



DIVINING THE LINE

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The first time it happened it felt like stumbling across another avenue to an ancient monument, but this one pulled at more than just his head, there was a tightness in his chest, the lights twinkled and flashed inside his mind, the intensity giving Perran a firework of a headache. Following the line - years later in the early nineties - leads him into Liz Hawkey's ordered life, and together they discover the source of the line.

A story of family, love and loss, Divining the Line brings the ordinary and the extraordinary together into everyday life.

To my four boys, without whom I would have never started writing novels

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Chapter 1

Perran Lovering stood in the centre of a circle of white steel spears, marking the lines, and thrust a red spike into the earth between his feet. 'Right,' he said 'that's it.'

He smiled and looked round the garden; it was about the best place they could have found, close enough to the road to make access easy and far enough away from the old Cornish farmhouse to be discreet.

'Would you like to try? I'll show you how,' he offered, and held out the V-shaped hazel stick to the owners.

The wife blushed but held out her hand. As she took hold of the stick she tried to remember how he'd held it, but couldn't as she had been keener on watching this handsome young man go about his work, than the work itself.

'Like this,' he said warmly. He laid out her hand flat, soft white palm upwards, and placed one arm of the dark rod upon it, its end passing just under her thumb, the lead up to the V crossing the little finger. 'Okay, now the same with the other hand. Right. Now grip it.' She did, finding her wrists twisted inwards at an unnatural angle.

He looked at her, made sure he had her attention. 'Now pull the rods so that your wrists come straight.'

She followed his instructions feeling warm with embarrassment.

'Got it?'

She nodded.

'The rod feels alive now, doesn't it, springy? Now walk over towards the points, and think about water.' he indicated the spears stuck in the ground.

She paced as he had done. Her fingers ached with the tension. She was willing the rod to turn, to twist down in her grip. Nothing. She shook her wrist free and waved the rod at him with a disappointed sigh.

'Again,' Perran said and came round behind her, placing one hand on her shoulder, the other resting on her hand.

'Think about water, deep down,' he said softly. They paced in unison.

'Oh No! Look! James, Look!'

The rod twisted down, quivering. Another pace and the angle eased, another and the rod was horizontal again.

'And you couldn't have been doing that - making me twist it! You were barely touching the rod!' she said feeling excited and pleased. 'I can do it?'

'Most people have the gift in some way,' he smiled. 'Mr Walters?' Perran offered the husband the forked stick. He looked unimpressed, but took it. He'd also taken note of how to hold the rod when his wife had been shown. Had taken particular note. His strides were quick and the results empty. Perran came across to help, as he'd done for the wife. The result was slight.

'Viv. Mr Walter's a negative, best you go along with him.'

Vivian stepped heavily in his boots, giving Perran an amused scowl. 'All this larking about was wasting time, but he's the boss; it's his time,' he thought as he copied the way Perran had helped with the divining. Sure enough the rod twitched to life at the appropriate spot. Swung right up and nearly caught James Walters on the chin.

'Well I never!' he gasped, looking at the skin rubbed red by the twisting of the wood within his fierce grip. 'Like it had a life of its own!'

*

'Right, that's seven projects lined up for next month, one more would be handy,' sighed Perran as they drove back home.

'T'nt the same. These folk wannin a bore-hole, 'n their gardins no bigger'n spit.'

'You've got one!'

'That's diff'r'nt. That's trade.'

'And have you seen the price of water bills for a place that big?'

Vivian shrugged. In his opinion if these up-country folk could afford to buy big places in Cornwall then they could afford anything.

The main business of Lovering Engineering had been boreholes for farmers or small industry. Lately it had changed, and young Perran went through all this palaver of showing the customers how the divining was done. He insisted that it brought in more work, that these people would love to talk about it, spread the word. Viv had to admit that there was something in it; more and more they had these private jobs to do, and they paid just the same. Having work to do was a blessing. Times had been bad. As an old hand he'd been sorely worried that the firm would close. He knew that the boy had the gift, but he wasn't too sure how it'd work out. But despite the University stuff and the gadding about he'd still got it, and the firm had been running along sweetly under his hand for six months now. He supposed the lad deserved a break. But a month? Taking a month off just to go hiking round the country seemed a bit much.

'Mister din't like you 'elping out 'is missus, mind.'

'No, he didn't at that,' Perran grinned, 'But then, Nan Towans tells me I've a reputation to keep up.'

'Hur!'

It hadn't mattered in Australia, he was always on the move there anyway, but back home in Cornwall it was different. At home a solvent, 'ansum' single man doesn't go about alone for long. After a respectable time for mourning he found himself being partnered off whenever possible by kind hostesses. Over the years away he'd perfected the art of having a good time without ever being drawn in enough for any statement of commitment. The time that he could afford to enjoy any one woman's company had been defined by some inner feeling that told him whether she was becoming more than just interested. It had seldom failed him; the cut off had usually been early enough to be engineered without any rancour. It had meant that the relationships had remained as that of escort for the most part; it was a penalty he'd taught himself to accept. But for all that, the changing of partners since his return had, according to Nan Towans, gained him a reputation as a 'ladies man'. She, who seemed to understand him most, had laughed at the idea with him, and squeezed his arm a little in compassion.

*

It was early morning in Berkshire; Liz sat before her make-up mirror and swished the blusher brush lightly across her face. She wasn't looking at herself, just applying her

workday face. As she completed the task she looked beneath the facade, noted for the hundred-thousandth time the features that had always told her that she was different: the greyness of her eyes, the length of the fine-built nose, the fairness of her hair. Always they greeted her, always they had told her that she somehow didn't match her parents, but she'd not believed the fairy tale then, not until it was too late.

'It's not enough!' she told her reflection. Work had been a god-send, a distraction, a means to an end. Recently she'd begun to hanker after the dreams she'd abandoned over twenty years ago. University, Art college? Dreams. She considered this to be part of an 'empty nest' syndrome, but at the same time really meant it. Allie had moved out, finally, two months ago. The house wasn't the same without her, tidier, but emptier than the absence of one person could possibly make it. Automatically she tidied the make-up away before getting ready to leave for work. The walk was about two miles; she left in plenty of time to make it a pleasant stroll, her long legs carrying her unthinkingly along the path she'd taken so often. It gave her time to watch the pattern in the morning sky, follow the line of the train as it took commuters on into London, to absorb the silhouettes that the buildings made against the sky as she dropped down into the town.

'Morning!' her voice rang out in greeting to Joan over on prescriptions.

Joan beckoned her over. 'Guess what? I just got to tell you,' she blushed a furious red.

'I'm expecting.'

'Oh Joan. That's wonderful!' Liz beamed 'When?'

'Oh, end of January. Liz?' she looked concerned 'I'm not too old, am I?'

At thirty-seven there would be some who considered Joan old to have her first baby, but Liz knew they'd been trying for a long time. They'd gone through all the hoops and had been told that basically there was nothing wrong. If there's nothing wrong, then there's nothing to fix. Go away and make a baby. Now, just as hope had deserted them and age crept up on them, it had happened. Was she too old? Liz felt she was the last one qualified answer that question. Here she was just two years older and both her chicks had grown and fled the nest.

'Of course not! Forty's normal for you career women nowadays! Spring chicken!'

'Career woman, yourself,' retorted Joan, breaking into a beaming smile. Then leaning over quickly added, 'Don't say anything yet. Don't tell anyone else. I just had to tell you,' and smiled again, a secret shared.

Liz felt really pleased for Joan and Paul. She found herself smiling at the thought of them with a new baby as she hung up her jacket, tidied her hair and checked the face in the mirror. She slid in behind the 'Consultant' beauty counter and prepared her smile for the day, noticing her assistant, Kerry, dashing into the staff cloakroom at the last minute. Again.

*

Perran took a last look around his cottage. He'd made an effort to leave it tidy knowing that Aunt Pru would be dropping in to see that the place was aired and whatever. He smiled to himself at the enormous fuss that his elderly aunts made about him going off. It was as if he was a little boy staying away from home the first time, and they each felt they should take on the mantle of his parents. Truth was they loved to fuss round, and by going off for a walking holiday, no addresses available in advance, he'd made himself a target for their

concern. He flicked his pack on his back and left the cottage that had been his home from birth, locking the door behind him, sliding the key deep into his pocket. As he sat on the train taking him up to Bristol, he thought of Nan Towans. She alone of the women folk had made no fuss, but then she seldom did. She had a wonderful capacity for understanding and though twice widowed and childless somehow she'd become known as Nan Towans by everyone.

True to form she asked no questions when he'd popped in to say good-bye and it was not until he turned to leave that he saw anything but a smile in her eyes. 'Take care me 'ansum.' she'd said, the smile gone for a second. 'Good luck.' As if she knew what was in his mind. Luck was what he needed. He was going on a pilgrimage to a place he didn't know, just following the stars in his head. He wasn't too sure that he'd even be gone very long. There were times when he could easily forget the feelings that had assailed him, times when he thought it all pure fantasy. Yet it had nagged at him since his return to England, all through his sorrow it had been there, like a siren voice, calling. He'd put it off, this quest, years ago when he'd escaped to the other side of the world. Now the longer he tried to leave it the more insistent the urge to follow up the strange sensation had become. With life just about under control he felt he could take some time out to find out what it was about, once and for all.

*

Wednesday was Liz's evening at Keep Fit, just as Monday would find her at a local history society and Friday at her paints with the town art group. It was her social life, carefully mapped out, time to see different people to those she met at work, time to express her long-term interests, history and art. When the summer came and the classes and societies took a break it disturbed Liz's routine; disturbed her life. Things were on an even keel, just as she'd aimed for, just as she'd striven for over all the years that the children were growing up. Yet every so often she found herself feeling so disappointed with her life. In a rut of her own making, so deep, so hedged in that she wasn't sure she could see any way out. As a child she'd always been careful and orderly. Her elderly parents had always cautioned her, kept her from danger. As a child she could seldom remember running or shouting. All, in memory at least, was muffled and actions carried out with some kind of deeply ingrained secretiveness. To be noticed would be terrible in some undefined way. Never said, just absorbed into her being, creating a quiet, polite, careful child. Is it any wonder that the adolescent rebelled?

*

The pull had been strong, the 'power' line that he was following had led him right up through this sprawling estate of sixties housing, some small sectors had obviously once been council only, and were now mixed, others were always owner occupied, but some social engineer had interleaved them in curling cul-de-sacs and sweeping 'ways', so that, though the line held true, he had wandered and been thwarted and had to retrace his steps.

It was a hot, arid day, the type of day that reminded him of Australia. The sun wafted its heat down upon him; beat it back up from the pavement, as he trudged up yet another curve lined with matchbox houses. The line was strong. It, whatever it was, had to be somewhere near. As he reached the crest of the hill the 'stars' in his head almost completed

the circle, danced and creased his forehead. He looked around for some clue. Both sides the houses seemed similar, only the one across the road retained a hedge where most had lost theirs to make way for a parking bay. The traffic buzzed lazily as it moved around the estate. Perran crossed the road to take a closer look at the house behind the neat privet hedge. He was disappointed. It was identical to its neighbours on each side. He turned his back on the gate and gazed away into the distance, through the opposite houses. Could this position have had some significance? Would the sun rise or set over a point in the distance? Was it that simple? Finding no obvious signs on the horizon he reasoned that the line may merely pass through this point, and set off to circuit the line of houses and to take up from the other side. Twenty minutes later he returned to the same point on the road, certain now that there was something very important about that spot. Something that he could not define, something distinctly different to the types of power lines he was used to.

‘Can I help you?’ A voice from behind him cut into his thoughts. He turned. A tall attractive woman stood at the gate of the hedged house. Her tone was one of warning, but he smiled and stepped just one pace towards her. Suddenly she looked a little flustered. ‘Only you were standing out there a while back, and er, you’re back.’

‘Yes, sorry,’ he began, letting his voice lapse into the mildly Aussie drawl he’d picked up while in Australia. ‘I’m looking for somewhere. These roads can be kinda confusing. I’m sorry if I worried you, hanging around like.’

‘No, not at all,’ she added quickly, ‘I was gardening you see, I just noticed, that’s all. Um, where is it? Maybe I can help.’

‘Where?’ He found himself caught for a moment. ‘I - don’t exactly have the address - just a memory.’ He shrugged. ‘Not much good eh?’

‘No. Been looking long?’

‘Too right. Most of the afternoon!’

She looked at him for a moment, a quizzical smile touching her lips.

‘I’ll be off then, thanks anyway, looks like I’m right up a gum tree here,’ he chucked in for effect and turned to go.

Over the road a balding man had emerged and was lining up an electric hover mower. He glanced up. Enough to let Perran know he was watching him.

‘Um!’ she succeeded in turning his head once more, felt sure she knew him from somewhere, something in his face was familiar. ‘If you tell me the description, I may recognise it – it could help.’

‘Thanks, but it’s too difficult to describe.’ Suddenly his head was full of water, running dark and cool, sweet and fresh. ‘Tell you what, though, I could really go on a drink of water, if it’d not be too much trouble. I’ll stay right here.’

Liz looked at him again, darted a glance at her neighbour.

‘Sure! Sure, why not. Look, come in the garden,’ she unlatched her neat white gate, finding an irrational thrill run through her. This was foolish; dangerous. Mr Gransom was over the road, within ‘neighbour-hood-watch’ earshot, but it was outside her usual behaviour, and she knew that it was not wise. ‘There’s a seat - won’t be a moment,’ she said indicating a rustic-style bench that leant against the wall of her L-shaped house in the lee of a scattering of climbing roses and the wands of a winter-flowering jasmine. He smiled and flicked off his pack before sitting down. She nodded and smiled and felt as if she was being rude to her guest when she closed the front door and let the latch drop.

Liz ran the tap, shook ice cubes from a tray to crack into tall glasses of lemon squash and bore them back towards the door. Suddenly she felt a little foolish. Silently she moved across the living room to the small window from which you could just see the bench. He sat, almost laid back, his eyes closed, head resting back on the red- brickwork, his long legs stretched out in front of him. He did not move, sunlight played through the gently moving roses and created patterns that danced and bejewelled his figure. She felt the strange sense of knowing him again, distantly, perhaps a forgotten friend of her son.

He rested his head back, the firmness of the wall seemed to ease the tightness that he had been beginning to feel, it was good to sit and rest his feet. He was confused. The power line had led to this inauspicious place. But now the lights danced dimly and remained as a persistent blur. He really didn't know what it was that he was looking for - A pilgrimage to nowhere - A dead end.

Liz unlatched and eased the front door open; she picked up the glasses once more, fielding the door with her foot. At once his eyes opened and he stood. Feeling slightly silly she grinned at him.

'Thirsty work - gardening,' she said.

'Sure is,' taking his glass from her and sipping.

'Please,' she waved at the bench and sat herself. He followed suit.

'So, where have you been travelling?' she opened.

As she drank she stole small penetrating glances at him, each look well aimed to ascertain some point. He had an attractive face, finely drawn for a man, but not effeminate, set under a curling straw-blond mop. He was slim yet his arms were tightly muscled and shone with sun bleached hair. Not as young as she'd first thought, so probably not a long forgotten friend of Zed's. Michael, she reminded herself, not Zed now! Little Zed, her first born, had grown and was now twenty-three, a respectable accountant in Birmingham, and as old as the hills and just about as distant, and was to be called Michael, his middle name, his fathers name, from now on! As if she could remember the change after so many years, not that she had the chance to practise it that often.

'Just recently, up from Bristol.' His smile was broad, a sense of 'being at home' had invaded him.

'Where are you headed next?'

He drank deeply for a second. 'Not quite sure, you see.'

Holding his glass in one hand he held the other hand flat, palm towards her, fingers pointing forward, he held the stance and looked at her before he spoke. She found her gaze drawn to the hand and his words filtered into her head as if coming from within, as if they were her own thoughts.

'I'm following a line,' he said, wondering as he did so why he had chosen to try to explain. Yet there were those who would understand but then they understood so much else as well. Somehow in her mind appeared large masses of rocks and stones, monoliths and circles, but she didn't know why, and her conscious sorted through the lines she knew and settled on the Railway, that ran close, slicing through the swollen town.

'The Railway?'

His hand dropped gently, he shook his head, though something had urged him to explain he had been mad to try.

‘No, this line I’m following, you can’t see it; it’s not man made.’ He was suddenly afraid that he was going to frighten her with talk of ‘strange’ things. ‘Have you heard of ley lines, between great ancient monuments, like Stonehenge and Avebury?’ Thinking she must know of them at least, to bring the conversation back to reality of a sort.

Liz was surprised, her first unconscious reaction to his word had been the right answer, and yes, now she remembered a programme about an odd couple of blokes that had followed these lines right across the country using bent wires. Yes, it all came back now. She felt less uneasy, more sure of herself.

‘With bent wires!’ she pronounced, crooking her forefinger in example.

His smile was warm to the depth of his eyes. Eyes that were of the darkest brown that she had ever seen, so dark it was difficult to distinguish the black of the pupil. The darkness reflected all he saw, like the windows of an ancient house, but the dark was warm if a little disconcerting, as if the house was the home of someone you loved, who you had been expecting to be at home. ‘I knew – all right,’ he said very softly, the Aussie accent fading into the Cornish.

‘What?’ said in curiosity and mild alarm. Something had changed, something wasn’t quite right. He shook his head gently, the smile still in place.

‘So where did they start?’ she began, ‘I’m sorry - I don’t know your name?’ Thinking, as she did so, how foolish these pleasantries could sound, of course she didn’t know his name! ‘Perran - Perran Lovering,’ he gave with a just-resistable urge to add, ‘at your service ma’am,’ curtailed only because she probably thought him strange enough already without that kind of humour adding to his quirkiness.

‘Oh!’ she sighed. ‘Another to suffer from the whim of ‘hip’ parents - we did it ourselves - neither of them use their names now though.’

Perran looked at her a little puzzled, she seemed sorry for him for some reason.

She saw herself in his dark eyes, her tawny-blonde hair sweeping her shoulders, her hands reached up and hooked it back behind her ears, an old reflex in times of stress.

She thought about choosing names together, her and Mick, scoffing at the old traditional names, seeking something that made a good sound, then, more to please his Mum than anything, tacking Michael in as a middle name.

‘We named our children Zed and Alpha!’ she shrugged resignedly.

He suddenly understood.

‘No- er, mine’s not one of them,’ he began ‘Perran’s a family name, you know, father and father’s father? It’s a saint’s name too, and even,’ he smiled and gave a small laugh as if he thought she’d never believe him, ‘even the name of my village - in a way.’

She looked hard at him, he wasn’t being funny, he meant it.

‘In what way?’ she heard herself say, wondering where the name came in. Now he smiled his broad smile again, he was wondering whether she was going to believe him. He’d told a girl once the name and she’d sworn he was making it up until she had found it on the map.

‘Perranzabuloe,’ he announced.

Her grey eyes narrowed, she was distinctly suspicious.

‘And where is that?’ she asked with a hint of defiance in her voice mellowed by a mischievous warmth.

There was something there that he liked. ‘Cornwall, south-west of Newquay.’

‘Mmm!’ she mused, that’s what it was, not Antipodean at all. ‘So where’s the Aussie accent come in?’

‘I spent about eight years out there,’ he smiled. ‘Sorry. Bad habit when I’m in a tight corner.’

‘But you’re originally from this - ‘

He knew she’d accepted it as true now.

‘Perranzabuloe, Saint Perran’s in the sand. The coast is known for its dunes.’

Liz just looked at him for a moment, then said ‘So where are you going, following this line, do you know?’

‘No, not really. It’s not quite the same, this line has been there for me for - years. It’s only now I’ve the time to follow it,’ Perran said, he hoped, simply.

Liz looked at his backpack, lying on the grass, no sign of the wire things.

‘So where’s the wires?’ she said crooking her finger once more.

‘Ah! Well that’s part of what is different, I don’t use them, I can, but I don’t need to.’

As he spoke stars danced in the back of her mind.

‘It is like lights inside my head, they tell me which way to go,’ he concluded enunciating his words carefully, hoping that by clarity she would understand and believe.

She sat up, the action drew her away from him slightly, the usual reaction to something strange. Yet she had to acknowledge the stars that had spun in her head before he spoke of them, and perhaps this was something like the stones she’d ‘seen’ before, she held her tongue. He was watching her; he was aware she was uncertain of him again, yet a feeling of comfort and closeness filled him, something akin to like-minds meeting; he knew he was right to tell her.

‘Usually I know what I’m looking for,’ Perran continued, thinking of water hidden deep beneath the ground that was the basis of his family’s living, ‘but this time it’s more of a personal quest, an adventure!’ His grin that accompanied his words rendered it as quite acceptable.

They had finished their drinks and time was slipping by, measured by the shadow that now engulfed their wall. Liz shivered slightly and Perran glanced at his watch. It was well on the way to five o’clock, and certainly time he was moving on, reluctant as he was to leave this friendly face.

‘I must go,’ he said, indicating the time, ‘I’ve taken far too much of your time and your hospitality.’

‘Not at all.’ Liz smiled in reply, and meant it. He stood, flicked his pack on his back, and held out his hand. Liz took it looking straight in to his dark eyes.

‘Thank you, er,’ he gave a small laugh. Liz realised what was wrong.

‘Mrs. Hawkey,’ she began, then shook her head, her long hair adding to the swing, ‘Liz, Liz Hawkey.’

‘Thank you Liz,’ Perran repeated, and turned to go. She stood where she was until he reached her gate.

‘Where?’ Liz called, he stopped and turned to listen, head at a slight inquiring angle.

‘Where are you going to stay, tonight I mean?’ Walking over to him, wondering why she’d asked, she knew she had nothing she could safely offer.

‘I’ll find somewhere quiet, I’ve got all my kit,’ he smiled with the sort of confidence you believe in.

'Oh, fine - fine. Good trip,' she finished feeling inadequate and foolish. 'Bye.'
'Bye.' He said softly as he walked away. He didn't want to go, this was stupid.

Liz moved to a point where she could watch him until he disappeared as the road wound round the arc. The garden seemed so empty. She wandered back to the bench, plucked up the two empty glasses and stood there holding them for a moment. Shaking herself mentally she strode indoors to dump the evidence of her afternoon's insanity.

Chapter 2

It was ridiculous. He'd been travelling for four days, following this 'centre of attraction', this strange force but now, after a pleasant hour and a glass of lemon-squash, he didn't want to go on. The direction was confused; he put it down to tiredness, and the maze of houses that he had to escape to find somewhere suitable to sleep, and trod wearily down the hill to the town.

The journey had been slow, unnecessarily so as he already knew its centre was somewhere in or near Berkshire, but he'd been determined to follow it faithfully, kicking off from Bristol and working his way towards 'it'.

It had first hit him fifteen years ago, when he was hitchhiking back to University with a friend. They'd had a lift that had dropped them near Avebury. There was a place - the lights danced in his head as they crossed the line of the avenue and he could distinguish the 'feel' from that of the water that he usually divined for.

Dowsing ran in the family - his father had been the first to turn it into a business, to use his divining power to pinpoint where to position the machinery for drilling boreholes, and it was soon obvious that 'young Perran' had the same gift. Come to that most people had it to some degree, could work the wires, but the Lovers knew more, and didn't have to rely on hazel twigs or wires. It had been enough for his father to use the twig, it was well known and accepted in his part of Cornwall, but he insisted that his son should have the only qualifications that would become acceptable, pieces of paper in subjects that would convince the disbelieving, even though the practical method of locating the underground water may remain the same.

They trudged on, no lifts being forth-coming, then it hit him. Like stumbling across another avenue to an ancient monument, but this one pulled at more than just his head; there was with it a tightness in his chest, the lights twinkled and flashed and the intensity gave him a headache. He'd clasped both hands to his head and stood, eyes tight shut, dazzled by the fireworks display. When his companion had appeared concerned he'd called it a migraine attack, and soon after they were picked up, and dropped almost on the doorstep of their college. As the car had driven through the tail piece of Berkshire the power had become intense, then began to fade and his ears seemed full of a keening sound, like he'd heard once on a programme about old Irish life, and death, until his head was clear and he began to think that perhaps it had been migraine after all.

He'd driven the same road at other times, and not felt a thing. Then once, by now convinced that it was nothing, he'd stopped to stretch his legs at a lay-by somewhere past Hungerford. Almost as his head cleared, relaxed from the driving, the 'force' was there. He was frightened; a panic sent him back into the car as if the walls of glass and steel had protected him. It was not so. It was only as he began to concentrate on pulling out into the steady traffic that the pyrotechnics faded. Filled with regret, a heavy sadness of something important missed, he drove on, back to the safe academic world of Geological studies.

'That was years ago,' he thought as he came to an underpass that sounded inhabited, and decided to leap the barriers and defy the sparse traffic as a safer alternative. He found a non-too-smart pub that served bar meals and took a pint and a greasy helping of chicken and chips. As he nursed the last of his pint he considered where he could find to doss down. The way up from Bristol hadn't been too bad, most of it through real farm land and

he'd found suitable dry places to spend the night. Here in the town he wasn't so sure. There were plenty more spending their nights out on the streets here, as in any town. It was one of the things he'd been shocked to find when he'd returned. At one time it had only been the hardened down-and-outs. Today there were so many, and so many younger ones.

He remembered Tam. Tam who'd worked and lived on the road for all the years that Perran had known him. A true old man of the road. He tramped as a career. He had his stop-off places, those where he'd find a few days work for a few quid. 'Even on the road you needs a few quid', he told Perran, 'If'n you goin t' keep yo'self decent like.' And he hadn't meant booze, not even food, but toothpaste and silk underwear! Tam had taught him plenty about living on the road. As a boy he'd absorbed the old man's stories as he'd sat by and watched him eat the bread and cheese that his mother had sent out for him.

Now Perran wandered through the well-lit empty centre, the only signs of life being those round the garish pubs and take-away places that reeked of stale oil and yet still made the saliva run, only to find himself out on the other side of the town with a few large residences and then the river. Lights from a sea of houses told him that ahead lay more housing estates, yet here was an island of darkness, a breath of countryside before the houses crowded in again. He stood and watched the inky blackness slide by for a while and listened to the sounds of a town at night. He wondered if it was dry and clean and quiet beneath the bridge, and scrambled down the first side to find the way wide and well walked and smelling slightly of burnt wood and urine. It was too dark beneath the bridge to view the other side so he took himself back up, and over, and down to the bank. It was grassy and six-foot wide near the mouth of the bridge, becoming a very narrow, barely worn, path between hard stone and water as it disappeared beneath it. It smelled sweet and clean, and providing any rain that fell did not get driven under, it would be dry. In his present deflated mood he didn't much care any-more, so settling hard by the support of the bridge he squeezed into his sleeping bag, set his rucksack as a pillow, and drifted into sleep.

*

They came staggering down the path between the trees, their heavy shiny boots scuffing the soft earth, getting caught in stray exposed roots, causing expletives to burst from well-lubricated mouths. Two, almost identical in dress, they differed in stature. Stocky, with thick neck, rounded features and near bald head carried plenty of weight, enough to make it matter, whereas his companion was taller and lean, and wore more hair than the other, though still aggressively cut.

They wavered on the edge of the dark flowing water and, in unison, in ritual, unzipped and relieved themselves, their streams creating different cadences as they cascaded into the river. Satisfied they bent and straightened and stumbled on. It was dark here, overhanging trees blocking the lights from the road that ran over the bridge. The path was narrow; they went in single file.

Lean felt nauseous, he'd taken one too many lagers, spent a few quid too many - he was expected to, being the only one with a regular job, and that was one thing. Okay, so he liked the way there was always a lot of space made for them when they walked down the street, yeah, and he liked knowing he was 'safe' with his mates, but perhaps it was time to move off, they were turning into a right bunch of losers, always moaning about lack of dosh, and there was the other thing. So it wasn't much of job, working behind the desk in a motor insurance office, pretty run-down building it was in, and right up a back street, but it

was a regular job and, if he didn't blow it, it had 'prospects'. There'd been talk of sending one of them on a college course, part time, with a chance of some qualifications. Then he'd be really in. He knew he had a chance, rubbish as his GCSE results were they were better than Sharon's, and she might leave anytime, she'd just got herself engaged and bosses aren't stupid.

He watched the back of Stocky as he made his way along in front, in blurred silhouette, arms swinging away from his sides in an act of balance, Lean found a sneer slide into his mind, a snide thought, that he looked 'ape-like' and had a brain to match. They neared the bridge, a patch of sodium gold lit the grass giving it a sickly hue, beyond, the ominous black mouth held in contrast, from which flowed the river gleaming like oil.

'Wass that?' blurted Stocky, breaking the peace, then as Lean moved to look he must have made up his mind. 'Hey! Wino! Wino!' he chanted out in battle cry and threw himself forward in a thundering run that ended in a guttural shout and a jump, both feet together, whole body weight force, aimed to be broken only by impact with flesh and bone.

Drawn on in tribal pursuit Lean arrived as the body sat up in instant and acute pain, saw the pale disc of the face just before it was obscured by Stocky's boot swinging it back in a sickening thud against the hard stone. Stocky drew breath and passed a sly look that spoke of force and made Lean swing his own Doc's into the soft centre of the man, the force drew the body back into a curve, his head back into line for the next swipe, like a punch-ball on a spring.

Perran didn't know which came first the awakening or the pain. The shape above him was enormous against the mouth of the bridge, but it staggered a little way back. The pain was in his legs, trapped in the sleeping bag they felt pinioned - he tried to move - fire and sweat rushed through his whole body - and the shape moved towards him, his arm fended part of the blow but he felt the scorch of rough rubber burn across his temple as his head was snapped back and cracked against the wall. The chicken and chips forced its way between his teeth as he was folded over another blow, and in his retching he did not see the next coming, but endured a bodily movement that drew him up, back, propelled on a boot end, where the wall crashed against his skull and buried him in oblivion.

The way that the body gave and, soft, absorbed the blow from his boot had sickened Lean, he turned, and found the rucksack, an inanimate target, he raised it with both hands and performed a drop kick sending it in an arc above the oily blackness.

'Goa-wl' he sang out as it splashed, sank, bobbed and, caught in a current, span away into darkness. It was then he heard it, two soft long whistles. He froze to hear better, reached out to Stocky to stop him crunching against the body's chest.

'Listen!' Lean hissed.

He saw the small flick of a torch a long way up the path, and the whistle again.

'Shit - someone's fucking cumin!' he spat, turning; running away under the bridge, running the tightrope of path between wall and water, long legs lifting the boots high and clear of the ground, head cleared by fear. This was the 'other thing' a record and he'd be out of a job, and he'd just made up his mind, that wasn't on!

*

He wasn't going to call out that name. It was too ridiculous, naming their dog after a nineteenth century poet. Besides to him; to most people, the name called up the picture of a round-faced actor playing in the sit-com 'Shelley'. 'Where the,' he controlled his inclination to swear even though she wasn't there to admonish him, '...was that dog'. He whistled again, flicked his small torch around the trees and bushes, did not allow it to dwell on the water, and returned it to lighting his path, just in case he trod on 'something'.

It was her fault he'd lost the bloody dog now. Quite happy, he'd been, watching an old Western, when she'd arrived home from her Towns Women's Guild meeting. She'd swept in, looked at the clock, said 'Oh good, I thought I'd missed the start. You're not watching this rubbish are you?' and turned over just in time for the start of an Opera. Most things he could take, but Opera was not one of them. Pointedly, at least he hoped pointedly, he'd stood and said 'If that was all that was on, I'll take the dog out for a walk!'

He heard a sound, it sounded like a howl, where was that dog! He whistled again. There was more noise, above the distant hum, pounding feet, fading. He released the breath that he'd been holding. Oh hell!

'She-lley!' he called, 'SHE-E-LLEY!'

The dog suddenly appeared in the pool of light in front of the bridge, stood there quivering in the uncertain glow, its black and white coat transmuted to gold and shadow. 'Shelley! Come here boy!' the man called. The dog stood still. 'COME - HERE!' the man repeated. The dog turned and, crouching, edged towards the bridge. The sound of a low growl came from the spaniel, low and serious, unlike any the man had heard before.

There was something under the bridge. The man felt a shiver of cold trace its way round his frame.

'Shel-ley, stay!' he hissed. He didn't want to go near. He was frightened. The bloody dog! Sinking, so that its chest seemed to nearly touch the ground, it was edging forward. The man was drawn inexorably on, pace by pace with the dog and the closer he got the more he tried to tell himself that he didn't know what it was that lay there. It must be a bundle of old rags, rubbish thrown from the bridge. There wasn't, couldn't be the pale shape of a head there; it was a trick of the light, no arm stretched out, something else.

His chest felt tight and his breath was coming in short bursts. He gripped the torch so that the rubber moulding dug into his skin and, deep in the pocket of his coat, his other hand spasmodically clenched and released. With heart thudding he stepped towards the shape, even now denying it the name of 'body' though he could make out features that meant it could only be that, profile nose, ear, light wavy hair, a face tipped forward towards him, cheek resting on the dirt, the lower arm cast back from the shoulder, the upper wrapped around. Suddenly it was clear! A body, half in a sleeping bag. He had arrived at a point barely a yard from the foot end of the bag, and didn't quite know how he'd got that close.

The man looked round, hoping for help, scared of attack. The dog sat now, quiet, at his side, raised its mournful eyes to his sweating face. He reached down and gave the warm head a rub. Somehow the touch gave him some security, the man looked back at the body. 'First' he told himself 'Is he alive or - ' a savage sigh escaped him. He felt clammy all over, clothes that seemed light and cool when he left home stuck to him. His hand was slippery with sweat. He brought the hand down, lower, towards the mouth. He jumped back, the fan of breath had touched him at the same moment as he'd noticed the dark pool of blood behind the head. It took a few moments to get his breathing under control, to stop

the rapid-fire breaths that ensure panic. ‘Alive - Oh my God - what - what?’ he tried to talk himself through. ‘An Ambulance - ‘ just saying the word seemed to calm him. A positive action.

The nearest phone box was - he wracked his brain for their positions - if you don’t use them you don’t notice them - ‘Yes!’ He looked down at the man again. What should he do, should he try to cover him more? Move him from the dirt path?

‘No. No. Never move!’ He stripped off his coat, laid it over the exposed chest and shoulders, looked round once more hoping for someone to come along. Somehow it didn’t seem right to leave him all alone in that condition. Swallowing the taste of bile that had crept into his mouth the man turned to follow the path back. In his head he traced the line, far too long! Perhaps he could scramble up beside the bridge, the quickest way, and minutes might matter! A new type of urgency took hold of him as he threw himself at the steep bank, tugging at tussocks of grass and stems of bushes to pull himself along. A hot sweat trickled down his lined face, he slipped, the knees of his fawn trousers skidded on damp grass tearing it up by the roots. Tugging himself to his feet, seeing his goal only yards away, he pressed on upwards, his shirt caught on barbed wire that had once been a fence to stop anyone using this unauthorised passage, and was released with a neat right angled tear. And he was there. For a second or two he caught his breath, stooped and drained. With a waggle of tail the spaniel joined him, ready for the off, enjoying this new escapade.

The man rolled over the wall on to the pavement, the dog jumped up and down, then scampered ahead, to where the wall was lower, and was running back to his master as the man began a lumbering trot towards the telephone box that he could see further down the road. As he ran Shelley skipped and jumped in front of him, delighting in the game. When the man’s foot caught the dog and it dropped back with a yelp he wasn’t sorry, he was finding it very hard to run. He cast a thought towards his wife. All this was her fault! The phone was intact. He clasped the handset to his ear and punched in the numbers. He’d never used 999 before; it made him feel as if he was in a T.V. programme as he answered the cool inquiry with an explosive ‘Ambulance!’

The voice on the line was calm. His was stretched and torn between gasps of air. He had to repeat the position, and find words to explain quickly what he knew of the injured man’s condition, little as it was, and he said he’d wait on the bridge, and pleaded ‘Hurry’ into the phone, it was important to him now.

A wet nose nuzzled into his hand, and he stroked the silky ear. ‘It’s all right, boy. I’m sorry. Come on,’ he said, clipping on the dog’s lead, before setting a brisk pace back to the bridge, where he waited, alternately leaning over and looking down, where he could just see the end of the sleeping bag, and watching the road for the Ambulance. When it came it was announced by flashing lights, but no heart-flipping wail; the man was glad. He leant over the parapet, told them in hoarse words where the injured man was, how to reach him, the proper route, and the fast one. One took the fast route, and soon shouted back, and returned, and together they moved the stretcher out of the ambulance and disappeared into the darkness. Leaning on the wall, the trembling began in his spine, a contracting that pulled his shoulders back, that spread down his legs, along his arms, to tingle in clenched fingers and toes, to make his teeth chatter as if bitterly cold. The dog gave a sound like a sigh and laid, head on paws, at his master’s feet.

When they'd brought the casualty up, still half in the now split-open sleeping bag, they saw his ashen face and his trance like stance, and knew they had two to take in, he couldn't be left, and irregular as it was, neither could the dog.

*

At the bright entrance to casualty they passed on their messages and patient to fast hands that swept him away for intensive care, and took time to find someone to take Mr. Chalmers under their wing to bring him round with warmth and tea and talk, his spaniel on its lead, its lead locked in his hand, something real to hold on to.

Later, a nice, softly spoken policewoman came and talked to him. He told all he knew, of the sound of running feet, of the dog finding the man, of the shock he felt when he saw, 'Such a young face, it wasn't as if it was some old tramp. Who was he? A student?' 'It didn't matter, you might have saved the young man's life. If he hadn't been found, had stayed till dawn, he may well have died,' the policewoman said.

Mr Chalmers looked up, a trickle of warmth ran through him. Saved a man's life!

*

Cleared by the hospital the policewoman took him and Shelley home, and endeared herself further to him by assuming the dog was named after the sit-com character, not the poet. At the door he let himself in, and was followed by the policewoman a pace or two behind with Shelley.

At the sound of his key in the door his wife had risen and opened the door to the lounge ready to accuse the way people do when they have become worried. His torn and bedraggled appearance stunned her into unaccustomed silence as she took in the dusty coat, mud smeared trousers and torn shirt, and - the policewoman.

Both husband and wife seemed struck dumb. The tableau held for an hour-long-minute. 'Good evening Mrs Chalmers,' opened the policewoman, 'Mr Chalmers has had a bit of a rough time - ' she hesitated, then hazarding a guess, judging the domineering manner of the woman, 'Your husband has probably saved a man's life tonight.'

She wasn't quite prepared for the reaction. This stern faced woman burst into tears and embraced her husband, and drew him in to the room, and cushioned him to a seat. Her words flowed round him in care and caution with no hint of remonstrance. Harry Chalmers hadn't expected it either but felt good and warm and glad that he'd taken the dog for a walk.

Chapter 3

The house seemed empty too, somewhat as it did when Allie had moved out. Liz had thought that she would feel relieved, at peace, to have the house to herself for the first time in so many years, but it wasn't like that, it had echoed with tidiness and whispered messages that she was about to call out to Allie, to share with her daughter, that just proved the point that now there was nobody there. True, it hadn't taken long before she adjusted, but the departure of the young man with the unusual name had resurrected the feelings that she'd had then.

In a desultory manner she watched some of what was on offer on the television, experiencing a little of future technologies in a 'Tomorrow's World', and when that palled found a nature programme on The Northern Forests to explore, left at last with nothing but old films or repeats she switched off. She wandered round the house looking at her own things as if they belonged to someone else, wondered what they would say to an outsider. She paused by her idiosyncratic collection of animals carved from stone, any animal, many types of rock. Looking at them, how would anyone know that it had all begun with a freak of nature, a stone that looked just like a little mouse, complete with a coloured-in tail curling round its flank, and Mick had drawn in the eyes, and given it to her. She picked it up and felt the coolness of the stone and turned the tiny shape in her hand. The time when, in her despair and anger, she'd thrown it away, flashed into her mind. She could see the stone cutting a neat arc against the sky and disappearing against the hedge and herself running after it almost before it had landed to spend half an afternoon searching for a single stone on a gravel path. The memory disturbed the coolness of her thoughts. It had been then, as the stone flew, that she had realised that she could manage without Mick, and there was no reason to spite herself, or to excise every memory of him, to continue life. Liz placed the stone back in a new position and turned for bed.

*

They worked around the body, apparently frantic, full of purpose. At once, together, both head and leg were investigated and signs of life checked and monitored, many hands, the white and green clothed men and women worked as one hydroid being, to one end. The sleeping bag showed dark under the bright lights where it had become blood soaked. The temporary splint was slid away by knowledgeable hands, the length of the drenched cord jeans sliced, the scissors sliding along the undamaged skin and, sharp as tailors', making a swift parting in the material. With care, with speed, it was peeled back to show the sharp pointed teeth of bone where it had chewed its way through the flesh and skin to bleed and weep into the comfort of the cocoon.

Abrasions and lacerations to the head; bleeding with its usual profusion; concussion.

Expert hands, a well-tutored eye, investigated the skull beneath the blond waves, beyond their paleness, where they hung lank and deep in hue.

'I don't think we have any bones broken here, thank God, but a near thing by the look of it,' commented the Doctor glancing up at the new nurse, in Casualty for her first time, catching her look of fascinated horror at the leg wound as it was placed in compression ready for the patient to be transferred to X Ray.

‘You go up with him,’ he instructed, ‘keep a close eye on him for any signs of consciousness.’

*

The clock radio sang itself out of slumber at six-thirty, but failed to rouse the recumbent Liz as it usually did, it had to ping its annoying bleeper to wake her ten minutes later, something it had never ever had to do before. Waking; suddenly Liz smelt the faintest whiff of smoke, and was fired in alarm, as she always was when she was woken and did not know what by. It had always been that way. The scent of stale smoke dissipated as the bleep was identified and the background trilling of a song filtered through. Her heart paced steadily again, she went to haul herself from bed, conscious that she was later waking than usual. Her head ached, as if she was leaving some of the heaviest matter behind as she lifted it from the pillow, a weariness in all her joints, like the onset of flu. But she didn’t feel hot, or cold, she shrugged, it ached. Feet to the floor and dressing gown drawn on, she almost fell! It was as if the blood supply had been cut from her leg, numb, then tingling with pins and needles. She ran the shower hot to draw the aches from her limbs, then wrapped in dressing gown, her hair combed straight, she breakfasted.

She wondered what her ‘visitor’ Perran was doing for breakfast, but forgot to finish the mental question as a wave of pain swam through her head and rekindled the ache in her leg. Rubbing her calf Liz wondered whether to go to work at all today; it would be a first; seven years and not a day off sick. The pains eased, she washed the dishes, left them to drain, returned to her bedroom for the preparations for the day.

One of the obligations of working on beauty products was to be beautifully turned out with immaculate make-up. The process was as swift as seven years practice can make it, the only variations being the colours chosen or sometimes the use of a new product. Liz had found that by trying each new formula at least once, she was better able to advise her clients. Clients! She’d thought it funny when she had been taught to call the make-up buying population that, initially she’d thought it a pompous term reminiscent of lawyers. Now it came naturally, the confidences offered, the trust taken, the well-being created by her craft made her feel it worthy of the word ‘client’.

Foundation, the lightest possible but smoothing out the irregularities of colour, a brush of blusher, a dust of a new ‘luminosity powder’, she tried the words, microchrome and pearlescent, to hear how they would sound. Then down to the lips, lined, filled, blotted. Up to the eyes with shades to complement both her eyes and the deep blue linen skirt and soft blue blouse she would wear. This process was just part of her life from Monday to Friday, happily abandoned for a decent moisturiser at weekends. It was finished. Time to concentrate on her hair. When she lifted her arms there was an ache in her ribs. She decided to put it up in a quick tidy style; parting her tawny-blonde locks centrally she twisted each half separately then pinned them together at the back with an oval velvet-covered clip, giving her long hair a neat bobbed shape. The ache had gone as she concentrated on fixing the clip, and Liz decided that perhaps she would work today after all.

She’d walked the two miles down into the town every working day since Allie had left and she had insisted that Allie had the car. It wasn’t as if Liz had always used the car anyway, and Allie needed it more to get to work when she found it, or, if for nothing else, to drive over and visit her mum now and again. Today Liz wished she could have driven - even in her smart flat- heeled shoes the walking jarred.

*

Liz returned from her morning break. She was sure there was a name for it, the law that states that 'when you're feeling under-the-weather you're busier than ever'. Whatever it was, it had been in operation that morning. Kerry, her seventeen year-old trainee, was just greeting her own sister as if she was a potential client, trying to keep a straight face as she offered her a seat before demonstrating some make up for her. Liz allowed herself a wry smile, and let it pass for it was blessedly quiet for the moment. She'd curtail the 'consultation' if they became busy again. Liz perched on the high stool allowing the aching leg to dangle, swinging gently to and fro, not intending to, but listening to the sisterly chatter.

'Aren't you bushed?' asked Kerry and, before Melinda could answer, added, 'What was it like? Was it like on the telly?'

'I was shattered about four this morning, not that it was busy just then, that's probably what made me tired, but earlier, 'bout midnight - ' She stopped a moment as if considering her words. Kerry waited intently; her hand that had been swirling a brush on a blusher paused. It had been like 'Casualty' on TV when they'd brought him in, all the more vivid, dramatic in its full-size close up reality. She'd spent most of her time on a Medical ward and had become used to the neat, bloodless, planned wounds of the surgeon. It had shaken her more than she'd expected. Could she tell Kerry about it without breaching confidence? Well, it'd be anonymous all right, no one knew who he was, and he wasn't fit to tell, it was only Kerry anyway. 'Well?' Kerry prompted.

'Well, just after midnight we had a patient rushed in, full crash team, yeah, just like 'Casualty' 'cept when you're there you're not thinking, just getting on with your part of the job. Poor guy, he'd been done over, beaten unconscious, broken ribs, leg smashed - ' she swallowed, the memory of the glistening bone making her wince. 'I had to take him up to X-Ray, look after him.'

'What was he like?'

'Like? Oh, 'bout thirty or so, blond. They said - ' she stopped again wondering as to the wisdom of what she was saying.

The chatter had wound its way into Liz's ears, seeped into her mind, linked up with her aches and her wondering. It couldn't be Perran, surely not. A stately lady was drifting towards the counter. Liz recognised her, knew that she'd 'stop for a little chat' if at all encouraged. She wanted to hear what was going to be said next between the sisters. She was torn by the flimsiness of the information, felt an urge to take the girl by the shoulders and extract the words that would make it clear that the casualty of last night could not have been him. Liz turned and pretended to consult a list, a cardinal sin, presenting an unwelcoming back instead of the customer catching smile.

'Go on!' encouraged Kerry.

'Ambulance said that he'd been 'dossing down' under Albert Bridge, but he was too clean for that or to be one of those 'travellers' - neat like, can't explain it,' she shrugged.

Clean, neat, blond, thirty. Her leg ached and her head ached.

'So - who was he?'

'Don't know, no ID, no wallet, nothing. Ambulance said they'd looked round, nothing, probably nicked. So he's a mystery man 'til he comes to.'

A lump seemed to settle in Liz's chest making it hard to breathe. She wanted to know more, needed to, she swung round to face Melinda. Kerry gave a start and tried to swiftly recommence her pretence.

Liz smiled, 'Couldn't help hearing,' she said softly, her voice belying the madness she felt inside, 'did you say he had blond wavy hair and deep brown eyes?'

Melinda shook her head slightly; this was getting out of hand.

'I - I don't know, um, hair yes, I never saw his eyes, I probably shouldn't have said anything, only it was only Kerry.'

'I understand - only - ,' Liz was smiling outwardly, inwardly she felt intensely unhappy, and her leg ached and her head ached.

'Do you know him?' Kerry stared wide-eyed at Liz.

'Perhaps - I don't know.'

'It'd help if they can identify him, get his records - you know,' added Melinda.

'I don't know, I know someone - like that; said he was going to sleep rough last night.' Liz shrugged and shook her head. - it hurt.

Kerry's face was open with astonishment.

'You could go up and see, if he's not come round,' Melinda offered thinking of the marred face lying impassive above the stiff white sheet. 'Oh! But, um, better not to say how you know!' she added in a small panic of self-preservation.

Liz smiled with the corners of her lips turned down and gave a small shrug that indicated her indecision, but in doing so caught the attention of an approaching customer and raised the smile to that of an enquiring welcome. As she spoke of delicate balancers and moisturisers that combat dryness she heard the hasty farewells of the sisters and noticed that her aches were easing once more.

Once the customer left Liz began considering the situation. So easy to ignore it and leave well alone. After all what was he to her, even if it was him. Nothing. It was no good. There was something there that made her feel responsible for his well-being while he was near. If it was him - If - the pain swam through her again - as the image of him walking down the road, away from her home, filled her mind's eye. The hospital wasn't far, five minutes by car, how long to walk? Perhaps fifteen. If she walked swiftly there it should leave enough time to see someone and find out and still get back on time. No time to eat though. Well, it wouldn't do any harm - she'd go. She didn't stop to explain, just left as soon as one o'clock came. Kerry had barely stepped behind the counter and Liz had been waiting like an eager child at school sports, edging toward the start-line.

The pain totally left Liz - no ache in limbs or joints or head as she paced the rise to the hospital. At a major junction she was held up by the constant stream of traffic and allowed herself to wonder how she was going to explain her odd interest in a case that she shouldn't know about, possibly concerning someone she didn't know, maybe concerning someone she'd met for a single hour. The total stupidity of the situation flooded through her. She blushed though there was no-one to note it, she turned, began to walk back down the slope. Pain! Searing through her, singing from head down to toes, burning her ribs and leg, it stopped her in her tracks. The traffic stopped, a bleep indicated an invitation from the green man. Her hesitation was slight in time yet the uncoordinated thoughts that flowed through her mind seemed to run forever. She turned again and ran through the pain across the road

and, as if the road held healing qualities, the pain left as swiftly as it had come. Frightened and eerily drawn on she strode towards the hospital buildings that loomed ahead.

Once in reception she drew on her 'beauty consultant' personality, standing poised and smart she asked if she could speak to someone in admissions. Phone call made she was soon entering a room to be greeted by a small bespectacled man with a wide thin-lipped smile, who enquired as to how he could help. The words came. With a swift introduction she said that she understood that they had admitted a young man in casualty last night, who was badly injured and unconscious. It was possible, she said, that this person was known to her. He looked down some lists. Picked up another smaller piece of paper, nodded. He picked up the telephone and spoke to someone on ward nine, giving her another smile as he waited for the answer to his question.

'Yes, Mrs - Hawkey. The patient in question has not regained consciousness. To be honest it would help up if we could identify him - would you care to accompany me, perhaps we could see if he is indeed your friend.'

She thought to say that he wasn't exactly a friend but decided to let it ride, precision would not necessarily help just now. They walked the shiny tiles through the pale-green corridors to ward nine, the smell of the hospital becoming gradually more familiar and fading from notice. At the entrance the man stopped to speak to the nurse who indicated the first bed, the one nearest their little office. Three paces from where Liz stood to the position where she could see his face. She was holding her breath. It was as if her eyesight was failing, she couldn't make out the features. She sensed that the man was watching her as she stepped nearer, so slowly, with reluctance, no matter how she tried not to see that fine drawn face beneath the bandages and the coarse crazed blaze that ran across cheek and temple, it was him. And he looked older than when she had seen him yesterday, no longer a 'boy'; a man. Melinda had described him as being in his thirties. Yes, he certainly looked it now, and not golden-faced but ashen and his eyes were closed, boarded up windows, absent friends.

She looked up at the man. He raised an eyebrow, she sighed, a long deep sigh, and nodded. They stepped softly away, stood at the door to the nurses room.

'Yes.' Liz said softly, 'It is him.' The words felt like treason, as if she was naming one who would be taken out and shot, as if by admitting it, the body in there became him. Back in the man's office it became more difficult. She'd noted the clock as they returned. How could it have taken so long? Her time was running out fast, and now he'd expect her to know things about him that she didn't. 'Shall we start with a name?' he said picking up pen and form.

'Perran, Perran - ' she left the name hanging there. What came next, it taunted her but did not come close enough to be grasped.

'Can you spell that?' he inquired.

'Um - No, I've only heard it said - '

He wrote PEARAN. 'And the first name?'

'That's it, his first name, Perran Love-something - I know it had 'Love' in it.' She was getting flustered, feeling foolish and concerned at once.

He sliced through the name with his pen, wrote LOVE---- in the space left and filled in PEARAN in another box. His movements were not happy - he looked up at her enquiringly.

'Place of residence?'

'OH?' it came as more of a sigh, what was it, where? 'Cornwall!' She stated confidently. He wrote it at the bottom of the next section and looked up at her.

'He said he lived in a village, and - and the name was Perran- something. You see, he had the same name as the village, that's all I remember really,' she could see the man's exasperation, could see the minute hand of the clock move round, she had to leave soon or she'd never be back in time. 'I met him yesterday, I gave him a drink, we chatted. He said he was going to sleep rough, so when I heard I just - '

He put his pen down.

'I'm sorry! I didn't really expect to ever see him again so I didn't make a note of the details. I might remember, you know how you do,' Liz finished with a shake of the head.

He smiled his wide smile. 'Yes, and if you do?'

'Of course I'll come in to let you know. Could I - could I visit?'

'I would have thought so, medical condition permitting. Ask permission of the staff on the ward,' he said, his face warming again as if it was the request he had been waiting for to confirm her story.

She left the hospital as if propelled from its doors, at a half trot she made her way down to the crossing, stood impatient to cross, and realised that all sensations of pain had left her, had not touched her since she had seen him. The route ahead was mostly down hill but her watch told her that the time had already come for her to be back behind her counter. She crossed the road and ran. Five minutes late, her hair breaking loose, damp starting to show on her blouse, she arrived in the store. She waved at Kerry, held out both hands as plea and in helplessness and disappeared into the staff Ladies. Her repairs were made quickly, hair tidy, blouse straightened, she'd grab a spray of 'Guinevere' when she returned to the counter, strong enough to swamp anything.

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The manager had seen Liz arrive back, late, dishevelled. He also noticed how quickly she returned looking immaculate once more. He wondered if he should say something, but decided not to. She was an asset to the store - his wife had said that she was the most helpful and understanding beauty consultant that she'd met, and that her friends thought so too. She'd been a bit of a gamble all those years back. Twenty-five and never had a job before and with two children to bring up on her own, but it had been only part-time, and she had started on the toiletries counter. Simple work, easily replaced, but he'd felt it a gamble as he'd also found her attractive and thought that unwise of him. She'd been reliable though and quick to learn and just the person to take over the 'beauty counter' when her children were older and she started working full-time. Seven years and the regular clientele had increased seven-fold and she probably didn't realise how much was due to the way the ladies in their forties and fifties shared their 'finds' in consumables, and how they each felt she 'just knew what was so right for them'.

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The time until the store closed could not come fast enough. Liz wished the time away and when free half ran home. Even though she was hungry her first inclination was to find her old AA Book of the road. Opening it she swiftly found Cornwall, the first map, and began to scan the page for anything that looked like the name she sought. A 'Perran' jumped from

the page, 'Perranarworthal' odd, but not the right one! Perranuthnoe? She said it out loud to herself, Perranuthnoe, and it was near Praa sands - he'd said something about sands. Perranuthnoe, it was like that, something like that. The more she said it the more strangely odd and right, it sounded. She went to eat muttering the name, thinking to write it down for the Admissions man, still grasping for his surname.

Visiting was six-thirty to eight. She tidied herself, leaving her hair pinned up and make-up in place, changed her blouse, set off to walk to the hospital, uneasy about the venture but determined to go. The evening was balmy, the day still only half-done in the run up to midsummer. She made good time and arrived just before seven. There was a different nurse on duty, to be expected, but it made her feel less sure of herself, less sure of being granted permission to see him. But it was all right - Liz said she'd been there earlier in the day and the nurse mentioned that he hadn't regained consciousness.

Having arrived Liz didn't really know why she'd been so desperate to come. She just had a feeling that it wasn't right for him to be alone with no one to care about him. She pulled up the hard chair and sat beside his bed. One hand was out of the bed with a drip attached, she didn't remember that from lunch-time, and wondered why it was there, whether he was worse. Her eyes scanned his face, angles she felt she knew, a pallor that she didn't. She stared at his eyelids, willing them to open, calling up the deep darkness of them. The shutters remained. Her eyes wandered, took in the rest of the ward, caught on the Fire Drill notice ironically stuck to the wall with tape that, black on yellow, repeated the instruction 'TO BE BURNT'; it made her smile. Her gaze returned to the man in the bed. His face was softened in repose, his skin clear and fine textured. She experienced an irrational urge to reach out and stroke his cheek, but resisted. Instead she just reached out her hand a little and stroked the long fingers and found them cold.

It was the sensation of running fingernails across frost, the tingling cold electric ran right up her arm. She looked up - his eyelids flickered, opened, their dark mirrors shining. 'Nurse!' The word escaped from her lips with a gasp, not daring to look away or remove her hand from his.