

M J Johnson

Niedermayer & Hart

ODD DOG



PRESS

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'Tis Death my Soul to be Indifferent,
Set forth thy self unto thy whole Extent.

Thomas Traherne

Prologue

Shortly before 2am, a white Ford van was moving at a modest speed along a virtually empty carriageway. It might have been any one of a thousand places on the motorway network. Occasionally a lorry caught up and overtook.

The boy passenger felt extremely irritated by the driver's caution, at no time exceeding 55 mph.

'At least he's shut up though,' thought the boy, referring to the driver, who in fact had not shut up, but sang along with every song that came on the radio.

The boy recalled the question and answer session he'd been subjected to after first hitching the ride. It had posed no problem; he was sure his rehearsed answers sounded convincing: he was seventeen, and going to spend a few weeks with an older brother in London. He'd even been able to say what his brother's job was, his name and his girlfriend's name. The boy had invented a whole history for himself.

He was in fact only fifteen, a runaway; the background he'd escaped from told in his eyes, there was a fixed aggression about his features and a world-weariness that spoke volumes. He reckoned on at least a couple more hours before they arrived in London, maybe longer at the sluggish speed they were travelling. 'Perhaps it'll work out well for me,' he thought, 'No point getting there in the middle of the night.'

From the van's speakers the night-time DJ introduced, '*That all-time favourite about the Windy City, inimitably sung by no other than Ol' Blue Eyes.*'

The boy sighed inwardly as the squatly-proportioned driver joined Frank with gusto.

Despite the man's awful singing, the youth was finding it increasingly difficult to keep his eyelids open. He felt his head nod forward and jerked back into the seat. The driver's vocal accompaniment sounded far off, as if at the end of a long and echoing tunnel.

The driver smiled as he caught sight of his passenger falling asleep and immediately turned the radio off, the abruptness of which startled the boy momentarily.

“I’m stopping at these services ... need a rest and a bite to eat. What about you?”

“I’ll stay here if that’s okay,” replied the boy.

“No problem, I’ll be about an hour.”

As they came off the motorway and drew into the service area, the boy saw his all-singing all-driving companion more clearly as light spilled into the cab. The driver was in his late thirties. The boy reckoned he would be about the same height as himself when they were not seated, about 5’5”, except the driver appeared to be as broad as he was high. He wore a woollen cap that covered the top of his head all the way down his forehead to just above the eyebrows. The cap was either black or blue, the light was insufficient to distinguish which, although he could make out the man’s gingery hair, which sprouted in wiry curls about his ears and the back of his head, wherever the cap didn’t reach.

The driver put the van into a parking space. “Sure you don’t want anything?”

“No, I’m okay.”

The driver got out and began to walk away. The boy was about to close his eyes when he saw the driver in the wing mirror come to an abrupt stop and turn around, as if he’d forgotten something. He returned to the passenger door and opened it.

“I just thought,” he said amiably, “Look, get out and I’ll show you.”

“What?” the boy asked. The driver had already started walking to the back of the van. The boy released his safety belt and jumped down from the cab.

At the rear the driver had opened one of the double doors and had switched on a light, revealing the van’s interior. There were half a dozen boxes marked ‘Fragile’.

“What?” asked the boy.

The driver pointed to a mattress and some folded blankets that were piled on top of a box structure fitted across the width of the van at the driving cab end.

“You’ll sleep better there.”

The boy looked hesitant.

“It opens and locks from the inside,” the driver said, demonstrating the door’s locking mechanism, “You can get out if you need a pee,” he laughed.

The bed looked very appealing. The boy nodded and stepped into the van's lit interior.

The driver immediately slammed the door and locked it with his key. He required nothing at the service area and went back to his cab.

He was about to start the engine when he felt the van shake. There was no sound. The van's interior was completely soundproofed; it must have been quite an impact. Another rocking motion followed a few seconds after the first, followed after a short interval by a third.

"Very spirited," the driver said.

Then with a contented smile he started the engine and pulled away.

He switched the radio back on.

BOOK ONE

Chapter One

Wednesday, 4 December, 1996

Jim Latimer parked his car on the lane behind the bungalow then sauntered through the gate in the garden wall and along the path to the back door. The bright winter morning found him in an upbeat mood. It was ten to nine and he was in plenty of time for his appointment.

Erich Ledermann lived and worked from a small bungalow in Pett Village, a few miles inland from the coast. Jim and his wife Hannah had known him almost as long as they had kept a home in East Sussex; to their daughter Sophie he'd always been 'Uncle Erich'. And despite finding his interests in esoteric matters a bit cranky, Jim liked the man a great deal too; although he had been known to refer to him as the 'mystic pixie'.

Jim went straight in through the back door, where the aroma of fresh coffee pervaded the air. The kitchen doubled as a waiting room and clients were expected to entertain themselves here until Erich was ready to see them. Jim took a mug off a shelf, poured some coffee from an insulated jug and added milk from the refrigerator.

The mental association between the smell and taste of coffee and lighting a cigarette reminded Jim of his reason for being here. Erich practised hypnotherapy and was helping him to give up smoking. This was Jim's fourth visit.

Smoking wasn't the only thing Jim Latimer had relinquished during the past year. By this time, he'd also been free from alcohol for ten months. After Hannah had left with Sophie, his life had deteriorated rapidly; he'd thrown any pretence of normality away; stocked up at the nearest supermarket, where he regularly drove in alarming states, aiming to drink himself to death. At the end of the previous year, round the clock drinking had tolled heavily on his physical health and he'd spent six days in hospital with pleurisy. However, not even pleurisy and a stretch in hospital managed to reform him. Within an hour of getting home he was driving to the village store to replenish his stock of booze and cigarettes; the madness went on.

The reason why he stopped drinking had never been entirely clear to him. It had not come about through any sense of shame for harm done to his wife and child; at that point he was incapable of altruistic thought. It had nothing to do with realising he was alcoholic, he had known that fact for years; nor was it fear of premature death, in his view, unjustly long in coming.

The truth was, one morning he'd woken up sick and bleary-eyed, as usual; reached for the bottle, as usual, but had not taken the drink. Enough was somehow enough; what's more, and quite miraculously, he knew he need not go on. He admitted himself into an alcohol dependency unit and stayed six weeks.

The smoking continued; then, just over a month ago with the advent of cold weather, he had developed a rasping cough. Ruth, his neighbour, suggested he try Erich and hypnosis to help him stop. Ruth and Erich were close friends, and it had initially been through her that Jim and Hannah Latimer had come to know Erich. Ruth almost fell out of her armchair when Jim accepted the suggestion. In all the years she had known him, Jim had rarely been reticent in his disdain for alternative therapies. Considering his response to be something of a coup, she'd booked the first appointment for him there and then.

"This therapy will only work if you genuinely want to stop. As with any drug, staying stopped is invariably the hardest part," Erich had told him at their first session, the faint accent betraying his Austrian origin.

Jim hadn't smoked since that first session. He was convinced the hypnotherapy had considerably reduced the number of white-knuckle moments. Sometimes things might jolt his memory, like the coffee, but moments like these seemed to pass with increasing ease. During the twenty-five minute drive to Erich's on the first occasion he had chain-smoked the nine remaining cigarettes in a pack. Feeling a little nauseous on arrival, he'd confessed about it to Erich.

"Aha!" pronounced Erich, "Aversion therapy!"

Jim took a sip of coffee and browsed the magazine pile on the kitchen table. Unfortunately, Erich's selection hadn't altered much over recent weeks. At this time, Jim showed little interest in the world at large, however, the lack of less demanding stimuli forced him to pick up the daily newspaper: the beef crisis, the economy, credit card fraud, school standards falling, joy riding; more or less exactly the same stuff he recalled reading about the last time.

It was an insignificant column towards the middle of the paper; neither 'bizarre' nor 'suicide' would have enticed him; it was the word

‘photographer’ that grabbed his attention. Then as he ran his eye down the article and caught the name Loxton he let out a gasp of recognition.

John Loxton had taught at the school of printing where Jim had learned his craft. He checked the newspaper’s date: 4 December, then began to read:

PHOTOGRAPHER IN BIZARRE SUICIDE

At 6.35pm yesterday evening, police were called to a location in Berwick Street in London’s Soho. Local residents had alerted police to cries coming from a first floor apartment, home of photographer John Loxton. Police officers used force to enter the flat and discovered Mr Loxton severely wounded.

It appears his injuries were self-inflicted. Loxton had driven a Sabatier knife repeatedly into his groin, resulting in his emasculation.

A police officer later commented, “The pain must have been unbearable, he was still partly conscious when we got there.”

Loxton lost consciousness in the ambulance and died later in the intensive care unit at UCH.

A colleague, and the executor of Loxton’s estate, Robert Isherwood, rushed to the hospital to be with him when he died.

John Loxton enjoyed a flourishing international career throughout the 1950s, yet in later years became something of a recluse. He was never married. The police are satisfied the cause of death was suicide.

Jim looked up briefly when Erich entered the kitchen. Seeing him so absorbed, Erich leaned on Jim’s shoulder and read along too.

Loxton had not figured in Jim’s life for seventeen years; even so, he found the description shocking, “Emasculation ... that’s another way of saying castration.”

“You knew this man?” Erich asked, once he’d finished reading the piece.

Jim nodded.

“I see he was a photographer. Friend?”

“Hardly,” replied Jim, “He taught at the place where I trained.”

“A good teacher?”

Jim had to think about his answer before replying, “On a personal level Loxton was impossible. He’d stare down his nose at you with a really off-putting, supercilious air. I don’t recall any student claiming to like him. Even so, his lectures were invariably full. He was really skilled with the use of light in portraiture; I suppose it allowed you to partially overlook the poison personality.”

“If he was so talented and clearly disliked students so much, why did he teach?”

Jim shook his head, "I really couldn't say. It certainly wasn't vocational. John Loxton was very strange ... a really cold fish."

"But you looked surprised to discover he'd killed himself," said Erich.

It was true, Jim had indeed been shaken to learn of the man's death. He wondered if this was because he'd always credited suicides with a certain amount of introspection, a quality he had never detected even a trace of in Loxton. "I don't know why. Not wishing to speak ill of the dead or anything, but I found the man conceited to the point of repugnance."

Erich made a clicking sound at the back of his throat and tapped the paper with his finger, "Tch, what an awful way to go."

Jim considered the awfulness while he drained the last of his coffee.

"The genitals are central to our identity," postulated Erich, "Did he have problems with his sexuality?"

The question came out sounding like some dreadful cliché, particularly with the Austrian accent; Jim nearly laughed, but managed to maintain a straight face. "I've no idea," he said, "He wasn't someone you ever got to know. I recall he had a taste for expensive clothes, always wore a bow-tie. But he wasn't flamboyant. He was far too narcissistic for that, I think."

"The article doesn't say how old he was?"

"He must have been in his sixties. I finished my course in '79, and he was a good bit older than I am now." Jim did some mental arithmetic, "Early sixties, I'd guess."

Erich consulted the paper, "It says someone was with him when he died ... Robert Isherwood."

"Bob runs a photographic library."

"A friend of Mr Loxton's?"

Jim smiled at the idea, "I doubt it. I can't imagine him and Loxton having much in common. Bob probably held pictures for him."

Erich looked at his watch. "We should get started. I have a full morning."

The paper was left open at the notice of Loxton's death as the two men exited the kitchen. Jim followed Erich into an L-shaped corridor that led on to his study. Erich had adorned this hallway with dozens of photographs and prints; here and there an occasional poem or a few lines expressing some spiritual message had been added to the gallery. To Jim it seemed incongruous to find, amidst charts of the chakras and mandalas of eastern wisdom, photographs of Erich at eighteen or

nineteen taken with his commando unit during the final months of World War Two.

Erich Ledermann had fled to Britain from Austria as a twelve year old boy. Almost his entire family had perished in the Holocaust. Only one brother had survived the camps to become a Danish citizen after the war.

Erich was 5'6" tall, six inches shorter than Jim. He had kept himself fit, and on a good day looked twenty years younger than he was. Jim, on the other hand, looked considerably older than his thirty-seven years on even the best day. Erich had virtually no facial lines, his hair was still brown and full, immaculately brushed and regularly trimmed. Jim's hair by comparison was unkempt and streaked grey at the temples. As the two men entered the study it might not have been a great stretch of the imagination to think of them as contemporaries, though in truth, Erich was old enough to be Jim's father.

Within Erich's study a wall was devoted to family photographs, the lost childhood family from pre-war Austria, and his own small family as a man. There were several portraits of Erich with his wife and son. His wife had died some years earlier and had been much younger than him. Erich had married late; by this time he was seventy, yet his son, Danny, was only in his mid-twenties.

The room was very much a working space. A small pine desk was set against one wall, with bookshelves containing literature on various alternative therapies and healing techniques built into the space above. On the desk surface was a large lump of rock crystal and a framed photograph of Erich and Danny, looking like they were having a very good time sitting in a dinghy. Also in the room there was a couch, presumably for clients to lie down on, although Jim never had, and a couple of comfortable armchairs.

Jim sat with his back to the family pictures. The wall facing him bore an oil painting, a seascape. The artist had brought remarkable skill to the work; sea and sky merged, and at the painting's heart was a large setting sun, spilling rays of orange and crimson light onto the clouds and water. It was initialled R A, which Jim had recognised as soon as he clapped eyes on it for the first time four weeks ago, as the work of his neighbour and their mutual friend, Ruth Allinson.

"How have you been?" Erich asked from the other chair.

"I'm still not sleeping."

"Following the relaxation techniques I showed you?"

Jim shook his head sheepishly.

Erich smiled, nodding sagely, “Only you can alter it. Let go all the guilt you carry around. It’s a waste of brain space. We can’t change the past, but we can make a better future for ourselves by mastering the present.”

Jim, who had clearly not been paying much attention to Erich’s advice, went on to say, “I feel so ashamed of the damage I did ... all the crap I put Hannah and Sophie through.”

“Going over and over it isn’t dealing with it, you just give the past more power than it deserves. Addictions are like smokescreens, they conceal the real problem ... the tip of the iceberg.”

“I don’t want to be addicted to anything ever again,” Jim said with feeling.

Erich paused, perhaps thinking about Jim’s statement or maybe considering his next approach. “How are you feeling, now, at this moment?”

“Pretty good ... relaxed, comfortable.”

“You’re an excellent subject,” observed Erich, “Hypnosis gets easier the more you practise it. I watched you let go the moment you entered the study. You’ve started doing my job for me.”

Jim didn’t appear to understand.

“You have begun to trust these techniques. As I’ve told you, all hypnosis is really self-hypnosis, inasmuch as we permit it. Hypnosis is rarely what people imagine it to be.” Erich finished talking in a general way and told Jim to choose a point on Ruth’s painting, “Release any thoughts you’ve brought in here with you ... let them go ...”

Jim felt himself sinking into the whirl of resplendent light at the painting’s heart. As he listened to Erich’s voice, calm, comforting, he merged with the sunlight. It was unimportant that Ruth had painted it; it no longer existed as a painting. He detached from the failed marriage and career; Erich’s voice and the image before him were the foremost things he was conscious of.

Then, for just a split-second, the newspaper column about John Loxton sprang back into his mind.

“Become free of mental activity ...”

And Loxton too was forgotten.

Chapter Two

Wednesday, 4 December, 1996

Jim tried not to analyse the hypnotherapy sessions and why they appeared to be working. Erich's approach came down largely on the therapy side. It was the kind of stuff Jim traditionally sneered at and labelled 'psycho-babble'.

As Jim drove home after the session he was more relaxed than he could remember feeling in a very long time. For years, enslaved by the bottle and an increasingly negative mind-set, his eyes had been blinkered. His thoughts had grown increasingly bitter, like an anaerobe growing in some dim cavity of the brain, slowly poisoning its host. He had obsessed endlessly, cosseted old resentments, re-run ancient quarrels, and constantly scripted different outcomes.

For today, Jim's ghosts seemed laid to rest.

Normally, the sight of lights flashing and the barrier going down as he approached the level crossing in Robertsbridge would have made him irritable. But today, he waited contentedly as the fast train to London zoomed past; the gaps between carriages creating a kind of strobe effect against the winter sunlight. When the barrier went up again, Jim recognised one of the village postmen in the red van opposite and exchanged a wave as he drove by.

Jim lived about a mile and a half from here in a small cottage halfway between the villages of Robertsbridge and Brightling. He drove uphill, past the signs for the secondary school and the Hutterian community. A quarter mile on, the road forked; Jim kept to the left. From here on there were only occasional signs of habitation, the odd chimney stack puffing wood-smoke behind leafless trees.

He turned left into an unmade road without any sign to mark it; the car rattled along, bouncing and subsiding on the uneven surface. After about a hundred and fifty yards or so, two cottages, built together at the end of the nineteenth century, emerged from the woods. Both were uninhabited and all but derelict when Jim and Hannah had discovered them nine years ago. They had purchased the one nearest to the road as a retreat from London and its pressures.

Jim had been openly hostile when Ruth bought the adjoining property less than a year later; it wrecked a grandiose scheme he'd had of one day converting both cottages into one. Hannah, Sophie and Ruth had hit it off from the start. However, for many weeks Jim had sulked. He'd sometimes refused to visit the cottage at all.

"She's ruined it," was his sad refrain.

Eventually, feeling more than a bit dejected because everyone was getting on so well, he sullenly accepted the fact he'd gained a neighbour.

In the intervening years Jim and Ruth had become far closer than most friends, at times squabbling like sibling rivals. He probably wouldn't have survived the darkest booze-sodden months after his marriage break-up without her. Not that Ruth had become his caretaker, but she'd kept a watchful eye on him; rescued him when he'd collapsed unconscious in the garden on a night the temperature dropped to minus four; turned off the unlit cooker and opened the windows the time he filled the cottage with butane. Fortunately, on this occasion too he'd been unconscious; else as a chain-smoker, he would most likely have blown himself to kingdom come. Needless to say, she had received no thanks. In the final months he'd mostly ignored her, considering her to be in the enemy camp. Sometimes out of sheer loneliness he would deign to talk with her, inevitably twisting the conversation round to what a bitch Hannah was for abandoning him.

"You're lucky she stayed so long. Take a good look in the mirror, Jim. You're the problem." Ruth was rarely indirect.

At the end of the track an area had been cleared. Jim's car was the only one normally kept here, so he didn't concern himself with parking neatly. A footpath went down an incline towards the cottages, their boundaries marked with a picket fence. The location was idyllic, set amongst oak trees and hills.

As Jim got out of the car, he saw Ruth coming towards him, wheeling her bicycle along the footpath. She possessed no car and held strong views about the internal combustion engine and its destructive overuse. She was forty-six, 5'7" tall, and still a striking woman. She wore an army surplus jacket dyed a deep purple, and beneath the open jacket her grey sweatshirt and blue jeans were spattered with the obligatory patches of paint that adorned most of her clothing. She had thick brown hair tangled and trailing about her shoulders in customary unmanageability.

"You were up and gone early," she said.

“I had to see the pixie,” he replied, coming to a stop before the bicycle.

“You were out before it was light.”

Jim feigned a grand theatrical manner, “An irresistible urge to commune with nature!” It was true, he’d gone to visit the sea before Erich.

“Weirdo,” she said with a smile, and wheeled by him. “Do you want anything from the village?” she called, not looking back as she glided alongside the bike with one foot on the pedal.

“Nope.”

Once off the footpath, Ruth brought her leg over the moving bicycle and pedalled away, “See you!”

Jim went in through his gate. The gardens had to be fenced in order to prevent the deer that roamed the woods from causing havoc. Jim had learned the hard way how a couple of Bambi lookalikes could strip a garden bare in next to no time. There was more land to the front of the cottages than at the rear, so Jim had allocated his front garden to his passion for growing vegetables. There was little to be seen now; except leeks, the purple broccoli would be ready in a couple of months and the broad beans were overwintering beneath straw. Jim considered the restoration of his garden quite an achievement. It had gone wild after Hannah and Sophie left; an outer manifestation of his inner deterioration.

He went round the back and entered via the kitchen, removed his jacket, and threw it over a chair. He filled the kettle and spooned some tea into the pot ready for when it boiled.

Jim’s study was entered directly from the kitchen. He checked his answerphone for messages. There were none; which was generally the case. In times past he might have expected half a dozen work enquiries a day, but life situations change. After Hannah and Sophie moved out and set themselves up at their London home, Jim had kept the answerphone on twenty-four hours a day. He wiped any messages without even listening to them. Consequently, Jim hadn’t worked in two years. In his early career he’d presented himself as hedonistic and cultivated a reputation for unpredictability; already drinking heavily, but before alcohol had led him into an ever-decreasing spiral, he’d produced work of very high quality. Quite recently in a reflective moment shared with Ruth he’d said of himself, “The unpredictable genius became an undependable arsehole.”

A small hallway led from the study. The staircase was here, and on the left a sitting room. Jim picked up two envelopes sitting on the front door mat and went back to the kitchen; they were both bills.

“They’ll have to wait in line,” he said, placing them for company amongst a pile of other bills.

But still, positive thoughts remained from the session with Erich. He placed slices of bread under the grill, scrambled two eggs, and had a late breakfast. Normally he left dishes and pans piled in the sink until the decision came to wash up or not eat; this, however, was a day for turning over new leaves; he not only washed up but ran a cloth across the work surfaces too.

He decided a walk in the winter sunshine would put him in the right mood for the dozen letters he intended to write that afternoon to various picture editors. It was time, he thought, to get back into the frame. He’d put his jacket on, and was reaching for the door latch, when the telephone rang.

“Jim Latimer,” he said.

“Hullo Jim ...”

Loxton’s suicide flashed back. The man’s voice, immediately recognised, prompted a sensation at the back of his neck.

“... Jim ... it’s Bob.”

“Yes. Hello,” Jim replied with some awkwardness. It was a shock hearing Bob Isherwood’s voice after seeing his name in print so recently. Five years ago Jim had stormed out of Bob’s office showering him with a string of expletives, and they had not spoken since. Bob had taken the liberty of telling Jim what a mess he was making of his life.

“Have I called at a bad time?”

Jim identified with Bob’s diffidence. “No”, he replied, trying to ease up. “I was just surprised to hear your voice.”

“It’s been a while.”

“I read about Loxton this morning. It mentioned you.”

“Christ, Jim, it was awful. You can’t imagine what he did to himself.”

“Stabbed himself it said ... ‘emasculated’ was the word used.”

“His balls and dick were purée,” the image expressed itself fully through Bob’s tone. “For some strange reason he was carrying his will on him, so I got called to the hospital almost straightaway. I was down in it as the executor.”

“I was surprised you knew Loxton that well.”

“Christ no, course I didn't.” Bob sounded shocked by the suggestion. “He breezed into my office about three weeks ago. ‘I’ve decided to make a will’, he declared, you know how he was, all sneery. ‘Will you be my executor?’ ... no foreplay like, ‘How are you?’ or any of that crap. I said, yes, okay, and thought no more about it. I didn’t know he was planning to lop off his flamin’ bollocks, did I? I used to see him round occasionally, he only lived a couple of streets from the office, and I held a few pictures for him. But as for knowing him, Loxton was a closed book far as I was concerned.”

“It’s seventeen years since I saw him,” put in Jim.

“He hadn’t changed much ... not at all. In fact ...” Bob broke off mid-sentence.

“What?”

“Just thinking about the way he was, always decked-up, bow tie, suit ... he must have been dyeing his hair.”

“The police sounded definite it was suicide.”

“No doubt there. He’d locked himself in. They had to break into the flat.”

The conversation about Loxton gradually subsided and they started to crack up the years of accumulated ice, going on to discuss what had changed and was happening now in their lives.

“I was having lunch with a client last week when Hannah and a friend came into the restaurant. Do you see her and Sophie much?”

“Things have got better. I’ve been sober ten months.”

“That’s great,” Bob sounded genuinely happy for him.

“I can see Soph anytime I like, and I pop by the house for a coffee and chat with Hannah.”

“If you don’t mind me saying, I can’t think of two people better suited to each other than you and Hannah. Think you’ll patch things up?”

“I don’t know Bob, too early to say. I think she’d like me to have more time under my belt before committing herself.”

“She told me you were doing well, a bit concerned though that you aren’t working.”

“I haven’t worked in a couple of years. To be honest I’d have been incapable for most of that time.”

Bob cleared his throat, “That’s why I’m ringing, I may have something ... if you want it that is?”

Jim felt a judder, part excitement at the prospect of earning a living, part fear of returning to work after such a gap.

He made no reply, so Bob continued, “Actually, it’s indirectly to do with John Loxton. He was supposed to start a job, today in fact, photographing porcelain for some catalogue. He’d worked for them before, it seems. Anyway, they have a deadline to meet and they rang me.”

“Why you?”

“Christ knows, I told them I wasn’t an agent. I spoke to a nice woman called Rosemary Hines. She said they were really sad to hear about Loxton and asked me if I could personally recommend someone. They’re based not far from you, Brighton, and I remembered what Hannah said. Interested?”

“Yes. Thanks.”

“Here’s the number, ring up, find out what it entails. Can’t hurt can it?”

“Okay, I’ve got a pen. Fire away.”

“They’re called Niedermayer & Hart ...”

*

It took Ruth an hour round trip to do her bits of shopping and chores in the village. The ride home was mostly uphill, and the general rule was ten minutes down, twenty back. However, she had been known to halve this when pushed for time, or feeling particularly vigorous. She navigated her bike off the main road onto the track that led to the cottages. There was no sense of urgency about Ruth that morning. She had enjoyed the exercise and the winter sunshine.

Almost the instant she turned off, long before the cottages came into view, she felt her perception of space and distance altering. She was only moderately breathless, and initially assumed over exertion was the reason why the trees and sky were shimmering. Her head was reeling, heart pounding, as she braked and brought the bike to a standstill. She felt more secure once both feet were planted on the ground.

The first explanation that sprang to mind was physiological, “Shit! I’m having a heart attack!”

But she was not having a heart attack, and realised this before imagination had time to develop the thought. Ruth grew calm again; actually, this was nothing new. She had never known it catch her quite like that, but then she had never been on a bicycle when it happened before, and each time was different. These ‘events’ had been part of her life as far back as she could remember, although it had taken years

to come to terms with it. Erich Ledermann and the sisters had helped her to understand it, to use it beneficially without fearing it; she controlled it these days, unlike in the past when it had made her feel like she was mad. However, on this occasion her gift had caught her completely off guard. She knew there was nothing she could do, but keep calm and watch.

She felt a rigidity run through her body, her fingers clenching tight onto the rubber grips of the handlebars. The sky grew larger and the trees all around appeared to move further away, creating an expanse of air and light charged up with tiny flickering streams of electricity. The pressure in her head and neck was building, as though she were soaring up into the sky at some phenomenal rate of knots. Then everything exploded brilliant white, and for a moment nothing existed. She was not even aware of her own body, all pressures and restraints were gone and all was peaceful, pure bliss. Although the light had increased in its intensity it didn't hurt her eyes, but she knew that none of this was being witnessed with physical eyes. Once the brightness reached its zenith it suddenly vanished and all was exactly as before; the trees, the unmade road, the bright winter day.

Along the track a man was shuffling towards her. At first she failed to realise it was Jim. His movement was different, stiff, uncoordinated.

"Jim?" she called out uncertainly.

The man kept staggering towards her giving no outward sign that he had heard. Even when close enough to identify Jim's features, Ruth continued to feel unsure; something about him was wrong.

"Where are you going?" she asked, unable to think of anything better.

Again, no reply. He was now passing alongside, his intention was obviously to ignore her.

"Jim ... Hey! Jim! What's wrong?"

Only then did he seem to hear. He stopped in his tracks and turned to face her. The look he gave was chilling, as though she was nothing. During the final months of his drinking he had rarely shown her anything but contempt. Ruth thought she'd already seen Jim's worst side, but Jim's worst didn't come close to that look. The hate pouring out from the eyes was tangible. She knew whatever it was she was looking at, it wasn't Jim. Its mouth started moving. At first she thought it was trying to speak but then realised it was attempting to smile; a horrible vicious smile, a leer, a corrupted facsimile of that most human expression.

Ruth staggered backwards, suddenly very scared, vaguely aware of becoming entangled in something, losing her balance and crashing onto the dirt track.

Then came another flash of light and the alarming vision vanished.

For a few moments Ruth lay still, stunned by the realness of the encounter. She knew it was over; it always ended like that, with the flash. Once her heartbeat had normalised a little, she extricated a bootlace from the bicycle chain and pulled herself out from under its frame. She left the scattered debris that was her shopping where it had fallen and sat, shaking, on the grass verge.

She had no idea what the vision was supposed to convey to her. However, she had no doubt that it was both meaningful and significant. Only once before had she experienced anything quite so vivid.

Ruth had been six years old; far too young to put forward any rational argument, and with no understanding yet of the powerful gift in her possession. She had fallen back on the only resources a small child has when all else fails; begging, screaming, kicking.

“We are not going to put up with your tantrum. Daddy is driving us to the seaside, whether you want to go or not. You are being a very naughty girl, now be quiet!”

That was the last sentence Ruth remembered her mother making.

Two hours later, firemen cut her free of the car wreck and the carnage that had been her mother, father and baby brother.

Incredibly, Ruth emerged physically unharmed, but the mental scars she was left to carry had long outlived the child.

Chapter Three

Wednesday, 4 December - Thursday, 5 December, 1996

Jim called the Niedermayer & Hart number as soon as he finished talking to Bob.

He spoke to Rosemary Hines. She thanked him for getting in touch promptly, stressed the urgency of their situation and suggested meeting to discuss requirements as soon as possible.

“I could drive over tomorrow.”

“I’m afraid I shan’t be here in the morning, and Mr Hart is currently away on a buying trip.” Rosemary Hines spoke impeccably enunciated English. Jim pictured a woman in her sixties, the product of a ladies’ finishing school that had trained its girls in the finest traditions. “The afternoon looks more promising. Would 2.30 be convenient?” she asked in the politest of tones.

“Yes, fine.”

“Then I shall look forward to meeting you tomorrow, Mr Latimer.”

He felt he had been regally dismissed.

Jim decided it was still a good idea to take a walk and get some fresh air. He was making to leave again, but on reaching the back door, he discovered Ruth peering through its glass.

“Are you going out?” she asked casually, “I was coming in for coffee.”

Jim took off his coat and filled the kettle.

Ruth seemed pale considering her recent physical exertion, a bit distracted too. She was excited to hear the news that Jim might have landed a job, “That’s great! When do you start?”

“I’m meeting them tomorrow, they’re in a bit of a fix ... Loxton was supposed to have started today.”

“Loxton?”

Jim explained; he told her about the newspaper at Erich’s and the subsequent conversation with Bob Isherwood. She looked rather shaken by the account. Jim wondered if he had been a little too graphic in the re-telling of it.

“Horrible, isn’t it?”

Ruth shook her head, “To mutilate yourself like that ... like torture ... like some vicious punishment. The pain would be unbearable. I can’t believe it possible ... you’d pass out with the shock.”

“He was a strange man. Perhaps in the end he wasn’t quite playing with a full deck.”

Ruth drained her coffee. “I must go,” she said.

The speed of her departure was probably a record. Loxton’s suicide certainly had the power to clear a room. Jim thought he might mention it the next time a Jehovah’s Witness called.

*

Niedermayer & Hart were based in Hove; exactly where Hove became Brighton, or Brighton Hove, Jim had no idea. He found a parking meter in a nearby street and walked the remaining distance.

He entered Barnswick Square from its northern end. The square reflected the grace and refinement of its Regency period, black iron railings standing out against the cream facades of the houses, an inner perimeter of lawned garden at the square’s centre, before a backdrop of sea and sky.

He climbed the steps to number sixty-seven. He was ten minutes early. A brass plaque assured him he was in the right place:

Niedermayer & Hart
Fine Porcelain
Est. 1957

He suddenly felt a bit jittery. He needed to work, but it would be a complete turn-off if he looked too hungry when he met Miss, Ms, Mrs Hines? He imagined her peering from behind bi-focal lenses, asking, ‘And what has one been doing recently?’ What could he say? ‘Well, one has been pissed out of one’s brains until quite recently, almost incapable of focusing one’s pecker on the porcelain, in fact.’

In an attempt to calm down he looked around briefly. There was little to see, every window was fitted with blinds. He peeped over the railings down at the basement area; here, the windows were barred with wooden shutters inside. He wiped the sweat off his palms onto the legs of his jeans. It was such a long time since he had been an interviewee. Then, looking up he noticed a video camera peering down at him and wondered if his nervousness was being witnessed.

‘To hell with it,’ he thought, and pressed the doorbell.

He heard its ring announcing his arrival, and listened for the sound of approaching feet. Jim waited half a minute before deciding to try again; his finger hovering above the bell button just as the door opened.

Standing before him was a flimsily-built man, possibly in his late teens or early twenties. He was wearing a dark blue suit that looked about a size too big for him. The same could be said for his collar and tie, which failed to form any satisfactory union with his neck. The young man's sallow complexion and small, dark but alert eyes, didn't improve the presentation. As he smiled, a mouthful of widely-spaced teeth exposed themselves behind fleshy, crudely crafted lips.

"Hello. I've come to meet Rosemary Hines."

"She isn't here," replied the young man rather brusquely. "Were you expected?"

Jim gave an exasperated sigh, "I'd arranged to meet her at 2.30."

"Mr Latimer?" asked the man-boy, his eyes opening to maximum size, with an incredulity that was nearly insulting. "I'm sorry you were kept waiting, please come in."

Jim entered. The floors were carpeted in a sumptuous royal blue, discreetly patterned with a small grey fleur-de-lys design. At the hallway's farthest end a wide staircase rose in elegant progression to the floors above with polished brass rods holding its carpet in place. Various landscapes adorned the walls in large gilt frames. A semi-circular table accompanied on either side by two straight-backed chairs comprised the only furniture in the hallway; arranged in the centre of this table was a piece of Meissen.

Jim waited while the young man closed the front door.

"I'm Nicholas Cureton, Miss Hines' personal assistant. She's probably been held up in traffic. Do come through." He pointed towards the first door.

It was like entering a giant display case. Brightly lit glass cabinets adorned both chimney alcoves and several others had been placed around the room. The cabinets were arranged with porcelain figurines, plates and various commemorative cups, mugs, jugs etc. A white leather sofa was set along one of the walls, presumably to allow visitors an opportunity to relax and delight in this wonderland of fine china.

Nicholas Cureton gestured towards the sofa, "Please, take a seat. Can I get you anything, tea, coffee?"

"Some coffee would be great. Thanks."

The toothy grin returned and he left.

The room did what it set out to do, presented Niedermayer & Hart's wares in an atmosphere of refinement. Jim had never experienced the remotest flicker of interest in china of any description. In a glass cabinet to his right were some figures representing different kinds of cats. They were skilfully crafted, but porcelain, animal, human or vegetable, just didn't ring his bell.

He'd anticipated feeling wobbly; two years was a long time away from a career. Just being here was an achievement. At the end of the drinking he had needed a drink to steady his hand enough to brush his teeth. The anxiousness he felt approaching the house had now largely gone, but he still felt uncomfortable. Despite the obvious efforts that had gone into creating an attractive showroom, there was a stuffiness about the place Jim didn't like. Upon entering the house the cloying scent of air freshener had immediately assailed his nostrils. He had never liked the sickliness of those aerosol things. In bathrooms the world over, air fresheners overwhelmed a new occupant, while the inevitable, unmentionable, lingered beneath. It was akin to that here; beneath the smell of roses was a stale, slightly fetid odour.

'Must have drain trouble,' he thought, and consoled himself with, 'Think of the money.'

Nicholas soon returned carrying a tray. He placed it before Jim on a small glass-topped table. After he'd put it down, the unusual young man hovered about, closely observing Jim as he added a drop of milk from the jug provided and stirred his coffee.

"Thank you, it's very nice," Jim said, taking a sip, hoping it would encourage him to back off.

But Nicholas Cureton didn't move. After an awkward silence, he asked, "I understand you knew Mr Loxton?"

"John Loxton taught where I trained."

"His friend, Mr Isherwood, recommended you to us."

It didn't seem appropriate to point out Loxton had no friends. Jim nodded.

"Mr Isherwood was there when he died."

"I believe so."

"Does anyone know why he did it?"

Jim wanted to say, 'Why the hell should anyone have a clue what was going on in Loxton's head?' but instead he replied, "I've no idea. I haven't spoken to Bob since yesterday."

Nicholas Cureton was seriously encroaching upon Jim's space and beginning to creep under his skin. There was something intrusive about the young man's manner and the way he formed his questions.

Jim was rescued by what sounded like a lift arriving. Nicholas, clearly attuned to its sound, had already pricked up his ears before Jim first heard it, and immediately lost interest in him. The sound of a concertina door sliding across was reminiscent of old-fashioned department stores.

“Excuse me,” Nicholas said curtly and left the room.

Jim detected a woman’s voice in the whispered conversation that followed his exit. After a short time, the concertina doors were pulled across again followed by a gentle hum. A single set of footsteps, all but muted by the carpeting, approached along the hallway.

“I’m sorry to have kept you, Mr Latimer.”

Rosemary Hines gave him quite a shock. Jim had pictured her the way she sounded, like women in old British movies, Celia Johnson in ‘Brief Encounter’.

He rose and shook her hand.

Rosemary Hines was about twenty-seven years old, approximately 5’4” tall, with dark hair braided and raised about her head. Her face was finely-structured, her eyes deep blue, the lips full-blooded and sensuous. She wore a simple black dress to just above the knee, pulled into a tiny waist with a red belt. Rosemary Hines was one of the most striking women Jim had ever seen.

“Thursdays are always hectic ... payday for the staff.”

Jim found it slightly unattractive the way she’d highlighted ‘the staff’.

“Most of our business is through mail order. Our distribution centre is in Eastbourne. We try to maintain a family feel. Mr Hart and I always take the wages over together on a Thursday. Unfortunately, he’s on a business trip to Amsterdam, so it all fell on my shoulders this week.”

“Is Mr Niedermayer involved in the business too?”

“Mr Niedermayer passed away shortly before I joined the company.” Inclining her head to one side, she gave Jim a smile accompanied by a girlish laugh and asked, “Would you like to come through?”

She led the way through the hall and into an office; here two desks sat face to face. The nearest desk had two TV monitors on it, one relaying pictures of the front steps, the other showing an alleyway. At the other end of the room, as far away from the other two as was physically possible, was a third desk. It was smaller, far less prestigious looking and Jim presumed that Nicholas, the office junior, was kept at bay over there. Rosemary Hines took up a position behind

the farthest of the two joined desks, gesturing for Jim to be seated in a chair beside it.

“We were deeply shocked by Mr Loxton’s death. He had photographed our collection over the past few years. He was extremely professional and is a great loss to us.”

“Your catalogue is produced annually?”

“Yes. Clients receive our catalogue in early February. We like all the photographic work completed by mid-December, in order to add text, allowing us time to proof read, check colour etc.”

“How many pieces are involved?”

“Two hundred and thirty-seven. Only about a quarter is new, but as we’re using a new photographer we’ll re-shoot the whole collection.”

“I think I should point out,” Jim said, “that my own area of expertise is mainly in portraiture. There are people who do this kind of work all the time.” Later he could hardly believe he had talked himself down like that.

Rosemary Hines opened a drawer and handed Jim an A5 brochure. He began leafing through it.

“Mr Loxton had never photographed porcelain before either.”

“How many catalogues did he do for you?”

“I couldn’t recall without checking, three or four.”

“It is very straightforward.”

“Mr Isherwood spoke highly of you and my instincts tell me you’re the right man for us.”

She made Jim a generous financial offer. Jim concluded from the size of the sum mentioned that they were desperate to find a replacement for Loxton. It was already the fifth of December, and because of the urgency of the situation it was arranged that he should make a start on Saturday. Tomorrow he would need to organise some equipment.

Rosemary Hines led him to a room on the first floor that he would be using for the shoot. It was the same room Loxton had used, sited directly above the office. It had been recently decorated and the smell of paint was fresh; the room itself was bare.

“Excuse the mess, we’re having this floor re-decorated. We’ll fix you up with something to sit on.”

“Fine,” replied Jim.

“When you come on Saturday, park at the rear, drive down through the mews.” She opened the window blinds and pointed past the concreted area below in explanation. “There’s an entry-phone by the gate. Nick will let you in.”

A pair of solid steel gates was set in an eight foot high brick wall. While Jim watched, a plain white Ford van drove out into view from the right side of the house and stopped before the gates. Nicholas then rushed into view coming from the same trajectory as the van. He seemed to be angry about something; a driver emerged from the cab and followed Nicholas back to the house. Jim could only see the top of this other man's head. He wore a navy blue woollen hat with wisps of curly red hair sticking out at the sides. The driver returned almost immediately carrying a cardboard box marked 'Fragile'.

"We have four shops. We deliver directly from here. We like the hands on approach."

"Where are the shops?" Jim asked, without any real enthusiasm to know. He found watching the driver load the forgotten box more interesting.

"Bristol, Chester, Edinburgh and London," she replied.

The gates opened electronically, presumably operated by Nicholas somewhere out of sight, and the white van drove away.

Once all the details and arrangements were discussed and finalised, Rosemary Hines escorted Jim to the front door.

"We shall look forward to seeing you on Saturday, Mr Latimer," she said, shaking his hand again.

As he walked down the front steps into Barnswick Square, the air struck him as particularly fresh and exhilarating after being subjected for the past hour to the faint whiff of the house's drains.

*

When he got back, Jim dropped by next door. In Ruth's cottage, the study and sitting-room had been converted into one large studio. There were a dozen canvases, mainly landscapes, at various stages of development dotted about. Within the space were several tables without any uniformity of shape or size strewn with materials, brushes, bottles, and palettes with squeezed-out lines of paint blended and streaked in puddles of colour. The floor, walls, and even the ceiling here and there were flecked and speckled with paint. Ruth was working at a large canvas supported on an easel in the centre of the room.

"What's happening?" Jim called as he entered.

Ruth almost leapt out of her skin.

"Don't you ever knock?"

“I thought you heard me,” he replied defensively, “You aren’t usually that jumpy.”

“Just bloody well knock next time.”

“You never knock my door.”

“That’s because you were always pissed and I’d have been knocking till the cows came home.”

At least one argument per week could be guaranteed between these two. The subject matter varied, and they were by no means one-sided, but regardless of how heated things became, they remained friends. Their fondness for each other ran deep; surprising considering how totally different they were.

Ruth had taught art until shortly before she became the Latimers’ neighbour and started painting full-time. She met Erich through his son Danny, who had been a promising student of hers. Erich was the only subject Jim never broached, it was their taboo; he was not sure if their friendship was platonic or sexual. Hannah was never any use on the subject; undoubtedly she knew, women always did, at least so Jim believed. For all his pretence of worldliness there was something of the innocent about Jim and something of the prude too. Ruth generally stayed over at Erich’s bungalow on evenings when they went to their healing group. Jim understood no more about what went on at these weekly meetings than the name suggested; he showed no interest in anything that came under the heading ‘esoteric’.

“So how did you do?” Ruth asked, not in the mood for a good quarrel.

“I start Saturday,” he replied excitedly.

Ruth paused almost imperceptibly. Jim failed to notice.

“Good. You must be pleased.”

“It’ll be great to have money again,” he said. Then, remembering the bills on his kitchen table, added, “After the wolves at the door.”

“How long will the job take?” she asked.

“I reckon four maybe five days. I’m off to London tomorrow to pick up some gear.”

“Will you call in on Hannah and Soph?”

“Probably.”

“Give them my love.” She wiped the brush she was using on a rag and put it down on the nearest table, “Even though I’m busy I suppose you expect me to stop and make you coffee?”

“I made you coffee yesterday morning, even though I was on my way out for a walk. So the answer is yes, except I’ll have tea, please.”

Ruth smiled.

“It’s okay,” Jim said, “I’ll make it.”

Ruth made the tea. She felt like stopping; they chatted, drank tea and shared a pack of biscuits. Jim stayed about an hour.

Immediately after he’d gone, Ruth dialled Erich’s number. It always surprised her how much stronger his accent sounded on the telephone.

“Erich. He’s taken the job.”

“Have you told him anything?”

“No, you know Jim, he wouldn’t listen.”

“Perhaps it’s best, for the moment anyway. Let’s face it, we don’t understand it ourselves yet.”

“I woke up terrified last night ... I was screaming ...”

Hugh's Tale

As narrated by Hugh Apsley to Brother Anselm at the Abbey of Valle Crucis during
the month of December in the year 1202

I

After the passage of years even the most painful memories of childhood are apt to fade and thereby lose their poignancy, good Anselm. I still recall my mother's tearful eyes the day that I was taken screaming from her bosom. My father scolded me gently for my timidity, and assured me once again of my good fortune. I was six years old, and to become page to Gerbert Corviser, lord of a sizeable estate north of Chester.

"Let me be proud of you, Hugh," he said, as he hoisted me, still blubbering, into the arms of Gerbert's steward.

I caught a final glimpse of my mother's gentle face through milky eyes. The steward turned his horse about and cantered away from all that had been home.

Four months on, the same steward carried news to me of my mother's death. The next time I kissed that soft cheek, all warmth had left it as she lay before me cold as earth.

She had been with child, a fact that in my childish innocence I had no knowledge of. However, not even my ignorance of such matters could deny the howling presence of a baby girl, Melisend, my sister. Myself, I took no interest in the caterwauling bundle of misery my old nurse placed so joyously into my arms.

As Melisend grew she bore a striking resemblance to our mother. As transformation came about in her features, so too did feelings of brotherly affection in my heart. She was quicker-witted than I was, aided by a mischievous streak and determined will; my father doted on her, and his reprimands, usually meeting doleful eyes, often as not gave way to swift forgiveness.

Gerbert Corviser proved himself a fair and gentle master. I served at table as his page, and when a homesick look overtook my eyes, he

would give me leave to visit my family. I saw them at the fairs of Shrewsbury and Chester, which my father always attended with Melisend and sometimes my older brother Geoffrey too.

Gerbert grew fond of his reluctant page, and treated me as well as his own kin. At the age of thirteen I became his squire. The years passed comfortably, my master educating me in the knightly arts, whilst I continued to see my family at various times.

Gerbert Corviser had never been a man of much devotion in religious matters. He enjoyed hunting and good wine much more, and possessed a taste for women. However, as he progressed in years, he grew concerned for the state of his mortal soul. When news reached England that the Infidel had taken Jerusalem and men talked heatedly of the abomination, Gerbert I recall remained silent on the matter, which was not normally his way.

Whatever Gerbert's sins were, whether real or imagined, I knew him for a better man than most. However, the promise of absolution for setting foot upon Crusade brought comfort to him, and Gerbert was resolved to cleanse his soul in holy war.

When all the preparations for our departure had been made, I visited my home to bid farewell. Melisend was thirteen then, and on the eve of womanhood. Leaving my homeland brought to mind my earlier departure, and the sight of Melisend with tears on her cheek as I rode away forced me to choke back a tumult of emotions in my own breast.

We sailed with the fleet and met King Richard's army at Marseilles. We arrived later than expected, and the King had already departed. We sailed for Sicily, and met with Richard's forces outside Messina. We launched an assault on the city over a sum of money owed to the King. It was soon resolved, and I had received my first taste of battle.

We overwintered in Sicily before sailing for Cyprus. There was trouble here too, and Richard led his army against the island's fortresses. Within a few weeks the whole of Cyprus was ours; these victories intoxicated my youthful mind, and Gerbert seemed to grow younger with the thrill of battle.

Finally we reached Acre and joined the siege that had begun two years before. The bombardments started and our fleet blockaded the harbour cutting off their supplies. The city's surrender was only a matter of time.

King Richard himself was eager to reach Jerusalem. Saladin delayed payment of a ransom for the prisoners of Acre, and the King, impatient to move on, ordered they be taken outside the city walls and executed. The majority, about two and a half thousand, had been men

of the garrison, yet a few hundred women and children were also put to the sword. I felt pity for them. Until then I had seen only glorious victory, but on that day I saw another side to war which did not glisten so brightly.

We marched south towards Joppa. At Arsuf, the rear of our column was attacked, and many horses were lost. Our knights charged too soon, but the King, seeing an advantage in this error, did not recall his men, and caught the Saracens off their guard. He ordered his knights to drive forward twice more, bearing down like a charging wall into the enemy. We won a great victory that day, handing us the prize of Joppa.

Gerbert had launched himself into each charge with great enthusiasm. I could see little from my position behind our lines with the other squires. Twice Gerbert rode back proudly, but after the third charge only his stallion returned. Taking no thought, I rashly mounted the beast and rode into the fray in the direction where I had last seen my master.

I found Gerbert propped against a rock, being comforted by a knight of the Temple, and knew at once that my master could not recover from the injuries he had sustained; his belly was split open, and much of his entrails had spilled out onto the dust. A short way from Gerbert lay the Saracen who had done him injury, himself dispatched by the Templar.

“Is this your master, boy?” the knight asked as I dismounted.

“Yes, sir,” I answered.

Gerbert, seeing me, called out in a weak voice, “Hugh, you found your old master.”

Tears filled my eyes as I knelt beside him; Gerbert took my hand and clasped it to his breast.

I said, “Don’t try to speak. I’ll take you back to our lines.”

Gerbert shook his head, he spoke in short bursts, for his pain was great, “I will die where I am fallen. I shall not see the Holy City. Perhaps God will show mercy ... for the commitment I have shown to his great cause.” Then Gerbert looked up at the Templar and said, “I would ask a favour of you, sir.”

“If it is in my power to grant then it shall be given,” the knight replied.

“This boy ... my charge ... take him into your order ... I have trained him well, he is obedient and dutiful ... I intended him to be a knight.”

“I will speak to my order for your squire, if that is what both you and he desire.”

Gerbert looked anxiously into my eyes; it was the look of a man desperate to conclude his affairs.

“I wish only to do your bidding, good master,” I said.

A look of tranquillity came over his old face; he never spoke again. Then, a great wave of pain suddenly rose up and overtook him; he squeezed my wrists in his mailed hands as his body convulsed. He coughed, and a great issue of blood poured from his mouth. He gave out one last cry, then sighed, as though his soul had already fled from him. His painful grip on me released and I lowered his head gently to the rock.

The Templar recited a prayer as grief spilled from my eyes.

When the knight had finished, he said “We should leave this place, boy.” The clamour of battle was still raging nearby, the combatants only visible to us as spectral shapes in the heat and dust. “I believe the day is ours, but we are still in the midst of a battlefield.”

We lay Gerbert across the saddle of his horse; the Templar mounted his own steed and I followed behind leading my master.

When we were near to our lines, the Templar glanced back at me and said, “I will not hold you to the promise you made, to bring comfort to a dying man.”

The knight’s faithlessness caused me to speak angrily, “I gave my word. I will not go back on an oath I gave my master.”

The knight turned his horse about, and looked down at me directly. I felt fearful of him for a moment, thinking the anger I had shown in my voice had overreached my station.

But the Templar only smiled, “If we are to be brother knights, then you had better learn my name. I am Reynald de Sauveterre.”

Chapter Four

Friday, 6 December, 1996

Jim caught the train to London; it was often easier when he had several ports of call as he did today. As he entered the station concourse at Charing Cross, he was aware that the run-up to Christmas had begun. Living where he did, in a semi-hermitlike existence, it was possible to let the festive season come and go virtually unnoticed. Not here, amidst the hurly-burly of the city; with Christmas trees arrayed with fairy-lights and tinsel, platoons of shoppers on reconnaissance missions bearing armfuls of well-known brands, and, ‘*The train now standing at platform three ...*’ softly backed by the well-worn tunes of the season.

Whenever he could, Jim preferred to walk, but today his schedule was too tight for this, so he took the tube to Warren Street. Bob Isherwood was meeting him for lunch, and he was picking Sophie up from her school later. He’d phoned Bob the previous evening to let him know he’d taken the job.

“Great to know you’re up and running again,” Bob said.

Jim mentioned he was hiring a medium format camera. He normally worked in 35mm, but for catalogue work a larger negative was necessary. The photographic suppliers were based in Drummond Street, an area renowned for some of the best Indian food in London. They arranged to meet in a restaurant suggested by Bob at 1pm.

Drummond Street was only a short walk from the tube. They had his camera waiting to be picked up. Jim bought twenty rolls of 2¼ square film and four rolls of coloured paper: red, purple, and two shades of blue. Loxton had shot the porcelain against two backgrounds; Jim thought he would experiment with a couple more. When he realised how much there was to carry, he wished he’d brought the car. He arranged to pick the stuff up after lunch.

Jim got to the restaurant a bit early. He was pouring himself a glass of mineral water as Bob arrived.

“Now that’s a sight to behold ... like watching a whore in a nunnery.”

“Just shows you can get used to anything,” said Jim, standing up and extending his hand towards Bob.

Bob flicked the hand away and the two men hugged.

“Christ, Jim, it’s good to see you. I thought the next time I’d hear about you would be your funeral.”

“I was headed that way. Anyway, how are you, how’s the picture business?”

“Bloody great, bought a bigger house since I last saw you, which keeps the wife happy, and I just bought myself a fiftieth birthday present of a Mazda MX5, which the wife hates, but makes me happy!”

Bob looked greyer, balder, and a good bit wider around the middle. His laugh hadn’t changed; it was the kind that made heads turn.

“How’s Isla?” Jim asked.

“Yeah ... enemy’s okay,” Bob replied. ‘The enemy’ was the normal term he used for his wife. Bob and Isla had been married twenty-five years, had three daughters, and adored each other.

The Indian waiter came over and asked Bob if he wanted to order a drink. Bob cast a glance at Jim, “You mind?”

“Course not.”

He ordered a beer; Bob had a prodigious capacity for beer. Jim had met Bob whilst still a photographic student. Bob had given a talk at his college and they had chatted over a few drinks in the bar afterwards. He had guided and encouraged Jim in the early years, introducing him to several influential people who had aided his career.

Bob was a New Zealander. He still retained a strong Kiwi accent, despite having moved to London in the late sixties, where he’d started out as a photographer. Bob had always possessed a fascination for native peoples, and by the time he arrived in Britain had amassed a large collection of photographs depicting Maori and Aborigine life. This had formed the basis of his library collection, which he’d built into one of the best picture libraries in Europe, representing native peoples from every corner of the earth. His company could supply an up to date photograph of a Laplander or an inhabitant of Borneo just as easily as a portrait of a nineteenth-century Cornish fisherman.

The restaurant offered a set buffet at lunchtimes. The food was excellent; Jim was slowing down on the second helping. Bob was ploughing through a third, when Jim brought up the subject of John Loxton.

Bob’s face changed its demeanour immediately the name was mentioned. He tossed the naan bread he was about to attack back onto his plate.

“I got a visit from a friend this morning. Someone I play golf with, who as it happens is a Chief Inspector in the Vice Squad.” Bob’s face looked like thunder; Jim looked on perplexed as his friend continued, “Oh, it was okay, it was a friendly visit ... least I hope so. He wanted to know why Loxton had chosen me as his executor, were we good friends? Had I known him socially?”

“What was all that about, they don’t suspect foul play?”

“No, no question of that ... definitely suicide. The body will most likely be released for funeral on Monday.”

“So why the visit?”

“Loxton, it seems, mixed with some unsavoury types.” The waiter passed by. “Could I have another beer?” The waiter nodded and continued on his way. Bob leaned across the table and said quietly, “They think Loxton was part of a paedophile ring.”

Jim’s eyes widened and his mouth fell open, “What?”

“Let’s face it, Jim, everyone knew Loxton was weird, but Jesus, I was just as incredulous as you when I heard.”

“They can’t seriously think you’re involved?”

“I don’t believe so, least not any more, I told Ian in no uncertain terms,” he saw Jim’s confusion at the name, “Ian Rice ... the Vice Squad man. Actually, he was embarrassed too, kept apologising. To be fair, I think he was acting as a friend ... you know, clear my name, all that crap.”

“You said paedophile ring, have they made arrests?”

“It seems not. Judging from what Ian said, they’ve had these people under surveillance for months. Loxton’s suicide was a set-back. These sicko bastards are hyper-cautious and run to ground soon as they whiff any hint of the police. I tell you, if I find anything when I start going through Loxton’s stuff, it’ll give me the greatest pleasure ... they should have their balls mashed same as Loxton.” He thought a moment before adding, “Yeah, and a stick of plastic explosive up the arse.”

After this Bob’s appetite recovered. He managed to finish his meal, drink a third beer and enjoy a helping of dessert washed down with coffee. Jim liked him a lot. It was good to bury the past.

The two men lost track of time trawling areas of mutual history, and were oblivious to the fact that they were the only diners left. Fortunately the waiter was watching the clock, and no doubt keen to put his feet up, was driven to place a stainless steel plate with the bill down on their table.

“Come by the office on Monday when you drop the film off,” Bob shouted back at Jim as they set off in different directions.

Jim had forty minutes to pick up his gear and reach Sophie before she left school. They called him a cab from the photographic suppliers. Sophie's school was only a couple of miles north, but pre-Christmas traffic moved as slowly as hell. Fortunately, the taxi arrived just before the school bell. The cabbie grumbled miserably, but agreed to wait.

Jim watched Sophie coming along the school drive amongst a swathe of friends laughing and joking with each other. It had only been a couple of weeks, but he was sure she'd grown. She looked more like her mother every time. As a child she hadn't appeared to take after either of them much. Everyone agreed she was most like Jim in temperament, which used to flatter him, but more recently he'd worried she might be too much like him.

"Hi Dad."

"Hi."

The days of uninhibited displays of pleasure at the sight of him were long gone.

"Did you bring the car?" she asked.

"I've got a cab." Jim led Sophie to the taxi, amidst calls of "Bye Soph!", "Have a nice weekend!", "Give me a ring!", "See you Monday!"

Once away, without appearing to draw breath, Sophie filled her father in on what was happening in her life, "A boy in year eleven is a really good guitarist, he's in this band, and a record company want to sign them up ... I got the best mark in English and history this term ... there's a girl who left last year who moved in with her boyfriend and got pregnant, now she's having triplets, imagine that?" Occasionally she came up for air and asked him something like, "How are you, Dad?" or "How's Ruth?"

His answers needed to be concise.

The house where Hannah and Sophie lived ran behind Clapton Pond. They had bought it fourteen years ago. It felt odd returning to it, no longer as an inhabitant, but only an invited guest. Sophie opened the front door with her key and they piled the photographic equipment up in the hallway.

"Brought the kitchen sink I see," said Hannah, appearing on the staircase.

"I should be getting paid for this," joked Sophie, as she struggled awkwardly through the door with a metallic box.

"Shut up complaining kid, or I'll send you back to the chimney sweep," warned Jim smiling up at Hannah before going out to pay the taxi-man.

“Victorian Father!” Sophie shouted after him.

Hannah was standing just inside the doorway when he returned.

“Hello Jim,” she greeted, “You look well.”

“Thanks. You’re looking good yourself.” He meant it, she did; she had done something, the hair he thought was the most likely candidate, but couldn’t be certain; the curse of being male.

They welcomed each other with a hug. They both felt uneasy when they touched, and greeting was best done swiftly.

“Can you stay to supper?” Hannah asked.

Jim suddenly had a flashback to pulao rice and chapattis.

“Go on Dad,” encouraged Sophie.

“I had a late lunch with Bob Isherwood.”

“It won’t be ready for at least an hour.”

“Go on Dad.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

“I’m going upstairs to take off the prison uniform. If the phone rings, don’t pick it up, it’s for me,” Sophie instructed as she climbed the stairs.

Jim and Hannah exchanged eyebrow movements in mutual recognition as they watched their ‘little girl’ go off to change.

“She’s right,” Hannah said as they went down the short flight of stairs to the dining-room and kitchen, “If the phone rings there’s a ninety-nine point six percent chance it’ll be for her.”

“What do they find to talk about?”

“God knows. They spend all day together and start ringing each other five minutes after they get home.”

“Boys?” Jim asked, feeling an authentic attack of Victorian Fatherhood coming on.

“Not yet ... just talk.”

The phone rang; it was picked up, the house’s adult population was not required.

Hannah made a pot of Earl Grey; they sat and chatted at a large pine table in the kitchen. Talking had not been hard once Jim got sober. They shared the same liberal views on nearly every subject.

“So you met Bob, how was it?”

“Like old times, he hasn’t changed much, just a bit wider round the girth.”

“I saw him recently ... I was having lunch with Fleur.”

“Yes, he told me. I believe I have you to thank for the job I’m doing.”

“Me?”

“Bob put me up for it. The people Loxton was supposed to start work for got in touch with him.”

“Loxton?” asked Hannah. The name rang a distant bell.

Jim reminded her who Loxton was.

“I remember, ‘Pompous prick’ you used to call him.”

“He’s dead.”

Jim told her about his suicide, the piece in the paper at Erich’s and how Bob had unwittingly become involved.

“What an appalling death, poor man.”

“You might prefer to reserve judgement on the poor man bit.” He explained all about Bob being visited by a friend from the Vice Squad.

Hannah was clearly horrified by it. “You read about these people but never expect them to be someone you know.”

“Let’s change the subject, what about you?” Jim asked.

“Things are fine. I’m picking up as much work as I can handle.”

Hannah was a freelance journalist; she usually thought up an idea, got an editor interested in commissioning it, then researched it in more detail and wrote it up. She was good at her job, and enjoyed the work.

Before supper Jim was invited to hear Sophie’s latest CD up in her room.

“Can I come to stay soon, Dad? I haven’t been to the cottage for ages.”

“Yes, of course you can. When?”

“What about next weekend?”

“Okay by me. I should have finished this job by Thursday at the latest. Talk it over with Mum, and we’ll arrange it.”

Shortly after supper, some friends called for Sophie to go ice-skating with them. Jim slipped a tenner into her hand as she hugged him.

“Thanks, Dad. I’ll give you a ring.”

Hannah and Jim chatted, mainly about Sophie, surrounded by the debris of the meal. After this Jim washed up and Hannah made coffee.

Jim rang for a cab to take him back to Charing Cross. It arrived just before 8pm.

“Soph asked if she could come to the cottage. I told her to discuss it with you.”

“Fine, we’ll arrange it.”

“Thanks for the cannelloni, it was great. Blame Bob that I didn’t quite do it the justice it deserved.”

He gave her a quick peck on the cheek and began to struggle into the cab with the photographic equipment.

“Come for Christmas!” Hannah blurted out the invitation, as if it was a thing she’d wanted to say all evening but had found the words difficult to get out.

“What?” he asked, turning back to look at her.

“Would you like to spend Christmas with me and Soph?”

“Er ... yeah ... okay, thanks ... I’d love that.”

The cabbie, different to the previous one but clearly weaned on the same rules of etiquette and good manners, growled with impatience, “Hurry up, mate, I’m losing fares while you piss about.”

Hannah smiled at Jim’s momentary confusion, one leg in one out of the cab.

“We’ll speak next week,” she said.

*

Jim recognised the waiter operating the buffet trolley along the aisle of the moving train. The man had clearly identified Jim too, and brought his trolley alongside him with a slightly unpleasant, rather knowing expression on his face.

“And what can I get you, sir?” he asked smugly, his hand hovering above a miniature of brandy.

“Nothing thanks,” replied Jim chirpily.

“Oh,” replied the trolley man, wheeling himself away slightly crestfallen.

All in all, it had been a good day. He was about to start work again, rekindled an old friendship and been invited for Christmas by the estranged wife he still loved.

The only blight on an otherwise perfect day was learning the unpalatable truth about Loxton. He immediately recalled Bob’s justice for paedophiles, ‘... balls mashed ... stick of plastic explosive up the arse.’

Then, for no apparent reason, Ruth’s reaction to Loxton’s suicide floated up into his mind. ‘To mutilate yourself like that ... like torture ... like some vicious punishment. The pain would be unbearable. I can’t believe it possible, you’d pass out with the shock.’

Chapter Five

Saturday, 7 December – Sunday, 8 December, 1996

Close up, the gates looked even more impenetrable than they had appeared from the first floor. Jim stepped out of his warm car into the chilly morning and pressed the buzzer set into the wall at the gate's side. A camera peered down at him from the top of one of a pair of concrete monoliths that served as gate posts. A moment later a click was followed by an electronic whirring as the gates began to open; someone was alert.

He amused himself with the thought, 'It's a kind of Fort Knox for porcelain,' as he drove through the opening and parked beside a white Mercedes. Despite it being a rather gloomy morning, Jim felt bright and positive.

The gates vibrated and clicked as they joined together again. He found himself enclosed in a desert of brick and concrete. It was quite shockingly stark; no moss or lichen grew on any of the walls, and not even a solitary weed broke free at any point. The only relief in this hard-surfaced world was a series of small, square flower beds roughly formed in the concrete base of the car park, three on either side. Each bed supported a single rose-bush, dormant now and cut right back to the stem. They didn't look like happy plants but appeared frail, their surrounding soil light and thin. The constant squawks and banterings of seagulls didn't seem to add any life or colour, but somehow only contributed an element of eeriness.

The ground where Jim stood was level with the basement window, which like those at the front of the house, was barred and shuttered. There was a metal shuttered loading bay locked up tight, but next to it a normal sized door made of steel was opening.

"Good morning, Mr Latimer," Nicholas greeted with a toothy grin, his slight frame adorned as before in oversized clothing. Jim wondered if there had been a clearance sale at Oxfam. "May I help?"

"Thanks," Jim replied, opening the car's rear and sharing out some of the equipment he'd brought.

He followed Nicholas through the steel door into an area behind the docking-bay. Here there was a lift and two more metal doors, both bolted and padlocked; the one situated to the right of the lift bore the words 'Fire Escape' just legibly in peeling paint; the other, labelled 'Stockroom' was opposite the docking-bay. The lift was old-fashioned, with a varnished wooden outer door containing a small diamond shaped glass panel roughly at eye level and a sliding inner one that concertina'd across. The bad smell Jim had noticed when he'd visited on Thursday was far worse down here.

They made two journeys, piling the equipment at the back of the lift which left just enough space for them to stand.

"That's everything," Jim said.

Nicholas closed the outer doors. He activated the lift with a key which was kept on a chain attached to his belt. After he'd done this he drew the inner door across and pressed the button marked 'One'. As the ancient lift began its ascent, spontaneously and without warning, Jim's body gave an involuntary shiver.

Nicholas smiled. "Cold this morning," he said.

*

It took Jim just over an hour to get organised. Nicholas brought him a table, which he dressed with coloured paper to form a background for the items to be photographed. He used his own lighting equipment, setting up a soft box above the table, basically a black lampshade that held the flash and when operated threw the light down onto the object. The camera was set up a few feet away on its tripod and connected via a synch lead to the flash bulb.

Once everything was in place, the process would be straightforward. He would manually operate the flash in the soft box to get a light reading, and after focusing, take three photographs of each individual or group of items, the first exposure at the initial light reading, then by adjusting the aperture, one at half a stop above, providing more light, and another exposure half a stop below to give less. When the film was developed he could then choose the best shot from the three transparencies.

All ready, he went downstairs.

"I'm all set," Jim said as he entered the office.

He had not seen Rosemary Hines yet that morning. She and Nicholas were sat opposite each other behind the two joined desks.

"Good morning, Mr Latimer," she greeted.

“Good morning. I’m ready, but I don’t have anything to photograph.”

She giggled. “Nicky,” there was something unattractive about the way she used the name, almost sexual, “Can you arrange whatever Mr Latimer needs?”

Nicholas Cureton stood up; his face carried a beaming smile.

“Can I help?” asked Jim.

“There’s no need, Mr Latimer, it’s just a matter of getting the items out of the stock-room. Nicky’s very strong.” She looked admiringly at the young man as she spoke.

‘I feel like puking,’ thought Jim, as he watched the smug youth go proudly off.

“Can I offer you some coffee, Mr Latimer?”

“That would be lovely, if it’s no trouble.”

“No trouble at all. I’ve just made some.”

Rosemary Hines left the office and Jim took Nicholas’ vacated chair. When she returned half a minute later with a tray she paused for a second as though surprised to find him sitting there. Jim, quite oblivious to this, was leafing through the previous year’s catalogue which had been lying on the desk.

“I’d like to try some different backgrounds if it’s okay with you?”

“Yes, of course, we trust your judgement entirely, Mr Latimer.”

“Call me Jim.”

“And I’m Rosemary.”

They went on to discuss various details concerning presentation. Once all the pre-shoot planning was finalised, Rosemary somehow got on to the subject of John Loxton. Jim wished she hadn’t; he was certainly not about to mention the man’s alleged involvement with paedophiles.

“Does Mr Isherwood have any idea when the funeral might be?”

“I don’t think so, not yet.”

“Please let us know. I’m sure Mr Hart would wish to attend, as a representative of the firm.”

“Yes, of course. Bob thinks the body may be released on Monday”

“As the executor I expect Mr Isherwood will be keen to get on and deal with the estate.”

“Yes, I’d imagine so.”

At this point Nicholas returned. He didn’t look very pleased to find Jim Latimer sitting in his place. And for once, he wasn’t grinning.

“Everything’s ready,” he grunted.

Nicholas led Jim back upstairs. He had delivered about ten large cardboard boxes, each one containing items individually packaged. Most of these belonged in sets, which varied in number but were generally around five or six pieces. Each box contained a small brochure showing other pieces in the series plus a certificate detailing its manufacture and authenticity.

Nicholas unpacked the first figures, a set of six, and presented them to Jim.

“What are these?”

“They’re ‘Stars of the Silent Era’.”

The figure of a young woman seductively draped on a chaise longue made no impression on Jim, not even her name, Janet Gaynor, told him anything.

“They’re collectors’ items,” Nicholas said sniffily, “This is our twelfth series.”

“I see, so now you’re left with the ones nobody living has heard of ... less stars, more comets ...” he raised another of the figures, its identity also a mystery to him “... asteroids even.”

He could sense Nicholas’ hackles rising. Jim was aware and not proud of the fact that one of his failings was the childish delight he could take in annoying people who lacked a sense of humour; Nicholas was irresistible.

“You should be able to manage. I’ve made it very straightforward for you,” there was a touch of vitriol in Nicholas’ voice as he left.

Jim became engrossed in his work, and over the next two hours photographed about twenty-five items both individually and in their sets. However, around 11.15am he noticed that he was slowing down. There was a point of pressure growing directly between his eyes.

“I hope I don’t need bloody glasses.”

He opened the window and took a few deep breaths. The fresh air helped, so he left the window open, even so, he couldn’t seem to regain his former speed, and considered it possible that he was exhibiting early flu-like symptoms. By 12.30 he was feeling far worse, and decided to break for lunch.

There was a sandwich bar nearby where he bought an egg mayonnaise roll and a tea in a polystyrene cup. He walked down to the seafront and found a bench to sit on.

It was cold and grey, but the sea breeze was exhilarating, and the headache and eye tension soon dissolved away. He returned to the house just before 1.30pm.

He had intended working until four, but by 3.30 the headache had returned and was hampering his work again. He had done fairly well, and counted seventy items completed. He would get the film developed on Monday. Jim was extremely fussy about who did his developing, tending to use a firm in Clerkenwell, who did excellent colour work.

“I’d like to start a bit earlier on Monday,” he told Rosemary. “I don’t want to inconvenience you, but would eight be too early?”

“Eight is fine,” she replied.

“You don’t have far to travel to work then?”

Rosemary paused momentarily; Jim thought she registered a look of consternation, as if he was prying into her affairs. The next second she exhibited a large girlish grin, and said, “I don’t travel. I live here.”

“That’s convenient.”

Nicholas resumed his duty as lift man and took Jim down to the basement. It was pitch dark in the area outside the lift, Jim felt a shiver of discomfort as the damp air clung to his skin. Nicholas reached a hand around the side of the door and flicked on the light switch with the familiarity of habit, then unlocked the outer door and let him out. Jim thanked him and walked to his car with an unexpected feeling of relief.

*

Long before he arrived home, Jim’s headache had cleared again.

‘Perhaps there’s something toxic oozing out of their drains?’ he thought, briefly embracing a tendency for hypochondria. Common sense suggested that perhaps his eyes needed testing, ‘I suppose getting to thirty-seven without needing specs is a decent run.’

When he got back, he found Ruth’s house in darkness. She had put a note through his letterbox, which he discovered on the doormat in the company of two new bills.

Jim,

Gone away, back tomorrow.

Ruth

He wondered why she bothered. Ruth's notes, succinct and to the point, lacked a little depth. Once, when they hadn't been to the cottage for several weeks, she'd left a note that just read:

Hi

He was disappointed she wasn't home. He felt a twinge of loneliness.

He ate, watched ten minutes of some utterly predictable detective series, then read for a bit. He managed two chapters, which was something of an achievement. His attention span had been about thirty seconds when he'd first left the treatment centre. Later he watched ten more minutes of television, and concluded from this that although quite possibly brain-damaged from alcohol abuse he was not yet brain-dead. He made some hot chocolate and went to bed.

Jim had slept badly since he'd stopped drinking. He rarely dreamed, or if he did, certainly had no recollection of doing so. Yet every morning he woke with the same grey feeling inside, as if all his failings and weaknesses had been re-run throughout the night like an old 'B' movie. As soon as he awoke, his conscious mind would be assailed by all the inconsistencies of his personality and a host of missed opportunities in his life. So catching up on sleep was not altogether an attractive prospect.

"Early nights are good for you," he told himself.

*

The sun's rays struggled to find the merest chink in a grey ocean of cloud being driven across a turbulent sky. The wind howled over the mountainous terrain, venting its spleen like a deranged beast. Only the barest tint of colour defined the features in this isolated place, sky and land almost indistinguishable, merging where they met into a grey and wavering obscurity.

Briefly, a shape on the horizon took on solid form, before dissolving once more into the haze. Then it appeared again, for only the briefest of moments; it came and went in this way for many minutes until, clear of the swirling backdrop, it propelled itself forward slowly. The shape gradually divided into two, which then became discernible as two hooded men, staggering through a barren land. Their faces were hidden beneath their white hoods. One man was taller than the other, and limped, the smaller man occasionally lent the other

assistance at the most difficult places. Yet they continued on with a grim determination.

Jim began to feel the emotions of these two. They were set upon a path of no return; advancing with singleness of purpose, resolved to do or to be damned. Then, as he watched the scene unfolding, he began to feel fearful; he had to warn them their plight was hopeless.

“Go back! For God’s sake, go back! You’ll be destroyed!” he cried.

It was just before 6am and still dark outside as Jim reached out a trembling hand and put on the bedside lamp. He leaned back against the headboard, T-shirt soaked in sweat, panting, waiting for his heart to stop thumping in his chest.

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