

## After The End

'You're new.'

'Yes.'

'Where's the other one?'

'He's not very well at the moment.'

'Well of course he isn't. He's not dead yet?'

'No.'

'He will be. Once upon a time I could make them drop like flies. It's growing old that does it. I need my mirror. Mirror, mirror on the wall...'

The man waited. The woman opposite seemed in no hurry to finish her rhyme, but instead appeared to be fiddling with something under the table. He was not going to be tempted to look.

No appeasement. No giving in to her games.

'Look what happened at the ball.' On the last word, the woman quickly brought one her shoes crashing down on the table, making the man flinch a little despite his best intentions. Her eyes showed him she had noticed. 'Not that it was this,' she added, stroking the shoe in a manner that was curiously sensuous and in rather ridiculous contrast to the very utilitarian style of the shoe. It was an example of what in his youth were sometimes referred to as stout walking shoes.

'I know the story,' he replied.

'Oh do you? Do you really? Now that is what everyone says – *the* story, as if my life is wrapped and tied up with a bow into a neat parcel containing *the* story.' She tilted her head on one side and gazed at him. Her eyes were very blue, he thought, the sort of blue you see in a kitten's eyes.

She slowly turned the shoe around and around and then left it pointing towards herself. 'I am all the stories. Little Red Riding Hood, that was before my mother died and my father remarried and I got stepsisters, wandering the forest with that idiot brother Hansel – do you know he didn't think there was a slightest thing odd about a house made of gingerbread? – and I've been more witches and wicked queens than you could shake a stick at. All a bit theatrical at times, but I'm good, I'm very good.'

She turned the shoe towards him, as if inviting him to speak.

‘Jack and the beanstalk?’ he asked, after the silence had begun to solidify.

‘My tomboy phase,’ she replied without hesitation.

‘The little mermaid?’

‘My blue period.’

‘Why?’

She was silent for over a minute. He thought that would fox her. Idly she turned the shoe to point towards herself.

‘One does not choose. One is chosen.’

‘By whom?’

She turned the shoe again. ‘You tell me. Who chose you to ask me questions today? Who chose you to be their child? Who chose you to be you?’

He did not reply but just watched her. She watched him back. Eventually she spoke, her eyes shifting to a spot over his shoulder.

‘Mirror, mirror on the wall, is he any good at all?’

He felt a strong urge to look over his shoulder but he knew there was no mirror there. They had all been taken away a long time ago. Suddenly she picked up the shoe and shook it. A key fell out onto the table. He made a great effort to keep his face expressionless, despite the uncomfortable thoughts that were now jostling in his mind.

‘If you take the key, you must find the lock,’ she said, her disturbingly blue eyes once again fixed upon him. ‘It is required.’

He placed his left hand on the edge of the table. ‘May I?’

‘Of course. This is how a story starts.’

He carefully picked up the key and placed it in his left jacket pocket. It had looked worryingly familiar and it was something of a relief to have it in his possession.

‘So that’s that,’ she said. ‘Let me know when you get to the bit that says *the end*. If you’re still alive. It’s odd how we never start *the beginning*, but that’s always how it is, announcing the last but not the first step, as if the first were easier to see, which it usually isn’t. Except in your case. You have your challenge, your quest. A reason to be. You have been chosen. Now go.’

He remained seated.

‘Do not forget who I am.’ Her voice now carried an almost comic haughtiness. ‘I do not expect to have to give orders twice.’

‘Indeed Ma’am,’ he replied, humouring her, and to be on the safe side made his way to the door without fully turning his back. She did not get up.

On the other side of the door he quickly compared the new key in his left jacket pocket with the one in his right. Very much the same. He tried the new key in the lock. Just as he had feared, it worked. He turned to the man half slumped in the velvet and gilt chair in the corridor to his right.

‘I am afraid that there is no change from what Doctor Gribbins described to me, Sire. If anything, a little worse. Very manipulative.’

The man in the chair slowly got to his feet. ‘And you also have no idea if anything can be done, Doctor Frost?’ he asked.

‘If Doctor Gribbin sees no cure... he’s the best in the land... but, I’ll do some research,’ the doctor replied. ‘There is a more urgent matter though. She had this in her possession and it fits the door.’ He handed the key to the King. ‘I think the apartment and indeed the Queen herself should be searched for any more.’

‘It fits the door,’ said the King without emotion. He shook his head slowly. ‘There are probably many keys to all the royal apartments and God knows who has them.’

‘That’s the one you gave me,’ said Doctor Frost, handing back the other key.

‘But no key to her illness, no key to her heart any more,’ the king murmured. ‘Yet she’s still my Cinderella, the only woman I’ve ever loved. She stole my heart. And what a theft that has turned out to be. I’ll see you to the top of the staircase.’

## Another Country

‘Why?’

Julie closed her eyes. The question was valid, you might even say natural; but it was not the reply she wanted to hear after telling her father that the badly made half-eaten sandwich she had found in his fridge was ‘not a lunch’ and that he needed to keep his strength up.

When she opened her eyes, she found that her father was watching her. Faintly smiling perhaps? Or not? With those big brown eyes that, when he was a junior doctor, had (according to her mother) led him to be nicknamed Bambi and made all the ward sisters want to mother him.

‘Stop it,’ she said.

‘What?’

‘You know perfectly well. And you know I’m right. You’re just going to waste away like this. You do have to keep your strength up.’

‘I repeat, why?’ Her father, switched his gaze to the window. ‘Let’s go for a walk,’ he said.

Julie stifled a sigh. The walk. Those lovely walks with her father when, from as far back as she could remember, they had discussed everything under the sun and beyond. Walks she had treasured, walks that had helped her navigate many rocky coastlines in her life, walks that spoke of love. And walks that brought bad news. How could she forget looking out over a field of wheat being harvested? ‘Mummy’s dying, as of course we all are, but I’m afraid that in the case of her journey, the brakes no longer work. I don’t really want you to know, but I don’t want you not to know.’ Like that. Realistic as always, a metaphor or analogy as nearly always, an acknowledgement of her being both their child and an adult, as had been pretty much the case even when she was a child. ‘Just a strangely young person,’ as he used to say.

She got her coat.

As they walked, they chatted about this and that, matters of passing interest but little consequence. Julie was aware of the signs. She knew that if there was to be something important, he would stop somewhere and it would be spoken to a view. He would look at

her directly afterwards, but for him difficult words and thoughts were always on the horizon. He had to gather them in from a distance.

It was a long time before he stopped. They were on a footbridge over a stream and he seemed this time to find his inspiration in the water flowing downstream.

I'm tired,' he said.

'Well, let's go home,' Julie suggested, knowing nonetheless that he wasn't talking about the walk. He glanced up at her for a moment, checking her understanding.

'That's what I mean,' he continued. 'It's like still being at school after your final exams. There's no place for you. You don't belong any more. Your future is somewhere else and you are just marking time, getting in everyone's way, trying to amuse yourself with things that no longer amuse when you could be at home or off on some adventure. I want to go back, or forward. Just not here. I'm sorry.'

'I wish I could turn the clock back, Daddy. For me too. But the past *is* another country.'

'And besides the wench is dead'.

'Oh Daddy!'

'In my twenties, I climbed with a friend in the Black Cuillins of Skye. Not hard, but more challenging than a trog up a Lake District fell. You'd enjoy the Cuillin ridge. A number of routes were opened up in the 1880s by a Chemistry Professor, Norman Collie, and a Gaelic speaking crofter and guide, John McKenzie. It was said that in his eighties Collie could sometimes be found at the Sligachan hotel at the foot of the peaks, looking out on the mountains. I've thought of that off and on since I was first told that when I was there. What would it be like to just look at what you can no longer achieve? I'm learning fast. Age strips you of all the things you like to do, one by one.'

'You're not thinking of doing anything stupid are, you Daddy? Please?'

'Well, what looks stupid at one time doesn't necessarily look stupid at another. But no, I'm not much of an antique Roman.'

Julie didn't try to place the quote. She was too sad, getting too angry now. 'You always told me – from *Little Dorrit*, you *always* said – that, oh, 'You hold your life—'

'On the condition that to the last you struggle hard for it'. They spoke the words together.

'I did,' he acknowledged. 'It's true, but I also now think we are programmed – no, built, evolved in such a way that we in a way know when to give up the struggle. There comes a time when you wake up each morning and think: *shit, still here.*'

'I don't want to listen to this, Daddy.' Julie turned to look upstream.

'Have I ever been less than honest with you?' he asked.

'I don't think so.'

'Shows how much you know then!' he laughed. 'No, I just want you to know, not so much for me, but for you. A bit depressing to say that's what lies ahead, but if you know that's what may be, you can perhaps do something to make sure it isn't. For yourself.'

'Always the educator. You wouldn't be saying this if Mummy was here.'

'Interesting,' he replied, turning also to look upstream. 'Probably not, assuming we both still had our marbles, but I don't know.'

Julie looked at him quizzically.

'Well, according to some people, you will meet your spouse again in some heaven or other – and why are heaven's so boring? Where is the myth of the infinite library with surprise doors leading out onto all kinds of hills and mountains and cafés and restaurants full of friends? Where is Valhalla with books? I loved your mother very much, still do, but I don't know that love isn't of its time. Would we stay in love if we met again with the whole of eternity to get through, or more accurately, not to get through? It's a daunting thought.'

'I need to get back soon.' She didn't ask him about the love between him and her. 'What are you going to do?'

'I've had a good life. On balance. My concentration is now on having a good death. Not a hurried one, just a good one. I'll keep you posted.'

Which he did and he didn't. It was two years later, while she was on a New Year holiday so that she only found his letter when she got back, that he took a train to his beloved Lake District and a taxi into Langdale and hid himself in the rocky face of Pavey Ark. She wondered what a struggle it had been for him to climb the path to get there. Assisted by some sleeping tablets, but not enough, the coroner said, to kill him, he had lain there clad only in some pajamas he had evidently packed in his small rucksack for the purpose, until the cold took him.

'I've been mildly hypothermic before,' his letter said. 'The brain gets fuzzy. It gets really hard to think. It looks as good a way as any. And the scenery is, of course, wonderful. Give me this instead of drawn curtains or a hospital bed any day.' She was not surprised that the letter explained that his will specified a generous donation to the local Mountain Rescue, to whom he had also written with a map reference.

He was at times apologetic and at times quite the opposite, even a bit self-righteous about his decision. He was very sorry for the hurt it would cause her, but his death would hurt her anyway whenever it came and he was more than aware of how the manner of dying, especially if drawn out and painful and/or delusional, could add to grief. 'Think of Grandpa.'

'I have not taken my life,' he wrote at the end. 'I have let life leave. I have given it permission to go, wherever that may be. We part as good friends and lovers do, wanting time together we cannot have but happy for each other in our separation too.'

It would be months before Julie could see his final sign off in clear focus.

## Arcadia

'It's hopeless. If we fight, we will be massacred. If we surrender, we will be massacred.'

I wasn't standing for that, especially not from Aegeus. He was supposed to lead, to set an example. I know it wasn't a public pronouncement, but you don't offer defeatist talk to your generals either.

'If we fight, we can win,' I told him.

He looked at me with curiosity. 'We are outnumbered, we have relatively old weapons because we haven't spent all our time making new ones, we are relatively untrained because we haven't spent all our time on manoeuvres and we are inexperienced because we haven't spent all our time picking quarrels and fighting. It is quite clear that they would prefer it if we weren't here.'

'But why?' I asked. 'What have we done to hurt them?'

Aegeus shrugged, almost smiling. 'The usual reasons. We are different to them, we are too much like them. We are too strong, we are too weak. They want what we have, they think we want what they have. We are in the way. Wiping us from the face of the earth would for them be a pleasure. I have no doubts about your bravery and that of many others, but if you think we can defeat them in battle, the first death has been of your capacity to reason.'

'So what are you going to do?' I tried not to make it sound like a sneer. 'Evacuate the island?'

'You know we can't do that,' Aegeus replied. 'The island is surrounded. I don't think they'd even let a boatload of children through.'

'So we lie down in front of them?'

Aegeus walked over to the balcony and looked across the city towards the sea, where in the distance the white sails caught the sun.

'Perhaps,' he said.

I caught the eye of Leonidas. He shrugged. He had no idea either.

'Gentlemen,' Aegeus began. 'You know as well as I do what atrocities will be committed even as they kill us. The clean thrust of a sword to the heart has little attraction when blood flows in every quarter. You know what women, especially pregnant women can expect, what small children, babies, will suffer – how the defenceless seem to outrage



aggressors even more than fighting men. If this is to be the end of us all, we could make it less agonising, less obscene. And in doing so deny them the victory and the spoils they seek.'

Not a word was spoken as we let that sink in. Did we really understand what he was saying?

In the end, Patrides coughed and said almost in a whisper, 'We, um, control it ourselves. Especially how. We take charge of the... inevitable.'

Aegeus inclined his head in assent.

'There must be another way,' I said, angrily and too loud.

Aegeus walked back to face me and put his hand on my shoulder. I was about to shrug it off, but his face told the full weight of his pain.

'If there is another way,' he pleaded, 'tell me. Find a way out of this. Find a way that we can live, to persuade them to leave us in peace. Let the suffering be solely mine, if that will please them. I beg you, if you have any idea, any other workable plan, tell me now, for we have precious little time.'

I had nothing to offer except heroic resistance, heroic but futile. I knew there were no odds in our favour. I looked away.

Aegeus nodded. 'If we must die, let it be with dignity and with speed. And the last will set fire to the city. Let there be no victory here, but our own over ourselves.'

And so we set to work planning how it should be done. And I have written this down and placed it where I believe it will not fall to the flames and will not be found by those who have come to destroy us – and though destroyed, we are also not destroyed so long as one day this document is found and our side of history finds again the light of day.

Philo of Arcadia

## Beauty Spot

'Would you prefer a safety pin through my lip? Maybe both of them so they're fastened together? Or I could tattoo my tits. You wouldn't have to see them. Anyone who did would be someone you wouldn't like of course, but they'd get the message, they could read there all about how you've screwed up my life. And yours. In two chapters.'

Roz had been very angry when she said that to her feckless mother. Oh what a great word, feckless. Without feck, which sounded like something worth having, half-way to fuckless, and who would ever want to? She had no regrets about it nor about the day a month later when she stormed out and took a grip on her own life. But she had mellowed over the years, perhaps as so many of the tangles that seemed to be stifling her got gradually straightened out. And she was sorry for her mother's death and the manner of it. It was a hard way to go. Arduous. Another good word. 'Ard for you and us. Hard stretched out a bit longer.

Yet she felt no guilt. All she'd done was paint a small beauty spot on her face. Quite why her mother had gone ballistic was incomprehensible, other than the booze which was never the whole story. It would be something else that had put her mother on the brink, but even so. The beauty spot had thereafter become Roz's flag of defiance. 'In your face', as it were.

It had been her photography course at school that had opened her eyes to what her eyes saw. She had learned to look at a picture and be conscious of where her gaze was first led and then where she was brought to look next. 'It's the essence of composition,' her teacher Mad Dog Maddocks had said. 'Track your eyes. Recompose. Track your eyes. Manipulate the viewer.' It had been a chance smudge of mascara on her cheek that had made her realise how it diverted attention from her embarrassing crooked nose. It didn't matter what other people said, she knew her nose was not straight and was the first thing people noticed about her. But now she could control how they looked at her. The red buoy that Turner had quickly added to his seascape, changing everything for the viewer, just as Mad Dog had said.

Roz had spent many weeks experimenting with exact size and position and colour, using different cosmetics, and had to say that in the end she had come up with the perfect beauty spot. It was where it had to be and the size and shade it had to be. So day after day her first morning task was to recreate it and after a while she reckoned she could have

done it blindfolded. She would have left it on overnight but for the small stains on the pillow, especially if she had had a bad night, especially if she had been crying.

That had changed with her discovery of the La Pura range. No staining, they said, and they were right. Yet she could still remove it using La Pura Cleanser if she wanted to. *Perfetto*. Most of the time she just left it on, touching it up as necessary. Maintenance, not resurrection.

It was obviously still necessary. When she did occasionally remove it in order to start again from scratch, it was as if her nose suddenly went *Boing!* and leapt into a disfigured bend before her eyes. It was an effect that appeared even when she had the rest of her make-up in place, all the subtle blends that moved the eye from the beauty spot up to her cheekbones and then to her subtly lashed eyes, making the nose a kind of semi-transparent divider, of no greater importance than being a necessary normality. Not a nose for comment or remembrance. But oh did you see her eyes!

Two months ago there had been a small miracle. She tended to refashion the beauty spot on Sunday mornings, but she could not say if the miracle had begun with any darkening of the skin underneath where it had been. Nonetheless at some unnoticed time a mole had appeared exactly where she had always wanted one. There was, Google had explained, no etymological connection between a skin mole and a burrowing 'little gentleman in velvet', but both seemed to announce their presence quite suddenly. You rarely saw a molehill in creation. They appeared overnight. Few of the moles and skin tags now on her body were there in her teens. Perhaps everyone is taken by surprise one day, dropping the towel in front of the mirror. When did my back get like that?

This one was a gift from the fairy godmother. A fraction too small perhaps but Roz could not fault its place or shade. *Addio La Pura. E grazie.*

Except La Pura did not stain. The first time she looked closely at her face, there was nothing unusual to see. But the second time that she found the tiny pillow stains and inspected her reflection closely and carefully, she found the culprit. Her beauty spot had started to bleed.

## Booked In

'No, no, please. Just call me Peter. Now let's see. We have a lot of bookings at the moment, but I'm sure we can find where you are. Bailey, Bailey, Bailey... Ah yes, here we are. Room ten fifty-two. Mr and Mrs Bailey, who I see has arrived before you. If you would just follow me. I'm sure you are dying to see her again.'

'I'm sorry, I don't understand. Mrs Bailey isn't here yet.'

'But of course she is. The one and only Mrs Bailey. Mrs Hannah Bailey.'

'No, there must some mistake. She's not Mrs Bailey. Not any more.'

'With respect, Sir, we do not mistakes here. Mrs Hannah Bailey, your wife.'

'My first wife.'

'Exactly.'

'My ex-wife. I'm married to Rose now. And Susan before that. After Hannah and before Rose. I haven't seen Hannah for decades.'

'Which will make it all the more interesting, don't you think?'

'Just stop a minute, please. Peter. Why are you saying that Hannah has already arrived and that she is my wife, when she isn't? Not any more.'

'Well, I might ask you why you say she isn't your wife. You were married and exchanged vows, did you not. To have and to hold from this day forth until death do you part. Did you not say that?'

'Well, yes, but... It didn't work out. Quite frankly it became hell on earth and we divorced. Of course, she took me to the cleaners, but I eventually got my life on track again. I don't want to see her ever again.'

'Oh, that's a pity.'

'What do mean?'

'I mean that your wife, Mrs Hannah Bailey, is waiting for you in room ten fifty-two. She has been waiting for some time.'

'Look, Peter. This isn't funny. I keep telling you that Hannah is not my wife any more. That's Rose. Hannah and I are no longer married. There seems to be a huge misunderstanding here.'

‘Indeed, Sir, I believe you are right. I suspect the problem is that you are either unacquainted with or have misunderstood the scriptures. Matthew 19? Luke 16? First Corinthians? Or what one might call the significant examples. The Samaritan woman by the well for instance.’

‘You’ve lost me.’

‘I don’t suppose you have read Mr Geoffrey Chaucer. The Wife of Bath, her prologue? No, that is a particularly blank look. So twenty-first century. Right. We had better just briefly go through the fundamentals. A man gets married. He says *till death do us part* as does she. That means that while either partner is still alive, the other cannot be married again, whatever local custom or laws may say. From our standpoint – and we do have the ultimate say in this, the ultimate power if you like – no further marriage is possible until one of the pair dies. And you went through marriage ceremonies with Susan and Rose while Hannah was still alive, so neither of those what you call marriages is in fact valid. Those are the rules. We adhere to scripture here, whatever they may do in the other place.’

‘Hannah’s dead *now*.’

‘Quite so. But *now* is a little late for you to do anything about it, don’t you think? We don’t perform marriages here. We just reunite people. So we have a booking for Mr and Mrs Bailey – *ipso facto* Hannah Bailey – to share a room from now to the unknown end of eternity. Onward and upward.’

‘No, no. This can’t be true. Hannah! For eternity! That’s not fair. That’s not what’s supposed to happen in heaven!’

‘Heaven? Good Lord, what – I’m almost inclined to say *what on earth* made you think this was heaven? Shall we go? No time to lose, eh?’

## Boundary

It was the kind of scream that he never wanted to hear again. But he would. He knew that. It was going to be, if he could stick it, part of his job now. His friend Jack had been right. Never volunteer for special duties unless you know what they are and you never will until it's too late.

He was extraordinarily aware of how his heart was beating and he wondered if he was going to be sick. He could not look at the man strapped in the chair. It was easy enough to divert his gaze but there is no auditory equivalent of staring at your shoes.

It was all over surprisingly quickly and he was equally taken aback to hear the man who could only be from the security services, whichever branch it might be, say 'Thank you' apparently to the prisoner rather than to the Major seated at the table.

He watched as a couple of expressionless soldiers entered, helped the prisoner into a wheelchair and took him away. The security man gathered his papers, nodded at the Major, said "We'll be in touch" and left. There was just the two of them now.

Silence.

That was some relief, but there was still a crackle in the air.

"The right voltage to the right parts," said the Major quietly. "Tell me your thoughts."

"Sir?"

"You may be quite frank, Lieutenant. It is important that you are."

"It was... horrible. I felt sick. Sir."

"Yes."

"I find it hard to think that we should need – that whatever the need, we should choose to do that to anyone."

"Good." As Lieutenant Dixon frowned, the Major continued, "Because the moment you stop questioning the need, you're out. Abandon questioning the morality too, and you are of no use. You will have become desensitized – at worst find pleasure in the wretched business – and then you are... an unreliable operator and a suspect witness."

"But what good is it? They only tell you what they think you want to know, anything to stop the pain. Surely?"

“Sit down, Lieutenant.” The Major walked over to the chair in which the prisoner had been held and lowered himself slowly into it. “Ask me a question, the sort of thing you might ask a suspect.”

Dixon hesitated. “Um, who are your contacts?” No, too vague. “Who... who gives you instructions?” Too early for that, he thought. “How do you get your instructions?”

The Major leaned forward. “I can lie to you on any of those. For a time at least. In the Second World War, an agent picked up by the Gestapo would try and last out for 24 hours, knowing that after that time all his or her contacts should know of the arrest and be lying low or have left the area. Of course the Gestapo knew that too and the treatment got worse as time progressed. Now news travels a lot faster. All sides know that. But every false lead wastes our time and gives time to the enemy. So you’re right, torture doesn’t work.”

“So why—?”

“In those circumstances.” The major settled back, his left hand playing with one of straps on the arm of the chair. “Ask me what I’m wearing.”

“Sir?”

“You ask me what I’m wearing. I then describe my uniform. You stop the pain.”

“But I can see what you are wearing, Sir. Why should there be any need for... pain?”

“The colour of my underwear? Can you see that?”

“Well, no, but I could find out. Easily, if you were strapped in, I suppose”

“Quite. You can test the veracity of the answer on the spot.”

The conversation paused. Dixon didn’t know what to say next, what he was supposed to say next.

The Major helped him out. “Do you know which of the questions put to that man were the only ones that mattered?”

“No, Sir.”

“Ah, my mistake. I thought you knew. They were about the passcodes to his mobile phones. And to a couple of apps.”

Dixon was not sure that he had been left inadvertently in the dark. He had a feeling that he was meant to witness the event without much means of justifying it.

“We have the phones,” the Major explained. “The labs let us know as soon as he gave the right answers. We could test their truth instantly. It boils down to the three R’s. The right voltage to the right parts with the right questions. Get any of them wrong and it’s all a waste of time. Not just time lost, but time consumed checking up on things that can’t be checked or turn out to be false.”

So that’s supposed to be all right then, Dixon thought, aware that he still felt very uncomfortable with the whole business. He was no fool. He had no illusions about what humankind did to its own species out of a hatred that most of the time seemed beyond reason; how all kinds of beneficial discoveries were turned into instruments of death and torture. Molten plastic. The electric drill, too often during his tour in Iraq evidently the last thing the victim saw. The blowtorch. But still, a part of him rebelled against what he was being asked to condone.

The major watched Dixon’s face carefully, as though following his thoughts. “We’ll go and see the prisoner this afternoon,’ he said. “A social visit. You can ask him about his experience.”

“Sir?”

The major stood up. “It’s none of my business, but have you ever had anything like a bronchoscopy? Spinal injections? Something where a procedure requires you to be anaesthetised but conscious enough to answer questions or demonstrate capacity for movement? Where your reactions need to be monitored during the surgical procedure?”

“No, Sir. Nothing like that.”

“It’s interesting. There are drugs that achieve all the objectives, but they have a curious side-effect. Amnesia. Our man will remember nothing of what happened in this room. Of course we use a variant where the anaesthetic effect is much reduced but the resulting amnesia is just as strong.”

“I’m not sure that changes anything, Sir. There are boundaries.”

“Yes there are. I don’t need to tell you that in conflicts today the boundaries are all over the place and certainly not the same for all the participants. This morning I’ve taken someone to hell and back with the result that countless innocent lives are likely to be saved – not a cliché, just a simple truth – and now he doesn’t remember he ever went to hell. Is that not a kind of mercy? Or let me put it another way. You have served in Afghanistan and Iraq. Do you wish you hadn’t?”



“I did my duty, Sir.”

“You know that was not the question. Do you regret serving there?”

“I do not regret serving, Sir. But I can think of better places to be.”

“And if I could wipe the worst of what you saw from your memory?”

Dixon looked away. The Major must know what kind of things he had seen. God, if that were possible. But something was stepping forward to speak for him. “Therein the patient must minister to himself.”

The Major waited, his head slightly tilted in query.

“*Macbeth*, Sir. One of my A Level texts and I acted in it at school. I was the doctor. Macbeth says, um, something like ‘Can’st thou not take from the...pluck from the mind a rooted sorrow, pluck from the mind diseased a rooted sorrow, raze out the... something troubles of the brain and with a sweet, oblivious antidote...’ all that and the doctor says ‘therein the patient must minister to himself.’

“Your education was not lost on *you* then,’ said the Major. Dixon found the tone hard to judge. “Well, you stay or you go back to your unit. I must have your answer at 0700 tomorrow.”

The major indicated they should leave and they walked the corridors in silence, the only sounds being the unlocking and locking of doors by the sentries as they returned to ground level. Finally, they saluted and parted company.

Dixon leaned back against a wall. He had some hard thinking to do. And one thought kept edging its way into view. He was bound by the Official Secrets Act of course, but if he accepted the post, he would be bound to silence by complicity too. On the other hand, while he was already an accessory and witness to what had happened this morning, he could, by requesting a return to his unit, show that he was not prepared to go along with it. Then his silence was guaranteed only by the Act. Would that be judged sufficient? Just what boundaries did the Major have?

## Courier Call

It was beyond annoying. Once again he had, even if by chance, been in all day but in the early evening had found on the doormat a delivery firm's card claiming that he had been out when they called and so they would come back on the next day. Not quite so bad as that time when a company had texted him the same message accompanied by a photograph of his next door neighbour's house. Even so, what was he supposed to do tomorrow? Stand on the doorstep all day waiting for them? Jump up and down and wave his arms when he saw them at the end of the drive? If they were even at the end of the right drive?

Who were they anyway? He looked at the card. DED. Was that some kind of rip-off of DPD? And what were they delivering? He could not recall exactly what he might be expecting, but that was not unusual for the modern age. With some companies delivering next day, some taking several business days and others taking weeks – it was only when you spotted such a long delay that you would realise that the perfectly English-sounding business with a London address was actually located in China – with all those various times to wait, it was hard to recall with any clarity exactly what was on order and expected on any particular day. A first world problem indeed.

It was even more aggravating the next day when the doorbell rang at five minutes to seven. He was half way through shaving. He quickly rinsed off the foam and scuttled downstairs, still wiping his face with a towel. Opening the door he found on the porch step a man in jeans and some kind of black hoody, although drawn back far enough for it to be fairly obvious that his head was by accident or design almost entirely bald.

'Mr Jenkins?'

'Yes.'

'Number 19?'

'Yes.'

'I just wanted to be sure. I've come to collect. We missed you yesterday.'

'I was in all day. Oh never mind that. What have you– what do you mean *collect*?'

'I've come to collect.'

'Collect what?' Inside his stationary body, Jenkins staggered backwards at the reply. Had the man really just called him an arsehole?

'What?' he exclaimed.

This time the man did not answer.

Jenkins did not resist the rising anger. 'Look, you say you called yesterday, but you can't have, because I was in all day and the doorbell never rang. So whether it was you or somebody else, there's some lying going on. And I know how it works. It gets to the end of the shift and not everything has been delivered but you want to go home so you tell people you called...when you haven't...' He felt his certainty begin to wobble as he remembered that he had found a card posted through the letterbox rather than being texted, but he was not going to stop now. 'And anyway, who are you? Who is DED? I've never heard of them and I've got nothing that needs collecting and you could be anybody. Have you got any ID? How do I know you're genuine? You've not even got a uniform and—'

He stopped as the man held up his hand.

'Uniform is not a problem,' the man said. "I do like a traditionalist.'

Jenkins just had time to register the sudden transformation before the scythe parted him from all interest in the affairs of the world.

'But you're right,' came the cold whisper out of the dark cowl, 'it was the end of the shift and I was tired. I'm feeling better today.'