reservoir, its just getting steeper and steeper, and the new steps don't help very much. The slope lessens, near here is a patch called the Horse Race, why, even Fr. McDade doesn't know, but probably something Celtic. The clouds have parted, there's a moon, not full, but enough to make Nancy's newly whitewashed festival party dress sparkle. Fr McDade is happy, he's in his element, this is his territory, whether it's the morthbrood or black dogs, he has the knowledge to match them, and he is after all a (7th son)². Of course a strange woman with a gun in her pocket is another matter, but she might have forgotten about it for the time being, he hopes.

The woman did nothing but gaze at Nancy, Fr McDade did nothing but let her. Slowly, as their gaze became fixed the village below disappeared in silence, no owlhoots, no rustlings in the trees. Magic was in the air and Fr. McDade against his better judgement reached for his torch. There were no million candles in his hand, just one, its flame slowly waving in an old lantern.

And there was the strong oak door, square nails studding the wood, at the side a small lancet window.

*Fairy Queen, Fairy Queen, name the places that you've been,
Fairy Queen, Fairy Queen, name the people that you've seen,
Fairy Queen, Fairy Queen, what do all these stories mean?*

CHAPTER FIVE

“Have you heard them up there? They’re at it again. Every two minutes it’s the same. Chanting over and over. It gets right on your t..”

“They’re entitled I’m afraid.” Mandy, this year’s Fairy Queen picked distractedly at her long painted nails. “You know we can be called on at any time. It’s in the rules.”

“Rules my pointy goblin foot,” iterated Paul the pointy footed goblin. “Don’t they know there’s a time and a place for calling us out?”

“Well...” Mandy stood up, shook out her designer cerise pink and black polka dot robes and smoothed her hands down their luxurious folds. “You know what these Nancy Fanciers are like. It’s all written down in the legends. They go for years and years without a care in the world and then something turns up and it has to be sorted out straight away.” She turned this way and that, admiring her reflection in the moonbeams.

“So what do we do?” Paul was obviously disgruntled as he had taken to waggling his bottom in each direction of the compass in turn, a nasty habit that pointy footed goblins were notorious for.

“Stop that,” Mandy was regal but firm. “We must go down to the village and hang around on the festival bunting for a while. We should get a feel for what’s going on then.” She bustled off to get changed, her robes rustling imperiously. “You listen by that oak door, your big ears might pick up something, although that priest and his floosie don’t seem to be giving much away – other than their incessant chanting.”

Paul sighed. Mandy had been such a nice fairy before she became queen. They’d swung out together more than once on passing stars. But these days, well, it had all gone to her head this royalty. He stuck his ear up to the oak door and flinched. They were still at it. “Give it a rest,” he said under his breath, looking over his shoulder to make sure Mandy hadn’t heard.

*Fairy Queen, Fairy Queen, name the places that you’ve been,
Fairy Queen, Fairy Queen, name the people that you’ve seen,
Fairy Queen, Fairy Queen, what do all these stories mean?*

Nan hadn’t been able to settle. She’d tried whitewashing the airing cupboard. She’d tried flushing out the s-bend but nothing was doing it for her. As a last resort she’d made Jack put on his tan slacks and third best Fred Perry polo shirt and walk her up and down the festival

procession route. There was something in the air. She knew it and she knew Jack knew it. He was tense and not just from being dragged away from 'The Life Laundry'. "There's something in the air." She said to him, squeezing his arm and noticing how the years were making him shorter.

"I know, Nan," Jack said, rubbing his watering eyes and wishing he'd brought his cap.

They both stood a while, looking up at the swags of bunting that lined the street. "Those flags look sharper in the dark," said Nan, "sinister, like shark's teeth." She shivered and held Jack's arm tighter.

"Do you think Alice really is around here then?" Jack's eyes narrowed, he stared into the distance as though he was looking back down his memories, back into that time so long ago.

Nan didn't reply. The wind had got up and she was listening to the howl it made as it whipped and dashed through the gaps in the houses, as it dipped and coiled round the chimney cowl.

The bunting was rattling and banging like the rigging on a storm-tossed galleon. Nan was frightened. "Let's go home," she said to Jack, pulling at his arm. He didn't move. Couldn't move. The dust was rising from the black streets. It swirled in the gathering squall, wound around the couple like a tornado.

"There's something in the air, Jack," Nan was shouting now, shouting to be heard over the vicious storm, "there's something in the air and it's evil."

Paul the pointy footed goblin had tears in his eyes the size of marbles. He stared at the paving slab, two rows down and one to the left of the Briscola Restaurant door. He was scarcely able to keep his pointy footing as the force ten buffeted him. "She's gone," he wailed, his unchecked tears falling like thunder spots. A blemish marked the slab and to the untrained eye it could just have been a stray piece of ravioli that had been unchecked by the ample serviettes generously made available in the restaurant and belatedly brushed from a diner's skirt. But Paul knew better. Paul knew that the ravioli look-alike was Mandy's tiny corpse, disintegrating in the eye of the storm. He lifted his head to the heavens and cried, "Who has killed her? Who has killed the Queen of the Fairies?"

Seth Arrowmint was a hack of great experience. At least he considered himself so. After all, hadn't he worked for the Barnsley Chronicle for forty years. Alright, he had to admit, he'd hated every minute of his sojourn in the Births, Deaths and Marriages columns, but his big break had come and he'd got a job with the Manchester Evening News, oldest junior reporter at 60. Still this had meant crossing the big divide to the big city with his big plans. He was a tad disappointed though, when his first assignment was reporting on this backwoods town's festival. "Nothing going on 'ere to mek me name," he muttered to himself as he ambled past the Drop in Centre's notice board. He lit up a fag and waved his reporter's notebook around, hoping someone would offer him a tasty titbit of gossip worthy of someone of his calibre. "All thev been goin' on abart is a reet bad storm and som'dy called White Nancy. Storm's is old 'at

i' Barnsley and a Nancy is sommat altogether different," he muttered to himself, wondering if they sold a decent pork pie in these parts.

It was a quiet afternoon and Seth wondered where everyone was. This was supposed to be a 'thriving arts scene', so his editor had said. Well they were thriving in silence was all he could think. Seth found himself down by the canal, wandering, admiring the painted barges with their bonny little pots of flowers.

Suddenly his eye was taken by a pile of black rags, abandoned by the canal towpath. He poked at the rags with his foot, idly wondering what they were doing there. As his foot hit something solid, Seth realised that this wasn't just cloth after all. There was something inside, somebody!

Fr McDade was still alive – if you could call it that. His eyes were open but staring unseeing into the far distance. Unspeakable horror etched shadows under the hollows of his eyes and his mouth was hanging open, its blood red lips encircling a fresh white rose in full bloom.

CHAPTER SIX

Alice really couldn't stand another moment of Father McDade. It had been bad enough having a drink with him; she couldn't imagine what impulse had made her suggest that they climb White Nancy together. As they stood in front of the over-sized cotton bobbin in the middle of the night he had started acting very strangely. It had been fun at first to chant a childhood rhyme together, but then he became more and more incoherent, almost hallucinatory. His gibberish ranged from wooden doors, to goblins perched on bunting, to the significance of bits of food trodden into the pavement outside Briscola's Restaurant. And yet he kept on referring to the Goblins, and to Mandy and Paul. Alice felt sick as she thought back to that traumatic midsummer night twenty years earlier, on this very spot. Could Zadok McDade have been involved? Probably so.

She led the Priest down the hill, turned left onto Chancery Lane and then right onto Grimshaw Lane. By the time they arrived at the canal bridge McDade was barely able to walk, and his babbling talk was beyond comprehension. She pushed him up the steps to the canal path, lowered him to the ground and left him. Someone would find him within a few hours. It wouldn't really matter if they didn't.

Alice trudged back up the hill to White Nancy and carefully retraced the path by the stone wall she had taken hours earlier along Kerridge Ridge. It took a while to find the rucksack she had hidden in the thorn bushes, but she managed to extract it, take off the old woollen clothes and inadequate shoes and quickly change back into her track suit and trainers. She carefully transferred the letter to her tracksuit jacket pocket, packed the old clothes into the rucksack and set off once again on the circuitous downhill paths that led her away from Bollington. It was three in the morning by the time she let herself unseen into the small hotel in the middle of Macclesfield.

It took twenty minutes for Alice to produce some sort of order to the events of the last twelve hours. She had successfully hacked into the Bollington Festival web site from her laptop and substituted her own first chapter of the Internet Novel for the original. She didn't know for certain if Jack and Nan Swindells would read the chapter, but if they did they would surely understand that Alice had returned to Bollington, and draw their own conclusions, influenced no doubt by their fears and guilt. Her childish game of knocking on their door and then hiding had the desired effect of proving that both of them were still alive, if somewhat frail. Alice was convinced that Jack and Nan knew the truth about her sudden departure from Bollington, and about her parents' death: that it was not simply an accident. The letter she had been carrying with her so carefully since she received it three weeks earlier confirmed that their knowledge was now potentially deadly.

Tiredness suddenly overcame her, an accumulation of hours in the cold, the potential danger of her return to Bollington, the exertion of fifteen miles of walking, and the vivid, hurtful memories. Feeling in need of new energy, Alice stripped off and indulged in a long hot shower. She towelled herself down in front of the full length mirror in the bathroom. Her firm body enjoyed the coarse treatment from the cheap hotel towel, and Alice stared into the mirror for some minutes in self admiration at the bronzed torso and the taught thigh muscles that came from years of surfing. She was nearly forty and had produced two children, but she still looked and felt great.

The newfound energy made her skip into the bedroom and phone her office in Sydney. The familiar cheerful voice answered after only two rings.

“District Nurse Detective Agency. We are the first aid in your life. How may I help you today?” Alice hesitated for a moment. Whenever she rang the office she regretted the moment of madness in which she had named her company after the first undercover disguise she had used.

“Tom!”

“Alice. Isn’t it the middle of the night for you, honey? How’s it going?”

“Not quite as I had imagined. Tom, I need you to come out here straight away.”

“OK honey. What’s the deal? Feeling horny are we?”

Alice tensed. She and Tom had maintained an on/off affair for the two years since they had started the Agency together. It more or less reflected their mutual needs and desires, and usually meant a night of frenzied love making whenever they had to be away together. Spending a couple of thousand dollars on an air fare for Tom just to get a quick bonk in a Macclesfield hotel room was not top of her agenda, even if she was naked.

“Cut it out, Tom.” Alice used her most officious staccato voice. “You know what I went through here twenty years ago. I need to heal those scars, and find my parents’ killers. And I suppose I have to safeguard the lives of Nan and Jack. But Bollington is still an odd place, Tom. There are strange people around and I have weird glimpses of the past which seem to go much further back than my memory. I’m not exactly frightened, Tom, but I do need another brain on this, and one that does not have the excess baggage that mine does. Please come over as soon as you possibly can.”

“Have you made any sense of the letter yet?”

“I think I understand what it implies.” Alice was more hesitant now. “But I don’t know who wrote it, or even if they were directly involved.”

Tom tried to lighten the atmosphere. “Just stay where you are, honey. I’ll get on the next flight, whatever it takes. I’ve got exactly what you need to sooth your troubled mind.”

“Forget the sex, Tom. This is too serious for me.”

“Bet you change your pretty little mind when you see me, honey.” Alice knew he was right and could see her body reacting to the thought. Her mind raced to the possibility that they might go

to hear the performance of Verdi Requiem together on the final Sunday of the Festival. It may be about death, but it was the most erotic music she had ever heard. She was damned if she was going to give him the satisfaction of being right, though.

“Just get on the next flight, Tom.” She slammed the phone down.

Alice’s hand was still on the receiver when the phone rang ten seconds later. She picked it up angrily. “Tom, please take this seriously.”

“This isn’t Tom. We know you’re here, Alice.” The phone went dead. There was a knock on her door.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Two hours later, a boy was sitting in his room in the stone house where he lived alone with his sister.

Raskolnikov Bracegirdle was six years old. He was a sullen child with ginger hair, who only dreamt in the Cyrillic alphabet.

His parents, who died from apathy, were called Brenda and Jude. The only thing that could have differentiated them from your bog-standard, net-curtain twitching wage-slaves was their passionate love of Russian novels.

Jude had the disorientating habit of quoting Crime and Punishment during coitus. It was for this reason Raskolnikov bore his name.

He was a fierce child with piercing eyes and a melancholy air. He wore an old tattered black overcoat. He had burnt all his toys in a rejection of the cruel and impersonal God who oppressed him with his petty diktats.

Raskolnikov blamed God for making him go to school, to church and play rugby. He shivered in the cold and felt at home. The boy lit one of his woodbines and glanced up to his bookshelf. He had already sold his entire collection of Just William and Winnie the Pooh books to pay for his habit. Raskolnikov had never read them. He preferred Nietzsche.

The boy had one accomplice, whom he carried in his overcoat pocket at all times.

“Well, Nihilist, you are my only friend.” The hamster looked at his master.

“And yet, you only live because I will it.” Under the overcoat, the sickle swung in its harness against Raskolnikov’s body.

Next door Faith Wavering-Bracegirdle rolled a scarlet stocking up her one good leg. She snapped the top against her thigh. The red lamp in her bedroom flickered.

Faith had known she wanted to be bad ever since she first went to Sunday school. And yet, she had never had the chance to be a bad lot, to seduce a teacher or priest, to be fast and loose.

It is hard to be fast and loose after losing half your leg.

At age 16, two years ago she had gone into the family planning clinic to get free contraceptives. She was determined to be fully prepared as she entered womanhood. Unfortunately the door

slammed on her leg, causing her to fall and drop the multitude of multi-coloured prophylactics she had stashed in her Hello Kitty handbag. The leg had shrivelled up in embarrassment and dropped off.

Since then she had stayed in, claimed her benefits and looked after her brother. Faith didn't hear Raskolnikov cross the landing, go down the stairs and walk out of the front door.

"I knew you wouldn't let me down."

Raskolnikov stopped on the street and turned around. He had been thinking of St Petersburg.

"I am not speaking to you because I know you don't exist."

The boy carried on walking but the whispering continued.

"If I don't exist, then who were you just talking to?"

Raskolnikov furrowed his brow. "You're mad."

Charnel Leperhouse laughed and danced on his pointy feet. "I may be mad but at least I don't talk to people who don't exist."

Hackett Emphysema had run the tobacconist's for 10 years. He moved to Bollington for the fresh air. He used to be a regular about the town until one fateful evening.

It had all began when the mint-sucking missionary had given him an Indian headdress from his travels. He still had it; he kept it to remember. The whole village was in the pub. It was karaoke night. Hackett had had too much to drink. He was intoxicated with the sense of community and bonhomie.

He had spoken excitedly to the karaoke master and ran back to his shop. The silence, which greeted Hackett Emphysema's rendition of the Village People's greatest hits, complete with Indian Headdress, was met by the loudest silence ever heard in Bollington.

He fled in tears and swore revenge. The pub closed soon after. Hackett had nursed his resentment for nine long years. He took vengeance where he could, mostly by selling cigarettes, pipes and sweets to the children of the town.

He dreamed of creating a whole generation of hugely obese, choking, coughing kids that would pollute the byways of Bollington with an endless stream of flatulence and second-hand smoke. That would show them. Raskolnikov Bracegirdle pushed open the door.

"A packet of woodbines and some Rhubarb and Custards."

"Sold some more books have we?"

"If you like."

Hackett grimaced. That Bracegirdle boy was an odd one. He could swear the kid was growing a goatee beard. Probably drawn on. His voice sounded deeper, more foreign. Maybe he was an asylum-seeker. Hackett turned around to the sweet jars. Raskolnikov climbed onto the counter in the dark, oaky shop and stood over Hackett's turned back. He unharnessed the sickle and raised it.

Nihilist the hamster found a sunflower seed in Raskolnikov's pocket.

Raskolnikov Bracegirdle crouched on the desk and watched his victim snuff it on the floor of the tobacconist's. He helped himself to a woodbine and took a swig of vodka. He had made himself a Napoleon.

Alice walked past the tobacconists, clean and serene. White dress, white stockings, white shoes, white hat, red lipstick. Her pearl-handled revolver smoked lazily into the night sky. She stopped, turned around and walked into the tobacconist's.

Raskolnikov heard the doorbell ring and the wind blowing outside and the clack of heels on the floor. He jumped down behind the counter next to Hackett Emphysema's body.

"Hello, Charnel Leperhouse," said Alice, "It is a lovely night isn't it? Have you got any Sobranies?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

The next morning dawned bright and early for some of the residents of Bollington except perhaps for those who had consumed such copious amounts of Festival Ale, a snip at £2.40 a pint that later arrivals in the bar had to make do with cans of John Smith's.

At ten o'clock Nan and Jack were still finishing their breakfast. Half drunken cups of tea lay abandoned on the crumpled blue and white checked table cloth. Jack absentmindedly crumbled a piece of toast between his fingers. Normally Nan would have reminded him not to make such a mess but today a few crumbs on the table cloth were insignificant compared to what was happening or going to happen. Sleep had eluded them both until almost dawn. They felt someone or something was watching their every move. They spoke in whispers. What had happened last night? They remembered the black swirling dust cloud gathering itself up from the street and winding its prickly tentacles around them, pushing and tearing at their clothes and skin. It had been difficult to breathe and Jack's feet had seemed rooted to the ground. They had heard the singing, music and laughter from the Festival Big Top pulsating through the night air. It was only when Nan began to laugh that the fierce wind instantly deflated, like a balloon being punctured by a pin.

Between them, on the table, lay the small oblong package. Both knew what was in it. Both wished they didn't know. George and Ethel Bunting, Alice's parents had given them the package a few days before they had been killed in that so-called road traffic accident. They had been asked to keep the package safe for Alice, for when she was older. They had decided to keep it until Alice's 21st birthday but she had left them long before disappearing without leaving a trace or clue to where she had gone. Last night to make sure the package was safe Nan had carefully placed it under the middle of their bolster pillow. Jack had even joked about the Tooth Fairy or Package Fairy. As Nan had tossed and turned during the night her fingers had strayed to check it was still there. You couldn't be too careful.

Nan had read about an Alice in the first chapter of the Festival internet novel, if it was their Alice surely she would come to see them. They needed to talk. Perhaps if they had given Alice the package she wouldn't have left them like that.

"Anyway we can't sit here all day. Got to get to the Doctors to get my new prescription. Let's get washed up and ourselves sorted out. I'll put this package in my bag. We ought to keep it with us." Jack nodded.

"What about calling in at the Drop-in Centre for a cup of tea on the way back?" he called as Nan walked into the kitchen carrying a tray of breakfast pots. He peered fondly over the rims of twisted spectacles, 'Married over fifty years and I still love her,' thought Jack as he smiled to himself. "What are you smiling about? Come on shift yourself."

Jack folded his newspaper, rose slowly from the table and went into the kitchen to help. Just as they had finished there was a loud knock at the door. The cloth Nan was folding slipped through her fingers and wafted gently down over her swollen feet and ankles whilst her hand pressed against her mouth. Jack placed a reassuring hand on her arm.

“I’ll go.”

This time there was someone at the door.

“Yes!” said Jack sharply. “We don’t buy anything at the door, so if you’re selling you’re wasting your time and mine!”

“I’m not selling. I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions about Bollington, I understand you and your family have lived here for some time. By the way my name’s Seth Arrowmint, here’s my card. I’m a journalist from the Manchester Evening News. We’re hoping to do a series of articles on Bollington and the Festival.”

“Well, we’re just about to go out.”

Nan appeared at the end of the hall, “It’s alright we can spare a few minutes. Let him in.”

“Well if you’re coming in I want a better look at your card before you put it away. I don’t just let anyone in.” Jack held out his hand for the card.

“Yes, of course.... You have to be careful,” smiled Seth. Inwardly he was thinking, ‘Silly old fool, just like that Priest I found on the canal towpath. He’d looked at deaths door but before I could ask him anything he had suddenly got up, spat out the white rose from his mouth and sprinted off, chanting nursery rhymes, like the devil was after him.’

Seth settled himself into one the comfy chairs at the side of the fireplace, his eyes wandering over the room.

“Cup of tea?” asked Nan.

“Oh yes, my mouth’s like the bottom of a errr..... Never say no to a cup of tea, that’s my motto. Milk and seven sugars please.”

Seth found it easy to get the couple to talk steering the conversation to what he really wanted to know. Following his encounter with the priest he had been busy. What he thought to be a backwoods town was really a place seething with secrets and mysteries.

There was definitely a story here. He would show those young whippersnappers back on the paper who thought they knew it all. When the name Bunting was mentioned Seth thought he was getting somewhere at last. Something very odd about that accident, it had already been mentioned to him several times, as if it had only happened yesterday. It’s amazing how people love to gossip when they get going. Seth was going to ask about their niece Alice when a woman dressed completely in white came bursting through the door. Nan stood up and slumped in a faint to the floor.

CHAPTER NINE

Alice was still reeling from the nightmare she had just experienced as she unceremoniously burst through Jack and Nan's front door. The dream had left her chilled to the bone, it was as if all the people of Bollington had turned into a bunch of weirdos with strange sounding names and talking gibberish, it was like the end of the world had come to Bollington and all the villagers relished the hallucinatory state.

But somewhere during the course of the dream a voice played over and over in her head, "you must see them now, you must see them now" before it's too late.

As she left the small hotel the hairs on the back of her neck began to prickle, she was sure someone was watching her every move. Now even more she wished Tom were here as she at last confronted the old people.

The dark brooding quality of the man with the thick dark red hair who sat in the corner of the bar was overly apparent, the air of menace hung around him like a cloak, and his dark-ringed eyes gave out signals of murderous intent - if you dared stare at him.

He huddled himself into the corner, trying to be absorbed by the background, the cool night air had brought in more than the normal regulars, no bad thing, he thought, makes me less visible. The landlord of the "Bush" had greeted him in grudging tones, "Evening Joe, usual is it?" serving him quickly and turning away to address the rest of the bar. Joe knew that people were running scared of him, the past had a way of labelling you and casting you as a bad 'un.

He had seen the woman on the ridge and for a fleeting moment recognition flashed across his mind, what the hell was she doing at that time of night running her hands over the white folly? He decided to leave it; he had enough blood on his hands for one day. The red mist descended again when the memory of the woman came back, the voice in his head screamed "they want to change my village, I can't let it happen, too much has gone on, too many strangers with their fancy ideas" well not if I stop 'em first.

It's a pity she had to die, she were a pretty lass.

With a rush of cold air the pub door opened and the lanky figure of Jack stepped inside. The hatred was apparent between the two men and Jack as old and frail as he was attempted to launch himself at Joe, but the landlord sensing trouble guided Jack to the other end of the bar. This didn't stop Jack from yelling "you evil bastard, it was you t'other night, one day you'll

pay for what you've done lad" From the moment Joe saw Jack he knew where he had seen the girl on the hill before and with avid certainty he knew he would have to do something about it before she confronted Jack and Nan.

Seth Arrowmint sat quietly in the bar ruminating on the day's events, finding that priest character in that state, hell this quiet village was throwing up hidden depths, some arts scene this was, more like mayhem in Manhattan.

He was made aware of the two men and their outburst, well who wouldn't, in the silence that followed; you could have cut the air with a knife.

Mondar McDade reacted to the phone call he received that morning with absolute disbelief. It came from the Cheshire police, they had found a woman's body who they believed to be his wife Isobel, she had been brutally murdered, found at the foot of some stone steps in the converted Clarence mill. A man they believed to be his cousin Father Zadok McDade had also been seen wandering the streets acting in a strange manner as if possessed by some evil force

Mondar stared at the raging clouds as they raced across the ashen sky, the sudden anger he felt inside struggled to reach the surface, his mind trying to come to terms with the misery that had been thrust upon him. This could not have happened, not to me, not to Isobel. Living with tragedy was something for others, it happens everyday, so surreal in its ambiguous targets, and this wasn't for him, nothing to do with his world, his cocoon. His hideaway had its own destiny, just himself and Isobel his beloved wife. A month ago Zadok had offered Isobel a job assisting him in collating information and processing some of his vast library of old photographs which were to be part of a Discovery Centre in a converted mill in Bollington, a small but pretty village in Cheshire, a far cry from their small fishing village on the wilds of the Northeast coast of England.

As he drove to Edinburgh to catch a flight to Manchester his mind strayed back to the last letter Isobel had written. Was there any clue or any sense of strain in her meanderings? She had written in her own open honest style, that the change of scenery was doing her good although she was missing him terribly of course.

The festival was about to start and she was looking forward to that, especially the Piano concertos and the Opera. She said that without being too unkind "your bloody cousin is definitely losing it". He seems to be more in touch with the dark side than with God.

Mondar McDade held himself in check, he could feel the anger rising within him, the total feeling of helplessness that made him feel sick to the core. Someone will have to pay for this.

Later that night he found himself outside the Holly Bush Inn on Palmerston Street in Bollington, the tourist office in Macclesfield had given him directions and booked a room for him. The place had the feel of a real old local and yet there was something pressing at the corners of his mind, something sinister.

As he walked up the stairs after picking up his room key from the landlord, he noticed a scruffy red-haired man moving silently across the far side of the bar towards the door.

The door to his room opened to a small but clean space with a wash basin and a single bed, it was then he noticed a brown envelope which had obviously been pushed under the door.

With nervous fingers he pulled out a very old piece of what looked like old-fashioned kitchen roll and scrawled on it was what appeared to be a poem of sorts.

*For those who play on sacred ground
Beware of bodies never found
Nancy rules, and through her door
You'll find the secret at her very core
I've spilled blood, now you'll feel my wrath
Look at the crazy man of cloth.*

CHAPTER TEN

Outside Mondar McDade's door, the tallest, darkest and most handsome member of the Bollington Festival's Literary Committee was huffing and puffing his way along the corridors of the Holly Bush Inn.

Relentlessly, greedily, Sebastian Gimp had been folding innumerable sheets from his pile of A4 paper, leaning down and pushing them through the draughty gaps under each guestroom door. In this way, he mused, every single guest staying at the Holly Bush that night was going to damn well read a selection of the verse he had sweated over. Sebastian paused to consider which of the poems should go under the door of the newest guest in town. With a self-satisfied smile, he picked a desperate warning plaint of blood and doom, popped it under Mondar's door and then moved silently down the stairs to emerge into the chill night air.

One of the instigators of the 'Post-a-poem' idea, in which every last telegraph pole and lamp-post in the village had been emblazoned with a poem ranging from Sappho to Shakespeare to Michael Symmons Roberts, Sebastian knew now that his brainwave had been cruelly hi-jacked. This had been the moment that his very own poems, his babies, the most precious outpourings from the depths of his troubled soul would be recognised. But the pesky people on the Literary committee had scotched all that, saying that only one of his efforts could be included. And it hadn't even been his favourite. It was time for revenge, and a bit of taking matters into one's own hands never hurt anyone. Hence that night he had tramped the lonely streets of Bollington with his opus in a Co-op carrier bag, and had already delivered edited highlights to around half the village.

Soon, he murmured, soon, soon, his brilliance would be shouted from every stone-slabbed rooftop. Soon, he too would command packed audiences for poetry readings at the Arts Centre – even the Big Top – and given his delicious good looks, succulent young groupies with pierced navels and firm rolls of flesh peeping over low trouser waistbands would be hanging on his every fevered utterance. Now though, it was time to meet his latest conquest up the hill at the Meridian. He didn't have any money, but starving artists don't, he rationalised. Maybe she'd buy him a pint. Really, she should be honoured to have a drink with a soon-to-be famous poet. Trudging up the hill, Sebastian stepped on a squashed ravioli outside Briscola restaurant, and as he slipped and fell, thought he heard an agonised yowl emanating from the gutter in the road. From his vantage point lying flat out on the pavement, he peered over the kerb only to behold a tiny pointy-footed goblin weeping silver tears as though his heart would break.

Having recovered swiftly like a good northern lass from her faint, Nan busied herself with getting the kettle on. Postural hypotension had always been her bugbear, and standing up too quickly had seen her conk out many a time in the past. The last time she'd felt the blood draining from her face and a sudden sick feeling preceding total blackout had been in

Heathcote's butchers while holding a pound of sausages only last Tuesday afternoon. Jeremy Heathcote had popped a large rare steak onto the bruise on her forehead and later on she'd cooked it for her and Jack's tea.

Not having noticed the smoking gun in Alice's hand because she couldn't afford a new pair of glasses, all she had seen when she had come to was a slip of a girl in a floaty dress that was quite unsuitable for the cold night air.

"Fancy a cuppa sweetheart? You look freezing in that dress – now, I'm not saying it's not pretty, but it's not quite right for these parts, is it?"

Silently, Alice nodded. Damn. Stupid of her to have worn the white chiffon number for the main event without bringing a jumper and jeans for later. Image was all very well, but she'd forgotten how dank the north could be.

Nan still hadn't recognised her, and as Alice settled back into Jack's rocking chair and tucked her legs under her, she looked across at Jack. Nan didn't seem to have noticed, but Jack was shaking like a leaf, gazing in horror at the woman who had commandeered his place in the corner of the room, rocking lazily and hugging her ankles. Slowly, Alice smiled. It wasn't a pleasant smile. She brought her hand up and cocked it in the shape of gun in Jack's direction.

"Sugar, love?" called Nan from the kitchen.

"Three and a half please."

"Biscuits? I've got some of those royal ones, organic, you know, from Prince Charles's estate. Got bits of lemon in them."

"That's lovely, thanks."

Serenely, Alice gazed at the frightened old man in the corner. In the kitchen the kettle whistled shrilly and Nan bustled, stirring sugar carefully into the tea and unwrapping a packet of His Highness's very own lemon shortbread.

With a slick flip of the wrist, Alice discharged her gun. "Pow!" she whispered quietly. And with a muffled scream, Jack took off into the night, banging the front door behind him.

In the fields below White Nancy, a barn owl hunted pale and ghostlike in the almost night. Only a few hours of dark at this time of year to catch the voles and mice, the moles and chicks it needed for its own brood. Hooting as it skimmed across the fields towards the canal looking for food, its pale feathered face was caught in Tom's headlights as he drove along Jackson Lane. Startled, he braked to a halt. Having called in a favour from a friend in the Australian Air Force, Tom had been flown 12,000 miles in a top-secret prototype plane that went faster than the speed of light. It had taken barely a blink to reach Manchester airport, and he mused that the half hour it had taken him to negotiate the winding lanes to Bollington was easily the longest part of his journey from the other side of the world.

Never mind what Alice said, he'd bought her some hot pink and black undies from the Calvin Klein concession in the airport, and he hoped that she'd managed to find a hotel with a decent bed somewhere in this Hicksville town. But first, he had a job to do. Pulling up outside the

Holly Bush, he hoped Alice wouldn't feel he had betrayed her. Suddenly, Jack reeled out of the Holly Bush after being forcibly ejected by the landlord for starting another altercation. Jack wasn't having a good night.

Drunk for the first time in 30 years, he shuffled up the hill towards the comfort of home. There was a sense of dread felt deep in his bones, but he knew that Nan needed him urgently, and he had to get back. Tom tailed him, a dark shadow flitting unseen and unheard as the old man slowly negotiated the hill. Another drunk was ranting in the gutter outside Briscola but both ignored him. As they passed Heathcote's butcher's shop, Tom noticed that the lights were blazing. What he didn't see was the dark trickle sliding underneath the door and down Palmerston Street. And as the light of the laser hit White Nancy, a new graffiti in what looked like fresh red paint shouted 'Blood and Honey!' for all to see.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

On hearing the door slam Nan came in to the sitting room and was surprised to see it was Jack who had run out. "Not like him," she thought. The young lady was still sat in Jack's rocking chair smiling in a curious way, meanwhile Seth the journalist (who was in the room despite the desperate time shift that keeps occurring in this story) was sitting nervously on the edge of the sofa wondering whether things could get any more weird.

"Do you still want that tea then love?" "Yes please I have really missed your tea Nan." At that moment the scales fell from Nan's eyes and twenty years flashed by in a second.

"Alice, Alice my darling my darling!" In a surprisingly balletic action Nan almost skipped across the carpet to her niece and tried to throw her arms around her. "Not so fast Nan" Alice quickly rose to her feet and stepped out of the way leaving Nan to fall on the chair in an ungainly heap. With a swift movement Alice produced her revolver and pointed it at the old lady's head. Seth, rather nobly for a rancid old hack immediately leapt to his feet to stand in the way of any bullets. "Now then, there must be a better way of dealing with this," he said more with hope than confidence. "Don't worry I am not here to kill her just to frighten her in to telling me the truth of what happened to my parents. I am being followed and threatened and I want to know the meaning of this..."

Alice, now standing over Nan who was slumped in the rocking chair, threw the carefully folded letter on to the old lady's lap. Seth, his heroic moment passed sat back on the sofa and rummaged for his pen and pad to take notes. This was better than he could possibly have dreamed - a real life drama unfolding before his very eyes; he didn't even have to ask the questions. Nan, still shaking and a little teary unfolded the piece of paper to reveal a neatly handwritten letter. As she read it what little colour left in her cheeks faded away.

"Oh my dear - you must know we did not write this - this is evil..... and terrible and....and oh my God we are all in such danger."

"So you knew nothing of this?"

"My dear Alice of course not, we have been terrified all these years, we knew this would never go away. We so wanted to see you to talk to you to tell you all we know. We too are victims here, not safe in our own house, not safe in our village."

Seth was beside himself with curiosity to know what was in the letter but Nan was holding it flattened against her heaving bosom. Slowly the fire in Alice's eyes dimmed and the anger, fear and hatred that had been welling up in her momentarily abated and she saw her old aunt as a

fragile and scared old lady, no longer a person to be despised but more an old friend in need of support.

She went out to the kitchen to bring in the tea which was cooling on the side.

Father McDade opened his eyes slowly and breathed a sigh of relief that a) he was alive and b) was in his own bed. His peace of mind was less calm when he noticed an empty bottle of Lagavulin lying on its side on the floor by his bed. Single malt whisky was his one luxury and was also the only way he knew to stop the madness that visited him all too regularly these days. His mother had always told him he was too sensitive, too open to the pain in the world. After becoming a priest though he realised that such vulnerability was precisely what made him such a good exorcist. He knew that he was going to need this skill very soon because evil was stalking the village and he was sure it would not be long before he would be donning his robe and dusting off his special crucifix which had helped him so much during his South American days. He didn't enjoy the process of exorcism, in fact it was very painful and scary but he knew that God had given him a gift and he had to use it.

He also found women a bit scary but he had enjoyed working with Isobel his cousin's wife, she was an attractive young lady and was proving very useful in helping him to archive all the material for the festival. He knew that she had noticed his occasional madness but he hoped that she would stay with him for a bit longer, at least until the job was done. It was curious that he hadn't seen her for the last twenty-four hours – but that could have been the result of too much whisky blotting out the memory.

Alice, although calmer, was hardly in the mood for going through family snapshots and catching up on family news. She was still burning inside with righteous anger and fear for what still might happen. But over the lemon shortbread and comforting sweet tea she was able to tell Nan, and, inadvertently Seth, all the news of her detective agency and about her ex husband and children. "But you tell me now Nan, what the hell has been happening. Why is someone out to kill me and you and what is the connection with the death of my parents?"

"Well dear I don't know all the story but I do know that your Mum and Dad were in possession of something very important and secret that I think goes back hundreds of years. It's all connected with Nancy on the hill up there but not what you see today but something that was there before. It was a site of 'happenings' shall we say.....strange ceremonies and your dad seemed to know that there was something up there that was terribly precious. Anyway he wasn't the only one who knew something coz there was another man - who had lived up in Kerridge all his life who started to pay George, your Dad, calls late at night and I remember Ethel telling me the conversations got more heated and once or twice blows were thrown. It was around the time you were born and it was only a few weeks after that they came round here with you in the pram - and gave us a package which we were to give to you on your 21st birthday. George, yer dad, was shaking as he handed it over, it didn't feel like a very nice present for you but one that he sort of had to pass on if you know what I mean. A week later the accident happened."

"But it wasn't an accident was it Nan?"

"No - it wasn't - it was before the Silk Road was built, I suppose today they would say it was some kind of road rage. I remember we were in the car in front of your parents and this big truck was behind them. It was driving right on their bumper and started to ram them, again and

again until they were pushed off the road, the car rolled over and they were both dead when the ambulance arrived.”

"Why didn't you shop the bastard to the police"

Nan paused as if digging deep into her soul for the next bit of the story. "Oh I'm so sorry, we were so frightened." Nan's shoulder heaved with the grief and pain of the memory, then her words started coming thick and fast as the skein of pent up anguish unravelled – “what were we to do - we thought we knew who the driver was and what he was after and we just didn't want to get involved – he was, is I mean, a scary man. George and Ethel were dead anyway what good could it have done? And besides we could never have children and we loved you so much and we wanted you so much and there you were in the car seat miraculously saved, we clung to you and loved you as our own from then on.” She practically gasped for breath. “But you seemed to know we had been cowards and you sensed that justice had not been done and so you were never really happy. And then after the other incident on the hill those twenty years ago, you ran off and left us to our guilt and our memories.”

At that point the tears that were stifled by trying to talk were unleashed and Nan cried like she hadn't before, her whole body wracked with the convulsions of grief and unresolved pain.

Alice sighed a deep sigh of sadness and noticed for the first time a curious looking oblong package on the table. Leaving Nan to her tears and Seth to his note taking she went over to the table and picked it up. There was an old label stuck to it with some faded writing – it said: For Alice – our darling daughter – use with great care.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Sebastian? Did I wake you up? It’s Lucy. Lucy Phloughers from the Library?”

“Lucy! What a pleasant surprise! No, I wasn’t asleep. Burning the midnight oil.” Sebastian Gimp was grateful that Lucy couldn’t see him. He’d been asleep...of course he had. It was nearly one in the morning. Unseen by Lucy, his face was twisted up at the realization that within seconds of picking up the phone, he was already spouting clichés as if there were no tomorrow. There...that was another one. He was even thinking in the damn things now. Enough. What was Lucy doing, phoning him up in the middle of the night? He’d read too many novels and seen too many movies where a midnight call heralded Doom in a variety of guises.

“I’m so sorry, Sebastian...you don’t mind me calling you that, do you?” Lucy’s honeyed tones (blast!) purred down the line at him. He couldn’t think of a single thing she could do to him that he would mind, even after midnight.

“No, that’s fine. What’s the matter? You sound a little...well, distressed.” Perhaps, Sebastian thought, I could rescue her in best damsel in distress/gallant knight tradition.

“I saw one of your poems the other day, and I think you’re just the person we need. I’ve had a call from Dickie Witherspoon, who was going to be doing creative writing with the children in the primary school tomorrow morning. A verruca has suddenly turned extremely nasty on him, he says, and he can’t quite make it to Bollington in time. Can’t drive, you see. And allergic to trains...oh, Sebastian, you don’t want to know the details, but the thing is: I need someone to take charge of all those little ones tomorrow morning. Well, this morning, actually.”

Sebastian’s heart sank. (Never mind, let that one pass). He’d imagined for a moment that he was about to be asked to step in for one of the Festival Stars, not for this Dickie Witherspoon, who’d been a third-rater even before his career as a famous poet hit the skids. (Maybe he ought to set up a Cliché Box, like the Swearwords Box in pubs). He’d fancied, in the few seconds before Lucy had told him what she needed, that he’d be called upon to save the day (groan!) at the eleventh hour (double groan!) and rescue the Festival. In that short time, his mind had already formed pictures of acclaim, financial reward and a spot introducing Poetry Please on Radio 4. Alas, ’twas not to be. (There was another one. Damn and blast). A workshop. With kids. Little kids at that. Did he know how to talk to small children? Never mind, it would be a steep learning curve. Sebastian moaned.

“Is anything the matter?” Lucy crooned, in that delicious voice.

“No, not a thing. Happy to help. Tell me when and where and I’ll be there.”

Lucy giggled. “That’s a rhyme! You’re a real poet, I can see that.”

“Thanks,” said Sebastian. Rhyme and cliché. Perhaps he should seek employment in a greetings card factory. “What time d’you need me at the school?”

“Well, come nice and early and we’ll have a coffee together and I’ll fill you in on what’s needed and so forth. 8.30, shall we say? For a nine o’clock start.”

“Righty-o! See you then, Lucy. Good night.”

“Night, Sebastian. And I’m so grateful.”

An 8.30 start, eh? He hadn’t seen 8.30 for the last three years, ever since he’d left his position in the Job Centre and taken up poetry full-time. That was going to be tough. He ordered a wake-up call and set his alarm clock, too. Better to be safe than sorry. Oh, those clichés! What was to become of him? He pushed his face into the pillow and conjured up alluring visions of Lucy Phloughers, whose cleavage did so much to enhance the experience of a library visit. Lucy and Sebastian 4 Ever. He could practically visualise it, carved into a noble oak. Shut up and go sleep, Sebastian. It’s nearly two in the morning.

Raskolnikov Bracegirdle stared at the tall, dark young man who was standing in front of the class looking completely terrified. Their teacher, Mrs Porthouse, was on a chair at the back of the room, hiding with her bulk quite few of the pictures they’d done last week. This was not much of a loss. The theme had been ‘Blossoms’ and most of the artwork was a mess, Raskolnikov thought.

“My name’s Sebastian,” said the stranger. “I’m part of the Bollington Festival and I’ve come to help you write poems of your own. You’d all like to be poets, wouldn’t you?”

The children began to dissent, quite loudly. Engine driver, fireman, nurse, teacher, footballer, footballer’s wife...the Bollington Tots were of one mind. Not a single one of them wanted to be a poet. Raskolnikov put up his hand.

“Yes?” said Sebastian, peering down at him.

“I wouldn’t mind being a poet.”

“Great! Super! I have a volunteer.”

“Do I have to suffer?” Raskolnikov asked.

“Oh, goodness me, no. That was in the old days. Nowadays, poets don’t suffer. They do lovely things like ...well, like coming to talk to youngsters like you. They take part in Festivals, like this wonderful festival we have unfolding all around us...they read poems on the radio...no suffering whatsoever in the job description.”

“Then I don’t want to be one.” Raskolnikov was disappointed. Ignoring the collection of happy, springtime words Sebastian had written on the board to encourage the others, he took out his black notebook and turned to a new page:

“The Despair of the Child,” he wrote. See how you like that, Sebastian Spring and Sunshine, he thought, and began to chew the end of his pencil.

“How very unusual,” said Sebastian, peering over Raskolnikov’s shoulder. If he’d known the expression, Raskolnikov would have replied: “You ain’t seen nothing yet.” Instead, he kept on frowning and writing.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Alice was troubled by her obsession with Verdi's Requiem. She'd had a fixation with it long before that night in Sydney last year when she and Tom had heard it together as part of one of their 'memorable weekends'. That occasion had certainly changed the way she felt about Verdi's creation. It had confirmed her suspicion that people really do let sex and death get hopelessly jumbled up together. And since she'd noticed - not so long after she'd arrived - that there was a performance of it on the last night of the Festival, she knew she'd have to be there. And she knew that getting Tom over was somehow connected with it.

But Alice and the Requiem went back much further. So much further in fact, that she was quite unnerved at the prospect of hearing it in Bollington. It was too long ago to be sure, but she had always had the suspicion that she'd heard it around the time of the accident. But how could she possibly know that from the age she was back then? How far back can memories go? Was it playing on the car radio as the accident unfolded? But why would Jack and Nan have been listening to that music, anyway? Or had she heard it with them at some later time?

Whatever had happened in the past, Alice could not dissociate the Requiem from her past - more than her past, her inner life. It was the Dies Irae especially. There was a time when she used to dream recurrently that she was singing it, all alone: "Dies Irae, dies illa.... Day of anger, Day of terror... Solvet saeculum in favilla.... all shall crumble into ashes". She would be singing it, all alone, standing on a prominent bluff of some sort, standing next to a small white, pointed building... but all that was some time ago, too. How would she cope with Verdi this Sunday evening, with Tom, with her fears? She was exhilarated, and frightened. But she would go through hell and high water to get tickets for Sunday. She'd do it immediately.

Fr McDade used to sing to himself a great deal. He was never sure whether this meant that deep down he was happy, or desperate. He imagined it was a necessary emotional release for him - his way of purifying his system. But it was hard to know what each snatch of song meant, because the content so rarely seemed to fit the mood. Often he would find himself singing parts of Verdi's Requiem, but confusingly. On walks on fine summer days, striding out happily on the breeze, he would chant "Quid sum miser tunc dicturus?... What shall I plead in my anguish?". And then in moments of crisis he would hear himself exhaling joyfully "Hosanna in excelsis! Benedictus, qui venit in nomine Domini!" He even sang it, prostrate and barely conscious, by the canal. Was it his own form of self-protection, or his best articulation of an unorthodox but unshakable faith? But he'd never felt the need to sing it so urgently as this week.

Sebastian Gimp found himself in a quandary about Sunday evening. He was turned off by most religious poetry and liturgy, and didn't care for sacred music, but happened to be an old acquaintance of Alice Hunting, the mezzo-soprano hired for the Bollington performance. In fact, truth to tell, he still carried something of a flame for her, though he hadn't seen her for many years. Still, he couldn't quite explain to himself the burning, unsettling need he felt to be there on Sunday.

The only thing that normally interested Tom in Verdi's Requiem was the knowledge that it did peculiar things to Alice, and made her like putty in his hands. The other thing that intrigued him this time was that the name of the mezzo should be only one letter different from his own Alice. A strange coincidence, and rather alluring. He would make sure that, if Alice didn't get tickets for Sunday evening, he did.

"Are you having the time of your life?" asked Adrian from the office in Manchester.

"I'm always having the time of my life," replied Seth down the phone, portentously.

"Oh really?"

"Really. What other sort of time can you have as a human being limited to your own, individual, finite existence?" said Seth. Life's pleasures, he thought, were sporadic and unreliable, but without doubt one of them was irritating other people with silly bits of bogus, superficial philosophising.

"Yes, thank you, Seth, very interesting. Don't put that in your report, or you might find yourself without a job", was the best that Adrian could manage at that particular moment. "And now for a sensible answer?"

"Well..." Seth drew himself up to his full height, cleared his throat, grandly scanned the horizon (a pointless gesture, since Adrian could not see it, and nor could anyone else, as far as he was aware), and began to speak with the authority he fancied he might have acquired if things had taken a different turn and he had become the chief feature writer on the New York Times:

"Adrian, Bollington is not your average village. Inexplicable things happen here. We have had famine, plague, war and earthquake here over recent days - most of them more than proverbially - and yet all anyone seems to want to speak about this morning is Verdi's Requiem. There seems to be a fever in the air, almost an obsession with death, and a strange conviction that something bizarre is going to happen on Sunday night, something which will affect everyone here directly. People are saying they'll kill to get tickets. I don't know, perhaps this sort of thing always happens here at this time of year. But my journalistic antennae are quivering vigorously. Yes, Adrian, I think I am having the time of my life. But I'm not quite sure what sort of time the villagers are about to have. I'll talk to you later."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Tom was in the shower. His Australian charm had conjured tickets from somewhere and he smiled as he thought of the feast ahead - superb music - and its climax....

Alice was trying to still her thoughts by making an entry in her diary. She had kept a journal for most of her life, almost superstitiously, for she felt it formalised and tidied up the chaos of her thoughts. Joyce Grenfell had defined diary writing as a sharing of pleasure with oneself. How ironical, for so little of Alice's life had been pleasurable. The diary was her way of coming to terms with all she had faced. There must be some purpose for this annihilation of her family, but however she rationalised, the only outcome was a boiling anger. Tom was featured often in the pages of the diary. He was her soulmate, the only person she had found to make her calm, to make her laugh, to diffuse her rage against life. He was the only person she was truly honest with. Laughter defused tension and laughter could emasculate evil. If only that lesson had been taken to heart that night!

Tonight as she flicked through the pages she knew that there had been moments of pleasure – her passionate exquisite moments with Tom's sensitivity to her needs – but these moments were not chronicled. How honest could one be in a journal? Who was the audience? If she were to be the only reader then she really could be honest, but if she were to meet with sudden death, then who would read – who would judge?

She remembered her diary entries in the idyllic days of young motherhood, before it all went wrong. The birth of her children connected her with the thread of motherhood and the realisation of her children's individuality which showed her their endless possibilities. At the same time it rewove the thread back to her own mother and only anger was born from the fact of her parents' murder. Who was the driver of the ramming lorry turning the car into the ditch and catapulting her into a life of rebellion and fear. She would find that driver. She would find that killer. Dies Irae!

She was tense now. Not a time for writing. Words were clumsy tools to express her rage. She looked back over the last few entries. The flight from Australia with long periods to reflect on the reasons for all this - the letter – the call back to her roots. The anxiety of whether her gun would be discovered by the airport staff. She saw it clearly as her hand luggage was scanned but her chatter acted as a deflector. The gods were with me she had written. How crude was that with such an evil intent.

She wanted to record something of the events of the last few days but anger, fear and the sheer enormity of what lay ahead was too much How could you possibly form all this into words?

Maybe one day she would. . . If there were to be another day, perhaps this was her last. The threat was certainly nearer. Obviously someone considered she was a threat. Her solving the secret of the package was a threat.

What no one knew was that she had a precious possession, stolen in childhood while crawling under her mother's bed. She had found a book. She had loved to stroke the deep purple leather cover. The squiggles inside meant nothing to her but such soft suede had been hidden in her toysack, where it had remained hidden until she was old enough to read but still too young to understand. When, at 21, she read her mother's thoughts and fears she felt the link back beyond death. One entry had always puzzled her. "She must learn the secret of this package and use it with care."

One day she would write of this very particular place, Bollington – so full of character and characters (Hackett Emphysema? Surely not!) Her roots were in this place so safely nestled in the sure hills, so protected White Nancy, the beacon meerkat, stretching to look for approaching danger. Bollington safely nestled but surrounded by many dangers, wild brooding landscapes and the turbulence of inter-family webs within the village. Into this beautiful valley she had brought her anger brewed over a lifetime. When her fingers had grated their way round the white beacon she had wondered what madness had made her agree to accompany the wild stranger. While he chanted strange fairy music, her ears thundered with the full terror of Verdi.

Tom would soon be out of the shower and she knew she must come out of this downward spiral. Against all odds he had secured tickets. They were going. And who knows what would follow? Perhaps the day of anger could become a night of love....

They joined the crowds walking down through the village. There was an air of anticipation everywhere, an air of pride that this village could produce such a feast of culture. Father McDade was there. This music had saved his life as he lay on the canalbank. It had reminded him of his real path through doubt. He wanted to hear it again to sluice the apostasy out of his veins. It would replace the voodoo of his past with the white rose of his true belief. Seth Arrowmint was there. Joining the crowd, ears strained to pick up some snippet to turn into a front-page scoop. For once he was in the right place. Would his antennae detect the malevolence in the air? He was so near to the biggest story of his life. He brushed shoulders with a man with thick dark red hair but without realising.

The whole village was there, or moving there – iron filings milling round the magnet. Nan and Jack listened to the growing wind in the trees of St. John's churchyard. They had no thought of venturing out but their thoughts, in contrast, were roaming far and wide – to the past; to the words they should have said and to the love they knew they had for Alice. Nan knew that she had come in time – but only just.

This was no ordinary night. Meanwhile on the hilltop a white meerkat stretched higher, sensing danger.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Seth Arrowmint's mind wrestled with recent events like a frustrated novice grappling with a Sudoku. He wondered- and worried- how his story would turn out. There seemed to be so many angles he could go at but where exactly, to use newspaper parlance, was the hook to hang it on? What was his intro that would allow him to string words like 'blood and honey' with 'dark satanic mills'? He'd talked it up so well that the news desk were expecting a double page spread with photos and he'd be blowed if he'd go back to smug greasy graduate Adrian who didn't know a mill from a converted penthouse, never mind come up through one, and tell him the story wouldn't stand up. He felt like a late arrival at a Murder Mystery weekend who'd missed the opening scenes. He'd picked up some of the important threads from listening to Alice Bunting's dramatic rant at old Nan Swindells' but was mystified by several of the sub plots. Were they all linked, he wondered, or were there some spectacular red herrings that kept reappearing which he needed to discount? He knew there was tension mounting and sometime soon there could be an eruption that would shake Bollington. But somehow he had the sense that those who could blow this whole thing wide open were, to use newspeak again, sitting on the story. Everyone seemed reluctant to bite the bullet and move things on to the next level. (Shurely shome mistake? Seth Arrowroot, morphing into cliché ridden Sebastian Gimp- ed). Seth turned up his collar, positioned pencil behind one ear and fag behind the other and swiftly sidestepped through the crowd to get a better view.

Fr McDade definitely felt better. He had replenished his supply of Uncle Joe's Mint Balls at the Late Shop, his mind was calmer and he'd benefited from the security and stability that the week's important feast days gave to the calendar. He was still puzzled by Isobel's disappearance but his fractured memory meant that time seemed hugely distorted. Right at this moment he was coping by dwelling, not only on the promise of fine, restorative music, but on another passion-the Macclesfield, Bollington and Marple Railway. He had recently purchased at auction a third class, cheap day return ticket from Hyde Junction to Bollington via Marple Junction. This was the sort of news to kill a conversation stone dead or arouse interest, even envy from the anoraks who thought it a good day out to take a single journey from Stockport to Stalybridge on a Saturday afternoon with no direct way of getting back. Zadoc, his usual heightened awareness somewhat toned down due to these musings, had failed to discern that his cousin Mondar had entered the radar screen and was even now putting two and two together and coming up with, well - a failed Sudoku.

Mondar's devastation at the loss of his lovely wife Isobel threatened to engulf him. Huge waves of dull grief leapt towards him but he held them at bay, choosing instead to stoke the bright orange fires of anger that rose up from inside. Since he'd received the phone call from the police, his mind had been full of tortured images, some arrived unbidden like a gruesome home movie, others were frames he was constructing himself, changing the action like a director, altering perspective and bringing new biddable characters into play. His thumb and forefinger

curled the corner of the piece of paper that had been pushed under his door and read and reread the inscrutable lines that spoke of Nancy and secrets at her core.

'I've spilled blood, now you'll feel my wrath, Look at the crazy man of cloth.'

It had taken Sebastian Gimp several hours of introspecting and pencil inspecting before those words had taken form in his fertile mind and transferred themselves to the piece of paper. Of course he had lied when that strange child Raskolnikov had asked whether poets had to suffer. He'd known exquisite pain since quitting his job to give himself more time to alliterate, to dredge for unexplored metaphors and practise the finer points of onomatopoeia. Mondar now did battle with his verse, trying to make sense of the allusions. Mondar was a simple man, strong and uncomplicated Isobel used to call him. His name was Dutch for beach and that was where he felt he belonged. The dark-haired Zadoc was a man for his books, while sandy-haired Mondar was in his element out in the elements, capturing on canvass the moods of the North East tides. Mondar folded the paper, breathed in deeply to try to quell his own rising tides, and stepped out of the Holly Bush into a now-bustling Bollington.

As the number 10 bus moved along, Alice and Tom appeared from behind it, holding hands as they walked. Both were used to maintaining casual conversations, their eyes seemingly on sights in the foreground while all the time scanning the crowds, seeking out the smallest detail or deviation. This, after all was their job and they needed their skills in abundance this evening. Alice knew that somehow the various parts of her splintered past were lining up like a macabre cast emerging from the wings to take a bow. Alice, centre stage, watched as the denouement slid closer.

Dies Irae, dies illa...

Nan was frightened. Over the years she'd got used to living with a gnawing low level of fear but now she was unable to calm down and her breaths came in small snatches. Jack too was anxious but they did not speak. The tension was palpable, like extra time moving into penalty shootouts. This was no way to settle anything. Nan sat down at her computer to log on to the Festival website. Jack moved from his rocking chair to reach for the packet of Duchy Originals. A split second later a round, white stone punctured their living room window and hurtling forward like an Exocet missile, found its target.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

As Joe Black strode along the footpath below White Nancy, heading for the Recreation Ground, the red mist started to rise again as his mind relived the torments of his past. A foundling discovered at the foot of White Nancy in a winter storm, he had been adopted by some kind Kerridge folk with no children of their own. His parentage forever a mystery, he had always known he was different – outwardly, the wild eyes and dark red hair (said by some to be the mark of the Devil), inwardly, the barely contained compulsion to wreak havoc.

As a child playing inside White Nancy, he had felt the power contained there, and as he grew up during the war years, strange nocturnal dreams and daytime visions brought a realisation of his true purpose – to ensure that this so-called Happy Valley was no more, to recover Bollington for the forces of evil. This was proving increasingly difficult – once the festivals had started in the 60s, everyone had begun pulling together and being nice to one another. This latest Festival had raised the stakes even higher, and he knew that a climax was approaching.

The stone was key – his dreams had slowly coalesced around the familiar shape, and now he could feel its power growing. He had to find it - the stone would change everything forever.

When the Gaskell family had built White Nancy, they had been unaware (or had they?) of the significance of the ancient site as a gateway to the Underworld. Joe knew that once he slotted the wedge-shaped stone into the base of the table inside, and revealed the vortex beneath, all hell would break loose. Only problem was, the stone had been passed down through the Bunting family for generations, and its whereabouts had remained a mystery since the deaths of George and Ethel. He'd only meant to scare the couple into handing it over – their deaths had been a major inconvenience.

Unfortunately he had also bungled his attempt to get it from Alice twenty-odd years ago – she clearly didn't have a clue what he had been on about, so there had been no point in killing her then. She was bound to find the stone eventually, he had reasoned, and when she did, he would know. But all he'd managed to do was to provide her with the clinching reason for finally responding to the newspaper ad recruiting nurses for Australia – he had just been the last straw. After a couple of postcards to Nan and Jack she had disappeared without trace, making no contact with anyone in Bollington, and the trail to the stone had gone cold.

Now that Alice was back, he sensed that she was finally in possession of the stone, or at least knew where it was. He knew in his heart, however, that Alice had survived the crash for a reason, and that she would be able to draw on all the forces of good to stop him.

He also knew now that he had killed Isobel too late – she had already found the card bundled up with the photographs that Nan had lent to the Discovery Centre, and sensing its importance

somehow, had shown it to Father McDade. The last thing Joe had wanted was for Zadoc McDade to become involved, but at least some good had come of it – he was sure it was McDade’s anonymous letter to Alice that had brought her here. She would lead him to the stone. But now he also knew he was in for one hell of a battle - he and his side had fought with Zadoc and his predecessors for thousands of years.

Joe was carried along by the throng towards the Festival Big Top. Dark storm clouds gathered over the town, providing an ominous backdrop to the evening’s performance. Tonight, when the battle was won, his wrath would descend upon all those who wished to take Bollington back to the time when ‘kick one and we all limp’ had been true. Joe knew that this was a fantasy, that community and respect were dead, that the good would be defeated. Now, tonight, all the ‘incomers’ would perish, and the dark forces would triumph. He murmured his favourite lines of the Dies Irae:

*Day of wrath and doom impending,
Heaven and earth in ashes ending!*

The ridge was deserted that evening, so no-one saw the cracks that started to appear in White Nancy’s eastern side as the sun set. Slowly, the shape of a door appeared. On the inside, the alphabet began to glow.

Alice walked towards the Recreation Ground, hand in hand with Tom. Her other hand rested on the package in her bag. She was certain that her parents had died because of this stone, and that Nan and Jack’s lives had been - maybe still were - in danger because of it. The symbols on the stone had made no sense – she had scanned them into her laptop and set the decryption software running, confident of an answer by the time they got back.

Joe spotted Zadoc in the crowd – he pulled up his hood, and hurried down the steps leading to the bridge. He knew that Zadoc’s senses were attuned to the dark side and that he also understood the power that Alice possessed.

Zadoc shivered, jolted back into the present by some intuition of evil. He realised that the train he should be thinking about was the train to hell, with the devil on the footplate. He also realised with a start who it was that he had taken up White Nancy – Alice! He held his hat as he rushed forward to find her.

Alice elbowed her way in to order red wine for herself and a pint of Festivale for Tom – she had insisted that it was her shout. Luckily they still had some of the popular beer. She rested her bag on the bar while she took out her purse and rummaged for some coins. When she turned to replace her purse, the bag was gone – and out of the corner of her eye she spotted a man striding purposefully away. As he broke into a run at the exit, his hood fell away to reveal a shock of dark red hair.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Alice's screams of "Stop thief!" were drowned by the booming of the loudspeaker.

"Ladies and gentlemen, kindly take your seats in the big top. Tonight's performance of Verdi's Requiem is about to begin."

Without stopping to look for Tom, Alice started after the red-haired man. She was hampered by the crowd streaming into the marquee and had to fight her way out on to the Recreation Ground. By the time she was clear of people ("Mind out!" "What's she after?" "Look where ye're goin'!") Joe Black was nowhere to be seen. What now? Where should she go? The decryption! That would tell her what might happen next, what was the significance of the stone, now stolen. She began to run towards Church St, driven onwards by her anger.

Her anger and her fear. As she hurried under the aqueduct and up the long incline of Palmerston Street she heard pounding feet behind her. She ran faster, not daring to look round. She had turned the corner into Church St and was banging on Nan's door, when her pursuer caught up with her.

"Tom! You might have let me know it was you!" "Shut up and get inside. We're being followed. What the hell is going on in this one horse town?"

The door was locked. Without thinking, Tom hurled his big, surfer's body against it and they both fell into the tiny front room, landing in a heap on the broken glass.

"Whomping wallabies! What have we here?" It did not take long to spot the neat puncture in the window. Alice looked around wildly, calling out as she did so, "Nan! Jack! Where are you?" There was Jack's chair, Nan's computer on the table, the Festival Website still up on its screen. On the floor beside it lay Alice's laptop, its damaged screen black and lifeless. The decryption! She seized it and tapped its keys frantically. Nothing. On the floor beside it lay a round white stone. She picked it up. Suddenly the screen of Nan's computer changed. Words began to appear and spin crazily. She stared, and realised it was the internet novel, the chapter she had inserted. But the letters were rearranging themselves before her eyes.

"If . . . you want to . . . see . . . your Nan alive . . . keep away from Nancy . . . tonight . . ."

"What the? Who's Nancy, anyway? Anyone we know?"

"Shut up, Tom. Come with me. There's no time to lose!"

Seth Arrowmint (or was it Arrowroot? ed.) had failed to get a ticket to the Requiem. His anxiety about finishing his story was becoming acute and he decided to go back through his notes and see if he had missed anything. Zadoc the mad priest, his missing researcher (Isobel something, was it? Probably just got bored and gone home to hubby), Seb the mad poet, Alice Bunting home from Australia, Nan and Jack Swindells in Church St, the unexplained accident so many years ago. There had to be some sense in it – some sense behind the madness of this intense little town. Or maybe there was none. Just one absurdity after another. As if life were not a logical narrative after all but only a random series of unrelated events, like a series of chapters composed by different authors. No. That thought was too much to bear.

“I need some air,” he thought. “This Festival is going to end with fireworks up White Nancy. I’ll go ahead to get a good position, clear my head, and make something up for this stupid report. They’ll never check it, I can write anything.”

It could not have been more than five minutes later, as Alice and Tom reached the stile on Cow Lane, that they found the body. The light was fading rapidly, making every shadow ambiguous in the cool damp stillness. The village seemed abandoned, the streets empty, the cottage windows dark. In truth, most people were at the Verdi or in one of Bollington’s innumerable pubs, but Alice had an eerie impression of absence, as if the whole population had been spirited away. Tom tripped and fell over something slumped behind the stile. His loud Australian curses ripped the silence.

“Sshhh, Tom, for God’s sake! Are you incapable of keeping your voice down?”

“Yep. And someone here won’t be making much more noise either.”

As Alice looked down at the battered, lifeless face of Jack Swindells, all her old hatred evaporated, leaving only a great tenderness, too late. She understood suddenly the great love this childless couple bore her, how much they had sacrificed and given her through the years, the thoughtless cruelty of her abrupt departure.

Tom shook her shoulder. “C’mon Al. Where the heck is Nan? We need action here!”

“Not so fast.” In the silence Joe Black’s soft words carried down the hill towards them.

*Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine,
et lux perpetua luceat eis.*

Rest eternal grant unto them. O Lord, and may perpetual light shine upon them.

Father McDade had lost sight of Alice as the crowd streamed in to the big top. Now that the lights had dimmed and the Requiem begun, he strained to see her among the intent faces of the audience. The awful climax of this strange few days would be tonight, he was sure of it. He sensed it in the plangent sobbing of the strings, the timpani like the voice of doom.

*Confutatis maledictis,
flammis acribus addictis,
voca me cum benedictis.*

When the wicked have been confounded and condemned to the bitter flames, summon me among the blessed . . .

Quite what was holding Mondar back, he was not sure. He had trailed Zadoc for hours, trying to get a clue as to what his motive could have been. For it was Zadoc who had killed his wife, of that he was certain. He was sitting two rows away from the priest, staring at the back of his head, watching him as he ceaselessly scanned the crowd, only half hearing the urgent music that filled the night air. The gun in Mondar's pocket seemed to scorch his hand as he fingered it. Absently he took it out. In annoyance, Sebastian Gimp turned to his fidgeting neighbour. If people came to a performance, why could they not respect the music and at least pretend to listen? In the momentary pause between the pianissimo dona eis requiem and the Amen he saw the gun in Mondar's hand and let out a long drawn out, terrible cry of "No!"

What happened next is not altogether clear. Many different accounts circulated later and, in true Bollington style, each version grew in the telling. There was a loud crack – a gunshot, perhaps? A tent support splitting? This was followed by screams and panic among the crowd. The big top did seem to totter and begin to collapse, but whether this caused or was caused by the mad exodus of the audience, no one could later agree. What started the fire nobody could agree, either. Suffice it to say (according to Sebastian Gimp), one thing led to another, and, in a nutshell, the whole audience, the choir and the orchestra fled the tent in panic and began to stream away from the collapsing and now blazing marquee, up Hurst Lane towards the canal. Who first caught sight of the lights moving on top of the hill, the flickering shadows stark against White Nancy, was also never agreed. Many claimed to have been the first to shout, the first to break into a run, the first to lead what became a wild, scrambling advance on the hill. Parents carried children; choristers held up the skirts of their satin dresses and hobbled on high heels; musicians staggered over the rough ground with tubas and double basses. Leading the crowd, it is said – though this may have been the invention of later storytellers - a flautist and a fiddler played as they climbed, improvising wild variations on the Dies Irae. What followed, the climax to the mysterious and terrible events of that Festival, was to pose as many questions as it solved, and fuel debates in Bollington's pubs for generations to come.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The three-man firing squad, clad again in the distinguished uniforms they had worn for the execution scene in Tosca in the big top, escorted the handcuffed prisoner across the recreation ground and placed him against the wall of the men's toilets.

They charged their ancient muskets. The captain of the guard, a noted tenor in the festival choir, asked the prisoner if he had a last request.

"Only to be allowed to suffer," he said with dignity.

Three shots rang out and three fictional bullets found their way to the heart of Raskolnikov Bracegirdle. There would be more executions before the work of the International Court For Crimes Against The Novel was done.

Alice, overwhelmed with grief at Jack's brutal end and unable still to find poor Nan, sat among the charred remains of the circus tent. She drew her diary from her pocket and, as Tom scuffed through the ashes of instruments and music, began again to try to organise the chaos of her thoughts.

"Jack dead; my heart will break. The stone stolen. Evil in the town.

"Too beautiful an evening for a Requiem. Had been hoping music – especially this music – would bring an end to turmoil, a resolution, a final chapter that made sense of all that had gone before. Now know that was impossible.

"Dies irae: vicious chords, screaming choirs, pandemonium of terror. Dies illa...dies illa...that day...that day. That day 20 years ago. That day, that night by White Nancy. A moon, storm, Zadoc wild-eyed, new-slaughtered chicken in one hand, crucifix in the other. Screaming, screaming, 'You are the devil's child! The evil one must be cast forth!'

"Feel the terror now, feel the pain of the ropes tight on hands and feet. Thunder crashing, lightning flashing across the ridge.

"The mad priest: 'I command you, unclean spirit, whoever you are, along with all your minions now attacking this servant of the Almighty Powers, that you tell me by some sign your name, and the day and hour of your departure!'

"Thought that day, that awful day, had been exorcised by Australia, sun, surf. Not so. Back here, black here. No, no, no.

“The music. Magnificent basses and last trumpets. But then that woman, that mezzo, she in the shiny blue dress. Where I should be. In scarlet. In the limelight. My voice, my power, my triumph.

“Liber scriptus proferetur...Then shall written book be brought, showing every deed and thought; from which judgement shall be sought. So before the judge enthroned, shall each hidden sin be owned, naught of guilt left unatoned...”

“I think, Miss Bunting, that this has to stop,” said Joseph Green, enthroned as judge in the International Court Of Crimes Against The Novel. “The court sympathises with your anguish but can have no truck with monstrous creations who have no right to live on for ever in narrative.

”Sentence has already been carried out on the obnoxious Bracegirdle. Other executions will soon follow. McDade, who knows not whether his first name is spelt with a c or k, will return to the canal with fine Kerridge stone hung from both neck and feet and will be plunged into the still waters.

“Paul, the infuriating goblin, will have the toes of his pointy feet amputated before being stretched and squashed by the side of his fairy queen on the pavement outside Briscola.

“Seth Arrowmint, for failing to preserve a consistent accent and being the slowest hack to file a story in the history of fictional journalism, will, like most of his copy, be simply killed.

“Joe White, he of the red hair and devilish ways, will be walled up within his White Nancy. There he will be obliged to memorise his alphabet but never be able to remember A to M by the time he approaches Z.

“But with you, Miss Bunting, this court will be lenient. Your counsel has told us that it was indeed true that your parents died in an horrific car accident while you were still a babe in arms. She has also confirmed that it is a fact that you were brought up by your kindly uncle and aunt who in no way deserved the violence you served upon them in your scribblings. It is also apparent that the closest you have been to Australia is the Boomerang Bar in Congleton.

“Witnesses, including several members of the Bollington Festival Choir, have told us of the other precipitating factor which drove you to your crime against story-telling. It appears that, having for many years, been a loyal member of the alto section of the choir, you conceived, one year ago when a festival performance of Verdi’s magnificent Requiem was announced, a pathological conviction that you should be the mezzo-soprano soloist.

“Kindly friends tried to disabuse you. But you repeatedly harangued Sir Nicholas Smith, the conductor, and when he would not accede to your request, we are told that you ‘flounced off’, vowing never to return, not even for the Messiah From Scratch.

“And so you devised your revenge. Showing no outward sign of your inner turmoil, you suggested to the festival committee an internet novel, what one might call an 18-day fictional relay race.

“A happy idea but in your hands a treacherous one. You insisted on secrecy, with no author’s name known until each succeeding day of publication. Those names were unfamiliar and the

good readers of Bollington, some understandably distressed to have been omitted from the list of writers, wondered who they were.

“Now we know that those persons were all your inventions. Some names were exotic; some less so; and the final chapter is written by a person purporting to have just three dull syllables.

“But we know that you, Alice Bunting, were the one and only author of the Bollington Festival Internet Novel.”

In the dock, Alice bowed her head in silent acknowledgement of the truth. She was relieved it was out. Otherwise how would this thing have ever ended?

Judge Joseph Green paused to adjust his wig and then continued. “Much, especially the prolix final chapter, was contrived. But there were agreeable touches which pleased the court, even if they were clear signs of your self-obsession.

“Yes, it was clever to have Nan ponder whether she was a literary creation; it was clever to have yourself hack, which I believe is the correct technical term, into your own novel; it was clever to give the despised singer a name differing from your own by just one letter.

“As a lifelong lover of the folk-songs of these islands, we admired the introduction of *The Streams Of Lovely Nancy*, collected exactly a century ago from the singing of Mr George Dowden, of Lackington in Dorset. It is a song which we ourselves have often rendered at informal gatherings of members of the Bar.

“Although we have no training in psychology, we have no difficulty in interpreting the mysterious package, later revealed to contain the hieroglyphic stone, as a metaphorical bundle of your accumulated neuroses.”

Judge Green paused for a moment and took a sip of water.

”But we cannot forgive your fantasy lover Tom and his cry of ‘Whomping wallabies!’. And above all we cannot forgive your vain depiction of your ‘bronzed torso’ and your ‘taut thigh muscles’. And as for your ‘firm body’ enjoying ‘the coarse treatment from the hotel towel’ ...that, I fear, is beyond excuse.”

Alice hung her head again, deeply ashamed. But there was worse to come. “And what vanity it was,” continued the judge, “to have described yourself as 40, a fact which would have required you to have been born four years after your parents died.”

Judge Joseph Green reached for the rainbow-coloured cap reserved for the most severe of judgements and placed it atop his wig. “The sentence of this court is that you will never write fiction again.”

The hearing ended in time for Alice to attend the festival’s final concert given by the Chris Barber Big Band. She was happy to see the big top intact, to see people thronging in the bar. For the first time in years she felt free. Her obsessions, not the big top, had tottered and collapsed. Her demons exorcised, that night she slept.

Alice woke before dawn, needing to walk. She pulled on her clothes and strode up Shrigley Road, past the poem on the railings of the house with the hideous bow window. She turned up Nab Lane, through the wooden gate and over the stile into the still-dark field.

She followed the path to the Nab, the dew soaking the thin leather of her shabby shoes. As she passed the lone tree, there was the faintest hint of gold and pink in the eastern sky.

She walked on, past waking sheep and over the high ladder stile. She went forward and then turned towards the summit, seeing in the growing light speedwell, buttercups and daisies, as yet uncurled to welcome the day. She shivered, but there was no breeze. All was still as the slope steepened. She reached the trig point as the sun rose over the shoulder of the white lands of the Harrop valley. She paused to wonder who, five thousand years ago, had been buried in this mound, now concave where it had once been convex.

Slowly she walked on and sat as a skylark sprang from the damp grass to sing hymns at heaven's gate. Ahead lay White Nancy, where last night the festival had ended in joyful celebration, peaceful in the early light.

Free now, Alice smiled.

THE END

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