



By Fall of Night

Michael Graeme

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**Published:** 2014

**Tag(s):** "end of the world" "lucid dreaming" "time travel" "Contemporary Romance" asteroid romance love teaching dreams yoga tibetan victorian post-apocalyptic

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**by**

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~ Feedbooks Edition ~

~ December 2014 ~

**Published by:**

Michael Graeme on Feedbooks

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This version fully revised for Feedbooks  
December 2014

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*"The most vital issue of the age is whether the future progress of humanity is to be governed by the modern, economic and materialistic mind of the West or by a nobler pragmatism guided, uplifted and enlightened by spiritual culture and knowledge."*

*Sri Aurobindo 1872-1950*

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# Chapter 1

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I dreamed of her again last night - at least I think I've dreamed of her before, but sometimes dreams are like that, aren't they? They plant an impression, as you dream, that you've dreamed something before, when you haven't. And even though you haven't, the fact you think you have alters your whole outlook, at least so long as you remain dreaming. You become convinced your life is one thing, when actually it's quite another and all coloured by this possibly false conviction - unless it isn't false, and you really have dreamed this dream before, but merely forgotten.

And then what?

Anyway, I'm following her along this woodland path, dappled sunlight falling in pools of molten white along the way, and painting luminous streaks in her long black hair. She's wearing a black suit that fits her beautifully, accentuating a lithe figure, curvy around her hips and derrière. Her movements are quick and nimble, like a dancer, and I'm struggling to keep up. I have the impression she's the only one who knows the way, and I'd better watch out because I don't want to get lost in the woods.

We come to a fork in the path. One route goes down-hill into a greater leafy darkness, towards the roar of running water, and I imagine a hidden fall of vertiginous depth. The other continues rising gently, and looks as if it emerges into the light, a little way up a yellow-painted hillside. There's a stone marking the junction - tall, rough hewn. It might be a standing stone, or more likely a Victorian facsimile, its meaning lost to us now. The sun plays upon it in an eerie fashion, animating it, making it pulse in long, slow waves of dappled light. It marks a parting of the ways; I'm being presented with a choice: the light or the dark.

Well, Timothy, which is it to be?

I'm tempted to choose the lighter path, but don't really trust my intuition well enough to act upon it. I'm afraid the path will peter out into a waste of barren moor, that it's the darker way that will lead me through to a more fertile conclusion, though from this angle it looks less promising. I'm afraid of the darkness too, afraid of the hidden water, afraid of falling, afraid of drowning in the depths of myself alone and unknown.

She pauses, places a hand upon the stone and turns to look at me. She has a smile that puts me in mind of the Mona Lisa: inscrutable, mysterious. I don't know her face, it's no one of my acquaintances which makes her the unknown woman from the dreams of Jung, and her beauty shocks me; it's sublime, profound, deeply stirring. Then I see the white slit of the clerical collar and I feel the guilt and confusion of being in love with a woman of God - and worse, of wanting to make love to her.

It wakes me to the dawn light and to a feeling of oppression, also to a sense of thwarted longing much keener than anything I've felt in years. I know my dreams, even if I don't always understand them; something's stirring, something odd and dangerous. A journey, perhaps? A transition? God's False choices? Who is she? I'm sure she'd been about to say something, her name perhaps, but I woke too soon to hear it. Or did I just forget? Did the dream mean me not to hear it?

You never know with dreams, do you?

I lie there for a moment in the warm cocoon of a post-sleep stupor, and I reel back as much of the truth as I can, landing the details, each a slippery, iridescent fish, leaping and twisting for escape - but

can't get at those words. I see her lips move but,...

The alarm goes off.

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Damn!

I'm left with just the fragments now: *fear of the deeper darker realm of the forest. Afraid of trusting my intuition because it so often goes against the logical facts of material reality. And like all humans the biggest fear I have in the day to day of my life is simply that of feeling stupid.*

*The path of light is the one I can see, the one I'm treading every day and, yes, I am afraid of petering out into a barren waste of meaninglessness and, most likely, the uncertain void of an early retirement. The dark depths might prove more fertile, but it takes more guts than I have to go wandering about down there - I mean all the way down.*

*Where daemons live.*

I knock the alarm off and reach for the 'Droid, jab in the details of my dream, then squirt them into the cloud where I keep the autobiography of my time here on earth. Yes, I know there are state-salaried snoopers of all nationalities these days who scan the clouds for such careless chatter as this.

Perhaps you're one of them.

May I call you Cloud Snooper? No, that's too unwieldy - let's shorten it to C.S. Or better still, let's make a clever little joke of it, and call you Lewis. There, I like it. It gives you a human face, though I suspect you be mostly machine. I scan my words ahead of you, and ponder their meaning. Other men have movie stars for muses. I have a vicar. Perhaps, Lewis, you will e-mail, and explain all of this to me, for we have no greater, all-watchful and all-knowing god than you these days.

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# Chapter 2

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All right,...

Six thirty: Rise; pee out my aching bladder, then shuffle into the back garden for Qigong, warming gradually to Tai Chi, then a little Kung Fu. These are Chinese exercises for mind and body, Lewis. There is no equivalent system in the West, where the imaginative faculties have been regarded with increasing suspicion since the day we laid Wordsworth to rest in Saint Oswald's churchyard.

That was in 1850.

Seven fifteen now: Shower then breakfast, while I scroll through the news on the 'Droid: War, sexual perversion, torture, corruption, terror-bogeymen and economic collapse. Same as it's always been.

Eight o'clock: I leave the house and drive from the southern suburbs of Middleton, to the north, to the school. My radio is tuned to the BBC. There's a politician of the party of the rich bluntly evading questions while landing spurious rabbit punches on the policies of the party of the less rich. I notice there is no party of the poor these days. The vacuum is suffocating. No one of intelligence talks about change any more, only of adaptation to circumstances that cannot be altered. The interview ends in stalemated nothingness, fades back into the breathless reportage of war, rape, torture, corruption, and economic collapse.

I shiver: someone moving over my grave.

My,.. the world feels hollow this morning.

*M? Is that you?*

Eight fifteen, I'm cruising past Dave's Dodgy motors on Elm Street, and see an old MX5 for sale, a little glittery in the early morning sunlight. Am I not overdue a change of vehicle, Lewis? Is a little sport's car too menopausal do you think? But what's wrong with having a bit of fun? What's wrong with waking up and trying to engage more with my reality? But a little sport's car, Timothy?

*Do grow up!*

Eight thirty: The day begins. Meeting with other male colleagues in the boss's office, all of us seated like ministers of state around a pretentious oval table. I don't know what the meeting's about yet, and I'm too old to care. Besides, it's Friday, the last day of term, and I'm travelling to the cabin tomorrow for a six week break - my annual summer decompression.

I'm looking at the boss - I no longer call these transient, self important nincompoops "Headmasters". We've had such a long string of them in recent years, all the same, all of them on the springboard to somewhere else, and not one of them teachers. Surprised, Lewis? When was the last time you were in a school? They come from Corporateville these days, wearing sharp suits, their mission being to similarly corporatise these ancient, crumbling institutions, turn them into profitable examination factories, into businesses with Orwellian slogans like "Excellence in Everything" or "All children are created equal,..." "

War is peace. Freedom is slavery.

And all that.

Remember your Orwell do you, Lewis?

*Ignorance is the new enlightenment.*

I notice Orwell is no longer on the approved syllabus. The irony amuses me.

~~Apologies, you may find my cynicism wearing. The cynic might be funny for a while, but his~~  
company soon becomes tedious. I promise to do better.

What's he like, this man? It's impossible to know for sure of course. All I can describe is his mask hideously distorted through the lens of my own shortcomings.

Middle fifties, silver haired, immaculately groomed, Strickland sits upright like a spoof new anchorman. He has a smile like Jabba the Hutt - huge, insincere, and slightly disgusting. He notices my quietly analytical gaze, looks unhurriedly away, then flicks self-importantly through his impressively stuffed diary. I am his audience for that moment and am close to being flattered he should think me worthy of such a performance. He's not much older than me and I'm wondering what the difference in us is; what quirk of fate, or genetic coding, puts him there and me where I am?

And where is that, Timothy Magowan?

Let's see: forty nine years old, childless, divorced, nothing in your life now except your job and your dreams, and a cabin in the Lakes. And your dreams are more real to you than anything, aren't they? What does that make you? Dreamer? Loser? Ne'er-do-well?

Enough!

The meeting gets under way:

Ah,... it's another subtle reminder of the dress code: the question of the suit that some of us are still not wearing. Strickland has already won over the women - had them parading around like corporate tartlets for months, so I'm left wondering at the source of his charisma, because all he does with the guys is get their backs up. There's nothing wrong in this; when even teachers fail to recognise the empty gloss of corrupt authority, we really are in trouble.

Wait a minute - the suit! A dream fragment surfaces: *The vicar is wearing an immaculate suit. Is there a link there, Lewis? But what of the sexual angle? Because that suit definitely makes me want to have sex - sex like I knew it in my youth, when I was taken over by an energy that was not my own, working me up into a tornado of detached erotic madness for hours and hours and hours.*

Wait! Was it ever like that for me?

Stop it, Tim. Pay attention now.

Strickland has cleared his throat and put up the first slide. Bullet points: *Empowerment, Emotion, Enrich, Emphasize, Energize*. His famous five E's. But try as I might, they refuse to gel into anything collectively meaningful - and I have been trying all term. I also have to work hard to forgive him the Americanization of the words Emphasise and Energise - apologies to my American snoopers; that's the trouble with us English teachers of course, if we're not careful we no longer see poetry in words - just the spelling mistakes and the debatable points of grammar - not that there's any poetry here - just the same old bullshit.

He'd be better simply handing out a note that says "wear a suit to work next term or you're sacked" - I might even respect that, but it would be too direct for the modern day workplace, and Strickland has a PhD in mealy-mouthedness.

Of the twenty male members of staff gathered that morning, most by now have succumbed and have bought themselves cheap supermarket threads in regulation grey. Conformance need not cost the ear - indeed I've observed it's often the cheapest road to ruin. So, the meeting is aimed at those of us who have yet to capitulate.

Like me.

I feel myself blushing.

I'm wearing an indestructible Harris Tweed, purchased in Edinburgh twenty years ago, and probably worn every day since then, a jacket that holds more kit among its multitude of sturdy pockets than any corporate butty box. But tweed is not "Corporate". It's too relaxed, conveys the wrong message. It does



not say: "excellence in all things". Nor do my industrial grade chorded trousers, and brown brogues.

They are too,... workmanlike.

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What does your appearance convey, Tim?

I'm thinking of the earth, down-to-earthness, and common sense. Integrity too? Yes. I would like to think so. We're growing short on common sense these days, and have long ago replaced integrity with the false security of tick boxes.

*You are becoming old fashioned Tim - is it not time you moved aside for the suited ones?*

*Hmm.*

What's that he's saying now?

Ah, he's droning on about values, but his voice sounds like a bee in a bottle and I'm thinking of the vicar again, of her smile and I'm wondering if there's any significance in her pausing by that standing stone, significance in the speculation over its authenticity. *The authenticity of religion, Tim? Or is the stone the hermetic heart, the mystical core of all religion?* It is hewn from the earth. The ten commandments were written on stone, implying what? An ordinance that is not man made, but divine truth, from God. And if you don't like the G word then from the Universe, Universe with capital U, or the great ground of being, or all that is. How many names do we have for God these days? And none of them true.

I snatch back to the present but only to lament how corporatisation, like monolithic religion, seem to degrade innate intelligence, empowering those who conform at the expense of those who do not. I'm appalled; after thirty years at the chalk face, will it be this comfy old jacket, and not my obsolescence that unseats me?

How banal!

I note since the last meeting, another of our number has succumbed. That leaves two of us, the other being Raul Hankinson, head of art, who is still reassuringly casual in full volume Hawaiian shirt and shorts, and behind whose rich razzle dazzle I now take metaphorical cover.

The kids love Raul. Never was a teacher more popular than he. He relaxes them to a point just short of insolence, boshes skilfully with them. His art classes have the appearance of a loosely contained explosion, one that has been known to have the inspectors reaching for Ibuprofen. But his results speak for themselves; grades in art are outstanding.

But art is of no interest to Strickland.

It does not open doors to the suited halls, to the vast open plans of the modern workplace with its rows of Visiphones.

Children are notably subdued by suits. Suits make robots, and robots have always been a scary concept, hosts for all our projected fears. And suits, like uniforms, hide incompetence. We've known this since the sixties, been fighting this since the sixties. I thought we'd won, so how the hell did the suits get the upper hand of a sudden? All right, I think you have a handle on my politics now, Lewi enough to profile me. But what I'd really like to know is when, behind this tired old cover of blistering cynicism, did I begin to feel so worthless and alone?

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# Chapter 3

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"It was when they started shutting the factories," says Raul.

We're walking the corridors, freed from our tutor groups and our registers. We are stepping out not into the fray. The place is sweaty and dusty and crushed with uniforms - uniforms in various stages of reversion to self expression: ties folded into infeasibly fat full Windsors, skirts rolling up from the waistbands to reveal more knee than regulation allows. The feel of that meeting is still sliding from our faces, dripping uncomfortably with the raw sulphurous egg that Strickland habitually regurgitates in our direction.

"It was when we reinstated the idea of 'us' and 'them'," he goes on. "'Them' being the disenfranchised losers who are out of work, or languishing on minimum wage, and 'us' being the fucking conformist wankers who aren't."

Girls gasp and turn aside, blushing at his language, mostly in approval.

Raul has a face lined with much history, little of it good. He fled his native Africa in the eighties but found a Britain he describes as far from living up to his expectations. He found himself caught up in a minor riot in Toxteth, claims innocence, but got a baton in his face and twelve stitches across his forehead for his trouble, mainly on account of his colour. He concluded we don't do it any differently to anyone else - just not as often, but only on account of cold blood and apathy. His art now features policemen's helmets, and Billybats and Tazer darts lighting up the bodies of schoolchildren, the faces frozen in a terrified catatonia as a corporatised state bears down upon them.

His vision of our future unsettles me.

I deny it wings.

I'm surprised his dismissal has not yet been constructed. I'm sure Strickland is capable of it; Raul's themes, like much of his language, are decidedly "off message".

I remember asking him once, as I stood in his art-room, at the same time admiring and yet equally repulsed by his images: "Are things really so bad as this, Raul?"

"If this shit makes you ask the question," he replied, "It doesn't matter if it's right or wrong, accurate to how things really are. There is no right or wrong in art, man. All that matters is you're honest to yourself and you provoke a reaction."

I'd thought he was pretty well up himself in those days - typical arty type. Not exactly on the same planet as the rest of us. But as the years have passed I've grown to respect him, grown to understand him more, mainly because I've learned you can't rely on society to do the dreaming for you. You have to do the dreaming for yourself, or your life will always lack meaning and direction.

I'm sorry if at times I appear nonsensical, but as a wise and very beautiful lady once said: it's better to be utterly ridiculous than absolutely boring.

*Marilyn Monroe, Lewis.*

*Save you Googling.*

I'm a bit of a film buff, though forties noire is more my cup of tea these days.

I turn to Raul now as I'm about to peel off into my room, conscious of the kids already lined up by the door, curious of my relationship with this genial, wizened bear of a man.

"So, Raul, when are you getting the suit? I hear they have some deals on cheap sweatshop-threads

Freshways supermarket."

He flashes me a grin, "When hell freezes over. You?"

"I'll get one when I see you wearing one."

"Deal."

We laugh, shake hands on it - the last of the rebels - but nothing good will come of it. We deny that any of this is serious, but it's serious to Strickland, and he didn't get to where he is without the ability to break people. I note we were both eyeballed in the meeting; only Raul had the nerve to reflect back unflinchingly, so Strickland blinked away and focused instead on me.

Raul has survived unspeakable torture and years of solitary confinement at the hands of a regime less subtle about its descent into repressiveness; Strickland cannot intimidate him. Me? I've suffered nothing more serious than the loss of my soul, which I recognise makes me vulnerable; I'm fond of the old ways, of the romance of teaching, but we're not even trusted to be near children these days - the authorities assuming we're all potential paedophiles, so even our mobile telephones must be handed in at the school office lest we take photographs of our charges during the day, then wank ourselves blind over them at night.

The only person exempt from this humiliating and depressing precaution, I note, is Strickland, and I wouldn't trust him with my grandmother.

I worry about putting that word *paedophile* into the cloud, lest you take it out of context, Lewis, and use it to oppress me. Can your text parsers interpret irony? Do they recognise and categorise? For the record then: I am a drone and largely defenceless. I am also brainless, trustless and in the process of being stripped of my professionalism. I deliver a syllabus,... dollop it up with a blind apathy, now like the school cook, anaemic gravy splashes and all, the pair of us starved of funds so we are reduced to a very poor and watery fayre indeed.

How does one escape such a mess as this?

Sorry, Lewis, I'm going on a bit here,...

Where was I?

Story, Tim, *story*,...

Righto.

I do not want to wear the suit, which is a symbol of all I've come to hate. I have a little money, but not yet the guts to walk away, wagging Strickland my Agincourt fingers. What then is my purpose, Reverend? What is my journey?

I ask the question of my Priestess, and look for augurs.

*You think I'm joking?*

Amelia Grey walks by; thirty five, dark blue trouser suit, black high-heels clicking, hips swaying like a fashion model. As augurs go, this is a pleasing start, but also confusing. Raul and I are simultaneously distracted as she winks at us, and our eyes follow the roll of her deliciously cushioned *derrière*. The corridor coos in approval at our middle aged weakness, also her sauciness. And I'm thinking: dark suit, long black hair? Is she the prototype for my vicar? It's possible. But I'm pushing fifty, and the thought of making love to a thirty five year old woman like Amelia seems even less feasible than making love to a vicar.

Far too energetic, I imagine.

No, sex is not it, Lewis; I am not suppressing lust, though the Freudians would point out the unambiguously phallic nature of that standing stone in the dream. But I am not a Freudian. I am of the Zurich school and my dreams oblige accordingly, though I admit with no more clarity. The nearest interpretation I can come up with is I'm staring something in the face, being presented with a source of great spiritual power and meaning, and all I want to do is fuck it. I feel a rush of recognition, and wonder if this could be the truth, except by now I no longer remember the question.

What was the question please?

*Augurs?*

*Significance?*

*Reading the world like a dream?*

Miss Rayworth is seeing in her charges next door. I catch her eye. Dowdy Miss Rayworth. Age indeterminate, but something past forty, also suited, but in a crumpled thrift shop sort of way, and lame - white hands clutching an old lady's walking cane. I wonder if she's smirking at Raul and I, or tongues metaphorically hanging out. I want to tell her it's not how it looks, that I don't feel the same way about women that I used to do, that I am largely dead from the neck down these days, and all this is merely an intellectual exploration.

She looks at us, briefly, her expression blank, then turns aside and follows her charges in. I feel myself seen but unnoticed - story of my life - and realise I don't even know her first name. But whose fault is that, Timothy? Did you never think to ask it?

"Do you fancy Miss Grey, sir?"

Audience titters.

"Hmm?"

We are settled in class now, thumbing through our readers - Steinbeck: *Mice and Men*. I know; it's the last day of term and other teachers are showing their charges Digital Video Discs of blockbuster movies, and otherwise giving over to chaos, while here I am familiarising them ahead of time with what will be their study text next term. Indeed the poor dears will be studying this little book so deeply and so intently over the coming years, they'll leave Middleton High School, (a specialised language college) throwing up at the very mention of it.

I think about the question regarding Miss Grey. Decide it best not answer directly, but neither must I show weakness or they will seize upon it.

"Don't you, Mr. Stott?"

Christopher (Plank) Stott; what use has he for Steinbeck? I'm fond of the boy - no, not in *that* way as Lewis - but he'll never make it to college, let alone university. No suit for him, except for weddings and funerals. And why should he worry about that? After all, he's good with his hands and would make a success of himself building cabinets, or doing plumbing, or wiring, or joinery - all things that are essential and potentially lucrative in any civilised society, yet sadly out of fashion, and certainly could not come under the banner of Strickland's elusive "excellence".

Stop.

Pause for breath:

They are too,... ugh,... *vocational*.

We are failing him. Failing most of the children here under the pretence of valuing them. Measuring them for suits, when jeans and tee shirts are more comfortable. No wonder they pattern their skins with ink at the first opportunity.

My honest advice for Mr Stott would be to concentrate on his spelling and his basic English, that others might take him seriously at whatever he settles to in the future, that Steinbeck is indeed a waste of time for him. I could recommend other extracurricular readers that would light him up, but he has a lot of Steinbeck to come, and this of course will kill his desire for reading anything but the big tit red-tops in the years to come.

"Tits are too small, sir!"

Laughter.

Mention of Miss Grey's tits in the same breath as the big tit red-tops? An echo from the universes of Lewis, and a curious synchronicity! I like that. I might have returned that I hadn't noticed, but it would be a lie, and would only have escalated things.

Dangerous territory.

So,...

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Line drawn.

"Thank you for volunteering to read first for us, Mr. Stott."

Groans. More laughter, a hint of embarrassment. Am I blushing? I'll be sweating in a minute. Move on quickly now. My word the energy in the classroom is vibrant this morning, also colourful, but not threatening. I decide it's safe to draw upon it, and I smile.

Mr Stott reads slowly, slightly wooden, but with increasing fluency. I let him off after half a page then subdue any further embarrassing outbursts by smothering him in cheap flattery. "Well done Mr Stott. You read that very well."

He blushes modestly.

I smell a mixture sweaty armpits and strong body spray, mostly female. Janice Iddon is looking at me with cow eyes, big pancakes of sweat pooling under her arms. I'm too old for her to have a crush on me - that's an occupational hazard that fades once a man gets past thirty five - so I am left to assume it's a father figure she desires. I would tell her I am not a good candidate, having failed in the requisite sperm department long ago. The rest of it remains a mystery to me.

I ask her to read next. Her voice is measured, lyrical, sweet.

It sends a shiver up my spine.

Someone standing over my grave.

The day ripens.

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# Chapter 4

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There are teachers here who swagger with self importance, and even from a distance they sicken me. Is this still some weakness in myself - like the way I hate Strickland for no good reason? I thought I had rooted out all these shadow triggers by now, but at least I am not alone in my weakness:

"Look at that bastard Lister," says Raul.

We're eating lunch in the glazed refectory, gazing out across the courtyard where John Lister is upbraiding a sleight young first year for walking on the grass. The child is eleven, sensitive, perhaps a little de-mob happy in anticipation of his holidays, and is by now traumatised by this big besuited moron who is incandescent, red faced, and ejecting spittle with every full stop.

An unpleasant man for sure, disappointed in his career, and in his private life, I suspect.

"Seems a little disproportionate," I reply, then realise I'm similarly disappointed on both counts and wonder what the difference is - I mean why do I like children, universally, good and bad, and Lister appears to hate them. Is it because I have none of my own, and he has too many?

"What would you have done?" asks Raul.

Like me, Raul never looks at the surface of life, but reads every event like the page of an oracle, scouring it for the solution to life's deeper meaning. Raul has no children either - he suspects the result of electrodes attached to his scrotum for no good reason other than routine induction to a particularly nasty prison regime.

"I suppose I would have asked the boy politely not to walk on the grass - while lamenting with him how most rules are just a pain the arse."

"Me too, I think. But that's us Timothy. Do we trade our egos for cheap popularity? And is such a thing any less repellent in the eyes of God?"

Mention of God puts me on my guard, bringing back snippets from the dream. "All I know is that God makes my days pass more quickly the easier they are," I reply. "And I wouldn't say I've achieved popularity, more a kind of safe mediocrity. Not like you, Raul. You're very popular, very colourful, dressed like that, shamelessly effing and blinding all over the place. Me? I'm just your regular invisible grey tweed Englishman. Harmless, patient, confused. Popularity? I don't know. I think if you're sincere, it gives you an easier ride in class. They sense it. I'd rather they were relaxed around me than fearful. It's just my way. Yours too, I think?"

Raul nods sagely. "Children are perceptive," he says. "They suffer fools badly, can recognise a pillock from a hundred paces. Only adults have learned to tolerate them."

"True."

"And Lister's like that with everyone, have you noticed?"

"He's always very polite to me."

"On the surface, yes, I don't doubt it. But underneath he thinks you're a spineless twit. However, Lister also knows you've got a black-belt in something Chinese - because I told him - and this confuses him but helps him moderate his tone with you. You want to know how someone really is? Listen to the way they speak to a dog, or a small child."

"Wait - back up a bit there; he thinks I'm a spineless twit?"

"Don't take it so hard - you got off lightly; he thinks I'm a waste of space, and that art is no vocation."

for a man."

"~~You told him I have a black belt in Kung Fu? But I don't. We didn't grade back then. And I don't fight. I never have. I wouldn't know the first thing about it.~~"

"Like he's going to know the difference. No sense having an edge and not using it to your advantage. The silent warrior! The warrior monk! This is the myth we should be weaving for you. The whole world is built on myths, not truths. No one knows what the truth is. The truth is something we merely invent to suit ourselves."

"Unless it's cast in stone."

"Hmm?"

"Never mind. I think I prefer spineless twit. It's not far off the mark anyway."

"If you were spineless you would have worn the suit months ago, discarded your fine Harris Tweed for cheapness and deceit."

"If Strickland starts getting nasty, I'll probably do it anyway, in spite of what I promised you earlier - leave you standing out like a blind cobbler's thumb in your fluorescent floral shirt."

Raul thinks about this. He's been betrayed before of course, someone speaking his name just to make the pain stop. He looks grave for a moment "You must do what you have to do in order to survive. But rest assured, my friend, I shall never judge you."

We've become morbid for a moment. Time for a change of subject: "Anyway, have you noticed Lister's suit? That's made to measure. Almost as good as Stricklands. Do you think he's out for deputy?"

"It's possible, and to be fair the role would probably suit a man of Lister's lack of moral calibre. But I suppose we must forgive him his mental incompetence if we are to rise above him. And, as you say, his threads are fine indeed, but they don't fit him anywhere near so well as Amelia Greys. Now there's a woman I wouldn't mind working under."

"Lister doesn't have her figure. Anyway, it's hardly the same thing. She'd look good wearing a bikini bag. He wouldn't look good in anything."

I think back to the sight of her that morning, strutting down the corridor like a catwalk model. "Do you see those heels? And who was she winking at?"

"Well it wasn't me," says Raul. "I'm fat, unfit, and married."

"And I'm fifty next birthday."

"So what? Can you really have lost the art of innocent flirtation, Timothy? Flirtation is what keeps us all young."

"I'm hoping an hour of Tai chi a day is what will keep me young, Raul. In my experience women age simply age."

"Yes. An intriguing paradox. A woman ages a man, but equally a man needs a woman,..."

"Like a fish needs a bicycle."

"You've been too long celibate, my friend. Have you tried online dating yet?"

"Raul, we're old artists, you and I. You paint, while I'm writing probably the worst semi-autobiographical novel ever written. One that only my online state-salaried snooper is going to read. We don't do women."

"Speak for yourself. I do them all the time - metaphorically speaking of course. And so should you, though with less emphasis on the metaphorical. Tell me, who is your current muse?"

I hesitate to divulge, but in his flippant asides Raul often speaks much wisdom. "I dreamed she was a vicar last night."

"Seriously? " He widens his eyes into great bulls-eyes of surprise. "This is new. And interesting. And possibly perverted, but tell me more."

"She's quite good looking, in a mature sort of way."

"Well of course. Aren't they all?" He grins, wags his finger knowingly. "That's simply our age mate's friend."

"And I think I've dreamed of her before. Or it may just be the once. I need to re enter the dream and ask her some questions."

"So what's the problem? I mean, apart from the fact she's not real?"

"You can't shag a vicar, Raul."

"Well, that was my first thought, but why not? So far as I know the Anglican priesthood has not taken vows of chastity. If it were my dream I'd say she means you need to get laid, that it's more than your physical well-being riding on this; it's also spiritual. Shall I ask Amelia how she feels about it?"

"About what?"

"About getting laid, with you. Better a real woman you can shag than one you can literally only dream of shagging."

"In case you'd forgotten, Amelia's married, and also for good measure currently rumoured to be having an affair with Strickland's deputy,... you know, what's his name? I doubt she'd have the time to fit another lover in, though at my age I probably wouldn't take up much of her time. A couple of minutes a month ought to suffice."

Raul is incredulous. "You mean she's having it away with Ratface? Since when?"

"They've been at it for months. Don't you listen to gossip? Even the kids are buzzing with it. It'll be interesting to see what happens when Strickland finds out."

"Well, it's obvious. Ratface is for the sack, and Amelia, having unambiguously demonstrated her wanton nature will be invited to a private ticking off which involves the unzipping of Strickland's trousers,... and hers,... " Raul gives a mock shudder,... "Unthinkable,... but if she's really gadding about with that tedious self inflated buffoon, I've seriously underestimated the depth of her compassion, also her generosity. All the better. You can be assured she won't take things too seriously, thus allowing you time to experience all the charms of a beautiful woman again, without the elongated shadow of the long term spoiling anything. And if you can win her away from Ratface, you might just be sparing her defilement at the hands of our Nemesis. Indeed, this has escalated into a matter of utmost urgency. I shall speak with her at the next opportunity."

"Don't you dare."

He smiles. "Very well, but only if you agree to eat with us this evening, to celebrate the beginning of another blessed summer break. Dora is cooking an heroically huge Shepherd's Pie and has been stocking up on ingredients for weeks." He pats the well- rounded protuberance of his stomach. "You'll be doing me a favour, saving me from morbid obesity and an early grave."

"I'll be glad to. But no alcohol. I'm driving in the morning."

"Of course. I thought you'd given up anyway."

"I have."

"And you are escaping the metropolis, as usual?"

"A run up to the cabin."

He sighs in disapproval. "You know, my fear is that one day you will decide not to return, and I shall visit you there to find your emaciated cadaver rigidified into a meditation pose, while your vital self remains lost in the woods of another bizarre dream."

"Lost in the woods? Yes,... that's possible. But the peace and quiet will help. I need to understand this phase of my life Raul. I feel the emptiness of the world, and I fear it,... "

"We all fear it, Timothy. When a man is young he thinks he can change the world. With middle age comes cynicism upon realising he cannot."

"I'm still hoping there's an answer in my dreams."

"And well there might be. But your dreams have already told you the reason for your angst."



Timothy. They tell you to stop wasting your life in this menagerie. Our time is over. We are no longer required. We are obsolete. Our world is gone, our vision never was, it failed to live and now we stand in the way of those who would change things. Yet we are still men, still capable of greatness, given the right circumstances."

"I know we still matter, Raul, if only by virtue of our continuing presence, but our voices carry an ever diminishing weight. You reach a certain age and you might as well be sitting there mute for all the difference you can make. I don't get it. Where the Hell do we fit in any more?"

"We don't," he says. "I used to think that we had been outpaced by the world, but now I realise it more that we have outgrown it. So we might as well leave the world as it is. What we need somewhere else to go."

"Such as?"

He shrugs. "You have put your finger on the malaise of the western world, my friend. In truth I do not know. I'm relying on you to discover it, and come tell me."

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# Chapter 5

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5:15 and the school has long ago emptied of pupils, and most of the staff who are mostly gone by 4:00 these days. Only management remains, and me. I'm sitting alone at my desk, eyes resting in the warm dark sanctuary of my palms. There is little danger of being disturbed here; though the English department is a forlorn outpost, little frequented after hours. Lister, head of department will be schmoozing with Strickland and Ratface. I have had emails from all three this afternoon, banal dictations on this and that and none of them to do with the business of teaching. It amuses me that, considering we are a specialist language college, all three appear to have learned their English spellings and grammar from chat forums.

I'm playing binaural beats through my buds, shamanic frequency, 4.5 Hz, alpha-rhythm inducing. It clears the fog from the images on the screen behind my eyes, gives them a motion of their own. I see the standing stone sharply delineated, see the animated patterns of dappled sunlight playing over its surface. I've been like this for a while, trying to coax back the image of my vicar, my priestess, but I'm trying too hard and she keeps melting. Only the stone and the forest remain stable. I can hear the leaves moving in the breeze and the white noise of the distant falls. Then I'm thinking I can smell something aromatic above the pungent earth-scent of leaf mould and ramsons.

Is that... Chanel No 5?

It's unusual that I can smell things so sharply in the vision state - I'm particularly observant of scents these days, being a recovering anosmic, but I can normally tell the difference between a scent that is imagined and one that is actually sensed. It's definitely Chanel No 5. My wife hated it, but only I think because I was attracted to it. Come to think of it, she took instinctively against anything I was fond of. Some people are like that, aren't they? only reassured of their own existence if they can pour scorn on the fact of someone else's. Either that or she was simply resentful of my sterility.

Why can I smell it now?

*What is its significance, Lewis?*

The scent is stabilising, filling my senses, while all I see with the inner eye is the standing stone. Try as I might, I can coax no other association from the dream. I take a breath and open my eyes to find Miss (Mrs?) Rayworth (Religious/moral studies) sitting across the desk from me. She's watching me like one might watch a fish in a tank, with a quiet curiosity. She has a slightly cross-eyed focus, which lends her a peculiar intensity. I give a start, and yank the buds from my ears.

I'm embarrassed, yes, also beginning to sweat a little on account of it, but this is very interesting and curiously portentous.

*Miss Rayworth, up close!*

She has long black hair, mad cascades of it, and such volume! It's like it's never been cut in her life and it has the untidy texture of dried straw, as if it lacks care. Also there's the shadow of a moustache and, God forgive me, but I'm making a Freudian association here and imagining a bush of the hairiest proportions - one that a man might get lost in for days, should he be so inclined,...

*Which I most certainly am not, doctor.*

The suit looks like it came from her mother's wardrobe, and her blouse, buttoned up tight to the throat, is both chaste, and defiantly un-ironed. Miss Rayworth? I would never have associated her with

Chanel No 5. Yet there we are, Lewis.

First impressions?

"Is everything all right, Mr. Magowan?"

"Em,... yes,... I was just,... resting my eyes. I thought everyone had gone."

"Obviously. So did I. Why haven't you? Or are you a slave to your job like me?"

She graces me with the twitch of a smile. *I'm being sarcastic*, she's saying, which is curious; do I detect in her a streak of dry humour? It's like she knows me already, knows something about me, that she will share with her in this seditious talk, that we will both brave the Billybats and the Tasers together, hands clasped in a last minute gesture of solidarity.

We wag our Agincourt fingers as the policemen charge.

*What? Slow down, Timothy.*

Curious metaphor, not unpleasant.

But solidarity against what?

Ah,... I think I understand; I intuit she's been talking to Raul. Raul makes it his business to flirt with all the women on the staff, regardless of age or how fearsome their reputation – indeed I'm told the more fearsome the better. He's been telling her about me. I feel my ears go red.

"I was just,... finishing something off," I explain. But this sounds weak, possibly also a little guarded?

*What does she want from me?*

She nods, clearly unconvinced, looks anxious for a moment, then hands me my 'phone. "Sorry for startling you. The office was closing. Miss Somerville asked if I'd return this to you - otherwise you would have had to wait until next term for it."

"Em,.. thank you. Yes,... that would have been,... tiresome."

"Wouldn't it just."

I've not seen her up close before, not really paid her much attention. She has rather a studious face, introspective, not unattractive, though disguised somewhat by a pair of big glasses that look as if they were chosen specifically for their ugliness. She also has freckles and a pale, smooth skin that suggests she's far younger than the centenarian way she dresses. She's forty perhaps? Or possibly a very well kept forty five?

"It's a stupid rule," she says. "My theory is Strickland only brought it in to stop us texting and loafing on Facebook during school hours."

"I'd not thought of that. Never actually caught up with Facebook though." I refrain from telling her I have no one I can think of whom I'd want to text either.

"I know," she says. "I checked. I can't find any mention of you on Facebook at all."

"You checked? Really?"

She laughs. "No,... I'm joking. *Obviously*. I never caught up with Facebook either." She pauses, sighs, then takes a breath, as if steadying herself for an important announcement. "You need to know Raul's invited me round to his place tonight for dinner."

"Oh?"

She lets slip a smile. "Obviously he means for us to be married, Mr Magowan. I just thought it polite to mention it in case you wanted to duck out."

"Ah,... and there was me thinking he was setting me up with Amelia Grey." A joke, Lewis, but will she find it funny? What was it Marilyn Monroe said? *If you can make a woman laugh, you can make her do anything?*

She frowns, but not unpleasantly. "And that would have been all right, I suppose?"

"Actually,... not really."

"Why not? Is there something wrong with you? I thought all the male staff were palpitating for

brush-past with Amelia Grey."

I feel a rush of something pleasant; I don't know this woman at all; our rooms have adjoined each other this past term, but we've shared nothing beyond the occasional good morning, and then under the ever critical scrutiny of our charges - and I'm no good with women. Heavens! How awkward! What is her first name? I've heard it somewhere: Rachel? Rita?

No,... it's Rebecca.

"Well, not all men are comfortable with overt displays of sexuality," I tell her.

"Is that why you're so relaxed with me?"

Now that was definitely a joke, Timothy! There's a crinkle at the corners of her mouth, and her eyes twinkle. Yes, a joke! Self deprecating. Sharp. How charming!

"No need to answer that," she says. "And impossible without insulting me anyway."

"Then I shan't."

"So, will you be coming?"

"I've already promised, and Dora will be disappointed if I don't. I'm sorry, Miss Rayworth, Rayworth does this with all the single members of staff. He describes them to Dora and she pairs them off. It never works out, but they have endless hours of fun plotting these things, and we get a good meal in the bargain. If we smile and play along, they'll both be very happy."

"Sounds like a plan."

She crosses her palms on the crook of her cane, pushes herself up, then walks away, slowly. Her limp is pronounced now, as if her leg has gone to sleep. I notice her feet below her long skirt. She wears a smart patent court-shoe on the left, and a cheap flip-flop on the right, toes painted funereal black, as are her fingernails. Her lameness intrigues me. The cane taps as she walks, yet I did not hear her enter, and I'm sure the volume through my buds was not that loud - as I did not want Liston surprising me. Can one be both lame and stealthy?

"Don't forget to bring a bottle," she says.

"I don't drink," I tell her.

"Well, I'm afraid I do," she replies. "In fact bring two. I drink a lot these days."

I watch as she goes. Curious archetype: the lame woman, the ugly duckling - except she's too old for a duckling. She's more of an ugly duck then, a creature for whom further transformation is unlikely. I think back to the vicar, another curious archetype - this one being beauty unobtainable for having devoted herself to God. And now Rebecca! What is she? Beauty unrecognised? Beauty skin deep? Something overlooked beneath the dust and creases of self-neglect? One might think that was the case, except I suspect something inauthentic about her, something of a Hollywood movie about her dishevelment. She has only to comb her hair, change her ugly specs for designer frames, or contact lenses, slip herself into a silken sheath of a gown and, what with that ample bosom of hers, she could easily pass for Rita Hayworth, doyenne of silver screen.

Yes, Lewis: Forties movie queen and dancing girl. Google: Hayworth, Gilda.

*An actress!*

Rebecca is *acting*? She is not what she seems, or she is *more* than she seems. Or am I being challenged to accept someone as they are, and see where it leads? What? Oh, for heavens sake Timothy, wake up. Haven't you realised it yet? You suddenly have a blind date tonight with Miss Rayworth (Religious/Moral studies).

Now that's definitely worth waking up for.

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# Chapter 6

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Early evening, driving to Raul's house, the radio is telling me of a girl abducted and murdered. A suspect has been detained, described as a loner, a man who kept himself to himself, a teacher at the girl's school. The tabloids have scented blood, and sex, and want more details, but details are thus far lacking so they've begun to make them up. They have invented neighbours who say they are shocked at the thought they've been living near someone so sick and strange all this time. Sexual perversion. Lewis.

The man has yet to be charged with anything.

And they could be describing me.

I think of Janice Iddon, all cow eyes and pools of sweat, making vindictive accusations, and a because I broke her heart by being blind to her infatuation. And there but for the grace of God,... the teacher's nightmare.

Then there's more economic collapse, more of how little money there is nowadays to spend on anything good and decent and civilised. The usual declinism. Then there's more war, and finally a novelty closing item about a huge meteorite making a close pass with the earth, followed by a banal alarmist discussion of the probability it will strike.

I had forgotten the perennial subject of Armageddon: Global Warming, 2012, Y2K, Bird Flu, uncontrolled immigration. Yes, I like it: *an earth shattering meteorite impact!*

It has something of Hollywood about it.

I think of the standing stone, something passing close.

Close enough to touch?

No, too vague, Timothy, no resonance, look elsewhere,...

Rita Hayworth!

Sorry, Lewis, I'm jumping around here, which must be making you dizzy, but I can't help reflecting on the resemblance of Rita to Rebecca,... possibly self constructed, even delusional, but I'm looking forward to testing the hypothesis when we meet again.

So,...

Raul greets me at the door. Note how he's now wearing grey flannels and a conventional shirt, clean white and pressed, like any regular guy. His shorts and floral patterned shirt are not a matter of personal preference, you see? They are a bayonet shoved up Strickland's arse. Dora emerges from the kitchen and hugs me like a sister, though we've only met on a few occasions. She is fragrant, her perfume an exotic orchid. I can also smell Chanel.

Rebecca is here then.

I find her in the back room, a large, light and airy space where Raul hangs his work, or at least the examples Dora considers suitable for the eyes of visitors, to wit there is a tastefully reclining nude that looks like Amelia Grey. Dear me! Does Dora mean to tickle other appetites this evening? I'm surprised by it, but only because it's so unlike Raul's other work. It's almost romantic, except there's a look of hopelessness too, of despair about this woman.

Could it really be Amelia?

Rebecca is studying it.

"Don't show too much interest," I warn her, "or Raul will gift it to you."

~~She's wearing a long summer frock, cherry red and crumpled, like she just pulled it from the bottom of the washing basket. Her hair is piled above her neck and held in place with what looks like bits of spaghetti. She leans heavily on her stick and turns. I note she's now wearing a matching pair of cheap flip-flops. And I know this will sound unlikely to you Lewis, having Googled Gilda by now, I hope, but the resemblance is striking - at least to me - and I'm puzzled by it.~~

*Am I sickening for something?*

"You don't like it?" she asks.

"Em,.."

She laughs. "You're blushing, Mr Magowan."

"Just hot."

"No, *she's* hot. You're embarrassed. You know,.. it looks a lot like,.."

"I was thinking the same thing myself, but,... I'm sure it's not. It *can't* be, can it?"

"Well, Amelia wouldn't be the first woman on the staff to disrobe in Raul's private studio. Or so I'm told."

"What? Really?"

"Of course. Didn't you know?" She laughs again, presumably at my crimson face. "I'm sorry, Mr Magowan."

"Sorry?"

"For gate-crashing your evening. And making you blush."

"It's all right. I blush at the slightest thing. Always have. As for the evening, I'm sure it will be a the more entertaining for your company."

"Well, I couldn't resist. I was curious about Raul and Dora,... and about you."

"Me?"

"We've taught next door to one another all year, but we never speak. I decided it was time we did. The awkwardness was killing me. I'm the kind of girl who has to be open and easy with everyone. But there's a reluctance in you that I take as a serious challenge."

"Yes,... I'm sorry about that. I really should make more of an effort. I suppose I'm just not good with adults any more. I'm told it happens to all teachers eventually."

"Ah, then I'd better quit while I'm ahead. I teach religious and moral studies by the way."

"I know."

"And you teach English." She's not asking me when she says this. She's telling me she knows.

"That's right."

"Raul also tells me you have the ways of a shaman about you."

Is she testing me or teasing me now? It's the sort of thing people say just before they start demonstrating how superior they are in the "critical thinking" department. I become defensive and deny it at once, but without demeaning the role, for I have the utmost respect for it: "I've neither the guts nor the calling for that kind of work."

"That's not what I've heard." She turns to look once more at the picture. "I wonder if he actually has someone pose for him - you know - sit for hours and hours like that, or if he works from photographs. Can you imagine the scandal if they got out?"

She holds up her phone and snaps a quick shot of the nude, gives me a challenging flash of her eyes. "Often hard to imagine what people are really like, isn't it? I mean without their clothes on."

Is she flirting now? She can hardly mean she's wondering what *I* look like. There's nothing to show about there these days. I blush again.

"I was speaking metaphorically," she says.

"Of course." I knew that!

Her turn to be embarrassed now. She begins to fiddle, unconsciously with a silver crucifix at her throat. I wonder at the religious dimension, and its connection with the dream. Does she just teach or does she live her religion? My vicar again, Lewis, teasing me aside into a momentary reverie. I'm afraid my gaze lingers a little too long on the crucifix, and I worry she's thinking I'm staring in the impressive chasm of her décolletage – which of course I am not.

"Convent girl," she says, then sets the cross down flat. "But before I taught I was a dancer, you know?" She taps the floor with her cane. "Hard to believe, isn't it? Now I can barely stretch far enough to pull my knickers on."

"A dancer?"

"Theatre," she says. "Nothing filthy." She smiles. "Slipped on a wet stage. Ended up in the orchestra pit. Then it was six weeks in traction and the last ten years hobbling about. Haven't danced since. Story of my life. What's your excuse?" She says all this with a sparkle of humour rather than self pity.

"Me? I've always been a teacher."

"But what makes a teacher become a shaman?"

"I'm not, really,... Raul,... he has a colourful imagination. He exaggerates everything for the purposes of his art, to get a,... I don't know,... a reaction. A shaman is someone comfortable in their culture, comfortable also in the apparent chaos of the imaginary world and its interface in the liminal zones. Me,... I'm anything but comfortable. Our culture forbids us from being comfortable. It relies on our discomfort and a permanent craving so we'll stop listening to our dreams."

She thinks for a moment, staring at me all the while, then nods. I find her unsettling, but only because I have the impression she's taking me seriously. Most people don't, including me.

"And dreams are important, are they?" she asks, but I think she already knows the answer to this.

"Without our dreams how else are we to divine our purpose? Unless we listen to our dreams the daemons who live in our heads will break down the doors and drive us mad."

"And you say you're not a shaman?"

"Any westerner who makes that claim is most likely a poseur and a fool."

"I see where you're coming from. You don't like labels. Neither do I. No need to be defensive by that way. I'm not a sceptic. Shamanism, or whatever you choose to call it, interests me, that's all. I don't just teach Christianity, you know? It's all about comparative religion these days."

"Look, I don't know what Raul's told you about me."

"Not much,... just hints. Like the time you cured him of an eye infection."

"That was a coincidence. He challenged me to do it. I've no idea what happened. It was obviously going to get better on its own."

"Raul doesn't think so. And where he comes from, it's okay to be a healer."

"Well not where I come from, unless you're a fully qualified doctor."

"Hmm. And I don't know many of those who are particularly good healers either, beyond broken bones and stitches, which to my mind is more a sort of craft. You're not quite *out* yet are you? Sorry. And there was me all this time, thinking you were just a dusty old English teacher."

She likes to tease. She has a playful, Puckish spirit, and considerable grit, and I do like her, Lewis. She's easy to be with; no need to be guarded; no need for lies to preserve my persona - indeed, quite the opposite; with Rebecca, I must keep tearing off the mask she offers, in order to go on safely recognising myself.

Dora calls us to dinner and Rebecca moves ahead of me to the door.

"I'm sorry," I tell her.

"Oh?"

"About the dancing."

She smiles. "I was getting too old for that game anyway," she says. "Perhaps it was fate's way of..."

telling me to move on."

"Trouble is, we're not always ready to move on, are we? Even though we say we are."

Her gaze narrows. "True."

It's a fine, warm evening, late July. We eat outside at the sun-bleached, hardwood table in Raul's garden. It's a rural setting, a detached seventies dormer, the height of middle class chic in its day. A long garden runs out to meadows and hills. Bees buzz lazily among the starry heads of cream and red honeysuckle. Their monotonic meanderings remind me of Strickland's lecture that morning. Raul is thinking of it too because he teases Rebecca for having succumbed to the suit. She flicks back her hair and pulls off her glasses. Her eyes are hazel and liquid and very beautiful.

"I dress like a bag-lady, Raul," she says. "That suit belonged to my grandmother. But, it's a suit. It conforms, but without looking like a city clone. I also wear odd shoes on purpose, and shuffle around like a cripple, and Strickland's afraid of saying anything, afraid of my invalidity, like most people are - afraid of being seen as politically incorrect if they challenge me on it."

They are two Pucks together, but rather than annoy, they seem to connect, become a team and therefore present double the trouble. I wonder if Raul is thinking of painting her. I wonder if he already has.

She goes on: "If I were you and Mr Magowan here, I'd be searching the thrift shops and commissioning theatrical designers for the most bizarre and out of date fashions you can find. You, Raul,... I see you in a double breasted pin-stripe de-mob suit - you know, late 1940's era, complete with rakish Fedora and spats. The fact you're black also counts in your favour. Strickland is a racist, of course, but afraid of showing it. The ruling classes waste no time in exploiting our fears, so we must waste no time in exploiting theirs. Once upon a time we gathered into trades unions for safety. Nowadays of course all we have is our wits."

Raul tips back his head and roars with laughter. Rebecca is accepted to his bosom as a kindred spirit, a fellow revolutionary. "And Timothy here? What would we have him wear?"

She turns to me and makes a show of appraising my looks. "Mr. Magowan is so much older, I think at least in spirit. His is a very old soul indeed. Very turn of the century - nineteenth that is, very, very Dickensian. Don't you think? No offence, Mr Magowan, but you were born this way. I see you in a bow tie perhaps, button down collar, and a frock coat. Mutton chop whiskers too would not go amiss if you can manage them."

Raul applauds. "Timothy, what do you say? Shall we have you surgically removed from your tweed at last?"

"I'd rather get sacked than be parted from my Harris Tweed."

"You don't mean that. Teaching's in your blood. What else would you do?"

"I don't know,... the only thing keeping me in teaching these days is cowardice and old age, and the thought of my pension pot maturing, and not wanting to do anything to rock the boat and ruin my transition into a safe retirement - the sooner the better. Then I can wag my Daily Mail at the world from a distance like every other former middle class professional. But where's the honour in that?"

He frowns. "You could be describing any one of us over forty. Any professional. Any teacher. And I'm sorry, Timothy, but you do not read the Daily Mail. You are a Guardian man, born and bred, if you're bothered to take a paper at all, which I doubt. You are strictly BBC, much abbreviated of course through the aegis of its Android App."

"You might be right."

"I know I'm right."

"But what we do now isn't teaching, is it? We deliver a syllabus up for consumption, and we tickle



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