

The Mezzotint

By

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Adapted from the short story by Montague Rhodes James

I

Creest

There is an old Willow tree that sits on the outskirts of Greeven that folk describe as genial. Under the urgencies of a country breeze, gentle or otherwise, it greets those entering the sleepy hamlet with wafts of horticultural massage by way of its long arching branches, relieving them from the tensions of that other, modern universe. Occasionally, in those rare, windless moments, its arms would flop, symmetrically downwards, like an old wig, shading the ancient gnarled bark beneath.

It was the latter, serene image of this aged and beloved piece of aesthetic timber that another Greeven resident was often compared to. He was Professor Henry Creest, pronounced creased which was a rather unfortunate name to acquire on birth for a man who, as his autumn years set in, found himself the proprietor of a gratuitous quantity of facial wrinkles, matching those of the famous willow. The principle of a natural doppelganger was further reinforced through Creest's expanse of lank white hair which hung like lazy string along the sides of his head in the manner of those sacred limbs and although his complexion was comparable more to the contours of a steep sided hill on an ordnance survey map, it was gnarled enough to cement the association. Despite this unappealing combination, his appearance, rather than ostracising him from his fellow villagers, proved to be rather endearing, in particular to the younger generation of 'Greeveners'. So Creest became known as 'Old Willow'

Creest, however, was not old Greeven. His history was etched in two other places: Taunton, which provided him with an attractive south western brogue and Oxford, which rescued him from Taunton's 'provincial normality' and where he gained a BA First, a Master's distinction, a highly regarded PHD and a Doctorate in Art. He accepted a post with the University, developed his expertise to worldly renown, was accepted as a Don and taught there for thirty-five years, until retiring to Greeven at the age of 62.

Why Greeven? Why 'provincial Norfolk' when, as a young man, he had been intolerant of such rusticated places? Why extricate oneself completely from a world that offered him a cultural menu notably absent on the dining table of this East Anglian backwater?

No-one knew and Creest offered no plausible explanation. Folk meditated amongst themselves and concluded that the professor had drained his chalice of luminosity and desired nothing more to drink now than tea on his back garden patio and watch a warm summer sun set across the woodland that decorated the rise behind his cottage, relaxed that

he had achieved all there was to achieve for a man of his talents; a sense of leaving at the top, before the onset of senility depreciated all his life's success, and so they let it be.

He had purchased a modest but pretty cottage at the end of a small lane which wound away from the last vestiges of the main street by which the majority of Greeven's principal businesses could be found: The pub, post office, grocer's, a small butcher shop and the church of St Helen-in-the-Wold C of E. The cottage had a small lounge and kitchen with two bedrooms. It was snug and Creest enjoyed the trait, reminding him of his rooms in Oxford. The garden was larger than expected at first as the green lawn ran away from the back door in a dog leg bordered by a selection of small trees and bushes so that its far end was hidden from view. One had to follow the curve to its zenith to discover that the lawn turned once again conversely, and then straightened up into a large hidden rectangular section surrounded by the most beautiful array of flowers and plants. A privet hedge lined the end of the property and beyond this the village stream gabbled away happily cradled by the trees that lined its banks running toward and away from Greeven.

Not that Creest sat on the peripheries of village life allowing the uncomplicated rural tide to wax and wane around him. The weekend after his arrival assuming, correctly, that his advent would be the subject of local discourse, he decided to alleviate the inquisitiveness of the Greeveners by visiting the local public house on the Saturday night and the communion mass on the Sunday morning, introducing himself to all and sundry in order to pre-empt those of curious appetites, by presupposing, also correctly, that most of the village principals would be found at either or both locales.

Their interests or intrigues covered a spectrum of work, leisure and personal relationships. Creest was happy to discuss his work, albeit on a superficial level, and wherever in the world his expertise had been happy to locate itself. Hobbies and pursuits were few but passionate. A Times crossword and the completion of at least two of the harder Sudoku puzzles were a must every morning, as a form of rigorous lateral thought exercise. He hated outdoor physical exercise but happily manipulated his aging skeleton through a series of morning and evening stretches. He ate healthily and drank plenty of water and yes, still liked the odd beer, such as the one he was enjoying during his inauguration.

When inquiries moved to the history of his relationships, Creest was not so forthcoming. His parents, long since dead, had been supportive and communicative. Yes, he had two intense affiliations with members of the opposite sex but stressed that these had been work based with no romantic purpose, at least not on Creest's side. Without reference to the cliché by which many unmarried creatures offer as their excuse, he left the village in little doubt that for the last forty years his work had been his only mistress.

Within a year Creest was as good a Greevener as those with whom he co-existed and those who had preceded him. His attendances at the Pub and the Church became less frequent as those first forays had served their purpose and besides he was never an ardent worshiper at either altar, but he ran stalls at the church fetes in summer and winter and often his garden flora was seen as decoration upon its dais and pews. He led a team in the monthly pub quiz and was always the first to contribute to the good causes that the landlord was wont to patronage across the course of a drinking year.

What Creest brought to the village which it hadn't had before was the support of a weekly art class held at the village hall each Monday. It hadn't been his suggestion, rather that of a well to do widow of around 75 years, Dorothy White, who had been attempting to engineer one for some years with other semi-professional artists who had lived in or around Greeven to no avail and who saw Creest as her last opportunity, and not just in this sphere; indeed her prompt to Creest had been given with, if not a twinkle, then at the very least, a glaze in her eyes.

He didn't consent on the spot but considered the challenge over the following week and then made his way one morning to the village hall and placed a small notice on the events board. It read simply "Art classes every Monday morning at 10:00. Budding beginners and established Picassos welcome." Humour wasn't his strong point.

They'd been running for over a year with the usual gamut of successes and failures, but to Creest's credit and kindly temperament, more people had joined and stayed, despite their shortcomings, than had left discouraged. Creest was never convinced that he would ever discover a pupil with genuine skill despite the fact that the art class maestro's reputation had drawn in people from all over the locale, and yet somewhere in the recessed hallways of that great mind, a small candle of hope flickered.

Then one day in late summer, Hope walked in: Hope Lincoln.

Hope

Most people walk through doors - few have the doors melt around them. The latter are proprietors of bodies that simply diffuse the banality they encounter, as an obligation, in order to concentrate the viewer's attention on their quintessence alone.

Hope Lincoln was such a being. In her mid-twenties but exuding a child-like quality which was frustratingly difficult to define. She was handsome rather than stunning, after all a flawless face is rarely the façade of a candid personality. Her winsomeness too, was immediate and seemed to radiate from the shimmer of her eyes to the pronounced but attractiveness of her gait. She was slim but not tall and wore a red and white checked shirt atop a cappuccino skirt, beneath which two lithe legs stretched and slipped into two white sandals. Her auburn hair, with flashes of scarlet, bobbed like a string-less marionette along the sweet curve of her shoulders. She had uttered not one word as she walked into the art class and yet she was there as surely as if a royal bugler had trumpeted her arrival.

Creest was the last person in the room to see her and reacted only after seeing each of his pupils in turn, cease sketching to gaze or gape at something behind him. When finally he reciprocated, his reaction was immediate, as if Leonardo himself had walked in with La Gioconda in tow. Her introduction was entirely different, given in the most casual manner, as if she had arrived for a dental appointment. He saw, immediately, that there was a knowing maturity seeped into her eyes and yet she evoked a childish quality, but he knew not from where.

"Professor Creest?" – Creest nodded – All he could muster, finding his tongue suddenly as arid as a Nomad's sandal. "Miss Hope Lincoln" She offered her hand. He took it, sensing that contrary to the desert in his mouth, his palms were a rainforest; she, in an effort to avoid embarrassing Creest, awaited an opportune and discreet moment and then wiped her own hand on the back of her dress.

"I've just moved into the area and would like to join your group" Then acknowledging the others with a nod of her head, she continued: "You don't mind do you? I imagine a modest set like this can become quite cosy" The five gentlemen amongst the amateurs were most welcoming, whilst the eight ladies, the widow White included, were a little recalcitrant at first.

It was the widow that fired the first shot. "Are you sure? You do seem a little young for us. Elizabeth, here, is our youngest, and she's 49"

"48, Dorothy dear!" Elizabeth corrected her and then after a consideration added: "I think a transfusion of youth might just freshen some of us up and...do call me Lizzie, Miss Lincoln!"

This brief interchange over, Creest finally found his voice. "Mrs White, when you first approached me to organize this class there was, I believe, no stipulation given that reaching a certain, shall we say, stage of maturity was a prerequisite for membership" Turning back toward Miss Lincoln he smiled and said, "You are very welcome. Would you like to take a seat?"

Miss Lincoln was apologetic, "I won't, not today, if you don't mind, I've still a lot to unpack, but I'd love to start next week"

"Of course" Creest confirmed, "We start around ten but we're not at school so, you know" he was aware that his cheeks were simmering like hot soup and that his discomfiture was obvious to everyone in the room.

"I'll walk you out if I may" he offered in a rather obvious attempt to conceal his embarrassment. Understanding, she consented, waved a munificent goodbye to the class and strode confidently outside followed by an almost shuffling Creest. In the corridor she swung around again to face the professor. The power of her self-assurance rocked him back on his heels as if it required delineation between its source and whatever moved toward it. Creest's mind had already transported its thoughts to seven days hence, anticipating that first inevitable touch that dared contravene her impervious shield and relishing those on-going obligatory moments of close contact between teacher and pupil.

"They look delightful" Hope proclaimed as if judging a floral display at a summer gala.

"Are they?" he replied.

"Your art class professor"

"Oh them" his reaction already tinged with how unimportant they all were at this moment.

"Yes, they are a lovely crowd"

"I'm sure I'll blend in" she said, with a delicate upward curvature on the right side of her mouth. Creest noticed it at once. It was both mischievous and sensuous.

"Do you paint at all?" Creest suddenly remembered what they were both here for.

"A little: some street scenes from the city; when I had time"

"You took lessons?"

"Some evening classes; the tutor did commend one of my drawings. He could see something there, he told me. With the move to the country I just thought...well I expect it's an old cliché..."

"It is, but as with all clichés there's a basis of truth there. Where would the great painters be without the countryside? No 'Flatford Mill', no 'Starry Night', no Monet's lilies.

"That sort of genius may take some time professor"

"You'll find that time ambles around Greeven"

"Yes, and time for me to amble too"

"Would you like some help moving your stuff?"

"Most of it's done, but there is an old piano I need shifting. I had it in the front room but it's a little small. I think between us we may get it in the back. Perhaps Friday night; I could fix some dinner as a reward"

Creest could feel himself reddening again. "That would be most welcome"

"Six...six-thirty; okay?"

"Yes, fine. I'll be there...where?"

"Oh, of course; the Old School House"

She moved away, graceful but satiated as if she'd already eaten.

Creest told himself later that his emotional response had been elicited through his years of appreciating the great beauty he saw in art as well as in nature, but his intellect knew a lie when it sensed it. For the first time in over 40 years Creest had fallen head over heels in love and with a woman 40 years younger.

Harriet

After Creest left the village hall he decided to take the longer route home following a brook that straddled the northern perimeter of Greeven. After a mile, where the stream swings away in a series of loops and bends toward open countryside, Creest headed back toward the village across a small open field, the far end of which sat the back gate leading into St Helen's Church grounds.

He often meandered lazily for a while after art classes, emptying his mind of its superfluous detail as if he were leaving a paper trail of his thoughts behind him. This afternoon Creest's mind was a squall, replete with the images and sounds that Hope had irradiated despite their quite transitory dialogue. He had even lifted a fallen willow branch, a slim rather than substantial limb, from the bankside and wheeled it around his head as if testing the strength of his biceps, suddenly conscious that he might embarrass himself if Hope's piano was, in any way, too heavy.

Stepping into the churchyard he began to read the names of the gravestones. It was an exercise he hadn't undertaken since his arrival. Creest was not a saturnine fellow at all but it was a way of assimilating, a way of clothing himself in the village history, albeit in his own divergent manner. He stopped abruptly noticing a legend etched into one of the stones he hadn't noticed before. It simply read:

"Hope lies here"

An odd coincidence, he thought, this manifestation after his discussion with Greeven's newest resident. At once he felt light-headed as if he were going to faint but recovered, using the headstone to rest upon.

Suddenly a large shadow moved across the stone and Creest span around as precipitously as his old hips were capable of doing. There was nothing except the meadow before him. A bird perhaps, he considered, unconvinced. He looked back at the stone and was astonished to discover the legend now read:

"Samantha Felice.

A Dear Daughter

Taken from us too soon

Born 13th April 1956 – Died 13th April 1964"

Creest leaned in toward the stone angling his viewpoint, considering that the sun's glare may have obscured the words he'd read a moment earlier; so he knelt down, awkwardly, in front of the marble running his fingers over it, feeling for the words now, obstinately refusing to accept that what he had seen was only a conspiracy between an elevated emotional state and decrepit eyesight: nothing. The only lettering visible was the Felice epitaph. Glancing down he noticed a plastic flower lying prone across the dry mud at the base of the marker. The forlorn object seemed out of place to Creest. Whilst he wouldn't claim to know

every Greeven living in the village he was certain he hadn't come across that surname since moving here. Who would have left such a paltry offering and when? Just then a drop of blood hit one of the petals. He looked upwards toward the sky as if expecting the beginning of some biblical plague and immediately censured himself for such a ridiculous reaction. The second drop hit the stem before Creest figured it out. He turned over his right hand to find a small scarlet bubble on the top of his index finger. He touched the wound and could feel the splinter just below the surface. He put his finger in his mouth to suck away the blood and scratched away at the cut attempting to remove the stone sliver. The shrill sting cutting into his flesh made his eyes water. Through the glaze he thought he saw the gravestone turn the colour of blood and rocked back on his arches. It was then that the hand landed on his shoulder.

'Christ!'

The Vicar looked amused, despite the blasphemy.

'No, merely his servant'

The Vicar smiled adroitly as if privy to a celestial joke beyond the ears of this layman. He was as genial looking as most vicars. Creest wondered if men of the cloth naturally progressed or aspired to this state as they aged. He was bald on top but retained a healthy brush of brown hair that rolled around the sides and back of his head, like a huge bowling ball rolled into a hedge.

'Vicar, are you touting for business?'

'No need; that particular line is, naturally, reliable in a place like Greeven'

'I'm not surprised if that's how you greet your brethren'

'An apt place for one to give up the ghost so to speak, though making a habit of it would, no doubt, displease our local undertaker'

'Sad isn't it?'

'It's a Church graveyard, not the comedy club'

'I take it that's on Sunday'

'Come along – I don't mind a heckler or two - you did once'

The two shared a second of silence, enough for each to garner a collective respect for the other. The onus was on the vicar to respond to Creest's initial observation. His gentle blue eyes registered the memory.

'I knew them, the Felices. Originally French, I believe, hailing from Carcassonne near Toulouse. The little girl, Samantha, or Sam, was six when they first moved here. I was 18 and had just crossed the Rubicon'

Creest shrugged his shoulders, the vicar continued

'I had given my heart and soul to God'

'So you've been installed here all your life?'

'Installed! You make me sound as if I were a washing machine'

'Well aren't you – metaphorically speaking?'

'I think you rather overestimate the consciences of the villagers. Are you looking for forgiveness professor Creest?'

'Maybe; when did you come back?'

'I've been vicar here these last twenty years. Like many of us I've seen quite a bit of the country and, of course, there were the obligatory missionary sojourns as well. It was on my last trip, a six month stay in Sierra Leone that I contracted an unhealthy dose of malaria and was shipped home. I was convalescing, oh somewhere in Sussex, when the previous incumbent of St Helen-in-the-Wold fortuitously, God forgive me, swapped the pulpit for one of these. He's lying just over there '

Then the vicar grimaced as if he were absorbing a strident pang somewhere deep in his gut. When he spoke his voice had lowered an octave.

'Sad case'

'A young man then, your predecessor?'

'Oh no, no, I was referring to Samantha'

'What happened to her?'

'Officially? – Accident due to depression - the truth? - she committed suicide'

'She took her own life...an eight year old...on her birthday?'

'Tragic seems so poor a description'

Creest looked down at his hands. They were quivering. Then, suddenly, his back straightened as if someone were tracing an icicle along his spine.

'Why?'

The vicar placed his hand on the gravestone and stroked it as if he were consoling the long dead girl.

'Would you mind awfully if we repaired to my sacristy? I would prefer to relate this terrible history in more congenial surroundings'

Creest agreed and within moments they were both ensconced in a small but comfortable chamber behind the church altar and both with a small glass of porter. There was a small desk with a candlestick atop positioned centrally and an armchair tucked into the recess. Another chair sat against the far wall which incorporated a small bookcase which contents seemed perfectly suitable to their surroundings. The vicar proffered Creest to sit down and continued his narrative.

'You asked me why she did it Professor. That, I'm afraid, remains unanswered. Sam was a bright little thing. She had very blonde hair and deep blue eyes; popular with her peers, partly because of her lovely French accent coping with learning a new language. As she got older and taller, one could see that she was developing into a beautiful young lady, but three months before she died everything changed'

His eyes seemed to darken as if a shadow had passed between his memory and its visualisation.

'It was gradual, of course: little things. She used to skip to school; instead she dragged her feet. Her demeanour – so carefree, became almost reclusive. She spoke little and ostracised her friends through her taciturnity. Her parents came to me. They were Catholic, lapsed or lazy, as I tended to brand those who spurned the opportunity many never get'

Creest, a devout Agnostic, gave him an admonishing glare. The vicar excused himself: 'Not in a malicious fashion, you understand' - The reproachful transformed into the disparaging. 'Consider it from my point of view Professor. Year on year goes by. The world accelerates driven by all the marvellous technology crafted from the genius of minds given to us by God; the same God left standing back at the starting line, a smoking pistol in his hand and watching his people run away from him'

Creest's impatience could not be suppressed: 'The parents, vicar?'

'Oh yes. The mother, Angelique, was distraught, as one would expect, but it was Philippe, Sam's father that surprised me most'

'In what way?' Creest had regained his interest

'He never stopped crying. Months later you could pass him anywhere in the village rambling without any intended purpose sobbing intensely'

'It was his daughter. I expect if I'd had a child and lost it in such traumatic circumstances, I may have shed quite a few tears, especially it being a girl'

'Father and daughters?'

'Well, yes but you do seem reticent to go into detail. I suppose it's still painful'

'I must admit I have never put much stock in time being the great healer. I don't think it's capable of any more than dulling the pain simply by putting distance between us and the original wound; those first awful pains. Every time something triggers those unwanted memories it's there, less agonising each time maybe, but it never goes away'

There was another pause, orchestrated by Creest quite deliberately. Time may be limited in its healing qualities, thought the professor, but it's an effective enough weapon in the right hands. Like a salesman pressuring his client into breaking the pregnant pause, so Creest remained silent knowing that if he wanted to pursue the conclusion to this tragedy the Vicar would have to speak first. A long, bloated minute later, he was obliged.

'The day of her Birthday...'the vicar said reluctantly, '...her mother told me that everything had gone reasonably well. Sam even seemed to be back to her old self, smiling and joining in the party games – the parents had managed to persuade Sam's school friends to come along. I was invited but only managed to arrive just as they were cutting the cake. Her

father was dishing out the slices and saw me come into the room and greeted me with a large slice of Victoria sponge. Then it happened'

The vicar gulped as if swallowing an apple whole. This time Creest could not abide the hiatus: 'And?'

'Apparently she smiled at her father who returned the smile, showed him the edge of the knife she had just used to cut the cake then ran it across her throat'

'Good God man' - This time it was Creest who fell quiet.

The vicar continued as if relishing the affect he had imbued on the agnostic. 'I'm sure one can imagine the scene quite vividly but believe me to witness such an event was traumatising in the extreme'

'I was expecting pills, or perhaps a leap from a window, but...'

'It was beyond awful. Whether she meant it or not the artery was severed. I remember, and believe me I remember, looking down at my slice of cake and thinking why would anybody cover it in strawberry sauce? Around me children were running away screaming or were transfixed to the spot mute in absolute trauma. Sam's father had his hands around her neck trying to stem the deluge. For one insane twinkling I thought he was strangling her. The tears were raging from his eyes and he was blubbing something indecipherable. Sam's mother collapsed. She lay on the floor like a ghost. I thought she was dead too'

The vicar paused and breathed sonorously. Creest dared not prick his bubble. He pushed him into this, uncomprehending how savagely those events would unfold. Now he stayed silent for a different motive.

'You understand now my disinclination to revisit a part of my memory I would rather confine to its deepest recesses'

'My apologies vicar; I was a tad clamorous'

The vicar smiled painfully. 'Do you know that even now, after all this time, I still find it difficult to look at blood, even my own'

Despite a swelling tide of guilt Creest could not contain his curiosity and prompted the vicar once more as tactfully as he could. 'Did you ever find out why she did it?'

'No', the vicar answered. 'To this day little Samantha's actions remain a complete mystery'

'And her parents'

'They moved back to France, but tragedy travelled with them. Sam's father died in mysterious circumstances seven years later'

'Oh?' said Creest, expectant more than in surprise.

'If anything his demise was stranger than his daughters' he declaimed, then paused, looked down as if gathering up the threads of his tale from the ground and finally continued. 'The Felices were living in a small village in the Auvergne if I remember correctly. I say village but it closer to what we describe as a hamlet. They didn't have another child. The mother

couldn't bear it, but they had befriended a young married couple, the Lecuyers, living in the next cottage. They had moved from the city with their daughter who was aged around 8, Harriet I think her name was, with a desire to rear the child up in the gentleness of the French countryside. The father, Henri, was a psychiatrist, newly qualified, and when he learned the story of the Felice's recent history he encouraged them to become more involved with their child; a sort of therapy and perhaps his first real 'casebook'.

The child, funnily enough, was a blue-eyed blonde as Sam had been but rather than increase the poor man's heartache he actually warmed to the idea of a closer contact but both women were reticent. Angelique refused to have the child in her house. So Philippe became a frequent visitor to his new neighbours. The child liked to draw and absolutely doted on him and before too long he had become 'Uncle' Philippe.

She would give him simple sketches but seemed to belie a maturity for her age. Not a prodigy, you understand, nothing that would task your keen eye professor. In time Juliette, Harriet's mother, was won around partly because of Philippe's usefulness as a sitter of sorts, but Angelique remained hostile to their association even to becoming jealous of the attention lavished on Harriet and squandered on her'

Creest sighed unexpectedly. The vicar, afraid he was boring his audience, apologised but saw that Creest was rather more uncomfortable than indifferent; notwithstanding he felt an obligation to curtail any extraneous detail from the rest of his narrative.

'One day, in early January I believe, Henri was delayed in getting home. He had attended a conference in Geneva but there had been an avalanche in that corner of the Alps which blocked both road and rail routes into France forcing him to stay overnight. Juliette had promised to visit a sick Aunt in Clermont-Ferrand and asked Philippe to look after Harriet. He was happy to do so and decided to take the child on walk in the nearby woods. Everything seemed well. Philippe picked the child up at midday. The child was dressed warmly against the afternoon chill. She had a pencil and pad with the plan to sketch some of the winter scenery of the locale and they set off. Juliette was on her way soon after'

The vicar stopped seeing Creest take a rather large gulp of the port. 'Are you okay?' he enquired

'Intrigued, I guess' Creest growled due to the alcohol tickling the back of his throat.

'Juliette arrived home a little after eight o'clock that evening. The house was in darkness and outside it was beginning to snow heavily. She assumed that Harriet was at Philippe's house waiting to be picked up and decided to fetch the child immediately. She knocked on the door to be met with terrible screams coming from within. The door flew open and Juliette, already bracing herself for news of some terrible event, was confronted with the manic face of the Angelique, blanched and soaked with tears'

'He'd kidnapped the child?' Crest interrupted

The vicar shook his head and his eyes were querying Creest's awkward presumption so he ignored the conjecture and continued. 'No, no, Angelique was frantic. Neither Philippe nor the child had been seen since they walked off into the forest, but she had been too afraid to search for them herself, so she persuaded Juliette to accompany her and armed with torches both walked off into that wintry night.'

The vicar paused and outside the sacristy the high scream of a swift punctuated the bubble of silence like a claw hammer smashing a peach.

'Wasn't there a local constable?' asked Creest

'A token presence only, semi-retired, after all this was rural France'

'Please go on Vicar, finish it' Creest insisted rather desperately.

'They walked for about 20 minutes through the thick dark wood, light snow flurries eking down through the treetops latching on to their cold, tired, frightened faces. Eventually they reached a clearing. As they searched the area, their footsteps crunching fresh snow, Juliette suddenly stopped still and beckoned Angelique to do the same. In the unnerving quiet a human voice could be heard. It seemed to Juliette that someone was giggling somewhere close by. Their torch beams darted and weaved across the open space until Angelique's caught a small shape about 50 feet away, kneeling at the foot of a large conifer. Juliette whispered her daughter's name and began to walk toward the figure. When they had reached half-way, almost uncannily, the laughter turned out to be whimpering, the whimpering of a child. Juliette screamed out "Harriet" and ran to her, grabbing her fast as if she were about to fall from a tall building. Whilst Juliette smothered her daughter in kisses, Angelique was rooted to the spot behind them as if the weather had infiltrated her very bones making movement impossible, with one exception, her eyes, which were gaping up at the tree which towered over them all. It took Juliette a moment to adjust her own eyes before they could decipher the object hanging from the lower branch some ten feet in the air. It was Philippe. Instinctively, not through choice, she shone her torch at his face and revealed to the mute Angelique, bulging eye sockets bursting from his face like two abnormally large hard-boiled eggs. That was the trigger for the suppressed emotion within Philippe's wife. Juliette reported that that first scream will live with her forever'

'Suicide?' queried Creest

'The obvious conclusion, the problem being several strange factors surrounding the affair. The coroner confirmed that Philippe had been dead no longer than two hours and, as the heavier snow had ceased prior to his 'demise' and as there was no evidence of any footprints in the clearing bar his and Harriet's, terra firma so far; however the branch was too high up for Philippe to commit the act from the ground, meaning he would have had to had climbed up there, wrapped the noose around his neck and launched himself off. Here's where logic exits and irrationality enters. The bark of this particular tree was far too wide and smooth for him to attempt a free climb nevertheless there were no scuff marks to indicate Philippe had even tried. Neither was there an aid visible underneath his poor swinging body, no ladder or stool of sorts, nothing at all. It was as if he'd been hung there as one would hang a picture'

'He must have had the child help him unwittingly' Creest asserted, now feeling uncomfortable with this heightened level of histrionics.

'The Gendarmerie may have taken this as an explanation but for one fact' and again the Vicar paused.

'Well go on man' urged the impatient Creest.

'Philippe had been emasculated'

Creest leaned back in his chair.

'The police assumed some madman had attacked Philippe but left the child untouched though traumatised by what she's seen. They could not get young Harriet to describe a single thing - she remained silent. They put out local warnings about keeping doors locked at night but they never solved the murder and eventually closed the case'

Creest conceded but his cynicism toward the sinister elements remained. Part of him was happy to indulge in the Vicar's narration, his curiosity perhaps, but there was an itch, nay an irritant, resounding deep in his psyche, that made him shuffle in his armchair.

'What happened to the mother?'

'Angelique? She lived for another two years but she became quite mad, deranged even. She insisted that Harriet had killed Philippe and that she wasn't mistaken when they first found her that she heard the child laughing, not crying. She drowned in the local river, apparently attempting some sort of baptismal ceremony and screaming about wanting to be cleansed from her sins'

The Vicar discharged a tremulous, exhausted sigh, as if he'd just extracted himself from a lengthy session in the confessional with a particularly industrious 'fille de joie'.

Once again an enforced silence lowered itself on the little vestibule they were sitting in, either born of respect or simply of pity for the tragedy the vicar had shared with Creest. As Creest motioned to excuse himself, considering further conversation could only have been banal compared to what had preceded it, a huge thump emanated from behind his chair forcing Creest to leap from the upholstery.

The vicar also rose, rather more dignified, and together they moved to the rear of the chair. A large volume had slipped from the small bookcase on the wall and landed face down but, remarkably, the leaves had spread outward prior to landing as if the book itself had committed an act of literary suicide. Its spine was clearly displayed. Creest recognized it as a Buddhist text - The Dhammapada.

Creest stepped back and allowed the vicar to pick it up. He read the open page and then handed it to the professor. On one of the open pages a passage had been underlined with a pencil:

"All that we are is the result of what we have thought: it is founded on our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with an evil thought, pain follows him, as the wheel follows the foot of the ox that draws the carriage"

'A favourite quote vicar? Use it in your sermons do you? And I thought you were staunch Church of England'

'Oh no, I picked it up after a book sale at one of our church fetes. No offers, even at 10p. It's actually quite profound in parts. Funny though, I can't remember ever marking out a particular passage even if it made an impression. I have an over-fondness of books I suppose. I hate to see them defaced in any way, well except for the toll inflicted by time which, after all, takes no prisoners'.

'A psychic judgement on Philippe perhaps?'

'For what? He had never seemed to me to be anything other than a kind and loving father and neighbour. But it does trouble me'

'So you've said, despite the years between'

'No, I mean the bad things that happen to good people. That's the hardest part of this job or calling or whatever it's deemed to be. That awful phrase that devotees always use – "Why has God done this to me" – as if they are exempt from the cruelties of the earth simply because they claim to have more faith than others'

'It could be that's why they're chosen'

'Meaning?'

'That faith is therefore stronger and can survive the blow'

'Some but others...well that's another story for another day'

'Another, before you go?' the vicar motioned toward Creest's glass.

'No, no I have an important mission today'

'Yes, of course, well enjoy your dinner'

He offered the vicar his goodbyes. As he closed the gate at the end of the footpath leading away from the sacristy he turned and looked at the church beyond. He knows I'm going to Hope's for dinner. The sky had darkened and accentuated the profile of the church as if it had been lifted from a Roger Corman film and he shivered. The terrible history of Harriet's family had affected him, but there was more.

The cottage Hope Lincoln had rented was one of those picture postcard dwellings that tend to validate an English sentiment that infests itself in scores of typically twee television series. It was one of only a few in the village with a thatched roof the top of which could be seen as he left the Churchyard. The effect stirred something warm within him as if he were the Native returned. The reality often misled and so it did in this case.

Creest entered the garden through a gate that stuck against the pathway as he made his way in and nearly ripped the inside of his trouser leg. The foliage against the fence was quite impressive and blazed with colour, but that nearer the cottage seemed to be in terminal decay. Closer up Creest noticed that the front door and window sashes needed more than just a lick of paint. Whilst the upper parts, though well worn, were respectable, the lintels and the base of the door had pealed to such an extent that parts of the original wood were rotten and the whole frontage probably unsalvageable. Worse still the thatched roof which had seemed so welcome, was on its last legs and would cost a fortune to replace.

He knocked the door hard releasing four days on pent up anticipation; it opened almost immediately.

'Hello Professor. I wasn't quite sure you would turn up' she said, intimating exactly the opposite.

'Why ever not?' he answered, again reeling from the forcefulness of her presence.

'Come in then' She stepped back and let him through

'Please call me Henry'

'That's good isn't it – Henry and Hope!' she grinned

As he walked in he was struck by two potent aromas in succession. The first was a perfume that lifted off her neck (he guessed) that smelt like a mixture of smoked wood embers and lemon. It was irresistible; the second a pungent torrent of a powerful tomato sauce laced with basil, infiltrated with garlic. She led him toward the upright piano when all Creest wanted to do was sit. He needed to; he was giddy.

Between them they shuffled the object into the desired position then Hope sat him down at her dinner table and though Creest was grateful for the breather he disguised it. As she returned to the kitchen that cultured, intelligent being that he had crafted himself over the years was being undermined by this uncontrolled adoption of immature machismo.

'I'm not very good' she confessed as she returned with an uncorked bottle of red wine

'The odours would suggest otherwise' Creest replied

'Oh, no, painting I mean. I will admit though, immodesty aside – yes I can cook'

'You've chosen a good subject then. I can certainly eat'

'Yes, I can see you're hungry' she smirked playfully.

'I am but my appetite for another unearthing a Monet from the rural soil has diminished over the years so I wouldn't worry too much about your abilities'

'Are you strict? I wouldn't like to be made to look foolish'

Creest looked at her and knew that, even as a child, that state had never been applied to her. Nevertheless he replied in earnest. 'Why be? It's very informal'

'What about your class?'

'Oh they'll be fine. It will be nice to see the average age of the class dip below 65, the amount of wrinkles too'. Surprised at his own impromptu candour, Creest immediately coloured.

'Stop flirting Professor' she countered, eradicating his embarrassment in an instant, almost as if she knew, eventually, he would flatter her. 'Let's eat'

To those of us with generous frames a more than ample dinner requires penance, usually in the form of feeling bloated. One wonders if that sensation is exacerbated by guilty feelings that we have eaten more than we should, even when one is quite innocent in that respect. Creest, wiry as whippet on a diet, was fit to burst after a valiant attempt at Hope's Tarte a Citron. He may have eaten it all if she hadn't decorated it with a sublime cream dressing laced with lime; he may even have finished it if it had been the second course following a wonderful Italian dinner - a miasma of fusilli, bresaola and prosciutto; but it was the third course of a meal that began with a delicately poached salmon with capers, resting on a bed of huge slices of beef tomato.

He stretched back in his chair, relieving the pressure on his abdomen and closed his eyes. He was so satiated he began to feel sleepy although he had had no more than one glass of red wine. He closed his eyes and dozed. Through the darkness he heard a tune being played on the piano. He assumed Hope had sat down to indulge him so after dinner entertainment. The melody seemed to come from a nursery rhyme but he couldn't place it. As he listened it became obvious that the notes were staccato and without rhythm as if a child were attempting to play the instrument with their index finger. Then it abruptly ceased.

After a moment he opened his eyes to find Hope staring at him with a gaze that seemed to have harnessed all of her physical force. Silently she rose and stood behind him and for a few seconds nothing happened and in that enormous bubble Creest became giddy with arousal and the expectation that she was about to caress him, which she did, but in the most unexpected manner.

In his heightened sensual state his spiralling head felt so heavy that he could look no further than straight down at his knees. Something white appeared between them and his first reaction was to push away but he was unable to do so. Then it became clear that it was a hand; her hand. It slowly rose up like the Lady of the Lake's, sword-less, until the base of the wrist and the lower arm came into view. With the palm of the hand facing him the hand made a ball fist as if it were about to punch him but then its fingers stretched out to form a crab like posture resting on the base of his right thigh. It crawled along toward his crotch like a spider stopping briefly atop his zipper. The forefinger lifted and hovered above the catch and flicked downward at it like an impatient horse scratching the floor with its hoof.

After a half dozen of these movements the finger inserted itself into the tab of the zipper and began to pull it backward. Creest's heart was booming in his chest like the manic thrashings of a trapped bird battering at a closed window, as the teeth of the fly hit the bottom stop. He thought it would burst through his rib cage when the hand began rifling inside his trousers and as the foreskin came into contact with the cool stroke of her forefinger an electrical

surge shot through his brain making the room spin. As she eased his member into the open air her head emerged in the space that her hand had moments earlier.

She looked so child-like and as vehemently beautiful as anything he had ever seen in art or nature and as she leaned in with that beautiful mouth to complete the fantasy, he climaxed.

Then Creest woke up. Hope was standing over him sympathetically. 'My, my, I think I may have overfed you professor, you nodded off for a while. Why not try the nice old armchair in the lounge. It should be far more comfortable'

He hesitated in getting up more in embarrassment at the thought that he may really have achieved orgasm and not simply dreamt it. Surreptitiously he pawed at his crotch and having assured himself he was dry he followed Hope into the lounge.

'Coffee?' she asked

'Yes, strong please, if you wouldn't mind' he requested, considering the benefits of a good dosage of caffeine on his lethargy.

'I have something to show you' she added intriguingly and disappeared upstairs.

If Creest had suspected that there was innuendo loaded in that last sentence of hers he was in no shape to react to it. His knees were hardly capable of supporting him.

She returned holding what appeared to be a painting of some sort. 'My first effort' she admitted sheepishly.

'Oh' Creest replied, the relief palpably audible. He accepted it from her and held it away at arm's length. 'But this is...'

'Well let's say we each know where the other lives'

It was a picture of Creest's cottage, though not a particularly passable representation. The building itself was out of sync as if she had started drawing it in three dimensions to begin with and then filled it in. The texture of the lawn and foliage was non-existent and the sky simply a flat pale blue canvas with a couple of white pillows inserted for effect. Creest was conscious on the back of an excellent dinner that he did not want to discourage his hostess.

'For a first attempt I'd say it's not too bad' he proffered, in the full knowledge that even when inspecting amateurs, traits of ability are visible: something a teacher can work on. There was no chrysalis of aptitude here, however, he mused, from a talent perspective, assimilating her into his village group would be seamless.

'Take it as a gift' she said

Creest was taken by surprise and stumbled for an excuse. 'My cottage is rather small and the walls tend to be taken up with treasured works I've collected across the years'

'You don't have to display it silly; it's not that sort of gift' So he took it, had his coffee and they chatted for about an hour discussing each other's histories until Creest left around nine-thirty.

Walking home he suddenly became aroused again unable to plug the flow of fantasy sexual congress with his hostess that his daydream seemed to have initiated. 'She's more than half my age' he chastised himself hollow fully cognisant that this was the most exciting element of all.

5

Hope Disappears

Creest saw nothing of Hope Lincoln over the weekend after their dinner date. He was surprised, and more than a little disappointed, after adding an extra afternoon stroll to his customary morning and evening rambles around the village with every intention of 'bumping'

into her. Furthermore on each occasion he deliberately altered his normal route to ensure he crossed close by Hope's cottage. Despite fine warm weather and slightly varying the times he left his house on each occasion he had failed to orchestrate a 'meeting' with Hope either in the garden or at any of the focal points of the village. Neither had Creest missed her at these places making enquiries after her, in as nonchalant a fashion he could muster considering the enormity of passion she had sparked within him.

The following day heralded the weekly art class. Creest had arrived early. He was slightly haggard as he had slept little over night, his mind filled with anticipation at the guilty pleasure of being able to spend the best part of two hours gazing at her in a situation that would not compromise him. At 11:00 he was in the process of setting up the easels, boards and paints in three separate arched rows of four, when the regulars began to file in. Creest tried to concentrate on the task in hand but found it impossible not to glance at the door his eyes almost requiring her to walk in as she had done so a week ago and satiate the longing lodged in his soul.

By 11:05 all the class were seating bar one. The place in question was for Hope and Creest had positioned it intentionally and inconspicuously, in the middle row just off centre. He had determined this would dampen any accusations of favouritism and allow his gaze unparalleled access without betraying his ardour for a girl old enough to be his Granddaughter.

The class was getting fidgety and loud whispers informed Creest that they were cognisant of the name of the absentee. Creest guessed that any further delay would unravel his disguise and began the lesson.

For 30 minutes he taught staccato style, unable to focus. When he wasn't glancing toward the door his ears were pricked for a creak or a knock. Exasperated, Dorothy, seated front centre of course, spoke up, the usual model of reticence. 'Is she not coming then?'

'Who?' Creest returned unconvincingly, moving nearer to her

'That's the difference isn't it Professor?'

'I really don't follow'

'The elderly lady; what we lose in looks we make up in fidelity' Dorothy declared, the corners of her mouth lifting almost imperceptibly with malevolent mirth.

Creest's tetchiness suddenly swelled into anger which he sought instantly to suppress but in doing so accidentally bit the inside of his cheek. He turned away and winced. Dorothy, one of those people who haven't the capacity to understand when a line has been crossed, spoke again. 'Heartburn Professor? I'm told Italian food does have that facility'

Creest reeled on her. 'Not with me' he growled. 'I become bilious digesting nauseous doses of cant vocabulary'

Dorothy, stunned by his ire, offered no reply and Creest's rage subsided with the same velocity as it had arisen, assisted no doubt by witnessing the grins of the assemblage behind, content to see the Village faucet stoppered for once.

The class dismissed at one o'clock. To redress the customary ambience of his art class Creest over-complimented Dorothy on her composition ensuring the others

heard. Nevertheless he remained uneasy over Dorothy's knowledge of his dinner at Hope's cottage and the latter's non-appearance. He pondered that consciously he had manifested his disappointment in the quality of the picture she had given him, knocking her confidence and causing her to stay away. It might also explain why no-one had seen any sign of her in two days. Perhaps, he thought, she envisages me mocking her effort with the others in the class. All sorts of guilty thoughts seemed to swirl around his brain like litter in a high wind. It needed resolving. It was a good reason to call on her.

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The gate to Hope's cottage was open – he was sure the last time he passed, it was closed. It shocked him that in his heightened emotional state what was probably just the lazy attitude of the village postman, became a harbinger for abandonment. With trepidation he knocked on the door. There was no echoing boom in the silent rooms beyond but it was soon evident Hope was not at home. He peered in through the windows. The furniture was neat; almost too neat. One would hardly guess the house had been occupied at all. Creest was crestfallen and irritated in equal measure. He moved to the rear of the cottage and tried the kitchen door. It was locked but he noticed the window was slightly ajar. He pulled at it and manipulated his fingers into the space to unhook the arm from its mounting and prised the window fully open.

'Hope' he cried – silence. Then he astonished himself by attempting to climb inside. His wiry frame presented no problem even with the window being not particularly big but he needed leverage. Two feet away and resting against the kitchen wall was the base of an old tree trunk. Creest tried lifting it but it was too heavy so he pushed at it with his feet until it rolled underneath the window sill. After half a dozen attempts he managed to drag his thin carcass across the shelf head first, pulling his legs after him. Then, lying across the sink he rather awkwardly, and risky for a man his age, rolled over, planting his feet before him. Exhausted from this ludicrous exercise he leaned forward, resting his hands on both knees and gulping in air on the same spot two days previously he had been breathing in those wonderful smells of Hope's cooking.

As his heaving lungs and heart rate subsided it occurred to him that if his instincts were wrong and Hope were to walk back through the front door right now, given a month to consider, he would be unable to think of a reasonable motive for him being caught here. But he felt sure. He knew she had gone. She'd been here barely a week. He had to find out why.

A scrawled up letter in a bin containing a plea from a sick mother begging Hope to return home urgently; money problems even. Like a retired and bored detective he shuffled around the rooms looking for clues but they were clean. Not tidy clean but the kind of clean that signifies abandonment nevertheless, he still braced himself for that turn of the key in then lock or the snap of a latch unfastening as he climbed the narrow staircase to the upper rooms.

There were two small bedrooms and a tiny bathroom. Once again the interiors were spotless as if they were being readied for a photo shoot. The bathroom contained no toiletries – the surfaces of the bath and basin were dry and the wispy shower curtain hung from a hook next to the nozzle like thin over read newspaper. The smaller bedroom was

sparse with furniture and the master hardly better, the only accoutrement being a large standing tailor's mirror.

Standing in the door of the master bedroom he closed his eyes and imagined her lying beneath the sheets on the bed in front of him when suddenly he caught her essence. He opened his eyes to find her lying there exactly as he had envisaged. She was curled to one side and sleeping deeply.

He moved almost on tiptoe not wanted to disturb her but also fascinated by her seeing her slumbering. As he reached the end of the bed she turned and, as if sensing him, slowly opened her eyes. He stopped, partly guilty of breaking that peaceful state but also in anticipation. How did he miss her being here? What will she say? Will she scream? She didn't do either; she just smiled and then beckoned him closer.

He obeyed and eased around to the side of the bed, his member already throbbing so hard it hurt him. She watched his every step, unblinking, until he stood above her. Silently she gripped the top of the blanket and peeled it back. His desire to see her naked became everything to him. It depreciated his love of art, his work, the summation of all he had achieved in his sixty odd years. He kneeled down beside her because those joints could not bear the weight of his trembling body.

As the blanket rolled back he looked down in want of fulfilment, but she wasn't naked. She was dressed in what appeared to be a doll's outfit. The surprise tapered his desire which swiftly became a mixture of attraction and repugnance. He looked at her. She was sucking her thumb as if she were performing fellatio. He shot back away from her. Her head seemed enormous as if in the process of transformation and her tongue lolled outside of her mouth and listed from corner to corner. Then the piercing shriek of a child wailing reverberated throughout the cottage, seeming to emanate from within the walls and up through the floorboards. Creest spun around facing the mirror but the glass was without reflection. It had become a widow displaying a view of a long garden enclosed on either side by trees. At the far end a row of bushes sealed the space and Creest could see a small hooded figure standing there. It crouched and moved swiftly toward him growing larger as it neared. Creest turned to run but found his arms pinioned at his sides. Hope had grabbed him, her strength a direct contradiction to her mass. He wrestled to free himself but it was in vain. He could hear her giggling like a schoolchild behind him. Ahead of him the figure was almost upon him. The face beneath the hood was featureless except for two piercing eyes shining from within. It leapt from the mirror as if to devour him.

He woke up and realised he was propped against the master bedroom door. The bed was shapeless and the room visible within the mirror. Creest wasn't waiting the J B Priestley effect and exited the cottage far more swiftly than he had entered it. He didn't even stop to reset the window latch.

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Crossing the village green some 5 minutes later Creest was hailed by a loud voice behind him. His heart still clattering from the experience of his second and rather more sinister daydream the shout caused it to bounce around his rib cage like a pinball. He turned imagining for a frozen moment he would be facing the hooded figure he'd seen in the mirror, but, mercifully, it was the vicar. He attempted to compose himself as the cleric skipped toward him but was clearly unsuccessful.

'Are you okay Professor?' he asked

'Away with the fairies I'm afraid' he answered after the fleetest of pauses and a confession that felt partly true.

'Perhaps a drink would bring you back from the nether life? I have a rather nice Shiraz give to me by a parishioner' He brandished it like a trophy.

'I was on my way home. I rather fancied a nap to be honest'

'A glass of a good muscular red might be the tonic. It can be drunk at any venue of your choice'

The temptation was enough. 'The patient relents but requests that he be treated at home'

'House visits are my speciality'.

*

'How was the class today?' the vicar enquired after pouring them both a full glass.

'I'm afraid I lost my temper' Creest admitted dolefully after a rather large gulp of the Shiraz. 'Dorothy was...is...such a busybody...I...'

'She's one of my most dedicated parishioners...'

'Oh...I...'

'...and I therefore understand and, indeed, sympathise with your frustration'

Creest smiled in relief at his companion's leniency.

'One's flock are arrayed in a variety of fleeces, after all isn't that what the confessional was invented for?'

Creest took another large sip. 'Have you seen Hope...Miss Lincoln at all?'

'The new girl? I haven't seen her for a couple of days but it is quite coincidental you mentioning her. She was in church Sunday, though not during the service. I had just finished the obligatory farewells at the church door and was on my way back to the vestry to change when I heard whispering coming from near the crypt at the far end. I thought perhaps it was a member of my congregation saying a private prayer but in this profession you soon learn that there is a rhythm to supplication – supplicants rarely accentuate. I think it creates a kind of trance like state. Anyway these mumblings were far more staccato and random. I crept along to investigate, but slowly. The language wasn't English, French I assumed, but I couldn't be sure. We've have had some problems in the past with thefts and it is quite dark there even in the bright glare of a summer day. Half way down I saw a fleck of cream in the corner, near the statue of St Nicholas. It turned out to be the colour of a thin raincoat and wearing it was Miss Lincoln'

'Religious? That's one trait I would have...well I mean I only met her briefly...'

'Didn't you have dinner with her?'

'My God does the whole village know? As a virus the pneumonic plague can only pay lip service to gossip. That's why I was angry with Dorothy. How did it get out?'

'I'm sorry professor I didn't mean to pry and I have no idea who knows and who told who, but my confidant was Miss Lincoln herself'

'But didn't you just say you hadn't seen her'

'That's the thing. She told me this on Sunday – Sunday week. "Good morning vicar" she said, "I'm inviting Professor Creest for dinner Monday night. Have you any idea what I might cook him?"'

'But I hadn't even met her and I now realise that's what your earlier remark referred to – enjoy your dinner. I marvelled at the time as to how you could have known, but nobody knew. She made the offer outside. No-one else was present and I ran into you less than an hour later. How did you know who she was?' Creest replied astonished.

'I didn't, until later' the vicar spoke softly, 'I just assumed she was a friend of yours from the past. Unfortunately not every new resident feels the need for spiritual sustenance. I've often run into new people months after they came to stay here. What made me uneasy was her manner of conversation'

Creest could feel his knees shuddering but asked the question anyway and the vicar obliged.

'She said it without acknowledging me at all. Not a hello or anything, as if she sensed I would be drawn to her. What's more she said it all with her back to me'

'What did you do?'

'I began to engage her in conversation with the usual chat; where she was from and how did she come to know you, but she said nothing more and never turned from facing the statue. I felt uncomfortable and chill. Just then my curate entered the church to tidy up the altar and caught sight of me. He called, a little concerned when he saw me talking to someone in the dark. I turned to discharge his fears and he continued his work, but when I had turned around Miss Lincoln had disappeared'

'Did the curate see her go?'

'I quizzed him about her. "No Vicar" he replied, "I didn't see her leave but then again I didn't see anyone at all. I thought you were talking to yourself"'

'I have a confession to make' Creest said

'As good a place as any' It was a cliché but the vicar sensed a slice of banality was a requisite to counter balance the strange events he'd related to Creest.

'I broke into her cottage'

The vicar laughed but Creest face remained stolid.

'Actually I didn't break in I sort of let myself in'

'She left the door open? Silly these days even in a quiet spot like Greeven'

'A window; I crawled through her kitchen window'

'Good God man' the vicar replied and cast his eyes to heaven in apology. 'I mean what on earth compelled you to do such a thing?'

'I can't really say. Like you, in Church the other day, I felt drawn. I needed to know if she had left the village'

'Aren't you being a little presumptuous? She may be off visiting'

'No, no, the house is completely bereft of personal items, even the piano I helped her move. Only the furnishings are left and I expect they came with the cottage'.

'It does seem odd, but I'm sure they'll be a logical motive for her going. Perhaps someone close to her is ill?'

'I considered that' said Creest, 'but there's something else'

'Else? My dear man you are not obsessed with the girl are you?'

'Not at all' Creest lied

'Did she show signs of talent at all then?' the vicar offered, leaving a door open for a rational excuse.

'In what way?' Creest seemed baffled and uncomfortable

'I was rather thinking along the lines of your profession'

'An artist? Miss Lincoln? Nothing of the kind, in fact she gave me a picture she'd painted of this cottage. I have it here; just a moment.' He scuffled off to fetch it and handed it to the clergyman without glancing at it.

'Even to an untrained eye as yourself, it must be obvious that the attempt is almost childish. No feel for the dimensions of the building and surrounding countryside. The colours too, are garish, and offer no contrast to demarcate light and shadow'

The vicar looked at it and nodded in submission as if he understood Creest's objections and then something caught his eye and he spoke, a triumphal nuance accentuated his words. 'I think, you know Professor, the young lady may have more about her than you think'.

'What do you mean?' Creest answered, a little stung but discerning that the man of the cloth may have had a little too much Shiraz.

The vicar stood up as if he were repudiating any notion of such and laid the picture out on Creest's lap. 'Look there, at the bottom of the garden. What do you see?'

The professor scanned that area of the canvas and after a few seconds sat back in his chair, rigid. 'But that was not there before' he cried. 'I've been looking at art for almost 50 years. I would've spotted that straight away'

The vicar, smugly, went on as if he were the expert now. 'A strange little thing isn't it. Do you think it's a child? Perhaps it's Miss Lincoln's 'take' on Red Riding. Yes that's what it must be; which makes you professor, the wolf sitting in Grandma's house!'

The last sentence was wasted on Creest. He knew it wasn't Red Riding. After all, the figure, if anything, was clad in grey. It was the figure from the mirror.

They polished off the Shiraz between them content in the knowledge that, as elderly gentlemen, three glasses of a good red was not only an equitable volume but also elevated one to that genial state that borders the countries of sober indifference and drunken wantonness. On the doorstep he offered to stay the night if Creest could put him up. He was convinced the professor was more than a little shaken by the revelation in the picture although he couldn't imagine why. He was politely excused, Creest assuring him he was quite robust and if he were a little piqued a good night's sleep would elicit its own sweet remedy.

The heavy clunk of Creest's front door shutting echoed in the space behind him. He stepped slowly from the hall toward his front room to a point where he could espy Hope's painting, resting on the floor up against the small coffee table where he'd put it down. Stopping in the doorway between, he forced himself to look at the picture, inducing his self-conscious to extract the figure he had seen there and prove to him that it really was an illusion and the result of a conglomerate of strong wine, self-reproach for his unwarranted entry into Hope's house and the Vicar's horrible history of poor Harriet. Unfortunately for Creest the figure was there still and he quickly flipped the painting over, grabbed it in his right hand and walked upstairs.

He went into his own bedroom and opened up a closet and grabbed a spare bed sheet. Returning to the landing he pulled down a trap door to the loft which enabled a pull down ladder. Creest fixed the steps then climbed rather awkwardly pulling upwards with his free hand. The loft was dusty but relatively free of jumble. He'd inherited a junkyard of tat and had it cleared the following day as an obligation to his own sense of the aesthetic. He had left one piece of furniture untouched; an old oak stool. It was sturdy and not unattractive but required a degree of recovery which he hadn't got around to. It stood, lonely, at the far end, but not for long. Creest sat the painting on the stool leaning it back against the brick wall behind it with the picture facing outwards. Again his eyes were drawn that corner of the painting. 'Good God' he thought, 'if anything the shape is even more pronounced'. He threw the sheet over the canvas.

'Why don't you just throw it away or burn it you old fool' he thought? But she had given him it and as bad and mysterious as it was, he couldn't bear the thought of destroying something she'd given him, and yes, he was hoping she'd come back for it.

*

Tired, tipsy and in still floating in an unnatural state, Creest made himself a Horlicks drink, his usual ritual, hoping that a return to monotony might dislodge the supernatural that had solicited its way into his humdrum but contented existence.

He took it upstairs and laid it on the table next to his bed, with his Hardy – The Return of the Native - and a small lamp. The bedroom was Spartan which suited him. Apart from a small table in the corner on which his laptop sat (his only real excursion into the 21st century and his best kept secret from his fellow Greevens) there was little else. His clothes were kept in a wardrobe and dresser in the second bedroom.

Switching off the main light he undressed quickly and stockpiled the pillows behind him. After draining half the cup and a saunter on Egdon Heath, the physical world was drifting beyond him and he surrendered, lying down flat and letting his eyelids slide to a close like a slug on the side of a glass. The last fleeting thought he had before darkness smothered him was of Hope's painting which he only now realised was sitting directly above him the other side of his bedroom ceiling.

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Nevertheless Creest slept; and then woke. It was still dark. He hadn't closed the small curtains on his window. Outside the shadows of the trees that encircled his cottage threw their shapes on the wall to his left, lit by a distant but effervescent moon. He watched them for a while anticipating their gentle list might send him back to slumber when without warning, in unison, they began to dance as if a gale had sprung from the earth and was piping the devil's own tune for them to reel to. He looked outside fearing the wind may break the delicate glass in his windows but he could hear no roar and in fact the trees, contrarily, were still.

He looked back at the shadows. They were still moving but had slowed, almost as if they were children caught in a pretence trying to bamboozle an elderly relative. The professor relaxed his rigid grip on the blankets and continued to scrutinize them as a child would a kaleidoscope. And as if obliging the silhouettes began to coalesce to form a single figure that slinked languidly against the white wall of Creest's bedroom.

After a few moments the figure seemed to peel itself way from the wall and took on another dimension. It stood there motionless in the ebony void. It had a head but no discernible features but the force of it was immense as if it incorporated all the dark matter from the universe that moved, imperceptibly, above the roof of his cottage. He wanted to scream but his throat was restricted and his head locked tight against the bed. It was as if a pair of hands had emerged from the mattress beneath him and pinned him solid by the neck.

Sensing he was defenceless the shape slid along the end of the bed toward the window. A slim arm reached for the latch and pushed it open. A pale moonshine illuminated the shadow and he saw that it was Hope. Her hair was carelessly tied in braids and some had unravelled. Her face which was so winsome that day she swept into the art class had a colourless countenance which accentuated her garish make-up. The mascara was over applied and gave her eyes the appearance of two nuggets of coal pushed into a meringue base with her lipstick draining away from both corners of her mouth like a tragic clown. Perhaps a child would look like that if she had found her mother's vanity case and was aping her. Her silhouette was clothed now too. He could see that she had on a white bib like shirt above a short pleated royal blue skirt. From the hem her legs stretched toward the floor dressed in long socks and flat red shoes. She at once both appalled and fascinated him.

Hope stared at the professor and then grinned, but with little sense of warmth or humour in that shapely mouth, only malevolence. The claw on his throat lightened its grip and he gasped for air like a diver coming up from the deep. 'Take your picture back Hope...please.' he heard himself cry.

Hope skipped away from the window, ran her fingernail across his laptop like a malicious student scratching a blackboard and crossed to the other side of the bed. 'But it was a present for you, daddy' she replied coyly.

'I don't want it. I don't deserve it' he bleated, as if his disjointed reasoning would hold any significance with her.

'Then take something else' she whispered and leant toward him, shuffling off her pants with both thumbs. As the fabric fell to the floor she threw back his bedclothes and sat astride him. Despite his fear Creest knew he was as erect as ever he had been, so much so it felt painful. She corralled her skirt around his penis and pulled it to her stomach holding it there. Anticipating consummation with relish and dread, his nose was suddenly assailed

with a sudden heavy pungent scent that emanated from outside. It was sweet and nauseous but familiar. Hope noticed it too but she said nothing. She turned to look out the window at something in the distance and began to beckon it inside with her forefinger. Creest knew exactly what it was.

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This time he did wake up - in his dominion, at least. It was morning but what sleep he'd enjoyed had given him little rest and lesser still comfort from the inexplicable events and dreams that were permeating his demesne. The room looked as it always did first thing on a summer morning - sunbeams threading through the air illuminating the dust particles. He noticed quickly too, that his bedroom window was closed. Though the evidence helped confirm that last night's events were all a dream it provided no solace to the professor.

He dressed but consumed nothing more than a cup of sweet tea sitting in his favourite armchair. He sat for more than an hour ruminating. He was raised a Presbyterian but the first time he'd entered a church since a young boy was when he first moved to Greeven and that being a tactic toward desegregation. 'Perhaps the vicar could help, after all this is his thing' he mused, without conviction.

He walked into the kitchen to clean his cup and stared out into his back garden. There was the fence running along the bottom - no hooded figure, no gap, just plain green privet. For a fleeting moment his curiosity superseded his trepidation. 'Sod it! I'm going to see for myself'

Still in his pyjamas, dressing gown and slippers he padded down the lawn like a cat trying to ambush a pigeon, his gaze intensely focused on that spot. The nearer he got the more he felt the likelihood of the hooded fiend leaping out at him, its features now visible and ghastly. He pressed on drawing on nerve born out of a greater will to purge his mind of this irrational nonsense.

He was now a couple of feet away. The privet was thick with no hint of a gap that would allow even the hardiest rodent passage. He gripped it with both hands and smiled feeling the thorns scrape away at his skin. He sat back on his haunches in relief just as a wren flew out of the privet in front of him rocking him onto his back. After the initial fright he suddenly began to laugh heartily.

'Whatever is happening is confined to art and art alone then' he cried. 'It has no import in this world. It's a trick. Yes, a trick, in fact I have it. I, of all people, should have guessed it straight away. The figure was always in the original. She's simply painted over it. She must've treated the section with some kind of removal fluid just before she gave it me and that's why I didn't notice it at first. It's all been a game....but why? Some disgruntled student paying me back in kind for telling them the awful truth; someone I over criticized trying to 'disprove' my expertise? Why follow me out here? How did she even know where I had moved to?'

The relief gave way to more ominous considerations. Whereas before this paranormal business, though disturbing, could now be explained; but this was a real threat. He climbed to his feet ruminating over the magnitude of this new hypothesis and turned to go to the cottage. He suddenly froze. There, between him and the house, stood the hooded figure, seemingly immobile but with a latent intent that it was moving toward the

cottage. Creest looked up at his bedroom. The window was open again though he'd left it closed. He turned back to the figure and cried aloud 'Stop!' but it had disappeared.

Creest rushed indoors and with his heart hammering in his chest and sweating profusely, hurled himself up into his loft and ripped back the blankets covering Hope's picture. What he saw confirmed everything. The figure in the painting was now half way between the house and the privet fence and the bedroom window which had been closed was open as if the approaching demon had the kinetic will to impel it to open or another demon was inside assisting its evil compatriot in its malignant pursuit of Creest. Like Hope, in his nightmares.

The Pentimento

'I can't really think of any parallel at all, certainly in my experience, but to be sure I would have to adopt the same tactics as a barrister'

'I don't quite follow'

'A man of the law could not conceivably be expected to maintain a complete compendium of precedents in his head, similarly with pentimenti...'

Creest sighed. Professor August Brevocet was the leading expert in the field and an old acquaintance. He also had a leading appetite and consequently cast an extensive shadow across his spacious rooms in University College London. His frame filled the large armchair he was sitting in. Above his rotund head sat on an enormous pair of shoulders like a football resting on a rigid curtain pelmet. Despite his physical frame his manner betrayed a certain delicacy.

'So the practice is not unusual?' said Creest

'I would say, in your case, yes, but there isn't any way I can prove it. Some artists have painted over objects or figures for a variety of motives, political, aesthetic or otherwise, so why not use the same technique to scare if you had sufficient motive to do so? The bigger problem seems to be the method adopted'

'Making the figure appear in different places'

'Exactly - how does one do that? There is no substance I know of that can reveal an element of a picture and then cover it over again. Are you sure no-one had access to the canvas at all?'

Creest considered this. 'Possibly; I live in a quiet village. There have been times when I've come home and to discover I'd left the door unlocked'

'That may be the case then. If you are right in assuming she is a failed student exacting some sort of childish retribution I suppose it's possible she was watching the cottage, waiting for you to go out and gained access to the painting to make the necessary manipulations'

'But she clearly has no skill at all'

'You only have her word that it's her picture after all. Someone with clearly a modicum of talent could have drawn the subject for her. She may be more skilful than you believe, which may be her point'

'Okay, if we allow for the fact that maybe I missed the figure when it was first spotted by the vicar in the bushes it has since appeared in two places. As the painting has been in my cottage since she gave it me, are you telling me she could've got inside twice? On both occasions had the time necessary to reveal one figure and paint the other out? As seamlessly as it looks? No wet paint?'

'I'm not doubting your expertise Creest but you have been under a strain and even renown authorities such as yourself have made mistakes. It would not require too much time or effort if the figure is small, as you suggest it is. As for wet oils, a simple hair dryer would suffice'

Creest was clearly stung by the remark and almost spat back his reply. 'The only affect has been on my sleep. My judgment for art remains, I believe, as it was', nevertheless after the trauma he'd suffered this last week, Brevocet's suggestion wasn't invalid; furthermore he hadn't mentioned the physical appearance of the apparition and the nightmares he'd been plagued with.

'The only thing we can do then is look at it together and try to find a logical resolution, yes?'

Creest nodded. The object was resting against the far wall which contained a small library of art related literature. Creest collected it gingerly, almost reluctantly. Although he'd slightly repositioned the cloth and tightened the bonds the painting was transported more or less as he had left it in his attic; he couldn't bear to look at it alone now.

'Tell me one thing' asked Brevochet, as he took the painting off Creest, 'Why didn't you just throw it away, after all there is no value to it?'

Creest blushed and Brevochet understood immediately, 'Pretty then?' he said mischievously.

He stopped unpicking the binding for a second, 'There isn't any violent or unspeakable history associated with the cottage at all?'

Creest looked at his colleague incredulously. 'Brevochet...did I really hear that from you? I came here to discredit this mumbo jumbo, not give it some credence'

'If you recall Creest I'm more agnostic than atheist'

'Meaning that if my kitchen floor had been the scene of a horrific mass murder committed two hundred years ago that would explain the notion of a hooded figure creeping along a painting presented to me by a woman I have never met and has no connection to Greeven at all?'

Brevochet shrugged his shoulders. 'Perhaps I am a weaker agnostic than you believe Henry, besides how could you know if Miss Lincoln is or isn't linked to the village?'

'I don't but what would be the significance?'

'The picture, can you date it?'

'A date? It could be anytime. There is nothing to distinguish it. The oils look...well...I just assumed it was her work after all' Creest paused for a moment then continued. 'August, are you insinuating the picture belongs to the cottage?'

'It's possible. After all you say that it has no aesthetic quality?'

'None that I know of'

'Chances are then it was painted by someone who lived there'

'And Miss Lincoln's ownership?'

'You are interrogating the wrong person Henry, how it came into her possession and why are questions that need to be put to her.'

Brevochet prised open the string and removed the coverlet. He held the painting with its back to Creest. As he scanned the canvas his face screwed in on itself in puzzlement. 'Henry... is it the first of April by chance?'

'What do you mean?' asked Creest

He turned the painting around and pointed it at Creest. 'Where on earth is the figure?'

Creest's bottom lip lost its footing and lapped around his chin. True enough the figure could not be seen in the garden; neither was it back in its original position by the privet. The picture was as it had been when Hope had first given him it.

'It can't be' Creest cried

'Henry, are you seriously telling me this is not a joke?' Brevocet studied the professor's face.

'August, you have known me nearly 30 years. I don't possess a sense of humour'

'Yes that's true, so where is this mysterious figure then?'

Creest sat back in his chair for a second and then shot forward again.

'It's in the cottage!'

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On the mahogany desk in front of Creest sat half a glass of single malt whisky. His preferred tippie had always been gin but Brevocet had doubted that the characteristics of the clear liquor would restore any colour to the professor's face. Creest's cheeks were withdrawn and blanched as if he were a ghost from one of his nightmares.

Brevocet spoke softly to him. 'Henry, what makes you believe this creature exists and is pursuing you?'

Creest motioned to speak but his throat was dry. Brevocet handed him the scotch and Creest took another swallow. Its sweet tickle made him cough.

Brevocet continued 'Henry, I believe we may be the victims here of some sleight of hand. I think we are taking the wrong approach here. Logically we cannot concede that it is possible for pentimenti to be the basis of a method of intimidating you. It's fraught with problems and quite frankly would be impossible, under the circumstances you've outlined to me, for anyone to pull it off. Henry, I do believe that you have seen what you have seen. I have no doubts in that direction however I think the effect has been achieved by a different means'

'I am relieved that I have your faith but where are you going with this?'

'Consider this...' Brevocet said forcefully, '...not one painting but several'

'I don't follow' said Creest

'What if the perpetrator had painted a series of canvasses and in each one the figure appears in a different spot?'

'But these were not prints. The artist would have had to paint the backgrounds in each picture exactly the same to avoid detection'

'Are you sure?'

'I came here for help August and all you seem to be doing is questioning my proficiency'

'How does a magician work; or a pickpocket? It's all distraction. You told me it was the vicar who first spotted the figure in the privet'

'Yes'

'Since then, every time you have looked at the painting your focus has been on the progress of the figure, not the background'

'Are you telling me the vicar is in on it?'

'No, of course not; but I bet neither of you bothered to look beyond the character creeping across your lawn'

'Possibly but how does this solve matters?'

'You've admitted that access to your home isn't too much of a problem. What if the perpetrator got inside and simply switched the pictures?'

Creest responded to this scenario with the first smile he'd managed in a week; then frowned again. 'You're forgetting today. That canvas has never left my side since I left the cottage.'

'You must've have put it down sometime, even if it was only when you were buying your rail tickets and...'

'You're forgetting,' Creest interrupted, 'I tied the thing up myself. They were my knots you undid a few moments ago – no-one else's'

'Even if you are right, they could have switched it before you left. Did you check the painting before you secured it?'

Creest shook his head. 'I couldn't bear to look at it'

'So you see Henry, we have a rationale'

'I remain unconvinced. Whose future could I have dashed so badly they would go to the most extraordinary lengths to drive me insane? I would have remembered'

'You prefer a scenario that involves the supernatural then? Haven't you just criticized me for that train of thought?'

'But what could I have done to them?'

'It may have been something insignificant as far as you were concerned but perhaps they took it the wrong way'

'That's an understatement.' Creest sighed. 'Okay August, we accept that someone is out for revenge; what do I do now?'

'There are really only three options. Ignore it, they'll get bored and you'll never hear from them again or, play along and endeavour to unmask them or un-hood them shall we say'

'How?'

'Mark the painting' Brevocet said impishly.

'In what way?' Creest asked

'Turn it over'

Creest obeyed. Brevocet took a small pen from his inside pocket and made a small black cross in the right hand apex - just enough to see but small enough to miss if you were not looking for it.

'So you go home professor and take this with you. Put it back where it was and carry on with your normal day to day activities as if nothing was wrong. When you wake up in the morning, check the painting. If you leave the house check the painting when you return. You'll see'

'And the third option?'

'Burn it'

Creest made his way from the campus and walked slowly down Gower Street towards his hotel. He always booked the Russell when in London. He loved the 'au lait' terracotta exterior. It looked like a wonderful huge biscuit. Inside the building he would indulge in stroking the marble columns and gliding his hands along the fabulous staircases. He only ever took the lift if he had been allocated a room above the fifth floor.

Creest loved London but in the way that most people do who never have to live there. His time in the city always allowed for good walks. As commuters, shoppers, students, parents and schoolchildren combined to form a melee that seemed to move in swarms around the public transport system, he revelled in the freedom of the basic form of transport. He thought it indefensible that the inhabitants either had little time to or were simply blasé to the

extraordinary art that enveloped them, but Creest had shed the raiment of residential city life a long time since and always brought a rustic eye to the city.

That day the only 'art' that concerned the professor was the mundane depiction of his cottage that he was holding in his right hand as far from his body as was reasonably practicable without looking ludicrous. Despite Brevochet's plausible narrative Creest would rather have left it with him than take it back. Reluctantly he agreed to play the game to disprove the hauntings were only a malicious deception, nevertheless the latter consequence, though not as mentally disturbing, may represent a bigger physical threat. August was convinced that once the scheme had unravelled the conspirator, if not unmasked, would at least relinquish his or her vengeance. Creest was unconvinced. He felt that if the intriguer could not satiate his retribution by vicarious means they would quickly resort to more direct methods.

In Montague Place a section of the pavement had been cordoned off and a huge builder's skip was resting against the kerb. The workmen were dismantling a nearby wall and at irregular intervals brick and concrete slabs crashed into its belly. The sudden temptation to slip the canvas inside the skip overwhelmed him. 'Destroy it', he thought, 'there's no black magic here. A child could've painted it. Throw it away. Crush it underneath the weight of all that debris. That will end it, not some silly ploy'

Insentiently he stepped out into the road. Half way across a black cab came hurtling out of Malet Street to his left, forcing Creest to jump back to avoid it. As the taxi sped away a face appeared in the rear window. The head was beautifully sculpted but unbecomingly decorated at either side by pigtails. Creest knew that winsome smile emanating from behind the glass. She mouthed something and continued to stare at him until the cab swung into Bedford Square.

His heart had somersaulted at seeing Hope's wonderful yet devilish face. The urge too, to destroy what she had created, however inexpert, dissipated in equal measure. She wanted him to have it, that's what she had said inaudibly: 'It's yours, from me.' The builders too, having heard the screech of tyre behind them, were looking at Creest in the middle of a busy wondering why an old fool would choose to cross a road towards a point with no pedestrian access at all. That decided it. He turned around and continued toward Russell Square.

In his hotel room he placed the painting in his cupboard and lay down. He slept fitfully and woke in the early hours. A shaft of light from the bathroom was eking through in a diagonal shaft and lay across the wardrobe in the corner of the room. Creest could see the door was open despite him closing it securely when he had set the painting inside. The sound of running water alerted his ears. Like the light, it too was coming from the bathroom and Creest rolled out of the bed and crouched down at an angle peering inside. He could see nothing. He rose and was suddenly aware that his legs and knees were shivering with trepidation and his eyes were watering. He was actually crying, weeping because he, at once, knew it was a dream and how real it would seem. How long would this torture continue? Like a dream he was meant to endure it and follow its illogical format until that point where the terror overcame the dreamer and jerked him awake.

Barefoot he stepped inside the bathroom. He assumed the steady drip was a tap left on but both hot and cold were off. Abruptly the drip increased to a torrent. Creest looked behind him and could see that the shower cubicle was misted over. He could make out a shape within. At his feet lay a set of clothes: a pleated uniform skirt, a white tee-shirt, a pair of white pumps with socks tucked inside, a small bra and a pair of small, thin panties. He slid back the door. The person showering had their back to him. It was beautiful. The skin

unblemished like ivory or marble without a freckle or wrinkle as if Michelangelo had sculpted it. The figure turned to face him. He stood unable to manufacture any physicality beyond the movement of his eyes. It was, as he feared and prayed for, Hope Lincoln but not the woman he had first encountered in Greeven. Her breasts were smaller and her vagina was shorn of hair. It seemed to be a younger incarnation of her and yet the potency was magnified. She smiled as a child would smile given a sweet and then looked gave a coy look towards his crotch. Creest looked down at himself and saw that he was naked and his penis was erect, enlarged even.

She turned her back to him again and put out her hands and grabbed the shower coil. She began to beckon him with a swirl of her bottom to enter her from behind. He complied but found her vulva tight. After several painful attempts he managed to penetrate her. Throughout she never flinched but her grip on the coil became intense. Creest steadied himself by pressing hard on her back and found that he was thrusting with the energy of a younger man. The heat inside her was extreme. Creest knew the approaching orgasm would be unlike anything he had ever experienced. As if she knew his sexual organ as well as her own, Hope moaned, even whimpered, prompting the professor to climax immediately. His arms went around her midriff holding her for ballast as the semen pumped its way out of him.

As his senses gorged in sublime pleasure a sharp and biting pain struck him in the groin. It rapidly became excruciating. He wriggled like a madman to get free of her but Hope's buttocks had closed in on his member like a vice. She too was giggling like a schoolgirl as she waved her bottom moving him from side to side. Desperate he found a last source of strength and detached himself but the pain became even more intolerable. He looked down and saw the blood gushing from where his penis had been. She had taken it. He screamed.

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An early September sun filtered into his room from the window. It had been a warm but not spectacular autumn month but Creest lay under his bed clothes shivering with horror. Until last night the dreams that had plagued him, though terrible, had the quality of all nightmares that their effect on the subject dissipated after a certain distance of time had elapsed. As he lay in bed quivering Creest could still discern the touch and taste of Hope as if she was lying next to him and knew the sensation would remain as authentic to him in a year's time as it felt now. The echo of that racking pain continued to emanate from his groin. He felt it immediately upon waking and for a few horrifying seconds before he had the courage to search it's presence out, he thought he'd truly had been emasculated.

He wanted to cry as he had at the beginning of his dream. He ached for some kind of cosmic solace to take pity on him. He would have avowed that his faith as an atheist was unshakable but this morning he felt an urge to whisper some kind of silent prayer. He resisted believing in one thing: if he were to seek the assistance of one branch of the supernatural it may only serve to intensify the belligerence of the other.

After an hour the professor's nerves had settled enough for him to get dressed. It was still early, around 7.30, but he couldn't face breakfast nevertheless he wanted coffee and not from a sachet. He reached out his arm toward the wardrobe handle and hesitated. The

door was shut but there was an object on the floor beside it. He picked it up. It was the small remnant of a boiled sweet.

'They've given themselves away this time' he thought, without considering how an intruder gained entry to a locked hotel room. He ripped open the cupboard door and removed the canvas from the painting checking the back carefully. There was Brevochet's mark exactly as he had made it. There could be no mistake. He picked up the sweet and examined it. It could've been easily missed by both him and whoever cleaned his room.

He threw the painting face up on the bed and went gingerly into the bathroom. He looked into the shower. The sensation of touching and being inside Hope was still so vividly tangible that he felt the beginnings of an erection. He poured himself a glass of water and looked into the mirror above the basin. The face he saw was blanched, almost grey and the lack of colour only accentuated the lines on his face. 'I've aged 10 years in the past two weeks' he whispered.

Whether it was the golden morning sun or the ambience of his favourite London hotel or both, a surge of resolve rose in the professor. 'I have to beat this' he declared through gritted teeth. 'Use my intelligence'

He took the glass with him and dropped it as he walked back into the room passing the bed. It bounced on the carpeting and vomited the liquid in a tongue-like projectile across the room. Creest's eyes were inflexibly anchored to the canvas in front of him. The bedroom window was open again and the hooded figure had reappeared in the middle of the garden. Creest edged closer. He could see that the fiend was moving away from the house this time.

A restricting pain drove into his upper torso from both sides. The professor leant forward onto the bed for support. It eased but as Creest tried to stand again the severity of the sting drove him back to the same position. The picture seemed as if it were inches from his face. He could see that the shape's body language was different. Whereas before there was a purposeful stride to it going towards the house, now it was tentative as if it had something secreted in its cloak and it was being careful to avoid dropping it. There was a shaft of silver just visible beneath the folds.

'Oh my God' he cried. The pain intensified and the professor felt as if he were being sliced in half. He started to hyperventilate but each time he leaned back to draw in some oxygen the agony of doing so drove him back, his movements resembling a macabre mimic of a dippy toy. His gasping became shorter and louder. He began to feel faint. The last physical action he was capable of was to clutch at his chest at his beleaguered chest. His tenacity of a few seconds ago had been supplanted by a desire for the torment to end and as his legs gave way he welcomed the blackness that swallowed him, the room, and that hideous painting.

The Mezzotint

Creest woke up in a white world. His ears registered a bleeping noise like a satellite beaming signals back to earth. 'Maybe I'm beyond space. Is this the afterlife?' he thought. Slowly he came to realise that he was in a hospital ward bed encased by curtains. He turned his head toward the sound. A cold steel machine stood next to the bed eking wires which ran to various positions on his chest. He attempted to haul himself into a seating position but gave up. He felt too weak to manipulate the medicinal spaghetti so lay back down and waited.

Then he remembered the pain; the pain and the painting. What he had seen was the most disturbing manifestation of all. A sharp wrench streaked down his side. He breathed deep and hard, calming himself and the pang dissolved like sugar in hot coffee. 'I must get home' he sighed.

As Creest was considering an exit strategy a hand drew back the curtains and a mischievous looking nurse stared him straight in the eye. 'Are we off somewhere?' she stated without the nuance of a question mark.

'I feel fine' Creest said defensively.

'Well you're not. You're as pale as a ghost. Like Van Gogh's Scream'

'Munch' Creest corrected her.

'Know a bit about it then?'

'I'm an authority of sorts'

'Well let's do a deal. I won't tell you about art -you don't tell me about your heart'

She propped him up, stacking the pillows behind his back and made no attempt to hide the smirk as she carolled her little verse.

Creest acknowledged the deceit. 'I hope my heart attack wasn't as bad as your poetry'

'The doctor will be along shortly to explain. You sit tight and watch you don't disturb these' she pointed to the wires.

'That sounds very ominous'

Seeing his doleful face she pitied him and whispered. 'You have Microvascular Agina. It can be controlled, but don't let on I told you'

'Munch's the word' Creest replied. 'Where am I?'

'University Hospital; you were taken to our A and E this morning. Rest now' she said, smiling, and then carried on with her other duties.

The day before, Creest's relief had been achieved through a combination of luck and opportune timing. A chambermaid had turned up late for work at the Russell the previous day, and not for the first time. She had managed to offset the threat of dismissal by offering to come in earlier in the following morning and part cover the end of a night shift. Luckily enough an important party had been advised to catch an earlier flight from Heathrow allowing extra time for their rooms to be made up. Those rooms happened to be adjacent to Creest's own. Normally she would not have been on this floor at all.

Nevertheless the chambermaid had completed the task and would have passed Creest's room as the professor was dressing however she was waylaid by a rather obese guest who had been checking out and had inadvertently left not only an item of hand luggage, but his door key inside the room and required the chambermaid to open up for him. The delay, as she checked his credentials before letting him in, was crucial. As she walked back towards the lift Creest was leaning over the painting, his heart booming through the restricted blood being supplied to it and his legs unable to sustain even the paltry weight of his wiry frame. She heard a thump as he hit the floor and put her ear to the door. She called out for an answer but received no response, so she pummelled the door and raised her voice but Creest's ears were already closed to her world. She quickly let herself in and found Creest's unconscious body curled almost foetal at the side of his bed. She summoned the maître d who, after ensuring the professor was breathing, put him into the recovery position and phoned the emergency services.

The doctor saw him around an hour or so later, explained what had happened and why and assured him that with a proper recuperative period and an eye on diet and light exercise the condition was manageable. Creest confessed he'd been having some domestic issues and hadn't been sleeping well. The doctor told him he could sleep as long and as often as he wanted. They wouldn't discharge him for at least a week.

The latter discomfited him but then he suddenly brightened like a sliver of light across a cold dark lake. Creest realised that he'd just enjoyed the best sleep he'd had in days and he knew why. He hadn't dreamed of Hope, hooded figures or had been emasculated. Something had changed, he could feel it.

'Where are my things?' he enquired.

'The hotel has your suitcase I believe, and your valuables, wallet etcetera' said the doctor

'What about the clothes I was wearing?'

'We've had them folded in the drawers next to your bed' There were three and he drew out each one. 'Trousers and shirt here; underwear...socks here and shoes in the bottom'

'Thank you doctor, you've been very kind'

He leant back into his pillow as the doctor left him and smiled as broadly, something he'd hadn't managed in a very long time. Despite the attack a measure of control over the lunacy he had experienced had returned. As enervated as he felt, he dismissed concern over his heart. His focus was other things now. All these shenanigans would have stressed younger men than me. I'll get over it; now that I know. Now that fiend has finally revealed itself to me. I can destroy it before it destroys me. I have a purpose now. It's not too late' He opened the drawer where his trousers lay and felt into the back pocket. 'Still there' he murmured. He always folded up two twenty pound notes and tucked them there for an emergency before going on a trip, just in case he mislaid or had his wallet stolen. He could feel his teeth grinding as he generated a plan in his head. 'Tonight, when it's dark'

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Creest waited until about eight that night. Earlier he had surreptitiously taken his clothes to the toilet and hidden them behind a cistern. As visitor's hour ended he mingled with those leaving, dashed into the lavatory, changed and left inconspicuously. He walked slowly to Kings Cross and booked a single train journey to Lincoln on the 21:35 with enough to pay for a taxi back to Greeven.

It was nearly one o'clock when the taxi dropped him at his cottage in Greeven. As it returned down the narrow lane and its headlights faded, Creest was suffocated by darkness. This part of the village was less populated its appeal when he chose the cottage. Now the isolation that gave him solace was a threat.

He waited a moment for his eyes to adjust to the lack of light so he could pick out the shapes of the house, the gate and the pathway and then proceeded slowly toward the front door. Halfway there he thought he heard a giggle, like a child laughing, and imagined that behind him somewhere on the lawn the fiend was glowering at him.

A rustle alerted his ears. Was that its cloak unravelling? What instrument did it have underneath to welcome Creest home with? He was at the door now and could barely hold the key to the lock for shaking. The presence of something behind him was overwhelming. He stole a glance behind him and saw a light hovering down by his gate. He shuddered and inhaled deeply to control his juddering hands then slipped the key into the lock, turned the handle and ran inside slamming the door solidly behind him.

*

Across the lane a figure holding a small torch moved within the blackness. It was the vicar. He hadn't slept well and had wandered out for a stroll. He had heard a car door slam but was too far away to recognize Creest, especially in the blackness. He stood still and turned off his torch. He saw a shape and it was going into Creest's cottage. He dismissed the notion that it would be the professor, not at this ungodly time of night, and

assumed it was a burglar. He turned back toward the church but turned his torch on a little too early so that it shone toward the cottage. In an instant he turned it off again, worried that he may have alerted the thief, and walked as quickly as he could for at least 50 yards before he felt comfortable in using the torch for a guide. It took him less than five to get to the church and call the authorities.

*

Creest pushed at the hallway light but nothing happened; the cottage refusing to yield to the power of those that would eradicate him. The professor walked into the kitchen. He peered into the black canvas of his garden. The mysterious light had disappeared but he thought he saw something move down by the privet. To Creest now any shadow cast by a shaft of moonlight appeared as a phantom from some dark corner of Hell.

He fiddled about in a drawer and found a small torch and switched it on. The light danced about the kitchen walls creating goblins and trolls out of the silhouettes of pots and pans hanging from the oven range. He quickly directed its light to the floor and followed it out into the hallway. He aimed it at the top of the stairs. Three quarters of the way there was a dog leg to the left. He considered how a simple wooden construction could exhibit such fearfulness looked at in a certain kind of light. He began to climb.

Creest's old staircase creaked and groaned with every footfall but tonight each tweak was amplified as he made his way to the upper floor. The balustrade felt icy cold to the touch. As he reached the juncture he felt exhausted and stopped to take a rest. As he exhaled his breath became visible and he was suddenly aware that the temperature within the cottage had dropped substantially. 'They're here' he thought.

He pressed on, his lungs grateful for the plane of the landing. The door to his bedroom was closed. That was how he had left it. He gripped the handle and walked in. Light flooded into his irises and blinded him for a moment. He shielded his eyes looking down at the floor. There were tiles where there should have been floorboards. Toys were skewed across the floor and a small doll's house sat in the corner. There was a single bed where his double should have been. Above it was the painting with his tormentor as clear as ever looking at him, displaying the one thing he knew would destroy Creest.

He glanced to his left. His desk was untouched and there above it his laptop. 'It's still there, they're too late' he whispered then sat down and flipped the lid back and logged on. Behind him he could hear a pathetic whimpering. He looked down to his left. It was coming from beneath the bed: a scared cry of someone in mortal terror. Creest cried 'I know who and what you are now but it's too late; you've lost'

In front of him the computer booted up. His desktop sprang to life. He manoeuvred the mouse over his documents and clicked. Another file opened up. He clicked again: another... and another. Deeper and deeper Creest delved into the recesses of both his and the laptop's memories; looking for secrets. The moaning beneath the bed stopped but Creest dared not. He didn't hear the creak of the bedroom window opening up behind him. He was nearly there. 'I'll finish it' he declared.

The lights went out again. Creest looked around his bedroom was as it should be. Then a kaleidoscope of flashing blues and reds filtered in from outside, followed by the scrunch of rubber on gravel but Creest ignored it. 'I'm winning. It'll be all over soon'. Finally the file he was looking for was presented to him. He selected the entire contents and eyed the delete button with relish. He took one final victorious look around him and cried aloud 'Screw you Harriet' and moved his finger forward but it never connected.

An arm had appeared from the dark corner to his right. It was cloaked and held his hand above the delete button with an iron grip from which he could not extract. He took a final look across at the figure the arm belonged to. It was the fiend from the garden. Its face appeared from beneath the hood: that of a beautiful deep blue-eyed child. She was smiling at him.