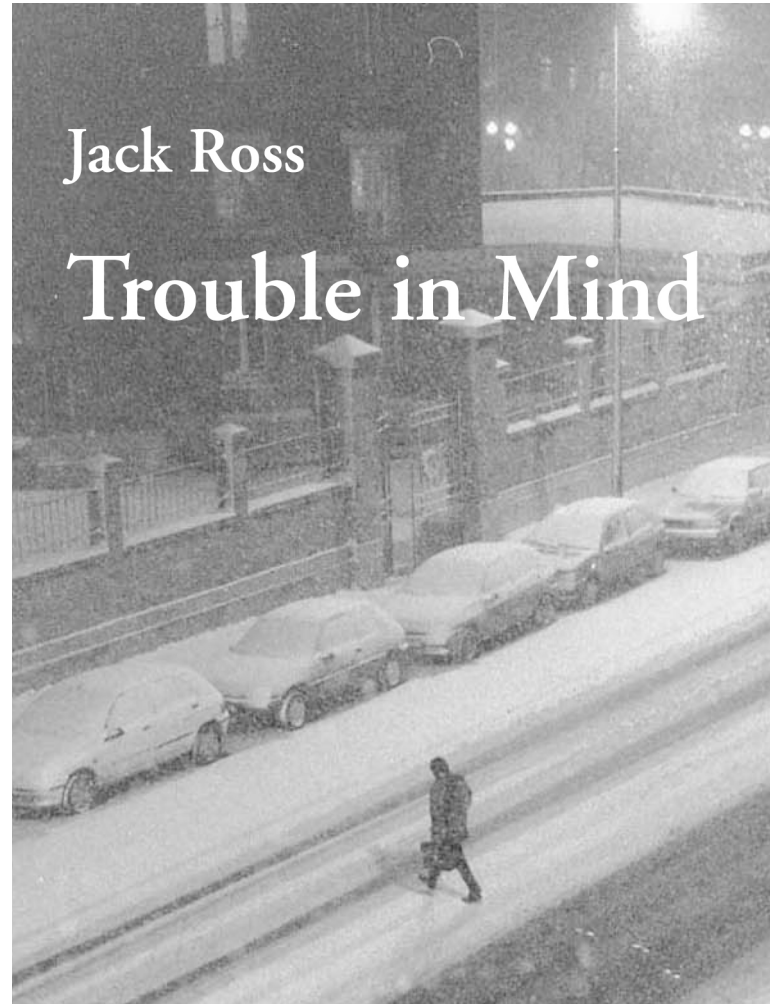


*life ain't worth living  
sometimes I feel like dyin'*  
– Marianne Faithfull

EBK 5

*Trouble in Mind* [complete]

A Titus e-Book



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## 1 – The House of the Nightmare

It was important, very important ...

Gran and Grandpa had emphasised that over and over again, adding some hurried instructions on what to do and what to wear.

“But *why?*”

“You’ll find out soon enough ...”

“Be sure and take a hat,” reminded Gran, while Grandpa contented himself with one last squeeze of the hand before pointing her on her way. When she turned her head she could still see him, finger to his lips in a gesture of silence, standing posed in a little family group – *Kimi Gothic* – at the far end of the hall.

She didn’t have a hat, only a baseball cap, so she’d compromised by hanging some Walkman headphones round her neck. For the rest, she was wearing a pair of paua earrings, a tiki (real greenstone!) bought by her father for her fifteenth birthday, the last happy day they’d all spent together. A short black tube-top (no bra – she didn’t really need one), her very best designer jeans. And a pair of Nike sandals. Oh, and a gold watch she’d inherited from Mum.

The stairs were not as dusty as she’d expected, but it was still very dark down there. The visibility seemed to improve as she went deeper, but that was probably just her eyes adjusting to the gloom.

Round and round the winding staircase she went, till she was far below the foundations of the house (visible up on the side, like a thin splash of white circling the coal-black walls).

Down and down. Every ten feet or so there was another layer of discoloration on the walls, marks of some kind of flooring which had been removed (by tunnellers, escapers?)

About forty feet down she found a layer of oak logs, sealed with putty. There was a trapdoor there, but it seemed to be stuck. No way through. Suddenly the instructions she had been given popped into her head. She took off her Walkman, and hung it on a nail on the rough



earth wall. The trapdoor swung open easily, and she was able to continue her descent down the pitch-black cellar.

Ten feet down there was another log platform. She took off her paua earrings and tossed them to one side. Instantly the trapdoor in the middle opened, and she climbed down through it.

More logs. This time she took off her tiki and placed it carefully on the floor.

Ten feet further, another layer of logs. She took off her top, and, sweating heavily in the stuffy air of the tunnel, kept descending.

Ten feet further, more logs. She removed her jeans. The trapdoor opened and she went on. By now it was very hot.

Ten feet further there was a stone floor, covered with strange writing. She couldn't read it, so she removed her watch and sandals. The stone split in two and she continued the descent.

The tunnel was now very narrow: dark-red and pressing in like a birth-tunnel. She reached the last platform of logs and removed her last garment. Now she stood totally bare, as water began to swirl up around her feet.

The water was warm and viscous. Was it water – or blood? She started to scream as it rose higher and higher around her body. Each of the trapdoors had closed behind her as the descent went on, so there was no way of escape.

The liquid rose to her lips, then closed above her head. Everything went quiet. Her inert body drifted towards the surface.

•

*Everyone who likes butt-fucking is Greek, thought the Count –  
Count Cipher.*

I found this in an old notebook. Undated. With no clue to its significance. I must have composed it in a dream, because it's certainly in my handwriting.

I imagine the Count – Count Cipher – can be related to Mr. *Lou* Cipher [Lucifer] in that horrible film *Angel Heart* (Robert de Niro, Mickey Rourke, Lisa Bonet in her first non-Cosby role). He probably also owes something to William Gibson's *Count Zero*, as well as to innumerable other sinister Counts in fiction: Count Fosco in *The Woman in White*, Count Dracula (of course), Graf Spee – even, perhaps, that Apostle to the Impostors, Fr. Rolfe, Baron Corvo.

But what does the statement mean? Everyone who likes butt-fucking is *not* Greek, except in some kind of Cretan paradox. Unless one *becomes* Greek by exhibiting this predilection; does it enrol you in the ranks of articulate-speaking men (and women), leaving behind the region of the bar-bar-mouthing barbarians?

The *atmosphere* of the remark, as of an after-dinner conversazione/colloquium, seems to me to owe something to the story "Sombrero," by Martin Armstrong, which I read years ago in a multi-volumed anthology of *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror*.

*Fiction? The old gentleman turned his piercing grey eyes upon the visitors who sat with him before his library fire. Fiction? No, I never read fiction.*

He then proceeds to give a series of dazzling character analyses from the bare bones of an old trial transcript.

That's as far as I can go with this fragment, but I like it, even cling to it – I see it as the door into a world of crackling fires, and port, and rich cigars, and wise old Counts whose spirit has endured the world's vagaries.

•

## 2 – Grandmother

The driver had a skull-face. Chalk-white, crabbed and cold – a mask to frighten little children with.

From the back seat of the Daimler, all Laura could see was a pair of bony ears protruding from between the red scarf and black top hat. But every time he turned his head those cheekbones came into view. Sharp as knives. As if he were slashing a way forward with them.

He hadn't spoken once since the journey began.

It had been a cold morning at the cemetery. “No flowers by request,” her mother's will had stipulated. Or rather, the hastily-scrawled note which was all she'd left behind.

The smoke from the chimney was swallowed by a jet-black sky.

Peter, her half-brother, tried to look stern and sorrowful, as he knew a brother should. “You'll *love* it there,” gushed Sylvia, her sister-in-law, seizing her in yet another unwelcome hug.

Once, as a very small child, Laura had been taken to see her grandparents' estate. The grounds, she remembered, had seemed immense: tall box hedges, elaborate flower-beds. She'd tried to climb one of the smaller trees, but had fallen and hurt herself. She could still recall that sick sensation of hanging poised in space, scrabbling desperately to hold on, the stomach-churning rush of the fall, then lying dazed and bleeding on the ground.

Was the delicate tracery of cuts on her wrists and thighs a relic of that day? Silver-white, like a gossamer spiderweb.

The box hedges were still there, she noted as the car nosed into the gateway of the park. Tall – *too* tall, surely? Wouldn't they block out the sun, rather than simply frustrating the curiosity of passers-by?

*What* passers-by? What stranger would penetrate here, so far from town?

Laura shuddered. A quick furtive movement in the hedgerow, glimpsed through the corner of an eye, made her think of rats, weasels, stoats – nasty little creatures burrowing under the ornate façade.

She'd only seen her grandparents once since then, and *that* visit had been overshadowed by the bad blood occasioned by Father's indiscreet choice of a second wife. Whatever her other virtues, Laura's mother had never been one to let things lie decently concealed. She'd provoked a row, and any attempts at rapprochement had been swallowed up in a jangle of raised voices and shouted accusations.

It was a little difficult to follow the reasoning which exempted Peter and Sylvia from accompanying Laura back to the house – something about having urgent business to transact the next day. “And we'll be seeing so much more of you now that you've moved out of that little shack in the sticks anyway, darling,” Sylvia had continued in her typical strain. *A strong odour of mendacity*, Laura repeated silently to herself.

Strong odour of mendacity – it was a phrase from a play her senior class had put on the previous semester. Even at the time Laura had been taken by the power of that word *mendacity*, the perfect way that it rolled off the tongue, seeming to sum up all the lies and deviousness in the world. God knew she'd encountered enough of those already in her sixteen years on earth!

Would this, too, be a place of mendacity, lies etched on every brow, written into every cornice and chink of the wainscoting? It looked solid enough from the outside – quite grand, in fact. Two wings, a central staircase, a multiplicity of rooms ...

As the driver pulled up outside the door, she thought she saw a curtain twitch. Was that someone watching from an upstairs window? There'd been a flash of white as well. A pale, sickly face?

Was it her grandmother taking stock of the new arrival? Preparing a garret room for the poor relation? She knew already that there was little to be hoped for from her grandfather. “He's been very quiet since the stroke,” Sylvia had confided in the long ride to the crematorium, in a

voice which implied a series of intimate talks cut tragically short by this aberration of nature.

“Looking after your grandfather” had always provided an excellent excuse for her grandmother to avoid tedious duties – in this case, attending the funeral rites of one who had never been anything but an embarrassment to the family as a whole.

The window was clearly empty now – a black gap, like a missing tooth. The house *did* look like a face, too, when looked at from this angle. An ugly, leering, vapid face. Was that why the drive had been laid out this way, with elaborate curves where a straight line might have served better?

That was one time Sylvia had shown up really well. While she and her mother stood tongue-tied, trying to cope with the successive blows of *malignant*, *metastasised* and *inoperable*, Sylvia had enquired, chattered, speculated, and insisted on sharing the results of a long comparative study of the cancerous experiences of her entire social circle.

It was hard to say if Laura’s father had rejoiced in this initially, but as time went by it became almost the only way in which he could discuss his condition without seeming to complain. The rest of them cringed at Sylvia’s indiscretions, her morbid fascination with the disease’s workings, but nobody could deny that they came to depend on her visits for some lightening of the oppression.

In due course, he died, and Peter and Sylvia ceased to call. The former had never seen exactly eye-to-eye with his unconventional stepmother, and the ten years between them had precluded any real intimacy ever growing up between his stepsister and himself.

Laura and her mother were thus left to their own devices, which one might have anticipated would suit them perfectly. Troubles come *not single spies but in battalions*, however (another quote from drama class). Her Mother’s untimely death had cut the experiment short.

Assuming reluctantly the mantle of decision-making, Peter and Sylvia had promptly decided on their grandparents’ estate as an appropriate

place for Laura. Somehow any question of her staying with *them* had been ruled out very early in the piece.

If only Laura had had some alternative to propose: some suitable school friend whose parents would be overjoyed to welcome another girl, her reluctance might have seemed more reasonable! “Better the devil you know ...” Peter had started to say the night before his stepmother’s funeral, only to be swiftly shushed by his wife before Laura had a chance to retort that she did *not* know these particular devils, and had (in any case) little desire to improve acquaintance with any of the damned ...

“You must be Laura.”

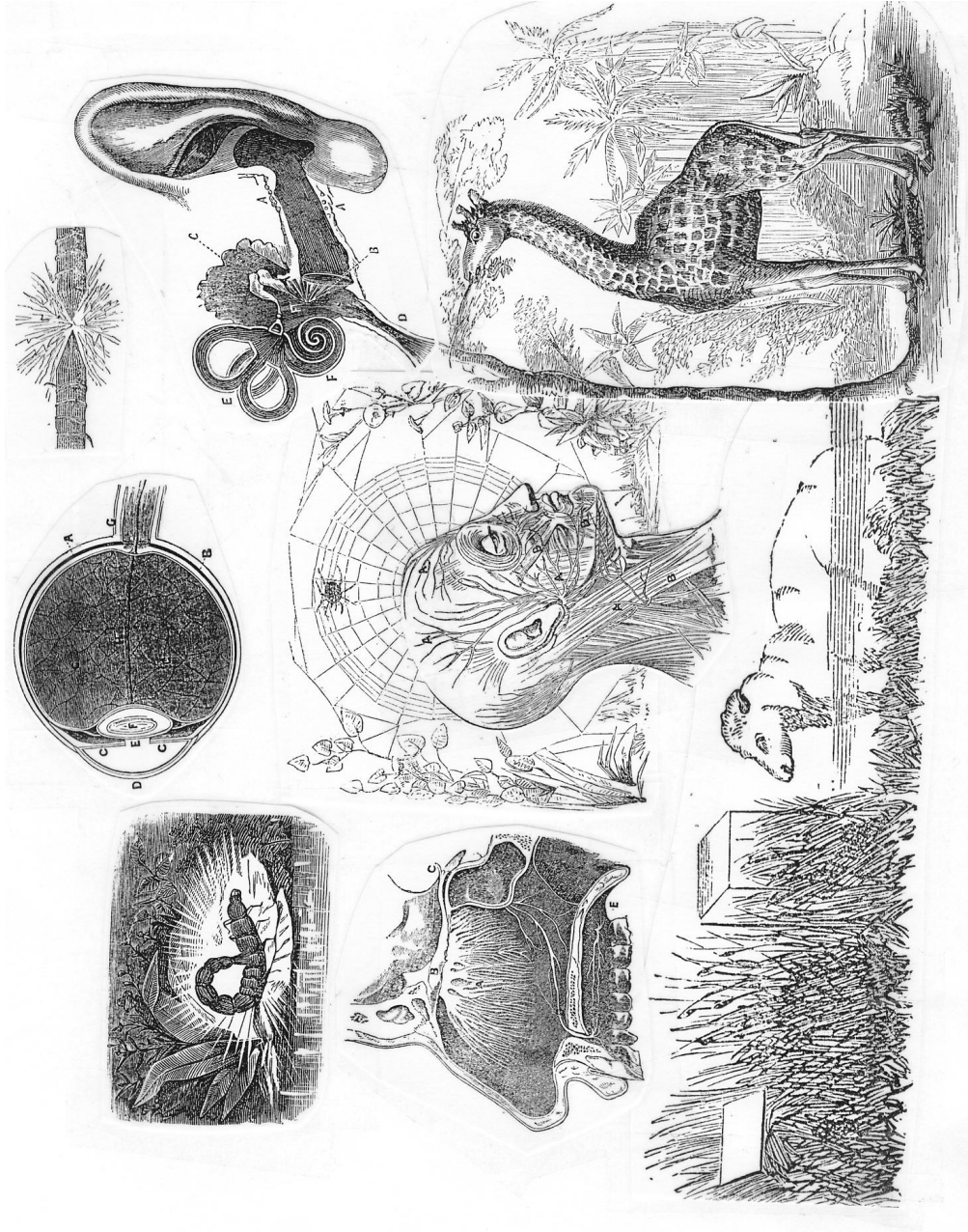
The woman who stood in front of her, in response to her knock at the large front door, seemed at once less intimidating and more ordinary than anticipated. She was even smiling – a tentative half-smile, the smile appropriate for two people meeting on the morning of a funeral. Her white hair was somewhat wispy, as if it refused to lie down for the comb. She reminded Laura of the White Queen in *Alice*.

“Do please come in. Do you have any other luggage with you?” This with a wave towards the skull-faced driver hoisting her backpack out of the boot.

Laura found it difficult to speak. She’d built up this scene so much in her mind: the threatening grandmother, the abandoned orphan ... Shaking her head (*like a deaf-mute*, she thought) she stammered something about Peter and Sylvia promising to bring the rest on later. And at that she burst into tears.

The tears provided relief of a kind. While they lasted, there was nothing else to think about. Her grandmother was holding her, muttering little endearments, as she barked and whined her shock, her grief. Then she found herself being led into the house, through the long dark hallway, into the kitchen (bright, gleaming ... glimpsed through blurred eyes), to the immeasurable comfort of a cup of tea.

•



I found an old ledger by the side of the road while walking home from the cinema one afternoon. It was a list of suppliers and customers for a furniture warehouse, a set of computer transcripts concertinaed and bound up between two brown covers.

I don't know why I picked it up. It was coming on to rain, so it would soon have been ruined by damp anyway.

In any case, I brought it home with me and left it lying in a corner of my room.

It was slightly damaged, so I patched up the covers and repaired the plastic binding apparatus.

After a bit I pasted some pictures inside it – collages I made from an old book of Victorian pseudo-science: heads, and lambs, and spider-webs.

And there the matter rested. For a time.

•



### 3 – Friends

“It’s part of the competition.”

“I’m sorry?”

Laura had been watching the activities of a group of smaller girls on the trolley-bus. Something about them fascinated her – a free and easy response to things, an almost total lack of self-consciousness as they shouted from one end of the bus to the other. And yet, *were* they truly oblivious? Wasn’t it rather that they knew everyone was watching them, and only affected to be unaware of it?

She turned to look at her neighbour, the one who’d spoken to her. A pretty smiling face, uniform like her own, shoulder-length black hair.

“Hi, I’m Lucy – Lucy Snowe,” the girl continued. “It’s the same every morning. They have a competition to see who can stand up the longest without holding onto anything.”

One of the younger girls, a svelte, dark sprite, was bellowing, “You’re in my competition space!” to a knot of other girls, as she balanced precariously in the aisle.

“Have you ever done it?” asked Laura, surprised into continuing the conversation.

“Sure. When I was younger. It’s not as easy as it looks.”

At that moment the driver slammed on the brakes, and the dark girl was sent flying into the lap of a young man in a suit. He looked embarrassed and flustered. The girl turned bright red, and jumped back up without a word.

“He’ll be dreaming about that tonight, I bet,” whispered Laura’s companion, and the delicious absurdity of the thought broke through her reserve. She found herself giggling helplessly. From that moment, somehow, the friendship was sealed.

•

“D’you know anything about spiritualism?”

They are sitting under a tree on the far side of the playing fields.

The question ties in so neatly with what Laura has been thinking that she gasps. There have been other dreams since she moved into Grandmother’s house, and her thoughts have been turning on the subject a good deal.

“Do *you*?”

“Nah, not really, but that girl Ismé does. I know she can be a bit of a pain sometimes, but she’s got some really cool stuff at her house: Persian carpets, and packs of cards, tarot cards, with pictures on them. Even a planchette.”

“Planchette?”

“Yeah, you know, a Ouija board.”

“Have you ever used it?”

“Once or twice, yeah, but nothing much happened. That’s why I was asking, really, because some of the others have been planning this slumber party on Saturday night, and I wondered if you wanted to come along. The thing is, though, they’re bound to want to start playing with the board, so I thought I’d better ask you about it first. I know it freaks some people out.”

“Doesn’t it frighten you at all?”

“Nah, not really. I don’t believe in that kind of stuff.”

“Does Ismé *really* go out and get wasted every weekend?”

“Fuck no, she’s never even had a boyfriend that I know of, unless they still have arranged marriages in Armenia and she’s got a husband waiting for her back there.”

“He’d have a big black moustache and a pot belly.”

“Oh, and he’s about fifty, and he’s already been married twice, and he’s got twelve children.”

Somehow it has been settled that Laura will go to the party with Lucy.

“Great, that means I’ll have somebody I can rely on. I tell you, one time Carol brought along this bottle of schnapps she stole off her parents, and everybody got totally shit-faced drinking it, and we were all

**Jack Ross**

sick as dogs next morning. *Anything's* better than that – even putting up with all that phoney crap about the spirits and the ancestors Ismé goes on about.”

“Are there going to be any guys there?”

“Oh, *that's* how the land lies, is it? Anyone in particular you've got your eye on? I tell you, you'd better watch out. There's some pretty horny guys around this school.”

Laura blushes and says nothing.

•

Have you ever thought that if you took a single story and read it carefully enough, you could deduce all the laws of human behaviour from it? I don't mean something like *War and Peace* or *Ulysses* – though the process would undoubtedly work with them, too. I just mean an ordinary novel, with a few characters entangled in some standard-issue peripeteia.

It seems an idle enough speculation, but the trouble with such ideas is that they tend to grow if not attended to. The two matters grew together, in fact – the question of what to do with the ledger, and the resolve to deduce all human behaviour from a book.

The choice of book was essentially irrelevant, but it seemed best to take one which was *unusually perfunctory* – one which made no serious attempt at all to understand its flimsy characters' psychology. It was not an act of literary criticism I was proposing to perform – rather, a species of magic: plucking out Leviathan by the tail – as if, once the faintest fingertip of human reasoning had been seized by the mangle of narrative, the vast machinery of hell would conspire to drag it all in.

It was while reading the novel *Dieb* [Thief] by a certain "Gordon Strahl" that I suddenly saw a way of putting the matter to the test once and for all.

Even mass-market paperbacks can be surprisingly difficult to dismember. The covers come off easily enough, but the glue backing is stubborn; the pages must therefore be ripped out one by one, with some risk of tearing them.

Eventually, though, one is rewarded with a small stack of loose leaves, ready for the next stage.

I had seen, like a window opening in my mind, a vision of my ledger's pages as frames: each displaying a page of text to underline, draw on, comment upon, annotate with marginalia – *marginalise*, in the truest sense of the term. The reality entailed a good deal of tiresome work with razor blades and scissors, but eventually I achieved a species of square hole, reaching from top to bottom of the ledger, with only the covers to hide the whole from prying eyes.

As I began to paste in the leaves of *Dieb*, I saw at once that the back of each one would now be reversed. No longer would the reader be lulled by the

easy flow of turning pages – the ledger would have to be physically turned around in order to examine *recto*, then *verso*.

I welcomed that, however. It seemed to me to symbolise the radical surgery I was proposing to perform on the white body of this book.

What I had created resembled – in a crude, impromptu way – the editions of his earlier novels which Henry James had specially printed when he was preparing the New York edition of his works. Each page, there, was surrounded by a broad expanse of white paper upon which the master could scribble amendments – a space of which he took full advantage (as would appear from the facsimile of one of these volumes which I looked at once in a library. It was here that he achieved that famous revision of the sentence “he was clean-shaved” into the more precise “he spoke, as to cheek and chin, of the joy of the matutinal steel.”)

My pages (appropriately?) looked less virginal than Henry James’s. The material trappings of the ledger were still there – the list of addresses and figures, somewhat *disfigured* by the addition of a rectangle of text in the middle of each one. Many of them, it is true, were blank, having formerly formed the back of a folded signature of computer paper, but these constituted a minority.

I welcomed the worldly *involvement* of these two competing levels of notation, I should say. It all seemed to me germane to my grand design: a taxonomy of human behaviour and motivations: the purpose for which I had assembled this somewhat unwieldy (and still a little ramshackle, despite my best efforts to repair it with sticky tape and glue) tome.

•

## 4 – The Séance

He had the body of a Greek god. There were no other words for it. They hadn't been sitting in the living room long – nervously saying hello to Ismé's aggressively friendly parents, and trying not to look too hard at the bizarre ornaments occupying corners of the room. Then *he* came in. He seemed quite unconscious of being naked to the waist; his attention was taken up by the immediate family – specifically, his mother.

“It's come up all funny,” lifting his left arm and using the other hand to point out a slight razor rash under the armpit. The gesture had the effect of accentuating his otherwise flawless upper-body musculature, but no-one else appeared to notice. “They said to shave them for the shoot, but now it's gone kind of itchy.”

All other conversation had lapsed: the four girls, two younger children, and two parents all concentrated single-mindedly on this dilemma of the firstborn son.

“Maybe some ointment, nah?” said Ismé's mother, as she levered herself up to examine the offending redness. “Maybe some of the Aloe Vera cream?” (she pronounced it “Alo-é Vé-ra”).

The boy (*Joseph – that was the name – Joe*, Laura remembered now. Ismé had been going on about him at school, about how he was a surfer and had won prizes), continued to pout. “It's on *Saturday*,” he whined.

“It'll be okay,” Ismé offered at this point. “Mama'll fix it.” (“He's got a photo shoot on Saturday,” she explained under her breath to the other girls. “For a calendar. They want him to pose for a surfing calendar.”)

Mama swept him away in the direction of the bathroom, while Ismé's father seized the opportunity to round up the two younger children (a girl and a boy, eight and ten respectively). They departed for bed with surprisingly little protest.

•

“What a *spunk*,” said Lucy, the moment the coast was clear.

“*Laura* thinks so, anyway,” added Carol, a mousy girl with lank blonde hair.

“I do *not*,” said Laura, stung into denial. “He’s not my type at all.”

“You like ’em all intellectual, do you? Like Timbo?” riposted Lucy.

Timbo was a particularly repulsive-looking boy with glasses and a receding chin who always came top in maths and physics, and was popularly rumoured not to have washed since he’d got too old to be bathed by his mother.

The other girls laughed. Laura, feeling a little betrayed at being thus singled out, paused before she too joined in. Honestly, one did have to admit he was something special!

“No more than *you*, anyway – you were staring at him like you wanted to start having his children right away.”

“Like a total wench,” added Carol, getting into the spirit of the game.

“Looks like *you’re* going to end up stuck with Timbo, then,” said Lucy, turning to Ismé. “After all, he’s your brother – it’d be really creepy for *you* to think he’s good-looking.”

“That’s not *fair*,” cried the indignant Ismé. “You girls are *such* perverts. Just ’cos my brother works out ...”

“Jerks off, more like,” interrupted Lucy, to a chorus of laughter from the others. “I bet he’s got a mirror propped up in his bedroom so he can see himself properly while he’s shaving.”

“Just how much of himself *does* he shave, anyway?” asked Laura.

“Why, do you want to check? I’ll go ask him if you like. I’ll tell him you really want to know. That you can’t live without knowing. That you want to touch and feel how smooth it is ...”

By now they were hysterical, giggling so hard that it was difficult to come up with further excesses to heap on the head of the hapless Joseph. It took a while for the laughter to die down.

“So what now?” asked Carol.

“Shall we go wake up Joseph? I’m sure he’ll be happy to take care of you,” quipped Lucy, but the joke had lost its savour.

“How about playing a game?” suggested Ismé.

“Yeah, we could use the board again,” said Lucy.

“Nah, I don’t know. It kind of freaks me out a bit. You know my Mama takes that stuff real serious.”

“Oh come on! You know nothing ever happens, and Laura’s never done it before.”

“I betcha Laura’s done *other* stuff, though,” said Ismé, with a leering sideways look, almost setting them off again. She rose, though, good-naturedly, to get the board from a little cabinet under the TV. (*A strange place to keep it*, thought Laura. She didn’t know why, but she’d imagined a more mystic hiding place: with secret runes, perhaps, or a Chinese puzzle concealing the entrance).

It took a while to get pencils and paper ready, then set up the planchette (a little triangular platform on wheels, with an Egyptian eye painted at the apex), and by then Laura knew it was too late to protest. She looked at Lucy to see if any support could be expected from that quarter, only to see she was as keen as all the others. It was as if this were what they’d been waiting for all evening.

“Is there anybody there?” intoned Lucy. Carol laughed, but Ismé was frowning and bustling about in a self-important way, trying (at least ostensibly) to get the planchette straight in the middle of the circle. Laura stayed silent. She felt a little cold, and wished very much she’d never agreed to this.

“Put just one finger-tip on the edge of the board,” said Ismé. “Gently, gently,” as it darted off in Carol’s direction, impelled by Lucy’s mischievous index finger.

“Let’s try a couple of spins.”

The little wheeled apparatus felt incredibly light, as it darted about the board. The moment you exerted the slightest pressure on it, though, it tipped up and came to a halt. Even Lucy had to give up trying to influence it after a while, after a few upsets.

Ismé went over to turn off the lights, and the questioning began.



“Who’s there?” they tried many times, to no avail. That was mainly because “Is there anybody there?” sounded so ridiculously hackneyed. It *was* tiring, sitting there in the dark, trying to detect the slightest quiver in the little pointer. There was something about it, though – a fascination that kept them there, slowly getting into the rhythm of asking questions and waiting for answers. Ismé did all the talking, at first, while Carol had the pad to write down any letters that came out. Then they swapped around: Carol asking, Ismé writing. No dice. Lucy asking, Laura writing. Still nothing.

Patterns started to build up, only to break down again:

A G N I ...

“Agnes?” “Agnieszka?”, the girls whispered, eagerly (there was a girl of that name in their gym class) –

J K M L L L L L ...

It was as if there was the faintest spark of a signal, but the engine was failing to fire.

G U N N A ... then off into Q P ...

(“Kewpie?”)

D N J ... NO NO NO

The pointer kept on indicating the *Nø* for some time and could not be shifted.

Laura felt fine about writing things down on the pad. It meant she didn’t have to concentrate on her hands, left her mind free to wander. What was she *doing* here? Where had she let them take her? This was just a bit too ... familiar somehow, too much like the old crib, the sound of the sea, the long nights when the rain and surf beat down on the lonely shore outside ...

“Laura, it’s your turn to ask the questions.”

“Oh, no, look guys, I’d really rather not, you know.”

“Why not?” asked Lucy, in a rather impatient whisper. Carol, too, was glaring at her as if at the ultimate party-pooper. Ismé looked smug, as though this cowardice was what she had expected all along. “If she doesn’t *want* to ...” she began.

“Okay,” said Laura curtly, pushing the pad back to Carol. “I’ll do it.”

“*Finally*,” muttered Ismé, with a thwarted expression.

“Is there anybody there?”

Silence. They were all tired, and the ornament-festooned suburban room, albeit darkened and muffled with curtains, seemed anything but spooky.

“Answer me now: where are you?”

Nothing. In a minute they would give up the game, and she could go home. Why had she wanted so badly to be friends with these girls anyway? She hardly knew them, and on the strength of this evening even Lucy had shown herself to have a bitchy tongue and feet of clay.

“Where *were* you?” she asked, on an impulse.

A little stir. As on a couple of previous occasions, the pointer started to edge towards the alphabet: C R J – “no, I!” B, and then came to a stop. CRIB. “Crib!” Laura felt a sudden stab of anxiety. Was it just a coincidence? She *had* been thinking about their little cottage by the seashore; she’d even used her mother’s word for it!

“Keep going, keep going ...” the others whispered. She was the apple of their eye now, the centre of attention. Laura continued:

“Where are you now?” A stupid question, one they’d asked before: a safe one, surely.

With almost military precision the planchette spelled out:

H O U S E.

*House!*

“Whose house? This house?” the others whispered. But nothing happened till Laura put the question herself:

G R A N

*Gran’s* house. She remembered that little flurry of white she’d seen at the window when coming up the drive that first afternoon. She’d looked for it again a few times as she came home from school, but there’d been nothing there.

No further prompting was needed. Grimly, she continued:

“Who are you?”

M O ...

*Mother?*

Jack Ross

N T Y

*Monty?*

“Have you got anything to tell me?”

D R O W N

*Drown?*

T H E J A P C A T

“The jap cat?”

“Maybe it’s for my parents,” whispered Ismé. “They used to have a Siamese cat.”

YES YES YES responded the pointer

“Why drown the cat?”

N A U G T Y

*Naughty.* This was nonsense. It didn’t feel the same as the first couple of words:

“Where are you in Gran’s house?”

U P S T A I R S

It, whoever or whatever “it” was, was back again. The prankster was off the line, but for how long? Rather desperately, Laura continued:

“Why are you up there, what are you doing?”

C O M I N G

“Coming?”

C O M I N G B A C K

“What are you coming back for?”

C O M I N G C O M I N G C O M I N G C O M I N G C O M I N G  
G C O M I N G C O M I N G

“Who are you?”

Silence.

“Are you my mother?”

Silence. The pointer quivered a little.

“*Why* are you coming back?”

Y O U

“Are you coming back for me?”

Silence.

“Tell me who you are!”

EMUSHKALAMMA ...  
HURSA GKALAMMA ...  
ESHARRA ...  
BARATUSHGARRA ...  
ZABALAM ...  
EULMASH ...  
HEHEHESNAKEEYES ...

And that was all. Just nonsense syllables and bits of broken words came out after that. It was rather a relief when Ismé's mother came bustling back in and started in on about sleeping arrangements, blankets, hot-water bottles ...

The other girls seemed happy enough to let the sense of threat, of tension, dissipate. Even though it hadn't been her idea in the first place, Laura felt she had shifted somehow to the outer. It was as if none of them really wanted to question what had happened there that night.

•

Claiming that anything is impossible is a perilous act. My dream last night involved a long and complex narrative set on an ice-planet, with a central character (male) who remembered an encounter with a woman named Susan. In the dream, I was trying to find a place to sit down and write a plot synopsis of this story, with scant success. I seemed to be living in a summerhouse, by the sea: one place was too noisy, another too cluttered. Finally I went outside into the dunes, only to see a strange animated windstorm rushing towards me over the sandy fields.

At that point I woke up. The whole plot had disappeared, except for the first few words I was trying to write down:

*Susan woke up, unexpectedly, in the small hours of the morning.  
She'd had a dream, and the memory of it was still animating her,  
still working its way through her ...*

I can see Susan now, as she sits up in bed, then gets up and starts to look for her son. I can see the ice-planet, and hear the mellifluous syllables of its name, but I no longer know how the two are related. I mourn for my lost story. Susan and her boy were both going to die, a death for which my hero felt some measure of responsibility.

The question is, are the events of this story recoverable? I tried the usual oneirologist's techniques: closing my eyes and trying to remember specific details which would lead to larger elaborations, thinking laterally about other things in order to charm it into reappearing. Nothing worked. It was, for all intents and purposes, gone. I miss it, because it was long and beautiful. It would be rash, however, to claim it could *never* reappear.

•

## 5 – The Tower Room

“Laura?”

“Yeah?”

“What *was* that?”

“What was what?”

“You *know*.”

“I’m not sure I want to talk about ...”

“Don’t give me that! I was *there*, remember.”

“Yeah. You haven’t been there so much *since*, though, have you?”

The two girls are in Laura’s bedroom, high in the north turret. Through the window one can see the garden, trees, the distant sea. The afternoon light slants in on the covers.

“Sorry, babe, but you just got to understand. We were really freaked out, all of us. The others didn’t want to have *anything* to do with you after that. Ismé said you were some kind of witch, and Carol ...”

“If I’m a witch, then what are you doing *here*?”

“Oh, come off it! I *know* you. I know you aren’t a witch or any of that shit. But, man, I was really scared when it kept on spelling out that word again and again. That *wasn’t* you, was it?”

“*You* know. You were there.”

“Yeah, but maybe you were moving the thing somehow.”

“Could *you*?”

“No, of course not, but I’d like to *think* that was all it was ... It wasn’t, though, was it?”

“Why ask me?”

“Look, we’re friends, right?”

Laura sits up and hugs her knees. The sheet slips down. “*Are* we? You were certainly keen enough to get me into that thing, that seance, after all that crap about needing me for moral support!”

“Oh God ... I’m really sorry! I just thought it’d be fun. I was in kind of a stupid mood, you know, and it seemed funny, especially after all that shit about Ismé’s brother.”

“Joseph. Man, I haven’t given him a thought since then.”

“Mmmm. Maybe you should, girlfriend ...”

“Oh, I don’t know, Lucy. Do you *really* want to be friends with me, or do you want to keep on hanging out with Ismé and Carol?”

Lucy rolls over on her side. “D’you want me to make a *choice*?”

“No! Fuck it, that’s not what I mean. I just mean that they don’t like me, and it’s going to be difficult if we all keep on spending time together.”

“You know, that’s the first time I’ve *ever* heard you swear, I think. Wash out your mouth with soap, young lady!”

“Seriously!”

“I *am* being serious. If they can’t hack it, fuck ’em. I don’t give up my friends for *nobody*.”

“*Nobody*?”

“*Nobody*.”

“Not even voices from the beyond, spirits coming to get you?”

“Not even them.”

“Not even if they’re ten feet tall and covered with scales?”

“Man, not even *my* mother is ten feet tall ... eight feet, maybe.”

Laura couldn’t help emitting a snort of laughter at this last sally. Lucy continued:

“I mean, you gotta admit, there is something a bit funny about it. Coming, coming, *coming* – just like they’re having the biggest orgasm of all time, right in Ismé’s living room.”

“Yeah, I know, but God, Lucy, it wasn’t *like* that. It was frightening.”

“I know, man. I was there, remember. I’m just kidding around, but like I said, it was totally freaky at the time ...”

•

“... It wasn’t that she didn’t love me. I think she did, in her way, it was just like she was always thinking about something else.

No, not Dad, either – I think he would have preferred it if she *had* thought about him, noticed him more. He was distant, too, with her, with both of us, but you didn’t notice it so much. He always had so much work to do.

And then she would go into these towering rages – over nothing, it seemed. You could see them coming a mile off, like a kind of thunderstorm, and sometimes you’d provoke her just to get it over with quickly.

My brother? Well, he’s quite a bit older than me: ten years, actually, so we were never close when I was a kid, and then he left home when I was about five or six. After that it was just us.

They never talked about it much with me, but I could see that they had some really strange interests – especially Mum. She would read people’s palms, and there were little talismans and bundles of herbs nailed up all round the house. She had some pretty creepy friends.

Sometimes they’d come to the house (we used to live in a house, then), but Dad didn’t like them much, and so after a while they didn’t come anymore. Mum still saw them, though – just never when he was around, and she used to get me to go out when she was expecting them.

How were they creepy? Well, you know those kind of older people who wear really strange gear: tight leggings, and crazy hairdos, and bright colours, and this fat old guy with a ponytail and leather jeans who grabbed me once and wanted me to sit on his lap – he was in charge somehow. He did most of the talking, anyway.

All I knew was that I didn’t like them much – especially him; the others weren’t so bad, quite friendly really. I just felt that they were waiting for me to get out of the way most of the time.

Yeah, I have wondered why Mum didn’t try to get me more involved in it. I probably would have been quite happy to spend more time with her, but most of the time when she was with me she was just ... ordinary. She liked clothes and dressing up and all that, and she didn’t think much of all the books I read.



Oh, fairy-stories, and adventure stories, and fantasy ... anything *untrue*, really – anything that wasn't boring old reality. Once or twice she lent me one of *her* books, but they were mostly stuff about seasonal observances and astrology and where to find the right roots and berries, so I just couldn't be bothered. I think I was more like Dad, in that respect. He used to give me books for my birthday: Doctor Dolittle, and the Narnia books, and Mervyn Peake, and that kind of thing.

I used to wonder what they found to talk about when they were on their own. They never seemed to agree on anything. Most of the time Father would let her have her way. It was like he'd got tired of fighting. After all, he'd been married once before, and that hadn't turned out all that well, and maybe he thought she'd run off if he disagreed with her. She wasn't really beautiful, I suppose, but she was tall and dark with huge eyes and a kind of interesting face. She was a lot younger than he was.

Anyway, after Father got ill, things got difficult. He had to give up working, of course, and there was a lot of hassle before we could get the insurance company to pay out on his health insurance. So suddenly there wasn't any money anymore.

It didn't affect me much at first. We had to shift out of the house, and go to live in the beachhouse, but I kind of liked that. I had to take two buses to get to school, but that was okay. That meant that I had more time after school before I had to go home. It wasn't really home anymore after he started to get really sick. It was like a kind of hospital, where you had to keep quiet all the time in case he was resting, and he'd get really angry about little things he never used to notice before, and it just went on and on and on.

Mum did her best, but she just wasn't cut out for that. She'd go into rages, but even *she* couldn't take them out on him anymore, so that left me. I was always the one to blame for everything – if anything got left out in the kitchen overnight, or if Dad's breakfast wasn't ready in time, or he didn't get his medicine at just the right moment.

To be honest, I think the reason she was impatient with him was that she didn't really believe that he *had* to be ill. She thought you could

control your body if you thought the right things, and ate healthy stuff, and propitiated the planets. Nothing *she* could do had any effect, though, and it's hard not to blame the other person for not trying hard enough when that happens. I mean, if you really believe in it all yourself, you tend to see it as the other person's *choice*.

Then he died. It was really painful, and it seemed to take forever, but I don't want to go into all that now. There's no point. I'm glad it's all over for him – not that I don't miss him, 'cos I do, I always will – but I wouldn't want *anybody* to have to go through all that again.

After the funeral I thought we'd move, but Mum seemed to want to stay right there in the beachhouse. She didn't really say anything. We were talking less and less about anything that wasn't absolutely everyday – pass the peas, what time do you want dinner? – but she certainly showed no signs of wanting to leave.

Then I came home one day and found them all there again ...

She must have loved him more than I knew. I can't say I'd ever have guessed it. They seemed fond enough of each other, but not really rabid, you know. A bit absent-minded, like they took it for granted somehow.

Either that, or there was something she had to get off her chest. God knows what. Maybe she'd been having an affair with the local fire chief and wanted to beg for forgiveness. How should I know? Anyway, there they all were, sitting round like a bunch of black crows, with that repulsive fat freak in the middle.

'Laura, you'd better go to your room,' says Mum, which I was happy enough to do. There weren't any phoney greetings and questions about my class at school this time. I could see these people were *serious*.

The trouble was, the way that place was built, you couldn't avoid hearing everything that went on in the living room, especially when there's a whole lot of spiritualists, or witches, or channellers – whatever they call themselves – chanting away outside your door.

I tried to read, play loud music with my headphones on, but it was no use. After a bit I gave up the struggle and listened in on what they were doing.

Then it all got kind of quiet. No more loud choruses, just a kind of muttering. I went over to the door and opened it. I could see right into the lounge. It was dark, but there was a full moon outside, and so everything was painted silver.

‘... so happy over here ...’ one of the women was saying.

Her face was pointing upwards but her eyes were closed.

Ponytail asked her: ‘Can you put us in touch with the one we seek?’

‘... many difficulties, groping in mist, new spirits lost in fog for several months, years even some times.’ It was a strange voice, with a sort of Indian inflection, like those parodies people do of waiters in Tandoori restaurants.

Ponytail was just starting to ask her to try again when the voice cut through his:

‘Ah, seeing better now ... vision clearer ...’

Then the voice changed.

God, Lucy, I’d never have believed it if I hadn’t heard it myself. It’s true that they’d all met Father – some of them probably lots of times, but this wasn’t like someone doing an imitation, this was like the real thing. It was the voice only *we’d* heard, his voice during those last few days before the cancer got him, when he was trying to tell us that he loved us, but all he could really think about was the pain.

‘Where ... where am ... who are you? ... need to get back ... Allie?’ (That was my mother’s name: Alison – he was the only one who called her Allie, and I only heard *him* do it once or twice).

‘I’m here!’ said Mum, too loudly I thought. *God, what if she scares him away?*

‘Where?’ the voice came back.

‘Here, at home. We’re all in the front room!’ [that was what she called it – the front room. Posher than the lounge, I suppose].

‘I can’t see you.’

‘We’re here with you ...’

Indian voice: ‘Quickly, this spirit is very confused, needs to pass on through very soon now ...’

‘John, I’ve got to ask you something.’

'Yes?' [very faintly]

'John, was it true, what you said, that time? You know, about your sister?' [Silence]

'John, I want to know ... I have to know if it *was* my fault!'

'Allie ... very tired ... under the ... under the ...' [I couldn't hear the last word. It might have been *housse*, *but*, anything like that].

[Indian voice:] 'The spirit is gone on now, but he wishes me to tell you that all is well. Now it is time to go, the energies are building up and must be discharged. You have attracted something – something you did not wish to see, to allow through ...'

Lucy, I've got to tell you, it's really hard to explain what happened next. It was a sort of dark explosion. It wasn't that there was anything actually visible, but a kind of dark light flashed through the room. One minute everybody's face was in shadow, and then boom! All the windows flew out, just shattered like in one of those movie hurricane sequences, the cupboard doors flew open next door in the kitchen and I could hear the crockery rattling out onto the floor.

It all happened in a instant. None of us had any time to react before it was over. The moonlight was back, everyone was screaming, and I was running over to Mum (God knows why – she was hardly the one to protect me), but she was holding me and smoothing my hair, and saying 'Don't worry, don't worry it's over now it's all over,' and all those freaks were piling out. They didn't offer to stay and clear up, which is just as well, 'cos I think I would have started screaming if they'd stayed a moment longer.

The cleaning up next morning took ages. I had to go off to school before we'd really done much more than get the dishes back on the shelves. The bizarre thing was that none of them were broken. It was as if they'd all been laid out on the floor in strange little patterns. We broke one or two ourselves getting them back in order. The windows, though, that was a different story. Talk about smashed to smithereens!

Two months later she killed herself ..."

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The plot of *Dieb* [pron. *Deep*] has the advantage of fixity (if not depth). I can sit down and analyse it, now that its author's cloudy phantasms have been seized and set down on paper. It has thirteen chapters, each centring around a different act, or encounter, or event.

The action takes place in some strange denuded England of the imagination. The time seems contemporary with publication (München, 1999), though there are no clear indications of political, scientific, or other social manifestations. It is told in the third person, though wholly from the heroine Kimberly's point-of-view.

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<b>Ch.</b>	<b>[pp.]</b>	<b>Characters</b>	<b>Action</b>
1	[1-22]	<i>Kimberly Jade</i> <i>Alban Bryant</i> <i>Beverley</i>	Kimberly is caught by Count Alban Bryant while burgling his stately home. He takes her to his picture gallery, and shows her his collection. Afterwards, she goes home. She is worried by an anonymous letter received that morning, listing six of her recent thefts. Later, at the office, Kimberly discusses with a colleague the fortnight's holiday she intends to take.
2	[23-45]	<i>Kimberly Jade</i> <i>Elsbeth Grahame</i>	At Alban's suggestion, Kimberly attempts to burgle the house of his cousin, the Countess Elspeth. She is again caught, and this time is locked in a room.

<b>Ch.</b>	<b>[pp.]</b>	<b>Characters</b>	<b>Action</b>
3	[47-68]	<i>Kimberly Jade</i> <i>Elsbeth Grahame</i> <i>young farm-worker</i> <i>young lorry-driver</i> <i>Alban Bryant</i>	Next morning Elspeth proposes inviting over two friends for dinner, but Kimberly succeeds in escaping out of a window. A farm-worker tries to recapture her, but a lorry-driver takes her home. She goes to see Alban, and is accused by him of stealing some paintings. He locks her in his attic.
4	[69-89]	<i>Kimberly Jade</i> <i>Alban Bryant</i> <i>six men</i>	Alban sends six acquaintances up to question her about the theft. She finally manages to convince them she is innocent by telling Alban about the anonymous letter. She steals an antique barometer on the way out.
5	[91-110]	<i>Kimberly Jade</i> <i>Vicar</i> <i>Elderly Lady</i> <i>[Alban Bryant]</i> <i>manservant</i>	Going to a nearby church, Kimberly tries to steal a gold cross, but is surprised by the vicar. An elderly lady interrupts their conversation. After talking to Alban on the telephone, she goes out to steal some gold coins. A young servant finds her. She tricks him, leaving him tied up on the floor.

<b>Ch.</b> [pp.]	<b>Characters</b>	<b>Action</b>
6 [111-131]	<i>Kimberly Jade</i> <i>[Alban Bryant]</i> <i>Jack</i> <i>young man</i>	After talking to Alban on the telephone, Kimberly invites in a neighbour, Jack, whom she saw spying on her from a top-floor window. Going for a walk among the allotments, she meets another young man behind a shed.
7 [133-154]	<i>Kimberly Jade</i> <i>Alban Bryant</i> <i>Liz</i> <i>Jan</i> <i>mystery man</i>	Kimberly visits Alban, and is introduced to two young friends of his, Liz and Jan. Later, she and Alban go out to try and trap the mysterious person spying on her. He escapes before they can catch him.
8 [155-175]	<i>Kimberly Jade</i> <i>young man</i> <i>middle-aged man</i> <i>middle-aged woman</i> <i>[Alban Bryant]</i> <i>[mystery man]</i> <i>Jack</i>	Dressing up as a schoolgirl, Kimberly follows a young man, whom she suspects of being the spy, into a house. There she is caught by a middle-aged man, Harry. She escapes when his wife comes home. After talking to Alban, then the mystery man on the telephone, she invites Jack to come round.



<b>Ch. [pp.]</b>	<b>Characters</b>	<b>Action</b>
<b>9</b> [177-197]	<i>Kimberly Jade</i> <i>Lucy Westenra</i> <i>Alban Bryant</i> <i>Liz</i> <i>Jan</i>	While burgling Lord Greystoke's mansion, Kimberly overhears the maid Lucy telephoning an accomplice about her attempts to find some concealed money. Kimberly finds it herself instead, then goes to visit Alban and his two friends.
<b>10</b> [199-220]	<i>Kimberly Jade</i> <i>[Alban Bryant]</i> <i>old man on allotment</i> <i>Cristobel Blake</i>	Next morning, Alban rings to invite Kimberly for dinner. She goes for a walk among the allotments, where she spends some time with an old man, then meets a young woman, who invites her back to her terraced house.
<b>11</b> [221-242]	<i>Kimberly Jade</i> <i>Alban Bryant</i> <i>[mystery man]</i> <i>[Elspeth Grahame]</i> <i>Tony</i> <i>Jack</i>	Kimberly is rung by the mystery man, whom she arranges to meet next day in the woods. She visits Bryan, who asks her to marry him. She rings Elspeth, and then meets Tony, an art-dealer friend of Alban's. She goes home, inviting Jack round for a nightcap.

<b>Ch. [pp.]</b>	<b>Characters</b>	<b>Action</b>
<b>12</b> [243-263]	<i>Kimberly Jade</i> <i>The Vicar</i> <i>five men</i> <i>dark-haired man</i>	Kimberly goes to visit the vicar again. Waiting for the mystery man in the woods, she sees five men burying a bag under a tree. They capture her. After they let her go, she meets another man, but still not the one she's looking for.
<b>13</b> [265-284]	<i>Kimberly Jade</i> <i>mystery man</i> <i>Alban Bryant</i> <i>Jan</i> <i>Liz</i>	Kimberly goes to the house of the mystery man, now identified by Tony as a certain "Smithers". After seeing him go out, she steals back Alban's paintings, then rings the police. She goes to see Alban. The girls are visiting him also. She agrees to live with him, with a view towards marriage.

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Some patterns can be glimpsed already even in so bald a summary:

*Kimberly's* centrality represents a kind of ego-stability in the world of the story. Her repeated self-reproaches and attempts at self-analysis point, however, to a more post-modern sense of fragmentation (this out-of-control, *unrichtig* self is called "Satanic" by her, on a number of different occasions).

Significantly, *Kimberly's* family background makes little or no appearance in the story (her parents live "three hundred miles away," and call or visit seldom). Nor indeed do any other details of her past besides the information that she had a boyfriend, that he left her a year before her meeting with Alban, and that her relationship with her office colleagues is a distant one.

The other "constant" in this narrative is the Count, *Count Alban Bryant*. *Cherchez la femme*, it is said, only in this case it is *cherchez l'homme* [check out the man].

He counsels *Kimberly*, either on the telephone or in person, in virtually every chapter, and together they attempt to solve the mystery of the observer watching her every move (more of *him* later). At the end of the story they are to be married – a conventional, though not necessarily unsatisfactory, resolution to such a quest.

Three other characters make more than a single appearance. They are (in order): *Elspeth*, the *Vicar*, and *Kimberly's* unemployed neighbour *Jack*.

- Countess *Elspeth* attempts to socialise and "tame" *Kimberly*. She offers the possibility of a same-sex resolution, with the advantages of mutual comprehension, but the disadvantage of a lack of opportunity for offspring, fertility, creativity.
- The *Vicar* presents an implicit challenge to *Kimberly's* "Satanic" self. She visits him twice, and each time tries to convert him (with questionable success) to her more dynamic model of social interaction.
- *Jack* is a more equivocal character. His voyeuristic behaviour makes him a natural candidate for the mysterious observer, a suspicion which does not seem fully resolved by the somewhat *deus ex machina*-like appearance of "Smithers" towards the end of the book (indeed, very few of the book's characters escape suspicion of being the spy at one time or another).

In essence, of course, the problem of the unseen observer dogging Kimberly's footsteps is easy to resolve. Only authors have that degree of omniscience about their own creations. Jack – unemployed, rootless, without social bonds or constraints – is more of a shifting signifier than any of the other (named) characters, and can thus be seen as the fantasy projection of an author who has become unsatisfied by his own hovering omnipotence in the narrative. Jack begins as a voyeur, but is charmed by Kimberly into becoming a participant in the action.

Authorial omnipotence must, in other words, dare the frustrations and impotence of a delimited place in the world before achieving self-realisation.

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## 6 – Diary Entries

... *Monday, 14<sup>th</sup> July* – As I walked in the front door after school, I saw someone going up the stairs in front of me. Gran was in the kitchen, Grandpa in his study. So far as I know, there was nobody else in the house. I couldn't see properly, as the figure was out of sight so quickly, but I thought it was a woman (she had her back to me, then turned out of sight on the landing).

Later that night, footsteps creaking up and down the stairs.

*Wednesday, 16<sup>th</sup> July* – Asked Gran if she or Grandpa had had to get up in the night. She looked at me a bit strangely as she said no (they have an en-suite attached to their room, so in any case there'd be no need for them to be climbing up and down the stairs). She asked why, and I had to admit that I'd heard some noises. She didn't say any more, but I think she's watching me. *I would if I were her.*

This afternoon I went into my room to do my homework, and found one of Grandpa's books open on the table. The book was called *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. This was what I saw when I looked at the open page:

*Release against her, [against] Ishtar, the sixty mis[eries]:  
Misery of the eyes [against] her [eyes],  
Misery of the sides ag[ainst] her [sides],  
Misery of the heart ag[ainst] her heart],  
Misery of the feet ag[ainst] her [feet],  
Misery of the head ag[ainst] her head] –  
Against every part of her, against [her whole body]!”  
After Lady Ishtar [had descended to the nether world],  
The bull springs not upon the cow, [the ass impregnates not the jenny],  
In the street [the man impregnates not] the maiden.  
The man lies [in his (own) chamber, the maiden lies on her side]*

I've copied out the whole section, because I don't know which bits (if any) are significant. It doesn't sound too cheerful. The whole poem is called the "Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld," and it has "as its central theme the detention of the goddess of fertility – Sumerian *Inanna*, Akkadian *Ishtar* – in the realm of the dead and her eventual return to the land of the living."

I went and asked Grandpa if he knew what the book was doing in my room, but I don't think he really knew who I was or what I was saying. He took the book but didn't seem to know what to do with it after that. There were some papers on the desk in front of him, but they looked pretty dusty. I guess the obvious explanation is that he was reading it and left it in my room by mistake. But what was he doing in there? Maybe he wanders around the house at night and that's the reason I hear those footsteps. Gran probably wouldn't tell me anyway.

*Thursday, 17<sup>th</sup> July* – Some funny scratches left on my bedside pad this morning when I woke up. I must have tried to write something down during the night, but I don't remember doing it. The paper was torn in places cause the pen-nib had gone in so deep, but it was just meaningless squiggles and curves. I couldn't tell if it was supposed to be a drawing or words.

This afternoon the book was back in my room again. This time I think I'm going to hide it instead of giving it back to Grandpa. At least that'll stop him from leaving it in here if that *is* what's happening.

*Friday, 18<sup>th</sup> July* – I've decided that I'm going to try to get to the bottom of it all this weekend. I started off by taking that book of Eastern texts to school this morning and leaving it in my locker, along with a bunch of the other books I've been reading (*Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death*, *The Roots of Coincidence*). The school library only has scientific types of books about parapsychology and all that sort of stuff – nothing about ghosts or hauntings. The librarian wouldn't tell me if they did, anyway. She looked at me like I was going to freak out on her any moment when I asked her.

When I got home there was a book open on the desk. It was a paperback, so it had been propped open with one of the big beeswax candles I've been burning to keep the air fresh (it gets quite stuffy in here at night). These were the words at the top of the page:

*Naked Inanna dropped to her knees  
as Ereshkigal mounted the throne  
the Seven Judges discussed her case  
they turned their eyes towards her  
eyes of death  
they passed sentence  
on the accused*

The book was called *Poems of Heaven and Hell from Ancient Mesopotamia*, and this was from a poem called "Inanna's Journey to Hell."

As far as I can tell, this is the *same poem* as the one in the other book, only this is the Sumerian version (with Inanna as the heroine), and the other one was the – later – Akkadian version, with Ishtar instead. Not only is it the same poem, but this is the *same section*, talking about what happens to the goddess after she's gone through the seven gates of the underworld, leaving a different piece of clothing at each one.

Nothing else had been touched. The threads were all in the same place, and the talcum powder hadn't been trodden in. Of course, it's *just* possible that Gran or Grandpa could have come in, propped open the book, vacuumed up the powder, and then put down some new powder and threads in exactly the same places, then crept out again, but they'd have to be (1) incredibly precise and observant, & (2) completely insane to do that. I just can't see it somehow. That's not to say they know nothing about it. I'm sure they do. There was a huge crash up in the attic last night just as we were all sitting down to watch the news, and I'm sure they looked up at the same time as I did, even though nothing was said.

*Saturday, 19<sup>th</sup> July* – Last night, before I went to bed, I again attached threads across the rungs of the stairs, and scattered powder (according to the descriptions in *The Ghost-Hunter's Companion*, which I managed to find in the public library in town). I also decided to stay up, and go and investigate the moment I heard anything odd happening.

This morning I woke up in my chair. Nothing. No footsteps. No books. None of the threads were broken. I had to clean up all the powder so Gran wouldn't notice it, and then – wouldn't you know it? – just when we were sitting down to lunch I heard it again. At least I know it wasn't either of them – the footsteps were clearly audible. Of course, they could be tape-recorded or something like that. There's a story about that in the *Ghost-Hunter's Companion*. Who would be doing all this just to freak me out, though?

*Sunday, 20<sup>th</sup> July* – Woke up to find a face staring into mine, on the pillow. It was a woman's face, or kind of. I couldn't tell whose it was, because it was only half there. (It's actually quite hard to write that down. I felt so scared I thought my heart would stop. It was like a big ball of fear suddenly rose up and choked me). I closed my eyes and opened them again, and it was gone, so it could have been a dream, but it didn't seem like one. *Was* it Mum? I couldn't detect any expression on the face, but then there wasn't really enough of it to register.

Afterwards, while Gran went off to church and Grandpa was sitting in his study, I did some searching upstairs. There's a whole lot of junk up there. Attics and bedrooms and all sorts of stuff. I even had a look in Dad's old room, but there was nothing but old clothes and children's books and a few old letters in a drawer.

I read some of them to see if there were any clues there, but they were just the usual letters from friends and family which pile up.

*Tuesday, 22<sup>nd</sup> July* – Had the strangest talk with Grandpa this afternoon. He usually goes out for a walk before afternoon tea, so I kind of assumed he'd be out when I got home from school. I opened the door of the study, and there he was, looking in my direction like he was



waiting for me. Usually he just glares when he meets someone he doesn't know, but then he must have got used to seeing me at meals by now, you'd have thought. Anyway, his face kind of lit up, and he said, "Come in, come in." I was going to just mutter an apology and withdraw, but then I looked at his face and saw how excited he was. I've never seen him so animated, to tell the truth. So I came in and sat down.

"I'm so happy to see you. It's been so long," he kept on saying, like he thought I was someone else (he *must* have done, actually. In his mind I'm probably about two years old, so he'd hardly be likely to welcome me into his study ...) He asked me stuff, and I tried to answer, but none of it really made sense. Who did he mistake me for?

*Wednesday, 23<sup>rd</sup> July* – This morning, Gran said she didn't want me to disturb Grandpa in his study any more. I said I was sorry, then asked her who he'd mistaken me for. She wouldn't answer at first, and said it wasn't important, but I kept insisting, and finally she told me that it was my Aunt, Dad's sister, the one who died before I was born. "She used to live in this house, but she wouldn't talk to anyone. She stayed barricaded in her room, so he got used to not seeing her."

I asked her if there was any resemblance, and she said there might be a slight one, but that I really had more of my mother in me. "He was very, very fond of Nina, and that's why he was so happy to see you, but it leaves him terribly upset afterwards. He doesn't remember things for more than a short time, but their effects stay with him." I asked her if seeing me at mealtimes wasn't just as bad, but she said that was different. "I think Nina used to sneak down to see him in his study sometimes, and so he associates that room with her."

I didn't ask how Auntie Nina had died, as I think I know. I think I overheard Father talking to Mum about it once, and they said something about an overdose. Man, what a family! Mad Grandfather, dead father, suicidal Aunt, suicidal Mother, grim old granny, and just me and Peter to carry on the line ... And how many of them are stuck in this house, unable to move on? Is there really a message they're trying to send me, or do they just want to cling to *life* through somebody like me?

*Thursday, 24<sup>th</sup> July* – I'd given up tying all those threads and stuff around the place, so – wouldn't you know it? – last night there was a real full-dress performance. Maybe it was the weather. It was kind of wet and foggy and they say that's conducive to *appearances* in some of the books I've been reading. Anyway, I heard the footsteps the moment I turned out my light, so I went out on the landing. I didn't really expect to see anything, so I wasn't all that scared. I *did*, though. For a start, I started shivering the moment I got out there, and saw this kind of mist drifting down the stairs, and then it started to form into something: a rough body shape, then shoulders and arms, then a head, and finally a face. I *think* it was the same face that appeared on my pillow that time. It didn't look at all like Mum, and I'm pretty sure it was a woman, so it wasn't Dad. Maybe it was my Aunt, I don't know. I've never seen a picture of her. I wanted to speak to it, but somehow I couldn't, and *it* didn't say anything at all. I kept on staring at it for a bit, then it disappeared. At that moment, there was a huge crash upstairs, and then a series of crashes going down the walls and ending up in my room. When I went back in it was like a bomb had gone off in there. All the bedclothes were scattered in the centre of the floor, and it was like every single object had been removed from where it was and dumped on top. (Luckily I don't have all that much stuff here – most of the things from the beach-house are still in storage). Funnily enough, nothing much was broken, so far as I could see. There was talcum powder pretty much everywhere, but no breakage of things like my tapes and CDs and my Walkman.

There's something bad wrong here, though. Either I'm going insane, or this house is really haunted. And I'm pretty sure it's all connected with *her* somehow. ...

•

Jack Ross

	[Actions]	[Openers]	[Orifices]	[Positions]	[Subjects]	[Parts]	[Fetishes]
<b>B</b>	<i>baiser</i> kissing	<i>penis</i>	<u>vagina</u>	missionary	<i>Male</i> <i>(hetero)</i>	<u>face/</u> <u>cheeks</u>	<u>feet</u>
<b>C</b>	<i>caresser</i> stroking	<i>tongue</i>	<u>anus</u>	dog-style	<i>Male</i> <i>(homo)</i>	<u>breasts/</u> <u>nipples</u>	<u>hair</u>
<b>D</b>	<i>pincer</i> pinching	<i>fingers</i>	<u>mouth</u>	spoons	<i>Male</i> <i>(bi)</i>	<u>arse/</u> <u>buttocks</u>	<u>voyeur</u>
<b>E</b>	<i>embrasser</i> hugging	<i>fist</i>	<u>right nostril</u>	St. George	<i>Male</i> <i>(trans)</i>	<u>legs/</u> <u>thighs</u>	<u>bonds</u>
<b>F</b>	<i>frotter</i> rubbing	<i>dildo</i>	<u>left nostril</u>	reversed	<i>Female</i> <i>(hetero)</i>	<u>back/</u> <u>shoulders</u>	<u>whips</u>
<b>G</b>	<i>pénétrer</i> thrusting	<i>vibrator</i>	<u>right</u> <u>earhole</u>	soixante- neuf	<i>Female</i> <i>(homo)</i>	<u>waist/</u> <u>navel</u>	<u>materials</u>
<b>H</b>	<i>sucer</i> sucking	<i>vegetable</i>	<u>left earhole</u>	sideways	<i>Female</i> <i>(bi)</i>	<u>clitoris/</u> <u>glans</u>	<u>spanking</u>
<b>I</b>	<i>mordre</i> biting	<i>liquid</i>	<u>right</u> <u>eyeball</u>	sandwich	<i>Female</i> <i>(trans)</i>	<u>lips/</u> <u>foreskin</u>	<u>strangling</u>
<b>K</b>	<i>tirer</i> tugging	<i>toe</i>	<u>left eyeball</u>	scissors	<i>Herm- aphrodite</i>	<u>bridge/</u> <u>balls</u>	<u>excretion</u>
	[Actiones]	[Absoluta]	[Prædicata]	[Questiones]	[Subiecta]	[Virtuta]	[Vitia]

Alphabet of the Art

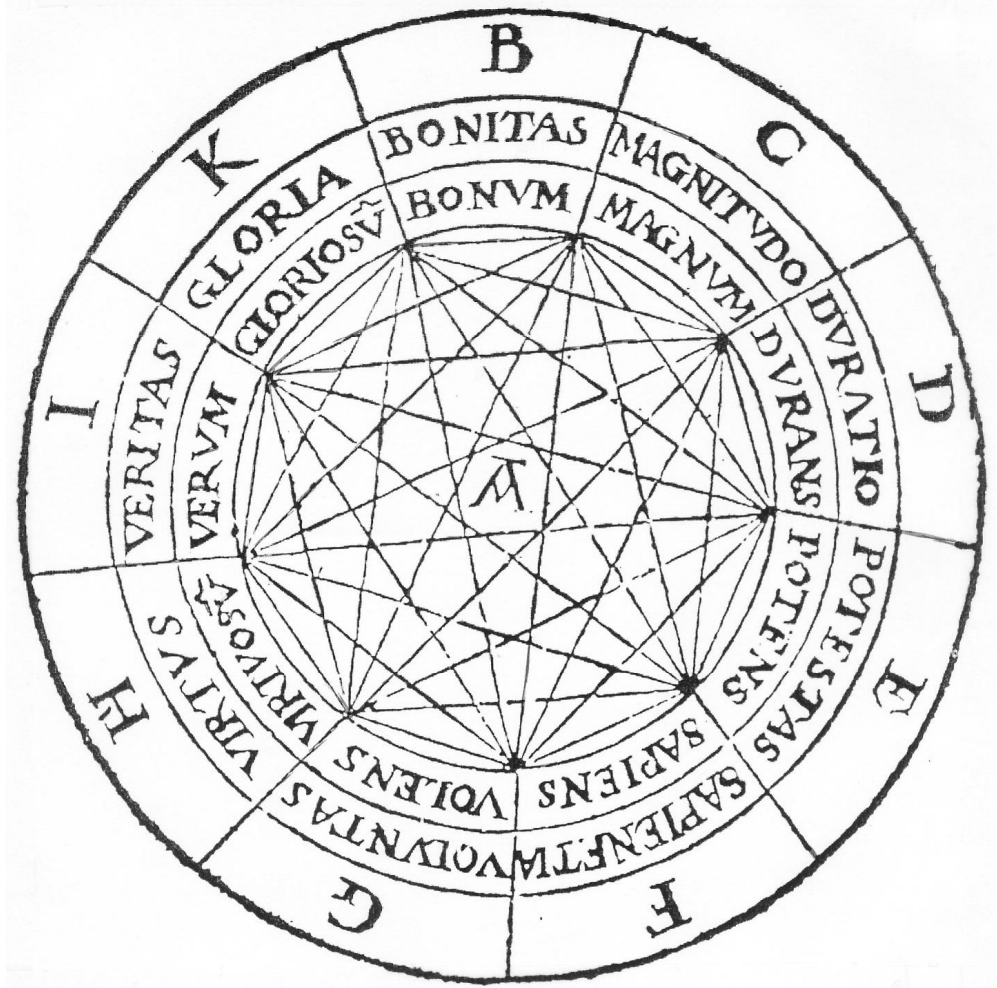
One important – indeed virtually omnipresent – motivation which I have left out of the discussion up to now, preferring to treat it separately, is sex. Kimberly constantly, and with a growing obsessiveness, indulges in sexual behaviour and sexual intercourse. This is a major source of self-reproach for her, but also enables her to achieve intimacy with Alban towards the end of the narrative.

As this factor *is* so important, I have tried to analyse Kimberly’s responses diagrammatically, in the hope of deducing more generally applicable rules. My model here is the twelfth-century Catalan mystic Ramón Llull’s “Ars Combinatoria” [Art of Combination], which aspires to represent all terrestrial phenomena with the aid of a certain set of wheels and tables. I should stress, though, that this Eroticon is not intended as a Satanic *inversion* so much as an *extension* of Llull’s insight. How does it work, then?

Four figures are required to make sense of the table:

1. The first figure enables us to make connections between two different categories on the table, but still solely in *terms* of that letter and its attributes. For instance, with the two letters “BB”, one is obliged to make connections between all of the different categories. For that reason, I have used different typography for each column: Roman for [Actions], *Italic* for [Openers], Underlining for [Orifices], **Bold Roman** for [Positions], **Bold Italics** for [**Subjects**], **Bold Underlining** for [**Parts**], **Bold Italic Underlining** for [**Fetishes**].

We therefore start with the B [Action] *baiser* (kissing) next to the B [Opener] *penis* – (the French word “*baiser*”, it should be noted, does indeed mean a kiss, but when used as a verb it has the slang connotation of *fucking*): the penis fucks (or plants a kiss). If we go along the table step by step, we find that “BB” can also mean: [B] *baiser* (kissing) / [B] vagina – fucking (or kissing) a vagina; [B] *baiser* (kissing) / [**B**] **missionary** – fucking (or kissing) in the missionary position; [B] *baiser* (kissing) / [**B**] **male (hetero)** – the act of fucking (or kissing) performed by a heterosexual male; [B] *baiser* (kissing) / [**B**] **face (cheeks)** – fucking (or kissing) the face and/or cheeks; and [B] *baiser* (kissing) / [**B**] **feet** – fucking (or kissing) the partner’s feet: a total of six separate sexual acts.



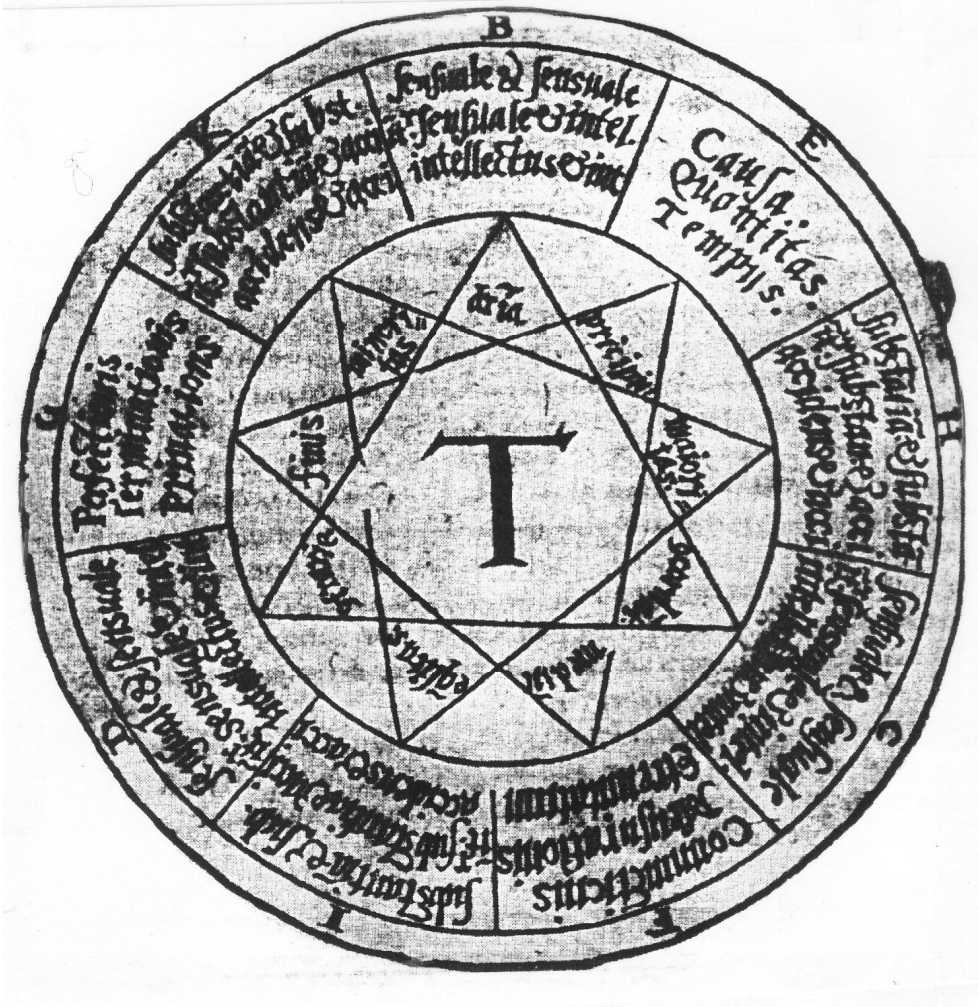
First Figure of the Art

This is, of course, only the beginning. Now we must go on to the next term in the table: [*B*] *penis*, and put *it* beside all the other categories, thus: [*B*] *penis* / [*B*] *vagina* – the penis, as it were, invaginates; [*B*] *penis* / [*B*] *missionary* – the penis is employed in the missionary position; [*B*] *penis* / [*B*] *male (hetero)* – the penis utilised by a heterosexual male; [*B*] *penis* / [*B*] *face (cheeks)* – the penis is applied to a partner’s face and/or cheeks; and [*B*] *penis* / [*B*] *feet* – the penis is rubbed by the partner’s feet. There are only *five* sexual acts in this application, as we have already used up [*B*] *penis* / [*B*] *baiser* (kissing) above (reversing the order of the terms was not regarded by Lull as affecting interpretation).

A simple exercise of logic informs us that the next set of juxtapositions will yield *four* sexual acts, the next after that *three*, the next *two*, and the last *one* – a total of twenty-one. It seems tiresome to taxonomise them all, but here, in order, they are:

- B/B: vagina / **missionary** – the vagina entered in the missionary position;
- B/B: vagina / **Male (hetero)** – the vagina approached by a heterosexual male;
- B/B: vagina / **face (cheeks)** – the vagina applied to the face and/or cheeks;
- B/B: vagina / **feet** – the vagina touched by the partner’s feet;
- B/B: **missionary** / **Male (hetero)** – a male employing the missionary position;
- B/B: **missionary** / **face (cheeks)** – the partner’s face in the missionary position;
- B/B: **missionary** / **feet** – the partner’s feet in the missionary position;
- B/B: **Male (hetero)** / **face (cheeks)** – a male touches his partner’s face;
- B/B: **Male (hetero)** / **feet** – a male touches his partner’s feet;
- B/B: **face (cheeks)** / **feet** – the face touches the partner’s feet.

So, successively, for CC, DD, EE, FF, GG, HH, II, KK ... Since each pair of letters encodes 21 possible interpretations, 9 letters gives us **189** sexual acts or attitudes.



Second Figure of the Art

2. No physical act (deliberate, instinctive, or simply recreational) can be entirely separated from the emotions. The second figure relates these *sensual* realities to those of the spirit or intellect.

In sum, then, under each of the three letters BCD we find these three lines:

<b>sensuale &amp; sensuale</b>	in the realm of the senses
<b>sensuale &amp; intellectus</b>	a mixture of brain and instinct
<b>intellectus &amp; intellectus</b>	purely cerebral

Under HIK we find:

<b>substantiã &amp; substantiã</b>	substance (reality)
<b>substantiã &amp; accidens</b>	substance/accident
<b>accidens &amp; accidens</b>	accident (contingency)

Under EFG we find, respectively:

<b>Causa</b>	Cause	<b>Coniunctionis</b>	Togetherness
<b>Quantitas</b>	Amount	<b>Mensurationis</b>	Weighing up
<b>Tempus</b>	Duration	<b>Eternitatum</b>	Forever
	<b>Perfectionis</b>		Completeness
	<b>Germinationis</b>		Kindling
	<b>Privacions</b>		Fasting

Each of the letters is touched by the tip of a triangle. There are three triangles:



B <b>differentia</b> difference	C <b>concordantia</b> similarity	D <b>contrarietas</b> opposition
E <b>principium</b> beginning	F <b>medium</b> middle	G <b>finis</b> end
H <b>maioritas</b> more	I <b>æqualitas</b> the same	K <b>minoritas</b> less

**Triangles of Relationship**

BC	CD	DE	EF	FG	GH	HI	IK
BD	CE	DF	EG	FH	GI	HK	
BE	CF	DG	EH	FI	GK		
BF	CG	DH	EI	FK			
BG	CH	DI	EK				
BH	CI	DK					
BI	CK						
BK							

**Third Figure of the Art**

How, then, does this relate to our purpose? There is no art of combination associated with this figure, so the letters B, C and D: **difference**, **similarity** and **opposition**, can each be considered in relation to (1) a purely sensual experience, (2) a partly instinctive, partly thought-out action, and (3) a decision of the intellect. For example, *sensual difference* could be a woman achieving orgasm from her partner's tongue, the two experiencing the scene quite differently. *Part instinctive, part thought-out similarity* could be two partners reining in their arousal in order to come simultaneously. *Intellectual opposition* could be a fetishist's decision to gratify/torment his partner by smacking her upturned behind.

There are **27** such possibilities on this table, with unusual latitude for interpretation.

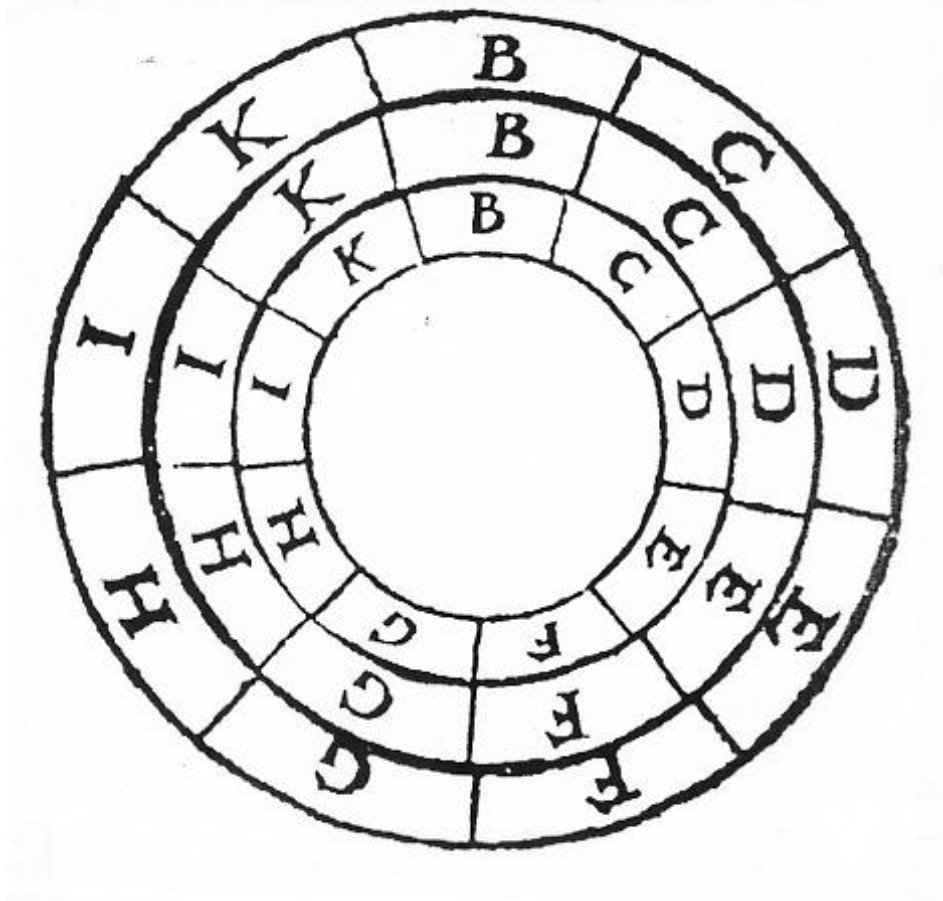
3. The third figure lists all the possible concatenations of two different letters:

- BC: kissing with the tongue; BC: kissing the anus; **BC**: kissing from behind (dog-style); **BC**: kissing a homosexual male; BC: kissing the breasts or nipples; BC: kissing the partner's hair.

Here are six concatenations already, but the rule is that each letter can only be paired with a letter from another column; otherwise one would end up with repetitive acts like BC: kissing & stroking, which don't match the *dynamic* and *predictive* nature of Lull's scheme.

Next, then, one moves to *BC*: stroking the penis; BC: a penis enters the anus; **BC**: the penis employed *a tergo*, from behind ... another six possibilities.  $7 \times 6 = 42$ .

Since each pair of letters can be interpreted in 42 different ways,  $36 \times 42 = 1512$  sexual combinations to add to the **189** from figure one, a total of **1701** separate acts.



Fourth Figure of the Art

4. The fourth figure is different from the others in that it contains the possibility of movement. Lull did not allow tautologies on this level of the art, so the figures did not include BBB, BBC, BCC, or even BCB, but were confined to BCD BCE BCF BCG BCH BCI BCK BDC etc. **49** triplets can be generated in this way by each of the nine letters, giving us a total of **441**. And, naturally, since these also are to be read according to our Alphabet of the Art, each level of variation provides an exponential increase in the number of interpretations available.

Lull saw these variations as opening the way to a science of universal communication – almost as if he had foreseen the behavioural problem preoccupying us here.

For now, at last, we reencounter our primary text. Lull's fourth figure works best in reverse, translating the actions of our narrative into diagrammatic form. For example, in her first sexual encounter with Alban, Kimberly is penetrated by a dildo while the Count simultaneously pleasures her vagina with his tongue. These actions could be encoded, respectively as BFG: vagina, dildo, thrusting; BCH: vagina, tongue, sucking.

The same scene can, of course, be described in different ways. If we type Alban as **B**: male (hetero) and Kimberly as **H**: female (bi) we could see it as (active) **BH**: **Male**, **clitoris**, **sandwich**; or (passive) **FGH**: *dildo*, thrusting, **female**. It would be true to say, though, that at this point in the narrative we are not really aware of the sexual orientation or proclivities of the two protagonists. *Nor are they*. The book is, in a sense, a voyage of discovery for both of them (particularly Kimberly), so it would probably be falsifying to define them thus in advance.

What, after all, are the emotions of the occasion? Kimberly's are made up of *humiliation* [p.7], the *sensation of violation* [p.8], and *forced arousal* [p.8].

Looking at Lull's second figure, we could see these as the three points B C D on the triangle of **differentia** (difference), **concordantia** (similarity), and **contrarietas** (opposition), each of which points to an admixture of the sensual and the intellectual.

**Jack Ross**

There is, admittedly, considerable latitude for interpretation here, but one begins, at the very least, to see the *possibility* of an immense set of interlocking wheels, encoding actions, sensations, and emotions, which can be dialled as simply as a telephone when the occasion requires.

\*

## 7 – Job’s Comforter

She pauses on the approach to the house and stares up at the top storey windows. The others hesitate, not quite sure what to do. No-one speaks. Ismé’s mother (“Call me Helena, child. We must get better acquainted now ...”) mutters something under her breath, then walks forward, more confidently now, towards the front door.

Inside, her attention is drawn immediately by the staircase. She walks up to it, strokes the long banister with her hand, then turns back and asks Laura to show her the other rooms. The kitchen and dining room are passed through quickly, with only a cursory examination. Grandfather’s study is locked, so they can’t go in there, but the door gets a long hard look.

Laura’s bedroom is examined minutely. All the way up the stairs, Helena keeps on stopping, stooping, and stroking her rosary beads. Then she goes up a few more steps and stops again.

On the upper landing, she goes systematically through all of the rooms, flinging open their doors and looking round them thoroughly before walking in and touching odd items of furniture. Her lips move continuously but distractedly, as if reciting long-memorised instructions – more of a mantra than an exact response to her surroundings.

When they reach the end of the hall, she stops. “I have seen,” she says.

“Wouldn’t you like to look through my father’s papers and things?” asks Laura, anxious to get the most out of this bizarre and illicit visit. Who knows if this opportunity will ever arise again?

Ismé says something rapid to her mother in Armenian. The mother replies. After a brief conversation Ismé says to Laura, “Nah, she’s seen everything that’s willing to be seen, she says. We should go downstairs now.”

When they are all seated in the living room (the offer of a cup of coffee has been refused, as it apparently “upsets the spirits,” according to Ismé). Herbal tea is, however, found acceptable.

Helena begins to speak: “There *are* spirits here, in this house, but you already knew that.” (her speech comes in alternate bursts of English and Armenian, which gives it a jerky but undeniably impressive effect. Ismé dutifully translates these brief asides).

“There *are* spirits here, maybe three – maybe more. There is a man’s spirit here, an older man, wasted, ill – maybe your father? He was not the first to arrive, but he is here for a reason, to protect you. Then there are two other sprits, both women. One is a young girl. She is a little jealous of you, but not wicked, not evil. She cares most about the man. She is perhaps his lover, his sister? I do not know. She is the one who looks out the window. I think you told me you saw her when you arrived. Yes? That was her. She was looking out to see the new arrival.”

“Does she know she’s dead?” enquires Laura, remembering all the “channelling” lore picked up from endless perusal of ghost books.

“Dead? I do not know. *Is* she dead? It is not the right question.

She is here and she is active, and she is involved with some things here as she is with other things elsewhere. Maybe she is not alive as we are. In any case, she is not to be concerned about. She may walk a little, and now that her ... her brother, you say? Yes, that would make sense. She is very close to her brother. Now that he is here she is more active than before ...”

“What about the third ghost, Mama?” prompts Ismé, after a short pause.

“The third spirit is more difficult. She does not want to be seen. She is not earthbound like the others. No, that is not how to say it. The *girl* is bound to the house, and your *father* is here because *you* are here. Otherwise he would have passed on by now. The third spirit is more aware of where it is and what it is doing. It is a dark spirit. That is not to say an evil spirit, but a spirit with unfinished things to do, things partly concerned with you. This spirit feels cheated, deceived. I think it passed on too early, and it feels that something was promised it, and that

something has not come. It wants something. I don't know if it wants you or the man, but it is concerned with both of you. The girl and the man are resisting it, insofar as they are aware of it."

The scene has been too bizarre to be really creepy up to this point. Laura listens to this gradually more terrifying recital, though, with a distinct lack of scepticism. It *was* as if there had been something hanging above her head since she entered this house. How could there not be? she has been saying to herself all along. After Dad's death, then Mum's suicide, *any* house would seem haunted.

"Can you be more specific?"

"No, I cannot. Not without speaking to the spirit and I do not wish to do that. Not here, at any rate. It would require much preparation, and might be dangerous. I think this may be the spirit you spoke to in my house, with the liars' board. My house is safe again now. I have protection, but that was a dangerous day, and you must *not* do that again. You strengthened it when you did that and it is well that you have not tried it here. It wants something, and I do not think that something would be good for you; that is all I sense."

"Does it want to kill me?"

"I cannot say. It may be. In any case, the other two spirits are protecting you. They have laid out the books for you; they fight for you and try to set up lines of force around you."

"What should I do, then?"

"There are spells and thoughts you can use to strengthen yourself. I can teach you some of those. That is no problem. They will make you safer, but they will not drive the spirits away. There is more, though."

"More? Couldn't we just have an exorcism, and get *all* these spirits out of the house?"

"No! You must not! It is their home (the girl's, at any rate), and they are well-disposed at present. If you try to drive them out they may go or they may not, but that will greatly strengthen the other spirit, the dark one. It will weaken your protection and open you up for ... invasion ..." [this last word, in Armenian, needs quite some debate before a translation is arrived at. Laura can see the seeds of her mother in Ismé



as she frowns over the problem. As if their essential kinship were only visible at such moments].

“In any case, there is more to say. I have not finished. I said there were three or more spirits. The girl and the man are clear, the dark spirit less clear. You think it is your mother? It may be, it is not entirely bad, though it has taken bad counsel. There is something else here as well. I do not know if it is one or more than one, but I know it is here. I do not know for how long. It may have been here before the house was built. I think that might be so. In any case, it is strong now because the dark spirit has allied itself with it.”

“Is it another spirit?”

“It is not human. There is no word for it. You might call it an elemental, a force of the earth. Some would call it a demon. There is that force here, and that is what the other spirits are screening from my sight. I scent it here, though. It has begun to stir and it is a noisy spirit. It is strange ... I ...”

“*What*, Mama?”

“I have felt them before, many times, these spirits, but this one is not ... alone. *Something* holds it back. You would have cracked dishes and twisted bedsheets all the time if it were free – maybe worse things. It is not intelligent. There is something behind it, there must be, but it is not clear. I cannot sense it. The other three are the only *spirits* present.”

“Can’t she just get out of here? Leave them all behind?” asks Lucy, who has remained very quiet up to this point.

“No, I do not think so. You were born under a shadow, Laura, and you must work it out. Here is a good place because here you have protection. I think your grandmother may know more than she says. Your grandfather is a source of strength to *all* the spirits here because his mind is wandering. He is a little like a ghost himself. He cannot remember new things, only old ones, and so he floats through old times without recognising change. That is like a ghost, only he still has the strength of the living. He is the reason why the sprits can act so easily here. Even without *him*, though, they would have *you*. You are attuned to them and their world. That is a part of you, that is something you

were born with and which has been cultivated in you. I think by your mother? Yes, she dedicated you when you were very young, too young to know what she was doing, and that has opened you up even more than your ordinary nature, which is sensitive. You are like me, a sensitive.”

“Why can’t I see these things *you* see, then?”

“You have not learned to use your talents. That is because you have not yet begun to talk with your guardian spirits. Once you open the inner eye it is very hard to close again. You *must not* begin that conversation until you are sure which direction you want to go in. I think you cannot escape it now, but you must be very careful where it leads.”

“So there’s nothing I can do? I can’t run away, I can’t get rid of these ghosts. I’ve just go to wait and see what they do next?”

“Yes.”

\*

**Experiences not included in the book:**

- Swimming in the sea [*walk in, cold kiss – feet and legs are easy, trunk is hard, turn round and topple backwards, strong strokes impel away*]
- Buying an item in a shop
- Making a cup of tea
- Walking down the road to post a letter
- Holding your lover close, all night
- Waking to bird-song [*raucous in the garden – sweet, insistent*]
- Hearing the fridge go on, at night, when it's hard to sleep
- Watching a relaxing programme on TV [*Randall and Hopkirk (Deceased), perhaps?*]
- Getting sick with the 'flu
- Impotence – *not* achieving an erection
- Being ugly

\*

## 8 – Protection

Deep breaths.

Imagine the light – golden, calm, peaceful – passing through my body.

No darkness there – darkness out, away!

My aura's all clear, all the energy floating up to my head, throwing off the bad things.

None of them can touch me now.

*Man, what bullshit!*

Nah, back to work ... gold, gold, glowing, moving *up*.

*Have I done that enough? Is it time for the cloak?*

A dark cloak, all around me, covering me and guarding me from any intrusion.

A cloak that keeps me safe.

Yes, I can see it – not very styly – kind of ugly in fact.

*I don't think Lucy would like it. In fact, she'd say it was quite dorky ...*

Shut up shut up – it's *real*, it's a big cloak of protection all around me.

And in my hand I'm holding an ankh, a crooked cross, with light and love coming out of it.

It's really strong.

It looks like a key – it *is* a key.

To the underworld, the seven gates.

*Is my cloak like Inanna's cloak of power? Will I have to give it up when I go through the seven gates, will I be left bare on a meathook at the end? Ugh! So painful – hooked through the flesh, like a nose-ring tearing out of you ...*

No, not *there!* Back to the cloak, the ankh, the golden power all around me, strengthening me ...

*How crazy can you get, mumbling all this mumbo-jumbo to yourself, pretending you believe a word of it?*

No, I *do* believe it. I know you can't measure it, explain it, but there's something in it.

There's power in all these symbols; I feel it taking hold. My mind *can* conquer if I can just keep it *on the subject* and stop it drifting off ...

*That's always been my problem, mind just won't stay on one thing – even sex.*

*I wonder what Joseph's doing right now. Maybe he's lying nude in bed, running his hands over his body and thinking about how much he'd like to be holding a girl against him, maybe he'd like to feel my hands on him, my mouth kissing him, and*

...

No, not there, can't go there.

*Why not? Isn't that natural, isn't it okay for me to think about that stuff?*

*I mean, not like letting myself dwell on it, work it up till I have to get off – Lucy says she does it all the time, just thinking about kissing boys and them touching her on her tits and between her ...*

*Like she did with me that time.*

Why do I have to think about cloaks and symbols and auras when the rest of them are thinking about *natural* things?

*Must be because I'm unnatural, a real freak, because I see ghosts and they want to drag me down with them not all of them no there are ghosts here that are good Ismé's mother said so she said they wanted to protect me Father and Nina who I never met but she's still here and wanting to help him help me, is it Mum? she's so strong, stronger than me and that dark thing she was talking about the one that's been let loose how can I believe any of this kind of stuff? I'm not crazy, but it makes me feel so afraid ... what's that noise? A creak outside? Is it starting up again? Haven't heard anything since Ismé's Mum came round, yeah, definitely a creak, gotta get back to golden eggs and auras and strings and chakras cloaks symbols, gotta put the symbol round my bed and at my door. Wish I could do the whole house but Gran'd go apeshit, shouldn't I try at least to talk to her about it? nah she'd send me to the loony bin, and so would I if it was my granddaughter, more noise outside, why can't I just be like everybody else? just natural, skin, kisses, muscles, why not me?*

...

\*

You're very quiet, Laura. How are things at home? You *know* I approve of thinking positively, and if these acts of self-protection help you reinforce yourself, then I can endorse them wholeheartedly, even if in my position of course you can't expect me to believe, not the same way *you* believe ... Have you got any more dreams for me, I like to hear your dreams, any with hairy wolves or older men ... are you naked or with clothes on, what kinds of clothes, are they tight on you? Do you have a boyfriend in the dream you're jealous of your mother aren't you? having sex with daddy, you'd like to be there instead why not with someone else work out those feelings with an older man I'd like to see some more of you I think it could do good if we were to see a little of each other outside the office maybe in a bar you could have a milkshake or a soft-drink you'd like that, wouldn't you? an older more sophisticated professional in good shape I'd love to have you suck my dick

"You should send it to him! You really should. Anonymously. Just change the names. He's probably leching after *all* his patients. He'd think he'd *really* been rumbled."

"You think? Nah, I don't ... I didn't write it for that. Don't even know if he's *like* that. I just woke up with all these strange thoughts in my head, and wrote them down. It was like I was just recording what was already there."

"You think you were tapping into his skull? What he really thinks?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. Not really. Maybe a little. It was kind of creepy though. It was as if I *was* him, this guy, and I could understand how he felt about girls, how he thought about them all the time and whether they were looking at him and what they were thinking, and how *everything* he did was part of that. I don't know if that's imagination, though, or something real."

"Were you dreaming about him?"

“No, not really. Not at all, actually. I wasn’t even thinking about him till I grabbed the pad when I woke up.”

“Joseph?”

“Shut *up*. Seriously, not even him.”

“Not even a little?”

“*No*. I mean, do *you* think about it all the time?”

“I suppose not. Don’t have to, anyway – not when I’m with you.” She runs her hand down her friend’s side. “So what *were* you dreaming about?”

Laura jack-knives away. “Why do I have to have been dreaming about anything? Everybody treats me like I’m sort of a dream machine, churning them out. What if I just had an ordinary night’s sleep?”

“Did you?”

“No ... It was really strange, though – less like a dream than any of the others ... I really don’t remember it.”

“Come *on*. What was it about?”

“That’s it, I don’t remember. I just know that I was outside in the corridor, outside my door trying to get in, only there was this big gold symbol glowing there. I kept on forgetting what I was doing and then coming back and trying to get in and coming back. It was like I had no memory, the me that was trying to get in. Only, it was strange, it was like I could watch myself doing this stuff, and understand what it was like, but I was also outside looking on, so I could remember the stuff that had happened, even though the me that was walking up to the door forgot it every time.”

“Weird.”

“It *was* weird. I don’t know if it was *bad*, not bad exactly, but it was like I understood what it was like to be a ghost, not to have any memory for things, to keep on doing the same things over and over because you don’t know where you are or what’s happened to you, and no matter how many times you do it you never get anywhere.”

“Kind of like Alzheimer’s?”

“*Yeah*. That’s it exactly. Some things were quite clear, but everything after a certain point was just empty, only with this big feeling of anxiety

coming out of it. Like I could never advance from there, because nothing I did would ever get me from *there* to *here*.”

“Was it your Mum? Your Aunt?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. Maybe it *was* me. Maybe it was Grandpa. His memory must be like that, I suppose. But I think it was a woman; yeah, I *know* it was, I was a woman.”

\*



Once we have chosen this book, our rhetorical (and narrative) pattern to impose upon the world, we are committed to it. Henceforth, everything we see must be defined as *present in* or *absent from* the story. The point would therefore seem to be proven. All of human behaviour *is* there: albeit in embryo or potentiality (**accidens**: accident) as much as in reality (**substantiā**: substance).

The story lasts ten days (*Ten Days that Shook the World*, one might almost say – “Did the earth move for you?” – the world of Kimberly and Alban, at any rate). Her sexual encounters – and consequent orgasms – increase at an dizzying rate throughout this period, as the narrative seeks to gain impetus, take flight into the empyrean.

•

## Dead Eyes

Haunting can become a routine like any other.

Each afternoon, as Laura returned from school, it would begin. First, a gradually growing sense of depression and unease as she approached the house. Then, stopping at that corner of the drive where the figure at the window showed (sometimes she would succeed in walking past it without looking up, but the eyes still bored into her skull; usually it was easier just to face them). Then through the front door, greetings to Gran at her table in the kitchen, and through to her room for homework. Usually the room would be disarranged. Little sculptures made out of pillows, bedclothes tangled together – sometimes more macabre touches: smeared on the window by sooty fingers ...

*LAURA YOU ARE MINE TO KILL*

*COME ON DOWN THE WATERS FINE*

... dolls hanging from the light-switch, books left open at nasty scenes of violence and death – a concentrated air of malevolence.

Sometimes she'd go to Lucy's after school instead, and stay for dinner or the night, just to keep away, but there was no real relief. It was always there waiting, at the back of her mind. Talking about it, too, while granting temporary ease, left it waiting there to sneak back in, however friendly and helpful the listener.



So convoluted had her thoughts become that Laura didn't even notice anything strange in the atmosphere as she entered the house. The door swung shut with a hollow boom, the usual signal for her grandmother to come out and greet her (in her restrained, formal way), but this afternoon the house was apparently empty.

Just as well. The last thing she needed was to talk to anyone right now. She couldn't even bear to go to her room and see what horrors the

presence had arranged for her today. Maybe two pillows rolling together like girl lovers ... She walked into the kitchen.

Everything was gleaming, tidy, clean and put away. A kind of Sunday hush reigned over all. In the middle of the table was a note from Gran:

*Laura,*

*I've had to go out. An old friend has just been taken to the hospital and needs me to bring her some things. I might not be back till late, so could you kindly prepare an evening meal for your grandfather and yourself?*

*There's cold meat in the fridge, and things to chop up for a salad. Or, if you prefer, there are lamb chops.*

*Love, Gran*

Chops sounded good; a little work cutting up vegetables and lettuce would serve to distract her.

Calmly and deliberately, Laura drove the point of the sharp knife into her finger, and watched the drops of blood form like beads upon a necklace.

•

“Grandfather! Dinner’s ready.”

As Laura walked into the study, she was conscious of an immediate change of climate. She’d got rather hot cooking in the kitchen, and the temperature here seemed ten degrees lower – a glacial chill. She’d never noticed that in here before.

Grandfather turned his eyes towards her, but they weren’t his eyes, his friendly, absent-minded grey eyes: *these* eyes were cold and dead, the face turned towards hers a complete stranger’s.

Laura dropped the plate. The sound of its shattering scarcely registered on her, news from a distant star.

•

Lucy walked in the front door. It wasn't locked, and no-one had replied to her knocking. All the lights on the ground floor were blazing, though. Perhaps Laura's Grandparents were out. In any case, she needed to be sure that Laura wasn't there and hiding from her.

She *had* to talk to her, to explain ... kissing that girl, it was nothing serious. It had nothing to do with the way *they* felt about each other. Laura had looked so stricken, running away like that. She'd never meant to hurt her – especially with all the stuff she was going through already!

No-one in the kitchen either, though there were signs of meal preparation, and even a congealing plate of meat and salad on the sideboard. What was this, the *Marie Celeste*?

On the table a book lay open:

*The shepherd's flute  
is broken his pipes are broken  
Inanna turns upon him  
eyes of death ...*

No clues there.

She didn't fancy going upstairs, after all she'd heard about the house. There was something just a bit too ominous about the way the steps led up into darkness, the black mouth of the landing. Instead, she tried the last remaining door on the ground floor, Laura's grandfather's study.

It was difficult at first to understand what she saw when she looked in there. Laura's grandfather was sitting bolt upright in his chair, his eyes staring sightlessly across the room, to where ... *Laura!* ... lay crumpled in a heap on the floor. Had she fainted? She'd dropped a plate of food, and parts of it were strewn halfway across the room.

Lucy ran to her. Should she touch her? The question was in her mind, but her hands were already taking action, rolling her friend over on her back. Was she breathing? She lowered her head to check. *Breathing, yes!* A wave of relief came over her. On her side was best: *recovery position* – but somehow she looked so peaceful lying on her back that Lucy didn't want to move her.

“What ... what’s going on?”

A voice came from the doorway.

Laura’s grandmother tottered in, looking blankly at the shattered plate, the girl kneeling above her granddaughter. *How must it look to her?* thought Lucy, and the thought almost made her giggle as she knelt there. The old lady’s eyes turned to her husband.

“Harry!” Rushing over. Lucy rose to join her.

“I found them. Just a second ago. Is he ...?”

But Laura’s grandfather was dead.



The hall was very large and dark. The spiders had a long way to come. They colonised each corner, first, grouping there in clots of black before advancing their threads across the floorboards. From where she sat, paralysed, in the centre of the room, Laura could only look straight in front of her, but her angle of observation seemed higher up, as if she were hovering above her own head, able to see in four directions at once.

At first she had thought there were only dark shadows in the far corners of the room, but as they started to pulsate and leak, she had realised there was something there: Tar? Treacle? *Molasses?* The tiny wisps of silk had told her it was spiders.

In front of her was a wooden desk. She was sitting on an old steel-framed chair, as in an examination room, and – yes – there were papers in front of her, papers waiting to be turned over when the clock struck the hour. This clock would never strike. It hung poised on the wall, frozen just before one o’clock. There was no movement besides the little streamers of black, no sound save the faint susurrations of their legs. So many of them. Who would have dreamed the room could hold so many? And every second there were more.

Eternities passed. White paper, brown desk, black scurrying. She tried to shift her head. It moved, a little. Enough to see how far they’d come up behind her. They were almost at the chair. *What happens when they reach*

*it?* she thought with her sluggish brain, but the answer was obvious enough. They would swarm all over, pinching, eating, till she'd ceased to be alive. They'd crawl down her throat, her nostrils, choking her with their little bodies. She'd be unable to resist them; they would come on and on in hordes and suffocate her if they couldn't bite her to death.

The deep throbbing horror which had been with her from the start was growing by the minute. Soon she would start to scream. Her mouth opened a little, a little croak came out: "Can't ... come ... back." *Why that? Why those words?* Where was she? Some kind of finals, obviously. The spiders flowed towards her.



Lucy was kissing Carol. They were on the beach. The three of them. Lying on towels in skimpy bikinis on a white expanse of sand. Laura looked on, embarrassed, stirred, disgusted.

The kiss went on so long she couldn't believe it. Their bodies pressed against each other, warm sun-tanned flesh. Didn't they *know* she was here? Couldn't they *wait*? Didn't they want to ... ask her, if she wanted ... ask her if she felt ...

She stood up. Her movement broke the spell. They looked up at her, silent. "I'm going to get an ice-cream," she explained. They nodded: satisfied, complacent.

She walked off.

There was an ice-cream truck further up the beach, parked on the shimmering sand. She walked over to it. A clown was serving cones to grubby children. She asked him for one, then recalled she had no money.

"My friends have got my purse, back by the towels," she said, gesturing behind her. Of course there was no-one there when she turned to look. The clown stared at her, belligerently, with his cruel red eyes.

"I'll give you one for free," he said. "*Almost* for free." He took a knife and poked it at one of her fingers, squeezed out a pattern of blood over

Jack Ross

the snow-white ice-cream, then began to pack the streaky mixture into a cone.

Laura watched him in silence. She knew she had to eat it, every drop.

•

Grandfather had her on his lap. They were in his study. He felt so firm, so manly under her. She wriggled to get more comfortable. *Aren't I too old for this?* her mind asked anxiously. His hands held her so firmly. He stroked her chestnut hair (*“So beautiful!”*)

She turned to look at him. His eyes were fixed and glassy, like black marbles. A tiny thread of drool drooped from his lower lip. She longed to wipe it off, to tell him about it, but he held her hands so tightly she could hardly move.

She looked down at the floor and saw the razor.

•

“She is fighting hard. She is trying very hard to come back to us,” said the dapper little doctor, as he looked down at Laura’s feverish body, tossing and turning in the neat white bed. “Keep on talking to her, please, Miss Snowe. She is trying to break out, but it may still take some time.”

•

MY NAME IS LAURA. I LIVE IN A CASTLE WITH MY BROTHER. WE ARE VERY CLOSE. WE LOVE EACH OTHER. HE HAS PROMISED NEVER TO MARRY ANYONE BUT ME. THE CASTLE IS DARK BUT WE HAVE CANDLES. WE GET UP AT NGHT AND CLEAN THE CORNERS THERE ARE SPIDERS HERE WE HAVE NO FOOD WE DRINK EACH OTHERS BLOOD SOMETIMES WHEN WE GET HUNGRY I AM ALWAYS

THIRSTY BUT I CAN'T DO THAT NOT WHAT HE WANTS ME  
TO HE IS MY BROTHER I WONT DO THAT NO ...

“What *is* this? Is this some kind of joke?”

“No,” said Lucy. “No, it’s not a joke. They come from Ismé’s mother. She’s a medium. She got them from the board last night.”

“What good are they to me? These crazy things? She won’t wake up! How can this help her?”

“That’s the point. That’s what *I* thought at first, but you know Laura’s been seeing lots of stuff around your house. I don’t know if she told you?”

“She told me *nothing*. Laura’s a good girl, not full of nonsense. She would never ...”

“Didn’t you notice those threads she put up round the stairs, the talcum powder, locking her door?”

“Well, ye-es, but she’d been under so much strain, I just thought she was ... nervous.”

“Maybe that’s all it is. It doesn’t really matter. *Something* tipped her over. Finding her grandfather like that maybe. But we’ve got to get her back. That’s why I brought you these. I don’t know what they mean; honestly I don’t, but maybe she’s trying to talk to us somehow.”

“Like this! But it’s all nonsense! Listen to this: KEEP YOUR HAND AWAY THE RAZORS EDGE I WONT YOU CANT MAKE ME DO IT I WON’T EAT YOUR RED EYES ... What’s all this gibberish got to do with Laura?”

“She had a cut on her hand, didn’t she, quite a bad one?”

“Yes, but that was from a knife, one of the kitchen knives, we saw it afterwards. It was just an accident, it wasn’t ... there was no razor ...”

“Perhaps she’s thinking about it in her sleep. I don’t know. I mean, she *is* my friend, but it’s really up to you. I wouldn’t presume to ... get involved if it weren’t for ... some of this is quite close to things we talked about ... things I don’t think she told anyone else.”

“You think I’m desperate, is that it? Peter will be here tomorrow. We should wait for Peter.”



“He’ll just say I’m mad. He’ll send me away. Maybe she’ll still wake up. And maybe not.”

“I think you *are* mad. You and all your friends.”

“I’m not, really I’m not. Please, what do we have to lose? What could be worse than this?”

“She’s alive. She may not be awake, but she’s alive. We might be risking her life. Or her sanity.”

“We *might* be. I don’t think so. I feel she wants us to wake her up.”

“You may be right. I don’t *know* ... What ... What do you want to do? Mind you, I’m not saying I’ll do ... let you do it. I just want to know what you’re thinking of.”

“It’ll have to be tonight, before her brother gets here. Ismé and her mother have agreed to help. We’ve got be real quiet, but they’re discharging the other patient in her room this afternoon. The nurses told me. We could be alone ...”



The tests were getting harder and harder. She found herself trying to count every black square in a room tiled in black and white like a lopsided chessboard. Only none of her calculations worked. The room seemed to shrink when she counted them by hand, and expand when she tried to extrapolate from the edges. She might have been there for years. There was a door at one end, but something about it frightened her. It didn’t look right. Others came through occasionally and then went out through it, but none of them would ever speak to her. If she stopped counting, though, there would be nothing else left to try.

The room was narrowing now, the tiles bleaching out into oblivion, into a normal tiled floor. It was a corridor, and she was walking down it, banging through the doors, faster and faster till she came to a bed.

The people round it looked familiar. There were four – no, five of them. Four sitting with linked hands, one lying in the bed, a girl with long pale hair. An elderly woman, one a bit younger, two teenage girls.

The second woman looked up when she entered. Could she see her? It seemed unusual in this hall of mirrors.

At any rate, she could hear the words she was saying: “Tell us where you are.” *Why not answer?* “In the room. I walked down the corridor, now I’m in the room.” The woman muttered something to the others, then continued: “Can you come back to us?” *Come back from where?* thought Laura. “I don’t know,” she faltered. “Where am I?”

Looking down at the bed, she saw herself.



Waking.

climbing out of a well ...

out of an immense darkness ...

feeling your fingers, limbs stretch, resuscitate ...

blood beginning to flow again.

Eyes open, like a gate that lets in dazzle, too much dazzle, like a blast-furnace of light.

Gradual return to (*something like*) a bed, to (*something like*) smooth sheets, to ... a steel bedstead with ... what? *Machinery?* beside it.

She ached all over.

She’d been dreaming, she could remember that – something about huge rooms and tests and creeping shadows, a whole expanse of darkness ... She shifted her hand a little on the bedspread. It ached, felt clumsy, there were bandages around it. Where? Was she at home?

Where *was* home? The picture of a house came in her mind. A big house, with a garden, not that seaside house, nor the suburban bungalow, a big house ... *That* was where she lived. Was she there now?

Something about the light looked different. This bed was too high; what were those things? Were those curtains around the bed?

*I’m in a hospital*, she said to herself, and decided to sit up.



And yet, one still requires a falsifiable hypothesis. If *Dieb*, by inclusion or exclusion, can be used to compile a lexicon of human behaviour, could the same effect be attained through other media? A film, a computer game, a newspaper comic strip, television series-*feuilleton*?

The playing field must be level for the experiment to proceed. I have therefore chosen to match the thirteen chapters of *Thief* against thirteen episodes of the American TV sit-com *All Save You* (all save the first, the pilot – which I watched but did not record – preserved on a single long-play video cassette).

Again, the criterion was that the programme be *unusually unsuccessful and perfunctory*. In essence, the plot revolves around the May to September romance of Jason and Willie (Wilhemina?), but there are no good characters, and very few laughs. The bare skeleton of its genre constraints accordingly stand out in stark relief.

Set in New York. Time: the present day.

<b>Ep. [length.]</b>	<b>Broadcast</b>	<b>Action</b>
<b>1</b> [45 mins]	7.30-8.30 – (20/9) <i>Willie:</i> Susan Floyd <i>Jason:</i> Thomas Newton <i>Shirley:</i> Miriam Shor <i>Ted:</i> Desmond Askew <i>Jesús:</i> Winston Rocha <i>Doug:</i> Colin Ferguson	Willie, a thirty-something divorcée, jokingly asks out a young room-service waiter from the hotel where she is staying, and is embarrassed when he takes her up on her offer.
<b>2</b> [23"]	8-8.30 – (27/9)	Willie and Jason discover their birthdays are only three days apart and agonise over what kind of presents to give each other.

<b>Ep. [length.]</b>	<b>Broadcast</b>	<b>Action</b>
<b>3</b> [23"]	8-8.30 – (4/10)	Willie introduces Jason to her friends at a wedding reception, where he is working as a waiter.
<b>4</b> [23"]	8-8.30 – (11/10)	Willie talks Jason into performing at an open-mike night; Shirley dates a younger man.
<b>5</b> [23"]	8-8.30 – (18/10)	Jason pretends to be Willie's cousin to avoid upsetting a volatile author who is in love with her; Ted goes to beauty school to avoid deportation.
<b>6</b> [23"]	8-8.30 – (25/10)	Willie and Jason explain themselves to a cop after the celebration of their "monthiversary" goes awry.
<b>7</b> [23"]	8-8.30 – (1/11)	Willie balks when Jason invites her to spend a night at Ted and his grungy apartment.
<b>8</b> [23"]	8-8.30 – (8/11)	Jason's ex-girlfriend comes back from Europe, forcing Jason to admit that he never really broke up with her before she left.

<b>Ep. [length.]</b>	<b>Broadcast</b>	<b>Action</b>
9 [23"]	8-8.30 – (15/11)	When Willie finally moves her things out of her ex-husband Doug's house, he kisses her. Unfortunately Jason witnesses the event.
10 [23"]	8-8.30 – (22/11)	Willie goes back to work for the first time since starting her affair.
11 [23"]	8-8.30 – (29/11)	Doug complains about the way Willie and Jason care for their "joint custody" dog.
12 [23"]	8-8.30 – (6/12)	Willie and Jason consider buying a house together.
13 [23"]	8-8.30 – (13/12)	Willie learns Jason is applying to law schools and pulls some strings to get him in

Am I in love with Willie? Not really, though she *does* remind me of someone: a once-significant other. Her shark-like mouth and prominent teeth are a little offputting, though she can exhibit tenderness at times. Jason is boringly perfect, while Ted and Shirley display an equally irritating quirkiness (*she*: thirty-something neurotic manhungry wiseacre; *he*: horny worthless insensitive opportunistic *gamin*). Perhaps the most truly misguided character is Jesús [Hay-zoos], a combination of funny ethnic sidekick and Wilson-like man-next-door philosopher (à la *Home Improvement*). There is also Willie's ex, Doug, who verges on the interesting at times, despite his implausible continued omnipresence in her life.

All this is nothing to the purpose, though. Why do I watch this programme? Am I insane? Does it have an audience of lonely people, comforted by the wooden plotlines and inexorable *solubility* of the characters' small dilemmas? How am I to analyse it? The screen turns to fire if I watch it too much – to indecipherable dots if I approach too close.

As in Bram Stoker's *Jewel of Seven Stars*, the grand experiment approaches its dénouement. Will the mummy come back to life, or be consumed by fire? The Eroticon is here of little value, as all the love scenes have a beginning and end and no middle (this deficiency can be made up for by *Thief*, of course).

Does it give us anything which we cannot deduce from our book? Is its grasp of the psychology of the individual more comprehensive, more astute, in any way at all?

Hardly, but it *is* themed, is (at least in intention) comprehensive.

What *are* these themes, these feelings, then?

- In Episode 1: embarrassment  
infatuation  
shame  
crystallisation (as defined by Stendhal: *De l'Amour*)
- In Episode 2: confusion  
misapprehension
- In Episode 3: social awkwardness  
embarrassment
- In Episode 4: embarrassment
- In Episode 5: intrusion of the author (à la Jack in *Thief*):  
Willie is revealed to be a book editor  
one of her writers has fallen in love with her  
embarrassment
- In Episode 6: stupidity  
embarrassment
- In Episode 7: disgust  
shame

## Jack Ross

- In Episode 8: Jason's ex-girlfriend: "You two are sick!"  
Willie: "But we're happy ..."
- In Episode 9: mistrust
- In Episode 10: lies
- In Episode 11: excrement and horror
- In Episode 12: fear
- In Episode 13: absurdity

I never thought to tape the pilot episode (would *you* have?) I remember, nevertheless, a scene where Willie was watching baseball with Jason. "You walk like a girl!" she shouted at the screen, her crotch thrust forward in tight jeans: sweet image, endearing still.

•

## 10 – Home

... *Wednesday, 3<sup>rd</sup> October* – Back from the hospital today. I don't know why I'm starting to write in this notebook again. I certainly don't want to show it to anybody, so it's probably a bad idea. Reading back through the entries, it sounds like I've been pretty close to going crazy these last few weeks. Now everybody treats me like I'm made of china. Even Lucy's all meek and mild and doesn't make jokes anymore. She cried when she saw I was awake. Gran said she'd been coming to see me every day.

Grandpa's gone. It feels like everything's gone from here, actually. No more Father and Mum, no more ghost-stuff, just me and Gran, here all alone. It's all there ever was, I guess.

I find myself looking at things as though I'm seeing them for the first time. The doctor said that was normal, that I'd take a while to get my normal sense of perception back. He actually would have liked to keep me in the hospital a bit longer, I think, but I felt I had to get home.

They asked me what it was like while I was asleep. I can't remember anything much except bad dreams, really bad dreams. I don't know what they were about, but I know there were a lot of nightmares. That was one reason I wanted to get out of there, I must admit. I've had bad dreams before – quite a lot since Father died, in fact – but nothing like these. These ones seemed so real.

I'm sure I didn't dream at all last night, though – just pitch blackness all night long. I think that's it. I shouldn't think I'll write in this again. I've made a decision. No more ghost books. I'm going to stop that now.

*Saturday, 6<sup>th</sup> October* – Oh God, wouldn't you know it, here I am again, writing in this book. I said I wouldn't, but after last night I feel I've got to. Everything was going fine. Lucy and I were fine.

I've just got off the phone with her. She's really mad with me. The thing is, I don't know why. She was saying all sorts of stuff, but I can't



remember any of it. She says I was acting really slutty, that she didn't know I could be so spiteful.

Did I have too much to drink? I don't remember *any* of it. I remember her picking me up in her Mum's car, and then it's blank, just blank. She didn't believe me when I told her that. I guess I wouldn't either if someone else told me that, but it's true. Maybe that coma left me with some brain damage? I'm really freaking out here. I tried to get her to tell me what I did, but she wouldn't say – just kept on saying I'd know better than she would about that. I did notice I was hurting a bit this morning when I got up, and there were two bruises on my upper thighs, but ... one or two bruises. They could have come from anywhere ... I suppose.

*Sunday, 7<sup>th</sup> October* – *Everybody* seems to be freaking out on me now. I told Gran that Lucy was angry with me and that there was something I was supposed to have done but I couldn't remember it, and she looked all stern and disapproving. "You *know* I've told you not to try and get over it too fast," she said (I don't remember her *ever* saying that to me). Come to think of it, she has been looking a bit more disapproving than usual just lately, but I thought it was depression over Grandpa. "What have I done?" I asked her. "You know very well," she replied. It's like there are two of me. Only I don't remember what the other one does.

*Monday, 8<sup>th</sup> October* – This is ridiculous. One minute I'm at school, in English class. The next minute I'm down by the railway station. It wasn't like waking up, or coming to. Just one minute there. Boom! Next minute somewhere else. I don't have the faintest idea what I'd been doing between times. I was carrying a bag, a shopping bag. I guess I'd bought some shoes, because there was a new pair inside, all gift-wrapped and everything. I had my purse, but not my school things. God knows where they'd got to!

I thought about ringing Gran, but somehow I just couldn't face the lecture she'd give me. So I decided to try Lucy instead. She didn't want to talk to me at first. I must have done something really bad the other

night, but I finally got her to listen. I'm sure she didn't believe me, but at least she agreed to come and pick me up. She said she'd seen me walking out when the bell rang, and then I wasn't at the next period. I must have walked straight out the gate and downtown. No wonder my feet were sore!

We talked about it in the car. I kept on asking what I'd done to her, but I could see she was suspicious. Maybe we've had this conversation before and I just don't remember? Maybe she's been asking me what's wrong with me, and I've been dissing her or something? I don't know. Finally I got her to tell me what I'd done.

"It wouldn't have been unusual for *some* girls – just that I've never seen *you* do anything like that. It was like you were all over my guy from the moment we went out, and totally ignoring the guy *you* were with. You kept on leaning over me and asking Ben to dance. It got really embarrassing. I didn't want to fight in front of them. And then you disappeared with him! It was *so* humiliating. The other guy just left, with me having to pay the bill. I mean, I thought you must be ... breaking up with me, or ... That's why I just got mad when you said you couldn't remember anything about it. Then when I tried to talk about it with you later you just blew me off. Told me I was imagining it, that I must have been drunk ..."

"I don't remember that at all! We never talked about it at all after that first phone call."

"But we did! That's just it. Either you'd say you didn't remember it at all, or you'd be real dismissive of me. We must have talked about it two or three times after that."

"I just don't remember. It's like there's two of me. I'm not making this up. It's like there's two of me."

•

**Samples of automatic writing:**

**Question:** “Who are you?”

*round the dark yard on the spikes I walk and then back in the light I look at you  
but I can only see the yard the spikes I want to come back into the light*

**Question:** “What do you want?”

*you you you you you  
me mememememe*

**Question:** “Is there anything I can do for you?”

*come with me down into the dark then I can go come with me I can go back do  
what we started to do but then he stopped I need to start over again*

**Question:** “Will you get out of my head?”

*when you come back with me then we'll be all together in the dark or in the light  
together you can come with me I need you to do that for me*

•

So what have I accomplished? What does it prove, this analysis of the minutiae of dreck? (Drit-sker: shit-island, as in *Eyrbyggja Saga*). Perhaps simply that “my mind’s not right” (Robert Lowell)?

Kimberly is a rare jewel, that much is certain (let the galled jade wince) – or precious jade (Lin Dai-yu) as in the *Red Chamber Dream*.

The thirteen chapters/episodes might perhaps be read/seen as seasonal: thirteen moon-months, or twelve with the missing pilot. Plot – pilot: only an “I” apart.

I glimpse, somewhere, within it, though, a perfect language of acts and characters: a projected syntax of fiction/friction which could anticipate all possible human events. It would be made up of all the names from our two texts: Willie, Kimberly, Jason, Alban, Elspeth ... combined on wheels of **situation**, **action** and **emotion** (the Eroticon being but one such).

*never had no trouble  
in my life before*

Kimberly, comfort me  
Willie, give succour to your author in distress

The syntax would be, one would suppose, the trickiest thing to manage. One could begin with one wheel for **subject**, another for **predicate**, others for **situation**, **attributes**, **bystanders** – perhaps five in all, with at least thirty fields of variation in each. After that, one could begin to generate combinations at a gradually accelerating rate. The equipment required would be minimal – five pieces of cardboard, locked in some kind of frame, so that one could pull them, one by one, past a certain point, then note down the results in abbreviated form – perhaps a letter code. You would be creating *images* as well as *words* – a little world of puppets, under your control. A better world. The kind of world where promises were kept / And one could weep because another wept ...

•

## 11 – Ereshkigal

A long time ago a nation of people lived in a river valley. Perhaps in Egypt, Iraq, perhaps in the Indus valley. They were a soft people, gentle and generous. But their rulers were weak and indecisive, which brought them many defeats. Gradually their territory shrank, until it was only a small part of what had once belonged to them.

One day a wanderer appeared among them. He came from the desert, from outside. His skin was dark and rough where theirs was olive-brown and soft. He offered to help them win back what was theirs by leading them in battle. “What can we do against so many?” the people wailed. “We’re surrounded on all sides.”

“If you do as I say you can defeat them,” he replied.

“And what will you ask in exchange?”

“That you will find out when the victory is won. Then you must grant it, whatever it may be.”

They debated the matter long, the ruling council, the men and women who were the elders of the tribe (for the women took part in their councils, too). Finally they decided to accept his help. What had they to lose? Their enemies would destroy them otherwise, and make their story as if it had never been.

Next day the people marched out to battle, led by the fearsome stranger. Only this time the battle did not go as before. Usually they would attack strongly in the morning, be held by noon, then driven back by nightfall. This had been going on for years.

This time the stranger told them to wait for his move. Their enemies were waiting to contain the first attack. When it didn’t come, they grew puzzled. Could it be their opponents had finally given up the struggle? They sent out some scouts to see. No, there the army was, the few chariots and footsoldiers that were all that were left of the people’s forces. Yet they did not attack.

Some skirmishers were sent out next. As they got nearer to the people's lines, they braced themselves for arrows, ambushes.

Nothing.

All this time the young stranger stood in silence. The people watched him, and did as he did. They murmured somewhat as the other army began its approach, but still he did nothing save gesture to them to stand silent.

Their enemies, emboldened by this inaction, mustered their full forces for attack. Still the stranger stood silent.

The attack came. The people stood still. They had no trenches, no barricades. There was nowhere for them to take cover. Some of them started to drift back as the enemy forces drew closer and closer, but the stranger patrolled their lines, enjoining them to stand firm.

At this point a dark line appeared on the farthest range of hills. At first it was on the left, then it became visible from the right, also. The enemy did not see it at first, focused as they were on what was in front of them, but as it grew darker and darker behind the hills, one or two of them started to point. More and more of the sky was obscured as the shadow reared up behind the hills until the darkness met above their heads. And then it broke.

A horde of locusts settled on the attacking army. Uncountable millions and billions of insects, gnawing their straps, their harnesses, tangling in their hair. The horses went mad, rearing and throwing their riders, the chariots crashed into one another. The soldiers waved their shields and swords to keep off the parasites, but nothing could stop them. There were simply too many.

And now the stranger gave the signal for attack. The people swept forward. Their enemies had, in many cases, dropped their weapons to slap at the insects. Some had even stripped off their armour to get at the burrowing fiends. They were easy prey for lance and arrows.

It was a massacre, not a battle. The stranger stood by and watched as the people rampaged through the ranks of their foes, striking and killing. The locusts began to thin as the day went by, but by then the enemy were surrounded and largely unarmed. They begged to surrender but the

stranger said no: "As you have done so will you be done by. You sought to destroy, now be destroyed." He did not let the people rest till the sun went down on a reddened field. Hardly a man of their enemies was left alive by then. Those few escaped across the hills to bring the news to their leaders.

All next day the people rejoiced. The realm was safe. The stranger had killed the hosts that opposed them. He walked among them as they laughed with joy and praised him to the heavens, but he alone did not smile. "This is not enough," he said. "Tomorrow we take the fight further." Victory is intoxicating, and the people obeyed him. There were some protests, for they were still a peace-loving people, but they obeyed him.

And so it went on. Battle after battle they fought, till they had won back all of their valleys, all of their fields, and had encroached far and wide into the kingdoms around them. Always the forces of nature would aid them. A flood would rise to swamp their opponents' camp. Landslides and avalanches helped them in the mountain passes. Cattle stampeded on the lush open lands. Crocodiles harried their opponents as they retreated over rivers. The people waxed great and rich. Their markets teemed with booty and slaves. They were again a great nation.

At the end of all this, of ten years of war, the stranger, still rough and taciturn, though somewhat grizzled from his years of hardship in the field, came again to the council of the people. "I have come for my reward," he said:

*"First – I and mine will be your kings forever."*

They murmured at that, but nobody could deny it was just.

*"Second – I shall choose a queen from among you. And any I choose must submit to me."*

This again was accepted, though with a certain trepidation. "From our daughters you may choose," said one, "but what of our wives? Do you seek to choose among them also?"

"Fear not," he said. "I have chosen already: your priestess, the Priestess of the Moon."

Now, the Priestess of the Moon was the chief priestess of the people. She was a virgin, for she served the New Moon, and her chastity was considered essential to the prosperity of all. What the stranger proposed was blasphemous, therefore, and yet – his counsels had saved them from disaster, and brought them untold wealth and dominion.

“*Third* – you will build a new temple, a temple to my master, and to him will you sacrifice your first fruits.”

“And who is your master?” the council enquired.

The name he spoke was that of the enemy of life. At once they understood to whom they owed their survival and success.

“No,” cried the councillors. “To this we cannot agree. Go back to the desert. We will help you win back whatever you wish for outside our borders, but we cannot surrender our souls to your dark master.”

At this the stranger smiled, and stripped off his robe, and straightened himself, and they saw that his back was marked with lashes, and his thighs had great puncture wounds through them, and they recognised him at last.

Now many years before a young man, the son of one of the great families, had been driven forth into the desert when he spoke blasphemy against the gods. His father was the High Priest of the Sun, his sister the Priestess of the Moon. It was therefore his own sister he was proposing to make his Queen!

Confusion reigned in the room – the councillors yammered and threw up their arms. When they came back to order the stranger had vanished.

Things began to go wrong again for the people from that moment. Their enemies had been scattered to the four winds, but bandit raids began to disrupt their caravans. There was a great flood which drowned much of the harvest. Grain grew scarce in the city. An epidemic broke out, and carried off many of the young children.

At the height of all this the stranger returned at the head of an army. His army was made up of rogues and vagabonds like himself, yet none could withstand them. The struggle against him was short-lived, and



soon he was encamped outside the capital, ready to enter next day to take up his kingship.

That night his sister, the Priestess of the Moon, slipped out of the city and went to his tent to talk with him. She offered herself to him if only he would leave the city unharmed. He laughed at her at first, swore he could have all she offered and more, and still rule the great city, but at last her tears softened him.

Next morning, with his troops poised for the final assault, the stranger instead turned away and slunk off into the desert. Without him, his army was demoralised and easily defeated, and the people began to breathe easy again.

When the Priestess of the Moon came to term, she gave birth to a baby boy. She did not say who the father was, but most of the council could guess. Some said she should be burnt for disregarding her vows, but instead she was allowed to give up her post to another. She married a courtier, and bore another child, a daughter ...



Breakfast was a strangely stilted meal. Laura tried talking to Peter, who had arrived the night before, but he stared at his plate like a ghost. Gran, too, seemed strangely pensive, looking at the two of them as if she knew something they didn't.

As soon as decently possible, Peter broke off and dashed from the room.

Coming up the stairs, Laura saw him packing.

“You're not going already?”

“Yes.”

“But you only just got here!”

“I've got to get back.”

“But why? We've been looking forward to seeing you, talking to you. Some *weird* things have been happening ...”

[Grunt.]

“Okay. If it means that little to you ...”

“Why are you being like this?”

“Like what?”

“Like nothing happened.”

“Like nothing happened *when*? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Well, if you want to treat it like that – I just think ...”

“Look, Peter, if you’ve got something on your mind, spit it out. Don’t just drop all these hints. Have I said something, or done something ...?”

“Well, yeah. I mean, I’m not saying it wasn’t my fault, it’s just ... you can’t deny it happened.”

“That *what* happened? For fuck’s sake, Peter!”

“Last night, Laura. That last night happened.”

“*Nothing* happened last night. At least – I remember dreaming ...”

Laura fell silent as she recalled her dreams – the corridors, the rough beast pursuing. Nothing *had* happened, had it?

“It wasn’t a dream. That’s what *I* thought at first. I swear it is. I thought it ... that you were Syl. That’s why ... Christ, God, I’m sorry, Laura, I never meant. It’s just ... I couldn’t stop, I couldn’t control it ...”

“What did you do to me?”

“I never meant to. It’s just – I was only half awake. You know how it is. You wake up, and you think you’re at home, and the person next to you is ... and then when you realise it isn’t, that you aren’t, it’s too late, it’s much too late. *You* knew. You must have. There was a moment. It wasn’t too late, but you said ... those things, and – fuck, I just couldn’t help myself. You must have done it before, done *something* ...”

“No.”

“You mean it? I swear I didn’t know you were a virgin. You didn’t talk like ... And the way you ... I just assumed. It wasn’t till this morning when I saw all the blood that I *really* believed ...”

“That we’d done it.”

“Yeah. *Why*, Laura? Why that? For fuck’s sake, I could go to *prison*, you know.”

“I’m over the age of consent.”

“Is that all you can say – that you’re legal?”

“*You* started it. How the fuck do you think *I* feel? For God’s sake, I knew nothing about it! Nothing till you told me just now.”

“But ... you were the one who ...”

“I *told* you about the blackouts. On the phone. I thought that was why you were here. To help me, to talk ... Didn’t you believe me? When I wake up I don’t remember *anything*.”

“You mean you don’t remember it at all? That you didn’t even *know*?”

“Yes. Now perhaps you’ll believe me. Did you *really* think I’d ...? You’re my *brother*, for Christ’s sake.”

“But, this morning, you must have felt ...”

“Oh yeah, I felt it this morning all right! Like I’d been through a mangle. I’m just one solid mass of bruises.”

“I swear Laura, if you’re having me on, if it really *was* you ... I’ll kill you, I’ll fucking kill you.”

Peter burst into tears and sat down on the bed. Awkwardly, Laura sat down beside him and, after a moment’s hesitation, reached over to take him in her arms. He stiffened a little, then relaxed.

“Oh my God. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to ... I honestly thought it was her, it was Syl, and then when I realised it wasn’t, I wanted to stop, I really tried, but ...”

“Shh, it’s okay. It wasn’t your fault. It was *hers*.”

“Whose? Have you got a split personality then?”

“You’ve got to promise not to tell anyone if I tell you.”

“Who do you think I’m going to be telling about this? It’s not exactly polite conversation, you know.”

“It was Mum.”

“Are you out of your mind?”

“I don’t know. I don’t *think* so. I think it was Mum.”

“But ... she’s dead.”

“I know all that. She’s the one in my head. I feel it. I feel her, She’s the one who takes over when I black out.”

“You’re insane.”

“No. Anyway, the thing is, she’s not *your* mother. And I’m only your half-sister.”

“Are you trying to make me feel better? Because it’s not working.”

“Why should I? I don’t feel too great about this thing myself, you know. I mean, this was my first time. And now I’ll never know ... what it’s like. I was a virgin, and now ...”

“Oh fuck, I’m so sorry, Laura. You know I never meant ...”

“No, I know you never meant ... but maybe you could have ... stopped.”

“Oh fuck, I *did* try, it was just ... God God God, what are we going to do?”

“I don’t know, Pete, I just don’t know. Don’t cry.”

They hugged each other and wept – like little children, like children facing up to something far too hard to bear.

There was blood in her bed, blood dried to the colour of rust. It took a long time to wash it out of her sheets. Half-way through her grandmother came in, but she said nothing, nor did she offer to help.



“But how do you do it? I mean, you’ve got to train for years, haven’t you?”

“I don’t know. I just feel it’s something I’ve got to do, and I don’t know anyone else I can ask. I’ve seen how *he* does it. You know, my therapist.”

“Can’t you get *him* to help?”

“He wouldn’t understand. He wouldn’t ask the right questions.”

“I don’t understand!”

“You know she’s in me, though, don’t you? You *believe* that.”

“Um. I guess. I certainly know you’ve been behaving real strangely, and I know you’re not yourself a lot of the time.”

“That’ll do. It doesn’t really matter if you believe it all or not.”

“So what do I have to do?”

**Jack Ross**

“Thanks, Lucy. Really ... thanks. I can’t tell you what this means to me.”

“That’s okay. I owe you one, girl ... but I really *don’t* know what I’m doing. This could be dangerous. It could put you back where you were before, for all I know, and I wouldn’t know how to help you out this time.”

“I understand. I know the risks. I just don’t see any other way to go.”

“Okay, then. Close your eyes. I’m going to start counting. When I reach the number ten ...”

•



... “What happened then?”

“Well, I kept crawling into it. It was stiflingly hot in there, even though it was so big, far bigger than you could see from the outside.”

“You didn’t think of turning back?”

“No. I looked round at one stage, but there were flames behind me, and the door of the furnace must have swung shut. There was no way out but forwards. At least there was a window, someone beckoning.”

“Your mother?”

“I thought so at first. Yeah, it’s as if it *was* my mother at first, but it got hotter and hotter inside that boiler, until I was crawling on a kind of crust of asphalt above a pit of flames; then, just when it got to be almost intolerable, I felt her leave me.”

“*Leave* you?”

“Yeah, it was like I just boiled up and over inside – inside my head, you know. There wasn’t any room left for her, so she just kind of ...popped out. I could feel her go. She wasn’t pleased, but she had no choice.”

“Where did she go?”

“Search me. Maybe the flames got her, I don’t know. My skin was all rough and pitted by then, from crawling over that rough tar and charcoal, but after that it got a little easier. I could still see someone at the other end, but I just felt like lying down then, just dropping off and letting it all stop.”

“Did you?”

“No, because there was still someone at the other side. By then I knew it wasn’t my mother; *she* was gone. It wasn’t me either; it wasn’t a mirror or anything like that, but it was *like* me. I think ...”

“What?”

“I think it may have been my aunt, my father’s sister, Nina. I could hear her in my head, telling me to keep on crawling, keep on coming. It was *so* hot by then, I knew there was no way I could really hope to survive this even if I did get to the other side.”

“But you did. You got through. You came back, anyway.”

“I’m not sure. I don’t think so. I must have blacked out in the furnace. I don’t think I ever got to the other side.”

“Just as well, perhaps.”

“How d’you mean?”

“Maybe you’d be dead if you’d got all the way to the other side.”

“Maybe, I don’t know. Is that what it looked like to you?”

“You mean, from here, from this side?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, it didn’t look like anything much, really. It wasn’t like you were acting things out, though you did do a lot of muttering and even said some actual words at times.”

“Do you remember what they were?”

“Some of them, yeah.”

“What?”

“You said ‘Peter’ at one stage.”

“That’ll be when I first crawled into the furnace, I guess. I was thinking about him then.”

“*What* were you thinking?”

“I was thinking that’s over. I’m *not* going to keep up this family tradition or whatever it is ...”

“Are you pregnant, do you think? Did he make you pregnant?”

“I don’t know if he did or not. If he *did*, I think I lost the baby in there. To tell you the truth, I think that may have been what it was all about, that my mother was trying to be reborn through my body, in my child.”

“It only lasted a few minutes, actually, the whole thing, from the time you went under to the time you woke up.”

“A few minutes? You mean ... All that stuff at the school, and in the fire ...”

“Yeah. I barely had time to feel anxious before you were back.”

“Fuck. Maybe it *was* all a dream.”

“Maybe. What do you want to do now?”

“I want to start living my own life, that’s what. They can find someone else to haunt. I’m sorry for Gran and Grandpa and everything



I put them through, but it sounds like they knew quite a lot about it already.”

“Were they brother and sister, then?”

“No. That was before, in the old days. That’s if any of it’s true at all. But one thing’s for certain: they went through the motions. They served someone else’s ends.”

“Whose?”

“I don’t *know*. Some god or goddess I suppose. Something trying to be born.”

“*What?*”

“If I knew I’d tell you. Something that shouldn’t be ...”

Laura opened her eyes and squinted through the gathering darkness. *Was* that Lucy? It seemed to be, but the features shimmered and shifted as she struggled to make them out. Her grandmother? Not quite ... Her aunt? Maybe ... Not her mother! No, not her. Someone else ... Someone else looking out through them, through her eyes.

*Yes, I am with you now. I will always be with you.*

“Who are you? You’re not ...”

*No, not your mother. She served me once, then chose another path, the path of return – she feared to die, and thought she could have eternal life by sacrificing your father, and then you.*

“What’s your name?”

*Does that matter? I have many names. Ereshkigal you could call me – Persephone the young. Ceres, the mother, as well. I am the goddess. My womb drips life, my breasts swell with milk. You are mine now, Laura. You are a woman ...*

The voice seemed to fade off into the distance as Laura swam up through the darkness, up through the layers of sleep, of dream, up to the surface, the sunlit room, where she lay by her friend, her friend who was shaking her, shouting, “Laura, wake up! Laura, wake up! The school’s caught fire! There’s no more school. There’ll be no more school forever...”



EBK 5

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A Titus e-Book

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