

# Skiátheá



John Lennon

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gr: σκιά-θεά

tr-en: *Shadow-Goddess*

pron-en: *Sk-aa-they-aa*

Based on a Cornish folk tale:

*The Mermaid (the fair-eyed maid) of Zennor*

By John Lennon. (Revised edition 1 August 2012)

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## Chapter One

I fish in a quiet corner of the beach, at a place against the northern cliff where a stream drops a curtain of water across a cave mouth, of about twice a man's height. Beside it a dozen steps lead to a footpath that climbs to the headland one way, along the landward run of cliff in another, and past irregularly spaced bungalows to the top of the village, in a third. The cliff at this spot dips low, and the sea has made a circular shape of it; clap your hands in the centre and it makes an interesting sound, not an echo, for the cliff-bowl is too small, but the resulting noise is louder and deeper than it should be.

Men often go fishing to get away from things. But I come to this place to get closer. To the sea, to the wind and the sand and the coldness of the waves and to my thoughts. The latter can go onto paper, onto the writing pad that is usually on my knees – I do six pages in a good night, more than the usual count of fish. I am a faster writer than a fisherman. In fact, a better anything than a fisherman. Perhaps this is the shortcoming I am trying to get away from, which is paradoxical, like human nature.

This place where I fish is familiar to me: Mawgan Porth. Port Mawgan in the old Cornish, meaning both home and harbour. But it is a home no longer, I now live far beyond the beach and the green valley that bounded my childhood world. I return here for the same reasons as I stay away; waywardness; vagaries of circumstance and income; and the fact that you can return to the home of your childhood, but never to your childhood home. Whilst the hillside pines and the willows of the valley floor have grown taller since I left, and the houses have altered their shapes and colours, the real change for me is in seeing childhood friends all married and middle-aged, and that is why I do not linger.

Yet the beach itself does not change. Or rather it is always changing, which is why it remains a constant force in my life. I hope I can still come here in my last years and see the sand swept clean and the sea flowing in interesting ways with an incoming tide, the way it always does, if that is, my beach and I make it into old age.

For our world is changing, and I do not know how to put it back. I say our world, because my home, or more precisely the sea that surrounds it, has a living name, a different one from that in maps and guidebooks. It is a girl's name, and rather pretty. But that name is for the future. For now I am only fishing, it is an hour after sunset, the moon in a clear sky is a little past full and my thoughts are on the past, not the future. Always they are of the past when I am here – this being the unvoiced and perhaps the real reason why I do not linger in my childhood home for long.

\* \* \*

When I first saw the girl she was in the water. I don't recall which came first, the sight of her or of the wave that parted around the shape of a woman. Outside my

circle of lantern-light the edges of things merge together. Seaweed joins with rocks, sky with sea and cliff edge with beach sand. There are shapes and living figures out there where none exist in the daylight.

Yet as I strained to see, her shape did not fade; the girl was to her waist in the surf, her hair touching the water and being pulled around by it, her outline and her waist were slender and her form ghostly pale in the moonlight. She was like a shadow in reverse, a name which I unwittingly gave her at that moment: Shadow. It would stick.

The girl was coming towards me. As the wave crests lowered to her thighs, her knees, the body revealed was thin, almost painfully so, and her height looked no greater than my shoulders, and I am not a tall man. Her face was down as she walked and her hair hid her features, she seemed to be looking at the water that flowed around her, at the expanding circles of foam behind each wave, at the rising and falling of the wave crests, or at the seaweed tumbling beneath them. Her whole attention was either on or in the water, and not ahead of her, despite the man there on the beach with his folding stool, with the rucksack by his side, the rod on its hands-free stand and the line trailing out, and either that man or the lantern beside him was her target, and she was finding us by some inner sonar.

As the girl stepped from the water into my light I could see her colours forming, her hair was a deep red, her face as she raised it was startling. V-shaped, and very pale. Around her eyes was an extraordinary artwork, in face paints or some such medium; there was a butterfly across her face, of many colours, and the eye patterns in the wings of some butterflies, these eyes were her own. They were large, a deep green in colour, and very solemn. The butterfly and the hair which wrapped her body was her sole decoration. She was naked.

The girl held my gaze for a few seconds. There was nothing in her expression that I could read. I say 'girl' because she looked younger than me. Twenty-four? Twenty-six?

'What are you writing?' she asked.

'Do you want my coat?' I said, slowly.

'What do you write about?' she repeated.

I tugged my arms from my fishing jacket, and proffered it to her. 'Here. Have it.'

The girl stared at me sombrely. 'You're very short on words. Or are all writers like that?'

'Like what?'

'Over sensitive.' The girl turned around. Her hair made interesting shapes down her back. Water dripped from the ends. She made a circular gesture with her hands. Her fingers were very delicate, like a child's.

'I'm not a writer. It's just a hobby.' I unfroze and stood up and lifted the coat across her shoulders. The water in her hair as I bent close was like glass beads. I tried not to touch her skin.

She turned to face me again and pulled the sides of the coat around her arms.

'Thank-you.'

I found my stool with my foot. I sat down. 'I'm sorry if I startled you. You need to watch for the line if someone's fishing. It's not safe to swim nearby.'

'Uh-huh.' The red girl knelt to the sand beside my lantern and smoothed it with her hands. She sat down sideways, and spread the hem of my coat over her thighs. Past her shoulders her footprints were washing out in the surf. She must have clothes and a towel somewhere, I thought. Where were they?

My attention was caught by the fishing rod on its stand. The line was pulling to one side. The float, hooks and weights could be drifting into the rocks and seaweed of the shallows. It needed re-casting.

'Do you need me to get your clothing?' I asked.

'You still haven't answered me. What are you writing?'

'It's a story. A book.'

'Is it a nice one?'

'I don't know. No-one's read it yet.'

The girl fell silent. The background noise here was the chatter of waves against rocks, and it sounded like the static between radio channels. Tune out for a few seconds, and you could hear it.

'What is your name?' I asked.

She was smoothing the cloth of my coat over her legs. There were damp patches on the hem where her hands touched, and more down the lapels where her hair was spilling out. She raised her gaze. The lamplight and the line of her cheeks and eyes made interesting shadows on her face.

'You know it.'

'I think I'd remember if I did.'

Our attention was mutually drawn to the rod top, which was jerking around. 'Sorry, that's caught.' I said, and I stood up. 'Are you planning to stay?'

'Maybe.'

The waves where my line entered the water were rebounding from a projection of cliff to seaward, and making strange patterns in the water. There was a lace-work of foam on the surface, grey-blue in the moonlight. I waded through it, lifting the line in my fingers.

It was slow going. The sea as it washed out here made pits and whorls in the sand, and some of them could be startlingly deep. You had to feel your way forward. The line tugged painfully at my fingers and the water was cold at my knees. The girl must have been frozen.

I reached a place where the line as I lifted it went tight and then passed below a rock. There was thirty quid's worth of tackle on the end. Damn. I bent and felt along the nylon until my fingers were at maximum reach under the stone. Would the red girl be there when I got back? I didn't know. There was seaweed, black and oily, on the top of the rock. It was close to my nose. The smell was not good.

I let the line drop, pulled a cold arm from the water and inched around the rock.

The sand dropped away on this side and sliding further into the water was not pleasant. The surface was covered in foam, and black underneath when I pushed the grey mass aside. I felt forward with my foot. Further around again the sand dropped beyond the range of my boot. I gripped the slime on the top of rock as best as I could and swung my leg through the water to try and catch the line. Nothing. Time to cut it.

I waded back towards the lantern looping the line between my hands. I could see my rod was still there, and my chair. I couldn't see the girl. She could have moved out of the light, or she might have swam or walked away again. Looking at the light hurt my eyes. Around me the sea had more colour now. It was lighter where the sand was shallow, and there were other pale areas where bubbles and foam pushed below the surface by waves were rising back up.

Back in the cliff bowl I dropped my coil of line to the ground and looked around. The girl was missing, but where?

'John.' Her voice came from the darkness behind. I liked the sound. She could have been a singer.

I was folding the redundant line into my fishing pack. My sleeves were heavy with water, and cold. As I turned about, a pale form detached itself from the cliff face and walked towards my light. She raised my notebook. 'You should be more careful.'

'Sorry.' I dropped the rest of the line. 'I'm having a bad evening. You read my name, I presume. Can I have it back?'

She knelt to the sand and rested the book on her knees. 'You had an interesting childhood.'

'Maybe. Those are the interesting bits. It's more of a personal journal.'

She smiled at me. 'Which parts are personal?'

'I can't really say. Not unless I get it published. Right now it all is.'

She closed the notebook and proffered it to me. 'Can I read it one day?'

'Sure.' I shrugged. 'I didn't catch your name, by the way?'

She smiled again.

'Where are you from?' I said.

'The seaside. The same as you.'

'That's in the past. I don't live here any more.'

'That's a shame,' the girl said. She pulled the sides of my coat across her chest. The butterfly on her face flashed in the light as she moved. The paint might have been metallic. 'Do you want to go for a walk?' She smiled again. 'Now you won't be fishing?'

\* \* \*

Moving water has a fascination for those with small limbs and big ideas. On a sandy beach the potential for hydraulics is everywhere. First there is the tide which crosses the sand twice daily. This foe advances on a wide front, but with care and shovels it can be punished into shape; a fortress with a moat, a boating arena, a

Venice or a Rotterdam in miniature.

There is also water flowing within the sand, from a few inches to several feet below the surface. For this collecting ponds can be dug and the water led away down-slope for further use. This is a slow way to get water, but has the benefit of being available in most places.

Finally, every beach of quality has a brook or a stream; at Mawgan Porth there are two, one greater, one smaller, on opposite sides of the bay. The force of the first would overwhelm any barrier, but the smaller one could be controlled more easily; we once stopped it entirely for a time, with interesting results.

The three of us that day had finished our sandwiches and the air was hot. The sea was a disagreeably long distance away so we agreed, with the forceful logic of young boys, that an hour or so digging a bathing-pool would be time well spent, and so we set to work with pallet-wood shovels to dam the smaller stream where it entered the beach. Here there was also a cave that went back maybe fifteen yards, and the stream tipped over the top to make a waterfall. The promise of this shape, and of the coolness of the grotto that it would create, was obvious.

The skills required for a beach dam are simple; one must have built one before. Then you can proceed safely. So the foundations will be of stones, as large as can be carried, and these will go in a semicircle across the stream. About this there is no hurry, for as any beach child or engineer knows, the idea of dam building is not to stop the water but to let it pass safely, once fully halted then failure is only a matter of time, although nothing fails as willingly as a corner, hence the curved walls used by both specialists. Also driftwood, unless very short, is best avoided; whilst the uninitiated will make a centre section from a piece of ships' decking, or from the side of a crate, on failure it will take the whole enterprise with it, and its' proponent onto metaphorical latrine duty soon afterwards.

Milk crates filled with stone are a good thing, as are poles and sticks, if thin and strong enough to be driven into the sand. Round objects such as fishing floats, that can roll away, are quite useless, as are plastic sheets and barrels of any size, for the same reason as for planking. Nets and lengths of rope are of some use, as are abandoned items of clothing, beach towels and straw mats.

Finally there is the sand itself. We are always limited by our local supply, but in every place there is still good and bad sand. Dried out is useless, also if too wet, as in from under standing water, which will wash away as much wall height as it adds. And never undermine the dam by digging directly below it, except in an emergency, then the front parts on either side can be dug out but they must be refilled as soon as possible, else everything around about will start to slide.

Finally, take regular rest stops. Once the dam fills up then it can break at any point, and all hands must be upon shovels, buckets and spades. Even the experienced constructor can be wrong-footed by becoming tired at the last moment.

For on this occasion the dam broke only after we had exhausted ourselves making the wall a full foot higher than previously. This, as was later agreed, may

have been a mistake.

This mistake was not just ours. Part way through our work a visiting family had set up camp further down the beach, where the retreating sea had wiped everything clear, and the place where our cave-full of water was supposed to run was as clean and inviting as any other.

The stream normally ran along the base of the cliff. Holidaymakers also used to enjoy a warm piece of rock on which to rest their backs and dry their beach towels. Often they would bring a lot of equipment; spare clothes, a picnic lunch and a windbreak, camping chairs and a table, and some strange things to take near sand and salt water; the car rug, cameras with lots of screw-on components, transistor radios, cooking equipment.

All this stuff is not moveable at once, but the strangest thing was that a family seeing, as this one was, a wall of brown water bearing close would then rescue the most waterproof, mobile and least deserving items, bearing in mind that the architects of their misfortune were not their own children but something which is in all of them, but that was the way they chose to do it, and a fine mess was left afterwards as a result.

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The red girl and I walked below the run of cliff between the waterfall and the sand dunes. The bag was across my back and the fishing rod, folded into it, swung back and forth over my head. My lantern proved troublesome, it kept flashing in our eyes as it swung. I soon flicked it off.

'If you won't tell me your name,' I said. 'I'll have to try and guess it.'

The girl smiled. 'That sounds fun. Go-on then.'

'I need a clue though.'

'You want three guesses? Like a game?'

'Three clues would be better,' I answered.

'I'll give you one.'

'I want a good one. How long do we play for?'

'Until one of us wins.'

'That could take a while.' I smiled at her. 'How long have we got?'

'If I answer that, it's my clue. Do you want to know?'

'No, I'll need a better one.'

We were walking past a place where the cliff is fractured on a diagonal fault and water emerges. The flow is slight but the rocks below are always wet, and in the daytime you can see green mould on them, and red from the ores in the rock.

After entering the sand the cliff water re-emerges some twenty feet down the beach. Here it makes fan shapes that turn into tiny streams which flow to a long pool that always forms, no matter how fierce the tide, at the point where the sloping sand below the cliff joins the flat of the main beach. The pool itself is quite deep, and is



luxuriously warm after a few hours under the sun, although it is also messy, as the retreating tide flows in a way that leaves seaweed and other floating objects here.

'So where do you live?' I asked, after a few seconds.

'I live on an island.' The girl smiled. 'Far away in the sea. After the sun sets and before it rises I tell my stories.'

'Who do you tell them to?'

'Artists. Writers. Sailors. Fishermen. Writers who fish and sailors who paint.' She turned her head and her eyes caught mine. They looked dark. 'Do you want to hear one?'

'Okay.'

We were approaching the start of the big sand dunes. The beach here was a wide shelf of shingle draped with tentacles of seaweed, still moist from the rain. When first washed-up it was a fiery brown, almost ardent, but in the daylight it would stiffen, darken and crack; unless removed by the tide it would eventually merge with the beach surface to make it grey, slightly aromatic; the origin-point of soil.

The girl's name was Shadow. I'd made my mind up.

'If I tell my story, will you tell me some more of yours?' she asked.

'Maybe a few.' I glanced at the remaining stretch of foreshore. At the end was the lesser of the two main sand-dunes, bright under the orange lights of the road. A different land now floated above the stillness and the dark of the beach. 'I might need to put this bag down.'

The girl's eyes were upon a knotted length of rope that stretched for perhaps twenty yards ahead of us, before diving mysteriously into the shingle. 'Then I'll hurry up with my story. Which concerns, you see, a young fisher-boy with time advancing on him like the tide.'

She paused. 'Or maybe a stream. One with stones on the bottom that you can't see because the water runs too deep. Yet he has to step on them because that's the crossing place and the depths on either side would drown him. And it's important that he crosses quickly.'

'Why is it so important?'

'Because of a girl.' Shadow looked up at me and smiled. 'It always is, if you think about it.'

She returned her gaze to the debris of the tide-line. 'And this girl was quite slow. Not in the morning but in the afternoon she likes to lie down and rest. Which doesn't suit the fisher-boy at all, because on this day, that's when the tide is running and he has to spread his nets along the beach. Normally she would pull from one side of the stream, he from the other and between them they can trap any fish that try to run the river. But he has to do it alone this time and that involves crossing the stream several times. As the tide comes in it gets deeper and he has to work quickly. And this one time he loses his footing and falls in.'

Shadow shook her head. 'Poor fisher-boy. He doesn't fish well that day and he

doesn't drown very well either. Then after he's coughing seawater on the beach, he discovers he's learnt a lesson. About patience. That it would be better to fish together, even if they have to wait until darkness.'

'Or he could find a new girlfriend.'

Shadow lowered her gaze. 'He wouldn't want to do that, would he? When everyone knows the best fish run at night-time?'

'Which a new girl would know, too.'

'She might know the right place but not how to reach it. Because this particular stream is the Styx, the river between the worlds. You do not cross it easily, or on a whim.'

'Then how do the boy and his partner cross?'

'The stones are their love for each other. Only they can find them.'

'Ah, a treacherous footing indeed. I like the story. But for what do they fish?' I asked.

'To catch stories and songs. For they have built their house together, these two from different worlds, everything is correct to the smallest detail. But without these things they cannot live there.'

'They need stories to live?'

Shadow raised her head again and laughed. 'Of course they do. What else could they live on? They need their own tale to continue. So they must add to it all the time.'

'Stories and songs.' I smiled. 'So does this story tell me your name?'

'I'm not going to say. Guessing isn't going to help you win.'

'You could just tell me.'

She shook her head. 'Not the way it works. Now it's your turn to tell a story.' She smiled again. 'Aren't you going to? I've only seen a bit of your writing, hardly any of it.'

'You're talking to a man with a weight on his back. Perhaps if we sit down first?'

I looked around. Beaches beget stories, probably because they are the same the world over. The land varies infinitely, the ocean never, and the shore is an in-between space, but for the shapes of trees and buildings around one might be as easily in Alaska as Hawaii, although our minds insist upon certain things; Arabian sand should be dazzling white, with a robed silhouette on the horizon; in the shallows of an Indian beach there will be flower-petals; an Irish shore must have lobster-pots and grey seals.

From these little clues stories begin. Our own tale had a fine beginning; a man and a girl alone. All we needed on our beach was a ship too close to the rocks, the report of a gun, or a ring with an unreadable inscription.

Yet some stories come as much from within as without. It is true that without the cooperation of the Otherworld nothing of any depth can be said, much less dragged to lie bright and panting on the shoreline of our lives; bright tales need an

invisible partner working from the shadows, although these things cannot always be explained lest they darken and shrivel in the day-light of spoken words. And only by love can the river between worlds be crossed, and love is above all a thing of shadows and night-time.

But the goddess of love is also the goddess of bloodshed; Aphrodite's shrub is the Willow, the tree of mourning. To those who claim this is contradictory, the goddess replies that those who think love and suffering are two different things have experienced neither, she spurns them in return, for to heap flowers upon the blood-stained alter is to proffer insult to the same goddess that gave them birth. Thus we are all ignorant in our compartmentalised modernity. Alas also for erudition; it is a vanished art.

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Shadow was looking at me strangely. I touched her hand.

'My own tale is a difficult one,' I said. 'It's something I started but never finished. Do you want to sit just here? It'll take a while.'

She shook her head and pulled me off the shingle towards the base of the sand dune. Along it was a storm fence, pushed down in places where people had clambered over. The fence was of wooden slats braided with wire top and bottom. Behind it the dune system rose steeply; try to climb it too quickly and sand would fill boots and trouser tops. Coming down was a fast tumble and a slide, if you could get it right; the fencing had ruined most of our fun when first put up, although within a year or two you could head for the gaps, if brave enough.

'It's not the most comfortable thing to lean on,' I said, as we settled down. 'Don't sit back too hard, it tends to keep on going.'

Shadow adjusted herself in the sand. She pushed her feet out before her to make two little trenches. The sand here was dry, wind blown. It was comfortable enough, if you didn't mind a full shake down afterwards.

'When it gets dark,' I began. 'Things look different. Consider the sky. Have you ever heard of a rainbow at night time?'

Shadow shook her head.

'And yet they must exist,' I continued. 'The same optics should apply to the moon's light as when you see one in the day time. So there must be night time rainbows, somewhere. And my story is about someone that did see one.'

'Perhaps he was an insomniac, maybe he was just lucky, but one day, one night rather, this man was walking alone under the stars and there it was, right from one edge of the horizon to the other, a moonlight rainbow.'

I swept my hand across the full span of the beach. 'It was a night, I suppose, a lot like this one. The moon was out and there were a few clouds around, one of which rained for long and wide enough, and at the right distance, to make a rainbow.'

'And as it happens, this guy was an artist. So he went right home then to paint

what he'd seen. Except that he couldn't find the right colours in his paint box. So the next day he drove to every artist's shop he could find to search out the right colours for his rainbow. And what do you think he found?'

'No one had the right colours?'

'Not exactly. No one stocked the right colours but no one had the wrong ones either. They were all there. So he came back with everything he could carry and that night he went into his studio to try and mix them into a better match. He put a canvas on the board, opened the curtains and worked by moonlight. He worked all night.'

I paused for thought, then resumed. 'And that's where the problem started. You see, nothing seemed to mix right. He kept adding more and more paint, making the colours darker every time. And each time after he stood back to see whether he'd got it right, he'd have to go and try again, because the colours were still too strong. By the time the night was over the layers of paint were thicker than the canvas. But he had to stop there because the sun was rising and he couldn't work any more.'

'Of course, when he'd slept a while, he went straight to his studio to see how the picture was drying. And as chance would have it, he wasn't alone.'

I turned from my study of the beach and looked at Shadow. 'Have you ever been to St. Ives?'

She shook her head.

'Well, there's quite an artist's community there, and the thing about places like that is that there's always people dropping in, if you want them to, that is. Usually it's for something daft like they've run out of cigarettes, but they also like to eye up each other's work. Anyhow, our friend the artist had a friend who was also an artist, and what with our first artist being only half awake, and pretty convinced that the painting was worth seeing, soon after the bang on the door they both trotted upstairs to take a look. But what they saw under day-light horrified them both.'

Shadow had pushed one foot deep into the sand. She was sweeping her toes around as if she were some creature moving under the surface. As I looked at her, she pulled her feet back up and folded her arms across her knees.

'I can't see people being horrified by a painting. Especially if he put so much time into it. How was it horrible?'

'It wasn't horrible to look at. Except that the picture they were expecting to see wasn't there. Instead there was something else. You see a rainbow doesn't exist by itself. It has a context, a background, but in this case that was all there was. The guy had just painted the sea. A perfect sea, a well rendered one, but with just a big black crescent across it.'

'And that was scary?' she asked.

'Yes, if you've spent all night painting something different. Of course our artist now had another problem, because he'd told the owners of the painting shops all about his rainbow, and they'd told other artists that day, so there was already quite some interest in his painting.'

'He could say it didn't work out. Most artists do stuff they never show to

people. He could just put it somewhere quiet.'

'Vanity, I think, prevented him. Or something else, I don't know. Anyhow. What he did later that day was inspirational. He took a tin of decorator's emulsion and painted the canvas over and over until it was just a pure white. You could see the picture underneath from the brush shapes showing through, but nothing of the colours. He showed it in the best gallery in town and it sold for a fine price. Explained his actions by saying the rainbow was too beautiful for anyone to look at again.

'Only he and his friend knew the truth. That underneath all the white was a dark sea and over that was something.' I paused. 'Something un-paintable.'

Shadow was resting now with her chin on her knees. Her hair was partly across her face and her gaze was upon the further side of the beach. There was an isolated piece of the shore there, cut off from the rest by a loop of our little river where it first reached the shore-line.

'And what about the girl?' Shadow asked, quietly.

'The girl?'

She looked at me through a waterfall of hair. 'There's always a girl.'

I leaned my head back to the fence and looked at the stars. 'She was his problem.'

'What happened to him?'

'He's still alive.'

After a few seconds I pushed myself to my feet. Sand had worked its way underneath my shirt collar, up my sleeves and into the top of my socks. I stamped my feet several times.

'We've been sitting here too long.' I said. 'Everything's seized up. Do you want to go on a bit?'

## Chapter Two

A locked door, say of a shed, is a negotiable barrier. To break the lock and enter is to steal, to find some useful piece behind a field gate is greyer, to pull the same item from the shoreline is to win it fairly; yet the principle is the same, our gauge here being the amount of care employed by the owners. A boy can operate this slide-rule more freely than a man, and judge a thing more on its merits, for in some structures an extra entrance will exist; the rotten underside of a door or a poorly-nailed sheet. A young enough boy can enter some very narrow spaces without breaking anything.

The pump-house of a hotel swimming pool is cramped and boring, with incomprehensible machines and an odd smell. More promising is the service cupboard or the cleaning room of a camp-site. Here there will be gas cylinders and broken caravan fittings, stacks of toilet paper, mops, brushes, sponges, sets of drain rods with interesting tools on the end; often a torch and a ladder, or a collection of abandoned hair brushes, shampoos and towels. Usually there will be plumbing with a stop tap, or preferably several. After closing it, or opening it if that is the inclination, one should then listen carefully for the sound of water, for the ability of pipe work to cause interesting events at a distance is a wonder of the age, not to be missed at some point in our lives, although having a narrow torso and the escape velocity of an oiled rat is a considerable advantage when it comes to avoiding any consequences.

The true prize amongst sheds is held by the corrugated iron variety. To suit the standards it must be alone amidst sand dunes, preferably without vehicular access. The approach must be properly overgrown, and the shed itself must have been painted black, but long ago, and parts must be hanging loose, for easy access. The roof however, must be secure, else the treasures within will be in a poor state. Likewise the puddle that often forms inside the door should not be so big as to regularly spread around, for the same reason.

Nothing of consequence to grown ups is put into such a place, therefore it is all of consequence to youngsters who can use it, by the simple law of the tide line.

Inside the hallowed space will be secrets and mysteries from a vanished era; war ministry paint, bicycle frames, valve radio sets, seized up mowing machines, chairs and sofas, window glass, dismantled car engines, reclaimed timber of all sizes, sideboards still containing crockery, sacking, paraffin stoves, saucepans and kettles, car tyres, lengths of rope, old signboards, strange and rusted tools of all sizes.

Here, amongst the darkness of a past era, each thing can be examined for use and discarded, reused or removed to a more secret location as deemed fit, in this respect anything with wheels or a handle is particularly prized, our favourite discovery of all time being a pram frame with wooden boards.

Interior lighting is usually an issue, a shed of quality is always windowless and often half in the brambles, thus candles are the boy's best friend, preferably the common household sort. Borrow a battery torch and you may as well hang a warning

flag on your roof, but a few candles are seldom missed, especially during the strikes and power cuts of nineteen seventies Britain, when they were in easy supply.

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Shadow had slid to her feet and was looking thoughtful. Behind us were marks in the sand; my own boot marks and a larger hollow where I had rested my backpack; hers was a smaller depression surrounded by dots; hands, toes; longer marks where she had pushed her feet through the sand.

She tossed her head and regathered her hair with her hands. 'Yeuch. This sand gets everywhere.'

I smiled. 'You wanted to sit here.'

'I did.' She moistened both palms and smoothed her hair back over her head. 'What's that little place over there?'

'You mean the Lifeguard's hut?'

'It looks like a temple.'

I laughed. 'Only to Foster's Lager.'

'Temple it is then. But we could sit there instead.'

'Good idea.'

We advanced on the hut through an area of dry sand. It was pock-marked with footprints from the daytime, and scattered with the lifeguard's cigarette butts.

'Are you here on holiday?' I said.

'Sort of. I'm not here for long.'

'Are you on your own?'

Shadow smiled. 'Not any more. Maybe.'

The Lifeguard's shelter was a glass-fronted hut, on a concrete base that had been there all of my life. The wooden hut itself came and went; each autumn men from the Council would run their lorry across the beach to dismantle and take the little structure away. Then it was warehoused and set out again the following season, like a market stall. The corners and roof of the hut had worn round where each panel had been turned end over end along the pebbles and slid onto the truck-back. Each time the roof section was folded up the felting on top cracked along its seam and so every season a new felt was added, for speed each was nailed through the last. Thus the structure could be dated from its felt layers, like tree rings; the current hut was five years old, by this method.

We seated ourselves on the steps to the side door. They were narrow, and Shadow's hip ended up firm against mine, and her shoulder pressed into my arm.

'Do you often swim at night?' I said.

'Isn't that the best time?'

'Yes, I guess it's quieter. As a fisherman I can understand that.'

Shadow was looking at the sea. 'I know a story about a man that goes fishing at night. He's a king. Do you want to hear it?'

'Sure. What's the king trying to catch?'

'Immortality. The holy grail. It's a very old story.'

The moment I had been waiting for happened. The girl rested her head on my shoulder. Her hair against my neck was still damp. I didn't dare to breath.

'And as the story starts,' she said. 'The king is fishing beside his favourite lake. But tonight he's not feeling well. It's not something he's eaten, he's sure of that. He hasn't been out for long enough to be bored. But he's not caught anything and he's now feeling very tired. So he lies on a rock by the water's edge to rest.'

'And when he wakes up, it's dark and it's cold. But he can see the morning star. So he knows it's not far from sunrise. Shadow paused. 'The reason he woke up is because someone kissed him. He remembers a girl's hair on his face, the scent of her and the taste of her lips. But as he opens his eyes there's no-one there. He sits up quickly and looks around but he's quite alone.'

I stroked her hair. 'So how dark is it?' I asked.

'Very. But would you loose someone kissing you in the night?'

'Probably not.'

'Uh-huh.' Shadow continued. 'So the king goes to the edge of the water. He thinks she could have gone into the lake. But the surface is quite calm. He stands there for a while looking into the water and he sees and hears nothing. But he soon discovers something else. He feels a lot better. Stronger, full of life. Younger, even.'

Shadow turned her face to meet my eyes and smiled. 'On turning around he sees something he doesn't want to. His body is still laying on the stone. His illness has taken him you see, quite suddenly in the night, and now his spirit is free. He's dead, but he's free.'

'Long live the king,' I mused. 'I can't see why he feels better as a result.'

'He does,' said Shadow. 'Trust me on that one.'

'So does he meet the girl?'

'That's his problem. He can't see her in the Shadow World, because he doesn't know where to look. So he tries to return to life. He lies on the stone next to himself and tries to think himself alive again.' She smiled at me again. 'That's a difficult thing to do.'

'The grail of legend had the power of life and death.' I said. 'I guess if he succeeds then he's found it. In some way.' I added.

'Well this is a story,' said Shadow. 'So we'll say he does it. Somehow. And he doesn't feel very well afterwards. He sits up as a living man but only just. But he now knows what, or rather who, he's looking for. He just doesn't know how to reach her.'

'Hence the grail quest.' I said. 'The chalice and the waters of life. Symbols of love. And death, of course.'

'You could look at it like that. Or another way.'

'Which way is that?'

'As the start of another story.' The girl lifted her head and straightened up. 'But I should be getting back.'



'Of course. Will I see you again?'

'Would you like to?'

'Yes, I would.' I smiled. 'Keep the coat if you want.'

'Okay.' Shadow's eyes locked onto mine and quickly, with no warning, she leaned forward and kissed my lips, then withdrew. The taste of her was slightly salty. She was warm, more than I would have expected in the cold air.

'Here, tomorrow night.' She stood up, pulling the coat around herself. 'After sunset. That's so you remember to come.'

## Chapter Three

'Passing the Day' is an odd expression. To pass something in the night is to miss or to avoid it, to do the same thing in daylight hours is to seek it out, not actively perhaps, but nevertheless the thing or person with which we share the day will receive some attention.

So insomuch as one can spend a day attentively doing little, my next day was passed, largely with thoughts of food. I took breakfast and luncheon – cereal and coffee for one and eggs and toast for the second – but no evening meal. A plan was in my mind to take Shadow out, and I dressed accordingly, with jacket and shirt instead of coat and pullover. I kept my walking boots on for the trip across the beach, but clean shoes were in my car; the latter I positioned at the entrance of the beach car-park.

The evening was fair again, moonlit and fresh as before. As I paced the beach my thoughts turned forwards. There are hostelrys around Mawgan Porth, but these were too nearby for my taste. The sight of a former local man entertaining a pretty woman is enough to raise eyebrows in any small community. So I had decided to venture up the coast a little way.

To my relief, Shadow was clothed when I found her. Her garment was full length, of a black material that slightly reflected the moonlight. It parted between her breasts and was fastened by being tied above and around her waist in an 'x' shape. The material seemed to be cut from one piece, the fastening band being part of the same fabric.

Around her neck was a circlet of beads, jet or some type of dark pearls, weather false or not I could not tell. Her hair was fastened behind her head with a silvered comb. From here it fell tightly to her waist, bound into a single bundle with a golden thread.

As I came closer I saw she was un-made up, the artwork of the previous night had gone. Her arms were bare save for where the dress passed over her shoulders and behind her neck.

'You're late.' Her voice sounded stiff.

I glanced at my watch. 'I'm sorry.'

Shadow didn't reply. She looked at the sand.

'You look nice,' I added.

As I followed her gaze downward I saw a reflection there, like a broken fragment of river. From between her feet water flowed; it came down the cliff behind and re-emerged in many places close below it. Shadow stirred the sand with her foot. From where her toes raked the surface, more water emerged.

'Thank-you'.

Shadow raised her head and I met her eyes. There was a presence in them that resembled the stare of our first encounter.

'About two or three times a year,' I said, slowly. 'Someone drives their car down here, hits this stuff and gets stuck up to the axles. It's quite funny to watch.' I tapped my boot on the sand, for emphasis. 'You'd think they'd put up a notice or something but I guess you can't warn people about being stupid. You'd be there all day.'

'How do they get out?'

'Oh, the lifeguard carries a tow rope. It gives everyone something to do. Of course he got his Land Rover stuck once.' I briefly raised my index finger. 'But that's another story.'

The intensity in Shadow's eyes was subduing. 'I like stories.'

'I know you do.' I paused. 'Anyhow. I would like to ask you something.'

'What is that?' Shadow turned and motioned for me to follow her, as she walked towards a nearby rock.

I trailed after her. 'It's in a story, as it happens.'

She pushed her hair behind her and sat down at one end of the stone. 'What sort of story?'

'This one concerns a snail. A small domestic snail that lived under stones and cracks in a wall.' I seated myself beside her, my jacket hem touching the sand behind.

'Not a very adventurous animal, would you say?' I continued. 'Not much there for stories.'

'That depends on the adventure.'

Shadow's gaze was to seaward. She was half-seated, one leg besides the stone, the other tucked up to make a rest for her hands. Her face under the moonlight was silver, her lips dark, her eyelids eclipsing two shining moons each time she blinked.

'Well in snail terms this was a big one. So big in fact, it could only ever be a story. If he told his account in full the others would call him mad, or a liar, or both.' I studied her face. She really was flawless.

'He could call it a dream. Things happen in dreams that are neither lies nor the truth.' Shadow met my eyes. 'Is that your story? An unreal thing that happens to be true?'

'I have yet to tell it. But this snail really happened to be, oh, about twenty odd years ago, on the nose end of a surfboard that the owner threw into his car one day and drove to the beach. Went into the water thinking so hard about other things that he didn't notice the snail until the two of them were right past the break of the surf.'

'Shadow returned her gaze to the lapping water. 'And what did the snail do?'

I spread my hands. 'What could it do? It just stayed there. Stayed while the board's owner went up, down, up, down through the water. For an hour or more it just clung there, half out of its shell. Feeling seasick probably. Of course the surfer had seen it by then but what do you do? A snail is just a snail, after all. You can't spend a lifetime saving snails, you'd never walk on a footpath again.'

'And when they reached the beach, he got rid of it then?'

'No, he didn't. You see the surfer wasn't a bad sort, in all. Snails can't live on sand. No, this surfer figured that any snail who was brave enough to hang on that far

deserved to see its friends again. So he took the board and its snail right back and put it in his shed in the exact original spot. Later on the snail had crawled off and disappeared.'

I paused. 'And everything was probably okay, except that it could never tell the full story to its friends. How could a snail describe the sea?'

'Can't snails live in water?'

I shook my head. 'Not off this coast, no.'

Shadow paused for a few seconds. 'Didn't you have a question for me?' she said, quietly.

'A question yes, but one that doesn't have to have an answer.'

She didn't catch my gaze, her eyes remaining fixed on the boundary between sky and ocean. But they betrayed her. A single drop of liquid had collected in the corner of each one.

'And that question is?'

'I wonder if that's how myths begin. Someone's trying to say something that they know no-one else will believe.'

Shadow nodded slowly, but she didn't reply. She pulled her legs up and turned so her knees rested together upon my thigh. She put the side of her face against my upper arm and I felt her own arm touch across my back. On glancing down I saw her face was too shaded to see, but I could see her eyelashes flickering. They sparkled in the light as they moved up and down, and too fast for someone fully at rest.

In the empty space that followed I found the ocean in front of me drawing me in.

The sea, I thought. It brings many strange things to us. It touches every land and so a feather on the sand might have come from California, or it could be from an Antarctic penguin, or it could have just fallen from a passing gull. You can make a collage of the world from the tide line. A visitor from space might pick up a corner of packing foam and figure out our entire lives from it; the extruding machines and the presses; the extractive industries, the cracking furnaces and the chemical works; the factories to make the goods themselves; the ports and the container ships; and finally the ending of the story, that being amongst our waste lorries and rubbish heaps.

He, she or it might see that we are fools heading for disaster, or they might look out of another window and applaud the unknown masters of this world; both visions meaning the same thing. Progress is so often its' own reward and without journeys there are no stories to tell, although I am a fool myself, if I think that our modern voyage has a good and useful ending.

Things on the beach also change over time. In my youngest days the sea had brought an evil thing, for a supertanker wrecked near our coast had turned it black. In time the goo had left, but tar balls and stains in the sand remained for many years. I remember an odour, a petroleum smell in the nose, and things left in the water for any time would stain. Tar leeching from the sand at high tide would streak the skin orange, and then the things that we touched; other people's hands, our t-shirt, the

football socks that were wrapped around it in the wash basket, the knob for the radio, the cat.

Scrubbing just moved the stains around, reduced them somewhat but to the detriment of everything nearby. Half a loo roll was needed to restore a toilet seat to an unblemished state; best to stay away from sanitary arrangements entirely when the tar demon had worked its' evil magic. Dogs, particularly long haired ones, were another problem entirely. When properly tar-balled up the only hope would be to boil them down for glue, or to make the orange carbolic soap that graced the bathrooms of our elderly relatives.

June was potentially the stickiest month of all. That was when the tap of summer visitors began to turn fully on, and, misunderstanding the nature of the innocuous black lines along our shore, they would let children whoop, play and rummage along the water's edge, not recognising at first the thin orange line around the midribs of sons and daughters, not foreseeing the damage it would cause once the latter contacted soft furnishings, toilet seats and, worst of all, the same car upholstery that adult folk might later sit upon.

It turned out fortunate for all that once June had gone away, later visitors could be forewarned of the danger; from holiday van to hotel foyer the warning notes would go up – *beware of beach tar* – and supplies of detergent could be placed within reach of all. Even children would soon learn to wash themselves thoroughly before dinner; our little coast's contribution towards uplifting the hygiene standards of a nation; for tar soup is to no one's liking, especially if it began its' existence as a fruit salad or a bowl of ice-cream.

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I became conscious that Shadow's eyes were flicking about. She was looking first at the sand before my feet, then up at the ocean, and then back down to my feet again. She did this several times. It was as if she was guessing the distance between this spot and the sea's edge. Perhaps it was time for us to go somewhere, I thought.

'Can you see the stars?' she asked. She raised her arm and pointed at the sea. 'Look there. Can you see them?'

I lowered my head to touch hers. 'I can see lights. A few. It's the houses above us reflecting on the water.'

'I don't see houses. Just stars.'

An unpleasant thought stole into my mind then, that someone might come by. We weren't alone in the village and shape-wise, the beach was at the centre. I'm sitting here looking at the sea with a beautiful young woman, I thought. And I don't know her name.

'Do you want to go somewhere?' I asked.

'Maybe.'

'I'd like to. It's better than sitting here all night. Do us some good.'

She lifted her head from my arm. 'Only if you don't call me a snail again.'

'How do you mean?' I asked.

'And don't ever try and stand me up,' she added, quickly.

'Of course.' I pointed at her feet. 'You'll need something on those.'

Shadow reached behind the rock and raised a pair of plastic beach sandals. She wiggled them significantly. 'You can find anything here, if you look hard enough.'

I smiled. 'I'm not sure about the colour. Pink doesn't go with the outfit. Do they fit okay?'

Shadow stood up and dropped the shoes to the sand in front of her. She nudged them around with her toes until they were correctly pointed. Then she pushed her feet into them, one after the other, and stood up. 'There. See? Perfect.' She smiled at me. 'Can we go somewhere nice?'

'I had hoped to. Would you like to join me for dinner?'

Shadow nodded soberly. The comb in her hair caught the moonlight and broke it into sparkles. Its teeth were as fine as any I had seen and the silver was rounded on the corners and edges, as if treasured enough to be polished daily, and also very old. Antique, I thought, probably quite valuable. How on Earth did you come by such a thing?

I stood up. 'I've got my car here, we can go to Padstow or somewhere like that.'

Shadow pressed her forehead against my shirt, linking her arms behind my back. I could feel her at various points; breasts, hips, thighs. 'Padstow it is then,' I added, after a few seconds.

We walked the length of the shore without speaking. The beach at Mawgan Porth curves under a raised tide, so no wave will hit it straight at all points, and hence the unzipping Velcro of Hollywood breakers will never be heard here, it is more of an irregular slosh and a thump.

On the beach's southern edge there is the steady sound of the river. On its upper portion, where the stream is constrained between stone and cement piers and the tide seldom reaches, the bed is of stones, of sizes from child's fist to football, and the sound of the water is that of a detuned radio or of a garden tap left to run. Further down, where the wash of tide and sand messes up the stream bed, the sound is sad but musical, like a solo xylophone.

The noise where river and sea meet is oddly absent, the outward flow of the stream and the absence of hard sand damping the waves into a sullen quietude, likewise the sea water slows the stream to the point where it cannot flow downwards – the sea being flat after all – and so it too is silent at their meeting. If the two are lovers then they have been so for a long time, for there is no passion in their union, only a formalized familiarity, and not one worth speaking aloud or singing about any more.

I dropped my hand from Shadow's shoulder as we climbed the edge of the sand and stone ramp at the beach exit. There was an easier way around, but it was not needed; our foot-marks across the beach – of which there were three pairs since my

outward ones followed the same route – were in a straight line; not those of people in a hurry but there was purposefulness about them; a related cause.

At the road edge Shadow raised questioning eyebrows. I pointed towards the car park. 'Your chariot awaits,' I said.

She continued staring at me.

'My car's over there,' I explained. 'You look a little puzzled?'

Shadow lowered her gaze. 'Do I bore you?' she asked.

'I haven't had time to find out yet. Why do you ask?'

'You've gone very quiet.'

'I'm saving it up,' I said. 'For when we get to town.'

Her expression was unfathomable. 'Do you like the way I look?'

I nodded. 'I'm a little awe-struck, to be honest. That's quite an outfit you're wearing. Also I love the hair.' I paused. 'Although I'd swear it looks different. Fairer. Have you done something to it?'

Her gaze flicked downwards again and she smiled. 'Every woman has her secrets. That's one of mine.'

At that moment I caught a scent in the air. It was the smell of the beach. Salt in water is a preservative, so unliving material on the tide line – seaweed, dead crabs, jellyfish, dropped sandwiches, odd pieces of rope or wood covered in shellfish – all these things decay in a different way from usual, the decomposition is cleaner somehow, and the background smell of these things is strong sometimes, but not unpleasant. The salt itself doesn't have a smell but there is a taste on the lips and on the hands, and when you moisten your mouth, as I had done just then, that is when you notice the smell of the other things. Sea salt enhances both death and life without intruding upon either – a truly divine thing.

Shadow was quiet whilst I manoeuvred my car. She gazed in-curiously at the lights and buttons of the dashboard. My initial actions with gears, pedals and steering wheel had also come under the same expressionless scrutiny. After I had pulled onto the main road and accelerated up the hill, she spoke again.

'Tell me about when you left the village,' she said. 'Did you ever plan to come back?'

'Not really. In many ways I couldn't wait to leave.'

'Why was that?'

I shrugged. 'It's a big world out there. You can't stay in one place forever. I couldn't, anyhow.'

'So when did you decide to go?' she asked. 'When did the boy go off to be a man?'

We were turning the big bend at the top of the hill. From here on our beach was lost behind a row of bungalows. The road flattened out then along the upper rim of the village and after passing the last houses, we would be on the high plateau that formed most of the landscape between Newquay and Padstow. We were also beyond the Cornish tree line. From here on it was just may-thorn, furze and sideways-leaning

sheep. Where the road touched the sea the latter was, in daylight, a distant thing; tiny breakers, little foam-bearded rocks, all in silence.

'There's a story in that one,' I said, after a few seconds. 'But it's not worth the telling.'

Shadow curled sideways to face me. She hadn't concerned herself with the safety belt. I didn't push the issue. 'All stories are worth telling. Why don't you want to tell this one?'

We were pushing up out of the top of the village. The street lights had gone and the landscape opened up around us. Without the lights from outside Shadow became an invisible form next to me. I glanced at her, or rather at where she was.

'I left the village because I was bored. I had something to say to the world and I was fed up with saying it to the people I knew.'

'So did you?' she said. 'Did you tell everyone else what you thought?'

'No, not really. That's the way things work out sometimes. Perhaps that's why I'm back again.'

'Maybe you never really left. And that's why you're writing the book.'

'Perhaps. But that's not the story.' I sighed. 'No, if I ever wrote about exactly why I left, then it's only done for one person.'

'Myself,' I added. 'And I wouldn't be interested.'

She paused. 'Then I shall have to tell it for you.'

'You can tell me anything you wish. The night is young.'

'The night is timeless.' The sound of movement and a flash of arm suggested that Shadow had straightened up in her seat. 'But I shall begin this story in the morning when the day had risen and everything has begun to measure and to quicken. And this beginning is besides a stream with willow leaves floating down it. In ones, twos and threes, they pass a young boy with a stick who tries to fetch them from the water. Each time he gets one he puts it on the bank with some others to make a picture.' She paused. 'He's crying as he does this.'

'Why is he crying?'

'He doesn't know. All he knows is that he's crying and it's about the picture he's making.'

'What is the picture of?'

Shadow didn't reply. She moved again, bringing her hands to her lap, as best I could tell.

'What is the boy making out of the leaves?' I asked again, after a few seconds.

'A butterfly.' Shadow spoke, softly.

'What type of butterfly?'

'A sad one. The picture's sad as well.'

'Hmm,' I said. 'Mysterious. Does the story go on?'

'Yes.'

'And where does it go to next?'

'Everywhere the boy goes.'



'And the story ends where, precisely?' I asked.

'On a beach.'

We drove on again in silence. Away from the illumination of the village the sky seemed bigger, as if the dome of the heavens had descended and compressed land and sea into a thin dark circle. The road jerked this way and that before my headlamps. The edges were mostly the thick Victorian hedges that characterise this part of Cornwall. They were time-consuming to build and required many men – a deliberate policy on the part of long-vanished landowners. In a previous era the area was wracked with poverty and unemployment, and unoccupied men and women will resort to unmentionable acts of an evening when there is no bread for the table, and no straw for a child's bed.

I recalled Shadow's rebuke about silence. 'Of course, if I were to write that tale,' I said. 'It would probably begin with this very trip. The road to Padstow. Or in my case the annual journey to Padstow. For the May Day celebrations. Do you know about them?'

'Yes.'

'Good. Then you know about the two 'Osses – men dressed up as horses – that dance the streets and 'sing in' the summer? About the crowds that follow them and the pubs open all day and the fair stalls and the music and so on? Quite an occasion it is. Very magical.'

'Uh-huh,' Shadow replied.

'Well, there is another tradition, mainly that May Day's a good place to meet a partner. It's all about fertility, so I guess that figures. And the alcohol helps, of course.'

I paused while my memories parted. 'Of course,' I continued, 'being me, I didn't just meet a girl and fall in love. I did it the wrong way around. Fell in love first and then tried to meet her. Which wasn't easy in a crowd.'

'Here comes that girl again,' said Shadow.

'Yes, this is the romantic interest. Anyhow. This girl was one I'd seen before, maybe even when I was a child.' I smiled. 'Of course, I wasn't much older then. I thought myself a man but we always do, at a certain age.'

I nodded silently, as I thought again about May Day. The townsmen in costume were enacting an older mythology than the traditional Maypole dance, which symbolises shackling plough horses to a rope. They were fishermen, and the horses were hippocampi, sea horses. Hence the fact that they danced upright.

Hippocampi are unique amongst the natural world, in that the female impregnates the male and the latter bears and births the offspring. The courtship dance of sea horses lasts a day, and comprises of the female swimming around and around the male in an intricate fashion, testing his loyalty. The fact that a fishing community will enact such a ceremony, whereas a farming one will do something very different, is worth noting.

I smiled to myself. 'So I sat on the pavement for a couple of years running and

drank my beer and tried to see where she went after the dancing. Except I couldn't find out. Every time she slipped away.'

'Was she pretty?' asked Shadow, quietly.

'I can't say I remember. I can't recall her very well.'

Not entirely correct, I thought. It's just painful to remember. Her hair had been like Shadow's; long, red and luxuriant. Her dress was a plain white, with a green ribbon, which had confused me a little, because the other dancers have either a red or a blue one. There isn't much in the books about such things. There never is.

'And that's why you left home?' Shadow asked. 'Because you'd seen a girl dance?'

'No, that wasn't it. I left home after she danced with me. She came right up and pulled me on the shoulder. Wanted me to go in with her into the dance.' I raised my eyebrows. 'And I was just some chap from nowhere. I must have radiated something, I suppose. Anyhow, dance with her I did. She didn't take her eyes off me at all. She kept going around and around me in a circle.'

I paused to let Shadow speak if she wished, but she remained silent.

'But,' I continued. 'This story's a circle too because then I lost her again. Someone banged into me and then I was back on the pavement again. I couldn't reach her any more. After that she disappeared entirely.'

I stopped talking. A black cloud, if you could describe things that way, had begun filling the space around Shadow.

'Are you okay?' I asked.

'Please stop the car,' she replied.

'On this road? That's not a good idea. Is it something I've said?'

'I want to get out. Please stop.'

I studied the highway. There was a passing space a little ahead. I signed forward with my finger. 'I can stop there. Are you okay?'

Shadow didn't reply. As I drew up and killed the car engine the interior light turned itself on. Shadow's head was bowed and her hands were clasped together on her lap. Her face was blank and her eyes stared hard at nothing. She sat this way for a couple of seconds, then she moved quickly, opening the door and closing it again before I had time to think.

I sat in puzzlement, studying the wing mirrors for a sight of her. The tail lights illuminated the sides of the car beautifully, but little else. Then from further back I heard a muffled yell. A few seconds later first one pink sandal, then the other, were lit briefly by my headlights as they curled over the car and beyond the hedge.

I rested my chin on the steering wheel. Okay, I thought. What do I do now?

When I approached Shadow again she was sitting on the bank below a field fence, staring at the lights of my car. She looked up as I padded over.

'Okay?' I said.

'I've hurt my foot,' she answered.

'Badly?'

'It hurts.'

'I can probably carry you.'

Shadow raised her arms. Her face was still expressionless. Her eyes studied mine, unblinking.

'This is a bit undignified,' I warned, as I bent across her. 'There you go. Arms on my neck. That's it.'

I straightened up. 'You know, you're very light,' I said, after a few paces.

Her eyes were fixed on mine. Slung between my arms, as she was, her face was close. A memory came back to me of the butterfly painted around Shadow's eyes the previous evening. Her features; the fine cheek bones, the flaring eyebrows, her large, almost oriental eyes, somehow suited the shape perfectly. I could still see it there.

'I look after myself,' she said, quietly. 'I swim every day.'

I hesitated in my step. 'Am I missing something here?'

'You're good at that.' Shadow smiled. 'Don't worry about it.'

## Chapter Four

As a summer day turned towards dusk and teatime, a different sort of person would sometimes come to the beach at Mawgan Porth. From our vantage points my young friends and I could see them arrive, in threes or twos, some bringing firewood, others with bags or boxes of food, often there would be a musician or two with guitar, pipes or drums, and always there were children. The latter would be brightly, if strangely clothed, and they were friendly if approached.

The hippies, as they were known back then, lived in a loose collection of caravans in the grounds of a market garden some half a mile inland, off the road to St. Mawgan. The owners had given up trying to feed an entire village a decade or more previously, and the old vans, cannabis patches and chicken sheds that subsequently spread across the abandoned acres had a naturalness about them, a reversion to an old goddess, a worship expressed by the ways and customs of the new inhabitants. The owners tolerated their presence with the reticent good nature of old age, and they themselves seldom, if ever, left the environs of the garden. Their cohabitantes would bring in supplies from the village in lieu of rent; candles, soap and matches, tins of processed meat, tobacco for the old man's cigarettes.

I recall an argument which began in the early nineteen-seventies, and was still topical when I left the village, about the desirability of our communalist friends. The local council began moving them out from around nineteen seventy-five, mainly by inspecting, or more accurately by failing to inspect, the individual sanitary arrangements of each shelter or caravan. The hippies took their toilet together in one canvas built facility, and between the two cultures no common purpose could be found, save for a dislike of their own wastes, although the obsessive interest one party took in those of the other was not reciprocated, at least never in public.

By the time I was an adult, and beginning to understand the world, the old couple were dead and the hippies were long gone. In their place would eventually rise a new white bungalow, with a double garage, a tarmac driveway and a lake fed by a pump-powered stream. The old trees that kept the place secret would be felled. Of the commune members themselves, those whose lives I could follow had become scattered; the bulk I think had gone to Wales; some went to the far coast of Ireland, a few went to northern Scotland.

\* \* \*

'The stars have gone,' Shadow whispered. Her head was against the door glass, her gaze upward. Passing around us were the lights and attractions of Padstow, such as they are, and my thoughts were out amongst them. I knew the town little, this small portion being from some years previous, so I was a stranger here too.

In my childhood Padstow was half a moon away, its inhabitants unknown; here were children with names, places and secrets of their own. Nothing we knew of was

here save uncertainty, even the sea being different. It was unlively and grey with estuarine silt, having no waves save the 'V' of a passing boat, and the smell was that of an inland waterway; of reed beds and decaying rubbish, of diesel and of paint, of fish-baskets, chip fat and beer, of sun-oil, toilets and car exhausts.

'I'll try and park on the harbour,' I said.

'I like the boats,' said Shadow.

'I knew you would. In my day there were more trawlers and fewer yachts. Look, we can go right here.'

I halted the car amongst the others on the quayside. It was a lucky find, for the town had too many people of an evening, and their vehicles; the space between the houses had evolved around the needs of two ponies passing, and agile ones at that. The worst problem in the daytime was

people taking photographs in the street, and at night that of cars fetched up in the harbour, in short of visitors either paying too much attention to their surroundings, or too little; the problems of an era when few of us rest a full day in a single place, let alone a lifetime.

'So,' I said. 'Can you walk?'

'I think so.'

'Watch out for glass outside the pub. It's a lively old place.'

The tide was full in the harbour and the boats floated high, some decks approaching the level of the quayside. There were a couple of fishing trawlers, a dozen or more pleasure craft of varying sizes and ocean-going ability, numerous skiffs, row-boats and dinghies. The water there was oily; each boat resting upon an inverted and darkened replica of itself.

Shadow and I picked our way amongst the evening trippers, towards the quiet of the further quay.

'Where would you like to go?' I asked.

She looked at me with big eyes. 'Where's the nicest place?'

I studied the wall above us. There was a terrace with potted greenery, glass-topped tables and menu cards. Not entirely a coincidence. I'd done my research.

'Right here?'

'Okay.' Shadow glanced up too. Her gaze was not in the same direction as mine, it seemed to be upon the moon. It was still there through the haze of town lights, a little thinner tonight, and greyer and reduced in size, as such things look from within a town.

I held the restaurant door for a second. 'Are you sure?'

'I'll race you to a table.'

I opened the door and stood back. 'After you.'

Shadow raised an eyebrow.

'It's just easier,' I added. 'Go-on. I'll catch up.'

We found ourselves a pleasing spot, where the terrace narrowed to a single line of tables. Our company were all tourists, as far as I could judge, mainly older couples

of the type inclined to their own conversation, if they made any at all, and the tables adjacent to us were vacant. So the evening would be ours, even if we wished otherwise it would be difficult.

The lights of the harbour below were very fine, we could see most parts of the town that were worth seeing, and the buttery smell from the restaurant kitchen was pleasing. Impatient for a waitress, I fetched drinks from the bar; a house white for both of us.

'So,' I said, as I settled into my chair. 'What's the story, then? Where are you from?'

Shadow raised her glass and smiled into it. 'You're supposed to tell me. That's our game, remember?'

'You're still not saying?'

She smiled. 'Why change things now?'

'Because we're out for dinner. Now we tell each other about ourselves. That's the way it works.'

She shook her head. 'Too much of a clue.'

'Do I get a clue soon?'

'Maybe the clue is in a story.'

I flicked at a corner of the menu card. 'I think I might need another one. Anyhow. Shall we order?'

'Do you want to share the food? It's expensive.'

I pursed my lips. 'We could share a main and have separate starters. I do fancy the crab soup. But it's messy to hand around.'

'I could pass on the starter.'

'No, I insist. I'm paying for this and I'll be offended. Go-on, you have the soup too.'

'Okay.' Shadow shrugged. 'It sounds nice.'

'I know it is. The chap over there's got some and I can smell it from here.'

'How do you know he likes it?'

'He's not talking to his wife. Just drinking his soup. That's a good sign.'

Shadow smiled. 'Or he doesn't like her. Maybe she hates the smell of his soup. He's drinking it to make a point.'

'I'm not sure what that would prove. To him or to her.'

'Me neither. It's just a thought I had.'

'It might be correct. But I'm still going for the soup. And for our main course.' I turned the menu card around and pointed. 'Mussels and chips? That's another favourite of mine. It'll be one big bowl so we can dip in. But it doesn't have to be that. Anything here you particularly fancy?'

'That sounds okay.' Shadow wiggled her glass at me. 'And some more wine.'

'Of course. But we should go easier this time. We've got all night.'

When I returned from the bar Shadow was resting her head on one hand, with her elbow on the glass table. With her free hand she was making circles there with a

splash of wine. I refilled our glasses.

'Why didn't you like my last story?' she asked.

'I didn't dislike it. I found it odd.' I sat down. 'Food'll be about ten minutes, by the way. That'll give you time to finish it, if you like.'

She glanced up at me. 'It is finished. It's about a boy and a butterfly and a river. That's it. It doesn't go anywhere else.'

'I thought it went to the sea?'

Shadow bent over her doodling again. 'All rivers end at the sea. You don't have to say that in a story.'

'Fair enough. What are you drawing?'

'A star. From a story book.'

I turned my head on one side. 'With circles?'

She raised her eyes. 'Do you want to know where this one leads?'

'Round and round I should think. Go-on then, you tell me. Just make sure I can get the ending this time.'

Shadow bridged her hands in front of her and rested her chin upon them. 'A good story has no ending.'

I inclined my head. 'I agree. So tell me yours.'

'Okay. So a long time ago..' Shadow looked thoughtful for a second, then frowned. 'That's a terrible way to start.' She dropped her chin down in her hands and smiled mischievously. 'Are you trying to get me drunk?'

I nodded at her glass. 'Sorry. I did say to take it easy.'

She frowned at the table top. 'I'll begin again. With a long time ago. Now it'll have to start like that. That's all your fault.'

\* \* \*

Half a mile up from the beach at Mawgan Porth, on the St. Mawgan road, is a stone bridge. After here the road dips south and climbs a central spur which subsequently splits the valley into two parts. Ignore the bridge and walk on up the left fork of the valley. Here runs a sandy track with caravans beside it, these go up the grassy, former dunes of the hillside as far as is practical, the track itself terminates at the old market garden, and past this is a gate and a footpath through a big field which is now planted out with trees. This path crosses the river again on a footbridge and passes into the woodlands of the middle and upper vale of St. Mawgan or Lanherne.

The footbridge is a rough territory marker. Beyond it the reach of salt and wind are blunted, the vegetation more vertical, and the range of beach-children likewise ceases at this point, although occasional excursions can be mounted, it is an unknown landscape nonetheless. There are strange things in the woodlands of childhood, and not everyone that ventures inside can come out again so easily.

Before the footbridge and below the camp site track, the hippie garden and the

long field, are the wetlands characteristic of a Cornish coastal valley. Much has been lost through drainage and infill, but pockets remain. Within these are reed beds and willows, an impassable delight of mud that sucks at wellies, of snakes, birds nests and rodents, of abandoned television sets, of wasps and midges in summer and weird ice shapes in the winter.

Anything put into this place would stay there, although it might submerge and discolour a little, because for adults the swamp was a place that did not exist, a blank space between roads, houses, pubs and fields; sometimes children would have a dark and odourous liquor upon every portion of clothing, hair and skin, but where it came from was an unknown, as likely as not from passing aliens or the effluent of a giant seagull.

The forms within the swamp were different from those outside it. The willows of my youth have a shape as if each tree had aspirations of stature once, but the older ones had sagged like plastic under a hot lamp, the saplings being taller in many cases but not so interesting, being quite un-climbable. Water flowed within the swamp but in no particular direction, sometimes away from the stream, sometimes towards it. There was solid-seeming land that would sink and pitch if you jumped upon it, being formed mainly of reed-roots. Some parts of the swamp were quite unreachable, as nothing large enough to float even a child could be hauled through the brambles and thorns that surrounded most parts of it.

Expeditions into the swamp were best done via the river. We children used to meet at the footbridge, which was a good place to plan such expeditions. You could swing alternately high and low around the twin handrails of the bridge, could catch the top with your ankles and slide gracefully onto the concrete, or ungracefully into the stream. After you had your feet wetted there was no easy way back to the bridge; the lower reaches were a scramble up the bank and into the swamp itself.

The river further down was deep and brown, the sides were steep and had nettles. Further still there was barbed wire and electric fencing, slung low over the river to catch marauding cows. But from the bottom of the swamp you could exit again in one place at the side of the river, then go onto the lane for the camp site and down towards the beach, and back to our homes.

\* \* \*

'Of course, a long time ago in story terms, is just a way of saying that we don't have a beginning, so we'll put it somewhere out of sight.' Shadow paused while I refilled her glass.

'Sounds good to me,' I said.

'This is one of those stories,' she continued. 'And it took place on a beach, a big place of sand and winds at night and in one part, a fortress. One not made of stone, for there is no good stone around, and in any case the people there do not have the knowledge of it. Rather they know rock as a sturdy platform on which to build



things, and build upon it they did, although the fort, the city as it became later, was done in a very upside down way.'

Shadow fell silent for a few seconds. Her eyes were on the harbour beside us. Padstow was built around a natural cleft and landing place in the estuary, although the town, harbour and dock have now smothered the little beach and inlet that must once have been here. Under every modern story are older ones, with older ones still, beneath.

'From the bottom to the top,' Shadow spoke into the night. 'For the rock was on the outflow of a large river that flowed sometimes well, sometimes not much at all. And when the water wasn't running they took the mud from the bottom and made bricks from wooden forms, which they let dry in the sun. And from these they built the city. Although with walls around, so it was a fortress too. And also something else.'

She turned and met my eyes again. 'I don't think there's a word for it any more. It's a bit like 'sacrament' although it mainly means 'built from sacred mud'. Does that make sense?'

I shook my head. 'Very little. Although it sounds like the historical Middle East to me. Are we talking about the first cities in the world here?'

'Are you going to keep second-guessing my stories?'

'Not if you don't want me to.'

She sat upright and leaned her head back. 'The city could be anywhere.'

'Yes but,' I waved my hand expansively. 'The special thing about that area is that it's supposed to be the birthplace of civilization. That's pretty important. I mean, Padstow circa six thousand B.C. just isn't going to be as interesting. Even if it was, it isn't in the history books, so it's not interesting to us. Q.E.D.'

'Perhaps.' Shadow smiled at the sky. 'But then perhaps it wasn't.'

'Wasn't what, exactly?'

'Wasn't the birthplace of civilization. Maybe it was just a place where they built clay houses. That's not unique.'

'A remarkable building material, in the right climate.' I said. 'But I didn't mean to interrupt. Perhaps our history books are wrong.'

'Maybe. Anyhow, the people in my story also built canals. They used their wooden tools to make more water and less land. For along the river sides food was easier to gather and fish would swim into pools that the people had made and not swim out again. With the new way of doing things, the city grew and prospered.'

'Ah yes.' I nodded again. 'The dawn of agriculture. Larger settlements made possible by irrigation and cultivation of the same piece of land.'

Shadow lowered her head and frowned. 'In my story the people are fishing.'

I raised a finger. 'That as well. But they would go on to plant crops. With a canal you're half-way to an irrigation scheme. It's bound to happen, just by using a little more brain power.'

She was still frowning. 'More than a little. Why would a fisherman scratch

holes in the ground so he can eat something a year later? Or a boat-builder? Or a net-maker? They could starve before that ever happened. People don't start farming unless they're desperate.'

'Yes, but this desperation now feeds the world. That's just the way it is.'

Shadow looked at me closely. 'Does it really?'

'Most of the world. Apart from those who still fish, of course. But not every country has a coastline.'

Shadow looked thoughtful. I glanced around. 'Ah, here's our food,' I said.

A waitress approached our table and unloaded a bread basket and two steaming bowls. The smell was strong and appetizing. Shadow waved her hand through the steam, and sniffed delicately.

'Is it okay?' I asked.

'Yes' Shadow reached for some bread. 'It seems okay.'

'Indeed,' I said, dipping in with my spoon. 'It smells very fine. See, I wasn't wrong.'

'Neither was I,' said Shadow.

'What about?'

'People trying to make a point.' She paused with a piece of soupy bread half-way to her mouth, and grinned at me. 'Drink your soup. It's good for the soul.'

We drank our soup in silence and dipped the bread in it and watched the people along the quayside. There was a party in one of the flats overlooking the harbour. The windows were open and I could see many people inside. Now and again we could hear the noise of it. On the opposite side of the harbour two men in overalls were lifting boxes off a trawler. Their boat had foreign writing on the stern – Polish or Russian, from the letter shapes.

'Do you like it here?' I asked.

'Sure.'

'It's a nice spot.' I raised my glass. 'Nice company, too.'

She touched my glass with her own. 'I want you to tell me something.'

'Okay.' I cleared our bread and bowls onto the table behind us. 'What do you want to know?'

'In your book. That part where you were going into the swamp?'

'From the footbridge and down the river.'

Shadow nodded. 'You said that's where the children met. Did you meet any girls?'

'I can't remember,' I said. 'I didn't really cover that issue.'

She touched her wine to her lips. 'I wondered if there's a romantic interest in there.'

'Hardly. I was eight years old at the time. Or nine. I can't remember that either.'

'Are you sure you're qualified to write it?'

'Artistic licence. Gets me out of a lot of things. Look. Here's the rest of our food.'

The mussels and the french fries were set before us. They had been cooked the best way, with butter, wine and parsley. Behind my elbow our soup gear was unobtrusively removed.

'Looks good,' I reached for the plate. 'Have you eaten these before?'

'I know what to do.' Shadow smiled. 'You each make a wall of the shells. First side to fall over loses.'

'That's not sympathetic to the molluscs. Undignified. They'd get their halves mixed up.'

She looked at me bright-eyed. 'They might prefer it like that. A chance to mingle.'

'They should save that for the bin. It's very un-British, mingling in public.' I waved a half-shell around. 'On the other hand, these are probably French. So they wouldn't mind.'

'So it's okay.' Shadow stacked her first two shells up. 'To put them like this?'

'Pile away. And don't forget that story. I'd like to hear the rest of it.'

She shrugged. 'It was too long. It ran out.'

'You could abbreviate it, if you want to. I'm a good listener.'

'A good listener? You're the worst ever.'

'It's the writing bug. I like to get involved in stories.'

'I was going to mention a girl, that's all. But it doesn't matter.' Shadow licked her fingers. The shells on her plate were empty. She was a fast eater.

She turned and stared at the harbour. In the distance the Russians were still noisily stacking crates. 'So what do they catch here, if not shellfish?' she added,

'Not much, any more.' I shrugged. 'Fishing's on the way out. There's big money here now. Money from elsewhere. Strangely enough, the economy's taken a nosedive. Working men can't afford the moorings and lock-ups.'

'So this story is ending, then?'

'In a way.' I shrugged. 'And there aren't the fish there used to be. Stocks are running out.'

Shadow lowered her eyes to her glass. 'That's because the sea isn't a farm. You can't treat it the same way. Fishing is hunting, it's from a much older era.'

I nodded slowly. 'True, but as I said earlier, farming methods are needed now, to feed everyone. We can't all hunt for food any more. There isn't the space.'

'And people that fish and hunt are primitive?' Shadow raised her glass. 'That's the belief, isn't it? In the darkness of a different age are strange beasts. Don't look at them.'

'I don't know.' I shrugged. 'The ancient past of these islands is a mystery. Nothing was written down.'

'You're the storyteller.' Shadow sipped her wine. 'Speculate.'

I leaned my head back and studied the sky. 'In the case of Britain, I could start with Stonehenge. And talk about druids and wicker men and cover it off with a bit of Celtic nationalism. Or the mysteries of morris dancing, which might be less

contentious.' I paused. 'Sorry, did I say something wrong?'

Shadow was laughing. 'You are funny,' she said. 'I like that. I like it a lot.'

'Why?'

'You think hard about what you're saying, don't you?'

I frowned. 'In what way?'

'Your ancestors didn't come from here. Look at your hair, your eyes. You're not ancient British. They're all dark. Stonehenge is nothing to do with the story.'

I spread my hands. 'I was talking generally. We all come from everywhere, really.'

Shadow set her empty glass down. Her eyes were still bright. 'Then I'd better tell the right tale,' she said. 'Before you make it worse. And then I want a walk.' She leaned across the table and blew on my little wall of discards. It fell over. 'See? I win.'

'That you do.' I scraped my chair back. 'I'll go and pay up. Have you had enough to drink?'

'Uh-huh.'

She bridged her elbows across the table and rested her chin in her hands, her loose posture contradicting the absence of expression in her face. The Shadow Girl was happy, after her own way. The braid in her hair reflected the terrace lights in interesting ways. Her cheeks held a slight wine flush, red against white. Behind her was a vine that curled along the length of the balcony handrail, and past that was the river estuary, unlit and motionless.

On my return I pulled my own chair back and settled, as best it would allow, into an attitude of contemplation. I was a sea captain in his harbour-side chair, albeit one too narrow and without arm rests. Shadow's mouth flickered a smile.

'Has John had enough wine?'

'I'll do for now,' I said. 'We could go somewhere after, if you like. I know a few places.'

Shadow nodded absently, and she began staring at nothing again. After a second or two she spoke.

'Over a cold beach hangs a star. A bright one. The star you might see on an old book cover, or a pirate's treasure map. A star you could hang dreams on.' She leaned back in her own chair, her eyes half closing. 'Dreams of a world lost to all but memory.'

'Whose memory, out of interest?'

'Mine.' Her eyes flicked open. 'Mine and yours.' She closed them again. 'I'm telling a story. Please don't interrupt.'

'Okay.'

'From the water and onto the beach comes a girl. Her name is lost to memory but it means 'Oath' and also 'Plenty'. She is looking for a young man, one in particular. When she finds him she gives him a branch of oak. They kiss and embrace and then they part again. They do this every year. She bears him one child. When the

man grows older he becomes king of a great city. His wisdom spreads throughout the land and makes everything flourish. When he dies the people strew thorns and berries in mourning.'

Shadow paused, then continued, 'Later on a prince walks alone onto a beach. Above the sea hangs a star. Under the star is a girl. She is looking for him.'

Shadow's eyes remained closed, but she spoke no more. Behind her the vine leaves nodded with the breeze from the harbour. I experienced an inexplicable moment of sadness. It passed quickly.

'It's getting cold,' I said, after a few seconds. 'We should move on.'

'He's a tree.' Shadow opened her eyes. 'And she is a goddess.' She caught my gaze. 'Does that answer a rather obvious question?'

'I was trying not to interrupt. Is this another butterfly story?'

Shadow shook her head. 'This is a story for everyone. It's an old mythology. The branch is his manhood and the son is an acorn. This story does not end or begin. It goes on forever.'

'Until people cut the trees down. Then it ends.'

Shadow continued looking at me but her eyes changed. They were forming tears.

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be blunt.'

'You do know I love you?'

'I just wish I knew more about you. But you won't say.' I glanced downward. 'All I know is you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. Ever.'

'Thank-you.' Shadow sniffed wetly. She wiped her cheek with one delicate hand, the other she extended across the table. 'That's always nice to hear. Now come on. I want my night air.'

## Chapter Five

The sand dunes of Mawgan Porth were islands of adventure in the little stream of our boyhood lives. They were central to all worthwhile affairs. From the dune crest we could see all parts of the main road and a few hundred yards of the valley road. Within this vantage territory also lay both summer car parks, the filling station, the two shops and the café, the chip shop, the pub and the more interesting portion of the sand dunes. The bus shelter was also here but afforded sufficient cover of its' own that this strategic point had to be watched separately.

The main targets of our interest were other young boys. With each season of summer visitors a chorus line of our contemporaries would segue across the little stage set of our lives. Most would be anonymous, their time in the village too brief, or their parents too regulatory or aloof for any meaningful exchanges. Of the remainder there would be two types. Sworn enemies, or those about to be, and those who, if true worth could be proven, could become initiated into the great secret of which we, by coincidence of geography and history, were the current guardians. This secret, or set of secrets, comprised of full knowledge of the connected set of sea caves and tunnels beneath our northern cliff; its layout, times of safe access with regard to tide levels and duration of stay, and also of the hidden cliff path by which some caves could still be reached long after the tide had cut all access from beach level.

The cliff rock, a heavily metamorphic shale known locally as *elven*, had the characteristic of being strong in one direction and shattering long and deep in the other. This, combined with a natural sideways cant to the storm waves as they circled the Newquay bay, and abetted also by the abandoned drillings of an exploratory ochre mine, had punched a part of the waking world deep and tortuously into the sombre cliffs. Some interior parts of the formation were only accessible by an inflatable dinghy – to which we had access – and one part, this being our greatest secret, only on a few days each year and under conditions of precise timing.

To a city child this world would seem unearthly and sinister, an experience which not all comers would enjoy. Hence the need for our help. But not all we met would receive our friendship. Those who were older than us, or who were as big as our oldest, would attempt to bully and dominate. Likewise we found that pairs of boys, of which brothers were the worst, would not often bond. Usually the imagination of one would dominate the good sense of the other, if he had any, and only an argument and a fight around the grass humps of the dunes would end the matter. Thus were the unworthy kept away from our treasures.

For our prizes were great. Of these the finest, and the most secret, was the sea tunnel. We learned of it from an older brother of some twenty years of age; it had existed when he was young, and he claimed to have travelled through it, but he said that since then it had been covered by the sand and was now no more than a crack in the cliff face marking its upper portion; that in any case this spot could only be

reached at a rare combination of biannual tides and of calm weather; and also that the time to traverse it was limited, perhaps thirty minutes at most before the waves returned.

Thus had been the challenge set. But for a rare storm from the East that moved the sand away from the northern cliff for a couple of years it would have remained so, just a challenge. For, unknown to all but marine surveyors and shore fishermen with long memories, the northern part of the Newquay bay is silting up, as the prevailing tide moves sand up the coast. With each decade the likelihood of access to our sea tunnel becomes less. Perhaps myself and my young friends will have been the last to ever pass through it, I do not know.

As for the tunnel itself, the first time we entered it was during the spring tide of 1974. In the same year as strikes and power shortages gripped the land, the Jacksons and the Osmonds topped the charts and the Raleigh chopper bike was taking over the world, three small boys had gaped at a hole in the rock where had previously been nothing but raised sands. With the water still at ankle depth, and without a torch, we had to enter quickly and after a few yards, mainly by touch. But soon afterwards the story proved true, the sides of the passage were wetly lit again, and the wave noise was a double echo, from behind and from before us. And thus was the great secret of Mawgan Porth revealed to a new generation.

For at the far end of the sea tunnel is another beach, a miniature replica of its tourist choked, umbilical parent. It has perhaps a hundred yards of sandy crescent, there are rocks and their associated pools, sea birds, trails of weed and fist-clumps of barnacles and mussels. In short, everything a beach should have except for a place on any map or in any human consciousness.

On that first discovery we spent perhaps ten minutes there, which was too long, for the sea was fast closing around us as we exited the sea tunnel again. And here also was revealed the true reason for the new beach's hidden nature.

Unglimpsable from above because of the way the cliff curved dangerously back into a slippery and unscalable upper portion, our beach was also unknown from any other vantage, even from the sea, for the same reason that made our own access so difficult and limited. For the beach would only exist during the same flat seas and extra low tides that exposed its' sole access route. For the remainder of the year there was only an unvisited headland diving sheer into opaque, grey and white water.

In all of my life I know of fewer than ten people that have been to the lost beach – fewer, indeed, than have walked on the surface of the moon. I find this a humbling thought, but also disquieting, for reasons that I find difficult to express.

\* \* \*

Across the harbour mouth at Padstow, and closing it from the estuary at low tide by means of a metal swing-gate, is a sea wall. Along the edge are anchoring points for ropes; iron bollards and rings set into the stone. There are also those

mysterious stairs that you see only in harbours, the ones that lead beneath the water. Benches are there to eat fish and chips on by day, and to drink lager on at night-time; there are not enough bins here for both activities, and sea birds make free with the cast-offs.

Along this far part of the harbour Shadow and I now walked, arms and bodies linked. The Russians had finished their work and were in the deck-house drinking tea, or so it looked. They had china mugs at any rate. The gaze of both men was rapt upon a small television set.

Shadow's hip pressed against my leg, and her shoulder was close under my arm. I stepped carefully so as not to threaten her toes. Past water and boats the house party I had seen earlier continued a staccato laughter. In another age the sound would have annoyed me intensely. On the other side of us the estuary was silent, save for a sea buoy out in the darkness. Its bell clanged irregularly, and quite alone.

'You told me you're leaving soon,' I said. 'Is that right?'

Shadow nodded silently.

'When, exactly?'

'Tomorrow night. I'm sorry.'

'And you won't say where to?'

Shadow nodded again, but she looked up at me with bright eyes.

'You mean you will tell me?'

She nodded again quickly.

'So tell me.'

Shadow smiled and smoothly untangled our arms. She reached up and pressed her palms gently across my ears, pulling my head down. For our second time she kissed me and withdrew. Then she placed both hands behind her back and began to pull at her hair.

'I'm not winning here, am I?' I said.

Shadow shook her head, still smiling. Her hands made circling motions as she unwound her hair. As she pulled the braid free she leaned her head back and shook it out. She looped the braid several times between her hands and proffered it forward.

'Take.'

Shadow gathered the ends of her necklace and passed it to me wordlessly. Then she reached to the crown of her head and hesitated, her lips tightening. After a brief inertia she withdrew the comb and her hair fell across her face. She pushed it quickly over her shoulders. Then she touched the comb to her lips and briefly shut her eyes. Finally she pressed it into my free hand, folding my fingers around it.

'Look after.'

'I'm running out of hands,' I protested.

Shadow nodded but her eyes were unfocussed. She crossed her arms around her waist and pulled at the sides of her dress. It fell to the floor in one piece. She was, as I had suspected, naked beneath. She bent quickly and folded the garment across my arms.



'I'm not sure you should be doing this,' I said. 'You could get severely arrested.'

Shadow was facing half away from me, towards the harbour. She turned her head and smiled. 'Who, me?'

She faced the harbour again and touched the heels of her palms together above her head, a curious gesture. Eyes closed and body tense, she faced the water. The lower part of her hair, still curled from its binding, moved in a breeze from across the harbour. There was a synchronous clinking from the mast of a yacht further along the quay. I waited for Shadow to speak, but she did not. Below us and past the sea-gate, the Russians still sipped their mugs and watched their television. In the darkness behind us, the bell of the sea buoy clanked.

Slowly at first, but gathering speed, she fell forwards and into the water, hands and head first. There was no sound in her dive, and in the blackness where she had entered, a single ripple expanded a few yards, and vanished. I watched this place for several seconds and then wrapped her possessions, without much care, in the folds of her dress. I held it to my face. There was the scent of her, of a light sweat and of the wine we had drunk. I didn't want people to see my eyes. They were stinging. Some things are too much for us, at any age.

As I looked up again, past several boats and a stretch of greasy water there was a pale form. Shadow was across the harbour, upon one of the wooden posts that supported the jetty. Her feet hung in the water. Her face was away from me. People were on the quayside above her. Some had dined, they walked with, to my mind, an air of completion. Others must have been younger, with a faster pace. The rest were were of no one category. There were people in white shirts, jeans, evening gowns, waiters in suits, and businessmen with ties and jackets – all levels of society.

Shadow sat underneath all of them, hidden from view on her piece of wood. She moved once, turning a little my way, bringing her knees up to her chin and covering her face with her hair. I sat on a bench and held her things. The wind was blowing up and it played with the parts of her dress I hadn't folded properly. I felt cold around my shoulders. The wind over the harbour smelt of chip fat and garlic, of fish suppers, car exhausts and wine. I stroked her dress against my leg.

Shadow entered the water again, this time on the surface. She passed between two boats and I could see her wake separating and bouncing back from each keel. Her head was down and her hair was dark along her back. She moved quickly, and with little effort. There was an economy in her stroke that seemed to make the maximum of each part, and wasted no energy in splashes or bubbles. The same way she moved on land, I observed. Without effort.

Part way across the harbour Shadow twisted her legs out of sight and raised her head. Her face was towards me, but she made no sign of recognition. Then she rolled forwards and pushed beneath the water. This time I could follow her. She was a pale form maybe four or five feet below the surface, moving quickly and towards the nearest staircase. There she broke the surface, placed her hands upon the stone and pushed herself from the water.

We met at the top of the harbour stair. Her skin was oily in the moonlight, the hair plastered to her torso looked impossibly black. Her lips and her eyes too were dark. When I met her gaze there seemed at first nothing at all human in there, it was a blackness echoing the deeper parts of the sea from which she had emerged, of that place into which you might fall and never glimpse light again from the eyes of either body or spirit.

I cleared my throat and then proffered her dress forward. 'There are people coming.'

Shadow's stare was slowly humanizing. A smile brushed her lips. 'Too wet.'

'Okay, we'll do this again.' I pressed her clothing into her hands and twisted out of my jacket. I draped it around her shoulders. 'This isn't going to cover you like the last one. It's too short.'

Shadow moved slowly, wrapping my dinner jacket around her. She was still smiling. I touched her shoulders and helped her pull her hair over the outside. I reached past her arm to take her things back, and fastened her front buttons.

She looked up and backwards at me with big eyes. 'Is John cross with me?'

'No,' I muttered. 'I'm getting used to it. I've got a beach towel in my car, by the way.' I looked at her critically. 'Just please don't run.'

She raised an eyebrow. 'Why not?'

'You'll get some unusual looks.'

Shadow turned around and raised her arms onto my shoulders. The jacket hem rose above her hips. She lifted her nose and pressed it close to mine. 'Very cross?'

'Yes, and he's going to get arrested in a minute.'

Shadow looked at me incomprehensibly. 'Gotcha,' she said, and dropped back off her toes.

I opened my mouth to speak but Shadow pressed her palm against my lips.

I had at that moment an uncalled-for recollection, of a piece I had written some years previous. It was called 'Passage to the Sun', and I played a part in it, although a minor one. In this role I travelled, as a child, the coasts of Indo-China on a stolen boat, looking for a fabled lost island. I never finished the piece but I had enjoyed losing myself, for a while, in amongst the sea surf and rice fields of the nineteenth-century Orient.

Sometimes our hearts know things to which our eyes are blind. Although I had enjoyed writing the tale I had never completed it as the quest was a figurative one; we sometimes lose that which we seek along the way and such a tale is no more than a continual retracement of previous footsteps, on such a journey one can become further lost but never found, and so the way to the Island of the Sun was never found either.

Once on a market stall I found a story book like that, one from which the pages had become detached in clusters and the stall holder had put them all back, but in the wrong order, so the sense of them was lost but the story was still all there. Fascinated with the idea I had bought the tale and taken it home to read; certain passages in it

may have been improved, but most were destroyed totally, as one might have guessed, I suppose.

Yet to me the greatest tales of all are those that begin and end with the same moment; a day in the life of, or a story with a setting so distant in time and space that all movement becomes undetectable and any one passage can be read next to any other. This way of storytelling comes at the expense of knowing how things will finish, perhaps the best stories never do.

\* \* \*

'Towel,' I said to Shadow. 'Car.'

She was still smiling. 'You called it a chariot.'

'It's a figurative one. 'Car' will do for now. Mainly it's somewhere you can put your clothes on.'

'I prefer chariot.' She proffered a hand. 'Take me there.'

I nodded quickly and then led Shadow along the harbour wall, past darkened gift shops and the pub and the eateries. I kept between her and other people as much as I could.

I watched the faces of those we passed. The difference between diffidence and outrage is slim; it is in the twitch of a mouth, a frown held too long, a breaking of the no-eyes-contact rule. A child pointed once from its pushchair, its mouth making a big 'O'; otherwise Shadow passed through the crowds like her name; a little dark-haired vision with a strange smile and a borrowed half-coat, holding an anxious-faced man. She stepped quietly and the water from her hair made a drip-trail on the pavement behind her.

I was glad when we reached my car, and not a little relieved. English reserve knows no bounds, sometimes. I settled her into the passenger seat with a towel around her middle and her possessions on her lap.

She moved slowly, like someone half-dreaming, lifting aside the folds of material.

'Where is it from, out of interest?' I said.

She looked at me quizzically.

'Your dress,' I added. 'It's interesting. I noticed when I was holding it, it's beautifully done.'

'I made it. I like to make things when I'm alone. It's just something I do.'

'And are you, uh, often alone?'

'Not right now. Are we going soon?' She had retrieved her comb and was studying it blankly.

'Any time you want.' I reached above her and flicked down the sun visor. 'There's a mirror if you need one. The light works when you open it.'

Shadow nodded and started to comb her hair. The way she worked was interesting. She gripped it between palm and comb and pulled it slowly down the

whole length. With her free hand she teased out another part. I could see the whole thing was going to take a while.

'I can't drive until you've finished,' I said.

'Uh-huh.' Shadow was carefully squeezing water onto the towel on her lap. 'Tell me a story then. It's your turn.'

One suiting the occasion, I decided. Mysterious. I pondered the harbour-scape before us. There was music now, from one of the cruising yachts there, although I couldn't see any activity. There were living quarters below deck, of course. The voice was that of a woman or a girl, slow and unaccompanied, although too low to make out words or language. I checked a mental list of pubs on the way back that might still be serving. It depended on the route, really. A lot of things depend on the way you approach them.

'This a true account of a thing that I saw, but also an unreal angle, an interpretation, so it's like a story.' I paused. 'I'm not making sense. I'll just tell the day the way it happened.'

I rested back against the seat and folded my hands behind my head. Besides me Shadow continued to comb. Her head was down but she kept checking the mirror. Her brow was furrowed in concentration.

'The day the sun rose out of the sea,' I continued. 'We face west on this coast, so that's impossible. Nevertheless I saw it happen. And lots of others had come to see it, there was quite a crowd, people from every country in the world.'

I let my eyes drift from one side of the harbour to the other. 'Every country. Or that's what it seemed like. It was a solar eclipse, you see, and the totality was right here in Cornwall.'

I paused as the recollection came back to me. The day of my memories had been high summer, or getting near. Although the forecasters had put their best shine on the weather, the clouds were low and heavy, and no sun was there, save for a dull glow in one part.

An air of climax had been building nonetheless, and the streams of people that came to cliff-tops and beaches had a sense of the party about them. The numbers were difficult to figure. There might have been half a million, or one, along the whole coast. All around me had been pulled towards the edge, in some way, although things would have looked the same from moor-crest or church spire, it was the sea that had called them to witness, and both water and sky were the same colour, ash grey.

'And it got darker,' I said. 'Pretty much on cue, and it didn't seem much at first but the light kept on fading. At totality you couldn't see very much around you. It wasn't night-time, but it wasn't daylight either.'

I pressed my fingers to my forehead. There had been fireworks too at that moment, from across the Newquay bay, and then below them, ten thousand camera flash lights. The street lighting of the town may also have come on - all the things that can ruin the show if you are nearby.

'And when the sun rose again,' I said. 'It came from the West.' I lowered my hand and looked at Shadow. 'A trick of Nature, you see. The sky was so heavy that day that the sun wasn't much visible, it was the clouds that were shining. And the first ones to clear the totality were right over the ocean. Of which we had a clear view. It was quite unique. You could watch a hundred solar eclipses and never see one like it.'

I momentarily closed my eyes. Also impossible to describe. A fire rising out of the western ocean, speeded up like a film, from first glimpse to full dawn being less than a minute. I remembered there was a central portion like a solar sphere, but larger, this being the most distant part of the sky which had cleared the moon's shadow first, and then a line of light spreading upon either side. The new sunrise came and then the dawn swept overhead like a wave from the sun. Except that it was a wave from the moon. The sun had remained in one place; it was the shadow upon the Earth that had come and gone, hence the backward movement.

As I opened my eyes I saw Shadow had paused in her combing. 'What did you think of at that moment?' she said.

'How do you mean? Which moment?'

She shrugged. 'Any of them. Whatever felt most important.'

'Mainly, how long it would last. The height of the totality was beautiful. I didn't want it to end.'

'Did you see any stars?'

'It wasn't that kind of sky.'

Shadow was silent for a few seconds, then she looked at me quizzically. 'You know some funny stories.'

'I know.' I un-knotted my hands from their repose. 'How's the hair now? It looks a lot better.'

'Appearances can be wrong,' she muttered. 'It's right when it feels right.' She blinked at herself in the mirror. 'Can I have this? I like it.'

'What, the mirror?'

'Uh-huh.'

'You can but I think it's glued in. Also the light won't work away from the car.'

'Oh, okay.' Shadow pushed sun visor and mirror back against the roof. She slid her comb into the top of her hair. 'We can go now.'

I spread my hands. 'Which way?'

'Back to our beach.' Shadow turned towards me in the car seat and curled, child-like, into an attitude of repose. She blinked at me sombrely. 'I'm tired. I want to sleep.'

'Yes, of course.' I keyed the car into life. From the dashboard a familiar set of lights came on. Fuel, oil, temperature, clock; the latter being a quarter past midnight. Fair enough.

I pushed out of Padstow with few thoughts on my mind except one intrusive one about getting petrol the next day. Sometimes we can distract ourselves with such

things, other times we can poison our thoughts quite easily.

Beside me the Shadow Girl watched my movements and said nothing. Outside the car a slow rain began to settle in and it dusted the windscreen. I put the wipers on. The weather was changing. It was that time of year. Summer slips into Autumn too quickly sometimes. As we left the town, I glanced again at Shadow. She was curled up against the passenger seat, with her dress folded in two over her knees. Her hands were under her neck and she was breathing lightly. Her eyes were closed. I looked at her a second time before the light faded. She turned slightly towards me at that moment but her face didn't change.

The Shadow Girl was fast asleep.

\* \* \*

Of all the terrors that could visit a small community, amongst the very worst is a gang of children with easy access to combustibles, and the means to ignite them. Whilst my childhood companions and I had never endangered life or property by intent, the single-mindedness with which we worked our incendiary art upon everything must often have caused distress.

The shoreline at Mawgan Porth was the main gathering-place for firewood. Lumber of any size from matchwood to tree trunks would eventually arrive here; to be dragged and assembled from the beach to the top of the sand dune, or into a cave for the full pyrotechnic effect, or across the road and further on into any of a dozen secret locations, where it could then be ignited at a time of our choosing. This would be night time, preferably, although a degree of shelter here was necessary, as flames and rising sparks carried wide, and word wider, under the clear sky of a summer's evening.

Other things to burn could also be found on the shoreline; stoppered glass bottles, aerosol cans with foreign writing, tar balls, broken and unguessable pieces of plastic, fish nets, rubber balls and long filaments of nylon string. Each brought its' own fizz, bang or coloured flame to a fire, and all were worth trying for effect, even the big lumps of rubber that cushioned fishing nets from boats. These would not burn openly but if placed into the centre of a fire would cause the air to become heavy and thick, quite unbreathable, and hurtful to the eyes.

\* \* \*

I stopped my car beside the filling station at Mawgan Porth, this being the closest point to the beach entrance. There seemed to be no-one about, even the pub had closed its doors and extinguished the lights. Besides me Shadow was sleeping like the proverbial, and whether she faked it or not, I could not rouse her. She was curled up child-like, her hair over her face and her elbows and knees touching. I stopped shaking her shoulder and rested my forehead against the steering wheel.

Before me a red light blinked, as it had done all journey, to the effect that someone in the car was not wearing a safety belt. It was an unwanted distraction. What to do?

My camp site was lit but crudely, by those lines of elbow level lights that are supposed to be discreet but in reality cause strange illusions of shadow and colour. Our vision is designed for scenes lit from above, not below, and carrying a person through them, even one as light as Shadow, is not easy.

Once in the van I rested her along the TV couch and quickly closed the curtains. I eyed up the things lying around, some unwashed meal stuff and my collection of writing tools; notepads mainly, you need a lot of them sometimes. My fishing gear. A few clothes. Oops.

Shadow was watching me. She wasn't moving but her eyes had opened.

'Ah, you're awake,' I said.

She shook her head and her gaze dropped to the couch on which she lay. She uncurled an arm and stroked the material with the back of her hand.

'Do you want to go somewhere?' I added. 'I wasn't sure what to do.'

Shadow shook her head again and closed her eyes. I knelt down beside her. 'Is there anything I can get you?'

She opened her eyes again. 'The moon. A beach after dark and a cocktail waiter called Marcello.' She frowned. 'Or Samuel or something. Yes, that sounds better. I want to call him, Sam.'

I leaned closer. 'You know it's raining outside?'

'Not on my beach it isn't.'

'Not on mine, either.'

Shadow's kiss was slower this time, and the taste of her was sweet, not salty. She soon pushed the towel from her hips. Later on she pulled the comb out of her hair and placed it on the floor amongst her clothing. Even at that moment she was careful, folding the cloth neatly around it and then nudging the parcel under a seat so it wouldn't be stood upon in the morning.

## Chapter Six

The rain lasted the night and the main part of the morning. It didn't cease at once but returned every half hour or so, lessening by degrees. There was also a mist, like smoke from the sea, that came and went too, but following a pattern of its own, adding both complexity and mystery to the day.

Gradually both cleared and by lunchtime there was a sunshine on the camp site that you could rely upon; some of the campers, sensing the change, started to load car boots with windbreaks and folding chairs, portable barbecues, newspapers, beach hats and sandals. Others, less trusting of the sky, set up station outside caravan or tent, placing radios, wine bottles, mobile phones and sandwich wrappers upon the tables in front of them, and moved their attention from one to the other ceaselessly while they conversed.

Shadow was slow to waken and lifeless that morning. In the moments of sunlight her face looked overly pale and not a little drawn. I saw her hair was both darker and lighter than I expected, there were other colours beneath the red, from fair to quite black, so under different lights one colour might dominate the others; one mystery solved, at any rate. Her eyes were darker than the ones I was used to, more blue-green now than emerald. I'd been wrong about her years. The daylight had put five more on her, maybe more.

She lay naked for all of the morning, under our improvised bedding on the couch, although she seemed okay there. She smiled when I looked at her, and she ate the toast and drank the coffee I brought her mid-morning, the rest of the time her head was down; reading, with as much intent as I could determine, the still-growing manuscript of my childhood. She turned the pages slowly, and with what seemed like exaggerated care. An excuse, I decided eventually. Not to talk.

With the brightening of the weather I spoke my own excuse and took a circular walk to the shop. To give her a chance to leave. I should consider going too, I told myself. A part of me almost believed that I could.

On my return Shadow had left the caravan, but not as far as I expected. As I walked around one corner of the van, carrier bag and newspaper in hand, she appeared from the other. Ran, rather. She wore my shirt from the previous evening, with the sleeves rolled above her elbows, and around her waist, delicately but dangerously tied, was the beach towel. She halted before me, panting. There was laughter in her eyes. Then she glanced behind her. From between caravan and thicket came first a chorus of yells and then there emerged one, two, three small forms, two boys and a girl, the oldest no more than four, and all intent on bringing Shadow to bay.

'Oh!' she cried, and she ran off at an angle. The children determinedly changed direction and chased after. Between caravans and cars, over tent ropes and flower beds, behind dustbins and shrubs, the chase went. They reversed order several times, with Shadow alternately catching and being caught by her little tribe. Soon they all



fell onto to a shaded area of grass and Shadow gathered the children around her with her arms. With heads bent low they talked in whispers, telling stories, I suspected, secret ones.

When Shadow came to the caravan again she had two flower-chains around her neck, one of daisies, one of celandines; of silver and of gold. As she entered I rested my pen on my writing pad.

'You look a bit happier,' I said.

She blinked at me, big eyed. 'I was never unhappy.'

'Earlier on. You were quiet.'

'I was reading.' She smiled. And now I'm not. And you're too quiet as well.'

'Am I?' I raised my eyebrows. 'In what way?'

'Your book. It's all over it. A story you're not telling.'

'You'll have to explain that. I'm just writing about my childhood.'

She turned towards the little cabin bedroom. 'Then carry on.' She half turned back. 'Can I borrow your stuff for a while? And no peeking.'

'Sure. What stuff do you need?'

Shadow pouted. 'We are going out later, aren't we?'

'Be my guest. I don't have much you can wear, though. Most of it's a bit male.'

'Uh-huh,' Shadow said, and slipped into the cabin. She clicked the lock behind her.

I sighed and bent again over my work. The sun through the willow trees above the caravan made finger-patterns on the table top. I checked my watch. Two O'clock. A couple of hours writing time and then a late lunch. Maybe my companion would come for a walk then. We could go through the long field, across the old footbridge and through the woods to St. Mawgan. I scratched my ear with the pen. The patterns of light and shadow waved again across my notepad. This tale was not pulling together.

My main trouble was that I was running out of things to write about. Putting a whole childhood into a few hundred pages felt like you'd have plenty spare, but I had the opposite problem. I squeezed my eyes. Did children ever get bored? Of course they did. There must have been too many days when the rain fell endlessly, or when nothing interesting happened on the beach, when bicycles had punctures or when everyone went shopping with their parents; the day after the last of the summer visitors left, the day someone's dog died; the day of the broken racket strings, of the lost wellies, the day of the argument. I just don't remember them too well.

Sometimes our lives can be blank spaces bound together by interesting moments. I flicked through the empty pages. I was having one of the latter today. I wasn't doing a good job of distracting myself.

I leaned back and knotted my hands behind my head. The sun was pleasant on the backs of my fingers. I could hear the caravan fridge, and through the window a conversation from nearby, also an unknown radio set, and yells and splashes from the distant swimming pool. Shadow's end of the caravan was still silent. I closed my

eyes, to summon up the images I needed to write.

I could see a beach, and walking along it, three children trailing sticks behind them to make patterns. I could see a kite being repeatedly thrown into the air. A fire in a cave being fed with driftwood, one stick at a time. A long haired dog running out of the water. A flooded stream with an improvised raft being pushed into it. A barbed fence with a boot across the middle so the rest of us could step over. The things we see and the things we don't. Amongst the latter group; anyone older than us, the clock, any constraints of money and circumstance, endings.

I opened my eyes and reached for the pen. Write about the next thing you visualize. A childish exercise, but compelling.

I could see a girl with red hair, bent low over the grass, so low that heads touched together. Her eyes bright and her lips moving silently. A girl with golden flowers around her neck. A girl crying her love into the night. Secrets and stories. Songs and dreams. And the things I couldn't see: Children running forward and back, chasing, who? A girl with an invisible home and no past.

The final image stuck in my mind. I set the pen down again, page untouched. Then I rubbed my eyes. These late nights were getting to me. I leaned back into the sunlight and closed my eyes again. Maybe lunch could wait.

\* \* \*

I awoke with a start and a very stiff neck. Shadow was shaking me. The light through the windows was different. I rose from the couch and checked my watch. It was seven in the evening. Damn.

I blinked at her several times. 'What have you done to yourself?' I said. 'You look very..'

'Pagan?' Shadow replied. 'Come-on. I want to go out. You laying there's no use at all.'

'Okay,' I said, still eyeing her curiously. 'Have you been here all this time?'

She lifted her chin. 'More than you have.' She proffered her hands. 'Come on.'

I looked at the curve of her breasts through the material, raised slightly by her gesture. At the fine decoration above her hips, the knotted flowers on her neck.

'Is that my shirt?' I said.

'Two of them,' Shadow answered. She dropped her arms and turned around. I nodded. I could see how she had done it: Take the arms, collars and buttons from two white shirts and trim the remainder into a pair of rectangles. Wrap one around your middle and the other around your breasts. Fix both in some invisible fashion that probably involves the removed buttons. Gather your hair behind you at shoulder height and fasten with your favourite comb. Finally paint face, legs and torso with birds and woodland flowers. It was the last part that was difficult. Where on Earth did she get body paints from?

'How did you do your back?' I asked.

Shadow extended her arms again. One of them was patterned to the wrist with green ivy, the other had a swallow diving from her shoulder. A popular theme. There was a larger one on her upper back. 'My secret, remember? Come-on.'

I took her hands and stood up. 'Where to? We should eat, I think. I'm just not sure.' I looked at her eyes. Around them were two fine petalled flowers. Celandines, again. 'Where I can take you.'

'I had some already.' Shadow dropped my hand and pointed at the little fridge. 'Your food isn't very interesting.'

'It's only for snacks. Maybe we can eat later. We've a couple of hours of daylight. Let's make the most of them.'

\* \* \*

We passed through the long field without speaking, hands tightly together, enjoying the last warmth of the sun on our backs, and taking in the sensations from the trees around us and the swamp below. The young wood was silent, in the main, and water still shone on the undersides of the leaves and in the shaded spaces beneath the lines of trees.

From the swamp came clicking noises and an irregular fluting, frogs and marsh-birds I think, and that distinctive smell; old car tyres and Marmite. As we neared the field exit I gave Shadow's hand an affectionate squeeze.

'You're quiet?'

She looked at me with her eyebrows raised. 'Your book,' she answered. 'Why did you decide to write it?'

'Well that's my own secret, in a way. I became aware that my childhood was much more hands-on than ones today. More real. We had television, of course, but there wasn't much sophistication. We rarely watched it. Nowadays children just seem to look at life through a video screen.' I paused. 'My childhood experiences are disappearing. It's very sad.'

Shadow smiled. 'Why not just say how bad the old television was?'

'People probably know that. Some of the programs are still around.'

'I don't know. I've never seen a television.'

I dropped Shadow's hands and looked at her. Starting at the side of her chin and winding in several ways down her body was drawn a vine or an ivy plant. Its roots began around the flare of her hips and the tendrils emerged from below the improvised waist band. A solitary root trailed down the inside of her thigh and ended above her knee. The colours and the brush strokes were very detailed. It must have taken her? I honestly don't know how long.

Her eyes became sad. 'You don't believe me?'

'No, I do. I'm just confused.'

She glanced at the gate and the little path that led to the footbridge. 'I like stories, that's all. And music. Things you get involved with.'

\* \* \*

Shadow and I joined hands again as we approached the little footbridge. It was, as in my memories from youth, a single length of concrete with a metal guide rail upon either side. The stream here is around eight feet wide and between one and three deep, depending on the season. Right now it was at its lower extreme, despite the rain; the response time would be one or two days, from experience.

The crossing itself is overhung from both sides with mature willows, beneath them are hemlock, bramble and nettles. The rushes of the swamp have ended by now, from here on a darkness shines from between the root-humps, stumps and fallen branches of the trees, darkness and an evil smell, for this is the start of the woodlands, and it is a wet one, being of the same nature as the swamp, save in aspect to the sea.

We stopped part way along the bridge to rest on the handrail and watch the water. I think that half the people that cross here do the same; it is that kind of rail. The air between eye and stream quivered with evening midges, and the water was in shadow save for one part where sunlight entered from the west, angling between the banks of the stream.

'Sunset's within the hour,' I said. 'We shouldn't walk too far.'

There was a leaf turning in an eddy in the stream below us. It was trapped there, going around and around an invisible centre. I discovered that we were both watching it.

'That leaf's doing my head in,' I said, after a few seconds. 'Going around too fast.'

'Can you catch it?'

'I need a stick.' I stepped to the end of the bridge and peered at the undergrowth. I returned after a minute with a suitable find, a whippy length of branch. I squatted on my haunches and pushed the stick through the handrail and into the stream.

'Look at that. First time.'

'I'll take.' Shadow extended her palm.

I pulled the stick back and raised the end, with its leaf attached, within her reach. She lifted it off carefully and pushed the end into the material around her hips. The leaf adhered to her skin, its coating of water holding it there. It wasn't alone. There were similar painted all around her waist.

I tossed the stick onto the stream bank. It entered the mud tip first and held there, wobbling gently.

'So how come you don't watch telly then?' I watched the stick settle into the stream. 'Go-on. I'm fascinated.'

'Where I live there's no television. Or cars. There's no point.'

'Where is that then?'

She lowered her head over the rail. 'You wanted to guess, remember?'

'That was a while ago. Things are different now. Aren't they?'

Shadow was staring down at the water. 'Some things are different. Others are just missing.'

She had spoken through her hair and her voice was flat. I put an arm over her shoulders. We stayed motionless upon the rail for several minutes, watching the water. Around us the light lessened. I watched the stream below flow darkly on, carrying more leaves to the sea.

She raised her head and blinked at me. Her eyes were moist.

'I can't tell you where I'm from. I just can't.'

I was silent for several seconds. 'I'm not sure what to say now.'

'I hoped my stories would be enough.'

She dropped her gaze and stared once more at the water. I followed her gaze to the dark flow below us. The stream here was like a fabric being continuously woven and unwoven. Change without change. Stasis in motion.

'All we've done is tell stories, really. I still don't know you.'

'You have this talent,' she answered, after a few long seconds. 'For saying completely the wrong thing. Please don't say anything else.'

We walked in silence up to the ridge that divided the Vale of Lanherne. Here was the inland road to St. Mawgan and for the pedestrian, a choice - onward or back. The road looked sterile after the organic shapes of the woods. I took the lead along the edge. Shadow followed in silence, keeping her eyes upon the tarmac.

As I walked I recalled an image from my childhood. In the dark places between the stars, as we know from telescopes, are more stars. I saw this once, courtesy of a man whose hands were too old to steady the eyepiece for himself. The missing stars are very beautiful, and of many colours and secret constellations.

## Chapter Seven

How often do we seek that which we have forgotten exists? I do now, as it happens, recall the wet days and the lacklustre times of my childhood, if writing them down has a purpose then let it be this: I now understand that unseen force in my early life, that in the storm clouds and the ragged seas, in the rivers in flood and the endless rain.

Twice each year the Newquay bay fills like a bath left running, for this is the time of the spring and autumn tides, when sun and moon pull together at the waters and it is also a time, at the beginning and the end of the high season, of storms and sea gales.

Transitions like this can be unusual. As a youth I once saw in the bay a water spout, a sea tornado, hanging from an extraordinarily dark cloud. The turning of cloud around funnel was fast and all but silent, and the spout itself was pale and ribbony. It was difficult to sense, without using the intellect, whether sea had joined to sky or the opposite; at each end it flared out and on the sea was a gyre mirroring that above. Of interest is that there was no wind upon my face or stirring the dune-grasses; there was no wind perhaps, because it was all in one place.

When the spout approached our beach I thought the village might have a fine show, but upon passing the headlands the middle broke quite suddenly, and when it reached the boundary of water and sand, the lower part was no more than a circle of scoured foam. As the cloud column passed above me it lifted my hair and the bushes stirred, but these signs were all that remained of it.

The more enduring storms were those of autumn and of winter. Then the beach was assaulted, there being no more suitable word, and its defences being sometimes inadequate, would be overrun and the waves would enter the centre and low parts of the village. The lowest point of all was the filling station, and the shop counter at the front and the workshop behind, would submerge and then remain so, for water flowing over the road would bring sand, and it would also gather up the swept piles of it, for when the autumn wind blew long and hard enough in the right direction it would add a layer of sand like a yellow snowfall, and these too would be washed along by the waves and into every drain grate and pipe, and block them utterly.

The lifeguards' hut upon the beach was also vulnerable, although its platform had been raised in my youth by several courses of blocks, there was a week or so between the start of the storm season and the time that the men came to remove it, and sometimes the results of this negligence were interesting. What the sea was not inclined to do the wind would sometimes finish, either by tipping it over or once, by lifting the roof followed by the wall panels over the sand dunes and onto the road. There are no old beach huts on this part of the coastline.

\* \* \*

I found myself studying the road in both directions. Across from us was an unmade track down to the second tributary of the Menanhil. 'This is an old favourite,' I said. 'We meet the river again at the bottom.'

The lane was careful going; there were tractor-ruts full of water, and nettles, brambles and grasses had been pushed into it by the rain. In the centre was a low hump, and my companion kept hold of my hand as she stepped down it. Half way down she seemed to get bored; she switched hands with me, turned around and started walking backwards. She lifted her free arm high. Her steps were slow from then on, and precise.

In this odd fashion we gained our second bridge over the Menanhil. This one was no more than a length of concrete, and much overhung with weeds; in a motor vehicle you might miss it, and the river, entirely.

Her eyes looked a little brighter. We both stared at the river. The channel here was deep, but natural. The retaining banks were dug from the silt of the fields, but they curved to follow the form of the stream. On the bank across from us was a small hole; of a mouse, a water rat or some sort of bird. I briefly wondered what happened to the occupants when the water rose. Presumably mice could swim?

Light and shadow was around us on the meadows and upon the river. As the sun lowered each contour had become exaggerated, so the flatness of a drained marsh was now a landscape of hills and valleys, of settlements, woodlands and rivers, all in miniature. The sun was below cliff-level and was shining clear down the valley. Only at certain times of year would it do this. The light drew all the senses towards it. If sunsets could have had a sound then this was a deep chord played on many strings; the call of an approaching autumn.

'I remember paddling up here once in a dinghy,' I said, carefully. 'A beach one.' I studied the river banks. 'It must have been smaller than I remember.' I spread my arms. 'About yay width? Nothing else would get through here. Of course, it's all relative. We were smaller then, too.'

'In your book you made the boats.'

'I did that as well.' I nodded. 'But not very good ones. We were a bit obsessed for a while, but had no carpentry skills, you see. It's difficult to keep water out just with string.'

Shadow curled her arm around mine and inclined her head into my shoulder. I stroked her hair. She was looking fair again; another trick of the waning light.

'And wood from pallets and oil drums and fish netting,' she added. 'You said you used all of those things.'

'That we did. Anything laying around.'

She was silent for a few seconds. 'I know a boat story. But it's a sad one.'

'I'd like to hear it.'

She lifted her head and her eyes caught mine and they were bright. 'Make me something first. Something out of anything. Anything at all.'

'What would you like?'

'Anything out of something then. That's better. A better use of things.'

I looked along the track. 'There's not much around. Some netting in that hedge but it looks in use.'

She pointed. 'From the river then.'

I peered down. 'That could be difficult. Natural materials were never my forte.' I paused. 'You'll have to let go of me first.' We uncurled and I knelt to the concrete. 'There's always something under bridges,' I explained. 'Here we are.'

I stood up again with my haul, that being a couple of willow switches; they had been trapped between stream-side and bridge roof. I busied myself stripping the leaves off, by drawing each branch through my clenched hand. You see this done on television. It actually works.

'Mine,' said Shadow, extending her palm. She began pushing the leaves, which were mottled green and brown, into the top of the cloth about her chest.

'There,' she announced. 'Do they suit me?'

'I really couldn't say. You look a bit Hawaiian.' I raised the willow sticks. 'What do I do with these?'

She reached around my arm and guided my hands. 'In half like this. Then twist the ends around. Like making a basket.'

'Are we making a basket?'

'No. A boat.' She was frowning in concentration. 'This end's the stern.'

'The sticks won't hold together. They're too young.'

'String,' Shadow murmured. 'You said we needed string.'

'Every good boat has some.'

She was turning the bundle over in her hands. We were a little tangled up ourselves. I could feel her breast touching my side.

Her eyes were sad again. 'You said you couldn't make good boats.'

'I don't know how to.' I turned and brought my hands up to her shoulders. 'That's different. We can all learn.'

'You're squashing my boat,' Shadow said, after a few seconds. She separated from me and glanced at the sunset. 'It's going to rain.'

'It's just some clouds. We won't see rain until the morning.'

'I won't be here then.'

I followed her gaze across the fields and towards the sea. 'I'm sorry I upset you back there.' I said, after another pause. 'I didn't mean to be pushy.'

'That's okay.'

'We started talking about my book. I didn't ask if you like it?'

'Yes I do.' Shadow met my eyes. 'It's about children growing up by the sea. It's nice.'

'Thanks. I don't always know what people like to read.'

Shadow dropped her gaze to the bundle in her hands. 'I want you to keep this for me,' she said, slowly. 'When it's all dried I want you to weave it together properly. Using only itself. Then I want you to think about the things we've done together. I



want you to think about me. I want you to be alone when you do this.'

'Of course. I'm sorry, I'm feeling emotional now.'

Shadow raised her eyebrows. 'It's only a boat.'

'I'm sorry.' I took the folded sticks from her and pushed them into an inner pocket. It'll be a good one, I promise.'

She smiled again. 'I'll tell the story now.' She gestured seawards, along the river bank. On the raised portion was a path, little known, mainly just brushed down grass where the farmer walked to keep out of the field mud. 'Where next? This way?'

'Yes. Watch the fence. Best if I hold it.'

I bent and spread the wires carefully. There were climbing stiles along this route, but old ones and rotten. Shadow slipped easily through the gap. I followed with a little less dignity. It's awkward to both hold, and to let yourself through, at the same time. I have never mastered the art.

'Are you okay?' she asked.

'I'll repair. It's just a coat.'

Shadow was looking thoughtful. 'We can't hold hands here. It's too narrow.'

I nodded blankly.

'Follow me,' she said, and gestured along the embankment with her arm.

\* \* \*

I stepped into line behind her. Shadow was walking into the sun, but there was just enough light from above to see her by. As we walked I studied the darkening forms on her back. The swallow on the upper part was stylised, with the wings swept back to form a circle. Her head was slightly inclined, and upon her neck through her hair, I could see a pattern like water dripping through leaves. The curve of her spine was wrapped with an ivy vine; at her hips it spread out and made roots, these passed beneath the material at her waist and into darkness, of several kinds.

The union of man and woman is a one way journey. Once the spell has been said they will always remain together, if only in memory. After Shadow and I made love she cried for a long time, and with many tears. For that above all, I knew then I would always love her, always miss her.

She then began to speak, but softly. Indeed she caught me out. Fascinated as I was with the enchantment of her hips, that of her voice took a second or two to get through.

'... and the sea,' she was saying. 'Begets a dream. From the shoreline an old voice whispers into the night: "Come child, for she is waiting. Do not delay. There is much to tell you."' '

She turned and smiled at me over her shoulder. 'And the story book opens, the tale begins.'

After a few seconds I nodded reflectively. 'I'm trying not to interrupt. But which story book are we talking about?'

She turned back towards the dying sun. 'My next one. Isn't that enough?'

We continued walking and Shadow addressed the sunset once more. 'Upon an island in the midst of a great bay, there lives a queen. Golden-haired and azure-eyed she is now, for she is the brightest of all the stars. Her eyes fascinate and draw all to her. Her breasts and her skin are white. Many once made the journey there to gaze upon a loveliness undimmed by the passing of time. Only the luxuries of the modern age have dimmed her in men's eyes, they see her now as an everyday thing, if they see her at all.'

Shadow stopped walking, and she glanced down to the river, then back to the sun. 'John. I want you beside me.'

'Is there room?' I asked.

'Now.'

I stepped up close. We were of necessity, close together upon the bank. She looked up at me, expressionlessly. 'You're undressing me in your head. I can feel it.'

After a second or two of silence, I blinked back at her. 'You were describing a beautiful woman.' I touched her side. 'You are, too.'

Shadow's eyes refocussed somewhere else. I could see the change in them. 'Then follow me. Come to the end of the river. Prove yourself there.'

I withdrew my hand. 'I thought we were going there anyhow.'

'We are.' She raised an eyebrow. 'Anything else?'

We resumed our walk. Staying beside Shadow on the slope was difficult, so I walked a few steps river-ward. She seemed content to let me wander. The bank rose up and down, and there were nettles and reeds to step around, so we couldn't have held hands for long. Following my small boy instinct, I soon acquired a stick to swish around and to touch the water with. I don't know why we have to do this, it's just a male thing. I also pocketed more leaves from the stream, to give to Shadow later. She seemed to like them.

The areas of darkness around us were spreading. As I finished my experiments with the stick, Shadow began to speak again.

'As our story begins,' she said, keeping her eyes upon the one sunlit area of sky. 'The queen of the island is in conversation with visitors. There is a boat drawn up on the sand, and the men kneeling before her are soldiers, grim of face and of purpose. For their news is grave indeed: Great Troy is fallen, and all is lost. They call upon her to leave. But when she speaks she looks to the West, and towards a fading sun.'

"This sun will not rise again," she says. "And our fate is now bound to it. We must go where it goes. My own star is fading too. Now I will be, in the tongue of your conquerors, Skiá-theá, the Goddess of Shadows. This is my will."

"My lady," one replies. "What will become of you?"

"They will take me in chains to Olympus, there to be the plaything of their gods and the mistress of their bed-chambers. Women will call upon me for revenge upon their husbands and fighting men will mock my service." Then she spits upon the sand before them. "Thus is your goddess humbled. This is your will."

“What must we do?” the men ask.

“Olympus will one day fall. Look well upon this sun, for it is your last. Follow it into the West. Take to your boats and keep your eyes upon it. Never lose sight of your last sun. For the next sun, this Greek sun, will one day burn all the Earth. Do not live under its light. And another thing.”

The men raise their heads again, but with little hope in their eyes.

“I will not leave you entirely. I will be in the songs, and in the dances and the stories. Remember me in these things. I will always be there.”

Shadow's voice, like her footsteps through the grass, had trailed to a halt. The silence of this place became apparent. The south arm of the valley is unsettled, being in shade for half of the year. There are no roads here, only tracks and paths. The sole noise is from the river as it pushes past the reeds along each bank.

'Interesting. If I recall Homer's Iliad,' I said. 'The protectress of Troy was Aphrodite. The goddess of the sea. She was on Cyprus prior to Olympus. But I don't recall she ever changed her name and sailed off into the West.' I frowned. 'Writers have tried to link Greek and Celtic mythology. But I don't think any succeeded.'

'One ocean has many seas. Your ancestors came here on boats. Do you think that's all they brought? Just boats?'

'Some writing paper would have been useful.'

'Why? Most of the old tales were songs.' Shadow turned away. 'Writing them out doesn't work.'

I studied the river for a few seconds. It was now as black as oil, and depth-less. There were no shadows across its surface, only reflections of the sky.

'So did they remember?' I asked. 'The men from the boat? Did they remember their goddess?'

'For a while. It was a long time ago. All men forget, eventually.'

\* \* \*

After the hippie garden at Mawgan Porth became abandoned it was ignored by the world for a while, and it overgrew. The old man outlived his wife by some years and he finished in a care home somewhere. I returned at this time to see the paths and the old caravans, as is my want, and was struck then by the strangeness of the once familiar.

Now I saw for the first time the packing-wood, the insulation materials, the wiring, the canvas and the gas-lines that had once maintained life; for time had not been kind to the caravans, nor had the scrap-metal thieves. Only when a simple form decays can we see the complexity of the underlying mechanism. I mean this in several ways. Once when nearly broke I took a job in the preparation room of a local undertakers; it was interesting work, but once in a lifetime is enough.

Of the vans themselves, those that still had a structure contained snapshots of a vanished era. Amongst the broken china and packing boxes were fragments of the

lifestyle; tarot packs, crystals, charms of paper and wood, incense burners, cheaply printed Indian books, hash pipes, soapstone statues, half-finished tapestries. All had suffered from the elements, with dust and mould upon the bright colours, and also ash from old fires, fragments of burnt paper, and leaves that had blown in.

The garden itself was still oddly productive, with raspberries which had pushed their roots far through the sand and emerged into anywhere damp and shady. Strawberries had followed the same path above ground with their runners. In a greenhouse I found self-seeded tomatoes bearing fruit, and courgettes and cucumbers the same way in outside frames. There were still carp in the pond.

I left the old garden with a difficult mixture of feelings. As I climbed out over broken walls I realised I was looking for something in the caravans, but whether I passed through each one without recognising it, or if the item I searched for had already gone, I do not know.

\* \* \*

'I guess it's my turn to tell a story.' I raised my eyes from the water. The moon was now visible, but it was yet to illuminate us. 'Just a small one.'

Shadow stared down at me. 'I thought you were running out of stories?'

'I was. But things change.' I stepped up the slope to join her. 'Let's sit here for a while. Let our eyes adjust.'

I settled, splay legged, on the grass. The meadows around, the stream banks and the field on the further side were now more forms in the head than seen things. There was still a dart of light in the West, but its effect was to make the landscape less visible, rather than more. The village lights had yet to come on. There was an autumnal chill in the air. The stream made its gurgling but otherwise, we were in silence.

Shadow was still standing. I patted the ground next to me. 'Come on. It's not too wet.'

She didn't move. 'John?'

'Yes, that's me.'

'I went with you last night because I wanted to, okay?'

I lowered my head. 'We can move on. I'm not trying to be weird. Honestly.'

'You're acting it.'

'There's something I want to share with you.'

She slid to the ground, but a little away from me. 'Okay then, share it.'

'Can I just tell this story?' I pulled my heels in so that my knees were up before my face. I rested my chin upon them and put my hands across my ankles.

Shadow didn't speak but she pulled her hair together and gathered it down her back. I could see her silhouette. She was cross legged and her knees were high to keep her balance while she leant back. Her face against the sky was devoid of any expression.

'This is a short one, I said. 'It's about a beach some miles up the coast. There's a cave there, near the low tide mark, and to get under the entrance you have to go onto hands and knees. It's the sort of place that only children enter.

'Anyhow. The cave opens up inside and the lack of a decent entrance means it's very dark. There is light coming in from one other place, a crack in the wall, and in my youth someone set a fishing float there, a glass one. You don't see these any more but they're beautiful. I had quite a collection of them once.'

I paused as I remembered. The floats were green or white, yellow or blue. They were like a crystal ball on the sand. There was a tinkling sound when they rolled along the beach. They liked to lodge in places; the backs of caves; behind curtains of seaweed; at the edges of rock pools. Despite their fragile nature, I never found a broken one.

'I was alone when I visited. Or I don't remember anyone else. Anyhow, when the sun was out and from the right direction, the glass float made a picture on the opposite wall. You could see everything around, people swimming, boats on the water, the waves coming in. All upside down, of course. That's the effect of a lens.'

Shadow was looking at me, with her head resting sideways on her knees. 'What was it like at night-time?'

'I couldn't ever stay that late. But the image in daylight was remarkable. There was more in it than really existed. There was an island off the coast. The more you looked the more detail you could see. It had mountains, beaches, everything. I used to spend ages studying it.'

I settled back a little. The grass was still damp. 'The floats have dark marks in the glass. This one somehow made an image of an island. There wasn't really one there.'

Shadow was smiling. I could see her face now by the moonlight. 'What happened to your collection?'

'Glass floats? I don't remember. They probably got thrown away.'

'Maybe the others had pictures in too?'

'It's a nice thought. Anyhow, that's the story. I'm sorry I didn't include a girl.'

'I think she's there.'

'How exactly?'

Her smile faded. 'The girl in my stories is called Skiáttheá. The one in yours is called Shadow. They're the same girl.'

'I know. At least I think I do.' I stared at the grass for a second. 'We should get moving again. It's getting cold.'

Shadow lowered her gaze. 'No, there's something else. Something you've forgotten again.'

I reached out and took her hands. 'What's that?'

She blinked at me sombrely. 'The girl's in love.' There was a sadness in her eyes. 'You've no idea why, have you?'

I shook my head.

'I can't explain that.' She glanced seaward. 'Look, it's really dark now.' She gripped my hands tightly. 'Take me somewhere nice. Somewhere we'll like.'

'I can probably see the way to the pub. I could use a drink.' I paused. 'Unless we're supposed to navigate by inner light now. That could be difficult.'

She inclined her head. 'The light of our Otherworld is light from a day many thousands of years ago. The last day our walls stood. It's all around you. It still shines. You can see by it.'

'Indeed,' I said. 'Well there's a thought for the evening.' I frowned. 'I just hope the vicar's not in for a pint. You'll ruin his beer, talking like that.'

'Christians don't own a monopoly on the afterlife.' Shadow leant forward, curled her arm around mine and pushed her nose into my shoulder. I felt a kiss. 'But I'd ruin it anyway. I'm a pagan, remember?'

'I could try introducing you.' I kissed her hair. 'He might like you.'

'No.' She put her arms tightly about my chest. 'Tonight you're mine. No vicar. There's no point.'

## Chapter Eight

To forget our past is to disabuse the present. The old man at the hippie garden told us stories, but not from far back, as he had not grown up in the village. His great tales were all about, 'the war'. He told of the making of the great aerodrome at St. Eval, of the night bombers passing low over the village, of the wire and the landing traps along the beach, of the cliff-top patrols, of the watching of the sea and the waiting. Old men like him used to both fear and worship the ocean. It was for a reason.

There is a place against our northern cliff where you could once pick up fragments of metal; machined parts, cables, fragments of instrument casings, rivets and nuts. An American bomber had, in the old man's era, approached the airfield too low and hit the cliff; there was little could be done subsequently except to retrieve souvenirs, of which there were many, and scattered over a wide area. When I last returned there I searched the cliff base again but could find nothing left of it.

At the top of the northern arm of the village is a farm, most of its buildings are low and modern, but one is a shed of older construction, with timbers overly large for its size. There is a story here too, told by another old man who has since left us, but in his own boyhood, the beams came from a schooner beached here in a storm, just one survivor was rescued by villagers who then removed cargo and contents, and went on to dismantle the boat itself down to its last baton, in obedience to an old law of the sea.

At the church of St Mawgan one finds another relic, a tomb marker made from the stern of a rowing boat, upon it are names taken from the captain's diary, for all occupants were dead before it reached our beach. The name on the skiff is that of the ship who carried her: Hope.

Past the headland north of the beach is a sheer coast, with no access save at one point, where steps have been cut, the names of the men who built them are unknown, they have by all accounts always been there. But the steps have had their uses. In the long winter of 1846, which followed a somewhat longer one, for Cornish summers are sometimes entirely missing from the calendar, a ship from the Orient ended its journey here. On board were silks and calicoes, silvered tableware, preserved meats, barrels of wine and sherry, tanned leathers, spices, salt and beeswax. Some of the more durable treasures still exist, I have seen them in the older houses.

The ship took some lives that night but saved many more. She was called the Good Samaritan; showing the care we must take when naming things, there is a magic in there still.

\* \* \*

The village lights were blinking on, as Shadow and I ducked under a fence into the pub car park. There were puddles here, from the rain and the ruts made by cars

parking for the beach. We parted hands several times as we stepped around them.

'One thing..' I began.

Her attention at that moment was upon the puddle before her. Our hands were outstretched, our fingertips touching. 'Wait,' she said, as she stepped over it. 'I can do this.'

'I still don't understand where you're going.'

Shadow's gaze was now on the ground ahead. Her eyes were flicking around as if searching for the next challenge. For the right puddle; not too big, not too small, just right.

'I told you. Into the sea.'

'You can't. There's nothing out there.'

'I can swim.'

'Not far enough. Off this coast your next landfall is America.' I nodded towards the beach. 'Sorry, but some metaphors don't work. What is the truth?'

Shadow met my gaze. 'What is a story?'

I broke eye contact and stared past her shoulder. Across the river was the big summer car park, and the backs of shops and the filling station. The street lights were beyond these along the road, and the buildings cast long and strangely coloured shadows.

'So who is Skiátheá?' I asked.

'The Shadow Goddess. The goddess of the sea.'

'But who is she?'

'She is who she is. A goddess in shadow.'

'As a metaphor?'

Shadow inclined her head. 'In part. In another way, a truth.'

I frowned. 'In the shadow of what?'

'Memories. Wrong ones. A story that's broken. A belief that isn't true.'

'A belief about, what?'

'The past.'

I pursed my lips. 'Individual or cultural?'

'Both. The belief of all who forget where they came from. Thus, a goddess in shadow.'

'I think I preferred the stories.'

I glanced towards the pub, and the lights seemed welcoming. At the front were a few cars; the owner, the barman, a few unrecognised ones, tourists probably. I could settle Shadow in a corner somewhere. It would be quiet. She'd like it.

'Come on,' I added. 'Let's go in where it's warmer.'

\* \* \*

Shadow and I found ourselves a window seat, one facing the road and the darkened beach beyond. The waves there were paler shadows that came and went.



The road-ward side of the sand dunes was orange from the street lights, as was the bus shelter that butted into them. Further along the beach I could see the lifeguards hut and the line of litter bins stretching before and after it, but little beyond that.

The bar itself was quiet, the barman having performed his art for me and left. Some tourists were dining in the next room, and the owner was scrubbing out in the kitchen, but otherwise we were alone. I had set an ale before me, brown and bubbly, and Shadow had her wine. She sipped it and then she studied the beach with me.

Her face was in profile. Under the bar lights she really looked more set than the English average. Her chin and nose were stronger, her eye orbits larger than most. Every time I looked at Shadow I saw something new. Tonight she hardly seemed European at all. Except for her hair, as always. It was a luxuriant red again, with darker shades in places.

I took the willow sticks from my pocket and put them upon our table. My collection of leaves came out with them. I put these besides the sticks, in a damp pile. I shook my sleeves out. It was warm in here. It felt better.

'I know some more boat stories,' she said, turning back to me. 'If you want another one?'

'Okay.' I frowned into my beer. 'I guess so.'

'I know one about a shipwreck. A boat brought to an ending in a storm. And a new beginning too. But it's a one way journey. No-one from the boat returns to speak the tale.'

'A tragedy?'

'It's not a sad story. It's about hope. Hope and dreams.'

I sipped my beer. 'Do you need some more wine?'

Shadow blinked at me expressionlessly. 'I'm okay. But you might want more.'

I raised my eyebrows over their glass. 'Is it that long?'

'No.' She smiled and then was silent for a few seconds. She started playing with the leaves on the table, pushing them around with her fingertips. Then she began to speak.

'Hope and dreams,' she said. 'Born out of nothing and out of everything. That's all in this story. And it begins...' She stared again through the window. 'With a sea voyage. A very long one. With malice behind it and the unknown before it. When the ship reaches land it has gone further than any before it.'

Shadow glanced at me again. 'For the boat is low and long, with many oars. Its keel is made for a different sea. One without great tides or waves. And for a different sun. For this is the Atlantic Ocean. It is darker than their own. And they do not know its ways.'

I watched her motions with the leaves. 'Is this land an island, by chance?'

'It is.' Shadow nodded. 'One so far away that no pursuers will ever find them.'

'Is it Britain?'

She didn't glance up again. 'It might be. Or it could be anywhere. You don't know.'

'What's the boat called?'

'The boat.'

'Point taken. Okay, carry on.'

'In truth,' she said. 'The men on board don't know where they are. And that has to happen. Because other boats pursue them.' Shadow looked up. 'In another version the chase takes many years. That isn't true. But it still lasts a long time. And it's a slow journey. Everyone involved has to get lost first.'

'Why is it a long chase?'

'Because of a girl.'

'Okay, why because of a girl?'

'Why was the Trojan war fought?'

'That's easy.' I set the beer down and leaned back in my chair. 'It's in the history books. Over Helen of Sparta. Are we going in circles here?'

'That's the Greek story. Most of it's made up.' Shadow leaned forward. 'The Spartans win the battle of Troy but not the war. That's what the chase is about. And that's because of a girl. Her name isn't Helen. It never was.'

'Okay then. When does the war end?'

'It hasn't ended.'

'So where does it end?'

'I told you. On a beach.'

'Sorry.' I rested my chin upon my hands. 'I'm just not feeling illuminated.'

'Then let me finish.' Shadow gestured at my glass. 'You might want that full again.'

I stood up. 'I'll get another. And yourself?'

'What do you think?'

I padded back with our drinks. Shadow had arranged our leaf collection into shapes on the table; circles, a triangle, a star.

'Now I'll go back,' said Shadow, folding her hands before her. 'To the morning after the breaking of the city. There was a lot happening then. So picture another boat. One smaller than the other, with a high bow. A royal boat, or a princely one, at least. It leaves harbour under cover of smoke and darkness, and in the fore is indeed, a prince. Several in fact, but only one of note for our story. They all row until the boat is well out to sea, and then the vow is spoken.'

She paused. 'There is an air of betrayal. It is thick on the ocean and in men's throats. None speak of it. Then the one in the prow stands up. You see, by inheritance, this man would now be king in the city. But there is nothing left to rule. Except for the boat. So this king that is not a commander, save of the vessel in which he stands, holds up the royal sword, the one that isn't, and makes an unusual vow upon it. 'By this sword, he shouts, I shall be king again, one day.' He turns, still holding it high, and enters the sea. He quickly sinks. The last thing people see above the water is the tip of the sword.'

She smiled at me. 'That's it. End of the story.'

'Short, but interesting. Okay, I think I can cope with this one.'

'There's more, if you want it.' Shadow leaned forward again. 'Can you guess his name?'

'I can. The first prince of Troy was Hector. The hero that fought Achilles, but died, I think.'

'He was wounded that time, not killed.' Shadow leaned back and took up her wine glass. 'You know the story. You call him King Arthur.'

'Well, that's a novel version. Very novel.' I put my hands between my knees while I thought. 'but what happened to the other boat? The one in the first story. Is it the same tale?'

'It could be.' Shadow sipped her wine. 'Why don't you finish it for me?'

'But all I've got is a storm and a shipwreck.' I pulled my hands back and set them on the table. 'You said it was about hope?'

'Hope and a girl. Don't forget her this time.' Shadow touched her glass again and her eyes became distant.

My attention drifted to the window. It overlooked the cut-off part of the beach, this varied in area depending on the inclination of the stream. Currently it was a dim crescent of rocks and sand about five hundred yards long. In plainer view was the stone bridge for the road and the concrete one, immediately upstream, for pedestrians. The latter is of stronger and wider build, because it holds, or rather held, for the mechanism was in my own youth first neglected and then removed, the lock gates and sluices that once kept water from the lower valley floor.

In my early days the clearing of the stream was still done, and it was a show worth bringing sandwiches and crisps to, for this was a traditional spectacle of man and nature working together in a common cause, albeit a slow one.

First the workmen would unshackle the chain from the wheel handles of the winding mechanism, these would then be turned, over much bantering and the space of about half an hour, to lower the shutters into the stream bed. Then men and children would take their luncheon together and watch the water rise; it would do so quickly at first and then slower, since the river widened as it became deeper.

The interest at this stage was to cover as much river bank as possible and watch the various effects. The fields south of the river, being former marshes and prone to become so again, were drained at the lower end by a one-way lock, of the sort with an iron flap that would close against intruding water, but the lock would not always function as designed, so this was a place worth watching. Likewise for the drains from the garage yard, the car park, and from the back yards of the shops and the village hall, and from the various grates and covers along the roads and pavements; each emptied into the river via a similar lock, from large dinner plate to tea saucer size. Again, not all were functional, the system being old even then. So as the water rose there was potential for interesting events just about anywhere in the village, the trick was to find them in time.

The lower swamp too would flood, but the place being designed by Nature for

such things, not much of note would happen there. Sometimes oddments would wash out from it; plastic bottles, clumps of rotting vegetation, the odd wellie boot.

Once the river was full, this being after three to five hours depending on the flow rate, the men would rewind the iron wheels and the river would rush again onto the beach. This was the same event, on a larger scale, as our one time efforts with the waterfall stream at the other edge. Whilst many interesting things could happen now, the one the workmen were here to see was the clearing out of the stream bed, from the start of the meadows to out under the road bridge and beyond the stone piers that funnelled the water over the top of the beach. The torrent and flood across the beach enjoyed by the village children was just a by-product of their labours, but it was a worthy one too, in its way, and it was appreciated by all ages present.

To prevent a high sea undoing these efforts, a second system operated beneath the footbridge. Here existed more one-way locks, of considerable weight, which closed against each wave. The funnel shape of the upper beach, and the constraints of the piers and the road bridge, meant that a considerable mass of water could build up here, water that was brown with enough sand to raise the stream bed again, if allowed any further. The down side of this system was that a confined wave could sometimes rise above the footbridge, across the forecourt of the cafeteria, past the sides of the building and into the yard and storage area behind it. The time from first arrival to flood would be only a few seconds, and with little warning given, save for the crest of a wave as it approached the bridges being a little higher than the others, or in its being the last of several coming close together.

The sound of the tidal locks closing was a call to the beach-head for all boys around, that and the knowledge that the sea was in flood, and the wind was strong and in the right direction to push the waves forward. If dusk was falling it was worth taking a torch as well, for these good things often take a while to happen.

Nowadays the tide locks and the winches and shutters have all been removed, one mechanism being deemed too noisy and the other too dangerous for civilized folks. The river runs higher now, one building at least is on the move because of underground water, and the meadow fields now flood regularly each winter.

\* \* \*

'Okay, I've thought some more.' I frowned at the table top. 'The main trouble is, you've killed my favourite legend. Arthur, or whoever he is, won't be riding to save anyone now.'

'He killed himself. And maybe he was looking for something.'

'Immortality. In a way. The old Grail quest?'

'We lose the things we seek.' Shadow smiled. 'Or seek the things we're losing. Backwards makes more sense.'

'Like the men in the other story. Trying to lose themselves.'

'Maybe they're loosing a thing. Something that must never be found by their

enemies.'

I studied her eyes. They were a bottle green again. 'So why was the battle of Troy fought? If not over a girl's face, then why?'

She shook her head. 'It wasn't over a girl's face. Not in that sense, anyhow. They were fighting for her heart. That's why the struggle was so epic.'

'Literally fighting for it, or figuratively?'

'Mainly literal. Hence the high walls. The greatest fortress in the world. Built to impress her. And to frighten her enemies. That's the figurative part.'

'It doesn't sound like this ended well.' I sipped at my beer. 'Okay. Some time later, there's a ship in a storm heading for a beach. And it's carrying something important?'

'The most important thing in the world. The heart of a goddess.'

I set my glass down and bridged my hands over it. 'So this heart has to be a real thing. Is it a precious stone? That's very Middle-Eastern. Or is it a heart in a living body? That would make sense too.'

'Some say that it is a stone. Others, that a heart must be a heart, alive or dead.' Shadow turned her face to the window. 'Others are still convinced that it was a cup, a Grail. You decide.'

'One thing's for certain, there's a temple in old Troy that's missing a critical artefact. A lot of upset priests, I should think.' I raised a finger. 'Ah, hence the betrayal from earlier. I'm getting this now.'

Shadow studied the view. 'Troy was the temple. That's why it was on a beach. After the heart was taken to safety, the city fell. Its purpose was over.'

'Well, I shall call it a human heart then, but for narrative convenience, a dead one. Preserved, in a chalice-shaped container with a jewelled lid. Then we're covered.' I paused. 'Anyhow, this wonderful thing is taken off to sea and all this symbolises what, exactly.'

'Stories. All of them. All the old stories, together.'

'So it's a manuscript?'

'No, it's a heart. The heart of a goddess.'

Shadow kept her eyes on the sea. She seemed to be studying the waves. I followed her gaze. The glass held a reflection of the bar behind us. Waves washed slowly over the counter and spent themselves amongst the empty bar-stools. I felt an urge to be outside.

I frowned at my pint. 'Okay. So in our tale the Greeks fought the Trojans over ownership of stories. Well that makes sense, in a way. But why didn't they just copy them down? Or make up their own? Or is this what they were really doing in the battle? Fighting with stories?'

'It wasn't over ownership. All of history had to end. Without an ending they couldn't rule themselves, less still the world.' Shadow turned back to face me. 'Men that worship a goddess will never knowingly harm her. That's why, for the Spartan purpose to succeed, she had to go.'

'That has relevance to our plot then. What was it?'

Shadow's gaze returned to her glass. 'Farming. Mining. Machines that build and others that break. You know what that purpose is and where it ends. Here, in your world of today.'

'But didn't the Trojans also do agriculture and things? They must have done, to live in a city.'

Shadow shrugged. 'Less. It was coming, sure. That too, thanks to the Olympians. But change isn't the same as progress. It can be reversed.'

'Okay.' I sat back in my seat. 'Talking of reversals, what's happening back on the beach? Our men are still heading for a shipwreck. What happens next?'

Shadow looked up again. 'Their purpose is over. It was to start a legend, not to finish it.' She leaned back and folded her hands behind her neck. 'You can help them if you want. Let them bury something in the sand or have it wash out of a lifeless wreck. It's up to you.'

'Happy endings are hard to write. They never sound realistic. But what about these lost stories? What happens to them?'

Shadow shrugged. 'They're only lost if people think them lost. If they look hard enough they'll find them again. It doesn't matter where they search. They'll find them all, eventually.'

'But you said that men only remembered their goddess for a while. That all men forget in the end. Which is true?'

'Both. Things can be lost in plain sight.' She smiled. 'Where would you look for stories now?'

'Fairy tales, I guess. And folk songs. Old ones.'

'Just old ones?'

I frowned. 'I don't know. There are modern folklores too. People rework myths all the time. I don't know how useful that is.'

'It's very useful.' Shadow smiled. 'If you know them when you find them.'

## Chapter Nine

We can remember the places of our childhood better than anywhere else. For children, like animals, have territories. Knowing them is important, and passing this knowledge on, even more so. Before we part then, I will fill in a few gaps.

Above the cliff with the waterfall there rises a steep gully with a stream. Around it are bungalows, carefully stacked, so that the roof of one is below the front lawn of the next. This creates a colourful illusion that is curiously reversed from below, for then the hillside is all masonry and no gardens.

Climb the stream and the track uphill about four hundred yards and there is a plot, undeveloped for reasons unknown, having been planted out with pines some eighty years ago and then abandoned. The space inside the trees is quite private. Here is a good place to spend an afternoon, especially during hot weather. The pines are of an eminently climb-able type, with good views from the top, and there is one tree – it is easy to find – which is ideal for a rope swing. It has a branch that overhangs the excavation for a building that never happened. The branch itself will tell you where to tie a rope, for it is deeply marked from the previous ones, and some pieces of these remain embedded in the flesh.

Climbing this track again, before it joins the Padstow road it spurs off through the car park of the big hotel. The hotel itself has a swimming pool, or rather a set of pools, which are at the lower end of the hotel grounds and sheltered, being fenced around and well planted out. There are ways in from below, but these do vary over time, so by now you will have to find your own methods. But a permanent route is simply to walk through the front entrance, with swimming roll and flippers in hand, the staff in such places - in my day as much as this - being seasonal, they cannot tell a local child from a visiting one. It is best to do this individually and regroup at the poolside, as if you are meeting for the first time. Also, don't do anything original there, like take a packed lunch, you will stand out.

The beach and caves we have mainly covered, but there is a difference now with the latter in that the roof material of the deepest has suffered a collapse and the way to the inner portion is blocked. You will have to take my word that the cave once went much further in, and you needed a boat to complete the journey. Perhaps the sea will clear it out again in time, I do not know. As for the sea tunnel, that has kept its secret for several decades, but keep an eye out. It will reappear when least expected.

Here is a useful thing to know: After the waterfall the cliffs rise towards the headland, and they look un-climbable. But there is one place it can be done, and that is where the cliff base folds back into an old ochre mine; you can identify this from the red of the stream bed and the stones around. Before here the cliff sticks out some way. Around this promontory is a pool, and at the landward end of it there are places in the stone for hands and knees. After about twenty feet of climbing the cliff slopes back, and plants grow from the rock. You can stand up here if you take careful hold of them. Then you will see the way up, a zigzag movement will take you to the top.

The way is not worth describing in detail; you will see it when you reach it. Beware that climbing the whole way will take a while.

As for the rest of our village, while many corners have, since my day, been tidied up, there is still much wildness around, but I will not discuss this at length, as I would prefer a new generation to discover it for themselves. But the new woodland in particular, I think has much potential for the future. The loss of the hippie garden, and the wild areas above it, is a grave blow, but the nearby swamp is still there, and along both streams and the woodlands bordering them, are still many areas of quality. Also above the holiday park on the south side of our valley, there are some acres of grass and undergrowth which have seen neither plough nor cement mixer; long may they remain so. The efforts of the local authorities to raise the water table and restore the original marshes of the valley floor are also noteworthy, so this too has potential for the future.

And this is our village. Pass through it on a dull day, or on a fine one in the wintertime, and you will notice little, and that quickly gone, save for the beach which is magnificent in any weather, and is seen from either the Newquay or the Padstow roads as you enter. Pass a day here and you might appreciate it somewhat more. To spend a lifetime in Mawgan Porth, or a substantial part of it, is not an option for many, in any case the place would then be too crowded, and its wild spaces would soon become like any other. So we are limited to these words, which I hope you have enjoyed.

Oh, one final thing. From the sharp corner at the top of the Padstow road there is a footpath that leads down-slope and inland, it rejoins the valley floor and the path to St. Mawgan at the site of the old market garden and the new woodland. Part way down it, and set into the hillside, is a former stone quarry. This is a magnificent place for an evening gathering. The reason being that the high sides hide it from view in all directions save forwards. You will also see that fires have been held there before, a long time ago. So you will not be lighting a fire, but rather relighting an old one. Remember that driftwood needs time to dry, so you need plan ahead a little. Good things, as I have said, often take a while to happen.

\* \* \*

'On the strength of all this mystery we might need some food.' I nodded at the bar menu. 'Anything up there you fancy?'

Shadow studied her wine glass. It was empty. 'I'm not hungry. Do you want anything?'

'Not really.' I shrugged. 'Do you want to move on?'

She raised her eyes. 'Somewhere with a view? No food. Just outdoors.'

I drained my beer and stood up. 'Okay by me. We could climb the sand dunes, if you like. There's a good view of the beach.'

Soon we were walking down the pub steps. A group of locals had entered the



bar as we left. It is one of those places that is busy in the early evening, with families eating, and again in the last hour, with drinkers. Shadow and I had hit the point in-between, hence its quietness.

I rested my arm along her shoulders as we stepped along the road. A car passed us then and I made the mistake of looking at the lights, after which I couldn't see for several minutes. My night vision only returned after we had crossed the road, walked down the ramp and across the sand towards the big dunes.

I looked at the sea grass rising above us. The tops of the Marram were heavy with seed, their ends pointing down. The wind would soon scatter the seeds around; those that found water, or a damp patch, would send their roots down quickly and impossibly deep. The dunes rise to a hundred feet high in places, being constructed entirely by this one plant. The grass roots can go as deep as the piles of sand they collect; an extra-ordinary feature of the seaside, quite unique.

Shadow's face turned towards mine. She was half-lit by the lights from the road. Her chin and her lips were brushed with orange, her eyes were in deep shadow. She didn't speak.

'We'll go up here,' I said, and I touched her hand. 'Follow me, I'll lead us up.'

As we climbed the slope, or rather slid it, but more progressively up than back, I became conscious of a stillness in the air that could have presaged rain. The stars seemed absent now, although it was difficult to tell entirely, as we were still close to the village lights. The moon too was behind some form of cloud. The sand beneath us was still damp in the hollows made by others climbing up, and around the roots of the grass. It was difficult going.

At the crest of the dune I sat down heavily. Shadow was a few slides back; she joined me in her normal, silent fashion and we faced the dark and the beach together. Our hands were clasped in the sand between our legs. The tussock behind us made a useful seat-shape, that and the drop at our knees meant that we were traditionally but not romantically, seated, if you ignored the spiky tips of the grass. Shadow's legs were dusted with sand, and she seemed less composed than I was.

'Is this okay?' I asked.

'A bit. It is if you don't move.'

'I forgot about the grass. Sorry.'

She pointed at some bright squares in the distance; the pub windows. 'Do they close soon?'

'An hour?' I shrugged. 'Do you want to go back?'

'I should have let you eat.'

'There's food back at the van. I'm not that hungry.'

She looked at her knees and smiled. 'Your fridge wouldn't feed a mouse.'

I leaned forward and brushed some sand from her legs. 'I'm sorry about this too. We should have come down from the top.'

Shadow rested her head on my shoulder. 'Do you want another story?'

'Nothing too challenging, please.'

I couldn't see Shadow's expression, it was hidden by a combination of her hair and of the strange lighting effects.

'It's not like that.' She turned and looked up at me. She was smiling. 'This is our story now. Yours and mine. Can you guess where it begins?'

'On a beach?'

She shook her head. 'On a mountaintop. Not all stories start the same. Else there's no fun in telling them.'

Shadow brought her elbows behind her and rested her head back. 'On the mountain lives a girl. And she's lonely and sad. I just thought I'd say that.' She glanced up at me again. 'There's also a stream. And when the stream comes to a rock it does an unusual thing. It breaks around it and then flows in two directions, one down each side of the mountain. It enters the sea in two different places.'

'One day the girl follows one part of the stream to its end. She's had enough of her mountain. There on a beach she meets a fisher boy and she falls in love. But she cannot stay.'

Shadow looked thoughtful. 'For he doesn't see her. She tries all day to get his attention but he carries on plaiting his nets, dipping his lines in the sea, and skinning his fish into his baskets. She stands right in front of him but that's all he does, his work.'

'Maybe the fisherman's in love too,' I said. 'With his fishing.'

'Maybe. But either way the girl knows she has to leave. So she goes back up the mountain to think. And what she does then is clever. She walks down the other stream, the one on the far side, and right around the beaches of the island, close to where the fisherman lives.'

I raised my free hand. 'You didn't say this was an island. Just a mountain.'

'It's an island now.' Shadow smiled. 'Or would you make her task any harder than it is?'

'I wouldn't do that. Okay, so she's in the right place. What can she do now?'

'Before she reaches the fisherman's beach she takes off her dress and her jewellery, she folds her wings and she goes into the sea. This time when he sees her she's coming out of the ocean. He runs to meet her and he bears her up in his arms. It's a very sweet moment.'

'I bet it is. So why did love work the second time?'

'Because he thinks the second girl is a mermaid. You see, fishermen are terribly superstitious. To marry a mermaid is very lucky.' Shadow paused. 'He's also not very well travelled. He thought that a girl that lived in the sky must be a goddess. He was very frightened the first time and he pretended not to see her.'

'Most fishermen would marry a mermaid over a goddess,' I said. 'You can't fault them for that.'

Shadow blinked down at our clasped hands. 'Even if she loved him? In both forms?'

'Especially if she loved him. Then she'd know his needs. Even if they were

trivial, if she loved him, she'd know.'

'I've often thought about that,' Shadow said. 'I still don't know the answer.'

I frowned at the sand. 'I'd rather talk about something else.'

'That's okay.' Shadow raised herself up and kissed my cheek. 'What do you want to say?'

I put my arm around her shoulders. They were slightly cool. 'I'm sorry I hurt you.'

Shadow blinked at me expressionlessly. 'Go on.'

'With my book. You'd kept saying, 'There's always a girl in stories'. And when you read it you were upset. It was in your eyes.'

'There's a girl in your book but you didn't see her. That can be really hurtful.'

'I honestly couldn't remember her. Not as a person.'

Shadow raised her head and pushed herself upright. 'You remembered the boys.'

'Yes, but that's easier to write.' I withdrew my arm. 'Don't look so cross. She didn't say very much at the time.'

'You liked playing with her.'

'I did. But she was just the Sea.'

'You should still have remembered.'

I shook my head. 'Some things don't change. I always found girls hard to figure out.'

'She missed you.'

Shadow stared silently at the blackness of the opposite cliff. Like the northern one, the south cliff is sheer, becoming higher as the beach widens at its seaward end. The beach below is in perpetual shadow, even in high summer, and is shunned by bathers because of a coldness in the air, which seems to exude from the cliffs. There are little caves here filled with fine gravel. I used to hunt for coloured fragments of glass there, long ago. It was like panning for gemstones; the resultant treasures were quite smooth, worn like that by the continual motion of waves against the cave walls.

'Time for another story?' Shadow said, quietly.

'Okay.'

'First I want you to do something.' She pointed a decorated arm. 'Go down there and take off your shirt and trousers. Crawl up here and sit on some spiky grass. Then you'll know how it feels.'

'Ah, I am sorry.'

'Sorry? Of all your old places, this is the worst. Even your swamp was better.'

'We didn't go into the swamp.'

'Really?' she said. 'How did you manage to resist?'

'You were upset at the time. And so was I.'

'She looked at me. 'I'm still cross.'

I raised my eyebrows. 'So this story?'

'Begins now.' She broke our mutual gaze and stared at her knees. 'With a feeling. Because that's the only place you'll find it now. In your heart. I think the

original is lost.

'You always did forget things.' Shadow started brushing sand from her upper legs. 'I guess that's just you.'

'In the story a king travels to a far off country, to apologise for a mistake made a long time ago. Many thousands of years before. As is the way of such things, the longer his ancestors put the voyage off, the greater the problem became, and so by the time this man makes the journey it is to put right a considerable slight to the inhabitants of a far off land. Not an easy task. His courtiers travel with him but the king makes landfall alone, rowing himself, and in plain garb.'

'Upon the beach of the foreign kingdom a considerable crowd has gathered. When he lands his boat they gather around it but no-one speaks. The king steps forward and proffers his apology. It is not a long-spoken thing, but a one-word gift, as it were, this being a simple reply to a proposal made a long time before.'

'He speaks his word. "Yes," he says, and bows his head. Uncrowned he is, and it is an unusual feeling for him to feel so light on top, and to have his hair move so freely in the wind. Then the crowd on the beach parts and he sees a woman standing very still. She is as plainly dressed as him, and she is without jewels or a dowry.'

Shadow paused and she stopped the motion of her hand upon her leg. 'This is why the king's predecessors never made the journey. The queen of this country has nothing to offer except her love. This is the price to be paid for the marriage. And only in poverty can they live together. It is the law and custom of her ancient land.'

'Still, if she's pretty, that would be okay. As long as they can go out for meals occasionally.'

'She's a vegetarian,' said Shadow.

'Really? How does that fit in?'

'Unless she's forced to eat shellfish.'

'Ah, sorry.'

'Apology accepted.' Shadow resumed her rhythmic brushing. 'Anyhow. Married they are, there on the beach, with a simple pauper's ceremony, and with no bonds other than words to hold them together. The king keeps his poor man's robes, and they live in secrecy on the shores of her land. They have one child, a prince of course, who when he is of suitable age, returns to rule his father's kingdom in his stead.'

Shadow leaned forward and worked on the sand below her knees. 'And when anyone finds him and asks him, how does he endure his life after having known wealth, do you know what he answers?'

'That he's the richest man in the kingdom?'

Shadow shook her head. 'That's a silly idea. Try again.'

'That he now has two kingdoms so he's still out on top?'

'Not that either. Because the far off kingdom is in truth, the land of the dead, and its queen is the ruler of the Otherworld. Her riches are not in material things and her power is not of that to command living men.' Shadow paused. 'So why do you

think he did it?'

'I don't know. He's found eternal life? Or something similar?'

'He has reunited two lands that were once one. Now the light of each illuminates the other. Thus is his world healed.'

'What is the king's name?' I asked.

Shadow fell silent.

'Is it Arthur?'

Shadow was quiet for a few more seconds. 'Girls have feelings too, you know.' She pulled her hands back from her legs and pressed them against her hips. 'Strangely enough.'

'Sorry, I'm not with you.'

She stared hotly at nothing. 'It doesn't matter.'

'I think I'm running slow again.' I stretched my arms. 'I'm sorry.'

'I said it doesn't matter.'

'About these lovers from different worlds.' I lowered my hands. 'The man doesn't know how to join hers. The child thirty years ago didn't, either.'

I stared across the darkness. There was a smokiness in the air between us and the far cliff. It was the first drift of rain coming in. 'How does the girl feel about about children? Marriage? That sort of stuff?'

'Will you come here again?' Shadow asked, quietly.

I reached awkwardly into my pocket and pulled out our collection of willow leaves. They were still damp. 'I don't know. I find the place painful sometimes.' I peeled some off and started laying them across my thigh. I was pushing them around to make a shape. I wasn't sure what it was.

Shadow frowned and bent over my leg. 'You're doing it wrong. Here, put these like this.' She picked up a leaf and crossed it over another. 'One on the other side, too. There. That makes wings.'

'I can't see well in this light,' I said. 'And you didn't answer my question.'

She looked up at me. 'You didn't answer mine.'

My eyes drifted down-slope to the dune bottom. There were marks there from our climb up. The larger ones were mine, they looked like a giant crab had passed by in a hurry, and Shadow had overlaid them with narrow little trenches. It was an easy way to damage the structure of the dunes. Too much of this and they would need re-fencing again.

There was a coldness starting to sprinkle across my hands and face. 'We're going to get wet. Not that that matters.'

Shadow looked at me blankly. 'She can't go back with him and be a housewife. She'd hate it.'

'So what do they do now?'

The rain was drifting across the beach in waves. Where it touched the water the latter turned lighter, from black to grey. The grass around us was restless. I felt a head push into my shoulder.

'You do remember last night?' said Shadow, quietly.

'Yes.'

'I wanted to check.'

'I remember it.'

I had a sudden recollection from a long time before. The sea had come in too fast and we were all trapped in a cave. One that went a long way back and was dark in many places. My friends and I had spent our time there stepping from rock to rock, across deep pools and back onto the shingle banks around. We also collected things; a plastic bottle with the paint rubbed off by the sea so it was nearly all white; a length of nylon; something organic and long dead.

'So what is your secret?' I said.

Shadow raised a hand to shelter her eyes. The rain was brushing her face, and mine.

'You said you have a secret?'

She raised herself to her knees. 'We have a secret.'

'Sorry. "We" have a secret?'

"That's what I said.'

I looked again at Shadow. Her face was lit from one side. The rain was making beads in her hair, once again. The wind was pushing the ends of it past her elbows. 'Our stories. Yours. Mine,' she added. 'That's our secret.'

Shadow blinked at me in silence. My thoughts brushed again over the past. On the flat tidal wash and on the foreshore and on the dunes at Mawgan Porth are many, many small footprints. The elements move the sand around each day but the prints remain, being only scattered around, never completely leaving the place they were made. The Shadow Girl was right. Some stories never disappear entirely.

She put a hand on my shoulder and pushed herself upright, stepping down-slope as she did so. Her body with its strange artwork was pale against a dark sea and a darker sky. Through the rain the boundaries behind her were indistinct, each piece of the landscape had become a suburb of the others. Water dominated everything. Shadow's back was to me. The curve and flare of her hips drew my eyes. Her skin was reflecting the lights of the road. She must be cold, I thought. Frozen.

'It's time,' she said. 'I have to go.'

'I can't believe you're going swimming. Not in this.'

'Not just me.' She turned towards me, one arm raised. 'Don't you want to come?'

'Do I have a choice?'

'Do lovers have a choice?'

'I don't know. I'd like to think so.'

'Maybe. I don't want to find out.'

The sand pushed over my ankles as we went down the dune. Rain fell into our faces and it was cold. We parted hands as we stepped over the fence below the big sand hill and we rejoined at the start of the tidal wash. With her free hand Shadow started pulling away the cloth about her chest. The sand around us made a hissing

noise under the rain. The first waves were about a hundred yards off. I wondered where we were going. Maybe around the north headland. The water was deep there, except in one place. I could remember it.

'I have a caravan with stuff,' I said. 'And a book.'

'We can come back. Maybe. It depends on the tide.'

What does the tide do?'

'It says when we can come and go. You need to lose those clothes.'

Over the darkness and the salt in my mouth and the struggle out of my shirt came another childhood image. Of a day in high summer, swallows were diving amongst the swamp willows and occasional families with children passed along the camp-site lane, towards the beach. A girl with red hair knelt in the shade before the gate of the old garden, studying her hands. She held a butterfly. Its wings were beating, slowly.

On either side of her was the former stone wall of the garden. It had enough projecting stones so you could climb it at a run, if you knew the way. Parts became very hot in the sun, and there was ivy that would pull away right to the base, if you tugged at it. The wall, prior to its ending, was very old.

We were closing on the sea now. The wind was cold at my knees and foam was pushing towards us in lumps along the sand. The waves ahead were like some giant industrial process, ever turning, grey amongst black. They seemed higher than the sand, as if some force held them back.

I remembered the butterfly, when it left the girl's hands, flew towards the sea. She had glanced up at me then. She had green eyes.

I touched my wife's shoulder. She was cold. She looked at me without expression.

'The city,' I said. 'The one by the sea. Troy. Where was it really?'

'I thought you knew.'

'I don't. That's why I'm asking.'

'It was home, a long time ago.' She faced the sea again. 'Yours too, for a while. Come on.'