

*Escape from the Shadowlands*

By Etienne de L'Amour

Book 3 in the Shadowlands series.

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# Dedication

Dedicated to the wonderful friends I've  
shared time and dreams with on the Internet  
and with heartfelt thanks to Doris Lessing.



*Here we are, all of us in a dream-caravan.  
A caravan, but a dream - a dream, but a caravan.  
And we know which are the dreams.  
Therein lies the hope.*

~ Our Teacher Bahaudin, El Shah, from  
*Caravan of Dreams* by the Sufi exemplar, Idries Shah.



## 0. The extraordinary general meeting

All weekend long the delegates of the Caretaker Council had been arriving, close relatives of the family being put up in the specially reopened west wing of the oak-timbered and limestone manor house whilst others found rooms at the village inn and at Mrs Murphy's guest house, much to the bemusement of the largely elderly residents of High Langton. Not since the outbreak of the First War had the sleepy hamlet seen such a level of organized activity, and given the secrecy surrounding the meeting, wild rumours were rife, further fuelled by the deliberate release of disinformation by Miss Crawford, the council's honorary secretary.

In her early to mid forties, Mary Crawford was a slight figure, standing no taller than five feet six inches in her sensible heels and tweed two piece suit. Her unfashionable, mousy, permed appearance and eagerness to please fooled many a stranger, but not those who'd come to know and ultimately admire her. The councillors and co-opted dignitaries might have been masters of waffle and debate and have the final say when it came to a vote, but it was the unassuming, organized and efficient Mary Crawford whose hard work brought them all together in the first place and made the event possible. The woman had the worthy gift of being able to attend to fine detail without falling into unnecessary pedantry.

Word of the gathering had already reached the capital and all manner of ruses had been attempted to gain entry to the council meeting by government officials, sundry civil servants and members of the media to no avail. And the village had more than its share of unseasonably raincoated visitors, some of whom were alleged to be representatives of the Establishment, as the security service was called, all curious to find out what possible business the Caretaker Council could have on its agenda that demanded such extensive and clandestine organization and drew such a cosmopolitan mixture of eminent and common or garden folk from far and wide. All the people knew was that the group referred to themselves as “custodians”, though custodians of what

exactly was anybody's guess.

It was maintained by the lunatic fringe that the caretaker council, these dupes of Klingsor<sup>1</sup>, was actually a front for a secret, crypto-Luciferic organization of Illuminati: bloodsucking alien reptilians whose aim was the enthrallment of the masses, which were referred to as cattle, and total domination through the establishment of a New World Order. As yet, however, only one man knew the real truth of the matter – and not least could bear to shoulder the burden of that truth – whilst others could only wildly speculate. That man was Hamish Lightwater, the oft-debunked chair of the council, and his lips were firmly sealed.

For years, Dillon Lightwater, Hamish's youngest son, had watched from the wings as council attendees came and went, without knowing one jot about the business that went on behind the closed doors, but this was the first time he'd witnessed a full gathering, so it must be pretty important. Not only that, now that he had finally come of age, he had been invited by his father to join the delegates for the very first time.

Five minutes before the meeting was due to be convened, a shiny black diamond, limited edition Rolls Royce Phantom drew up the wide gravel drive to stop by the marble steps at the front of the manor house. A chauffeur in a smart grey uniform and peaked hat held the car door open as a rather twee, middle-aged lady emerged, then scurried around to the passenger's side to assist the other, somewhat portly occupant. That would be the one-time scrap metal dealer and now self-made millionaire, Sir Randolph, or 'Roley Poley' as Dillon's elder sister Marie referred to him. As for his mother, she was less charitable and used to say that, with the exception of his rotund build, he was the spitting image of Steptoe, a degenerate and lecherous character from an old television sitcom.

With an effort, the man huffed and puffed up the steps to the front door with his wife Lady Jane in tow, followed by the chauffeur and two attendants groaning under the weight of several bulging suitcases and a large cabin trunk.

“This had better be worth it, Lightwater: had a devil of a job getting here. I say, this had better be worth my while,” Sir Randolph grumbled, ignoring Dillon entirely, giving his host a

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1 An evil magician.

cursory handshake and brushing past him through the entrance to make a beeline for the cocktail bar before everyone was ushered into the committee room. “A malt whiskey, my good man, and make it a double. No, no, no: not the small measure, that's for women, nancies and the riff-raff, not for the landed gentry. Oh, for heaven's sake, just give me the bottle and I'll do it myself.”

“Would you like anything else, sir?”

“A small sweet sherry for Lady Jane.”

“Very good, sir.”

“Oh, and you'd better pour a glass of ale for my driver. Only the one, mind, I shall be requiring his services later.”

“That'll be seven shillings, sir,” the bar steward said calmly, weighing up the generous quantity of whiskey that the man poured into his glass.

Sir Randolph's stood there, mouth agape for a moment. “Seven shillings? Have you gone stark crazy, my man?” he demanded, his eyebrows twitching. “What do you mean seven shillings? Why, I've never been so insulted in all my life ...”

If you think that, you should hang around a while after you've gone and listen to the gossip, then mate, Dillon smiled to himself.

“Do you know who I am? Clearly not.”

Unruffled, the bartender pointed to a hand-written notice on the counter which read: “*All proceeds of this bar to be donated to the High Langton Silver Circle.*”

“Today's bar takings are in aid of charity,” the steward explained in measured tones.

“Yes, yes: I *can* read,” huffed Sir Randolph, casting his arms about in exasperated resignation, then abruptly turning away. “Oh, very well. Smythe: pay the man, would you? There's a good chap. Here's a sherry for you, Lady Jane. Shall we?” He motioned towards the open door of the committee room and, straightening his tie and taking his wife by the arm, like the emperor with no clothes, Sir Randolph prepared to make his stately entrance.

Mother intercepted them. “Hello Jane, Randolph. We're through in the hall. More room in there,” she explained.

As Dillon scanned the rows of expectant faces and sat down, careful not to make *too* much noise on the squeaky leather seat, tempting as a good, long, rasping fart may be, his father approached a dais at the far end of the hall and Mary Crawford

brought the assembly to order with a light tap-tap-tap of a gavel. That's it, pull yourself together, lad: no tittering in the ranks.

Again Mary Crawford brought her gavel down, with a little more gusto this time. "My lords, ladies and gentlemen, thank you, thank you. Your attention please. There is no set agenda for this morning's extraordinary meeting, so without further ado your chair, Hamish Lightwater, will address you and the grave purpose of our gathering here today will soon be made apparent. Hamish ..."

Brushing the arm of his tweed jacket a little self-consciously, Father took the floor and cleared his throat. "Thank you, Madam Secretary. Welcome distinguished guests and friends. You'll forgive me if I spend some time broadly outlining the crisis that looms over us, but let me first firmly set the tone. I cannot emphasize strongly enough the dire necessity of our gathering here today, which is due to unforeseen events which have no parallel in the custodians' history."

He paused for a moment to allow the words to sink in. "Unforeseen events which, I might add, are unrivalled even by the undoubted tragedy of the First and Second Wars.

"And before continuing, I must warn you that not one word of what I have to say and what we discuss here today is to leave these four walls, no matter how tempting that might be given the media interest in our proceedings."

"Spit it out, man," called Sir Randolph who was sitting in the centre of the front row to Dillon's right. "And perhaps we might dispense with the rhetoric and hyperbole?"

"All in due course, sir, all in due course. I can assure you that your time here will not be wasted, though by the time we adjourn for lunch you may wish it had been to the contrary. I hope you have a good stomach, my friends.

"Very well." Father relaxed his grip on the wooden dais, drew a deep breath and stood up straight. "As some of you may know, the entirety of existence from the spiralling of galaxies and the life-giving of individual stars such as our own sun; from our highest human endeavours and capacities all the way down to the metabolism of single celled organisms is entirely dependent on a subtle, hidden contact with what some call the Source, with a capital 'S'.

“You may know of the realms which are in planes beneath our own, yet more remote from the Source. For some time now, due to a cosmic catastrophe, the link between the Source and that realm which was formerly known as the Eden Project and in latter days as the Shadowlands, has been somewhat attenuated, and that has brought with it all the degradation, decay and suffering that attends such a loss. It was for this purpose that the Caretaker Council was originally instituted. Though the Shadowlands might be largely cut off from the Source, we are not and we are still within reach of the Shadowlands, so that we might act as a go-between until the time comes when there is a realignment with the Source. Were it not for that contact, mostly maintained by the caretaker system Psi; were it not for the representatives that we have sent in times of crisis, and were it not for the everyday work of the field agents, the human race in the Shadowlands would by now be extinct. And believe me, it has been pretty much touch and go on several occasions in the last century alone.

“Alas, of late, there has been a gradual build-up of negativity and disharmony emanating from the Shadowlands and this has begun to have a detrimental effect not only on the visiting representatives sent down to the Shadowlands and resident field operatives, but also on life here, too. In fact I would go so far as to say that this negative energy will eventually overwhelm us and threaten our very survival, turning our own realm into another Shadowlands.”

A hand was raised in the audience, followed by a polite cough, and Father paused. “Pray tell me, do you know what is causing this change, Mister Lightwater?” asked a lady sitting behind Dillon in a rather prissy tone.

“We're currently researching the cause of this new setback, Joan. Of course it's early days and there are several hypotheses to follow up on, but we suspect that rather than being a further weakening of the linkage with the Source, it may be a malfunction in the caretaker system, Psi, on which the Shadowlanders are almost wholly and even we are to an extent reliant. For one thing, we rely on Psi to get our people back to safety here, which is becoming more and more difficult. And for a second: our workers can only do so much: without Psi running we would have no option to pull them out altogether, thus wrecking

projects which have taken more than a century to plan and implement.”

There was an awkward moment of stunned silence until finally someone else spoke up and broke the spell. “So what are our options?” asked a second lady behind Dillon, apparently unphased by the revelations.

Father ran his hand through his thinning hair. “Now that's a good question, Ruth. I'm very glad you asked me that.”

Dillon smiled. That's what Father would say, tongue in cheek, when he hadn't got a clue as to how he might answer.

“Indeed, it's the 64 trillion credit question. And that's what we're all gathered here today to discuss. No pressure, mind,” he smiled, taking a sip of water. “So over to you, friends.”

“You say this may be due to faults in Psi. Can you elaborate on this and perhaps be more specific?” enquired Aunt Bettie from the back of the hall, raising her voice above the general hubbub of private exchanges.

“Well, this is all very speculative at this stage,” Father pointed out, raising his hand to politely request an end to the conversations, “but it does seem to coincide with recent software updates.”

“In that case, all one would have to do would be to wind back the updates, surely? If for no reason other than to discover if this alleviated the problem.”

“Alas, it's not as simple as that, Bettie. For some time now, Psi has been groaning under the strain of its workload. Matthew, perhaps you might add to this?” He turned to the tussle-haired chief systems administrator who sat fidgeting in his chair on the front row.

Matthew stood up and turned to face the audience, his cheeks growing red with the embarrassment of the spotlight on him. “I would tend to agree with Hamish. You see, it was never envisaged that the system would be on-line for this length of time nor that it would have to cope with a population in the Shadowlands now numbering over six billion. The fact is, the system simply could no longer cope in its previous configuration.”

Sir Randolph stroked his chin thoughtfully. “What you mean to say is that there can be no going back to previous versions of the software?”

Matthew shook his head. “No. It would be impossibly overloaded. And the last thing we can afford is to lose Psi altogether.”

“So what makes the new version of the software different that might account for the detrimental effect it's having? You must have changed something. What did you change?” probed Sir Randolph. Matthew flushed bright crimson and wiped away beads of sweat that were forming on his furrowed brow.

“We ... um ... looked at several options designed to reduce the amount of load placed upon the processors and we were forced to discount most of them. In the end, after much research and technical consultation, what we settled on was to reduce the processing time of one key procedure.”

“And what procedure would that be?”

“It's known as 'look ahead'.”

“And the purpose of this procedure is ...?”

“May I?” enquired Father. Matthew nodded vigorously and he continued. “Most of you will be familiar with the game of chess. In this board game, before a move is made, an assessment must be made as to the viability of such a move. 'If I move my pawn to this particular square, what will be the consequences? Will it advance my position? Will any of my pieces be placed in danger in my opponent's next move as a result. Or perhaps two or three moves hence?' Whilst a novice may not be able to see more than one or two moves ahead, the grandmaster will not only be able to calculate several moves in advance, he or she will almost instantly recognize the pattern of the pieces on the board and be able to draw on the experience of perhaps hundreds of thousands of games that have gone this way before, knowing the eventual outcome of these strategies.

“In short ...”

“In short you've reduced Psi's processing power from that of near-genius to that of an educated baboon,” Sir Randolph interrupted.

“In short,” Father concluded, ignoring the man, “by and large the people of the Shadowlands are little more than novices at the game of life and Psi the grandmaster. In order to prevent the foolhardy, mischievous and malicious decisions they make many times daily throughout their lives from wreaking havoc in the

Shadowlands and beyond, though they are of course unaware of any intervention and believe the decisions they make to be their own, through the use of a series of procedures which Matthew refers to as 'look ahead', Psi quietly guides their choices based upon either best outcome or least harm. And if that cannot be achieved through the exercise of free will, then the visiting representatives and resident field agents will be prompted to corrective action.”

Sir Randolph laughed out loud. “Well, that's a very nice theory, Hamish, but clearly these wretched beings seldom follow Psi's counsel, judging by the mayhem they've wrought in the Shadowlands over the centuries!”

“I concede your point, Randolph, though I do wish you'd resist the urge to heckle. Such communication has been fraught with difficulty. But sufficient of them *do* take heed of the message to make a difference, with our assistance. Were it not for Psi, the consequences would have been unimaginably more dire, even catastrophic.”

Father cued the systems administrator: “So, this 'look ahead', Matthew ...?”

“Of the countless number of procedures, look ahead accounts for by far the most processing time and resources. So, after other strategies were found to be to no avail, it was decided that we should reduce the look ahead.”

Sir Randolph raised his bushy eyebrows. “What you're saying is, mistakes in decision making are being made through short-sightedness. And now everything's gone pear-shaped as a result?” It was a rhetorical question. “More to the point, perhaps you yourselves might have enquired of Psi the efficacy of such a myopic plan before its implementation?”

Matthew could do no more than flush with embarrassment and shrug his shoulders.

“Besides which, wouldn't it have made more sense to leave the software more or less as it stood and instead increased the capacity and capabilities of the processors running that software?”

Father shook his head. “If only it were that simple. You see, though we have access to terminals with which to monitor and manipulate the software on Psi, we do not have any access to the

hardware on which it is running. So that is not an option.”

“Come again?”

“The technology was established by the Sirians shortly after the catastrophe and they have since beat a hasty retreat from this sector, leaving us holding onto the reins with no notion of where the blessed horse is. Rumour has it that the processors are located in deeply hidden power houses in each of the seven continents, but that's all we think we know and what little we do know is rapidly passing into legend and folklore.”

“OK, so supposing it actually *is* a malfunction in the dream machine, what could be done to rectify the situation?” asked another.

“We're working round the clock to find solutions,” Matthew offered.

“I'm sure you are, but what if your best efforts are to no avail. Shouldn't we be looking at alternatives rather than putting all our eggs in the one basket, as it were?” asked Aunt Bettie.

Father nodded gravely. “Yes, and that's precisely why we're here today. To brainstorm any potential solution, no matter how outlandish it may at first appear.”

Sir Randolph puffed out his chest. “On one of my many jaunts into the Shadowlands I spent some time as an inspector in a foundry. And one of the things we always stood by was the concept of 'right first time.' It's no use treating the side-effects of a defect way off down the production line. The real fault has to be rectified at source, and all the side-effects disappear of their own volition.”

“So what are you saying, Randolph?”

“Well, it seems to me, Lightwater, that the key element here is sheer weight of numbers. As your systems administrator pointed out, it was never envisaged that the population of the Shadowlands should expand to over six billion ...”

He paused to take a sip of his malt whiskey before continuing.

“So one suggestion would be to reduce the number of the critters. After all, they do it to their own: culling foxes, badgers, rabbits, seals; waging wars; committing acts of gross genocide ...”

“Good Lord, Roley,” gasped Dillon's sister Marie, “I cannot believe that you just said that. Equating the Shadowlanders –

many of whom are fledgling Arcadians, our own bloodline, I might add – with the likes of cattle. If the press got to hear of this, they'd have a field day and the conspiracy theorists would be thoroughly vindicated. You should be ashamed of yourself.”

“We're just throwing ideas around here, Marie,” Father was forced to concede. “It wouldn't be right for us to censor those ideas.”

Sir Randolph was unrepentant. “You may be outraged, little one, and you may scoff. But take away the weight of numbers and there's no longer any problem. What could be simpler? Now *how* exactly said numbers are to be reduced, well, that's a whole different ball game in which you may indeed be free to air your righteous indignation. You'll forgive me, I hope, but I spent some time in the Shires of the Shadowlands and like my fellows I grew to invariably call a spade a spade.”

“What kind of figure did you have in mind?” called a voice from the far right of the hall.

“Oh, I think we could get by with 10%.”

“You mean do away with 10%.”

“No, no. I didn't say that.”

“You mean ... we could adequately do away with the other 90%?”

“Precisely.”

“How precisely?”

Lady Jane spoke up: “Well, it strikes me that if we could isolate the gene for gross stupidity amongst the Shadowlanders – and let's not forget the even more abhorrent masses of the Outlanders – that we might be able to manufacture a biological agent that targeted only these dregs of society ...”

“Well, *Zieg heil!* to you, too! You fascist.”

“Saints preserve us ...”

There was uproar at this remark, and it took Father some time to restore order in the room.

“I should be careful what you wish for, as the saying goes, in case it should come true,” responded Mother as the hubbub subsided. “Gross stupidity is not something solely confined to the Shadowlanders and Outlanders – as clearly evidenced by remarks made in this very meeting of alleged Elders and betters today.”

“Hark who's talking, Jessica Lightwater. I seem to recall that

at one time you thought Communism would be a good thing down in the Shadowlands ... at least until that wretched despot Streiker came to power.”

“That's a little unfair of you, Lady Jane: even Regional Command advised in a memorandum that we should roll with 'the experiment'. And to go back to Randolph's suggestion of running our own decisions past Psi, unlike the Shadowlanders we still have contact with the Source, and we all – even they – have the inalienable constitutional right to exercise free will and learn through trying things out and making mistakes.”

Prompted by these words, Dillon decided to speak up himself: “Talking of getting things 'right first time' as Sir Randolph suggests, can nothing be done to at least partially restore the Shadowlanders' link to the Source?”

Father shook his head and smiled benignly. “Sorry, Dillon, but that's way beyond even the competence of High Command. It's a problem of cosmic proportions rather than something that can be simply 'tweaked' or manipulated by installing technology – at least technology as we know it.”

“Do the Shadowlanders know what's going on?”

“I would say that some have inklings or intuitions of their true state, yes, Dillon. The link to the Source waxes and wanes and some are still sensitive to the Necessity and to what we might call the inner-tuition. And of course there are a few, in whom our representatives and field agents seed ideas, who have gone on to found groups and even mass movements which serve a purpose for a time.”

“I mean, shouldn't they be told?”

“From time to time, yes, our representatives inform the Shadowlanders about their state and – in general terms – about their plight. They help individuals and groups escape from the mesmeric identification with the ego, to awaken to reality, and to transcend the cycle of death and rebirth in the Shadowlands. But as for the mind blowing specifics, of present circumstances for example, our hands are tied by Regional Command, just as theirs are tied by High Command, and theirs by the Source Herself. We are licensed to say and to do only so much, given the present primitive evolutionary stage of the Shadowlands.”

“And there are no exceptions to these rules?”

“There are always exceptions, yes, but none that apply in this current situation, as far as I can see. Which is not to say that from time to time the Source doesn't make things known of Her own volition and using her own informal channels of action and communication. Some of the great mystical teachers, such as the Uwaysi, emerged in this fashion without themselves being formally taught, though such a thing is a rarity.”

Sir Randolph sat there shaking his head. “In my humble opinion, it's high time we came clean and they learnt the truth. The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”

“The truth would blow their beady little minds,” someone countered.

“No, no. To them, the truth would seem so outlandish that they'd laugh the truth teller off the stage or suggest he sought professional psychiatric help,” opined another.

Sir Randolph continued unabashed. “For one thing, they should be made aware of the fact that even we, in this elevated station, can only dream of heaven and that by and large, they're destined to become nothing more than food for the Demiurge. You see there are two distinct streams of development: on the one hand, the Liberational which is the path we follow and on the other, the Demiurgic, in which the masses are enthralled. And this, many call God. They must be told that they are up Shit Creek without a paddle.”

“Oh, Randolph!” It was Father's turn to shake his head. “The matter has been appealed before, without success. And High Command have made it abundantly clear that the Incentive must be maintained at all costs.”

“Well, at least they backed down and allowed us to dump the Disincentive. That was a mistake from the outset,” Mother reminded them.

“It did serve some purpose at the time. 'Right time, place and people' and all that jazz,” Marie chipped in.

“Excuse me,” enquired Dillon: “What do you mean by incentive and disincentive? I don't quite follow.”

“The Incentive is life everlasting in heaven by God's side, for the obedient believers, Dillon,” Mother explained. “And the Disincentive is brimstone and treacle and eternal damnation in the fiery bowels of Hell for the hapless sinners. Such a stick and

carrot approach was all the rage in the mass moral and fear religions down in the Shadowlands, but it really doesn't have a place in cosmic religion or in spirituality. Or perhaps I should say that the mistake is in believing in the literal interpretation of such things as opposed to actually knowing the ... what can I call it? ... the symbolic, technical or functional reality of such things and also knowing when, where and with whom they apply or – equally – do not apply.”

“Speaking of brimstone and treacle,” Uncle Arthur ventured, looking furtively around him before continuing, “I know that we sent the Dread Lord Develin packing at the end of the First War, but you don't think it could be a resurgence amongst his followers and admirers, do you?”

That was the first time that Dillon had heard that name before and he could only presume that they were talking about the warlord the Shadowlanders referred to as Duval.

At that precise moment, as Aunt Bettie was ritually crossing herself at the mere mention of that accursed name, the lights of the chandeliers in the ceiling of the grand hall flickered and dimmed momentarily. “Speak of the Devil and he's sure to appear,” she warned them.

“Gremlins in the works?” pondered Father. “Well, I suppose it could be. We'll have to look into that possibility. Thank you, Arthur.”

“Is there any merit in sending down another representative?” asked cousin Elmo in his characteristically squeaky voice.

Father pondered for a moment. “Well, I really don't see his or her presence making much of a difference as far as finding a solution to the problem of the growing negativity is concerned, Elmo. However, an observer and guiding hand at the coal face might not go amiss in such difficult times. The representative would also be able to help pull a few more worthy individuals out of the Shadowlands. On the negative side of the scales, as I mentioned earlier, it's becoming more and more problematic pulling our own operatives out when their work is complete. It would take a hardy soul not to get sucked in.”

“As you know, I've worked in many diverse settings over the years from the Lords and Ladies in the halls of government to the destitute in the gutter,” piped up Sir Randolph. “If you're looking

for hardy volunteers, I'd be willing to give it another bash.”

“I'm sure you would,” whispered Lady Jane. “Another chance to pick up more floozies from the gutter to satisfy your animal urges, more like.”

“The Good Lord works in mysterious ways, my dear, and it not for us to question the tasks he sets before us, however onerous they might appear.”

Well, that was a new take on the old joke “I know, it's dirty work, but someone has to do it.”

Aunt Bettie wasn't convinced by the idea. “Perhaps we should be thinking of pulling all our people out of there whilst we still can, rather than sending more lambs to the slaughter?” she suggested.

“Perhaps in due course, Bettie. Rest assured that contingency plans have been drawn up.”

“I'm ready,” chipped in Dillon. “Get me a ship and I'll go.”

An unrestrained wave of laughter echoed round the hall.

“What's up? Did I say something funny?”

Father smiled and ran his fingers through his hair. “It doesn't work like that, Dillon. How can I put it? Imagine that your consciousness is represented by an elevator in the lift shaft of a massively tall building. Towards the top are what we might call the 'United States'. That's our goal.”

“Let's say that at the moment the elevator is on the second or third floor and that for the large part, the Shadowlanders' consciousness resides in the sub-basement, at best in the basement, at worst in the dark, amongst the rats, cockroaches and maggot-infested crud of the sub-sub-basement. Believe me, you do *not* want to go there.

“To reach them requires a descent. The descent or immersion as we call it is not a physical journey, it involves a change in your state of mind – well, change of heart and soul or being might be a more appropriate phrase – together with a loss of some higher consciousness and the adoption of grosser levels of consciousness. Imagine a ballet dancer descending into the depths of the sea on the end of a rope and an air pipe, wearing a confining leaden diving suit. It takes a great deal of specialist preparation to be able to live and work under such adverse conditions and still stay tuned into the Design, and so easy to

become utterly identified with the mesmeric pull of the lower self.”

“Ah ... Thanks, Dad. I think I see what you mean.”

“Little one,” Sir Randolph Higginbottom pointed out, “the fact that you say such a thing is evidence enough that you merely think and do not see.”

Father waved his hand in the direction of the door. “You've seen all those portraits in the hallway? Well, those are the valiant guys and gals who've gone before us. The ones on the left are the friends who descended and made it back. And the ones on the right are the friends who gave their lives for Us, out of love more than a sense of duty, and have yet to make the return journey, many of them being lost themselves whilst on missions to rescue their comrades in alms. And that's A.L.M.S, not A.R.M.S, I hasten to add.”

At that moment, Father's attention was distracted. There was a tentative knocking at the door, the door opened a fraction and his private secretary, Valerie, poked her head round the door, waving a sheet of paper in the air to quietly attract the Secretary's attention. Mary Crawford beckoned her in and the two met halfway down the hall and exchanged hushed words. Dillon had the hots for this curvaceous, auburn-haired beauty and his eyes were riveted on Valerie. Having read the contents of the document, Mary thanked her and went back to Father and drew him aside. He scanned the sheet of paper and returned smartly to the dais.

“Friends, forgive me. Thank you, friends. If I may have your attention for a moment. I've just received an important memorandum from Regional Command which I'll briefly relate to you and then I suggest we adjourn to the dining hall where Mrs Hadley and her capable staff have laid on a magnificent standing buffet for us.”

“The message, which I shall read verbatim is as follows:

*“To: Mary Crawford, Honorary Secretary, Caretaker Council, Sector ARK-A-41.*

*From: Regional Command, Area ARK.*

*Subject: Re. The Shadowlands, formerly known as the Eden Project.*

*Message: Thank you for your caretaker council's recent*

*report concerning the deteriorating condition of the Shadowlands (referred to by the Sirians as Sher Point) and the effect this is having at higher levels in your sector. Your findings are largely confirmed first-hand by our visiting observer and also by investigations carried out here at Regional Command..*

*We have given serious consideration to your preliminary proposals aimed at rectifying the growing crisis in the Shadowlands and the Secretary General and regional committee would like to extend their thanks to the caretakers for their good work not only now but over many years. In view of the serious nature of the crisis, a collated report was sent to the Directorate at High Command, containing our combined recommendations and we recently received a reply from them which also made a special point of commending you all for your sterling contributions.”*

At this point, his voice beginning to waver with emotion and clutching hold of the dais for support, Father paused and drew a series of long, deep breaths before continuing.

*“It is with deep regret, therefore, that I have to inform you that the matter is now out of our hands. In their wisdom, High Command has decreed that there will be a period of grace during which you will be able to retrieve as many of your visiting and resident agents as you are able. That period shall be no more than five years as measured in the Shadowlands and should be long enough to enable some of the more advanced students amongst the Shadowlanders to make their own escape with the assistance of their Arcadian mentors. High Command appreciate the difficult and complex nature of such an evacuation and ask only that you do what you can, without unduly jeopardizing the life of others in the process and without coercing those who, through forgetfulness of their mission, refuse to leave.”*

“Holy cow!” gasped Marie, unable to contain herself any longer. “This can't be happening. Tell me it's all a bad dream.”

“So what now?” asked cousin Francesca.

“Oh, I would imagine that they'll simply nuke the planet, my dear. Get it over and done with. There's no point in causing unnecessary and prolonged suffering. It'll all be over in a flash.”

Father continued without comment.

*“After that period of grace, the caretaker system Psi is to be*

*taken permanently off-line and the experiment is to be terminated. High command has not as yet furnished details of how such a termination will be carried out and have asked us to stand by to await further instructions. Contingency plans will also be drawn up in case it should become necessary to evacuate your own sector, ARK-A-41.*

*God bless each and every one of you, friends.*

*Signed: G.M. Ronson, Secretary."*

"Thank you again," Father concluded gravely, brushing back a strand of grey hair that had fallen out of place. "And on that less than happy note, we'll reconvene in an hour's time after the buffet, for those of you with a stomach for it." He turned to his wife and took her arm, clearly shaken by this event. "Jess, I think given the circumstances that a good stiff drink would be in order. I'm having a brandy. And you ...?"

"A Black Russian," she nodded. A few short minutes ago, Mother had looked radiant despite what she'd had to endure, her eyes sparkling, her face so fresh and her long, shiny raven locks tumbling over her shoulders, every bit the good and glamorous hostess. But now she, too, was looking a bit flustered, nibbling her bottom lip nervously, and desperately trying to bear her share of the burden and put on a brave face.

"And what about you, Dillon?"

This was the first time he'd been invited to a drink since he'd come of age, though he'd sneaked the odd drink from the cocktail cabinet whilst his parents were otherwise engaged. He couldn't stand spirits like whisky or brandy, though.

"A Black Russian sounds interesting," he said at length. "What's that?"

"Vodka, coffee liquor and cola," Mother informed him. "It's a drink I discovered on my first mission to the Shadowlands. In fact that's when I met your father, *wasn't* it, my sweet? I think you'll like it."

"Well, it'll certainly blow the cobwebs out of the lad's ears," Father replied, forcing a smile. You could tell that the news from Regional Command had gone down like a lead balloon in his stomach.

"Might as well give that a try. Thanks."

"Okay, you dig into the buffet and get a plateful for me and

I'll go and fix the drinks," Mother replied, heading for the bar, giving Father a cheeky pat on the backside as she went.

# 1. The descent

As Dillon was leaving the buffet, feeling suitably stuffed with ham sandwiches, chicken legs, sausage rolls and *vol-au-vent* and ever so slightly squiffy after the Black Russian, Marie caught hold of him by the arm and tugged him down the hallway towards Father's study. Once inside, she closed the stout rosewood door behind them and pressed her finger to Dillon's lips. Her hand smelt of cheese and onion crisps.

“Marie, what are you doing? You know we shouldn't be sneaking around in Father's private study behind his back.”

“I've decided,” she told him.

“Decided what?”

Marie puffed out her chest and wagged her finger in the air. “I've decided, Dillon, that I'm not going to stand idly by and let those inhumane buffoons at High Command 'terminate the experiment' as they call it without doing my bit to help. What they really mean is that they are going to consign over six billion mortal souls to a fate worse than death. And I'm not going to let that happen. As far as I'm concerned, if one isn't part of the solution, then one is part of the problem. Now what I want to know from you is whether you're going to help me.”

“How can I decide that when you haven't confided in me the nature of your plan, sis'? I take it you *do* have a plan?”

Marie grabbed hold of his hand and led him across the study to father's dishevelled desk. She rooted around in his drawers and produced a key, then half-dragged him toward a further door at the back of the study between two tall rosewood bookcases crammed with dusty old books piled in at all sorts of angles. Father's favourite saying: “A tidy body makes for a tidy mind” apparently didn't extend to his own office. Turning the old brass key in the door, they went inside, switched on the light and closed the door behind them.

The room was pretty bare and uniformly decorated in a silky white paint, other than the squeaky-clean polished wooden flooring. At one end of the room stood some kind of console with banks of switches and coloured indicators and in the centre of the

room, beneath a bright light stood two brown leather reclining seats with some kind of contraption above head level that reminded him of the hair driers he'd once seen in a film scene set in a ladies' hairdressers.

Without further ado, Marie threw a switch and the electronic console sprang to life.

“Do you know what you're doing?” Dillon asked, rather alarmed by Marie's behaviour.

“Yes,” she nodded. “I've watched Father operate this machine on several occasions.”

“Oh, that's very reassuring. Machine, you say?”

“This is one of the terminals connected to Psi,” she told him as she flipped one switch after another and adjusted one or two of the dials.

“And what are you doing now?”

“I'm setting up the terminal ready to transfer us.”

“Are you sure you know what you're doing?”

“Do I have to repeat myself, Dillon? Yes, I made my first descent last month. You did say that you'd like make a descent, didn't you? Right. Everything's set up.” She guided him over to the nearest chair and got him to sit down in it whilst she adjusted the device over his head. She brought it down until it was covering his head like a crash helmet, but not obscuring his view.

“Are you sure we should be doing this?” Dillon asked. “If Father catches us, he'll have our guts for garters.”

“Don't worry,” she smiled. “We'll be back here in the land of the living before he even knows we've been gone.”

“But that doesn't make sense.”

“It does if you know a thing or two about relativity, Dillon. Anyhow, you'll soon see. Now do keep still while I get myself settled in. I've set the console to begin the descent when I press the green button on my chair. And above all, don't forget to clench your buttocks.”

“Whatever for?”

“Just in case you feel the involuntarily urge to shit yourself, stupid.”

“What?” Now he was scared.

“Only kidding,” she smiled mischievously, pulling a hair band from her pocket and tying up her long black hair at the back

before climbing into her own seat. She was so much like her mother and actually not bad looking, in a weird kind of a way, for a sister.

“Keep your legs together and your arms where I placed them on the arm rests,” his sister advised. “Right, then. Off we go on the count of three. Ready?”

“Well ...”

“Three ... two ... one ... Houston, we have lift-off!”

As she said that, Dillon felt his arms and legs being clamped into position through some kind of cold metal restraint mechanism built into the chair and the helmet tightened around his head. He had the strangest sensation in his temples, as if something inside the helmet were attempting to drill into his skull and thread its way through the soft tissues of his brain.

Without warning, the room darkened and he felt himself tumbling, down, down, down into an ocean of soft black, star-spangled velvet until he knew no more.

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When Dillon finally did come-to, it was to find himself lying on something soft with stout bars rising up all around him. He tried to heave himself up to look around and get his bearings but, for some reason or other, his limbs would not cooperate and he could not summon up the energy to even raise his head.

In the back of his mind, an insistent voice kept nagging him. “You must wake up and remember. Dillon! Wake up and remember yourself.” But wasn't he awake already? And what was there to remember? His mind was more or less a blank, other than for these intrusive thoughts and for a wave of desperation and panic that washed over him. There were tears in his eyes now, streaming down his cheeks, and he felt the urge to cry out.

Without warning, two enormous arms descended from above and he was lifted bodily out of the confines where he had lain.

“There, there, little one. Did little Georgy have a bad dreamy-weamsy? Oh, poor little munchkin. Well, Mummy's here now, so there's no need to cry. I'll tuck you back into your nice warm cot. Now off you go to sleepy-byes again, my ickle precious, and you'll feel a lot better in the morning.”

No, no! You've got to listen to me. I mustn't fall asleep again and forget. I have to wake up and remember!

But remember what?

Finally, after the indignity of having his pants unceremoniously removed and being changed into fresh clothes, the woman put him down. “There we are, then, my precious. Little Georgy Porgy's all safely tucked up in your nice, warm bed again.”

*Hush a bye baby, on the tree top,  
When the wind blows the cradle will rock;  
When the bow breaks, the cradle will fall,  
And down will come baby, cradle and all ...*

Well, that's charming and so reassuring to know. You're a whole barrel of laughs, missus.

## 2. Out with the old ...

George Ivanovich Kovak stood by the half-closed door, nervously puffing on a hand rolled cigarette, his trusty old canvas backpack slung over his right shoulder, to take one last, lingering look around the bare apartment. Six long years he'd spent working alone in the musty confines of 32b Lower Westgate and, though he had little to show for it, other than a rapidly receding, greasy auburn hairline, it was no easy thing to finally and unconditionally admit defeat, cast aside his treasured computer project and turn his back on this blighted, all-consuming passionate phase of his life once and for all.

He hadn't even left the flat, yet already the landlord had been round with his brother to size up the place for redecoration – as you might measure someone up for a coffin – and soon you wouldn't even know that George had ever been there at all. Was this to be the story of his life?

*Ten billion green bottles, standing on a wall,  
Ten billion green bottles, standing on a wall,  
And if one green bottle should accidentally fall –  
Would anybody notice it had fallen off at all?*

So many hours had been invested in the project, surmounting each and every minor obstacle and major headbanging nightmare in his path except the very last – the clincher or “ring pass not”, as it were – beyond which no further progress could be made, period. Well, in his present incarnation at the very least: never say never. Such were the perils of the lone developer. Ninety five percent of the time that which other folk called problems were simply solutions that hadn't yet been found, according to his home brewed philosophy. But not this time, and that realization hit George hard. The journey on which he'd taken himself had been both challenging and rewarding – he so loved a good challenge and hated to be beaten – and the project's successful completion was to have been his longed-for *cause celebre*, his emancipation from the mundane drudgery of everyday life, and to have set him on the road to ultimate salvation. Make a somebody out of a nobody. Evidently, and sadly, this was not to be: it had no

place in the grand scheme of things. Or if it did, then the part was to go to some other: hopefully to someone more deserving than him. However, in this realm of decay that did not always follow, as witnessed amongst the higher echelons in fields such as politics and big business in which, so often, it was not the cream that rose to the top but the dross. Whilst it was true that he worked doggedly, indefatigably, autonomously and with resourcefulness at backroom work, which was his favoured environmental niche, George had never been what you might call an alpha male, nor at all confident in public.

One thing at least: he could count himself rather lucky having thus far survived with his sanity and his faculties more or less intact despite his own workaholic folly and all the shit that life in the metropolis of Sher Point had thrown at him. And now – God willing – it was time to move on and start life afresh.

Of course, chance would be a fine thing, he mused, scratching his stubbly chin. He'd shaved once already that day, but the stuff just kept growing. How did the saying go: 'As one door closes, another slams shut' and again 'Every silver lining has its dark cloud'? Or so it seemed to George in the gloomier moments of his long dark night of the soul. The project had been his baby, perhaps a substitute for warm, comforting human relationships, and his heart cried out. Yes, he did grieve its passing, perhaps he grieved his own remoteness, even his own gradual, inevitable passing away?

On a brighter note, the move was made all the more appropriate and symbolic given that the day before had been New Year's Day. George so dearly hoped that it would herald the dawning of a bright new era in his life, and yet he couldn't help but be reminded that no matter how fast you run, you cannot escape your own shadow any more than you can your own feet. It wasn't so much a case of external obstacles and circumstances standing in one's way in life – though true this was sometimes the case – so much as stubbornly or unwittingly standing in one's own way.

That thought reminded George of an old tale his mother had once read to him as a child:

*Mullah Nasrudin, the comic mystic, was down on his knees searching around on the pavement under the light of a street*

lamp.

“What are you doing?” asked his neighbour.

“I’ve lost my key and I’m searching for it,” Nasrudin replied. So the neighbour got down on his hands and knees and joined Nasrudin in the search.

“Are you sure you dropped your key here?” the neighbour asked after some time. “We’ve looked everywhere. Where did you lose it, Nasrudin?”

“I dropped it in my house.”

“Then why on earth are you looking outside?”

“Because there is more light here,” Nasrudin replied.<sup>2</sup>

This was the kind of behaviour ingrained in us from childhood and throughout life: to project blame for our own failings on adverse circumstance, on our culture or on other groups and individuals; to search anywhere and everywhere other than the dimly-lit recesses of our own heart and soul.

With that thought in mind, George Kovak closed and locked the apartment door behind him, posting his key back through the letterbox as instructed, turned smartly on his heel and hurriedly descended the stairs. Once outside, he had to hold his breath and dodge between the splattered masses of lumpy vomit, puddles of stale urine and the odd fly-infested dollop of human excrement in the ginnel, a narrow alleyway between the shops. One thing he wouldn't be sorry to see the back of: the crowds of drunken late night pub and club goers who regularly attempted to break the nearby shop windows and used the alleyway as a public convenience and for the occasional hump. Well, if nothing else, the stinking alleyway served as a daily reminder of the reality of Sher Point and his lowly station in the community. Fortunately, his new flat was in a relatively secluded and rather more up-market village on the outskirts of Pendlebury just up the coast.

Once out of the alley, drawing in a deep gasp of air and belatedly running a gap-toothed comb through his straggly, thinning hair, George set off swiftly down the cobbled road past the old Belmont chapel, heading for the train station, *en-route* to his new flat to await the arrival of the removals van.

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2 Adapted from a tale in Idries Shah's *The Exploits of the Incomparable Mulla Nasrudin*, Octagon Press.

### 3. Little Smithington

If George thought that life in Little Smithington would be very much different away from the lager louts and binge drinkers, then he was soon to be sadly disappointed. All day long, the skies had been hung over with a slate grey air of gloom and foreboding. It had rained the day before and the air still smelt quite damp, earthy and actually quite refreshing.

As George left his bijou flat over the local chip shop, heading off down the village high street in the direction of the newsagents to stock up on tobacco and cigarette papers before they shut up shop, a figure emerged from the local pub and walked straight into his path. Spotting the fellow at the last moment, George instinctively reached out to fend off the impact and deftly side-stepped.

“Watch where you're going,” the *chav*<sup>3</sup> growled, brushing George's hands away and pushing past him.

“Sorry,” he apologized, even though it hadn't been his fault.

“Tosser,” the man spat, flashing a glance at George as he walked away; a fierce, wide-eyed glare through grey pinprick eyes deeply sunken in dark, hollow sockets. It looked almost as if the guy had woken up on the wrong side of the grave that day.

Smack head, he thought. Just the sort of dead brain for whom he'd left Sher Point and moved to the country, in search of the good life.

“What you say?” a voice called out. He heard a heavy footfall behind him and was spun round by the shoulder. “Clever cunt are we?”

A wave of adrenalin surged through George's system and he was within an inch of lashing out, but resisted the temptation. The guy was a lot beefier than him.

“I just said sorry, that's all,” he said, pulling away from the man and hurrying on down the high street. But the man was still following and looked intent on starting a fight.

“You wanna fight, I'll give you a fucking good kicking, tosser.” He reeled as a fist hammered into his jaw, almost

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3 A working class, ill-educated and ignorant youth.

knocking his teeth out.

“Ronald? Ronald!” bellowed a woman's voice from a nearby doorway. “Get in here this minute!”

The man stopped dead in his tracks at the sound of the voice. George didn't turn to find out who'd just saved his bacon: he strode briskly on and hurriedly entered the safety of the newsagent's, ignoring the twitch of the lace curtains in the nearby granite-built terraced cottages.

George staggered up to the counter, his legs still quite jelly-like with the shock of the assault and waited whilst Mrs Mercer came through into the shop from a back room, taking slow deep breaths to quieten down the heavy thump, thump, thump of his heart in his chest.

“Yes, my love.”

“Half an ounce of cherry menthol tobacco please, Enid, and a couple of packets of liquorice papers.”

“Certainly, my love.”

“Your hair looks nice,” he observed.

She smiled and delicately patted the curly blue rinse. “Why, thank you. Yes, I had it done just yesterday.”

Then: “Are you alright, George? You look like you've seen a ghost.”

“Yes, I'll be okay, thanks. Some bloke just tried to pick a fight. Thick set lad in his mid-twenties. Wiry red hair.”

“Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. That'll be Ronald Blake,” the woman informed him as she weighed out his tobacco. “He used to be such a pleasant lad, but he's been very offish of late. If you ask me, it's most likely drink and drugs. You can call the police from here, if you like.”

He shook his head. “No, I'll just put it down to experience, Enid.”

The lady didn't seem convinced. “Well, if you're sure. You know best, love. Anyhow, that'll be three pounds twenty seven pence, please.”

George fished around in his pocket and counted out the exact change. When he'd been in town, life was so much busier and there never seemed to be the time to mess around with change at the tills. He was forever breaking into new notes and had collected half a carrier bag full of small coins. As far as he was

concerned they could get rid of all coins smaller than a ten pence – and bloody good riddance – anything smaller was more trouble than it was worth.

Enid Mercer's eyes lit up. “Oh, that's lovely, thanks. We're always short of change and the bank charges for it, these days. Mind how you go.”

As he strolled back toward his flat, George could hear voices raised in argument coming from the half open door of a cottage on the other side of the road. One he recognized as the woman who'd stopped Ronald in his tracks a few minutes earlier; the other was more muffled but, judging by the expletives which punctuated the argument, it was Ronald Blake himself. George thought it best to hurry on by and turned his head away so as not to attract further undue attention.

A couple of minutes later and he was back in his flat, having made doubly sure that the door was firmly locked behind him. It was at this point that he heard the unmistakable sound of shattering glass from somewhere outside and, going over to peer out through the nicotine-stained lace curtains, left behind by the last tenant, he could see that one of the glass panes in the bay window of the cottage where the Blakes had been arguing had been smashed. Moments later PC Hardman, the local bobby, came pedalling down the street from the police house and went inside.

George crossed the room of the bedsit to make himself a cup of tea and roll up a cigarette and when he returned to the window, he saw that there was an ambulance outside the cottage. He watched as Ronald Blake was roughly manhandled inside by two burly medics in white tunics. The nearest public hospital was over thirty miles away in Gormley Wood, but there was a private clinic up at the top of the hill outside town. Apparently, the local health authority leased a little space there to provide basic emergency cover and community nursing for Little Smithington, surrounding villages and outlying farms.

Ten minutes later and one of the neighbours, Joe Sedgewick who'd retired but still did odd jobs around the village, was there with his battered old van, measuring up the window to replace the glass. He'd erected a television antenna on the roof for George for little more than the cost of the materials and a few pints. Little

Smithington was the kind of close-knit village where they looked after their own and he'd been made almost instantly welcome there, which was quite something. George had lived in more than one place where five years on he'd still been treated as an outsider. Once upon a time there had been this same kind of community spirit in the towns and he found it sad that you could live in a place for so long and go away not even knowing the names of your neighbours.

When evening came, having already “eaten on the hoof”, as it were, George stopped work and turned off his laptop. He splashed his hands and face and spruced himself up a little. Then he poured himself a glass of vodka and coke for courage, locked up and headed for the pub, the Red Lion. It was a quaint little place with low oak beamed ceilings, horse brasses and dim lighting. The first couple of times there he'd felt rather awkward and out of place, but by now he'd largely got over his initial jitters and felt comfortable either sitting there or his own or enjoying a little good-hearted banter with the locals.

“Evening, George,” the potato nosed landlord greeted him as he walked up to the bar in the lounge. “What'll it be?”

“A pint of lager, please, Harry.”

“I can't tempt you with the new real ales we've had put in? We've got Old Fart and Sheep Dip as our guest beers this week.”

“No, sorry, I'm a confirmed lager man, Harry. Beer and ale make me too frisky and give me an awful hangover.”

“I gather you work from home ...” the landlord prompted as he filled the glass.

“Word gets around,” George smiled. “Yes, I scrape together a living writing articles and short stories for magazines – mainly women's magazines. But right now I'm trying my hand at a bit of scriptwriting for a television drama.”

“That sounds interesting. You'll have to meet Buster Brown. That's the Reverend Bertrand Brown, by the way. He's always looking out for interesting articles for the local rag. Don't quote me on this, but the Rosedale Herald could do with an injection of new talent. I've been trying to get him to ditch his old manual typewriter and buy himself a new computer system, but he's very attached to it. I presume you have a computer yourself?”

“Yes,” George nodded, “though I'm still reliant on snail mail

to send out my typescripts. I've got a dial up Internet connection but it's so painfully slow. When I moved here, I hadn't realized just how far away we are from a telephone exchange and hence how abysmal the connection would be."

"If you've got a laptop, you can always bring it here. The whole pub's a wireless hotspot."

"Really? How did you manage that, way out here in the sticks?"

"Don't ask me the technical details: it's a dark and arcane art to me, George. Joe Sedgwick's son, Ian, just installed the gubbins. He's the man you need to talk to."

"Cheers, I'll do that. Anyhow, good chatting to you, Harry. I'm going to take my drink out into the garden before the sun goes down." He always enjoyed sitting out there, watching the fountain play over the pond and the birds flitting about in the hedgerow and trees. It was a world away from the hustle and hassle of Sher Point, an oasis of peace and tranquillity in a mad, mad world.

"Right you are, George."

Not long afterwards, Ian Sedgwick came strolling across the patio, beer in hand and toupee flapping in the gentle breeze over a highly polished bald head. He was heading in George's direction. Word travelled fast via the grapevine in Little Smithington.

"Hello there. George Kovak isn't it?"

"Hi."

"Ian Sedgwick." The man took a seat at George's table. "Harry tells me you're interested in the new wireless hotspot."

"Intrigued, certainly. Out here, my Internet connection over the phone is pants. Is it a cable system? Fibre optics?"

Ian smiled. "Better than that by far," he said. "It uses the very latest digital satellite technology, the man explained, pointing into the distance toward a large dish antenna on the roof of one of the clinic's buildings. So they engaged in technical talk for a time.

Apparently, the setup was run by a division of the Rosedale Foundation, Rosedale Telecom.

"You know the manor house by the lake, George?" Ian explained. "That's where the founder of the organization, Lord Rosedale lives. So he thought they might stage one of their trials here. The Rosedale Foundation, which is actually a charitable

institution, also runs the research clinic up the hill. That's another of their divisions: Rosedale Health. Believe me, George, they've established a good reputation in all the industries and services in which they operate."

"So, when would you like to sign you up, George?"

That was a closed question, of course, designed to limit his choices and close the deal favourably, but George merely smiled and gestured toward Ian's attaché case. "I presume you've brought the necessary paperwork with you?"

"There's no rush, George."

Ian's body language suggested otherwise. He sat there leaning forward like a praying mantis.

"But yes, you can sign up today if you like. Then there's a cooling off period."

"OK, that sounds fair enough, Ian. Yes, let's get me signed up. In for a penny, in for a pound, as they say."

Ian passed the necessary paperwork across the table. "Oh, by the way, for every other person who signs up on your recommendation, you get five percent of their rental every month for as long as they're signed up. All you have to do is send them along to me and I get in touch with my upstream manager. Maybe you're interested in joining the marketing team?"

"That sounds like a pyramid scheme to me, Ian. No, that's definitely not my forte. I'll just sign up for the basic package and leave the selling to the experts."

"As you wish, George." Ian finished off his drink and got to his feet. "Let me buy you a pint while you're studying the contract. Same again?"

"Thanks but no, Ian. I've reached my limit and still have some work to get through when I get back to the flat."

Ian Sedgwick excused himself and went off to the bar for a refill, returning a short time later. He took a sip of his pint and smacked his lips together in appreciation. "If I'm not intruding, George, what do you do to earn a living?"

"Not at all. I was heavily into computer programming," George told him, as he finished signing the contract and pocketed his pen.

"That's rather serendipitous, George. Rosedale have just put an ad in the regional newspaper: they're looking to hire a couple

of programmers. In-house applications, web site design, that sort of stuff.”

George shook his head and passed the papers back to Ian. “It’s kind of you to think of me, Ian, but I came here to leave all that head banging behind and start afresh. I’m trying my hand as a writer.”

“Ah, I see. Well, good luck to you.” Ian took another gulp of his pint and thought for a moment. “If you don’t mind me saying so, you do still look a little stressed out, George. You need to unwind.”

Go on, don’t tell me: the man’s a yoga salesman, too, George smiled to himself. He shrugged his shoulders. “I have to earn my crust, though I’m getting there slowly.”

“You know, we run a meditation group on a Thursday evening. You’re welcome to come along. I’m sure you’ll be made most welcome.”

“Rosedale again?” he asked as he rolled yet another cigarette. It was more of a statement than a question.

Ian nodded. “They look after their people. It started off as a staff venture, but the invitation has since been extended to the locals. I think you’d enjoy an evening out and you’d benefit from a spot of relaxation.”

“Thanks, Ian. I’ll bear that in mind.”

“I can see you’re thinking that the time could be better spent, George. Think of it as an investment that will yield handsome dividends.”

“I’m sure you’re right, Ian. When do you meet, then?”

“Thursday, seven o’clock at the clinic up the hill. The session goes on until nine, often split into a one hour meditation session, followed by a lecture. Then we adjourn here for a pint or two and a chin wag. You’ll find they’re a friendly bunch and you’ll soon fit in.”

“Thanks again.”

Ian drained his glass and looked at his watch. “Well, needs must. My dear lady will be wondering where I’ve got to.” He stood up and held out his arm and they shook hands. “Anyhow, it’s been lovely meeting you Ian. And I look forward to seeing you again. Next Thursday, perhaps?”

George rose to his feet and thanked the man, but wouldn’t go

as far as committing himself. At the moment, for every article he was writing and sending out, two were coming back to him marked “thanks, but no thanks” so, minimalist lifestyle or not, he had a lot of work on if he was to keep his head above the water.

“No pressure, George,” Ian lilted. “Feel free to come along whenever it feels right to you.” And with that, and a confident spring in his step, the man was off.

As it was to become apparent to George over the months, this Lord Rosedale's name kept cropping up in conversation again and again. He ran a rather intriguing and largely clandestine operation from his base in Little Smithington, but he leaves our story here.

On his way back to the flat, George was folding his copy of the agreement and about to slip it into his jacket pocket when something fell out and fluttered to the ground. It looked like a sheet out of a notepad and he stopped momentarily, picked up the paper and had a look. It must have accidentally got mixed up with the documentation. Yes it was a page full of scribble. There was the phone number of some guy in Sher Point, judging by the area code: Tenzing Jangbu Rinchen, whoever he was. And folk thought George Ivanovich Kovak was a mouthful.

George flipped the paper over and had a look on the other side. On the back, there were some more scribblings. A note read “Tenzing: 'Mindfulness' lecture, City library”, a time and date that had just gone past. Beneath that were a few lines of what looked like verse, which he read to himself out of idle curiosity before stuffing the note in his pocket.

*Listen, listen, listen to my heart's song*

*Listen, listen, listen to my heart's song*

*I will never forget you, I will never forsake you*

*I will never forget you, I will never forsake you*

*Listen, listen, listen to my heart's song*

*Listen, listen, listen to my heart's song*

*I will always love you, I will always be here for you,*

*I will always love you, I will always be here for you,*

*Listen, listen, listen to my heart's song*

*Listen, listen, listen to my heart's song.<sup>4</sup>*

As George mentally recited the lines, he felt a shiver running through him and he came out in goosebumps. Whether it was a

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4 A variation of a chant by Paramhansa Yogananda.

song, a poem or some kind of incantation, the words were actually rather reassuring and heartwarming. Who the verse was by he didn't know, as there was no by-line.

George's meeting with Ian Sedgwick soon slipped from his mind, and he never did make it to the meditation group. It was a distinctly minor event. In spite of the way in which fictional lives are neatly packaged and all loose ends tied up with fancy bows and imbued with great, sometimes mystical, significance in the world of print and film; real life wasn't this neatly packaged. Even what appeared to be major events and opportunities, thrilling possibilities that presented themselves with fanfares, bells and whistles, even these often petered out or turned out to be red herrings or abruptly came to a dead-end some way further down the line, leaving you wondering what on earth had possessed you to get so excited and invest so much time and effort in pursuing these damp squibs and phantoms. And why, oh why, you'd wonder, had you not listened to the authority of reason, to the nagging of your conscience, or to the quiet voice of intuition, or followed up on some altogether more subtle, less tempting and less appealing possibility: the plain looking, sad and neglected woman in the red shoes standing like a wallflower in the shadows at the annual ball. The one who didn't give you a rush of hormones and an instant erection. He smiled, remembering an old joke he'd once heard, that God gave man both his wedding tackle and a brain, but unfortunately not enough blood supply to run both at the same time.

George wouldn't have given the matter any more thought, and didn't at the time; he simply went on his merry way. Only later, when he coincidentally came across that name again – Tenzing Jangbu Rinchen – did it give him cause to pause for thought. And even then he was largely oblivious to the quiet possibilities that were beginning to emerge in his life.

## 4. Cherished dreams

Jeanine Gardner had just emerged from the old-fashioned haberdashery on an errand for her father who had been confined to his bed for the last two days with a bad case of influenza. There was a chill wind blowing from the north, with the odd flake of snow in the air and she hoped and prayed that father wouldn't develop anything worse like pneumonia in that cold house.

“For pity's sake, wrap a blanket round you and get yourself downstairs in the living room with a good fire going, unless you want to catch your death of cold,” their next door neighbour Florence Haggerty had warned father in no uncertain terms.

As Jeanine turned to cross the narrow cobbled street, she caught sight of a figure standing in the light of the archway at the town's eastern gate. He was too far away to make out his features, and yet she felt strangely attracted to him and gave way to the urge to walk down the street on the pretext of looking in the baker's shop window, to take a closer look. She often had these inner promptings and had learned to follow them up, having so often come to regret not listening to her intuition in the past.

As she approached the figure, brushing aside her long shiny black locks which obscured her view in the breeze, she could see that he was a young man, about her own age and quite handsome looking, though his clothes were a little threadbare and had known better days. Seeing her looking in his direction, he smiled and doffed his flat cap respectfully.

“Can I help you, miss?” the lad enquired as she approached. Every now and again he'd fidget nervously.

Jeanine could see now that there was something peculiarly familiar about the lad: the wayward mop of shiny auburn hair, the big brown eyes and the broad smile of his full lips, and yet she couldn't quite place him. It was almost as if she'd known the lad before and somehow forgotten him, which was unusual for her: though she sometimes struggled to remember names and dates, she seldom forgot a face.

“Oh, I'm sorry. You must think me quite rude staring at you like that, sir, but I took you for a friend. Alas, I was mistaken.”

“And you must forgive me, also,” he apologized. “I’ve been searching high and low for my sister who went missing some weeks ago, and for a moment there my heart leapt, for I thought I had at long last found her.”

Yes, there was a distinct air of sadness in the lad's eyes, and he looked as if it had been some time since he'd had anything substantial to eat. Poor as her own family was, mother and father always made sure they had plenty to eat, even if much of it was filling food like bread and potatoes.

She smiled and turned away to walk back up the street toward the butcher's on the way back home, but something was tugging at her inwardly and she turned back. “You look famished,” she remarked. “Perhaps you might accompany me and we can share a cup of tea and a cake at Mollie Perkins' tea-house further up the high street? I just have to visit the butcher's for some lamb chops and some tripe, but that won't take more than a few moments.”

The lad's eyes brightened instantly. “Certainly, I'd be delighted, miss.” Then his face dropped. “Alas, I have no money with me to pay for the meal.”

“It will be *my* treat,” she smiled.

“Oh, I couldn't impose on you in this way, miss. That wouldn't be right and proper.”

“Nonsense. And please don't call me Miss. My name is Jeanine Gardner.”

Again he doffed his cap politely. “That's a pretty name. I'm Dillon.”

When she heard that name, Jeanine's heart started thumping. It was a name that had cropped up time and time again in her dreams from an early age. And it was then that she realized that she actually was dreaming once again.

“Tell me, Dillon. Your lost sister: what's her name?”

But when she turned toward Dillon, Jeanine found him no longer there, nor anywhere to be seen on the cobbled street. Now that was sad. In point of fact, she didn't have to ask the name, other than to confirm her belief, for she already knew in her heart that the girl's name was Marie.



Jeanine Gardner was the sensitive type and, it had to be admitted, she always felt a little out of place in this world, like the

proverbial round peg in a square hole, though she did her best to fit in, mostly at her own expense. For as long as she could remember she'd had these lucid dreams and more than the occasional nightmare, yet she had nobody in the world with whom she could share them, for whilst her father thought more charitably that she merely had a vivid imagination and might go far, her mother was convinced that she was in some way unhinged and had been adamant that Jeanine be taken to the doctor for psychiatric assessment. So instead she kept a secret diary, hidden under a loose floorboard in her bedroom by night and safely tucked in the bottom of her canvas holdall by day.

Mother thought it was high time she left school and began to pay her way in the house. She had recently made enquiries at a nearby mill which was always on the lookout for cheap labour. But Jeanine had other ideas. One day, perhaps, she'd take those notes and write them all up as a novel. Well, there was actually no "perhaps" about it: she *would* become a writer, period. And if she ever became rich and famous, then that would be spit in her mother's eye. No, to be fair, one thing Jeanine had always promised to herself that she would do: she'd get them out of that dreadful, cold and musty tenement and buy them a nice little cottage by the sea.

The next morning, with the latest dream still fresh in her mind and already written up in her diary, Jeanine set out for town to deliver some mending that her mother had taken in and to do some shopping on the way back with the pin money she'd collect. Mother was always hard at work. If she wasn't cleaning and cooking for the family, then she was sowing, darning, knitting or ironing for others. With father only able to pick up casual work these days she had to, if they were to escape eviction for not paying the rent.

"Hello, my dear, do come in," lilted the cheery-faced lady as she called with the mending. They went through to a back room and Jeanine showed her the repairs and alterations. "Oh, that's very well done. Well done, indeed. Here's the money I owe your mama and five iron shekels for your own troubles, my dear. And be sure to thank your mama for her work."

As Jeanine turned to leave, she stubbed her toe on something hard and unmoving on the floor and nearly took a tumble. It was

an old manual typewriter.

“Oh, I am so sorry,” she apologized. “I hope I haven't damaged it. I'm so clumsy.”

“No, no. I should be the one apologizing, my dear. Harold, my better half, left it out to take down to the jumble sale they're holding at Saint Joan's this afternoon. I told him not to leave it lying around, but does he listen ...? Tell you what: it's a bit of a weight, but if you would be so good as to take it down to the Church on the corner, I'll give you some coppers. It's heavy and Mr Blackshire's back isn't as good as it once was.”

Jeanine nodded vigorously. Then a thought dawned on her. “I don't mean to ... to um ... be presumptuous, Mrs Blackshire, but if you no longer need the typewriter, I know of a very good home for it. You see, I'm ... um ... I'm going to be a writer.”

“Really? Why that's a splendid idea, my dear.”

“So you wouldn't mind if I took the typewriter for myself? I can pay you a few shekels for it, or ... or I could give the church a donation, if you'd prefer ...”

“My dear, consider the typewriter yours. No charge.”

“Oh, thank you so much. You really don't know what this means to me, Mrs Blacksmith.”

“Oh, judging by the gleam in your eyes and the broad smile etched across your pretty face, I have a fair idea, my dear.” She fished in her purse and brought out a brass shekel. “Here, take this and buy yourself a new typewriter ribbon and some paper.”

“Oh, I couldn't really ...”

“I insist. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to see you make something of yourself, my dear. Now hurry along or your mother will be wondering where you've got to, and we can't have that.”

That was the last thought on her mother's mind when she saw the typewriter in Jeanine's arms. Her first thought was how much they might get for the machine if they placed an advert for it in the local newsagent's shop window. But Jeanine refused to be parted from the typewriter for love nor money, which really vexed the woman, telling her that Mr Blackshire himself had insisted that it should not be sold. This was her passport out of here.

“Jeanine Elizabeth,” her father called up the stairs as she

cleared the tiny writing desk under her bedroom window and put the typewriter in pride of place. When her father called her by her Sunday name, it usually spelt trouble. Well, one thing at least: he was clearly getting over the flu.

“Coming, Dad.”

“Yes, and so is the ruddy Harvest Holiday.”

She took the steep wooden stairs at the double.

“And how many times have I told you not to run in the house? You'll have that stair carpet worn out. Heaven only knows where we'll get the money for a replacement when it goes.”

“Sorry, Dad.”

“Your mother's through in the living room and she'd like a word.”

“Right.”

Her mother stood in front of the cast iron cooking range in her pinny, with her hands on her hips. “Right, then, Jeanine. I have something to tell you, so listen up. I went along to Thackrey's mill earlier this morning and had a word with a very pleasant young man by the name of Hardcastle. He does all the hiring and firing. They're willing to take you on as an apprentice machinist initially on a three month trial.”

“But ...”

“Now no 'ifs' and 'buts', young lady,” her father spoke sternly. “You're to report to a Mr Millerbank and start bright and early at six thirty on Monday morning. And you should be thankful that we managed to find you a place that actually pays *you* during your apprenticeship and not the other way around.”

For the first month there, Jeanine's head was so full of the intricacies of the work and her body so weary – as she was given the heaviest and most tedious work – that she was asleep almost as soon as her head hit the pillow and she had little enough energy to keep her diary up to date, let alone commit anything to type. Even her dreams seemed to have deserted her. But gradually, as she became acclimatized to the new regime, she began to lay down the plot of her first novel. Well, if the truth be known, she'd at least managed to come up with a provisional, working title.

And, true enough, she was learning. Things like how to sweep the shop floor from end to end with a broom and then be

told to do it all over again with the right brush and shovel. How many sugars and which particular brand of biscuit Fat Pat, the lecherous overseer, insisted on for his morning tea. It was his privilege to have the cream off the top of the milk in his brew. She thoroughly learnt the meaning of the term “shit for brains” and much more in the same vein. And she quickly learnt to keep all talk of her higher aspirations in life very much to herself, having already acquired a new nickname and reputation for herself in their august ranks which did not bear repeating in polite company. Still, it was all grist for the mill and she could see the advantage such experience would bring to characters that might feature in her writing at some later point.

Of course the money helped. She gave her pay to her mother every Friday afternoon, and mother in turn gave it to her father who ran the household finances; then having performed all manner of intricate and arcane calculations, he returned their allowances. Father would often go out fishing on an evening and usually came back with two or three cod or coalfish in his bag and the occasional turnip stolen from fields *en-route*, so they didn't starve, though he did like his tippie at the weekend. But neither were these easy times for any of them and for the most part they simply had to make do and mend and largely do without any of life's luxuries. It was certainly character-building in those days.

Once her three month trial was over, Jeanine was beginning to settle into work at the mill. By that time three other youngsters had started work there and it was they who got all the crappy jobs that the overseer had given to her. And she'd learnt enough to make herself useful and appreciated by the others. Above all else, she could by now carry out many of the jobs almost automatically, without conscious effort, which gave her some free head space in which to work on her *début* novel. Rather than allowing this cherished dream of hers to fizzle out into distant memory and fill her with regret in later life, if anything the menial labour further encouraged Jeanine to strive toward a better life.

When her great-uncle Stanley died, he left the family a broken old gramophone, which Father managed to fix, his collection of seventy eights and a wireless set, and the music and

talk brought a little welcome life to the house which had drifted into a dreary air of perpetual graft over the years, and it also fuelled Jeanine's insatiable thirst for knowledge of the world outside those four dour walls.

The following spring, after the most awful and seemingly interminable winter, Father landed himself a permanent job working as a gardener cum odd job man at a nearby estate and life began to look up for the family for the first time in years. As for Father, who could turn his hand to so many practical things, he was in his element. And as a result of this turnabout in their affairs, they soon joined the ranks of those on the street with an upstairs bathroom and hot running water. Until then, each Saturday night ready for Sunday school and church the next day, they'd have to bank up the fire in the old cooking range and take turns in an old zinc-plated bath in front of the fire. Father would go in first whilst the water was still hot, even though being a manual worker he'd be the dirtiest, followed by Mother and finally by Jeanine. Though Mother topped the bath up with hot water before Jeanine got in, the water would be barely lukewarm by the time it came for her turn. Still, it was better than a poke in the eye with a shitty stick, you might say.

It was on one such night that Jeanine went to sleep and had another lucid dream, the first she'd had since starting work at the mill. Indeed it had been so long that she'd become worried that the dreams might have been something she'd finally grown out of. It was so vivid at the time and absolutely pulsating with meaning for her, but alas to her horror when she woke up, though she could recall having the dream and knew that it had been rather significant, she couldn't recall its detail. All she knew was that she'd met the young man Dillon once again and that he'd repeated over and over again some phrase that he insisted she remember and take to heart when she awoke. In the end, after searching her thoughts for some time, Jeanine decided that perhaps it was that sense of urgency and importance that was preventing her from recalling the dream and that she'd go about her business in the hope that it would pop into her head of its own accord. Things sometimes worked that way, she'd found.

It was the weekend and Jeanine had two whole days off work, which so seldom happened that she simply had to make the

very most of it, when she'd finished helping Mother out with the household chores. For the last week she'd been burning the midnight oil working out the plot line of her book and she was by now satisfied that she'd given the story sufficient structure or backbone to actually start work on writing it. She had sketched out the outline and now all she had to do was colour it in. Well, at least that was the theory. "All" – did she really say that in her innocence of the writer's craft? How naïve. There was a mighty big assumption and a good deal of brow-furrowing and perspiration behind that innocuous little word. For one thing, she hadn't counted on the devious nature in which several of the characters of the story would take on their own lives, independent of the way she'd planned them to behave. And before long one of them had her backed into a corner wondering how in heaven's name she'd get them out of the mess they'd got themselves into. Thankfully she'd decided to write the thing out in longhand before committing it to type. Time to put the cap back on the pen and go for a bracing walk over the moor, methinks. If nothing else, that would blow a few cobwebs away and, who knows, some fresh idea or insight might just bubble up in her imagination.

Starting at the beginning of the story, Jeanine first of all wrote several key scenes, but this only left her feeling that the story didn't quite hang together. She had a cuff here and a sleeve there and a collar somewhere else, but she didn't yet have a finished coat. Sometimes the ink in her pen would really flow and her hand had its work cut out to barely keep up, whilst at other times she might toil and toil over two or three pages; even over a single sentence. And occasionally she'd find herself looking at that awful blank sheet of paper for days on end without knowing at all how she might begin to put pen to paper. Those were dark moments when her patience with herself was severely tested. And more than once she toyed with the idea of screwing her work up, or tearing it to shreds, and tossing it on the fire. Fortunately, however, though the waste-paper basket was seldom empty, she managed to resist the temptation to abandon her work.

It took Jeanine over three months of solid slog to fill in the gaps, in the end having to rewrite much of those early key scenes, until she felt satisfied that the work was taking shape. And after that, it took a further month of re-reading and copy editing. She'd

read a piece and be hit by a great turn of phrase she might use only to find that in a previous edit she'd used that great turn of phrase a little further down the page. Still, by now she was becoming familiar with her own work not only in its detail but as a whole.

One day Jeanine had worked into the early hours on yet another re-read and she must have fallen asleep at the old trestle table that served as her desk.

“Jeanine? Jeanine,” called a voice and when she turned her head she expected it to be her mother come to wake her up for work. “You can't carry on like this without a break.”

Her eyes nearly popped out of their sockets when she caught sight of the figure behind her. “Oh, Dillon! It's you. Don't do that: creeping up on me. I nearly jumped out of my skin.”

“You've done enough, Jeanine, and you're in danger of working your writing to death. Now you have to let go of it and place your faith in forces outside your control.”

“But what if it's not good enough? If I do some embroidery, I can compare it to another piece I've seen and instantly judge how good or bad a piece of work it is. But not the writing. As yet that art is still so arcane to me.”

Dillon smiled.

“Is that what scares you, Cherub, and the reason you haven't allowed yourself to finish the work? Fear of rejection? Fear of failure? Listen to me, Jeanine: take a break, then type it up, and send it off to the publishers. Just let go of it.”

“What if they say no? What then?”

“Then you send it to another and you keep sending it until one of them either says yes or you run out of addresses to send it to. A rejection can mean all sorts of things other than 'We don't like it.' Look at *Bloomsbury Way*: That was turned down by over thirty publishers before the author renamed it and sent it out again. It's been in the best-seller list for months.”

As she stared across the room, she could see Dillon fading away into the dingy floral wallpaper. “Oh, by the way: yes, my sister's name *is* Marie,” he whispered as he disappeared. “Sweet dreams.”

One thing Dillon hadn't said to her, however, and how this played on Jeanine's mind over the days ahead. He hadn't told her

if her work was any good.

And one thing that even his sagely advice really couldn't prepare her for: the sheer volume and sting of the rejections. Again and again she sent her work off to publishing houses in Sher Point, cultural district of the Freelands – there simply being no publishers of any note in the Outlands. The First and Second Wars and the terrible and repressive sanctions that the Freelanders still imposed on her country as a consequence of those wars, which included bans of many imports, most notably anything of any technological nature, had had a devastating effect on the Outlands and her beleaguered people. Speaking of technology, by and large the Outlanders rode around and plied their wares by horse and cart whilst, it was said, those in Sher Point drove around in motor vehicles and had done since just after the Second War. Which by her calculations would mean that her country lagged behind by something like sixty or seventy years as far as the new technologies and health care were concerned, and that gap was rapidly widening. The average life expectancy of her people had actually fallen after the Second War and still was less than forty years, which was a terrible thing. It really was inhumane – indeed criminal – what the Freelanders were doing, even though she could appreciate their desire to prevent her country from ever again rising up and threatening their existence and way of life.

If Jeanine could have afforded to, she'd have travelled to Sher Point herself to deliver her typescript and plead her case, but she had little enough money to afford the postage, let alone fritter it away on a wasted journey. In any case, though a great many Outlanders applied for visas to travel to the Freelands, virtually all applications were summarily rejected. And as for work permits, they were granted only to an elite few with exceptional skills, money or both.

All this effort – and it was real effort on her part – to receive rejection after rejection. And again, with increasing difficulty, she'd pull herself up out of the gutter of despondency and send her work off once more. There was one possible taker, but on closer examination it turned out that it was a vanity publishing company and, rather than pay her for publication, they expected her to pay them. The company dressed it up in rosier prose, of

course, in repeated glowing and unsolicited letters to her, but that was the bottom line and she was not about to prostitute her art in that way.

For one final time, Jeanine ironed out her by now slightly tattered typescript, put it in an envelope addressed to the named editor of another publisher along with a stamped envelope for its return, gave the letter a little kiss for good luck, pulled on her overcoat and set out for town to hand the package in at the post office.

She took the scenic route, down the rutted lane, around the newly-planted park and up through the woods, then west through the sanctuary of the cemetery to town. That's the way she'd taken to school for many years and still she felt it brought her peace and tranquillity even in her more sombre or hectic moments. Jeanine simply adored the lush grass, the delightful fragrance of the wild herbs and flowers and the majestic trees that lined her route.

“Thank you, Jeanine. Take care,” the rather demure post mistress smiled as she handed over the package. It showed how many trips she'd made to their office that they should by now know her by name. “Poor little mite,” they'd probably be saying after she'd gone.

So, at last the dreaded deed was done. She'd long gone past the stage of anxiously waiting for replies to flutter through the letterbox, well, invariably thud on the doormat. But the question was, should she get to work writing another to keep the pot boiling – heck, even an article in the local newspaper would be an improvement on nothing. Or maybe she should find herself a more worthwhile job, perhaps even a career?

Rather than return home the way she'd come that day, Jeanine followed her feet as she emerged from the post office and her feet took her down a narrow alleyway and through a warren of side streets across town. On the corner of Vine Street, there was a tiny secondhand bookshop which she'd had a look round a few times over the years, but she'd seldom come away with the sort of book that jumped out at you and shouted “buy me!” so she wasn't exactly expecting a miracle as she entered the shop and clambered up the steep wooden stairs to the floor above.

There was an elderly lady sitting at a cluttered desk by the head of the stairs. She had a multicoloured woolly hat on that

looked like Mother's tea cosy. They exchanged polite greetings as Jeanine went in and the lady had a sip of tea and went back to her knitting. As creative as the craft could be, and as useful as it undoubtedly was, Jeanine couldn't really imagine herself spending countless hours knitting herself into a state of stupor. She thrived on intellectual variety and challenge.

Jeanine worked her way methodically through the rows of books, which was the only way, really, given that the organization of the shelves varied from the cursory to the non-existent, other than to separate fiction from non-fiction and romance from crime. But look as she might, she couldn't find anything that really grabbed her attention, with the exception of an old thesaurus that might prove useful to her.

"Come on," she whispered to herself. "Where are you when I need you, Dillon?" Even she thought this a strange thing for her to say. She'd meant to say "God", but the name Dillon had come out instead. Well, after all, hadn't he come to her in her dark hours, whilst God himself had maintained an apparently disinterested distance?

No, it was no good. Twice already she'd replaced the thesaurus and twice she'd picked it back up again, which probably meant that she wanted the book, so she decided to return to the desk and buy it. She'd have to make do with that.

"Can't find what you're looking for, ducks?" asked the lady at the desk quite astutely as she fished about to find a brown paper bag for the book. She spat on her fingers and wiped them on her handkerchief before picking up the book, presumably to clean them.

"Not today," Jeanine agreed. "I've no doubt the thesaurus will come in handy, mind."

"You're a writer, then, ducks?"

Jeanine ummed and ahed and the lady smiled. "I know what you mean and how you feel," she confided, "having spent a good few years of my own life before even an agent would take me on-board and give me a shot."

"An agent? Now there's a thought."

The lady nodded. "Elsie Tipple, by the way." She held out her arm and they shook hands.

"Jeanine Gardner."

“Pleased to meet you, Jeanine. And I shall look out for that name.”

“Alas, you won't find it,” Jeanine laughed. “I'm using a pen name.”

“Which is?”

“R.J. Fletcher,” she said. But as she was saying the name, someone whispered “Marie Lightwater” in her ear. Suddenly feeling the cool breath on her ear, she jumped and the book tumbled out of her grasp. “Oops, clumsy me.”

As Jeanine ducked down in front of the desk, something caught her eye. It was the cover of a book on top of a pile in a cardboard box. Instinctively she picked the book up. It was entitled *The Way it Is*.

“Something caught your eye, ducks? Those have only just come in and I haven't had time as yet to price them up.” Elsie Tipple put on her glasses and had a quick look at the cover. “Would two shekels be too much to ask ...?”

“No, that would be fine. Yes, I'll take this, too. No, the one paper bag will suffice for the two.”

In a daze, Jeanine fumbled in her purse, paid for the books, bade the old lady a polite *au revoir* and took the stairs two at a time on the way out.

Only when she got home and had gone up to her room did Jeanine take out the thick volume and look at it once more. Again, as she peered into the twinkling brown eyes of the oriental-looking gentleman staring through her on the front cover, there was an immediate recognition, as if she had seen this man before, more than that: had known him. And it was then that she finally remembered one of the scenes in the dream she'd had of Dillon. For that man had been standing behind Dillon and peering over his right shoulder. The man's smiling, “I wish” eyes warmed the cockles of her heart.

Reading through the publisher's blurb on the back cover, she discovered that his name was Tenzing Jangbu Rinchen. And looking through a potted biography at the back of the book, she read that Tenzing means protector of dharma, which is the teachings and also so it said: “the way things are” in nature and the cosmos; Jangbu means wise and skilful, and Rinchen a precious treasure. In short, he was a spiritual leader and guide,

and as soon as Jeanine began to read his wonderful prose, and his extraordinary insight, she knew even then that she would have to one day meet this man with the sparkling eyes.

## 5. The window of opportunity

Seven days after, when she was least expecting it, Jeanine got up and went downstairs still half in the Land of Nod, to discover a slim envelope on the doormat, addressed to her. “Knowing my luck, it’ll be from the tax man,” she sighed to herself as she stooped down to pick up the letter. It looked altogether official. Then she noticed the foreign stamps on the envelope and the postmark, and her heart skipped a beat. The letter was from the Freeland capital, Sher Point.

Going through to the kitchen she found a knife and slit the envelope open, then paused for some time whilst she plucked up the courage to take out the letter, as if that act could in any way influence the outcome. That was nothing more than “magical thinking” as Tenzing Jangbu Rinchen might say. It merely postponed the inevitable. Thinking about it, it was all to do with expectations and the pain one felt when those cherished expectations were in some way thwarted.

Oh, Lord. She caught sight of the printed letterhead which read “Trenchers Publishing Company, Limited.” That was fast work: she’d had to discreetly chase up one or two of the publishers who’d received her work and had not returned it for over two months.

Oh well, here goes nothing ...

*Dear Miss Gardner,*

*Thank you so much for letting us read your typescript, Whereabouts Unknown. The editor at Trenchers passed it on to me as a reader for my assessment and I must tell you that I am writing to you in my private, though professional capacity, rather than as an agent of the publishers.*

*I read your work with great interest and want you to know that you're nearly there as regards your technical writing skills and I found your lively informal writing style both enjoyable and easy reading.*

*As for the subject matter, though it very much appealed to me personally, regretfully I have to say that I don't think it is the kind of thing that Trenchers are currently looking for, so please*

*do not be too disheartened if you receive a letter of rejection. It may be up Willard's street, if you haven't already tried them.*

*Please don't quote me on this, as it may get me into trouble, but even in this allegedly enlightened and emancipated age, very few publishing houses run by Freelanders will consider work originating in the Outlands, and it may be worth your while finding an understanding agent in Sher Point and concealing your true identity and place of residence, at least until after successful publication.*

*That aside, and more importantly, would it be too much to ask of you to allow me to make a copy of the typescript and send it to a dear friend and mentor of mine? As soon as I read the first chapter of your work, something told me that this is what I should do – with your permission; that he would be equally interested in what you have written, and that it might prove to be to your advantage, though perhaps in an unexpected direction.*

*Thank you again. I look forward to your response.*

*With kind regards,*

*Rosalie Muller (Mrs).*

That letter was at one and the same time both another disappointment and yet also pleasantly affirmative. Jeanine fished in her purse and produced a coin. “Okay,” she said to herself. “Hearts I let Rosalie Muller do it, heads I don’t.”

As the shekel came to a slow, rattling halt, she saw that it was heads.

“Best of three?” That was her instinctive reaction, but she didn’t really have to toss the coin again. The mere fact that she was not settled by the first fall of the coin was enough for her to realize that what she really wanted to do was to say “yes!” to Rosalie Muller.

Jeanine dashed back upstairs, gave herself a cat lick and hurriedly got dressed, then took out pen and paper and wrote back to Mrs Muller, rushing down to the post box with her letter before she had chance to change her mind.

Jeanine should have been excited by this turn of events over the coming days, but strangely she was not. She'd simply relax and finish Tenzing's book, at her leisure, to take her mind off the disappointments, and try to take life in her stride. Alright, alright: to be perfectly honest with herself, and despite her outward show

of calm and forbearance, inside she was a seething mass of frustration and anguish.

One thing at least, having read Tenzing Jangbu Rinchen's book, a whole new realm of possibilities opened up in her life. How she longed for the refined spiritual world of which he wrote and seemed to have so much first-hand experience. He had such a clear vision of what was holding us back from actualizing our true potential as conscious co-creators on this and higher planes.

She'd hunted around in all the bookshops in town and enquired at the public lending library, wondering if perhaps Tenzing had written other books, eager to get her hands on more of his work, but few had even heard of the man, let alone stocked any more of his work.

Plucking up the courage, having realized by now just how rough and unready she was, at least in comparison with the kind of refined folk of whom Tenzing wrote, Jeanine had written a rambling letter to his Holiness, care of his publishers, Norbu, which meant precious gem. From what she'd read, the man divided his time between his homeland in the mountains to the East and Sher Point. So, there was a possibility he'd receive her letter and, though unlikely given her circumstances, there was a vague possibility that she might one day meet him in the flesh.

Eighteen months passed by, during which Jeanine transferred most of her energies to work at the mill, having been made a charge hand by this time. And by the end of that time, though she'd read and reread Tenzing's work, as the book had itself suggested, she had had no word: not from Rosalie Muller, nor her friend to whom she'd sent the typescript, nor from Tenzing Jangbu Rinchen. Perhaps this silence of his actually spoke volumes about the naivety of the approach she'd made to him? Or perhaps the censors had intercepted the mail, as was rumoured to happen from time to time? Mind you, rumours were rife in the Outlands and reliable information so hard to come by. At one time rumour had it that the Freelanders were breeding them like cattle and had a special predilection for the flesh of newborns. Most of the news they received came from the tongue of the occasional travelling tinkers and entertainers who slipped across the border and passed their way.

Yet again, Jeanine had risen early to get ready for work, and

made herself a strong cup of tea to clear the sleep from her head, when she heard the letter box snap shut. She had a sip of her drink and wandered through to the tiny hallway to retrieve the post from the doormat.

There was a small white envelope addressed to her and slitting it open, she found a sheet of paper inside, neatly folded in six. The thing she noticed straight away as she opened the envelope was that the paper carried an exquisite scent. As she unfolded the letter, she saw that there was no printed letterhead, just a few rows of typewriting and a handwritten signature that she was unable to decipher.

*Dear Jeanine Gardner,*

*Thank you for allowing me to read your novel, Whereabouts Unknown, which one of my students, Rosalie Muller, kindly passed onto me. It was an enjoyable and intriguing read and I wish you every success in getting it published, if that is still your intent.*

*Since you ask my advice, please forgive me if I am frank with you and please appreciate that I have your best interests at heart. Firstly, though your work reveals to me that you are what might be termed a natural, the talent you have is still raw and largely undeveloped and needs to be further cultivated if your work is to have a real and lasting impact on your would-be readers. Do you want dried fruit today or are you willing to wait for fresh apricots the day after tomorrow?*

*Secondly, as I believe Mrs Muller has pointed out to you, of late it has become most difficult to find a publisher willing to take on the work of an Outlander such as yourself. This is further compounded by the, shall we say, spiritual dimensions of your work which, alas, have gone somewhat out of favour of late. If you want to write a bestseller, then write about thrills and chills, about sex, crime, intrigue, double-dealing and things in that vein. But I very much doubt, given what I've read of your work, that a sensitive, sentient soul such as you are, would wish to prostitute her art in such a fashion.*

*In a letter to me, you express a great interest in my work ...*

On reading this, Jeanine gulped. She dropped the letter on the living room table and went through into the kitchen to borrow one of her mother's cigarettes to calm the sudden cocktail of

excitement and trepidation that rushed through her and flooded her system. What a small world, she marvelled.

*... and by now you will have had ample opportunity to review your initial approach to me and to decide whether or not you are willing to embark on a course of action which will require from you a great deal of sustained commitment and will inevitably change you at the most fundamental levels.*

*Do you still wish to become involved in the great work? If you do not, then I wish you every success in life. And if you do wish to become a student in the Way, then I have something to propose, but not here and now. I will be going away for a couple of months, but I'll be back in Sher Point from the 2<sup>nd</sup> July. If you are still interested in meeting informally with me, then please write to Mrs Muller and she will assist you in making the necessary arrangements. Shall we say Friday 7<sup>th</sup> July? It's a long journey for you to make, so it would be good for you to spend time with her on the Friday afternoon and evening, meet with me on the Saturday and share a meal with us, and then travel back on the Sunday. That will give us all time to better get to know one-another.*

*Have a think about it.*

*With my very best wishes to you, Jeanine,*

*Your servant, Tenzing Jangbu Rinchen.*

Jeanine's head was spinning as she read the rest of the letter, made all the more giddy by the nicotine in the cigarette she'd borrowed, which made her feel a little sick and turned her legs to leaden jelly. She took one last drag on the stub and tossed it in the coal fire. Hell-fire, if she didn't get a move on, she'd be late for work, and it was her turn to open up at the mill and let everybody in.

On the way home from work that day, she took a detour to the carriage station to enquire about the cost of a return ticket to Sher Point, to discover that though, yes, she could just about scrape enough money together for the fare, all carriages terminated at the border and that she'd have to get a train from there to Sher Point. The clerk didn't know how much that would be, but a rather well-to-do lady behind her in the queue who'd overheard the conversation volunteered the information that when her husband had made the journey earlier that year, it had cost

him nineteen brass shekels, which was altogether too expensive for Jeanine. That was more than she'd earn in a month, even supposing that she worked all the overtime she could get.

The only way she'd be able to get to Sher Point would be if she pawned her trusty old typewriter and took out a loan at some exorbitant interest rate with Mr Shenkle, the rogue who ran the broker's. No, that was simply out of the question. There was absolutely no way that she could saddle herself with such a debt at a time when she should be doing the reverse and attempting to save up for possible marriage. So, with her heart in her boots, Jeanine resolved to write to both Rosalie Muller and Tenzing and thank them for their help, but politely decline their kind invitation. There was no other option and it looked like she'd never get to meet the great man.

"Never say never," whispered a voice in her head, which she recognized as that of Dillon. Strange, she'd seldom had any vivid dreams since she'd sent the typescript out one last time. And that had been well over a year ago.

"Alright, alright: and I don't suppose you've got any bright ideas, clever clogs," she mumbled to herself as she stalked back home. A passer-by, hearing her grumbling but not catching her words, gave her a rather disdainful sideways glance.

"And you can sod off, as well," she called after him. "Is it a crime to talk to yourself these days, or something?"

Yes she was angry, though angry at herself as much as anyone. She'd been given a test and had fallen at the very first hurdle. No, Jeanine resolved. If she had to save up for every month and forego the Harvest Holiday, then quite simply that's what she'd have to do. She was going to Sher Point and that was that. Bright and early tomorrow morning, well at tea break when the mill owner's son deigned to present himself, she'd volunteer for all the overtime they could throw her way.

Three months later, however, no matter how many times she counted her savings, she couldn't get it to add up to more than nine brass shekels and by that time she was almost on her knees under the pressure of work. This had not passed by her mother unnoticed and she strongly advised Jeanine to take things a little easier, unless she wanted to end up in the sanatorium or even the local asylum like her grand-cousin Maudley Sheraton. And that

was warning enough coming from one as relentlessly hard-working as her mother.

Perhaps she should write to Rosalie Muller or Tenzing and outline the difficulties she faced? Yet, no, how could she? For that might appear to be some kind of begging letter and oblige them to either send her money or else make them feel uncomfortable should they choose to decline. Besides which, Jeanine didn't want to present herself as some kind of lame duck, for she might yet be rejected. Tenzing very much insisted in his book that the way he represented was not one of asceticism, relying on alms, or of living the hermit's life meditating on some mountain top for one's own salvation, but of working in the everyday market place amongst the people, and of paying one's own way. For three long weeks, Jeanine mulled over one option after another and was forced to reluctantly discard them all. But she would not be beaten.

She'd already written to the authorities at Sher Point to see if she would be able to obtain a travel visa and in the latest blow to her plans, she had just received a courteous but direct letter in return informing her that her application had been turned down. Not only, as if to add insult to injury, they asked her to send a money order for six iron shekels to be made out to their office, to cover the cost of processing her failed application. That would be seven, it turned out, including the commission that the local post office took on the transaction.

Still, that day was her day off, the first she'd had in the last ten days, which hadn't pleased her mother, who so often relied on Jeanine to help out with the household chores.

Later that afternoon as she was returning from the greengrocer's, Jeanine was presented with a hand-scrawled flier by a man dressed as a clown who was handing them out to passers-by. Evidently, Maurice's Circus was coming to town and would be open for performances on Friday and Saturday before moving on to the next town on the way up north. The travelling circus was numbered amongst the few who were afforded free travel across the border between the Outlands and Sher Point. Well, whether the access was free or not was a moot point. It was said by some that the only way to obtain a pass was by bribing the officials at the border crossing points. Anyhow, since she had a

late start for work on Sunday, Jeanine thought that perhaps it would be nice to take her parents along to the show and pay them in. It would make a welcome change for them all.

Jeanine had just got her mother and father seated at the ringside that afternoon and was going to see if she could get a lemonade to cool them, as it was such a hot day for springtime, even in the shade of the tent. As she was waiting in line to be served, one of the circus workers, a lad about her own age, spotted her and after exchanging words with his two co-conspirators, he came across to Jeanine. He was quite a gangly looking youth and he suffered from bad acne. Raging adolescent hormones, no doubt. Thankfully she'd been lucky in that regard. It did not take her long to work out that he was trying to chat her up and she asked him if this was the case.

“Yes,” he nodded. “I’m sorry that I’m not very good wooing the ladies, but they just bet me two iron shekels each that I’d fail.”

“I see,” she smiled.

“Tell you what, miss, if you make it look like you’re interested and I win the bet, then I’ll share the proceeds with you. Can’t say fairer than that, now can I?”

“Like this, you mean?” She placed her arms over his shoulders and pressed her lips to his. He, for his part, turned the brightest beetroot colour she had seen in a long time, and looked like he was praying that this would not be a long, lingering kiss.

“That do you?” she enquired with a mischievous grin.

“More than plenty. Oceans in fact,” he gulped, pulling away and he went scurrying back to his fellows.

For a moment, Jeanine thought that she’s been had, but then to her surprise the lad returned and slipped two iron coins into her hand, just as he had promised. “Thank you,” he gulped. And then: “Will you still be here at the end of the show? I look after the elephants ... well, by that I mean I get to shovel out their stables and wash them down. I’d be glad to show you the animals close up, if you’d like.”

She thought for a moment. “Alright,” she nodded. “Yes, I’d like that very much. Thank you.”

“Are you alone? I mean if there’s anyone with you they can come along, too.”

“No, but I’ll come alone,” she told him. “And I’ll see you

at ...”

“Five o'clock, by the lemonade stand.”

“Right you are ...”

“Fletch.”

“Jeanine.” She shook his trembling hand and kissed him on the cheek. “Right you are, Fletch. I'll see you then.”

And with that, the lad hoofed it back to the lemonade stand to serve the customers before it was time for the show to start.

Soon enough, and thrilling as it had been, the show was over and Jeanine made her excuses. To be honest, it was a relief, because with all her niggling doubts about Sher Point playing on her mind, she hadn't been able to relax and really enjoy the show. Of course that was wrong. Things really shouldn't have turned out this way, casting a long, dark shadow over her life. But what was she to do?

Her mother raised her eyebrows and gave Father a sideways glance. “You wouldn't be going a-courting would you, Jeanine Elizabeth?”

Jeanine merely smiled and headed for the refreshment stand. Sure enough the lad was there waiting for her and still as nervous as ever judging by his fidgeting.

“What's up?” she asked. “Have you got ants in your pants?”

He blushed and led the way.

“That's Toby,” he announced proudly, pointing to a large bull elephant tethered to a large wooden stake by a stout rope. He seemed quite content, picking up large bundles of hay, using his long trunk as a hand, and thrusting it into his open mouth. He pointed to another: “And that's Amy. Toby gave her a good humping a couple of weeks back and with any luck she's pregnant. Baby elephants go down a treat with the kids.”

“So where are you off next, Fletch?”

“Oh, we'll spend the spring in the Outlands, going round in a clockwise circle, then come July we'll be back across the border into the Freelands for a long circuit. Come winter, we go back to our base on the outskirts of Sher Point and stay there until the following spring. Then we do the whole thing all over again.”

“But how do you get across the border? I applied for a travel permit a few days ago and they turned me down flat.”

“Yes, but you're an Outlander. And we're from the

Freelands.”

“I'd give anything to get across the border,” she sighed, and told him a little of her story. He seemed genuinely fascinated by the account.

Then: “Sometimes we have strangers travelling with us,” he volunteered. “Though for heaven's sake don't tell another soul or we'd be for it.”

“Tell me more,” she beamed.

“I'm not really the one to be asking, Jeanine. You'd need to talk to my elder brother Jonno or our old man.”

“Tell me what you *do* know.”

“I'm not sure that I should be telling you anything, Jeanine. I could get our people into a whole host of trouble ...”

“Trust me.”

“Alright. When we take strangers, we have them dress up to look like circus folk and they have to pay their way. I don't know the details, but I do know they get all the best jobs, like mucking out the elephants,” he laughed. “And after we've got safely across the border, they disappear into the night and we don't see them again. Sometimes we have to hide them while we get across.”

Jeanine's heart was beating fast in her chest by now. “Fletch? Let's dispense with the guided tour. I think maybe I'd better have a word with your father.”

“He's busy tonight. He told us not to disturb him.”

“Your brother, what his name – Jonno? – then.”

Fletch hesitated.

“Trust me,” she reiterated, giving the lad a reassuring pat on his shoulder. “Don't worry, I won't let you down.”

Oh please, God, please. Don't quit on me now.

The lad led her toward the wagons and went ahead to speak with his brother first, then returned to guide Jeanine to him. They sat around a table and a girl, perhaps their sister, served them some cool, refreshing home-made lemonade whilst they talked.

“When do you cross over into the Freelands?” she asked.

“The third of July,” he told her. “In time for the annual fair they hold in Brassingham.”

“So if I met you near the border, you could take me across? Do you know which crossing you'll take?”

“For a price. And we always cross by way of the Wye valley.

Yes, if you could meet us at Upper Wyevale at the head of the valley, at ... let me see ..." He consulted the calendar pinned to one wall of the caravan. "Let's say eight o'clock in the morning on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July, just beside the war memorial. Yes, we could take you across. As I said, at a price."

"So what *will* it cost?" she asked.

"Five brass shekels is the going rate," Fletch's brother told her, looking Jeanine up and down. "Unless we can, shall we say, come to an alternative means of remuneration. I'm open to barter or payment in kind."

"Five shekels is all I have to give." She thought for a moment. Then it dawned on her what the lad meant. "Oh, that's disgusting. You should be thoroughly ashamed of yourself. And by 'going rate', I take it I'm not the first."

"Can't blame me for asking, Missus. And, no, you're not the first, nor likely to be the last. The smuggling goes on all the time. What we make from the smuggling is sufficient to keep you fed and bribe the guards to let us cross the border in the first place."

"So, is it a deal?" she asked, fishing in her purse and slowly counting out five brass coins on the table before him.

Jonno offered her his hand and they shook on it. "See you on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July, then," he smiled. "And don't be late, Missus. If you're not there at eight o'clock sharp, be assured that we won't wait for you. The slightest hint of trouble and we leave without you. And there will be no refund."

"Right," she nodded as she left the caravan. "Don't worry, by hook or by crook, I'll be there."

## 6. The dream caravan

Mother and father were still in bed on the morning of 1<sup>st</sup> July, as Jeanine quietly slipped out of the house. She'd told them she had to go into work especially early that morning to open up the mill and they'd swallowed the story without question.

She'd been meaning to tell them that she was leaving, but every time she'd opened her mouth to broach the subject, something or other – fate? – had always intervened or else she'd had butterflies in her stomach, and so she'd decided instead to leave them an explanatory note. Well, they could read the note at their leisure without interrupting her every third word with a question or objection. Some things she couldn't tell them, such as when, if ever, she would be back, because she didn't know the answer to these things herself. Sure, she was taking a big risk, abandoning her family, her home – well their home – and stable employment to follow her dream, but at least she wouldn't grow bitter and twisted in her old age, wondering what her destiny might have been had she followed her own heart instead of her parents' head.

If all else failed, for five brass shekels she could slip back across the border and take up her old life again. And if her plan succeeded, well perhaps she'd make a good life for herself in Sher Point and have enough left over each week to send her parents money to make their lives a little easier. They were by now no spring chickens and still had little if anything saved up to tide them through their retirement ... if they lived long enough to see that day. Dying young was a traumatic and unfortunate experience for so many families, but neither was life much more palatable for those who lived longer, who ran out of money when they retired from paid work, and had to subsist by begging in the streets and being fed in the lowly soup kitchens provided for the needy. Or were confined to the dire municipal workhouses and debtors' prisons that peppered the land.

Jeanine walked down the cobbled street toward the park, to have one last look before leaving. She had plenty of time before the stagecoach departed, having left the house early only to avoid

awkward questions and the inevitable emotional scene. Once round the park, she headed off up through the woods and through the cemetery, then cut across town toward the coach station. There was a café there that catered for early morning workers and she ate a hearty meal and drank a nice, warm, sweet cup of tea.

All she had with her in her two bulging cases were her clean clothes, precious typescript, secret diaries and a stock of paper, pen and ink. The typewriter she'd had to leave behind in her room. Perhaps it would be there still should she ever return, but the chances were that sooner or later, her parents would sell it for a little coal, tobacco or weekend tippie. Or have pawned it and then been unable to afford the cost of redeeming it at a later date. Even with father working full-time, they still seemed to live a life that was forever hand to mouth. Well, it wasn't life as she would use the term: it was nothing more than subsistence. So in a way, you could understand and forgive these poor people from the indulgence of tobacco and grog. They had so little else by way of comfort or fun in their lives.

Soon enough Jeanine heard the clock behind the counter chime on the half hour and she pulled on her coat. It might have been July, but it was still quite chilly at this time in the morning and the bushes and grass in the park had been laden with dew. As she picked up her bags, the waitress went to the door and opened it for her.

“Thank you, that's very kind,” Jeanine smiled.

“You're welcome and thank *you*. Take care now and have a safe journey.”

“And you.”

The journey south seemed interminable over heavily-rutted dirt roads, but fortunately the carriage was well sprung so that though they swayed about at times, it wasn't too bumpy. And at midday, there was a welcome break as they stopped for lunch at a stage post whilst they changed horses and the driver and his mate had a rest. Jeanine had been on her own thus far, other than for a priest who'd got on for a short ride, and she had made the most of the quiet to gather her thoughts. On this latter stage, however, she was joined by a matronly woman and three small children who, though well behaved, were excited little bundles of nervous energy. Still, making polite conversation with the woman helped

pass the time: she certainly wouldn't die of boredom that afternoon.

At long last, the carriage pulled into the side of the road and the driver's mate clambered down and opened the door. "Upper Wyevale," he informed her, taking the two bulging cases as the driver handed them down to him.

"Oh, thank you. I'm glad you remembered because I've been dozing off for the last half hour and I'd have missed my stop."

"Glad to be of help. It's the end of the line anyway, so it wouldn't have made much difference," he laughed. "Mind how you go."

"Are you looking for somewhere to stay the night?" asked the driver, peering round the side of the coach as she looked around to get her bearings. She nodded.

"Then take my advice and walk straight past the Jolly Roger – right den of iniquity and thievery, it is. Take the first left down the hill past the church and look for Lily Cottage. You'll find it a whole lot cheaper and more homely."

"Thank you for the advice," she smiled. "Have a good journey."

"And you, ma'am. Good day to you."

"Mrs Longhorn," the portly woman smiled and greeted her as she answered the doorbell.

"Hello there, Jeanine Gardner. I'm looking for a room and the coach driver suggested I try here."

"Oh, that'll be Archie. He'll be staying at the Jolly Roger, like as not for some rumpy-pumpy."

"But he specifically warned me off and recommended Lily Cottage."

"And I should think he would, my dear, you being a lady and all. I tell you, the things that go on in the bar and between the sheets of that whoremongering establishment do not bear repeating in polite company."

"Anyhow, let's not stand out here in the cold, come in. Have you eaten? No? Then you get warmed up in front of the fire and I'll see to some food for you. Home-made dumplings and lamb stew suit you? Good. My son Bryan will take your things up to your room. Number six at the very top of the stairs, if you'd like to freshen up."

“It'll be ten iron shekels a night. Just the one night? No, that's fine. No, there's no need to pay now. Before you leave is good enough for me. You'll find us trusting folk around these parts.”

Jeanine went through to the sitting room and pulled an armchair up in front of the gently flickering log fire to toast her toes. It looked like she had the place all to herself. Considering that all she'd done that day was sit down in a carriage, it had been such a long journey and she felt quite drained. She sat there for a few minutes, sipping the hot tea and chewing on a biscuit that Mrs Longhorn's son kindly brought her, then went upstairs to wash her hands and splash some water on her face. There wasn't any hot running water in the room, but the landlady's husband took her up a bowl and fresh towels. That was something she'd neglected to pack in her haste, though she'd had the sense to take her other toiletries.

Jeanine went back down the steep, narrow stairs and Mrs Longhorn guided her through to the dining room, warning her to duck her head under the doorway, so as not to bang it on the low beam. There was a distinct odour of furniture polish in the air and it was a little chilly in there without a fire, but since she appeared to be the only visitor that night, it was understandable. Besides, the vast plateful of stew more than warmed her up.

“And when would you like your breakfast in the morning, my dear? Any time after seven and before eight thirty would suit us.”

“Well, I have to meet a friend at eight sharp by the war memorial, and I've no idea where that is from here or how far.”

“Oh, it's only about ten minutes walk from here, my dear. You'll have passed it on the way here. Right opposite the Jolly Roger, set back on a paved area by the old village green. How's about seven o'clock, then, would that suit? Or is that too early?”

“Yes, that would be fine, thank you. I'm quite used to getting up early on a morning for first shift at the mill, so that's not a problem.”

“Good,” Mrs Longhorn smiled. “I'll get Bryan to give you a knock about ten to seven, anyway, just to be on the same side. Many folk find that the country air makes them sleep like logs when they first come here.”

“Right you are. And thank you.”

As Mrs Longhorn had said, Jeanine slept soundly that night

and before she knew it, there was a knocking on the door and a voice called out to her: "It's your early morning call, Miss Gardner. Are you awake?"

Jeanine roused herself and thought it wise to get out of bed straight away in case she should be tempted to roll over and go back to sleep. That would be Bryan, the landlady's son.

"Yes, thank you, Bryan, I'm out of bed and I'll be down for seven."

The fleecy duvet on the bed had been so lovely and warm in the night, that she really would have liked nothing more than to have gone back to bed for another hour. But of course she couldn't. She had a very important and pressing appointment to keep.

If she thought the stew and dumplings had been a hearty feast then the full, traditional cooked breakfast she had that day surpassed even it in quality and equalled it in quantity. Like working town's people, country folk liked to fully stoke the boilers before a hard day's graft. Feeling slightly bloated, she took her cases back downstairs and knocked on the kitchen door to pay the landlady for the stay.

"If you like, I can get Bryan to give you a lift up the hill in the buggy," Mrs Longhorn offered. "Save your legs."

No, it was already twenty to eight and she couldn't afford to be late whilst the lad got the horse and hitched up the carriage. "Oh, I don't mind walking, thanks all the same. I had a lovely stay, thank you."

"Well, if you're ever back this way, you know where to come. You'd be made most welcome."

"I do indeed," she smiled, and headed down the garden path and off up the hill to the rendezvous.

She arrived at five minutes to eight, according to the old pocket watch she'd inherited from her grandfather, and looked furtively about. She had done no wrong as yet, and in truth all she wanted was to find a better place to live: what harm was there in that? And still she felt like a criminal.

Eight o'clock came and eight o'clock went and by quarter past, standing opposite the Jolly Roger she was feeling something of a lemon and also beginning to think that after all this effort, she'd been taken for a fool and well and truly had.

By half past, Jeanine was feeling gutted and close to tears, as she slowly walked across the road toward the quaint row of old shops to enquire about the next northbound coach. She had no option other than to return to Wanstead-on-Sea and start all over again.

At that moment she heard the unmistakable sound of horses' hooves and wagon wheels and turned to see a whole brightly painted caravan heading toward her from up the road with the elephants in tow.

"I'd given you up for lost," Jeanine grinned broadly as she caught sight of Jonno in the lead wagon. By his side was an older man, holding the reins, who was presumably the lad's father. "I thought you'd taken me for a mug."

"Oh ye of little faith," the lad grinned back. "One of the horses shod a shoe, so we had to fix it before we could leave."

"In the back," the other man requested, without so much as a how do you do. "And look smartish. You never know who might be watching these days."

A lady in the back of the lavishly adorned covered wagon helped Jeanine safely inside and with a lurch they were on their way. She was a rosy-cheeked woman in her mid-thirties, with a wild mane of red hair under a floral headscarf, and she introduced herself as Martha.

"Best get the lass changed into something a bit more suitable," the man called through from the front. "And get those cases out of sight. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, Bill, I hear you."

"In fact, bright and early tomorrow when we get nearer to the border, I think it would be a good idea to take her along to the tigers' wagon."

He had to be joking: they'd maul her to death.

"There's a space hidden under the wagon," Martha reassured her, probably having seen the fright on Jeanine's face. "You'll find it a bit cold and cramped in there, but it would only be while we crossed the border. We'll be passing through a town called Middleton and we'll let you off in the park near the train station."

"Thanks. You don't know how much this means to me. I'm very grateful."

"Oh, judging by what we've seen ourselves on our travels

around the Outlands and the terrible tales we've been told, by others just like you, I have a pretty good idea, love. Don't worry: you'll be there soon enough. I take it you have somewhere to stay when you get to the Freelands?"

Jeanine shook her head. "I have an acquaintance in the publishing business – I'm a writer, you see – and I plan to call on her and then on the weekend of the 7<sup>th</sup> of July I have a meeting with a mentor.

"I figured that I could find work. I worked at a mill and I'm an experienced machinist. And I'm also pretty good at typing ..."

"And you don't have a work permit? Well, clearly not or you wouldn't be here, would you?"

"No."

"You know it's virtually impossible to find employment in the Freelands without a work permit. It's recently been made law that any employer approached by what they term illegal immigrants is to contact the police authorities and report the offence. If they fail to do so, then they're liable to a hefty fine and possible imprisonment."

"I didn't know that," gulped Jeanine, the colour draining from her face at this news. "I just knew that I had to get here."

"Of course, there are employers willing to bend these rules, but these tend to be those who engage in criminal activities in any case, such as sexual services and slavery – and somehow I don't think that would be your cup of tea, love."

"And are there no alternatives, Martha?"

"Well, if you have enough money on you to survive a few days, you could try to make it across the eastern border, or you might be able to find someone willing to provide you with forged documents."

"And how much would that cost?"

The lady shrugged. "I've heard that fifty brass shekels will get you what you need."

"Fifty brass shekels? I don't have that kind of money. It might just as well be five hundred."

By now, Jeanine was beginning to wonder what ever had possessed her to embark upon this foolhardy mission as she slipped out of her own clothes and put on the new outfit that the lady passed her way. "They're a bit old," she pointed out, "but

they'll do you until you can find yourself some new clothes. Whatever you do, don't walk around in that overcoat: it has Outlander written all over it and you'll be picked up by the police in no time."

"And they call this 'the Freelands?' It sounds more like a police state," Jeanine remarked.

"You're not far wrong there, love!" Martha laughed. "What you're witnessing is the unsavoury legacy and paranoia left over from the two great wars.

"Listen, if things get too difficult for you, there is an organization – well, a network of associated groups, actually – known as 'the Underground.' You might attempt to contact them."

"Do you have any details?"

Martha leant across the caravan and found a sheet of paper and pencil stub. She wrote something down and passed it to Jeanine. "This is a man who can point you in their direction. And that string of numbers? That's a telephone number. I guess that newfangled gizmo is still something that has yet to make it into the Outlands?"

Jeanine nodded.

Then Martha lightened up and went into a cupboard under the seat where they sitting and produced a bottle of some amber-tinted drink and two crystal-cut glass tumblers. "Lady, I can see that this trip is going to be a real eye-opener for you. Speaking of which ... Here: get this down your gullet, Jeanine. It'll warm the cockles of your heart and help you become sufficiently squiffy as to forget all your worries for a time."

She took a sip. "Mmm, that's delicious, Martha: what is it?"

"Oh, it's an old traveller's recipe made from wild flowers and aromatic herbs gathered from the roadside verges. Of course, some of the herbs we use have also recently been banned in the Freelands and they've begun to spray the verges, but who cares. The more they spray, the more we plant for our fellow wayfarers! Enjoy it while you still can!"

Ten minutes later and Jeanine was fast asleep on the couch and, for the first time in months, vividly dreaming once more.

When Jeanine awoke, it was to find herself flat on her back in the baking sun in long, flower-bespeckled grass. Pushing herself up, she got to her feet and looked around, amazed that even

though she was standing, the abundant vegetation was still up to her waist. She recognized where she was almost instantly, for she'd visited this beauty spot on many occasion in her dreams, stretching back for as long as she could remember: it was the wild-flower meadow by the woods, close by a bubbling stream. And yes, over there in the distance she could make out the tell-tale roof and crenelated towers of the old manor house. She'd spent many a day playing around the sun-kissed gardens of that house, and even ventured inside a time or two. The building was well kept, as if some invisible host went round spring cleaning, and yet to this day she had never bumped into any of its occupants, which was a pity. She'd have liked to have met these people to find out who they were and what they were like. With a nice house and well-maintained gardens like that, she imagined they must be good people. Gentry perhaps?

Jeanine waded across the meadow and followed a scrunchy, winding gravel path down an incline toward the sound of rushing water and came upon the stream. She bent down and selected a flat white stone and sent it skipping across a deep pond and as she bent down to pick up another stone, she caught sight of her reflection in the water and saw that she was no longer the half-adult she'd taken herself to be, but a child once more. She looked herself up and down and held out her arms and examined her slightly podgy hands. Why, she could be no older than five or six, which was the strangest thing. Perhaps time was different in this fairytale land and people didn't grow old here?

Just then she heard a voice calling from further along the path which snaked its way up and down the glen following the stream.

“Marie,” the voice lilted.

Then she heard another voice, coming from the direction of the meadow at the top of the winding gravel path. “Marie! Where are you? Marie!” the voice called out over and over again and in more desperate tones. She dashed back up the path and looked out over the meadow, but she could see no signs of anyone there.

“Hello?” she called out. “Hello?” And she listened intently, but she could hear no reply. Even the birds' chorus had fallen silent.

Then she saw two distant figures walking down the dusty lane by the side of the meadow, heading back in the direction of

the house and she ran after them, calling out over and over again. "Hello? Hello? I say – you there. Hello?"

For a moment one of the figures, a man, stopped in his tracks and craned his head around as if listening for something. Then he turned to the woman who was with him, shrugged his shoulders and walked on.

Were they deaf or something? Jeanine had been calling at the top of her voice and they appeared to have heard nothing more than a tiny squeak. She dashed down the twisting lane after the pair, but they were walking at a fair pace, taking what to her seemed giant strides, and soon they had disappeared from sight around a corner. She could see their heads bobbing along and then they were gone, hidden by a tall privet hedgerow full of white blossoms. She didn't particularly like the fragrance the flowers gave off: it reminded her of some creamy and foul-tasting medicine she'd once been given as a child.

Though she could no longer see the couple, Jeanine ran after them until she was too puffed out to run any longer and had to stop to rest for a time in the shade of a tree, out of the hot glare of the sun. Then she set out again, walking on toward the house, which is where she presumed the people had been heading.

Jeanine crunched her way up the wide gravel driveway and up the wide polished marble stairs to the front door, but the door was closed and, try as she might, she found herself unable to open it.

She saw a long dangling cord beside the door and as she tugged at it, she could hear a bell ringing in the hall beyond, so she waited. There was no reply, so she rang the bell again and again, all to no avail. Despondently, she sat down on the cool marble steps, her elbows on her knees, nestling her head in her hands and wondering what to do next.

Just then Jeanine heard the heavy crump-crump-crump of footsteps on the gravel drive and saw another rather rotund man with a chubby, jowled face coming up the steps towards her. She leapt to her feet and called out to him, but even though she danced frantically around him by the door, waving her hands in the air, he was utterly oblivious of her presence.

As he opened the door to let himself in, Jeanine squeezed through behind him to find herself in a brightly lit hallway. High

up above was a glass dome through which shafts of sunlight were streaming, bathing the hall in light. To the right, a wide carpeted staircase swept gracefully up to the first floor and dotted around the hallway were several tall polished wood doorways. The place was so high and spacious that it dwarfed her.

“Any sign of them, Randolph?” asked a woman, coming down the sweeping staircase. “I’ve looked all over the house and there’s not a sign.” For some reason, this lady seemed familiar and yet Jeanine could not for the life of her put a name to the face, nor place her.

The man shook his head. “No, I’m sorry, Jessica. We’ve searched the gardens, the meadow, the woods, the stream to no avail. They’ve vanished without trace.”

“Oh, Lord help us. What are we to do? Poor Hamish is beside himself.”

There were tears in the woman’s eyes now and she wiped them away with a lacy handkerchief which she had tucked up her sleeve. Then the woman took a deep breath, presumably in an effort to gather her wits about her. “Well, I don’t know about you, but having missed tea I’m famished and you must be too. Since everybody’s back from searching, let’s adjourn to the lounge and I’ll have Mrs Hadley rustle us up some supper.”

Looking out through the diamond shaped leaded window panes of the hall, Jeanine could see that it was already getting dark for some reason – and yet only a few minutes ago the sun had been shining brightly, high in the sky.

She was standing close by listening intently to the goings on and as the lady turned abruptly she stepped straight into Jeanine’s path and walked straight through her without blinking an eye. Ugh! That was an awful sensation and made her feel quite queasy. She fell to her knees and fought to catch her breath.

Once she’d recovered, Jeanine got to her feet and followed the fat man down the hallway and through into the lounge and watched as one by one others entered the room, all of them looking despondent and apologizing that their searching had proved fruitless.

Just then another man dashed into the room, looking somewhat dishevelled and in a state of near-panic.

“Oh my Lord, not bad news, Hamish ...?”

The man headed for a cabinet which stood against one of the walls, took the stopper out of a crystal decanter, poured himself a large shot and downed it in one. Then he turned back toward the others. “Not the best news, no Randolph. I was in my study and quite by chance I noticed that the key to the box room which houses the Psi terminal was in the lock, not in my desk drawer where it should have been.”

“What are you saying?”

“I'm saying that Marie and Dillon stole into that room.”

Jeanine's jaw dropped when she heard those names.

“You mean that's a possibility.”

“No, I checked the logs and I have to tell you that it's a certainty. The transporter was used twice today, probably whilst we were otherwise engaged having the buffet. Marie has been with me as I set up previous descents and she must have remembered how to operate the terminal.”

Randolph smiled. “Then the search is over, well done.”

“Well done?” Hamish spluttered.

“Well yes, all you have to do is initiate the return sequence, based on Marie and Dillon's current coordinates and – Bob's your uncle! – we have the little ones back home, safe and sound.”

Hamish shook his head and sank down in one of the armchairs by the hearth. “There are no current coordinates, Randolph.”

Randolph cocked his head to one side, questioning. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I checked the controls and went through the logs.”

“But how can that be, man?”

“I can only assume that Marie made a mistake when she set up the controls for the descent. Matthew, the sysadmin is looking into the issue, and should be able to come up with facts and figures, but it doesn't bode well. It's all my fault, of course: showing Marie the ropes thinking she was grown up and able to act responsibly; leaving the key lying around rather than keeping it safe on my person ...

“I have to go after them. Not having been briefed for the descent, Lord knows what ills may befall them.”

“Now, now. Let's not be too hasty, Lightwater,” advised Sir Humphrey. “Best wait to hear what Matthew has to say on the

matter first. Not to mention, we should all get something in our stomachs. Speaking of which ...”

At that moment, one of the servants came through into the lounge, wheeling a trolley, two others following in her wake bearing gleaming silver trays.

“I’m not sure that I feel like anything to eat,” Hamish sighed deeply.

“Nonsense, man. Force yourself if needs be, but you have to eat. Got to keep your strength up. And we all need plenty of brain food, especially at times like this. Three heaped sugars in my tea, Jessica dear.”

Jeanine felt sorry for Hamish, he looked so down in the dumps and beside himself, and she edged closer to peer into those sad eyes. Yet he looked straight though her, staring into space and lost in thought. And when she raised her hand to touch his, her fingers tingled almost unbearably and passed through his. She involuntarily pulled away, momentarily unnerved by the unpleasant sensation and started shaking uncontrollably.

“Jeanine? Jeanine! Wake up, sleepy head.”

Jeanine started and her eyes sprang wide open to find herself back in the caravan, with Martha standing over her, smiling.

“Fancy a spot of lunch?” the woman asked. “We’ve a long way to go today, so we won’t be stopping, but I have a pork pie and some sandwiches that I made up earlier.”

Jeanine pulled herself up on the couch and nodded. “Yes, that would be lovely. Thank you.”

She ate heartily and Martha laughed and told her that the wine often gave folk the munchies.

“And vivid dreams, too,” Jeanine observed. Having finished her sandwiches, she rooted in her shoulder bag and made a note of the dream in her precious diary, so that she would remember it and write it properly later.

“Did you go anywhere nice? In your dreams, I mean?”

She sketched out the episode as best she could for Martha’s benefit, but by and large it left them both baffled and her feeling more than a little uneasy.

“Did you tell your folks that you were leaving?” Martha asked quite suddenly.

Jeanine shook her head. “I kept meaning to. In the end I left

them a note. And yes, in retrospect, I *do* feel bad about that.”

“Yes, it's easy to see such things in hindsight. So maybe you were dreaming of their reaction when they found you gone?” Martha wondered.

“Maybe, Martha. Yes, that might account for it,” she nodded. But if the truth be told, she was not totally convinced that this is what the dream had really been about. It was as if she'd known another life in some distant realm, and that the life she was currently living was little more than a shadow in comparison to it. As if ... how could she put it? As if she were now living in the shadow lands but had once come from some land of light.

When she volunteered her thoughts to Martha, the woman slapped her thigh and beamed. “Well, knock me over with a feather! Funny you should say that, Jeanine, but we come from a long line of travellers and I remember my grandmother telling me something very similar. She always used to call this world the Shadowlands. And by that I don't mean just the Outlands, but the Freelands, too. I mean this whole world. She was getting on a bit, of course, but her mind was still sharp, and Granny told me that long, long ago, we came from the stars. She said that babies still know this when they're newborn, but for some reason or other – she didn't tell me the whys or the wherefores – folk always got sleepy and pretty soon forgot about our real home.”

Jeanine felt a wonderful warm quiver run up her spine and set her scalp tingling as Martha related this to her and she smiled and nodded. “Yes,” she concurred. “Except I don't so much see my real home as being 'up there' so much as 'in here.’” She patted her chest.

“Home is where the heart is,' as they say.”

“Yes, but even more so.”

Martha raised the bottle of wine and gestured. “Why not,” Jeanine nodded.

“As my granny always used to say: 'A little of what you fancy does you no harm.’”

“Not too much, though, Martha. I don't want to get legless.”

“Right you are, chuck.”

At length, peering out through one of the windows in the wagon, Jeanine could see that they'd reached the foot of the valley. Martha told her that the Freelands were just a few miles

further off over the other side of a range of hills, and they set camp for the night. They arranged the wagons in a circle, for shelter as much as anything, and after an hour of foraging and preparation, they had a healthy camp-fire burning in the centre. First they ate and then when they'd cleared away and the stars had come out, they entertained themselves in revelry, dancing and singing to music into the wee hours. This was a close-knit community spirit and camaraderie that Jeanine had not until then experienced, and she enjoyed every minute of it. Even Bill, the caravan leader, who'd been so offhand with her when they first met, turned out to a decent old stick, and at one point in the evening he actually apologized for not having been more welcoming. It was simply his reaction to the enormous risk they were taking.

Then at the crack of dawn the next day they were all awakened, washed in the freezing water of a nearby stream, filled their stomachs on breakfast and broke camp.

Just after lunchtime, as they began to descend the far side of the hills, the caravan master brought the wagons to a halt and Jeanine was asked to wrap up warmly. Saying "*au revoir*" to Martha, she was taken to the wagon housing the tigers and two wide wooden planks were prised from the rear of the wagon. She had to shuffle her way inside, underneath the carriage, and the nails holding the planks were hammered back in place. Jeanine was given a bottle of water to quench her thirst and had already eaten, but thought it a little unwise to drink too much, as she could only imagine what would happen should she have the urge to pee. There was a shallow metal basin in one corner of the hideaway, she later discovered, which most likely answered that question.

The wagon transporting the tigers was not nearly so well sprung as Martha's and, though there was a thin mattress on the floor of her hidden compartment, it did little to cushion her as the carriage rattled along the heavily rutted dirt road. And besides that, though there were only a few gaps in the compartment, the air was soon filled with a fine haze of dust particles that got up her nostrils and into her mouth. Still, she wouldn't have to suffer this discomfort for very much longer. Martha had told her that they'd cross the border by teatime and reach Middleton just

before nightfall. To alleviate the boredom, Jeanine thought she might as well shut her eyes and try to snatch a few winks, having been a little too excited to sleep well the previous night. Having had another shot of Martha's home-made hooch a few minutes earlier, despite the rumble and jolting of the wagon, she soon fell fast asleep.

Jeanine eventually awoke to find herself back in the lounge where she'd been before Martha had roused her, but though the windows were open to let in some fresh air and there were still empty plates and cups and saucers strewn around, there was nobody in the room. The door was closed and refused to move, but at that moment, Mrs Hadley came back in the lounge and began to clear away the empties, so Jeanine took the opportunity to slip out of the room, investigate more of the house and perhaps track down its occupants, to see whether or not they'd managed to find the missing children.

As she was walking down the hallway, she passed a full length mirror on one of the walls and stopped for a few moments to look herself up and down. Seeing her reflection in the mirror confirmed her earlier impression that she could be no older than five or six years of age and though the family had no camera to take childhood photographs, she was certain that she hadn't looked like this as a child. For one thing, her hair was now jet black, just like she pictured herself in her other dreams, and just like the lady in the house, whilst Jeanine had always been auburn. And she recalled being quite thin, yet now she was a little chubby. Besides which, when what's his name ... Hamish had been talking in the lounge earlier, she got the impression that the two children, Marie and Dillon had been more grown up.

Just then, the strangest thing happened. Jeanine found herself staring right into the eyes of her reflection in the mirror and she could feel herself slowly drifting off. The eyes were like whirlpools and seemed to be slowly sucking her in. With a great effort, she pulled away, and leapt back as a wave of primeval fear engulfed her. For the reflection she saw in the mirror was not her own but of a figure once feared throughout the land. She'd seen an engraving of the man once before in a book they read from at school in history and the resemblance was not only uncanny, the image sent a terrible shiver right through her. It was the Dread

Lord Develin.

“But you've been banished!” she gasped.

The grotesque figure merely laughed at her: “Rumours of my demise have been greatly exaggerated, my dear. I've merely been biding my time, waiting for a moment such as this.”

Without warning, Develin began to reach out through the silvered glass of the mirror to grab her and again she leapt backwards and ran screaming down the hallway as the creature began to emerge.

In that instant, Jeanine felt a jolt that threw her up into the air and she banged her head on something hard and unyielding above her. For a moment, Jeanine wondered where on earth she could be, and then she realized, to her relief, that she was safe in the hidden compartment beneath the circus wagon.

“Not a murmur!” she heard a voice call from somewhere above her head. It was the man steering the wagon, presumably. Then: “This doesn't look good.”

On hearing those words, a wave of adrenaline flooded Jeanine's system and she felt frightened. What she didn't know and couldn't know from where she lay was that something had not gone to plan.

Further up the wagon train, the caravan master got down from his carriage and offered a hand rolled cigarette. “Hello there, haven't seen you in these parts before. Dougie or Chad not around?”

The border guard declined the cigarette, which was not a good sign.

“They've been relieved of their duties,” the guard informed him.

“Oh, really? They were good lads.”

“They were on the fiddle,” responded the guard, “and after court-martial, they were banged up in military gaol.”

“Oh, dear, that's a shame. Always got along well with them.”

The guard looked at him askance.

“Oh well, just goes to show that appearances can be deceptive,” the wagon leader remarked a little lamely.

“Indeed. And speaking of deception, if you don't mind – and for that matter all the more so if you do – I'd like you all to get down from your wagons and stand to one side while I have the

lads give this caravan a thorough going over. You lot: start at the second wagon and work your way back.”

“And be sure not to break anything,” the caravan leader added. “I’m on first name terms with Colonel Wiseacre, I’ll have you know.”

The guard was not at all phased by this. “And he’s been relieved of command, too. He wasn’t so lucky: they strung him up for corruption at the barrack gates to serve as a warning to the wise.

“I know all the tricks, that’s why they drafted me in, you see. Used to work in customs.” The man stood there, fiddling with his leather gloves and looking the caravan leader up and down disdainfully. “Once caught a fellow smuggling illicit substances. Had eight ounces stuffed up his jacksie, but we sniffed ‘em out.”

“The mind boggles. Can I offer you a drink or something to eat, Lieutenant? Or perhaps complimentary tickets to the circus for your good lady and children?”

“Sergeant. And no, thank you. I don’t believe in fraternisation whilst on duty, sir.”

“As you wish, Sergeant.”

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, sir, time’s pressing and I would like to search your wagon.”

“Of course, do forgive me.”

It did not take the men long to find the many bottles and flacons of wine that were stashed in the occupied wagons, and when the sergeant of the guard tasted it himself the travellers feared the worst. But fortunately for them the man seemed unaware of the illicit herbs that had gone into the brewing process and after consulting his book and performing a calculation, he merely imposed a levy on the alcohol, which the caravan master was quite happy to pay. After all, it was small change, as things go. More than once in the old days, during the prohibition, their entire stock of wine had been confiscated. Once it had been poured away at the roadside. And far worse could have befallen them. So it was a small price to pay.

One by one, the sergeant’s men returned from their search to report that they’d found nothing untoward, though they certainly had a good poke around in the hay with the business end of their razor-sharp lances.

“Very well, you may pass,” the sergeant concluded at long last. “On your way – and keep your noses clean.”

Only when they had set off and moved some distance down the road did Jeanine allow herself to let out a deep sigh of relief and breathe normally again. She'd felt certain that she would be discovered, but thankfully her trepidation had been misplaced.

Once they were out of sight, the wagon came to a halt and one of the young men prised open the planks and helped her out of the cramped compartment. After a hasty dash behind some nearby bushes to relieve her bursting bladder, Jeanine went back to sit with Martha in the lead caravan and they set off once more on the home leg of their journey. One of the first things she noticed after crossing the border was how much smoother the roads were. In place of the rutted dirt tracks were roads made of compacted stone chippings and wide enough that you could pass traffic coming the other way without running the risk of toppling over into the ditch.

“The tigers didn't pee on you through the cracks in the floorboards, then?” Martha laughed.

“That thought had crossed my mind,” Jeanine smiled. “But no.”

“Well Tara certainly gave one of the guards a good spraying through the open bars of her cage. He was livid. I tell you, the musk stinks to high heaven.”

Then, more seriously: “And it's just as well the tiger did, because the guard was just bending down to have a look under the wagon. Regular little lifesaver, our Tara.”

“Gracious me, I didn't know that. I was more intent on staying still and holding my breath.”

“Like us, God moves in mysterious ways,” Martha said with a wink and a smile. “Well, truth be told, it was their keeper Roger who saved our bacon. One discreet cough or whistle out of him and Tara will do anything ... well, unless his back is turned. That is a cardinal rule he has to live by each and every day. Never, ever turn your back on the tigers or they'll be on you before you know it. And by the time you do know it, it'll be too late.”

The sun had already gone down by the time they pulled into Middleton and stopped at the park near the train station. Jeanine was prepared to go off round the town looking for lodgings, but

Martha persuaded her to stay the night with them there and suggested that it would be safer to leave Middleton as soon as possible, it being so close to the border. Near the train station was a stage post, she said. It was rather run down with the advent of steam, but still provided transport to the south, mostly catering for those who couldn't afford the rail fare and for those few, generally the more elderly and rural, who did not take kindly to the newfangled steam engines.

Soon enough, morning came and Martha cooked her a fine fry up to see her on her way, whilst the menfolk were already out and about putting up the tents ready for that night's performance. Two of them had gone on ahead of the wagons and already posted adverts around the town.

“Well, Jeanine, it's been nice knowing you,” said Martha as Jeanine got up to leave.

“Yes, indeed. Maybe we'll meet again some day?”

“That would be good, yes. Now take care of yourself.”

“And you,” Jeanine beamed as she set off down the road.

What Martha had failed to mention was that though it was far cheaper to go by carriage, it was a marathon journey which lasted from eight o'clock in the morning on Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> July, arriving in Sher Point at around midday on Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> after a midday rest to eat lunch and change the horses and an overnight stay in a coach house. Fortunately for her she'd had the good sense to pay a little extra to take the express service rather than the stopping service which zigzagged down through the Freelands calling at all-manner of hamlets *en-route*.

Boy, was she glad to see the back of that journey, huddled in a corner of the overcrowded and overly boisterous carriage. Fortunately, some of the rabble were only going as far as Brassingham, the circus's next port of call, and for a short time she and a studious priest who had his head buried in the good book for most of the journey, had their side of the carriage to themselves.

Standing at the coach station with her two bulging cases, Jeanine pondered about what to do next. She'd already written to Rosalie Muller and accepted the invitation and was expected on Friday afternoon, but it was still only just after lunch on Wednesday. In the end, she decided to make her way to the train

station and then follow Rosalie's directions from there – as it had been assumed that Jeanine would be arriving by train – and make sure she could find her way to Mrs Muller's house. Anyhow, on the way, she'd keep her eyes peeled for any guest houses that might put her up for the two nights before her visit. Yes, that would make sense. And the sooner she could dump these two cases the better. They weren't that heavy, but they were quite bulky.

Fortunately, when Rosalie had proposed that she meet Jeanine at the train station, Jeanine had had the sense to suggest that she make her own way to the house, as she couldn't be sure which train she would be taking.

Rosalie Muller's directions were impeccable and easy to follow, with plenty of landmarks to look out for, even given the many twists and turns of the route. There off to the left was Rivendell Avenue and yes, she could make out the white house, third on the right, with the two stone lions in pride of place by the door, just as Rosalie Muller had indicated. Now to back track, having spotted a couple of potential lodgings just down the road, less than five minutes away.

As she turned around, Jeanine nearly had the fright of her life, for who should be following her down the road but the man himself: Tenzing Jangbu Rinchen. Oh, Lord, this she had not expected. And there was a slim, middle-aged lady with him. Perhaps this was Rosalie Muller? What should she do? If she let them pass by, then when they saw her on Friday they'd think her action rude. And if she stopped them, then what on earth would she say after she'd said "hello"? She had a bit of a speech sketched out, but not for this eventuality. And meanwhile, she was standing there with her two cases, looking every bit the lemon she felt squirming in her stomach.

"Hello there," she smiled broadly as the pair approached and put her cases down. "You must be Mr Rinchen. And Mrs Muller?"

The man raised his eyebrows and nodded slightly. He had that unmistakable twinkle in his eye that she'd been so taken by on the front cover of his book. She'd expected the man to be dressed in a suit and tie, though not a stiff and starchy type, but he was actually quite informal and wore smart black jeans and an

open-necked shirt. And Mrs Muller, though stylishly dressed had a distinctly relaxed look about her which Jeanine was unaccustomed to seeing in the Outlands. Everybody there seemed so gaunt and workman-like in comparison.

“Tenzing and Rosalie,” the man corrected her. “And if I'm not very much mistaken, you must be Jeanine. Jeanine Gardener? Am I right?”

“Gardner, but that's close enough,” she replied, and she found herself courtesying before she realized what she was doing.

“Glad to meet you, Jeanine.”

She shook their outstretched hands. “I arrived a couple of days early and thought I'd best check out the route to your house, then find lodgings close-by until Friday, Mrs ... um ... Rosalie.”

“Nonsense, we can't have that,” Rosalie answered without batting an eyelid. “I already have a bed aired. Today is as good as Friday by me.”

“Here, let me help you with your bags,” offered Tenzing. He was a lot taller and broad-shouldered than she'd imagined him to be. Then: “If you don't mind me saying so, you have an inordinate amount of luggage with you for a weekend visit ...”

My, this guy was quick thinking.

“Mmm, well ...” What could she say?

“I think perhaps we should go and have ourselves a sit down and a nice, hot pot of tea,” advised Rosalie, leading the way up her garden path. She paused for a moment, bent down and plucked a weed from the crack between two paving slabs. “That's something my teacher Tenzing taught me,” she explained. “If you keep a place weeded a little every day, then it saves an awful lot of effort later on.”

“I see.” Jeanine was already impressed.

“In you come and make yourselves at home,” the lady cooed, opening the front door to them. “I'm sure we each have a thousand and one questions to ask.”

It was all Jeanine could do to stop herself gawking open-mouthed at the décor. The place was a palace compared to the seedy tenement blocks she was used to, and instead of doors there were archways between the rooms on the ground floor. They'd have frozen to death if they'd done that in the tenement she lived in – correction, had lived in – yet the house felt comfortably

warm, even though there were no fires burning.

“Actually, your early arrival could not be better timed,” Tenzing explained, “because something has come up and I am needed back at base camp.”

“Base camp?”

“My centre in Narayana,” he told her. “Ah, I see you look puzzled, Jeanine. That's a mountainous region to the east.”

“Then my being here is holding you up?”

“Not at all. I can't leave until Saturday at the earliest, so don't worry unnecessarily, Jeanine. This is your time. So relax and enjoy.”

“Did you have a pleasant journey here?” enquired Rosalie, coming back through from the kitchen.

“It had its moments,” replied Jeanine, taking a sip of her tea. “Mmm, that is such a good cup of tea. A lot better than the tea we have in the Outlands ... I'm not sure where to start, really.”

“Just say whatever springs to mind.”

“Well, I applied for a travel permit, but the authorities in Sher Point turned me down.”

“Yes, I thought they might,” Tenzing nodded. He didn't look in the least bit surprised.

“Then it was a test?” she asked, hoping she wasn't being too forward.

“Yes,” he nodded. “We could call it that.”

“Anyhow, I was determined to come and to meet with you and I didn't want to let you down. By chance, I got chatting to a traveller when the circus came to town and discovered that they could smuggle me across the border for a price. So that's how I got here: I took a stage to Upper Wyevale and met up with the circus. Then I hid in a compartment underneath one of the wagons and they got me across the border. It was a close thing, because the guards they regularly bribed had been replaced and they searched the caravan pretty thoroughly.”

Tenzing raised his eyebrows. “That's useful to know,” he nodded. “Forewarned is forearmed, as they say.”

Jeanine went on to tell them just how close to discovery she'd been and they laughed when they heard about the tiger spraying the guard. “Then I caught another stage from Middleton all the way down here.”

She searched their faces to gauge their reaction.

“I’m sorry – if I did the wrong thing, then I’m really sorry, but I could think of no other way of getting to meet you as we’d arranged.”

Tenzing leant forward and patted her hand as she sat on the settee. “Jeanine, I think it’s a marvellous story. You should be proud of your achievement. And in any case, the important thing is that you have shown resourcefulness and actually made it here to my door.”

“Then you’re not mad at me? Not even a little bit?”

“Not at all.”

He nodded his head toward the two cases that she’d brought with her. “And I take it that you don’t want to go back home to the Outlands?”

She shook her head.

“And if the authorities refused to give you permission to travel here, then they would have turned down any request for a work permit, am I right?”

She cast her eyes down and nodded sheepishly. The man was pretty shrewd.

“Chin up,” Tenzing chided her gently. “So how do you aim to support yourself should you stay in Sher Point?”

Jeanine told Tenzing what Martha had said about her options, including the contact address for the man who could point her in the direction of the Underground, but ended up more or less saying that she really hadn’t much of a clue.

“Not to worry,” Tenzing smiled, replacing his cup in the saucer. “Let’s put that on the back burner for now to gently simmer, rather than thrashing it out. And something will emerge at a later stage. As the old dictum goes: ‘Where there’s a will, there’s a way.’ For now, let’s just concentrate on getting to know one-another a little better, shall we?”

“Are you free for the rest of the afternoon, Rosalie?”

Without hesitation, Rosalie confirmed that she was free all day.

“Then instead of going through all the paperwork today, let’s put that off until Friday, shall we? After all, we’re still waiting on Ben’s input.”

“Okay.”

“And instead, let's go to town, pick up one or two things I need for the journey, and have a late afternoon meal at Morris' café? What do you think? If you'd rather play it some other way, then you know by now to simply say so, Rosalie.”

“No, that's fine by me, Tenzing. Just give us time to take the cases upstairs and for Jeanine to freshen up after her journey. Jeanine, would you like a sandwich to put you on until we eat?”

“No, I'm fine, thank you. I bought a sandwich on the way here.”

“Good. While you're doing that, I'll make my list.”

“That sounds ominous,” Rosalie laughed as she helped Jeanine with her luggage.

“Hark who's talking!” Tenzing laughed. “They don't call me Rosalie Muller. No, it's a reasonably short list, but I have so many things on my mind right now that I don't want to forget anything.”

“If you have a lot on, you know ... I can always come back at a later date.”

“Jeanine, Jeanine,” responded Tenzing gently. “You are indeed a sensitive being, but you worry too much. Firstly, it's really not an issue. Rest assured that if it were, I would have no option but to let you know. And secondly, you've come so far and at such great expense. To be turned away would be an insult. Have patience and all will be revealed in due course.”

Jeanine wasn't usually the kind of woman who got wildly excited at the prospect of going shopping, other than for the fact that it got her out of the house and mixing with folk. But what she saw in the shops in the centre of Sher Point took her breath away. Almost everywhere she looked were luxuries of almost every description, some of which she didn't think they even had a name for in the Outlands. The nearest thing her family came to luxury was to order a chicken from the butcher's for the Harvest Holiday.

She shared her thoughts with Rosalie and Tenzing and asked him if things were like this in his homeland of Narayana.

He laughed. “Not at all. It's a very scantily populated land and by and large made up of small settlements in the valleys. There is one place, the capital, which you might call a small city. It has electricity, running water and a sewerage system. But for the large part, the population is rural, and trade is made up mainly of arable and dairy farming in the lowlands, sheep farming in the

foothills and many trades connected with the weaving of fine carpets which accounts for a large part of the country's exports. The real thing mind you, not the sort of cheap imitations you so often find in the marketplace. And of course the country is famous for a semiprecious gold-flecked blue mineral, lapis lazuli. Well, I say gold, but the flecks are in fact fool's gold."

"But one thing it does have: a spiritual heritage that goes way back in history beyond the formation of the mass religions we now have; some say as far back as the great floods of antiquity."

"And the Way which you describe in your book ..."

"Which one is that?" asked Rosalie.

"*The Way It Is*," she replied. "Is that the only book you've written? I searched high and low in my town but I could find no more."

Rosalie laughed.

"I have written five in that series," he told her, "but *The Way It Is* is as good a place as any to start reading the works. Rosalie, let's head for Potter's bookshop. The books as a whole form a comprehensive study of the Path I follow and it would be worthwhile for you to read each one if you are still interested in the Path. Of course, you wouldn't be here unless you had already said 'Yes', inwardly."

Jeanine fished in her purse and, seeing the iron and brass shekels, Rosalie suggested she put her money away: it would be her treat. "Outlandish shekels are not accepted as currency here, though due to the intrinsic value of the metal, some shopkeepers will accept gold shekels. Apart from which, offering to pay in shekels is a sure way to have the police descend on you and cart you off."

"Heavens, I have yet to *see* a single gold shekel, let alone own one, Rosalie. Are you sure?"

"Yes, a dear friend bought me my first books and now it's my turn to pass on the favour."

Then: "Five in that series, you say? You mean there are more?"

Tenzing nodded. "But let's take one step at a time, eh? You were asking about the Way ..."

For the life of her Jeanine couldn't remember what it was she was going to ask.

“Forgive me, I digressed. I was saying something about the Way pre-dating the mass religions.”

“Ah, that's right. I was going to ask if the Way which you describe in your book falls into the category of a religion? That's not the impression I gained from reading *The way It Is*.”

“You could call it an action philosophy,” Tenzing replied. “I think you'll find that most of the questions you'll want to ask are already answered in one or other of the books, Jeanine, but for now I can tell you that there are many things in this world – such as the modern study of the mind and of education, for example – which may be used as vehicles for our perennial Teaching. Religion has been one such vehicle, especially in Classical times.”

“I see.”

“Another thing I noticed, Tenzing, is that though you frequently mention exercises, you don't actually present any exercises in the book.”

“True enough, at least if you are looking for what appear to you to be obvious exercises. You see, Jeanine, people always clamour to take part in exercises, even though they may not yet be in a state when they could carry out those exercises in a useful way. In fact, some exercises might have an adverse effect on them and make it more difficult for them later on. And another thing, exercises are prescribed for individuals. Perhaps you've heard of the phrase 'Right time, right place, right people'? I'm not one of the many who dole out the same exercise to all their students, as quacks and charlatans might sell snake oil as a remedy for all afflictions. That is sheer folly and laziness on their part.

“There is also a great deal of preparatory work to carry out first – which we call learning how to learn – before a student is in a fit state to contemplate exercises.”

“Thanks. Yes, that makes sense.”

“And another thing. Many people are into 'self help' and 'do it yourself' these days. In our line of work, there must be contact with a Teacher, one who has already walked the Way, knows the Way, and returned to assist others. It's possible for Grace to come upon someone unattached to a teacher, of course, but it's far more readily available in the presence of a teacher. And by presence, I

don't necessarily mean geographical or physical proximity: the feeling heart knows no bounds. Of course, by 'feeling', I don't mean a state of overly-emotional excitement.”

Jeanine nodded, trying her best to take in all that he was saying.

“The Way is not one of thinking you know, nor of feeling you know, but of opening your heart and other organs of higher perception and actually Knowing, Loving and Being.

“All of which is more easily said than done, simple as it may eventually turn out to be,” he laughed.

“I'm not sure that I follow you.”

“All in good time, Jeanine, all in good time.”

They stood for a moment by the doorway of the bookshop before going in and he began to recite, oblivious to the curious look of passers-by whilst she felt rather uncomfortable:

*I who think I know or feel I know, let me Know,*

*I who think I love or feel I love, let me Love,*

*I who think I am or feel I am, let me Be.*

*She who thinks she knows or feels she knows, let her Know,*

*She who thinks she loves or feels she loves, let her Love,*

*She who thinks she is or feels she is, let her Be.*

*We who think we know or feel we know, let us Know,*

*We who think we love or feel we love, let us Love,*

*We who think we are or feel we are, let us Be.*

*She who Knows and Loves and Is, let her be followed.*

*So let it be.*

“Anyhow,” Tenzing said suddenly, as if snapping out of some reverie, “let's pick up these books for you. It'll give us more of a basis for getting to know one-another and preparing you for life on the road. Try to read the second book in the series by Saturday, but don't rush the book, savour it, and come back and reread it again at a later date. Read it and reread it until you get to the point where you're learning nothing new and may dispense with it. As for the rest of the books, simply read them at your leisure over the coming weeks and months.”

“I'm on my sixth read of some of the books,” volunteered Rosalie, “and I swear each time I re-read them, the books seem to say something new to me.”

“Because you're growing and you present new facets of

yourself to the book, which acts like a mirror and a polishing cloth at one and the same time,” Tenzing told Rosalie, though probably more for Jeanine's benefit than hers. “The books form an important part of the study, especially in the preparatory phases.”

“And how long are these preparatory phases?” Jeanine enquired as Rosalie headed for the cashier to pay for the four remaining volumes.

“In some cases, the whole process can happen in the twinkling of an eye,” Tenzing informed her, “though such cases are a rarity amongst rarities. Traditionally we would say that the course takes twelve years, that's the average. The course is undertaken at whatever pace best suits the individual student, given other circumstances. So sometimes the course is longer, sometimes it is shorter.”

Tenzing smiled. “Jeanine, perhaps you've heard of the phrase 'If you have to ask how much it is, then you can't afford to buy it'?”

She shook her head.

“Well, it's also said that when asked how long it takes, one of the Masters replied: 'until the day that you cease asking how long will it take?' In other words, certain pursuits such as that kind of questioning, expectation and anticipation may actually impede the learning process.”

“And of course the learning and growth process, the conscious evolution, does not end there. Far from it. The course merely adds momentum to what is an inevitable progression.”

Rosalie came back toward them and handed Jeanine a shiny black and gold cardboard carrier bag, and she thanked the lady profusely.

“On Saturday I will ask you a question, Jeanine,” Tenzing told her. “I will ask you what interests you about this Path and whether you are prepared to devote twelve years of formal study to it and a lifetime's dedication thereafter with no hope of ever returning to your former, raw, unregenerate, forgetful state.”

Jeanine nodded solemnly.

“Right then!” Tenzing clapped his hands together. “How's about we make our way to Morris' café and eat our fill?” And before they had a chance to reply, he was off down the road.

Rosalie had some work to do in her office that evening, so Jeanine took the opportunity to make a start on Tenzing's second book. As she read, she found that Rosalie had been quite right: Two or three of the questions she'd thought of asking as a result of reading the first book were indeed answered in the next.

When she mentioned this to Rosalie on her return, Rosalie told her that Tenzing received whole sackfuls of feedback from his readers – in fact that's what she'd spent most of that evening working on: reading through their letters and choosing which to ignore, which to reply to herself, which to pass on to Tenzing or to some third party, and also which to simply place to one side for a time. She said that when Tenzing received a new question that wasn't yet answered, he'd see how he could fit the answer into subsequent books.

After supper, Jeanine went to bed for an early night. She lay there reading until she fell sound asleep and didn't know a thing until she woke to find the sun streaming into her room. The bed had a wonderfully well-sprung mattress, the room was pleasantly warm, and she'd had the best night's sleep that she could ever recall.

On Thursday, after making them both breakfast, Rosalie told her that she had to go out for a time and lent Jeanine a key to let herself in and out. The lady said that she still had a lot of paperwork to get through before Tenzing's departure, so she suggested that Jeanine might take the time to read the second volume, *The Veils of Truth*. Jeanine was already three chapters into the book, making new discoveries almost at each turn of the page, so – if she could be of no help to them in other ways – that suited her just fine. With any luck, by Saturday she'd already be well into the third. As she read, she made brief notes of points arising from what she'd read and questions she might ask, many of them already crossed through as answers were presented in subsequent pages.

Clearly, Tenzing was well in tune with his readers' potential reactions and needs. The very first lines of the book had stated:

*“When you read this work, imagine that it is addressed directly to you – yes I do mean **you** – and relevant to aspects of your own life, delivering the stimuli you need; often challenging your way of thinking, feeling and being, not least about who you*

*think you are; and answering questions that have a profound resonance with you. This work is not intended to fulfil your desires, indeed if anything you might expect your lower aspirations to be somewhat thwarted, and it is natural that you should find this disturbing and frustrating at times.*

*This work is carefully designed and crafted to set you on the way to discovering your real needs buried under a mountain of conditioning that must first be dug away, which in turn requires a strong and lasting commitment on your part to be free of these limiting factors in your life; then mobilizing and augmenting your resources; and later directing these resources to the fulfilment of your real needs in tune with the needs of the cosmic design.*

*If the going gets tough, as it undoubtedly will from time to time, always remember that I am here for you and that I have your best interests at heart.”*

And how right he was.

Rosalie emerged from her office at noon and Jeanine took the opportunity to ask her about something Tenzing had mentioned about a more rapid course of study sometimes used in schools such as his.

The lady smiled and suggested that they prepared some lunch. Jeanine offered to help but Rosalie declined politely, saying that Jeanine was her guest, and she watched as the woman slowly and meticulously prepared their sandwiches. It was almost as if she were delivering her answer through this means, using signs. Finally the lunch was ready and they sat down to eat. But still she made no answer.

Only when they'd finished, this time accepting Jeanine's offer to help dry the plates as she washed them and they'd sat down to a cup of tea, did she answer.

“The course of study is prescribed individually,” Rosalie reminded her, “and by and large the pace is slow to allow the student to be properly prepared, adequately served and given plenty of time to properly digest what is 'put on his plate' as it were. Which is not to say that in certain cases, given certain circumstances, this process may be speeded up. This is the Rapidness of which Tenzing and others speak. But these are by far the exception, rather than the rule.”

“Of course, if you are intent on this rapid course of study,

then Tenzing could point you in the direction of other schools and cults which specialize in this 'Fast food' as we sometimes call it. But you can expect to suffer chronic indigestion as a result ... perhaps worse. I know of folk who've been unhinged by such rapid and often ill-directed study.

“Does that answer your point, Jeanine?”

“Yes, wonderfully. Thanks, Rosalie.”

“You're welcome. And now, if you'll excuse me, I must return to the office. I'm sorry to leave you on your own in this way but, alas, needs must.”

“I quite understand. I'm just happy to be here. Besides, Tenzing's writing is very moreish.”

“Indeed. But mind you don't give yourself indigestion. It's not only the preparation and presentation of the materials that need to be carefully paced, but also their consumption. Again, this is not to say that you have to analyze his every word, pull the carcass apart and chew the thing to death. This lark is not an intellectual nor an emotional pursuit.”

And with that Rosalie was off and Jeanine was back to her book.

As she turned the next page, she found that Tenzing had quite abruptly and with little warning switched from a more didactic description of the study to illustrating what he wanted to say through the use of stories. One tale in particular found an inner resonance with her. It told of a young girl who'd been orphaned as a child and taken in by a poor family who scraped a life together fishing. She found work as a lowly servant at the king's palace, but due to the intrigues of another in the household, who had taken a dislike to her, the girl found herself accused of a crime and wrongly imprisoned in the cold dungeons of the castle by the king, who had become something of a despotic ruler over the years.

To cut a long story sort, word had soon reached her foster parents of her imprisonment and when every other means of obtaining her release had been tried, to no avail, and they were exhausted, they happened to mention their daughter's plight to an old wandering holy man, asking him to pray for the girl's release.

This master of the Way, being a holy man, was granted access to the girl to cater for her religious needs after presenting

himself to the king and successfully arguing his case.

He visited her many times over the coming months until the guards became quite used to his comings and goings. At first they used to question the man, but as he always gave such an incoherent reply, the ramblings of a deranged holy man, and as he stank to high heaven, after a time the guards simply waved him through.

Then one day, the holy man failed to turn up as expected and come the evening when it was time to take the girl her bread and water, they found her lying in a corner of the cell covered by a thin blanket. When she did not respond, one of the guards pulled back the blanket. To his astonishment he discovered that it was the old holy man, naked as a jay bird, and that the girl had escaped.

And when they questioned the old man about the escape, he told them that the girl had dressed herself in his coarse woollen robes, with her hair tied back and her hood up to hide her features, and had simply walked out of the prison. The guards had become so used to his comings and goings, and his incoherent grunting, that they'd let her pass without question.

“Well,” declared the king when word of what had happened reached him. “The old man needn't think that any advantage has been gained from the escape. Lock him up in the girl's place and let him serve out her sentence.”

“No, double the sentence. In fact, throw away the ruddy key.”

But the very next day, when the guards came to check on the old man, they found that he had quietly passed away in his sleep, knowing beforehand that his time had almost come. So what had he really lost in order that the girl should gain her freedom?

Later that afternoon, Jeanine read the last paragraph of *The Veils of Truth*, closed the book and laid it on one side. What she'd read thus far had certainly stimulated and excited her and, moreover, had whet her appetite for the orientation beyond that contained in the books, which Tenzing said was provided by experience in a school. But it was already Thursday afternoon and Tenzing would be leaving the country on the Saturday, so it rather looked like she'd have a long wait.

One thing that was nagging at her, though, was the growing awareness of the enormity of the commitment she might have to

make. Initially, this involved living under the discipline of the Teacher, which was something she felt she could readily handle. But the book talked about the struggle to free oneself from the shackles of the false self and of submission to the Divine. And she had to admit that such a level of commitment with so few guarantees rather frightened her. Some of the stories in the book contained warnings of difficulties and pitfalls which might be encountered on the way ahead, and Tenzing did talk of the impossibility of turning back beyond a certain point. Not unnaturally, she felt uneasy and torn by what she had read.

“A penny for your thoughts,” remarked Rosalie, seeing her deep in contemplation.

“Funny, my mother always used to say 'Shekel for them.'”

She thought it best she let Rosalie in on the gist of what she'd been mulling over in her mind and the lady lent a sympathetic ear, not in the least surprised by what she heard, or if she was surprised then she certainly took it all in her stride.

“I so want to progress, yet deep down, I'm scared that I'll lose my identity,” she told Rosalie. “You know, the thing that makes me uniquely 'I'”

“Well, I know this will be of little comfort to you right now, Jeanine but, for the most part, what we think of as 'I' is nothing more than a whole heap of conditioning. Of vanity, pride, envy, greed, hypocrisy, ignorance and forgetfulness. That's not who you really are, deep down. And the task is not so much to annihilate the ego as to transform it so that it becomes an aid to unearthing the real you, rather than being a hindrance. Use a fox to catch a fox. Frankly, I'd be rather scared, too, if I thought I faced annihilation as preached by so many schools, but though I've still a long way to go, I'm sufficiently far down the road to no longer be worried by such things.

“What can I say other than that you already know in your heart whether it is the right or the wrong thing or the right or wrong time for you to embark upon the Path. And you know in your heart that it is not a matter of really losing anything of value but the chance of regaining something long buried away and of inestimable worth.

“I guess at first there is a need to be patient and trusting, and at a later stage – before the time comes to make up your mind

about whether you want to take yourself further along the Way – at that later stage, you will *know* whether it's right for you and you will be perfectly free to decide the matter for yourself, without let or hindrance.

“Anyhow, since you've finished the second book, I suggest you let it quietly bubble away inside you for a while. There's no rush. So, how's about we hit the town? I have some shopping to do and a couple of other students to see, and maybe you'd like to come along?”

“If it's not too much trouble.”

“If it were, Jeanine, rest assured that I wouldn't have asked. It's no trouble at all. Anyhow, I could do with the company.”

They had quite an afternoon together and Jeanine was particularly taken by the two students they met: Matt and Karen. They were a hoot and didn't seem at all damaged by their studies: they were perfectly witty, fun, everyday, down-to-earth folk, which came as something of a relief.

Just as they reached the twisted gate and began to walk up the garden path, they spotted Tenzing there, sitting on the doorstep. “Tenzing, I wasn't expecting you. I hope we haven't kept you waiting here long.”

Tenzing shook his head. “No problem. I've only just arrived myself.”

Rosalie turned the key in the lock. “Anyhow, do come in. You're just in time for a nice warm cuppa.”

“Finest tea this side of the mountains,” he said in an aside to Jeanine.

“So what brings you here – now I mean?”

“Another change of plan,” he told her. “Can you be ready to leave first thing tomorrow morning?”

That would be Friday. And all of sudden Jeanine was hit by a wave of panic, for she hadn't realized that Rosalie would be going, too, and so soon. Which would completely leave her in the lurch.

She slumped down on the settee in the lounge without saying a word or able to find a word to say, whilst Tenzing and Rosalie saw to the tea and talked through some details about the journey.

“So, then, Jeanine,” Tenzing enquired as they sipped their tea and dunked their wholemeal biscuits. “Do you like what you've

read so far?"

"Yes, thanks," she replied, trying not to look as if she had to force a smile.

"And can you be ready to leave bright and early tomorrow morning?"

Just for a moment she thought he was addressing Rosalie, and then it hit her and again a wave washed over her, this time one of exhilaration. She put her cup down on the low table in front of the settee, for fear that her trembling hand would cause her to spill her drink.

"Who – me?"

"Yes, you," he smiled.

"Sure I can," she'd responded before she even had time to give a considered answer. "I'm greatly surprised, but yes, I'd be delighted to join you."

Tenzing stroked his chin thoughtfully. "And I bet five minutes ago your mind was in a whirl thinking we'd left you in a pretty pickle?"

"Oh, listen, you don't have to go to all this trouble on my account ..."

"It's no trouble, Jeanine, no trouble at all," smiled Rosalie. "It was Tenzing's idea all along to take you with us, should you say yes. And try not to be so self-effacing."

"And if I'd said no ...?"

"Then we'd have accepted your decision and tried to make alternative arrangements for you, my dear," Tenzing told her. "Don't worry, we wouldn't have left you in the lurch like a bride at the altar. Now are you sure you want to come with us? You're perfectly entitled to have third thoughts and to change your mind."

"No, I know I made the right decision," she replied. "I mean *really* know, not just think it."

That appeared to tickle Tenzing. "Splendid! Now, back to practical matters. I see that you have some good warm boots with you, since we'll be trekking up into the mountains and it can get cold even at this time of year. Now what about other clothes?"

"Well, I brought all my clothes with me. I have one thick jumper and a little woolly hat ..."

"No problem, Tenzing: Jeanine's more or less my size and I

have a whole heap of warm clothes that will fit. So what's the next item on the agenda?"

"Nothing more, really," Tenzing replied, draining his cup and offering them another. "I take it Rosemary has a key, so she can continue with what's left of the paperwork whilst we're away?"

"Yes, she said she'd be in around nine in the morning. I'll leave a note to tell her to raid the larder and take or get rid of any perishable food while she's at it."

"Good, then I'll bring the car round at about seven tomorrow morning."

"We're going to drive there?" asked Jeanine.

"Across the border as far as the central plateau, yes," Tenzing nodded. "Your first time in a car, I'll bet. Yes? Well, you'll find it rather more comfortable and speedy than riding in a rattly old stage coach."

Jeanine had a thought. "There's just one thing: how are you going to get me across the border?"

Tenzing raised his eyes toward the heavens. "Good point." Then almost immediately: "In the boot. I'll throw in a sheepskin tonight when I get home. That'll make it a bit more comfortable for you."

"But won't the guards search the car at the border?"

"Oh, they're not so fussy on the way out and it's no problem at the Narayani side of the border. Besides which, I have diplomatic immunity, as does my car. Strictly speaking I don't think they could touch you even if they saw you inside my car, but I'd rather not chance it. No, you should be fine in the boot. Don't worry, it'll only be for five or ten minutes at most."

Then, with a wry smile: "Of course it's the bandits you really need to worry about."

"You say we take the car as far as the central plateau. Then what?"

"Then we take a bus to the foothills: no sense in needlessly knacker the suspension of the car. From there we go by horse and mule all the way to the the northern mountain ranges of Narayana," explained Tenzing rising to his feet.

"And with that, if you ladies don't mind, I'll take my leave of you and see you in the morning. Sweet dreams."

"Chance would be a fine thing," Jeanine laughed. "I'm sure

we'll be awake half the night with excitement.”

Tenzing turned back. “If you wish, Rosalie will teach you a simple exercise that might help settle your mind. Rosalie?”

“I'd be only too delighted.”

## 7. Back on the road again

Jeanine hadn't been in a car before and was quite astonished by the pace at which this “old banger” as Tenzing called it could travel. All the same, they seemed to be travelling through the city and the leafy suburbs for an age. Jeanine found it hard to take in just how sprawling the metropolis was compared to her home town. She could walk from one end of that town to the other in thirty minutes at the most.

By noon, they had driven south through the rolling hills and lush green pastures of Midsomer, before turning east through the vast expanse of the Great Forest, and again Jeanine was astounded by the vastness of the forest which could have swallowed even the metropolis and still had plenty of room for more.

As they were nearing the eastern border, Tenzing pulled off the road for a moment whilst she answered the call of nature in the bushes, then she clambered in the boot and it was securely locked behind her. It was another bright summer's day and if anything she was quite hot in there, rather than cold, and reasonably comfortable with the exception of the occasional bump as Tenzing skilfully negotiated the potholes: it had clearly been some time since this road to the east had been resurfaced.

The car began to slow now, then stopped, though with the engine still ticking over, and she could hear Tenzing talking to someone – presumably a border guard – and she heard laughter, too, which boded well. Within moments they were off again, without further ado.

As soon as they set off, presumably now across the border, Jeanine could feel the difference in the quality of the road and for a time she was tossed this way and that in the boot before finally, having taken a sharp bend in the road to the right, the car stopped once more and Rosalie went round the back of the car to let her out. Yes, it looked like they were on dirt roads again and in for a bumpy ride.

“You'll get used to it after a while, don't worry,” Tenzing assured her, as if reading her mind. More than once, both he and

Rosalie had stolen words straight off her tongue. Indeed, she told them this and they laughed and said that they often found this happening to them, too, and that it was actually a good sign.

“Before you experience the real thing, you'll have many foretastes,” he added. “Think of them as minor encouragements along the way.”

They were well out of the forests now and travelling through areas of open and undulating, heather strewn moorland which looked both bleak and barren and inspiring at one and the same time. Tenzing told her that this, too, had been thick, natural forest many years ago, but little by little it had been felled and burnt over the centuries, and due to subsequent over-grazing, these wuthering heights could now support only the crudest vegetation sure as bracken, gorse and heather, except in the still-fertile valley bottoms where there were still clumps of trees and the odd farmstead and hamlet. The further on they travelled, the more barren and desolate the terrain became. And several times Tenzing had to climb out of the car and clean the dusty windscreen so that he could see where he was going.

Through the windscreen, ahead of them, Rosalie caught sight of three riders on horseback. They were not too far distant and coming their way, and she was instantly reminded of Tenzing's “joke” about the danger of bandits. As the riders came closer he slowed the car, letting his passengers know that he didn't want to spook the horses. He also hoped that the car would not backfire, for he was worried that the riders, who were clearly armed, might mistake the sound for that of a gunshot. The country dwellers weren't fond of motor vehicles at the best of times, and some of the older ones considered the car the work of the Devil and an abomination.

Now that was reassuring. And what certainly didn't help was seeing Tenzing opening up a small compartment near the steering wheel, pulling out a revolver, checking that it was loaded and that the safety catch was off and placing it on the seat just by his right hand. Clearly his Way was not the way of the self-effacing quietist but more the pragmatist or realist. If needs be, that of the warrior. Discovering that was a little teaching point in itself.

“Forgive me, ladies, but I'll have to do all the talking here. Sadly, the menfolk around these parts still count women amongst

their goods and chattels and sometimes treat them accordingly.”

Tenzing wound down his window and gave the riders a wave and a friendly smile. “Tashi dele!” he called which, Rosalie whispered, meant hello.

“Tashi dele,” they called back as they came closer, but with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. One of them pointed his rifle at the car and moved it several times in an upward motion, signalling that Tenzing should get out of the car. Tenzing hesitated for a moment, unsure about taking the revolver with him. In the end he left it, perhaps having weighed up the odds stacked against him, and there followed a lengthy conversation just a little too far distant for Rosalie to make out.

Some words Rosalie did hear: “kale shoo”, which meant “goodbye” when going and “thoo jaychay” or “thank you.” And in response, as he turned away, they called after him “kale phe” which perhaps also meant goodbye.

“That’s a good thing, right?” asked Jeanine.

Rosalie shook her head. “No, you see it means ‘goodbye’ when staying. Alas, I gather that we will not be leaving.” And this was confirmed when Tenzing returned to the car and the men positioned their horses around the car as he drove on. Suddenly, Jeanine felt quite nauseous.

“What do they want?” asked Rosalie.

“Probably anything valuable we may have in our possession, including the car. But fortunately none of them can drive, or else they’d have killed us by now or left us here. It seems I’m to drive the car to their camp in the hills.”

“But didn’t you tell them who you are?” asked Rosalie.

“I did, but they’re all too young and ill-bred to know any better. He said if I was Tenzing Jangbu Rinchen – whoever that maggot might be – then he was some local deity or other: in other words, he was in no way convinced.”

They drove on for a time, with the horse riders easily keeping pace over the rough road, until one of the riders signalled that they should take a narrow dirt path to the right. And ahead of them some hundred yards they saw the bandits’ camp.

As they approached, the whole clan surged forward and surrounded them, touching the glass of the car windows and the metalwork. One of them tried to prise the metal motif off the

front of the bonnet with his dagger. Few of them had probably seen such a beast before and it was quite a catch for the young riders. Even if they couldn't drive the car, then at least they could set it up by their camp where they could stand and admire it.

Eventually their captors worked out how to open the car doors and all three of them were unceremoniously dragged from the car and paraded around the camp, with the three bandits strutting around like prize peacocks.

Then a voice boomed out across the camp and there was instant silence. Well, they were perhaps not as ill-disciplined as Jeanine had thought.

“Looks like the leader,” Rosalie whispered as a giant of a man came marching toward them. “Ex-military type, it would seem, unless he's merely stolen the uniform.”

The man stood facing them, with his hands on his hips, and bellowed out something she could not understand. Rosalie continued her whispered commentary. “He wants to know who we are.”

“One of our captors is telling him a tale now, that one of us claims to be Tenzing Jangbu Rinchen. And now they're all laughing. Except their leader, that is.”

The leader raised his hand in the air and again there was instant silence. He motioned toward Tenzing and beckoned him forward and one of the captors unceremoniously pushed him, so hard in fact that he stumbled and fell on the ground. This infuriated their leader for some reason and he yelled something – possibly some foul-mouthed oath – at Tenzing's assailant that had him bowing and apparently begging his leader's pardon as he helped Tenzing to his feet.

The bandit chief came forward now and exchanged quiet words with Tenzing and then a broad smile crept across the man's face and it was he who was bowing and begging the forgiveness of Tenzing.

Moments later, Tenzing returned. “Well, thank the Lady Alicia for that. It would appear that our bandit chief is – or at least was – a man of culture who knows a supposed holy man when he sees one. You'll be much relieved and pleased to know that we have been invited to lunch as his guests of honour. He did suggest us stopping the night, but I told him that we had to press

on, and he's assured our safe passage as far as the river, about an hour's drive away, which is where his territory ends.”

“Oh, and he's spread the word that any man found touching you two ladies will have his testicles surgically removed and fed to the goats and his scrotum used as a tobacco pouch.”

Rosalie laughed, though Jeanine was still feeling nervous and rather embarrassed to have so many eyes upon her.

Three hours later and the three of them were back on the road again, with an escort galloping ahead as the chief had ordered. “Sorry about the delay, ladies,” Tenzing apologized. “We'll have to drive after the sun goes down but we should just about make it to town before they close the inn for the night.”

As it happened, driving along the rough and rocky road in the dusk took a little longer than Tenzing had foreseen, and they had to knock on the iron-studded front door of the inn repeatedly to rouse the landlord from his bed, but as soon as the man saw that it was Tenzing, he opened the doors, roused one of the house boys to prepare their rooms and insisted on his wife preparing a meal for them. She took some persuading not to cook them a meal, but eventually she relented and sorted them out a bowl of soup and some of their delicious unleavened bread and retired to bed after Tenzing's insistence that he would wash up after them.

They were more than ready for the food and it went down a treat, washed down with some of the finest mead that Jeanine had ever tasted, and she went to bed, which she shared with Rosalie, top to toe, feeling suitably squiffy. That, Rosalie informed her, was due to the effects of the thin atmosphere at this altitude. What Jeanine hadn't appreciated was that as they'd left the Freelands, they'd been slowly climbing into the hills, beyond which lay the central plains, which they'd be across in about a week. Fortunately, though few of the inhabitants could afford to drive a car, there was an irregular bus service running the length and breadth of the “lowlands” (low at least in comparison with the northern mountains of Narayana, that is), and Tenzing being so well connected, they could always be persuaded to let him fill his tank and the few spare cans they stowed in the boot, at a price. As for the landlord and his wife, the next morning as the three of them left, try as he might, Tenzing could not persuade them to accept payment for the food and lodgings. So instead, as they

drove out of town, he gave a few coins to an elderly lady he caught sight of selling her meagre wares by the roadside and the look on her face as she saw the coins was truly priceless.

As they passed through the hills, Jeanine saw that the land around them was a lot greener here and the dust gave way to fertile earth. Tenzing explained that there was quite a lot of rainfall and that the land was well irrigated from the many streams and rivers descending from the mountains through the foothills that surrounded the plateau. In the spring and summer there was a great deal of meltwater.

“Can you type? What am I saying? Of course you can type, I've seen your work,” Tenzing said, changing the subject and peering at Jeanine through the rear view mirror. “You were wondering what you might do to pay your way, whilst spending time with us, Jeanine ...”

“That's right.”

“Well, I can see by your hands that you've had altogether too much experience at manual labour, so we'll go easy on you in the gardens, kitchens and weaving workshop, but one thing you might do for me is type up the manuscript of a new book I've been working on. That in turn will free up Rosalie here for other work.”

“Yes, that sounds like a good idea, I'd be only too delighted,” Jeanine nodded. “I still only use two fingers, but I can move them quite quickly,” she laughed.

“Oh, I'm sure Rosalie will be able to teach you how to touch type. It's too late for me, of course, but a girl with your abilities will be able to pick up the technique in no time.”

“Of course, what Tenzing hasn't told you,” laughed Rosalie, “is that his scrawl is as illegible as a doctor's prescription. But don't worry, if you get stuck, as you will, I'll be there to help you out.”

“And it will also give you an opportunity to read more of my work,” Tenzing added. “Speaking of which, how is the reading coming along?”

She'd been reading on and off since the journey had begun. “I'm about half way through the third of the first five books,” she told him. That slightly thinner volume was entitled *Soul Food* and was entirely composed of traditional stories, interspersed with a

little text to introduce or partly explain each story or link to the next.

“Well, take your time,” he advised.

“I didn't realize that these tales were actually teaching aids in their own right,” she observed.

“Oh yes, indeed,” Tenzing concurred. “And almost without exception they have been designed, rather than merely written for entertainment. They contain several successive layers of meaning which you'll discover and unfold for yourself in time. You might like to consider the different characters present in the stories as being folk we encounter in our daily lives, facets of your own character, or regions of your own mind. Or you might see various developments as mirroring the kind of developments you yourself will go through in your studies. Later you will perhaps recognize encoded references to many of the exercises we use in the School.”

“I see.”

“But don't attempt to wrench or torture meanings from them, Jeanine; for now simply reading and inwardly digesting will adequately suffice. Reading the stories may be likened to planting seeds. And, when watered, that is when added to by contact with a teacher and through your own everyday life experiences, these seeds will germinate of their own volition, according to the Plan, grow out of the dark earth of the mind – which you have spent some time preparing beforehand – emerge into the air, and eventually come to fruition under the warmth of the sun. At which point you may fully reap their benefit. It's a thoroughly well orchestrated organic process, you see, not a mechanical, repetitive or a ritualistic thing.”

“Do you have a diary, Jeanine?” Tenzing asked her after some time as he slowed to a crawl to allow a milling herd of sheep to pass safely by.

“Yes, I mostly keep it to record my dreams.”

“Well, there's some merit in that. But you may find it useful at a later date if you were to record your daily thoughts, especially whilst you're spending time with us, Jeanine. It may prove useful to you at a later date.”

“Thanks for the advice, Tenzing: yes, I'll do that.”

She wondered whether it may have something to do with her

skill as a writer.

“Yes, at some point in the future, you may be in a position to write something useful about your own studies. But it's early days as yet and you still have so much to unlearn.”

To *unlearn*? That was the first time she'd heard that phrase, but it made sense in view of what she'd read already.

“You can put nothing useful into a full pot,” he explained. “First it must be emptied. And, if necessary, repaired. Many of the people who approach the Way for acceptance into the teaching are full of themselves and their beliefs, or what you might call 'damaged goods', requiring much preparation before any useful progress may be made with them. Some have to be broken down almost completely before rebuilding can start. Finding the treasure hidden in the ruin, as we call it, and then using that treasure to rebuild a new palace. Fortunately for you, you appear to have survived life thus far with all your faculties intact, which is a blessing.”

She picked up the book once more and turned the pages to her bookmark. Strangely enough, the very next story she read in the book was all about the teacher, the student and the full pot, and she made a point of telling Rosalie and Tenzing about the coincidence.

“Make a note of these things,” Rosalie advised her. “What most folk call coincidences are sometimes an indication of higher mechanisms being in operation and of an attunement.”

“But don't get so excited about them,” added Tenzing, perhaps as a corrective, “that they detract from the learning process. Acknowledge them, but don't indulge yourself. As with so many opposites, look for the golden mean, a sensible, balanced middle way.”

“Such as?”

“Such as – say – a middle way between asceticism and hedonism. Between emotional over-excitement and emotional repression. That kind of thing. Just use your common sense, even if that common sense is at odds with majority thinking. You know, not only individuals can be mistaken about a thing, sometimes whole cultures can be astray. So part of our published work is to take a look at these cultures and point out where they've got things right and where they've gone astray.”

“Right.”

“Of course, at times that has made us rather unpopular, especially amongst specialists who think they know the be-all and end-all of the cultures in which they live or which they study. As for the Way, so much as been written about it over the years and so much of what has been written isn't worth the paper it's printed on, since these studies have been made from outside the circle and are what we call studies *of* the way. As opposed to studies made from within which we call studies *in* the way.”

“Looked at from the outside, all many see are the externals and time and time again these studies confuse the container – the externals – with the real content and inner dynamic. Many of the great and lesser institutions you see around you now are nothing more than the remnants of what were once active operations which have since fossilized, so that the inner dynamic having moved on, only the externals and empty ritual survive; or else mere facsimiles of the real. The land is littered with these relics. Sometimes the dynamic may be freshly injecting into an organization that has slipped into a state of disrepair, sometimes not. There's no point in merely postponing the inevitable.”

That said, they drove on for some time without another word being spoken, and Jeanine returned to her book. As night fell and they reached the next town, she had finished reading the last story in the book. This time, rather than stop at an inn, they sojourned instead within the cloistered walls of a rather austere religious community, Tenzing sleeping in a dormitory in the west wing, whilst the women slept in the east. It was all too cold, grim and grey there for Jeanine's liking and morning couldn't come soon enough for her. After obligatory prayers, a bowl of lumpy oatmeal porridge and a piece of buttered bread for breakfast and helping with the clearing away, once again they were off on their journey, stopping in the town centre first to stock up on provisions while Tenzing haggled for fuel at the nearby bus depot.

By nine o'clock that day they were out of the hills and cruising along a pretty straight road that crossed the central plateau, heading east then still further north. Spring had come early that year and the crops had grown tall already, Tenzing told them, so many of the farmers would be planting a second crop

which would be ripe for harvesting by late autumn, before the snows came once more. They were fortunate this year, but not so long ago, the farmers had lost two crops through an unexpected drought and lost much of a third due to unseasonal frost late in the season. Still, they didn't starve, for the government took as much as one bushel of grain out of every ten that the farmers harvested and kept it until times of need when it would be redistributed.

Jeanine wasn't particularly enthralled by the central plateau. When you've seen a hundred fields, she thought, you've seen them all. She much preferred rolling hills and mountains, natural woodland, lakes and bubbling brooks, and to a lesser extent she liked walking along the cliffs and beaches on the coast at her home town of Wanstead-on-Sea. So her time was split between reading the books, asking Tenzing more and more questions, generally daydreaming and the occasional sleep. Today Rosalie was driving, to give poor Tenzing a rest from having his eyes glued to the uneven road and by the end of the day she admitted it was quite exhausting maintaining that level of concentration for such long periods, something which Tenzing seemed to simply take in his stride. He said it was simply one of the spin-offs of his own continuing developmental work.

So were there any other useful spin-offs, she asked him?

Yes, there are many side-effects, some of them useful, he told her, but there was a danger in developing them for their own sake and thus he would not be drawn into providing her with any specific information concerning them.

Such as mind reading, she suggested?

Yes, there was something like that, and this was a skill that he could use in diagnosing certain ailments and it helped sometimes in deciding on a course of action. Occasionally if proof were needed, then it might be used to establish that proof. But it was important that such a special faculty be used in accordance with what he called Necessity with a capital "N", rather than to further one's own desires or for the purpose of entertainment. One might legitimately use it, for example, to mirror a person's unconscious thinking or behaviour, to bring it to their conscious attention, so that they could then begin to see it in themselves and hopefully deal with it.

“That is why our people are sometimes referred to as 'Spies of the Heart',” he told her.

Strangely enough, she'd just finished reading a section in the fourth book, which contained echoes of what Tenzing had just said. It was the title piece and was called *How the Design Works*:

*A seeker called Robin approached a Master of the Way and asked him to teach him.*

*“Very well,” the mystic agreed. “But on one condition. You are to first procure for me a finely woven rug so that I may give it to a friend who is in need.”*

*So Robin set out to find such a rug. He visited the town's bazaar and indeed he found a most exquisite piece.*

*“Kind sir,” said the lad to the rug merchant. “I am a poor seeker with no more than a few coppers to my name, and in order that a mystic should teach me, I agreed to obtain a finely-woven rug so that he could give it to a friend in need.”*

*The merchant stood there, with his hands on his hips and looked askance.*

*“Seeker? Teacher? Friend in need? What do you think this is – a charity shop? I have a growing family to feed, so – much that it grieves me – I cannot give away these exquisite rugs.”*

*The seeker looked downcast and he was about to walk away dejected when the merchant spoke up:*

*“... However, since we are both in need, perhaps we can come to some mutually acceptable arrangement?”*

*Robin's eyes lit up: “Indeed I hope so, sir – what are your terms?”*

*“I myself am in need of rugs to sell. If you can obtain for me a fine goat's wool rug from the old weaver who lives in the next village, then I shall see what I can do to help you.”*

*So, collecting together a few provisions for the journey, the seeker set out to find the weaver. When he arrived in the village, he asked around and soon enough he found himself outside the weaver's cottage.*

*“Yes lad, can I help you?” asked the weaver when she answered the door.*

*The old lady looked so sour-faced that Robin wasn't quite sure what to say to her.*

*“Er, um ...I'm a poor seeker with no more than a few coppers*

*to my name, and in order that a mystic should teach me, I agreed to obtain a finely-woven goat's hair rug so that he could give it to a friend in need."*

*The old lady shook her head in disbelief. "Seeker? Mystic? Teaching? What interest are these things to me?"*

*"Ah, well ...."*

*"And you have no money, you say?"*

*Again, the lad cast his eyes down and shook his head.*

*A faint smile creased the old woman's face: "Well, perhaps we can come to some kind of arrangement. You need a rug and I need fine goat's hair with which to weave. Get me some spun goat's wool and I will see what I can do."*

*"Now off you go – I haven't got all day to hang around, you know. I have work to do." And with that, she shut the door in the lad's face.*

*So Robin asked around the village and arrived at the house of the local wool spinner.*

*"And what can I do for you?" asked the woman, whose name happened to be Jenny.*

*"Dear madam, I'm a poor seeker with no more than a few coppers to my name, and in order that a mystic should teach me, I agreed to obtain a finely-woven goat's hair rug so that he could give it to a friend in need."*

*"This means nothing to me," the woman replied. "But I have a need for dyed wool and you have a need for a rug. So get me some dyed wool and I'll see what I can do to help."*

*And with no further ado, she ushered Robin out of the house.*

*Again, Robin enquired in the village and he was directed to the house of the wool dyer, a grizzly old man called Gregor.*

*"And what it is you want, lad?" the man asked gruffly.*

*"Sir, I'm a poor seeker with no more than a few coppers to my name, and in order that a mystic should teach me, I agreed to obtain a finely-woven goat's hair rug so that he could give it to a friend in need."*

*"That means little to me, lad, but you have your needs and I have mine. I suppose you want me to give you the dyed wool, out of the goodness of my heart, do you? Well, I've a better idea: you get me some raw goat's wool and I'll see what I can do."*

*Again, Robin was shown the door and sent on his way.*

*And again Robin asked around the village and eventually found out that up in the hills to the east of the village there lived a goatherd who might have just the thing that the lad was looking for.*

*After a bite to eat sitting in the sun beside the village green, the lad set off along the steep dirt path that led up into the hills. He found the goatherd sitting outside his ramshackle hut smoking a large brier pipe.*

*“Yes, lad. And what can I do for you?” the man asked.*

*“Kind sir, I'm a poor seeker with no more than a few coppers to my name, and in order that a mystic should teach me, I agreed to obtain a finely-woven goat's hair rug so that he could give it to a friend in need.”*

*The goatherd looked at Robin quizzically. “And just what in tarnation has seeking and teaching and rugs got to do with me?”*

*“The weaver told me that if I could get her some goats wool, then she would help me.”*

*“Ah, so it's goat's wool you're after. Now that I can understand. Why didn't you just come out and say it and save everyone a good deal of time and grief, lad?”*

*“Well ...”*

*“As it happens, lad, and as you could see if you only opened your eyes, at the moment I have no goats. The blessed wolves got every last one of them. Drove them right off the cliff, yonder.”*

*Robin sighed and he was about to walk away and make his slow, painful way home, when the goatherd spoke up again:*

*“But I'll tell you what, lad. Maybe we can make a deal?”*

*“Indeed, sir.”*

*“Very well. If you can get me half a dozen goats, then I'll see what I can do. Now I can't say fairer than that.”*

*So, with renewed gusto, Robin made his way down to the hill and back to town. Tomorrow was the cattle market, so after getting himself some supper he went to bed early so that he could be up in good time the next day.*

*When he arrived at the market, he looked and he looked, but he could find no goats for sale. However, when he asked around, his search led him to the local tavern where a wizened old goat dealer was sitting disconsolately. He looked so dejected that, poor as he was, Robin bought a drink for him and sat down at the*

table beside him.

*“And what do you want, lad?” the goat dealer asked rather gruffly.*

*“Kind sir, I'm a poor seeker with no more than a few coppers to my name, and in order that a mystic should teach me, I agreed to obtain a finely-woven goat's hair rug so that he could give it to a friend in need.”*

*“Seeker? Mystic? Teaching? Rugs? What have these things to do with me?” the man retorted, taking a large gulp of his ale.*

*So Robin explained that he needed half a dozen goats for the goatherd.*

*“Now you're talking,” the man nodded. “Of course, it'll cost you, like. I have a wife and my dear old mother to look after, you know.”*

*“Ah ...” the lad sighed.*

*“But happen we can come to an arrangement? All my fences are in a shocking, dilapidated condition and the goats keep getting out. Driving me round the bend it is. Can't sleep a wink for worrying about the poor critters. Anyhow, you fix the fences and I'll see what I can do.”*

*So Robin left the inn and went in search of materials with which to rebuild the goat dealer's fences. Eventually he came to the house of a carpenter whose name was Morris. But when he saw the man, he appeared even more dejected than the goat dealer had been.*

*“What is it you're after?” the man asked.*

*“Kind sir, I'm a poor seeker with no more than a few coppers to my name, and in order that a mystic should teach me, I agreed to obtain a finely-woven goat's hair rug so that he could give it to a friend in need.”*

*The carpenter sighed deeply. “And what have these things to do with me?”*

*So Robin explained to the man about the goat dealer's dilapidated fences.*

*“Ah, now that I can understand,” the carpenter nodded. “Why didn't you say that in the first place instead of going all the way round the island?”*

*“So you'll help me, then?” Robin chirped up. “Though I have no money, perhaps we could arrive at a mutually acceptable*

arrangement?”

*“Under normal circumstances, lad, I'm sure we could. But these days, I am so utterly despondent that it's all I can do to drag myself out of bed on a morning or eat, let alone work.”*

*“Why's that, if I might ask?” said Robin.*

*“Well, if the truth be known, lad, some time back I saw the most beautiful woman on God's Earth, and I fell madly and immediately in love with her. And now I simply can't live without her.”*

*“Who's that?” asked Robin.*

*“Alas, it's Princess Tamara,” the carpenter sighed. “And the sad truth is that though I'm so madly in love with her, she probably doesn't even remember me fixing the wheel on her carriage when it passed through.”*

*“Ah ...” replied Robin. He would have dearly loved to have been able to offer words of comfort to the man or to help make this most cherished wish of his come true, but he knew then that he could not help in any way. And if he could not help the carpenter, then his quest for the finely woven goat's wool rug had come to an abrupt and sad end. So, bidding the carpenter farewell, Robin set off back home.*

*And then, quite by chance, as he was crossing the market square, Robin caught sight of a notice pinned to a post. Seeing half a dozen other people standing there reading the notice, he went over to read what it said. The king himself was offering a reward of 1001 gold pieces to anyone who could cure his daughter, Princess Tamara, who had fallen ill some time ago. And when Robin quizzed the folk about the matter, it turned out that all the greatest doctors in the land had been consulted about the matter and they had all been to examine the Princess, but not one of them had been able to offer a cure.*

*All night long, Robin tossed and turned in his bed, unable to sleep. And in the end, he got up even before the sun had risen, made himself some breakfast and decided there and then that he simply had to see the Princess. Lord knows what he could do, but he could not deny that quiet yet strangely insistent voice inside him that said “You must go and see Princess Tamara!”*

*So, again collecting a few provisions for the long journey, Robin set out for the capital city. Fortunately for him, one or two*

*folk were kind enough to let him hitch a lift on their carts at least part of the way, though by the time Robin arrived, his feet were badly blistered and he was hobbling.*

*Despite worrying rumours to the effect that the King was becoming more and more impatient and vexed with the many would-be healers and gold diggers seeking to gain admittance to examine the Princess, Robin found himself at the very back of a long queue snaking around the palace. But eventually, just as the sun was setting, his turn came and, after being frisked for concealed weapons, he was escorted inside the palace, up a flight of gracefully sweeping marble stairs and along a long corridor lined with portraits of the royal family.*

*“Wait here,” the guard commanded, and the man knocked, stepped inside the room and announced his presence.*

*Moments later he re-appeared and ushered Robin inside.*

*Across the delicately decorated room stood an elegant large four poster bed. The Princess lay there, whilst at her side sat the Queen. Across the room, half a dozen attendants waited impassively at a discreet distance.*

*Robin looked around the dimly-lit room, found a chair and took it over to the bedside and sat there for some time whilst he stilled his own rapidly beating heart and thought of what to do next.*

*He spoke to the Princess to introduce himself, but though her eyes were open, she continued to stare blankly up at the canopy above her bed and made no response.*

*“Well?” asked the Queen imperiously. “And what is your diagnosis, pray tell?”*

*Robin's heart skipped a beat. Saying nothing, he instinctively took hold of the princess's hand and held it, gently stroking it. He could feel a faint heartbeat, but by the look of the princess's ashen features and sunken, bloodshot eyes, she looked as if she was gradually fading away.*

*Not really knowing what he was doing, Robin made polite conversation with the Princess, hoping to elicit some response from her. And quite by chance, when he mentioned in passing the name of his home town, he distinctly felt the princess's pulse beat slightly faster than it had.*

*He remembered what the carpenter had said about fixing the*

wheel of her wagon when it had passed through the town and he mentioned the broken wagon wheel. Again, the princess's pulse beat changed and it became noticeably stronger.

And then, throwing caution to the wind, Robin told the Princess that he had just met the carpenter who had fixed the wagon wheel and that his name was Morris.

At the mention of the carpenter's name, the princess's pulse began to race and she stirred in her bed.

"Well?" demanded the Queen. "We haven't got all night, you know!"

"Your Majesty," replied Robin, his own heart beating heavily inside his chest. "I do believe that the princess's illness is not of the body but of the heart."

He turned back to Princess Tamara and, taking a deep breath, he told her all about the carpenter and of the man's great love for her.

At that that moment, tears of joy welled up in the princess's eyes and began to stream down her face, and – miracle of miracles – the illness was ended.

And so it was that a messenger was sent through the night with instructions to bring the carpenter back to the palace without delay.

Within days Morris and Princess Tamara were married, and went on to live a wonderful life together and to eventually succeed to the throne of the kingdom.

Such was Morris' gratitude to Robin that one of the very first things he did was to tear down the goat dealer's fences and rebuild new, strong ones, as had been agreed.

And in turn, the goat dealer was more than happy to let Robin have six of his finest goats. Robin drove the goats up into the hills and gave them to the goatherd and he in turn gave the lad two bales of the finest goat's wool. So Robin took the wool to the wool dyer and she gave him some small bales of wool that she'd already dyed. He took the dyed wool to the spinner and she gave him some bobbins of the most delicate spun wool. Then he took the wool to the weaver and she gave him the finest goat's wool rug he had ever seen.

Robin did think that it made more sense to simply give the rug to the mystic, but remembering his bargain with the carpet

*dealer at the local bazaar, he took it to him instead.*

*And when the carpet dealer saw the finely-woven rug that Robin had brought him, he smiled broadly – and in that instant, Robin saw that the carpet dealer was none other than the mystic who had originally sent him off on his long quest.*

“What do you call yourselves?” Jeanine asked at length. “I keep coming across words like way and path, master, teacher and mystic and yet I have yet to find a name you call yourselves collectively.”

“Well, the Way as we call it is perennial and it has gone under many names and adopted many forms over the centuries, pre-dating organized religion and the Orders which have sprung up after the death of notable teachers. You see, if you give something a name then before long so many people will start calling themselves by that name even though they are not intimately connected to the reality behind that name. And as a result what was once a reality without a name (or even a form, for that matter) will sooner or later become a name without a reality.”

“I see. So what names has your organization been called?”

“Those who have followed the Way – and I mean those who have walked the Path, not those still on the road and learning – have at different times and places been called the Masters, the Designers, the Bees ...”

“Why bees?”

“You could probably answer that question yourself without too much difficulty, Jeanine. Use your intuition,” Tenzing advised her and, since he said no more on the subject, she took that to be her first task of the day, and gave it some thought.

“Well,” she said after perhaps an hour.

“Well what?”

“Oh. I'm sorry, I assumed that since I'd been thinking about bees for the last hour that you would know what I was talking about.”

They laughed.

“Well, bees are social. They live in a colony and work toward a common task to which they are attuned. And that task is the collection of pollen, serving the flowers that produce it, to yield a nutritious substance they call honey.”

“Not bad. To which I might add that these creatures are able

to navigate by the sun. And that we too collect a subtle substance which you might call a gift, blessing or grace. In times of need we distribute it, just like our own government here collects surplus grain and stockpiles it for use in times of need. Or in areas where some useful or vital element is lacking or overwhelmed in a society, grouping or individual.”

She'd missed that link in their earlier conversation and resolved to pay more attention in future.

“We, too, call this substance honey or *baraka*. Baraka is a Gift, or Grace,” he concluded.

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My, what a strange week it was, most of it spent driving across that interminable central plateau which could have swallowed her own country for breakfast and blown it out in bubbles. Jeanine was so used to a world whose bounds were the four walls of their squalid tenement, the nearby mill and a few local shops that sold basic provisions. She had no idea that the world could be this expansive, impressive, even awe-inspiring.

On the last day of their journey, Jeanine had been spinning out the final chapter of the fifth book and as they finally pulled into Shakra, a town at the north-eastern-most extent of the central plains, she packed the book away and pulled herself up in her seat. Tenzing was as alert as ever, totally unphased by the sudden transition from wide open plain to bustling market town. As for Rosalie, after spending most of the morning driving to give Tenzing a rest, she was still fast asleep and snoring.

When they arrived in Shakra, there was little time to lose. Tenzing left them in the town centre and drove his car to a friend's house for safe keeping until their return, whilst she and Rosalie picked up a few provisions. Then the three of them hoofed it up the road to the bus terminus, only just in time to catch the bus heading into the foothills towards the mountains which were somewhere over the horizon to the north.

The road to the north was heavily rutted and they spent six long hours being bounced around. Up and down they bounced and this way and that they swayed from side to side until Jeanine was sure she could bear no more, whilst Tenzing and Rosalie scarcely batted an eyelid. They seemed to be able to find some peaceful inner space or still centre and simply switch off when

they needed to, unperturbed by what was going on around them, like strangers in a crowd. Needless to say, though she had wanted to while away some of the time adding to the entries in her diary, the jolting of the bus made this task impossible. She had tried, but what should have been neat and legible writing looked as if some drunken, ink-dipped spider had staggered this way and that across the page, so she'd quickly abandoned that idea. Instead, she again tried the exercise that Rosalie had shown her the evening before they'd left Sher Point and she did find that it helped in a minor way.

At long last, after stopping to pick up and deposit passengers many times along the route, and with the fearsome range of mountains looming ahead like the teeth of some massive reclining dragon, they arrived at a small town nestling in the shelter at the foot of a steep, rock-strewn valley. Renchok was as far as the bus went and they all alighted and collected their belongings as the driver clambered up onto the roof and tossed the baggage down to them.

Once there, Tenzing led them across the street to an old stone and timber-framed building, which turned out to be an inn. One of the first things she noticed about the fabric of the place was that everything appeared to be slightly out of alignment. The windows were all slightly crooked, with frames that were not quite level. And once inside, she could see that the passageways and corners of the rooms were not quite square. And she marvelled at the bright and intricate designs of the carpets that lined some of the walls, which were woven to perfection, finding it a little strange that the carpets should be hanging on the walls of the building rather than on the floor which was made of smooth flagstones and liberally sprinkled with sawdust. No doubt the owners feared that the wonderful, precious carpets would be ruined by the muddy hobnailed boots of their clientèle.

They waited patiently as two or three other travellers who'd been with them on the bus were found rooms and then they were served. There was no register to sign, Rosalie told her, because so few of the people in Tenzing's country could read or write. In fact providing such basic skills to the poor was one of the tasks with which a number of Tenzing's students were commissioned. They'd set up several tiny school rooms around the country and

took it in turns to teach young and old alike. It wasn't easy persuading many of the villagers to allow their children time out from their chores to attend school, all the more so if the children were girls, because in this harsh environment their parents had come to depend upon their help and were often quite set in their ways. But with the aid of a few of the more enlightened elders, some progress was being made on this front. Of course an alternative would have been for Tenzing to use his influence at court to have a decree issued making education compulsory up to a certain age, and this was a possibility at least in the slightly more affluent towns, but Tenzing had to be careful not to be seen trampling on these people's traditional ways of life and hence antagonizing them.

One thing they could do was to travel around the country bringing news to the folk of the outlying districts: news not only of current events in their homeland but also from abroad, and generally trying to broaden these people's outlook in life. And, most prized of all, they could help these folk build upon their traditional skills, provide them with wells for water, and sell their wares farther afield where they could obtain a fairer price for their work.

As they sat down for a bowl of hot soup in the inn, two fur-clad young men came into the inn and, seeing Tenzing and Rosalie sitting at the wooden table, they came across and joined them and they shared warm greetings. Jeanine was quite surprised how fluent they were in her language, which was of course a foreign tongue to them. It turned out that the pair had brought horses and mules for their long trek into the mountains. For a time they continued to talk about the work that Tenzing's people carried out in the land.

“Little by little our efforts are beginning to yield dividends,” one of the young men told Jeanine. “Gone are the days when we faced persecution and had to hide ourselves away in mountain fastnesses.”

Tenzing sighed deeply and put his spoon down. “Alas, Tovek, governments come and go, even whole cultures and civilizations rise and fall, sometimes cataclysmically and with little warning. Our soothsayers have long predicted that the current state of relative peace and tranquillity is not guaranteed to

last. Remember that the First War was said by many to be the war to end all wars. And how wrong these people were, even in the space of their own short lifetime. So it would be prudent, therefore, to maintain our mountain retreats rather than go out entirely upon a slender limb.”

A little taken aback by what he heard, Tovek nodded, and nevertheless took his master's solemn words well.

“To go back to the matter of education and the danger of treading on the elders' toes, we have to be careful that our efforts do not lure too many young folk away from the villages for the bright lights and glitz of the towns, and thus potentially decimate their traditional way of life. So we have to look at ways of augmenting that way of life. As with so many things, it's often a complex balancing act. Well, it is at the level of intellect. At another level, it is a simple attunement to the Design.”

“As for the girls, we get a surprising number of them wishing to join our ranks. Away from the towns, the people have rather large families, though the infant mortality rate is still far too high, and families are often more willing to let one of their girls go – well let us take them off their hands – whilst hanging onto the boys since their assistance with the daily work is more highly valued. Yes, it often comes down to a simple calculated matter of 'one less mouth to feed.’”

“Strangely enough, in the towns, we often find the reverse. Here folk are better off, free of at least some of the hard work of rural life, and see it as a great honour for one or more of their sons to be enrolled in our ranks. And also, it has to be said, the prevailing attitude in the towns, which is influenced to a great extent by religious mores, is that a woman or girl's rightful place is in the home, catering for their menfolk. A very strange and often vexing set of affairs, I sometimes think, considering how much more could be achieved, given free rein and a level playing field. Still, as the saying goes: 'This, too, shall pass.’”

“I haven't heard that saying before,” Jeanine remarked.

“Well,” began Rosalie, “there was once a king who simply could not settle his mind and his mood swings were giving his staff a devil of a time. One adviser after another attended him, seeking to alleviate his problems and one doctor after another was called to see if his malady might be cured, all to no avail.

“In a dream, the king had seen a magnificent golden ring which when he was sad would make him happy and when euphoric would make him sad. And he instructed his servants to scour the land for this magical ring.

“Scour the land they did, yet they could find no trace of the ring, until they came across an old jeweller who had a tiny shop on one of the back streets of the city.

“‘Why, I have the very thing,’ the man told them and he went into the back of his shop and returned with a simple golden ring.”

“But that plain gold ring surely cannot be the magnificent magical ring that the king saw in his dream.’

“‘Trust me, this will work like magic,’ the old jeweller assured them. So, despite their doubts, they paid the jeweller and took the ring back to the king.

“As he sat there morosely toying with the thing, wondering what on earth had possessed his servants to pay the jeweller for this worthless piece of junk, he noticed some fine writing engraved around the inside of the ring and he laughed out loud. For there the jeweller had inscribed these words:

“‘This, too, shall pass.’

“And until the day he died, the king never forgot those wise words.”

“The design had a stabilizing or smoothing influence on him,” Tenzing added. “Differentiation has its place in our world, of course, for example in the use of a net to catch fish. But for us to become completed, there must also be its complement: that of integration. This requires capacity, just as a reservoir helps smooth out the supply and demand of erratic drainage systems to provide a reliable source of drinking water.”

They stayed the night there at the inn, getting up early the next morning and putting on their winter woollies ready for the trek north. Tenzing had given her a long coat which seemed to be made of sheep's skin and still smelt rather sheepish, worn with the hide outermost and the thick wool coat innermost, with some embroidery over the plain tan hide. For a fairly lightweight garment, it was surprisingly warm, probably due to the pockets of air that were trapped between her and the fleece. With that, her heavy boots, furry hat and thick gloves, Jeanine felt quite the mountain adventurer.

The first part of the journey, following the banks of a swirling river that meandered its way down the lush valley, was easy going and it was quite pleasant when the sun shone down on them, if a little nippy in the shade. They climbed for what seemed like an eternity, until the town they'd left behind was little more than a tiny splotch of paint on a vast mottled landscape, and yet ahead of them she could see still taller mountains, still peaked with snow even at this time of year.

For two long days they climbed into the mountains, setting up three small bivouacs on the first night with a camp-fire in their lee fuelled with bricks of dried out yak dung that the two men had left ready for the ascent on their way down the mountains.

On the second day, they had to take a narrow path which ran around one of the mountains and Jeanine was quite unnerved by the drop beneath her. It wasn't a sheer drop, it was actually a slope, but she knew that if she slipped on the loose scree, she'd tumble several hundred feet down to the small, dark blue tarn at the bottom. The horses and mules didn't seem to mind the height and were pretty sure-footed, but there were places where they had to dismount and lead the animals. They were pretty high up in the mountains now. The air was becoming more rarefied and they hadn't had any time to acclimatize. So even something as simple as walking became something of an effort for her and for Rosalie. They simply couldn't get enough oxygen to the muscles of their aching legs.

At length, they descended a little into the lee of the mountains and out of the biting wind that had sprung up. Ahead of them lay a wide lake, fed by a broad waterfall that cascaded down a cliff from above, and they took a gentle path around the lake's perimeter. Quite why they should be going this way, Jeanine couldn't say, as the valley appeared to be a deserted *cul-de-sac*. She could only imagine that they were having to make a detour to get back on a serviceable path.

The party were getting quite close to the head of the lake now and the noise from the towering waterfall was intense. Jeanine could feel a chilling haze of tiny water particles swirling around her face in the air. One of the young men, Dorek, had gone ahead. One minute he was there ahead of them and in the next blink of

an eye he was gone. She assumed he'd gone scouting ahead, but Rosalie told her that he had gone to let his people know that they were on their way, so that preparations could be made for their arrival.

What Jeanine didn't know as they approached the base of the thundering waterfall and into the perpetual wet mist, but was soon to find out, was that the narrow path led right behind the vast curtain of water to the mouth of a dimly-lit cave. They entered the smooth-walled, damp cave and walked forward for what must have been many hundreds of yards, Tovek leading the way with a flaming torch which he'd lit to light their way. Then, at the far end, the tunnel widened out and they could again see in the gloom. As they emerged, once her vision had again adjusted to the brightness, Jeanine could hardly believe what she was seeing, for ahead of her, nestling in a ring of mountain peaks was a secluded valley that looked every bit as luxuriant as the Shires she'd seen on her journey into the Freelands.

“Good heavens,” she marvelled. “If you didn't know about the cave behind the waterfall, you'd never know that this place was here.”

As her eyes fully adjusted to the bright light reflecting off the snowy mountain peaks, she looked out over the hidden valley below. Much of it was a hundred shades of green and yellow with grass and woodland, whilst further off was a splendid patchwork quilt of cultivated fields and what looked like gardens. And around the gardens, she could make out a number of dwellings, with faint wisps of smoke emerging from their steep roof tops. As they followed the path that wound its way down into the valley bottom, she saw, too, that there were even some dwellings or perhaps storehouses hewn out of the rock in the valley wall.

“Why this is incredible,” she enthused. “What do you call this place?”

“Welcome,” Tenzing said to her. “We call this the *babs chu* retreat which simply means waterfall. It has other names, of course, but we merely refer to it as the waterfall, since we want to keep this place hidden, except to those to whom we extend an invitation. It's safer for us that way, you understand.”

“There are many who would give their eyeteeth to get their hands on the riches of our storehouses,” he continued. “Word

once got out about the secret treasury and people have been trying in vain to locate it ever since, searching the world high and low. You see, we're also masters of disinformation and orchestrated many of the subsequent legends concerning this place ourselves.”

“Such as that of Abshar?” she enquired, suddenly recalling the name from a book on myths and legends that she'd once come across in the local library.

“Just so,” he nodded. “Just so.”

“Gosh, I read about that as a child. How I wished I could go there. And now – here I am. I can't believe it. Pinch me, somebody.”

Rosalie playfully pinched her arm and she let out a yelp.

“Sometimes what we wish for really does come true (given application),” Tenzing offered, then added a proviso: “So be careful what you wish for.”

Then: “No, seriously, there are techniques that can be applied to even quite tricky situations. This involves clearly stating an intent and picturing in as much detail as possible, without being obsessive, the desired outcome, as if it had already come about. Then, after some attunement, letting go of the intent and allowing God's Will, the fairies, the mind or whatever you want to call it, to work out the details and set things up accordingly.”

“Is that magic?” she asked.

“It's not so much magic as the working of mechanisms we don't as yet fully understand, Jeanine. We call it the Design. But if you want to call it magic, then where's the harm, providing that you are grateful for the bounty?” As he said this, a brightly coloured butterfly fluttered by and settled on his arm. He stood there admiring it for a time, then gently blew and sent it on its way.

“It's hard to believe that this is real,” she confessed.

Tenzing put his hand on her shoulder and guided her down the path toward the settlement. “Coming from a relatively deprived and inward-looking environment such as the Outlands, Jeanine, that is to be expected. And there are, indeed, so many charlatans on this mortal coil. As my own master once said when I was knee-high to a grasshopper: 'Counterfeit gold exists because there is such a thing as real gold.'”

“Mmm, are those herbs?” she enquired as they passed

through the fragrant gardens leading up to the houses.

“Yes,” he nodded. “Another aspect of our work concerns healing, part of which is spiritual and psychological in nature; part physical, and part based on the medicinal qualities of herbs such as these.”

“That's another cherished dream of mine,” she told him. “I always wanted to be a healer.”

“It's a lengthy training process,” Tenzing informed her. “It may take fifteen years to become a doctor; as long as twenty one to become an elder doctor. That's including the twelve years of prior study, of course.”

Still, that certainly was a long time.

“But you have youth on your side,” he added, “and you'll find that the older you grow, the quicker the weeks, the months, even the years will appear to pass by.”

She wasn't sure whether that would prove a boon to her or else a bane.

Then they were there. The dirt path had given way to neatly-raked gravel, flanked on each side by a number of quaint dwellings built of sturdy granite blocks, topped by steep slate roofs. Rosalie told her that the roofs had to be that steep to ensure that the snow slid easily off, or the timbers would be groaning under the weight come winter.

One thing she noticed was that the paths weren't designed in straight, parallel lines but seemed to go off across the grass in all manner of directions.

“It's what you might call 'organic' rather than manufactured,” Rosalie told her. “First of all the grass is laid down, without any paths. Then as the community goes about its business, certain favoured routes become more worn than others, so that is where the paths are laid down. Not where some petty bureaucrat *thinks* they should be but where they are actually most needed.”

“Again, it's a balance,” Tenzing added. “In this case, between a necessary degree of forward planning (which is intellectual), attention to feelings and the reality of experience: what we learn 'on the hoof', as it were. To which we might add ongoing and subsequent review in the light of such experience.”

Tenzing turned toward Rosalie as they approached a larger building in this tight-knit hamlet. “I need to go and freshen up.

Perhaps you might sort out some accommodation for Jeanine and show her around and I'll see you both in the dining hall at six o'clock?"

Rosalie asked around and it turned out that there was a vacant room to be had in one of the chalets nearby, so they went off to locate some fresh linen, a thick duvet and pillows for the bed and towels so that Jeanine could bathe. Together, they turned the mattress and made the tiny single bed, then Rosalie took her to the bathhouse. Way out in the wilds as they were, Jeanine had been fully expecting to have to draw icy cold water from a well to fill a bucket, a prospect she was not at all looking forward to. But defying her expectations she discovered that the bathhouse, though cool, was not unbearable. Rosalie explained that there was a fire at one end of the building which fed warm air up under the floor, and said that if she liked the warmth, then she'd be best using the bathhouse earlier in the day or before dinner when the workers returned from the gardens, fields and workshops. Though there was no hot running water, of course, there was a dung- and log-fuelled boiler in the room with a tap on it which was sufficient to fill a large bowl with tepid water.

When they'd washed and changed into a fresh set of clothing, Rosalie took her on a guided tour of the settlement and introduced her to some of the students they met *en-route*, ending up at the spacious dining hall just in time for the evening meal. Spotting one of Jeanine's would-be house mates, Shirley, a plumpish girl with frizzy blond hair and an impish grin, Rosalie paired them up and asked the girl to look after Jeanine and find her a place at the table. Begging leave of them, she went to sit near a couple of older women with whom she evidently wanted to speak.

Jeanine had actually expected that Tenzing would sit at the head of the table as most fathers did in her home country, but according to Shirley he didn't have a set place at the table: he simply mucked in and fitted in with the others wherever he could find a place or wherever and with whom he was prompted to sit.

Something that Shirley said as they were seating themselves at a table surprised Jeanine even more. She said that a lot of the new students thought that Tenzing was actually the head of his Order. But according to Shirley, though he was head of the order as far as public teaching went, there were others elsewhere with

higher ranking functions than him. Apparently they were known as the elder abbots. Some called them the secret chiefs.

Had Shirley seen these officials, Jeanine wondered, between mouthfuls of spicy lamb and rice.

No, Tenzing and his deputy alone knew who they were and knew their whereabouts.

His deputy, who's he?

It turned out, not entirely to Jeanine's surprise, that *he* was a *she* and her name was Rosalie Muller. Well, Shirley corrected herself, strictly speaking, Harold Grainger, was officially number two, but if you asked her, Mrs Muller did most of the donkey work and deserved the title. Apparently, Mister Grainger was one of the teachers at *Foxholes*, the Network's study centre at Sher Point, and like Tenzing and Rosalie, he spent part of his time at *babs chu*.

Dinner over, Shirley took her down a long corridor near the dining hall to stand before a large cork noticeboard. "You need to check the work rota here first thing every morning," Shirley advised her. The girl went through the list and pointed out several entries bearing her name and labelled "herb garden", "kitchen", "bathhouse" and so forth. Jeanine didn't expect her name to feature, as she'd only just arrived, so she was surprised to find her name already listed. Tomorrow morning she was due to start work in the kitchen, in the afternoon it read "typing (see Rosalie)" followed by washing up in the early evening. Now that was efficient.

"But what about classes?" she asked.

"There's a developmental circle for new students on a Wednesday afternoon," Shirley told her. "That's through in the main hall, down the other end of the corridor on the left. Oh, and you'll also be expected to attend a preparatory reading group. And there's an open circle every Thursday evening which everyone attends. As for classes, these are few and far between, if you mean the type where you sit down in rows with pen and paper in front of a blackboard. But you will find yourself learning an awful lot in your everyday work, woven into the fabric of your life you might say. Every now and then, you'll have seminars with some of the senior students, with Rosalie or with Tenzing. They'll give you daily exercises and keep track of your progress."

“You'll probably find that not a lot appears to happen for the first few months, Jeanine, so don't expect the teacher to tap you on the shoulder and give you instant enlightenment. At first, it's often a matter of little more than marking time whilst invisible developments begin to manifest.”

“I see.”

“Speaking of reading: you'll find all the books and thousands more in the library, though Tenzing prefers students to buy their own copies, because the books are charged with a subtle substance and when people read the books they leave a trace. You can buy the books from the librarians.”

“The only thing is, I don't have any money,” Jeanine pointed out.

“Oh, don't worry about that, you'll be paid for the work you do. It's not much of a wage, of course, but you'll find that you don't actually need much money here. There's a shop, too, where you can buy all sorts of things at little more than cost price. Except for the winter when we have to batten down the hatches, supplies come every month, and if you need anything special bringing in (within reason), you can put in an order for it – though expect a long delay before eventual delivery.”

“About the books ... I've read the first five and just finished *The Precious Pearl*. Which should I read next? Tenzing did say that they formed a course of study, so am I right in thinking they should be read in a particular order?”

“I'd read them in the order in which they were published, yes. The next book you want is *The Lower Self*.”

She slept soundly that night and had to be awakened the following morning by Shirley who explained that it was most likely due to the thin mountain air to which, she assured Jeanine, she'd soon get acclimatized. Apparently it took a few weeks for the body to make more red blood corpuscles to transport extra oxygen around the body. “Make sure you eat plenty to keep your energy and your body temperature up,” she advised.

Jeanine spent the first part of the morning under the redoubtable Mrs Rowling's tutelage, learning how to make and stir a vast cauldron full of porridge without it going lumpy or burning on the bottom. She was used to cooking, but not on such an industrial scale. After that, breakfast had to be served. Rather

than all queue up in a long line, the others seated themselves at the tables whilst the kitchen staff and other conscripts took the bowls to them as Jeanine struggled to keep up with her ladle. Jeanine gathered that there was some talk of adopting a cafeteria system where they all helped themselves, but nothing official had been decided as yet. Once that was done, Jeanine took the opportunity to snatch some breakfast herself before it was time to clear away. It was her job to wash her own pans and utensils whilst others washed the bowls and spoons through in the sluice room, so it was just as well that the porridge hadn't stuck too badly to the copper-bottomed cauldron.

“That's the spirit, Jeanine,” Mrs Rowling lilted, as she was just about to ask the pleasantly plump lady what she required next. “Polish it until you can see your face in it. If there's one thing I can't abide in my kitchen, it's badly washed pots and pans.”

“All done? Good lass. Well, time's pressing on, so let's set-to and peels some veg to make soup for lunch,” requested Mrs Rowling, pointing toward huge mounds of potatoes, turnips, carrots and peas-in-the-pod on a nearby work surface.

“Always remember that cooking and cleaning charge the food – for good or ill – and that other folk have to eat what you serve up. So set all your daydreams and frustrations aside and put your heart into your tasks. No dear, not the black-handled knives, those are mine, and I'm very particular about how I use and sharpen them. They, too, carry a charge. Yes, you can use those ...”

“And Peter, *do* take that sour look off your face, son, or you'll curdle the milk. Yes, I know you miss Eve – we all do – and you'll see her again soon.”

## 8. Work for the Work

“As for the Barkas, their heart is in the right place,” Tenzing told them at one of the seminars. “But I have to say that their whole church is based upon a gross misunderstanding.” He paused for a moment to allow these words to sink in.

“It all hinges, you see, upon a missing diacritic, which is a mark added to a word to denote a special pronunciation or different meaning. What it boils down to is a classic mistranslation of two words from the original manuscript, and those words are 'knowledge' and 'sin'. So the whole edifice, you see, is built on these false premises, and the stonings, the barbaric torture and the burnings for heresy over the centuries – all of this is perhaps down to a moment's carelessness or because the scribe neglected to fully ink the nib of his pen. Let that be a learned lesson to us all.”

“Does that answer your question, Justin?” he asked.

The lad nodded. “Yes, thank you Tenzing.”

“So are you saying that we should abandon religion?” asked James, who sat to Jeanine's right.

“Not at all, James. But I am saying that these factors need to be taken into account. When we approach these things, we should do so from a position of knowledge as well as love.”

Under normal circumstances, Jeanine loved to hear Tenzing speak. He had a wonderful ability to tap into a mine of wisdom; he was genuinely caring, and his understanding of the needs of others was uncanny. But today Jeanine kept drifting off and it was all she could do to stay awake. To be honest, and much as it troubled her to feel this way, she was thoroughly exhausted and had had as much as she could take.

She was questioning herself more and more, but she was also beginning to question Tenzing, too. More worrying still, she was beginning to feel paranoid about the whole setup at the *babs chu* retreat. Indeed, she was left wondering if, despite Tenzing's warnings about the dangers of involvement in cults, whether his Order itself could actually be some kind of mindfuck cult, dressed up as something benign.

That month, according to the work rota, every single morning, afternoon and evening Jeanine had some allotted task and as she worked through the long list she found many of them quite complex and taxing. She had wondered whether she should broach the subject with Rosalie, but another part of her thought that this might be a test of some kind, and in any case, she didn't want to appear work-shy. By the end of three weeks of this gruelling routine, she was feeling quite exhausted, much as she'd actually found herself relishing the tasks that had been set for her. And still she had another week to get through. Each night she had intended to read some more of *The Magic Horse*, the book she'd been set, ready for the end of month seminar. But try as she might, Jeanine couldn't summon up the energy or concentration to read more than a few scant pages before falling asleep.

It was close to lunch that day and it was Jeanine's turn to help serve the meal and to clear up and wash up afterwards. As she walked into the kitchen and looked around for Mrs Rowling, she tensed up involuntarily. For a brief moment, she was unsure of why this should be, and then she saw the pan handle sticking out into the aisle, which was something that Mrs Rowling was so very careful to avoid. Young Peter was there, with his head in a comic book, walking down the aisle toward her, quite oblivious of any danger.

Not daring to call out, in case she scared Peter and perhaps brought on the calamity unwittingly, Jeanine strode down the aisle, grabbing Peter's arm and dragging him away, just as he caught the pan handle with his arm. The pan toppled from the cooking hob and came down in a splash of boiling water. In spite of her efforts, the water splashed Peter's lower leg and he cried out in pain. The pan was full of thick soup and it clung to his trousers.

Instinctively dashing to the sink, Jeanine picked up the plastic bowl which was half full of cold water and potato peelings, turned back to Peter and threw the cold water over his legs.

Peter was greatly unnerved by this event and clearly still in some pain, so with no time to offer any explanation to one of the other students who just stood there looking on, she dashed to the first aid cabinet, found the cream they put on scalds and burns and, yanking up Peter's trouser leg, she plastered the cream over

his reddened skin. Then, taking a moment out to offer him some reassuring words, she led him off in the direction of the health centre across the square outside, so that the nurse could have a look at his wound.

Peter emerged from the examination room with a smile once more on his face, accompanied by the nurse, and Jeanine relaxed. "What's the verdict?" she enquired.

"Well, Jeanine, thanks to your quick wits and prompt intervention, no lasting damage had been done."

"Thank you," Peter nodded sheepishly.

"You're welcome, Peter," she smiled. "And I don't think I need tell you to be more careful in future, do I?"

The lad shook his head.

"I'll have to report this to Matron, of course, and she'll no doubt have words with Mrs Rowling," Mary remarked.

"I don't want to get Mrs Rowling into trouble," Peter blurted. "It was all my fault ...."

Mary smiled and tussled the lad's hair. "I know, Peter. Don't fret. If young students like you are to work in the kitchens, then you need to be under careful supervision at all times ...."

Jeanine sighed and nodded. She wasn't fond of confrontations, but she could see that some things really did need saying.

"Thanks, Mary. Right then, I'd best be getting back to the kitchen. And as for you, Peter, I think maybe you should take the rest of the day off."

Peter's eyes lit up. "Oh, wow. Thank you."

"Don't worry, I'll square it with Matron," Mary smiled, as the lad scurried off.

On and on the work went. And then quite suddenly she found her name dropped completely from the work rota, which she couldn't fathom – unless of course Rosalie or Tenzing were in some way concerned for her health following her earlier punishing ordeal? If they thought this, though, they certainly said nothing and she was reminded that they were both invariably open, frank and straightforward in their dealings with her.

It was a shock to her system, one minute being so engrossed in all this frenetic activity, her mind reeling. The next, what was she left with? An empty ocean of silence and tranquillity.

“How are you feeling?” came a voice behind her as she sat on a wooden bench overlooking the floral gardens. She turned to see Tenzing standing there, looking resplendent in the long, flowing blue and saffron robes he wore when on retreat.

“I'm not sure,” she replied.

“Do you mind if I join you?” he enquired, and came to sit beside her. “My, it's a beautiful day, isn't it? The birds a-chirping, the bees a-buzzing and the flowers blossoming, without a care in the world. Look at that little chap over there, wooing his would-be mate.”

“What's this all about, Tenzing?” she asked him straight out. “I've been worked like a dog for over a month now. Then all of a sudden it all stops, as if someone had called out 'bkag pa!' (stop), as they do in the exercises.

“Are you unhappy with my work?” she asked. “Or did you stop the work because you thought it was making me ill?”

Tenzing smiled. “Nothing could be further from the truth, Jeanine. You've made good progress since you joined us. You were a diamond even then, albeit if I might say, a somewhat rough diamond.”

“So what's it all about?” she asked him again.

“I can tell you now, Jeanine. To have told you before would have influenced the outcome, you see. As our scientists are only belatedly finding out, the act of observation can actually change the results of an experiment. Yes, it was an exercise. You remember I once told the story of the master of the Way, the would-be student and the full pot?”

“Yes, you said that nothing could be put in a full pot.”

“And ...?”

“And that it had first to be emptied.”

“That's right,” he nodded. “So for a month now, we've been filling you and filling you, almost to bursting point. Keeping the pressure up so that you were totally engaged and immersed in all manner of complex tasks until you could hardly bear it any longer and could 'hardly contain yourself', you might say. Don't worry, we were monitoring you carefully to make sure that nothing untoward happened.

“And then we let go, as it were, as you might release the cork of a bottle of sparkling wine. And, after a bit of a 'whoosh!' here

you are, enjoying the space that has been created by the removal of all that frantic activity.

“Now, as you may know, nature abhors a vacuum. And being empty as you now are, you will find something new and wonderful entering your life and permeating your being.

“Anyway,” Tenzing smiled as he arose from the bench. “I have to see Rosalie to discuss some matters. It's been good talking with you. So simply relax and enjoy yourself.”

“Thanks. See you later, Tenzing.”

“See you sooner,” he laughed as he walked away.

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“I have been having lots of dreams since the work stopped,” Jeanine told Rosalie when she saw her later that week.

“Good,” Rosalie nodded, looking rather pleased. “I hope you've been writing them down.”

She confirmed that she had.

“Once upon a time, not so very long ago, I read a typescript of yours ...”

“Looking back, I can see how mixed up I was at the time. The book would never have been published – at least not by anyone in their right mind. You were right to reject it.”

Rosalie nodded. “Well, I think the time is right now for you to write some more. There's a spare typewriter in the office and reams of crisp, new paper. Come and go as you please.”

“Right,” she beamed as a wave of excitement ran through her. Then: “But what about Tenzing's new book? I'm still only half way through typing it up.”

“Don't worry about that, Jeanine. Just concentrate on your own work for now. This is *your* time and *your* destiny.”

## 9. The race is on

Months had passed upstairs in Sector ARK-A-41, since Marie and Dillon's disappearance, which was bad enough. What was worse, of course, was that in that time, in the Shadowlands, not years but decades would have passed. And every year that passed down there, Hamish and Jessica's hopes for their safe recovery fast faded.

Unless Marie or Dillon made an effort to stay awake or, having succumbed to sleep, to reawaken, then the family knew that there would be scant chance of locating them, and conditions were so bad down there that such a reawakening through their own resources was unlikely. More often than not, this was something that could only be accomplished with help from another who had themselves awakened, and even this might take years to accomplish even given the best guidance.

The family had debated the matter long and hard and they had decided that there were two main ways in which Marie and Dillon's signature might be recognized. The first, which was subject to the whims of Shadowlands society, was that the children might have some half-conscious inkling of their plight and of the possibility that others were looking for them. So they might attempt to gain some kind of prominence or celebrity in society, in the hope that they might stand out from the masses and be recognized. So, what resident field workers the family had been able to contact, were on the look out for people who might have some unusual talent. But, of course, this really was a long shot and it was founded on the shaky premise that though their people didn't quite know what signature they were looking for, they would nevertheless recognize it when they came across it.

And the second was that the children might retain some equally half-conscious inclination to things spiritual, and eventually find their way to someone who could offer them spiritual guidance and development and the more awake they became, hopefully, the more they would be driven to retrace their roots. Again, the family had their people looking out for possible prospects, but until such time as the children had made sufficient

spiritual progress, the chance of finding them was equally quite remote.

One good thing that had come out of all this was that after much wrangling between Hamish and Regional Command and between Regional and High Command, he had managed to get the termination of the Experiment temporarily postponed while these efforts were being made, and this was beneficial not only to the children but to their many other field workers and to the people of the Shadowlands themselves. But, of course, the clock was still ticking.

What none of them knew, however, was that word of the children's disappearance had also reached the ears of an old adversary of theirs. He, too, seeing how he might use the children as pawns in his own game, and to his own advantage, had his own vast network of followers, spies and confidants on the look out for them. Once he had these little sprats in his possession, they would provide him with real leverage over the rather bigger fish who held them dear.

That being was the Dread Lord Develin. True enough, he had been banished and was currently unable to return, but again what the Freelanders did not know was that the incarnated aspect of himself the Freelanders knew as Duval had survived and was still in their midst. Of course Duval did not possess Develin's full powers, but he had sufficient to handle the children or anyone else who stood in his way.

Even the so-called and self-styled elders of the caretaker council at ARK-A-41. For every one of their field workers, Develin had a hundred either in his pay or sympathetic to his unholy cause; a thousand in his sway, and any number of unprincipled, mercenary souls who'd do his bidding at the right price. So, yes indeed and though the elders didn't fully realize, the race was well and truly under way. Bring it on.

## 10. Coincidences

For some reason, it had taken George over an hour to get to sleep last night and his sleep had been broken by a dream so real that it woke him with a start. It was like the snap of elastic, suddenly catapulting him back into his body. So, rather shaken, he'd got up, put the kettle on to make a coffee and rolled three cigarettes. One to smoke while the kettle was boiling; one for later when his coffee was half-drunk, and one for first thing the next morning. Alas, one thing that he hadn't been able to leave behind him when he'd moved, but which had followed him to Little Smithington like a bad smell, was his terrible nicotine habit. He'd give up one moment and give in to that last, last cigarette in the next, and every time he gave in, he made it that much easier to crumble the next time he decided to pack the habit. This was the battle he had and it had gone on day in and day out for years now, without a successful resolution. Some dismissed him as lacking willpower, but – truth be told – it went a lot, lot deeper than that.

What a dream, though. Ever since his childhood, he'd had these dreams and some were so lucid that he sometimes wondered whether he was in the “real world” whilst asleep at night and in some dream world during the day.

In the dream – or was it a distant memory? – he'd been on the brink of some great and urgent discovery, details of which he couldn't for the life of him remember, which was all so typical and depressing. And in the next breath, everything went black and he felt himself tumbling down into some dark abyss. When he awoke, in his dream that was, he found himself in what looked like a barred prison which turned out to be the kind of cot you'd put a baby in. And again, in the dream, he had struggled to remember something that had happened to him, and had burst into tears of frustration. The last thing he could remember was being picked up in what he at first took to be his mother's arms, but when he looked at her, he was terrified to see himself looking into the eyes of the most hideous creature imaginable. He didn't know it's name, but he would never forget those fiery, bloodshot eyes and the fierce snarl, which he'd seen before on several

occasions in his life. Nor would he ever forget the vile, vinegary, sulphurous stench of his own terror.

At which point George had awoken with a start to find himself absolutely drenched in sweat and still trembling with fear. But now he had calmed down a little, George tried to thrust the events from his mind. Since there was little point in going back to bed, he thought it best to turn his attention to the day's work. If there was one thing he feared even more than his nightmares, it was not being able to pay his bills at the end of the month. Demons he could live with: but not court judgements for debt against his name.

For one reason or another, he couldn't seem to make a start on his latest offering, a short story for one of the women's magazines. When he'd first started out as a would-be writer, though the magazine's editor didn't feel that his work was quite what they were looking for, she had taken the time to write back to him, thanking him for thinking of their periodical, offering some practical advice and enclosing a useful copy of guidelines for their contributors.

From frustrating experience, George knew that nothing substantial would come of staring at the blank screen of the word processor that morning, so he decided on the spur of the moment that he might as well go to town and pick up a few things from the shops to restock his near empty larder. Prior to that morning, he'd put on something of a spurt with his writing over the last week and everyday things like shopping had been neglected whilst he committed to disk as many of the ideas as he could before they slipped from his mind. Sometimes he was becalmed and at other times it was as if he'd tapped into an underground reservoir and had a real gusher going.

Heading back to the bus stop that day, he happened to pass by a bookshop and, ever willing to stock up on fresh inspiration, he retraced his steps and went in to browse around. It was so easy to neglect other people's writing in favour of one's own (though strangely enough, sometimes he couldn't bear to reread his own work after publication), but George knew how important it was to read others' work and to keep up with trends in publishing. What might seem at times to be time wasted was in fact something of an investment. And yes, when he said that, he remembered Ian

Sedgwick saying the very same thing about taking up meditation. Maybe the next day, maybe in a year's time, some snippet that he'd read might come bubbling up in his imagination and set off a chain of events that eventually became another article or book.

He scanned through the stand containing the bestsellers and read some of the publishers' blurb on the back, but found nothing that particularly excited him, so he went across to the shelves of fiction and scanned through their ranks, starting at "A" and working his way quite speedily towards "Z." It was a pretty random and arbitrary process really, and no substitute for a personal recommendation.

For some obscure reason, though his eyes were already working their way along the row beneath, his attention was momentarily captured by a book with a black cover. He made a mental note of his place and went back to that book to take a closer look. It was *Lost Souls* by an author going by the name of Marie Lightwater. He hadn't heard of this writer before and yet the name seemed strangely familiar. Perhaps it was the title *Lost Souls* that had attracted his attention? Perhaps it had some inner correspondence with the way he was feeling? He did feel a bit of a lost soul sometimes. Of course, it might simply have been the fact that he ate a tin of cold baked beans for breakfast that day, having run out of cereal, and so his eyes had happened to light on that book and not one two shelves back or two shelves further on?

Idly flicking through the pages, he decided that he'd be comfortable with the easy-going writing style and skim-reading the blurb, he was quite taken by the plot. It wasn't the usual sort of book he'd read, but maybe that was in itself a plus? Maybe it would open up a new vista for him? What the hell, it was only the price of three pints of lager, when all was said and done. So what if it *was* a lemon? Big deal. Mind made up, George took out his wallet and headed for the cashier's counter.

That afternoon was as barren as the morning had been, work wise. So he turned off his computer monitor and went to make a coffee and have yet another cigarette before sinking back on the settee to make a start on the book he'd bought.

It was two o'clock in the afternoon when George started reading *Lost Souls* and six o'clock in the evening and several coffees and cigarettes later when he put the book down. He had

intended cooking something substantial for himself that evening, but was so intent on getting back to the book that instead he made himself a quick egg sandwich, left the washing up and went straight back to his reading.

*Lost Souls* was the tale of a brother and sister who through some as yet unspecified calamity found themselves separated. Written from the point of view of the girl, who was called Marie, just like the book's author, it was about the astonishing coincidences in their lives that hopefully would finally lead the pair to find one-another again.

It was a silly idea, of course, but a third of the way into the book he could really identify with the lad, whose name was Dillon, and could imagine himself working on a complement to the book, this time written through the eyes of the male protagonist.

George read right through the evening and by now feeling peckish again, he made himself another egg sandwich and read solidly into the early hours. The last time he looked at his watch it was two o'clock in the morning and he was beginning to nod off as he read on, and that was by no means the fault of the author. Still, he only had another twenty or thirty pages to go, so he had another coffee and cigarette to wake him up and carried on. It was three fifteen in the morning when he finally put the book down and wandered through to the bedroom in a daze to get some shuteye. Before long the sun would be creeping up toward the horizon and the wretched cockerel at the nearby farm would be strutting his stuff and exercising his bloody lungs. Then there'd be the tinkle of milk bottles as the milkman came on his rounds, followed by the clunk of gates and the snap of the letterbox as the postie delivered his mail ....

George was asleep almost as soon as his head hit the pillow.

Not altogether surprisingly, though George slept soundly most of the night, come morning as he gradually emerged from deep sleep, he began to dream, knowing that he was dreaming yet content to go along with these flights of fancy.

Again he dreamt of falling down into some dark void, but when he awoke in his dream, this time he found himself striding through the long grass of a meadow. It was a scorching summer's day and the sun was beating down. The air was still and far too

hot for comfort, his shirt drenched in perspiration. Off in the distance, down a narrow, dusty lane were formal gardens and beyond that he could make out a large house. Over to his right, nearer the house he could hear someone calling out over and over again: “Marie? Dillon? Where are you? Marie?”

He realized instantly from reading the book that this would be the grown-ups looking for Marie and Dillon who had disappeared earlier that day. He called out: “Hello! It's me,” fully expecting a response. But they just blanked him.

“Hello?” he asked, more hesitantly.

Even though he could see the others and they must have been within earshot, they gave no sign of having heard his call. That came as something of a blow to him.

Just then he thought he caught sight of someone out of the corner of his eye leaving the meadow and walking off down a gravel path that led into the woods. He followed the footsteps, descending through the woods toward what sounded like running water. As he followed the path and came across the wide pool formed by a narrow stream, he thought he recognized this place and though he couldn't be quite sure, he thought that he remembered having been here before, perhaps as a child.

Again he saw a shadowy figure flit through the gently rustling trees and for a moment he caught sight of a young girl in a brightly floral summery dress. Perhaps this was the Marie that the others were looking for.

“Marie?” he called out. “Marie! Don't run off, I want to talk to you. Marie?”

But the girl walked on, heading back up through the woods. And by the time he reached the dirt track by the meadow, she was out of sight. He looked out across the sunny meadow, but could see no sign of the girl, so he decided to head toward the house. That's where she'd head if she had any sense.

The front door was open when he arrived so he clambered up the steep marble steps and went in. As he did so, a portly gentleman who'd been standing in the hallway strode across the foyer and closed the door behind him, then the man headed off down the hallway and disappeared into one of the side rooms. George saw the girl now. She, too, had entered the house and she followed the portly man into the room, apparently oblivious to

George's presence there.

George could hear several voices now, and as he entered the room he saw several people standing around. One of them was sitting in an armchair beside the hearth, with his head in his hands. He was distraught about something and the girl was standing close-by trying to console him. She kept calling the man, telling him that she was there, but for some reason, though he looked right through the girl several times, apparently the man could not see her. The girl reached forward, trying to touch his face, but her hand passed straight through him and she yelped and jumped back as if she'd been stung.

George wondered what would happen if he tried to touch the girl. Would his hand pass through her, too, or would she notice? He called her name, but she made no response. He went closer and tapped her on the shoulder, but he felt an unpleasant sensation in his fingers as they passed through her and he understood now why it had made her yelp.

“Well, well, well,” a voice called out behind him. Both he and the girl spun round on their heels. And again he felt a shudder of terror hit him as he saw the foul creature standing before him with those mesmeric, bloodshot eyes. “If it isn't those two poor lost souls, Marie and Dillon.”

“Who are you?” George managed to stammer at length.

“You mean you've forgotten, Dillon? Think back.”

The girl stepped back and looked all around her, as if she were looking for him. “Dillon? Are you here, too?”

“Yes, Dillon is here, Marie. And Dillon wants to know who I am. Why don't you tell him?”

“Tenzing? Tenzing!” the girl cried out. “For God's sake, help us.”

“Tenzing?” the creature wanted to know, spinning round to face the girl, and she staggered back, perhaps hit by the realization that she'd said too much. “Who's this Tenzing?”

“Who is this?” George gasped when he again found his voice.

“It's the Dread Lord Develin!” she warned him. “And we've got to get out of here.”

No sooner had she spoken that fear-inspiring name than for the second time in two days, George awoke with such a start this time that he leapt out of bed and stood there cowering by the

door. He had to cast his eyes back just to check that he hadn't actually leapt clean out of his skin.

It took several minutes of deliberate, slow, deep breathing before George could gather his wits together. Still shaking, he went through to the lounge and rolled himself a cigarette to calm his nerves. The fact that had he not smoked, he might not be so nervy in the first place was utterly lost on him at such moments.

That morning George finally made a start on the short story for the magazine and by lunchtime he'd made some headway. By now he had the storyline pretty much fixed in his mind and the rest would be more or less a matter of filling in the missing words. But try as he might, he couldn't put that awful dream out of his mind and he sensed that he was in danger of allowing this to colour the mood of the story. It was supposed to be a piece of upbeat romance, after all, not a chiller.

And another thing. Again and again his mind turned back to the things he'd read in that book and he was very much tempted to put pen to paper and write to this Marie Lightwater, care of her publisher. What she'd written had struck a chord deep in his heart and he wanted her to know this. But why should *she* care? He was little more than a hack, when all was said and done, working all the hours under God's sun for what – to just about keep his head above the water financially? Besides, she didn't know him from the next man and if he *were* to open up his heart to her, then like as not she'd dismiss him as yet another crank, of which – given the ethereal subject matter of her book – she would probably have more than her fair share.

One thing he couldn't or was unwilling to dismiss, however, were the quite astonishing coincidences that had leapt out of the pages at him, between the life Marie Lightwater portrayed in her book and things that had happened in his own life, not least the dreams they shared. Yes, and you might find this a crazy notion: though he had not as yet met the lady in person and had read only the one book by her, he did feel a bond between them. Or at least the potential of a deep bond forming between them.

And if what she had written was not actually autobiographical but was in fact nothing more than a work of sheer fiction? Of course that was a possibility. If that *were* the case, then that would show him up as a fool and he'd end up

crawling away back under the rock from whence he'd come, feeling rather foolish and hurt. After all, it wouldn't be the first time he'd misread the signs, got carried away as writers and artists often do, and mistakenly attempted to strike up a romance when nothing of that kind was actually ever on the cards. More than once he'd had to eat humble pie. And it wasn't as if he had a glass slipper that would prove to her that he was her man.

George took a break and returned to look up Marie Lightwater on the internet. He came across several pages of entries from book stores selling her work, but as yet he could find few reviews. Clearly, her publisher had not gone overboard on the promotion of her work: they usually sent copies around favoured celebrities and experts before the book launch, to get advance praise and hopefully reviews. Mind you, the book had only been published the month before, so there was still time. Perhaps he might lend her a hand and get her a write-up? Well, that was legitimate reason that he might contact her.

George typed the name of her publisher into his web browser and was quite surprised by the number of hits. Looking at their website, which had a pretty professional feel to it and was thankfully easy to navigate, he saw that most of their works were either the writings of some guru type by the name of – wait for it – Tenzing Jangbu Rinchen or translations of spiritual texts. Yes, oddly enough it was the same guy that he'd briefly come across weeks back when he'd first met Ian Sedgwick, the guy selling him internet access. And what's more: George suddenly recalled the girl crying out that name in the nightmare. What a small world, he smiled to himself. Then again, it was only a coincidence, and nothing to get wildly excited about. George said that, of course, since he had to keep himself grounded, rather than allowing himself to get carried away, but the thought still made the hairs on his arms bristle.

Aha! There was Marie Lightwater's work and, yes, it was her début book. According to the blurb, at least, it was categorized not as a novel but as a piece of faction; that is, a fictional work based upon or extrapolating from basic fact.

He had thought of typing up a letter care of the publisher and sending it by snail mail, but when he found a contact link on the website, he decided to email them instead. He just hoped that his

message wouldn't end up in the recipient's spam can, as so often happened these days, or get binned by the woman's agent. They could be angels to deal with, worked exceptionally hard for their commission, opening doorways that would have been shut to him. But sometimes they could be a little overly-protective of their clients.

Time to open the email client. Now where on earth could he start without coming across as deranged in some way? George thought he might cut to the chase, after saying hello and praising Marie Lightwater for your work. So he told her about the recurring dreams he had and how her own writing had struck a deep chord with him. But he couldn't help thinking that any number of other losers could come up with equally plausible storylines.

Let's suppose just for one minute that she really was Marie Lightwater – I mean *the* Marie Lightwater whose story the author told in her book – and that he really was this Dillon of whom she wrote – or at least someone in a very similar position. And supposing that she received hundreds, if not thousands of letters and emails from her readers and other losers, chancers and gold diggers, saying much the same things as he did. If she had the task of weeding out the wheat from the chaff, what would make him stand out from the crowd and grab her attention? What could he possibly say that would prove to her beyond all shadow of a doubt, wretched hack that he appeared, that the red shoe fitted him? Or her. Whatever: you know what I mean.

It took George the rest of the morning to write the first fateful paragraph, which was pretty poor going for him, since he could manage ten thousand words on a good day, down hill, peddling away with the wind behind him. At that rate, in theory, he should have been able to churn out a whole novel every ten days, but in practice it never worked out in quite that way, more's the pity.

*“Dear Marie Lightwater,”* he had begun. Well, it was a start, at least. High time he had another fag break. And at that point, that's where his head turned to mush. Once upon a time, he used to meticulously plan everything out on paper beforehand and surround himself with dictionaries and thesauri and reference books before he even put pen to paper, but since the advent of the word processor, more and more he found himself typing his work

in as fast as he could, as he thought it up. So why today's little task should present him with such problems, George didn't know. Perhaps it was fear that held him back from freely expressing himself? But fear of what? Of ridicule? Yes, he may have hit on something there. That was the point where any head shrink worth their salt would be asking questions like "When was the first time you remember feeling ridiculed?"

As a child, he'd been invited by a friend to a fancy dress party. But because he didn't want to look a fool had his friend merely been winding him up, he went there in his everyday clothes. And then he'd felt such a prune on finding everyone there dressed as cowboys and Indians, pirates and bug-eyed monsters. "Oh, nice one, George," someone had derided him. "Come as yourself, have we?"

So, yes, he could relate to Marie's difficulties in fitting in and with her feeling like a stranger in a foreign land, as she put it. But just presenting himself as some kind of social misfit was hardly going to endear him to her. Or should that have been "endear *her* to *him*"?

Crumbs, what could he say to the woman? Should he just come straight out and boldly state: "I, too, believe that I am an alien, who foolishly transported himself into the Shadowlands in a vain attempt to save the world from nuclear apocalypse. And unfortunately, I've become separated from my sister and travelling companion and been caused by the miasma of decay prevalent in this mortal coil to forget my mission"? And yet, wasn't that precisely what she was hinting at in a somewhat veiled way in her book, dressing it up as science fiction? That what she had written in her book was not mere fiction but based at least in part on actual fact? Maybe it was all some sad head shrink's idea of a joke or his way of obtaining data for a clinical research paper he proposed to publish?

In the end, George settled on congratulating Marie Clearwater on her fine work and the profound impact it had had on him, going on to ask about her teacher Tenzing Jangbu Rinchen who also interested him. And then with a few brief words of introduction, he told of the nightmare he'd had in which they both featured. As for the creature they'd encountered, he could remember knowing that name at the time, but for the life of

him, he couldn't recall it now. Now that really would have been a clincher, if Marie Lightwater, too, had recognized that name.

That done, George hovered his mouse over the "Send" button, momentarily shut his eyes and left clicked on it. And with that, his email was away with no possibility of retrieval.

Having done that, he sighed deeply and mentally slapped his face, suddenly feeling very foolish indeed.

## 11. The spam can

Jeanine had been back in the Freelands for about a month now. When her application to the authorities in the Narayani capital for citizenship had failed, Tenzing had been to the king's court and pleaded on her behalf, as her sponsor, and had come away with all the necessary documents signed and sealed.

Much to her surprise, when she'd subsequently applied for a residency permit in the Freelands, she was granted provisional residency and a much-coveted work permit.

When Jeanine had finally plucked up the courage to show Rosalie her new typescript, she was deeply worried that Rosalie would have to tell her that, alas, it was still not up to scratch, and that night she had tossed and turned for a time until she'd remembered her exercises and managed to calm her mind. Clearly, though she'd come a long way since she'd first met Tenzing, she still had some way to go before she could match his level of calm.

“You worry too much,” Rosalie had assured her. “It's quite understandable given the investment of time, energy and expectations that you've put into the work.”

Jeanine was sitting there in the office, unaware of how tightly she'd been clutching her precious typescript to her breast.

“If you can bear to part with the script,” grinned Rosalie, “then I'll read it through over the next couple of days and when I'm through, I'll get back to you.”

She'd thanked Rosalie and headed off for a quiet walk through the fragrant gardens, with a whole flight of butterflies fluttering around in her stomach. She tried to picture a favourable outcome, which was to have the work published and on show in all the fashionable bookshops, even in her old home town – yes, to make her parents proud of her – though she realized that since the deed of writing the book was already done and couldn't be changed, that was a bit like closing the stable door after the horse had bolted. The matter was in God's hands now. Well, Rosalie's at any rate.

Two long days passed. Then four. Still there was no word

from Rosalie and Jeanine didn't want to harass her unnecessarily. Well, truth be told, she was scared stiff of another rejection and part of her would rather avoid any response for fear it would be negative. If Rosalie rejected the work, then there was no point in sending the typescript off to any publishers: Rosalie clearly knew a good work or a lame duck of a book when she read it.

She tried to recall Rosalie's advice about dealing with unnecessary worry, which was to imagine the worst thing that could happen if such and such a course of action failed – Sure, and what if it did? So what? – and when she thought about these things, she realized that it wasn't after all the end of the world. And often these worst things failed to materialize. But in this case, following Rosalie's advice was to little avail. Of course it wouldn't be the end of the world if her work was rejected, but it would still deal her a bitter blow, since so much revolved around getting the message of her book into circulation. That was even more important to her than breaking into a lifelong career as a writer. The book was not entitled *Lost Souls* without good reason and the aim was, after all, to find herself and to find Dillon.

It was almost a week since she'd shown Rosalie the typescript when she received word through her house mate Shirley that Tenzing wanted to see her in his office, and then it occurred to her that Rosalie had probably passed on the script to him for his reaction. Of course that might mean that she herself was undecided. And Jeanine wouldn't be at all satisfied with merely scraping through by the skin of her teeth, she needed an unequivocal thumbs up.

Jeanine hesitated as she arrived at the office and drew in a series of slow, deep breaths before finally knocking on the polished rosewood door.

“Come in, the door's open,” Tenzing called and she entered, with her fingers mentally crossed behind her back, which was magical thinking, of course, but right now Jeanine could do with all the help she could get.

“What do you think I'm going to say to you, Jeanine?” he asked her straight out.

“Well, I presume that it's about the book ...” she began, casting her eyes down to the finely-woven geometrically-designed rug that stretched across the centre of room. This just

about said it all, really.

Tenzing got out of the chair behind his desk and ushered her toward the settee over the other side of the office under the bay window.

“Well, I'll be brutally honest with you, Jeanine,” he said in a solemn tone.

Right then, the colour drained from Jeanine's face and it felt as if the world had dropped out of her bottom as she might have joked in a happier moment.

For a time, she sat there in stunned silence.

Without warning, Tenzing slapped his hand loudly on the leather upholstery of the settee and Jeanine nearly jumped out of her skin. Suddenly she was utterly alert and ready for anything. She knew little about cars, never having driven one, but it was as if in that moment, something had shifted into a higher gear.

Then the man's face creased into a broad grin. “Forgive me, Jeanine. Yes, it is about your book, which I have just finished reading. I hope you don't mind, but Rosalie wanted my input.”

She gulped and averted her eyes once more.

Again he brought his hand down on the leather with a crack that reverberated right through her and echoed around the room, jolting her to her senses.

“What are you thinking?” he asked her.

“I was just thinking that until you did that, I hadn't realized that I'd sort of 'slipped away' into thought,” she told him.

“And now?”

“Now I feel 'here', if you know what I mean?”

He nodded and gently tapped several times on her head. “Yes, now you are fully present and not wandering around in a daze amidst the cloistered halls of your noggin.”

“As I said,” he continued, “I read your book with growing interest. It'll make a fine novel for those who are interested in novels and also provide that little extra, gleaned from your studies here, for those who are into such things.”

Inside, she was bouncing up and down like a spring bunny at this news. Too overcome for words, her elation was written clearly across her face for all to see. Tears welled up in her eyes, dribbled down her face and dripped from her chin. Tenzing already had a handkerchief to-hand and he passed it to her.

“So you think I should send it off to the publishers?”

“Rosalie told me that she would be only too happy to act as your agent, if that's what you want,” Tenzing told her. “And for my part, unless you find a better offer, I'm willing to take the work on board under the *Narayana Publishing* imprint of our publisher, *Norbu*.”

“Oh, my God. Oh my God! You mean you're willing to publish the book?”

“Read my lips,” he advised her as he mouthed the letters “Y E S.”

“But that's incredible.”

“It's the product and amalgamation of successful work and dedication,” he suggested. “Amongst other and more subtle things. Now what you must realize is that your work may not hit the bestsellers list and that only a minority of authors earn sufficient to pay their bills.”

“Yes, I realize that, Tenzing – but it's a start – and I'm grateful for that. Over the moon, in fact. Thank you so much. You don't know how much this means to me.”

“It is I who should be thanking *you*, Jeanine. And, yes, having had work published myself under every bit as much of a cloud at the start, I might add: yes, I think I *do* know how you feel.”

Then: “Or maybe that should be 'I feel I *do* know how you think,’” he laughed.



Twelve months later, while Tenzing stayed on for a time in Narayana, and the book having been just recently published, she and Rosalie were back in Sher Point. She'd found a lovely new *bijou* apartment not far from Rosalie's house where she and Rosalie often met and chatted. It was such a delight to have a place of her own, with food in the fridge, hot showers every morning and fires that she could actually afford to turn on. If she ever did go back to the Outlands, not that she had any inkling to do so, she would find it doubly hard to live there now that she had tasted the fruits of freedom.

Jeanine bought herself a secondhand typewriter and found a part time job to help pay the bills. Rosalie had suggested she buy herself a computer, but at the moment she had enough on her

plate without having to learn a whole new set of skills. Perhaps later, if she became more successful?

Already Rosalie, her agent, was forwarding mail to her. Jeanine had specifically asked for all the mail to be sent on to her, even that of the cranks, with the exception of the inevitable begging letters, the lechery of perverts and the odd pieces of hate mail.

That morning, a whole bundle of messages had arrived. Most of it was snail mail, thanking her for the book, asking questions about the characters and wondering if she had a signed photograph that she could give them. Of those who expected a reply, she simply binned any letters from people who hadn't thought to include return postage, unless their letter merited more consideration. After all, she wasn't running a charity. There were also many emails from folk both at home and abroad and Rosalie had printed out some of them for her, though she'd binned a large number which were trying to sell her such bizarre items as pills to enlarge your penis or make your sperm taste sweet, as if that would have at all interested her. Apparently, this was one of the pitfalls of publishing the address of your email account.

She scanned through the emails, noting that Rosalie hadn't flagged any of them as being urgent or important. There was one from a guy called George Ivanovich Kovak. Crikey that name was quite a mouthful. He seemed rather sweet and like her he was a writer, mostly of short stories and articles for magazines. He asked about Tenzing and Rosalie had kindly scribbled a note to say that she'd added him to the mailing list and forwarded a copy of the *Narayana Publishing* catalogue to him, since he gave his land address.

Then he went on to relate a nightmare he'd had in which she apparently figured, which was the kind of thing she was looking for, but contained nothing that couldn't have been gleaned by carefully reading her book. There was no detail in there that caught her eye, so she put the email aside to be filed away and went on to the next, which turned out to be from a real cuckoo called Ike and had her rolling about the floor in laughter. Apparently he'd been abducted by aliens who'd administered mind-altering suppositories which had caused him to start wearing women's clothes. And, being a member of the clergy, he

wondered what advice Marie's teacher, Tenzing Jangbu Rinchen, could give him. Get a life.

## 12. Following up on a lead

The loudspeaker on his desk crackled and Develin spun round in his swivel chair.

“Yes?”

“We have Duval on-line for you now, Lord Develin.”

“About bloody time, too,” he snapped, reaching down by his side and retrieving the headset. He slipped the device on, making sure it fitted his ears, then lowered the visor over his eyes. For a time, there was little to see, only a sight of slowly rolling clouds, but gradually his vision cleared and he could see Duval standing there before him.

Duval wasn't the most receptive of people, so it took some time for Develin to attract his attention and to get him to at least make an attempt to focus his mind.

“Is that you, Lord Develin?” the man kept asking over and over again, pausing every now and again to listen for a reply.

Finally Develin got through to him. “Yes, it is me, Duval.”

Already, the image of Duval was wavering. He was on the verge of losing him almost as soon as they'd made contact.

“I'll keep this short and sweet, Duval, so stay focussed.”

“Yes, I hear you, Lord Develin.”

“The people we are looking for. Do you remember we spoke of this before?”

“Yes, Lord, I remember.”

“Good, Duval. One of them mentioned someone by the name of Tenzing, calling out to this person for help.”

“What was the name again?”

“Tenzing.”

“Tenzing, yes I hear you.”

“Find this person and I think you'll find the people we're looking for, or at least the girl.”

Again, Duval was beginning to fade away.

“Did you hear me?”

“Yes, Lord. Find Tenzing and you'll find the girl.”

Develin was about to speak again, but the vision faded away and the loudspeaker crackled again. “Sorry, Lord Develin: we've

lost contact again.”

“No matter, Yates,” Develin replied, casting the head set to one side. “I said all I had to say, and Duval got my message. And now all we can do is wait. Get someone to run me a bath, would you?”

“As you wish, sir.”

## 13. With compliments

A week later, George went downstairs one morning to discover a thick envelope on his doormat. It was postmarked Sher Point and bore a printed advertisement on its cover for *Narayana Publishing* with their post office address.

When he opened the letter, he was rather disappointed to find that it contained nothing more than a blank slip “With compliments ...” and a copy of the latest book catalogue. Still, this did infer that his message had got through, which was the main thing.

George made himself some breakfast and took his coffee into the lounge to drink while he had a flick through the catalogue. Most of it he'd seen before on the website, but clearly he hadn't paid the write-ups much attention at the time as he could remember little of what was said about the books, and he was quite taken by the title of Rinchen's first book *The Way It Is*. Well, if he were to get to know Marie Lightwater better, then that seemed as good a place as any to make a start and a fair price to pay. He turned on Old Faithful, waited for her to boot up, then went on line to see if he could order the book directly from the publisher. Though Rinchen seemed to be based in the wilds of Narayana, they gave an address in Sher Point. Ah yes, he could select the book and add it to his shopping cart. Allow seven to fourteen days for delivery. Oh well, he'd been around all these years without worrying about it, so what was another two weeks in the grand scheme of things? Confirm details of your order. He got a hard copy of the details, just to be on the safe side, then clicked on “OK.”

Two days later, before he was even washed and dressed, and there was a ring on the doorbell. The book had already arrived. Now that was efficient.

Well, since he'd managed to send off two more articles in as many days, George thought, he shouldn't feel too guilty if he took a little time out to get stuck into the book. He wasn't sure what to expect from the book, as things spiritual didn't feature highly in his list of priorities. He'd read a great many adventures, thrillers

and science fantasy novels as he was growing up, though in later years most of his reading had been computer user manuals and software cookbooks. He'd realized from the start that computers would become the "in" thing and technical skills much sought after, though even he hadn't envisaged the revolutionary information age that would come about, nor quite how speedily technology would advance. And to think that only a few short years ago, families would spend their evenings huddled around a wireless set, if they could afford such a luxury. Maybe this high technology had been seeded by advanced intelligences, he mused? After all, "stranger things happen at sea" as his old Aunt Gladys used to say.

George was almost two chapters into the book when he realized that he'd been had. He'd just been reading a short story about a smuggler.

*There was once a man called Ibrat Namun (which means exemplar) who worked at a factory for thirty years. Every night he'd leave, pushing a wheelbarrow full of straw past the guard at the factory gate.*

*Every night, suspecting that he was a smuggler, the guard would search through the straw but, always finding nothing, he would reluctantly let the man pass.*

*And every morning, Ibrat Namun would trudge back to work to begin his shift.*

*After Ibrat Namun had retired from his work, the guard happened to see him in a teahouse in town and, buying a drink, he went over to join him.*

*"Tell me," the man asked. "It's been bothering me so much over the years that I can no longer sleep. What is it that you were smuggling all that time? I shan't rest easy until I know the truth."*

*Ibrat Namun took a sip of his tea and smiled at him. "Wheelbarrows," he told the man.*

Looking back over what he'd read thus far, George could see that this was precisely the way in which Rinchen had introduced materials and slipped information past him whilst his thoughts were occupied with other matters. Indeed, further on, Rinchen spelt this out more explicitly, as he talked of the way in which the teaching materials were often designed to bypass our predominantly linear and logical thinking and what he termed the

“censors” of our minds. These all had their place, Rinchen said, but the mind could also operate in a more holistic mode, based on intuition rather than logic. Rather than being mere passive reading matter, the materials themselves actually exercised the mind so that it could better use these alternative faculties and learn to switch between them and conventional patterns.

Just as he was congratulating himself at so astutely spotting these links, however, George read just a little further on that according to the teachings which Rinchen represented, there was not one but three main types of knowledge. There was intellect which was often little more than mechanical analysis and the regurgitation of fact (fact often being confused with hypothesis and mere opinion); there was emotion, which might be little more than the thirst of our base desires, or over-excitement; and then there was what they called real knowledge, which was their aim. Indeed, though George was by no means convinced by this, they claimed that there was such a thing as objective truth and that it was possible to approach this without the aid of an intermediary. Presumably, by this they meant priests or other “go betweens”, because elsewhere Rinchen had made it quite clear that in the learning stages contact with a living teacher was required. Mind you, they would say that, wouldn't they?

George was particularly tickled by a little puzzle that he came across in the book.

*There are three people waiting at a bus stop one bitterly cold winter's night as you drive by. The first is an elderly woman who looks as if she might die at any moment. The second is a friend who once saved your life. And the third is the soul mate you've been dreaming about.*

*Given that there is room for only one passenger in your car, who would you choose?*

Now that one had George stumped for quite some time. He thought about the puzzle for a good half hour as he prepared a stir fry for a midday meal, to no avail. Finally, he decided to take Rinchen's advice about leaving things to gently simmer on the back burner, and went back to the book. Yet still the puzzle appeared to occupy a part of his attention, as was perhaps Rinchen's intention. He was still less than half way through this can of worms and he had so many as yet unanswered questions. It

was almost as if these ragged, unsatisfied, loose ends had been designed into the work.

George finished the book at ten that evening and, after making himself some supper, decided that he might as well turn in for the night and make a start on his work early the following morning.

He'd expected to fall sound asleep soon after closing his eyes, but possibly due to the large volume of input he'd had that day, he seemed to spend most of the night dreaming as he tried to make sense of what he'd read, a task further complicated by all those loose threads that still remained.

As morning approached, after some deep sleep, George again began to dream. This time he found himself way out in the wilds, though again he knew that he was dreaming and was content to go along with the dream. Perhaps the setting was inspired by the snow-peaked mountain terrain behind Rinchen's picture on the front cover of the book?

"Who knows?" a voice behind him remarked and he turned around on his heel to see who it might be.

"You've made it here to my door and that's all that really matters, young man," the apparition continued.

Yes, the close-cropped hair, the broad full-lipped smile, those big brown eyes: this had to be Rinchen.

"My friends call me Tenzing," the man told him.

"Am I a friend?"

"A friend of a friend."

"Where am I?" he asked.

"You're at a place we call the Waterfall. And when you awake tomorrow morning, I want you to remember that."

Suddenly, his surroundings shifted and he found himself standing close to the edge of a thundering waterfall.

"As to why you are here," yelled the man to make himself heard, as if he'd read George's mind, "I was rather hoping that *you* might tell *me*."

Already George could feel himself beginning to slip away.

As if sensing what was about to happen, the man pushed him firmly in the chest and he staggered back into the bitterly cold curtain of water.

"Oh my God!" he shrieked as he was suddenly drenched to

the bone by a shock wave of icy cold water. Waking in an instant, he leapt out of bed.

Remembering the man's words, he grabbed a pen and wrote down the word waterfall, though he was hardly likely to forget, given the adrenaline that had pumped through his system at the shock of his sudden immersion. Then he wrote the name Tenzing. What else could he remember? Oh yes, Tenzing had said something about making it to his door. "You've made it here to my door and that's all that really matters." Yes, that was it, word for word.

Now George knew what he must do. He hurriedly washed and dressed, then dashed downstairs to put the kettle on and make himself a coffee. He lit a cigarette whilst the kettle was coming to boil and fired up Old Faithful.

This time he knew what to write.

*Dear Marie Lightwater,*

*Having read *The Way It Is* yesterday with growing interest, I dreamt of Tenzing last night. He was at a place in the mountains that he called the Waterfall and he told me to remember that when I awoke. When I suggested that the dream might have been inspired by the photograph on the cover of his book, he remarked "Who knows: the important thing is that you have made it to my door." Just before I started drifting away, presumably I was beginning to awaken, he pushed me and I stumbled backwards into the bitterly cold water of the waterfall. I think he did that so that I'd be sure to remember the dream.*

*I thought that this might mean something to you. If not, then send the message to your spam folder with my apologies.*

And with that, he pressed "Send" and dispatched the email on its way. If that didn't grab Marie Lightwater's attention, then nothing would.

Two hours later, he heard the familiar jingle that indicated that he had mail and he opened up his email client with a mixture of dread and excitement. It was a Mrs Rosalie Muller, who informed him that she was Marie Lightwater's agent. He half expected the woman to reproach him for pestering Marie, but instead her tone was quite friendly and informal.

*George Kovak,*

*Thank you for your email. I'm glad to hear that you find*

*Tenzing's work interesting. Judging by your dream, you found it both stimulating and provocative. Please keep me posted of any future developments every now and again and rest assured that as Marie Lightwater's literary agent, I have passed your message on to her.*

*Yours sincerely,  
Rosalie Muller (Mrs).*

He noted the phrase “now and again” which was a polite and informative way of suggesting that he not flood her with messages and also noted that though she would be interested in hearing about future developments, the dream as he related it hadn't set off a flurry of fireworks at their end as he had hoped it might. Nevertheless, he'd made a start.

George did think about ordering another of Tenzing's books from the website, but since he had to go back into town that day and do some shopping, he thought he might visit the bookshop there, on the off-chance that they stocked Tenzing's work. Thinking about it, though, rather than go to town and risk disappointment, he might as well take the bus all the way to Lakeside. That had a larger and more cosmopolitan town centre and they'd be sure to have the book there, having so many students at nearby colleges. It was only an extra fifteen minutes' ride on the bus and the fare was cheap enough. And besides, that would give him a chance of going round the indoor market. There were all manner of bargains to be had there.

He made it to the bookshop by ten thirty that morning and quickly found some titles by Tenzing, but not the book he'd been looking for, *The Veils of Truth*. After scouring the shelves for some time, he gave up, reluctantly resigning himself to putting the fruitless search down to experience and headed instead to the indoor market to pick up some provisions. They had a superb wet fish shop there and a very reasonable butcher's and they sold many exotic herbs and spices.

As it happened, as George was crossing town toward the market, he passed by a tiny bookshop that specialized in the esoteric and he decided to have a look around on the off-chance that he might find the book. But they had so many categories of book there that he wasn't sure quite where to look, so he asked the assistant.

“*The Veils of Truth?*” the man pondered. “You know I’m sure I put that book out the other day when the fresh stock came in.”

The man looked around and scratched his curly mop of grey-peppered hair for some time, finally shrugging his shoulders and coming out with: “Do you know, I’m sure I put the book somewhere, but I’m blessed if I can remember where.”

“Not to worry,” said George, with a sigh.

“I can order the book if you like.”

“No, that’s all right, thanks: I’ll leave it.”

Then the man had a thought. “Excuse me a minute. Maybe my missus knows.”

He went to the back of the shop and called up the stairs.

“Gertie. Gertie? Have you got a minute?”

“What is it now, Fred?” a voice called down.

“Have you got a minute? I’ve mislaid a book.”

“Again?”

George could hear her clump-clumping down the wooden stairs now.

“I can’t find *The Veils of Truth*,” her husband told her as she entered the shop.

“And is there any ruddy wonder,” the dumpy little woman half-laughed, half-sighed, going over to a set of shelves near the doorway of the shop. Within moments she’d found what she was looking for, pulled it from the shelf and held it up for her husband to see.

“How many times have I told you, Fred, that you don’t file non-fiction books under the author’s name but under the title and you don’t file books like this under ‘T for The’ but ‘V for Veils?’” She shook her head in exasperation and took the book behind the counter.

“Not to worry,” George smiled. “I’m just happy to find the book. No, there’s no need to wrap it up: it’ll go in my rucksack as it is.”

“Right you are, ducks,” she smiled. Then as he paid her, she added: “Finding the Path is the easy bit, of course,” she laughed. “Now as for finding yourself – your true self that is – that’s a different matter altogether.”

“When you read the stories, at first you’ll find yourself saying ‘Oh yes, I know a couple of idiots like that,’ but later on when

you've unlearned a few things and you know a bit less than you first thought you did, you'll be saying to yourself. 'Yes, that's just like me in the mirror. I wonder why I didn't notice that before?' So good luck to you."

He laughed. "Thanks."

Though he'd thought little of it at the time, as he read the first pages of Tenzing's book he was struck by the teacher's insistence that no experience was ever wasted and that one should pay due attention to even the most mundane and banal events in one's life. The whole world, according to Tenzing was pregnant with symbolism, meaning and significance. Indeed the world itself might be seen as a school.

So perhaps George's journey would not have been wasted after all as he had imagined, even had he failed to locate the book?

## 14. Under surveillance

Develin tossed the headset down on his desk and spun round and round in his swivel chair, punching the air with glee. “Yes, yes, yes! Develin, you are a ruddy genius!” he congratulated himself.

Following up on his request, Duval had come up with a list of possibilities for people using the name Tenzing. Apparently Tenzing was a given name amongst the Narayani and there couldn't be many of those about in the Freelands.

Duval had begun to read out the names and whatever details he and his people had been able to unearth. On and on he droned.

“Whoa Neddy, let me stop you there,” Develin had requested, impatiently drumming his fingers on the desk. “Just how many Tenzings do you have on your list, Duval?”

“Well, um ... we've whittled it down to one hundred and forty six, sir.”

“For heaven's sake, man. Don't waste my valuable time. You'll simply have to whittle down the list some more. Start by looking for people who are resident in the Freelands and are specifically in a position to offer assistance to these people we're looking for.”

Days had passed and not having heard any further news from Duval, Develin had become more and more impatient. He found it deeply frustrating not being able to intervene directly and having to rely on such imbeciles.

Then Duval had been in contact once more. Again, he had begun to read off details of those on his short list. “Tenzing Brug, who imports rice, herbs and spices; Tenzing Cospa who runs some kind of religious monastery; Tenzing Jangbu Rinchen, a writer, publisher and guru ....”

When Develin heard this name, he could feel the hair on his arms stand up on end. “That last one,” he had interrupted. “Say that name again.”

“Tenzing Jangbu Rinchen,” Duval had repeated. “A writer, publisher and guru.”

“Now that one sounds promising. Let's not put all our eggs in

the one basket, though. This short list of yours Duval. I want you to put them all under surveillance. But this guru fellow: I want you to watch him especially closely.”

“Your wish is my command, Lord ....” Duval had begun, but he'd already been cut off.

As if this were not good enough, however; it got even better. In his investigations, following up on one of Develin's hunches, Duval had been through the publisher's catalogue and come across a book by one of this guru's followers. The title, *Lost Souls*, was intriguing enough. But what really clinched it was that the writer had used the pen name Marie Lightwater. There was no doubt in Develin's mind. This had to be the girl that everyone was looking for. But still there was no sign of the lad.

Duval had wanted to know what to do next and, after much deliberation, Develin had decided to bide his time. “I want her under close observation, Duval. Worm your way into her life and her home. And look for anything that might lead you to her long, lost brother, Dillon Lightwater. If you haven't come across him by now, it's likely that the pair have become separated. It's a long shot, of course, yet this homing instinct is built into these people at a core level and is not to be underestimated. With the aid of Source, there's always the possibility that they'll find one-another. Keep me posted.”

## 15. The courier

One of the local students, Barny Rudge, arrived at around noon that day, knocked at the door and let himself in. Jeanine had mixed feelings about that. On the one hand, she appreciated his acting as a courier between her and Rosalie and he might have taken it the wrong way had she insisted that he wait for her to answer the door. And on the other, it was her apartment, her space, and she didn't like being taken for granted or taken advantage of. He always seemed to arrive just as she was making lunch and somehow got himself invited to stay for a cup of tea, sometimes a bite to eat, and – he being quite the inquisitive type – they inevitably had a long chat.

She waited until he'd gone, then turned her attention to the mail. Some of it was for her, but the bulk was from would-be students whose correspondence, Rosalie felt, could adequately be handled by her. Most of the questions that were asked had already been answered at one or other time and replying was pretty routine. They always tried to deliver a personal answer, however, rather than hand out preprinted stock responses, frequently reiterating that the answers to the questions were to be found in Tenzing's books and deliberately refraining from quoting chapter and verse. It was not their job to do these would-be students' homework for them.

Every now and again, Rosalie would pass on a letter that required a more thoughtful reply, and slowly but surely she was learning the ropes and growing better able to work out appropriate responses for herself without having to constantly consult Rosalie for a second opinion. “Go with your intuition,” Rosalie would advise her.

She dealt with this correspondence first, before turning her attention to her own mail.

When she came to George Ivanovich Kovak's email, Jeanine scanned quickly through it, remembering that mouthful of a name, and was glad to see that he'd taken the trouble to read some of Tenzing's work and found it stimulating. As for the dream, she was momentarily taken aback when the figure in his dream,

whom he took to be Tenzing, told him they called it “the Waterfall.” That wasn't common knowledge, though it could have been a lucky guess. And she was also taken by the phrase “The important thing is that you have made it to my door.” Tenzing had, indeed, said something very similar to her, when she'd first met him.

One thing that Tenzing did emphasize, however, was that whilst creative imagination was a good thing, folk were all too prone to what he called spurious imagination, which could cause all manner of difficulties. So, with that in mind, she decided to file the email away with a note to keep an eye on further developments, if any.

Later that afternoon, however, she dug out George's email and read it through once more, then set it down on the table whilst she prepared the evening meal, in two minds as to whether or not she should reply.

No, Jeanine decided, as she washed up after the meal. Rosalie had already indicated that she'd asked to be kept posted about any future developments. So let's leave it at that for now.

The following morning, however, just as young Barny Rudge was leaving, Jeanine had a sudden change of heart and had him wait whilst she typed up a quick note. The lad sidled over to take a furtive look at what she was writing. She expressed interest in these dreams George Ivanovich Kovak had been having and suggested that if he were still interested, perhaps he might like to write back to her directly and arrange a meeting at their mutual convenience in Sher Point. If he was in need of overnight accommodation, then she could arrange a room for him at one of the nearby guest houses.

## 16. Disappointment

More than a little disheartened as the days went by, since he had not heard from Marie Lightwater herself, George had turned his attention back to his writing to keep the pot boiling. Yesterday he'd written a technical piece for a computer magazine; today it was another Bettie Wainwright mystery for local radio, which still left him with some time on an evening to take a more leisurely approach to reading Tenzing's *The Veils of Truth* with a break halfway through to watch an episode of *The Ministry* on the television, a darkly satirical situation comedy set in the corridors and halls of government which had him howling with laughter.

No doubt inspired by recent events, George had another lucid dream that night. He was standing in the little esoteric bookshop he'd come across in Lakeside and the dumpy little lady at the shop, Gertie, had led him through the shop and pointed to a door at the back of the premises.

"Through you go, ducks," the lady had advised and as he approached, the door opened up before him. As he entered a dimly-lit, grey and green corridor, the door gently swung to behind him with the squeak of dry hinges and he had to grope his way forward in the dark. As his eyes grew a little more accustomed to the darkness, he thought he could see light ahead and he gingerly headed toward it, emerging at length at a steep flight of stone steps. At the head of the steps was another door, which was ajar, letting in a bright shaft of sunlight.

George pushed the door open and stepped inside the room beyond. Looking around, he could see that he was in a large library and that the light was coming from a wonderful glass dome set in the ceiling, as well as through several stained-glass windows that lined two of the walls.

"Welcome," came a voice from further down the library, and the voice echoed around the walls. George turned on his heel and saw that it was Tenzing.

The master anticipated his question. "Where am I?' you ask, young man. You're back in our retreat at the Waterfall, high up in the northern mountain ranges of Narayana."

“As to 'why am I here?', we could say that I am here because of *you* and that you are here because of *me*.”

Tenzing motioned toward the double doors at one end of the library and they walked together through the doors and down a long, wide corridor lined with all manner of art which, Tenzing said, was the work of some of the students who'd passed through the school over the years.

“But some of these paintings look so old,” George remarked.

“It's a very old school,” Tenzing told him.

“Seriously, why am I here?” he asked.

“I want you to meet someone and spend some time with them, young man, in order that we may find answers to that question.”

“Call me George,” he offered.

“George it is, then. Now we're making progress. I meant to ask the first time we met, but you slipped away before I had the chance to ask.”

That was a strange thing to say.

Tenzing guided him down another long corridor to the right, through a room which appeared to be Tenzing's office and into a cosy book-lined study.

“Ah, we appear to be a little early. So if you'd like to take a seat, I'll go and see if I can locate Hubert. I shan't keep you waiting long. Oh, and I'll see if I can find one of the dinner ladies to make us up a pot of tea and a nibble.” With that, Tenzing was off.

The settee on which George was sitting was upholstered in shiny brown leather and it squeaked as he shifted about on it, as if he were farting, which quite amused him. As this thought crossed his mind, he experienced a peculiar sensation of *deja-vu*.

Five minutes later, Tenzing was back, bringing with him another man who was quite tall and sprightly for his evident age. He rose to greet them and shook the man's hand as Tenzing introduced them, then the master motioned to the seats and they sat down just as one of the ladies arrived with a trolley.

“Shall I serve it now, Tenzing?” she asked.

“It's alright, Doris, I'll sort it out. Thank you for your effort. How do you like it, George?”

He was actually a coffee addict rather than a tea belly, not

that it really mattered. “Milk and two sugars, please, and as strong as it comes.”

“I’ll let it brew for a while longer, then. What about you Hubert? Weak to middling with a dash of milk and one sugar?”

“That’ll do nicely,” smiled the man, taking the cup from Tenzing.

“So what do you do, Hubert?” asked George, feeling a little awkward and eager to make polite conversation.

“Oh, I’m one of the elder abbots,” Hubert informed him.

That sounded pretty high ranking.

“And are you an elder abbot, Tenzing?”

Tenzing shook his head. “No, I’m just a teacher and an administrator. I’m the public face of the Order: what you might call the front man. I say ‘man’, but the post has been held by several notable women in the past.”

That surprised him.

“It surprises most people,” Hubert said, as if he’d read George’s mind. “As far as his students are concerned, Tenzing is what we call the Pole Star, the Teacher of the Age. And that is, after all, the task with which he has been commissioned. Our Order is not organized hierarchically, however, it’s more of a functional arrangement or, you might say, a meritocracy.”

“I see.”

“Now down to business, young man,” Hubert told him, putting down his cup and saucer. “I’m going to tell you a story which will go some way to solving a riddle that has perhaps puzzled you from birth and also vexed us for some considerable time. Chances are that when you wake up, you will have little recollection of what has gone on here, tonight. Bless him, even Tenzing is not fully present here and will forget. But God Willing, my friend, help for you will soon be at hand.”

“To begin with, the realm which you take to be your everyday reality, the ‘real world’ as you use that term to describe the concrete, physical plane, is not the only reality. Far from it. There are many more planes of existence: some below the world you inhabit and many, many hidden or invisible realms above and beyond it.”

“Here you are today, perhaps even knowing that you are dreaming, George. Perhaps thinking that it is nothing more than

the workings of a fertile and over-active imagination. You're still a good ways distant from us, in what might loosely be termed the 'ethereal' or the 'astral' realms, but nonetheless, this is no ordinary dream and you are not in the Shadowlands any more, though alas that is where you will return when you awaken, since – if you'll forgive me being so direct – you are still so unregenerate.

“To get back to the story. A calamity of cosmic proportions and dire consequences once befell the land which was then called the Eden Project.”

“Where's that?”

“It's now referred to by us as the Shadowlands. I believe you know it as the Outlands, which lie to the west; the Freelands to the south, and Narayana which is in the east. By that I don't mean the Ocean that is Greater Narayana, of course, but Lower Narayana and the limits of people's understanding of the true nature of Narayana.

“Anyhow, this catastrophe threw things out of alignment and, as a consequence, over the years our link to what we call the Source has weakened considerably. You may not know it, but sentient life is dependent upon the life-giving energies and subtle communications of the Source. This has made it very difficult for us to continue with our Work, as we need to be attuned to the divine Design and to the call of Necessity.

“Many moons ago, a race known as the Sirians installed a caretaker system called Psi. This was designed to alleviate matters and see us through this bleak period until such time as a cosmic realignment occurred and linkage to the Source was re-established.

“It was a very advanced technology and the Sirians would never let us anywhere near their hardware, which was said to be based in seven secret powerhouses, one for each of the world's seven continents.

“Some time later, the Sirians were forced to leave the sector altogether, taking with them all knowledge of the hardware. However, they did allow us access to terminals connected to Psi, so that we might continue to operate the system in a caretaker capacity. Furthermore – and this is getting closer to the matter before us – the terminals may be used for what you might call teleportation purposes, to enable representatives of the caretakers

to travel to and from the Shadowlands.

“Having said that, this teleportation of which I speak is not the transfer of physical matter from one place to another but something far more refined.”

“So where do you and I fit into this grand scheme of things?” George asked.

“If you'll forgive me, we'll come to the part you play a little later, George. As for me, I am one such representative affiliated with the Caretaker Council, as it has become known.”

“You mean you've used this Psi system to transport yourself here.”

“As I said, it's not a physical transfer. Let's say that Hubert here has lent me his body for a time.”

George was quite shocked by that. “That sounds like a case of 'possession.’”

“Well, I suppose it is, really. Yes, you could look at that way. In days of yore it's been termed the descent of the holy spirit.”

“So if he's Hubert, who are you?”

“You may call me Rifatzada, if you wish. Or Hubert. It doesn't really matter which.”

“Okay, Rifatzada. But what about me, if that doesn't sound too egotistical?” he asked.

“Very well. Wind forward to more recent times. Around the time of your own birth, in fact.

“Picture the scene: the link with the Source is at an all time low. The Shadowlands are shrouded in dark clouds of negativity. This corrosive negativity is beginning to threaten the whole sector. The Caretaker Council calls an emergency meeting to discuss what is to be done. These are desperate times you are living in – yes, right here and now. Desperate measures are called for ...

“The chair of the Council favours further research into a possible malfunction in the Psi system that may account at least in part for the deteriorating circumstances. Regional Command is contacted and they appear to broadly agree with this approach and they in turn contact High Command. High Command put the kibosh on that idea. They decree that the workers are to be evacuated and the experiment once known as the Eden Project is to be terminated ...

“Now the Chair of the Council has a daughter and when she hears about the decision – which basically signs the death warrant of over six billion mortal souls – she is aghast. She enlists the help of her brother; they sneak into their father's private study and into the transporter room. She sets the controls and they make their descent into the Shadowlands with some apparently ill thought-out notion that they can somehow come to the planet's rescue.

“Back at the Council, the folk search high and low for the pair, who've gone missing, and eventually discover what has happened. But for reasons unknown – perhaps due to a mistake in setting the controls of the transporter; perhaps, some think, the work of the Dread Lord Develin's minions – they cannot locate the pair and hence they cannot bring them back.”

When he heard that name, a cold shiver blew right through George. “I've known that name before,” he told Hubert urgently. “And I've had dreams about him. Terrible dreams.”

Then: “I believe that the girl you're looking for is a writer who goes under the name of Marie Lightwater. She's written a book which, though it contains rather different details has the same kind of pattern to it. She called the book *Lost Souls*. So all you have to do is to find her, which shouldn't be difficult, since she's one of Tenzing's students.”

He looked toward Tenzing who was seated opposite them, but he was far away, staring as if transfixed, into space. He was away with the fairies.

“As I said, even Tenzing will remember little of this dream when he awakens, bless his cotton socks. Nor Hubert, for that matter.”

“So you're not him?”

“Wake up, sleepy head,” Rifatzada laughed at him. “We've already had that conversation.”

“Sorry,” George replied, rubbing his eyes and having some more of his tea.

“No, as I said, I'm using Hubert as a conduit and he's doing his best to translate and to interpret. You see, mine is the language of the heart and yours of the head and he's a bridge or go-between, squaring the circle as it were.”

“But I presume you will remember, Rifatzada. And you

know where he is. You can easily contact him.”

“Do you know how far I've had to descend in order to contact you, George? Further than I'd care to imagine. You see, I can't contact Tenzing in that manner. Oh, it's so simple when you know and yet so very hard to explain ...” He paused for a moment, as if searching his mind.

“Like trying to explain the taste of chunky marmalade?” George enquired, remembering Tenzing's words in his second book. What cannot be explained may yet be communicated through direct or shared experience.

Hubert was still miles away and George feared he might have fallen asleep, too.

“But you have a name now, Rifatzada. Get Hubert to write it down. I simply don't see what the problem is.”

“Alas, from where I'm standing, George, I can't see any easy solution. Though you understand to a certain extent what I am telling you, when I look at you through my own eyes, as it were, I'm not aware of names and other labels. You could tell me that her name was Marie Lightwater; that she had long brown hair, lived at such-and-such an address and worked as a schoolteacher and I wouldn't be able to locate her. Now if you told me that she had certain qualities or a characteristic signature, then yes, I could sense those qualities and know when I had encountered someone possessing those same qualities. But let's say she's kind, generous to a fault, enthusiastic ... and, even if I were to discount countless weeds and plants of different species, still it would be like looking for a particular ear of corn in a field full. And then there would still be the difficulty of communicating what I'd found to others who operate in her plane and time and are able to offer her assistance. Do you see what I'm driving at?”

“I think so.”

“Yes, but you don't know so, George.”

“And you think that I might be this girl's brother? That would go a long way to explaining what I've been through.”

“Yes,” Hubert nodded. “Either that or else you've been through a similar experience. Whichever way it is, you are in need of help, I can see that.”

“You know, Hubert, perhaps I can help in some small way? Having read some of Marie Lightwater's work, I've contacted her

and I could contact her again. It's possible that I might remember fragments of these dreams: sufficient to arouse her interest.”

“Well, that would be a start, at least,” Hubert nodded. “And I'll see what may be accomplished at my end.”

“Is there no other way out of the Shadowlands?” George asked.

“Well, yes, naturally. Remember that Psi is merely an artificial substitute for something very real and alive. It's a stand-in for what can be achieved through genuine spiritual progress in particular and more generally what we might call the evolution of consciousness. Having said that, with the link to the Source so out of alignment, it's not at all easy for anyone to escape from the Shadowlands, even with the aid of Psi. You see, the Shadowlands exert a very strong and growing 'gravitational pull', you might say, all the more so on the dense and unregenerate soul. And, as you've probably already discovered, folk tend to fall asleep and forget their heart's true desire and their mission in life and soon succumb to what we call the 'Shadowlands Disease.'

“Anyhow, keep your chin up, George. I think we've shared enough for now. I'll see you another time.”

The man clicked his fingers and as he did so, George awoke to find himself alone, in bed.

For a fleeting moment he remembered the dream, but not in detail, rather as a pattern or picture in his mind. Scrabbling for his pen and opening the notepad he always kept by his bed, he jotted down the few words that still sprang to mind, then having washed and dressed in haste, dashed downstairs to fire up Old Faithful. Poor thing, she was getting old and the fan at the back of the housing vibrated badly until it warmed up, even given the odd squirt of oil.

While the machine was booting up he went through to the kitchen and grabbed a coffee and a roll-up. Breakfast could wait.

*Dear Rosalie and Marie, he wrote.*

*I had the most extraordinary dream last night. I saw Tenzing again and another man whose name now escapes me. I do know that he referred to himself as an elder, No, an abbot.*

*One thing I do remember is that this place in which we live is in some kind of terrible danger. Some kind of catastrophe has befallen the land which causes people to fall into a state of sleep*

*and forget. The lands were once known as Arden (?) though I think he said that they were now called the Dark Lands (?) for obvious reasons. Sorry it's all so vague, I'm racking my brains here. I have this elusive picture of the dream and keep snatching snapshots of it. Then I lose it again.*

*What I do know is that it was decided that the experiment be ended in some way. I presume that meant violently ended. On hearing this, two children – a brother and a sister – decided that they would come down here to help out. But somehow they got lost and people are searching for them. I know it sounds crazy, but I believe that you, Marie, were one of those children and that I am your brother, at least “in spirit.” Oh, yes, now get this. The search began around the time of our birth.*

*Don't know if this will mean anything to you but one name that was mentioned was Devilin (?). Maybe that's the tyrant we know as Duval?*

*Oh, yes. I also remember telling the abbot my name and yours, too, because I thought given those names he'd have no problem locating us: especially you, being a student of Tenzing. But he said even Tenzing would remember little of the dream when he woke up and that in any case, names and labels didn't mean anything to him or at least were of no use to him. His language is that of the heart, not the head, and he was using an associate of Tenzing as some kind of “go-between” and could only locate us by looking for qualities. I tell you, that was a bit over my head.*

*Well, that's it really. I hope this means something to you and that it helps you in some way. Would it be too much to ask to meet up somewhere sometime?*

*Best regards,*

*George Ivanovich Kovak.*

Without further ado, George clicked the button and sent the email on its way, hoping and praying that they wouldn't mark him down as a crazy person and call in the men in the rubber gloves and the long white coats.

Then George had another thought. Just in case his message ended up in the spam can, he printed out the email and went off to the post box to post it by snail mail to the publisher's land address.

Having read the message back to himself some time later, and trying to put himself in Rosalie and Marie's shoes, he found himself cringing at this fumbling attempt to communicate, but there was nothing he could do now to rectify that. If he were to send off a follow up, in an effort to explain himself better, he might only make matters worse.

## 17. Duval

Rosalie Muller had an important appointment in town early that morning, so she'd left her key under a plant pot just round the side of her house and had given young Barny Rudge instructions to let himself in and begin work without her. He was to file away the previous day's correspondence and go along to collect some office supplies she'd previously ordered from the local stationer's, then await her return, which shouldn't be long after.

In her haste to leave, Rosalie had left her computer plugged in and switched on, which didn't escape the lad's attention and, waving the mouse to dismiss the screen saver, he opened up her email client to have a look through the messages that the sad anoraks had sent her today.

Rudge had flicked through half a dozen boring old farts asking the most banal questions, skipping several messages that were clearly spam, when he came across the name George Kovak. He was the guy who'd been writing about his dreams. Jeanine had sent him a letter suggesting they might meet up, but – oh deary, deary, me – the letter must have accidentally got lost in the post. So much for the competition, he sneered.

When he read the latest email that Kovak had written, however, his heart started thumping heavily in his chest. Duval's people would pay him a whole heap of money for this information. He entered his contact's email address and clicked on the button to forward it, careful to delete the email from the inbox and also the copy of the forwarded message from the sent folder.

Then he was on the phone. “Yes, Halliwell? This is Barny Rudge and *do* I have something for you. Take a look in your inbox. You're looking for a forwarded email with the subject 'Catastrophe.' This Marie Lightwater must be who you've been looking for. Her real name is Jeanine Gardner. No, Gardner with only the one 'e'. And it could be that this other bloke Kovak is in on it, too.”

He waited impatiently as the guy on the other end of the phone read through the email. Come on you ass-hole, I haven't

got all frigging day.

“Ah, you're back. You think so, as well? It's red hot information, this, you know. So you'd better make it worth my while. You'll be in touch later? Right. I'm looking forward to it.” And with that, he hung up. Oh, shit. Better close the email client down, too. Now, that would have been a bit of a giveaway.

That done, he set about the god-awful task of filing away the letters and emails, let himself out and hoofed it to the shop before Her Ladyship returned.

When Duval heard about this precious piece of information he was cock-a-hoop. After all these years, those little darlings Dillon and Marie Lightwater had been located. And not by the Caretakers but by him.

“We could command a pretty price for them,” suggested Halliwell on the other end of the speaker phone.

“Command a pretty price? For crying out loud, man, what good would another few million do me? Don't be so petty minded.”

“Then what do you suggest?”

Of course, that would be up to Lord Develin, but he wasn't going to tell that to his minion.

“How's about a sprat to catch a mackerel? No, let's think big. Let's say a mackerel to catch a whale. First things first. You have the man's email address, so send him an urgent reply asking him to meet somewhere just outside Sher Point. How's about under the old railway bridge across the river? Give the fellow a jolly good going over, then bring him here.”

“What should you tell him? Do I have to spell everything out? For heaven's sake, man: go online and create an email account in her name. Tell him you, that is Marie Lightwater, got his message and that their lives are in danger. Spin him a good yarn.”

“The girl? Oh, we'll take her later. No, don't you handle it, I'll get someone to sort her out. What's that you say? Rudge? Who's he when he's at home? Oh your informant: I see. Well, once we have the girl, I think we can dispense with his services, tie up loose ends as it were, don't you? If a fellow like that will squeal for us, he'll show no compunction in squealing for them – and we need that like a hole in the head.”

“Get it? Got it? Good. I’ll speak to you later.”

Duval sprang from his seat and did a little jig around the room in celebration. He’d have to inform Lord Develin about these developments, but that could wait until he had the lad in custody and he had something of real substance to report.

## 18. Under the bridge

At around ten o'clock that same morning, George heard the unmistakable ping letting him know that he had mail. It was some time before he managed to pluck up the courage to check who it was from. Heart in mouth, he opened up his email client and saw a new message there.

*To: George Kovak*

*From: Marie Lightwater*

*Re: Catastrophe*

*George, just got your email, sorry for the delay in getting back to you. When I read your email a quiver went right through me. I've waited for this moment all my life and now I can't believe this is really happening.*

*But listen, Duval is onto us and our lives are in danger. Pack a few clothes in a bag and take the first available bus to Sher Point. Don't go anywhere near Rosalie's house or my apartment and don't send a reply to this email. Instead, meet me under the Sher Point side of the railway bridge across the river. I'll have a car waiting. If you get off the bus at the railway station, turn sharp left at the exit and it's only five minutes walk away down Station Road.*

*Take care. Regards,*

*Marie.*

George was about to power-down his computer but the thought crossed his mind that she wouldn't recognize him when they met, so he printed off a copy of the email, folded it up and stuffed it in the back pocket of his faded jeans. Oh and best take his travel documents along, just in case there was a routine inspection on the bus.

Then he hoofed it upstairs, got a small haversack down from on top of the wardrobe and stuffed a few clothes in. Should he take money or food? She hadn't said. Still, he could always get money out of the bank if needs be. Best leave that until they met up.

Turning off the lights and triple checking that the taps weren't dripping and that the gas fire was out, he locked up and sprinted

down the road, oblivious to the rain, toward the bus stop. Providing the bus drivers hadn't gone on strike again over low pay and poor working conditions, there should be a bus due at any moment.

It was about an hour's ride into Sher Point, so despite the many questions which raced through his mind, by the time he'd arrived George had managed to settle himself a little. As Marie had said it took him just under five minutes to make it from the railway station to the bridge and he took the steep steps down to the path under the bridge two at a time. There was some green slime on the steps near the bottom and George all but took a tumble in his haste.

He was surprised to find the place deserted and he looked furtively about him and quietly called Marie's name. Then he heard a footfall on the steps and, turning, he saw two youths coming down toward him.

“George?” called one, extending his hand in greeting. “Leon Smart. Marie send us to pick you up.”

He reached forward to shake the man's hand and as he did so, the other man suddenly lashed out at him, catching him round the back of the knees, so that his legs buckled under him and he fell backwards, cracking his head on the ground.

Momentarily stunned, George rolled over and tried to pick himself up but the first man kicked out at him, catching him in the ribs and making him gasp for breath. Then the two of them rained a torrent of blows on him.

“Okay, that's enough Grant,” he thought he heard one of them say at length. They sounded so dim and distant. “Let's get him to the car.”

Just as George was beginning to lose consciousness, he heard shouting from further down the path and, in a blur, glimpsed people running toward him. And then he knew no more.

When he finally woke up, feeling very groggy and extremely bewildered, it was to find himself in bed in a hospital side ward, aching all over and with a terribly swollen face by the feel of it. A police officer was there sitting by his bed, and when he'd come to his senses, the man patiently explained to him what had happened. Yes, he remembered now it all made sense. A nurse popped her head round the door at that moment and, seeing that

George was awake, she came across to ask how he was feeling, and to check him over. When the nurse had gone, the policeman told him that he was ready to take a statement whenever George was up to it.

## 19. The news breaks

Jeanine had just come in from an afternoon out in town with Rosalie. They'd done some shopping, then visited a Narayani restaurant and filled themselves to bursting point on lamb in a spicy sauce, served with rice and unleavened bread, and liberally washed down with a couple of glasses of red wine.

She looked at her watch and switched on the television to catch the local early evening news and had just returned from making herself a pot of tea when she was alerted by mention of a familiar name. She reached forward and quickly turned up the volume.

*Police are appealing for witnesses to this brutal beating of Mister Kovak and would ask anyone who was in Station Road or the Station Road end of the railway bridge and bankside path around eleven to twelve o'clock today to come forward.*

*Though badly beaten and suffering two fractured ribs, lacerations and extensive swelling and bruising, George Kovak is said to be in a satisfactory condition. It is believed that he will be kept in hospital overnight for observation and may leave Yulegate hospital tomorrow.*

*And now onto other news. In a surprise move ....*

Jeanine switched the television off. Could that be the George Kovak who'd been writing to her, she wondered? Strange that she'd invited him to meet her and yet he hadn't as yet replied.

She flipped through her phone book and found the number for Yulegate, phoning them on the off-chance that it was him.

“Hello, yes. It's Jeanine Gardner and I'm phoning about a George Kovak who was brought in earlier today? Hang on a minute, what I need to ask is whether he's George Ivanovich Kovak. OK, I'll wait ...”

“Oh, he is. Thank you. No, I'm not family, I'm a friend. He's comfortable? Good. And when can I come and visit him? Any time between seven and eight thirty this evening, I see. Great, thank you so much. I'll be along right away. Bye.”

Slipping her shoes and coat on and skipping her make-up, Jeanine was there within half an hour and walked briskly down

the corridor to side ward 4. The place reeked of hospital disinfectant. Taking a deep breath, she entered and looked around the small ward. There was only one bed occupied by a very sorry looking man about her own age. As she walked up to the bed she could see from the sign above the bed head that this was indeed George Kovak and he looked in a pretty bad way, his arm bandaged and face badly bruised and swollen.

“My, we have been in the wars, George,” she lilted. “I’m Jeanine Gardner.” She held out her hand and he waved at her with his undamaged left arm. “Hello there, what can I do for you?” he slurred. “And don’t worry unduly: I was reliably informed by the nurse that the damage is not as bad as it looks. The fractures to the ribs are only minor.”

“You probably know me by my pen-name, Marie Lightwater,” she told him and his eyes lit up and he forced a smile.

“Hey! Good to meet you at long last.”

“So what happened?”

“I sent you an email about another dream I had,” he began to explain.

“You mean you sent an email to Rosalie, my agent?”

He nodded. “Yes, and I received an urgent reply from you, asking me to meet you under the railway bridge.”

She was puzzled by this. “You say I sent you a reply. Not Rosalie?”

“Yes, you. If you go into the bedside cabinet and fish about in the back pocket of my jeans, you’ll find a copy of your email in there.”

It made little sense, but she did as he asked and as she unfolded the email and read the contents, she grew deeply concerned.

“But this email is a fake. I don’t have an email account. In fact, as yet I don’t even have a computer. Have you shown this to the police?”

“No,” the man shook his head. “I was too bewildered to make the connection.”

“So, if this is the reply, can you remember what you said in the original email to me?”

“More or less,” George told her, painfully shuffling a little

further up in bed, and the man went through what he'd written in detail and said that he'd also sent a copy in the post, care of Rosalie, which should arrive in the next day or two.

There were certain things about the dream that quite surprised and fascinated her. What surprised her was that George referred to the other man in the dream as an “elder” or “abbot”.

“Tenzing mentioned the elder abbots or secret chiefs to me, though he provided no details,” she told him. “And you speak of Arden. Could that have been 'Eden'?”

“Yes, that's it! The Eden Project, if I recall correctly. Maybe that bang on the head did me some good?” George tried to laugh, then winced with the apparent pain.

“That's what I was about to suggest,” she told him. “And the Dark Lands? It's said that in the higher realms this world is known as the Shadowlands.”

The man thought for a moment. “Yes, again, that would be it. The Shadowlands.”

When the man mentioned the name “Devilin”, she felt a wave of fear hit her and she clutched the arm of the bedside chair until the wave subsided. “Yes, I've heard that name before. And I think it's likely that this is the man we know as Duval. Tenzing has referred to him at least once as the Dread Lord Develin. Yes, I am inclined to think that he and Duval are one and the same.”

“So, now do you believe me, Marie? I mean Jeanine. Or do you have me down as some kind of lunatic?”

She smiled as a tingling wave of ecstasy ran up her spine and bristled her scalp. “Oh good heavens! I think what we need to do is take you along to meet Rosalie and Tenzing,” she decided. “And no, I don't think you're crazy. Oh my, I really *do* think you're on to something.”

“And that we should be very careful,” the man added.

“Yes, indeed,” she agreed. Then: “Tell me, a while ago, I sent you a letter inviting you to meet up with me in Sher Point. Did you ever receive that letter?”

“No,” he replied.

“You're sure?”

“I'm positive. That's not the kind of thing that I'd forget or ignore or hide under the carpet. When you go home, maybe it would be an idea to check with Rosalie to see if the email I sent

you turned up, Jeanine.”

“Yes, I was thinking that myself,” she agreed. “According to the police appeal on the local news, they’ll probably be letting you out tomorrow after observation. Do you know when?”

“The ward sister said it would be sometime after the doctors did the morning rounds. Maybe around lunchtime, all being well. They were going to keep me in for a couple of days, but since nothing was broken and I’m free of concussion, I managed to persuade them otherwise.”

“Good. Well, tell you what ...” She fished in her shoulder bag and found a pen and paper. “Here’s my phone number and my address, George. Let me know when you’re due to leave and I’ll come by in a taxi to pick you up and take you back to my apartment for a chat. Oh, heavens! And meanwhile I’ll have a word with Rosalie. She’s Tenzing’s deputy and lives just round the corner from me.”

“So where’s Tenzing?”

“He’s at the retreat in Narayana at the moment. Yes, George, they really *do* call it the Waterfall and when I met him, Tenzing also said to me that I had made it to his door and that this was all that really mattered. It’s all beginning to fit together like a jigsaw puzzle. After all these years ...”

“Anyhow,” she smiled, unsure of where she could give the man a friendly pat for all the bruises. “I’ll see you soon. Take care.”

“Thank you, Jeanine,” he beamed as she scurried off excitedly. “Really. Thank you so much.”

## 20. A cosy weekend

Things were running a little behind schedule the following day apparently, but at one thirty, George Kovak phoned Jeanine to let her know that he'd been discharged and asked if she could pick him up, unless of course she'd changed her mind. It was only a ten minute ride in the taxi cab and they were there. After some protest, Jeanine reluctantly let him pay the fare.

"I went to see Rosalie earlier this morning," she told him as she unlocked the door and led the way up the rickety stairs and into her apartment. George was still in some pain and could only walk slowly and stiffly, so she didn't rush him. "And though your letter had already safely arrived in the express mail, there was no sign of your email."

"Did she check the spam folder?" George asked as she offered him a seat on the settee and went across to the kitchen area to make a pot of tea. He remained standing and followed her over to the breakfast bar and sat down there on a high stool.

"Oh, coffee for me please. If that's alright by you?"

"Sure. Yes, she says she always checks in there because recently the anti-spam program has been a little over-zealous, marking legitimate mail as spam."

"Well, clearly someone intercepted the email *en-route* and used it to forge a reply," he observed. "The question is: did that happen before Rosalie picked up her email or afterwards – and if afterwards, do you know of any way in which someone could have seen the contents of the email and prevented it from reaching you?"

She told him how Rosalie filtered the mail, printed some of it out and sent it on to her via a courier, Barny Rudge, who was also one of Tenzing's students, under Rosalie's care as deputy of the Order.

"Maybe we should have a word with him?" George suggested. "Will you see him today?"

"Not today," Jeanine told him. "He phoned in sick this morning."

"And do you know where he lives?"

“Yes, he has a bedsit just round the corner from Rosalie.”

“Then perhaps we should pay him a visit?”

“In your condition? No, what you need is a few days rest, George. Why don't you stay the weekend until you're feeling a bit stronger and able to cope on your own?”

George shrugged. “Thank you. If you're sure that's not too much trouble.”

Jeanine laughed. “That's the kind of self-effacing turn of phrase that I was forever using when I first met Rosalie and Tenzing. No, it's not too much trouble or I wouldn't have asked. It's no trouble at all. Besides, I could do with the company. And heavens, we have *so* much to talk about.”

“Have you briefed Rosalie?” George asked.

“Yes, I've put her in the picture as much as I was able. She'll be around later today to look in on us.”

“And Tenzing?”

“Not as yet, as he's still out of the country. But don't worry, George, the wheels have been set in motion. Hopefully Rosalie and Tenzing will know what to do. Anyhow, George, you go through to the lounge and make yourself comfortable on the sofa, and when it's ready, I'll bring our drinks through.”

In spite of his bumps and bruises, George felt so good inside to know that progress was being made. And as for Marie, though he knew so little of her, there was something almost inexpressible about this woman that he really liked.

“So,” he said as Jeanine went back to the settee with a tray, handed him his coffee and offered him a biscuit. “Do you think that this Duval really is onto us?”

“It could be.”

“But for what reason?”

She shrugged.

“Perhaps if 'our people' want us back so desperately, then he might want us as some kind of bargaining chip?”

“I really don't know, George.”

“What I'm driving at is that we may both still be in danger.”

She nodded as she poured out her tea from a rather dinky little pot. “I think we should take precautions. Let's wait and see what Rosalie and Tenzing suggest.”

“Changing the subject, Jeanine. Do you have any more books

in the offing?”

“Well, I've made a start on one. Tenzing wondered if I might write up some of the experiences I and others have had when they've met him or spent time at the retreat. All the accounts would be lumped together as if they were the experiences of one mythical student, warts and all.”

“*Journeys with a Narayani Mystic?*”

“Yes, that sort of thing. And what about you, George?”

“Oh, my work is here, there and everywhere. Anything from a three line filler through short stories in women's magazines and articles in computer journals to a series of Bettie Wainwright mysteries for the radio ....”

“Really? You wrote those? Why, I quite often listen to Betty Wainwright. I didn't know.”

“That and a thousand and one other pot boilers,” he confessed.

“So where do you live?”

“Oh, a little village called Little Smithington on the outskirts of Pendlebury.”

“What a small world, Rosalie has a friend who lives there and often visits.”

“I used to live in a flat above a shop in Lower Westgate in Sher Point. What a dive that was. Every weekend the local drunks would be pissing and throwing up in the alley by the side of the shop, or kicking the shop windows in. It got so's I'd lay awake at night worrying. At the time I was working on a complex suite of programs that began to do my head in, so I decided to dump the computing, move to a better location and concentrate on my writing instead.”

“And has it worked out?”

“Well, I earn enough to keep the wolves from the door,” he told her. “But I still have to work all the hours God sends. Maybe I should have been born a normal person?”

“Aren't most of us born normal?”

“Yes, maybe we are. OK, I sometimes wish that I'd grown up to become a normal person. By that I mean someone who's willing to work in a boring job, marry, have two point one kids and content to leave their work behind rather than take it home with them. Someone who's satisfied with watching soap operas

and game shows on the television all night .... You know what I mean. Things would be so much simpler that way.”

“Yes, I think I *do*, George. So what are you striving for? What's your heart's true desire?”

“Sheesh, excuse me if I take a rain check on that one, Jeanine. I'm stumped for an answer to that right now.”

Then: “I think I've been trying to find and understand myself; looking for someone else to understand me, to recognize my qualities and talents ....”

“... Someone to love you?”

He thought about that for a moment. “Yes, you could be right there, Jeanine. And then, of course, there's this feeling that I don't really belong here. The same kind of questioning and restlessness and searching that you write about in *Lost Souls*.”

As he said this, George felt a delicious quiver run through him. That was happening more and more.

“Indeed. What do you want, George? What do you yearn for?”

“Quick answer?”

“Quick answer.”

“I'm tired and I want to go home,” he said, and there was a tear in his eye as he told her. “I want to be in love again.”

There was silence for a moment, then Jeanine spoke up again. “I think that's what I've found working with Tenzing. I've found my home in a sense, and I've found Love. Or at least I've had a good whiff of it.”

“So you think that's the way ahead?”

“Spirituality? Yes, it's certainly helped me. It's *a way* ahead. Perhaps the only way ahead ultimately.”

“And yet from what I've read, Jeanine, a lot of it boils down to abandonment.”

“Is that the real source of that feeling? Or is it that it hurts when you experience or think about your own sense of abandonment, George? Do you feel abandoned?”

“Yes, I guess I do. But by whom I'm not sure. Perhaps yet again this comes back to the ideas expressed in *Lost Souls*?”

“So you think that some bug-eyed aliens are going to come down in their little green flying machine, beam you up and take you back home to live happily ever after? Or that some master of

the Way might take you under his wing and fly you to paradise?”

“Ouch, ouch! That stung a little, Jeanine.”

“Sorry,” she smiled, rubbing his hand affectionately.

“If these caretakers really are looking for us and can't locate us to bring us home, Jeanine, then it could be that spiritual development is the only way of getting back home, unless you'd rather wait until you die of old age.”

“In the latter case, there's always the danger of being reborn here ...” she remarked. “According to Tenzing, a lot of hard work is needed to reach what he calls 'escape velocity.’”

Jeanine poured herself a second cup of tea and offered him another coffee, which he gleefully accepted. “If you'll excuse me for a few moments,” he said, “I'll just nip outside to stoke the boilers.” He waved the tobacco pouch in his hand.

“You can smoke in here. I don't mind.”

He shook his head. “No, really, it's a filthy habit and I'd rather smoke outside.”

As he clambered slowly back up the stairs and re-entered the flat, something crept into George's head and he turned to her. “By the way, do you ever dream of someone called Dillon?”

Jeanine raised her eyebrows. “Oh, my! Now that's a turn out for the books. I haven't revealed that name to anyone other than make a note of it in my diary.

“Yes,” she concurred. “He's featured in many a dream of mine.”

And it was at that moment that George's features seemed to change and she could see the face behind the cuts and bruises. “Oh heavens,” she gasped. “It really *is* you. Somewhat older, mind, but it is you.”

Rosalie Muller arrived about half an hour later that day, and was instantly shocked at the sight of George's battered state. “Lord, they *have* given you a pasting, haven't they? I'm so sorry to hear of your misfortune and glad to meet you all the same.”

Rosalie was not much older than him and Jeanine, though clearly more refined than he was and more well-to-do. But she seemed quite a jolly and amiable sort and he liked her from the outset.

The woman listened with avid attention as the two of them told her what little they could, attempting to fit the fragments of

their secret lives together to form a coherent whole.

“It's an astonishing story,” Rosalie agreed at length. “But I feel that there are as yet so many pieces of the picture missing.”

“So what should we do?” Jeanine asked.

“I have to confess that this is beyond the scope of my competence,” she told them.

“That sounds like the kind of thing a doctor might say before referring a patient for psychological evaluation.” This was George's instant reaction.

Rosalie shook her head. “No, no, you mistake my meaning.”

“What do you propose?”

The woman sat there for a moment with her hand lightly touching her forehead as if in deep thought. Then she said: “We had a case some while back which was not entirely dissimilar. It may be – and this *is* only a possibility – that deep down you actually remember more of these dreams that you've been having and of their significance than is available to you in your waking consciousness. Do you see what I mean?”

They nodded in unison.

“Now, there are techniques which are sometimes able to unlock these repressed and forgotten thoughts, feelings and memories. If it could be arranged, would you be willing to subject yourselves to such examination? No promises, mind.”

“It's worth a try,” said Jeanine.

“Why not?” he concurred. “What have we got to lose?”

“Well,” suggested Rosalie. “There is always the possibility that you may discover that these dreams are nothing more than the workings of spurious imagination.”

“Is that what you really think?” George wanted to know.

“Personally, no. But you should be aware of that possibility.”

“And this technique? Are there any other dangers?”

“Well, it could be that it brings painful memories to the surface that were repressed for a good reason. But other than that, none that I know of. Again, however, that's beyond the scope of my competence and you would have to speak to the lady I have in mind, Darman Kuna. What I will say is that to date, the lady has not let us down.”

“Is this going to involve another journey to Narayana?” enquired Jeanine.

“Not unless that is indicated. Darman Kuna has a house in the country, not far from Rampling.” That was to the south, little more than ten miles out of Sher Point.

“If you like, I could phone Darman Kuna and drive you there myself. Then you can talk with her at your leisure and decide whether or not you're willing to undertake the investigation.”

Looking at one-another, they were agreed and Rosalie borrowed the use of Jeanine's new telephone to make the necessary arrangements.

## 21. The consultation

The next day, Rosalie had picked them up and driven them out of the hustle and bustle of Sher Point, toward Rampling. They passed through the busy market town of Rampling and turned off the main road onto a narrow, winding country lane bordered by blossoming cherry trees and tall hedgerows, hoping that they wouldn't meet a farmer's cart coming the other way, for there were few points at which two vehicles could pass one-another.

Crossing a humpbacked bridge, they drove through a quaint little village and a short distance beyond that Rosalie pulled the car into the verge, outside a picturesque small, thatched cottage. They had arrived.

As they clambered out of the car and stretched their legs, an elderly lady came down the garden path to greet them. She looked a little frail and her shoulders had begun to round with old age, but she had a cheery disposition and welcomed them warmly as Rosalie introduced them.

“First order of the day, a nice warm pot of tea,” she smiled, guiding them into her tiny living room, which they entered directly through the front door. There was no hallway nor upper floor.

As they savoured their tea, they told Darman Kuna what they could of the recurring dreams they had and of their feeling that their true home lay elsewhere, and the lady listened with avid attention, every now and again asking some astute question that crossed her evidently agile mind.

“Yes,” she nodded, “I can see why you should come here now. And yes, I may be able to help you to unlock things that you already know in your hearts that you are not as yet consciously aware of.”

“Could you tell us how your techniques work?” George asked.

“Well, I can certainly tell you about the mechanics,” the lady said, and she went on to describe the procedure.

Having heard all that she had to say, they were unanimous in their agreement that they should go ahead.

“Good,” she smiled. “Now who would like to be first?”

George volunteered Jeanine and after a little light-hearted bargaining, she agreed.

“Would you like us to leave the room?” Rosalie asked.

Darman Kuna thought for a minute. “Well, I think you should stay, so that you can be what can we call it – an independent witness? My memory isn't quite as good as it once was and it would be useful if you could make a careful note of what's said, if that's alright with you?”

“Yes, that sounds like a good idea,” Rosalie agreed and she took out a pen and her notepad.

“Now as for you, young gentleman ...” Darman Kuna nodded in his direction. “If we're to arrive at the truth of the matter and not put ideas into one-another's heads, it might be better if you were out of earshot of what the young lady, Jeanine, has to say.”

“Yes,” he nodded. “That makes sense.” So she showed him through into the kitchen to the back door.

“Perhaps you might have a wander through the garden? It's a lovely sunny day and the roses are coming on a treat. You'll find a nice comfy seat over by the horse chestnut tree. I spend many a contented hour there, relaxing and drinking in the atmosphere.”

“Okay. Thank you.”



Darman Kuna rearranged the cushions on the settee in the living room and had Jeanine lay down. The settee was a little short, so that her feet poked out of one end, but she felt comfortable and didn't mind.

The lady asked her to look up toward the ceiling and focus on a strange star-like symbol that was inscribed on a small piece of paper and stuck between two of the dark brown oak beams.

“Don't try to concentrate hard on the design, however,” the lady advised her. “Just relax.”

For a time Darman Kuna had her go through each part of her body and first of all breath in and tense up and then relax, feeling herself sinking gently into the soft upholstery of the settee. And then the lady began to move her arms over Jeanine's body, starting at the toes, up her body and over her head, momentarily and repeatedly obscuring her vision and sight of the design.

Darman Kuna kept quietly humming a short phrase as she

worked and every now and again, the lady would blow gently across her face.

Within minutes, Jeanine could feel herself drifting off, as if into slumber, and yet her eyes were still open. Or at least she thought they were.

“Now, I want you to cast your mind back in time,” she heard a voice calling her. “Take yourself back, back, back to a time just before you were born here in the Shadowlands. Imagine yourself there, just before the descent. Look around you and describe your surroundings. Describe to us how you feel. And if you hear words or have thoughts, repeat them to yourself so that we can hear them, too. Be our eyes and ears and heart.”

For a few moments, Jeanine couldn't see anything. “It's all so dark,” she spoke. “I'm falling into darkness.”

“Leave that place and take yourself back to a time before the darkness enveloped you,” called a distant voice.

“It's light now. We're sitting in two reclining seats in a white room with a bright light on the ceiling above our heads. Opposite us is some kind of desk. But not like a writing desk.”

“Describe it to us.”

“It has knobs to turn and switches to press. And so many green and yellow, red and blue lights that it's lit up like a Harvest Holiday tree.”

“You say 'we'. Who are you and who are you with?”

“I'm Jeanine Gardner.”

“No, that's your adopted name, my dear. What's your name?”

She thought for a moment. “I'm Marie Lightwater.”

She heard someone whispering something, then the voice said “And that's the name you use when you write your books. What's your real name?”

“But I *am* Marie Lightwater.”

“I see. And who is that with you?”

She pulled herself up in the reclining chair and turned to look over toward the other chair.

“It's a youth. A youth about my own age, maybe? He looks frightened.”

“Frightened of what?”

“I don't know.”

“And what's he called, Marie?”

“I can't remember.”

“Think back. What's this young man's name?”

“I don't know.”

“Why don't you ask him? He's certain to know his own name.”

“Who are you?” she called across the room.

The young man turned his craned his neck toward her. “I'm frightened.”

“What about?” she asked him.

“I'm scared of going down to the Shadowlands.”

“Right. And what's your name?”

“Don't be silly, it's me: Dillon.”

“It's Dillon! He's my brother,” she blurted out. “I'd almost given him up for lost. I've searched and searched for him, hoping he was still alive.”

“And do you know where you are? Why don't you stand up from your seat and have a look around, Marie. Take your brother Dillon with you.”

“I can't. There are metal restraints on my arms and legs now. And I think I'm about to start falling again!”

“Stop right there and cast your mind back still further, Marie. Take yourself back to the time before you entered the white room and sat down in those chairs.”

Jeanine was silent for a time, then she spoke again.

“Okay. There are a lot of people milling around in the house. And now they're going through into another room.”

“Follow these people and describe what you see.”

“They've gone into a hall. It's got a squeaky dark brown wooden floor, a highly polished floor. And there are several rows of seats arranged and a dais at the front. It must be some kind of meeting. I'm taking a seat now, not far from Dillon.”

“And do you recognize any of the faces there?”

“Yes, yes! There's my father at the front. He's standing behind a dais and he's addressing the audience.”

“Tell us what he's saying.”

“Someone's just come in the room and he's been handed a piece of paper. That's strange. Things seemed to suddenly jump forward there and I missed what he had to say.”

“Not to worry, Marie. Tell me what he has to say about this

bit of paper he's been handed.”

“It's grave news. High Command have informed them that the experiment is to be terminated.”

“And do you know what that means? What experiment are they talking about?”

“Something has gone wrong, that I *do* know. I'm feeling anxious about it all. They say that in the Shadowlands there is so much negativity building up that it's threatening us up here, too. So the experiment is to be terminated.”

“And do you know what that means?”

“I think it means that they're going to blow up the Shadowlands or something like that. They're going to kill six billion people.”

“Do you know that for a fact?”

“No, but that's my impression.”

“And the Shadowlands? You mentioned that place before when you were telling me about the dreams. Where are they?”

“That's what they call our world.”

“Our world?”

“The Outlands, the Freelands, Narayana. Up here they call that the Shadowlands. It used to be called the Eden Project. That's the experiment they're talking about. They seeded life there, aeons ago.”

“And 'up here'? Where is this?”

“This is Arcadia. Poets sometimes call it Arcady, not that they have a clue about it's real location.”

Suddenly, Jeanine froze. A sixth sense told her that she was being watched and she turned slowly round to see a man at the rear of the hall staring at her through piercing bloodshot eyes. A wave of primeval fear engulfed her and she jumped out of her seat.

When she came to her senses, Rosalie was guiding her back to the settee and Darman Kuna was offering her a glass of brandy to steady her nerves.

“Tell me what you saw, Jeanine. I know you're upset, but tell me now before you forget.”

Jeanine took a large gulp of the fiery liquid. “I saw the Dread Lord Develin sitting behind me in the hall,” she told them. “His stare was so intense.”

“And who is this Dread Lord Develin?” Rosalie asked. “I haven't heard that name before.”

The old lady looked a little shaken herself. “My own master once mentioned that accursed name. In the Freelands, he's known as Duval.”

So George had been right, Jeanine realized at that moment.

“But he's been banished to the Farthest Reaches,” said Rosalie.

“Perhaps so,” Darman Kuna said. “But as he wasn't killed, he may yet return. It was foretold long ago that there would be not two but three Great Wars in these lands. And on that distressing note, I suggest we take a break for some lunch, and then see what young George has to say for himself. In the meantime, if we're to be scientific about this, I suggest that we make no mention of what we have learnt from you, Jeanine.”



What George had to say as he described his own regression later that afternoon more than confirmed the tale that Jeanine had to tell. Though he hadn't seen this Develin in the hall, brought forward in time to talk of the dreams he'd had since childhood, he recalled that same phrase “Dread Lord Develin” and of his apparition in a series of nightmares he'd had from an early age. He became agitated for a time, but fortunately he didn't break out of the trance and he went on to describe his meetings with Tenzing.

“And this man whom you call Hubert, George. You say he is an elder abbot and yet though Tenzing once recited the Order's lineage to me, I don't recall hearing that name.”

He tried to explain about the apparition's language being the language of the heart, whilst his own was the language of the head, and how Hubert was being used to interpret between them.

“Ah, so you're saying that some entity was using Hubert as a sort of go-between or channel. Can you tell us more? Can you ask his purpose in being here?”

“No,” he said. “Hubert is with me again, looking rather bemused, and Rifatzada is gone.”

“Really?” the lady's voice sounded quite startled. “Do you know who Rifatzada is, George?”

“No, all I know is that I met him in this dream. He said he'd

descended a very long way to be there in what I think he called the astral or the ethereal plane.”

“Well, I'll tell you, though please keep this information strictly to yourselves. Rifatzada is one of the elder abbots, some call them the secret chiefs. And his name means 'Elevated Noble.’”

“And do you know where these secret chiefs reside?”

“It's said, George, that they are *'in this world and yet not of it.*”

“Yes, I've read that phrase in one of Tenzing's books, though it meant little to me at the time.”

“Given the dream you had, George, perhaps you now better understand at least one of the significances of that phrase.”

“And Darman Kuna?” he asked when they were all together and reviewing what had been said.

“That simply means 'healer.’”

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Barney Rudge didn't turn up for work the next day nor ever again. And about a week later, his bloated and decomposing body was found floating several miles down river. When police searched his flat, they found a number of documents which they traced back to Rosalie: items of mail that he was supposed to have passed on to Jeanine. They were still at a loss as to his motive for withholding this mail, though cryptic diary entries and sundry items of semen-stained underwear did suggest a possible sexual infatuation.

## 22. Danger looms

Though there were, of course, no telephones up in the mountains, they did have a radio transceiver and Rosalie arranged for messages to be relayed to Tenzing via a trusted friend who lived in a town on the central plateau.

When Tenzing got to hear of recent events, he immediately sent word that the three of them: Rosalie, Jeanine and George should leave Sher Point and travel with haste to the retreat. He felt that there was not a moment to lose. So, packing their bags in a rush and filling the tank of the car and some spare cans in the boot, they set out that same day.

Less than two hours after they left, unbeknownst to them, Duval's men were outside George and Jeanine's apartments, awaiting further instructions before moving in to take the pair hostage.

But that order did not come, since Lord Develin had other ideas. Instead Duval ordered his men to maintain their surveillance and follow the pair wherever they went. Rather than capture the pair and use them as bait for any others of the caretakers who might come to their aid, perhaps the fools might lead him to a greater prize?

By the time Duval's men realized that George and Jeanine were not there in the apartments and that Rosalie Muller had also disappeared, the three of them were long gone. Of course, Duval was furious when he first found out, and his own master, Lord Develin was even more vexed with him, but having a pretty shrewd idea of where they might be heading, he soon calmed down and dispatched a car with three of his best men after them. Well, he called them his best men, but if anything they were his worst. And, to err on the safe side of caution, realizing that Lord Develin would be full of wrath if anything further went awry, he decided to follow on behind them.

## 23. Narayana revisited

It took them several days travel before they arrived at the town of Shakra to the north of the central plateau of Narayana. It would have taken them a good deal longer, but in view of the urgency, Rosalie drove by day and George had volunteered his services to drive by night and slept a good part of the day. Well, slept was perhaps a euphemism. In between the jerks and bumps as they negotiated the many potholes in the road, he dozed and woke repeatedly. And poor Rosalie fared little better, for he had to wake her up every now and again to ask for further directions.

Still, they were here now and that's all that mattered. Or so he thought. After collecting provisions and reporting in to a friend and one-time student of Tenzing's, it turned out that they had a long and bumpy bus journey ahead of them, which would take them as far as a small town nestling in the foothills.

There they stopped overnight, meeting up with three young men from Tenzing's retreat, and then – just when his aching rump and still painful ribs were beginning to recover from all the travelling – the six of them began a long and gruelling trek up into the mountains. Though he was well strapped up, George's progress on foot was slow, but thankfully they could ride most of the way.

“But this isn't the way to the retreat,” Rosalie had complained, growing alarmed.

“It's alright,” the guides assured her. “There's been an avalanche further along the route and we're having to make a detour.”

“And why have you brought so many donkeys? Two would have been quite adequate.”

“We received word that there were some strangers crossing the central plateau in a car. They'd been asking questions of the locals and had aroused suspicion.”

“You mean we're being followed?”

“Yes, but these strangers have been unavoidably delayed. I believe someone poured sugar in their petrol tank in the night.”

“I see.”

“Anyhow, Jonjo here is going to take his horse and two of the donkeys way off to the west, then double back toward the central plateau. He'll lead these strangers a merry dance. And after we part, I will walk behind, sweeping away all trace of our actual route. Don't worry Rosalie, these fools will never find their way to the Waterfall.”

“Thank you, Tovek. And please forgive me for questioning your judgement: that was remiss of me.”

The lad merely smiled and set off ahead again along the mountain path. When they came to the intersection of two valleys, true to Tovek's word, Jonjo carried straight on, making sure he left good tracks, whilst they went off to the right with Tovek walking on behind, brushing away their tracks and burying any stray animal dung in the snow, as he went. This slowed their progress, of course, but better safe than sorry.

As they came to the last upward leg of their journey, once they'd negotiated a perilous, narrow, crumbling ledge, Tovek gave up his sweeping and returned to lead them toward the retreat, having a quiet word with Rosalie as he passed.

Rosalie unwrapped the thick woollen scarf from her neck and turned to George, who was coming up behind. “Sorry, old friend,” she apologized as she reached up and fastened the scarf securely over his eyes, “but you're the first stranger to come to the retreat ... We simply cannot afford to take any chances. If outsiders were to discover the location of the Waterfall, well, it could prove catastrophic.”

“It's okay, I understand,” he told Rosalie, though slightly abashed at being called a stranger. “You do what you have to do.”

“Good. Now let me take the reins and I'll lead your horse on, George.”

He did know that they passed under the torrent of a waterfall *en-route* to the retreat, hence its name, presumably. There could be no disguising that thundering sound, nor the cold wet spray that enveloped them for a time. And for a time the horses' hooves echoed on bare rock, as if they were passing through some kind of long, long tunnel. But that's all he knew until much later when Rosalie decided it was safe to remove the scarf.

Having come this far up into the mountains, he was astounded when his eyes grew re-accustomed to the light, to find

himself in a wide sheltered valley with lush grasslands and fields all around.

“My God, I can see why you should be so cautious about folk seeing this place,” he enthused. “It’s like a long lost, hidden world. The stuff that dreams and legends made of.”

“Indeed. There are other reasons for keeping this place a secret, too, George,” Rosalie told him. “But for now, alas, my lips are sealed.”

As they arrived, a man in long, flowing blue and saffron robes came hurrying out of a large building ahead of them. George presumed it must be some kind of community centre, and as the man came closer he recognized him from the photo on the front cover of *The Way It Is*. It was Tenzing.

“Hello there and welcome one and all,” the man lilted. “Hello there, you must be George. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Only good things I hope,” George smiled, shaking the man’s hand cautiously for fear of joggling his aching ribs. “Thank you for inviting me here.”

“You’re welcome, friend, though I only wish that it could have been under less difficult circumstances. Good to see you’re on the mend: Rosalie has kept me fully informed.

“Anyhow, Rosalie will sort you out with rooms and when you’re washed and changed, I’ll see you in my study. We normally eat in the communal dining room, but on this occasion we’ll eat in my quarters so that we can have a jolly good chin wag.

“Until then, friends, I bid you a brief and fond *adieu*,” and then he was off on his way once again.

## 24. Rifatzada

As they ate with Tenzing, the three of them exchanged polite conversation and George got to know this Master of the Way a little better. Having read two of his books, which in places had a rather dry and sombre tone, warning of the pitfalls that lay ahead and in no way pandering to the ego, he was quite pleasantly surprised how jovial, amenable and down to earth he was in real life.

They drank only water with the meal, water from the pure mountain springs that emerged in the valley walls. But after the feast, Tenzing went over to a cabinet beside the crackling log fire and brought out a bottle and four crystal-cut tumblers. They sparkled wonderfully in the flicker of the fire.

“I see you're admiring our handiwork,” Tenzing remarked, pointing to the glass. “You'll find that most of these artefacts: the cut glass, the bowls, the furniture and the furnishings have been hand crafted in our own workshops here. It's a veritable hive of loving industry.”

“Remarkable,” George nodded.

As Jeanine took her first tentative sip, she looked at him. “Why, I'd swear that this is the same wine that the circus travellers gave me on my flight from the Outlands. They told me that it contained illicit herbs which they gathered from the grass verges and which they helped plant for the benefit of other travellers. It made me feel quite squiffy.”

Tenzing nodded and didn't appear surprised. “Yes, it's a herb we've grown up here since the Order was founded. We use it for medicinal and developmental purposes, rather than recreation, however. I wasn't aware that its use had spread so far. I've heard that some people dry and smoke it to get a 'high', though this is not something that I would at all encourage or recommend. Developmentally speaking, you might as well stick a carrot up your nose and light it for all the benefit it will be.”

“So what 'developmental purposes' do you use it for, exactly?”

“For now, Jeanine, if you'll forgive me, I'd rather not say.

You see if you were to have certain expectations, then this might unduly influence the outcome.”

“I see.”

“Very well, to business. How's about you tell me your stories, George and Jeanine? Yes, I've heard some of it already, of course, but I'd rather hear it first-hand. I gather Darman Kuna was of some assistance to you? She's very experienced. Indeed, when I was a novice myself, it was she who tutored me in the healing arts. At one time it was thought that I might go on to become a doctor, but vacancies arose elsewhere and my services were required in other fields. Still, I don't regret the way things have turned out.”

So they told him their story and he listened with rapt attention, topping their glasses up every now and again as they spoke. Half way through his recitation, however, George broke away from the script, for a time unaware that he was doing so.

“As far as I know, before High Command vetoed the idea, the Caretaker Council was to have investigated the possibility that a fault had been introduced into the software they were running on the Psi system.” He went on to explain that the caretaker system had not been designed for the massive amount of processing occasioned by the rapid growth in the population of the Shadowlands and that as the system had been groaning under the load, crucial changes had been made to the software to reduce the load.

Jeanine was agog at this revelation, but she said nothing and let him continue, for fear that her interference might stem his flow.

“An alternative or additional possibility,” he concluded, “is that Develin's gremlins have in some way sabotaged the system.” Yet he could not see how the impending destruction of the Shadowlands could fit in with their plans. Unless, of course, they might in some way escape the holocaust and take dominion of the lands by default.

“But this is incredible, George,” Jeanine remarked. “Where on earth did that information come from?”

For a moment, the spell was broken and he looked around to gauge their reactions. He shrugged and shook his head. “Am I dreaming again?” he asked. Jeanine leant across the settee and

gave him a playful pinch on the arm and he yelled out involuntarily.

Tenzing went round their empty glasses again and topped them up without comment. Then he asked:

“Why did you make the descent? What had you in mind, before you fell asleep and forgot?”

“Marie and Dillon felt that they could not stand idly by whilst six billion souls were obliterated.”

“You say 'Marie and Dillon,’” Tenzing noted. “So, tell me: if you are not Dillon or George, then who are you?”

“Don't you recognize me, ban chung?” he asked in return. It was as if he'd taken a back seat and that someone else, some hidden hand were driving the car.

Tenzing Jangbu Rinchen laughed loudly and slapped his thigh.

“What's that mean?” asked Rosalie, looking puzzled.

“Ban chung' means young monk,” he told her. “It's how my own master would refer to me when I was a novice. But no, I don't recognize you as being 'Dkar Po', the wise and talented one. So who are you?”

“You haven't twigged yet? Well don't worry, there's no rush. The penny will drop in its own good time.”

“George! Aren't you getting a little ahead of yourself?” suggested Jeanine, strongly. “Let's not play these mind games.”

Tenzing shook his head and motioned that she should relax.

He repeated his last question: “What had you in mind, before you fell asleep?”

“Dispersed around the Shadowlands, one in each of the world's seven continents, are seven secret powerhouses,” George continued unabashed. “These house Psi's central processing systems, its hardware. Though the Caretakers still have access to the software which runs on Psi, via remote terminals, none but the Sirians – who installed the caretaker system – know of the location of these powerhouses. And for reasons known only to themselves and to the Source, they steadfastly refuse to reveal this information.”

“It had occurred to Dillon that if he could gain access to one of the powerhouses, which presumably had local terminals, he could check through the software himself and rectify the issues

that had developed. This is one of the reasons why, unbeknown to his everyday waking ken, George was attracted to the field of computing in his early adult life. Deep down, you see, he remembered fragmentary details of his mission.”

“His mission?” asked Jeanine. “But surely this was all unplanned? We were not briefed for any mission before the descent.”

George shook his head slowly. “Forgive me, Marie, but that's how you remember it. The reality is that you were both briefed before the event.”

“Are you saying that we forgot our briefing, George?”

“No, what I'm saying is that you were not consciously aware of your briefing at the time. How can I put it? It was imparted to you at a subliminal level, outside of your awareness. There was then a mishap as you made the descent. And after the descent, there was a further malfunction which prevented the plan from being initiated. You see, it is at this point of initiation that the seal on the plans for the mission is broken and the design revealed.”

“So you're saying that our descent was actually planned?”

He nodded.

“But if not by the Caretakers, then by whom?”

“We'll come to that point later.”

“Is there no alternative that might yet save the people of Shadowlands – save us – from destruction?”

“No alternative strategy has been drawn up. No other agents have been assigned to the task.”

Tenzing went over to the cabinet, brought back a fresh bottle of the herbal elixir and refilled their glasses.

“And the mission? Has it now been aborted?” asked Rosalie.

George smiled benignly. “You will be relieved to hear, Rosalie, that a fresh window of opportunity has recently opened up. And though the plan has lain little more than dormant over the years, there is a chance now that it may be reactivated.”

“So we're back in business?”

“Yes,” he affirmed. “We are back in business.”

“And ...” he began.

“And?”

“And time is running out.”

“You still haven't answered all of our questions,” Jeanine

pointed out. “Tenzing asked who you are and I asked who planned the descent.”

“Some call me Rifatzada,” he told them.

When Rosalie heard this, she nearly choked on her drink.

“And who do you represent if not the Caretakers? Regional Command? Surely not the Directorate of High Command?”

“My name is Rifatzada and I am a servant of the Source. The plan was orchestrated at the behest of that Source.”

“And who are we up against?” asked Jeanine.

“That's a good question, Jeanine. We are up against the Demiurge, his vice regent the Dread Lord Develin and the many minions who wish to bring about his return. Duval is here already, but as yet he is weak.”

“You mean Lord Develin has returned?” Tenzing queried.

George shook his head. “No, Develin is as yet unable to return. Duval is an incarnated *aspect* of Develin, not Develin himself. Yes Duval has returned and yes, he is still weak.”

“So what's he after?”

“The same thing as we are. He hopes to use Psi to transport Develin into the Shadowlands and be able to feed off Psi in order to regain his former powers and strength.”

“Who's this demiurge?” asked Jeanine.

“The Demiurge is a petty tyrant who rules here in God's stead. He's an evil and gluttonous upstart, a minor deity linked with the moon who feeds off the energy of the Shadowlands,” he told Jeanine. “This is the principal reason why so many folk are trapped here and enthralled by the petty desires, frailties and myopia of their false selves.”

“Be on your guard,” he advised them. “I cannot emphasize that more strongly. You may have sent the puppet Duval and his henchmen off on some wild goose chase, but it will not be long before the master Develin finds his way here, into your minds and begins to pull your strings. You must take care and protect yourselves.”

And then, without warning, Rifatzada was gone and George was back in the land of the living.

“Why are you all looking at me like that?” he wanted to know. “Is it something I've said? I haven't farted out loud, have I, or made a fool of myself in some other way?”

“You don't remember?”

“Remember what?” he begged. “You can tell me, I can take it. I'm a big boy now.”

Jeanine began to explain what had happened but before she'd finished her sentence both he and Tenzing were laughing their socks off and slapping their thighs.

“I'm sorry,” he said at length, wiping the tears from his eyes. “But I just couldn't resist. Yes, I remember. I was just fooling about with you.”

“But isn't there one small matter that has been overlooked here?” asked Jeanine.

They all turned to look at her.

“Rifatzada said that the location of the powerhouses is known only to the Sirians and that they refuse to reveal that information.”

George had that awful sinking feeling as she spoke those words. Ah, the best laid plans of mice and men, he sighed. Tenzing and Rosalie said nothing.

George's stomach was gurgling and as if anticipating his need, Tenzing went into the corridor and asked one of the passing students if he could arrange for a little cold food.

They sat there eating the sandwiches in silence for a time, not knowing quite what to do and praying that providence would send them some fresh inspiration.

It was Tenzing's turn to speak up:

“I've known times when everyone around knew exactly what had to be done. In those times, which come around periodically in one's life, everyone seems to awaken to the necessity and, casting aside as best they can any stage fright, apprehensions or shock at waking to find themselves in their plight, and in tune with what is required, great things are achieved.”

“Yes, I can relate to that,” nodded Rosalie.

“If you have a pressing need, then that need will be met, though perhaps not in the manner in which you might have imagined that need being met,” Tenzing assured them. “The whole universe will bow to the necessity and back the moves you make. Nothing can stand between you and truth if you are ready for it. Anything can stand between you if you are not.”

Jeanine was suddenly struck by a thought. “Tenzing,

Rifatzada said something that may be of relevance to the here and now. He said: 'It is at this point of initiation that the seal on the plans for the mission is broken and the design revealed.'

"Go on," he invited.

"Well, I've been a student of yours for over ten years now and for some unknown reason, the subject of initiation has never come up."

"Many schools talk much about initiations," he told her.

"Yes, but I don't want to go off in search of any school to be initiated, I want this school," she protested.

He smiled and politely asked if he might continue.

"Many schools talk much about initiations. They sprinkle honours about like rice at a wedding. But for all their talk, the initiation they offer is worth little more than a paper diploma, to be brandished around and used as some sort of passport to respect and high society.

"In this Order, no mention is made of initiations."

"So you don't initiate?"

"No mention is made of initiation. The teachers do not ask if a student wishes to be initiated. When the time is right, there may well be an initiation, but it is not celebrated publicly. It occurs in private. Well, in actual fact, it first takes place in the heart. And when the initiation has been carried out, the lips of both teacher and student are sealed. There is no written confirmation. There are no robes of honour to be worn. No chevrons to add to one's sleeve. If someone asks about initiation and isn't yet ready or is in a place where others may overhear, then both teacher and initiated student will plead utter ignorance, even if it makes them appear ignorant or makes them feel insignificant. Which is not to say that they may not discuss such matters amongst themselves, *if* they have a valid reason."

"I see."

"And yet you're saying this now, Tenzing, in our company," she pointed out, which had George wondering, too.

Tenzing asked her to think about what the pair of them had just said.

"Are there exceptions?" she asked.

No, he confirmed, there were no exceptions to this hard and fast rule.

“Then we must either all be ready for initiation ... But no, that wouldn't meet the requirements.”

“Or ...?”

“Or already have been initiated in one way or another, either in our heart or as an external, token gesture?” she offered with a shrug.

“There you have it, Jeanine,” he smiled. “And I should add that in our Order, token initiation is quite rare and never precedes initiation in the heart.”

“So you're saying that both George and I are ready and have already already been initiated in the heart?”

He said nothing.

“And when did this happen?” she asked. “I don't feel any different than I did three hours ago.”

“It's happening right here and now, Jeanine. Not that it ever occurs at any other time and place. So just relax and enjoy. The night is still young and the moon is not yet at its zenith.”

He paused for a moment then continued: “You mentioned that you'd tasted this wine before whilst you were with the travelling circus and I told you that we grew the herb here. You'll forgive me if I don't tell you the real name of this herb, nor describe its appearance since it's surprisingly common if only rarely infused, but what I can say is that some call it *chungari* which means 'herb of enlightenment.' It's not called that without ample reason, though you must understand that like oil, it serves as a lubricant, rather than actually initiating enlightenment itself. Folk could sell it freely in the bazaars like snake oil and it would only marginally swell the ranks of the elect.”

“Having said that, Tenzing,” Jeanine remarked, “it would most likely have a significant beneficial effect on the nation's crime rate. Folk would be too squiffy to be bothered to go around robbing, fighting and causing damage.”

They laughed.

At this point, Jeanine begged leave and went to powder her nose. While she was at it, she thought she'd have a look to see if the taps in Tenzing's private bathroom really were made of gold as urban legend had it. As it happened, they were not. They were just regular taps.

When she returned to the study, though she wasn't drunk,

since there was actually no alcohol in the drink, she felt as light as a feather and almost floated across the room, to gently sink down in the plush upholstery of the settee, beside Rosalie. George sat in a chair opposite, whilst Tenzing had given up his chair and sat cross-legged on the rug just to one side of the hearth so that he didn't block the fire. He'd placed another log on the fire and it was just beginning to take light. It occurred to her then that he'd placed the first log in the glowing fire just before George had started channelling Rifatzada and she found this significant.

It was then that she noticed the old ink drawing hanging on the wall above the mantelpiece. She got up to her feet and walked across to it. It looked like a map of the known world, though she couldn't fathom the annotations which were presumably place names and she could only see the one continental mass.

Narayana was there near the centre with the mountain range running along its northern boundary like a jagged crown. To the west lay what were now the Freelands, though the borders had surely changed since the map was drawn. To the north of that lay The Outlands, beyond which were drawings of strange, mythical beasts.

“The detail on this map is incredible,” she enthused.

Tenzing rose to his feet and helped her with some of the place names, which turned out to be written in an ancient Narayani script.

“And is this the whole of the known world?” she enquired.

“No,” Tenzing told her, “according to legend this map was one of several drawings taken from the great library of the then ruler, Zejook, but alas there was a fire and this is one of the few that survived.”

“Tell me, Tenzing,” she asked. “How many of these drawings were there originally?”

“I'm sorry, I can't say. Is the number important?”

“Oh yes,” she nodded earnestly.

“Then, if you'll excuse me for one moment, I think I know a lady who may be able to assist in the matter.” He went over to his desk and dialled a number.

“But I thought you said there were no phones here?” noted George.

“There is no outside line,” Rosalie told him, “but one of the

students, an engineer from the Freelands, very kindly installed an internal system. We're not entirely cut off from modern technology here.”

“And the electricity?”

“That comes from a turbine he installed in the river that runs through the valley. Hence the lighting.”

George laughed. “You know, I simply took the electric lights for granted, though I did wonder why there were so few.”

Tenzing returned from his phone conversation with news. “Wii Lu assures me that there is a reference in some obscure and ancient tome to seven maps and confirms that this is the only one to be retrieved from the fire. Apparently the ink on the maps had begun to fade and it was being restored elsewhere at the time.”

“Do you mind if I take the drawing down and examine it more closely?” she asked.

“Not at all, Jeanine. Feel free,” he replied and he carefully unhooked it from the nail in the wall and handed it to her.

Then it dawned on her. “But this isn't the original, surely? The ink looks too dark and the canvas seems too new. If it's as ancient as you say, though I'm no expert, I'd have expected it to be deteriorating in some way. Maybe cracking or becoming powdery?”

He nodded.

“But you knew that, Tenzing. Why didn't you just come out and say it?”

“And spoil your fun?”

“Do you have the original still in your possession?”

“I'm assured that this is a faithful copy, Jeanine. So does it make any difference?”

“Oh yes, indeed, if my hunch is right.”

“Your hunch being ...?”

“That there were seven of these ancient maps. One for each continent of the world and that they may contain clues as to the whereabouts of the secret powerhouses.”

“I've studied the map long and hard, Jeanine, and I can't see anything striking about it. I have a magnifying glass if you wish to examine the detail more closely, which I'm reliably informed is accurate in every way. But it'll take you the best part of the night to check the whole map.”

“May I see the original? And, yes, this *is* important.”

Tenzing agreed and even before the words had left his lips, a lady arrived, bearing a wrapped object in her arms. It was Wii Lu and she had been into the vault to retrieve the picture.

“I thought you might insist,” Tenzing said as Wii Lu carefully unwrapped the map, which was in a glass frame, and laid it on the rug beside the copy. She thanked Wii Lu and the lady left to resume her work.

Whilst the others were busy chatting, Jeanine took Tenzing's magnifying glass and checked one, then the other and she found that it was as faithful a reproduction as Tenzing had said.

After a time, she decided to have a break and another glass of the herbal elixir, because all this concentration was giving her eye strain and she going cross-eyed.

Then Jeanine suddenly had an idea. She made sure that the two pictures were carefully aligned beside one-another and stood back. Tenzing wondered what she was doing and she explained.

She stood there and deliberately crossed her eyes so that the image from one eye slid over the other until the two images were aligned. There came a moment when her mind made sense of the composite image and it stood out clearly. It was hard to maintain this focus, but she found that she was able to scan through looking for any differences. Where there was a difference, the image at that place appeared to shimmer and stand out slightly from the canvas.

“My, that's a stroke of genius,” Tenzing congratulated her.

“Alas, I think you'd best save your congratulations, Tenzing,” she said at length, feeling more than a little disheartened. “All I see are very minor differences which don't appear at all significant.”

She went back to her drink.

“Shall I have Wii Lu return the original to the vault?”

“But ...”

“But what?”

“But I'm not ready to give up yet. Just humour me, Tenzing.”

“How can I help?”

“Do you have a lemon?”

“Not lemons, but I believe some limes in the kitchen. A consignment arrived just recently.”

“And may I borrow one? Perhaps cut in half?”

Again, Tenzing picked up the phone and within a couple of minutes a slightly bemused student appeared with the lime on a small saucer. Meanwhile, Jeanine had picked up her bag and begged leave again to use Tenzing's bathroom. All eyes were on her as she returned.

She squeezed the juice of one lime onto the saucer, then took out her pen, having just washed out the ink under the tap in the bathroom. Then she dipped the nib in the lime juice and filled the bladder of her pen.

Now she took a sheet of plain paper and let everyone see that there was no writing on it. Handing the pen to Tenzing, she asked him to write something on the sheet of paper with the pen. As he did so, you could make out what he had written, though it was, of course, quite faint.

“Now we let the paper dry out,” she told them and went back to her drink, joining in the chat until she saw that the paper was dry. She handed it round and they all agreed that the writing had disappeared.

Handing the paper to Tenzing, she asked him to hold it close to the blazing fire, being careful not to set the paper alight or burn his fingers. As he did so, slowly but surely they saw the invisible writing turn brown until it could once again be seen quite clearly.

“So there you have it,” she told Tenzing. “That's invisible ink.”

He was suitably impressed.

“So what's this have to do with the drawing?” George wanted to know.

“It's a hunch, George,” she told him. Then she turned to Tenzing. “Now that you know what is possible, Tenzing, I want to ask you a big, big favour.”

“Go on ...”

“I want you to let me take the map from its frame and hold it to the fire.”

She was waiting for a cry of “Are you crazy?” but in the event, it didn't come.

“No, I'd rather you didn't do that, Jeanine. The map is of inestimable worth,” he informed her.

She was gutted.

“However, I will allow you to take the replica from its frame and subject it to this test.”

“But that's plain crazy,” she protested. “How will that prove anything?”

“Trust me,” Tenzing requested.

She unclipped the back of the frame, turned the frame over and carefully removed the canvas from the frame. Replica or not, it had taken inordinate length of time to produce this work.

She hesitated. “I don't want to ruin the copy. It's a priceless work of art in its own right.”

“Then you must trust your instinct,” he advised.

“But I'm split two ways.”

“You must choose.”

She had another sip of her drink, went back to the drawing, picked it up and held it within a couple of feet of the fire, ready to pull it back as soon as she could make out any markings on it. She was assuming such a lot. But needs must.

“Oh, heavens,” she gasped as brown words began to form in a clear area of the drawing, just above the depiction of the mythical beasts, to the north of the Outlands.

She went over and gingerly handed the map to Tenzing. “What does it say?” she asked.

Without looking closely at the brown writing he peered into her eyes and he said. “It reads: 'I am the one.'”

“But you don't seem at all surprised, Tenzing, even for the inscrutable Master of the Way that you are.”

“I, too, had a dream many years ago. I was visited one night by Banu Zadar and she told me to do this thing: to write this message with the juice of a lemon. I, too, protested that it might ruin such a wonderful work of art, and she, too, asked me to follow my instinct and to make a choice. There are four requirements: to believe, to trust, to obey and to act in attunement with necessity.”

“And who is Banu Zadar?”

“Banu means a lady, a bride or a flagon of wine and Zadar means noble. The consorts Banu Zadar and Rifatzada are the two elder abbots and patrons of this Order.”

“Wow, you learn something new every day.”

“Better to unlearn something old every day,” he laughed.

“So what now?”

“You tell me, Jeanine. You tell me. And thank God for this providence.”

“I think that we do the same again, but with the original this time.”

“Even though the masterpiece will be disfigured?” he asked her.

“Yes,” she nodded. “As the saying goes, 'you can't make an omelette without breaking some eggs.'”

“Very well, Jeanine. You must do what you must do.”

After carefully replacing the copy and having Tenzing hang it back up on the wall, his arms being longer, Jeanine took out the ancient map and nervously held it in front of the fire. Nothing happened. And then, just as she was about to give up, and with a lump in her throat, she saw the tell-tale brown signs begin to emerge on the canvas.

Without daring to look closely at the map she placed it carefully down on the table that stood between them, well clear of their drinks, and held her breath.

“Don't you want to know what the invisible marks reveal, Jeanine?” asked Tenzing.

She plucked up the courage and went to stand at his shoulder. “This mark here means energy and this means centre.”

“Oh, heavens! Energy centre. Now that sounds about right. So whereabouts is it?”

Tenzing borrowed the magnifying glass and studied the map for some time. “We're approximately here, though the map does not show our valley. We have a couple of landmarks that should help guide us. I recognize this lake, for instance, which is a couple of days journey away to the west. And from there, it should be possible to locate these two valleys leading up to the powerhouse, if as we hope, that is what it is.

“This is quite astounding progress we've made here tonight. Thank you,” he added. “Now, I think that this map should be returned to the vault as soon as possible. Not a word of this must leave this room.”

“But Wii Lu will surely notice.”

“Then I shall have a discreet word with her. Wii Lu we can trust implicitly.”

“So what now, Tenzing?”

“I suggest that we wind down from this evening's extraordinary events – it has been a most remarkable and powerful Occasion – and all the thoughts and questions it has undoubtedly engendered. It will give George the opportunity to see and join in one or two of our exercises. And then I think we should turn in and get a good night's sleep.”

Tenzing added: “If you don't mind me saying so, George, judging by the dark rings under your eyes, your nicotine-stained fingertips and your half-chewed nails, you'll find our meditations a great help to you.”

When Tenzing said this, he was instantly reminded of Ian Sedgwick's proposition, all that time ago, and he told Tenzing about his time in the village and about the mysterious Lord Rosedale.

“Little Smithington?” Tenzing smiled. “I know it well. Indeed, Lord Rosedale is a good friend and major benefactor of ours, as was his father before him, and friends also run the weekly meditation sessions there. Were it not for his unstinting generosity, our activities at *Foxholes*, our residential study centre near Sher Point, would not be possible.”

“It's a small world,” he nodded.

“And George,” Tenzing added, “had you taken the time out from your busy schedule and joined that class, you might have found your way to our door a great deal sooner. But that's water under the bridge and no concern of ours now.

“Right then, people: let's arrange these cushions in a loose circle on the floor ....”

## 25. Dolgethel

At first light, long before the sun would come up over the horizon, and with the valley still shrouded in darkness, George was awakened by Rosalie.

“Splash your face and get dressed, George,” she requested with some urgency. “We're leaving.”

George didn't think to ask where or how but simply complied. He was still rather high from the evening's entertainment and, surprisingly he didn't feel hung over, but he was in desperate need of a drink.

“Make mine a coffee,” he called after her, “A very strong coffee. I simply can't function without caffeine in my system.”

“Right you are. Milk and two sugars?”

“You got it, sis'.”

Within the hour, the horses were saddled and ready waiting for them, and the five of them: Tenzing, Jeanine, himself and two arms-bearing youths set out from the valley. Rosalie had thought she might be going along with them, but it was decided that she remain behind to hold the fort. Judging by the light in the sky behind them as the sun crept up towards the horizon, they were heading in an approximately westerly direction. It was fortunate for them that the winter was over, but there were still pockets of snow in the shadow of the peaks and it was hard going. At times there was nothing for it but to dismount and lead the horses on foot. His ribs were feeling better that day, but George still had to take care and walk slowly, apologizing profusely for holding up the others.

After the first laborious day of the trek, it was great relief that they finally stopped and made camp in a sheltered spot by a stream in a wide glacial valley. Even though the sun had smiled down at them for most of the day, as he freshened himself up, not having properly bathed that day, George found the water in the mountain stream chilled him to the bone as he stripped off and took a foolhardy splash.

“Oh my God, it's nithering!” he cried, quickly hopping out of the pool before he caught his death of cold. Jeanine merely

laughed and handed him a thick fleecy cotton towel to dry himself.

As soon as he lay down, wrapped in the woolly skins that they'd brought with them, George was asleep, unaware that Tenzing and the two others took it in turns that night to watch over them. And before he knew it, it was first light again and he awoke to the sound of sizzling fat and the wonderful aroma of breakfast being cooked over an open camp fire. There was something quintessentially romantic and energizing about venturing into the wilds and enjoying such simple pleasures. Had it been winter, however, he realized that there would have been no room for talk of romance.

They came upon the lake within an hour or two of sunrise that day and it was bathed in a wonderful golden light, with a thin layer of mist hovering over the still waters. Tenzing told them that this lake was called the Horse Head and that the place they were heading towards was Dolgethel. He mentally traced out the outline of the lake's shores and yes, given a little poetic licence, it did resemble an animal's head and look pretty much as depicted on the old map.

As they journeyed on up the valley, skirting the gravel past the lake, Tenzing stopped and waited whilst they caught up with him and he suggested that they cross the river at this point, since they needed to be across the other side. If memory served him correctly, the water was a lot deeper upstream. Cold as it was, they stripped to their waists, casting embarrassment aside in the face of necessity, for the alternative of having to continue in freezing wet clothes or stopping for perhaps an hour to dry out their clothes was not an option. By the time they made it to the other side, their horses were snorting and their limbs had gone beyond pain and become quite numb.

Don't you dare remind me "no pain, no gain," he warned Jeanine as she opened her mouth to speak.

"I was about to tell you that there's a blood-sucking leech stuck to the back of your thigh, George. But no matter."

He grimaced and took a look, but fortunately there was no leech there.

"Had you going for a minute," she merely laughed.

"Sure, funny ha-ha to you, too."

Lan Cho wasn't so lucky, though, nor was he laughing. Half way across, he'd been attacked by some large winged insect, which had bitten him on the neck. It gave him a painful burning sensation, perhaps from formic acid, and left the site red and slightly swollen. There was nothing that Jeanine could do other than bathe the wound and spread some antiseptic ointment on it, but Lan Cho was a tough and courageous young cookie, so he was content to grin and bear the pain until it gradually subsided.

At length they reached the valley in which, according to Tenzing's calculations, the energy centre was supposedly situated and took a few moments out to heat up some soup and share some rounds of unleavened bread. Though they'd lit a real camp fire the previous night, this time they cooked over a little stove that one of the youths, Lan Cho had brought with him.

Still, there was no time to waste if they were to locate the energy centre that afternoon before the sun began to go down.

"What kind of thing are we looking for?" the other youth, Weazl had asked Tenzing as they set off once more.

"Your guess is as good as mine," he had told them. "All I can say is that we are looking for a place this side of the river which is big enough to hide and hold a large amount of equipment."

"So we're looking for something out of the ordinary?"

"No," Jeanine suggested: "I think it more likely that we are looking for something that looks quite ordinary on the outside, to ensure that it does not attract attention and so that its contents remain hidden. I don't think we're looking for some ancient tomb, say, that might attract plunder."

On they slowly rode, methodically scouring the westernmost slopes of the valley and looking east toward the river as they went, without result.

And then Jeanine saw something ahead and she spurred her horse on to take a closer look. They followed her and came upon a ruin. It looked like the remains of an old farmhouse. Here and there you could still make out the broken down remains of stone walls that had most likely once formed animal enclosures. Well, her heart was in the right place, George mused.

So they rode on a few further miles up the valley until they were a way beyond the point where the map had indicated the energy centre should be, without sighting anything of interest.

There were no obvious caves in the valley walls, nor anything of significance along the valley floor.

“What now?” one of the youths enquired.

“Now we work our way back down the valley, repeating the search all over again.” Tenzing decided. And when they'd gone far enough down the valley, they turned back and searched it thoroughly again. All to no avail.

The sun was going down by now and they decided to bivouac in the shelter of the old ruined farm and wait until the next morning.

Tenzing had made a careful copy of what he thought were the salient details on the map and he studied his sketch for some time. He was almost certain that they were searching in the right general location, but it was always possible that the energy centre was in an adjacent valley. Certainly not to the east near the twin peaks, but perhaps one valley over to the west?

As they'd searched, each of them had picked up what dead wood they could find *en-route*, so they just about had enough material to make a camp fire for the night, and they warmed some more soup which they ate with flat bread and strips of dried meat which had been softened in the soup. Not unnaturally, the mood that night was sombre, though Tenzing did try to liven things up a little by reciting poetry and storytelling. It snowed a little that evening and they sat huddled in the entrances of their bivouacs warmed by the camp fire.

Tenzing told them the tale of a would-be seeker who had once met a Master of the Path on his travels and asked if he might spend some time walking with the man. He told the old man that he was journeying in search of his Fate. Though the Master was at first reluctant, saying that it would be a waste of their time, nevertheless he eventually agreed and the two travelled on for some time.

One day they passed a spot and the seeker thought that he heard a faint noise close by, coming from under a rock. He put his head to the ground and listened and could indeed hear tiny voices calling. He couldn't understand what the voices were saying, however, so he asked the old man if he knew. The Master listened carefully and told the seeker that the voices were those of ants. They were saying that there was a large mass blocking the path of

their burrowing and were asking for help. The Master suggested that perhaps they might stop and offer assistance, but the seeker shook his head and told the old man that he was seeking his Fate and that it would waste valuable time were they to stop now. Very well, said the Master and so they continued their journey.

As they stopped for the night at a wayside inn and sat there eating their meagre soup and bread, which was all they could afford, an excited group of travellers came in with a marvellous tale to tell. They, too, had heard the tiny voices and, discovering the ants' plight, they had stopped to remove the rock. Digging down into the earth they had discovered that the hard object blocking the ants' burrowing was in fact a large hoard of gold coins. And with a little of the gold, this excited group ordered themselves a truly splendid feast.

The seeker was vexed by this turn of events, all the more so when the old man reminded him that he had been given the opportunity to help the ants but had declined the invitation.

The next day, as they walked down the road, the seeker again thought he heard a faint buzzing sound coming from the direction of a tree and, putting his ear to the tree trunk he listened, but again he had to ask the old man what the voices were saying. The Master told him that it was a colony of bees who were trapped in the tree. If he were to break off a certain branch of the tree, then they would be released, the old man said. But the seeker shook his head, saying that he had better things to do with his time and that in any case the swarm of bees might sting him, so again they walked on.

A little later as they stopped for a time to drink at a roadside teahouse, another seeker came down the road with a jubilant smile on his face. It was a miracle, he declared. There he was, a hapless seeker after truth wondering how on earth he would be able to afford to continue on his travels. And, lo! Having discovered the bees' plight and released them, he had collected two large jars of delicious honey which he'd be able to sell for a high price at the market in the next town he came to.

When he discovered that the old man had suspected that such a thing might happen all along, the seeker was annoyed that he hadn't been told this.

For a third day they continued on their journey and after a

time their path took them along the banks of a wide, clear river. As they were about to take the ferry across the river, the seeker thought that he heard a faint sound coming from the water and, looking down, he could see a fish near the river bank. The fish was in distress, though he couldn't make out what the creature was saying. The old man listened and told the seeker that the fish had swallowed a large stone and that if the seeker were to pick a certain herb that grew along the river bank and feed it to him, the fish would be sick, bring up the stone and be made well again.

But the ferryman was waiting for them and the seeker told the old man that they were wasting valuable time and should cross the river and be off on their travels again.

Later that day, the ferryman came into the inn where they were staying the night with an astonishing tale to tell. Overhearing what the Master had said about the fish's plight, he had fed it a herb he'd found by the river bank. Astonishingly, the fish had coughed up a precious gem the size of his fist, which he could sell for a high price at the jeweller's in town and might at long last be able to afford to retire.

Again, the seeker was livid when the old man revealed that he had known all along that this is what ailed the fish and that the old man hadn't told him what he knew.

When he turned around to vent his wrath, the seeker found that the Master was no longer there beside him at the table. And in all his travelling, he never saw this wise old man again.

Just before they turned in that night, Jeanine went across to check on Lan Cho's wound and was shocked to find that his neck was still as red as ever and that the spot where he'd been bitten had swollen to the size of a boil. Unsure as to whether she should lance the boil or leave it be, she again bathed it and liberally plastered it with antiseptic cream, assuring Lan Cho that she'd have another look at the wound in the morning.

“Well, then, Jeanine,” George asked when the next morning came. “What do you want to do? Shall we move on?”

For a moment she was puzzled by George abruptly asking her this question, rather than leaving the matter up to Tenzing who was leading the expedition.

“I'm asking you, because Rifatzada wants to know,” he explained, anticipating her response. “What does Banu Zadar

have to say in reply to this?"

"Straight off the top of my head?"

"Yes."

"I think I hear a still-small voice calling from inside me," she replied without hesitation.

"Go on."

"And that voice is telling me that we could be sitting right on top of this blessed energy centre and we simply wouldn't know it."

Tenzing looked up sharply from studying the sketch he'd drawn. "And what does your intuition tell you?" he asked.

"That we should search and dig."

One of the youths was shaking his head with incredulity, but Tenzing went to his saddle bags and unstrapped a short handled spade he carried with him. "Where would you like us to start?"

"Right here amidst the ruins."

So they all set about the task, scrabbling about in the broken down remains of the farm house. For over an hour he and the lads shifted the stones from around the dwelling whilst Tenzing and Jeanine worked within. Then, just as the sun reached its zenith and they were toying with the idea of breaking for lunch, Tenzing's spade hit something solid under the dirt floor of the abandoned house. Several times he brought the spade down on that patch and several times they heard quite clearly how hollow and metallic the impact sounded.

Abandoning work outside the building, they all went over to see what Tenzing had discovered. And as he dug away the layer of weed-infested, snow-patched earth, they saw that he had unearthed some kind of square metal object about the size of a tea chest, with hinges along one side and a metal handle on the opposite side. He scraped away more of the soil, then asked the two youths to lend a hand to see if they could shift whatever it was that he'd unearthed, but it wouldn't budge. They could see a keyhole now, but of course, they had no key.

Lan Cho went away and came back with a sack full of tools and he spent some ten minutes hammering away at the metal near the lock until he'd managed to bend the metal sufficiently with his cold chisel to insert a crow bar into the gap for leverage. Though it was bitterly cold that day, he was steaming with sweat from the

effort. The two students repeatedly brought their combined weight to bear on the long crow bar and quite suddenly the lock gave way and they both hit the dirt as the thing popped open.

Of course, they were ecstatic at this find and wanted to open this object up right there and then to see what lay beyond, but Tenzing asked for calm and suggested that they put the kettle on for a brew of tea. He'd brought a small silver flask of the herbal elixir along with him and as Jeanine helped George pour the tea, Tenzing topped up their stone beakers from the flask.

“Your good health, friends,” he toasted them. “And to a favourable outcome to our quest.”

It didn't take them long to drink their tea and soon they were all clamouring to open the thick metal lid. Giving it a good heave, Tenzing flung the lid back with a squeak of dry hinges and they all peered inside. No, it wasn't a horde of buried treasure. Instead they saw now that what they'd taken to be a lid was actually a hatch. They could see a shaft now, with a metal ladder fastened to one side, leading down into the darkness. George picked up a stone and tossed it in, hearing the echo as it hit metal far down below.

They'd brought three oil lamps with them and Lan Cho led the way down with one, with Tenzing following. Then Jeanine descended behind them carrying the second, with George and the other youth, Weazl, bringing up the rear, carrying the third lamp. As he gingerly descended the metal ladder, George counted thirty rungs and then he was down. It was just as well that it was dark in there, because he had an awful fear of heights. There was a small niche half way down and they left one of the lamps there, to light the shaft.

It came as something of a surprise that as soon as they had reached the bottom of the shaft and tentatively opened the unlocked metal doorway that stood there, that the whole place began to brighten as, one after another, lights set in panels in the ceiling of the room beyond sprang to life. Clearly, this was not some ancient crypt but was the work of a technologically advanced culture.

Just as the lights had come on as they entered, so too did the many equipment panels that lined the walls. George was left in little doubt that this was the powerhouse that they had been

searching for. And when he spotted the transporter console and the terminal at the far end of the room, he was convinced beyond the shadow of a doubt. Jeanine, too, seemed to recognize some of the equipment when she saw it.

“What now?” asked Tenzing, looking round and marvelling at the many flashing green, amber, red and blue lights and the complexity of the controls. “This is way beyond the limits of my competence.”

“This could take a long time, Tenzing,” George advised him.

“Then, as I’m of little use here, I think Lan Cho, Weazl and I might better spend our time topsides, keeping a lookout on the off-chance that we were followed here. We’ll scout around for wood and get a meal prepared.”

George crossed the room and took a seat at the terminal. “You do realize, of course, that if we wanted to, we could use the transporter and be out of here before you could say “*Tarjik Barak*” ....”

Jeanine nodded and sat down on the bench beside him, looking over the console.

“But we’re not going to do that, are we, my precious?” he smiled. “We’re going to see if we can discover the gremlins bedevilling Psi. Now the question is, how the hell do you get into the system?”

The monitor set into the control console was blank and they could see no visible means of turning it on. He typed randomly into the keyboard and spun the wheel of the mouse but there was no response. They spent a good half hour thinking up different possibilities and sitting there pondering before Tenzing and one of the youths descended the ladder, bringing with them much needed food. Tenzing fished in his pockets and brought out two tumblers, sharing what remained of the herbal elixir between the two of them before making the re-ascent. For the second day running they were having curried rice, but they sat there and ate it with relish all the same.

As she was eating her rice and sipping the drink, Jeanine was idly fiddling with the console. There was a silver ring to the right of the monitor, with a fluffy black, dome shaped insert and she couldn’t quite figure out what possible use the thing might have. And when she gave the thing a little tug, it suddenly slid out from

the panel on a long flexible stalk.

Instantly the system sprang to life and a voice called out through a metal grill beneath the monitor: "*Psi terminal activated. Identify.*"

As soon as George saw the device emerge, he realized that it was the boom of a microphone.

"George Kovak," he responded, leaning forward.

"*User unknown. Access denied.*" Still the display on the monitor was blank, but at least the system was booted up.

"Let me try," Jeanine suggested. "Do I just speak out loud?"

He turned the boom to face her. "Yes, speak into that. It's a microphone."

"Marie Lightwater," she spoke loudly.

"*User known but has no access rights.*"

"Dillon Lightwater," said George. Well it was worth a try.

"*User known but has no access rights.*"

"Shit, you'd have thought that someone upstairs might have given us rights in case we tried to access Psi," he huffed.

"Any ideas?" asked Jeanine. "I mean we've come too far to fall at the final hurdle."

They sat there for another good fifteen minutes, wondering what to do.

"Hamish Lightwater!" cried Jeanine, apparently suddenly remembering the name.

"*User known but voice print mismatch. Access denied.*"

"Maybe if we try and fail for long enough, someone upstairs might be alerted, thinking we're intruders. And if they put two and two together, they might just figure out that it's us?" George wondered.

They put their plates aside and downed the last of the elixir.

For another five minutes they sat there, repeating their names over and over again just in case there was someone awake upstairs, to no avail.

"Where the hell are Banu Zadar and Rifatzada when you most need them?" Jeanine screamed out loud.

There was a momentary pause, then the loudspeaker crackled again:

"*Welcome, Banu Zadar. System activated,*" came the reply and at last the monitor sprang to life and a menu appeared on the

screen. And thank heavens they weren't being asked to supply a password.

“Now we're cooking!” George whooped for joy. He turned to Jeanine and they exchanged a warm hug.

He scanned through the menu and found that clicking on items brought up sub-menus. What he was looking for was a way into the programming interface, so that he could check through the code. Or perhaps access to a folder containing the program files. At this point there was no point into asking Jeanine's advice, because she still didn't know how to operate a computer, let alone program one.

“Help!” he cried in desperation, not finding what he was looking for.

*“Request for assistance received. User identify.”*

“Rifatzada.”

Again there was a pause.

*“User known but voice print mismatch. Access denied.”*

“Oh shit,” he groaned. Then he tried again, this time trying to recall the way Rifatzada had spoken when he's been channelling him.

“Rifatzada,” he spoke with more authority.

*“Welcome Rifatzada. Access granted. State your request.”*

“Bingo!”

*“That game is currently archived. Would you like me to retrieve it for you?”*

“No, no. It was a joke.”

*“I'm sorry but your statement does not compute.”*

“I need access to edit the programming code of the Psi system,” he said, getting a grip of himself.

“Do you require directions or should I load the Xyrex module?”

“Load the module.”

The screen cleared and a program editor popped up. He had a quick scan through the drop down menus, then had a look at what “Load” had to offer. Yes, he was presented with a long list of files and decided that he'd best start at “Main.”

“I'm sorry, Jeanine,” he said at length. “It's going to take me hours to get my head round the overall structure of this code, let alone get down to specific routines. Rather than sit around

twiddling your thumbs, why don't you go topside with the others. And if you can locate any more of that drink, or failing that a beaker of coffee, it would go down a treat.”

As he said this, he realized that this was not at all the right thing to say. “I'm sorry, that sounds so patronizing.”

“No offence taken,” she smiled and playfully ruffled his hair.

Jeanine returned shortly after with a cup of tea and some biscuits, which was better than nothing, but reported that there was no more of the drink to be had. He asked her what time it was and she looked at her old pocket watch and reported that it was just after sundown. As he had anticipated, he was only just beginning to make sense of the code, though it was written in a dialect that wasn't too far removed from the languages he'd used. And the long variable names were pretty easy to follow.

He'd found the main procedure of the program, which seemed to run in a big loop, checking each subject in turn to see if any processing had to be carried out:

```
for eachof (living_souls as n) do
{
  if (check_requirements [n] == TRUE)
  {
    result = process_decisionmaking [n];
    ...
  }
}
```

Which looked quite simple and innocuous enough until he followed up functions such as *check\_requirements* and *process\_decisionmaking* and found that they called other routines which themselves called yet further routines. It was like looking through the knots of a knitting pattern in order to work out what that pattern was. Or like knitting spaghetti.

Later that evening, Jeanine brought him some supper and he took a quick break before continuing. She suggested that he turn in and start work afresh the next day, but he was determined to work through the night if needs be. He had a head full of loose ends and he didn't want to lose track of them quite yet.

“What time is it?” he asked, suddenly realizing that the system might have that answer.

*“The time in your zone is twelve thirty seven and fifteen*

*seconds,*” came the voice through the speaker.

“Thank you.”

*“You're welcome, Rifatzada.”*

And then he found it. This routine, named *look\_ahead* had to be the one they'd been talking about at the council meeting. Yes, it was all beginning to come flooding back to him now.

He looked through that and associated routines and yet he could see nothing wrong with them, other than the fact that there was a thoughtful comment in the code which indicated that the look ahead had been reduced to decrease load on the processors.

But then he had it. There was a line in the *look\_ahead* routine that looked correct at a second or even third glance, yet contained the tiniest of errors. There was a stray semicolon at the end of the *for ()* line, and this meant that the program whizzed through an empty loop for each of the *living\_souls* and after that it broke out of the *for* loop and only provided *look\_ahead* to the one person that the variable *n* had previously been set to which, after a great deal of searching hither and thither, since he wasn't sure whether or not he could add breakpoints and get a print out of the figures, came to 37816145.

Out of curiosity, he asked:

“Can you bring up the database of living souls?”

*“Request granted.”* the voice said and another application opened up on the screen. He carefully tapped in the number 37816145.

The record belonged to one Samuel H. Jones of such-and-such an address in the Freelands. Well, it had been worth a try. And then he noticed a strange thing. Again out of idle curiosity he tried to bring up additional details of this man but each time a little pop-up on screen declared that access was denied. He made a note of this man's name and number, for future reference.

“Psi, can you access a record for me?” he enquired, and he read out the details.

*“Level 1 clearance required. Access denied.”*

“So what's my clearance level?”

*“You have level 2 clearance.”*

“So who has level 1 clearance?”

*“Access denied.”*

“I mean in general terms? High Command, for example?”

*“Access is denied to that information.”*

Well, bugger that for a game of soldiers, he thought. Without further ado, he removed the stray semicolon, went through the drop-down menu and clicked “Save.” Whoever Samuel H. Jones was, he'd wake up feeling a little less omniscient than when he'd gone to sleep. And everybody else, who'd been wittingly or unwittingly **totally cut off** from look ahead would think they were in seventh heaven. If folk had been cut off in this way, that might go a long way to explaining why things had suddenly turned so sour down in the Shadowlands.

George was about to close down the session for the night, yet a nagging doubt told him that his task was not complete, however, and he felt uneasy. Perhaps he'd noticed some other discrepancy in the code but hadn't registered it at a conscious level. Sheesh! He groaned as he contemplated just how many thousands of lines of code he'd already waded through. So there was nothing for it but to start all over again at the *main ()* routine.

An hour later and Jeanine returned, this time bringing him some breakfast. George had noticed himself dozing on and off and had obviously fallen asleep at the helm. She wanted to know if he'd made any progress and he tried to explain to her that yes, he had, and what he'd found. Though Jeanine couldn't understand the technical detail, she fully appreciated the impact that the change to look ahead would have made on the population.

She, too, was curious about this Samuel H. Jones might be – all the more so, given that access was denied to his record. She tried to bring up the record, too, without success.

He worked on through the morning and then he let out a big “Yahoo!”

*“Service currently unavailable,”* the voice told him. *“Would you like me to try again later?”*

“No, just shut up and forget about it,” he told her.

*“Memory artefact deleted,”* she confirmed. *“Please repeat your request.”*

Deeply hidden amidst surrounding code, there was one line. Yes, now he saw it, it had indeed caught his attention for a split second before his attention turned elsewhere. It was a call to a routine called *result = assert\_weight ()*. At least that's how it should have been written. When he looked again, however, he

could see that the line contained a typographical error and actually read: `result = ascertain_weight ()`. Now, on its own this meant nothing, of course. Except for the fact that he'd located the corresponding function declaration in one of the modules and it was quite clearly spelt `assert_weight`. So the call should have failed. It should have produced some kind of “function undefined” error and, as he could see no error-handling in the function, maybe brought the system to a grinding halt. Yet, clearly this wasn't happening.

Searching through the menus, George found a global find and replace function and searched for “`ascert_weight`”. And it didn't come as any great surprise to him to find that this function was included in an obscure module, hidden amidst a whole heap of other code. Scanning through the code and comparing it to what should have been there, he realized that this section of code had been deliberately written to cause mayhem in the system. This was the act of the gremlins and had to be removed, with thanks for the many years he'd spent proofreading his writing.

He was reminded of that old tale about making the most of what you have available:

*A man who went into a shop and asked the shopkeeper, “Do you have leather?”*

*“Yes,” said the shopkeeper.*

*“Nails?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“Thread?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“Needle?”*

*“Yes”*

*“Then why don't you make yourself a pair of boots?”<sup>5</sup>*

Finally, after years of collecting and warehousing and selling to others – thanks be to the Source and to the Friends – George was finally making himself a pair of boots. Tenzing had rightly said that no experience is ever wasted and that all the disparate pieces click into place at the end of the day.

He deleted the rogue function and saved the module. Then he went back to the misspelt call and corrected it, then saved that module, too. That should do the trick, he thought, and collected

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5 A joke retold in Idries Shah's *The Sufis*, Octagon Press.

his plate and beaker to take them back up top and tell the others that the work was complete.

Then he suddenly realized that perhaps the job was even yet not complete. Sure, he'd saved the code, but was that all he had to do? Maybe the code had to be compiled or uploaded to a server? Scanning through the menus, he did indeed locate an entry for "Build" and he clicked on it. This was a gamble, but one he had to take. Another window popped up and he could see from the text scrolling up the screen that the compiler was running through each of the modules and recompiling the application. He just hoped and prayed that there would be no errors that would prevent the build from completing. So far so good. And now the linker was at work, pulling all the loose ends together to produce the final executable file. For heaven's sake, don't crash on me now. He'd been chewing at his nails all night and had bitten them down to the quick.

Then finally, there it was:

*Build successful. Process complete.*

*Activate revised code (y/n) ?*

He clicked "Y" for yes and waited as the system went through a reboot. At length, the screen again popped up a message:

*Reboot complete.*

*Psi successfully reactivated.*

And with a great sigh of relief, George wiped his brow, took his things and clambered back out of the shaft and into the blinding light. Cold or not, with all the nervous energy he'd expended, his shirt was wringing wet with perspiration.

"Is it done?" asked Jeanine as he emerged.

Shielding his eyes from the glare of the sun, he nodded.

"Yes, it's done," and as they sat around the camp-fire amidst the ruins, he told them what he'd discovered and that he'd managed to rectify the situation.

"And now?" she asked. "What do we do now, George? Should we use the transporter to take us back home? Should we use the terminal to at least re-establish contact with the Caretakers? Or maybe we might stay here for a while longer?"

"Perhaps we should make contact, yes. They need to know that the problem with Psi has been solved, and how."

George was almost dead on his feet, but he put the plate and beaker down and turned back toward the open shaft. "Give me a minute or two while I see if I can send them a message."

"I want to send a message to the Caretaker Council," he announced, sitting back down at the console.

*"Request granted,"* the voice called back. The screen cleared and an application popped up on screen. And immediately he could see a snag.

"I need an address to send the message to."

*"Please name the recipient and I' will fill in the details."*

"Hamish Lightwater."

An address popped up in the recipient's address box and the local terminal's address was already filled in, so after much thought, he typed out his message. He wasn't quite happy with what he'd written, however, and spent a good ten minutes editing and re-editing the text, before finally hitting the "Send" button. The system confirmed that his message had been successfully delivered.

"How do you close this thing down?" he asked.

*"If you're finished with the terminal for the time being, simply say 'log off' and it will be placed on standby."*

"Thank you for your help. Log off."

*"You're welcome. Goodbye."*

And with that he clambered back up the shaft, retrieving the oil lamp on the way.

"Okay, I've sent a message. What do you want to do now?" he asked them, looking first at Jeanine and then at Tenzing.

"Excellent. We have food for another day and for the journey back," Tenzing told them. "How's about we stay here for the day in case you receive a reply to your message. And tomorrow we may have a better idea of the right way forward, eh?"

"That sounds like a sensible idea," he nodded.

"Now, my bleary-eyed friend, I suggest you get a few hours sleep. You look all in. Don't worry, we'll watch over you."

## 26. Develin

George awoke with a start to feel the ice cold barrel of a rifle being pushed against his left temple.

“Don't do anything foolish, George,” a voice snarled at him. It was one of the youths, the one called Lan Cho. George had thought that things had been going all too well of late.

“Now stand up nice and slowly, please. Any sudden moves and I'll shoot you.”

As he pushed himself up on his elbows and cast aside the thick furs, noticing the fresh covering of snow on the ground, he could see the others huddled together across the far side of the camp-fire. By now the fire had gone out and he was already quite cold.

Lan Cho took his eyes off the others for just a brief moment and that was all the time the other youth, Weazl needed. Picking up the crowbar as he ran, he brought the iron bar crashing down on Lan Cho's head.

But in that split second, Lan Cho ducked to one side, rolled away from him, raised the barrel of his gun and fired. The bullet drilled a tiny hole and passed straight through Weazl's skull, bursting out through the far side in a shower of brain tissue and blood which dyed the snow bright crimson and grey. Weazl was thrown backwards with the impact and landed awkwardly on his back, dead before he even knew it.

“Any more tricks like that and I shoot the woman,” Lan Cho spat, his breath clouding in the cold mountain air. He went across to George and rapped him in the ribs with the butt of his rifle, making him wince with the agonizing pain. “Take an oil lamp and lead the way down into the shaft. When you are down, place the oil lamp on the floor and stand aside. Do you understand?”

He nodded. Again Lan Cho poked him painfully with the butt of his gun and, picking up one of the hurricane lamps and lighting it, George began to clamber down inside the dark shaft. At the bottom, he placed the lamp on the ground.

“Now stand aside,” demanded Lan Cho. “Go inside the room and wait.”

George did as he was told. As he entered the room, the lights came back on and he waited for Lan Cho to make his descent.

“Now, close the door behind you and stand over in that corner.”

Lan Cho rested his rifle on the top of the control console and sat down on the bench.

“Activate system,” he commanded.

*“Not logged in. Please identify.”*

“Develin.”

That did not surprise George in the least. He must have taken control of Lan Cho's mind.

*“User known but has no access rights.”*

Thank God for that.

“Samuel H. Jones.”

*“Welcome Samuel, access granted.”*

“Grant level one clearance.”

*“Password required.”*

“37816145”

*“Level one clearance established.”*

Keeping a watchful eye on him every few moments, Lan Cho feverishly typed away at the keyboard.

“What are you doing, Lan Cho?” he asked.

“I'm setting the coordinates to receive a distinguished visitor,” the youth told him. “Now come back over here and kneel with your back to the door and your hands behind your head.”

The terminal pinged and Lan Cho smiled. “Oh, I see you have mail from your nearest and dearest. 'Children, it's so wonderful to hear that you are both safe and sound after these long years.' How touching. It's such a pity that you won't be able to return their call. Should I send them a reply reporting your tragic and sudden demise?”

The youth crumpled the sheet of paper and threw it down on the floor at his feet.

Lan Cho clicked a few switches on the control console, hit “Enter” on the keyboard and stood back, with one eye on George and the other on the empty chair of the transporter.

The machine was humming now and within moments the air around the transporter began to shimmer and glow as if phosphorescent. At first he could see little more than a shadow,

but gradually a shape began to emerge and finally it began to solidify into a body.

“Welcome, Master,” Lan Cho said finally as the figure pushed himself up in the reclining chair.

George was stunned as panic hit him head on. He knew those awful bloodshot eyes and the black leather jump suit. It was Develin. And this was no dream. This was reality.

“Well, well,” he leered. “If it isn't little boy lost. What a pleasure to meet you again after all these years.”

“I assure you, the feeling is not mutual,” George retorted in a quavering voice.

Develin cast him a withering glance which stunned him and nearly knocked him over. And yet he felt that this attack was quite weak compared to what he'd expected. Perhaps Develin wasn't yet as strong as he might be?

Develin sank back into the reclining chair and again the helmet-like device descended over his head, obscuring his eyes. George thought he might make a run for it.

“Pull yourself up, George, and get back in a kneeling position,” spat Lan Cho. “Hands behind your head or I'll put a bullet in you.”

He did as Lan Cho requested.

“Get on with it, man. Divert all the energy from Psi.”

“Are you sure you can withstand such a high level of input, Master?”

“Do it,” Develin commanded. “With that power and the link to the Demiurge complete, I shall rule over this land for an aeon.”

Lan Cho typed away at the keyboard and the helmet over Develin's head began to hum and glow brightly. This went on for two or three minutes, then the humming came to an abrupt stop and the helmet retracted. Develin got to his feet and staggered across the room. He appeared less than steady on his feet.

Lan Cho went to kneel before him. “Enlighten me, Master, for I have done your bidding.”

Develin let out a long laugh and laid his hands on Lan Cho's head. Then, without warning, he squeezed his hands together. George could hear the youth's skull crack under the immense pressure. Develin let go and Lan Cho slumped to the ground and lay there motionless. “Fool,” Develin spat, and he strode across

to the control console.

“What are you doing now?” George asked, hesitantly. He got up off his knees and stood by the door.

“Now it is time to bring my people here. Before the week is out, we will have taken control of Tenzing's hidden valley and set up our base. And within the year, the world's governments will have been toppled and people will be wailing in the streets that the Latter Days are nigh.”

As Develin took his seat, George called loudly:

“Rifatzada! Lights out! Log off all users!”

George leapt past the control console, snatching up Lan Cho's rifle as he went as the room was plunged into instant darkness. The sudden move jarred his ribs, and all he could do was grit his teeth at the pain. He aimed the gun toward the console and knelt there, waiting, and staying very, very still.

“Develin. Lights on!”

*“Unknown user. Access denied.”*

“Samuel H. Jones.”

*“Welcome Samuel. Access granted.”*

George aimed the rifle toward the voice.

“Lights on!”

*“Lights on.”*

Immediately the lights began to flicker and light. And in that instant, while Develin was looking around, he fired the rifle. It hit Develin on the shoulder, yet he hardly flinched. He fired again and this second bullet hit Develin in one eye, blinding him and hurling him back against the wall of the control room. Again and again, George fired into him, jerking his body about. Then slowly, Develin's legs gave way beneath him and he slumped to the ground, leaving the wall streaked with blood as he fell.

George dropped the gun and looked around him. He slumped down on the floor with his head in his hands, still shaking with trepidation and stayed there until he had collected his wits about him.

He was about to leave the room but then he remembered that Lan Cho had mentioned a reply to his message.

“Rifatzada. Print out incoming messages.”

*“Confirmed.”*

A single sheet of paper began to emerge from a slot to the

right of the monitor. He folded the paper up and pushed it into his pocket to read with Jeanine.

“Log off.”

“*Confirmed, Rifatzada. Goodbye.*”

“Goodbye Psi.”

Then, slinging the rifle into the far corner of the control room, he walked out of the room, took up the hurricane lamp and clambered painfully back up the ladder, closing the hatch behind him.

## 27. Fond farewells

They all sat round the glowing camp fire as George produced the sheet of paper from his trouser pocket and began to read out loud, his voice faltering with the emotions that welled up inside him:

*Children, it's so wonderful to hear that you are both safe and sound after these long years. We can't wait to see you again.*

*The work you have carried out is beyond our wildest hopes. Thank you so much. Matthew, the systems administrator has checked the changes you made and our preliminary findings are that this will indeed improve matters in the Shadowlands given time. We have sent word to Regional and High Command and the termination has been postponed pending further investigation. God willing, the experiment will continue.*

*You indicate that you have access to a transporter. To avoid any more little accidents, I attach the coordinates you'll need to safely make the return home. If that doesn't work, we now have a lock on you, so we can always initiate a re-ascent remotely.*

*With fondest wishes,*

*Mum, Dad and family.*

*Attachment: Return coordinates 1428571-KLG-5.*

There were tears in their eyes as George read out that message and tears again later when they said goodbye to Tenzing. It was a pity that Rosalie couldn't have been there that day, but God willing they'd meet again some day.

“You won't forget, will you Tenzing,” Jeanine reminded the man as they were about to leave. “I want a third of the royalties on my book to be sent to my parents and the rest is to go to your Foundation, to ensure that funds are made available for needy students. And send our love and fondest wishes to Rosalie.”

Tenzing nodded and thanked them both once more. “What's wrong, haven't you seen an old man weep before?” he asked, wiping his face.

“Goodbye, Tenzing,” Jeanine smiled and gave him a last big hug. “Now are you sure you can make it back to the valley on your own?”

“Yes, I'm certain. I'll have to bring help to take back Weazl and Lan Cho's remains, however. Lan Cho was a good lad, really. What befell him could have easily happened to any one of us, so he'll be given an honourable burial along side our friend Weazl.

“Anyhow, take good care of yourselves, you two. I'll bid you a fond *au revoir* and I look forward to being with you again.”

And with that, having typed in the coordinates, first Jeanine and then George returned safely Home once more.

~O~

**The End**

## **Answers**

One possible answer to the puzzle about which passenger to take in your car is this: take the old lady, give the car keys to your friend and wait at the bus stop with your soul-mate.

***Other books by the same author***  
in the Shadowlands series,  
awaiting publication on the Kindle

1. The Lost Treasure of Roth Nagor.
2. Life on the Flipside (or In Two Minds).
3. Escape from the Shadowlands.
4. In Search of Destiny.
5. The Lucian Uprising.
6. Time and Time again.
7. The Gift.
8. The Host and the Guests.
9. Whisperings of Love.
10. The Insiders: Exploring the higher realms of possibility.

## *Escape from the Shadowlands*

By Etienne de L'Amour

Something has gone drastically wrong with Psi, the caretaker system, and the effects are even being felt in the higher planes. The experiment in the Shadowlands, formerly the Eden Project, is to be terminated, imperilling the six billion souls down there, as well as the representatives and resident field workers.

Marie and her younger brother foolishly decide to make the descent, in order to help out, but their plans go awry and they become separated from one-another, and they forget their origins.

Fortunately, they eventually find help in the form of the writer and spiritual Master Tenzing Jangbu Rinchen and his clandestine organization, The Network.

Book 3 in the Shadowlands series.

