

THE WITCHING YEAR



Nigel Fletcher

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*The story is set in an English city
towards the end of the 1990s*

One

With her soft nose a millimetre from the plate-glass window of Wicca's World, Debbie Palmer contemplated the silver talisman she planned to steal. On a neat, hand-written tag was the price: £499.99, but Debbie scarcely noticed this – it was the talisman itself that held her attention. Even in the light from the street, the amethyst and the silver setting appeared to glow deeply, supernaturally, sympathetically. She'd coveted it for so long, and every time she'd passed the shop had dreaded she'd find it sold.

For a moment, while she caught her thoughts, a newly planted maple in the newly pedestrianised street provided a comfortable and practical support. It bent obligingly to her sixteen stones with a sappy little squeak, its hessian bandaged trunk stretching accommodatingly. Debbie was half aware that she must be drunk from her need for this tree and the fact she was here at all. She'd left her best friend's fiftieth birthday party half an hour ago and should have been safely on the bus home, but a bellyful of Woodpecker and red Cinzano had guided her irresistibly towards Old Street and the emerald Celtic Script of Wicca's World fascia, and she was now fully charged with the blind resolve of the late-night drunk.

At the base of the sapling, for all the world as if she'd ordered them – submitted an official requisition – was a small pile of bricks left by the city horticulturists. Debbie relinquished the tree's support and fell on the bricks gladly, embracing them. There was a feeling of security, of certainty in the rasp of baked clay against her cheek, a

reassuring texture and a smell of the earth. Their presence was like destiny. Picking them over with alcoholic fastidiousness, she selected a half-brick with a broken edge that could have been moulded for her hand, then tacked her way back to the window as if buffeted by a strong sou-westerly.

Despite the compromising brick in her hand, Debbie spent long moments gazing into the window with nostalgia for the first time she'd come across Wicca's World and succumbed to the talisman's spell.

It was not so much that Debbie felt it belonged to her, more that she was possessed by it, and when she stepped back from the window and took a firm purchase on the brick there was no sense of wrongdoing, only the certainty that her actions were justified by some higher authority than law and order.

The brick hit the centre of the big rectangle of plate glass with a dull thump, then bounced back sharply. Just as Debbie thought she must have failed, the window gave a violent shiver as if in delayed shock, and formed a sudden, fast-flowing waterfall that shimmered and glittered, emptying the frame of all glass. There was a pretty, over-prolonged tinkling noise, followed by the harsh bell of the shop's alarm, and Debbie sprang forward, her hand already open, her heart thumping with adrenaline and desire.

The police advised the owners of Wicca's World to be like everybody else in the street and have security shutters fitted. 'You can't trust to magic,' joked the middle-aged constable, and then regretted it when the

owners Alice and David Jones, or Morgana and Vulcan as they preferred to be called, looked resentful.

‘That talisman was at least two hundred years old,’ said David/Vulcan.

‘It was one of our most powerful items.’ added Alice/Morgana.

The policeman nodded as if he understood, then repeated his advice about the shutters and mentioned his brother who was a glazier.

*

Debbie woke to the sound of another bell - this one from the alarm clock at her bedside, though for a second or two she inevitably imagined she had fallen asleep in the street with the shop’s burglar alarm still ringing out. The sound took her straight back to the theft, and she chuckled to herself in the bed that was snug with her own fat warmth and fingered the talisman which was now securely around her neck. She’d wanted it for so long, and it didn’t disappoint. It felt smooth and special, warmed and oiled by her flesh.

She remembered every detail of the burglary; but how she got home and into bed was a mystery. Couldn’t have been a taxi because she’d spent her last fiver on a round in the pub. And however drunk she’d been she surely wouldn’t have walked home, not her. That meant she must have managed to catch a night bus - which made it a truly heroic evening, an evening well deserving of a trophy.

Debbie dipped her fingers down into the duvet and extracted the stolen item. In shape it was like the flat,

oval pebbles to be found on a shingle beach, and the back of it gave the same impression of having been worn smooth over centuries. It fitted the folds of Debbie's fleshy palm as if tailor-made. In the soft morning light she scrutinised the engraved eye. The outline had been gouged quite deeply, and had a sinuous look about it, as if it had been etched with a flourish of the hand. The edges of the engraving had been softened by time, and at the very centre was the polished amethyst, embedded so deeply it must have been dropped into the molten silver.

Debbie closed one of her own brown eyes and gazed into the blue one in her hand. It was the most desirable thing she'd ever possessed. The amethyst had such a cool, calm gaze. It was that look which had drawn her to it so strongly. Every time she'd visited the window of Wicca's World she'd felt it scrutinised her personally, held her in its searchlight vision and asked to be released, to be with her alone. Debbie closed her hand on her lustrous, silver pebble and pulled it down to her heart. She closed her eyes. Just another five minutes.

'Debbie!'

Bugger, thought Debbie. Her mother's raucous voice jarred her hangover. Debbie raised her head an inch from the pillow and shouted down, 'Just a minute.'

'Debbie!' Even louder this time with a sustained falsetto on the last syllable.

'Alright, alright,' muttered Debbie, and wearily dragged herself into a sitting position.

Her hangover promptly sat up with her, as devoted as a faithful hound. Wincing and groaning and swearing turned out to be a waste of time – they only uncovered hidden depths to her headache – but when, compelled by

some instinct, she pressed the talisman against her head, it was miraculous, like a paracetamol ad come true: the clouds cleared, the hammers melted away, the dawn broke clear with sun-rays and larks.

But it was a brief reprieve

‘Debbie!’ her Mother insisted again. ‘Get your backside down here.’

Grimacing, Debbie pushed the talisman even harder against her broad fleshy forehead. Then with a final luxurious groan, threw on her dressing gown and went downstairs to face the music, always discordant where her Mother was concerned.

‘You don’t have to shout,’ grumbled Debbie, as she entered the kitchen where her Mother sat on a plastic chair close to an open gas oven.

‘I want my breakfast.’ said Mrs Palmer.

‘You’ll get your breakfast, don’t worry. And turn that oven off. You cost me a bleeding fortune, you do.’

‘I’m cold.’

‘Put another cardy on.’

‘I don’t like to be hampered.’

‘What’s to be hampered about. You never bloody do anything.’

‘You can’t when you’re disabled.’

‘You’re not disabled.’

‘I am. If we had a car I could have a sticker, then you’d know.’

‘You know nothing about medical matters. You told me Dad had died from smoking.’

‘It was cancer.’

‘Yeah, of the prostate. Lungs, throat and mouth...that’s what you get from smoking. Not your bleeding prostate.’

‘I thought it might worry you out of the habit.’

‘Well you smoke, don’t you.’

‘They didn’t have cancer in my day.’

Debbie snorted. There was something wrong with the argument but she was far too hungover to work it out.

She’d acquired the info on the prostate quite recently from her work mate Joyce, who knew just about everything that was worth knowing, though she had been a bit vague on the exact location of the organ. It had been Joyce’s fiftieth birthday they were celebrating last night.

‘Where were you last night?’ demanded Debbie’s Mother.

Debbie pointedly ignored the question and threw the contents of a full 500g pack of Danish bacon into a frying pan. It was funny, she wouldn’t normally have expected to be able to face a fry-up this early after the skin-full she’d had last night. As she flipped the bacon, she felt the talisman warm in the cavernous cleavage of her breasts, and the solid touch of it made her think of Adrian.

*

The young insurance assessor wanted to know if the owners of Wicca’s World had a photograph of the stolen item.

‘To make any sort of replica or image of it could have reduced its potency,’ explained David.

‘Could you describe it, then.’

‘It was silver, probably 17th. century,’ said Alice, ‘about an inch and a half long, lozenge shaped, with an eye engraved on the convex side with a small amethyst for the pupil.’

‘And it had a silver neck chain,’ said David.

The insurance man wrote this down in his little leather bound notebook, then asked, ‘What was it retailing at?’

‘Just under £500,’ said David.

The insurance man whistled admiringly. ‘And what did you pay for it.’

‘We didn’t,’ said Alice, ‘I found it.’

‘You found it?’

‘Yes,’ Alice’s voice suddenly went a little distant, ‘I found it on Glastonbury Tor at the Winter Solstice. The moonlight caught the silver...’

The young insurance man brushed back his floppy blond hair and smiled happily. ‘So technically the item isn’t yours.’

*

Debbie enjoyed her breakfast that morning: eight rashers of streaky, two eggs, a quarter bottle of HP Fruity, and several thick slices of crusty white to mop up the juices. Her mother was having the same but half the quantity. Afterwards they sat for a while, smoking a Lambert & Butler each, and digesting noisily.

After a while Mrs. Palmer commented, ‘You’ll give yourself a heart attack. All that fat.’

‘Shut up,’ said Debbie, ‘You know nothing about medical matters. Anyway, what do you care. You’ll be gone long before me.’

‘Then you’ll be happy.’

‘Oh shut up.’

Debbie didn’t really mind being overweight. She’d come to accept it. Being fat went quite naturally with being thick, like butter went with bread or custard with pudding; and besides if it weren’t for her fat she wouldn’t have Adrian. A postcard from him had arrived yesterday to say he would be in town today. Debbie shivered pleasantly with anticipation of the evening, already feeling Adrian’s hard body embedded in her softness.

It was the abundance of her flesh that Adrian found attractive about her, she had no delusions otherwise. He also liked the fact that she wasn’t educated. That she spoke bad grammar with a local accent. That her clothes were cheap. Above all, she suspected, he liked the fact that he paid her for it. All in all, it was an arrangement that suited Debbie just fine.

‘What’s that you’ve got down your tits?’ was Adrian’s first question when she saw him that evening.

‘It’s my lucky charm,’ replied Debbie.

‘I always assumed you must be superstitious,’ said Adrian, who was a management consultant and prided himself on his ability to assess motivation, ethical controls and gender attitudes across the whole gamut of the work force - from the broom cupboard to the

boardroom as he liked to say - a particularly apposite phrase since he actually met Debbie coming out of the broom cupboard at Speedwell Telecommunications, mop in hand. He had wanted her there and then, but had had to wait until Debbie had finished the Gents on the third floor.

‘Let me see,’ said Adrian, holding out his hand for the talisman.

Debbie suddenly felt reluctant, almost afraid.

‘Come on, let me have a look.’

‘You can have a look in bed.’

He seemed satisfied with this and started to undress. He was wearing a Paul Smith single breasted new wool suit, an Edinburgh University tie, Cheaney brogues, M&S socks, a white unbranded cotton shirt he'd bought in Cairo and Sloggi underwear.

In addition to the talisman, Debbie was wearing a black PVC mini skirt a size too small, a scarlet matador shirt in 100% polyester, a black choker with rosebud, a black lace trimmed peep-hole bra, black crotchless nylon panties with fake ermine trim, a red garter belt, black fishnet stockings, black garter with rosebud, and red stilettos. They'd chosen all but the last item together (though naturally Adrian had the final say) at the Marital Bliss shop on Fairbright Mews. The shoes had come from Freeman Hardy Willis in The Arcadia.

As always, Adrian was the first to undress, though he retained his snug fitting underpants. Then he sat attentively on the rickety wooden hotel chair to watch Debbie strip.

Over the months she had become expert at this. In her head she heard sleazy brass music, moaning trombones

and wolfish tubas which accompanied the unfastening of tortuously strained catches and buttons to finally release an abundant overflow of soft flesh. His thingy in its brushed cotton pants was the perfect barometer of what worked best. The first time she'd bent over and looked back at him through her legs, she'd thought it was going to erupt there and then. She could see he longed to pull himself off right away, but they had their rules. Only she was allowed to touch his prick before they are in bed.

In bed, Debbie was naked except for the talisman. She pulled Adrian's face into her breasts, smothering him in the way he loved. She felt his bristles against her, his hot breath as he fought for a pocket of air, then with her other hand reached down to his hard cock, and in reward got the vibration of Adrian's groan right through to her heart, and felt happy, very happy indeed.

Adrian's body was lean from five-a-side and squash and salad bars. He once said it was hard to believe they both came from the same species.

'What do you mean?' Debbie had wanted to know.

'Nothing,' said Adrian, 'Vive la difference.'

'Eh?'

'God, Deborah, you're thick.'

Debbie didn't mind him calling her thick, but she'd die if he ever called her ugly.

Debbie's been called a lot of things in her time. At the comprehensive she'd been the first in her class to be given a nickname. They called her Jumbo, but within days this changed to Dumbo as her schoolmates came to realise it wasn't just her waist that was thick. On the whole, she preferred Dumbo. It could sound quite pally, and was infinitely preferable to Plank - short for

Plankton - which was the nickname of the boy she sat next to in the special reading classes.

Funny though, it wasn't so much what you were called, it was more a question of who was doing the calling. Like "Fat Cow" – that was the usual one - even Joyce her work mate called her that!. But Debbie didn't mind, not at all because Joyce didn't mean anything other than friendship by it. Mostly though she hardly heard the name-calling, because it happened so often. On the bus, in the shops, in the pubs - mostly in crowded places, but sometimes even in the street. 'Fat Cow' – it had become just background noise.

Adrian called her 'Deborah'. He was in love with the name, and claimed just thinking 'Deborah' could give him a hard on. Debbie had never told him it wasn't actually her name; that she was christened simply Debbie.

In bed, in the shabby little hotel room, Adrian reached his climax. 'Deborah... Deborah... Deborah... oh... Deb... or... aaaahhhhh!!' Debbie's podgy fingers with their glossy crimson nails pressed hard into Adrian's muscular buttocks. She wanted all of him inside her, and felt at times like these as if she could easily accommodate him. It was as if her whole body was turning into an immense mouth, so hungry it wanted to swallow him whole.

The bed creaked like a galleon in a storm, and a quantity of air trapped inside Debbie rasped out every time Adrian's thrust his pelvis forward. Debbie began to shout too; it was impossible not to. 'Fuck, fuck, oh fuck.' As always, brilliant lovers, they came together, baritone and soprano, a massive, triumphant Ode to Joy.

Downstairs, the manager of the cheap little hotel on the London Road shook his head resignedly, as he did every night Adrian had business in town.

Debbie lay on her back as Adrian's sweat dried on her stomach, and Adrian lay beside her, playing with the talisman which reclined between her flopped breasts.

'Where did you get it?' he asked.

'I found it.'

'Not your usual trash, is it?'

'What do you mean?'

'Where did you find it?'

'None of your bleeding business. I found it that's all'

'You're a terrible liar, Deborah?'

'I'm not.'

'You think you're a good liar then?'

'Eh?'

He was always like this afterwards. In Debbie's imagination it was a time when he started to think about his wife, a slim woman with very straight thick eyebrows who had given him two sons, Oliver and Luke. This much she knew about her lover - that he had a thin wife and two little boys - she had persisted until he'd showed her the photograph.

Looking at it had made Debbie feel hollow and miserable. 'Bet you wish I looked like that.'

Adrian had been suddenly angry and snatched back the family portrait. 'Of course not, you stupid cow, that's the whole point.' he'd said.

Debbie had pondered those words for a minute or two and decided that on the whole they had to be reassuring.

In bed in the cheap hotel on the London Road, Adrian played with the talisman. He seemed fascinated by it,

and Debbie started to feel possessive because she knew only too well its power to attract. Every time she'd passed the window of Wicca's World she'd had to stop and take a look. It lay among the tarot cards, the crystal balls and phials of essential oils in a little box of purple velvet which had highlighted the silver and reflected the amethyst....it had beckoned to her.

With one hand, Adrian lifted her shoulder from the pillow, and with the other began to slip the talisman's chain over her head.

'No!' cried Debbie and grasped her lucky charm.

Adrian laughed, surprised. 'Calm down. I only want a gander at the engraving.'

Reluctantly, Debbie removed the talisman herself. As she put it into Adrian's manicured hand, she felt a bit funny. A bit muzzy headed.

'It could be a fish,' said Adrian, and Debbie snorted derision. The fact that Adrian couldn't even suss out the engraving made her feel happier.

'It's an eye, stupid.' said Debbie, and lunged for the talisman, but squash-playing Adrian was too quick for her and pulled his hand away sharply.

'You could be right,' he conceded eventually, 'Presumably the stone is meant to be the pupil. I wonder what stone it is. Could be worth a bob or two.' He closed his hand, 'Like me to find out?'

'Give it me,' shouted Debbie furiously, and made another grasp for the talisman. She was starting to feel a bit like the day she tried to give up fags. Desperate, confused and irritable.

‘All right, all right,’ said Adrian, and handed it back. ‘I hope it brings you luck,’ he said with a heavy hint of sarcasm.

As usual, Adrian left a minute or two before Debbie. He was off to his posh hotel in the City Centre. Adrian often only spent weekends at home. A management consultant had to be prepared to travel to wherever the work is.

Alone, Debbie finished putting her finery back on. She didn’t bother with the choker or the garter – instead she stuffed them into the pocket of the coat with which she was going to cover the whole ensemble to take the bus home. Even then, the fishnets and stilettos were likely to attract a few comments, especially now it had got to throwing out time. ‘Christ, what a slag!’ ‘She’d eat you for fucking breakfast, Tony.’ ‘Eh love, room for two on top?’ ‘Ha! Ha! Ha!’

Debbie put her coat on and picked up the four ten pound notes Adrian had left on the wobbly bedside cabinet. She switched the bedroom light off, said goodnight to the manager lurking in the hallway, and got a grunt in return. It was so cold outside her breath clouded in the night air, but it was going to be spring before long. She remembered seeing buds on the maple tree in Old Street.

There was no question that Adrian was an important, if irregular, contributor to Debbie’s income. If he ever got bored with her, she’d have missed a lot more than simply the sex. Apart from the evening job at Speedwell Telecommunications, which now paid a paltry £3.45 an hour since re-tendering, she relied for survival on

Adrian, the DSS, and Mrs. Fripp. And of those, Adrian was by far the most generous. She received a lot more for an hour with Adrian than four hours with Mrs Fripp.

Stella and Toby Fripp were the middle-aged couple she did for three mornings a week. They lived in a suburb to the west of the city, so leafy it was like a forest to a born and bred townie like Debbie. Few buses penetrated its exclusive shade. The nearest she could get to the Fripp's house was a number 52 to Granville Road, and that was still nearly a mile away. But she didn't mind the walk too much. It was almost as good as taking a stroll in the country.

The area where Debbie lived actually shared a boundary with the Fripp's suburb, but there the sharing ended. The trees quickly ran out on Debbie's side of the track. Instead of stuccoed Regency mansions there were three storey Victorian terraces, some of them turned into crowded bed sits for students, others owned and occupied by large Asian families. Many of the houses had rotting, paint-flaked window frames and parked cars outside that sagged down low on their suspension - old Austins and Toyotas, rusted at every extremity. If somebody asked her what it was like where she lived, her answer would always be the same, 'It's crap.'

But it was true she'd miss the smell of malt from the brewery at the end of the road where her Dad used to work. And the shops with their vegetables on trestles made from upturned milk crates were handy when you ran out of fags or bacon, though you always had to check the sell-by date. Mrs Fripp had once commented that Debbie's street must have had aubergines, chillies and root ginger long before Sainsbury's or Waitrose, which

had baffled Debbie. Who wanted to eat foreign muck? Certainly not her mother. It wasn't until the Co-op pulled out that Mrs Palmer had been able to bring herself, through absolute necessity, to go anywhere near a "Paki shop".

'Bloody students and Pakis, they've ruined this area.' That was Mrs Palmer's opinion, often expressed.

Of course now, thank god, she didn't have to venture anywhere near Mr Patel's or Mr Singh's since Debbie did all the shopping. Being disabled was not all grief for the disabled, as Debbie knew to her cost.

Debbie was sceptical about her Mother's disability. The X-rays hadn't shown anything and it was a lie about her entitlement to a sticker - Dr. Greaves wouldn't register her as disabled, which would have meant more money from the Social at least. Instead, it just meant more work, unpaid work, while her Mother sat all day in the kitchen chair, wasting gas, and slept at night in the living room, claiming she couldn't climb the stairs.

There was one advantage, however. Shortly after her Mother had decided she was going to sleep downstairs, Debbie had moved into her bedroom. It was bigger than her own with a double bed and a view of the back garden rather than the street, and meant a bit of peace and quiet first thing in the morning.

It also boasted a spotty full length mirror, and ever since she'd acquired the talisman, Debbie had been undressing in front of it, though not the way she did for Adrian, of course. This was a much more practical business with a great deal less to take off: just T-shirt, bra, slacks, pants and slippers on a Sunday usually. But for some reason Debbie was drawn to watch herself

undress. She liked to see the talisman softly gleaming in the 40 watt light against her dimly lit flesh. It made her look expensive.

By blotting out the background of faded floral wallpaper and second-hand bedroom furniture, she could imagine herself a high class tart (if she'd known the word she'd have said "courtesan") for an old fashioned monarch with a taste for the fuller figure. Twisting round with some difficulty, Debbie looked over her shoulder at her buttocks which were extremely generous but definitely not sagging - a lot of physical effort went into professional cleaning - then catching herself looking, remembered to close her mouth and narrow her rather bovine eyes. Then she fondled the talisman, feeling at one with its beauty. Feeling powerful.

Sunday night. Her mother went to bed early on Sundays, and Debbie had already made up her sofa bed, which occupied nearly half the living room. There was the usual ritual of Debbie watching TV while her Mother grumbled from the bed.

'I can't sleep with that noise. When are you going upstairs?'

'It's only half past bleeding nine.'

'What are you eating? You're always eating.'

'I'm eating chips. Satisfied?'

'When did you get chips? I never heard you go out.'

'They're oven chips.'

'You're extravagant you are. It's no wonder we've never got any money.'

And so on. Debbie didn't really mind. The TV was crap on a Sunday evening anyway. She wished they

could afford satellite. Nearly all her mates at work had got it.

While her Mother droned on she flicked continually through the four measly channels.

‘...the greylag goose inhabits estuaries and flood plains yet is in fact an ancestor of the domestic...’

Switch.

‘...Oswald is thinking of the time you were so opposed to the idea of his being a painter...’

Switch.

‘...not so much that of a Christian soul in its earthly journey towards eternity, it is rather the story of...’

Switch.

...for years it’s the women who have been making the sacrifices, now the pendulum is swinging...

‘Bugger me!’ exclaimed Debbie.

It wasn’t the words that prompted this response, it was the speaker. There on the screen in their own living room was the face of Stella Fripp, the woman whose house Debbie would be cleaning in around twelve hours time.

The effect on Debbie was to make her feel instantly famous. Her heart fluttered with pride.

‘Mum, look! Look, Mum! It’s Mrs Fripp. On the telly.’

Mrs Palmer raised herself slowly in her bed. ‘Who?’

‘Her there. It’s the woman I do for.’

‘I’m not talking about who does the dishes or the ironing,’ said Stella Fripp, imposingly and with conviction, ‘I’m talking about the fundamentals of power distribution.’

Debbie was thrilled. She’d be seeing that face on the screen in the flesh tomorrow.

Two

The pasta had stuck hard to the octagonal black plates and the remains of garlic had dried in the garlic crusher. Debbie filled the sink with nearly boiling water from the tap and gave it a squirt of Fairy.

She was scrubbing hard with the washing-up brush when Stella Fripp came into the kitchen. Debbie was desperate say something about seeing her on TV, but in her presence she experienced the usual bristling at the back of her neck, and a general stiffening of muscle and sinew. She wasn't sure why Mrs Fripp always made her feel so uncomfortable, especially when Mrs Fripp had insisted that Debbie should feel at home when doing the housework. 'Feel free to help yourself to tea and biscuits whenever you want,' she'd said on Debbie's first day. 'Thank you, Mrs Fripp,' Debbie had said gratefully 'Oh, don't be so formal, Debbie,' said Mrs Fripp, 'Call me, Stella.' 'Alright,' said Debbie. But she'd ended up not calling Mrs Fripp anything – afraid to use her Christian name or her surname.

Debbie scoured the pasta-glued plates even harder, hoping now she wouldn't have to talk to her employer. It always turned out to be such hard work.

'Debbie?' Debbie froze at Mrs Fripp voice. Somehow it managed to sound like a command and a query at the same time. Debbie turned feeling disadvantaged in her undersized apron which the Fripps had provided and which she felt she had to wear to spare their feelings.

'I know I'm a nuisance,' said Mrs Fripp, and the face that had looked so stern last night now had a vaguely

desperate smile on it, ‘but could you do the reception room first. I’ve some people coming round in an hour.’

Though she’d been cleaning for the Fripps for over a year, Debbie still had trouble remembering which was the reception room, which the drawing room and which the morning room. On her first day Mrs. Fripp had given her the guided tour. (‘This is the reception room, awful suburban name, but you’ve got to call it something, haven’t you?’) There was also a dining room and a music room, but those were easy to spot thanks to the dinner table and the harpsichord. The others all seemed to perform a similar function and had become mixed up in Debbie’s mind. So it was a relief when Mrs Fripp led her to the appropriate room and indicated what she wanted done. It involved a flat old fashioned looking tin, which Mrs Fripp handed to Debbie with a degree of reverence.

‘Lavender Polish,’ said Mrs Fripp when Debbie looked at it blankly. ‘Mr Sheen is fine for most of the house, but don’t you think it’s time we gave these relics their due?’

Debbie blinked with incomprehension. The design on the tin looked like something you might see in the City Museum in an exhibition including scrubbing boards and whalebone corsets.

‘You don’t have to use a lot,’ said Mrs Fripp encouragingly, ‘but do rub it in deep.’ Debbie opened the tin with the little swivel key at the side and a perfumed waxy smell emerged. The contents looked like violet fudge; they looked like hard work.

‘Saw you on TV last night,’ Debbie muttered. There she’d said it.

‘Sorry?’ said Mrs Fripp.

‘You was on the telly last night,’ persisted Debbie.

‘Was I?’ said Mrs Fripp, faintly surprised. ‘That thing with Germaine was it? God, isn’t she a pain?’

‘S’pose,’ said Debbie.

Then there was a moment while both women studied the tin of polish Debbie held between them.

‘Well,’ said Stella Fripp finally in her brightest voice, ‘can’t stand here chattering all day, can we? But you’re absolutely right, Debbie. It’s time that woman called it a day.’

The room took Debbie three times longer than usual.

To get to her evening job, Debbie had to catch a bus from home into the City Centre, then board a train from the mainline station which in time branched out onto a suburban line and took her four stops to the purpose built station for the expanding Science Park where Speedwell Telecommunications had their hi-tech offices. All this was covered by her Travelcard which cost her £20.50 per month. It took nearly two and a half nights cleaning at Speedwell Communications to earn the cost of her Travelcard, but this was not something Debbie had worked out.

The only good thing about Speedwell Communications was her friend and fellow cleaner Joyce.

Debbie’s greeting was always the same: ‘All right, Joyce?’

And Joyce, who was not born locally - St. Lucien to be precise – never seemed to have the learnt the colloquial greeting and always replied literally. ‘I’m excellent, girl,’ or ‘It’s been a terrible day,’ or ‘I’m always all right, you know that.’

Today she said, 'I'm okay, I'm okay,' in a crestfallen tone, then brightened up on catching a glimpse of the new chain around Debbie's neck. 'What's that you got then,' she demanded, and without warning delved her long, matt black fingers into Debbie's glossy pink cleavage to pull out the talisman.

'That's a bit tasty. Real silver, am I right?'

'Yeah,' said Debbie

'Where'd you get it then?'

Debbie giggled.

'Come on girl, where'd you get it.'

'I nicked it, didn't I'

'Where from?'

'That magic place on Old Street.'

'You ain't sayin' that was you? You was in the paper Friday.'

'What?'

 Debbie felt the blood drain from her face.

'Weren't exactly shoplifting were you? That was a breaking and entering job.'

'What you mean, I was in the paper?'

'Not you personally, you silly cow. The breaking and entering.'

'Oh,' said Debbie, relieved. Then was suddenly awash with the same rare flood of self-esteem she felt at seeing Mrs. Fripp on the telly. Fame again!

'You'd better be careful though,' said Joyce frowning.

'What you mean?' asks Debbie.

'May be a curse on it,' Joyce rolled back her eyes to show the whites, 'It might be fuckin' voodoo.'

Debbie looked worried for a minute, which is exactly what Joyce wanted. She broke into delighted cackles.

‘You silly fat cow, there’s no fuckin’ voodoo. No such thing.’



On a stormy night, in a large garden at the back of a house in Granville Street, not so very far from where the Fripps lived, Alice and David Jones, together with eight other members of their coven chose to perform the ritual of Drawing Down the Moon. This had been the designated night for the ritual for the past month and neither the High Priestess and Priest nor their coven were going to be deterred by foul weather, even though the ritual was to be performed naked, or “skyclad” as they preferred to call it.

Of course, the moon was not to be seen on a night like this, but the lashing wind and rain whipped up the coven into a frenzy such as they had never experienced before. Rarely had the suburban garden seemed so primal, so spiritual. The tall conifers were giant hooded druids bending solicitously over the assembly and creaking as if they had ancient bones. On the altar, a permanent fixture made of concrete clad with Welsh slate, three candles flickered wildly inside glass spaghetti jars whilst incense burned under an upturned plant pot. Given the conditions, these were necessary improvisations.

Also on the altar was a sword and several knives with rune-inscribed handles plus one earthenware bowl filled with consecrated water, another with salt. The rain drummed a tattoo on the cling-film that covered them.

‘WOOWEE!’ howled Adam Berger, a contract carpet salesman, as a particularly strong gust of wind made the rain as hard as gravel dashed against their naked flesh.

Even shy Samantha Thomas, an illustrator of children’s books, let out a little scream.

Then the ritual began.

Alice Jones, the high priestess, known as Morgana to her coven, stood before the slate altar, which gleamed like black glass in the rain. Her arms were crossed over her chest, and in one hand she held a wand of hazel wood and in the other a scourge, its eight horsehair cords dancing crazily in the gale.

David Jones, the high priest, known as Vulcan to the coven, kneeled before his wife and she opened her arms wide. It was an impressive sight as young, lean Vulcan gave young, lean Morgana the Fivefold Kiss out there in the worst storm of the year. He kissed her feet, her knees, her pubic hair, her breasts and finally her lips as she stood statuesque, her skin luminous in what light there was: a proxy for the absent moon.

‘I invoke thee and call upon thee, Mighty Mother of us all,’ intoned David, then shouting as he found the wind was making him literally swallow his own words, ‘bringer of all fruitfulness, by seed and root do I invoke thee to descend upon the body of this thy servant and priestess.’

Morgana’s long hair streamed over her face as she drew a pentagram in the air with her wand, and her voice reached the kneeling, shivering, but awe-struck coven in gusts: one moment it was as if she were speaking right in their ear, next from a great distance.

‘Of the Mother darksome and divine, mine the scourge, and mine the kiss...’

The conifers suddenly all bowed as one, bending so far over you could almost believe they wanted to catch her words themselves.

‘...the five-point star of love and bliss, here I charge you, in this sign.’

‘Aaaahhh!’ There was a collective sigh from the coven, which was not strictly part of the ritual. Never had they experienced such close bonding before.

Afterwards, as they all sipped Australian Chardonnay in the hermetic warmth of Alice and David’s centrally heated home, it was generally agreed that it had been a night to remember.

Alice was enjoying a serene sensation that went all the way through to her internal organs, and was experiencing a pride for her coven which she had to admit came close to maternal. Many of them had expressed how sorry they’d been to hear about the burglary at Wicca’s World, and Alice knew their sympathy was genuine and deep-felt. They all loved her tonight.

‘It was the most beautiful thing,’ she explained to Samantha Thomas, ‘silver and amethyst.’

‘And that was all they took?’

‘Must have taken fright I suppose when the alarm went off. But it worries me. Stolen magic can be so dangerous.’

Samantha Jones whose speciality was illustrating dragons and wizards for children’s books looked suitably awed. ‘So the talisman was magical?’

‘Very much so,’ said Alice, lowering her voice. ‘I found it at Glastonbury right at the top of the tor. I can’t help feeling I was meant to find it. It has to have a purpose. A destiny to fulfil.’

Even with the double glazing, the wind could still be heard moaning outside. After one particularly sepulchral gust, there was a moment when the drinking and talking spontaneously ceased among the coven, and it wasn’t until Adam Berger broke the silence with a childish, ululating impression of a ghost that nerves were restored and glasses raised again.

Alice began to wonder if Adam really had quite the right attitude.



On the same stormy night, in a dim light, Debbie stood naked in front of the full length mirror. The old sash window was banging and buzzing with every gust of wind, whilst raindrops rattled against the panes of glass more violently than pebbles thrown by a desperate lover.

Having left the curtains open, Debbie could see herself reflected in the window as well as in the mirror. The image in the window was an even softer, shadowy version of herself; a floating phantom, dashed with water, trembling as the frame shook in the gale. There was no resisting this gorgeous picture of herself and Debbie quickly deserted the mirror to stand in front of the window.

The room was more than draughty. Perhaps a hundred years ago the window had fitted snugly, but tonight it

was jumping in its frame and Debbie was being douched with squirts of cold air that made her skin prickle with goosebumps.

But she was prepared to stand the cold for the sake of flattery. In the window her inexpensively cut hair was disguised, her eyes were deep, suggestive hollows, her breasts, belly and thighs so softly graduated with light and shade they could have been painted by Rubens no less. She was a ghostly beauty against a backdrop of stormy violence, and at the centre of it all was the fixed star of the talisman, shining steadily.

Debbie watched as her hand in the window raised itself to touch her lucky charm. She felt her fingertips make communion with the warm silver and the hard facets of the amethyst. With a single fingernail she traced the worn engraving, then pressed it deep into her chest to feel the talisman throb like a living thing.

‘CRASH!’ Debbie jumped violently. What the hell was that? It had been a sound to wake the dead, never mind her mother sleeping downstairs.

Instinctively, Debbie had leapt away from the window when the crash came, fully expecting flying glass or worse. When she judged the danger past, she returned to it cautiously, still holding the talisman with all the determination of a baby grasping an adult finger.

At first it was impossible to see anything outside, but then slowly her eyes adjusted until she could just discern a number of indefinite shapes scuttling about in the little concreted back yard.

To retreat would have been more terrifying than remaining. Not to know what they were: that would have been unbearable.

The things in the yard chased round and round in mad fits and starts, emitting little scraping and rustling noises which Debbie could hear despite the wind. Then she was aware of something else. Beyond their yard, standing in the brick-walled alley which ran along the back of the houses, was a dark figure, virtually a shadow: only its head and shoulders visible above the wall, and hooded like a monk. Debbie sensed that the figure was somehow commanding the creatures in the yard, though it was not looking at them. Rather it was looking straight at her. She couldn't see the eyes, only a deeper shadow inside the cowl, but she knew by the attitude of the head and the angle of the shoulders that she was being gazed at intently, scrutinised from head to foot.

Swallowing deep gulps of air, Debbie staggered back from the window, and frantically ducked down to be out of the angle of vision, even though she had the horrible feeling that it was a gaze that could pierce walls. The thought of that made her instantly conscious of her nakedness and grabbing a blanket from the bed she cocooned herself in it, and started to shiver more than when her flesh was exposed. For several seconds she was rooted to the spot, her mind completely stalled with terror, before instinct took over.

'Mam! Mam!' Debbie scrambled down the narrow stairs and burst into the living room. Mrs. Palmer blinked up at her from the camp bed with a just-woken look on her face as Debbie switched on the light.

'Jesus, what is it?' said Mrs. Palmer at the sight of her daughter in a tangled blanket.

'There's something out there.' said Debbie, pointing with an ominous corpulent finger towards the window.

‘What? What’s out there?’

‘I don’t know. A ghost or something.’

‘Don’t be so stupid. There’s no such thing,’ said Debbie’s mother uncertainly.

‘Listen!’ hissed Debbie. Above the wind could be heard the rustling noises of small things on the move. ‘That’s them.’

Mrs Palmer’s face began to pale. ‘There’s no such thing,’ she asserted quaveringly.

‘Well have a look then, Mam!’ pleaded Debbie, recalling the times when she was a little girl who would jump into bed between her Mum and Dad when a nightmare woke her.

But her Mother seemed to have lost some of her power to reassure, to make the world solid again.

‘There’s no such things as ghosts,’ she said again, but Debbie knew that, like her, she was listening with every ounce of attention to the sounds outside, scuttling away busily.

‘What is it, Mam?’ wailed Debbie.

‘Shhh, you silly beggar,’ said Mrs Palmer, who was beginning to listen with a little more confidence. And after a time even Debbie began to notice that there was a definite pattern to the noises which was less than supernatural. It seemed they increased with the wind, and dropped with the wind.

Debbie’s mother eased herself out of bed, then tiptoed over to the window to open the curtains a crack.

‘You daft bugger.’

‘What?’ said Debbie, knowing she’s going to feel stupid.

‘It’s only the lid blown off the dustbin. There’s rubbish blowing about all over.’ Debbie’s mother turned from the window. ‘You daft bugger.’ Debbie hadn’t heard her voice sound so cheerful for a long time, and her eyes looked brighter than normal. It was a long time since Mrs Palmer had been able to play the parental role to the full.

She looked at her daughter with an expression that was simultaneously exasperated and proprietorial. ‘Well, now you’ve got us up we might as well have a cup of tea. I shan’t be able to sleep now, I know it.’ She hobbled badly as she made her way back to the bed, and shot Debbie a glance to make sure she was watching.

‘Alright,’ sighed Debbie. She supposed for once her Mum had earned her cuppa, though in fact as far as Debbie was concerned she’d only managed to dispel half the nightmare. What about that figure in the alley – that hadn’t been made of rubbish. On her way to the kitchen, Debbie took a quick peek through the curtains herself. There was nothing behind the wall, just the rubbish chasing itself in the little concreted yard, thank God. But she shuddered involuntarily all the same. There had been something out there, she’d swear to it..

Come morning the wind had died down to a breeze, and the sky was swapping freely between cloud and sunshine, alternately drenching and dazzling the rubbish in the yard. Debbie looked out at it. She looked at the glittering foil containers full of rainwater, the empty boxes of frozen beefburgers (Findus: her favourite), the big plastic bags with pictures of golden chips on them, at two Styrofoam egg cartons (Farm Fresh, Size 2), at the countless sodden filter tips splitting at the seams, at a

blue plastic shoe she didn't know her mother had thrown away, at a crushed can of Lilt ('the totally tropical taste'), at several empty packets of Cheese Wotsits, at cans of Curried Beans, Beans in Tomato Sauce, Beans with six Frankfurters, Beans with Bacon, at a litre bottle of Mason's lemonade, she looked at a full week of consumption out there in the rain and the sunshine. It was all hopelessly messy and a bit depressing, but harmless enough. Then she looked at the wall beyond all the rubbish, shivered, and felt desperate for a fag.

Three

The image of the hooded figure stayed with her all day. It kept her company as she cleaned the Fripp's house, when she ate her dinner, when she took the bus and the train to Speedwell Communications, even while she was scouring out basins and urinals.

It was his look that persisted more than anything - not that she saw his face, of course - but she could tell from the tilt of the head, from the intent angle, that he had been eating her up with his eyes, yearning for her... for better or worse.

As Debbie mopped, dusted and polished, her fingers strayed every so often to the warm silver lozenge between her breasts. It was the talisman that had summoned him, she was sure. Though she had no real sense of the time scale of history, Debbie knew enough from the telly to believe that there had been a time long ago when magic and superstition were a part of everyday life, as much a necessity as social security or a decent bus system were to her now. The figure in the alley had radiated ancient forgotten power like a dark mist and there was something irresistible about it. It was the same way she'd felt about the talisman: hopelessly drawn to the unknown and powerful. When he stood, so potently impassive, gazing up at her window, it wasn't just her he was desiring. It was also the talisman. She had the feeling that he may once have owned it. Perhaps it was an item he'd invested with a mysterious force long, long ago. Debbie's hairs stirred on the back of her neck as if a hand had lightly brushed them.

Inevitably she'd begun to think of him as The Monk, because that is exactly what he looked like. The Monk. Just evoking the name was enough to give her palpitations, and to say it while simultaneously touching the talisman was to guarantee a shudder of excited fear as surely as if she'd pressed a button marked Scare Me.

The night came too soon. She knew exactly what she had to do. She had been playing the scene over in her head all evening. There was no alternative. The talisman demanded it.

Leaving the bedroom curtains open, she turned out the light, then taking off her clothes walked slowly over to the window. It was a calm night and a sickle moon, thin as a fingernail paring, had hooked itself onto a cloud above the steep pitched roof of the brewery; and though the alley below was in deep shadow, there was no mistaking his outline, his concentration of desire as Debbie approached the window.

She was cold with terror. The awareness of her own nakedness had never been so acute. It was as if having taken her clothes off she was being stripped again of an invisible body stocking that left her a sensitised surface of goosebumps and exposed nerved endings. The air itself could have bruised her.

Nervously, she rubbed the talisman between finger and thumb, and sensed a vibration within it as the whorls of her fingertips made friction against the metal.

The figure remained motionless. But then Debbie forced herself forward to within a foot of the window and released the talisman, allowing her hands to fall by her sides. Total exposure. Only then did she perceive a nod forward of the cowed head and wondered if she

caught just a glimpse of a face inside the blackness of the hood.

It was so, so quiet. The kind of silence you got after a close crack of thunder, so loud it had even stunned the birds. Debbie could hear her own breathing, but it might easily have belonged to someone else, someone who was trying to avoid drowning.

‘What do you want?’ muttered Debbie to herself, between her teeth, afraid to allow any animation in her face. She touched the talisman once more, her forearm brushing her breasts. There was no response from the shadow in the alley. They stood, equally still, facing each other like weird chess pieces, black and white. ‘Gawd!’ muttered Debbie in exasperation. It was starting to feel like an eternal stalemate, but then suddenly a light came on in the yard next door followed by the sound of a back door opening, quite startlingly mundane and domestic. A sound from another dimension.

Instinctively Debbie darted to one side of the window, out of sight. Above her laboured breathing, she could hear the delicate, precise noise of a bicycle wheel, tick, tick, tick, a few footsteps, then the opening and closing of a creaky back gate.

She listened as her neighbour walked his bike down the back alley. She didn’t really expect any drama, but when he started whistling some stupid tune from Grease which had been on the telly earlier, Debbie felt the ordinary world suddenly reasserting itself, and considered herself strangely cheated when she looked back down into the alley and found it empty. It was a bit like when Adrian came too soon for her liking, the beginning of something rudely stalled.

As Debbie lifted the tightly packed bin liner the thin plastic membrane stretched yawningly then seemed to melt in her fingers. It hadn't been so long ago that The Fripps would buy tough, industrial-strength liners with yellow plastic drawstrings at the top, but about the time Stella Fripp started taking bottles to the bottle bank they had switched to these useless items. An empty jar of green olives bounced off the red quarry tiles, followed by a minor avalanche of rubbish - anchovy tins, cauliflower leaves, onion skins, carrot peelings, the skeleton of a trout with head and tail intact, wine corks, a cardboard egg box (Organic Free Range Size 1), and last but not least the husks and heads of some large prawns - much of it splattered with glutinous home-made mayonnaise

'Shit!' remarked Debbie.

The stench was gross, so impossibly bad it made Debbie gag. She'd never smelt rubbish like it, and it went without saying that Debbie had smelt a lot of rubbish in her time.

Taking a fresh bin liner from the packet under the sink, she eased the old bag into it, surprising herself with her enterprise. Then she threw in all the muck from the floor, and took the foul smelling package outside to the dustbins.

Professor Fripp was nearby on the patio, standing tall and taking deep, exaggerated breaths through his nostrils, so flared they looked like torpedo chutes.

Debbie had always quite liked the Professor, even though she was never quite sure what he was going to come out with. He often said the most ordinary things in

an odd way, as if there was some kind of joke behind it all that only he knew about.

What an exceptionally nice day,' he said as Debbie emerged, and there was that note in his voice that suggested he might have meant just the opposite.

As she dropped the rubbish in the bin Debbie gave him an uncommitted smile.

'The kind of day that makes you wonder if perhaps God likes you after all,'

'It's lovely,' risked Debbie.

'Exactly,' agreed the Professor immediately, 'The exact word. A lovely day.'

And it was true. Even the Fripps' untidy garden (their gardener retired at the age of eighty five four months ago and replacements were simply non-existent) looked a picture in the spring sunshine and, with the stink from the dustbin dispersed on a light breeze, Debbie could smell fresh, complex scents and hear the excited, twittering conversation of suburban birds.

Tall, skinny Professor Fripp and short, tubby Miss Palmer gazed out silently for a few minutes over the big, sprawling garden. Both were reluctant to return to their tasks: Toby to his research and Debbie to mopping up the kitchen floor. Like oddly paired dancers they turned simultaneously to face each other, and Debbie observed a spot of reflected sunlight hit the Professor in one eye. He flinched and closed it briefly as if giving Debbie a wink.

'What have you got there? It's dazzling me.'

Debbie looked down to see that during her exertions with the rubbish the talisman had fallen out of the top of

her dress. It glared across at the Professor opposite with its single eye, staring him out with mirrored sunlight.

‘Don’t matter,’ said Debbie, and suddenly all fingers and thumbs attempted to put the talisman back where it belonged.

‘Wait. Let me see,’ said the Professor insistently. Debbie knew it was useless to argue. The Eye had this pull on people: she knew it only too well.

With a resigned sigh, Debbie let the talisman fall and waited as Toby came over to rest the nugget of silver in the palm of his slender, deeply lined hand and rock it gently as if gauging the weight.

‘Very unusual,’ says the Professor, ‘Where did you get it?’

There was no accusation in the words. His voice was full of gentle, ingenuous interest.

‘I found it,’ said Debbie.

‘Lucky find,’ said Toby, and smiled down at her. Debbie raised her eyes with the horrible conviction that she was blushing. The Professor didn’t seem bothered though.

‘It’s supposed to represent an eye isn’t it?’

She could smell toothpaste and alcohol on his breath. It was only ten in the morning, but Debbie knew that by one-o-clock there would be at least one empty wine bottle in his study, sometimes two. She should know; she was the one who had to clear them away. She always cleaned the Professor’s room while he and his wife ate lunch: the last job before going home.

‘It looks almost medieval. Have you any idea of its origin?’ the Professor was asking.

‘No,’ said Debbie. She looked up at the papery skin of the Professor’s fifty-four year old neck. It’s irregular slackness and grainy texture gave it the appearance of a material that had been stretched and then ineffectively shrunk to fit. It looked decades older than the rest of him.

‘Wouldn’t you like to know?’

If she’d stood on tiptoe she could have sunk her teeth right into that tempting hollow beneath his Adam’s apple..

‘Don’t know,’ said Debbie, ‘Perhaps.’

‘A colleague of mine, an archaeologist, he may be able to enlighten us.’

‘S’alright’ said Debbie, ‘Honest.’

Rather clumsily, her meaty fingers scrabbling a little, she removed the talisman from the Professor’s dry palm and dropped it down inside her dress. It was an unavoidably revealing action to someone standing so close and so tall, and Debbie blushed again. Hopeless. She was never normally embarrassed about her body, and besides it was the Professor. An old man.

‘I can see you value it very highly,’ observed the Professor in his laid-back, caressing voice. ‘I always think beautiful things should belong only to those who really value them.’

‘Thanks,’ said Debbie. For a moment, in her confusion, she was sure he had called her beautiful. But he couldn’t have. He was simply talking above her head in more ways than one, as usual. Though the funny thing was he never made her feel stupid the way Adrian did.

When a cloud came and covered the sun they both shivered spontaneously, and the Professor walked back towards the patio and open French windows.

‘Back to the grindstone,’ he said cheerfully.

Debbie noticed that his shirt collar was worn quite threadbare at the back, and wondered why it didn’t look terminally scruffy the way it would on any other bloke of her acquaintance.

It was a fact that The Fripp’s world was a mystery to Debbie in so many ways. They seemed to make money effortlessly yet would tolerate old shirts and bicycles; had no central heating or dishwasher (if you discounted Debbie herself) and even owned a device that squashed together old bits of soap to make another full size bar.

Yet they’d spend twenty quid or more on a bottle of wine and throw away eggs even before the Best Before date.

A mystery. As far as Debbie could tell, wealth simply pursued them. Yet all they appeared to do was talk about the things they wanted to talk about (sometimes writing them down or going on telly or radio to repeat them) and in the meantime making sure they were half drunk before teatime.

Debbie went back to her chores. That little encounter with the Professor had left her strangely stimulated. She could still smell his breath, a mixture of Pinot Noir and Mentadent P, which not even the Lavender Polish could quell.

Just after half past twelve Debbie heard the Professor come down to the kitchen and she went up to clean his room. It didn’t take long. There were very few free surfaces to dust, polish or vacuum. The room was always

a tip - papers and journals covered the floor so thoroughly they were silting up against the walls, like drifting snow. Empty bottles and glasses stood wherever they had been finally drained of their contents. Stella Fripp had once said to Debbie, 'I don't know how a paper on Chaos can generate so much...chaos!' She'd laughed aloud at her own words and Debbie had chortled along in knowing fashion, even though she hadn't a clue what she was talking about.

As Debbie cleaned what she could of the study, papers scrunching under her feet, she heard a faint clink of cutlery from the kitchen and got a whiff of something spicy. The Fripps never seemed to eat ordinary food. It always smelt foreign, like in the Chinese quarter or inside one of the Paki shops. The Fripps probably never had ordinary English sex either. Debbie knew they kept a copy of the Kama Sutra and much weirder modern stuff in their bedside cabinet alongside the copies of New Woman, New Scientist and Private Eye.

As she sprayed Mr Sheen on the Professor's old fashioned wooden chair positioned in front of the computer, Debbie heard his melodious middle-class voice drift up from the kitchen table where he was in conversation with his wife. Debbie loved the educated voice; she loved it when Adrian used his to request unusual things; and before she knew it, she was imagining what Toby Fripp might ask of her, right there, sitting in his chair.

Debbie caught herself. He was old enough to be her bleeding grandfather, for Christ's sake, but this was a consideration that only seemed to add another fertile dimension to her embryonic fantasy.

Ashamed of herself, Debbie aborted the thought before the thing took on life. What had come over her she wondered. She'd known Toby Fripp for nearly a year, but she'd never remotely had the hots for him before. He was old enough to be her grandfather, for Christ's sake.

The fantasy reared its ugly head again, and again she killed it. She simply couldn't be fancying someone so ancient, so unobtainable. It wasn't right.

When she'd finished polishing the Professor's chair, Debbie sat down in it. On the desk in front of her was an empty wine bottle and a three-quarters full one, and alongside them the computer which Debbie was under strict instructions not to touch. At that moment it was displaying a colourful graphic that reminded her of funny shaped, fluorescent Lego bricks floating in space. Every time two of the glowing bricks came together the screen switched briefly to a bar graph before returning to the silent, idly rotating shapes.

Debbie had never sat in this chair before. Was this what it felt like to be a professor?

The chair was too narrow for her. Its arms were pressing into her waist, and even that was erotic somehow: almost as if she was being gripped by the man himself.

The computer display was hypnotic. The luminous bricks did their strange eternal dance, and Debbie was being gripped tighter and tighter by those arms that could have been almost human, they held her so snugly, so securely, so sexily. Debbie sang softly to the impassive, self-absorbed computer screen, 'I would do anything for you...'

On her way back from the Fripps, Debbie found herself gazing intently at the few men on the bottom deck of the bus. They were mostly old, much older even than the Professor, probably making use of their off-peak pensioners' travel-cards. But there was one young bloke - not really Debbie's type - denim clad with a shaved head, a small ring through his earlobe and a butterfly tattoo on the back of his hand. If he hadn't been so obviously unemployed he'd have been one of those blokes who managed to make a career out of sitting next to the driver in a van, the kind who would go to the trouble of winding the window down to shout abuse at fat girls.

Debbie stared at the hand with the tattoo. She was sitting behind and across the aisle from him and so was able to enjoy an excellent view. The hand looked surprisingly soft and pink and young, almost delicate with its long fingers resting casually on faded blue denim. Perhaps she shouldn't be so prejudiced; he could be okay, thought Debbie, gazing at the head with its taut skin gleaming under a covering of blond down. He might be a nice boy. She wondered what his face looked like and made a bet with herself that his eyes were blue.

Debbie's newly-hatched lust for Toby Fripp had been transferred neatly and completely to this boy in a matter of seconds, as naturally and efficiently as water flowing to a reservoir.

As the bus rocked and bucked its way down Spring Hill, Debbie's eyes went torpid with desire.

She'd never felt it so intensely before. It was as if somebody had turned her heat up all the way to Regulo 8 and left it there, and it was only with a hefty amount of

self control that she kept herself from reaching forward and taking the hard, short-haired skull in the palm of her hand.

What was happening? Her libido had become an animal that had forgotten all its training overnight. There was no leash strong enough to hold it. Debbie had never been a creature of strong inhibitions, it was true, but there were limits - she had some discernment - and surely old men and yobbos were beyond the pale!

As she prepared to meet the Monk for the third time she wondered if it was possible to die from a rampant libido, to spontaneously combust from a surfeit of unrequited lust. 'The bastard,' she breathed as she undressed. He'd put some kind of spell on her for sure. It was as if she couldn't get her clothes off quick enough and she began tearing at them as if she was ravishing herself.

Below, in the alley, stood the dark, hooded shape, as motionless as a sentry, but despite his stillness he was not passive. It was under his direction that Debbie pressed her breasts against the cold panes of the window, filling them, her flattened tits as big as dinner plates. Under his scrutiny, she kissed the glass, kissed the dark night, kissed her own reflection. For his benefit, she spread her legs to his upturned gaze and opened herself as wide as she could.

They were such opposites, poles apart, but that was what made it so electric: her so white and exposed; he all darkness and disguise.

She climaxed, crushing her face against the window, desperate to cut down the distance between them, and hoping he was able to see how her breath clouded the

glass, the way her saliva dribbled down it like a sticky raindrop. She simply couldn't help herself. It would have been easier to give up food.

The following night was no different. Come the appointed hour, Debbie was a twitchy, perspiring addict waiting for her fix. The talisman doubled as a worry bead, twisted and turned obsessively in her feverish fingers while she sat as bare as a baby on her Mother's creaky old bed, the bed in which she was almost certainly conceived, staring at the closed curtains which had turned the room into a stifling, closed box. She was torn.

If only Debbie knew the word "dilemma" that would be precisely the word she would have been thinking.

On the one hand she longed to satisfy herself, to cool her heat through long distance communion with the dark presence outside; on the other hand she was convinced that she was losing more than her body to him. Debbie had seen enough late night films to know what Possession meant.

But it was a battle she couldn't win. Before long she was crossing on urgent tip-toes to the window to open the curtains a crack. Though she was expecting him, it was still a shock to see the shadowy figure there, standing with eternal patience. But for what? For his lover? His victim? His bride?

Whichever it was, Debbie barely hesitated before flinging the veil of the curtain wide. He could have her any way he wanted.

Four

The next time Debbie visited the city centre the maple that had supported her drunken body outside Wicca's World was in full, fresh leaf. It also had a fancy wrought iron railing surrounding it for protection.

The shop had likewise taken defensive measures and its front window boasted a recently fitted metal shutter that could be rolled down at night.

Debbie was oblivious to these new developments, however, being intent upon her "shopping" expedition. She was wearing her big overcoat with two carrier bags safety pinned into it. The pockets of the coat had had the lining cut so that Debbie's hands could go straight into the carrier bags. The day was really too warm for the heavy coat, and she could feel herself beginning to perspire as she made her way ponderously down newly pedestrianised Old Street.

It was only six weeks since she'd drunkenly threw a brick through the window of the occult shop, but for Debbie that was more than enough time for her to forget it had ever happened. She had more or less convinced herself that she'd found the talisman, not stolen it at all.

But in any case, no matter how she acquired it, there was no doubt in Debbie's mind that the talisman was hers by right. It had had such a profound effect on her life, how could it be otherwise?

It was some time since Debbie had thought of the Eye as her lucky charm: it clearly belonged to a much bigger world than the one of Old Moore's Almanac which her mother bought every year with its cheap ads for Rabbits'

Feet, Japanese Money Magnets, Wishing Cork and Lucky Cornish Piskeys.

The talisman could not be bought (Debbie had conveniently forgotten it once bore a price tag). No, the Eye sought you out, demanded you possessed it....and then possessed you!

During the day it was like a bad dream, but at night it turned into a different kind of dream - in which bad meant good, where sour tasted sweet, where vivid, supernatural excesses and unbearable sensuality were the norm. Whenever she stopped to think about it the whole business scared her out of her wits.

But walking down Old Street with the Spring sunshine giving everyone an amber Smiley face, it wasn't so hard to assume that everything was normal after all. The talisman was just a piece of jewellery, no different to the stuff Debbie nicked off the stall in the market that was manned by the stupid bloke with the Game Boy.

She pushed open the door of a newsagent's shop and walked casually over to the sweets section which was conveniently situated some distance from the counter with a carousel of postcards in between offering partial cover for the sweet-toothed and light-fingered. This was one of Debbie's favourite shops, and her mouth was sluiced with saliva as she stuffed Topics, Mars bars, Milky Ways, Tiger Bars and - more for contrast than roughage - a single bag of Smoky Bacon crisps into her seemingly bottomless pocket. Crisps were always tricky because the bags made such a racket. She'd once made the mistake of pushing ten bags of Walkers into her pocket with the result that she'd ended up sounding as if she was wrapped in foil herself.

Just as she was about to make her escape from the newsagent, she spotted a copy of Playgirl on the top shelf with some very tasty beefcake on the front cover. Debbie hesitated. A few weeks ago she wouldn't have risked it, but these days male flesh could look every bit as desirable as a rippled coating of milk chocolate over a biscuit and nougat centre, perhaps more so. He really was a total hunk with slightly oiled skin and grey eyes that burned right into you.

'Must have that,' she thought to herself and reached up, but even at full stretch found she could barely get her fingertips to it. She grunted out loud, straining every fibre in her body towards the magazine, knowing she must be making a spectacle of herself.

'Can I help?' asked a voice with a polite German accent. Debbie turned her head to see a large blond man, almost as fat as herself, with a pale face and watery blue eyes. His name was Otto Fritsche, which Debbie would have known if she'd been capable of reading the conference badge on his lapel.

'These shelves can be difficult,' said Otto slowly, and with a surprisingly delicate touch reached up over Debbie's head to take two copies of Playgirl, one of which he gave to her.

The big blond German tapped the cover of his magazine. 'In our country we have better than this, but this is not so bad. The men in it are quite good I think.' Then he gave Debbie a wink which turned his flabby burgher's face into that of a cherubic devil.

'Ta,' said Debbie, and under the cover of his large body rolled up the magazine and inserted it into her pocket. The German didn't look surprised.

‘It is a modern world...’ Otto shrugged, then stood courteously aside as Debbie walked like an automaton on top speed out of the shop.

She had always been a lucky thief, and actually preferred to put her clean record down to good fortune rather than her own skill, which to be fair was not inconsiderable. She had an instinct for the times of day when the security staff were slack; if the cameras had a blind spot, she’d always find it; and like Otto’s, her stubby fingers were deft, but these were things Debbie took for granted – after all she’d been shoplifting since she was eight, and though many of her contemporaries with a similar bent had ended up on probation, doing community service or even a custodial sentence, Debbie remained untouched by the Law. The difference, she believed, was Luck.

Walking on down Old Street, towards Debenhams, the weight of the sweets and magazine knocked against her thighs and she was hotter than ever, but also happy to have got away with it once again. In fact it was a day on which she felt more confident about shoplifting than ever before in her life. The Monk didn’t want any harm to come to her, she was pretty sure of that, because he was saving her for himself, for some, as yet, unrevealed purpose. She could have probably thrown herself under a bus and come out of it in one piece.

The idea that the Monk had some destiny in mind for her was something Debbie tried not to think about too much. Introspection and analysis had never been her forte anyway but, despite that, always at the back of her mind was the suspicion that there had to be a price to pay. It wasn’t a cosy set up like she had with Adrian

where he got to satisfy his little quirks and whims while she enjoyed a generous remuneration for services rendered. With the Monk it wasn't a comfortable business arrangement; if anything, it was a marriage, though hardly one that had been made in heaven. There were no dreamy notions of for richer or poorer, for better or worse in this unholy alliance. If anybody was going to come out worse from it, Debbie would have laid money on who it was going to be.

She knew what she ought to do. She ought to kiss goodbye to the talisman.

'No such thing as voodoo,' Joyce had said, but nowadays Debbie only had to look at the talisman to suspect it was giving her the evil eye: the amethyst pupil glinting with bad intention. And one day she would get rid of it. She swore. She would take the Eye somewhere and bury it so deep it had no chance of ever getting out. Perhaps she would chuck it in Barge Street basin next time she was crossing the canal bridge.

Debbie fingered the chain around her neck before pushing open the door to Debenhams. It was funny, usually when she went shoplifting she would feel completely alone, exaggeratedly so, surrounded by hundreds of sharp-eyed potential enemies who would love to betray her, but that day it was as if she had a companion, an accomplice almost. Debbie made her way towards Lingerie. One day she was going to ditch the talisman that was for sure. But not today.

Adrian was back in town. Debbie received his postcard the day before his arrival. As usual it had an old fashioned cartoon on the front featuring fat women and

skinny men at the seaside. Debbie imagined Adrian must spend half his time at seaside resorts, even though the postmark was always somewhere like Manchester or Reading or Milton Keynes.

Debbie did pretty well at reading the caption, though where the joke was she couldn't say. "Come on Dick," called a big woman standing in the sea to the runt standing in the shallows, "the further you're in the better it feels." Debbie was more interested in what was written on the back. "Wednesday. Same time, same place, same channel." It was what he always wrote. Only the day changed.

Her mother caught her reading it at breakfast. 'What's that? Another card from your fancy man?' Sometimes Mrs. Palmer's vocabulary seemed to belong to a generation older than her own. With her disability and colloquialisms she could have been eighty-something rather than fifty-something.

She'd never made much of a fuss about the liaison though, and especially not when she could see a red-coloured gas bill had arrived with the postcard.

For Debbie, it was more than the money that was welcome. One of the male models in the Playgirl she'd nicked had turned out to have a build just like Adrian's and sported a similar long, slender penis. Every time Debbie took a peek at it in the privacy of her bedroom she got homesick for the 3D, blood and flesh version.

And so, in the shabby hotel room, Debbie's passion caught Adrian unawares.

'Steady on Deborah, this shirt cost eighty quid.'

She'd missed out the usual striptease and got straight down to business. Her fingernails raked Adrian's buttocks and actually broke skin.

'Fucking hell, this is all very flattering but...'

She gagged his mouth with her tongue.

'Come on, come on,' she moaned. Adrian hadn't even got an erection at this stage, so she knelt and stuffed the floppy item into her salivating mouth, where it grew like a seedling in an accelerated film, a tough sap-filled stalk that probed her gullet.

That made it Adrian's turn to moan as she stood and lifted herself onto the now fully committed cock. A knee trembler deluxe. She hadn't had time to undress, but fortunately the pants were the ones split at the crotch. With her hand she felt a hot baton of flesh, the skin stretched silky smooth, penetrating the fluffy fake ermine.

'Oh Deborah, oh Deborah, oh Debaaaaahraaaaaah!'

Three more times they did it after that, while downstairs the hotel manager groaned in unison with each fresh engagement.

The bed hadn't been touched; to have used it would have seemed too prosaic, too domestic, for such a primal experience: both of them knew such fucks only come once or twice in a lifetime, for the lucky few.

Four hours later, Adrian was sprawled on his back on the grubby hotel carpet, his chest heaving. Debbie rested on her side facing away from him, curled into herself a little and panting. They were temporarily satiated with each other and looked for all the world like a couple of prize-fighters who had achieved a simultaneous knockout.

Eventually Adrian said reflectively, jokingly, ‘You know, Deborah, I sometimes think it should be you paying me.’

His voice sounded soft and entirely relaxed; quietly proud of himself. There was none of the usual post-coital guilt for once, and Debbie felt as happy as she could remember.

Also flushed with the heady experience, Adrian started to plan another visit to the Marital Bliss shop, having a notion that some experimentation with rubber might take their pleasure to even greater heights.

‘What you want me in rubber for?’ said Debbie, ‘I’ll be like the bleeding Michelin Man!’ It was an unexpected shaft of wit, and Adrian’s laugh came as much from surprise as amusement, but she treasured it nonetheless because it was the first time he’d laughed with her rather than at her, and when he’d left there was something else to treasure – not the usual four, but five fresh ten pound notes placed neatly overlapping on the bedside cabinet.

The Monk was later than usual that night, but Debbie didn’t mind. She waited for him loose limbed and sedated – as placid as a baby milk-fed to satiety, and when she performed for him, her movements were languid to the point of torpor, she was more liquid than flesh, her body caught in an endless delicious meltdown, her moans quieter than usual, but longer and more melodious - a primal song which she was sure the monk can hear despite the window dividing them. It was a delicious aftercourse to Adrian. Something infinitely sweet, soufflé light, a dream topping that was quite out of this world.

As arranged, the next day found Debbie outside The Marital Bliss shop on Fairbright Mews: a row of dilapidated Victorian buildings which had somehow survived the redevelopment around them. There was a wine bar called Billie's at one end and a pub called The Shakespeare at the other: the bread for a sandwich whose meat included the Executive Cinema Club and Sauna, the Aphrodite Book Exchange and the Marital Bliss shop.

In front of these buildings was a patch of threadbare grass with a few struggling trees, then came a main road flanked by a multi-storey car park and the massive black-glass Copthorne hotel where Adrian was staying.

Debbie had arrived early, but didn't think of going into the lobby anymore than she'd have thought of going into a mosque. It was a day when Springtime was on the cusp with Summer, so she lay on the tired grass along with the sunbathing office workers, and by the time Adrian had arrived to block out the light, her bare arms had begun to turn pink.

It was immediately obvious that Adrian's mood hadn't survived the night.

'Come on, let's go,' he addressed the recumbent Debbie, staring over her into middle distance. Debbie struggled to her feet, feeling suddenly flushed.

She knew what it was, who wouldn't? He was feeling bad because he got sloppy last night with his fat, ignorant, skivvy whore.

Under the fascinated gaze of the sunbathers, they walked out of daylight into the Marital Bliss shop. The window had been whitewashed over for the mutual

protection of customers and passers-by, making the interior so gloomy they had to blink to see. Behind the counter was a man in his twenties, smart but casual, who was copying figures into a ledger but who looked up when they entered to nod an indifferent greeting.

Debbie and Adrian pretended to browse, though in fact there was little enough to look at. With its bare wooden floor and unpainted shelves the place had a spartan feel, making what items there were on display all the more absurd by their isolation.

On one shelf stood a row of dusty dildos - more sad than proud - most of them in a shade of pink reminiscent of National Health surgical appliances. There were two mannequins with a 1960's dolly bird look to them, one dressed in the usual suspenders and stockings, the other in a cheap leather waistcoat and mini skirt featuring flimsy looking chains. You could have found more fetishistic garments in Miss Selfridge. On another shelf was a plastic woman's head with moulded hair painted canary yellow and the big open O of her mouth in scarlet, while stacked next to the disembodied head were four boxed blow-up dolls, Oral Nora, Black Dolly, Nympho Nurse and Three-way Leila. Another shelf displayed toys and jokes, Willie Warmers, Penis Candles, Playing Cards and the like; yet another shelf was dedicated to "Therapy" and included such items as Spanish Fly, Big Man Cream, Vacuum Developers, Ginseng, Penis Rings and Joy Jelly.

But not a whiff of rubberwear was to be had.

Out of the public gaze Adrian was beginning to relax, and Debbie sensed that he loved this place. He was like some pedigree dog, a much pampered King Charles

spaniel perhaps, who had slipped his leash to snuffle around the interesting smelling turds in the park with the abandoned mongrels.

He picked up a foot long dildo with a circumference of at least eight inches and chuckled out loud.

‘Made to measure, eh Deborah?’

‘That’s for novelty value only,’ said the smart but casual young man behind the counter.

Adrian put the dildo back. ‘You seem a bit lacking in the rubberwear department.’

‘If you want something special you can order from the catalogue.’

‘How long does that take?’ asked Adrian.

‘About two weeks usually.’

‘Shit,’ said Adrian, and he seemed to have picked up a trace of the young man’s local accent, ‘what if it’s an emergency?’

‘Is it for your own use or the young lady’s.’

‘Bit personal that, isn’t it?’ said Adrian, and gave Debbie a covert wink. He was really in his stride now.

‘It says personal service on the door if you noticed,’ said the smart but casual young man.

‘Touché,’ said Adrian, reverting to his normal voice, ‘We’d better have a decko at the old catalogue then.’

‘There’s just one thing...’ said the young man as he handed over the plastic-sleeved volume.

‘What’s that,’ Adrian already had the book open and was gazing hungrily at an item described as “face mask and attached penis gag with pumping action.”

The young man looked significantly at Debbie, ‘It’s one size fits all.’

Adrian looked at Debbie too.

‘It’s all top quality latex,’ assured the young man, ‘Plenty of give, but I wouldn’t like to vouch for the girdles and bras.’

‘What about these masks?’

‘You should be all right there,’ said the young man, then suddenly addressed Debbie directly, ‘Do you know your hat size, love?’

‘Don’t wear them,’ said Debbie, embarrassed now.

The young man turned back to Adrian and said confidently, ‘You’ll be okay if you stick to the masks and aprons.’

‘Right,’ said Adrian, and pulled Debbie towards him. ‘What do you fancy, girl?’



There was still a gap in the window display of Wicca’s World where the stolen talisman had been - not because of any oversight or laziness - but because Alice had decided that she and David would invoke a spell for its return.

They cast the spell one moody, windy dawn after driving to nearby Glent Hills. There Alice laid a rough, childlike picture of the talisman she’d drawn in crayon on the top of a stone plinth at the summit of the highest hill. Both Morgana and Vulcan then placed a fingertip on the waxy image and with eyes closed visualised the real item, allowing what they saw in their mind’s eye to be transmitted through their fingers into the representation.

‘Go forth and seek out thy mother of amethyst and silver,’ intoned Morgana into the gusting wind, ‘and bring her home where she belongs.’

At these words David imagined he could feel the wax sliding away under his fingertip leaving virgin paper, though on opening his eyes the drawing was still there, if somewhat smudged. Alice tore the paper into tiny pieces and cast it high into the gusting wind.

On top of the plinth was a brass plate, a kind of local compass etched with arrows naming the surrounding visible features which somehow made the spell even more appropriate. Vulcan couldn’t deny that Morgana had an undeniable talent for magic – it was the exact same qualities which made her such a star at running the shop. Just as she had magical and psychic abilities, it was clear to anyone who knew her that Alice also possessed a natural, goddess-given gift for retailing which used all her innate intuitive and predictive powers. A kind of magic.

There was no denying Wicca’s World was doing well. The pedestrianisation of Old Street had helped of course, attracting more shoppers from the county, people with serious money to spend, and making the city centre a viable option to the big out-of-town shopping malls. But this was just a welcome bonus - Alice didn’t rely upon the City’s development schemes for the shop’s success; she and David were both attuned to the psychic currents of the era. Interest in the occult was growing, it was even finding its way into the likes of Woman’s Realm and the Good Morning programme on Central. And that was the kind of advertising money couldn’t buy.

It was Alice who had devised the Aladdin's cave ambience for Wicca's World with the merchandise displayed in little rough plaster niches, back-lit in slightly lurid greens, oranges and purples to make the chalices, the ritual knives, the crystal balls look even more exotic and enchanted. Real birch branches, painted silver and gold, dripped with talismans and amulets that were at eye-level for the average sized woman.

'Organised chaos' described it exactly, and was exactly the effect she set out to achieve. She wondered if it was possible to patent an interior design.

Alice did not need the Tarot to predict a great future for herself and David: she felt she had the power to achieve anything, and as they stood shoulder to shoulder at the top of Glent Hills, watching the scraps of paper jig in the wind against a rosy dawn sky, she had absolutely no doubts that the talisman would return and the correct order of things be restored.



Debbie returned to the Marital Bliss shop to collect the rubberwear. It was two weeks now since Adrian had handed over more than two hundred pounds in new fifties for the order, and the smart but casual young man had it packed and waiting under the counter.

'There you go, love,' he said as he handed over the big, brown paper parcel. Debbie was astonished at the weight of it.

The young man eyed her in a friendly fashion. 'You ever done any modelling?' he asked.

‘What you mean?’

‘With your figure you could earn herself a few bob. I could have a word with a photographer mate of mine if you like.’

Debbie said nothing, unsure if she understood, and wondering if he was taking the piss.

‘Don’t worry. It’s just glamour stuff. Nothing heavy. I can give him a bell right now if you like.’

‘Yeah, okay,’ said Debbie, deciding she’d got nothing to lose. She waited passively while the young man picked up the phone and dialled.

‘Hello, Gary? It’s Mike. Yeah, fine. And yourself. Good. Listen, I’ve got a girl in the shop with me might be right up your street. Yes, very big. Could look quite tasty if you slap the old paint on a bit. Well no, it’s not out the goodness of my heart. Just the usual fifteen. Okay. I’ll send her down now.’

He replaced the phone then picked it up straightaway to ring for a taxi.

‘He’ll look after you, Gary will,’ said Mike as they waited, and handed her a business card with a funny looking bird on it flapping its spread wings over a bonfire.

‘Ask him for three hundred and take two.’ Mike gave her a nice smile, friendly, brotherly. ‘And don’t say anything to that plonker you were with the other day.’

The taxi arrived and Debbie was whisked off towards the part of the city where old warehouses and factories had been stripped of their innards, cleaned, refurbished and generally tarted up for architects, advertising agencies, film companies and the like. They shared the

area with scores of jewellers and an occasional remnant of light industry.

More than any other part of the city this sector throbbed with a singular purpose: the making of money. It's was like a pulse, vibrating from the mellow orange and red brick walls of old, newly washed buildings.

In fact there was money in the air quite literally thanks to the jewellery makers, or at least gold dust, falling invisibly on the carefully recreated, historically accurate blue-brick pavements. The jewellers windows glittered as if King Midas had just walked through.

The taxi deposited Debbie at a small development of modern industrial units, artfully hidden behind an old courtyard wall, with a car park packed with Porsches, Jags and Mercedes.

She knocked on the door marked "Phoenix Photography", recognising the logo from the card in her hand, and Gary answered it immediately.

'Great, you must be Debbie,' he said

Gary had a boy's face and old man's eyes. He was wearing black Levi's, Nike trainers and a white T-shirt with a picture of an oak tree on it.

After taking her parcel, he sat her down in the flimsy red metal chair, asking if she'd like tea, coffee or coke, and hoping she wouldn't mind waiting a few minutes while he just finished with Koko.

Dazed, Debbie watched as he crossed to the girl in the corner of the studio who was in a blaze of light against a scoop of brilliant white.

Koko was slim with a high forehead and full glossy lips, and not the least bit oriental. She was wearing a white one-piece swim suit which meant half her body

seemed to merge with the background, showing off her long brown legs and long brown arms splendidly. In one hand, incongruously, Koko held a fan of bright shiny spanners. Another girl with cropped black hair wearing lemon dungarees emerged from the shadows with powder and brush to add more blusher to Pippa's already exaggerated cheek bones.

Gary looked through the camera, and Pippa brought the dazzling spanners close to her vivid face. 'Okay, you'd better give us a pout,' says Gary. 'This is for Autotrader, not Vogue.'

It was nearly two hours before he'd finished with Koko, and Debbie's backside had started to go numb on the perforated metal seat. She expected her bum would look like she'd been sitting on a Meccanno set, and the thought surprised her. Or rather the act of thinking the thought surprised her, like when she came up with Michelin Man.

The girl with cropped black hair crossed over to her. 'Hi, I'm Pippa,' she said, 'the stylist. Do you want to come into the dressing room,' and Debbie followed her to a standing sheet of plywood which had a basin and a mirror behind it.

'Let's have a look at you,' said Pippa.

The mirror had bare light bulbs all round it. A film star's mirror.

Pippa stood behind Debbie, looking over her shoulder, and both their faces were lit full blast. It was odd to see Pippa's little pixie face by the side of hers, scrutinising it so carefully.

'Okay, you want to strip off?' said Pippa eventually, 'We'll try on some stuff.'

Pippa returned with some oddly familiar looking items, and Debbie squeezed herself into a peephole bra, lacy pants, suspender belt, fishnet stockings and stilettos. It all seemed to fit rather better than her own. She had left on the talisman.

‘Do you want to have a look?’ Pippa called to Gary.

‘Yeah, that’s nice,’ said Gary, his eyes going up and down Debbie. ‘I like the nipples. Perhaps we could get them a bit more perky when we shoot.’

‘’ang on!’ said Debbie.

‘What’s the matter, love?’ asked Gary,

‘Well...’ said Debbie.

‘Any problem?’ Gary’s voice was concerned and patient, like a perfect doctor.

Debbie thought, looked at her body drenched in light from the mirror, and then decided. ‘Well, the nipples is going to cost three hundred.’

There was a badly suppressed explosion of laughter from Pippa, and Gary’s bedside manner faltered ever so slightly. ‘You saw Koko?’ he said, and Debbie nodded.

‘Even she doesn’t earn that sort of money.’

‘But your mate said...’

‘Mike’s on a percentage. He’s always trying to up the ante the stupid bugger. I’ll give you seventy-five. That’s twenty-five more than usual, ‘cos I’ll admit you’re exactly the type of girl I’m looking for.’

Even seventy-five pounds impressed Debbie – it wasn’t the kind of money she often had in her hand all at once - but feeling flattered that she was just what Gary had been looking for, she was emboldened to play it coy.

‘It’s got to be a hundred or I don’t do the nipples.’

‘Tell you what. A hundred if you’ll throw in some flap shots.’

‘Eh?’ said Debbie.

Gary fetched a glossy magazine, and leafing through found a spread which he showed to Debbie. ‘Like that.’

Debbie couldn’t stop herself giggling at the picture. ‘God, that’s bleedin’ horrible.’

‘It’s a question of taste,’ said Gary. ‘Some blokes love this kind of stuff.’

‘Ugh!’ said Debbie.

‘All right,’ said Gary, ‘One hundred and twenty five, and not a penny more.’

‘Yeah all right,’ agreed Debbie beaming.

Two hours later she walked out of Phoenix Photography dreaming of wealth and fame. Her body echoed with sensations; the delicately rapid touch of Pippa’s powder brush against her cheek, the lingering sharpness of the vodka and tonic Gary had provided to help her relax, the cube of ice on her nipples, the heat of the lights reflected from white umbrellas onto her nearly naked body, the gently breathed instructions from Gary telling her to do this, do that, close this, open that, the ever watchful eye of the camera, a black-boxed Cyclops with an obsessive stare, and most recently, lingering in her fingertips, the divine feel of money: five twenties, two tens and one five, pulled from Gary’s crocodile skin wallet and placed in Debbie’s hot paw, each note as limp as an old lettuce leaf, but each one legal tender.

Never before had she been so richly pampered, so much the focus of attention. Pippa must have spent ten minutes putting on the lip gloss alone, and as for the eye shadow...

Debbie had closed her eyes when they'd put the big wig of chestnut curls on. And when she'd opened them the mirror was occupied by a stranger. A staggering beauty.

'Magic!' Gary had said, then given Pippa a kiss on her cheek and stroked Debbie's newly acquired chestnut mane.'

'What about the pendant?' Pippa had asked him.

'Keep it,' Gary had said, 'It'll give her a bit of character.'

For one shot he'd asked Debbie to put the talisman up to her lips. The lights must have heated the silver, because it seemed to burn her, and Debbie instantly imagined the monk in his shadowy garb, standing just outside the pool of light reflected from her brilliant stage, watching as she twisted this way and that on the flimsy cane chair. She imagined him motionless, but as intently focused on her as the camera lens.

At the thought Debbie's limbs had grown languid, and the talisman had seemed to burn more fiercely as she melted under the lights and the gaze of the camera and the monk.

'Now you're cooking,' Gary voice had breathed from the darkness, 'just hold that.'

Power surged from the big transformer behind Gary and there was a hazardous sounding pop to accompany the blinding flash.

'Gotcha!' said Gary.

Five

The Fripps had stopped buying mild green Fairy liquid. In its place Debbie found a badly printed plastic bottle called Eco-something which squirted out an insipid green liquid to produce fragile, short-lived suds. The water felt heavy and sticky with the residue of various oils and fats, and Debbie grieved in a minor way because there had been real pleasure to be gained from a bowl-full of steaming hot water and high grade washing liquid that was silky and syrupy against the back of your hands. It had been a nice way to start the morning's work. At home they bought eighteen inch high Economy bottles of washing up liquid from the local supermarket which didn't seem to do anything much except scent the water with an overpowering smell of artificial lemon. The Fairy had been a little borrowed luxury.

Stella Fripp entered the kitchen just as Debbie was about to plunge a wok stuck with bamboo shoots and oyster sauce into the water which had turned grey and flat.

'Debbie!' called out Mrs Fripp an instant before the wok entered the bowl, in a voice of such urgency that Debbie feared one or the other of them must be in mortal danger.

'You don't have to wash the wok in detergent' said Mrs Fripp, more calmly now Debbie wasn't about to immerse it, 'nor the sauté pan, remember, because they have been seasoned and can be cleaned in plain hot water.' Her voice had gone the full gamut from panic to

light apology as if really it was a shame such trivial things had to be considered.

With Stella Fripp was a female companion who had joined her in the kitchen to continue their conversation while Stella percolated coffee grounds.

‘No, Angela, you’re wrong,’ said Mrs. Fripp, now adopting the voice Debbie had heard her use on the telly, ‘part-time work is bound to grow in status. It’s inevitable. There has to be dignity in work, otherwise who the hell would be stupid enough to do it? The old masculine sweat-of-my-brow jobs are all in the hands of machines now. How many men do you hear talking about women’s “pin-money” these days? Of course you don’t because half of them are having to live off it.’

‘Crap!’ cried Mrs. Fripp’s companion, and Debbie had a sense of foreboding. Angela was half Mrs. Fripp’s age, perhaps more than half, and much shorter.

‘I can’t believe you’re condoning that kind of oppression,’ continued Angela, apparently undeterred by Stella’s height and seniority, ‘No way have women won the battle in the workplace. Do you know how many women we have on the board at work. Can you guess. Zero. Absolute zero. That’s how many. I can’t understand how you Stella... You were my fucking hero when I was at school. You were. I fucking worshipped you.’

Debbie tried running scalding hot water from the tap into the wok, and was surprised when the beansprouts and oyster sauce washed off quite easily. It was a welcome distraction.

‘Love, love,’ pleaded Stella, ‘you’re talking about economic power. I’m talking about the real power base...

interpersonal relationships. That's what we've ignored for far too long. I'm talking about a situation where the woman works...okay you can argue she's being exploited - you can always argue that in the selling of labour, but she's working, don't you see. She is a social component and the man isn't, which means the man is going to have to listen in future. He can't ignore the female voice any more because he relies upon her for his subsistence.'

'Crap!' repeated Angela, but with less conviction this time. Debbie heard the percolator cough and wished it would hurry up so that they'd go back to the drawing room or the reception room or wherever they were planning to drink their coffee. She didn't understand a word of what they were talking about, but the intensity of it was enough to give her a headache.

'Is that what you're going to put in your book?' demanded Angela, 'How can you present such a wet view of it all? What about single mothers, what about lesbians? Why do you always have to define power by referring to the fucking man?'

'That was your argument,' returned Stella, 'you brought up the boardroom.'

'As an example,' said Angela weakly.

'The point is,' pursued Stella, 'the boardrooms are being turned into bunkers. It's the last bastion of defence for them. They've gone to ground.'

'How can you say that, Stella? How can you possibly know that? You've never even had a proper job?'

There was a brief and awful silence in which even Debbie could tell that her employer had been mortally wounded.

‘How on earth do you define a proper job, Angela dear?’ said Mrs. Fripp weakly. ‘Nine till five, I suppose. Yet I am working all the time. I am working now.’ But she didn’t sound too convinced of this.

For a moment Debbie was afraid her hand had got stuck in the asparagus steamer.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Angela, ‘I didn’t mean to imply...’

Debbie’s hand came free and the percolator emitted one last cough.

‘You’ve given up cream haven’t you?’ said Stella Fripp, and Debbie thought she detected a wavering note in the voice that could have been close to a sob. But surely not. Not Mrs Fripp.

It was a relief when the two women decided to drink their coffee elsewhere. Debbie finished the washing up in peace, then went upstairs.

There was something about the likes of Angela and Mrs Fripp that left her in a state of tension she couldn’t explain. She knew it was their argument, not hers, and they’d made absolutely no attempt to include her in it, quite the reverse, yet Debbie felt obscurely as if she’d absorbed all their tension through osmosis.

And entering the Fripps bedroom she couldn’t help feeling a mite annoyed at the sight of the unmade bed. It wasn’t as if she hadn’t expected it – it was her job to make it: one of the things she got paid for, but she wished they had a duvet like everybody else in the world, rather than sheets and blankets that were always such a hassle. To Debbie, the whole room was oddly out of date with bits and pieces from an era long before she was born. There were some tassly, lacy, pinky things on the dressing table that had a distinctly girlie appearance,

circa 1965, and seemed very unlikely possessions for Stella Fripp. The wallpaper, which was going a bit mildewy in the corners, was an overwhelming art-nouveau whirl of lilies and vines, which in Debbie's opinion were enough to give you heebie-jeebies, but then she supposed it was what you got used to. The Fripps must have decorated the bedroom when they arrived some twenty five years ago, and decided since it wasn't on public view they could live with it forever.

The en-suite bathroom was in an especially violent shade of lilac, which again was peculiarly old fashioned and ladylike. It was inevitable that Debbie sometimes tried to fit the Fripp's together and make sense of them, but the only clues here were in the bathroom cabinet which was stuffed with medicines.

Professor Fripp's shelf displayed an ever-mounting collection of alternative controls for hypertension alongside the mega-size packet of Anadin. Mrs Fripp clearly suffered periodically from piles but always threw away her tube of Anusol when one batch was quelled only to have to buy another later. It arrived periodically on her shelf like a badge of defeat.

Then there were recurring treatments for athletes foot, insomnia, hay fever, earwax, hangovers, halitosis, flu, indigestion, and so on.

Outside her local chemist, Debbie had never seen so much medicine in one place, but it didn't surprise her. In her observation, the middle classes had more of everything, including illnesses.

An overwhelming tide of weariness came over Debbie. Listening to Angela and Mrs Fripp had given her the feeling that life was terribly complicated, and she'd slept

badly last night. It wasn't getting dark till after nine these days, and it was a long wait sometimes before the monk deigned to grace her with his presence, gone eleven some nights.

Waiting in the dark of her bedroom she couldn't help but be afraid he might not appear at all. Then there were those few occasions when she was late after a tryst with Adrian or a night out with the girls, when she knew he would be waiting, and she would perceive an annoyance with her tardy appearance at the window. She wondered with a shiver what really existed within the depths of the hood, and what kind of revenge it would exact if she ever decided not to come to the window.

He was hard on her, she knew, but she didn't dare deny him, and wasn't even sure now if she could live without him.

Thinking about the monk as she Ajaxed the Fripp's plastic bath, stirred up something in her and when she had finished the bathroom she drifted into the bedroom, drawn to Professor Fripp's side of the bed.

Downstairs Stella and Angela had resumed their argument, and their strident voices drifted up the stairs, but with few distinguishable words.

Debbie lowered herself into the bed and pulled up the sheet, overwhelmed by sexy sloth. There was a stale version of the Professor emanating from the sheets and the pillow, prompting all kinds of thoughts. What would it be like to lie here next to Stella Fripp every night? Which one of them would instigate proceedings? Did sex turn Mrs Fripp as soft and pink as the satin tissue-box holder on her bedside table? Debbie rolled over to the other side to imagine lying next to the Professor, and

reached a hand across to the centre of his part of the sheet, stroking it silkily.

Sex had always seemed so simple before the monk. Now she felt confused. She was wanting too much. She was wanting the impossible – a coupling that was divine and unearthly, and a far cry from Adrian who had satisfied her for so long.

She remembered the absurd rubber apron he'd wanted her to wear at their last session. It had been just like an ordinary kitchen apron, the kind the Fripps had given her, only all black and flabby, and came with a suffocatingly tight mask that gave her Spiderman's profile. The stench had been something awful in there, and when he'd taken her she'd felt like someone being screwed in a spacesuit by an alien, and had had to fake it for the very first time. Fortunately Adrian had been far too excited by the rubber to notice.

She wondered what sex with Toby Fripp would be like, and imagined something civilised involving wine and posh snacks beforehand, followed by slow, exquisite love-making. The hand which was stroking the sheet had automatically cupped itself at the thought, and in her mind she was caressing Professor Fripp with a lightness that would leave him helplessly hers. Then a sudden moan startled her, even though it was from her own lips. Her moan had penetrated silence. Mrs Fripp could no longer be heard arguing with Angela downstairs, and as she lay listening with bated breath there was the creak of a floorboard just outside the bedroom door.

Debbie was out of bed so quickly that there was a split-second delay before her stomach and breasts caught up with the rest of her body. One foot had got twisted in the

sheet and dragged the rest of the bedclothes with it, and so it was that Toby discovered her, desperately attempting to unravel the spiral of linen and wool from around her right ankle.

He blinked at her amiably, and it dawned on Debbie that he probably thought this was a perfectly normal procedure in bedmaking.

‘Oh hello,’ he said in his pleasant voice, ‘I don’t suppose you’ve seen a pair of reading glasses in here?’

‘Haven’t, no,’ said Debbie breathlessly. ‘What they look like?’

‘Half-moon.’ said Professor Fripp.

The ones that make you look dead intelligent, thought Debbie, but just shook her head whilst simultaneously wagging her tethered foot, a miracle of co-ordination which resulted in a lot of wobbling around the abdomen. She felt absurd and helpless, not the way she wanted to appear to Professor Fripp at all.

Then she remembered. ‘They’m downstairs. I’ll get them if you like.’

‘I don’t want to trouble you,’ said the Professor.

‘I don’t mind. Honest.’ said Debbie, and started to walk towards the door, dragging half the bed with her. She stopped, hopped 360°, and finally released herself. Toby Fripp still looked as if he thought this was all perfectly normal housekeeping behaviour.

When she returned with the glasses Toby was on the landing apparently listening to the debate between his wife and Angela that was being broadcast throughout the house with normal service resumed at full volume.

‘Ah, the siren’s song,’ said the Professor with a smile, and gave Debbie a colluding smile which actually made her blush. She could only guess at what he meant.

Debbie smiled back shyly. She could smell alcohol and the musty old tweed of the Prof’s jacket. Toby Fripp was a tall man with a slight stoop, and the jacket was hanging a little awkwardly off his shoulders, its pockets laden with God knows what, looking more utilitarian than a casual garment should, like something you’d sling over a donkey’s back, and even as she was fancying him, Debbie was wondering why on earth she did.

‘You ever fancied older blokes?’ Debbie asked Joyce.

‘If I was to fancy an older bloke he’d be geriatric or in his grave, you stupid girl.’

‘I mean when you was my age.’

‘How much older you mean?’

‘Quite a bit.’

‘Who you fallen for, girl?’

‘Nobody’

‘Come on, you can tell Auntie Joyce.’

‘It’s that bloke I does for, the Professor. I get feelings about him. You know. And it’s just like weird, you know.’

‘Nothing wrong with that. You wouldn’t believe the hoary old devils I gone for, but you’re out of your class with this one. You remember that. Look, but don’t touch, girl.’

Debbie took a sip of her tea. They were in the ground floor kitchenette of Speedwell Communications having finished the cleaning ten minutes earlier than usual. Joyce didn’t seem in any particular hurry. She never did.

Debbie felt she could say just about anything to Joyce, but nevertheless hesitated before committing herself.

‘I think I’m under a spell.’ said Debbie finally.

Joyce sang in her rich voice, ‘You got me under your spell...’ Then cackled with laughter. ‘What you mean, a spell? Not still harping on that magic eye of yours are you?’

Debbie decided she simply couldn’t tell her about the monk as she’d intended, but Joyce must have sensed the depth of her anxiety because she looked at her with the kindly expression Debbie adored, the one which filled her with assurance.

‘I tell you, girl, it’s just the time of year. The sap is risin’. You can’t withstand the forces of nature, girl. Nobody can. Ha, ha, ha!’

Debbie smiled gratefully. Of course Joyce was right, she knew about these things. And for several hours afterwards Debbie was quite able to believe that the monk didn’t really exist at all, almost up to the moment he made his evening appearance.



Before opening up Wicca’s World for the day’s trading, Alice and David always made an infusion of herbs to be drunk quietly together in the stockroom. The herbs had been picked dew-fresh that morning from their own garden, chosen to engender specific moods or overcome current maladies. On this particular day, they were drinking Tansy tea, not for its medicinal properties, as both were in the peak of health, but for its soothing

effect. The gingery aroma of the tea mingled with the heady scent of Sandalwood, Cedar and Frankincense coming from the already burning incenser in the shop.

A shaft of early Summer sun was lancing through the high window of the stockroom to set metaphoric fire to Alice's hennaed hair, attracting admiring looks from David. He knew she was wearing nothing but the black cotton dress that dropped straight from her small breasts to her small bare feet. Today she had the wild look of a rural child. In contrast, he looked faintly colonial in a beige linen suit, open necked white shirt and sandals. For the shop, they usually dressed in opposite colours, white and black, red and green, blue and orange. It started as coincidence and had now become a habit, a ritual if you like.

After they'd drunk their tea, they said a short blessing on the shop, 'Let this place of work be a place of joy,' and then at half past nine precisely they opened the doors.

The first hour was always fairly quiet, so they potted around, restocking shelves, brushing the doorstep which the Council's pavement sweeper had missed, topping up the incenser, chatting inconsequentially as the bustle of the city outside gradually increased.

At around ten-o'clock, David as always said he was popping out for a paper. 'Okay, love,' said Alice.

Old Street ran east west, and the sun was already powering down into it, making the miniature leaves of the cedar trees flash as they turned in a soft breeze. The crystal sound of the fountain in front of the City Hall also came on the breeze, and David breathed in the negative ions deeply. It was a wonderful day, a

wonderful life in fact. He felt loose-limbed and perfectly tuned in his unobstructive linen suit.

People were walking at a Mediterranean pace along the wide street. The manager of a jewellery shop, a fellow trader said, 'Hi,' as David passed him, and David said 'Hi,' back. The manager of the newsagent, Hanif, also acknowledged him with a nod as David entered his shop.

David picked up a copy of The Independent, then, as was his habit, scanned the racks of magazines for anything interesting. Occasionally something would catch his eye, and anyway it was fascinating to see so many interests catered for - photography, mountain biking, embroidery, cooking, stamp collecting - Alice had an idea for starting a magazine on modern witchcraft. She was sure there was a gap in the market.

David's eyes strayed to the top shelf. Mayfair, Playboy, Consort, Men Only, Big Babes...

The stolen talisman was featured prominently on the cover, quite unmissable against that expanse of flesh, the blue amethyst a perfect foil to the pink. David reached up and took the magazine. He was quite calm, almost unsurprised: after all, hadn't they made an invocation for the return of the talisman? And here it was, albeit as a photograph. The taste of Tansy lingered in his mouth, as he flicked through the pages of large women, pouting and posing, holding up their breasts like offerings, until finally he came to the centre of the magazine which featured the girl with the talisman.

POLLY

They don't come much bigger than Pantechnicon
Polly.

Jolly Polly her mates call her
because she's always game for a laugh.
In fact a little bird tells us that
Polly is game for anything.

David remembered informing the insurance assessor that any image or reproduction of the talisman would reduce its power. There was irony for you.

He looked at the face of the girl above the talisman. It was strangely engaging. Even through the heavy make-up her total commitment to the moment was quite clear. She was enjoying herself. Jolly Polly.

Another customer came up beside David, standing so close he could smell a mixture of sweat and cheap, aggressive underarm deodorant as she reached up towards the top shelf. Out of the corner of his eye he saw fleshy fingers, five little piggies, scrabbling to pull down a copy of Playgirl. He'd always thought it was only gays who bought Playgirl, and turned his head a fraction for a glimpse of this bold female. Just natural curiosity.

The girl was going red in the face from her exertions. Her softly veined stretching arm bulged with tender little folds of flesh where it met the shoulder and disappeared into the sleeveless polyester dress which tented the big body. Her roughly cut bob of hair had swung back to reveal a thick, soft skinned neck embraced by a silver chain.

The power of Wicca. David marvelled at it. He imagined the cone of power that must have emanated from the hilltop as he and Alice concentrated their minds upon the stolen talisman, willing its return, sensing the current flowing into the drawing and then out in

scattered pieces, out into the world. Together, they'd constructed a psychic magnet emitting waves of attraction that had eventually brought David and this girl to within a metre of each other.

David watched, totally absorbed now, as the girl used the friction of her fingers to pull down the glossy mag.

When she had it she turned immediately towards him with a face full of blood and petulance.

'What you lookin' at,' she said, her local accent very strong, 'Can't you mind your own bleedin' business.'

David was taken by surprise. Her furious energy didn't seem compatible with the big body. He could see her chest literally rippling, the fat in her upper arms shaking.

'I...' began David.

'Pervert,' said the girl unequivocally, loud enough for Harif behind the counter to look over inquiringly.

As if to ward her off, David held up the cover of Big Babes like a crucifix before a vampire. It was an instinctive reaction. He was sure this woman wouldn't respond to words.

'Jesus,' said the girl, and her face lit up as she took in her own image. She was transfixed.

'I was wondering,' said David.

'Yeah?' Her eyes didn't leave the magazine.

'About the talisman.'

'The what?'

David pointed on the photograph as a teacher would point out something in a book to a child.

'Me lucky charm, you mean.'

'Yes. Do you mind if I ask where you got it from.'

‘Found it, didn’t I?’ At last he’d got her attention away from her picture. There was a nervous kind of defiance in her face.

‘Where did you find it?’ asked David.

‘It’s mine,’ said the girl, and her hand went up to cover her chest as if David had suddenly ripped the top of her dress.

‘You know it’s imbued with powerful magic, don’t you?’ said David.

The girl looked at him, mouth open stupidly. Then suddenly, with surprising dexterity, grabbed the magazine from his hand and ran from the shop.

‘Oi!’ shouted Harif.

‘Oi!’ shouted Dave, and set off in pursuit.



After closing the shop, they’d sat Debbie down in the back room on a bent-wood chair that felt unsteady under her and wasn’t really big enough. The bloke who had collared her in the street was sitting next to a black-haired, hippyish type woman, both facing her, perched on the edge of cardboard boxes, ready to give her the third degree no doubt.

‘I’m Alice,’ said the woman, ‘and this is David. Do you mind telling me your name?’

Debbie contemplated giving a false one, but her mind was suddenly empty of any but her own, so she had to say it.

‘Okay, Debbie,’ said the woman called Alice, ‘We want to clear this matter up as quickly and cleanly as

possible. If you co-operate there shouldn't be any need for the police.'

The police! Debbie hadn't even thought of them.

'I found it,' said Debbie abruptly.

'Where?' asked the bloke called David. He said it very softly as if he was a social worker or something. He made Debbie feel bad about lying.

'In the park,' said Debbie.

'Which park?' asked David, so kindly he must have been taking the piss. He must have known she was lying.

'The big one. Victoria.'

'Where in the park.'

'I dunno. Near that statue.'

'The statue of Queen Victoria?'

'Yeah .That one.' The taste for making it all up had completely deserted Debbie. She was usually better at it than this.

Alice heaved a big sigh, then leaned forward and smiled. 'Are you really telling us the truth, Debbie?' Debbie could have been three years old the way she said it. 'Because that talisman is quite capable of turning against you if you're not its rightful owner.'

'What you mean?'

'It's not just a piece of jewellery, Debbie. It's been charged with magic.'

'I know,' said Debbie, and fingered the talisman possessively.

'How do you know?' Alice had leaned forward even further. Her blue eyes had got Debbie's so she couldn't look away. Her mouth wasn't smiling anymore, but her lips were parted showing little teeth as white as toothpaste. Should she tell? If they didn't believe she'd

found it in Victoria Park, how likely were they to accept a story about the monk's nightly visitations?

Alice put a hand on Debbie's knee. It fell on her as softly as a leaf, suddenly there, barely a pressure, just warmth. She nodded gently, encouragingly.

'There's this monk,' said Debbie, 'this monk what comes to me at night...'

Alice nodded again.

'He stands outside my window, every night. He makes me do...things.'

Alice's eyes opened a fraction wider. Debbie was suddenly very aware of her hand on her knee. This weird, beautiful woman really wanted to know. She really wanted to believe her.

'Every night,' said Debbie, even more insistently, 'Honest.'

Shit. Why did she have to add "Honest". Debbie could feel Alice's withdrawal, and saw her eyes narrow a little, turning from acceptance to assessment.

Then it occurred to Debbie, the obvious answer. Of course. 'I can prove it,' she said, 'I'll show you if you like.' She could hear her voice had gone quite wild. 'You can come to my house, then you'll know I ain't lying.' She was so excited she was bouncing in the fragile chair, making it creak ominously. She looked from Alice to David, David to Alice. 'I mean it. You can see for yourselves.' They appeared staggered at the suggestion, at the simplicity of the idea, as if such stark ingenuousness was outside their experience.

Six

Two days later, Alice and David brought round the whole coven to witness the manifestation of the monk: twelve of them all together, trooping into the little bedroom, whispering grammatically, while Debbie worried about the threadbare carpet and whether she should offer them tea and whether her mother was going to embarrass them all with accusations of paganism and devil-worship.

Debbie thanked god that Mrs Palmer didn't catch sight of the curious wooden box Alice and David (or Morgana and Vulcan as their coven seemed to call them) had brought. It was about the size of a large briefcase and, most revealingly and excitingly, its lid was branded deep into the grain with a simple pentagram.

When they all trooped into Debbie's small twelve foot by twelve foot bedroom it was barely dusk, yet already everybody was talking with low, expectant voices.

'Now,' said Morgana, addressing her little throng who were grouped as tight as a Greek chorus, 'Debbie tells us the presence will not manifest itself unless she comes to it skyclad. That means naked,' she explained in parenthesis to a baffled looking Debbie, 'and I think it's only fitting that we should join her.'

Without preamble the coven started to take all their clothes off, and Debbie, as yet still fully dressed, wondered what on earth her Mother would think if she decided to get nosy. It was fortunate that her sloth would almost certainly win the day.

Debbie looked around the bedroom, at the solid wedge of exclusively white flesh. It was not an entirely pretty sight. Apart from one bloke with a beer gut, there were a lot of visible ribs and hip bones, which would be okay if not for a distinct lack of muscle tone. Debbie assumed they must nearly all have office jobs and serious diets. The older members tended to have sagging paunches and breasts that had the look of something recently emptied or siphoned off.

It was still too early in the year for serious tans, though a shaved bikini line was visible on one woman. After that, Debbie tried to avoid looking too hard at crotches or at the bloke who was so hairy his skinny front looked like a dog's belly.

It was definitely a strange tableau, and for some reason it reminded her of a poster she had once seen in a city centre shop full of studenty type stuff: a dark print in browns and evil reds showing lots of scrawny naked people, surrounded by devils and furnaces, howling open-mouthed as they were devoured by weird machines and creatures. (Who on earth would give something like that wall space, she couldn't imagine.)

Debbie undressed. She'd begun to feel like a freak in her own bedroom with her clothes on. The coven watched her unblinkingly, with a look of expectancy in their eyes, and a little shiver of pleasure ran from Debbie's toes through to her fingertips.

There she stood, cover-star of Big Babes, among all those bony bodies, like a defrocked sugar plum fairy, big and generous, her flesh flowing out into the room, invading space rather than retreating from it. The coven seemed slightly stunned.

Alice/Morgana, graceful in her nakedness with neat pubic hair and neat breasts, crossed over to Debbie and took the talisman in one hand. She stood at Debbie's side, still holding the pendant towards the coven, resting her hand gently on the lectern of Debbie's soft chest, and began to tell the story of how she found the talisman on Glastonbury Tor, of how, 'It shone like another moon in the long silvered grass, and winked its blue eye as I moved to take it.' The calm lilt of Morgana's voice, the living magic of her tale, caressed the coven into a state of semi-rapture, and soon they were truly spellbound.

She reminded the coven of their own ritual on the Glent Hills when they had sent out a powerful call for the talisman's return, and how their wish had been answered so effectively. And here she turned to Debbie, standing at her side.

'But Debbie believes she has a greater claim to the eye of amethyst. We are all here as witnesses tonight to observe whether a presence Debbie calls the Monk manifests itself when she wears the talisman.' Morgana paused significantly, 'It may be that Debbie was driven by forces outside herself to steal the talisman. Such a powerful magic token operates under its own laws and seeks out its chosen owner. If this is true then it is not just the talisman which has returned,' said the beautiful, taut-skinned Morgana, her voice the sweetest vibration in Debbie's ear, 'along with it we will have gained a magical friend.'

Debbie experienced a rush of joy which was almost unbearable, and the coven smiled their welcome at her.

But Morgana hadn't finished, 'If, on the other hand, there is no manifestation, Debbie has agreed she will

relinquish all rights to the talisman and return it to ourselves, and there the matter will end.’

The coven contemplated Debbie with serious, calculating faces.

It was a warm night, and the naked bodies were individual faucets of additional heat, filling the pool of warmth in which they all bathed. Debbie sweated heavily in the improvised sauna, and hoped the warmth which surrounded her was not just physical.

As dusk came, Morgana talked on. If the presence made itself known there was every chance it was the original owner of the talisman, she believed, and that he was the one who had endowed it with magic. The question was not just whether he existed, but whether he was a benign or malicious force. As a precaution, it was only right that Debbie received the protection of the coven, said Morgana, and there was general nodding and murmured agreement at this.

‘He’ll be here soon I reckon,’ Debbie interrupted. The room was now almost dark, and the coven glimmered ghostly in the background, like a collection of souls in limbo.

‘We’ll be quick,’ said Morgana, and snapped open the wooden, pentagram-branded box.

In the light from the window, Debbie could just make out a silver bowl; a round copper tray marked with strange symbols; a large knife with a black handle; a small plastic bottle of Evian and a cardboard container of sea-salt.

Morgana splashed mineral water into the bowl and placed it on top of the copper circle. Tiny facets, shards

of moonlight, glinted in the water as the high-priestess dipped the blade of her knife into the bowl.

When Morgana spoke her voice was as mellifluous as ever, but seemed to have acquired a deeper resonance, as if amplified from a distance. 'I exorcise thee, O Creature of Water, that thou cast out from thee all the impurities and uncleanness of the spirits of the world of phantasm. Mertalia, Musalia, Dophalia, Onemalia, Zitanesia.'

Morgana removed the bowl and poured salt onto the copper.

'Blessings be upon this Creature of Salt; let all malignity and hindrance be cast forth thence from, and let all good enter therein. Wherefore I bless and invoke thee, that thou mayest aid me.'

Everyone in the room had stilled their breath. In the potent silence, Debbie could even hear the soft whoosh of the salt being poured into the water.

'Yamenton, Yaron, Tatonon, Zarmesiton, Tileion, Tixmion. But ever mind, water purifies the body, but the scourge purifies the soul.'

Morgana turned to stand directly in front of Debbie. Her proximity was unearthly: she was a shade supporting the luminous silver bowl which seemed to be the only solid thing remaining in the room; everything else had dissolved into tints of grey. Debbie was faint from heat and solemnity, and the world suddenly switched into dream-mode as Morgana dipped her finger in the bowl and brought it up gently towards Debbie's right eye. The moistened finger was as light as a water-colour brush as it swept across her eyelid. 'Be thou sealed against all evil.' murmured Morgana. Then the other eye, 'Be thou sealed against all evil.' Her ears. 'Be thou sealed against

all evil.' Her nostrils, her nipples. 'Be thou sealed against all evil.' Between her legs. 'Be thou sealed against all evil.' Between her buttocks. 'Be thou sealed against all evil.'

Debbie kept her eyes shut throughout the ritual. She'd never been touched like that before, with such tender concern, with such lack of violence or passion.

'You're safe now,' said Morgana, and the coven emitted a collective sigh.

Half a moon, blurred by cloud, had nudged itself above the Victorian brewery roof. Debbie went to the window and, even without lowering her head, could see her belly absorbing the moonlight, turning her skin the colour of steel. She opened her legs, her arms, as she had done so every night for so many weeks. But this time it was different. She could feel every place Morgana had touched as if her finger was still there: a gentle pressure on every orifice, a lingering imprint as definite as kiss. She would meet the monk tonight without fear.

Behind her the coven was bubbling: a cauldron of excitement. Debbie sensed people jockeying for position, there was a whispered curse and a slightly clammy hand rested for an instant on her shoulder.

'You'll have to stand back,' David was saying at the very moment the hooded figure emerged smoothly and silently behind the wall at the end of the yard. There was a second's pause, then Debbie was being flattened against the window by the crush of ten naked people all anxious for a view. It was an odd sensation. At her front, the cold hard glass; at her back the damp heat of crowded flesh. She was aware of a female breast

enfolding her left bicep, a limp penis half buried in one thigh, a hairy chest slotted between her shoulder blades.

‘Get back! Give her room!’ someone shouted right in her ear.

Debbie’s cheek and nose were flattened to neatly fill one complete pane of glass. There were people taller than she craning over her head and shoulders, while a person either side of her had their heads slotted in at navel level.

The monk stood rigid as if astonished.

A window stacked high with flesh and faces stared down at him while he stared back. Trapped, Debbie had to strain her eyes sideways to see. He had adopted a hunched look she hadn’t witnessed before. For the first time she was encountering him without a trace of fear. Rather she was beginning to feel a twinge of sympathy for the poor spectral figure: he looked so alone down there in his dark, smelly alley.

‘That is evil,’ someone said, and Debbie wanted to disagree but her jaw was locked fast against the window.

‘Get back,’ commanded Morgana suddenly in a voice that carried almost headmistressly authority, and one by one the coven picked itself away from Debbie, peeling away from her stickily like wet Elastoplast. Then Alice and David moved in swiftly to either side of Debbie, taking her by the hand as if in instinctive protection, though whether it was herself or themselves they were protecting Debbie couldn’t have said.

There was still a rigidity to the monk Debbie had never encountered before, a kind of paralysis. The three of them, hands linked, gazed down at the cowled presence, with the rest of the coven still pressing forward as close

as they dare in the background. Morgana was squeezing Debbie's hand to the point where she was actually hurting her.

'Incredible,' murmured David without seeming to move his lips.

The monk's stillness was infecting everyone in the room. Nobody breathed or even blinked, but then suddenly, with uncharacteristic haste, the figure was gone, so swiftly it was impossible to say whether he had dematerialised or simply ducked back into the shadows. Released from unbearable tension, the coven emitted groans and sighs, while the trio at the window remained standing there, Alice and David gazing blindly into the vacated space.

'I don't think he'll come back tonight,' Debbie ventured after a minute or two of this, but the high priestess and her priest continued to clutch her hands as if the monk had turned them to stone, and with a sense of triumph and vindication Debbie knew they'd take no more convincing. Now there was no question about who was the rightful owner of the talisman.

After the coven had dressed and departed, Alice drew Debbie down to sit beside her on the bed and gazed into her eyes with slow-burning intensity. Debbie's instincts told her that the thing to do was to return equally unwavering eye-contact, but every so often she found she had to look away, come up for a breather as it were, to avoid being drowned in the blue embrace.

David meanwhile was at the window, his back to them, still looking down into the alley, but not, Debbie suspected, because he was expecting any return of the

monk, but rather to allow some privacy to herself and Alice.

‘You must join our coven,’ said Morgana, ‘Will you?’

‘That would be great,’ said Debbie, then wondered if her response had been a bit over-eager. Even to her own ears it had had some of the desperation in it of the kid in the playground who’s never picked for anything, only ever picked on.

But Alice’s smile was slow and warm, and she reached out to lay her hands on top of Debbie’s

‘We’ll initiate you at our next Sabbat.’

‘Great,’ said Debbie, unable to prevent what she knew was a daft grin. The high priestess squeezed her wrists and treated Debbie to more scrutinising eye contact, bathing her in waves of devotion.

It was all a little overwhelming, and it was mainly to divert attention from herself that Debbie nodded towards the window, ‘What do you think it is, then?’

Morgana’s expression grew contemplative. ‘It is obviously the manifestation of some very ancient entity,’ she said with slow deliberation. A little fold appeared between her eyes which Debbie found herself coveting for some reason. ‘Interesting,’ she continued, ‘that your first thought was of a monk. There is of course an abbey at Glastonbury,’ Morgana reached forward and took the pendant talisman in her small hand, ‘but is this something you’d expect to find on a Christian?’

‘You’re not saying the talisman is pre-Christian?’ said David, turning from the window.

‘It could be,’ said Morgana excitedly, ‘A pagan symbol.’

Debbie felt herself suddenly neglected, and half wished she hadn't raised the question.

'There were druids at Glastonbury, long before the monks,' continued Alice. 'They had a sanctuary by Chalice Well just at the bottom of the Tor.' She angled the talisman so that it caught a little of the glimmer from the single 40 watt bulb. 'If you look at the engraving round the eye it has the typical curve of Celtic art.'

David came close, his head next to his wife's, as they both scrutinised the silver and amethyst lozenge. 'I sensed the magic as soon as I picked it up, but this...'

'I think we seriously undervalued it,' said David.

'Is my charm valuable then,' said Debbie, desperate to reassert her ownership.

'Don't worry about its worth in material terms,' said Alice quickly, giving David a cross look, 'just remember that it represents an eye. And an eye permits vision. Whatever the manifestation was tonight, I sense that it intends to reveal something to you. Anyone could see it resented the intrusion of others. It is you it has chosen through the talisman. You must watch and wait, Debbie, watch and wait.'

Morgana's voice had a timbre that made Debbie shiver and glow at the same time. The future suddenly seemed enormous. Watch and wait – that was exactly what Debbie had divined was expected of her, but to have it confirmed by the Wiccan high priestess made it an even more exacting duty. Watch and wait. She could do that; she'd had plenty of practice, no trouble, but what precisely was she waiting for? Not even Morgana seemed to have the answer to that one.

The house was different now. Every time Debbie entered the kitchen her eyes strayed to where the wall met the ceiling - where the Vymura, put up by her Dad sometime back in the seventies, was peeling - drooping over to show its filthy underbelly. Rationally, she knew it had been like that for years, but to Debbie it could have happened that very day. Suddenly she had become painfully aware of how the pattern on the wallpaper had faded, or was filtered through a layer of grease, so that the different kinds of fruit - pomegranates, apples, bananas, oranges - illustrated in a way that belonged to a different era, a time of simpler, more innocent tastes and more garish colours, had lost their lustre.

Then there was the grime on top of the skirting board, as thick as a penny. Surely they couldn't have lived with that for so long! It was as if, overnight, a coating of grease had oozed out of every surface, like a nocturnal sweat.

'This place is a bleedin' pigsty,' announced Debbie to her Mother.

Mrs. Palmer screwed her bottom round on the kitchen chair and surveyed her surroundings. 'Well, what you going to do about it then?'

'Don't know,' said Debbie. 'Clean it I suppose.'

'About bloody time,' retorted Mrs. Palmer.

'I ain't your slave,' replied Debbie, 'you clean it.'

'You're the one that's bothered,'

'I don't know how you can live like this.'

'It was good enough for you till you had your la-di-da friends round.'

Debbie went pink in the face. It wasn't often her Mother got to her, but that was well below the belt,

particularly considering what had happened since. Her Mother wasn't to know that of course.

'And my knees are no better, you know,' added her Mrs Palmer with satisfaction. She was referring to Alice's attempt to heal them. Before leaving, the high priestess had exchanged a few sociable words with Mrs Palmer which inevitably led to a full account of Mrs Palmer's affliction. and Morgana had immediately offered some healing magic which Debbie and David had observed as the young woman knelt and held her hands an inch or two from the older woman's joints, not warming herself at them as it looked - the reverse - Alice was supposed to be the source of radiation, generating therapeutic waves of energy from her upturned palms.

'They're no better,' Mrs. Palmer repeated when she got no response from Debbie.

'Well, they're no worse are they,' said Debbie.

'You wait. You'll be old one day,' said Mrs. Palmer.

'Yeah, but not bitter and twisted. Anyway you're not old.'

'I don't like you mixing with those heathens. I brought you up to be a good Christian.'

'You must be bleeding joking. When did you last go to church?'

'I'm talking about values.'

'The only values you know is look out for number one.'

'When I think how I struggled...'

'It was Dad what struggled. And now it's bleedin' me.'

Mrs Palmer leaned forward in her chair and rubbed her right knee ruminatively. 'I loved your Father.' she said.

'Yeah,' said Debbie grudgingly.

Her mother continued rubbing her knee. ‘Perhaps it is a bit better.’ she said cautiously, looking sideways at her daughter. There was a pause which they both recognised, and Debbie knew word for word what was coming next.

‘Be a pet,’ said Mrs. Palmer, ‘and make us a cuppa.’

Debbie returned with the tea and a heavy heart. There was something she was desperate to talk to someone about, but her Mum wasn’t any good. She’d never said a word to her about the monk, druid, or whatever he was. As far as her Mum was concerned the coven had assembled in her bedroom to drive off evil spirits in general.

Mrs Palmer, of course, had never heard the like of it. ‘Evil spirits! Your Dad and I occupied that room for twenty one happily married years. You’re going daft in the head.’

Debbie had let her get on with it. She supposed her Mum deserved some satisfaction for putting up with twelve strangers in the house.

But there’d been a tragedy. The monk simply hadn’t appeared since that evening. For over a week Debbie had been keeping punctual attendance at the window in the evening, watching and waiting, watching and waiting just as Morgana had prescribed, but nothing had manifested itself, however hard she wished it and no matter how hard she rubbed the talisman. It was like thinking you’d won the lottery then realising you’d mistaken the numbers.

The alley looked awfully empty come nightfall, a big, black nothing. She climbed under her sheet on the hot summer nights with an almost unbearable sense of deprivation, and whether it was the heat or something

else - a midnight horror of never getting to go to the ball – she wasn't sure, but it would take half the night before blessed sleep came.

Morgana had said the manifestation clearly demonstrated that Debbie was “a powerful psychic” who could be “a real asset to them”. The words were etched deep on Debbie's mind. She was a little vague about their precise meaning, but they definitely constituted more praise than she'd had in a long time, and compliments were like precious stones to Debbie, collected and hoarded for their rarity value.

And when Alice had performed the Openings of the Body ritual on her, Debbie had been left feeling like a baby wrapped in its mother's arms. The high priestess's finger imparted a warm, loving protectiveness, that still lingered days later. It was as if something had been restored which was lost.

But now she wondered if she'd lost it again. The talisman had taken on an aura of impotence since the monk's disappearance: even its amethyst appeared dimmed to Debbie's eyes, but she was determined still to watch and wait, however long it took, even a million years.

Debbie sipped her tea, and it provided a predictable comfort. Her mother had raised her cup simultaneously. ‘That's nice,’ she sighed as she placed the cup back in its saucer.

Debbie gave her a smile, why not? She could watch and wait forever. It was her destiny, her duty, and there was surely no reason why she shouldn't still be initiated into the coven. Alice didn't even have to know that the

Monk no longer visited her. Debbie sipped her tea. How could it be a lie if she didn't say anything?

For the first time ever, Debbie found she did not completely welcome the arrival of a card from Adrian. In fact it took her off guard. Adrian now belonged to a world she felt she had already left behind, a world that was purely physical with no room for magic talismans or psychic manifestations.

'Same time. Same place. Same channel,' it said on the back, together with the following day's date. Debbie surprised herself with a smidgen of irritation at his assuming she had nothing else planned. Couldn't he give her a bit more notice? She looked at the postmark and found it was a word she could read. Bath. With no warning, Debbie suddenly had a vision of a fat girl in Bath getting a postcard with a Bristol postmark. A fat girl in Bristol getting a postcard with a Swansea postmark. A fat girl in Swansea getting a postcard with...

Debbie turned the card over. The cartoon was in colours that managed to look bright and washed out at the same time, as if it had been out in the sun too long. A woman on an ochre coloured beach was bending over to pick up an interesting looking shell. Her backside swelled massively in her one-piece, horizontally-striped bathing suit, the buttocks as circular as if they'd been drawn with a pair of compasses. Behind her was a cheeky faced crab, reaching up with an open claw and exchanging a collusive wink with the skinny-ribbed man who was about to pinch the other obese buttock.

The card looked familiar, then Debbie realised he'd sent her this one before. Another revelation hit her.

She'd always vaguely imagined Adrian buying the cards in the towns he sent them from, but now she realised he must have a ready supply of the things; probably carried scores of them stashed in the glove compartment of his Audi.

It was disconcerting to start contemplating Adrian's existence outside that shabby little hotel room on the London Road, to think that there might be other hotel rooms, other saucy postcards sent to different towns, other girls, plumped up and ready, just like her. The idea of the wife was easily handled, but this had a different odour to it.

But there was no question that Debbie would fail to keep the appointment. She wasn't that kind of girl. She couldn't afford to be that kind of girl.

'Got something for you,' were Adrian's first words, 'A little pressy,' and he handed over a parcel wrapped in the anonymous light brown paper with which purchases from sex shops advertised themselves. There was a clink of brass and a whiff of leather as Debbie tore open the paper.

'It's a bridle,' said Adrian to Debbie's bemused look. 'I'll show you.'

None-too-gently, Adrian forced the cold, acid tasting bit into Debbie's mouth, and arranged the straps to form a headband, linked none-too-loosely to the bit by a broad band of leather covering Debbie's nose. She could barely breathe. The reins hung limply, tickling her back.

Downstairs, the hotel manager jumped at the sound of a terrific commotion from the room he rented hourly to that posh bastard and his fat tart.

'Yeeeeehhaaaah!!' went the man's voice; a cowboy at a rodeo: there was no mistaking it, and this was followed by a terrific racket of galloping feet going back and forth across the ceiling, heavy enough to make the light fittings shudder. 'Yeeeeehhaaaah!!'

'Jesus!' cried the manager, and threw down his Evening Mail, 'that's a fuckin' nuff!' and was half way up the stairs before he realised it. Caution didn't hit him until he'd almost got his hand on the door knob.

It wasn't just the fact that the hotel business had moved decisively away from his part of town in recent years, it was the dread of what he'd see, which steadied his hand. And he wasn't not getting any younger either. He was pretty sure the bloke would behave himself, but that fat bitch – there was no telling. Women could be a lot nastier than men when it came to the crunch. He turned and walked back downstairs. Maybe if he turned the telly up loud. Yes, that would do it. He picked up the Evening Mail from the floor and scanned the telly page. Something loud.

A profusely sweating, leather bridled Debbie lay next to a gently perspiring, rapidly wilting Adrian, whilst from downstairs came the unmistakable cacophony of Bruce Forsyth's 'Play Your Cards Right' at maximum volume.

'A LIBRARIAN. REALLY? IT SAYS HERE YOU'RE SCOTTISH.' There was a roar of laughter as raucously metallic as ball bearings tipped into a bucket.

'What's he playing at,' grumbled Adrian, 'You'd think he'd have some consideration for the guests.'

The sound of the programme made Debbie feel oddly homesick. She realised that she'd rather be sitting in the

telly room at home with her Mum, watching Brucie, than lying here next to a distracted, frustrated Adrian.

‘HIGHER, HIGHER!’ called the crowd. Then ‘LOWER, LOWER.’ ‘OHHHHHH!’ There was a gasp of communal disappointment, and Debbie pictured the unfavourable card being turned over, and felt keenly for the unseen couple.

Adrian threw himself off the bed. ‘Is there nowhere in this blasted country you can have a shag in peace?’ he shouted at nobody in particular.

As he dressed furiously, pulling on socks and pants as if trying to punish them, Debbie reflected that he must have detected a lack of enthusiasm in her, and understandably there was something grudging in the way he slammed the twenty quid down on the bedside cabinet before slamming the door. If she wasn’t careful, could end up without his contributions to her income.

Debbie removed the bridle which had become pasted to her skin with sweat, and put it into her handbag. She dressed slowly then lay on the bed for a while, listening to the end of the programme. To deafening applause and effusive congratulations from Brucie, she heard a couple win an all expenses paid trip to Florida; and that cheered her up. She hated it when people lost.

Seven

Now the summer solstice was little more than a week away, there was still a good two hours of decent daylight left when Debbie finished work at Speedwell Communications. Usually she would stroll to the station with Joyce to catch their Sprinter into the City Centre, but Joyce was away on holiday, visiting family in St. Lucia - a trip she had been saving up for since 1985 when she last went there.

Debbie walked out into the landscaped grounds of the Science and Technology Park and rather than taking the pathway signposted in cast iron: 'Rail Station', followed instead the sign to 'Canalside Walk'.

Though the Park had been started about the time Joyce last visited the Caribbean, it still had a fresh, unwrapped feel about it. The shrubs that lined the unblemished tarmac of the pathway looked as if they were still trying to establish themselves, like yokels who would never feel quite at home with urban life. There were, of course, no weeds anywhere thanks to the contract gardeners who could be seen at work every day, and the surfaces of the squat, boxy buildings, clad with impervious materials like glass, plastic, steel and marble, gleamed as if they'd just been washed...which they probably had. It was all as unnaturally neat as a model village, and, as usual, Debbie had the feeling she shouldn't be there. Even the sky at that moment had a picture-book quality of flawless blue with just the right number of puffy, perfectly defined clouds to decorate it. A hand could

descend at any moment and lift Debbie from the scene, restore it to its pristine state.

The canal was little different. The towpath area had been bricked over and there was a large black cast iron sign to tell visitors the name of the canal, the date of its construction (1789), the engineer (John Smeaton) and so on, with the embossed lettering precision-painted in white: as glossy as if it had never dried.

Debbie sat down on a gleaming cast iron bench, still feeling a bit like a trespasser, even though this was a fully public area.

The seat had absorbed the heat of the day, and imparted it generously into Debbie's flattened thighs. The sun, half way down the sky, retained a hint of midday fierceness, but it was on the wane, like an angry person beginning to relax, and Debbie began to relax with it. The shadows were long in the suburban gardens that came down to the towpath on the other side of the canal. A dog was barking monotonously in the distance.

Debbie sat for a long time. Every so often a narrow boat came chugging by; usually a holiday vessel, though some were proper homes with an old fashioned smell of coal smoke coming from their stove pipes and a runty looking dog perched proprietorially on the roof.

Nobody on the boats looked at Debbie, and when they were gone there was just the localised sound of water slapping against the canal wall set against the retreating noise of a lazy engine.

Yet Debbie was still not entirely at peace. She reached into her handbag and took out some sheets of paper given to her by David Jones, handling the papers carefully, almost reverently. In David's small neat

capitals at the top, were the words DEBBIE PALMER, which naturally she could read easily enough, and the word which followed was almost certainly INITIATION, because that was what David had said the ceremony was called, but below that things became a lot less certain. The rest of it was a typewritten photocopy of the Wiccan Initiation Ritual, including her responses which David had told her to learn.

Debbie hadn't like to admit her reading difficulties to David. She'd even wondered if it might disqualify her from joining the coven. How could someone be a great psychic if she couldn't even read proper? Debbie looked up as a pair of Canada geese flew by just three feet off the canal's surface, the steady whop, whop, whop beat of their wings clearly audible and causing a faint disturbance on the water's surface. She watched them as they tracked the curve of the canal, on out of sight, then she took the talisman and pressed it against her forehead. Instantly her mind seemed to become clearer, less cluttered - a room that had had most of the furniture removed. 'Dear God,' she said in her head, 'please, please let me read.' She pressed the talisman harder against the dense bone of her skull. 'Please, God, please.' Her eyes were tight shut. She lowered her head and positioned the papers so that when she opened her eyes she could start reading straight away.

The first word was "The", the second word, a long one, began with "P", the third word was "is", the fourth word was "stood", the fifth word started with "o-u-t" which Debbie suddenly realised spelled "out" and continued with "s-i-d-e" - "outside!", the next word was "the", and the one after that began with "C". Debbie stared at this

word, willing it to reveal itself. It was not a long word, just six letters, but they remained locked in a mysterious combination which Debbie knew she wouldn't be able to crack. It could of course have been a spelling mistake. Such things were possible. But at heart Debbie knew this wasn't the case. She was thick. She was fat, thick Debbie Palmer. Dumbo.

Debbie was desperately missing Joyce. Joyce wouldn't have allowed her to get so moody. She imagined the lean, fifty year old body on a dazzling white-sanded beach which was fringed with palm trees and had an impossibly blue sea slithering in. A shiny muscled servant arrived with a bottle of Malibu and two glasses. In the Caribbean it must be like waking up every day to find yourself in the middle of a TV ad - Debbie was sure of it - and Joyce had said nothing to disillusion her. 'It-is-brilliant,' – that was Joyce's summation, each word given equal weight, with a falling cadence on the last syllable of 'brilliant'.

The sun was going down now in very fiery fashion, and Debbie pictured it setting simultaneously in St. Lucien, except that Joyce would be watching it dip down into the sea instead of across the oily cut. It had grown very quiet. There hadn't been a narrow boat for some time; they must have all found their berth for the night.

Debbie got up a bit stiffly from the rapidly cooling bench. She was going to get an earful from her Mum for being so late. Well, bugger her. She'd been absolutely no help cleaning the kitchen. 'Neither use nor ornament' were the kind of words her Mother could have used to describe herself - if only she'd had that much self-knowledge. Though as it happened, it might have been

better to have left the kitchen as it was. It had taken a day and a half, and a whole bottle of Flash, but somehow the room ended up looking even older and shabbier than before, as if it was only the grease that had been holding it all together.

As Debbie retraced her steps the Science and Technology Park was bathed in a pink light, its buildings deserted, making her feel even more of an intruder, like a thief. She walked quickly along the gently curving path, between the shadowy shrubs, towards the Railway Station. She could see a train approaching, its interior lights glowing comfortably in the dusk, making it look as cosy as a row of linked cottages. It could be the last train, Debbie suddenly realised, and forced herself to run.

With the day of her initiation less than a week away, Debbie suffered a hollow dread she hadn't experienced since school with its tests and special classes and playground humiliations. Only this was going to be even worse because she was sure they were all going to be very kind about it in their civilised, adult, well-heeled way.

She tried once more - with the talisman pressed against her forehead till it hurt - to read the instructions for the ritual, but unlike before there was no faith in the process, and the whole thing was doomed for failure from the start.

There was only one thing for it: she would have to ask her Mother to read for her. Her Mother wasn't a great reader, but she could get by, and generally took a certain pride in being able to outdo her daughter in this

department, enjoying the idea of Debbie being dependent on her for one thing at least. If Debbie brought her a missive from the DSS or wanted to know what was on telly, Mrs. Palmer would usually kick off with a mild rebuke: ‘You should have paid more attention at school,’ or ‘Sharon’s six year old is a better reader than you,’ but she didn’t mean much by it. Such things were what Mother’s were for. Nevertheless, Debbie dreaded having to show her the instructions from David Jones, high priest of the Old Religion. Though Mrs. Palmer’s claims to Christianity were very much open to question it was inevitable that the contents of the initiation ritual would not fall within her approved universe, Old Moores Almanac or no Old Moores Almanac.

Debbie decided to test the water. ‘How’s the legs, Mam?’

‘Middling.’ Only her Mother could use an expression like that without it being a joke.

‘Any better since, you know, Alice had a go at them?’

Mrs. Palmer sniffed and looked away. Debbie assumed she was not going to answer that one, which didn’t bode well. Then she offered a surprising and very grudging, ‘Might be.’

Debbie decided to press her luck, and held out the photocopy, ‘They gave me this.’

‘What’s that?’

‘They want me to join them.’

‘You?’

‘Yeah, me. They think I’m psychic.’ Debbie couldn’t keep a note of pride out of her voice.

Mrs. Palmer shook her head. ‘You silly bugger. You’re too gullible. You let people use you.’

Debbie would have liked to have said, ‘People like you, you mean,’ but knew what that would lead to.

‘Read it for me, Mam,’

With another sniff, Mrs. Palmer took the paper.

‘Debbie Palmer. Inish...Initiation.’ she stated with a formal frown of disapproval, then cleared her throat.

‘The pos...’ she continued. ‘The pos-stew-lant...’

‘What’s that?’ asked Debbie.

‘What’s what?’

‘The postulant.’

‘Don’t ask me. This is your mumbo jumbo. Do you want me to read it or not?’

‘Go on,’ said Debbie.

‘The postulant is stood outside the Circle to the north-east, and blindfolded and bound by witches of the opposite sex.’ That was as far Mrs. Palmer got. ‘Good God,’ she said, ‘What is this?’

Even Debbie had been taken aback by the opening, but she wasn’t going to let her Mother know. She snatched the document from her. ‘An orgy, that’s what it is,’ she said crossly, ‘A bleedin’ orgy.’

With Joyce still holidaying in St. Lucia, there was only left Toby Fripp left as a possible candidate for reading her Initiation responses. On reflection he was so ideally qualified for the job, Debbie wondered why she hadn’t thought of him before. He was a Professor wasn’t he? Had to be a brilliant reader. Much better than that stupid cow of a Mother of hers, and there was no way somebody as intelligent as Toby would get his knickers in a twist about witchcraft and sex and that. But approaching the Fripp’s house, the photocopied sheets

carefully folded in her handbag, Debbie's nerve began to falter.

It was Mrs Fripp who answered the door and showed her in, which was a relief, but when she started nattering on about something to do with the cleaning, Debbie was finding it hard to concentrate.

'I'm not sure of the period accuracy,' Stella Fripp was saying, 'but I just couldn't live with those porcelain inlay horrors any longer.' Debbie suddenly realised that her employer was trying to hand her a tin of something.

'Are you alright?' queried Stella, 'you seem rather distracted.'

'M'alright,' said Debbie, 'sorry, what was you saying?'

'We've had brass door knobs fitted.' said Stella patiently, 'Don't you think they're splendid?'

'Yeah, great,' said Debbie, summoning up some guilty enthusiasm, though personally she preferred the old white ones with the painted flowers.

'I know it's a bore, but do you think you could find time to give them a bit of a polish every now and then?'

'No problem,' said Debbie, absently taking the tin of Brasso, her ears following the tread of the Professor footsteps from upstairs.

'Once a month should be plenty,' said Stella in a liberal tone.

'Oh, Gawd,' groaned Debbie under her breath when Stella had left the room. She looked at the tin of Brasso. Cleaning for the Fripps seemed to get more complicated every time she went there. It was a bit like keeping Adrian happy in that respect - give them an inch and they took a mile.

She felt suddenly defeated, and she hadn't even approached the Professor yet! Somehow the idea of asking one of the Fripps for a favour had come to seem a gross impropriety, but if she didn't ask Toby who else was there? No one. And if she couldn't learn her responses, there'd be no initiation and she couldn't join the coven, and that didn't bear thinking about.

Debbie had been polishing the brass door knob of Toby Fripp's study for nearly ten minutes before he finally came out.

'You're making a good job of that,' said the Professor, looking at the knob which now had a lustrous reflective depth to it, 'only have you nearly finished? I'm finding it a tad difficult to concentrate.'

'Just finished,' said Debbie, and gave the knob a final rub with the cloth in the ball of her hand, then, as the Professor turned back into his study, blurted out with all the courage at her disposal, 'Think you could read something for us?'

And as Toby stopped in his tracks, she added, 'Pleeeese!' Debbie had only meant to be polite, but it came out as the most pathetic, plaintive plea imaginable.

Professor Fripp looked a little surprised at this abrupt, heartfelt request. 'I expect so. What is it?'

'My Initiation.' gasped Debbie, holding out the photocopied sheets.

'Initiation into what?' said the Professor, and to Debbie's relief he sounded genuinely interested, quite intrigued in fact.

'I'm going to be a witch.' Debbie was unable to keep the pride out of her voice.

‘Are you really?’ said Toby without missing a beat, ‘Black or white?’

‘Dunno,’ said Debbie, ashamed. How was it that the Professor even had a greater knowledge of witchcraft than she did?

‘Well it’s probably worth knowing first,’ said Toby mildly. ‘but why do you want me to read your initiation.’

‘For my responses,’ said Debbie.

‘I’m afraid I can’t learn them for you.’

No, but you can read them for me, can’t you? If you don’t mind,’ added Debbie.

Toby seemed puzzled as if he’d encountered something quite outside his experience. Debbie took a quick quizzical look and in that instant observed that a revelation had had struck him which seemed to cause some consternation. The next moment he stood back hastily, holding the door open and extravagantly ushering Debbie into the sanctum of his study. ‘Of course I’ll read them for you.’ He took the papers from Debbie’s hand and cleared some of his own typed sheets from a chair, simply threw them on the floor and gestured for Debbie to sit down. She couldn’t understand why his mood had suddenly become so extravagantly accommodating, obsequious almost.

‘Now let’s see what we have here,’ said Toby, sitting down himself and smiling across at Debbie as if she were a valued customer just come into his shop.

No, Debbie couldn’t fathom it out, but at least she seemed to have got what she wanted. While he riffled through the papers, she let her eyes wander round the room. It was so untidy it never took long to clean. There was barely a square metre of carpet available for

vacuuming and the surfaces were nearly all covered with papers, books, bottles or glasses.

With unavoidable professional interest Debbie looked across at the computer to see it could do with a wipe, and as she did so the screen changed from boring words and figures to something much more colourful and engaging.

‘The Mandelbrot set,’ said the Professor, who had caught the line of Debbie’s absorbed gaze. ‘Beautiful isn’t it? The most beautiful thing in mathematics.’

There were swirling forms: coral reefs, seahorse tails, crystalline clusters, curling fronds in prismatic hues. It could have been fished from the ocean, mined from a quarry, or macheted from the jungle floor, and managed somehow to be both abstract and concrete, anarchic yet structured.

Suddenly the screen changed, or rather it dissolved to another picture very like the first. There were similar shapes and patterns - but the colours were quite different, mainly graduated shades of blue and green which gave the whole thing an aqueous dimension, as if the computer screen was the window of a bathoscope.

‘What do the patterns remind you of?’ asked the Professor, and Debbie instantly started to feel nauseous: the way she did before taking tests at school.

‘Don’t know,’ she said. Often the safest answer.

‘Surely they bring something to mind.’ he persisted patiently, ‘Haven’t you ever seen things in the clouds? Or in a stain on the wall?’

Cautiously, just to please him, Debbie eventually conceded, ‘That bit looks like a shell, like a snail or something.’

‘Excellent ! Anything else.’

‘Debbie pointed. ‘That bit is like bones.’

Toby looked. ‘You mean the way vertebrae link together.’

‘Yeah,’ said Debbie, ‘And there’s a snowflake.’

The screen changed again. ‘It’s taking us right into your snowflake,’ said the Professor, ‘magnifying it a thousand times.’

Now the pattern looked like silver peacock feathers floating in a blue-green river.

‘Like Mrs Fripp’s scarf,’ said Debbie.

‘Paisley, you mean,’ prompted the Professor, and seemed delighted.

Together they watched as frame by frame, the screen advanced further and further into images which seemed on the verge of duplicating themselves each time...but not quite.

‘You can see a whole world in there,’ said Toby, ‘In a way it is the whole world’.

Debbie looked at Toby looking at the computer. She didn’t really understand his words, but they were so big, so knowing, so...sexy. He was sitting close enough to the computer for his face to reflect the colours on the screen which made the skin look younger, and Debbie was engulfed with a longing for the impossible.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Toby, swivelling back towards her, ‘I could sit and watch that all day.’

‘Me too,’ said Debbie.

‘Anyway to business,’ said the Professor, and re-assembled the papers of her initiation with expert fingers. ‘Are you ready for this, Miss Palmer...’



Alice and David Jones' high-walled, conifer-bordered garden had retained the heat of the day. It had been a hot month, with a decidedly un-English intensity to the sun, which Alice, David and the majority of the coven blamed on the depletion of the ozone layer. Some of the naked bodies in the garden were glossy with protective oils and creams, even though the area where the initiation was taking place was now in shadow.

David in his role as Vulcan, high priest, looked down at the initiate's back as he let the scourge fall across it for the thirty-ninth time. The whipping was symbolic in their coven, intended to stimulate blood circulation, nothing more. But as the blindfolded Debbie Palmer knelt before him, facing the slate-clad altar, her feet, knees and hands bound with red cord, her vast haunches enfolding her ankles, David was acutely conscious of how vulnerable her broad naked back looked. The plump, delicately skinned shoulders had turned red despite the scourge having been applied even more lightly than usual, and a shiny film of perspiration was visible. Though David was sure this was attributable to the humidity in their enclosed garden, it still gave the impression of a scourging that was more than merely ritual. As if to confirm this, his assistant in the initiation (Gerald Heald, something in computers) had been showing mild signs of sexual stimulation.

With a light swish, the eight tails of the scourge fell for the fortieth and final time across Debbie Palmer's rosy-hued shoulders, and a little droplet of sweat tracked its way down one side of her spine. David handed the

scourge to Gerald, then stood in front of the kneeling young woman.

‘Thou hast bravely passed the test. Art thou ready to swear that thou wilt always be true to the Art?’

The reply came back promptly, in a girlishly proud voice, ‘I am.’

‘Art thou always ready to help, protect and defend thy brothers and sisters of the Art?’

‘I am.’

David nodded to Gerald, and together they helped Debbie to her feet. Her flesh felt damp, warm and yielding, even her elbows had a padded quality to them. She reached the standing position with a small grunt, and promptly sagged to one side.

‘Me leg’s gone to sleep,’ she hissed, and looked blindly around for help through the black scarf that covered her eyes.

There was a titter from one of the female members of the coven.

‘It’s all right,’ said David, ‘just take your time,’ and with some effort he and Gerald supported Debbie’s trussed weight while she groaned under her breath.

‘It’s the kneeling that does it,’

They all waited in silence for a few moments until David asked, ‘Do you think you could support yourself now?’

‘Think so. It’s nearly come back.’

Carefully, they took their hands away like men who had just managed to balance a statue on a precarious plinth.

‘It’s okay now,’ said Debbie, and David signalled to Gerald to fetch the oil and wine from the altar.

‘I hereby sign thee with the Triple Sign. I consecrate thee with oil.’

David dipped his finger into the thimble-sized glass jug of Frankincense and touched the woman just below her belly button, at the fringe of her pubic hair. From there, he placed his finger on her right breast, then her left breast, crossing the talisman as he did so, and finally back where he began to make an inverted triangle.

‘I anoint thee with wine.’

He repeated the sequence with the Country Manor Debbie had brought, half of which had been transferred from its bottle to a silver chalice.

‘I consecrate thee with my lips, priestess and witch.’

As David brought his lips to the watchspring hairs at the base of Debbie’s ponderous belly, he found her saline smell had mingled with the mature sweetness of the Frankincense and wine to make an exotic olfactory cocktail. He kissed her breasts as lightly as he knew how, yet still his lips seemed to impress themselves so positively in the soft white flesh he felt he could have bruised them.

David drew back, the initiation complete, and he and Gerald removed Debbie’s blindfold and bonds.

‘Is that it,’ asked Debbie, blinking in the evening light and rubbing her wrists.

‘You are now a member of our coven,’ smiled David and turned to the others in the garden. ‘Let us all welcome her.’ The coven flocked around, embracing her, congratulating her, kissing her cheek, patting her head, hemming her in with smiles and good wishes.



After the initiation, with everybody dressed and withdrawn to the Jones's living room to drink wine in their new member's honour, Morgana came across to Debbie with a sisterly conspiratorial smile.

With subtle grace she topped up Debbie's glass from the remaining half bottle of Debbie's Country Manor before asking how she was feeling.

'Excellent,' said Debbie shyly. Her shyness was mainly in using such an unfamiliar word: the kind of word she thought Alice might think appropriate.

'I'm so glad you've joined us,' said Morgana.

Debbie shivered with pleasure.

'I'd never witnessed anything like that manifestation the other night.' said Morgana, and Debbie saw her eyes drop to her chest where the talisman lay, 'you must remember Debbie, watch and wait. And one day he may reward you with knowledge beyond your dreams.'

'That's what I'm doing,' said Debbie, 'watching and waiting.' She didn't even have to cross her fingers, it was true, even though she hadn't seen the monk since the night the coven came to witness him.

Alice smiled. 'You're very special, you know, Debbie,' The words were purred with a Swansea lilt, and Debbie's body seemed on the verge of liquefying with delight. 'I have high hopes for you. I suspect you may once have been a witch in the old times. An important reincarnation.'

Debbie drank her Country Manor and tried to reflect Alice's calm, knowing smile.

‘There is a great deal for you to learn,’ the high priestess continued, ‘but if I am right about you it shouldn’t be difficult. You will just need reminding. Think of it as being taken back to a place you left as a child. The memory of it will return very easily. That’s how it was for me.’

‘Are you a reincarnation then?’ said Debbie, struggling a little on the word, but managing.

‘My earliest memory is of Camelot,’ said dark-haired Alice, her clear blue eyes beginning to lose their focus, ‘Who knows? Perhaps we have already met.’

Debbie took a good draught of Country Manor to settle the beast that was suddenly jumping around in her chest.

For several days afterwards the conversation with Alice was on a tape loop inside Debbie’s head, perpetually playing.

Initially, the idea of being a reincarnated witch had terrified her. She imagined it as a kind of possession, and, despite herself and all her previous desires, couldn’t help but visualise a wicked old hag with a pointed hat, chin and nose, a Walt Disney witch, manipulating her from inside, pulling the levers to some sinister purpose. It wasn’t so difficult to picture a smallish adult fitting inside her, like somebody inside an Edwardian deep sea diving suit. But as the tape loop kept playing, rerunning its mantra: reincarnation, reincarnation, reincarnation, it slowly dawned on Debbie that Alice hadn’t meant the witch was inside her - that wasn’t what she meant at all. No, she meant that Debbie was the witch.

Eight

There was movement where the monk usually stood and Debbie halted her breath, her pupils wide in the dark room as she tried to take in every particle of light coming from the alley below. The shadow moved again with fastidious stealth, and then, crossing a bar of light from next door's kitchen window, she saw the Robinson's cat, Samba, on his night prowl. Debbie released her breath with a long sigh.

She watched Samba jump down lightly into their own back yard, and was unnerved to see the animal suddenly look directly up at her and engage luminous eye contact.

Morgana had a cat called Merlin, who was black like Samba and whom she referred to as her familiar. She'd set great store on the fact that Merlin had jumped up onto Debbie's lap. Merlin, apparently, was very attuned to psychic forces and was drawn to them or repelled depending on whether they were good or evil.

Perhaps Samba was the same. Debbie opened the window and looked down at the cat, who gave a querying 'miaaow'. She tried to radiate good, powerful forces, but Samba wasn't impressed, and started looking behind him as if he hoped something more interesting was about to turn up. The next second, with a scrape of claws, he was over the wall and into the alley out of sight.

Debbie shrugged. Stupid cat.

She drew the curtains and switched on the light, deeply frustrated. Within herself, she felt so different, so newly powerful, and had convinced herself that she would be

able to command the monk to come to her tonight. She flopped down heavily on the bed whose old springs made an arthritic protest.

Lying there, Debbie started the process of consolation. She was being daft. Hadn't Alice impressed on her that it would take time before she would know how properly to utilise her gift? But hadn't she promised that the day would come when Debbie would be a conduit of psychic energy with great powers at her disposal?

Alice was right, she had to be patient.. Watch and wait. The monk hadn't abandoned her – they'd already shared too much, he was merely biding his time while she developed her latent skills as a witch and became a being worthy of his attention in a spiritual way, someone with the cosmic status he naturally had the right to demand.

But it wasn't going to happen overnight. Debbie knew she still had a great deal to learn, or remember as Alice had put it. Normally the concept of learning would have scared her stiff. School had been the worst days of her life by far, but this was different somehow. The initiation ceremony had been so great because it had felt so absolutely right, as if it had been written specially for her. It had been like coming home after a long time away – home to herself.

And with that thought, Debbie hugged her own body, lying there alone on the bed, and let pleasure wash over her, the pleasure of pure anticipation, a heart-soaring delight that came from the prospect of a future packed with such promise.

Her face beamed as her own arms held her tight in an embrace of self-congratulation.

‘Yes!’ she said out loud to the empty room. ‘Yes, yes, yes!’

The cooker hob had been performing much more efficiently since Debbie gave it a cleaning. The gas rings ignited from the wand with an impressive whoomph and roared away quite fiercely, but it took a bit of getting used to, which was why, when she fried bacon, she draped the rashers into the frying pan rather gingerly at arms length. Even on half heat the melted lard spitted and popped, stinging her forearms.

But it was the one part of the kitchen cleaning project that had been really worth it. She liked bacon done quickly, done crisply. When it was sizzling away, she’d stick some thick slices of Mother’s Pride under the grill and get half a saucepan of Alphabet Spaghetti going. Though she wouldn’t admit it to anyone, she first bought Alphabet Spaghetti when she was in the fourth year at school, thinking it might help her to read, hoping that by devouring the letters they would somehow make their way through her digestive system into her brain. They didn’t of course, but she preferred the feel of it in her mouth to the usual wormy stuff, and had been buying it ever since.

Debbie plonked down Tomato Sauce, Daddies Sauce, HP Fruity, Flora Margarine, salt and white pepper in their dinky plastic shakers bought from Tesco around 1975, and finally a jar of pickled onions in spicy vinegar. Each item rattled a bit as she placed it on the faded, but now shining, Formica table top. Debbie always tended to do things a little more heavily than was necessary. Her Mother, sitting at the table reading the Evening Mail,

didn't look up, but made a small noise, which could have been a grunt of acknowledgement or disapproval.

'Anything in the paper, Mam,' asked Debbie cheerfully. still bathing in the afterglow of her initiation a fortnight later. It was similar to when she first had Adrian all that time ago; there was the constant presence of something deeply pleasurable and exciting, haunting everything she did. Even making the tea.

'There was a bloke got knifed in our park last night.... Second one this month it says.... A little kiddie got knocked down in Highbridge Road. Critical, poor mite....They're talking about putting up the bus fares. It doesn't seem long since they went up last time... One of the councillors has been caught on the fiddle. And you wouldn't credit it, they're closing St. Catherine's. That was where your old Dad died.'

Debbie wished she hadn't asked. But nothing was going to get her down. It just wasn't possible.

The kitchen was full of the heavy aroma of frying bacon and hot tomato sauce. Debbie flipped the bacon expertly, a dab hand, and started to sing the theme tune to Neighbours.

She had quite a good voice, and lost all trace of her accent when she sang. Her Mother gave her a look over the top of her paper.

'Anybody'd think you'd won the Lottery.'

'You don't like it when I'm a bit cheerful do you?' said Debbie cheerfully, 'Anyway I might win this week. I feel dead lucky.'

'I'd have thought you could just magic yourself a win.' Her Mother gave her a keen glance, 'Now you're a witch.'

‘It don’t work like that,’ said Debbie.
‘Fat lot of use it is then. About as much use as Mystic Meg you are.’

‘It helped your leg didn’t it?’

‘Might have. But it could be just psychosomatic.’

‘Doesn’t matter what it is as long as it works.’

‘You don’t even know what psychosomatic means.’

‘It’s what your bleeding leg probably was in the first place.’

‘Eh?’ said her Mother, with a shock that stemmed not just from the harshness of the retort, but also from the fact that her daughter appeared to know the meaning of a five syllable word.

‘You heard,’ said Debbie. She had Joyce to thank again for “psychosomatic”. It’s what she reckoned Debbie’s Mother’s leg was when the X-ray didn’t show anything.

Debbie dropped her Mother’s loaded plate in front of her even more heavily than usual. ‘Just eat your tea and shut up.’

There was something in Debbie’s attitude which meant that for once her Mother didn’t argue.

Debbie wasn’t cross though: it was just Mam being her awkward, interfering self, but it was time she stopped taking crap from people all the time. Now she was a witch.

And so it was two days later, about five in the evening, when she was at Old Street station on her way to Speedwell Communications - standing at the top of the escalator that would take her down to the concourse - that a young bloke in a suit and a hurry, not much older than herself, squeezed past.

“Fat Cow,’ he said.

Debbie heard this quite clearly even though he’d got past her and had muttered it under his breath. Normally, she’d have ignored it, hardly notice it at all: “Fat Cow” was just background noise to her, and he was no different to all the rest. But somehow it was different this time.

With a mounting, reckless feeling she filled her lungs and directed her yell at the cheap blue suit running for its train.

‘DIRTY WANKER!’

It was lovely to see the shoulders of the suit go up, almost to the ears, and she started to run down the escalator after him.

‘WHO THE FUCK DO YOU THINK YOU ARE, CALLING PEOPLE NAMES LIKE THAT?’

Before long, they were in the main concourse area, running hell for leather towards the ticket barrier.

‘WANKER! OI, FUCKING WANKER, I’M TALKING TO YOU!’

She saw him fumbling desperately in his inside pocket for his ticket.

‘YOU BASTARD!’

Her breasts were slapping against the top of her belly as she ran faster than she’d run since the humiliation of athletics at school and, just as then, she was quickly beginning to tire. It was no good, she didn’t have a cat in hell’s chance of keeping up with him. Better to preserve her breath for one final shot.

So she stopped in the middle of the concourse, right in the middle of the rush hour crowd. There was a path between the commuters stretching from her to the blue

suit, for all the world as if she'd scythed it out with her name-calling. There was a feeling of expectancy in the air you could almost touch. People had stopped in their tracks and were standing to look. Debbie sensed for some reason that they were on her side, almost an extension of the coven. Even the ticket collector was taking his time, and she had her target right in her sights, as helpless as a dopey rabbit with its feet nailed down.

'YOU FUCKIN' BASTARD! YOU OUGHT TO LEARN SOME FUCKIN' MANNERS.'

There was laughter at this, and everybody watched companionably with Debbie as the suit finally got through the ticket barrier, and behind its protection turned and gave a feeble, embarrassed V sign. Debbie returned the gesture with knobs on - a lofty, triumphal victory V reversed, accompanied by a rasping fart from her lips.

Joyce couldn't stop laughing when Debbie told her the story. 'You silly fat cow,' she gasped over and over again, and Debbie grinned delightedly. Joyce was clearly impressed, and Joyce wasn't an easy person to impress. Debbie wondered whether to tell her friend about joining the coven, but something held her back. She knew Joyce would find a joke in it, not a malicious one, but still...

Her Mother and Toby Fripp were the only two outsiders who knew about her initiation. To Debbie's relief, when Professor Fripp had so generously helped her learn her responses, he hadn't made any cynical remarks or offered gratuitous advice on the dangers of the supernatural. In fact he'd been quite interested and asked a lot of questions Debbie couldn't answer, and she found she was looking forward to seeing him again so

that she could tell him how successful the initiation has been, but for some days he'd been involved in some kind of Summer School at the University. He appeared to spend more time there during the vacation than during term time.

In the meantime, Debbie had to cope with Mrs Fripp, who was still finding more and more chores for her to do. With her husband out, she suggested it might be an ideal opportunity to tackle the accumulation of debris in the Professor's study. However, as they both stood there, surveying the dissipated scene, Mrs Fripp had relented and made another joke about there being order in Chaos but it took a Professor to divine it.

As a compromise she'd got Debbie to do an intensive cleaning job on Toby's computer, (if she wouldn't mind), which involved cleaning the screen with anti-static spray, then polishing every key on the keyboard with Sapona and digging out the debris in between with cotton buds.

The keys were thick with a cheesy grunge and, excavating deeply, she'd pulled out four full length silver hairs which she'd folded into a tissue and carried about with her all morning, pushed tightly into the palm of her left hand. Then before going home she'd transferred the ball of tissue to her handbag.

She confused herself. The sparse, dull-silver hairs were hardly a desirable keepsake: it had simply been impossible to throw them away. She'd hang on to them a while and then one day she'd find this old balled-up tissue in her bag and wonder why she'd kept such an old snotty rag so long and throw it away without a second thought. Without the slightest twinge.

As it happened the Professor's computer wasn't the last one she cleaned that week. Alice asked if Debbie would have a go (if she didn't mind) at the one in Wicca's World. It was even grungier than Professor Fripp's, and made all the more laborious because Alice hadn't any of the proprietary sprays which Stella Fripp had so thoughtfully bestowed on her. By the time she'd finished her fingers were numb with rubbing.

But it turned out to have been worth it. 'That's great,' said Alice, admiring their gleaming Mackintosh, 'I'd honestly forgotten it was that colour.' She turned to Debbie. 'You could have a go at the till when we close. I run a duster over it occasionally, but without your professional expertise...'

David came into the stockroom at this point, and also admired the computer. 'Like it's come straight out of the box,' he said.

Debbie was overwhelmed by all this appreciation. She'd been a bit put out when Alice had first asked if she'd give a hand sprucing up the shop - was that really what one reincarnated witch should be asking of another - but they were so grateful she couldn't possibly feel insulted.

Anyway, under no circumstances would she have turned down such an opportunity to surround herself with the trappings of Wicca, and in the immediate company of a high priestess and priest to boot. It really was an honour when she thought about it.

'Tell you what you could do in the meantime,' said Alice, 'the Tarot carousel needs replenishing.'

'Right,' said Debbie as if she understood perfectly.

Alice smiled. ‘These boxes here have the different decks. This is the Rider version, our best seller, the Dali, the Crowley Thoth tarot, the Medieval Scapini, Barbara Walker, the Mythic, the Witches’, the Norse, Zolar’s Astrological, Egipcios Kier, the Tree of Life, the Herbal, Oswald Wirth, Native American, Etteilla Egyptian, Art Nouveau, Wonderland, Church of Light, Renaissance, Cat People, Karma, Tavaglione, the Love deck, Old Path and this awkward swine, the Motherpeace Round Tarot, which doesn’t fit the carousel properly, so you can forget about that.’

‘I will,’ said Debbie.

‘Just check the carousel to see which slots are running out and fill ‘em up. Simple as that,’ said Alice, and gave Debbie another blast of her overwhelming smile.

Dumbly, with a panic sweat coming on, Debbie went to the plastic whirligig thing set in its plaster alcove. She turned it slowly, the colourful packs of cards a horizontal rainbowed waterfall to her confused gaze. She was going to look such a fool. She couldn’t begin to remember all those names, never mind read them. She turned the carousel again, three times, four times, convinced that Alice was watching her. David too. She turned it a fifth time, and then all at once it came to her with blessed relief that it was really very simple. She didn’t have to read the packs at all. Each one was fronted with a sample picture.

While she was filling the carousel a middle aged woman came up to her and asked which deck she’d recommend. Debbie looked around. Alice was busy with another customer at the counter and David was nowhere to be seen.

‘I like this one,’ said Debbie, pointing to a pack which was predominantly yellow with a picture of a young man in an orange robe holding up what looked like a double ended phallus.

‘The Rider Tarot,’ said the customer, reading the side of the pack ‘yes, my sister seemed to think that was the best. But it’s nice to have it confirmed.’

Debbie watched as the woman took the pack to the counter and had it wrapped by Alice in recycled paper patterned with moons and stars. Then as the customer left, she gave a nod of acknowledgement in Debbie’s direction, which made Debbie instantly feel like the world’s most persuasive saleswoman.

At a quarter to six Alice and David went through the little rituals of leaving the shop safe, switching on the burglar alarm - the one Debbie had once set off, though that didn’t occur to her - locking the stockroom, blowing out the candles which were part of the shop’s interior display, snuffing the incense burner. Finally, Alice came over to Debbie with something she had taken from the window. It was wrapped in a square of black velvet and Debbie’s hand cupped something round, slippery and heavy beneath the luxurious nap of the cloth.

Morgana’s slim hand rested for a moment on Debbie’s, ‘Don’t open it now. Always keep it covered when you’re not using it.’

Her expression was mischievous and mysterious. Debbie knew she was being teased a little, and longed to know what was in the velvet. She made a quick mental inventory of what was in the window. By a process of elimination, it had to be a crystal ball, and by the shape and weight of it, it was the small one she’d had her eye

on - not much bigger than a tennis ball, but priced at £44.95. Debbie's eyes moistened a little, prickling stupidly, and she said her thanks with a bowed head, moving quickly through the door David was holding open for her.

That evening, she took the crystal ball in her hands, cradled in the black velvet as Alice had instructed. She'd drawn the curtains in her bedroom and a single candle - one her Mother had been hoarding since the days of power cuts - stood lit in a saucer. The talisman rested against the second button of her shirt. 'Let your mind go blank,' Alice had said, which normally Debbie wouldn't have needed any bidding to do, but she was so full of expectancy thoughts were racing uninterruptedly through her head.

Calming herself down, she took a deep breath and continued to gaze into the flawless sphere where she could see the candle, the talisman and half her face reflected in convex miniature. Time passed. How much time she couldn't say. Afterwards she even wondered if she'd fallen asleep at some point, but she definitely wasn't dreaming when the interior of the crystal ball began to give the impression of filling with a white gas. Wide awake she watched, drawn into the pool of mist which was welling up into her cupped hands. The ball had become weightless, and if she breathed too hard she would surely blow the mist away, like dry ice from a bowl.

Then as she watched, her breath stilled, a section of the mist took on the subtlest tint of grey. She felt no fear, only fascination, and observed quite calmly as the

shadow deepened towards black, seeming to move forward as it did so through the pale fog in her hands.

It was his attitude, his stance she recognised before anything else. Nobody else had such a passive, patient stillness that carried such an ominous weight. She knew exactly who it was even before the hood with its fathomless interior finally came into focus and moved forward.

Finally fear came, irresistibly, but she wouldn't avert her eyes, she simply couldn't. This time surely she was going to see his face. The hooded head moved closer, looming larger and larger till it filled the ball in her hands with a blackness so pure it was as if she was holding an absolute negative. She was beginning to move into the hood itself, she was sure. Her eyes were fixed on that circular void in her palms. How much deeper could they go before all was revealed? It was like entering a tunnel without any idea of its length.

Then within the blackness she started to discern moving shades. There was something familiar about the motion which Debbie couldn't quite place at first: a rhythmic and pulsing urgency. Then as the shadows gained form, acquiring fleshy gradations of light and shade, Debbie saw it was two naked figures locked in an embrace, copulating in limbo, churning together in a horizontal dance that looked as old as time.

*

David kissed the top of Alice's warm reddish black head as she sat at their dining table with an A4 pad and a set

of coloured felt-tips. She was making a mind chart of the future. At the centre was a big yellow sun with a smiling face to represent brightness, warmth and hope. Six rays came off the sun, each one with its own label: US, FRIENDS, BUSINESS, HOME, COVEN, IDEAS. These large rays then split into smaller labelled branches which developed the individual themes. One of the branches from the COVEN ray was labelled DEBBIE and had a pentagram by it. This then split into two more branches, one of which said PRIDE, the other LEARNER. PRIDE then split into FALL and BLINDNESS with a picture of a closed eye. LEARNER split into GROWTH and HUMILITY. GROWTH into WISDOM and MOTHER. HUMILITY, symbolised by a kneeling figure, into GENTLENESS and POWER.

Alice felt David's lips kissing the parting in her hair, then a finger tracing down from her third eye, along the straight ridge of her nose to her lips, which it outlined softly, before delicately furrowing the dimple of her chin. She could visualise the beauty of the line he traced: her own beauty made objective to herself.

David looked over his wife's shoulder, at the many branched depiction of the future, its mixture of certainties and possibilities, causal projections and inspired guesses. Alice made one every six months, put together with the help of the Tarot, the crystal ball, intuition and common-sense. When completed it would replace the old one blue-tacked to the fridge door.

Alice picked up a pink felt-tip and drew a picture of a large bellied woman by the word DEBBIE. Her style was half way between William Blake and the Beano. Initially, David had been a Doubting Thomas about

Debbie, but Alice had helped him see past his preconceptions about her accent, cheap clothes, slowness and obesity, to recognise that she could indeed be a natural; one of those rare creatures, like Morgana herself, who were born witches, ready made priestesses of the Old Religion who just needed unwrapping and preparing in the right way. As a mere man, of course, David accepted he couldn't possibly penetrate Debbie's spirit as his wife could. He had to trust Alice, and that he generally did.

Alice finished her drawing of Debbie with a little circle for a belly button. It was also a full stop: the chart was finished.



Since Debbie had acquired the crystal ball her Mum had been moaning about the time she spent up in her room. 'Anyone'd think you'd got a fancy man up there.' Debbie didn't respond. It was none of her Mum's business what she did in the privacy of her own room, and she certainly wasn't going to tell her what the main attraction was.

The images in the ball were as clear as a photographs and always introduced by that cloaked figure. He drew her into the intimacy of his cowl to show her things which engaged and disturbed in some fundamental way she couldn't put her finger on.

They were like memories. His memories, surrounded by a void that formed an endless frame for every random object and gave it such potency. He'd show her a lake,

where the water rippled thickly at the edges like black treacle. A field of weed infested corn with a flock of birds passing over it, a hand that wrote with a stick of charcoal on rock – letters she didn't even recognise – a hedge covered in cobwebs; a small rock balanced precariously on a larger rock.

At these times she perceived the crystal ball had been commandeered to his purpose. She had no will over it, and it lay in her hands against the black velvet with an alien presence, blotting out everything except its own carefully delineated interior which always had a curious black brightness about it, like chrome at night.

She told Alice what she saw, but not who had showed her. Debbie guessed it was still important for the coven to believe that the monk still visited her outside her window: a more public manifestation which all of them had shared, not like this new intimacy. But Alice had no explanations, in fact seemed slightly irked that Debbie had asked her. It had been daft to ask her, Debbie decided, when the shop was so busy. But it was hard to stay patient all the time when you felt the future should be rushing straight at you.

Then one evening came the image Debbie was never to forget. An unmistakable bad omen, rich with foreboding.

As she'd entered the shadowy hood, Debbie had become aware of frantic activity within, and even before she could make out the details, there had been something gross about the motion itself. Then suddenly she could see it all in sharp focus: swarming insects in a feeding frenzy, a boiling heap of black, leggy creatures. But what made it truly disgusting was that they were feeding on each other, their burgeoning, segmented bodies

becoming larger by the minute. She watched mesmerised as the survivors grew fatter and the space grew less. They began to pile on top of each other, their antennae feverish with anticipation; the death throes of the victims indistinguishable from the gluttonous orgasms of the victors.

It went on and on, Debbie riveted to it all by disgust, until inevitably just two insects remained.. They circled each other, heads reared, complex jaws working, a familiar movement somehow, like dogs, like prize-fighters. Then after a horrible moment there was just one – so huge it nearly filled Debbie’s palms. As it turned to face her, squat as a bulldog, she’d dropped the crystal ball in fright and revulsion. It rolled onto the floor where she threw the black velvet cloth over it, and shivering, watched for some time, anticipating that it might suddenly start moving in some awful, surreptitious fashion.

Nine

Debbie woke late, disorientated, surprised to find herself lying on top of the bed, her clothes smelling sour and her neck stiff. There shouldn't be daylight. What day was it? Sunday? No, Monday. She made her eyes focus on the alarm clock by the bed.

'Shit!'

Then she saw the velvet draped crystal ball on the floor and remembered her long vigil and how she'd fallen asleep forgetting to set the alarm.

'Shit!'

Monday was a Fripp day. Debbie ran downstairs to the bathroom.

Passing through the kitchen she shouted at her Mother who was sitting at the table, 'You could have got me up!'

In the bathroom she stripped quickly to bra and pants, filled the basin and splashed water under her armpits, onto her face, hauled up a leg with two hands and plonked a foot into the basin, as meanwhile her Mother shouted, 'I've been calling you for the last half hour but you might as well try waking the dead.'

Debbie ran a sliver of soap between her toes. 'How do you think you're going to bleeding wake somebody shouting from the bottom of the stairs.'

'Certainly not you,' yelled her Mother, 'and you know I can't get up them stairs. You should have some sympathy. I suppose I'm going to have to get my own breakfast now.'

‘Well my heart bleeds,’ shouted Debbie, squirting copious amounts of deodorant over all the unwashed bits.

‘You were late last week as well weren’t you? I don’t know how you expect to keep a job with your attitude.’

That was it! Debbie launched herself half naked out of the bathroom door into the kitchen. She was so mad, her feet were slapping damply on the vinyl floor. Her Mother looked up from her paper astonished as Debbie thrust her dripping face right up against hers.

‘I’ve had it up to here with you, you lazy cow,’ Debbie was so close to her Mother’s paralysed face she could feel her own hot breath bouncing back, ‘Sitting there like Lady bleeding Muck. Fetch this, fetch that. I’m everybody’s bleeding slave, ain’t I? Well, I’m not going to be yours no more. I don’t have to live here you know. I could have my own flat. Then see how you like it.’

Mrs. Palmer squeaked just like a mouse.

Debbie was always aware of how much bigger she was than her Mother, and it was strange sometimes to be occupying so much more space than the person whose body you came from, and with her Mother seeming to shrink inside her blouse at the present onslaught, Debbie began to feel like a right bully. That little squeak was genuine fear. She fought to reign her anger back in. Sod it, what was the point of losing your rag? Life was too bleeding short. She looked away from her Mother’s cowed form and went upstairs to get dressed.

She was trembling so much she could hardly do up her buttons. What was the point? Life was too short, she kept telling herself, but still felt like smashing something. The smell of frying bacon drifting up from downstairs only

sustained her anger. The lazy cow could look after herself if she wanted. If you were soft with people they just took advantage. The story of her life.

The smell of bacon was doing strange things to Debbie's stomach. It started to feel cavernous, and let out a rumble that appeared to contain a genuine echo in it.

Dressed, Debbie hurried out onto the landing where the bacon smells had gathered in all their mouth-watering intensity deliberately to send her mad with hunger. But it was no good, she couldn't stop for breakfast. She was going to be an hour late as it was, and besides she didn't want to have to face her Mother yet. She'd just slip out of the door.

'Debbie?' Too late. Debbie groaned inwardly. She would like to just keep walking, but no.

She turned to face her Mother.

'You can eat it on your way,' said her Mother, and handed her a sandwich whose soft cushiony bread was warm with its bacon filling. Tomato Sauce bled seductively into the white crusty slices.

'Yeah, all right,' said Debbie.

'See you then,' said her Mother. Neither of them looked the other in the eye.

'See you,' said Debbie

'Right,' said her Mother.

'Yes, right,' said Debbie.

They stood uncertainly for a moment, until Debbie made a funny little gesture with the sandwich which her Mother acknowledged with a nod before turning back into the hallway. Debbie waited a second, then closed the flimsy front door as quietly as a prayer.

By the time she reached the bus stop Debbie had finished the sandwich. It sat in her stomach in a half-satisfying manner (she would have liked another), but one sandwich was definitely better than no sandwich at all.

Debbie waited. And waited. After twenty minutes there was still no bleeding bus, and she realised it must be that time of the morning when most of them were returning from town rather than going in. Her helplessness as the minutes ticking away stirred something in her quite new - a deep resentment at the way she earned her living. She was paid a pittance – that was the word, a pittance – for hard labour, and the Fripps, well Mrs Fripp, was always coming up with more and more to do, and never the suggestion of a reward for services rendered.

A bus finally drew up, and Debbie got on, flashing her Travelcard in a way she hoped conveyed her annoyance to the driver then, seated on the almost empty bottom deck, she continued her inner rant. Was it any way to treat an important reincarnation, a person who witnessed dark, mysterious revelations in the crystal ball? She didn't think so. In fact nobody should have to work the way she did for so little reward. She looked around the sparsely occupied bus, at the little old ladies and the little old men and the odd skiving schoolkid. They didn't know they were born. They didn't have to suffer the way she did.

As she marched up to the Fripp's big front door, just before she rang the bell, Debbie wondered if in her fury she'd arrived at the wrong house. Something was quite different. But this had to be the Fripps' surely – there was Mrs. Fripp's car, Professor Fripp's bicycle and the

Fripp's (presumably jointly owned) geraniums. But something was definitely out of sorts, disorientatingly so.

Then the penny dropped. They had a new front door. A heavy black panelled number with a whacking great brass knob in the centre, bigger than Debbie's fist, and a brass letter flap wide enough to take a small parcel. 'I'm bugged if she's going to get me polishing them. I don't touch outside. She knows that.' These were Debbie's enraged thoughts as Mrs. Fripp answered the door.

'Oh, thank God,' said Stella Fripp on seeing her, 'it was getting so late I thought perhaps you were sick.'

'Bus strike,' said Debbie shortly, trusting that her employer would have no interest in public transport, and marched straight in.

'I didn't hear about it,' said Stella absently, 'perhaps you could call if you are going to be late ever.'

'Haven't got a phone,' muttered Debbie.

'Oh!' said Mrs Fripp, taking a little while to digest this remarkable fact. Then at something approaching a trot, she followed Debbie's relentless progress down the hallway and into the kitchen.

'I do hope you can still do your four hours. I'm afraid there's all this lot from dinner on Sunday and I was really hoping you could take a look at the windows today. It's months since they've been seen to.'

'OH, DROP DEAD!'

Afterwards Debbie would swear that not a sound passed her lips, convinced that she only thought these words, but Stella Fripp who was already leaving the kitchen, suddenly turned and inquired, 'I'm sorry, did you say something?'

Debbie's heart which was already racing with resentment, moved up a gear with alarm. She knew the words were only inside her head, but she was feeling so venomous perhaps Mrs Fripp had received some vibration of them nonetheless.

'No, Miss,' said Debbie, frightened now.

Stella Fripp's face acquired a strange expression. There was something awful about her smile and the eyes which engaged Debbie's. She laughed out loud. Too loud. Her voice had a pleading note in it, a shameful twist. 'My dear, you must call me Stella. I told you that long ago.'

'Yeah, I know. Sorry.'

To Debbie's further confusion, Mrs. Fripp looked very agitated. 'We can't entirely avoid an employer/employee relationship, but you make it sound positively Victorian.' She laughed again, and Debbie struggled make sense of what was being communicated. All this grief had to be because she called her Miss, admittedly something she's never done before, and certainly not something she'd done intentionally. It had just popped out in all the alarm.

'Anyone would think we were a couple of characters from Upstairs Downstairs.' More laughter. 'My dear, I don't want you to think of me as some kind of Mrs. Gradgrind.' Mrs Fripp smiled again, maintaining eye-contact. 'Do call me Stella.'

'Stella,' said Debbie, and watched bemused as Mrs Fripp nodded her appreciation, and turned, still clearly flustered, to leave Debbie to the dishes.

Relief washed over Debbie. She washed up the small mountain of dirty plates and saucepans with resignation before following her usual routine of going upstairs to do

the bathrooms. She liked to get all the wet work over and done with first. As she was passing the closed door of the Professor's study she heard a cough. So Summer School must have finished. She hadn't seen Toby Fripp since her initiation she realised.

Entering the bathroom, she heard the pop of a cork from Toby Fripp's room: a sound pregnant with erotic potential to Debbie's ears. The bathroom smelt faintly of after-shave, and she breathed it in before squirting pine-scented Domestos under the rim of the toilet bowl, closely followed by Mr. Muscle sprayed over the faint ring around the white enamel bath. In no time the sexy, musky remnant of after-shave had been choked by vapours of chemical purification.

She finished the first bathroom and headed towards the en suite, a journey which took her onto the Fripps' long landing, where she encountered something quite unprecedented. At the end of the landing, at the top of the stairs, was a large window, partly of stained glass. The four centre panes made up a simple floral design in pink and green, while the outer panes were flashed with a blue and emerald border. The intricate leading made cleaning them a fiddly business, and it was never a job Debbie looked forward to.

To her amazement, however, she'd been relieved of the task. There at the end of the landing, clear as day, was Stella Fripp on tiptoe, balanced on one of the dining room chairs, reaching up with cloth and Windolene.

'Bugger me,' thought Debbie. She'd never understand the likes of Stella Fripp as long as she lived. Debbie knew she was trying to atone for something, but what? It

just didn't make sense. And if she was going to be expecting gratitude...

On the contrary, Debbie was surprised to find herself a trifle miffed. Despite her emotions first thing that morning, generally she took satisfaction from keeping a house as large as the Fripps' clean all on her own. And not just clean, bloody immaculate - if she did say so herself. It was irritating to see Mrs. Fripp's unprofessional attempts at window cleaning, still tarted up in her suit skirt and silk blouse. It was obvious that she was exhausted already, and she wasn't getting up to the edge of the leading, which meant there'd be a grimy margin there, and the amount of Windolene she was using...

What's more, if she wasn't careful she'd be off that stool and arse over tip downstairs. Debbie chuckled to herself. Serve her right. It bloody would, it would serve her right.

Debbie couldn't take her eyes away as Mrs. Fripp stretched to the top left hand corner of the window, leaning over, almost on one toe, well beyond the chair's centre of gravity, and caused it to tip, almost lazily at first, onto just two of its spindly, finely-turned 19th century legs.

There was a pause, that moment of delicate suspension when things could go either one way or the other, the absolute impartial stillness at the point of a fulcrum.

And for a second or two it was almost graceful. The chair appeared to go over in slow motion. Stella Fripp, her limbs long and clad in cotton and silk, was briefly as sinuously elegant as a ballet dancer as she extended her

right leg to its extremity in one last desperate attempt to provide a counterbalance.

But all too late.

In an instant Margot Fonteyn had become Charlie Chaplin, choreography had turned to chaos, as Stella disappeared with a yelp and a wild flailing of arms into the steep confines of the Edwardian stairwell. The chair followed her like an eager comic assistant, tumbling after with a kind of canine faithfulness.

‘Oof!’ Horrified, Debbie heard the sharp expelling of breath followed by a regular thumping noise, counterpointed by the busy clatter of the chair. It all seemed to go on for an inordinate length of time; she didn’t remember there being anything like that number of stairs. Then with a ghastly sounding smack and the briefest of groans it all came to a sudden end.

‘Shit,’ gasped Debbie, rooted to the spot in wonderment.

Toby Fripp’s head came round his study door. ‘Everything all right out here?’ His eyes looked hazy and bemused.

‘Mrs Fripp,’ said Debbie and pointed wide-eyed towards the top of the stairs.

Toby looked at her blearily before obeying her pointing finger and walking over in a relaxed amble to the head of the stairs where he stood and stared down. Debbie saw his expression change, observed him sober up in an instant, and knew it had to be bad.

As Professor Fripp rushed down the stairs, Debbie pleaded silently, ‘Let her live, let her live, let her live, for God’s sake, let her not be dead.’

It appeared that Mrs. Fripp's forehead had hit the edge of a small oak table in the hallway. One of the paramedics was later to remark that it was lucky she hadn't fallen on the ebony ornamental African phallus that stood on top of the table as she would probably have been impaled. However, lucky wasn't really a term to be used in this case: after three days Stella Fripp still showed no signs of emerging from unconsciousness. On the Thursday after the fall there was a brief report in the local morning paper, headlined "City Broadcaster in Coma". "The feminist writer and broadcaster, Stella Fripp, was today reported to be in a coma following a fall at her home in Springfields. Ms. Fripp first came to prominence in the late sixties with her book 'Eve of the Day', which though never enjoying the popularity and notoriety of Greer's 'The Female Eunuch', nevertheless...'

'It reads like an obituary,' said Toby Fripp to himself, as he studied the paper over breakfast. They were running out of Harvest Crunch he'd noticed and the peaches had become inedible. He missed his morning peach and wondered how you bought them. Singly, by the pound, by the kilo? He realised he didn't even know where the nearest greengrocer was. Perhaps if he cut out the soft bits from the three remaining fruit he would end up with the equivalent of one good peach. No, too much bother. The kitchen was a mess, even worse than Stella left it. When was Debbie Palmer's next day? Not till Monday. Poor girl, she'd been terribly upset about Stella. Perhaps he'd make a bit of an effort on the kitchen. It wasn't fair to leave it like this for her. But not yet. He'd just finish the paper first. And then perhaps a drink. '...in her later years Ms. Fripp concentrated her

efforts on the status of women in the workplace...’ He has, thought Toby Fripp, he has, he’s pulled it straight out of the obituary file. His eyes began to prickle, then welled up, as he observed the three peaches browning in their bowl.

The guilt came on at unexpected times. It hit her when she was least expecting it, and it was awful – an overwhelming tide of self-hatred made unendurable by the knowledge that there was no going back. She’d never be able to retract those two little words that rang like a cracked bell in her head: ‘Drop Dead!’

Of course, Mrs Fripp hadn’t died, but Debbie doubted if it would be any worse if she had done. The thought of Stella Fripp, so brainy and articulate, lying slack jawed and unthinking in a hospital bed seemed somehow crueller than death. Debbie remembered her desperate silent plea that Stella should have survived the fall and felt she’d been delivered some horrible compromise. Drop Dead, Please Live. What was half way between the two? A vegetable of course.

The worst thing about the guilt was that it infected everything she did: waking up, watching telly, smoking a cigarette, but especially eating. Debbie was aware that she was consuming more food than ever since Stella’s fall, but she simply couldn’t help herself. Guilt pangs became hunger pangs, and when she ate she became more guilty because there she was stuffing her face while Mrs Fripp was being fed through a tube in her arm. It was a vicious spiral. More guilt, more hunger, more feeding. It made her think of the gross insects in the crystal ball. That’s how ugly she was.

She tried blaming the talisman, tried telling herself she wished she'd never set eyes on it. The silver looked more steely to her now, the amethyst a cooler blue and the single eye, she decided, had acquired a calculating expression. It scrutinised her with a look of possession. Or could it be accusation? Was that it? Was the eye charging her with the misuse of her power?

Debbie replayed the events of the day so often they had become a ritual that had lost all meaning. Over and over she had tried to remember precisely how she'd framed the words drop dead in her mind, whether she could have possibly meant them literally, or whether it was just one of those figures of speech. She traced the course of events which had led to Stella Fripp's fall and always came to the same conclusion that it was the moment she'd called Mrs Fripp 'Miss' which had been the fatal turning point. But why she'd had such a bad reaction to that particular form of address Debbie couldn't guess. After all, it summed up their relationship in a way. It wasn't such a strange mistake to make, just a slip of the tongue, that was all, and an understandable one, but it had led to her deciding to clean the windows herself, which had led to her fall, which...God, it was all so complicated.

And now Toby was all alone. All alone in that big house. He'd be glad of a bit of company, especially female company, thought Debbie thoughtlessly. Then catching herself and her wickedness, the guilt came rolling in again like something off the Atlantic.

Debbie rapped on the Fripp's solid hardwood door with its new brass knocker. She'd tried the doorbell but

without a response. Rat-tat-tat! The noise was terrific, efficient and expensive. It agitated a couple of magpies perched in the beech tree at the end of the drive who chattered a copycat reply.

Debbie didn't need a watch to know she was very late again. It was evident in the length of the shadows and the absence of traffic that the time of commuting and taking the kids to school was long past. She hadn't got to sleep before four last night. The third night in a row.

Debbie knocked again.

A voice came from over her head, 'Who's there?'

Debbie backed out of the porch and looked up at Professor Fripp's pale, dishevelled face. An unmade bed of a face.

'Me,' said Debbie superfluously.

'Good grief, what time is it?' asked the Professor.

'Sorry I'm late,' said Debbie, 'Bus strike.'

'The Professor didn't seem to take this in. 'I must have overslept,' he said, 'Hold on, I'll be right down.

When the door opened, Debbie was taken aback by how ill Toby Fripp looked. His skin had the insubstantial appearance of layered tissue paper and his eyes were shot with blood to the cornea. The tatty old dressing gown he was wearing looked too spacious for his frail frame.

Having let Debbie in, the Professor retreated to the kitchen where he sat down at the table, supporting his head in cupped hands.

'Save my life will you?' he groaned to Debbie, 'Make me a cup of coffee.'

'I can't do the beans and stuff...' began Debbie nervously.

‘No, no,’ said Toby Fripp carefully, ‘there’s a jar of Nescafé. Two spoonfuls please. We’re out of milk.’

Debbie made the coffee. The cup suddenly came alive the moment it reached the Professor’s hands and rattled agitatedly in the saucer. He had to use two hands to bring it to his mouth.

He finished the coffee, grimacing all the time, then looked up at Debbie, straining to focus on her. ‘Just one more favour,’ he said, ‘there’s a bottle of Scotch in my study...’

Debbie managed to restrain her instinct to look disapproving, and went off on her errand of mercy, tuttuting to herself, though secretly pleased to be of service. She found the almost empty bottle lying on its side on top a filing cabinet in a study that was even more chaotic than usual.

Toby drained off the half inch of whisky with a degree of desperation while Debbie stood by mutely, waitress-like. She was suddenly aware of just how serious he was about drink, like somebody in a play.

The kitchen was almost as she’d left it on her last visit three days ago. The only additions were a few dirty coffee cups and a faint smell from the unused, stagnant sink which she could easily take care of with bleach.

The Professor stood up and his chair squealed viciously against the quarry tiles.

‘Oh God, never again,’ he said to himself, and returned to his seat.

‘Anything else?’ asked Debbie.

‘A reconditioned liver?’ joked the Professor bravely, ‘or failing that you’ll find another bottle of Teachers in the drinks cabinet.’

‘You sure?’ asked Debbie.

‘As sure as I’ll ever be of anything,’ affirmed the Professor.

Debbie potted off to fetch the Scotch wondering quite seriously whether she wasn’t contributing to another potential Fripp fatality.

Toby Fripp eyed the full bottle with a look of familiar affection and splashed a good quantity of whisky into the glass Debbie had provided. As he drank his eyes seemed to clear a little and he gained substance. He could have been consuming some hyper-strength, fast-acting ginseng rather than alcohol.

Eventually he said, ‘I do apologise, Debbie, for my condition. Nobody should be subjected to such a ghastly vision so early in the morning.’

Debbie was thrown by the Professor’s apology. ‘It’s all right.’

‘You’re very amenable,’ observed Toby, then glanced up blearily at the kitchen clock. ‘Good God, is that the time? I had a seminar at ten.’

‘You’ve missed it then,’ said Debbie feeling a bit dopey standing there watching the Professor drink himself back to normality.

‘That would appear to be the case,’ agreed the Professor, and splashed out some more whisky. He brooded over the glass.

There was something about his pathetic, slumped figure that gave Debbie a sudden presentiment. He’d had some bad news. His wife.

‘How is she?’ blurted out Debbie, frightened of the answer, but more frightened of ignorance, ‘How’s Mrs. Fripp?’

The Professor looked up, and made the effort of realigning his brain along this new tack. 'She's stable.' he said, and Debbie understood more from his tone of voice than the words that all was not lost. 'They've been asking me to talk to her, but what on earth do you say? I told her about the bit in the Post, but I didn't tell her where I thought they'd got it from. I told her about the peaches going rotten. Tried to make it funny. You know, how she was always right about men's dependency on women, but I expect I just sounded pathetic. Not much for her to wake up for. They've got her all nicely plugged in and she looks as happy as she ever has done. As peaceful as a blessed baby. You could almost envy her I suppose.'

'Not dead then?' says Debbie, still wanting it confirmed.

'No, there's a machine that tells you she isn't. I expect I'll turn up any day soon and find her sitting up and asking for breakfast and a Dictaphone.' said Toby without too much conviction. He took a sip of his drink and looked up at Debbie. 'It's good of you to be so concerned.'

'Oh no,' said Debbie, 'that's all right.'

'Why the hell,' said Toby Fripp abruptly, 'was she cleaning those damn windows in the first place?'

Debbie could find nothing to say.

'It's years since I've seen Stella touch a duster.'

Debbie just prayed he would leave the subject.

'I mean you do all the cleaning round here don't you?'

Debbie nodded.

'So why did she suddenly take it into her head to play Mrs Mop?'

Debbie's brain had stalled completely.

'It just doesn't make sense. Not like Stella at all.'

Debbie said the only thing that remained in her mind, the four words she been unable to dislodge. 'It were my fault.' she said quietly.

'Your fault?' responded the Professor with soft, assured disbelief. 'How could it be your fault?'

'I,' said Debbie, cautious at first, but then in a rush, 'I put a curse on her.'

She expected a bark of laughter, but instead there was a long pause during which Debbie anticipated either ridicule or rebuke, or maybe a large dose of both. She was already numbing herself to it, adopting the cow-like passivity she could quickly call on when needed.

Eventually the Professor remarked, 'What a strange thing to say.'

Debbie looked at him for signs of sarcasm and saw that his eyes had reacquired their intelligence. They had a focus: her eyes. It was a professional enquiring look, that made Debbie feel under an onus to explain, to provide more information.

'I didn't mean to.' she said, 'I don't know me own strength. I was only thinking I wanted her dead. And then it happened for real.'

'I've been feeling guilty too Debbie. It's a natural response. God knows, you go over all the awful, upsetting things you've said. All those moments of thoughtfulness. But nobody's to blame, only fate.'

'It's different for you,' said Debbie, 'You're not a witch, are you?'

Toby looked baffled. He was visibly struggling.

‘You read my initiation, remember?’ said Debbie. ‘I’ve got these powers. Psychic ones. And I can do curses.’

‘Trust me,’ said Toby, ‘you are in no way responsible for Stella’s accident.’

Half of Debbie wanted to believe him. Every day since Mrs Fripp had been in hospital she’d been tempted to shrug off responsibility, to blame Stella’s fall one hundred percent on an unpredictable reaction to being called ‘Miss,’ but that way there was simply far too much to lose. All her new found status.

‘I don’t care if you don’t believe me,’ she said. Then with a flash of intuition, ‘You’re a scientist, you wouldn’t understand.’

‘There are plenty of scientists who incline towards metaphysical explanations for inexplicable phenomena,’ countered Toby, ‘More and more these days. I’m not trying to denigrate your beliefs in any way, I just can’t accept...’

‘I can prove it you know.’

‘You don’t have to prove anything. I don’t mind what you believe. I just don’t want you blaming yourself for Stella’s accident.’

‘I want to prove it,’ said Debbie.

There was an impatient note in Toby Fripp’s voice. ‘Now you sound like a scientist yourself. Proof, proof, proof.’

‘I thought you’d be interested,’ said Debbie, ‘You wanted to know all about the initiation.’

‘I was interested,’ Toby conceded, ‘but it was mainly academic.’

‘I don’t understand what you’re talking about,’ huffs Debbie, ‘I’m thick you know.’

‘You may think you’re thick, just as you think you’re a witch. But I don’t believe you’re either.’

‘I still don’t know what you’re on about.’

‘Yes you do.’

‘No, I don’t.’

‘Oh, God,’ groaned Toby, urgently splashing more whisky into his glass ‘All right Debbie, have it your way. You’re thick and you’re a witch. You’re a thick witch.’

‘Better than being an old drunk,’ retorted Debbie quickly. She felt betrayed. Professor Fripp wasn’t supposed to lose his temper.

‘An old drunk,’ mused the Professor over his whisky, ‘what an apt summation.’

‘Eh?’ said Debbie.

‘You’ve summed me up very nicely, whereas my appellation...God, why do I always get so pompous when I’m pissed...what I called you was unjustified, not fair.’

‘I didn’t mean it,’ said Debbie.

‘Yes you did. Not unkindly. But you meant it.’

Up came the whisky bottle again as if to seal the argument.

‘You ought to eat,’ said Debbie accusingly, feeling bad and wanting to change the subject, ‘you shouldn’t drink on an empty stomach.’

‘I expect you’re right again.’

‘When did you last have something.’

‘I don’t know. Friday I think.’

Just considering the fact made Debbie feel quite faint. She went to the fridge, which was empty except for a bottle of dubious looking semi-skimmed milk, a half-finished jar of capers and one of Dijon mustard.

‘It had begun to stink so I threw the lot out,’ explained Toby Fripp with a touch of shame in his voice.

Debbie checked the freezer. A large packet of French Beans, several tubs marked “Chicken Stock”, something ugly wrapped in Clingfilm which she eventually established was root ginger, four trays of ice cubes and a nearly empty bottle of Vodka.

‘There was some ice-cream,’ said Toby helpfully, ‘but I’m afraid I scoffed the lot first day.’

‘No tins?’ enquired Debbie, closing the freezer door.’

‘Let me see,’ said Toby, raising himself slowly from his seat and crossing to the cupboard. ‘Asparagus, raspberries, chestnut puree, lots of tomatoes...’

‘Nothing proper then.’

‘It’s all right, Debbie, I’m not hungry.’

‘You’ve got to eat.’ Debbie was insistent. She was starting to feel in command, and it was a novel, but not an unpleasant sensation.

The nearest shops were well over a mile away, the Fripps house being on land originally owned by Quakers where no pubs or shops were allowed to spoil its suburban purity. The Professor ordered Debbie a taxi and she returned with a dozen eggs, two pounds of sausages, a pound of streaky bacon, half a pound of lard, four tins of Heinz baked beans and, at Toby's specific request, six peaches and two bottles of Teachers.

Toby ate the cooked breakfast cautiously at first, claiming there was enough cholesterol in it to give him an instant coronary, but in the end he wolfed it down as she’d known he would. Nobody could resist a proper breakfast, least of all someone with a two day hangover and an empty stomach. Debbie of course joined him.

‘I should have got some bread,’ she said when they’d finished, thinking it would have been nice to be able to mop up the juices on left on the plate. If she’d been at home she’d have picked it up and licked it clean, but she was in what her Mum would have called polite company now, as was confirmed by Toby’s gracious compliments on the food.

‘S’alright,’ said Debbie, it was just a fry-up.’ Then there was a pause during which she fought to keep down a burp.

‘You know,’ said the Professor suddenly, ‘I meant it when I said you mustn’t blame yourself for my wife’s accident.’

Debbie shrugged. She didn’t want to think about it now.

‘At least admit there’s might be a perfectly logical explanation for what happened to Stella. She was cleaning a window, balanced precariously at the top of the stairs – is it so mysterious that she fell?’

‘S’pose not,’ said Debbie.

‘If there is a mystery it’s why she was there in the first place.’

‘It was because I called her ‘Miss’,’ said Debbie grudgingly.

‘Sorry,’

‘She got in a bit of tiss ‘cos I called her ‘Miss’ by mistake,’

‘Miss?’

‘Like a schoolteacher or something,’

‘Or a mistress,’ said Toby sadly. Debbie could see he now had the full explanation, even if she didn’t.

‘All I know is I thought ‘drop dead’ in me head and then the next minute she’s fallen down the stairs, and I’m a witch now, so what do you expect me to think?’

‘At least admit it could be a coincidence.’

‘S’pose.’

Debbie suddenly found Toby’s hand was lying lightly on top hers. He was leaning towards her.

‘Say it was a coincidence, Debbie.’

His hand felt whisky warm but dry. It gave a light squeeze. His eyes were bleary but they engaged hers fully.

‘Alright, it were a coincidence,’ said Debbie.

‘It wasn’t your fault.’

‘It weren’t my fault.’

‘Thank you,’ said Toby and released her hand.

‘But I’m still a witch,’ said Debbie.

Ten

Normally the sight of her Mother asleep in her armchair at three in the afternoon would have irritated Debbie. It was a small room, and an afternoon sleeper gave the impression of filling the whole of it, but Debbie was feeling forgiving after her morning with Toby Fripp. He'd seemed to care about her so much, and that gentle pressure of his hand on hers, the persuasive squeeze, it lingered still. She would convince herself that Mrs Fripp's fall was simply an accident for his sake. Already she felt lighter, happier, sensing the burden of guilt lifting.

She stepped carefully over her Mother's outstretched legs; was unperturbed by the open mouth and little trickle of saliva that ran nearly to the collar of her blouse.

Debbie looked at her Mother, and remembered her gift of the bacon sandwich. Food and love, love and food. In Debbie's mind they were sometimes almost inseparable. She remembered breakfast with Toby Fripp.

Kneeling down, she stared closely into her Mother's face. Even asleep there was something pained in her expression, a crevice in the forehead, a tension stretching the corners of her mouth. Debbie leaned forward and moved her hand across the face an inch or so from its surface, a smoothing action. Then she let her hands move down towards her Mother's naked knees. Her palms hovered over the knobbly white joints the way Morgana's had done. She closed her eyes, and let all her energy focus in her hands till they grew hot and tingling,

then with her eyes still closed she brought her hands to the point where the hairs of her Mother's knees just tickled her palms. Debbie thought Warm Oil, then as she released the energy from her upturned hands she saw the oil flow over patella and femur, a lubricating, warming embrocation. 'All right now, all right now,' Debbie breathed, 'Pain gone, pain gone, better, better...' The focus of her world was the tight-skinned bumpy hemisphere of her Mother's knees, a planet's surface she was penetrating and flooding with smooth curative essences. It was flowing out of her, a radiation turning liquid. 'Better now, better...' Debbie remained focused until she felt sure she'd transmitted every ounce of her strength into her Mother's knees. When she finally opened her eyes the room appeared huge.

She could have sworn her Mother's face looked more relaxed, her breathing deeper. Debbie's hands were numb and cold, and when she cupped her Mother's knees in them she could feel the warmth behind the hard bone. Her hands began a slow massaging motion.

'What you doing?' said the waking Mrs. Palmer, struggling to understand.

Debbie took her hands away. 'Nothing.'

'You leave my knees alone. They give enough trouble as it is without you messing.'

Debbie's Mother sat up in her chair, smoothing her skirt down as far as it would go.

'Stand up, Mam,' said Debbie.

'I don't want...'

'Just stand up, Mam.'

With an exaggerated sigh of exasperation, Mrs. Palmer did as she was told.

‘Walk over to the window.’

‘I don’t know what...’

‘Please, Mam.’

Debbie watched as her Mother walked the four steps to the window, then stood there like an awkward automaton, grumbling quietly.

‘How do your legs feel?’ asked Debbie.

‘So, so.’

‘What does that mean? So, so?’

Mrs. Palmer was still staring out into the back yard.

‘You know. Not so bad. Middling to fair.’

‘Middling to fair? Can’t you be a bit more precise, Mam?’

Debbie’s Mother finally turned from the window. ‘You been meddling with my knees?’

‘I thought perhaps I could help.’

‘You’ve been meddling. I can’t feel anything.’

‘How you managing to stand up then?’

‘I mean I can’t feel any pain no more.’ It was like an accusation, as if Debbie had wounded her, or robbed her of something.

‘You mean they’re better!’

Mrs. Palmer looked frightened. ‘They don’t feel right. I have to look at them to make sure they’re there.’

‘I’ve cured you, Mam,’ said Debbie, ‘I’ve bleedin’ cured you.’

‘Let’s not be hasty,’ said Mrs. Palmer, and walked a few ponderous steps, lifting her legs carefully as if her feet were shod in diving boots.

‘They do feel different,’ she confirmed reluctantly.

‘No pain?’

‘Not to speak of, no.’

Debbie's face was ablaze with triumph. 'I bleeding did it, Mam. I healed you.' She held her hands out before her, scrutinising them with wonder and reverence. 'I healed you with these, Mam. Just like Jesus.'

There was no doubt that Mrs. Palmer was cured, though initially she was reluctant to admit it. For the first two days she continued to walk slowly and with a slight limp. She said her legs came and went, and reminded Debbie that they'd been a bit better after that Welsh girl had had a look at them...and look how long that had lasted!

But Debbie knew her Mother was cured. She knew because Mrs. Palmer was clearly worried. If she'd had a trace of pain remaining, she'd have magnified it into continuing disablement, but there was nothing left for her to work on. Her Mother might have been a malingerer, but she was not, as Debbie had come to accept, a complete impostor. And after a couple of days, Mrs. Palmer grudgingly confessed that her legs 'feel like new'.

Debbie had never been acquainted with the "prophet-in-his-own-country" concept, but it didn't surprise her in the least – in fact it was to be expected – that her Mother would be extremely reluctant to assign her recovery entirely to her daughter. She seemed more willing to thank the copper bracelet she had been wearing for the last six months or the cod liver oil she was always forgetting to take. Or the change in the weather, or a freak of physiology, or a simple act of God - she even referred coyly to a TV programme on Lourdes she'd watched the previous Sunday. In fact, Mrs. Palmer was

willing to bring in just about any contingent factor to explain her cure so long as it wasn't Debbie.

'I could turn you back, you know,' Debbie threatened unconvincingly, desperate for acknowledgement.

'There's no guarantee I'm permanently cured,' said her Mother wistfully, 'I'm not going to put too much strain on my legs at first.'

'You mean you're going to stay a lazy cow,' said Debbie.

'You'd have me running the flipping London marathon, you would.'

'No, but you could do a bit of dusting couldn't you? It's like a busman's holiday for me here.'

'I'll see,' said Mrs. Palmer, 'tomorrow perhaps.'

And amazingly she kept her word.

'I might have a walk up the shops this afternoon,' she said the following day, 'we're down to crusts. No promises mind. I'll see how I am in myself.'

'Yeah, don't push it, Mam,' Debbie found herself saying.

Mrs. Palmer set off gingerly to the shops that afternoon, and returned in good humour with stories of who she'd met and the changes in the High Street. In the evening, before they went to bed, she made toast for Debbie with the bread she'd bought and put a couple of poached eggs on top.

'I never realised what I'd been missing,' she said while Debbie ate, back on the subject of her expedition.

Debbie had finally accepted that her Mother was never going to admit it was she who had cured her. She put another good chunk of toast and poached egg in her

mouth, before saying, 'You'll be able to get out and about a bit now.'

'I'm not going to rush it though,' said Mrs. Palmer, and rubbed her knee ruminatively.

Debbie crammed another forkful of food into her mouth. She'd forgotten what a dab hand her Mother was at poached eggs: the white set just right, the yoke gushing out over the toast when you punctured it with your fork. It was the kind of food you couldn't get down you quick enough. Debbie looked up to see her Mother was observing her.

'You eat like an animal,' said her Mother, 'you really do.' But she didn't say it nastily.



Even though it was still over two months to Christmas, Wicca's World was experiencing a measurable increase in its turnover. They were already out of Glitter Candles and their supplier couldn't promise any more before the end of November. The Celtic fabrics had proved very popular, as had the Incensers which were usually purchased together with a selection of essential oils. Stocks of Frankincense and Myrrh were almost entirely depleted. The increased throughput of customers inspired premature seasonal cheer in Alice and David - the shop bell jangling on its spring had all the persistently jolly resonance of a sleigh bell.

The afternoons were particularly busy, and they'd considered taking on a part-time assistant. Debbie Palmer had been the first candidate that came to mind

but they weren't sure if she'd be able to handle the till. Also, as David pointed out, Wicca's World was not a large shop, so instead they advertised in the window and got a willing and willowy seventeen year old called Rachel with experience behind the Dior counter at Rackhams.

As Christmas approached, many City Centre shops were opening on Sundays to compete with the big out-of-town malls. Alice and David resisted this at first. They valued their Sundays, but when Alice read in the local press of the huge success of the Sunday openings, and learnt that gift shops such as Shared Earth and The Pier were packed on the Sabbath, she decided they really had no choice.

'Just till after Christmas. Then we stop. Promise,' .

'Oh, sure,' said David. He knew Alice better than that. 'Rachel and I can handle it if you like.'

'Well supposing we had our Sundays on Monday.'

'What?'

'We could close the shop on Monday.'

'We couldn't do that. Not before Christmas anyway.'

David sighed. 'You're right, Allie, you're right.'

'I feel as if I'm forcing you into something.'

'You're not. The shop is for me as much for you. I'm for it as much as you are. You know that.'

One of the people who walked into the shop on their first Sunday of opening was Debbie Palmer. It was nearly three weeks since Morgana had seen her at the last coven meeting. There were only four customers in the shop, but with Debbie's arrival it seemed suddenly packed.

‘Hello, Debbie!’ said Alice, leaning over the shop counter to kiss her on each cheek. She loved the way Debbie went pink with pleasure every time she did this.

‘Hello,’ said Debbie, ‘I got something to tell you.’

‘Hey, Debs. Hi!’ said David, who had just finished serving a customer.

‘Hello,’ said Debbie, ‘I were just...’

‘Do you have any conjuring sets,’ interrupted a customer.

‘We don’t,’ said David, ‘I should try Toy R Us.’

‘That’s the fourth person this week,’ said David to Alice when the customer had gone.

Debbie leaned over and gave Alice a little tug on the sleeve of her shirt. ‘I got to tell you about me Mam.’

‘Yes, how is your Mum,’ asked Alice, pulling her arm free as she turned to take a boxed set of rune-stones from a customer. The last thing Alice wanted to be was dismissive of Debbie, but they were very busy.

‘She’s cured.’ said Debbie dramatically.

Alice wrapped the stones, ran the customer’s credit card through the till and got a signature, then with a smile handed over the purchase and receipt. Any irritation at Debbie’s presence had completely evaporated.

Alice reached over the counter intending to take Debbie’s hands in hers, but somehow ended up being held herself by the larger woman. The way Alice’s slender fingers suddenly found themselves enfolded in moistly warm flesh struck her as a confirmation of Debbie’s straightforward generosity.

I’m so glad, Debbie. I really am. I could sense your Mother was suffering. I’m just pleased I’ve been able to

help. You really didn't have to bother to come all this way.'

For just a moment, Alice saw the eagerness in Debbie's face become veiled with puzzlement, then enlightenment came.

'No,' said Debbie impatiently, 'it weren't you, it was me. She weren't getting any better, so I had a go.'

Alice sensed David was watching now as Debbie hurriedly let go of her in order to present her hands to them, palms upward. The remaining two customers had paused in their browsing.

Alice and David, Morgana and Vulcan, High Priestess and Priest saw their newest recruit's face beaming behind the salmon coloured hands.

'I've got magic in them,' she said 'real magic.'



But Debbie left Wicca's World feeling let down. After all the confusion of Morgana thinking that Debbie had come to thank her for Mam's improved leg, there had been a certain distance from both the high priestess and priest when Debbie had tried to tell them the facts of the matter. They were still nice enough, but not quite as pally as when Debbie had first arrived. And Morgana had said, 'It's not a competition, you know, Debbie,' in a way that made Debbie think of school.

It wasn't fair. There she was, bursting with the exhilaration of discovering she was a healer, and all people wanted to do was pour cold water on it. When she told Professor Fripp, still determined that he should

admit she had special abilities, he went into some gobbledegook about the placebo effects of faith healing. She told Joyce, who just said, 'See, girl, I told you the old bird was suffering psychosomatically.' She drew out the last word with relish: 'psy..cho...so...mat...ic...ally', turning the condition into something rich and desirable.

One day they'll see, thought Debbie undeterred. She sensed that she was merely at the margin of her psychic gifts, at the border of a whole country to be explored. Steeling herself to encounter the insect again, she consulted the crystal ball the way somebody who could read might consult a guide book in a foreign language, searching for something recognisable, a hint of the direction to take. But the images seemed as impenetrable as ever. Thankfully the insect didn't return. In fact the only image which seemed to keep repeating itself was the one of the couple making love.

She looked forward to this image. The softly lit couple were always seen from a distance, surrounded by darkness as if they were mingling on black satin sheets in a room with black draped walls. Sometimes the man was on top, sometimes the woman, and they never reached the end; they faded as they had emerged, closely united in quiet persistent movements. It looked like perpetual motion, like a video loop playing forever, and it filled Debbie with a sweet longing for something she'd never quite attained, except in sexual dreams where loving could be like paradise, another world altogether that was hell to wake up from.

Deep down she had a feeling that fucking Toby Fripp could bring her close to that paradise. She'd never really been with a man who took it slowly and with style like

the couple in the crystal ball. With Adrian there was always something dirty about it, which of course was what got him off – and Debbie too in a way – but it would be just so good to take it long and gentle for once with fond words and slow-burning looks, to savour it rather than devour it. She knew that was why she'd started wearing the same sexy red pants every time she went to clean for Toby. Of course, in came Guilt to give her a nudge every time she put them on. How can you be so heartless, Debbie Palmer, with his wife at death's door? But it didn't stop her. Everybody had to wear knickers didn't they? And if these happened to be the scarlet ones edged with black lace well that was just too bad because they were very comfortable for cleaning.

Merely stepping into the pants seemed to enhance the possibility of something wonderful happening, like a step in the right direction, even a participation in the act itself. They were a red flag of desire as well as a lucky mascot, with the added bonus that if she and Toby ever did get together their satin lubricity over her yielding pink haunches was sure to give him pleasure.

It was a fantasy, but not the kind you had about a pop star or somebody you saw on the telly. Toby was flesh and blood, and they already did stuff which had a certain intimacy about it. She cooked brunch for him every morning now which they ate together, even though Debbie had already had breakfast at home. It was fried food of course. Hangover food, which Toby consumed with no more silly protests about cholesterol or calories. Debbie knew who'd given him that anxiety.

He hadn't referred to Stella unprompted since he'd told Debbie to stop blaming herself for the fall. If Debbie

asked after her, he would say that she was stable and leave it at that. Gradually the presence of Stella seemed to be retreating, the way Debbie remembered the ghost of her dad slowly dissolving from the house in the months after his death. Though her Mum had kept all his things it was as if he'd gradually seeped from them, day by day, until his chair became simply a chair, his cigarette lighter a cigarette lighter, right through everything he'd possessed.

It was amazing, horrible, how quickly you could forget someone thought Debbie. Over brunch Toby would gabble on quite happily without ever a mention of his wife while Debbie sat in the chair she'd so recently occupied. She didn't like to think that his words would have got a lot more intelligent response from Stella Fripp. Debbie only half understood most of what he said and some of it she didn't understand at all.

His talk was fuelled solely by whisky. She hadn't seen a wine bottle in the house since Stella's fall. At first she thought his increased drinking was because of loneliness, but recently she hadn't been so sure.

It was a bugger really. He was such an elegant drunk it made Debbie fancy him even more than when he was relatively sober. His fingertips would droop on to the rim of the glass in a way that was almost girlish, but not quite. His eyes became hooded and dreamy. He talked nonsense, but it was harmless, rambling, eloquent nonsense - at least to Debbie's ears it was. She knew she was on foreign ground, but that was what made it exciting. She suspected Stella must have had techniques to keep him off the hard stuff, keep him articulate and intelligent. If she could have seen him now she wouldn't

have thought him charming, Debbie decided. No, she would see him as ridiculous and pathetic. Weak. And of course he was. Debbie wasn't so stupid she couldn't see that. But still she wore the sexy red pants.

And now they had a little daily ritual which brought them even closer than the fried brunches. It had begun one morning when Toby had been suffering an abnormally severe hangover and Debbie had suggested the talisman might be able to assist. She was remembering the first morning she'd had it and was hungover herself.

Inevitably Toby resisted at first, but in the end he went the way of all sceptics who find themselves in a hopeless position. Debbie couldn't lose – whole businesses, towns and religions were built on the premise of anything is worth a try. And ultimately those were Toby's exact words

Debbie came across to where he was sitting and slipped the talisman from her cleavage. The chain only allowed her to extend it a foot or so from her body. She leaned forward and with one thumb pressed the silver against Toby's lined forehead. Her chin was almost resting on his grizzly head and she could feel his hot whisky breath on her neck and breasts. It was an uncomfortable position, but Debbie wouldn't have minded holding it forever. She felt Toby's breath increasing in strength against her skin and a smell of Boot's No.7 mixed with Teacher's wafted up from her chest.

'Perhaps I could come up for air,' said Toby soon. Too soon for Debbie.

She stood up straight. Was it just the drink that made him look so flushed? He rubbed his forehead wonderingly.

‘You’ve got something there, Debbie,’ he said eventually and a little bit reluctantly. He blinked his eyes as if they’d just been installed and needed testing out.

‘Remarkable,’ he said, with a shake of his head, and Debbie knew the talisman had captured him for her.

Every morning she gave him ‘the cure’ as he called it, she had to draw on every ounce of her willpower to stop herself pulling the his head down into her breasts. The agony of having him so close was exquisite, and it was hard not to whimper sometimes enduring a kind of infinitely prolonged foreplay that was almost as painful as it was pleasurable. It reminded her of when the monk came to watch her from the alley, the same combination of closeness and distance, like looking at food under glass.

Eleven

Another postcard from Adrian arrived. A rotund woman in the obligatory striped bathing costume was floating on her back in the sea, smiling rosy cheeked at the viewer. “Thar she blows!” was the caption written in a carefree flowing script across the cloudless sky.

‘I don’t know how you stand for it,’ said Mrs Palmer who had got to the post first and explained to her daughter, in a most indignant voice, that ‘Thar she blows!’ was the cry of whalers on sighting their blubber-rich prey. ‘He’s just got no respect for you,’ she concluded.

‘Respect don’t come into it,’ said Debbie a bit crossly. ‘It’s business that’s all.’

‘I must say I never thought a daughter of mine...’ began her Mother.

‘You’ve known all along, Mam. Nothing’s changed.’

But something had changed. Ever since the miraculous improvement to Mrs Palmer’s knees, she’d been acquiring a different attitude towards Debbie, and it took a bit of getting used to.

‘A young girl like you...’

‘Look, Mam I’m twenty years old. I can look after myself.’

‘Twenty is no age. I didn’t even know the meaning of...’

‘Mam, we need the money,’ says Debbie, and that shut her up.

When Adrian entered the hotel room he was wearing a beige, rain-spattered trenchcoat which he removed with a

flourish and shook out long and elaborately. There was something about all this which told Debbie, lying fully clothed on the uncomfortable bed, that he was feeling particularly pleased with himself tonight.

He found a single wire coathanger in the rickety wardrobe and hung the coat on it, tut tutting when the garment drooped from it in ungainly style: the hanger not big enough to fill the wide shoulders. Before he put it into the wardrobe, Debbie saw him take something from a deep inner pocket. A magazine.

He rolled it up tight, then Fosbury Flopped onto the bed, making the springs shriek, and bouncing Debbie so violently that bits of her jiggled as if independently sprung.

He slapped her on her stomach with the rolled up magazine.

‘You’ve been a naughty girl,’ he said, ‘You’ve been keeping things from Uncle Adrian.’

‘I ain’t,’ said Debbie, immediately thinking that he must have somehow discovered about her initiation. The last thing she wanted was him taking the piss out of her about that.

‘What’s this then?’ said Adrian, and opened the magazine. Debbie could see from the cover it was some kind of porno mag, but it wasn’t Big Babes.

Adrian read, “Juicy Bertha. The bird with the mammoth mammarys and a fanny to rival the Cheddar Gorge. Our photographer got so close we nearly lost him. Bertha likes Beer, Blokes and Big Macs. But not necessarily in that order.” Adrian held the magazine close to his face like a schoolboy with a secret. ‘I’m not

sure if I like sharing you with a lot of dirty little wankers, Deborah. Or should I say Bertha.'

'What you on about?' said Debbie. Adrian had this knack of making her feel instantly dumb, dispossessing her of whatever wit she had.

'I didn't twig you at first with that tarty wig, but nobody has lips like my Deborah's.' He finally turned the open magazine towards Debbie, one finger pointing to where the model in the picture has her fingers. Debbie had anticipated who the model was going to be, but for a moment didn't recognise herself. They hadn't used this batch of pictures in Big Babes, the ones she got paid extra for. She'd never seen that part of her body exposed like that before: literally under the spotlight. What on earth did blokes see in it?

'You never told me you'd been moonlighting, Deborah?'

'Take it away,' said Debbie, 'it's disgusting.'

'But it's yours, Deborah. Your very own preciousss. (He hissed the word for some reason) 'How can you call it disgusting?'

'It is. It's bleeding horrible.'

'Stop trying to sweet talk me, Deborah. Look there's more.'

'I don't want to see.'

'All right have it your way,' said Adrian, 'but you're missing a treat.'

Debbie was lying on her back, her arms folded over her chest uncomfortably. There was a sepia coloured stain on the ceiling that looked like Australia. Nobody knew why, but at school Debbie had always done quite well at Geography. 'Well, done, Debbie. Excellent,' was the

kind of thing her teacher, Mrs Cox, would say after she'd got nine out of ten countries correct on the globe. Norway was the one she didn't get. Debbie had been fond of that globe. It felt warm and papery under your fingertips - not the way you expected - and you could make it turn with hardly any pressure at all. Well balanced, smoothly engineered, there was something nice and old fashioned about it, even though it was nearly brand new. Only the thickies' class had a globe, and Debbie had considered it a privilege until she'd learnt that the other classes had their own atlases.

She bet Adrian had had his own atlas: leather bound with gold blocked letters and a red silk bookmark.

She would have liked to keep on gazing at Australia until he went. Trust him to have found those pictures of her. He really was a prick, he didn't have to show her.

'Deborah.' said Adrian softly at her side.

'Yeah,' said Debbie reluctantly.

'I need a hand here,'

'Eh?' Debbie finally turned her head. Adrian was too absorbed in the magazine to look at her. He took her hand in his and pulled it down his body. He was already hard, and moaned as he moulded Debbie's fingers around his erection.

'Good girl,' he said huskily, 'you've got magic in those piggy fingers of yours.'

'What you mean, magic?' said a startled Debbie.

'Shut up,' said Adrian, 'I'm concentrating. Talk dirty if you've got to talk.'

'Is that me you're looking at?'

'Uh huh.'

'You think I look good?'

‘You look like a fat dirty whore.’

‘Thanks a lot.’

‘For fuck’s sake, shut up, Deborah. I’m not paying you for conversation.’

‘Actually, I have got magic in my hands,’ said Debbie, and deeply regretted the words the minute she’d said them.

‘I wish you’d just use some of it?’ replied Adrian, too distracted to pick up on the nervously defiant tone in her voice.

That had been a close shave. The last thing she wanted was to give him something else to ridicule, especially not that.

Better keep my mouth shut, thought Debbie, and settled into the rhythm of bringing Adrian off the way he liked, the way he’d taught her over a year ago. She’d been nineteen then, still a teenager. He’d liked the idea of that, and Debbie had liked the idea of being in a hotel room with an expensive smelling, good looking bloke. The money had been like a bonus then, whereas nowadays she couldn’t wait until he’d got up and dropped the cash on the bedside table and left. If only she could have got a bit more interested in the task she knew it would be over a lot quicker, but all she could think about was ‘what was the capital of Australia?’ She’d known once, but now it had gone.

On tiptoes Debbie reached into the top of the wardrobe, then froze when she heard footsteps on the stairs - her Mother’s restored mobility was still unexpected sometimes, strangely intrusive. It had taken a lot of persuasion to get her Mother to agree to let her

stay in the back bedroom - the magic room as Debbie thought of it - and once or twice Mrs Palmer had strayed absent mindedly into her old place without warning. At least she claimed it was absent mindedness. Debbie quickly shut the wardrobe and listened.

‘Night,’ her Mother called close to the bedroom door.

‘Night,’ replied Debbie.

She waited until she’d heard her Mother’s bedroom door shut before returning to the wardrobe, then scabbled about on the top shelf, pulling down a small mountain of paraphernalia that would have given her mother kittens, or more plausibly a coronary, if she’d seen it.

The items were predominantly plastic, leather or rubber, pink or black, hinting at the orthopaedic combined with the totalitarian. They were the various sex appliances Adrian had issued to her at one time or another. None of them had been used more than once, which only added to their look of absurd abandonment as they lay there in a complex heap of tubes, spikes and bulbous bits on the bedroom floor. Handling them with her fingertips, Debbie dropped each nasty little number into a City Council bin bag then tied it tightly shut. Disposal wouldn’t be a problem: there was a very handy railway embankment close by which was the locally acknowledged dumping ground for all kinds of awkward rubbish.

Debbie propped the bag at the bottom of the bed, but there was something disturbing about it there, so she moved it to the side of the wardrobe. Before she fell asleep, Debbie realised what had bothered her. At the bottom of the bed the bag had looked like a sack-full of

goodies left by a devilish Santa, the Christmas pillowcase of her childhood, but in negative.



There was so much holly in the back of the Trooper it scratched at the back of Alice's neck as she drove down the dark, rutted track. David at her side had turned up his collar, and sat in a self-protective hunch inside his padded jacket. Alice turned on the extra headlights which were mounted on the bull bar, but it only seemed to emphasise the claustrophobia of the tight hedgerows.

'Do you think it was alright to cut all that holly?' said David. 'It felt like being a thief. A poacher or something.'

'There was masses of it,' said Alice, 'nobody will even notice.'

'Bloody cold in the country isn't it?,' said David after a while.

'You forget, don't you,' said Alice, having to wrestle a bit with the wheel.

'And dark.'

She felt reluctant to continue this line of thought. As witches they were supposed to be closer to nature than average folk, and it was important she kept faith in herself at the moment. She could hardly bring herself to admit it, but for the first time in her life she was feeling less than one hundred percent sure of her authority over the coven.

They came to the end of the track and drove onto an enamelled B road.

Of course she'd heard of the bitchcraft which took place in other covens. There was always plenty of gossip about splinter groups and take-overs, bust-ups and coven coups, but Alice had always considered herself above all that kind of petty politicking. But that was before Debbie Palmer.

A sign at a well-lit roundabout was directing them towards the motorway. Alice put her foot down on the accelerator.

Debbie was the first member of the coven apart from herself whom she regarded as a natural born witch. The others were great people - fine, sincere, well-meaning folk who'd joined the coven the way they might join Greenpeace or Amnesty International. They were the kind of people in whom both Alice and David saw hope for the future, and they were quite different to Debbie Palmer.

In the coven Debbie stood out like beef in a vegeburger. Many of the other witches really didn't know how to talk to her, though fortunately Debbie appeared blissfully unaware of this and always mistook politeness for friendliness.

It was the kind of naivety Alice had originally found so appealing. She'd seen herself playing the older sibling role with Debbie: a bit of wise guidance here, a bit of friendly bullying there, but it didn't seem to be working out that way. It was painful to admit, but Debbie's abilities appeared to have already outstripped her own in important areas. If it was true she saw everything she claimed in the crystal ball, then her gifts were truly remarkable. And that wasn't all. There was the also the druid, not to mention her astounding success in healing

her Mother...Debbie appeared to flex the kind of psychic muscle that you normally only heard about or read about, never encountered in the flesh.

Just before they entered the slip road to the motorway, Alice had the crushing suspicion that if the girl had been better-educated and slim she'd have probably taken over the coven by now. It didn't bear thinking about, and Alice wouldn't let herself.

Gathering speed, she moved out into the middle lane to overtake a lorry, and as they passed it she turned her head to see David's cultured profile silhouetted against the lorry's lights. He turned towards her and she could tell he was smiling.

Alice smiled back. She really was a fool. A paranoid fool. For all her gifts, Debbie was still a sorry social specimen and would have to perform unadulterated miracles before she would win the hearts and minds of the coven. She was to be pitied, not feared or envied.

Alice moved back into the inside lane. The words 'Poor Debbie' came into her mind, lifting her spirits and restoring some of the older sisterly feelings she'd started off with. She slipped the Trooper into fifth, feeling the engine relax.

'Poor Debbie.' Life really wasn't fair, and there wasn't a lot you could do about it, not even as a witch. Poor, poor Debbie, thought Alice, and eased a little more off the accelerator.

*

The talisman was growing tarnished, giving the silver a dull piss-yellow patina which Debbie thought might also be dulling its potency. Choosing a time when her mum was out, she took a wad of silver cleaner from the ancient tin in the cutlery drawer and bent to the task of cleaning it. She gripped the pink and pungent morsel of cotton wool in one hand and the silver in the other, working away carefully and was soon noting a dark stain gathering on the cleaner.

It didn't feel quite right somehow. The talisman possessed such unearthly power yet here she was dabbing at it the way you'd wipe away a smudge from a baby's face. The amethyst glared up at her as if insulted.

But she persisted, and gradually the gleam of the silver reappeared, more lustrous than she remembered it. She hadn't examined the talisman so closely since she'd first acquired it, and it looked quite different now, though she couldn't say how.

'No, it's me what's different,' decided Debbie.

She paused in her cleaning and gazed into the single blue iris lying in the palm of her hand. She wanted to close her hand over it, cut out the amethyst glare, but when she started to bend her fingers inward the effort was suddenly too much.

Surely it didn't mean her any harm. You could let your imagination run away with you if you weren't careful. But the trouble was, it wasn't just a question of the talisman.. There was also the monk. He seemed to be a part of the whole package and haunted her still in the crystal ball, showing her all kinds of stuff she couldn't make head nor tail of. Not even Morgana had been prepared to offer an interpretation. It felt like entering his

mind when he showed her those images – some of them horrible, some of them unutterably desirable.

Debbie looked down at the amethyst eye which still seemed to be scrutinising her. How could she hope to understand? It was stupid to try.

Gingerly she began buffing up the silver with a dry duster. When she'd finished, the talisman shone with a deep radiance – not like new, but like something reborn. Very, very slowly Debbie lowered her head and put her lips to the cold metal. It was not a kiss of affection, but of obeisance.

A frozen pool of vomit lay just outside the porchway of the Fripps' house. Toby Fripp's bicycle was lying inelegantly abandoned in the middle of the front lawn and the door to the house was ajar by several inches.

'Bleedin' hell,' muttered Debbie to herself and went to retrieve the bicycle. As she was returning with it, a girl about her age came out of the house dressed in a black strappy dress and black strappy shoes. Her hair was as dark as her clothes but her face so pale even her lips looked white. She didn't seem to have noticed Debbie, and Debbie watched as she put one hand up against the porch before resting her forehead against the back of it, distraught thespian style, and said something that sounded like 'Oh, God.'

Not until Debbie leaned the bicycle noisily against the wall of the house did the girl raise her head an inch to observe the newcomer under thick dark eyebrows.

'Oh, God,' she said, quite distinctly this time, 'somebody's puked down here.' Her voice was husky and on the verge of what Debbie's Mum would have

called la-di-da. As Debbie approached she could see that the girl's eyes were red and barely focused. She leaned her head back on her hand, and started to retch dryly.

'You all right?' asked Debbie reluctantly.

The girl managed to control her gagging long enough to say crossly, 'Does it look as if I'm all right?' before continuing to draw on her stomach's obviously depleted reserves.

'Oh God, I'm all puked out,' she gasped eventually in an exhausted voice that still managed to sound very classy to Debbie. The word 'puked' had never had such an elegant resonance.

'Can I get you anything,' said Debbie.

'Just leave me alone,' replied the girl without a hint of gratitude, so Debbie squeezed past her and went into the house.

She was instantly aware of an unusual smell. Before Mrs. Fripp's fall the hallway would smell of lavender polish mixed with a little lingering garlic or coriander or whatever they'd eaten the previous night. This morning it had the smell of a packed pub gone sour - top notes of stale tobacco and alcohol with a lingering base note of rancid human.

The parquet was sticky underneath her feet and had acquired a coating of grime. A rather sad and lonely looking piece of mistletoe dangled from the ceiling. Several glasses, not all completely empty, were perched on the hall table, and the African phallus, the one that so very nearly pierced Mrs Fripp when she fell, had acquired a pink condom.

Debbie entered the kitchen. Little of the table or worksurfaces could be seen for glasses, bottles, cans and

Chinese take-away cartons; the floor was awash with beer, and there had been a fire in the frying pan which had left charred remains and a brown mark on the ceiling.

‘Shit,’ said Debbie.

‘Oh, God,’ groaned a voice behind her.

Debbie was getting accustomed to these supplications to the Almighty. She turned and saw this one had been delivered by a lanky boy with greasy hair and glasses. ‘Let me die,’ he said, and slopped his way to the kettle. He held it up as if not sure of its function. ‘Toby wants a coffee,’ he said, and looked vaguely around the blitzed kitchen.

‘Give it here,’ said Debbie, unable to stand watching his helplessness a moment longer.

While she was making the coffee, Professor Fripp appeared and homed in on a whisky bottle as accurately as a bee locates nectar, or a fly excreta. He splashed some into a grubby glass, smelled and grimaced, then got it down quickly.

The lanky boy groaned, ‘How can you do that?’

‘Practice,’ said the Professor shortly, then turned to Debbie, ‘I do apologise,’ he said, ‘I had a little Christmas party for my students, and you know what these young people are like...’ He directed an ironic look at the lanky student.

‘You expect me to clean this lot up do you?’ said Debbie. She felt she could cry any minute, and it was nothing to do with the mess.

She looked at the object of her desire. Toby was wearing a shirt that was unironed to begin with and had been slept in subsequently. His grey hair, which Debbie

noted hadn't been cut since his wife's fall, was matted down on one side and flying free on the other. His skin was veined like a blue cheese, particularly around the nose, and his eyes were so bloodshot they might have been turned round in his head. He looked older and sicker than Debbie had ever seen him, and she wanted to despise him, and knew absolutely no one would have blamed her for doing so, but...she just couldn't.

She handed him his coffee. 'You look bleeding awful,' she said crossly.

The Professor looked at her with pleading eyes, then turned to the lanky boy. 'Anthony, nothing personal, but I don't feel you're doing anything to enhance this already depressing scene. Why don't you go home?'

'Sure,' said Anthony and promptly departed, the obedient student.

Toby held his hands up, palms outwards, a gesture of accepted guilt. 'I know, I know...' he said to Debbie.

'I suppose you expect me to clear this lot up,' she said, trying to sound exasperated, but only half managing it. Her professional eye told her it wasn't half as bad as it looked.

'Some of my students will help.' A pause. 'I'll help.'

'A fat lot of good you'd be.'

The professor slumped into a chair. He gazed at the whisky glass cupped in his hand for a few seconds, then put it to one side. 'I don't suppose...' he let the words hang.

'What?' Debbie had to say.

'I don't suppose you could work your magic?'

'What you mean?'

‘I’m in desperate need of the restorative properties of your talisman.’

‘Huh!’ replied Debbie. He really was a bastard. He knew just how to get round her. He must know how much she enjoyed the intimacy of the cure and the knowledge that he’s submitting himself to her and the talisman’s power. As she slowly pulled the amethyst eye from out of her dress and caught sight of its newly restored silver sheen, she wondered if she was abusing it by employing it in this way, but the temptation was too much.

‘Come here,’ she said to Toby, and he sighed in anticipation of the relief to come.

Standing in front of her seated Professor, she pressed the talisman against his forehead with one thumb, and for the first time daringly held the back of his head in her other hand.

‘Such blessed relief,’ said Toby.

Debbie stroked the back of his head.

‘I’m such a pathetic old drunk,’ said Toby, ‘without Stella it’s been like accelerated entropy round here.’

‘Shhhh,’ said Debbie.

‘I’m just not in control anymore. I can’t even feed myself for Chrissake.’

‘Not to worry. I’ll do us a fry up later.’

‘You’re kind. So very kind. The kindest of your kind.’

‘Shhhh,’

Debbie continued stroking the back of his grizzled old head, right there in the middle of the post-party devastation. It was a supremely quiet moment. A moment that seemed without a real beginning, and had no conceivable end. Toby, denied words, began to make

a noise not unlike purring which she could feel vibrating through his skull. Debbie stared out, past the dirty bottles, through the window to the granite coloured, frozen sky and hoped for a White Christmas to make everything perfect.

Then the phone rang.

Toby pulled himself away, blinking and red faced.

‘Who the fuck can that be,’ he said, and it was the first time Debbie’s had heard him swear properly. He staggered out to the phone in the hallway, and Debbie listened to his voice, suddenly soft and concerned: ‘Yes, I understand. No, I was expecting that. What time would you like me? That’s fine. It’s that time of year isn’t it. Thank you. I’ll see you then.’ The phone went down.

He returned to the kitchen and stood looking at Debbie absent mindedly. He could have been staring at a bottle he couldn’t quite place.

Eventually, he reached up, dragged his fingers through his hair, and said with apparent disbelief, ‘That was the hospital.’

Debbie’s heart began to thump where Toby had so recently had his head. ‘What they say?’

‘It’s Stella.’

‘Yes.’

‘She’s out of the coma.’

Twelve

For days afterwards Debbie didn't want to believe that Stella Fripp was back in the land of the living. She knew it was wrong of her, particularly as she still hadn't totally convinced herself that the fall had been purely accidental, but however much she told herself it was a time of rejoicing she simply couldn't get into the spirit of the occasion.

Mrs. Fripp's timing had been uncannily perfect, straight out of a farce, the phone call coming just when Debbie had got Toby exactly where she wanted him. After being in a coma for weeks why had she had to choose that particular moment to wake up? Another half hour wouldn't have made any difference to her, thought Debbie. Even twenty minutes would have done.

She'd never forget the expression on Toby's face when he'd come back into the room - it looked exactly the same as when Stella had had the fall which had knocked her out in the first place. There was that same look of disbelief in his eyes, a reluctance to acknowledge the facts. In fact, he'd actually said as he sat down unsteadily at the kitchen table, 'I don't believe it. I think I'd convinced myself she'd gone.'

To which Debbie had said after a while, 'I'd better put clean sheets on the bed then.'

But there was no urgency. Stella would not be coming home before the new year, and Toby had been told by the doctor on the phone to be prepared for a very different woman to the one he'd known for the last thirty six years.

Debbie was filled with foreboding, and hated herself for resenting Mrs Fripp's return to consciousness. There had been a sense of inevitability about her increasing familiarity with Professor and something delicious to anticipate in the near future. It had all been progressing like a well-oiled machine, but now a spanner had been dropped in the works from what felt like a very great height.

Debbie stared through a pane of her bedroom window and her breath instantly frosted into ice as it reached the glass, clouding her vision. It was a night that was surely too cold even for spectres. The weather forecast had said it would reach ten degrees below zero before dawn with the likelihood of snow showers in the morning.

Tomorrow was the 21st of December, Yule, and there were to be evening celebrations at Alice and David's house when the rebirth of the Sun-God would be enacted, followed by mulled wine, Christmas cake and mince pies.

Anticipating it all was a welcome relief from moping about Stella Fripp's reappearance on the scene. Debbie shivered with a combination of expectancy and incipient hypothermia. Her Mother had commandeered the only sound hot water bottle in the house, and cold as it was in the room, Debbie knew that the initial shock of the bed was going to be even worse.

She put on extra socks and a third sweater, picked up the ice-cold crystal ball and its velvet cloth, lit the candle on the dressing table, then, with several sharp intakes of breath, carefully manoeuvred herself into the deeply established arctic cavern of the bed.

t could have been worse. She could have been without her protective blubber. At times like these a bit of extra flesh came in handy, and it was not long before her own warmth was making a cosy nest of the bed. She snuggled down, wrapped her hands in the square of soft black velvet, and gazed into the crystal ball in the way somebody else might have settled down with a good book.

The long tracking glide towards the sentinel figure of the monk was familiar now, as was the smooth entry into the all-consuming folds of his hood. But after that she was in unknown territory.

This time the image was tiny, like a comma, which under her eyes quickly grew to the size and shape of a tadpole. Then the head and the body expanded smoothly, little nodules developing below the soft skull and at the base of the body and sprouting into recognisable limbs complete with plasticine soft fingers and toes. Before long, the head had swollen to a vulnerable, bald globe that appeared out of proportion to the body, and as Debbie watched, miniature features unmelted themselves - closed eyes, a bump of a nose, an intensely serious little mouth - the creature was so soft and insubstantial it didn't really have a proper outline, but was defined by an orange glowing aura. It floated and grew in the bowl of Debbie's hands, a radiant alien manikin curled in on itself, a little astronaut tied onto the mothership, and when it kicked Debbie imagined the perfect doll-like toes making a minute indentation in the fleshy ball of her palm, a first footprint.



‘Are we all here?’ called David above the hubbub in the living room, and getting little response, stood on tiptoe and started counting. 8,9,10,11...there was somebody missing. He scanned the skylad crowd - something he still couldn’t get used to was so much naked skin in their living room - and it was soon obvious that a significant ballast was absent from the fleshy congregation. Debbie Palmer. It would be very unlike her to miss a Sabbath as important as Yule, so David decided to give her another fifteen minutes.

‘You’d think the gritters would be out in force on a night like this,’ said Tim, a librarian, to Lola, a trainee advertising executive.

‘I know,’ David heard Lola reply, ‘I nearly came off by the church, and I’d have been in deep shit if I’d had a prang. The agency only got it last week.’

‘Have they given you a company car already?’ said Malcolm, a primary school teacher with an unusually capacious scrotum. David could hear the envy in his voice.

‘Good God no,’ said Lola, genuinely shocked, ‘They got rid of the van driver last month, so I’ve been making deliveries all day. Honestly, it’s slavery. I found out in fact I’m earning exactly half what the van driver got.’

Malcolm sounded happily sympathetic now, ‘What bastards. So they get rid of one experienced bloke then take you on under false pretences...’

‘I’m not going to be a van driver forever, Malcolm. Everybody goes through this, like an initiation, to see if you’re willing. Once I’m a fully fledged account exec

the potential earnings really are pretty good, thirty grand and upwards.'

'Oh,' said Malcolm, and sounded extremely disappointed.

It occurred to David that Debbie might be late because she had to rely on public transport. David hadn't been on a bus since he was a student, and back then he'd found their timetables and routes about as self explanatory as a crop circle. How was it that someone like Debbie could find her way around the city, happily hopping from bus to bus, an expert on numbers and companies and tariffs? Practice, he supposed. Born to it.

Alice joined him, looking very much Morgana in a white chiffon veil and tabard that reached to her ankles.

'Are you ready to start?' she asked him.

David looked over at their grandmother clock. 'Ten minutes,' he said, 'Debbie's not here yet.'

'We wouldn't want to start without Debbie would we?' said Alice, and David looked at her but her face was just a collection of mysterious shadows under the diaphanous veil.

Then quickly, as if to correct herself, Alice said very brightly, 'Doesn't the room look great!'

David agreed it did. The holly they'd gathered covered the ceiling and had turned the room into a bower of dark leaves and red berries. The only light came from the candles on the altar, supplemented by the flames of the gas fire. The archaic illumination went very well with the foliage and naked bodies, providing warm hues and deep mobile shadows, all quite primeval and very definitely pagan, which was of course precisely the desired effect.

Perhaps it was something to do with the meagrely lit room providing a liberating degree of disguise, but the coven seemed more animated than usual tonight. There was a touch of seasonal wildness to it all. Some of the members had had their office Christmas lunches that day, and were still on an alcohol fuelled high. At the back of the room, David saw Jake, who worked in the Tourist Office, pick up a pair of nutcrackers and make some comment to Heather, a GP's receptionist, which he accompanied with a wincing expression. Heather made a mock grimace and punched him on the shoulder with the flat of her hand. 'Getaway!'

Hanging from the centre of the room was a generous spray of mistletoe, and several people had already kissed under it, though rather more chastely than if they'd been clothed. The room was warm, alive and glowing, and David looked forward to the ritual and the party to follow, and just as he was thinking they'd have to start without Debbie the door bell rang.

She was full of apologies and excuses for her lateness. David showed her into the dining room where she could undress, which she did promptly, not giving him time to leave the room.

'You been waiting for me, haven't you?' said Debbie, 'I'm ever so sorry.'

'Really, it's all right,' reassured David automatically, watching with some fascination as Debbie struggled behind her back with the catch to her gigantic brassiere, 'Nobody noticed.'

'There's a bus strike,' said Debbie for at least the fourth time.

‘So you said,’ replied David, wondering if he ought to offer to help with the bra.

‘Honest, there is,’ grunted Debbie, and David realised she was lying. She was like a child sometimes with her earnest fibbing, but then the bra came free and she was suddenly nothing like a child at all.

‘We’ll be in the living room,’ said David, feeling embarrassed even though he’d seen Debbie’s breasts enough times before.

As soon as Debbie had joined them, Morgana and Vulcan began the ritual to celebrate the Winter Solstice. The coven stood in a circle, while at its centre Vulcan in the role of the Sun-God lay on the floor in the foetal position. Morgana, draped ghostily in her white muslin, accompanied by Heather, the coven maiden, walked seven times around the outside of the circle before joining the high priest inside it, kneeling at his side and placing her hands on his prone body. Next the coven linked hands and slowly circled the two of them while Heather, standing outside the circle, declared in a clear voice:

‘Bring to us the Child of Promise!
It is the Great Mother who giveth birth to Him;
It is the Lord of Life who is born again;
Darkness and tears are set aside when the Sun shall
come up early.’

At this Morgana rose to her feet, pulling Vulcan up with her. David felt his wife’s compact strength unravelling his body, supporting him, the reborn Sun-God. David stood facing Alice as she pulled back her veil with an extravagant gesture and smiled a welcome into his eyes that went beyond theatre. One of Alice’s

great talents as a high priestess was to appear to live the ritual rather than merely perform it. Whereas David sometimes felt detached, going through the emotions as it were, Alice was always absolutely there. She crossed her hands, as did David, then they held each other and started to spin in the same direction as the circle.

To David everything beyond his wife's face quickly became a blur. Their clasped hands formed the axis around which they and their coven span. Alice had her eyes closed, her mouth an arc of bliss, as the coven began to shout out with one voice, 'IO EVO! HE! BLESSED BE!' The candle flames shuddered from the breeze generated by the crazily spinning bodies singing out over and over again, 'IO EVO! HE! BLESSED BE!' Faster and faster they skipped, faster and faster they chanted, 'IO EVO! HE! BLESSED BE! IO EVO! HE! BLESSED BE! IO EVO! HE! BLESSED BE'

It was intoxicating. The wild light from the candles, the foliage overhead, the vigorous, repetitive chanting accompanying their spiral into dizziness, 'IO EVO! HE! BLESSED BE! IO EVO! HE! BLESSED BE!' But then, at exactly the point where David thought they were going to spin off into giddy madness, Morgana shouted above the chanting, 'DOWN!'

Down went the coven, Debbie with a thump that rattled the glasses on a table the other side of the room. David caught sight of her flushed, ecstatic face. She was the only one of them visibly sweating; it had put a sheen on her face and shoulders.

After the ritual Alice and David circulated with mead and mince pies. The coven was as relaxed and intimate as if they'd all just made love to each other. Voices were

low, the smiles unforced, honest conversation had replaced small talk, but as David approached a group of three with his warm, earthenware jug of wine and spices he could see that Debbie, as always, appeared to be on the perimeter of things. She was standing near to Tim and Lola, but was clearly not joining in, an empty glass in her hand.

‘Can I give you a top up?’ David said.

Debbie turned away from Tim and Lola as if she’d been participating, but gave the game away by holding her glass out with over-hasty gratitude.

‘Yes please,’ said Debbie, ‘It’s nice this. Is it very strong? I’m bleeding terrible when I’m drunk.’

‘Doesn’t matter,’ said David, pouring some wine into his own glass, ‘it’s Christmas isn’t it?’

Debbie looked a little puzzled. ‘I thought this was supposed to be Yule.’

‘I meant Yule,’ said David, ‘Anyway what do you do that’s so terrible when you’re drunk?’

‘I couldn’t tell you,’ said Debbie giggling happily.

‘Why not?’ pursued David. The ritual and the mead must have relaxed him more than he thought. This was almost like flirting.

‘You know how were you were lying at the beginning?’ said Debbie in a weirdly abrupt change of subject.

‘Lying?’ asked David confused. When had he lied to her? Why would he lie to her?

‘You know, when you were all curled up.’

‘Oh, lying,’ said David, a little relieved, ‘in the foetal position, you mean?’

‘Yeah,’ said Debbie, ‘I saw a baby like that in the crystal ball last night.’

‘Really,’ said David. He was beginning to understand why Debbie didn’t make it socially in the coven. You just couldn’t keep up with her.

‘Yeah,’ continued Debbie obliviously, ‘it was like I’d got it in my hands.’

‘Really,’ said David, gaining interest as he caught her thread.

‘It kicked and everything,’ said Debbie, her eyes wide with a mother’s astonished admiration, ‘When I saw you curled up in the foetal thing I knew I must have been seeing into the future.’

There was a hint of self-importance in Debbie’s earnest tones, but if what she was saying was true, you couldn’t deny it was pretty impressive.

‘That’s very impressive,’ said David.

‘Yeah, it is,’ agreed Debbie, beaming.

In bed, after the coven had gone home, tipsy and full of comradeship, David said to his wife, ‘Do you know Debbie saw a foetus in her crystal ball last night?’

‘You believe her?’ said Alice in a rather formally enquiring way, implying she had access to knowledge David didn’t.

‘I think so,’ said David, but suddenly not so sure.

‘I’m beginning to wonder if Debbie Palmer hasn’t got an overactive imagination,’ said Alice and turned over to show him the top of her slender back. They always slept naked together.

‘Maybe,’ said David and cupped his hand around the warm curve of her shoulder. ‘She seemed convincing at the time though.’

‘I think she convinces herself,’ said Alice. There was no annoyance in her voice, but there was a quiet firmness.

‘Maybe,’ said David. He was thinking of how Debbie had lied about the bus strike. But then he thought of the monk, that impassive figure they’d all witnessed in the alley behind Debbie’s house. No one had questioned the monk’s supernatural credentials at the time, least of all Alice who’d evidently regarded Debbie as somebody quite exceptional as a consequence. What had changed? As far as David knew the monk still made his nightly visitation, and when Debbie had spoken about the foetus it hadn’t sounded as if she was inventing it the way she’d clearly invented the bus strike. David was confused. If he was honest with himself, he’d believed in Debbie because Alice had believed in her, but now Alice appeared to have turned into an agnostic...at best.

‘If Debbie’s a fraud,’ said David, ‘what about the monk?’

‘I don’t know,’ replied Alice, ‘what do you think?’

It was so unusual for the high priestess to ask her priest’s opinion on occult matters David felt oddly nervous as he spoke.

‘There was definitely something in the alley,’ he ventured, ‘but whether it was supernatural...’

‘I’m keeping an open mind,’ said Alice, and rolled into her sleeping position. David remained on his back listening to a car passing the house, driven slowly on the icy road. He turned out the bedside light, and for a while the retained image of the illuminated lamp shade swam about his retina.

The eye could trick you in all sorts of ways, so could the mind, but Alice wasn't supposed to be a person who got fooled that way. In the darkness, David experienced a tidal wave of doubt about Debbie, about the druid, about rituals and scrying, about everything to do with Wicca, and all his doubt led back to Alice. As the wave washed over him the whole structure collapsed. Morgana and Vulcan seemed the silliest names, they were just Alice and David, well brought-up, well educated thirty-somethings going on forty-somethings from South Wales, selling a bit of Celtic mysticism to the gullible English. The wave washed over him, and at its heart was a void too horrible to contemplate. He turned to embrace Alice.

'Mmmmm,' she said, as his arm circled her waist.

'Morgana?' said David cautiously.

'Vulcan?' queried Alice.

'Nothing,' said Vulcan, and in ten minutes they were both asleep.



Debbie always made a point of buying Christmas presents rather than nicking them; it only seemed right somehow, but this year her total budget was a paltry twenty pounds which meant her gifts were not going to be exactly overgenerous.

Yet despite being close to broke, she still felt superior walking past shop windows festooned with the old ubiquitous images of Christmas: beaming Santas, fir trees laden with coloured balls, plastic holly and

Christmas puds, even the odd little nativity scene looking strangely out of place and miserably serious among all the festivities.

The reason for Debbie's superiority was quite simple. She was convinced that among the whole teeming, jostling crowd of shoppers, she was the only person who knew the origin of all these images. Her arcane knowledge had been gleaned from David during her conversation with him after the Yule celebrations.

'There's no date for Jesus's birth in the bible, you know, Debbie. It wasn't until years after his death that the Church fixed it in midwinter to bring him in line with the other Sun-Gods.'

'Bleeding hell,' had been Debbie's response. She was genuinely shocked.

And that wasn't the half of it. Apparently Christmas trees, holly, mistletoe, robins, decorations, the whole lot, could be traced back to pagan rituals long before Christianity.

Equipped with these revelations, Debbie Palmer, reincarnated witch, felt she could afford to regard herself as Queen of the crowded Christmas streets, even if she couldn't afford much in the way of presents.

For her mum she chose some fancy soap from Boots and a new flannel because her old one was so disgusting. For Joyce she bought a wooden necklace from Shared Earth because Joyce liked that sort of thing, and for two of the other girls at work she bought Toblerone, because everybody liked Toblerone. That left a little over six pounds for Toby's gift. It seemed a lot, given that she started out with only two tenners, but as the afternoon

wore on and the streets of shoppers grew rowdier and tetchier Debbie began to feel a knot of despair.

At first it had seemed simple enough. She'd buy him a tie; corny, but it seemed to have the right mix about it - not too personal, but then not exactly impersonal, but she couldn't believe the price of them. The only ones she could possibly afford were the polyester ones in the tacky shops full of young office blokes buying their party gear. But they were all too garish and shiny for a bloke of Professor Fripp's standing.

So what about a diary? She popped into the Diary Department of Lewis's and jostled with the other diary hunters who were clearly pissed off with her taking up so much room.

It turned out the diaries weren't much cheaper than ties, and which one would she choose anyway? She could tell what type of person each diary was targeted at by the pictures and diagrams inside, combined with a stab at reading the cover, and there seemed to be a volume aimed at virtually every profession, hobby and proclivity; the Girl Guide's Diary, the DIY Diary, the Budgerigar Breeders Diary, the House Husband's Diary, the Dog Owner's Diary, the Executive's Diary, the Sex Maniac's Diary (Adrian would appreciate that one, but she was bugged if she was getting that dirty sod anything), there was the Civil Engineer's Diary, the House Plant Grower's diary, the Aircraft Modeller's Diary - just about everything except a diary specifically designed for the Alcoholic Academic.

So she looked in the Fancy Goods department at unaffordable leather passport wallets, silver-plated hip flasks, Travel Scrabble and the like.

Then she crossed the street, shoved and jostled all the way by a tide of inhumanity, to the Innovations Shop where all the products were in glass cases like trophies, and pondered whether Toby would fancy a gold plated accupressure clip (just £7.95) to wear on his ear, supposed to cure addictions. She thought not.

WH Smith was so crowded she didn't even attempt entry. The gift department of BHS looked as if it had just undergone an attack by locusts. The Pier and The Sock Shop were bedlam. So next it was up Old Street, past Wicca's World, which appeared to have a small queue outside, then into Edward's Arcade. Now she was walking past seriously posh shops, and her eyes were beginning to swim with confusion. What was she doing here? A pair of handkerchiefs would have knocked her back nearly twenty quid!

Evening was creeping in fast and the Christmas lights in Old Street had come on, putting hellish colours into the faces of the crowd. It had started to drizzle in such a sly, persistent way, it had to be in for the night. Inevitably every other child was crying, and at maximum volume, naturally, to be heard above the general bustle.

Bugger this for a game of soldiers, thought Debbie. She could almost have cried herself. Toby's gift was important. She wanted to get it right, but what could you find worth buying for six measly quid? Bugger all.

Finally as some of the shops began to close, and the streets grew sparser of people, revealing pavements strewn with rubbish, Debbie made a decision. She would just have to break the habit of Christmases past. It was an awful precedent, but she simply couldn't let the Professor go presentless. So in Tie-rack she nicked a silk

paisley number in emerald green and burgundy which she thought would go a treat with Toby's tweedy jacket. Then on impulse she dropped the six quid into the hat of a harmonica player sat in the doorway of the Law Library. He stopped his playing of Silent Night to shout 'Happy Christmas' at Debbie through the drizzle.

'Yeah, Happy Christmas,' Debbie called back a bit reluctantly. She didn't really approve of begging, but it was Christmas she supposed. And now she could almost imagine she'd paid for Toby's tie.

Joyce was touched by Debbie's gift of the beads. 'You shouldn't have done, you shouldn't have done,' she kept saying, lifting them and letting them fall into the palm of her hands with a wooden clacking noise. Joyce had bought Debbie a 1lb bar of Dairy Milk, which they wolfed down together before commencing work.

There had been some attempt by the workers of Speedwell Communications to decorate their offices. Several computer monitors sported a frame of tinsel, which made cleaning them a delicate operation. The desks were covered with cards which either had to be removed and then replaced, or dusted around - either way it was a nuisance.

'It's like everybody gets to take it easy at Christmas except us stupid sods,' grumbled Joyce.

But worse was to come. On Floor Two there had clearly been an impromptu party, and the bins were overflowing with the garish detritus of empty snack packets and lager cans; and there was a stomach turning moment for Debbie, particularly dangerous with $\frac{3}{4}$ lb of Dairy Milk in her stomach, when she discovered a bin

that was a quarter full of vomit, amateurishly disguised with a covering of multicoloured popper streamers.

‘We shouldn’t stand for this,’ raved Joyce, her new beads rattling, ‘It’s totally disgusting.’

‘They’re just bloody pigs,’ agreed Debbie.

‘Animals,’ said Joyce, ‘This kind of filth don’t come within our remit.’

They both looked down at the wastepaper bin full of cold vomit and sodden streamers.

‘I found it, I’ll do it,’ said Debbie finally.

Joyce picked up the bin. ‘It’s Christmas,’ she said, ‘my treat.’

‘All right,’ said Debbie, ‘I ain’t going to fight over a bin of bleeding puke.’

Toby was surprised but pleased with his tie and put it on immediately. Debbie had pictured herself doing the job for him, but it was still a kick to see him wearing the item she had hand-picked in the scrum of Tie-Rack, even though its freshly stolen silky sheen looked at odds with the crumpled grimy shirt he was wearing. It amazed Debbie the way he’d let himself go during Mrs Fripp’s absence. There was a curry stain the size of a ten pence piece below his second button which had been there since before the weekend. However he had been more sober recently, having reverted to drinking wine rather than whisky, presumably in anticipation of his wife’s return.

Debbie sensed she was on borrowed time. The hospital hadn’t yet given a firm date for Stella’s homecoming, but Toby had intimated that it could be any time now. Debbie didn’t want to hear, she didn’t want to think

about it, and to make things even more depressing Toby had told her he planned to stay with his sister over Christmas and wouldn't be back until the New Year.

'Oh,' said Debbie.

'You'll get paid as usual.'

'Ta,' said Debbie dismally.

Toby looked puzzled. 'I'm sorry I didn't get you a present,' he said, 'I'm completely hopeless that way.'

'It's all right,' said Debbie.

'I'll be giving you a bonus today. I'd already planned to do that.'

'Ta,' said Debbie.

'Fifty pounds,' said Toby.

Counting the money at home for the sake of feeling it in her avaricious paws, Debbie wondered if he'd revised his original figure upwards because she looked so miserable. Toby struck her as the type who couldn't stand having unhappy people around if he could do anything about it. And Debbie, to her shame, had to admit it had cheered her up all right. Fifty quid, plus the day's earnings and an advance for the days he was going to be away - it all added up to a very tidy little sum. One hundred and twelve pounds to be precise.

But it wasn't the cash that had really lifted her spirits.

She'd been in the hallway, about to leave, Toby wishing her a Happy Christmas and New Year, when looking up, she saw he was standing directly beneath the mistletoe left from the party.

Well it was Christmas wasn't it? And what else was mistletoe for? This was an opportunity it would have been criminal to miss. Debbie went right up to him, so close her tits were nearly touching his Christmas present,

looked up at him, and said as boldly as her nerves would allow, 'What about a Christmas kiss, then?'

There'd been the briefest of pauses before the Professor said, 'Of course,' then bent and kissed her on the mouth.

His lips had been dry and coarsely textured, the oldest lips Debbie had ever kissed. She reckoned it lasted about five seconds. He'd put one hand on her shoulder for the duration.

Afterwards, Toby had wished her Happy Christmas for the third time.

'Yeah, Happy Christmas,' Debbie replied.

'And see you in the New Year.'

'Yeah.'

'Thanks for all your efforts.'

'Thanks for me bonus.'

'The least I could do.' There was something weird about his smile. 'See you in the New Year.'

Debbie didn't want to leave, but the Professor came and opened the front door for her. As she passed, he laughed abruptly and said, 'We can't carry on meeting like this.' It wasn't just the corny line that didn't sound like him, it was also his voice: as if somebody had taken his nice new paisley tie and pulled it uncomfortably tight.

He stood in the doorway, looking at her. 'Goodbye, Debbie' There was still a restricted edge to his voice.

'Bye,' said Debbie, Happy...'

But the Professor had shut the door.

Debbie celebrated Christmas Day with her mum and a sixteen pound turkey she'd bought with some of her bonus.

'I don't know why you had to go and get such a big bird,' said Mrs Palmer, 'it would feed the street this would.'

'I like a big turkey on Christmas,' said Debbie.

'We never had such a big bird even when your Dad was alive.'

'You're a real ray of sunshine ain't you?' said Debbie, but she didn't mind. She preferred it to her mum getting all sappy with her; her tendency since the dramatic improvement in her legs.

After dinner, until gone midnight, they gorged on TV, with just a break during the evening news to fetch cold sausages, cake and Liebfraumilch.

'The telly's not what it used to be,' said Mrs Palmer around ten-o'clock.

'No,' said Debbie. It was the first time either of them had spoken since their sausage supper.

They watched for another couple of hours, then Mrs Palmer made a demonstrative yawn and announced she was going to bed.

'That was Christmas then,' said Debbie.

'Same as always,' said her mother.

'Yeah,' said Debbie.

'Goodnight.'

'Goodnight, Mam.'

With her mother upstairs, Debbie was drawn to the kitchen by a force as irresistible as gravity. The turkey carcass was in there on the draining board, too big to fit into the fridge. Debbie picked at it, leisurely at first, just

grazing, then gradually began to pull at the flesh with growing urgency. It wasn't often that they had roast meat in the house, and this was an opportunity not to be missed. She tore off a leg, and ripped through the skin to the darker meat with feverishly working teeth, the grease smearing her plump cheeks and sausage-shaped fingers. When the leg was stripped to the bone, she turned her attentions to the breast, pulling off leaves of densely textured white meat, which she thrust into her mouth with such urgency it made it difficult to breath. To moisten the meat she delved deep into the turkey's cavity, hooking her fingers to rake out mounds of sage and onion stuffing which she transferred to the cavity in her face and masticated vigorously, pounding together the meat and the stuffing until her jaws ached. By the time she was fully satiated Debbie was panting from the exertion. She tried to burp and failed, then still short of breath, lit what must have been her seventieth cigarette of the day.

Debbie surveyed the turkey carcass. Still loads left. Perhaps her mum was right about it being too big. Still it was Christmas, wasn't it? Ah, that felt better - she'd finally managed to burp. She'd have to tell Toby about the big turkey, seeing as it was his generosity that made it possible. Just one more fag, then bed. Debbie lit up, inhaled deeply, leaned back in her chair luxuriously and sang softly and sweetly.

'Silent night, holy night
All is calm, all is bright.'

Thirteen

Two days into the New Year Debbie received a card from Adrian. It arrived just as she was coming downstairs in her dressing gown. She could hear the postman swearing at their broken letter-flap, the one she'd been intending to fix for the last two years.

The gaudy coloured card, badly creased, dropped onto the carpet. Debbie sighed, there was only one person it could be from. On the front was the usual fat lady in a horizontally striped one-piece bathing suit saying something to a skinny bloke with an enormous handlebar moustache. She flipped it over. 'Same time, same place, Diff...diff?' Debbie struggled phonetically with the unexpected word. 'Diff...differ...different.' That had to be it, same, different! Yeah. For a while Debbie felt rather chuffed with herself, but this was soon replaced by speculation on what poncey new idea Adrian's had got in his perverted head. She suffered a rush of nostalgia for the time when stockings and suspenders were all it took to get him going. A time when she used to be as keen as he was. Another era.

Over breakfast she wondered whether she could afford to ignore the summons. It wasn't just that she was starting to get a bit bored with Adrian - and had the horrible suspicion he was about to graduate to a literal pain in the arse - it was the fact that she'd had Toby so much on her mind recently and didn't particularly want to soil what she was beginning to think of as their "relationship" with some - at best dreary, at worst sordid - coupling with Adrian

Debbie abhorred problems like these. They made her head feel as if it was stuffed with jumble. But could she really choose not to see Adrian? She knew exactly how much money she had left after going crazy in the sales. Fourteen pounds and thirty pence. It would just about see her through to the next giro, but only just, and there was the milk due next month. Bleeding hell. One day she was going to find a better way to earn some money, that was a promise. She also promised herself she wasn't going to take any crap from Adrian: if he tried on what she imagined he'd got in mind, he could go and stuff himself.

Adrian was late. Debbie sat on the bed in the grim little hotel bedroom. Already she'd looked in every drawer - all empty - closely examined the faded pink flowers on the wallpaper, stared out the window at the two car parking spaces, both unoccupied, listened to a telephone ringing somewhere eight times before it was answered, confirmed the TV still wasn't working, tried to read the Fire notice and decided she was going to give him another fifteen minutes.

Immediately, there was the sound of a car pulling up at the back. Debbie went to the window and saw Adrian's metallic blue Audi, then watched as he climbed out athletically, shutting the door in a fluid movement and simultaneously locking it with his remote key. There was the faintest sign of an incipient bald spot as he strode confidently, long leggedly and immaculately suited towards the back entrance of the hotel. Confusingly, Debbie found her body beginning to stir with desire.

'I hate this city,' said Adrian as he entered the room, so soon after disappearing from Debbie's vantage point it

was as if he'd been spirited up the stairs. 'I was outside the Hyatt ten minutes and they're towing my fucking car away. Fucking morons. I had to beg them to let me off with a fine. Stupid fucking morons.'

Debbie found her libido was in recession.

Adrian tugged at his tie, and undid the top button of his linen shirt. 'I've never known such a petty minded bunch of bureaucratic idiots. What is the point of expending money and effort hoisting a car onto a lorry and taking it ten miles out of town? They'd have cleared the road quicker if they'd just let me drive away. All the bloody idiot would say is "I'm not authorised to take fines, sir." Give me the number of your superior then, I said. "I don't know if I'm authorised..." For fuck's sake, it was like I wanted an audience with the Pope. Fucking morons!'

His irritation filled the room like a static charge.

'He was only doing his job,' said Debbie quietly. It was a comment intended to defuse the situation so that they could get on with what they had to do, but she realised instantly that she'd said the wrong thing.

Adrian looked at her looking up at him from the bed. 'Only doing his job,' he mimicked in a pathetic voice. 'You don't know how lucky you are?' he added with a slight sneer, 'I sometimes wish I was as thick as pigshit. Life must be so much simpler.'

'Do you want to shag or what?' said Debbie, just wishing they could get it over with.

'See what I mean,' Adrian again tried to imitate her voice, 'Do you want to shag or what? That's all you ever have to think about isn't it?'

‘I didn’t come here to be insulted,’ said Debbie uncertainly.

‘My, my, the worm has turned. Don’t try to be assertive, it doesn’t suit you.’

‘Cunt,’ said Debbie.

‘Oh, very good,’ said Adrian, his sneer now fully developed, ‘I’m glad the art of repartee is not dead.’

‘You are, you’re a cunt.’

‘Shut up and get your fucking clothes off. Diverting as it may be, I haven’t got all night to exchange banter with you.’

‘It ain’t worth the bother,’ said Debbie, ‘You won’t be able to get it up anyway.’

‘We’ll see about that,’ said Adrian, and removed a small white tube of something from his pocket which he put down very deliberately on the bedside cabinet.

‘I’m not having any of that,’ said Debbie.

‘You’ll have it and fucking like it,’ said Adrian, and there was a nervous note in his voice which was more frightening than if it had been straightforwardly nasty.

Debbie knew he was strong, but the clamp of his hand on her upper arm still surprised her with its power. Despite her weight, he turned her over with ease.

‘No,’ said Debbie, ‘No, no.’

Adrian had twisted her right arm behind her and pushed it up between her shoulder blades. Debbie could feel him hauling up her miniskirt. His voice had changed again. It had become hot and breathy with persuasion. ‘Come on, Deborah. Be a good girl. I’ll make it good for both of us. I promise. Just relax, Deborah. Relax.’

Downstairs, the manager of the hotel had made himself a cup of weak, milky coffee. They’d run out of cocoa,

and he felt quite stricken by its absence. It was so much part of the nightly ritual. He sat down with the Evening Mail and the ten-o'clock news on low - something about the TUC, the bastards - and took a sip of his coffee. No, it just wasn't the same.

'RAPE ! RAPE!'

The manager paused, he paused with every fibre in his body, the coffee cup nudging his lips. Despite his shock, he registered that it was Tony Blair on the TV now, smiling in a sickly way that exactly matched his own feeling.

'RAPE! RAPE! RAPE!'

He'd hoped he'd misheard, but there was just no doubt this time. It could be a game, though. That was it. They were just fucking around as usual. God knew what those two got up to. They always made enough noise to wake the dead.

'RAAAPE!'

It was no good. That had had an authentic ring of desperation. With no excuses left, the manager shakily levered himself out of his chair, just as Tony Blair said, with uncanny prescience, 'We all have to do our bit...'

Even three steps from the landing the racket coming from Room 2 was quite audible. Bed springs were creaking, somebody appeared to be thumping the floor in a primeval rhythm, and he could hear muffled shouts which suddenly clarified into that one word, 'RAPE!'

The hotel was no stranger to prostitutes and their clients - probably 80% of the business came from them - but they were like Mormons compared to these two.

He thumped on the door and shouted shakily, 'I've called the police, you know.' A lie which he would later consider inspired.

The noises behind the door instantly changed. He heard the posh bloke swearing in a low voice, and heard the fat girl say, quite distinctly, 'You bugger,' and the man reply breathlessly, 'Your accuracy astonishes me, Deborah.' Then there was a lot of scuffling, which he prayed wasn't fighting. He hoped it was the sound of hurried dressing.

Seconds later the door opened, and there was the bloke looking unexpectedly cool and collected. Only a film of dislocation over the eyes and a wrinkle or two in the usually immaculate shirt, told the hotel manager that he hadn't spent the last half hour with his girlfriend discussing the price of Persil.

'Sorry about that,' he said politely, and reached back surreptitiously to close the door, just as the hotel manager caught a glimpse of the fat tart staring fiercely indignant at his back.

'Just something that got a bit out of hand. No damage done.' He delved into his inside pocket and pulled out a slim crocodile skin wallet. The notes inside somehow managed to look even more perfect than notes fresh from a cashpoint. He slid a couple of them out, and offered them to the manager.

'This a bribe?'

A look of resentment crossed the smooth shaved face. 'Think of it as a tip,' he said eventually, 'There's nothing wrong with tipping hotel staff, is there?'

'I'm not staff. I'm the manager.'

'I know, but I can still show my appreciation can't I.'

‘It’s a bribe isn’t it?’

The man lost his temper, immediately, efficiently. ‘Yes of course it’s a bloody bribe.’ The notes began to go back into the sleek wallet.

Quickly the manager held out his hand. ‘It’s all right I don’t mind a bung, but I like to know what’s what.’

‘Jesus,’ said the tall man, and slapped the notes rudely into the outstretched palm, creasing them, making them instantly old and used.

The manager stuffed the money into a trouser pocket and nodded at the closed door. ‘I don’t want to see her in my hotel again,’ he said. ‘You’re all right. You can bring who you like, but not her. I don’t want to see her again.’

The man raised his chin and adjusted his tie. ‘Don’t worry,’ he said, ‘I’ve finished with the bitch.’

‘That’s all right then,’ said the manager and watched as his guest moved swiftly down the narrow stairs.

She was well rid of him. She wasn’t going to think about him, the snotty-nosed perve. She’d concentrate on all the good things in her life, the positive things like you were supposed to do. She ticked off in her head the things she’d got going for herself. There was the Wicca thing – that came first of course. There was Joyce, her best mate. There was her Mum, she supposed. Couldn’t really leave Mum out now she was making such an effort. What else? They’d got a roof over their head. Yes, you had to include that. They’d got food on the table. Essential that. But there was one possibility almost too grim to contemplate. Without Adrian’s money coming in would they be able to afford fags any more? The thought of having to give up was horrific. She’d tried stopping once

and had nearly died. Fucking Adrian. She wasn't going to think about him. They'd get on all right. Something'd turn up. It always did. And as a witch she was surely protected. What about the ceremony in her bedroom when Morgana had sealed her against all evil? But not even Debbie could bring herself to believe its protection extended to saving her from having to give up cigarettes. Just thinking cigarettes made her want one. She reached into her handbag for the packet. Just two left from the twenty she'd bought yesterday evening. She looked in her purse. Good. She hadn't broken into that fiver yet. She'd be alright for smokes for a while at least. Perhaps she could just cut down a bit. Perhaps that would do it. She put one of the two remaining cigarettes in her mouth, cupped her hand around a burning match against the cold January wind, and drew in that first, gorgeous lung-full of nicotine. She deserved it after what she'd gone through the other day with Adrian. A cigarette was a comfort, she thought as she entered her street. Her only vice now. For just an instant, she felt almost nostalgic for Adrian's hard body, then she remembered the way he kept calling her Deborah, the precise pleading intonation as he tried to have his pervy way with her. Sick. That was how she felt all of a sudden, and she dropped the cigarette half smoked at their gate.

As she entered the house Debbie heard a man's voice coming from the back room that wasn't from the telly or the radio. She didn't close the front door in case she needed to make a fast exit. They never had blokes in the house nowadays except for the gas and the electric. Then she heard her mother's voice. 'I know, you'd think they'd do something about it,' she was saying in her

outraged citizen voice. Debbie closed the door and took a deep breath. Perhaps somebody new would take her mind off it all.

‘Hello, love, everything all right.’ The ‘love’ must have been for the benefit of the visitor on the sofa. Debbie put on a smile.

‘This is Tom,’ said her Mother, ‘Tom, my daughter Debbie.’

‘Hello, Debbie,’ said Tom. His face was so profoundly similar to Ted Rogers off Bull’s Eye that Debbie nearly remarked on it.

‘Lo,’ she said.

‘Tom was a friend of your Dad’s . We met, just. Up the High Street.’

‘Haven’t seen each other for ten years.’ The Ted Roger’s face seemed to be seeking Debbie’s approval.

‘More,’ said her Mother turning to Tom.

‘Must be good when that happens,’ said Debbie, trying her best to feel good about it, ‘meeting an old mate.’

Ted Rogers beamed. ‘Your Mum and me go back years,’ he said, reaching over to pat Mrs Palmer’s knee, and Mrs Palmer actually blushed.

‘You know who he reminds me of?’ said Debbie when their visitor had left.’

‘Who?’ said her Mother.

‘Ted Rogers.’

‘Don’t be saft, he’s nothing like.’

‘Is,’ said Debbie.

‘Well, Tom always was strong featured.’

‘He’s all right,’ said Debbie.

‘He is, isn’t he,’ said her mother and looked pleased with herself. Debbie sneaked a look out of the corner of

her eye at this new invigorated version of her Mother. Could she tell her about Adrian? Not the details of course, but enough so she'd perhaps offer a bit of tea and sympathy. Well sympathy anyway.

'Mum..?' began Debbie.

'Yes,' said her Mother cautiously, alerted by a seriousness in her daughter's voice.

Debbie looked away, 'No, it's alright.'

'That's alright then,' said Mrs Palmer.'

Joyce waved a sheet of A4 across the open-plan office at Debbie. 'Isn't this your man, Debs?'

'Eh?' said Debbie, and wandered over through the maze of desks, dragging her vacuum cleaner behind her. The squat, round body of the cleaner had the name Henry on it and was decorated with a smiling cartoon face. It looked a bit like R2 D2 from Star Wars as it trundled behind her. Debbie could almost have been related to it, it could have been her toddler.

Joyce jabbed her finger at the memo she'd picked up from the desk. 'That's your Adrian, isn't it?'

Debbie squinted as she always did when faced with words, and said 'Dunno. Never said his last name.'

'Mus' be,' said Joyce, her accent suddenly very West Indies. 'He Adrian ain't he? He a maaanagement consultaannt.' She drew out the title so mock-grandly that all the bad feelings Debbie had been having were temporarily consumed in giggles. Joyce grinned at her happily, then read in her normal voice. 'To: All female staff. From: Head of Personnel. Subject: Equal Opportunities. On January 8th 6.00pm Adrian Squires and Tanya Hyman of Alpha Strategies will be holding a

seminar in the 2nd Floor Conference Room open to all women staff on the subject of career advancement, with special reference to the knotty problem of sexism. Does it exist in Speedwell Communications? I'm sure you will find this seminar both enlightening and beneficial.'

Joyce opened her eyes wide. 'Ooooh,' she said, 'enlightenin' and beneficial!'

'I 'ate 'im,' said Debbie, suddenly sober again.

'I thought he was your lover boy,' said Joyce, 'your sugar daddy.'

'He's been a real sod. I ain't going to see him no more.'

'What's he been doing, girl?'

'He's real pervy, you know. It's been getting worse and worse.'

'So you going to finish with him?'

Debbie looked down. 'It was him finished with us.'

'Sounds like you're well shot of him.'

'Yeah,' said Debbie, 'but I'm so mad at him you know. He was such a sod. It's worse with these posh buggers.'

'You forget him, Debs. He's not worth the grief.'

'I'd like to get him, you know.'

'How you going to get at a man like that?'

'I just might,' said Debbie.

'Scary,' said Joyce. 'You know that, girl. You're getting real scary.'

Barbie's Ken would just have to do. Debbie held the naked doll in her fleshy fist, and with the other hand picked over Ken's three outfits for the umpteenth time. There was his casual look of jeans and bomber jacket, then there was his disco gear, white trousers, red shirt,

Cuban heeled shoes – bought second hand by her mum from a jumble sale when Debbie was six - and finally his winter-wear: duffel coat, woolly hat, miniature mittens.

Even if she mixed and matched, she couldn't put together anything that would really evoke Adrian; though the regularly featured face, if she ignored the bland smile, was a dead ringer.

Debbie took her black felt-tip and drew a graffiti-type nob and bollocks on the pink plastic, curving up from Ken's smooth virginal crotch, then she coloured the hair black, his colour. Finally she wrote ADRIAN, or in fact ADRAN, across his chest, then held the doll out at arm's length, appraisingly.

The pin was a beauty, knicked from her mum's sewing stuff. It was the kind you found holding shirts together, a good inch and a half in length, with a nice pearl coloured oval shape at one end and a dangerously sharp point at the other.

Debbie looked the doll right in the eyes, staring it out, then when she imagined it blinked, rammed the pin up hard between the legs, right into the tough plastic, giving it a good wriggling for maximum penetration. She turned the doll upside down. Bullseye. Right in the balls.

Was it just her imagination, or had the complacent smile on the doll turned a little sickly?

'You dozy cow,' said Joyce, 'you can't go in there.'

They were outside the conference room on the second floor. Debbie could hear a voice behind the teak veneered door, and even though she couldn't make out the words, it sounded pleased with itself: a voice that would have gone on for ever if you'd let it.

Debbie depressed the aluminium handle and opened the door a crack.

Adrian was standing at the head of the room with his back to his female audience, drawing squeakily and decisively on the whiteboard. There was a blonde haired woman facing the door, pencil in hand, sitting at a desk which she obviously shared with Adrian. Catching sight of Debbie, she smiled warmly, and beckoned to her in a conspiratorial, reassuring way, pointing to a vacant chair towards the back of the room.

‘No!’ said Joyce in a shouted whisper, but Debbie was already in the room.

Adrian had turned from the whiteboard, his arms spread to his audience expressively. Debbie’s eyes went straight to his crotch.

‘...the whole point about a glass ceiling is that it’s supposed to be invisible,’ he was saying. Then catching sight of Debbie, continued, ‘I’m sorry could you clean the room later, we’re in the middle of a seminar.’ He’d neither blinked nor paused as he registered Debbie’s presence.

Everybody in the room, about twenty women, turned in their chairs to look at her. Debbie felt stupid, but she had just had to see if there was any evidence her magic had worked. Apparently not. Now she was going to feel worse than before, she knew it. She heaved herself around in the chair and prepared to leave.

‘Just a minute,’ it was a female voice with the same accent as Adrian’s, ‘isn’t this precisely what we’ve been talking about? The categorisation of individuals within the hierarchy.’

There was a cautious murmur of agreement from the audience.

‘Oh really, Tanya...’ Debbie heard Adrian say.

‘How do you know this woman is a cleaner?’

A pause. Just a beat, then Adrian said, ‘Because I’ve seen her cleaning.’

‘And that disqualifies her from attending this course?’

‘As it happens it does,’ Adrian’s voice had a trace of the sneer Debbie had recently become so familiar with, ‘because the cleaning staff are contracted in. They are not employees of Speedwell Communications.’

Debbie started walking towards the door, slowly, hoping they were too engrossed to notice her.

‘Excuse me.’ It was the woman called Tanya, ‘Excuse me.’ Debbie turned reluctantly. Why hadn’t she listened to Joyce - Joyce who always knew best.

‘What’s your name?’ asked Tanya.

‘Debbie,’ said Debbie.

‘Please feel free to join us if you wish, Debbie.’ She pointed again to the empty chair.

‘I dunno,’ said Debbie.

‘Look, she clearly doesn’t want to,’ said Adrian nastily, ‘You’re as guilty of imposing your own....’

Debbie sat down.

‘Aren’t we keeping you from your work,’ asked Adrian.

‘Finished,’ said Debbie.

Adrian gave her a look which Debbie knew would have been much more vicious if he didn’t have the eyes of twenty other women on him. He took a deep breath.

‘Where were we?’

‘Glass ceiling,’ prompted Tanya.

‘Right, glass ceiling.’ He scanned the room, avoiding Debbie’s eyes. ‘As you know Speedwell Communications is an equal opportunities employer. You’ve probably seen it on the company’s recruitment advertising. That’s why we’re here now. But it’s inevitable that nearly all of you will have experienced incidents of sexism during your time here. No policy, however stringently applied...’

A girl on the front row had her hand up.

‘Yes, Judith,’ asked Tanya.

‘I’ve never experienced anything like that.’

‘I was talking generally,’ said Adrian.

‘The men here are okay,’ another woman nodded just in front of Debbie.

‘Except for Roger Brearley,’ said a middle aged woman, and everybody laughed.

‘No, they are,’ said somebody else, ‘I don’t know if you can generalise.’

Adrian had an expression Debbie recognised. It was the one he always had just before he called her stupid.

‘Of course one can generalise,’ said Adrian, but left the “stupid” off the end. ‘Is there honestly nobody here who has suffered sexual harassment sometime in their career?’

‘That’s hardly generalising,’ said Tanya, ‘and anyway we were talking about sexism not harassment.’

‘No, just a minute, I think this is important.’ There was an edge in Adrian’s voice that warned he was not to be diverted. ‘Is there nobody in the room who will admit to experiencing some form of harassment, doesn’t matter how minor, on these premises?’

Debbie put her hand up.

‘I meant regular members of staff,’ said Adrian. He was suddenly looking a bit sick.

‘You mean Debbie’s out of the reckoning again because she’s only a cleaner. Well you do count, Debbie!’ said Tanya heartily, and there were more spontaneous cheers. Debbie beamed at everybody, and raised her hand a little higher.

‘I think we’ve got side-tracked here,’ said Adrian.

‘It’s your side-track,’ said Tanya, and folded her arms.

‘Now I’m getting harassed,’ he said jokily, looking around the room for support, but it didn’t work.

Everybody simply stared at him.

‘I think if Debbie has anything to say, she should be allowed to say it.’ More cheers.

‘No,’ said Adrian abruptly. But that was all he said, and now everybody was staring at him even harder.

Debbie’s arm was beginning to ache. Adrian had stopped appealing to the rest of the room, and was now staring solely at her with beseeching eyes. A look that didn’t suit him at all.

He attempted a smile. ‘I don’t think we need to embarrass anybody...’

‘Are you embarrassed, Debbie?’ asked Tanya.

‘Don’t think so,’ said Debbie.

‘You’re quite happy to share the story of your harassment with us?’

‘Yeah,’ said Debbie surprised.

‘Well, let’s hear it then.’

‘It were...’ began Debbie.

‘Deborah!’ barked out Adrian, and he was suddenly moving swiftly from the whiteboard, his eyes so fixed on her, his intentions so frantically single minded, he

completely overlooked the corner of the desk Tanya was sitting at. With a soft thud, it caught him on the inside of the thigh, and his momentum twisted him violently around, all the way round towards Tanya and the pencil she was holding in her nicely manicured right hand.

In the next moment Adrian had let out a sharp yelp and adopted a strange crouched position, his hands buried somewhere between his thighs. The pencil no longer appeared to be in Tanya's hand.

It took a moment for Debbie to realise exactly what had happened. Then came a big, crashing wave of elation. That would learn him, that would bloody learn him, the bastard! It had worked. It had worked a bloody treat!

She stood up, and Adrian with gritted teeth, twisted his head to look at her.

'Deborah,' he groaned pleadingly.

Debbie surveyed the little tableau with satisfaction: Adrian crouching, Tanya bending sympathetically towards him with one arm ineffectively draped across his broad back. This was how she would always remember him. His stupid red face.

'Deborah...'

'It ain't Deborah. Never were, never will be,' she said loudly, and strode out of the seminar to a waiting, gobsmacked Joyce.

Fourteen

The mad thing was she'd had no intention of telling them about her and Adrian in the first place, even though their initial coupling had taken place in that very same conference room - in the top right hand corner to be precise, behind the projector screen. But that hadn't been harassment. It had been bloody lovely at the time.

It was only old Frank on night security she'd been going to tell them about - how he pinched her arse, or tried to the dirty old sod - when he was locking up after the cleaning staff. He'd tried it a few times now, but so far she'd always been too quick for him. That was harassment. Some decrepit old fossil after you who should have been past it years ago. Disgusting. But it was funny how if Adrian had known what she was really going to say, the curse wouldn't have worked. It was the idea that she was going to spill the beans about the two of them in front of his posh work mate and all those secretaries that had really put the shit up him. It would have killed him if they'd known he went for the likes of Debbie Palmer. And that was how he'd ended up on the end of Tanya's pencil. Ha! Funny how magic worked sometimes. In mysterious ways.

Tom's hands were skeletal with ochre skin stretched over them, mottled with liver spots. Old hands, scarred from years on the track at Morris, Austin Morris, British Leyland, Austin Rover, Rover Group. It made the way he handled the cards really surprising. With the pack in his hand, he was quick, silky and young.

‘Take a card,’ he said to Debbie, fanning them with the merest shake of his wrist.

Debbie pulled one out. The queen of clubs.

‘Now remember it, Debbie.’ She didn’t like the way he said that, like she was a kid or something. Her Mum must have told him she was thick. But it wasn’t his fault; he was all right, and she didn’t even think of Ted Rogers any more when she looked at him. He was Tom, her Mam’s new man.

Debbie made a show of closing her eyes. Pantomime remembering for his benefit.

‘Put it back wherever you want.’

She chose a place that was neither in the middle nor near the edge.

Tom gave her a smile. Her mum was smiling too, sitting at his side on the sofa. He was confident, she was proud of his confidence. It made Debbie feel safe, safer than she’d felt in their house for years.

He pressed the cards to his forehead, holding them there with one bony forefinger. He had his eyes closed just like Debbie had a moment before.

‘Something’s coming through,’ he said in a distant voice, and Debbie felt a thrill go right through her.

He brought up his other hand to cover his forefinger, to press the pack even deeper into his forehead.

‘There’s a vibration,’ he said, ‘the cards are speaking.’ and his hands began to tremble as if the pack was trying to escape.

Mrs Palmer was smiling proprietorially now and Debbie realises he must have already performed this trick with her.

‘Show yourself, show yourself,’ said Tom, and slowly, infinitely slowly, a card began to rise out of the pack. The queen of clubs.

‘Brilliant,’ said Debbie.

‘That’s real magic,’ said her mother.

When she reached the top of the hill Debbie turned, panting heavily, and looked back down the way she’d come. Some distance away stood her mother and Tom, small figures, huddled together on the escarpment. Tom was pointing towards the city five miles away and Debbie tried to follow his finger, suspecting that he was indicating the area where they live. She could see her Mum nodding.

The path that wound down to them was a snaky depression of cracked soil, deeply gouged from a century of weekend city walkers, though this Monday afternoon there wasn’t another soul around. The car park had been empty when they’d arrived in Tom’s immaculately preserved Austin Maxi. They’d all been a bit reluctant to leave its closeted warmth, its smell of car deodorant and vinyl. The car was being buffeted on its old springs and they could hear the aluminium shutters on the cafe banging away like it was the seaside or something.

But Tom had said ‘Let’s go, gals,’ or something equally daft, and they’d all spilled out into the over-pumped jacuzzi of cold air, laughing and screaming. If it had just been her and her mum they’d have sat there all day, grumbling at each other. Tom made things different.

Debbie looked down. Tom now had one arm round her mum, still pointing towards the sunlit city with the other.

Debbie longed to have somebody with her arm round her like that, feeling the shared warmth.

She walked down into a hollow surrounded by three sparsely branched larches, out of the wind, out of the sight of her mum and Tom, sat down, and reached into a pocket for her pack of Lambert & Butlers. The racket of the wind was all around, but she didn't really need to guard the match with her hand, the grassy basin was that sheltered.

The cigarette smoke rose in a straight, thin stream for the first few inches, then suddenly broke into all kind of random whorls. It made her think of Toby. A good example of Chaos, he'd said.

She ached for Toby. It was daft but there you were. There were some things you just couldn't help.

The emphatic farewell to Adrian had been a beautiful end to a crappy relationship, but it had also brought it indisputably home to her that she had nobody now, and for some reason it had made Toby seem even more inaccessible.

Debbie wrestled the talisman out from her tightly zipped turquoise anorak and pressed it with her mittened hand against her forehead, the silver warm on her exposed skin. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine what Toby must feel like when she applied the talisman to his forehead.

Toby! She willed to have him beside her, right now, and when she opened her eyes was only half prepared to find herself still alone. The grass scratched against the nylon of her anorak. It seemed hopeless, but then again if her improvised voodoo had worked so conclusively on

Adrian, surely she could conjure up something to get Toby.

As soon as Debbie started to think about it though, hate seemed a lot easier than love, more clear cut, as if there was black and then lots of different whites. She thought of hearts and doves, and other such sloppy Valentine stuff, but nothing came that lent itself to a plausible spell.

Alice would know though. She'd seen Alice sell people spells in the shop for all kinds of stuff. Proper spells. Debbie gulped in a draught of clear fizzy air. Her heart was jumping with the sudden realisation of what the future held. Not as a possibility, as it was for most poor sods, but as a sure-fire certainty. With the right spell from the high-priestess, Toby was hers as surely as the talisman was hers. She was in control now. Whatever wanted, she would have.

Debbie stood up with a whoop and the wind instantly snatched her breath, pummelling against the broad quilted sail of her anorak. She hauled herself out of the hollow, her feet slippery on the fine grass, then raced down the hill towards Tom and her mum. With luck they could get to Wicca's World before closing time.

Tom and Mrs Palmer watched with trepidation as Debbie approached them thunderously with spread arms, swooping heavily like a fully laden cargo plane, then spinning like an overexcited child.

'You'll bring your dinner up,' said Mrs Palmer, peeved at the sudden interruption.

'I don't care,' said Debbie, then linked arms with her Mum and Tom, shook them impatiently, and started to

drag them back down the hill, using all her weight against their meagre resistance.



Alice massaged David with stretched fingers, spreading the warm sesame oil between his shoulder blades and up to his neck. She sat astride him, her buttocks on his, leaning forward, feeling her deltoid muscles condense as she pushed hard against his lean back. She liked the way the oil made his skin gleam, made it look younger than it was. She preferred to massage than be massaged. When David returned the favour she would do her best to relax, but the truth was it tended to make her feel claustrophobic.

Perhaps it would be better to be massaged by another woman: David's touch, though gentle - remarkably gentle - was not entirely understanding. She found herself wondering what it would be like to be massaged by, of all people, Debbie Palmer: a perverse idea brought on by the memory of Debbie visiting the shop that afternoon to acquire a love spell. It had opened her eyes to an aspect of the girl she hadn't considered before.

Alice's first thought, entirely unbidden and unwanted, had been that it wasn't right to aid and abet the pursuit of some luckless male by someone so gauche and overweight. She hated herself for thinking such things, but you just couldn't help it. You were conditioned that way. In penance, she'd given Debbie one of the most powerful spells she knew. There'd been other customers in the shop, and she'd had to take Debbie to one side to

whisper the incantation in her ear, (it would have been a waste of time writing it down). With her mouth just inches from Debbie's ear, Alice had the extraordinary desire to bite it, nip it tight between her small teeth - not in a malicious way, nor in a sexual way, but just to taste it.

It was a surprisingly delicate ear, small lobed and softly blushing. For once, shell-like was a precise description - it had that same coral-pink, lightly veined, luminous interior which invited further investigation. At such close proximity, you couldn't ignore Debbie's voluptuousness, and when she'd asked Alice to repeat the incantation it seemed almost obscene to be breathing those evocative words just an inch or so from her hot, fat cheek.

'Ohh, that's good,' David moaned. Alice became aware that she'd lightened her touch considerably while thinking of Debbie. She'd never given him such a delicate, girlie massage. Perhaps he'd been like her all these years, enduring the business rather than particularly enjoying it. She would have preferred something more positive in his touch, more familiar. Maybe he responded to the reverse. She traced a finger down his spine, so lightly it barely touched. David moaned again with unconditional pleasure.

What if Debbie was a better lover than she was?

She had to stop thinking of Debbie fucking Palmer! It was absurd. Debbie could have rehearsed the Kama Sutra inside out, back to front and side to side, but it still didn't mean she could get a decent man. Pity the poor bastard, whoever he was, if that spell worked. Alice dug her thumbs deep into the base of David's neck,

compressing taught sinew till he moaned with something other than pleasure.

‘Stop whingeing,’ said Alice.

It was her man and she’d massage him as hard as she liked.



Debbie opened up the Kleenex carefully. The outside of it had become frayed and grimed at the edges from being in the bottom of her handbag for so long, but the inside unfolded to a soft white rose. In her mind, she was anticipating a neat lock of hair, a crisply snipped item, and the four untidy grey strands she revealed were a bit of a surprise. They were the hairs she’d fished out of Toby’s computer keyboard a couple of months ago, and contrary to her expectations, had nothing the least bit romantic about them.

From a Wicca’s World paper bag she took a stubby red candle, which she lit and waited while the wax began to melt, then tweezering Toby’s hairs between finger and thumb, brought them towards the steady flame and repeated the words of the spell Morgana had whispered in her ear.

‘Thus thy hair consumed by fire, so let thy heart burn with desire.’

The fragile grey hairs wavered for a second against the flame, then without warning crackled and flared up. Debbie had not been prepared for such immediate combustion and scarcely had time to throw the remnants of the hair into the candle without burning her fingers. A

dark, penetrating stench filled the room; it was hard to believe that a few dry hairs could cause such a smell. They lay black, shrivelled and gummy, submerged in the hot red wax, smelling evilly. It was not exactly what Debbie had expected. Even after she had snuffed out the candle the stink of Toby's cremated hair lingered like a presence that had nothing to do with him.

Morgana had told her that after casting the spell, she would sleep and dream of her loved one. The quicker the better as far as Debbie was concerned. She climbed thankfully into bed and turned off the light, screwing her eyes up tight.

After five minutes she opened them. The smell of frazzled hair seemed to be growing in pungency, assaulting her nostrils, and she could swear there were noises coming from the alleyway. She looked across at the window, at its latticed shadow cast onto the flimsy curtains. Was she being daft or was there an unusual, pale glow behind them that was more than moonlight or streetlight? An electric shiver rippled down from her scalp to her spine at the thought the monk might have returned.

She closed her eyes again, but the image of the window remained on her retina. It was hopeless. She would never be able to sleep until she'd made sure.

She threw off the duvet, instantly feeling exposed to all kinds of invisible dangers, and crossed to the window.

He wasn't going to be there she told herself. It was all her imagination, had to be. She was just feeling spooked because of the way the spell had gone. Even as she pulled back the curtain she was preparing to feel a fool when faced with the empty alley.

It was a cool, but not freezing, February night, with a soft light coming through thin clouds, sufficient to illuminate the cowed figure waiting there.

Debbie nearly dragged the curtains from their rail in her desperation to shut them. She backed away into the centre of the room, reaching behind her for support, but there was nothing until she reached the opposite wall. She stood with her back to it for many minutes, staring across at the dimly glowing window. She couldn't bear to look again. She ran for the bed and pulled the blankets up tight around her ears, burrowing her face into the pillow. Blood sounded loud in her head, but behind it the spell was turning over and over, 'Thus thy hair consumed by fire, so let thy heart burn with desire.' She reached for it like a comfort blanket. 'Thus thy hair consumed by fire, so let thy heart burn with desire, thus thy hair consumed by fire, so let thy heart...' She listened to it for hours, not daring to allow any other thought to replace it, before finally drifting off an hour or so before dawn and dreaming of Toby.

Dawn made everything different. Debbie dressed with great care. Dressing to be undressed always took more time. They were clothes she was wearing for the first time – the ones she'd bought in the sales with Toby's Christmas bonus. They were without a spot or stain, virginal crisp, smelling only of themselves, and represented a style departure for Debbie. She'd tried to copy the way Morgana dressed - loose flowing clothes in natural colours of oatmeal, rinsed blue, tabasco. Debbie sensed that such clothes would probably appeal to the professorial type, though she couldn't have said exactly

why she believed that. She was amazed and delighted at the way clothes flattered her, though in a completely different way to Morgana of course.

Even in the sales they had cost a lot more than she would usually pay and they made her remind herself of somebody. Somebody on the telly. A wide hipped black lady. Not a singer. Not a comedian....Winnie somebody.

Underneath she kept to cheap, sexy underwear, though nothing so gross as the stuff Adrian used to insist on. Debbie had great faith in the effect on the male of the species of her generous flesh lashed in and strapped down by crimson and black. The more elastic and clips the better as far as Debbie's was concerned, and though her experience was limited, she had never been proved wrong so far.

Her hair was washed and gelled. Her teeth brushed until the gums bled. She'd gone heavy on the eye shadow and lip-gloss, and had borrowed some of her Mum's Optrex to try to rinse some brightness into her still sleepy eyes. She couldn't have had more than three hours last night, but it didn't really matter. Mentally she was right there, heart thrumming along nicely and anticipating a beautiful day.

It was a beautiful day already. A crisp, efficient winter sun was putting extreme highlights and shadows into the view from the window. Apart from the dustbin and the coloured pegs on their backyard washing line, just about everything in the scene had to be at least a hundred years old, but it was all looking fresh off the assembly line. Even the moss between the bricks on the alley wall gleamed with an Astroturf brightness, making it all but

impossible to believe that anything terrifying ever stood there.

Debbie was not going to think of the monk. Today it was just her and Toby.

She sprayed herself liberally with Opium - another purchase with the bonus - the finishing touch, and sneaked downstairs, quickly shouting ‘Bye Mum,’ before closing the door smartly behind her. If she’d got caught all dolled up and smelling like a brothel (as her Mother would have predictably described it) there would inevitably have been a long, mood-spoiling maternal inquisition.

But she’d escaped. That was exactly how it felt. She was escaping to a new beginning.

Debbie simply didn’t doubt the spell would work. She’d had proof enough of her own powers, added to which Morgana told her that spells using the hair of the loved one had for centuries proved immensely effective.

Toby was hers. Bliss was just a bus ride and a short walk away.

A strange woman answered the Fripps’ door. She was in her forties and had the kind of face that came from a lifetime of taking on a little too much a little too often. Her eyes were underpinned by tired little pouches, her mouth narrow and drawn, her hair grey and distraught. It was a face that could have been the result of too many children, too many men, too big a mortgage, too little Prozac, too much work, too much afternoon TV, too much charity, too much imagination. Who knew? Certainly not Debbie, who had only had time to register that she was a stranger and a woman.

‘Yes?’ The woman appeared to expect bad news.

‘Er...’ attempted Debbie, totally nonplussed now she was off the script.

‘Did you want Professor Fripp?’

Debbie did.

‘I’m afraid he’s rather tied up at the moment. What was it about?’

‘I’m the cleaner,’ said Debbie, managing to recall the ostensible reason for her presence on Toby Fripp’s doorstep.

‘Oh dear, the cleaner. Just a minute.’ With a little flurry, the woman ran back into the house to reappear a minute later with money in her hand.

‘My brother said to give you this. It’s quite impossible today. Mrs Fripp only came out of hospital last night. There are so many arrangements. Could you come next week?’

Debbie realised she must be looking vacant, because the woman repeated more slowly and loudly, as if fighting interference on the line, ‘I said, could you come next week?’

‘Course,’ said Debbie, and watched in disbelief as Toby’s sister gave her a brief nervous smile before closing the door in her face.

Debbie stripped off her new clothes so vigorously she came close to tearing them. She swabbed the make-up from her face brutally, then threw the clothes out of sight into the bottom of the wardrobe. Quickly she got dressed in her usual outfit of old tracksuit bottoms and sweatshirt and stomped downstairs to the kitchen where she constructed a double decker sandwich of bacon, eggs

and ketchup which she chewed meditatively and miserably.

It was her own fault, she shouldn't have got her hopes up so. Spells took time to do their magic, she told herself, thinking of the Adrian incident. You couldn't predict the way they'd operate.

But she still felt jilted. What perfect timing it had been on Stella Fripp's part – as usual. Debbie couldn't help feeling jealous of her and all the attention she was doubtless receiving from Toby, never mind the fact that she was probably not in much of a state to appreciate it.

Why did everything have to be so complicated? Every time she thought things were sorted, along came another brand new spanner to bugger up the works. And to cap it all the monk was back, haunting her like unfinished business. He'd scared the wits out of her last night. For Pete's sake, what did he want? It was as if the love spell had stirred him up, but the spell was clearly meant for Toby, he must have known that.

Could it be the monk was jealous?

Debbie chewed that one over along with the last piece of her sandwich. The idea of the monk being jealous of Toby quite appealed and cheered her up no end. It would also explain Mrs Fripp's return to the world of the living. It wasn't just bad luck after all - the monk had masterminded it, timing her recovery to the minute to block Debbie's access to Toby, to block her spell. A slow private smile spread over Debbie's face.

The monk was jealous.

Suddenly he didn't seem so frightening any more. In fact she began to look forward to the evening.

He came sometime after nine-o'clock. Debbie had been keeping her vigil since nightfall and it was the first time she'd seen his actual arrival. She'd been expecting a sudden appearance, a genie out of the bottle, and it was a surprise to see him coming almost casually down the alley, a shade among the shadows, head bowed deep within his hood. At his approach Debbie threw open the curtains to reveal her cold, naked self.

The monk immediately came to a halt, slowly raising his head. Debbie had grown so used to his presence in the crystal ball, of holding his image in her hands, it was weird to be such a distance from him.

They were like two lonely planets who had suddenly discovered they each had life on them. The angle of his head suggested he was devouring the sight of her, but his passion was so still and concentrated, it was like a burning frigidity. Debbie watched and waited. Watched and waited for what seemed like hours on end. And then suddenly she realised he had moved.

His two hands were at his mouth, palm to palm, in an attitude of prayer or homage. Debbie caught her breath. The tilt of his head had not altered. He was still gazing up at her in her lofty position, and she had the view of him that a figure in a stained glass window would have had of a supplicant in an act of devotion.

The position was held for no more than a few seconds, then he lowered his hands and turned away with what looked like regret, his head bowed beneath hunched shoulders as he moved reluctantly back into the shadows he'd come from.

To Debbie the gesture was plain – it had been an act of adoration. She'd already guessed that the monk wanted

her, but she'd always presumed it was something physical. But how stupid had she been? A spirit like him wouldn't be after her body, it would be something else entirely that would attract the likes of him.

Debbie didn't sleep that night. She kept visualising the figure in the alley and his gesture of devotion, the adoring, worshipful angle of his head, and by dawn her mind was over-awed by the possible significance of it. She dared to think that perhaps she wasn't a witch after all. Perhaps she was something far more extraordinary.

Fifteen

‘You look like death warmed up,’ said Mrs Palmer.

‘You don’t look so bleeding good yourself,’ said Debbie.

‘Age is my excuse. What’s yours?’

‘I ain’t sleeping well.’

‘You sleep like a baby. Always have, ever since you were a baby.’

‘I got things on my mind.’

‘What things? I didn’t have a care in the world when I was your age.’

‘You didn’t have your Mam to support.’

This kind of banter was a ritual performed over so many years that Debbie could go through the motions with very little conscious effort, allowing her cerebrum to dwell on less mundane matters. But then she heard her Mother say something that brought her back to earth with a sickening thud of apprehension.

‘Well I might not be a burden to you for much longer,’ were Mrs Palmer significantly spoken words.

Debbie felt the blood leave her face. ‘What you mean?’

‘You heard. I might not be around much longer.’ Her Mother had a knowing look on her face. The possessor of a secret.

‘I didn’t say you was a burden, Man,’ pleaded Debbie

‘I know what you meant. It’s all right.’

‘But what’s the matter?’

‘Nothing’s the matter, you silly beggar,’ said her Mother, ‘Tom’s simply intimated that I might like to

move in with him.’ There was a note of pride in her voice.

Relief poured into Debbie. ‘Bleeding hell, you don’t hang about, do you?’

‘If you’re going to belittle it...’

‘No, Mam. But it’s a bit bleeding sudden.’

‘You’re invited too.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yes.’

Debbie grinned. ‘He’s a good bloke your Tom. You done all right there.’

Mrs Palmer looked down, performing complicated interlacings with her fingers, ‘He’s more than I deserve.’

‘Don’t be stupid,’ said Debbie, embarrassed. She’d never heard her Mum say she didn’t deserve something before. There was an unusual, unbearable silence between them, which Debbie broke desperately.

‘I could kill for a fag.’

‘Me too,’ said Mrs Palmer, relieved.

But they were both out of cigarettes so Debbie hurried off to the local newsagent on an errand of mutual mercy. Things were happening so fast. A good smoke would help her concentrate, take stock of it all – last night’s revelations, and this morning’s. Debbie hadn’t had her breakfast yet and her belly felt cavernously empty, but at times like these fags came before food.

When she’d left the house the sky had been eggshell blue, rinsed and shiny, but by the time she came out of the shop there were heavy charcoal clouds hanging like filthy washing over the street. Debbie hurried along. She hadn’t bothered with an umbrella, and could feel huge drops of rain, as fat as her thumb, beginning to wallop on

the top of her head, soaking into her supposed-to-be-shower-proof nylon anorak. She shivered. It didn't keep much of the cold out either.

The only other person out on the street was Colin Brain from two doors down. He was walking his slow walk towards Debbie, but the rain hadn't reached him yet. There was a clear line on the pavement where the raindrops start. It was that sort of day.

There was one thing everybody in the street agreed upon. Colin Brain was creepy. 'That weirdo' they'd say, or 'He's mental he is'. Not that Colin appeared to do a great deal to justify this. He didn't have to, his smile and his eyes and his lack of conversation did it all. Debbie would have preferred not to have to pass him on the pavement like this, but she certainly wasn't going to cross the street, she wasn't that bloody pathetic.

Even from fifty yards away though Colin looked odd. First there was his walk. It was as if he was taking one step at a time, as if he was going through a learning process every time he had to lift a foot. He watched the pavement very carefully too, seeming to be suspicious of it, suspecting it might open up in front of him at any moment or a hand reach out and grab his ankle. Yet walking the street seemed to be Colin's only occupation, his only pleasure. You could see him at it at any time.

Then there were his clothes. They always appeared to be the same, yet they never looked very dirty or old, just a couple of decades out of date. His trousers were chocolate brown with a thin, cheap bagginess that belonged to a time before he was born. His shirts had rounded collars, his shoes a spatula shaped toe, and his dark khaki cagoule an almost military seriousness to it.

Colin watched the pavement and Debbie watched Colin as they approached each other. She always said hello to Colin, everybody did for some reason. Over the year, he must have got more hellos than anyone else in the street, but you hardly ever got one back. Sometimes he went sort of 'hmmm..' like he was agreeing with you, and sometimes, and this was the worst, he'd give you that grin of his and fix you in the eye. A maniac.

The rain had reached Colin. Debbie saw his annoyance as he reached back with one hand and pulled the big deep hood of his cagoule over his head, then, obviously feeling the cold, brought his hands close up to his mouth, palm to palm, so that he could blow into them, like he was praying.

Debbie stopped right there in the rain. The horror of it came slowly. Her instinct was to deny it, it just didn't bear thinking about. It made too much difference.

Colin had seen her now, but seemed unperturbed. He just kept plodding on mechanically, one foot, now the other.

It was awful: the slope of the shoulders, the way the hood fell forward in a familiar beak over the face.

The wave of shame that engulfed Debbie was so great it took her breath away. As she remembered all the things she'd performed in front of that window, she felt she could die right there. She wished the pavement would obey Colin's fears and open up right under her.

He was close enough for Debbie to hear him humming to himself. It was not a tune.

Her world was collapsing. If only it had been anybody but Colin Brain!

The humming grew louder. Debbie's eyes were down, fixated by the approaching feet in their strange shoes, by the deliberate walk that didn't seem to propel him forward enough, as if he was treading water. The feet came closer. They slapped down absolutely flat each time, that was what made his walk really weird. Closer. Closer. He was going to walk right past her, the bastard.

'Colin.' Debbie choked on the name, but it stopped him. No doubt it was an unusual experience for him to be addressed by name in the street.

'Colin,' she said again. Now he'd stopped she was lost for words. He was standing sideways on, right in front of her, and had to turn his head almost ninety degrees inside the hood to peer out of a corner of it. It was unnerving. She'd never seen him like this before. Either he was grinning at you or he was ignoring you. But now he was looking almost normal.

'Wasn't me,' he said and waited.

'What wasn't you, Colin?' said Debbie.

'Wasn't me,' he said and the flat intonation was exactly the same as before, as if he'd just pressed Replay.

'You dirty bastard,' said Debbie feeling relieved as fury began to take over, 'I could have you put away for a peeping tom. I bleeding could you know.'

Colin head retracted into his cagoule as smoothly as a tortoise's.

'You filthy bugger.' She started thumping the side of his head and Colin calmly turned away and bent over, giving her nothing but his long back to hit. With no other target, she pummelled at his spine with both fists, close to tears. Colin stayed absolutely rigid, absorbing the

punishment without a sound as raindrops and blows bounced off the stretched canvas of the cagoule.

It was all so useless. Debbie began to sob.

Colin straightened himself. 'It wasn't me.'

'Oh, just bugger off,' cried Debbie, then watched through her tears as he resumed his intent walk. She shouted at his curved back, 'If I catch you again, I'll have your bleedin' balls.'

But the only response from Colin was a low hum.

Tom lit the cigarette like a novice, too deliberately. Everything else about the trick had been slick and professional, but he wasn't not a smoker, never had been. He marvelled at and worried about the number of fags Mrs Palmer and her daughter got through.

But this evening he was suddenly asking Debbie for the loan of a fiver, and a cigarette while she was at it.

The five pound note appeared to go into an envelope that got burnt. Tom pretended it had been a shock, a mistake, and lit the cigarette as if to calm his nerves.

He didn't inhale and held the cigarette like he was Noel Coward or Gloria Swanson or someone. The trick was from another era, a time when everybody except Tom smoked, when cinemas, trains and doctor's waiting rooms stank of tobacco, when people worried more about TB than lung cancer.

'That's not my fag,' said Debbie.

'Shhh,' said Mrs Palmer.

'That's a B&H, I gave him a Lambert & Butler.'

'The transforming power of magic!' Tom improvised, and quickly stubbed out the cigarette, then broke it open to discover a five pound note rolled up inside. Tom read

the serial number with a note of triumph in his voice, even though the trick was lost. Inevitably the number was the same as the one he had seemed to read from Debbie's note.

Mrs Palmer was clapping, and Debbie joined in miserably. How could they act as if nothing had happened? They were so wrapped up in themselves they'd become totally insensitive to others' feelings. It wasn't fair, and it was a stupid trick. The last thing Debbie wanted to think about was magic. Magic of any kind.

Tom leaned forward and reached behind her ear. When his hand went back it had a small cork ball in it, delicately held between finger and thumb. Mrs Palmer increased her clapping and Tom hushed her with a raised palm.

'Finally, ladies, the oldest magical trick in the world. The famous Cups and Balls, or le Jeu des Gobelets as our French cousins call it....'

In the ground floor women's toilet at Speedwell Communications, Joyce lit a fat cigarette and offered it to Debbie, who shook her head.

'What's the matter with you?' said Joyce, 'This is a good herb. Debs, I tell you, you need something. Can't always do it on your own. Is it some fella?'

Debbie leaned against the wall, looking at her feet, and shook her head.

'Your mom?'

Debbie shook her head.

'Your mom's fella?'

Debbie shook her head.

‘Do you have to be so literally dumb?’ said Joyce, ‘c’mon, Debs, you can tell me.’

‘It’s nothing. It’s stupid.’

‘Yeah? Tell me what’s stupid.’

‘It’s like I’m nothing, you know?’ said Debbie suddenly, ‘A thick, fat nothing.’ She blushed.

‘Is that all,’ said Joyce, ‘Jesus, I feel like that all the time.’

‘No you don’t,’ said Debbie, ‘Not like me. And you ain’t fat. Nor thick neither.’

‘Do you think I’d be doing this job if I wasn’t,’ said Joyce, ‘Let’s face it, Debs, neither of us is going to win no Krypton Factor, is we?’

Debbie shuffled her feet. ‘I thought I had something. But I got it wrong. You don’t know how wrong.’

‘You talking about your magic, girl.’

‘Yeah.’

‘You discovered you don’t have the power after all?’

‘It was all rubbish. I was just kidding myself.’

‘You believe what you want to believe, Debs. Nobody can take that from you.’

‘Someone did.’

‘Who?’

‘I can’t tell you. Really I can’t.’ said Debbie sadly.

‘You sure?’

‘Sorry.’

Joyce held the fat cigarette towards Debbie ‘Sure you won’t finish this for me? It could be just the magic you need right now.’

‘Nah, I’m all right.’

‘Sure?’

‘Yeah,’ said Debbie, but looked so pathetic Joyce immediately took her in her arms.

Debbie put the crystal ball into a good strong Aldi carrier bag along with her witch’s cord and garter, her black handled knife, her white handled knife and the semi-consumed red candle that she’d used in the love spell.

Only the talisman remained. She held it in the palm of her hand, its chain still around her neck. The silver looked dull, almost pewter coloured; the amethyst could have been tinted perspex. But it had always looked that way, she knew now that the genuine article didn’t always look the way you would have expected. The cheaper item sometimes appeared the more expensive to an untutored eye.

Her hands went to the chain. The talisman was the most expensive thing she’d ever stolen. That’s right - stolen, nicked, lifted, pinched, half-inched, thieved, burgled.... it wasn’t hers, never had been, and Alice and David, or Morgana and Vulcan or whoever they thought they are, were welcome to have it back.

Debbie let the talisman fall. It swung out from her neck annoyingly as she bent to lift the carrier bag. With a grunt she heaved the bag up, and pushed it to the back of the shelf so recently liberated by the disposal of Adrian’s gifts. She felt no better for having put away her occult belongings, but neither did she feel any worse.

Debbie got off the bus and headed for Old Street, for Wicca’s World. The January Sales had finished two weeks ago yet the city centre still seemed abnormally crowded, made worse by a great deal of building work.

Scaffolding had narrowed the pavements, and she could see that other pedestrians observed her approach with either trepidation or annoyance. She always stopped and turned sideways to let people pass, but it was still a squeeze.

‘Fat cow,’ she heard as two respectable fifty-something women got through; the words emerging from a jumble of talk, passing traffic and general city hubbub. Impossible. She had to be imagining it, like seeing objects in clouds... yet it still depressed.

Old Street was better: broad and traffic free, this was where the street performers gravitated. Lunch was imminent and they were out in force ready to catch the office trade. Debbie had passed a fire juggler, a saxophone player and two fiddlers before she was half way up the street. These were interspersed with those who just sat on the sidelines intoning, ‘Any spare change, please? Any spare change, please?’ all day long. In Debbie’s book the latter had always been scroungers whereas the performers were at least singing for their supper, sometimes literally. But today she couldn’t be bothered with such fine distinctions. She couldn’t be bothered with much at all. It had been an effort just catching the bus.

Further on she passed two market researchers, both dressed St Michael smart and holding clipboards. Unlike the beggars and performers, they never tried to catch her eye. In fact they often turned the other way when they saw her coming. They could assess with a practised glance that Debbie was neither A, B nor C, and barely D: her opinion was worth about as much as that of the grey faced boy throwing up firebrands at the end of the street.

At last Debbie reached Wicca's World. She didn't want to go in. She didn't want to have to explain and get a smart, reasoned argument back for her pains. Above the window display she could see Alice's head, its neat, petite profile bent at an exact angle of attention as she listened to a customer. It was the angle it would inevitably adopt when Debbie tried to explain why she'd decided to leave the coven.

Debbie's hand went to where the talisman lay beneath her coat, and pressed it one more time against her chest. This was where it began, this was where it would all end. She opened the door to the little shop and heard Morgana saying, '...or you could have it ring-mounted for £79.99.'



Alice held out the two gems in her small hand and indicated the first one, a mutton-fat jade about the size of a small jersey potato. There was a fish design, resembling a pike, carved in relief on the milky coloured surface.

'The fish represents long life and a natural fertility of spirit. That one is £29.99,' said Alice, then pointed to the other stone. The soft pink of her fingernail varnish contrasted nicely with the translucent green of the small polished gem.

'This is also jade, a lot smaller but not a lot less expensive I'm afraid.' The customer, a tense looking red-haired woman, laughed. Alice smiled at her. She'd been deliberately brisk, knowing it could set certain

kinds of people at ease. She knew now what the woman would buy.

‘This is the rarer jadeite. The gem on its own would cost you just under forty pounds, or you could have it ring-mounted for £79.99.’

The shop doorbell jangled.

‘The advantage of the ring of course is that you can have it close to you all the time and get continual benefit.’

While the nervous woman pretended to ponder, Alice glanced up at the new customer, except that it wasn’t a customer, it was Debbie Palmer. Alice gave her a quick smile, then returned her focus to the pondering woman before Debbie had a chance to interrupt.

The ring is 9 carat sterling silver and the setting is done by Golding and Berry in the Jewellery Quarter.’

‘Yes, I think the ring,’ said the customer woman in an emphatic voice.

‘Right, if I could just measure you...’ said Alice.

It was some minutes before she could finally attend to Debbie. How ill she looked thought Alice. Her skin, which was normally lit pink beneath the surface, had become a perfect swatch for the mutton-fat jade stone.

‘I want you to have this back,’ said Debbie without any preamble and removed the talisman from her neck, holding it out with the chain pooled in the palm of her hand.

‘Why?’ Alice was genuinely taken aback.

‘It’s yours, ain’t it?’ said Debbie sulkily.

‘We agreed, Debbie, it’s yours by right.’

Debbie seemed to swallow hard. 'There's no monk,' she said, 'never was,' and put the talisman firmly down on the counter.

Then Alice watched, stunned, as the girl collapsed in front of her. She went down neatly, gracefully; her legs wavering briefly, her eyes swivelling upwards before closing. The big body subsided with the languid elegance of a collapsing marquee and before Alice could catch her Debbie was lying on her side looking strangely comfortable on the rough floorboards.

'Oh God,' said Alice. She put two hands under Debbie's armpits and heaved. 'DAVID! DAVID!'

David came rushing out from the stockroom.

'It's Debbie, she's collapsed,' cried Alice, breathless from her struggles.

David stood looking stunned. 'How?'

With a final effort, Alice managed to turn Debbie onto her back.

'Help me, David,' she pleaded, struggling to undo Debbie's heavy coat whose big buttons were tight across her stomach and chest. Her husband rushed to join her, and together they pulled and tugged at the awkward buttons with such frantic strength they could have been attacking the body on the ground rather than helping it.

The door bell jangled, and a customer came in half way, then froze and watched wide-eyed for a second or two before turning away.

'Call an ambulance,' shouted David after him, temporarily forgetting the phone in the shop. They had the coat open now, and David leaned forward impulsively to put his ear to Debbie's heart.

‘No wait,’ interrupted Alice ‘I know what it is,’ and she seized the talisman from the counter, unravelling the long chain. She pushed David out of the way, then lifted Debbie’s head and slipped the chain over it.

‘Shall I call an ambulance or what?’ said the frightened looking customer from the doorway, just as Debbie opened her eyes.

‘Oh,’ said Debbie, blinked twice and then got up abruptly, swaying slightly. ‘I fainted.’

‘Is she all right?’ queried the customer cautiously.

Debbie looked down at herself and nodded.’

‘Good grief, Debbie,’ said Alice, ‘you gave us such a fright.’

‘S’alright. I used to faint at primary school. All the time.’ Alice found herself wondering if it was anything to do with Debbie’s weight, whether it was a case of not enough blood to go round. Her face did look desperately pale.

‘You could use some fresh air,’ said Alice firmly, ‘come on.’ And she took Debbie’s arm, leaving David to serve the shaken customer.

They walked up Old Street and into Gladstone Square.

‘How are you feeling?’ asked Alice.

‘All right, honest.’

They walked on a few more yards, slowly. Shoppers flowed round them briskly, but Alice felt as if she and Debbie were in a separate invalid world. ‘I want you to have the talisman,’ she said, ‘there are to be no arguments.’

Alice saw Debbie touch the amethyst briefly with her fingertip. The eye caught the sun and flashed a complicated semaphore as it swivelled on its chain.

‘All right,’ agreed Debbie, albeit a little reluctantly. She seemed to have forgotten she’d ever removed the talisman. They reached the City Hall Square and sat down on the steps by the fountain’s waterfall. Debbie immediately folded her body in two, insofar as she could, letting her head droop onto her chest. ‘It’s what you have to do for fainting,’ she explained as if she had access to some arcane knowledge. Perhaps it was just physical after all, thought Alice, and nothing to do with the removal of the talisman.

They sat in the sun and watched the water slide across the broad stepped granite. It sparkled and glittered, gurgled and chuckled just as it was designed to do.

Then Debbie said abruptly above noise of it all, ‘You know that monk?’

Alice waited while Debbie appeared to gather strength.

‘He was this nutter from up our street,’ said Debbie in a rush. Then, almost so quietly Alice couldn’t hear her above the sound of water, ‘A peeping Tom’

‘Oh, no!’ said Alice. Her doubts about the monk’s authenticity had been growing steadily over the last few months, but it was still a shock. And the matter of fact way Debbie said, ‘nutter’ - it was enough to make you shudder more than the thought of any spectre.

‘It were Colin Brain,’ said Debbie, as if that explained everything.

‘It would have been a remarkable phenomenon if...’ began Alice.

‘Thing is, I don’t believe in any of it any more,’ persisted Debbie, ‘I’m sorry, I just think it’s a lot of rubbish now. So you needn’t bother about me any more. I shan’t be coming again.’

‘But you had - have - such innate abilities, Debbie.
You can’t waste them like this.’

Debbie looked down. ‘Yeah, well...’

‘Your healing...’

‘Mam was psycho...psychosomatic, that’s all’

‘Your scrying.’

‘I don’t know. It was just seeing things. They never meant nothing really. None of it came true. There’s been lots of stuff I haven’t even told you about, and none of that came to anything neither.’ Debbie was staring straight forward across the square. ‘That love spell didn’t work. I ain’t even seen him since.’

Alice took a deep breath. ‘Magic isn’t a mechanism you can turn on and off like a computer, Debbie. It’s a part of the unseen forces of nature. Sensitive to all kinds of things.’

‘S’pose.’

Morgana’s arm described a graceful arc that embraced the blue sky over the square. ‘Your spell is in the atmosphere now, it’s a part of the air we breathe. Eventually it will do its best, trust me. But it will do it subtly. In its own time. Please be patient for me, Debbie.’ Alice put her hand on Debbie’s. It felt very cold.

There was no reply, and Alice sat in silence for a while, listening to the waterfall and feeling the cool, atomised moisture against her face, assuming Debbie must be feeling it too.

At the bottom of the waterfall was a stone pool with a small, splashy fountain in it, and either side of the fountain knelt the statues of a boy and a girl staring into each other’s eyes. Alice passed the statues every day, but

this was the first time she'd really looked at them. The eyes without pupils, the calm, bronze mouths gave them a beatific expression. They were like a pair of slim, sexy buddhas.

Alice and Debbie were sitting so close to each other that when Debbie shivered Alice shared it as a faint vibration against her shoulder.

‘Cold?’

‘Yeah,’ said Debbie, ‘a bit.’

Alice looked intently at the younger woman. The hopelessness was radiating from Debbie in practically visible waves - waves that were so irresistible to Alice they could have been magnetic. How could she ever have been jealous of Debbie Palmer?

They sat together in silence for a while, listening to the falling water, observing the sun yellowing the sculptures, feeling the fresh chilled air that, to Alice, seemed as inspiring as Perrier.

Knowing she might never see Debbie again was already filling Alice with sweet nostalgia, and she knew she would always remember the moment they sat together on the steps by the waterfall. Briefly, she wondered if she ought to persuade Debbie out of her decision. She suspected it would be easy enough for Morgana, high priestess, to play to her novice's vanity, use Debbie's insecurity as a lever and recharge her with dreams of influence and magic.

But perhaps it was better if Debbie moved on. She had never really fitted properly into the coven environment, even though Alice believed - still believed, despite the revelations about the monk - that Debbie had more psychic gifts than any of the other people in the coven.

She may well have been a genuine rarity, but as high priestess you had to think of the good of the community. Alice had a responsibility to all her coven.

She looked once more at Debbie. The sun was full on the pale, rounded face and Debbie's eyes were screwed up against its brilliance, giving her a thoughtful, almost intellectual look. The city clock struck one.

'I'd better be going,' said Debbie.

Alice moved her hand to one of Debbie's flattened thighs. She felt only love now for this big, strange woman. 'Are you all right?'

'Yeah, don't worry about me.'

'Take care, and if you're ever passing...'

'Yeah, thanks.'

The square had begun to fill with lunchtime people, marring the intimacy of the moment. Of course, Alice could have taken Debbie back to the shop. She doubted if Debbie would put up much resistance, but instead Alice found herself saying quietly and finally, 'Look after your talisman. It will bring you luck.'

'Hope so,' said Debbie sadly, and stood up with something of a struggle. Alice rose slowly to her feet beside her.

'Bye, then,' said Debbie, looking down.

'Bye,'

Alice watched as Debbie plodded down the steps, past the sexy Buddhas, avoiding the girl selling *The Big Issue*, and on into the crowds of Old Street.

Back at Wicca's World, Alice hugged David and told him they wouldn't be seeing Debbie Palmer again. When she told him about the monk turning out to be a peeping Tom it was initially an embarrassing moment for both of

them, because they'd both believed in him at first, but then they started remembering the evening the whole coven had stripped off for Colin Brain's benefit, and despite themselves were choking back the giggles.

'He must have thought he'd hit the jackpot,' spluttered David.

'I think we terrified him.' gasped Alice.

When they'd sobered up, David asked seriously, 'So what will happen to Debbie?'

Alice didn't really want to think of Debbie's future. She was already a pleasant and interesting memory, but she said, 'She'll be alright, I'm sure. She's a survivor, Debbie Palmer. I have the feeling someone's looking after her. Do you know what I mean?'

After considering the question carefully, David said brightly, 'Yes, I think you're right, Ally.' And then to the relief of both of them, a customer needed serving.



Tom and Mrs Palmer got into the Montego, watched by Debbie from the door of the house.

Mrs Palmer wound down her window and called, 'Remember, if you change your mind...'

'Don't worry, Mam. I know.'

Tom leaned across Mrs Palmer. 'You're welcome anytime, Debbie, and I mean that most sincerely.' The last bit was done in a funny accent: an impression of somebody Debbie couldn't place. She saw her Mum give Tom a good thump. They were both laughing now.

‘Thanks,’ said Debbie, in a voice probably not loud enough to carry as far as the car.

‘Well, cheerio, love.’ shouted her Mum as Tom turned the ignition.

‘Ta ra, Debbie,’ called Tom.

And off they went, her Mum waving vigorously all the way to the end of the street, watched by a less enthusiastically waving Debbie and a rigidly disapproving Mrs Doyle across the road. Mrs Doyle considered herself invisible behind her net curtain, but Debbie had observed her actually pull up a chair by the window when they had started loading her Mum’s bits and pieces into the car. As Tom and her Mother disappeared round the corner, Debbie allowed her waving hand to turn towards the Doyles’ house, casually forming a V with two fingers. She saw Mrs Doyle almost fall back off her chair, but there was no particular triumph for Debbie. It was an empty gesture. Just something which had to be done.

Sixteen

The house was different, very different, and it wasn't just the disappearance of a toothbrush from the bathroom, two coats from the hook in the front room and three family photos from the top of the telly which had caused it. Her Mum hadn't taken much, but her departure had transformed everything, her absence penetrating right to the corner of each room, even into the cupboard space under the stairs.

For an hour after they'd left, Debbie wandered ceaselessly around the house, opening doors, circling rooms, closing doors, pacing the length of the house, upstairs, downstairs. It was as if she was trying to fill it with human presence; she would have liked to be in each room simultaneously. She couldn't remember ever feeling so alone.

But it had been her choice. And Tom's house was only a mile away for Pete's sake. She only had to say and she'd be welcomed with open arms and Tom's good home cooking. She had to be stupid wanting to stay in this crappy house on her own. But that was it, she was stupid. That was what Mam had said when she first proposed it. Or what she had said exactly was: 'You daft 'aporth.' What on earth was an 'aporth? At least she wouldn't have to suffer that kind of language every day.

She'd looked forward to being alone for a bit, but now she was hating it. It was terrifying. When she opened a cupboard in the kitchen, the door's hinges made a terrific noise, over-defined and self assured, as if to say 'this is

our house now', the inanimate things had taken over. Debbie reached to the back of the cupboard for a packet of custard creams, and it felt like theft. Back in the living room she sat down with the biscuits and the telly.

Zap, zap, zap, she went through the channels. Munch, munch, munch through the custard creams. The TV seemed less friendly somehow. It used to be like an old mate, sitting there in the corner, now it was more like she'd invited somebody in off the street, desperate for company.

Debbie decided to do something she rarely did voluntarily: go for a walk.

She made her way to the nearest park, half a mile away. Apart from a few young mums who'd come with their kids to feed the ducks, it was full of unemployed blokes, looking guilty because it was a nice sunny day with a hint of spring in it and nature was hard at work even if they weren't. They furtively eyed the Mums with the loud, excited kids feeding the equally excited Canada geese. Nobody looked at Debbie though, bundled up in her big old coat, and she was pleased about that. She found an empty bench by the duck pond that got the full dazzle of the low sun and closed her eyes. She sat there until it started to grow frosty and dusky, then got up and walked the half mile back home. By the time she reached the front door of the empty house the street lights had come on and the air was harsh and wintry in her nostrils. 'I wish I was somebody else,' thought Debbie, not for the first time in her life, but this time with such longing, such explicit desire, she almost said the words out loud. If she had they would almost certainly have been heard by the person who'd just arrived opposite her gate on a

push bike. Debbie heard the sound of squeaky brakes, the scrunch of a tire in the roadside grit behind her.

‘Debbie?’

She knew who it was without turning. There was no mistaking the friendly, ever-so-slightly hesitant note of Toby Fripp’s voice.

His body didn’t seem to have enough substance or colour to it. It came as a surprise. She straddled him, squatting on her haunches, burning on one side from the fitfully roaring gas fire, freezing on the other from the cold draughts squirting through the badly fitting living room window. She sensed she had to take care. Toby’s body had the feel of something rather creakily assembled, an imperfect arrangement of bones, flesh and skin that would be ready for an overhaul if it were factory made. The skin was not a perfect fit, and even in the gaslight showed blemishes, little rucks and tucks, cratered pores, and sudden, surprisingly long grey hairs that possessed a wiry vigour at odds with the body they sprang from.

‘Ahhhh!’ he’d moaned when Debbie had pushed his penis inside her with two fingers. It hadn’t felt quite erect, there was an uncertainty about it, yet he’d caught his breath sharply as if the pleasure was intense.

He felt nice inside her, but it wasn’t the kind of lovemaking she was used to. This was more like relaxation than passion.

She stared down at him. His eyes were closed. His mouth half opened. He looked tired.

‘This all right?’ asked Debbie. She was somewhat distracted by mild cramp in her thigh muscles from

having to support her weight. She suspected Toby would have been quite happy to stay in this suspended state forever. Very gently she started to move, down then up, feeling the point at which he is about to leave her.

‘Wonderful,’ said Toby, and reached up with two hands and moulded them to her breasts. The talisman swung between his cupped hands. ‘You lovely big woman.’

Debbie closed her eyes. ‘Say some more,’ she said.

‘This doesn’t seem real,’ said Toby afterwards.

He was staring up at the ceiling with glazed eyes, looking terribly naked.

Debbie watched him, sitting on the floor with her back propped against an armchair and smoking a cigarette.

‘Perhaps we shouldn’t of,’ said Debbie.

‘No, it was fine,’ said the Professor, a little too quickly. He finally looked across at Debbie and smiled at her - not his usual smile somehow.

‘Pass me my jacket will you, there’s a bottle in the pocket.’

Toby unscrewed the half bottle of Jameson and drank deeply.

‘It weren’t a good idea,’ said Debbie.

‘Don’t be silly,’ said Toby in an uncertain voice.

They smoked their cigarettes and drank their whiskey with a concentration that implied the sex had been merely the appetiser to a main course of alcohol and nicotine.

Debbie inhaled deeply and looked into the uncertain glow of the old gas fire. ‘Thus thy hair consumed by fire, so let thy hear burn with desire,’ she recited to herself.

‘What’s that?’ asked Toby.

‘I put a spell on you,’ said Debbie. ‘I didn’t think I believed in spells no more.’

‘A spell? What kind of spell?’

‘A love spell of course. I got some of your hair and burned it in a special candle and said the spell.’

‘And you really believe that’s why I’m here?’

‘Don’t know anymore. I’d given up all that stuff but perhaps Morgana were right about it taking time. ‘Cos you’ve come in the end haven’t you?’

‘I just had to get out of the house, that was all,’ said Toby, ‘It’s so difficult with Stella.’

‘Oh,’ said Debbie.

‘It’s absolutely tragic. We have to do everything for her. Feed her, bathe her, put her to bed. She can’t remember a thing. I have to keep reminding her who I am. Soon we’ll have to start teaching her to read, how to dress, everything you take for granted. We’re starting from scratch, absolute zero. She’s just like a baby, but without the charm and the manageable size.’

Debbie tried to picture Mrs Fripp as a grown-up baby with a slobbering mouth, runny nose and half masticated-food down her front. It was too awful to contemplate, she’d always been the furthest from a baby an adult could get. The curse couldn’t have done any worse if it had killed her. Except... she wasn’t supposed to believe in curses anymore, was she?

‘I know I should feel sorry for her,’ Toby was saying, ‘and I do. But it’s just not Stella really. I had to get out. I was cycling for hours. I can’t even remember where. Found an off-licence and I was on my way back when I saw you.’

Debbie didn't know what to think. Could that really be how the spell had worked? It seemed so ordinary.

'You don't believe in magic do you?' she said to Toby.

'Not in the way you mean.'

'How then?'

'Some people might think it pretty miraculous that a butterfly clapping its wings in Japan can cause a tornado in Florida.'

He'd explained the butterfly theory to Debbie before and at the time she'd thought she'd grasped it, but it was beyond retrieval now.

Toby sighed - a kind of apology for what he was about to say - 'I just don't think I can accept that a couple of lines of verse can drag me over to your house and into your bed.'

'We're not in my bed,' said Debbie, somewhat hurt despite her own current agnosticism.

'I was speaking metaphorically.'

Metaphorically. It was a word Debbie had heard often, and she suddenly realised she knew what it meant. 'In bed' was another way of saying 'screwing'. They didn't have to be actually in bed.

'D'you like me?' tried Debbie uncertainly.

'You must know...'

'But do you?.'

'I like you, Debbie.'

'Yeah.'

'I do. You have many qualities.'

'Yeah, I'm thick. I'm fat. I smoke forty a day.'

'Well I'm old, cowardly, an alcoholic.'

'You're clever. You're rich. You could stop drinking if you wanted.'

‘You’re kind. Hardworking. Honest. Pretty. And you could stop smoking if you wanted.’

‘No I couldn’t, I’ve tried.’ She was actually concentrating on the word ‘Pretty’.

A glance to the side and she could see the goosebumps on Toby’s thigh in the orange light from the gas fire. They were sitting a foot apart on the scraggy hearth rug, their faces and chests burning, their backs freezing.

It was peculiar having him there. She kept expecting her Mum to come in any moment, but it was more than just his presence in the house that was out of kilter, there was something so fundamentally wrong she felt as if they were breaking the law. There had to be a clause against this. It was a pairing that couldn’t possibly be right anywhere, except in a dream, a fantasy, or in the depths of the deluding crystal ball.

Toby was too big for the room, he had crossed his legs but his knees were up by his chin, it was that cramped. The house had been built for Victorian working bodies, stunted from too much graft and not enough grub, a dwelling for pit ponies, not thoroughbreds.

They sat twelve inches apart and the gap was terrific. It was nothing like she’d imagined it was going to be.

Debbie had always assumed that to sleep with Toby, with Professor Fripp no less, would be the beginning of something that would change her life. It would be the jackpot in an emotional lottery. The idea of her and Toby in each other’s arms was so extraordinary, so audacious, that she was sure there had to be extraordinary consequences if it ever came to fruition.

And now it had, and nothing had really changed. Except that, if anything, she was more confused than

ever. It seemed her spell has worked, sort of. But it didn't feel like magic. Looking at Toby's goosebumps, his reddened ankles, smelling his middle-aged smell mingled with the fags and the whiskey and the gas, it felt like nothing more than real life.

Debbie leaned her body until her flesh padded shoulder was touching Toby's bony one. It only served to emphasise the gap between them, but there was something pathetically comforting in it too. It helped her say what she knew she had to say.

'You needn't worry,' she began, 'it weren't your fault. It were bound to happen I think, whatever you say. And I shan't bother you no more. I know another girl what can do your cleaning.' She paused. 'Cheaper than me.'

'Come on, Debbie. Don't be stupid. It was nothing.'

'I thought it was going to be something.'

Toby took a while to process this. Then shook his head, 'I'm sorry,' he said, 'I'm terribly sorry.'

'Yeah,' said Debbie, 'I got a lot of people feeling sorry for me.'

It was as if Toby hadn't heard. 'Surely things are going to be a bit difficult, aren't they,' he said, 'without the Fripp weekly pay packet coming in?'

'I'll manage. Always do.'

'It's ridiculous sacrificing yourself like this over...well, you know...'

He grabbed another gulp of whiskey, then held out the bottle to Debbie. 'Want some?' Debbie shook her head.

'How does one live without drink?' he asked rhetorically, desperately changing the subject. 'I've forgotten how.'

‘You’ll bleeding kill yourself, you will,’ said Debbie, relieved herself to get onto a different tack, ‘You going to ride that bike back tonight?’

‘You really care whether I do or not, don’t you?’

‘Course I care. You can’t just stop loving someone just like that.’ Debbie stalled at the end of her sentence.

Toby paused. ‘No,’ he said finally.

While Debbie lit another cigarette, Toby took another mouthful from the bottle. The roar of the gas fire suddenly sounded very loud. It had become quite companionable in the little room. They were down in the trenches together, manning the barricades, on night watch at the gates; united against some common foe, unseen and unnamed.

Debbie waited until she’d finished her cigarette, savouring the smoke and the brief closeness, before making herself say, ‘You’d better go, Professor.’ It sounded like a line out of a film. Nothing like her at all, and she was glad it had come out that way.

Without another word they both stood and dressed themselves, then made their way quietly to the front door. It was a chilly night outside with a clear sky.

‘You be careful,’ said Debbie as she followed Toby out to his bike. Before mounting it, he bent forward and kissed her briefly and softly on the lips. Both their lips were still dry and hot from the fire. Debbie shuddered.

At the end of the street Colin Brain was pacing out the paving slabs.

Toby followed her stare. ‘Someone you know?’

‘Just some nutter,’ said Debbie, but Colin Brain had disappeared, just like that it seemed.

Toby lifted a leg stiffly over the bike, and felt with his foot for the pedal. She watched him wobble away, looking older, almost an invalid on the machine it seemed he'd never properly mastered; going home to a wife who had to be spoon-fed like a baby.

It was the second time that day Debbie had stood outside watching till somebody rounded the corner of her street. She didn't go straight in this time though, but stood gazing thoughtfully at the empty road for a while, letting the cool air blow across her flushed face.

'I wish I hadn't said I loved him,' she said to herself, just before turning for the door, 'I don't know as I did till I said it.'

After the street, the room seemed overheated. But Debbie didn't turn off the fire or switch on the light. The nearly empty bottle of whiskey, the stuffed ashtray, the scrumpled rug, would have looked unbearably desolate in the glare of electric light. As it was, in the rosy gloom, there was a kind of sweet sadness to be returning to this tableau of partly satiated desires.

Debbie sat down in her Mother's armchair. After a while, she reached for the bottle which had about two inches of whiskey left in it, and put the neck to her nose. The smell was warm and honey-sweet, one of the notes in Toby's odour, and when she drank it was as if she was partaking of him all over again. A quiet communion. Her last.

She drank the bottle dry, and at the end of it felt very calm, more relaxed than she'd been for weeks - all the clutter had been cleared, the debris hoovered away. There was only her now, and she didn't want anything

more. She'd been driven by desire for far too long. Ever since stealing the talisman she'd had dreams which could never be realised, mad dreams of love and power which had had nothing to do with the real world, her world.

The talisman was in her hand. She held the amethyst eye close to her own eyes in the dim light. There were no answers. It couldn't even wink. Its stare seemed deep and penetrating, but that was simply the illusion of the polished stone. Somebody, at some time, somewhere, had crafted it, beaten out the silver with a primitive tool, ground the gemstone, patiently engraved the outline of the eye. Whoever made it must have wanted it to have some of the qualities of a living eye, so put a knowingness in its constant gaze, and made sure the silver felt more sensual than a metal should.

The talisman wasn't hers, never had been. Morgana had been wrong to make her keep it.

Without hesitation, knowing exactly what she was doing, Debbie crossed to the window, opened it to the cold light and air, then pulled off the silver chain from around her neck and hurled the talisman as far as she could. The noise it made as it fell into the alleyway beyond their yard sounded thin and insignificant, the metallic rattle of a trinket. Debbie closed the window. She didn't feel nauseous or faint as she'd expected. Instead, she had that tremulous, fragile sense of well-being that comes with the promise of recuperation after a long fever. Debbie turned off the fire and made her way upstairs.

He appeared at the very moment Debbie approached the window. She backed away from the full moon's

spotlight, back into the deepest, shadowy corner of her room and watched him advancing down the alley. The glaring moon etched out the hood like a rough woodcut as the figure made its inevitable progress to its position beneath her window. He kept his head bowed all the way, and Debbie had to stand on tiptoe, craning to see, unaware that she hadn't breathed since her first sight of him. With only the hood visible above the alley wall and the spooky moonlight turning everything outside a steely monochrome, she'd suddenly lost her conviction that she was only looking at Colin Brain.

The figure stopped. Too soon.

Debbie watched as the head inclined itself even lower, and the body dropped suddenly below the wall as if to kneel. A second later, however, he'd reappeared, and she knew from the attitude of the shoulders and the close scrutiny he was giving to something that he must have found the talisman.

Her mind made up, Debbie walked out of the shadows, and moved slowly but with decided purpose to the sash window. The figure below was still pre-occupied with its find, but the screech of wood on wood as Debbie hauled up the ill-fitting window drew his head up sharply.

With the moon behind him, the hood was as impenetrable as ever, but Debbie gazed down confidently into the hidden face, unafraid now.

In a voice just loud enough to reach his ears, she asked, 'What do you want?'

There was a pause, as if she'd posed an impossible question, then up came the hands with a glint of blue and silver hanging from them. The moonlight glanced icily off the polished stone.

‘It’s yours. Take it.’ said Debbie. She spoke with quiet urgency, but the words still sounded too loud over the row of quiet backyards, dark windows and slate roofs.

What next? Debbie could only wait. It was his move now.

With great care he lifted his hands even higher and drew down the hood.

What she saw engulfed Debbie in a soft wave of serenity. It was an affirmation of everything she really wanted to be true, and it was a blessed relief to know that this was how it was all going to end. Quietly, breathing steadily, she observed him slowly raise the talisman’s chain and place it carefully around his long pale neck.

He stood for a moment, seemingly entranced by ownership, before finally raising an arm in farewell, opening and closing his upheld palm in the manner of a child saying goodbye.

‘I hope it brings you luck, Colin Brain,’ said Debbie, ‘I really do,’ but not so loud that he could hear. Then she waited while he turned and walked what now seemed his unmistakable walk to the end of the alley. After a time, when she was quite sure the alley was empty, and she had listened for long enough to the ocean sound of the city, she closed the window, drew the curtains, and slid between the cool sheets of her bed where she fell at once into a deep sleep, undisturbed by dreams.