

ASPERGER'S SYNDROME AND FICTION –
AUTISTIC WORLDS AND THOSE WHO
BUILD THEM

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PHD BY PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

Do tangible, testable links exist between the autistic spectrum and creativity? How would such links work from the perspective of an author with Asperger's Syndrome? To what degree would autism mould the author's work, and how would it affect writing technique and style compared to neurotypical (non autistic spectrum authors)? Do these links provide a tangible advantage? Can an Asperger's author successfully engage a non-Asperger's readership? Has Asperger's become fashionable in fiction and if so what are the benefits/consequences? Can an "extraterrestrial stranded without an orientation manual"¹ communicate ideas in a meaningful way to non-autistics?

Asperger's Syndrome is a form of high functioning autism where those affected express a range of social, behavioural and perceptual traits which have no actual bearing on their level of intelligence. As an author with Asperger's my intention is to examine the degree to which my autism affects my writing technique and style compared to neurotypical (non autistic) creatives. Asperger's sufferers lack empathy and social skills, therefore creating situations a reader can empathise with is challenging. To an Asperger's other people are 'aliens'. If the characters and scenarios in my work are coloured by my difference, then it may be the difference itself which provides the hook for the reader.

To what extent do Asperger's authors need to 'pretend to be normal' in order to engage a neurotypical reader, or to make their work generally marketable? Is there an argument that they shouldn't even try? With increasing diagnosis and better understanding of the autistic spectrum, the Asperger's limited but intense range of interests and ability to focus without human distraction might link in to creative excellence that has an appeal far beyond the boundaries of the autistic spectrum.

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate whether claims of autistic links to creativity are more than heresy. I examine alleged positive evidence for these links, and see how this evidence ties in with my experience both as an Asperger's and an author, with particular regard to my decisions in crafting my novel *The Ghost Land*.

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Steve Silberman (2015) *Neurotribes*, London: Allen & Unwin (Pg 437).

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THE GHOST LAND

CHAPTER ONE

“You won't ever have kids, Miriam. They'd all be retards. I won't be grandfather to a monster.”

This belief has been festering in the mind and heart of my father since he first discovered I'd wandered into the Ghost Land. It's not something most twenty six year old women would want to hear, and though he first said it more than a decade ago I remember it perfectly. The fact Dad has hardly changed probably helps. One Christmas I got him a new hat, wide-brimmed and hand stitched in stag leather. Dad turned it over in his hands, pecked my cheek and put the hat on the top shelf of his wardrobe, where it's stayed ever since.

“I'm not trying to spite you, Miriam,” he explained once. “It's a fine hat, good for any job in any weather. I expect a man could even wear it in church but this,” he tapped the side of his old stetson, “I've kind of grown into it over the years. It's like a third hand. I can't just stop using such a thing, not after it's spent all those seasons keeping most of the weather off my face. I only take it off when I'm talking to the preacher.”

In certain light, his face looks just as it did through all those gone-away years. But soon he'll be an old man. It isn't something that can be fixed like nailing a shingle back in place or putting a fresh coat of pitch on the yard fence. Now the grey threads are spreading over his scalp like some parasite, his knuckles are starting to crack with arthritis, and through the walls I hear his groans when getting in and out of bed. He isn't going to marry again, and I'll have no brothers and sisters. All I have is that place beyond the Fence.

“Who knows what sort of shit you've been exposed to in there.”

Arguing won't achieve anything. He goes through this mantra anytime he gets wind that I'm going back. I pluck the pan of stew off the stove and ladle the contents over two plates. Dad isn't much of a cook and what finishes up in his pot depends on what he's managed to shoot on the remnants of his land. He doesn't look too closely. “Rabbit again,” is a favourite joke. Sometimes he fetches vegetables from the market at the Outpost or trades for the fish Burt McAllister

hooks out of the creek. Dad calls what he serves up “honest food”. Often it tastes as grey as it looks but his belly never seems to complain.

I take the plates through to the front room. Dad is sitting wrapped in his armchair, the TV burbling out news from its place on the side table. He's taken to mumbling under his breath when something isn't well in his world. Vietnam is getting worse and you'd think Russia had already dropped nukes on the White House.

“Look at those protestors,” he says, waving at the screen. “What do they think this is, another Revolution?”

I lay the plate on his lap and hand him a fork. “They feel lied to, Daddy.”

“Lying to people is what politics is all about. Not one man under that Capitol dome can say they're any better. Can you imagine what a real mess this country would find itself in if people told the truth all the time?”

He starts in on his stew knowing I won't bother contradicting him. We both eat in silence. He seems to like the strips of beef I brought over with me. When he's eaten everything but the gravy he jerks his fork at the ceiling.

“You planning on staying upstairs tonight?”

Dad is wise enough never to call the place I sleep in my 'bedroom'. It's nothing more than a base, a place I sometimes sleep, and we both know it. Mobiles have never tinkled from the ceiling and the white walls have never seen rock gods glowering out of dog eared posters. A bookcase would merely take up space. I have a bed, a dresser, and three shelves tacked beside my door on which I keep a few of my favourite sunglasses. On the top are the bright plastic stars, moon shapes and others I wore in childhood. Below are Aviator, Ray Bans and whatever happens to be flavour of the year. Many more are piled in a trunk in a cupboard below the stairs. About three hundred in all, though a good few are missing lenses or have the stalks broken off. Some were gifts I haven't the heart to throw out.

Most people don't question the sunglasses thing. It's put down as an affectation, like someone who wears a woolly hat all the time, even indoors. “I bet she doesn't even take them off in the shower,” old Mary Harem, who runs the liquor store at the far side of the Outpost, once joked. If she ever had to look me in the eye I reckon that big, batty old face of hers would dry right up. “You stare too long at people”, I was often told, or “You don't look at people when they talk

to you". Everything I did was wrong. So I told people I wore sunglasses because I had sensitive eyes, but in truth I wore them so my eyes could do whatever they pleased without someone else's say so. In the same way Dad's junk Fence is his barrier between the Ghost Land and his world, those sunglasses are my barrier between my world and everything else.

I clear the empty plates away and bring through coffee. Dad eyes my black clothing, the laced-up shitkicker boots and the pack I've leaned against the bottom of the hatstand. "When?"

"This afternoon."

"I figured that's why you're not staying. You never came back to this county to see me. You came back because of the Ghost Land. It's been simmering in your blood since you walked out. That place ain't God's doing. It's neither test or tribulation, good or evil. The Ghost Land doesn't even know what those things are. It spooked up on us one night and is there for its own purposes."

"And what do you think those purposes might be?"

"I don't know, do I? I'm a straight thinking man. I don't want my wits bedazzled by some fairground scare ride. It doesn't bother me and I won't trouble it. The Pilgrims are long gone from my patch of dirt. They're not coming back."

"Most of your farm's on that side of the boundary."

"And it can stay there. The Ghost Land is welcome to it. Out-of-town folk stopped buying my stock years ago. They say stuff from round here might be tainted, and nobody wants it."

"The government check you get each month is fat enough. It's more than you'd make running the farm."

"But that ain't work. It ain't something you can take pride in. Yet I'm stuck with it. I can't afford to move elsewhere and why should I anyway? Why should I be driven from my father's land and my grandfather's land because of something that's likely the fault of that damned government?" He gulps down coffee. "What more-money-than-sense clown is paying you this time?"

"He's from New York."

Dad snorts. "They're always from New York."

"It's *my* work. It's the only job I can do."

"You had a fine enough city job, so you kept telling me in your letters. I thought you'd finally gotten yourself sorted. I never believed you'd turn out a

quitter.”

“You didn't want me to go in the first place, and now you're griping because I'm back.”

"Why did you go to her, Miriam?"

This old thing again. "The law said I had to."

"When were you ever troubled by rules?"

"You would've been the one who got into trouble. I went because I wanted her to know how I felt every second I was forced to spend under that roof."

“I admit we had our differences, sometimes bad ones, but just because your mother couldn't live with me doesn't make her a bad woman.”

“What about me? Seems she couldn't live with me either.”

“You needed to be raised. I guess she couldn't cope.”

“I needed a mother.”

He nods. “I guess my being a father was never enough.”

I finish the coffee and scoop up my pack.

Outside, that same dusty midwest sun remains welded to the sky. I clatter down the porch steps and set off across the yard, boots kicking up their own little dirt clouds. Every visit ends the same, as if the last eleven years have never happened. To Dad I'm still a scab-kneed tomboy with a home made fishing pole slung over one shoulder. An old guy once told me that beyond a certain age life is lived in a blink. From my father's point of view that's all my life is. A blink. And it's still snot nosed little Miriam who stands in front of him.

I wore black in the city. Slacks, blouse, coat. Well meaning souls politely inquired if I was bereaved. I told them I could spill as much wine, beer and coffee down the front of myself as I pleased and it wouldn't show. Some even found that amusing. The hippie kids wore all colours, garments which reminded me of curtains and old country bedspreads. Because of the black, folk thought I was older, sometimes much older, but I didn't think the peace and love movement was served by out-of-their-head college dropouts wandering around barefoot, tramping in shit and broken glass.

Black, however, is not the colour of the Outpost. Two summer days walking around saw my stern city threads caked in the ochre dust from the collar down to the tips of my New York heels. The Outpost imposes its own colours, “Twenty shades of shit,” as Dad once put it. Johnston's Hardware has sold the

same washed-out checked shirts, jeans and cracker boots for nigh-on forty years. But black still suits me. I cling to it, even though the shoes are gone and the laundry bill cuts my purse to ribbons.

And what could the city be blamed for? I never quite managed to wash the country twang out of my mouth, but that would be too easy an excuse. My accent was mild compared to the folk who bussed in from Brooklyn or the Bronx. If it wasn't my voice something else would be tossed at me. My short hair, my mannerisms, the way I walked. If I sat in a crowded bar after work I could guarantee I'd have two feet of empty space either side of me no matter how busy the place. People looked worried when I walked towards them, and their eyes drifted when I spoke. I felt like telling someone their shoes were on fire just to see if they were paying attention. I laughed in all the wrong places and stayed serious in all the wrong places. I was at a party once. If I stood in the lounge, eventually everyone drifted into the kitchen, and when I went into the kitchen everyone ended back in the lounge. I didn't even have to say anything. I ended up thinking, *Am I radioactive? Do I glow in the dark? Should I wear sackcloth, ring a bell and shout 'unclean'?* I'm not sure they even realised they were doing it.

I suppose it's like a stage entertainer who forgets all her lines in the middle of a performance, only I didn't have a copy of the script in the first place. I could never understand why people didn't just talk to each other instead of going through all these complex routines. The words themselves don't seem so important. Instead it's all cues, gestures, tone of voice. Your mouth says one thing while your body says something else. So I find myself upsetting people and not understanding why, or making them all laugh without realising I've said something funny. In that sense it's worse than a foreign language because although you can spout everything in French the other stuff remains the same. Think about that. Someone from Paris could communicate better in my own neighbourhood than me. Even today I can sit in the bar on a steaming Saturday night and still have that two feet of clear space either side.

If you could look inside my head, see my thoughts, you'd probably notice lines, straight lines, travelling with an uncompromising logic from one place to the next. Other people think in loops that curl and intersect. They can be as polite as you like to someone's face and curse them behind their back. I could never do

that. Such a thing is unthinkable. I suppose if I'd become a diplomat World War Three would've started years ago. I admit to causing chaos wherever I go. Bars, coffee houses, even in the left luggage stall at the city train station. It's astonishing the way I can seemingly turn people's world upside down with a straightforward phrase. Men get angry and women bitchy. Others sit and stew, wanting to slap me down yet realising they have no rational reason to do so. That's the key to it. I never directly insult or hurt anyone. I give out psychological shovels, sit back and let them dig holes for themselves.

My boss once asked me if I enjoyed the effect I had on people.

“These folk lead such tight lives it only needs a gentle shove to send them climbing up their own asses,” I told him. “They all talk the same, think the same. I don't respect them for it.”

Despite my best efforts, every so often what I'd describe as one of my country hog words blurted out of my mouth. *Hey, cracker girl*, my colleagues would yell from the water cooler or coffee machine, or whatever other city slicker props were important in their lives. Finally I got ostracised outright because I didn't want to go on their war demonstration. I asked them if they thought I didn't have a choice in the matter, that if I went and demonstrated against something I wasn't especially passionate about it would be hypocritical. They told me they were sick of my bumpkin face and if I knew what was good for me I should take it back to the sticks where it belonged.

I don't like giving up. I tried to make it work but you can only bang your brow against a wall for so long before you get a headache. “Why'd you really come home, Miriam?” Dad asked. I'd been back in his kitchen less than a minute.

“I got tired of being an actress,” I told him, because that's what I'd been, an actress trying and failing to play the part of a normal person. It's not that I always want to be antisocial. Sometimes I'm just scared. Who wouldn't fear a world they don't understand, that bombards their senses day and night?

I stop by the Fence. Beyond, the Ghost Land stews in the heat, clunking through it's own unfathomable mechanisms. Believing it might have disappeared or changed in during my city years was a notion I never entertained. Some have likened it to a tide which ebbs and flows, but that's wrong. A tide is something you can predict, measure, even harness for energy, it's comings and goings

marked by the cycle of the moon. The Ghost Land has its own agenda. It's not spreading or receding as such. It swirls between trees, across meadows, into gulleys and streams. You might think you're somewhere safe then suddenly find yourself in it, the only warning being a mild sense of displacement, like standing up too quickly or stepping off a bus before it's come to a stop.

Long before I left home, Dad would sometimes come out with his binoculars and peer beyond the Fence to a ridge capped with a few scraggy trees. "Up there is a hole in the rocks," he'd say, like he'd never told the story before. "Some are of the opinion it was punched out by a meteorite thousands of years ago. It's fed by a stream which tumbles out as a waterfall on the far side. You can't see it from here, but it was a fresh, sparkly thing that made a noise like ocean washing over shale. The pool formed by the crater was always deep, dark and cool, even in the hottest summer. Your mother and I used to go there in the early days. For a girl raised in the city she could swim like no one else I ever knew. We'd take lunches just so we could eat on the rocks by the water. Once we dived in wearing nothing but our humour. She'd always been a summer child. When we came out dripping, she asked me to pass over her towel. I bent down, snuck my grandmother's emerald pendant out of my trouser pocket and handed her that instead. She was still wearing it when she walked out on us."

At this point he'd shake his head. "The Pilgrims can talk about spiritual journeys all they want. If some dumb kid wants to risk his neck over a dare or a few bucks that's his affair too. What I want to do is sit under one of those trees again, look out over the rocks and the dark water. Out of all the acres of farmland I lost to the Ghost Land, that patch of ridge is the most precious place it stole from me. But it can't be done and I'm smart enough to know that. I've got a past in there. Memories, places I've been, things I've done. But they're gone, do you understand? They're every bit as gone as if the earth had opened up and swallowed that land whole. All that's left is a wasteland. A dirty, foul place. There's nothing for me in there now. And there never was for you."

I don't suppose Dad was much better at coping with people than I was. Not long after this whole mess started, folk began wondering why Bradley Tasker refused to leave this meagre patch of dirt when his farm was mostly gone. Word got around, as word does, and some began holding that Brad had found something in the Ghost Land, something that he was keeping to himself. Forbidden

knowledge or a fortune, it made no difference. The Pilgrims kept coming. It took a lot of rock salt shot into a lot of asses before folk were dissuaded from mooching around his outbuildings in the dead of night. Unfortunately we still had problems of our own making to worry about.

Not long after Mother left us, Dad had gone into one of his melancholy moods, the sort they grind on about in all those blues songs, and spent an evening glugging rye at one of the Outpost bars with a bunch of guys who'd tolerate his company for a game of pool and not much else. He stumbled through our kitchen door, shirt flapping half off his shoulders.

"She's come back to us."

"Who?"

"Your mother. She's on the other side of the Fence. She's come home, Miriam."

"Oh shit." I got up and plucked the storm lantern from its hook beside the plate rack. Outside the night was blowing up a gale. Pieces of grit cut into my cheeks and the single bulb that lit our yard performed loop-the-loops on its cable. All we had separating us from the Ghost Land back then was a chain-link barrier the government hastily erected. I held up the lantern and pressed my face against the mesh.

"Don't you go back in there, Miriam," Dad slurred behind me. "I don't care how old you are, I'll paddle your butt until it glows."

The darkness sat heavy in the Ghost Land. The light spilling from the lantern barely touched it. I walked the length of the yard. No sounds but the wind in my ears and the slap of loose shingles on the barn roof. "Nobody's here, Dad."

I turned back to find he'd slumped to his knees. A couple of seconds later he threw up into the dirt. I put the lantern down next to him and wiped his face with a fold of his own shirt. He grasped my arm and stared at me across the harsh, unflattering light.

"I loved her," he said. "I don't know what the cursed ground over there did to you, did to us, but don't ever go thinking anything different."

Next afternoon, when he'd slept off most of the rye, Dad set to reinforcing the barrier. He used the new lumber meant for fixing the far pasture fence, then trucked home a pile of bald tyres from Stanley's Auto Boneyard. He spent a weekend emptying every piece of junk from the outbuildings and dumping it onto

a makeshift wall, sometimes fusing it in place with shovelfuls of concrete. When he was done he held me by the shoulders and said in the quietest voice I'd yet heard him use, "I won't stand to see you within five feet of that thing, ever. You have no kinship with that place, you hear me Miriam? I won't tell you again."

Now here I am, a dutiful five foot gap between me and our barricade. He'll be watching through the front room window, and it's not too big a thing to do just to keep him a little happy. He knows where I'm going, but if he can't see me he won't think too much about it. That's the kind of uneasy arrangement we have and, for what it is, it works.

Over the years chunks of mortar have been weathered out of the wall, leaving holes big enough for a man's fist. On the other side the grass is blowing in all directions. It's a wonder how creepy such a simple thing can be. Of course some would say it's nothing special at all, merely little eddies of air working against each other along the course of the barrier. Maybe if they stood on the other side of that self-same barrier they'd say something a lot different.

I strap my pack across my shoulders and kick off towards the yard gate, passing the barn. I don't go in there anymore without good cause. The shadows are full of rat traps and all kinds of horrible poisons. Most farming men keep a trained mongrel to deal with pests and lie about the size of the rats they catch. Pa had one for a while, some slobbering bundle of teeth with the blood of a half-dozen different breeds running through its scraggy veins. He wasn't much to look at with his half-chewed ears and skinny haunches, but it had a bark as good as any hunting hound, and if that beast let rip when you weren't expecting it, or he had snuck up on you in the yard the way he liked to, you'd jump far enough out of your skin to leave your heart behind. If he fixed its eyes on a rat then that rat was as good as gone. The cur ran like a greased gale and once it caught its prey it would crunch its teeth right along the length of the spine. The carcass was then dropped at your feet, the dog looking up all bright eyed and tail-a-wagging as if to say "Look what I've done, ain't I clever."

The dog never had a name as such. Dad said he was a working animal, not some pampered pet, and I wasn't to go stroking him or whispering nonsense in his ear. Mostly Dad called it "Mutt" or some other things that weren't repeatable in polite society.

Then, not long after the Ghost Veil fell, the dog spent one whole evening

barking at an unseen something on the other side of the Fence. Nothing Dad could do, from yelling to fetching him a kick in the ribs, made a bit of difference. In the end the beast pushed himself through a near impossible gap and caught hold of whatever was causing so much consternation. When Dad came outside the dog was back in the yard and dropped the prize at Dad's feet. The mutt's face was bleeding where the wire had cut into it, but he looked as pleased as anything.

I crept up behind Dad and got a look at what was lying in the dirt. It didn't resemble a rat or jackrabbit. It didn't look much of anything I'd ever seen before. The creature was still moving, or maybe not, it was hard to tell. Dad noticed me for the first time. "Go back to the porch, Miriam," he said, and his face brooked no argument. From the kitchen door I watched him stride across the yard, fetch his shotgun from the pickup and blow the mutt's innards across the dirt. He then covered all the remains with gasoline and set them burning in a whirl of yellows and oranges. The blackened residue was shovelled up and lobbed over the Fence. "Keep your shit to yourself," Dad yelled, as if the Ghost Land was something you could pick a fight with.

I watched all this without uttering a sound, as if the events I'd witnessed were playing out on our scratchy TV set. Later I sat at the kitchen table and ate the corn meal Dad cooked for me. It's not that I lacked feelings. I was a girl who could shoot squirrels with my Dad's old army carbine yet still cry at the ending of *Snow White*, but this was, as Dad would say, just one of those shit things that sometimes happens. So nothing was said on the subject, and Pa never got another dog. Over the years I've never had cause to doubt the real reason those traps and poisons are lying in the barn.

I shut the gate behind me. The track runs east to west, with twig-like tributaries leading to farms, shacks, and whatever other broken piles of timber have been abandoned along the way. Grains of dirt are blown away in the winds, other grains are blown in. Wheel ruts are a little deeper some months than others. There's nothing else to show the years. The land is slow to age, and it'll bury every generation that ever had the misfortune to be raised here. Some might think that's an unkind view, but my view is all there is.

I shift my pack so it's more comfortable against my spine and head off down the track towards the Outpost.

CHAPTER TWO

People remember their first school for all sorts of reasons, I guess, and the uppermost one in my mind was the way it looked – a kind of wooden gothic monstrosity. Much later when I was old enough to watch Hitchcock's *Psycho* on TV I saw Norman Bates come through the door of his dead mother's house and I blurted “That's my school!” sending half a tub of caramel popcorn scooting across the rug. Unlike the *Psycho* house though, Dawson's Elementary was built beside a crossroads on one of the flattest patches of dirt in the county. Its neighbours were a battered gas stop and general store which never seemed to actually open most of the time, though snubbing our noses up against the glass we noticed it was always freshly stocked, with lots of bologna, beef patties and other stuff in the refrigerator. Tommy Brady said the owner didn't open during school hours because he hated kids hanging around at recess, and anyway there was enough trade coming from the night trucks which rattled the highway from sunset till sun up.

The school was a catch-all bringing kids in from all directions. There weren't enough of us from the Outpost to warrant our own bus so we clambered in the back of Rick Spendler's pick-up. Rick was fifteen which seemed a whole world of ancient to us, and he got paid for his time and gas out of a collective pot. Farmers' kids driving their daddies' pick-ups was the done thing around here and the law didn't look too closely at who was in the cab. Folk said Rick drove these roads like he'd been born to it. His beat-up old Ford was a constant during our summer days. Something you could rely on, that you associated with good times. It was more trashed than any other vehicle I'd seen yet it never failed to start, even though the engine sometimes made noises like a trampled mule. Every so often Bobby's dad would come out with a thick brush and a can of whatever paint he happened to have going at the time, and slap on another coat. Honest, it was like tree rings. Whenever the body work fetched a scratch or the fender got bent you could see the layers of blues, reds and greens going back through the years. We joked that the paint was the only thing holding the truck together, and if it all washed off the Ford would collapse in on itself in a heap of rusted junk. The trip

was eight miles of bouncing around, laughing and singing. I sat in the corner and minded my business, and nobody bothered me. If I felt like it I'd sing along too.

Our class was one of the biggest rooms in the building and was a ramshackle ghetto of different sized tables and chairs brought from the attics and barns of scattered farms. Our books were good though, always bought new and smelling of freshly milled paper. The education board had brought in a replacement teacher, Miss Ronin, or 'Moanin' Ronin' as we called her, who for a while taught lessons in drama because she thought farm boys should learn to express themselves. Until she was disabused of the notion – and she was disabused quickly - everyone over the age of eight worked their fathers' fields while spouting Shakespeare or Arthur Miller. Miller was still fashionable on certain coffee tables, which shows how retarded Outpost society was.

Miss Ronin was a staunch Baptist with her own way of doing things. Boys were seated down the right side of the classroom and the girls on the left, and never the twain would meet. And speaking of things not meeting, her head was cut by a centre parting that left her hair flowing in opposite directions. Her nose twisted a little towards its tip and her mouth only seemed able to smile, when it smiled at all, on one side. When the light hit her a certain way it was as though someone had taken two halves of a human head and glued them together.

Despite her lack of inches, Moanin' Ronin had a voice that could slap a miscreant around the ears with the force of a leather belt. Tommy discovered that she was, in fact, Mrs Ronin and mother to three grown up kids, which led to much sniggering in the schoolyard. “Just think, somebody actually *did it* with her.”

“You don't know what she's really like,” I pointed out. “From what I hear no one gives her a chance.”

Tommy seemed to think about that and for a day or so afterwards I had a feeling he was brewing something. On Friday he took some corn cakes to class in the wicker basket his mother used to fetch bread. Thad Walker called him a pussy for toting such a thing but Tommy, who'd more than once rolled around the schoolyard with Thad in a tornado of fists, didn't even twitch. In the fuss-about minute before the lesson started, Tommy strode up to the front desk with the basket held out like some redskin talisman. Everyone stopped what they were doing to watch. Faces wore a mixture of disbelief and horror, as though

witnessing someone about to throw themselves in front of a railroad train. Mrs Ronin regarded him the way a cur might eye a rat.

“Would you like one of these, ma'am, they're real good.”

Her nose twitched as if trying to sniff a trick. Tommy stood like a supplicant, waiting her out.

“Thank you, Thomas, I believe I will have one. I can't eat cakes during class but if you don't mind I'll enjoy it during my coffee break.”

After that Mrs Ronin, who usually stormed through the lesson like a crashing freight locomotive, led everyone gently through the day's assignments. Nobody in that whole forty minutes sniggered, nudged each other or passed scrawled notes under their desks. Afterwards in the yard, Tommy was treated like someone who'd wrestled a wolf and avoided getting his head bitten off. But the bribe only worked once, and Tommy knew better than to try again.

I didn't know what to think of Tommy, in the times I thought of him at all. Being eleven he was a year older than me, and every recess he stood in the school yard, staring at me through those moon-bright eyes while the other boys scuffled over a battered leather football. When a bunch of them started teasing me I picked a fight with Thad Walker because of the hard feeling between him and Tommy, though in truth he was no better or worse than anyone else. Thad was a good head taller and fast on his feet. Thankfully he wasn't in any mood to go rolling in the dirt.

“Why so sore?” he asked, dodging my flailing fists. “I'm not the one who started it.”

I did my own fighting and everyone respected me for it. Dad deplored my bruises but I knew what was in his head. Even at that age I understood it was harder for a man to hide his pride than his fears. I was also a tree climber, the best in the county. I could go faster and higher than anyone, scaling branches in my summer pinafore whilst classmates sometimes clustered round the trunk and whooped encouragement.

“Why'd you spend so much time up there, Miriam?” Tommy asked when he was able to catch me alone. “Folk say you're a tomboy, that you ought to have slumber parties like the other girls.”

I gazed across the branches, shading my face with my fingers. “It's quiet up here. I don't have to listen to anyone unless I want to.”

Tommy told everyone that he was going to be a ranger when he grew up. His plan was to find work at a big national park – Yellowstone maybe. “In twenty years I'll be chief ranger and know everything there is to know about wild animals,” he declared. “I'll travel to Africa, write books. Big-name movie producers will come to me for advice.”

Every day Tommy carried into school a grocery bag stuffed with plastic animals he'd collected over the years. Afterwards he'd sit beside his gate and spread his favourites on the grass, careful never to let anyone touch them. For Tommy these weren't toys but educational tools. “This is an elephant,” he'd say, picking up a piece and turning it over in his fingers. “And this is a lion. You can tell by its long mane.”

In the schoolyard a horseshoe of the younger kids would squat around Tommy whilst he told stories about great hunters and the ferocious beasts they stalked. Some of his own classmates were of the opinion that Tommy wouldn't know the difference between a squirrel and a woodchuck, but they'd seen what his fists could do and kept their mouths shut.

That last fall before Dad took me out of school for good, nature graced us with an Indian summer that boiled the landscape into an ochre panhandle. The sun speared through the wide school windows and threw a million motes of dust into the thick afternoon air. I took my sunglasses out of my lunch pail and slid them up my nose. A favourite pair. Pink plastic in the shape of two stars. Mrs Ronin stopped talking. There was silence for a few moments, then she ripped up the aisle, flat brown shoes slapping on the floorboards, and plucked the glasses off my face.

“Not in class, Miriam Tasker. You should know better.”

She returned to her desk and dropped the sunglasses on top of a sheaf of papers. I didn't say anything. I sat with my eyes screwed up and my hands covering my face. And stayed like that. After a minute or so she stopped talking again. I heard my name called. Heard it again. I risked a peek between my fingers in time to see Tommy raise his hand.

“You'd better give them back to her, ma'am, or she'll stay like that all day. Won't do no good yelling or giving her the switch. ”

“What's the matter, Tommy? Is she ill? Does she have an affliction?”

“It's something she's got fixed in her head. Mr Dorner, our last teacher, didn't pay any heed.”

That's because Mr Dorner had pretty much given up on me. He used to shut me in the closet for any perceived misdemeanour until he realised I liked being in that small, warm place, thinking whatever thoughts I wanted. A huge fuss was kicked up when he decided to return home to Michigan and take up a principal's position he'd been offered there. Girls brought in cakes and cried, and the boys lined up to solemnly shake his hand. I sat in the corner and stewed, thinking I'd rather be out kicking up dust in the schoolyard than listen to blubbing classmates telling him how great he was and how much he'd be missed. He was just a man doing a job in the back end of nowhere and if anything I reckoned everyone ought to be pleased he was going back to his home state to get better money in a better job. In any case Moanin' Ronin had a lot of work to do in the liking stakes.

She handed the glasses back but I had to pay for them. A big essay on the importance of behaving in class and I was to write it all through afternoon recess. I didn't mind that. I mostly spent break times pacing the yard or up a tree anyway. I liked being in class by myself, enjoyed the scratching of my pencil across the paper and the feel of the pink sunglasses clutching my nose. When Mrs Ronin read the essay later she looked confused.

“Did you copy this from somewhere?” she asked.

“No.”

“Well, I doubt you're any smarter than you like to give out.”

All the rest of that week she leaned into me like a strong wind. She said my drawings were too ambitious and marked my quirky stories as 'incorrect'. She never picked me when I put my hand up in class and the stuff I brought in for show-and-tell was tucked at the back of the other displays. I felt her looking at me all the time, as though she felt I'd sprout fangs or another head. The poor marks started piling up. She rumbled ominously about my permanent record, and about holding the rest of the class back. I never thought of school as any more than something that had to be done, like eating or taking a bath.

Every Thursday, if the weather was fine, Rick Spendler would give us an after-school trip to Gilbert's Gully. The gully was a crack punched into a flat world. Bearded with trees, it swallowed up an acre of prime farm land. Men had tried to drain it or fill it in. Eventually most forgot it was there. Like a squashed

bug on the hood of a car that kind of spoilt the paintwork a little, but wasn't worth the time and effort to clean off. To us it was a whole ocean of our own.

I can still feel that pool. Some memories you can't shake off. The first time you cut yourself, or a bee sting made you howl. Other things you don't want to forget. A first kiss, a taste of wild blueberries, a warm towel smothering your face. The pool was like that. I'd been dipped in cold water before. A paddle in the sea that time mother took me to the coast on the Amtrak "To get away from the farm". Or a cold bath when the stove wouldn't light and Sunday School an hour away. But this was different. The water in the pool didn't shock the breath out of your lungs. It was smooth and easy, like ice cream on a hot day. A cold you wanted, that washed off the day's grit, sweat and weariness.

That water was something to look at. A black bucket of pitch. Always the same, winter or summer. You could never see more than an inch below the surface, even on a bright day. It was easy to imagine things lurking down there in the dark, yet somehow you trusted the pool. No rubbish, no rusted metal tubs or gutted tyres ready to snatch your feet. The water bubbled up at one end and trickled away at the other. Just enough to keep it fresh.

The pool was where I learned to swim. Tommy Brady taught me and I was a quick learner. I lost count of the pranks he played, but the first time he supported me in the water he promised he'd never let go. I believed him, and he never did. That first day I splashed and kicked like a drowning pup, and I loved it. Every chance I got I'd be with him, learning how to work with the water instead of struggling. For a dozen summer afternoons I thrashed from bank to bank. Then one day he hauled himself out of the pool and sat on the crushed reeds, grinning. "Now you have to do it by yourself."

I threatened him with everything my head could cook up. That grin never once slipped off his face. I swam across the pool and I swam back. He never had to help me again.

Rick parked the pickup on the sparse patch of grass and we all tumbled out of the back. Stripping down to your pants was the done thing. Nobody bothered much about our skinny bodies and I was some way from needing a brassiere. Some would argue I still am. We plunged into the pool and sent spray crashing into the gorse puckered banks. Something lit out across the grass. A jackrabbit maybe. Tommy winked and splashed water in my face.

We got an hour or so to fool around while Rick leaned against his truck door and smoked. If his Daddy caught him doing that he'd find his butt kicked all the way to Montana. He'd flick his ash every which way, not minding the piles of clothing strewn around the grass at his feet. Once an ember set fire to Freddy Buckler's shirt and Rick had to throw it in the gully to put it out. That took some explaining when Freddy got home.

It was near time to get dressed and I was perched on a rock like an undersized mermaid when Tommy swam up and pulled himself out of the water. He pressed my palms closed with his thumbs and turned both hands over. "You're still doing it," he said, tracing one of the pencil strokes.

"I don't like getting things wrong."

He rubbed one of the marks with his forefinger. "The skin underneath's still red. It must've hurt."

I shook my head and tugged my hands from Tommy's grasp. He sat, dripping, and eyed me for a moment.

"Listen here, Miriam," he said finally, "marking yourself this way won't make your schooling better or Miss Ronin like you any more. If she catches you doing this you'll only prove what she thinks of you anyway. You shouldn't pay so much mind to her. She's a teacher, not your Pappy."

"I don't care so much about Moanin' Ronin. It's myself I fret over. I just want to be better at stuff. Is that so wrong?"

"Yeah, and I want to be Superman. I got the cape for my birthday but that doesn't mean I'm going to be flying across rooftops anytime soon. Tell me, are your folks fighting again?"

I stared at him. What was going on behind those eyes? "You can't call it fighting. She talks at him and he goes stomping around the house with smoke falling out of his ears. Once mother gets started there's nothing to do except wait it out. To be honest I think Dad's getting tired of waiting."

I didn't figure on my parents splitting up. That was something farming men in these parts never did. Losing your wife was seen as a terrible failure, a slight against your manhood and a sin against marriage. Whatever happened Mom and Dad would go on lying in the rocky bed they'd made for themselves.

Tommy stared out across the pool. The other kids were hauling themselves out, shaking droplets from their hair and laughing. The fierce heat would scorch the wetness from their bodies in no time.

"I've never seen you-know-what up close." he said. "I can't imagine what it must be like living next to it."

"Your farm's only a few miles up the track."

Tommy shrugged. "Might as well be a hundred."

"You can get off at my place, sneak a quick peek then scoot home in time for supper. A half-hour here or there won't make any difference."

"Mom would take it hard if she thought I'd been within a dozen yards of that Fence."

"Either you want to see it or you don't."

"No halfway about things with you, is there?"

"I guess not, but people should say what they mean then do something about it."

His voice lowered. "Have you ever seen anything really weird in there? Maybe at night?"

"You've been listening to stories. I'm asleep at night. Stuff I've seen at other times could be all sorts of things. Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Cause you've actually been in there."

"Yeah, well I was born once but I can't say I remember that either."

We all scrambled into the back of the pickup. At the gate to my farm, Tommy climbed out first.

"Where're you going?" Ricky called from the cab. "I'm supposed to take you straight home."

"Tell my Mom I wanted to walk the track with Miriam awhile."

"Suit yourself, Romeo, but don't squawk at me if you get your ear cuffed."

He gunned the pickup and it disappeared in a cloud of its own dust. Tommy and I stood in the lane for a moment, awkward in the slowly dipping sun. Then I unlatched the gate. "Come on then."

Our yard was a sight to behold for anyone not used to the idea of knocking a bunch of stuff together from a whole bunch of other stuff. You couldn't just get rid of junk, leastways big pieces of junk, without either manhandling it into the back of the trailer and driving miles or hiring a bigger truck and getting someone

to do it for you. Every farm had gathered its bits and pieces over the years. I could see Tommy taking it all in as he crossed the yard with me. The piles of pallets, the sacking, the old tyres, the rusting twists of broken down machinery.

"Haven't you got stuff like this lying around?" I asked him.

"I guess so, for a while. Mom hired a guy with an excavator who dug a big pit and buried most of it. She likes things neat. She's had me out brushing the yard often enough. Hey, is that an Airstream?"

He pointed to the silver trailer parked half-assed in the door of one of the outbuildings.

"Yeah, but we don't use it."

That had been my mother's idea. She spent a year trying to talk Dad into it while he spent the same year trying to talk her *out* of it. "There's no place to keep it," he told her. "The pickup's not big enough to tow it. We can't get the time to go on vacation and I can't afford the darn thing anyway."

Mother had what Dad called a city-girl notion of getting out and about. "You can't just leave a farm whenever the notion takes you," he explained, "and it's not something you can hire a babysitter for". But Mother's voice was like a saw on his nerves and it got to the stage where I would buy the thing myself if my chore money could cover it.

In any case the Ghost Land had stolen most of his farm, and when the settlement money came through Dad used a chunk of it to buy the Airstream. I was jumping up and down when he drove through the gate, trailer bobbing behind like a ping pong ball on wheels. Even Mother was laughing and clapping her hands, that ponytail she liked to wear whacking about her face.

Dad unhitched it from the truck and wound down the steadies. I tried to help but cut my finger and retreated, howling, to the kitchen. When I finally reappeared, red-eyed, from my refuge, finger swaddled in crimsoning toilet paper, we had a look inside. Mother and I sat on the seats - "Turn into beds in less than a minute," she said - peeped in the cupboards and laughed at the little toilet cubicle. Surely we wouldn't have to *use* it?

"We'll go all around the country," Mother said, beaming. "Maybe as far as the coast. You like the thought of the ocean don't you, Miriam?"

It sat in the yard throughout that year and the next. It sat in all weathers until the tyres rotted and the wheels fused to the axles. Dad stored seeds in it and

filled the cupboards with his tools. It ended up like every other battered thing lying around the farm.

I led Tommy past my father's workshop. "What's with all the cables?" he said, pointing at the spiderweb of black lines slicing the air above the yard.

Dad didn't want to pay any more bills than he had to, so instead of letting the electric company run power lines to our farmhouse he kept a wheezy old generator in a backyard lean-to which he kept topped up with tractor diesel.

"Old army machinery," I told Tommy. The thing squatted on two bare wheel rims and darkened the dirt beneath it with pissed-out oil. "Dad got a deal on it when he came out of the infantry, along with a pile of busted truck parts."

Even in the calmest, cricket-chirping night the generator could barely squirt out enough juice to light a firefly's butt, and when a wind kicked up it played monkey with Dad's cobbled together wiring. Winter nights were spent in a flickering gloom but if Mother tried to light an oil lamp Dad would act like he'd been hit. "Think yourselves lucky," he said. "A hundred years ago we'd be burning candles. Besides, heavy snow always brings those electric company poles down. Two years ago the town was dark for three days before they set things right. Folk who bought these smart new electric stoves ended up burning their furniture."

In winter with the lights out I knelt over the hearth and spooned corn mash into my mouth. "You look like a jackrabbit with your nose in the lettuce patch," Dad laughed.

"Why don't you let the electric company run the power lines in?" I asked. "Then we could eat breakfast at the table like normal folk."

Dad didn't laugh so much at that remark. "Don't start talking like your mother," he said.

The generator was running now, wheezing out a few volts with a regular clackety-thump. I took Tommy round the side of the lean-to and there it was, the Fence, and beyond that, the Ghost Land. Dad hadn't got around to building most of his makeshift wall yet and we had a clear view right through the government wire. Tommy stood and contemplated it awhile. I settled back against the wall of the lean-to and waited while the generator sent tingles of vibration up my spine.

"Doesn't look much," he said, "Though I heard it's different on the other side."

“Were you expecting some kind of show?”

“Don't know what I was expecting. Maybe more than just a bunch of hayfields turned to seed. Those coloured patches over there don't seem so natural, though, and I heard there's funny lights at night. You seen any of those?”

I sighed. “I told you, I'm asleep at night, and during the day I'm either at school, at church or doing my chores.”

“Thought you'd know more seeing as you live right next to it.”

“It's not my fault the Ghost Land stole most of our place. All we've got left are a dozen acres or so on the other side of the barn.”

“It truly ain't your place anymore. It belongs to whoever put the Ghost Land there.”

“I guess that's true, Tommy. So who do you think put it there?”

He shrugged. “Everyone was fighting in Korea. My Mom says folk were sick of going into another war so soon after the end of the last one. He says they were working on secret stuff to bring it to a quick end, you know, like they did with the atom bomb? Mom says something went wrong and it all blew up. She says there's nothing weird or supernatural about it, there's just some kind of gas or poison that makes folk see stuff.”

“Seems to me everybody has their own notion of what happened.”

“You better than most, maybe.”

“I don't remember much.”

“Yeah, but you remember something.”

“That doesn't mean I can make sense of it.”

During the chaos nobody realised what was happening inside the Ghost Land wasn't happening outside it. The line was that thin. Knitting needle thin, maybe more. While my parents were standing there, wondering if the communists were trying to nuke us or the end of the world had arrived – yet probably knowing in their heads it could be none of those things – they failed to notice that I had stepped over that line. A few tremulous steps. A sense of being here yet somewhere else at the same time. My mother's hair flaying around her face as she tried to snatch me out of the madness while strange lights flickered in my wide eyes. I hadn't been in there more than a minute. It was enough. The Ghost Land touched me.

That's the sticking point. The truth is I can remember with absolute clarity

everything I had seen, heard and even smelled. The passing years have done nothing to diminish the sensations. And yet I'm quite unable to describe any of it. The images are there, sitting in my head like some long-ago movie show, yet the words to express them can't be found. They simply don't exist. Years of coaxing, prodding and out-and-out threats have made no difference. I'm not trying to be awkward or secretive. I wasn't in a state of shock back then or trying to subconsciously bury anything. Even a psychiatrist with his mental corkscrew couldn't twist it out of me. Yet if I could, I'd gladly tell everyone. I would pour the events of that night out until my throat turned sore with the telling of it.

I took a good look at Tommy, watched the way his crinkled blue eyes kept snatching glances back at me. A dusting of freckles coloured his nose and the ears below that fair hair lay flat against his skull.

“Why don't you kiss me?” I said.

“What?”

“You heard. It's the real reason you came here. The Ghost Land doesn't look any different a mile away than it does twenty feet in front of us. Don't try saying any different. I won't be taken for an idiot Tommy Brady.”

I pinned on a smile to try and encourage him. He leaned forward and pressed his boy's lips against the hairline just above my left temple. It was like getting licked by a puppy – warm and kind of ticklish.

“You can touch me if you like,” I offered.

He drew back. I expected him to blush, I'd seen him do it before, but he only frowned. “It's a sin.”

“No it isn't. If Adam hadn't touched Eve they wouldn't have had Cain and Abel. There wouldn't be any human race.”

He reached out and brushed my arm with his fingers.

“My, aren't you the brave one,” I said. “A real ladykiller is what you'll grow up to be.”

“We're too young for this kind of fooling around.”

“In olden days some girls in Europe got married when they were twelve. I read it in a history book.”

“We aren't in Europe. Round these parts fathers shoot boys for messing with their daughters.”

“Nobody's going to come after you, Tommy.”

“What about romance and all that stuff? Will this mean we're together?”

I flicked my shoulder, the closest I could come to a shrug. “You're not going to be my guy. Don't fool yourself that can ever happen. Don't go telling anyone either or I'll call you a liar to your face. We'll just do something nice and that's it.”

“Okay.” He reached and fumbled with my dress. I shifted to make it easier for him. And there, beyond Tommy's shoulder, stood my dear old Dad, shovel dangling in his calloused hands.

CHAPTER THREE

The Outpost is a shit hole, there's no getting away from it. That's okay though, because it was pretty much a shit hole before the Ghost Veil fell. One thing the yokels don't like round here is change, and during all the chaos the Ghost Land caused it served as a frame of reference, a familiar thing everybody could cling to when the world went ass-up around them. It wasn't always "The Outpost", just some piss-poor suburb of Claywood serving cattle feed, gas and take-it-or leave it liquor. The nickname gives it a kind of frontier feel which isn't entirely misplaced, although there's nothing much pioneer-like about the folk clinging to the boundaries of this particular wilderness.

The grit road that brought me from Dad's farm spills out onto the middle of the strip between Johnston's Hardware and Jeb Moore's Texaco with its line of busted pick-ups on a flat-tyred parade in front of the pumps. There's no movie house, roller coaster or Wal-Mart. Boredom is a better means of keeping people away than barriers or warning signs. Real estate prices have dropped so much that nobody's managed to profitably sell a place for the past two decades.

The truth is, if this dusty ramshackle of fading local businesses can be said to enjoy any blessing it's the two bars bookending the strip of blacktop that serves as the only major route into the Outpost. At the end farthest from the Fence sits *Rolly's*, a converted diner where the older farmers sit, drink Jim Beam and grouch about the government – my Daddy in other words. *Bucky's* is at the opposite end, a former roadhouse that used to have the kids flooding out of Claywood for the Saturday night dancing and the chance to burn up their hotrods on the asphalt outside the parking lot. The only thing the lot is good for now is a turning space for cars to head right out of the district the same way they came in. *Bucky's* is for broken people, Pilgrims and folk that don't give a shit who's in the White House.

I'm early. I always like to check out *Bucky's* beforehand to see what my client is walking into. Sometimes I'll meet these clients outside. They're seldom impressed. A flat roofed, two storey brick of a building with a single, crackling Budweiser sign. Bucky himself wouldn't give a shit. He's a west coast hippie

who came out here with his deceased mother's money because he wanted to live and work, "Somewhere weird". He bought the bar cheap from a tired woman who was taking a last chance gasp to quit the district. I once offered to take him into the Ghost Land. A quick hop in and out. Bucky's mouth almost fell over its own sentences as he talked his way out of it. Seems he prefers the *idea* of something as opposed to the actual reality of it.

Bucky keeps his hair cropped army style so he doesn't get any crap from the highway blow-ins about being a hippy drop-out or draft dodger. I figure the army would have to be pretty desperate to take him anyway. Under that Rolling Stones t-shirt lies a rib cage on which you could strum three bars of *Jumping Jack Flash*. We're not friends but we suit each other in occasional small snippets and, when I'm bored arguing with Dad, he lets me bed down in his storeroom. It's mostly taken up with old football pennants, broken pool cues and the husk of an old juke box squatting in one corner. A mattress under the window suits me as does the cracked black and white TV hissing from the top of an upturned crate. All I have to do is keep the bugs out. Bucky would sooner cut his own throat than let anybody have something for free but the rent he charges is back-pocket money and I get whatever food's left over from the sandwiches he sells behind the bar. I think he likes having me around. A genuine Ghost Land guide. It adds to the mystery.

Nobody turns and looks at you when you step through the bar door. Even when it's busy you feel like you can enjoy privacy if you want it. Today, three Pilgrims are parked at the end of the counter, talking too loud and drinking too fast. Bucky won't care. He'll drain their dollars and throw them out. He keeps a door at the back of the bar specially for it and despite his wiry frame he knows how to handle the livestock. One of the Pilgrims catches sight of me, nudges his friends and calls Bucky over. The visitor nods in my direction and whispers something in Bucky's ear. Bucky puts on a pout that would make an actor proud and shakes his head. The Pilgrim's expression collapses.

Maybe he told him I'm a dyke. It would be the safer bet given the way I waded into the last drunken Lothario who tried to pick me up. "You just want to screw me," I told him. "Why else would you be talking to me? I don't know you. You have nothing to sell. If you only want conversation there are plenty of men in the bar. I don't have to like you. I don't owe you anything."

All the “don'ts” poured out. He hadn't committed any crime but his sleazy confidence got to me. I met his flushed glare and didn't comment when he spat into my drink before leaving. In this neighbourhood you're surrounded by people who're ornery, dumb, knocked about the head or just plain snake-bit, but they should know when to leave me alone.

I sit at a table near the edge of the dance floor. It gives me a better view of who's coming and going. In the far corner is One Night Wendy, no doubt crying over yet another scurrilous evening of passion. I wonder who's been on the end of the 'I should never have done it I'm not that type of person,' routine this time. Wendy, over the years, had become exactly that type of person and the few decent guys she could have enjoyed a relationship with ended up in the same emotional trash can as the rest. In fact she'd folded so many good hands she was down to the Jokers.

Nearby, lugging his 8mm projector, is Milo in his shabby Pilgrim coat covered in rips and dubious stains. He points them out to the visitors, spinning increasingly unlikely yarns over each one. Eyes go wide at his tales of horrific encounters inside the Ghost Land and miraculous, near death escapes. He's good at it, is Milo. He has a storyteller's face and a voice that could make the bar menu sound compelling. These days he never goes within ten feet of the Fence but nobody seems to begrudge the few dollars in tips he makes. When you live next to the Ghost Land you get by any way you can.

Pilgrims, those who've ventured alone into the Ghost Land and come out again, often keep quiet about the things they find there. Others have come stumbling out, half crazed or half dead, babbling about something they saw but couldn't believe, or found but couldn't move. Some secrets you can't keep to yourself no matter how experienced you are. The Ghost Land does that to you. No known medicine can fix you after the things you undergo. All you can do is talk it out of your system, or go and live in the woods like traumatised war heroes who can't integrate back into normal society.

Greed is a great leveller, and rumour is the engine which feeds it. Drinks soften tongues, stories get exaggerated, whispers fly around the dive bars until nobody can tell what's real anymore. People got it into their heads that a factory in Claywood, posing as a fertilizer plant, was manufacturing horrible weapons for the Korean War. Chemicals, biological agents, mind altering substances.

Everything leaked out, got mixed up, was absorbed by the environment. Eventually the crisis point was reached and, boom, the Ghost Land appeared. After all, America was littered with places where bungling industries had screwed up the environment. What, to use a pun, was one more ghost town?

But foolish talk never leaves anything alone. Those who can't make a decent living on their own get lured into glorified looting. In this case their logic told them that some expensive, cutting-edge military equipment must have been abandoned in the toxic wasteland that appeared around Claywood. That some of the substances created there would fetch a pretty dollar or two from certain, say, agencies.

Milo got so broke the only healthcare he could afford was a toothbrush and occasional bar of soap. He breached the Fence and stumbled into the Ghost Land. The only difference between him and the other dollar-sighted idiots who'd gone before was that he at least had some experience of the place, though he hadn't made a trip in years.. Despite never having taken so much as a snapshot before, he took along a borrowed movie camera and made a pretty decent job of recording everything he saw.

Try to imagine it. Milo threading his way through the Ghost Land with nothing more than his thrift-store clothes, a movie camera and a sack. Everything should be against him. All the trash he must have passed. Maybe he just has the luck that day. Some say luck is everything in the Ghost Land, but I wouldn't always agree. In any case Milo never films his actual route. He's already outside the town swimming pool when the camera starts to roll. The brickwork around the entrance door is pecked with round holes as though cannonballs have been fired into the walls. On the sound tape you can hear Milo's breathing. The Ghost Land is normally a deathly quiet place. Anything with a brain larger than the size of a fly's usually avoids it. Birds don't even come close any more. Which says a lot about human thought processes.

Milo's muttering to himself. You can't make out the words. The camera shakes horribly. You sense him fighting to keep his hands steady. After a few moments he starts creeping forward. More words fall out of his mouth and this time there's no doubting what he says. "Can you hear it? Can you?" And we can hear it. Even on the piss poor tape. Even above Milo's terrified whufflings. The tick-tock. A steady, rasping pulse that despite the tinny soundtrack jars you to the

roots of your teeth. Nothing in any clockmaker's could emit a noise like that. A guy who claimed to be a music teacher said the beat was keeping perfect time. Perfect. More accurate than the most advanced timepiece.

Maybe the thought of a fat pay check keeps Milo going. It's a thought that sent Pilgrims into the Ghost Land for years before they realised they were playing a busted flush. The film goes dark as he creeps inside. All you can see are indistinct shapes, the odd shaft of light as the sun pushes through those concrete bite holes. Milo's doing his best with the camera but everything looks topsy-turvy until he gets to the pool. It has a glass roof. Dirty, stained with decomposed leaves, it still lets in enough daylight to see what's what, and even after a dozen viewings that home-made movie still has the power to scratch your nerves.

There, at the far side of the pool, is the tick-tock thing. You can see it clearly enough, sitting on the tiles next to the diving board. It resembles a metal packing crate and if it bears markings they've long been smothered by the black stains streaking each visible side. It has no logical reason to be there. It looks dumped, abandoned, forgotten.

Milo starts to work his way around the pool. The water has long gone and what sits in its place absolutely defies your brain to make any sense of it. Milo himself is chattering all sorts of garbage. His hands have gone beyond shaking and locked themselves into some sort of paralytic clinch. No words exist to accurately describe the roiling, flickering mess slopping beneath that diving board.

Milo is having serious trouble holding his shit together. He makes it around the pool by squashing his body against the wall and slithering inch by inch across the tiles. He never drops the camera, good boy. Now he's at the tick-tock and he ought to be taking a lot more care, but Milo's too worked up for such things, and who can blame him? If the stuff in the pool looks and sounds bad on a home movie it must've chewed his ears. He's weeping by now. It's obvious he's not going to be able to shift the tick-tock. The thing has something immovable, imponderable about it. You can hear its steady beat above the slither-slather of the pool. Some people, viewing the movie for the first time, swear the box is breathing, that its surface is flexing in and out, but that's not the truth. Some kind of goop has puddled on the top and Milo gets close enough to see bubbles form and then pop like a stew left on the stove to simmer. In the end he does the only

thing he can. He gives up. He has enough sense still trickling through the hysteria to keep hold of the camera whilst limping home. To this day he maintains he won't go back. He'd rather shoot himself. Look at his face when he speaks and you know he means it.

So a couple of times a week Milo will go into a back room and show his film to any Pilgrims who aren't too drunk to watch it. There are the scoffers, of course, those who say that Milo had some funny shit on his camera lens or he was making those noises by himself, or even that the ticking thing itself was just a piece of junk from the pool boiler room, but they watch it as intently as anyone else. Afterwards Milo'll bum a drink, a few bucks and maybe a couple of cigarettes out of his new pals. He got ten dollars once and was insensible for a whole weekend. "I've gotta put spirits in my guts to keep the Ghost Land out of my head," he said.

He did try selling the film. Certain cable channels pay wads of cash for weird stuff to feed the social cripples who make up their audiences. The more bizarre or horrible, the better the payoff. But in this case they didn't want to know. None of the aliens-are-living-on-the-moon periodicals would touch it either. Milo got scared, saying that it was all a conspiracy and "men in black cars" were going to come and get him. But nobody did.

Watching Milo's film isn't the same as watching a horror movie. Special effects, no matter how impressive, are just that. Effects. You know you're watching something fake. There's nothing fake about what happens in the Ghost Land. It's bowel-curdlingly real. The whole feel of the place is slanted. You get that notion even through the wobbly black and white images projected onto the back room wall. This is something that can't be replicated on a cinema or TV screen. In the real world the Ghost Land IS the bug eyed monster.

Bucky places a Coke with a shot of gin in front of me. Milo struggles through to the back room with his projector, and a few moments later the Pilgrims follow. I sit for a minute listening to One Night Wendy sobbing in the corner. On the wall above her is a clock that runs backwards with all the numbers reversed. "So you can tell the time when you're drunk," Bucky once explained. He thinks it's funny.

The hand on that ass-about-face clock just clicks onto the hour when my client walks in. I can tell it's him even without the introductions. A black

overcoat buttoned up to the chest with black pants spiking out underneath and a pair of brogues polished sharp enough to slice the moon. A white dress shirt with an open collar crawls up his neck, and his round face is topped with hair slicked with some sort of pomade. He looms over the table like a horseless rider of the apocalypse.

“Miss Tasker?”

“Kent Marshall?”

He scrapes back a chair and sits down. We don't shake hands. He glances at my drink then at the bar. “Should I order something?”

“Best if you do. Bucky ought to get something in return for the use of his space. Nothing too strong.”

He flaps over to the counter and returns with a tall glass. Soda by the looks of it, choked with ice. “You're punctual,” he says. “I like that.”

I slip into what I call professional mode, a trick I used when dealing with clients in my New York job. It didn't work with my colleagues. They wanted to know too much about you, were too interested in your opinions – so long as they were the right opinions – and were upset when you weren't equally interested in theirs. In professional mode too much information is an intrusion. It gets in the way of the business at hand. And, after a finite list of scripted niceties has been observed, it's straight down to that business.

I curl my fingers under my chin. “Are you a journalist, Mr Marshall?”

He blinks. “Does it make a difference?”

“If you want me to be your guide, yes it does.”

“So if I was a journalist you wouldn't take me? Why?”

“Hacks live for the story, Mr Marshall. They're less sensitive than others, perhaps a bit braver, often a whole lot more foolish. They'll always take that extra step to find their scoop. More often than not it's a quality which makes them good at their job. In the Ghost Land it gets them into trouble. They won't listen and they don't stop. If they see something that twitches their nose they'll investigate. And they'll suffer. You can't view this place through a camera viewfinder and you can't pause to take notes. You see it and you feel it, and with luck and a healthy dose of wits you'll survive.”

I gesture at his soda. “Bucky can fix you a cocktail. A small one won't hurt, and it'll knock the dust out of your system. I know this is the sticks but he

has his ways and means.”

“Do I look like a cocktail kind of guy?”

“You could look like anything. A change of coat. A different haircut. Doesn't take much. You can slip on a persona as easily as a pair of jeans.”

“Been judged a lot in your life, have you?”

“Yes. Now let's get down to it. Why do you want me to take you into the Ghost Land? Is it personal or something else?”

“A former friend's house is in there, and there is something in that house that I want very badly, have wanted badly for the past three years. I am not on any sightseeing trip, nor am I after what you'd call spiritual enlightenment.”

He lights a cigarette without offering me one and takes a long pull. Smoke wraps skeletal fingers around his cheeks. “I've exhausted every legitimate means of trying to find a way of getting where I need to go. Nobody wanted to help. Then I tried illegitimate methods, and that's how I found out there was another way in. That other way is you.”

“You say you want something. Pilgrims aren't after money anymore. The Ghost Land draws misfits, failed husbands, bankrupt businessmen. It soaks up losers like some cosmic sponge. Fortunately for the alcoholics, they can't get past the Outpost bars. Is this a suicide bid, Mr Marshall?”

He leans forward, breath thick with tobacco. “You think I'm a Pilgrim? I've heard about those. I don't think any kind of paradise lies beyond that Fence, and if I planned to quit on anything I'd have done it by now. There are better ways to die. If you thought otherwise you wouldn't agree to take me in, no matter how much I offered you, because if I don't come out then there's no money. Not for you, your kin, your lover, or anybody else you might have in mind.”

“Really? The authorities didn't make the Fence the way it is now. Locals did. It's a mishmash of a thing, built from logs, corrugated iron, barbed wire and even the shells of old pickup trucks.”

He flicks a speck of grit from his soda glass. “What did they think was going to come out of there? A personal boogeyman?”

“The barriers weren't put up to cage anything inside. People wanted to stop themselves crossing the boundary. In most ways it was akin to having both fear and temptation right on your doorstep. Prosperity has always been a fickle thing in these parts. Whole communities could dry up and blow away. Nobody can

afford to care about the beast in their backyard. Now, what's in this house that you want so badly?"

"My daughter."

He slaps a photograph onto the table. Grinning out of the frame is a blue eyed, dark haired apple pie girl caught between the gawky awkwardness of late teens and the natural grace of adulthood.

"We had a falling out," he says. "She told me she was going to stay with some old friends. I was too angry to think much about it at the time. My parents knew a few people on the edge of Claywood and sometimes took me to visit though I'm not sure, in the later years at least, they were anything more than acquaintances. We didn't hear anything after the Ghost Land stuff happened, and even growing up Stephanie never had much in the buddy department. Maybe her peers regarded her as one, though they were a bunch of stoned hippies and college dropouts mostly. Now and again she'd sleep over at various places if it suited her purposes. Sometimes in the city, sometimes out. But these 'old friends', the Andersons, that's where she's gone."

"What makes you so convinced?"

"Take a look at this."

A creased oblong of glossy paper. Another photograph, black and white, showing a girl squatting in ferns in some woodland. A flimsy white halter top clings to her bony shoulders. Her bare knees are drawn up beneath her and one arm crosses her breasts, the hand clasping her elbow. Dark hair sweeps around her neck and disappears into the shadows. Her head is raised, gaze staring upwards and to the right, her expression caught between something. Fear? Startlement? As if somebody had walked into her room and found her in a state of undress? Or resentment even?

"That's her," Marshall says. "My Stephanie. One of your Pilgrims brought it out not more than three months ago. I had some paid investigators on the boundary looking for news. I had a suspicion, you see? I remember showing Stephanie a picture of the Anderson place when my family visited one summer, and I spooked her out with stories about what might have happened to them. She was into that kind of stuff, and I wanted to humour her. I should've realised it would stick in her head."

He taps the photo. I've no doubt it's her. I know what you're going to say. Bundles of photographs do the rounds claiming to be from the Ghost Land. Some show weird things. Most show nothing much at all."

"And all are classified as fakes," I finish for him. "Only you don't think this is?"

"Stephanie is a girl who I thought considered art a waste of human endeavour. I wouldn't let her so much as sniff alcohol and the only drug she ever took was an aspirin to ease some eye strain. My daughter was meant to be a cradle-to-the-graver with every aspect of her life planned, revised and enacted. Squatting among weeds in her underwear is not part of the programme. I paid the Pilgrim a thousand dollars for this. I was warned not to ask any questions, not even where the shot was taken."

I studied the picture. "I recognise those trees in the background. It's Barker Wood. The place is always choked with ferns, almost as if it has its own climate. A long hike, Mr Marshall."

"I thought so. The house lies on the edge of Barker Wood. I have a good pair of walking legs."

"Fine, but if you get caught or lag behind I leave you."

His mouth thinned to a slit. "I take it that works both ways?"

"Yes."

"Good, now here's another one." In this picture Marshall's daughter is facing the camera. "My contact said the photo was taken from a distance. Stephanie couldn't have known it was there, yet look at that. Look at the expression on her face."

I don't think expression is the right word. The girl's face has seemingly lost the ability to express anything. Her muscles are slack, succumbing to their own weight. Black hair is drawn in ink-like tendrils across her face. Her dripping fist clutches a dead sunflower, its face a black button, the leaves curled and rotten. Eyes are closed, eyelashes a dark flutter across her skin. Mouth without warmth, lips merely shaped external forces. A blank, wet face with no heart to drive it into expression. Half her skull is capped with some unidentifiable object.

"How long between the two pictures?"

"A week or so. The Pilgrim wanted to make sure he'd got the right subject, but the local hick sheriff was on his case and he had to wait before going back.

She's still in those damned woods. Where does she sleep? In the house? What's she eating? And what's that thing on her head? It looks like a bridesmaid's hat pinned on the wrong way round.”

I notice other things. The scattering of blooms in the grass behind Stephanie. The fuzzy background, which resembles a dreamy forest grotto taken with a slightly out-of-focus camera. The sparkly buckle at the girl's waist which spells out the word LOVE.

“Very well, Mr Marshall, I'll take you to Barker Wood, though I can't guarantee we'll find what you want there. Three months is a long time to wait before deciding to come looking.”

“I thought she was trying to prove a point.” He slips a square of paper out of his coat pocket and unfolds it. “I bought a map.” Frowning, he turns it the other way up. “Some guy was pitching them out of a shopping cart next to an empty truck park.”

I snatch it out of his hands. The paper rips, leaving a corner still clutched between Marshall's fingers. “Let me see that.”

As I thought, an old gas station map with crude notations scrawled in coloured pencil. Half the things marked are either in the wrong location or were never there in the first place. “A Pilgrim map,” I spit. “You might as well put on a blindfold and fumble your way through the Ghost Land.”

“I paid fifty bucks for that. The guy said all the Pilgrims use it.”

“If that's so then no wonder half of them never come out again. You deserve getting suckered over this. Anyone can print an old map and write whatever they want on it, and the more sensational the 'attractions' the better. A lot of this made-up stuff isn't even spelled right. The most dangerous thing anyone can take into the Ghost Land is a fool.”

“Fine, keep it. Suppose I wanted to go by myself. How do I get round the barrier?”

“You can't. Not someone inexperienced like you.”

“Well how did Stephanie get in?”

“I've no idea. Maybe it let her.”

“Really? Then it should let me in too. I'm her father.”

I say nothing. Marshall waves a hand. “Fine. Let's get on with it then. You're not going to suggest boots, hiking gear, a survival kit?”

I shrug. "It won't make any difference. I have everything we need. We start now and come out when I say we're done."

"When do I write your check?"

"Now."

"A strict professional." He takes out a checkbook and pen, writes out the payment we'd already agreed and hands it over. "So where do we start?"

I swallow the rest of my drink, stand and pocket the check. "We have to go to church. But first there's something I want to show you."

CHAPTER FOUR

“Go home son.”

Tommy glanced at me, then Dad, then the shovel in Dad's hand.

“I've no mind to use this,” Dad said, “on you or Miriam. I just aim to stop you making a fool of yourself.”

“You're making a fool out of me now.”

“No I ain't. Just take your hand out of my daughter's shirt and go on home. Don't get set on defying me or what you will feel is the side of my boot across your ass.”

Tommy, frozen in this moment of childhood discovery, or seduction, slipped his fingers from between my buttons, gave me a look which I supposed he thought was heroic, then walked across the yard, his back stiff, hands in pockets, looking like a bad John Wayne.

“I told him he could do that,” I said, once Tommy was out of the gate.

“Figures. I saw that mule-smile on your face. His Ma's precious and totes a shotgun. She'll put a pound of lead up your butt.”

“Other kids do it.”

“Other kids ain't as young as you. Besides, I don't know what Tommy Brady hoped to find in there since you've barely more than pimples to speak of.”

I felt myself going red. Wendy Martin, who in class always sat in the corner nearest the window, was already wearing a brassiere and she was only two months older than me.

“It's not so much you fooling around, Miriam,” Dad went on. “I did enough of that when I was a boy, even though my own father would've leathered me raw if he'd found out. It's you bringing him here to do it. Right beside the Fence, beside that God-forsaken place. What d'you think this is, some kind of drive-in? Did you promise him a show? Did you bait him with stories about what goes on in there?”

“He wanted to see it.”

“They all want to see it. I told you to stay clear. You've got the whole yard and the rest of God's country to goof around in.”

He put down the shovel. “Are you fixing to hit me?” I asked.

“No.”

Dad wasn't overly hard that way. I never had a mark on me, unlike Billy Tranter who came to school with more black eyes than I had a mind to count. Or Lucy Barker and her sometimes switch-cut legs. I heard her father shouted all the time. At the dinner table, in the yard, outside church. He couldn't tell his daughter to sit up straight without bawling her ears off. He'd been a sergeant in the army and had lost a leg to a Chinese mortar. He came home with an honourable discharge and an attitude. His fake leg clunked along the porch all hours of the day and sometimes well into the night. He didn't take to the bottle though, which was one thing everyone felt grateful for, and he never beat up his kid more than twice a month, which some folk considered fair discipline.

In church my Dad sat and said the right things at the right time. He sang hymns in a surprisingly gentle voice out of the tattered, spine-broken books the preacher kept. But on occasion his eyes roamed over the congregation as if they were the vermin he chased out of his remaining crop fields.

I could never reconcile that. Dad always claimed a man had to be up front in his dealings with others because God was taking notes. After the service he shook hands, tipped his hat to the women, made small talk with his nearest neighbours. But that look never left his eyes. I couldn't understand how nobody else noticed.

“You get yourself a bucket,” Dad said now, “and some clean rags. You can wash the truck.”

I didn't move.

“Something eating your face, Miriam?”

“I don't see any sense in washing the truck on a hot day like this. Come nightfall it'll be covered in dust again.”

“So will you, but that doesn't stop you splashing around in the tub every evening. Find an excuse not to clean one thing and pretty soon you won't clean anything. That's not the kind of household I run.”

So while Dad went back indoors to argue with Mother over whatever today's topic happened to be I fetched a bucket and a cloth from the rag pile. I turned on the yard faucet and waited as it groaned out a trickle of water. The farm simmered quietly in the late afternoon heat, but my ears were thumping. Every bug, every bird, every breeze-rustled tuft of grass were screaming at me. I wanted to hit something, smack the wooden wall in front of me until it splintered.

I don't have an off switch for this. Information comes at me from all directions, often jumbled. In those days I spent much of my time trying to make sense of it. I hunted out puddles of quiet. Blank spaces, an empty corner of the yard, the space under my bed. I could sit and stare at a blank wall and colour it with worlds beyond dreaming, or turn everything down to a silent spot of white. Sometimes it seemed everyone was shouting, not just with their voices, but their eyes, their gestures, and busy, busy faces that I didn't understand.

I turned off the faucet. Sneaking upstairs to my room, I packed a little red case with my favourite books and a change of underwear. Five dollars was plucked from the jug on the kitchen dresser then I was off into the evening sun. If I pulled the seat of Dad's truck as far forward as it would go my feet could just reach the pedals. It was no big deal. Most every farm kid over ten-years-old knew the basics of driving.

I got as far as the crossroads before the truck chugged to a halt in its own little dust cloud. When I hiked back, Dad nudged open the porch door with his foot and let me in. The case went back under my bed and the money returned to the jug.

"So much for the escape bid," Dad laughed, shoving corn into his mouth. "You didn't make much more than five miles."

"Furthest I've been on my own."

He nodded. "That's true, the road's hot enough to fry fish. Did you take any water with you? I thought not. The next time you go diddling around in my truck, Miriam, make sure enough gas is in the tank or you might suffer more than just embarrassment. Now, I guess I'd better call Marv's autos and get my vehicle fetched back. I don't need to tell you where the money's coming from."

Next day, after school, Tommy Brady found a rabbit shivering in the corner of the yard. He picked it up by the back legs and walked to Rick Spendler's truck. All day he'd been trying to catch my eye. I'd kept my face in my workbook and though my efforts didn't exactly please Moanin' Ronin she leaned on me a little less. At the end of the lesson I even got a green star, which is fourth from best.

The rabbit was so sick the school tabby wouldn't touch it, and that mangy sack of bones would swallow a skunk if it managed to get the jump on it. Tommy walked along the verge, spitting dust, rabbit going 'thwack-thwack' against his thigh. "Got to tell the vet," he muttered.

"You take that into his clinic and you'll find yourself hauled back out by the seat of your farm pants," I told him. "A good heart beats in you, Tommy, but your head works in funny ways sometimes."

"Talking to me now, are you?" he said. "Well you might not care much for living things, but I've a mind to get this rabbit fixed."

Rick Spendler had other ideas. Tommy could either lose the rabbit or walk home. With a face like broken concrete, he let it go in the long grass by the verge. The thing didn't manage more than three feeble hops before flopping onto its side.

Rick's mother had made a big batch of lemonade and once we were all safe in the back of his pickup he poured some into glass jars and handed it out. The afternoon had warmed it a mite too much but the sharp taste was welcome in our dry summer throats. Tommy didn't touch his. The liquid slopped into his lap as the pickup jounced along the road. At my gate, Tommy climbed out behind me.

"What are you aiming to do?" I said, turning on him. Dirt caked his legs up to his knees. He must've spent the whole of recess trudging around the schoolyard. The preserve jar still had lemonade sloshing around. He'd travelled all those hot miles without drinking any.

"Rick's Mom is going to want that jar back," I said. "You should've left it in the truck."

Tommy stood there, looking at me, all kinds of things flitting across his face that made no sense. I shoved him, not hard, with the flat of my hand. His heel caught a rock and he crumpled onto the ground in a swirl of dust. He didn't scream or yell. He said "Oh" very quietly as if finding himself sprawled in the road was a minor surprise. The glass jar rolled out of his hand without breaking. Fruit juice glued the dust into dark lumps. When he got up and dusted down his shorts, I saw his calf was scratched and bleeding.

"You stay away from me, y'hear?" I told him. "Keep off our land and don't come near our gate again."

Dad was drinking coffee in the kitchen when I rattled through the screen door. "I heard yelling," he said.

"Tommy Brady followed me home."

"I'm surprised he hasn't got anything better to do with his time than mooch around here like a lovestruck pup. School is the only break he gets from the farm,

his mother drives him so hard. I daresay something ought to be done concerning that boy.”

An hour later, Tommy's Mom appeared at the front door. My own mother was upstairs either reading, sleeping, having a headache or a combination of those.

“What kind of mongrel are you raising, Bradley Tasker, that she'd go for my son like that?” I heard before Dad closed the parlour door on me. Some talk followed. Dad's measured tones, Mrs Brady's withering voice. It didn't last more than five minutes before Dad came in and sat heavily on the sofa.

“What did you do, Miriam?”

“He was on the road by the gate. I chased him away.”

“Did you hit him?”

“Kind of. It wasn't much of anything. He tripped and fell.”

Dad put his head in his hands. His voice was muffled through a cage of fingers. “I figured before too long you'd have a boy like that sniffing around your heels. Parents think all sorts of things. What sort of fellow will my daughter finish up with? What kind of man would he be, what kind of husband or father? I bet Tommy Brady couldn't raise a litter of curs on his own, but you can't treat people like that, Miriam, no matter how much they rile you.”

“I thought you didn't want him hanging around the farm. I thought you'd be pleased.”

“He's still just a kid. So are you.”

“But you threw him out of our yard. You said you'd fetch him a kick if he defied you.”

“You don't get it, do you girl?”

“No, Dad, I don't get it.”

“All the more reason to be ashamed. Tomorrow, before class, I want you to apologise.”

“In front of everyone?”

Dad nodded.

“I'll look stupid. The whole school will make fun of me.”

“They've no cause to. There's shame in what you've done but no shame in making up for it. You've got a thicker neck than most kids your age, and it pays to soothe Mrs Brady. You know how distressed she gets.”

Mrs Brady's distress was something the whole town had been tip-toeing around for a while. Her husband fought in every major battle of the big war, including the Pacific, without grazing so much as a knuckle, then one month into the trouble in Korea he was posted missing in action. She hoped he'd come back. We all hoped.

"It's the right thing to do. In your heart you'll feel good about it," Dad added. Now here's your supper."

I took the plate he offered me, sat down and started to eat. Dad stood looking at me for a minute. "Miriam, will it hurt you to say 'please' and 'thank you' when the situation calls for it?."

I swallowed the lump of beef I'd been chewing. "To keep people sweet?"

"If need be. It's not cutting in on your personal freedoms."

I went back to my dinner. After a moment, Dad sat down and started eating his. "What happened with the class painting competition you were supposed to have the other day," he said between forkfuls. "You never told me if you won?"

"I didn't win. Milo Ross got the prize. He didn't deserve it."

"How d'you figure."

"My work was the best. Anyone could see that. Miss Ronin said I copied his colours, that I should've chosen different ones. I said he could've done the same, but she made him the winner."

"Why would she do such a thing?"

"She's always making things hard for me. Whatever I do it's never right. She started talking about me seeing a doctor or getting put in a special kind of school. Everyone thought she meant a school for retards. Kids were yelling things at me in the yard and Tommy did nothing to stop them. I guess that's part of the reason I was so angry with him."

"These kids, what did they say?"

I thought for a moment, then put on my quote-voice. "*The scientists will come and get you. They'll put a metal band across your forehead and push a piece of rubber into your mouth. The juice will flowwww, Miriam. You'll bug out. The sunglasses will melt across your face and your eyes'll pop from their sockets.*"

Dad stopped eating. "Is that so?" he said.

Tommy started the new school day with a curled fist and a tight mouth. Before class started he prowled the yard like a coyote.

“Can I see your animals?” Wendy Martin said in her candy-sweet voice. “Did you bring them today, Tommy?”

“Mom threw my bag in the trash. She says I've got to forget about being a Ranger. I'm working on the farm and that's all there is to it.”

I climbed the tree and stayed there until Miss Ronin called in the class. The sun was beating on my desk so I slipped on my sunglasses and buried my face in the punctuation exercise she'd given us. I felt her looking at me but she didn't say anything. About an hour into the lesson the phone rang in the hall. When Miss Ronin came back she clapped her hands loudly and sent everyone out into the yard for an early recess. Everyone except me.

“Sit there and finish your exercises, Miriam,” she said. “Your father is coming to speak to me about your schooling and he wants you to be present.”

He turned up at the school in a shirt and tie, polished shoes kicking up dust around the ankles of his Sunday pants. When he knocked on the classroom door, Miss Ronin invited him in and offered him a seat, but he shook his head. “Begging your pardon, ma'am, but I don't take much truck with what you've been saying about my daughter. This is farming country in case you hadn't noticed. Pretty much all this land is good for. People who don't work the land drive trucks, pump gas or open a store. That's about the run of it. We don't need someone telling us what our kids are or ain't fit for.”

Mrs Ronin closed the door, red spots burning on both cheeks. Her carefully structured timetable was wiped off the blackboard with three strokes of her duster. She started chalking up a bunch of arithmetic problems.

“Miriam won't join in games,” she said, the scratch of the chalk loud in the sunlight-sparred room. “She calls them stupid.”

“Well maybe they are,” Dad said. “She was never one for rolling in the dirt. She leaves the kids alone and they mostly leave her alone. If someone wants to be a loner I don't see anything against it.”

“She brings her habits into class, Mr Tasker. Give her a subject she likes and she won't keep quiet. Try getting her to talk about a subject she's not keen on and she won't utter a word. Miriam is not a shy girl. In fact she can prove very

animated over any number of things. But she's a disrupting influence, and the class as a whole will suffer.”

“Respectfully, ma'am, she's just a child.”

I peered at them both from behind my sunglasses. Having people talk about me while I was in the same room was nothing new. Miss Ronin went to the art cupboard and took out a large sheet of paper. “Earlier this week we had a class painting competition.”

“Miriam mentioned it. She said you made sure she wouldn't win, that you accused her of copying another student's colours.”

“Did she? Well here's Miriam's effort,” Miss Ronin handed the paper over. “Please tell me if you think this was deserving of a prize.”

Dad took it in his thick hands and stared at it, brow furrowing under the brim of his hat.

Moanin' Ronin had asked us to draw our various neighbourhoods then colour them in afterwards. Most kids had drawn barns, meadows, trees or, if they lived in the Outpost, shop fronts. Hannah Burke had drawn a rabbit. I'd drawn my neighbourhood using charcoal for our side of the Fence and poster paints for the Ghost Land. “What is the meaning of this mess?” Miss Ronin said when she saw it, and I didn't win the competition.

I tried reasoning with her. I wanted to explain that I'd done my best to paint what I saw, that any picture of the Ghost Land would be incomplete because things exist there for which there are no shapes and colours. This was the closest I could come to showing it. Other kids' drawings were more or less the same as each other. I'd done something different, and I wanted a prize.

“I made her stay in class during recess,” Moanin' Ronin was saying now. “I got called outside when one of the children, the little Johnson girl, tumbled and knocked out a tooth. While I was distracted, Miriam took my chalk and wrote “STUPID” dozens of times across my blackboard. Then she took poster paints back out of the art cupboard and did the same for the walls. It took our handyman the better part of the afternoon to clean it up.”

“What kid doesn't throw a tantrum from time to time?” Dad said. “Nothing was broken, was it? If you put away every kid who kicked up a fuss when they didn't get their own way you'd be teaching to empty classrooms. Miriam would be described as gifted if she came from one of those big ranches up north of the

county. Instead because she's a poor farmer's daughter you're calling her a retard.”

“This wasn't done in any childish, heat-of-the-moment anger, Mr Tasker. Those words were written in clean rows with an almost mathematical preciseness. Now I'd like to ask you again, have you thought about a doctor?”

Dad let go of my picture. It fluttered onto the top of Miss Ronin's desk. He looked at me. “I'm taking you home,” he said.

What my teacher didn't know was that I *had* seen a doctor, right about the time I was due to start school. Mother and Dad insisted it was for vaccines but everyone knew it was because I'd toddled into the Ghost Land on the night the Ghost Veil fell. Dad certainly never confided as much, he just wore a dark smile on his face no matter what anyone said or did. At first he'd been frightened. He spent hours talking to his farming friends about whether or not I'd grow up normal, or whether my kids would be affected. When I was told of this many years later it helped me understand why he hadn't missed Mother as much as I thought he should. He preferred that his marriage had failed instead of his efforts as a father. In his head it was a simple equation. She couldn't have any more of his children and I was the last of his line. It didn't matter that I wasn't a boy. His thinking didn't extend that far, and I was certainly tomboy enough to be interested in some of the things he did, both at work and play.

The doctor was a something called a locum, filling in for our usual sawbones who was taking a long overdue vacation. His waiting room was full of kids who'd cut themselves, taken a tumble off their Pappy's tractor or got an ass full of rock salt for thieving out of the dime market. To keep us sweet he brought a trunk of toys out of his car, including a bunch of plastic, glassy eyed dolls for the girls. I recoiled when he waved one in front of me. My idea of a doll was a raggy-patch thing you could kick around the yard and dust down afterwards. Every clump of grass could become a jungle, every patch of dirt a vast desert. These freaks with their hard, cold faces could only ever belong in a plastic kitchen in a plastic house, and they spooked me.

The doctor did a whole bunch of tests on me, but something else was itching at him. “Tell me what you saw,” he said. “When you-know-what happened.”

I was already fidgety and scraped my kiddie chair back an inch. “I can't.”

"That's okay. You won't get into any trouble. Your Mom and Dad told me a few things, but I'd like to hear it from you. You did see something, yes?"

"As clear as I see you."

"So tell me what it was like."

"I can't. It wasn't like anything I've seen before."

"Was it something big? Small? Round? Square? Was it like fireworks or maybe a shooting star?"

"All of those things, and none of them."

I wasn't holding out on the doctor, but how can you describe a thing when there's no way of doing so? That would be like trying to describe the taste of chicken to someone with no taste buds. Drawing it, as Miss Ronin later found, couldn't help as there wasn't a pen or paper made by man that was up to the job. The shapes were incomprehensible and the colours weren't anything you'd find in any damned rainbow. I'd be a liar if I said otherwise.

The doctor sucked his teeth then started asking me all sorts of other questions. All gentle, all warmly spoken. He asked if I had any friends, real or imaginary. He asked about the games I liked to play, or things I had a special interest in. He asked whether I'd rather be anywhere else than on my Dad's farm. Throughout this questioning he gazed steadily at me. I stared at the swivel chair missing one wheel, the teetering column of papers on the corner of the dark wooden desk, the whirring propeller of the overhead fan. When it seemed the doctor was done he got up and pulled a couple of books from the shelves. He pored through these while I fidgeted, then he called my parents back in.

It turned out the doctor was one of those men who, when it came to ailments, said what he thought without any concern for diplomacy. "Miriam," he explained, "has a condition which makes it difficult for her to relate to other people." He mentioned some funny name that Dad later told me was German, or "kraut" as he put it. Mother sort of freaked and wanted to know if this meant I would turn into a maniac or some chuckling backwoods loon. The doctor said no, it wasn't anything like that. "It just means most people will have trouble taking to Miriam at first, but give them time and they'll come around."

Nonetheless Mother went into the sort of sulk I guess most parents throw when they think they've produced a less than perfect child. "Miriam must have

got it from you,” she told him in the parlour that evening. “There's no history of mental... *deficiency*... on my side of the family.”

“You don't think it has to do with that mess beyond our backyard?”

“I don't know. I just don't want any trouble, especially with the way authorities are dealing with the whole thing. If they hear about Miriam they'll never leave us alone.”

“That's okay,” Dad said. “I've already lost most of my land. I'm not about to hand over my daughter. They already checked us out and cleared us, and that's good enough for me.”

Riding back from Miss Ronin's class in Dad's clappity-clap truck, I could understand a little of how he felt. “You can't go back to school,” he told me. “I don't trust that teacher, and the other kids don't understand how special you are. They won't do anything to your face but they'll point and say stupid things behind your back. What happens in this county should stay in this county. I'll teach you at home. Heaven knows, your mother has enough books for the job.”

That evening Dad and Mother had another one of their conversations. These days having a conversation meant I had to be out of the room. That's how I mostly heard Mother's voice, as a whisper through the walls or a series of sounds from the upstairs bedroom. My ears grew careful and attentive, so that despite the house's attempts to muffle her I learned how to filter the words, to pick them out one at a time and reveal the sentences they made.

“Maybe it's for her own good, Brad,” Mother was saying. “They might be able to treat her, give her the kind of schooling she needs. Maybe it would do her good to leave the farm for a while, to go to a place away from the Fence and the Outpost. Prospects for young people were never up to much around here, even before the Ghost Land happened.”

“She should be taken away, is that what you're saying, Alice?”

“You're twisting my words again.”

“I'm not twisting anything. I know what you mean. Miriam won't have any kind of life in one of those those institutions. Once inside their doors she'll never come out. She'll be a specimen, and that bunch of communists masquerading under the banner of science hold their assets close.”

“I meant a special school.”

“What's the difference? I'm not letting her go and that's an end to it.”

Of course I knew, and I guess Dad did too, that when Mother got something inside her head that was never an end to it.

CHAPTER FIVE

Outside, the late afternoon has smothered everything in reds and ochres. Marshall looks about, blinking, as if this is the first time he's seen the Outpost, that he snuck into the bar at night or through some deep underground tunnel. An every-which-where breeze kicks up eddies across the parking lot and he coughs, wiping his mouth with a handkerchief produced with a magician's flourish from his coat pocket.

“What's with all the dust?” he says. “I thought this was supposed to be farming country.”

“Working the land properly means keeping a balance,” I tell him. “The Ghost Land changed that balance. Now the Outpost picks up all the chaff.”

“What is it you wanted to show me?”

“Over there.”

We cross the lot, his city shoes scuffing the cracked asphalt. He hasn't given much thought to clothing, but it won't matter in the end. I've seen Pilgrims appear looking ready to hike the Appalachians, only to shed most of their stuff within the first mile. The hippies were funnier, dressed in sandals and kaftans, ready to “commune with the spirit of the Ghost Land” by waving incense sticks and singing. Then there was the guy who wanted to go dressed in some kind of home-made astronaut suit. He could barely walk in the thing, and when I'd done laughing at his waddling I told him he had to ditch it. In the end he ditched himself, straight back to wherever he'd come from, but not before he'd paid me. When he got shitty about that I pointed out he was soliciting me to do something illegal and the local law was on the side of the local people. Daddy would've called me a dirt-mouthed liar for saying such a thing as the law hadn't really been on my side since the days of Deputy Bernard, but some lies are white lies, right?

I lead Marshall to the end of the street and we stop at the base of the Fence, a patchwork guillotine slicing the neck of the main highway to Claywood. Here the junk has been bolstered with railroad ties lifted from a disused freight spur and bolted together with rusted metal plates.

“Look at it. Our very own Berlin Wall. Try to get in and you'll be indicted for trespass. Try a second time and there's a chance we won't see you ever again. The government took ownership of the entire area.”

“That claptrap barrier doesn't suggest they're taking it too seriously.”

“A steel fortress with searchlights and watchtowers would attract attention from homegrown conspiracy theorists all the way to California. Keep things quiet. Ridicule anyone who tries to disturb the equilibrium. Governments, some churches, academia – all are good at turning away to avoid witnessing something they won't like. If they don't see it then it doesn't exist. Raise the subject in any school or branch of public service and watch what happens to your career.”

“You sound a little strident. I'm guessing this isn't the first time you've given this speech.”

“I guess I'm tired of people who know nothing thinking they know everything because they've read a few column inches in *National Enquirer*. But I do know what I'm talking about and I need you to be aware of what you're getting into.”

“Are you telling me this junk surrounds the whole thing? It would take tons of stuff to cover the miles involved. More than this hick town could produce.”

“I'm not saying any such thing. Don't be fooled by all the farmland. This is rough country and most of those fields were hewn out by hand a hundred years ago. Try to cross over in the wrong place and you could break your neck before ever putting a foot in the Ghost Land.”

He grunts. “That bad, huh?”

“I don't know what you've heard, Mr Marshall, but when all this first happened the army responded quickly. Too quickly some said, almost as if they'd expected the possibility. They built the original fence and wound it with razor wire. Anyone trying to climb over would be cut to pieces. Over the years folk have added to it, but there's still a lot of the old stuff left, usually where the terrain is hard. People tried sneaking in at night using cutters or ladders. They fell off rocks, tumbled down ravines, got swallowed up by deadfall. A local gang even went in for a dare, led by a kid called Joshua Twill. He still lives around the Outpost. You'd know him if you saw him, on account of his home made legs and set of crutches. His gang members have long fled the place. They won't come back.”

“Am I about to hear some kind of ghost story?”

“Ghost story? That's good. Johnny was brought out by his father. We'd had stormy weather. That doesn't happen often but when we get it, it hits hard,

and a lot of water was lying around. Johnny stumbled down a gully and pitched feet first into some kind of pool. His rubber boots were melted to his feet. No, that's not the right word, they were *vulcanised*. The doctor couldn't believe it, but Johnny's Dad wouldn't let his boy be sent up to the county hospital. 'I don't want anyone knowing where he's been,' was the reason. So the doc amputated the boy's legs, right there in his own surgery. Now Johnny lives off the store he inherited. You can talk to him if you like. He'll tell anyone who'll listen about that contaminated pool.”

“Sounds dramatic. Were they messing around with gasoline?”

“Maybe it would've been better if they had. That's something people could understand. But no, Johnny stepped into a pool of *something* and it melted his feet. That's what he said. That's what he still says, and, once they'd stopped babbling, the other members of his gang said it too, despite efforts to persuade them it must've been something else.”

“Didn't someone check?”

I shake my head. “The kids weren't ever going back and nobody was in the mood to start stumbling around. You don't know what a closed community is until you've spent some time in the Outpost.”

“If it's so dangerous I'm surprised the government didn't evacuate everyone.”

“We're safe on this side of the Fence. You can liken the Ghost Land to an oil stain that's spread as far as it can go. Usually there's nothing much in the way of creeks or streams to carry stuff out. Most of the wells around here serve the farms. The air itself isn't poisonous, at least not as far as anyone can tell. Besides, try to force people out of their homes and you'd end up in a gun battle. When folk die here they get buried in the same dirt they grew up on. That's the way it's always been.”

Marshall snickers. “Country hicks.”

“Yes, country hicks. They work the land their fathers worked and their fathers before them. Except the Ghost Land stole much of it and now they don't know what to do with themselves. So they sit and fade. Like all the buildings you see around you.”

“You were born here?”

“Yes.”

“But you think you're different from them?”

“I *am* different from them. Now look at this.”

I show him a noticeboard, a piece of packing crate teetering atop two plundered fence posts. Across its face are pinned yellowed photographs of the missing, messages to the lost, or mawkish, hastily scribbled poems. People's memories, thoughts and feelings litter the broken back of this community. In the early days these makeshift shrines appeared all along the boundary. Eventually folk got tired of their land being littered with shattered hearts, incomprehensible drawings and misfit pleas for help to some ill-defined presence. Tearful relatives and out-of-their-skull Pilgrims trampled the remaining crops and scared away the livestock. Impromptu roads, beaten into existence, cut across pasture and planting ground alike. Head of the Farmers' Association, Billy Cosgrove, went round in his pickup, gathered all the shit and burned it. Trespassers were usually met by his dog, a vicious mongrel with a mouthful of razorblades. Some claimed Billy kept the beast half starved so it'd get a taste for Pilgrim ass. Sometimes Billy himself would be there, lazily circling what remained of his farm with a rock salt-packed 12 gauge tucked beneath the steering wheel.

Then a whole heap of pallets went missing from the back of the hardware store and the noticeboards were back. Billy got on the sheriff's case and he tore them down, but in a week or so they returned, as if sprouting out of the ground during the short, muggy nights. Now there's just this one and the townsfolk leave it alone. A concession maybe, or perhaps they don't care anymore. Nobody's posted anything for a long time.

Marshall tears off a sheet from the board. The ink is so faded as to be barely legible. “Sentimental bullshit. I wrote better verse than this in first grade.”

“I think the feeling is probably more important than the author's literary skills.”

“I'm a practical man, Miss Tasker. Bad poetry won't help me find my daughter.”

At first I think he's going to tear the page up but, grimacing, he pins it back in the exact spot it was taken from. He walks to the Fence, holds out a hand as if to touch one of the wooden ties, then pauses. “Should I feel anything?”

“Not quite. There's a kind of buffer zone here. The actual Ghost Land boundary is further in. The distance varies with each section of the Fence. In

some places it's close. Real close.”

“Rumours say the government mined some areas, or that abandoned guard dogs now turned wild will bound out of the trees and savage you.”

“Old stories. Almost folklore now.”

“And the burning car?”

I'm smiling despite myself. “So you've heard about that? It's real enough, further up this very road in fact, though folks are still arguing over the cause.”

“What do you think is causing it?”

I shrug. I'm not committing myself, even though for a long time the burning car was the biggest genuine attraction the Outpost could boast. The Ghost Veil fell in the dead of night and traffic was sparse. Afterwards, two cars were visible from the Fence when it was still just a fence. One lay in the ditch with no sign of the driver. The other was parked in the middle of the asphalt a further twenty yards into the Ghost Land. It was on fire. It still is.

Just as Moses had his burning bush, the Pilgrims have their burning car. Unlike the bush, however, the car has been scorched to a blackened steel skeleton. The paint bubbled, peeled and has gone. Tyres are now nothing but black smears beneath the bare wheel hubs. The glass is long shattered, the upholstery inside eaten down to the springs. Nobody knows whether the fuel tank exploded during the Ghost Veil or sometime after. A starburst of twisted metal marks the spot.

The car burns without pause, as though squatting atop some bottomless gas pipe. The sheriff long ago got tired of trying to shoo voyeurs away. Some enterprising soul built a viewing platform in their back yard complete with telescopes. People were made to wait in an orderly line and charged for the privilege of a two minute peek into a crazy world. But the host got greedy and his custom drifted away. The platform ended up as part of the Fence it was built to peep over.

More than one Pilgrim claimed to see something moving around inside the car. The law tried to put that notion to bed by sending in a fireman with an insulated suit and a long, hand-held probe to check the area in front of him. It took an hour of nervous shuffling to get within a dozen feet of the car. Then he turned back. 'I couldn't go any further,' he said. 'Something was wrong. I can't tell you what. It was just *wrong*.'

A Pilgrim would understand.

In any case he saw nothing but rolling, boiling flames. No sign of the driver or anything that might be feeding the fire. Yet the rumours persisted. Someone even suggested harpooning the wreck and dragging it from the Ghost Land, but if the cause of the fire was down to some unknown element then what horror would be brought out?

“Wasn't there an explosion at the very beginning?” Marshall says.

“Some folk insisted they heard or felt something.”

“Maybe it opened up a small fissure beneath the car. Underground gases could be leaking out. They could burn for years.”

“Maybe so.”

“What say we find some high ground and take a look?”

“In case you didn't notice, Mr Marshall, high ground isn't something we have a great deal of in this territory and what there is can't be reached by any road. The deer trails are steep and overgrown, and you might be disappointed by what you see. The Ghost Land only truly comes alive when its doing something to someone. Then you get all the freak show you want. I'll admit this doesn't stop people claiming to see things. A heat haze or rising fog is often enough to get the devoted squealing. We don't need such hysterics, what we need is a church. Shall we go?”

The frown is back and for a second I think he'll refuse. “Church? Are we praying for safety? Taking part in some kind of ceremony? I'd rather not waste time.”

“The church is a safe way in, as long as you heed some rules. There's no ceremony, perhaps a little introduction or two. Let's go.”

We walk back to the parking lot. Marshall halts beside a black Buick, panels sprayed with rust coloured muck, squatting on its fat tyres near the exit. You can tell right off it's a city car. Local folk have a wide, lazy way of driving, as if in no particular hurry to go to no particular place. This is a car of red lights and traffic jams, of gas fumes and tight, squeeze-into places. It wears New York plates and the tired look of a vehicle that's gone too many miles in one day.

“Yours?”

“Yes,” he says.

“We have a short distance to go, but it would be useful if you could drive us.”

“We're not waiting till after dark?”

I suck in my cheeks, savouring the dregs of Bucky's drink. “It won't make any difference.”

Marshall draws an index finger across the auto's hood, frowning at the dirt. He pulls a wad of Kleenex from his seemingly bottomless coat pocket and for a moment I think he's going to try and clean the car. Instead he wipes down his shoes. Then he hands some to me. “Try and keep as much crap as you can out of my vehicle.”

I'm happy to oblige. Once inside I'm struck by the strong smell of detergent. The car's interior is showroom clean. There's none of the empty soda cans, scraps of paper, scattered feed and odd lengths of wire that infest the cabs of farmers' pickups. Marshall turns the ignition and the 8-Track in the centre of the dash coughs into life. It's *The Monkees* no less, Davy Jones warbling *Daydream Believer* over the Buick's throaty growl.

Marshall snaps off the music. “I like to play a bit of bubblegum while I'm driving,” he says, but his cheekbones have pinked a little. There's only one road out of town and he takes it at speed, wincing whenever a gravel chip smacks against the panelling.

“So tell me,” he says. “What makes you such a good guide? How can I trust you when so many others have come to grief?”

He's paying me for my services so it's a fair question. “I have a condition. My brain is wired differently, just enough to let me perceive things in a unique way. Others who've blundered into the Ghost Land always look for familiar things, things they understand, and because of that everything else is overlooked. Wherever I go I see every detail, hear every sound. It's a cacophony. I've had to learn to prioritise everything I experience. But the Ghost Land is a blessed silence. I suck in all it has to show me. That's the difference. Nothing is hidden from me. I remember every turn and twist, every shadowed tree, each puddle of poisoned water.”

“Are you some kind of psycho?”

“No, Mr Marshall, I'm not a psycho. I have a different bunch of skills and I use them to make a living as best I can.”

“Okay, I'll go with that. Since you're such an expert, what's your take on the Ghost Land?”

“Why should I draw any conclusions? The place exists, and you deal with it the best you can. My eyes see a lot of things but there's no proof they see everything. You might lose your life if it turns out I have a blind spot.”

He glances at me, probably wondering whether I'm kidding or not. We drive for a while in silence. The grit of the Outpost gives way to scrub then overgrown fields. The Fence runs in an irregular stockade away to our left. Littering the ground in front of it are stumps where farmers hacked down trees to reinforce the barrier. Some ran chains from their tractors and hauled them out by the roots. Nobody works the land next to the Fence any more.

“Turn in here,” I tell him, pointing.

He stops the Buick in the middle of the road, staring at the overgrown track I've indicated. “I'll never get the car up there. Those bushes will have the paint off.”

“It's wide enough. I've been driven up here before.”

“This isn't some clapped out hick truck.”

I turn in my seat. “What's more important, finding your daughter or your vehicle's paint job?”

“Can't we walk up?”

“And abandon your car in the highway? Someone might wonder where the driver's gone. They might perform their civic duty and tell the sheriff.”

For a moment I think he's going to argue further, but he sucks on his cheeks and spins the car onto the track. Pebbles grumble under the Buick's tyres, and Marshall pulls a face every time a twig draws a brittle finger along the car's body work. Entwined within the overgrowth is a bust-up picket fence, the paint long gone, the posts standing like broken teeth.

He slaps the steering wheel. “Shit. *Shit shit shit.*”

Ahead the track opens up into a weed-peppered yard. The car slews to a halt. Marshall lets go of the wheel and leans back in his seat. After a moment he turns off the ignition.

I tap the window. “Welcome to our own little Vatican.”

He peers through the windscreen at the structure on the far side of the yard.

“You're kidding.”

“Are you surprised Mr Marshall? Were you expecting some hillbilly church made of clapboard and wooden shingles?”

“Well yes, I was.”

That's what the parish thought they were going to get. But Father Jordan, who laid the foundation stone himself, was an Irish American and had seen the glory of Rome. He wanted a church the Catholic God would be proud of. He scoured the drinking holes and betting houses, offering repentance in exchange for dollars. He scratched the conscience of every middle class civic worker and chased farmers across their own fields. He got his money and the district got its church. Rumour says he even brought an architect over from Italy to design it. As it was, anyone possessing a hint of Irish blood within a hundred mile radius was persuaded to get involved. This was built with their hands, and every Sabbath it was rammed to the rafters.

“It looks like someone's taken a fancy cathedral and shrunk it in the wash,” Marshall continues. “There's even gargoyles.”

“Local rocks, local timber. It's a lot cheaper than it looks, but it's the look that counts.”

“The doors are scorched.” He waves a finger. “And there, behind those bushes, is that the Fence? Have we joined up with it again?”

“Yes, but it's as strong here as anywhere else.”

“And it runs right behind the church. I guess that's where we're going to sneak in, huh?”

“No, Mr Marshall, it runs *through* the church, and there's more to it than just sneaking in.”

“So what will I find in there?”

“A forgotten priest ministering to forgotten children. The diocese has disowned this parish. They can't decide whether the Ghost Land is heavenly or of the devil, so they don't think about it. No holy words of guidance exist. A service was actually in progress when the Ghost Veil fell. An entire congregation got swallowed up. They went in and never came out.”

His voice has gone up a notch. I suppose that's a sign of disbelief. “Didn't anyone try to find out what happened?”

“A cop eventually came to investigate, some out of area deputy filling in for vacation leave. It didn't end well.”

In those early daysstuff had been happening all over the place and our local force was stretched out. I don't know what the cop saw. He wasn't in there very

long, but back outside he lifted a jerry can from the trunk of his State owned 4x4, doused the oak doors and put a match to them. He never spoke about his experience, or even say whether the congregation were alive or not. "I did the right thing," was all he admitted, even though the wood was too thick to burn properly. The way I heard it, the State cashiered him. I suppose they weren't taking chances. People see things in the Ghost Land they can't always describe.

"Nobody bothers to check this place any more." I pop open my door. "You can look for yourself."

I'm a dozen steps towards the church before I realise Marshall isn't following. He's fussing over that accursed car, walking around, bending over, checking every inch of panelling. Okay, let him get it out of his system, I'm happy to wait. When he's done he hurries over, coat flapping, face intense.

"Not ready for the junkyard yet?" It's the best humour I can manage, because when I take him through those burnt church doors he'll have a whole lot of other stuff to think about.

"No." The thunderclouds running across his features disperse a little. He takes in the church, the undersized carvings, the silent, narrow windows, the weather-scuffed walls. "I'm fine. Lets go."

"How much cash do you have on you?"

"I'm not sure. Twenty bucks maybe."

"Give it to me."

"What's this? A mugging?"

"Nope. A donation to the cause. It'll sweeten the trip."

He prises a ten and two fives from his wallet and I stuff it in the back pocket of my pants. The doors grumble open and I lead him inside.

A gone-to-hell Sistine chapel. Broken down frescoes. Pews tipped up and leaning, splintered against a crumbling wall. Floor a dusty crumble-crank of fallen plaster, stone chips and blown-in dirt. High windows bleed muggy light onto the chaos. Rusted metal braces stop the whole thing falling in on itself. Miss Havisham's dining room turned sacred and filled with crippled penitents. And beyond, a heap of rubble cauterising the church from floor to ceiling.

And here he comes, seemingly out of the dust, hands folded across his plaster-dusted cassock, his feet preternaturally silent on the gritty floor.

"Why do you bless us with your company tonight, daughter?"

"Missionary work, Father Joe."

He eyes Marshall. "Ah, a Pilgrim. Well converting the heathen is a difficult cause, daughter. Expenses must be considered. A donation to the church perhaps?"

I pull out the fold of dollars Marshall gave me and press it into Father Joe's palm. In a breath it's disappeared into the folds of his garment. Behind him, a stirring movement ripples along the broken plasterwork. Shadows turn into figures. Tall, short, fat thin. Their clothes, like their faces, leached of colour. Some shuffle in circles, others whisper what sound like incantations. Now that Marshall's eyes have adjusted to the gloom he'll see the alcoves stuffed with makeshift bedding.

"Who are those people?" he says, voice hushed.

"This is my flock," Father Joe replies without turning. "Those too afraid to journey further, but with nowhere else to go. And those who have travelled and come out splintered."

"What's wrong with them? They don't seem injured."

"They didn't find what they were looking for, or the Ghost Land refused to give it to them. They are too broken to think even of dying."

Marshall strides over, pulling something from his pocket. It one of those pictures of his daughter. "You," Marshall shakes a dusty collar. "Have you seen this girl? Quit the dumb act and tell me."

A tired shake of the head. Marshall pushes the Pilgrim back against the wall and pokes another. "How about you?"

The now dog-eared print is pushed into the penitent's face. He pulls out of Marshall's grasp and stumbles up the aisle, hands covering his ears.

"You will keep your hands off the Pilgrims, sir." Father Joe is only a few paces away, and the look on Marshall's face says he's noticed the cataracts milking the old man's eyes. A simple operation would take care of them but Father Joe refuses to have it done because he no longer wants to see into the Ghost Land. 'Things exist in there no mortal man was meant to look at,' he'd explained, in one of his softer moods. 'My loss of sight is a blessing, but God's mercy stops right at these walls.'

It seems mercy is not on Marshall's mind. "What are you going to do, blind priest, take me out with a wooden stick?"

“This stick is not wood, sir, but steel. Poor sighted or not I will always know exactly where you are. Your anger gives your position away, and if you try to hurt any of these, my children, my wrath shall fall on you and none will hold me accountable for it.”

Marshall waves his arms. “What have I been brought into, a church full of cripples? Look at them. They ought to be in an institution. They're practically catatonic. Can't anyone even be bothered to clean this place up?”

Father Joe's face is serene beneath his greying tufts of wiry hair. “These *cripples* don't necessarily see what you see, my son. To them this derelict church might be the inside of Noah's ark sailing a flooded world, a busy rail terminus with trains to elsewhere, or a cavern of light deep inside a mountain.”

“Yeah, we've all tried those drugs.”

“See this,” Father Joe indicates a niche in the wall. Old sacking forms a bed, and a greasy candle gutters in a sconce above.

Marshall shrugs. “What about it.”

“This is your place, brother. I have saved it for you.”

“Shit, are you trying to indoctrinate me into some kind of cult? I thought this was the way in to the Ghost Land?”

I step forward. “It is, Mr Marshall. In fact the Ghost Land lies on the other side of that pile of rubble. Don't worry, we don't have to dig through it or do any clambering. Father Joe, is the door open?”

The priest's hands have refolded themselves. “It is, my daughter.”

Marshall doesn't resist when I grasp his sleeve. “Come with me.”

I lead him around the back of the tipped-over pulpit to an innocuous door set at the bottom of a short flight of steps.

“What's this?” he says. “Are you taking me into some sort of dungeon now?”

“This church has a more colourful history than you might think. Beyond this door is a tunnel cut by bootleggers. The hooch was smuggled out of a still in Claywood, stored in the church and distributed to customers from here. The congregation saw some very shady characters turn up to services in those days, and who was to say anything if their cars left a little lower on their springs than when they came arrived? Some of their guys worked in the zinc mines over in Pembroke County and knew what they were doing. The passage will bring us out

a good five hundred yards beyond the Fence.”

I squeeze his arm to make sure I have his full attention. “Once we cross the boundary you might experience an odd sensation. I can't describe it exactly. It's supposedly different for everyone. Some don't feel it at all, but I'm just warning you. Grit your teeth and keep going unless I say otherwise.”

I twist the knob and the door whispers into darkness.

CHAPTER SIX

Mother was from the north east, a Brooklyn accent stringing her sentences together. Her skin was milk, her mouth a puckered pink orchid. A rain child, born under glowering clouds. To her, sunshine was an interloper that sometimes balmed in on a summer tide to suck the juice out of everyone's muscles. In the city, men like ragged dogs panted on stoops or in dusty gutters. Women stayed in the shadows or hid under wide-brimmed hats.

My parents' skewed sense of love was conceived in the dust of an arts and crafts fair arranged by one of Claywood's more progressive mayors. According to Dad, my mother-to-be travelled over from the city in the company of a college dropout and self-styled descendant of a Red Indian chief. When this fellow wasn't howling at the moon he liked to squat around a campfire strumming a battered guitar that was missing two strings. Fruitbat was his nickname and he wore his dirt with pride. His hair was half shaved, half braided. Lice danced in the creases of his army surplus jacket and his breath could knock down a horse. Though he could turn out a half-decent tune he left the singing to other people. Nature, that intangible demi-god he was so set on communing with, had twisted his teeth so his mouth seemed to split his right cheek. When he spoke it was with a snake's hiss.

Mother was heavily into her own educational crisis and was determined to find her inner self. Wracked with stomach cramps from her newly-adopted vegan diet, she nearly collapsed during her first few weeks on the road. Fruitbat wore his lopsided grin and continued his tutelage. She accepted everything he told her with the smile of the converted.

Dad had been drafted in to help ship neighbours' preserves to sell at the fair. He was taken with Mother's soft city looks, she with his wiry, sunburned strength and low, country drawl. She'd wanted to see how midwest folk lived and, whether it was culture shock or novelty value, what happened happened. Three months later Dad got a letter, and the Right Thing was done.

He talked about it, and her former boyfriend, all the time I was growing up, though whether he was speaking to me or the air I couldn't tell. His gaze drifted, as I later learned people's do when they're not really interested in your opinion.

“Alice used to call me 'crinkle eyes,’” Dad mused. “She laughed when I told

her reflected sunlight in these parts could fry your eyeballs in their sockets. 'You're so pragmatic about everything,' she said. 'It's why I'm attracted to you. It makes such a change.' Except that wasn't the reason even if 'attracted' was the right word. When someone's that close, and touching your heart in that way, you don't have much choice about what to accept. To her, everything was a poem. Farm life was bound to disabuse her of that notion, and it did. The shame is we never realised at the time. A thousand songs will tell you love does that to people, and that was the closest to love I ever had.”

How it all fell apart I'm not entirely sure. They already had their own places in the house, areas of him and her, but there was no symmetry to it, no particular rooms allocated to either one. Instead a puddle here, another one there. A stack of her books spilling off a coffee table, a pile of his worn boots hugging a corner, her art magazines gorging out the wicker newspaper rack, a jangle of oily tools infesting the understairs closet. I trod around these jumbled oases, careful always to sit in the few neutral spaces left. I took whatever clothes they gave me, whatever knick-knacks each thought I should wear, and fed them to my dresser drawers, careful to mix them up so there were no borders or territories. Mother's choice of clothing was practical enough to keep Dad, if not entirely happy then at least quiet, and what he gave me was colourful enough to stop mother complaining that her daughter resembled some cowpoke's tomboy. In the fair season I wore a flower in my hair whenever the whim took me, and Dad acknowledged it as a permissible “girl-thing”.

Petty bickering seldom fell into full blown arguments. I never knew whether that was for my benefit or not. After I was taken out of school, mother started writing letters. Lots of them, to all the people she'd known in the city. “I'm not losing old friends just because you put a ring on my finger,” she once told Dad. Sometimes she'd be standing out by our gate a good half hour before the mailman was due.

I tried to get on with my new life. The school wanted a letter from the doctor, the doctor was happy to write one. Dad drove over to see Miss Ronin and arrived back with a parcel full of my schoolbooks. He went over the problems patiently with me, letting me take my time and wear my sunglasses as I pleased though, out of the classroom, I found I needed them a lot less. I also helped Dad

wherever I could. With a farm, even one as cut down as ours, something always wanted fixing.

Sometimes, after what would've been class hours, I was allowed down to the Outpost to find whatever fun I could with whoever happened to be there. Unlike school, it didn't matter if you were boss-eyed or too backward to spell your own name. We were Outpost kids, bound together by the ever-growing Fence at the end of the main street.

We weren't blessed with a soda fountain, but the hardware store scooped vanilla ice cream from a chest freezer kept out back with the animal feed. We splashed it with 7-Up or Coke and sat on the strip of grass between the porch and the parking lot. I didn't see much of Tommy Brady. His mom was leaning on him hard, and on the occasions he did turn up at the hardware store, Wendy Martin would always be there, a simpering figure in the dust at his heels. I always felt a clenching sensation in my belly when I saw them like this. I wished he'd turn around and push her into the dirt, or tell her to quit following him. But he did neither of those things, and in my mind became complicit in her loose-lipped adoration.

Then mother began spending a lot of time away from the house. Her old friend, Fruitbat, had reappeared, drawn like so many frustrated artists or misfits to the border of the Ghost Land. Mother wanted to show him around, to "catch up" with things in the city. With her having spent so much time shut up in her room her absence barely made a difference.

Dad made no pretence of hiding his disgust. "She's squandering hours with some dope-addled west coast beatnik who's filled her mind with so much nonsense she spouts it from daybreak until dusk. I've nothing against a poet or anyone else of an arty persuasion, but if he keeps a woman from her family then something's got to be said."

Dad didn't do anything though. Not right away. What finally shattered the fractures was Wendy Martin's birthday party. Around here, kids' moms invited other kids as a matter of course. It didn't matter who you were. I didn't mind the parties themselves so much as the getting ready, but mother seemed keen that I should go. She quickly took charge, standing me in a basin in the middle of the parlour and scrubbing until my skin felt inside-out whilst Dad was banished to the kitchen. I was getting way too big for that tub, but mother seemed distracted,

excited even. Next came the dress, washed to attention. And my school shoes, buffed back into life.

“You'll take her Brad,” my Dad was told. “You can drop her off, shoot pool with your buddies then fetch her back.”

When Dad had taken his boots off that was usually him settled for the evening. “The ball game's about to start”, he said, face flickering in the light from the TV screen. “Can't you get one of the other kid's parents to take her? No sense in two dozen cars all driving out there at once.”

Something in his voice made me think that he wasn't really complaining, but just going through the motions, and when Mom said, “You can watch the game in the bar, you'll enjoy it more with your friends,” he made no further protest but took me out and bundled me into the pickup, Wendy's birthday gift tucked under my arm. I had no idea what that gift was, just something mother had got through mail order and wrapped without showing anyone. If it was down to me I'd put a dead rabbit in the box and let Wendy shriek over that, but the party would mean cake and soda, and a chance to get out of the thick air filling the house.

When Dad took the wrong turning for Wendy's house I thought maybe the road was up or another one of those dusty landslips had blown across the highway again. I didn't want to say anything in case I looked stupid. Only when he pulled into the parking lot of *Rolly's* bar did I say, “We're supposed to go to the party first.”

“You wait there,” he said, opening the pickup door. I won't be long. I'll bring you a soda, I promise. Put the radio on if you like.”

He clicked it on for me, and the tinny tones of bluegrass kicked out of the makeshift speaker. I sat in my party dress, listening to the starched creases crinkle in on themselves. Dad came back a few moments later. “Look what I got you,” he said, no enthusiasm in his eyes. “A chocolate shake. I didn't even know Rolly still did these.”

He disappeared back inside. The radio slipped in and out of tune, the music demoted to a monotonous drone. The milkshake was cool on my tongue. I thought maybe if I drank it down I wouldn't have much room for the cake later, but my taste buds got the better of my reasoning. I settled back in the seat, my feet tucked under the dash. I was aware some time later, of the door opening

again, of the glass being taken from my lax hands. A few minutes beyond that, the rattling thrum of the pickup's engine sent me fully into sleep.

In later years, when I chose to reflect on what happened next, I thought that most men might have blundered in with a shotgun or tyre iron. In a sense, my father's weapon was much worse. He plucked me from the passenger seat and shook the sleep from my eyes. The pickup was parked a couple of dozen yards from our farmhouse. Before I had a chance to fully wake up and ask why we weren't at the party, Dad had whispered me inside and up the stairs. When he shoved open mother's door she pulled herself from a damp entanglement of limbs and hair to find me staring at her, open-mouthed but still some way from the confusion that would later follow.

"That's a whore, Miriam," Dad declared as if about to pin the winner's button on the prize steer at the county fair. "Thought you'd best get an eyeful of it and the stink of her sin in your nose. Life's full of cheats and those whose promises are as worthless as the tongues they're spoken with."

The blankets crinkled and another face appeared beside mother's. Bearded, sloe eyed. "What are..." it started to say.

"How long do you think it will take to heal?" Dad interrupted.

"Take what to heal?"

"The broken nose I'm about to give you."

"Hey, man, there's no need for that."

"Fine. Keep your mouth shut. You don't know what you're getting into."

Dad took a bill out of his wallet, crumpled it in his palm and flicked it across the room. The paper missile caught mother on the cheek and landed on the bedside rug. "There's five bucks. That's all you're going to get out of me. I'm going up to the Outpost and I'm taking Miriam with me. When I get back I want to see that jerk gone and you washing his stink off your face."

In the bar, Dad sat me in front of the TV and got Rolly to find me something I could watch. Instead of shooting pool, Dad sat beside me, staring at but not seeing whatever on-screen action I wasn't bothering to watch either. I wasn't sure what to think, except that the gathering storm had somehow broken. "I suppose you don't want me to say anything about this," I said finally.

Dad took a pull on his Coke. "Not at all, Miriam. You can tell whoever you like."

A couple of Dad's drinking buddies came in, but Rolly whispered something and they left us alone. I doubt my father even noticed they were there.

“That guy with Mother, did you know him?” I asked.

“They were together when she and I first met. She seemed quite serious about him. He was an in-and-out of college student, doing a dumbass course on American culture as a ticket to keep him out of honest work. He was supposed to have come here to write some piece on the Fence and its impact on the local community, or some such shit. It was probably just another means to avoid doing any actual studying and finishing up with an actual degree. Last week, when I went into the Outpost, he was standing by the Fence with your mother, reading one of the noticeboards the Pilgrims have started putting up. Alice introduced us like we were old buddies. He was cleaner than I remembered him, but wore this woollen hat which covered half his ears and most of his hair. Tufts of it stuck out under the rim. He looked like Howdy Doody dragged the wrong way through a briar patch. He never took it off, even when we sat and had coffee later. I politely asked if he had some head condition which obliged him to keep it on but the question rolled over him. I can hardly think of any time he finished a sentence, or spoke in words of more than two syllables, or used “Yes” and “No” instead of “Huh”. Alice told me he was staying in town a few days. What got me was the idea of him walking around with your mother while that stupid hat perched on his head.”

Dad took a drink, swallowed, took another. “I asked him to help me load my pickup while Alice went into the store for some personal stuff. I'd already loaded a dozen sacks of seed onto the pickup bed at the end of what had proved a hard day, so it was really just an excuse. When I inquired whether he had any notions towards my wife the little squirt squared up to me, right there on the asphalt. I tried to talk it through, but he wasn't concerned with listening to anything I had to say. In the end all I saw was that damned hat bobbing in front of my face. I scooped it off his head and threw across the lot. I said if he didn't stop ranting I'd heave him after it and never mind the injury or cost.”

“What happened then?”

“He went crazy. His eyes near popped from his skull. He called me every form of devious fiend and crook, and for one second I almost did lose my temper. But then I started laughing. I laughed right in his face. Honestly, you'd think I'd

hacked both his legs off. Under the hat he looked like an ordinary kid with an ordinary mess of brown hair. I don't know if the hat was his version of a baby's security blanket, that it endowed him with a special confidence or any of that bullshit, but he left. There was nothing else for him to do but leave. When I told your mother what had happened she swore she'd never speak to me again, but in her eyes she was kind of laughing back at me."

"What became of the hat?"

"I fished it out of the lot, knocked the dust out and kept it."

"A prize?"

Dad shrugged. "I guess so." He put his Coke bottle down on the table. "We have to go back now, Miriam. I can't promise the unpleasantness is entirely over but we're through the worst."

"Is everything going to change?"

"Not that much. You're clever enough to know Alice left us both a long time ago."

Mother planned to move out that evening. Dad would drive her to the nearest Greyhound station and she'd ride all the way to New York. Dad sat at the kitchen table, staring at the faded cord drapes while his wife finished packing. She left all her books, her favourite watercolour prints and the boxes of sheet music. She took a day's change of clothes and the art scrapbook that nested in the top dresser drawer. Dad helped her on with her coat, grabbed her suitcase and walked her to the pick up truck, me trailing after them like an unseen, breeze-blown piece of chaff.

"You didn't even know I had this case did you, Brad?" she said at last. "No call for such a thing in this house. No reason to go travelling. I saw it in a garage sale, tucked under one of the trestle tables and mostly smothered by kitchen junk and other stuff. A corner was sticking out. I noticed a label - Hawaii I think it was - so I caught hold of the strap and hauled. I was in such a fever to get it I guess I wasn't taking much care. Things fell over, broke, rolled under people's feet. I didn't know then why I wanted it so badly, and because of the breakages I ended up paying a whole lot more than I intended. Now when I look at it I see a big sign with the word 'Exit' stencilled across it."

Dad threw the case into the back of the truck. "You said you loved me. Marriage should be for life."

"It wasn't love, it was biology. My heart was raw and my head full of butterflies. I saw you as a protector, a rugged man of the earth. For that I'm sorry. I didn't plan on trading that first week in heaven for a lifetime of hell. Such a thing isn't fair, Brad, on either of us."

"I'm sorry I didn't live up to your expectations."

"I can't even hold a conversation with you unless it somehow involves the farm. You won't read a newspaper except for the small ads, and that's mostly for tractor spares or some other piece of junk that's going cheap. Whenever I try to talk about something I might want, your mouth goes tight and your eyes glaze over. Then you spend the next hour banging around this shack or tinkering in the yard. The only intelligent talk I hear is on the radio when you haven't tuned it to one of those hick shows, and that's a one-way conversation."

"You can't undo it, Alice, any more than you can buy a pumpkin from the market and take it back because you don't like the taste."

"Why not? You never listened to a thing I said. You're not listening now. You nod your head, say 'Aha' then ignore all my complaints. A natural reflex, like kicking the dog that bit you. For all the effect my words have you might as well stick to thinking about ball game scores or the price of Millers at the liquor store."

Mother pointed at me, as though I'd just become visible. "And what about Miriam? You've worked hard to make her your child Brad. I wanted a pretty, feminine daughter but someone like that wouldn't get your fields ploughed or the crop harvested, at least not the way you'd want it done. On our wedding night you smelled of tractor oil. I noticed it even beneath the stink of that cheap cologne your drinking pals bought you. Your pores are choked with dirt and it won't ever come out. That's what life around the Outpost amounts to. Dirt."

Dad was shaking. "My life went wrong the moment that straw-headed work-dodger parked his busted Ford in the market's parking lot. I knew there was always a chance you'd run off with someone Alice, and I should've figured it would be some tight-ass. No don't try to defend him, not in front of me. I can't do diddly squat about you leaving but I don't have to listen to any shit. His daddy pays for his comfortable life when he should've put a thick strap across his boy's worthless ass."

"And I was wrong to take up with some mid-country hayseed just so he could have someone to leave his shack to. Miriam deserves better than this."

“I’ve never hurt a woman in my life, Alice, but you try to take my girl and I’ll shoot a barrel load of buckshot into your self-righteous heart.”

“Fine, you want her to grow up into a small town shitkicker with a head full of dust then that’s your affair. You won’t ever leave this wasteland and neither will she. The world is bigger than your farm, or that freakzone beyond the Fence, or any other shitty thing in this county, and I want to see a piece of it before my bones turn brittle and I end up as one of those apron-smothered drudges working the Outpost every weekday.”

“Why ever did you marry me, Alice?”

“I was just a girl.”

“If you thought yourself old enough to choose a ring then you should’ve been wise enough to pick the right man to go with it.”

“You’ll survive, Brad. You’re too stubborn not to. Tomorrow you’ll be out checking what’s left of your fields and tinkering with one of those busted engines you keep out back of the barn.”

"You done, Alice?"

"I was done a long time ago. Done and dusted as you like to say."

And then she was gone.

I don't suppose there were many things Dad could've done next. He chose to fetch a pile of empty seed sacks from the barn and stuff them full of mother's things, everything except the books. "Might be of some use to you in your schooling," I was told. He stripped that room to the floorboards, piled the sacks in the pickup truck then drove forty five miles to the nearest Thrift Store.

I couldn't figure out my own feelings. Should I be upset, crying, glad the bickering had stopped? I spent a couple of days going round straightening all the cushions and tittle-tat in the house, then went round and straightened them again.

“I don't like stuff being wonky.” I told Dad.

Then I started snapping at him for leaving doors open all over the place. “Why can't you close them? What's the point of having doors if you're going to leave them hanging wide open all the time?” I yelled. I guess I deserved a tearing down for that, but all Dad said was: “Maybe I was wrong to use the words I did in front of you, Miriam. Your mother is a confused lady. She knew that man from long before, and in her heart I don't think he ever went away.”

And so the days came and went. The differences were small but hung

heavily around me. The lack of movement upstairs, no more whispers creeping through the walls. Every Sunday I sat in the parlour chair and watched as Dad put on dark church suit and tie. We never spoke to each other during this old ritual. He picked up his Bible and his prayer book, and walked me to the pickup, which was always washed the previous evening. During the service Dad was quiet and respectful throughout, singing the hymns with muted passion. Afterwards, standing in the churchyard with his pants cuffs turned ochre by the dust, he shook hands and exchanged greetings with the other members of the flock. People had given up saying, "What a shame your wife couldn't make it." When they learned that said wife had upped and left for good no one pretended to be surprised. Mother had proved a lively bee in everyone's bonnet, and when she was gone the Outpost settled back into the shimmering peace of a plains summer.

Driving back one day Dad said, absently, "That was a strong sermon from the pastor today."

"He quotes from a Bible he never troubles to read," I replied. "You swallow everything that old fossil spouts from his pulpit. He's only interested in two things - his marrow beds and his Cadillac, and never mind saving anybody's soul."

Dad looked at me. "I guess you're changing, Miriam."

I guess I was. Moods flowed over me like water. My body was starting to play tricks on me as the months passed and I fell into my teens. I once said, "I don't want friends. They get in the way. They want things all the time." But now I felt I needed people, for attention, for acknowledgement of my existence, to agree with me, to hurt the way I sometimes hurt. I started looking for excuses to go with Dad to the Outpost. The free time I had wasn't enough. He liked to walk the aisles of the hardware store, nodding greetings, watching what people bought and sold. He never spoke much, just flicked the brim of his hat with one long forefinger.

I continued my schooling as best I could. Dad always made sure I had the stuff I needed. Mother's room quickly filled up with boxes, tools, overspill junk, as if to emphasise the fact she wasn't coming back. I never touched her books if I could help it. She'd used them to build a wall between herself and my father. If she ever wrote or called, Dad never told me. Around us, the neighbourhood stubbornly refused to change even as its children grew up. The Ghost Land simmered beyond the Fence. Winter bit then let go, then cycled round again.

The calm lasted a further three years. Then everything changed when a cream Chevrolet sedan drove into our yard.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Did you have to close the door behind us? I can't see anything. Is there a flashlight in that backpack?”

“Patience, Mr Marshall. Father Joe needs to lock the door in case some of his flock go wandering.”

“Are you setting me up for some kind of Coney Island Funhouse where you'll yell 'Boo' and I'll jump out of my coat?”

“Just give me a moment to get the lights.”

“Are we in it? The Ghost Land? I don't feel any different.”

A snap. A naked bulb set into the wall and caged with rusting mesh. The dim light barely invokes a blink from Marshall. He takes in the bare, whitewashed room. The floor is concrete, the walls brick behind the stained coating.

“The former liquor store,” I tell him. “The bootleggers made sure they built it right. No damp.”

“Is this your boogey world?”

“No. The threshold is further down that passage.” I show him the doorless opening where a string of lightbulbs are daisy-chained down a rectangular corridor. “Where those steps lead onto the raised walkway.”

Marshall peers at the ramshackle offcuts of wood. “That looks rickety. Suppose it collapses?”

“I've led bigger men than you into the Ghost Land. Once we're on the platform don't try to touch the floor.”

“Why not? It looks like plain concrete to me.”

“Some things are colourless and odourless but they'll hurt you just the same. At the end of this walkway is a ladder and a trapdoor. There's no telling what can tumble down when it's open, or what might seep through the cracks. I can't stop you taking chances. If you injure yourself I won't feel guilty or think I've failed.”

“That's a bit melodramatic. Suppose I do walk on it?”

“That's your prerogative, but can you please do me the courtesy of waiting until I'm back in the church so if anything happens you can experience it all on your lonesome.”

“Suppose I do it now?”

“In that case your journey with me stops right here. I can't accompany you with those kind of thoughts going around in your head, and don't insult me by saying you were only joking. You're curious, I understand that. You're probably a little excited and perhaps nervous. Everyone is the first time. Doctors might say its mild hysteria in the face of the unknown or other such bullshit. Screw around in the Ghost Land if you want but not with me or near me. Now, no more time wasting. I hope you're fit for a bit of clambering.”

Our footsteps are muted in the dust. Under his breath, Marshall is counting off the lightbulbs as we pass. “What will happen to me at the threshold?” he asks.

“You may not hear or see anything, but you'll know when you're in,” I tell him. “An involuntary sharpening of your breath, an irregularity in your heartbeat, a small rush of blood to the brain. Perhaps you might shiver, or feel your stomach flip in a someone-has-walked-over-your-grave moment. All sorts of thoughts will flit through your head. You'll feel a sense of displacement perhaps, or of being watched. For some it's an epiphany. Others can't wait to get out. Either way you'll get a whisper of not-quite-rightness. Everything will take on a whole new hue. You may find yourself looking at things as if they could bite and, believe me, some might. Everything in the Ghost Land has the potential for danger.”

“Can we go in there without breathing equipment?” He sounds reasonable now. “Is there gas? Isn't it poisonous?”

“No, it's just air. *Different* air I'll grant you, but air nonetheless.”

He halts at the steps. The makeshift walkway is raised less than a foot above the concrete. Marshall kneels and peers underneath.

“What's that stuff on the floor? Dust bunnies? A sprinkle of fallen plaster. Peeling varnish from these old timbers?”

“I don't know.”

“Why is it all collected down there? What's stopping it drifting down the passage?”

“Do you want to prod it to find out?”

“No. No, I accept what you say. I won't touch it.”

I mount the walkway. I have confidence in its crude, angular design. No woodworm or rot exist in the passage. No cobwebs drape the corners. Even the bugs are too freaked to live here.

Marshall tests each step, wincing when one creaks under his tread. His progress is slow, careful. He holds each arm out at his sides like a balance beam walker. His eyes stay on his shoes, every inch an exercise in concentration.

“Any moment now,” I tell him.

Then I hear what I always hear. The sucking in of breath, a whisper of surprise. Marshall stops and crosses his arms over his chest.

“Do you feel something?” I ask him. “Uncertainty? A fluttering through your whole nervous system?”

“Yes, but that could be down to suggestion. You've been cranking things up pretty well.”

I laugh, though it's not really funny. “What did you expect? Fireworks? A light show? A barrage of special effects out of some blockbuster science fiction movie? The door into the Ghost Land is something you cross inside of you as well as out.”

“I feel dizzy, as if I've been sucking helium.”

“The sensation won't quite leave you, but you'll get used to it.”

I grasp his coat sleeve and lead him to the base of the ladder. It was filched from an old firetruck and is every bit as robust as during its service days.

“You're going up first, right?” he says, eyes dark buttons under the lightbulbs.

“Yes, I'll go first.”

I grab the pole standing next to the ladder and flip the trapdoor open. Marshall, backs off as much as the narrow walkway will allow, but all that falls through the open hole is a scattering of twigs. I climb up, but Marshall won't follow. He's at the foot of the ladder, staring at me.

“Is there a fire up there?” he says.

“No.”

“What's that light? Why is it such a funny colour?”

“I'll take you back to your car if you like.”

He waves a hand then grasps the rungs. “It's alright, I'm coming.”

I back away from the trapdoor and wait, ready to give him the minute or two I know he's going to need. His head appears like a squirrel from a hole, then his coat, which seems to have wound itself around his torso. His city shoes slip on the trapdoor lip and for a moment I think he's going to tumble ass-first down the

ladder again. It would be a first for me if one of my clients ended up in hospital before even reaching the Ghost Land proper.

I once claimed, perhaps harshly, that people all think the same, talk the same, live the same and will die the same. However their first words on entering the Ghost Land have, in all the time I've been doing this, proved different. So I go and stand beside the collapsed sofa and wait for Marshall to say whatever it is he's going to say. That blinking is back, a rapid tic-tic, as though his eyes are movie camera lenses trying to process images that forever move in and out of focus. Then he comes out with it.

“The walls have gone.”

Another first, but he's right, the walls have indeed gone, along with the doors, windows, roof and just about everything else. We're standing on the floor of a farmhouse surrounded by the detritus of some gone-away family life. The front room furniture, the kitchen with its rusty range, a blown out old radio, a bed rotted to its metal frame. As Marshall scouts the perimeter, his feet squelch on the rotted scraps of the parlour rug. He picks up a coffee cup from a splintered cabinet and tips it, allowing dirt and leaf husks to tumble out.

“Don't touch anything,” I warn.

“The walls have gone,” he says again. “Were they demolished?” He's turning his attention to the coffee table, where the faded, stuck-together pages of a newspaper still lie. “Was there an explosion? I don't see any rubble or broken glass. Look at all this shit,” he drops the cup and sweeps his arm round, “it's just sitting there like some kind of hick town *Mary Celeste*. The family must have been evacuated, right?”

“I honestly don't know, Mr Marshall.”

“So what then, the Ghost Land ate them?”

“I've never seen this place any other way, though father Joe might have an old picture from before the bootleggers started using it. Here, things are as you find them.”

He walks to the edge of the floor and stares across the weed-rustled path to the land beyond. “Look at those trees. Right out of some creepy Universal movie. The only thing missing is Bela Lugosi. What's the matter with them? Are they poisoned? I've never seen such stunted looking things. They're like traps, ready to grab and bite anything that passes. And that orange sky is nothing

natural. No sunset ever resembled that. It's more like some catastrophic industrial pollution has taken place. The area has been knocked out, put into a coma and gathering dust while it sleeps. I've seen smuggled photographs but nothing looked as crazy as this."

"Once you're in the Ghost Land *everything* looks worse than the pictures."

"But what about those houses over there?" He points to where a pair of shingled roofs poke above the scrub. "They don't look touched."

"Nobody ever goes inside those houses, Mr Marshall. Shorty after the Ghost Veil fell looters descended on the area. Most ended up hurt or dead, or wandering about in Father Joe's church, and all for a cookie jar full of dollars or something utterly stupid. One looter took a shine to an electric lamp with a pretty shade and brought it out of the Ghost Land. The shade was coated with something bad. When he switched the lamp on it poisoned everyone within twenty feet. His entire family died. The cops nicknamed the room in which they found the corpses the Death Chamber."

Marshall rubs his face with his fingers. "Okay, what now?"

"Here," I handed him the pills. "You'll need these for later."

"I take it they aren't aspirin?"

"A pick me up to keep you going."

He popped a tablet out of its blister, sniffed it, then tested it with his tongue.

"Amphetamine," he grimaces. "I used to use these when cramming for my law exams. For a moment I thought you were handing me suicide pills."

"Nothing so dramatic, we just need to keep moving."

"We can't rest at all? There's no safe place, anywhere?"

"It's a restless landscape, Mr Marshall. Some Pilgrims claim the Ghost Land is a living, breathing thing that will test you to your limits. I don't know if that's true, but we have an awkward trip ahead of us. Stay right behind me and, like I said, don't touch anything.

Weeds seem to flow and ebb across the path in a crawling tide. Marshall's heels clack on the concrete. He eyes the ground either side, but it's nothing other than dirt and clumps of scrub grass. There probably wasn't much of a garden here to begin with. Bootleggers don't have a notion to plant dahlias.

He's right about the trees. It's not winter, yet there's not a leaf or bud to be

seen. They're not dead either. On a previous trip I went as close as I dared. The branches have none of the grey brittleness of death, but are dark and chitinous, swallowing any light that strikes them. Not that the boiling sky illuminates much anyway. Staring at it is like looking into the embers of a furnace.

We pass through the broken wooden teeth of a picket fence. Marshall is chuckling.

“What's so funny?” I ask.

“You're moving differently,” he says. “Before we came here you were swinging your arms and hips all over the place. Now you walk like you've got a pine cone up your ass.”

“We can't afford to be clumsy. That might be dangerous.”

A mailbox, flag still up, marks the edge of the road. A good road - two lane blacktop - but now so thick with grit we leave footprints. It swings to the right past a cluster of thick bushes. These don't look too bad, though the green is a little washed out and they smell of old fish. I glance back at Marshall. He's produced a handkerchief from somewhere and is vigorously wiping his face. Ahead, the road dissolves into the orange fug. Nothing much to see. Fencing, knocked flat by some long ago gale. A line of telegraph poles, the cables snapped and lying coiled on the ground.

We approach the Bone Pile, a waist high jumble of animal remains lying in a neat, conical mound in the middle of the road. Mostly the skulls and ribcages of dogs, cats, raccoons, and heaven knows what else. Rumour had it the Pilgrims put it there as a warning or perhaps some kind of totem.

Marshall halts and takes it in, his face expressionless. The blinking has, for now, stopped. He produces a packet of Pez mints from his pocket, flicks one into his mouth then returns the packet without offering me one. “What's this, animal sacrifices?”

“I don't know. I doubt there was much left in the Ghost Land to sacrifice. Chances are these were already dead. Animals don't have a good history in this place.”

“What do you mean?”

“A herd of cattle ran out of the Ghost Land when the Veil fell. They stampeded down the Claywood highway, bellowing and bleeding from where they'd crashed through their paddock fence. The army rounded them up,

slaughtered them and burned the carcasses. Similar culls took place across the county.”

He stretched out a foot to nudge the pile, caught my look then straightened again. “I'd have thought this would be crawling with bugs. There's no birds that I can see, no crickets clicking in the grass. It's like the whole landscape has gone deaf.”

“I am making sounds. You're making sounds. Can't you hear your own breathing, the scratch of your fingernails, the scuff of those city shoes on the concrete? Can't you hear me?”

“I've never known quiet like this. It broods.”

“After you've spent some time here you might start talking to yourself, then start crying, then curl up into a ball in the dirt and wish the world away.”

He shakes his head. “It must take a lot of courage to do this for a living.”

“Courage? I don't even think about it, though I'll never be reckless enough to think the Ghost Land can't hurt me because I have a good sense of it. Knowing what a bomb is won't stop it going off in your face. Let's keep going. There's nothing here.”

Marshall falls in behind me again. He's still crunching on that mint. I wince every time I hear a piece crack on his teeth.

“Funny you should mention a bomb,” he says.

“Why?”

“Well, there are the stories.”

“The Ghost Land isn't short of those, Mr Marshall. Which one in particular did you mean?”

“The one that says there was some kind of secret lab, and where better to hide it than under a mid-west country town. Imagine stepping into some Mom n' Pop store off a dust blown main street, the kind of place that sells tin pails and sacks of corn seed, only instead of a store room out back you've got a place brewing all kinds of horrors to fight the commies with. But suppose there was an explosion, or a whole bucket of shit got out some other way, maybe through the vents?”

“Is that the only story you've heard?”

“No, but it's the best one. A weapon to bring the war to a quick close but one that wouldn't create a nuclear holocaust. A shell packed full of chemicals, or

drugs, or disease – who knows, maybe all of those things. Something crazier than the napalm or Agent Orange shit being used in Vietnam right now. Something made to spread so far and then no further, that instead of slaughtering thousands would create some psychotropic wasteland and scare the commies into surrendering.” He rubs his hands. “They'd transport it in a truck, maybe disguised as a furniture removals or something, and sneak it through the back country roads at night. It was dark when everything here went belly up, wasn't it? Only it went wrong, and the bomb detonated, and there you have it, your own little woo-woo land. Maybe they'd made something that worked better than they could ever have imagined, and that something scared them into never trying it again.”

“It seems you've come in here with some very solid notions, Mr Marshall. Wouldn't a bomb leave a crater?”

“The whole damned Ghost Land could be a crater, unlike one we've ever seen before.”

I grimace. “You're speculating. We've all been doing that for years, trying to deal with something we don't understand by mythologising it. We can't apply scientific values to this because its beyond our science. You might as well emulate the Pilgrims and take a quasi-religious approach. From a scientific perspective their answers are as good as yours.”

“Okay, maybe it was something on an aircraft that crashed. Ever seen a debris field from a plane impact? How far it can stretch? Imagine that magnified a hundredfold. It's not a bad explanation. Better than dipping into the pages of *Amazing Stories* in the hope of finding an answer there.”

I stop and turn on him. I'm wagging a finger under his face, a gesture I hate but sometimes my finger will do what it will. “I'll tell you what, Mr Marshall, let's take a detour. Just a short one that won't put you in any danger. I want to show you what happens when people are determined to find rational explanations for things that might lie outside the limits of their own comprehension.”

“A scare show? Like that pile of bones back there?”

“No, something that might persuade you to redefine the word 'rational'.”

I lead him off the road. A narrow track winds through the scrub. “The military spent millions on little wheeled robot things equipped with every kind of detection gizmo. Each was sent into the Ghost Land from a different entry point.

Within a day they were all wrecked. The people who built them should've known better. You survive this place by instinct. You need to feel the Ghost Land, be alert to its vagaries to the very tip of your jangling nerve endings. Some grunt working a radio controller is never going to achieve that.”

“And these supposed dangers lurk everywhere?”

“Mr Marshall, if I didn't know exactly where I was taking you we'd both be in trouble. Think about it. Years have passed since the Ghost Land came into our lives and it shows no sign of disappearing. Perhaps it never will, unless one day we do find some way of cleaning it. Like certain radioactive isotopes with long half lives it may be thousands of years before the area becomes safe. In the meantime a segment of our county is preserved, or locked in the past if you prefer. Some areas are derelict and overgrown. Others have hardly changed.”

“You sound like a talking copy of *National Geographic*.”

I actually laugh at that. “My Dad said something like that to me once. 'You could talk your way out of any shit,' was how he put it. And he was right.”

We're climbing a low rise. The bushes have retreated either side and our path is marked by a green vapour trail of flattened grass. Marshall's breath is coming in ragged loops. I don't stop or slow down. I want to get this over with then back on the trail. I wouldn't have done it at all if I didn't think disabusing him of some of his stupid notions would help. We crest the hill and there it is, the Pill Box.

“If you're one of these people who thinks science can explain everything then I hope you're prepared to have your worldview tilted,” I tell him. “Maybe there are things that have a reasonable explanation, but that'll depend on your idea of reasonable. We'll have all sorts of folk with all kinds of theories come by. All have a point to prove. All have a faith system. Those who claim to be rational fall first. I suppose that's because the true Pilgrims are better prepared to encounter anything and don't try to make judgements about it afterwards.”

He stares past me at the mess. A plate of flat topped rocks. A broken conundrum of thick brick walls, snapped-off spears of metal, and half-rusted sheets of corrugated iron. Not demolished or burned down. More like something monstrous had picked it up and let go from a great height so it burst like a cherry tart hitting a kitchen floor. Still above us is that bloated sky streaked with blood clouds and a forever-setting sun. Everything glowers like a fire in an otherworld.

The place was worse than ruined. It was *destroyed*.

“What is that?” Marshall says in his unendearingly blunt way.

“The Pill Box. Think of it as a kind of shelter.”

He observes the jumbled palette of browns upon greys upon browns. “A rat couldn't shelter in that.”

The story is simple, and Marshall is at least willing to listen. Pride and arrogance will get you killed in the the Ghost Land as effectively as someone putting a bullet through your skull. Scientific pride more than anything, and the instinct to piss on something to mark it as your territory. That's what led to the Pill Box disaster. Apparently it was intended as a prototype for some fanciful future base on the moon or perhaps Mars, though it looks like they'd skimmed on some of the materials. It suited its name well, though in official jargon this circular, flat-topped piece of specially manufactured bricks was a 'self-sustaining environmental module'. Very nice. It was pressurised, insulated, had its own life support systems and an array of communication devices. And they put it into the Ghost Land.

We try not to think too harshly of the poor fools. They genuinely thought they'd found a safe spot. The military believed progress was being made, that the horrors in this place could be contained, understood, dealt with. A wild frontier that would gradually become tamed by human expertise and endeavour. They would clean the place up, learn from their mistakes and do better next time.

So they sent in their bold pioneers, six of them, all men. They took their air and soil samples, posed in their protective suits, transmitted reams of numbers back to base to keep their fellows happy. The team was cheerful, dedicated, adventurous. They even held a birthday party for one of their number with vacuum packed sausages on little cocktail sticks and a splash of wine in a paper cup.

And they all died.

The official time was logged at 3.03am. That figure filtered down from a radio ham two counties over who knew someone who allegedly knew someone else 'in the know'. It could be nonsense, of course, but it sounded impressive, and added a sheen of truth to the whole thing. Monitoring equipment in the Pill Box picked up nothing abnormal. No vagaries in air supply, temperature or radiation levels. Food and water supplies were not believed to be contaminated. At the

exact same instant the six men simply stopped living. Five were in bed, one was on night duty. His corpse was slumped across a monitor.

In the corridors of the military, pandemonium ensued. Some, mostly friends and colleagues of the stricken men, wanted to mount a rescue party. Things were bordering on mutiny when the army brass, perhaps in panic, collapsed the Pill Box remotely. Nobody knew whether they used some kind of bomb or if the place was already wired with explosives as a just-in-case measure. To my knowledge no military personnel has been near it since. The story briefly leaked into the local press then vanished from its pages forever, but even the Outpost kids are familiar with the tale.

“Think about it,” I tell Marshall. “For hours the automatic systems continued to transmit data. The corpse-filled, sterile interior of the Pill Box has been captured for eternity.”

Marshall skips up onto a tipped concrete slab. I think about admonishing him, then let it go.

“The corpses are still in there?” he asks.

“As far as I know.”

“No further investigation? No autopsies.”

“No.”

“Hiding their own screw-up, eh? I can believe that, but it doesn't have to be a great mystery. Maybe the shelter, or bunker, or whatever it is wasn't as sealed as they thought, or their airlock didn't work properly. The whole thing looks cheap. Something could have got in, something airborne, that maybe was too experimental or too well camouflaged to show up on their fancy monitors. No need to go all H.P. Lovecraft. It's the same scientific principles that apply to everything else.”

“The Ghost Land doesn't recognise scientific principles, Mr Marshall, therefore the scientific community doesn't recognise it. To them we're just another Bermuda Triangle or Atlantis, a bunch of hicks in the ass-end of America trying to squeeze money out of the superstitious and deluded. They pretend we don't exist, or try to rationalise us away with a bunch of impressive looking charts, convoluted psychology and a whole pile of impressive sounding jargon. No scientist dares make the trip here in case their career takes a hit or certain academic doors are closed in their face. The scientific community only accepts

things that fit, or can be made to fit, within its own paradigm. They've given up on us.”

“You talked about theories?”

“Scientists have already run out of theories. The Ghost Land is an affront to them. It shakes their carefully constructed world view. So they put the losses down to freakish weather, naturally occurring toxins, mass hysteria and misadventure. They smother it under jargon and complex graphs. To them it doesn't exist. It *can't* exist. Say otherwise and that's the end of your career.

“Have you carried out any experiments of your own on this place?”

“No, I don't want to hurt it.”

He pulls a face. “Hurt it? Are you kidding? Do you believe it's alive? Does it hold some kind of religious value for you?”

“If being able to conceive of things beyond the end of my materialistic nose is religion then, yes, I'm religious.”

“Well if you're hoping to convert me to your ghostly faith you can abandon that notion.”

“I'm here to take you to your daughter, Mr Marshall. The religion I'll leave to Father Joe. Let's get going. Some interesting miles lie ahead.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Chevrolet swooped into the yard in a cloud of ochre dust. I'd lived long enough to recognise trouble when it showed up. I put down the bag of seed I'd been toting and ran inside the house to fetch Dad. By the time he appeared, wiping oily hands on the corner of a faded hunting shirt, the car's occupant was already half way to the front porch. Dad waited him out, eyes noting the sharp suit, silk tie and leather briefcase. Enough bankers and lawyers had crossed his path for him to know straight away what he was looking at, and this balding, pasty-faced city boy was already wilting in the Midwestern heat.

"Mr Tasker?" A blurred east coast accent.

"That's the name on the gate." An amiable enough reply, though I picked up the warning rumble at the back of Dad's throat.

"I'm charged with delivering these papers."

"I guess they're not something you could've just sent in the mail?"

"No sir."

Dad snapped the envelope out of the man's grasp, glanced at the contents and let them fall into the dirt. "Get the hell off my land."

The visitor held his hands up. "Now don't try anything rash, mister. I'm just doing my job. No need to get aggravated. I don't want to have to fetch the sheriff."

"I figured you for the kind of fellow who'd get the law to do his fighting for him. But this is a big county and you're a long way from home. Now get back in your car, put your foot to the gas and remove yourself from my property. Otherwise I'll be obliged to put rock salt in my shotgun and make a pretty mess of your ass."

The visitor licked his lips, looked at Dad then glanced at the Fence. "Is that..."

"Git".

He climbed back into his vehicle and was gone. Dad stared after the cloud of dust. The papers lay, undisturbed by any breeze, a white flag in the browns and ochres of his yard. He made no move to pick them up. Neither did I. Whatever was happening would play out in its own good time.

Later, when the seed bags were stacked and dusk was kicking in, Dad came back outside, scooped the papers up, and returned indoors. I cleaned myself up at the yard faucet and followed. Dad was sitting at the kitchen table with the papers spread out in front of him.

"She ran beyond the range of my gun then sent this jackass back with a piece of paper," he said.

I fetched the coffeepot, poured him a cup and sat opposite. He drank most of it in one gulp. "It was all a big show," he said. "She had it in mind to take you all along. Lover or no lover, I thought she left too easily."

"Mother?"

"Who else? She's built quite a nest for herself in the city. Now it seems she wants you to complete her pretty picture, as if you were some kind of kitchen gadget she could just get mail order."

He swept a hand over the papers. "Alice claims you never got a proper education, that it was my fault for taking you out of school. She says living next to the Fence puts you at risk, like we hadn't already done that as a family for years. It seems she thinks she can scare me into giving you up with a bunch of legal shit."

I sucked in my breath. "She wants me to stay with her for good?"

"I've never been entirely sure what your mother wanted, but custody is only a part of it."

"I'm fourteen. In a couple of years I can make my own mind up about where I live."

"That's true, but up until then it won't make you any less gone. It's a game, Miriam, all part of her neat little show. I'm not saying it isn't natural for a mother to miss her daughter, but if she loved you so badly she'd have done something long before now."

"Maybe she was scared. You were pretty hard on her that day in the yard, I remember."

"If she was ever scared of me she wouldn't have gone diddling with that hippy in the first place. Apparently he's now gone respectable. Works in banking."

"So, am I going?"

Dad stared out at the yard. "Bob Miller's been my family's attorney for a generation. He won't be browbeaten by shiny-shoed city pen lickers. I'll see him first thing. You fetch your supper and go to bed, Miriam, and don't fret."

"If it's all the same, Dad, I'd like to go down to the Outpost."

"Oh yeah, it's Saturday." A grin at last on his tired face. "I guess you've worked hard enough. Just make sure you're safe home."

Jessie Cairns, the woman who ran the bar next to the Fence, had fitted out a back room for selling soda to the Outpost kids. She'd put in a juke box, pool table and TV, and it was the nearest thing to a club we'd ever have outside the county capital. Tonight things didn't look good. Everyone was sitting in a loose cluster, talking or absently sipping soda. When I took a chair, Milo Hanson leaned over. "Not much work today, Miriam. The evening looks pretty washed out too."

"Maybe it'll pick up."

He shrugged. "Too many Missionaries, not enough Pilgrims, but who knows?"

Wendy Martin was sitting within nickel distance of the juke box. On noticing me, she scraped back her chair and paraded before the group like a firing squad officer, thin smile slicing her mouth. She produced a birthday-present camera from the red Betty Boop bag that always clung to her hip. "Picture time."

Without thinking, I leaned in.

"Actually I don't want you in the photo," Wendy said, brandishing the little Kodak.

I leaned back. "Well, I guess having me smiling at you from your bedside table would always remind you of what you'll never be. Isn't that so?"

A couple of the guys stared at us, trying to figure out whether this little piece of bitching would fizzle out or blow into something much bigger. After seeing Dad with those papers I wasn't in the mood for trouble. Not with Wendy. She clicked off a couple of pictures she wasn't interested in taking then stowed the camera back in her bag. Fugitive crumbs clung to the corner of her mouth from the two desserts she always ate.

"Tommy's been over at Ping-Pong's place," she told me. "He's coming to fetch me in the car."

I shrugged. A soda appeared in front of me. I didn't even notice who bought it. Girls never got their own drinks in the Outpost. I took a swig. Warm Coke flooded my tongue. Jessie's refrigerator must have been playing up again. Wendy, in the meantime, flitted about the place chatting to everyone. By the time she worked her way back to me I'd already grown tired of the game.

"Tommy's driving me to the Gilbert's Gully tomorrow," she said. "I expect we'll pack a picnic."

"Look," I told her, "I'm going home soon. I don't care whether you're going to Gilbert's Gully or the Grand Canyon. Just go meet your ride and stop jawing at me."

Wendy actually flicked her ass as she walked out the door, and I was irritated that I'd let her provoke another reaction from me. *One up for Wendy.* She'd be waiting under the bar's neon sign, illuminated like some spectral hooker. Her favourite spot, as though saying to the whole Outpost *This is where I wait for Tommy. This is where Tommy picks me up.*

I finished the Coke and slammed the bottle down without thinking. Tommy was spending a lot of time at Ping-Pong's place. Sure, it was a guy thing, they liked to mess around with car parts. He'd help Tommy to turn the ratty convertible he'd inherited from his grandpa into quite the hot rod. It didn't bother me like it did some folks that Ping-Pong's family were the most unruly bunch of unkempt trailer trash ever to disgrace a neighbourhood. Heaven alone knew where they'd come from, or where they were going for that matter, but less than a year ago they'd bought some smallholding for less than the price of dust thanks to the Ghost Land. A clutch of chickens they'd bartered for near starved to death till someone came along in the dark and broke their necks. It was a mercy, and it put an end to any attempt by the Pattersons' at farming.

Ping-Pong Patterson liked to steal other people's cars and race them on the asphalt apron bordering Jeb Moore's Texaco. Ping-Pong only took the out-of-town cars because if there's one thing his daddy taught him it's never to shit in your own nest. Besides most of these visitors were only here for the Ghost Land or because the Outpost offered the only gas stop for near enough fifty miles. The Mini-Mart parking lot provided a rich harvest for Ping-Pong when our little town was thick with Pilgrims. Thirty seconds with a bent piece of wire was all it took to open the door into Ford or Oldsmobile heaven. Tyres squealed on hot concrete

and sometimes, if the wind was right, the smell of burnt rubber drifted right across the farms. Nobody tried to stop Ping-Pong. Bernard, the local deputy sheriff, didn't have the balls for it. Besides, doors were often left unlocked and keys left in ignitions. A number of those Pilgrims had no intention of going home.

Ping-Pong's antics sometimes drew a small crowd. Girls, discarding their farm wear for yellow blouses and bright summer petticoats, sat like a row of fried eggs on the wall opposite the Texaco pumps, screaming adoration as Ping-Pong howled by in another cloud of dirt and burnt gas. When he was done he'd likely leave the car, hot and steaming, up some back alley. Then Bernard might get around to calling it in and put on his best country-yokel-smile to placate the scarlet cheeked owner who'd come blustering down to the pound to claim it. The obviously abandoned cars, the ones sitting for weeks under a quarter inch of grit, Ping-Pong took up to his Dad's place and dismantled.

Nobody knew exactly what age Ping-Pong was, and he wasn't much for volunteering information about himself. His short stature and peanut head were an ugly contrast to the old-man-eyes squinting from his pimpled face. He'd spend time in the adult bar, shooting pool and drinking beer the way the farmers did. Jessie, mom-from-hell veteran who'd seen sons and grandsons off to war, served him without a blink. She said he was where folk could keep an eye on him and not off somewhere trying to get a decent girl into trouble.

Though he swaggered around the pavement like John Wayne in a too-tight belt, Ping-Pong never seemed to get involved in anything approaching a fight. Sure, he picked on Dennis Parsons, but since Dennis was bespectacled and intelligent, Ping-Pong considered that his job. However the increasingly dark look simmering behind Dennis's eyeglasses suggested a major upset in the balance of nature was in the making. Ping-Pong was a kind of twister that had blown into all our lives, and Tommy worshipped him.

Another Coke appeared in front of me, and I drank that too. The clock tickety-ticked. Soon it would be too dark to sneak beyond the Fence. Whatever the Pilgrims were doing tonight, it didn't involve spending their bucks at Jessie's. I looked around at my fellow Missionaries. Gossip. A card game with cocktail sticks for money. Nickels sliding down the Juke Box's chrome throat.

'Missionaries' wasn't so much a gang name as a job description. The economy was pressing hard on the farms and other businesses around the Outpost,

and since prospects had taken such a dive with the appearance of the Ghost Land it was felt some kind of income ought to be got out of it. At least for as long as the lost and the curious were willing to pay. Once they'd reached their destination, people on that kind of one way trip had no use for money. Gaps appeared in the Fence, places you could crawl under, clamber through, climb over. So much cash was changing hands some kids started neglecting their farm chores. But some parents had gained a knack for not looking, or asking.

“Nutjobs, freaks and suicides,” was how Jessie described the Pilgrims. “These losers are going to kill themselves somewhere. Might as well give them what they want and make a few bucks. Who knows, they might even find their pot of treasure. And if not, what have they lost? They'll soon be gone one way or another.”

Giving them what they wanted. That was my business all right. Taking them in. Letting them see, I mean *really* see, what they wanted. Bringing them out again. Maybe. I'd seen my share of the regretful, those who turned up, sobered up, saw what really lay at the end of this particular rainbow then returned to the life that suddenly didn't seem so bad. Some underwent this epiphany on the edges of the Outpost, some at the Fence, and others after experiencing what lay beyond. No refunds.

Other Missionaries thought I was lucky because the Fence ran through our property. They didn't know my Dad. First bunch of Pilgrims turned up at our gate, he set the hose on them. Second lot got a warning shot over their heads. Word must have spread. I was sure the Pilgrims had their own grapevine, like some sort of college society or frat group, because there was no third bunch. Dad must have known what was going on but he never asked me directly if I was involved. “These so-called Pilgrims are being helped to kill themselves as readily as putting a razor in their hands and standing by while they cut their own throats,” he said over supper once, and didn't mention it again. The dollars I earned were stuffed into an old pillowcase and tucked behind the wardrobe. Dad never came into my room.

Jessie had worked out an informal rota. When Pilgrims would come in the bar, she'd fetch whichever of us was next on the list, and the deal itself would be done out back. She'd want her cut of course. Maybe she was exploiting us. We saw it as a good business arrangement. Tommy would've made a good

Missionary, but he went on working his mother's farm. He never led anyone into the Ghost Land, and if one of the Pilgrims asked him anything he'd say, "I know nothing about it," and walk away. He'd tried talking to me in Jessie's parking lot, trying not to hector but sounding like an old man just the same..

"Does your father know what you do?"

"I don't believe he thinks about it. Besides, anyone I take in gets exactly what they want."

"How's that, Miriam?"

"I show them things."

He had no answer for that, and never troubled me over the subject again.

My stomach couldn't cope with another Coke so I waved my goodbyes and headed outside, writing the evening off as a busted flush. Wendy posed under the sign, applying lipstick to her already painted lips. The neon light turned it a gruesome shade of purple. She caught sight of me and gave a look that suggested I'd no right to be walking down *her* street in *her* town. I fished the sunglasses out of my pants pocket and perched them on my nose. A really cool pair of Ray Bans, like something the CIA might wear. Tommy had gifted them on my last birthday and Wendy had squealed for days afterwards. I arranged my mouth into what I hoped was a killer smile and put a strut into my steps. In truth I could barely see a thing but not even a blind man could get lost in the Outpost. I let the night take me, a night that was full of Pilgrims, Tommy, Ping-Pong and a bunch of papers lying in the dirt of my father's yard.

Morning brought a surprise. A cloud of dust arrived at the gate and resolved itself into Tommy behind the wheel of his project car. I'd just finished up in the yard and had nothing to steal my attention for the rest of the day, other than going down to the Outpost in search of Pilgrims.

Tommy's pride and joy looked like something that had been shelled in the war. It was all mismatched parts and primer. A red fender, coupled with a blue hood. Hubcaps missing, exhaust growling like a cougar with a bad throat. He beamed at me through the windshield. One of the wipers was missing, I noted.

"Hey Miriam," he yelled. "D'you want to come for a ride?"

I slipped out of the gate. "In this? How far will it get?"

He laughed. "Don't be put off by her looks. That's just cosmetic, and I've already planned a paint job. Me and Ping-Pong have been working on the engine. Thought I'd take her out for a shakedown."

"Aren't you supposed to be taking Wendy to the Gully for some kind of picnic?"

"That's not for hours yet. Come on, you might not get many chances to ride in the Supermobile. We aim to race her when she's done."

I don't know what took hold of me. This was scarily different, but before I'd a chance to think about it further I slipped into the passenger side and closed the door. Tommy set off like a buck in a rodeo pen. I was pressed back into the upholstery, hair whipping about my skull.

"Where are we going?" I yelled, above an engine that had awoken from a growl and was now singing.

"Hog's Ridge."

"That's miles away."

"This baby'll eat up the distance. Watch."

And then we were going even faster. His car might have looked like scrap but it took corners like they weren't even there. I don't think I'd ever travelled so fast in my life. In no time at all we were past the Outpost and heading across the plains to the distant smudge of Hog's Ridge. I got caught up in it all. For one crazy moment I thought there might really be something new beyond the horizon, that if Tommy drove hard and fast enough he would take me there. And for a time I *was* somewhere else. Speed blurred the boring shapes of the world into exciting swirls of colour. My hair still beat about my head, while happy tears drew tiny Ghost Veils across my eyes. I yelled, and laughed, and thumped my knees with my fists. Tommy was invincible behind the wheel of that huge car, grinning back at me, and for a second a thread ran from my heart and connected with everything in the world. When he drove across the railroad tracks at Dawson's Crossing my butt actually left my seat and I collapsed back in a shower of giggles.

We were there in a heartbeat, drawing up into what passed for an outlook on the Ridge. I climbed out, legs shaking, hands trying to scramble some sense back into my hair. Tommy was standing over by the guardrail, gazing into the distance.

“Come and see this, Miriam.”

I passed the ticking metal of the car and joined him.

“Look at that big world,” he said, gesturing. “It's further than you've ever been before.”

Patchwork fields, a creek spelling out some unknown alphabet in its meanderings, a distant hill crowned by a porcupine of trees. An occasional farmstead, shingles dark in the sun. The railroad slicing up the landscape. A criss-cross of dusty roads.

Behind me, the way we had come, the Outpost sat in its ochre haze. The Fence remained formidable even at this distance, and beyond it lay the land of not-quite. Not-quite grass, not-quite dirt. Swirls and splotches, and colour patches that moved like cloud shadows across the Ghost Land's twisted contours.

Seconds ticked into minutes and Tommy sighed. “You're like Lot's wife, Miriam, turning back to look at Sodom. What do you see there that I don't? Paradise? To me it's a stain on our land. A blight.”

“And what have you showed me? More farming country peppered with a bunch of two bit towns?”

“It's a way out. The car will change everything. I can go anywhere.”

“Will your Mom change? Will Wendy Martin?”

He fingered the guard rail. A hundred seasons had left it old and splintered. “Heard you had another ruckus with Wendy in Jessie's again last night. The way I was told, she looked like you'd slapped her.”

“I didn't much want to talk to her anyway and I don't feel obliged to stick to a bundle of social niceties just so she can get laid.”

“Miriam, please don't stand there and shoot crap about Wendy in the bar again. It really rankles with you, doesn't it, the fact that she likes to sit under the TV, smoke a cigarette and talk about Pat Boone or her Aunt Martha's new baby? She works her ass off in the hardware store for a pittance and all she wants to do for five minutes is enjoy herself. What she doesn't need is any of your intense, heavy-going talk about what you think people should be doing with their lives. Nobody in the Outpost is likely to go to Harvard or UCLA. Jessie's is a bar, not some smartass art house where everyone wears sandals and suffers from too much gravity to the face. Maybe if you stopped being holier-than-thou and cracked a

dirty joke now and again you might win a smile. Wendy is honest, and there's nothing wrong with her liking simple stuff."

"Are you 'simple stuff' Tommy? It's no wonder she's on your trail all the time, with you spending so much time at Ping-Pong's"

He let go of the rail. "Ping-Pong's different. He wasn't born here. He came from the outside and can go back anytime."

"And you want to go with him? Seems Wendy's attitude towards me is misplaced. Is she included in your escape plans? You aren't going anywhere, Tommy. In five years you'll still be ploughing up your Mom's fields."

"If so it would be my choice."

I shook my head. "You're like my father. Born to this town just as my mother said. You'll never leave. You'll get dirt under your fingernails and dust in your face. Soon you'll be the same colour as everything else."

The sigh was back. "You've always been in your own world, Miriam, and you're not much taken with mine. There's no half-way place we could ever meet, no matter how much we both might want it. The same Fence that separates the Ghost Land runs right around your heart.. It's either my side of that line or yours."

"Fine, so I guess we'll just visit sometimes."

He stared at me for a moment, then laughed without laughing. "I never could tell when you're being serious or not. No, this isn't something we can do part time or work in shifts. Come on, I'll take you back as far as the Outpost. I've no doubt you'll want to go toting for business anyway. You can sit on the rear seat. It'll be better there."

The journey back seemed a lot slower than on the way out. Tommy turned his radio way up and that, taken with the singing thrum of the engine, threw any kind of conversation to the wind. I felt every mile of that trip, and by the time we hove into the main street my teeth were hurting, I'd been grinding them so much. Wendy was waiting in Jessie's parking lot, wearing a bright dress and her mother's lipstick. A wicker picnic hamper was at her feet. As soon as Tommy stopped the car I got out and walked away. I could hear Wendy squealing at him.

I spent a few hours helping Dad fix up the fences that marked the remains of our property. Real fences, not the Frankenstein of junk marking the other side of our farmyard. As soon as I could get away, I was back at the Outpost and hunting

for a prospect. I spotted one immediately, lingering beside the mailbox outside the hardware store. He kept peering at Jessie's bar as if he couldn't make up his mind whether to go in or not. I headed on over, keeping an eye out for other Missionaries, but the street was dust-empty.

“Hello, looking for help?”

The Pilgrim was shorter than me, with crew cut hair and a leather jacket that I guessed hadn't been within a hundred feet of a motorcycle. He wasn't sure of me, that much was plain, and if he twiddled with his zipper any more he'd pull it off.

“I want to, uh...” he gestured at the Fence.

“I can take you in and straight back,” I told him. “If a glance is all you want that's fine. You can say you've been there, seen it, *felt* it.”

“Well...”

This was going to take work. I'd guided a few like him before. Once inside the Ghost Land they'd start doing what I called the Slow March. Their steps would get shorter and shorter. They'd keep glancing back at the Fence and I'd know the trip was a bust. The money would still be mine, we were always clear about that but, darn it as my Dad would say, I wanted to *show* them.

I manufactured my best Missionary smile. I knew just the pitch to try, but I barely got the first words out when the hardware store door burst open and Wendy Martin was marching towards me. That must have been a short picnic with Tommy.

“What were you doing in my boyfriend's car?” she demanded.

My prospect was already making his excuses and leaving. Wendy however, stood her ground, looking at me like a rabid cat.

“Not really any of your business is it?” I told her.

“Of course it's my business. I'm his girlfriend.”

“Oh, is that what you think you are?”

“Why not? I've had a lot of fun, and I care about him. Can you say the same?”

“I know about the fun, Wendy. One whole night of it.”

“Can't get over that, can you?”

“Over? It never really began, bar the screwing.”

“Better than a lifetime with you, I reckon. Never good with boys were you, Miriam? Not much good with anyone, in fact. Maybe next time you go into your precious Ghost Land it would be better if you were the one who didn't come out.”

CHAPTER NINE

“It's gone.”

Marshall is doing his blinking act again. He peers out over the grass as though someone has hidden the house behind an invisibility cloak which will be snatched aside at any second. “These are definitely the gates.” He runs a forefinger over the metal. “Here's the chipped paint where Bobby Anderson clipped them driving home one night drunk from the club. My father told me the garage had to respray his whole car because they couldn't match the colour scheme. Anderson was pissed about that for months, and never mind him being lucky not to lose his licence for the amount of expensive liquor he'd put down his throat.”

“You remember all that?”

“I may have been young, but I'm good at recalling things I've seen or heard. This is the right place, I'm sure of it, but where's the damn house?”

The gateposts are bent, the metal gates themselves sagging towards the middle. If there had been a fence, that was missing too, the gates themselves simply an island of metal in the grass. Twenty yards further on the concrete path that led from the road stops. It isn't blocked, buried or dug over. It simply isn't there anymore. Swards of washed out scrub dotted with trees fall away to a low rise.

Marshall bends to peer at the ironwork. “No rust. Most of the paintwork doesn't look damaged at all. It's like the gates are slowly falling under their own weight.” He steps onto the grass, seemingly careful not to cross the boundary where the ought-to-be fence was missing. “Nothing. Not a brick, plank of wood or glass shard. If the house had burned down we'd see a pile of rubble, perhaps exposed foundations. And the path, what's the story with that? It doesn't go anywhere.”

He starts pacing. “Not even holes for the fence posts.”

“Do you want to turn back? House or no house, Stephanie isn't here.”

“No, I don't buy it. This place is toxic. I could be poisoned. It could be a hallucination.”

“Sure. Maybe you're not really here at all. Maybe you smoked some bad

dope and are lying on the church floor gargling out the back of your throat. You won't accept what you see, so you have to make something up. Anything. Your rational world is a small cage, Mr Marshall.”

“You *want* to believe this place has some inexplicable powers.”

“And you *want* to believe it doesn't.”

“Rules govern everything.”

“So they do, but what makes you think you know them all? Your daughter broke your rules and, if she's still here, now lives by the rules of the Ghost Land.”

But he's not listening. He's staring ahead to the rise in the near distance.

“What are those?”

Shapes on the crest of the rise. Not plants.

“Junk,” I tell him.

“We should have brought field glasses.”

“And while you stand staring through those something comes up and goes “Boo” in your ear? Binoculars will change your perspective. They'll put two glass lenses between you and the Ghost Land while it goes on living and breathing around you. I wouldn't use them any more than I'd use a blindfold.”

I'm not exaggerating. Being able to see trouble spots doesn't make them less dangerous any more than seeing a cougar will stop it coming after you. You won't feel any less hot, or thirsty, or scared. Sometimes you can find a way through, sometimes you have to go around, other times you're stuck.

“Take me there.”

The hillock seems clear enough. Mostly grass, no apparent discolouration. I shrug. “Extra distance means extra money.”

“My checkbook is still in my pocket.”

“Fine.” I set off at an oblique angle to the gates. Marshall already seems to have lost interest in them. I have to warn him to slow down, to keep behind me. The grass whispers under our feet. As we crest the rise, the objects come into sharper focus. Above, a circular break in the clouds creates a huge eye of burnt orange. Marshall is gasping a little.

Beyond the silhouette of a chitinous tree, three vehicles lie in a busted row of rust, chipped paint and gutted upholstery. Their tyres are long rotted, the steering wheels cracked skeletal circles. The detritus of their slow decay lies scattered under and around them. A bumper, rusted loose and fallen into the

grass. An exhaust shot through with holes. A spaghetti of electrical wiring. A trunk sitting open like a metal mouth.

Marshall stumbles forward with his arms open. "This is Bob Anderson's Plymouth. I recognise the colour. He had it custom sprayed. Cost him hundreds of dollars to get it the way he wanted, that's why hitting the gate was such a tragedy. How did it get up here? There's no road, not even a track. Was it winched up by tractor? Did Anderson think it would be safe up here from whatever was going on down there?"

He circles the car. "I wonder what happened to him. Did the army smuggle him away somewhere to run experiments on? Maybe he's still here somewhere. Or is one of those Pilgrim people back at the church."

"I honestly can't tell you, but make sure you don't touch..."

Marshall peers inside the Plymouth's trunk then slams it down in a squeal of corroded hinges. Flakes of rust shower the grass. He leans through the driver's side window. "The glove box is busted. There's nothing inside."

He's pacing faster, his body jack-knifing with each exaggerated step. "And what about this other car? It looks like some German thing. A Mercedes, maybe, or a Beemer. I can't be sure. Seems like some giant picked it up and squeezed until the windows popped out."

The third vehicle is boxy and snub nosed, like a truck concertinaed from both ends in some tremendous accident. Frog-eyed headlights bulge out from the front grill. There's no marque, stamp or license plate. Marshall is already fussing around it. "And this? Something from one of those French movies with Jean Paul Belmondo?" He checks the back. "Nothing but an empty metal box. If this is all another part of your Coney Island scare ride then it's pretty cheap."

Rust blots Marshall's hands. He pulls a handkerchief from his coat. Fingers are wiped one at a time, then the palms. He frowns. "It's not coming off."

"Don't touch anything else."

"They need scrubbing. Do you have any water?"

"In my canteen, but that's for drinking, not cleaning your mess."

"I'm not rubbing them on my coat."

"I wouldn't recommend doing it on the grass either."

"So now I have to go around with dirty hands?"

"It could be worse. You might have just poisoned yourself."

He stares at his hands. “You're kidding.”

“No. I'm not some glorified mugger who'd let you walk into something horrible so I can keep your cash, though there are those who've done that.”

Marshall pulls out another handkerchief. He must have an entire packet of the things. “Is something bad guaranteed to happen?”

“No. You might go home and find those stains wash out just fine.”

“Or mixing them with water might cause my hands to melt, right?”

“You're getting the idea.”

From another pocket he produces a pair of black kid leather gloves, which he pulls over his tainted hands. “We're not done yet. We can go to Barker Wood, where Stephanie's photos were taken.”

At the edge of the slope he stares northwards. “Unless that map I bought is totally useless the woods are that way, maybe less than a mile.” He squints. “There's a mist down there. I can't see anything through it. The whole landscape looks like its boiling.”

I stand beside him. “It's just a mist. Some kind of sinkhole opened up and filled with water. Or what passes for water. That's the closest thing to a marsh the Ghost Land is ever going to get. We can cross it if we remain careful, if you're sure you really want to go?”

“I'll try not to get my feet wet.”

“Okay, we'll go back the way we came, rejoin the road and follow it around this hill. That'll put us right beside the woods. I've been in these mists before and we mustn't lose sight of one another. Follow your own advice, Mr Marshall, and keep out of the puddles. I told you what happened to that kid with the waders. You don't want to lose your feet along with your footwear.”

We head back down the slope, retracing the impressions we'd left in the grass. Marshall stares at the gates again, as if something might have changed in the few minutes since he last stood here. “Were you aware the house is gone?” he says. “Did you bring me all the way here knowing it's a goose chase? Have you suckered me?”

I spread my palms. “Honestly, Mr Marshall, I never make assumptions about what myself and my clients might find. It's a restless landscape. Things collapse, are blown away, get taken. You tell me where you want to go and I lead you. Or you tell me what you want to see and I find it. The Ghost Land has been

here for years. People's memories get a little fuzzy, or stories get distorted in the telling. You're sure your daughter would have come here alone?"

"Usually she doesn't like to be around people at all, though it took me a while to discover that. Stephanie was a restless girl, always needing a specific goal, a destination, a *purpose* if you like. Merely travelling to the Ghost Land wouldn't be enough. As well as a few pictures, her grandparents kept some of the Anderson's letters. Stephanie was into reading everything she could find. Searching out the Anderson's would give her the excuse she needed. With the house missing I suppose it makes some sort of sense that the woods is where she'll be."

We don't see the mist coming. Suddenly we're in it, a gelatinous presence that roils in grey curtains around us. Marshall actually shivers. He turns a full circle on his feet. "How did that happen? I never saw it rise or roll in from anywhere. One moment we were talking, and now this, like we've stepped through a door, or one of those stage smoke machines has belched all over us. The road behind us is gone."

He sniffs the air. "Are you sure there's no gas? That we're not being poisoned? I can't hear anything. No running water, no breeze rustling through grass. Not even a loon calling."

"I told you. It's only mist. I wouldn't be standing here otherwise."

"I guess so. I've seen something like it before."

Now it's my turn to feel surprise. "You have?"

"There's a place in Virginia. A coal mining town. Not a metropolis by any stretch, but prosperous enough in its time. An accident occurred at one of the coal faces. A seam caught fire, and nobody could put it out. Those seams ran under the entire town and into much of the countryside beyond. The fire spread. It's still burning. It's been burning for the last five decades. The town was pretty much evacuated. The roads buckle, holes open up, cracks appear, smoke drifts out. Warning signs are in place but barriers are minimal at best. Anyone can walk in there but apart from a few curious tourists nobody much bothers. One or two folk have even moved back."

Marshall tugs his coat tight about him. "It's a strange enough place. Depending on how the weather is and how fierce the fires are burning a pall of smoke hangs over everything. Almost all the buildings were pulled down but the

foundations are in place. Roads still crisscross the land, traffic signs tell people to stop or mind their speed. Beside the school a kindergarten play park gets more rusty every year, yet these days Centralis rarely if ever makes the news. It's as forgotten as we are."

"There's no burning coal here. Claywood was never a mining town."

"The reasons might be different, but the results are the same. An area that attracts twisted pilgrims and a handful of nugget heads who won't leave. There's nothing cursed about Centralis, it's one of many places poisoned by man. Sometimes things just happen. Maybe something just happened here too, but it doesn't follow it's some juju from outer space, a gateway to demon land or another universe leaking into our own."

"Or maybe it's all of those."

He laughs, a sound so rare it startles me. "Is that what you'd like? Mankind's foul-ups are all over this country. There's another abandoned town, one that poisoned itself through zinc mining. Everything was contaminated, the water, the soil, the very fabric of the place. Know what the government did? They disincorporated the place. That was the actual word used. Removed its postal address, took it off the maps, stripped it of everything that makes a community. You're not as special here as you like to think."

"So how many of these other places have you been to? Why would you go? Do you have daughters there too?"

"Let's find Stephanie. That's what I'm paying you for, okay? At least I don't have to look at that orange sky any more. It was giving me a headache." He peers into the drenched softness. "Are those lights ahead? They seem to be moving."

"It's nothing. Colours in the mist."

"I can't see much through this fug. The woods can't be too far away."

The road has deteriorated into a dirt track. Ahead lies a flat meadow speared with rows of broken stumps. Clingy grass, heavy and sodden, forms ridges between which mercury coloured liquid glints. Luminous auras roll in the distance. As we move forward the outlines of other stumps fuzz through the mist and gain clarity.

Marshall halts and turns full circle, arms spread wide. "So where's the woods?"

I'm struggling to regulate my breathing. All sorts of chemicals are swishing around in my head. I understand the feelings and try to use the mechanisms I've learned to deal with them. Part of it is fear, a bigger part excitement. I wonder if drug addicts feel like this whenever they're high.

“These are the woods, Mr Marshall.”

He gives me exactly the look I expect. “There's no deception,” I tell him. “You were right all along, this is exactly where the woods should be. You saw them in your own photographs. This is new. Whatever happened took place since I was last here.”

He approaches one of the stumps. “Please don't touch it, Mr Marshall. You've been far too free with laying your hands on stuff as it is.”

“And what if I do touch it? Is my head going to explode? Will my balls drop off? Can I expect another funny stain on my hands? You can point to an empty chocolate wrapper and say, 'Whoa, that's dangerous,' and I'll be none the wiser.”

“Wise is certainly the word we're looking at there, Mr Marshall. Maybe your head will explode, maybe it won't. Maybe something worse will happen, maybe nothing at all. If you still think all this is a trick, that we're a bunch of hicks diddling the gullible out of their money, then go on over and take a real good look. I won't try to stop you, but remember I'm not picking up the pieces and I'm not endangering myself needlessly over you. I'm not supposed to lead you into the Ghost Land and you're not supposed to be here. We can't go to the police, the army or the newspapers. I won't even call an ambulance.”

He slows. The jerking motions are back. He retrieves the packet of mints and stuffs an entire handful of them into his mouth. He's stopped a few feet short of the stump. Bending forward, he peers at it, hands clasped behind his back. Those mints are damnably loud between his teeth.

“A typhoon, or maybe some other kind of twister. I saw on the news how one can take out an entire row of houses and leave those backing on to them untouched. All the stuff you normally find on a forest floor would be sucked up along with the trees. In the right season it wouldn't take long for grass to grow, especially if water was plentiful. Maybe that's how Anderson's car got to the top of that rise. It could've been dumped there. It was certainly wrecked enough.”

Mint fragments spit from his mouth. I'm not going to argue with him because I can see the things he doesn't want to. Those stumps are all regular in height. They're not broken or fractured, they've been chopped – *chewed* even. It's as though the entire expanse of woodland has been harvested.

Marshall is circling the stump. “That could also explain what happened to the Anderson house. It got sucked up, like Dorothy's home in the Wizard of Oz. The foundations could have fallen in, then been covered with soil and grass. There's your great Ghost Land mystery. A freak weather effect.”

I'm fighting to keep my voice steady. “You think that can account for everything you've seen?”

“Things can be changed by all sorts of stuff. Poison, radiation, birth defects. You people really could be using a piece of half-forgotten wasteland to sucker money out of the hopeless. For all I know my daughter might have taken herself off to Timbuktu and not told anyone. That would be just like her. All I'm getting here are a bunch of yarns, like Bigfoot or that lake in Scotland which is supposed to harbour a monster. People will see anything if they squeeze their eyes and imagination hard enough.”

“Fine, we can walk out of here right now”

Marshall frowns. “You've put notions in my head. I can't get rid of them no matter how hard I try to rationalise things. It's a fear of the dark, I know that. My subconscious believes without you something will happen to me, something bad, even though nothing has up until now. That's how persuasive you've been, like a really good salesperson, convincing me I want something I don't need. I can't run away from this, and I won't give up.”

Okay, I steal a few deep breaths while he's distracted and I'm back in control. “Did you expect the Ghost Land to be like a blockbuster movie, all wham bang and special effects?” I ask him. “Did you believe you'd see monsters? A gateway to another world? A chance to escape the mundane?”

“No. What I expected was some half-forgotten dump where the military made a mistake and the conspiracy theorists spin hokey stories out of their own asses. What about you? You look animated. Are you getting off on this, the fact that something has changed since the last Pilgrim you guided through here?”

“I like adventure.”

“So it's not just for the money?”

“Mr Marshall, it's *never* just for the money.”

“Well I want to see this *adventure* through, even if it means walking from one side of this wasteland to the other.”

Our voices are clamorous in the otherwise muted surroundings, as though we occupy our own area of focus. Marshall sets off along the ridges. I follow, careful of my steps. “Where are you aiming to go?” I ask.

“I want to check out the town, Claywood. I saw it marked on the hawker's map. If you decide to stick with me that's fine, I'll give you all the money you want.”

“And you're planning to just stroll in there?”

“It's on the other side of these woods.”

“Haven't you noticed? These aren't woods any more.”

A building comes into focus, its outline seeping through the mist. Marshall stops. I hear a long, guttural kind of sigh roll out of his throat. “What's the matter?” I ask.

“That's the Anderson place.”

“Are you sure?”

“Damn it, yes.” We take another dozen paces, the structure defining itself out of the mist. “The paint's gone, the windows are empty and the chimneys are half busted but I'd know it right down to that moss covered woodpile squatting out back.”

Wet mist licks around its walls, viewed as if through a smoky lens from yesteryears. Lichen blackened timber supports a roof sagging under the weight of breeze blown seeds turned to scrub. There's no imagination in the blocky design. It's the sort of house a lesson-bored school child might draw. The washed out ground surrounding it is spiked with the bones of drowned saplings. A long, straight ditch is full of murky sludge. A halo of rotted timber and fallen shingles together with the detritus of a dozen winters lies scattered about.

Marshall rushes ahead, keeping to the grass ridges. At the house he shouts something but I can't hear what. When I catch up, he grabs my shoulder and gestures.

“The front steps are gone, the door's three feet off the ground and hanging from its frame. I called inside. Not even an echo. Nothing's in there. No furniture, rugs or paintings on the walls. No sign of fire damage. The ceiling's

mostly gone; it's all just a frame. A twister must have picked it up and dumped it here, like I said.”

I pull myself out of his grasp and step away, rubbing my shoulder where he touched it. “The basement window's in place. You can see stuff inside.”

He twists around. “The basement's there? The foundations?”

“Yes, and everything that goes with it.”

“What d'you mean?”

“You know, all the things regular folk keep in their cellars. Empty pickle jars, boxes of old magazines, a bicycle with broken spokes. This house hasn't been dumped, Mr Marshall, it looks as if it was built right here.”

His face goes elastic. I swear I can see it turning different colours. “No. It was marked on the map. Those were the gates back there, the path, Anderson's car.”

I'm happy to let a smile grease across my mouth. “Scary, isn't it?”

Marshall scrabbles for the front door. He's trying to climb inside.

“Please don't go in there,” I tell him.

He pauses, arms on the bottom of the doorframe. “More ghosts?”

“Rotten floorboards maybe, or a roof ready to collapse. Or maybe I've just seen something and don't want you blundering in to it.”

“You never saw anything,” he says. “You're making it up.”

“Supposing I'm not.” That's what's frightening. When you glimpse something. You're not sure what it is but your mind is ready to fill the gaps with all kinds of horrors. In the Ghost Land something can appear in front of your face and you haven't a clue what you're looking at. You don't even know whether to be frightened.

Marshall leans his head inside and calls his daughter's name. “Like I said, there's no echo.”

“Damp, rotting wood. Not a great reflector of sound. If you go in I can't stop you.”

He doesn't move. “I'm anxious. I can feel it. My nerves are actually on edge.”

“It's just an empty old building. An abandoned house can get cold to its bones.”

“I know. But I'm still sure this is the Andersons' place. I can even see the

scuff on the woodwork where Bob Anderson mounted a basketball hoop. My mind must be projecting things.”

“Then why so nervous?”

“I don't know.”

“Maybe there's a boogeyman inside.”

He snorts. “I wouldn't go that far.”

“Yet you'd go far enough to take unnecessary risks in there?”

“No, you're right. The floor's mush. I'd fall through. And look how the remains of that ceiling sags. Upstairs must be worse. If my daughter's inside she would've answered me.”

Marshall steps away from the shattered doorway. He locates the basement window. The glass is cracked. Marshall kicks it in. I think he's lucky not to slice his foot off at the ankle. A sour odour immediately wafts out of the shattered frame. He gags and spits into the grass. “That's her. That's Stephanie. She's dead.”

“No it isn't.”

He glares at me, saliva ringing his mouth. “What else could stink like that?”

“Lot's of things, Mr Marshall. Damp cardboard, rotten wood, old paper, broken preserve jars. Look inside, just look. An absolutely leprosy of mould is spread all over that brickwork. If anything it stinks of an old garbage can. I'm a country girl. I know what a carcass smells like. Stephanie isn't around. I don't know how this house got here but it's empty. It has been for some time.”

Marshall's breathing settles. His fingers curl and uncurl. He's staring at me but his attention is elsewhere. “I won't give up”.

“That's what I was afraid you'd say.”

His eyes focus. “Or what you hoped.”

I fold my arms and watch him. He's gone back to checking his shoes which, all things considered, are holding up pretty well. Any man I've ever known would chew through those walls if he thought his girl was inside, even if it was only to find her body.

“Who are you really, Mr Marshall?”

He looks up. “I don't understand.”

“I've already asked whether you were a journalist. How about a private investigator? Maybe you picked your old friend Bob's address out of a phone

book, and everything you've told me about Stephanie is stuff you've been fed by your employer. Is your daughter even real, Mr Marshall? Is that even your name?"

He looks genuinely surprised. "Why wouldn't it be? What makes you think such crazy stuff?"

I shrug. "You're not like most of the other Pilgrims I bring in here. You seem to have another purpose, and this Stephanie business might just a means to pursue it without my supposedly knowing. Are you on a personal crusade, come here to pull the mask off the Ghost Land's secrets? Or is it me you're interested in?"

I try not to wince when he starts laughing.

CHAPTER TEN

On a good day, when the haze had lifted from the fields, the Amtrak could be seen snaking around Devil's Curve before starting its run across the plain. The sun beat off it like a strip of glass. Sometimes a kick of dust ran along the highway beside it as local kids tried to keep pace in their fathers' cars. As soon as the train crossed the Culver Creek bridge the race was on. A new game of chicken had spread across the county, and no amount of parental stern-talk or pulpit preaching could turn the youngsters against it. A car would wait a mile out from the nearest railroad crossing and if the driver made it over before the train arrived he'd won. That evening he'd find himself with a few free beers and smiles from the pretty girls. If the train reached the crossing first the car driver was left choking in a cloud of his own dust.

Nobody could survive a tie.

Ping Pong never said anything, not at first, but the challenge was there. It seemed his mission in life was to collect as many traffic violation tickets as he could, possibly seeing them as some kind of war trophies or badges of honour. He finally made it known he was going to race the Amtrak on the Labor Day holiday and nothing short of a police roadblock was going to stop him. He didn't have much of an audience when he drove Tommy's patchwork hot rod out to Culver Creek and parked by the railroad. Most folk were tired of Ping Pong ripping up their quiet town, and wanted nothing to do with what they saw as 'more of that boy's bullshit'.

Dad had started letting me borrow his truck, still joking about the famous day I tried to abscond in it and ran out of gas. It meant I could fetch the groceries or any pieces of hardware he needed. Heaving the odd coil of fencing wire over the tailgate was an easy trade for the freedom the vehicle gave me, though in truth it was now so old and cranky I wouldn't trust it on a trip of more than ten miles, give or take. I wasn't about to miss Ping Pong's race day though. His car was easy to spot, kicking up a cloud on the Culver Creek dirt road as it raced the Amtrak. The heavy farting sound the auto's souped up V8 made carried right across the fields to the gate where I was parked. Ping Pong didn't just beat the train, he beat it by a country mile. His 'bullshit' became the talk of the Outpost for a week, but while all the kids laughed and clapped Ping Pong on the back,

Tommy grew quiet. He'd been stuck on the farm on race day and Ping Pong had used the car without his say so. He started to argue with Wendy a lot, in fact every time you stepped into the parking lot you could hear them going at it. Wendy, it seemed, wanted a hero for a boyfriend, and didn't like Ping Pong being king of that particular castle. Tommy started driving out to the tracks. Someone told me he'd just sit there for hours, staring through the windshield and waiting for the Amtrak to thunder by.

Of course we all thought we knew what was coming. What we didn't figure on was Tommy's Mom.

Saturday night in the bar and business was thin. Milo, one of our Missionaries, swung through the door, a grin butter-smear across his face. He was known for glugging his father's hooch, and both eyes had the droopy familiarity of the six-hour-drunk. He jerked his thumb towards the door, and his nasal voice cut through the loud, fruity warble of the juke box.

"Tommy, hate to tell you this buddy, but someone is trashing your car."

We all tumbled out into the dust and crumpled litter blown into the parking lot by that evening's ill-tempered wind. Tommy's mother stood in a mess of splintered glass, sledgehammer clasped in her hands. It was a big one, a real rock buster, but, farming girl that she'd always been, she hadn't even broken out in a sweat.

Tommy's car remained neatly parked at the kerb where he'd left it, though it no longer resembled any kind of vehicle - more an oversized tin can someone had mangled then knocked into the gutter. Various sounds came out of Tommy's throat. At some point he was on his knees, though I couldn't remember seeing him fall.

"You had no business getting a car like that," his Mom declared. "No right to parade it around town like some whore trap."

Tommy found words. "It's mine. I worked for it."

"I gave you an honest job and paid decent money. I thought you'd buy something to help you in the business, something you could use."

"It's a big car. I could've carried stuff in the back."

"The back of that thing wouldn't see anything better than some two bit Mary Anne coughed out of a town pool hall. You've got to learn son. Money earned with your own sweat shouldn't be wasted."

Tommy's voice was choked with dust. "You trashed my car."

"I'll call Bob Sheldon at the bone yard. He'll give you ten bucks for the wreck. More than this heap of shit is worth. Meantime you can find another way home."

She threw the sledgehammer into the back of her pickup and was gone in a waft of gas fumes.

Tommy got to his feet. A glitter of broken windshield lay scattered across the asphalt. It crunched under his sneakers as he walked over and laid a hand on the wreck. Flakes of paint came off in his palm, the flame red paint he'd proudly applied only two weeks before. He looked around him, at the bar, the Fence, the street and all its buildings. I was reminded of Jimmy Stewart in the movie *It's A Wonderful Life* when George Bailey meets his brother off the train then realises that all his dreams of travel will come to nothing, that he's never going to escape the small town he was raised in.

We got more details from Wendy a few days later. Ping Pong had been paying a great many visits to Tommy's farm. The knock on the door would come sometime in the soft evening, though never at the same hour. When Tommy's mom swung it open Ping Pong would be standing on the porch, same look of polite anticipation on his face as if he and Tommy were privy to a great secret. In the beginning, Tommy's mom tried various conversational lead-ins that on a really expressive night might prompt a shrug from their visitor. Mostly they waited at the door and eyed each other.

"Why didn't she shut the door on him?" I asked.

"That ain't civil," Wendy said, as if I'd made a dumb suggestion.

This game, or confrontation, went on for some time. One night he turned up with a cat, all black and spangly with its tail curled around his arm like a lemur clinging to a forest branch. The cat stared at Mrs Brady with saucer eyes. Whenever Tommy finally appeared, he and Ping Pong would whisk off in Tommy's car.

"Mrs Brady got more and more pissed about it," Wendy said, relishing the tale. "Tommy would leave all his chores and not say when he was coming back. One time he stayed away all night and Mrs Brady nearly called the deputy."

It figured. Mrs Brady was as cranky as ever about her husband not coming back from the war, and though she'd pretty much given up hope that he ever

would, her grasp around Tommy was as tight as ever. Ping Pong was a threat to that, although it was kind of telling that Mrs Brady didn't see Wendy Martin the same way. And I guess Wendy thought Tommy's car getting trashed was a suitable punishment for him not spending enough time with her. In any case the situation was taken out of her hands, or played right into it depending on your point of view, when Ping Pong got himself killed.

It wasn't the Amtrak. That record still stood. Dennis Parsons, whom Ping Pong had continued to mercilessly rib well into the Fall, tossed a chocolate Hershey's Bar from the opposite side of the street. Ping Pong never got treats from his family as far as anyone knew, so the sight of chocolate descending from the clouds must have seemed like manna from heaven. He never thought about why such a gift should be bestowed on him. He stepped into the road and caught it with all the deftness of a Major League Baseball player guarding the last base. Right into the path of Bob Morton's pickup.

The truck was big and noisy, with a storm of dust backed up behind it. The front fender caught Ping Pong on the left hip and sent him bouncing, like his namesake, across the blacktop and into the hardware store lot. The Hershey's Bar was mashed beneath the pickup's tires.

"Never had much of a hooter on that machine," Bob confessed later, "but that boy was so fixed on his candy I could've blown a fog horn in his ear and I doubt it would have made a spit of difference."

The blood wagon arrived, scooped up Ping Pong and carted him off to Meredith General, brokenchocolate bar still clutched in his pale fingers. The only place he'd go from there was the mortuary, judging from the way folk described his neck when the ambulance men picked him up. "Loose as a strangled chicken," was the talk around the Outpost bars. The Deputy questioned Dennis Parsons but all he said was, "I tossed him the candy so he wouldn't pick on me".

There was no funeral, at least none we heard of. The body was claimed from the mortuary and his family lit out, leaving pretty much everything behind them. That everything was mostly junk. An abandoned Pilgrim's car sat in the shed, the keys lying on the dashboard as if they'd been thrown there. A truck was sent out from the pound but when it arrived the car had gone.

And then there was Tommy.

He came into Jessie's and announced he was going to race the Amtrak, and the look on his face suggested he'd knock the lights out of anyone, boy or girl, who tried to talk him out of it. Wendy certainly made no effort, and I wondered how pleased she was that Ping-Pong had been so dramatically yanked out of Tommy's life and, by default, her own. Things being as they were, people started talking all sorts of shit. They said it was Tommy's way of grieving, that he needed to get Ping-Pong's death out of his system, and that this was a way to honour his dead friend. I thought Tommy's mind was on town girls and roads bigger than a farm track or two lane blacktop. The Amtrak wasn't the fastest mode of transport in the modern world. A trap pulled by a pony with its dander up could probably beat it on a good day. But the dirt road bordering the railroad was crooked and treacherous, and the back end of a car at speed could fishtail like a badly landed catfish.

The problem of Tommy's trashed car was easily dealt with. He'd borrowed the one out of Ping-Pong's shed. I took Dad's truck. Only two trains a day came down the railroad and the first was a freight at the shit end of dawn. Tommy would race the noon streamliner that used to serve Claywood until the railroad company was paid to divert the track around the Ghost Land.

I thrashed the truck's clanky engine to within an inch of its bolts. I don't think it had ever done more than forty miles an hour in the last decade but it got me to the railroad crossing a spit before noon. I sat there, parked in the dirt with engine idling, waiting for the train to make the distant curve. A few of the older kids were already here, squeezed into one of their mother's station wagons. The little shits seemed to be taking bets.

The railroad tracks started hissing. A horn blared across the fields. The rolling mechanical growl of the approaching train rattled me right down to the buttons on my pants. And there, impossibly small, was Tommy in his borrowed car, a fantail of dirt spread out behind him. Horror movies try to tell you that terrible events happen in slow motion, that everything unfolds as a dark, dream like ballet. That's bullshit. One moment Tommy was a vague speck in the distance, the next I was staring right through the windshield into his stupid, beautiful, petrified face. The girl in the seat beside him, some impossible confection of ribbons and piled hair, was already screaming.

A moment, a hollow 'whoomph' of air and crumpled metal, and the car resembled a paper grocery bag crumpled and thrown onto the grass. It had carved a smoking arc through twenty feet of air and impacted in the adjacent field with the force of a small meteorite. A patch of grass smouldered where the engine block had come to rest.

Everything after that passed, for me, in a howling haze of screams and snapshot images. Most of the kids tumbled out of their mom-wagon and ran towards the wreck, while another got the car turned around and hared off, presumably for help. Other people were already running back down the track from the Amtrak. Faces peered out of doors. Voices shouted, then hushed, then shouted again.

I don't know how much time went by. It felt as though someone had let off a shotgun next to my ear. I felt dizzy and sick, then everything seemed to assume a perfect clarity before the world fell off-kilter again. Eventually the ambulance turned up, and the cops did what had to be done. Tommy had been tossed right out of the driver's seat and landed on his butt in the grass. It turned out he was unhurt save for a broken finger. *A broken finger.* The ambulance guys splinted it and then loaded him into the back of the Deputy's cruiser. I wondered why they didn't take him to the hospital to check him out. He was moving stiffly, his arms wide, and taking short, clunky steps like Boris Karloff in *Frankenstein*.

The girl with him was nowhere to be seen. It turned out that she'd been crucified across the front of the streamliner. The thing was so so big and heavy that, even with the brakes full on, the tail end of it was a good twenty yards beyond the crossing before it finally shuddered to a stop. The only damage to it was a broken headlight and a streak of auto paint beneath the driver's side window. The man himself spent five minutes puking beside the track before swearing he wouldn't take that train another inch even if it cost him his job. A few passengers started to kick up a commotion. "I have an important appointment", "We're going to be late", "My wife will give me hell". A red-faced citizen in a checked suit threatened to sic his lawyers on the railroad company if the journey didn't resume "Right away."

The victim he cared so little about was strapped to a gurney and loaded into the ambulance, a blood splattered blanket laid over her busted head. "I ought to make that complaining son of a bitch go with her," the Deputy said. I finally

figured who she was. Sandra Meyers, a scholarship girl who dreamed of going to Harvard. What was she thinking, going into the car with Tommy like that? Maybe she was bored and looking for a thrill. Maybe she wanted to show off to her girlfriends, or had a secret crush on Tommy. Quite a few college girls liked to sniff around the farm hands.

When Sandra's father turned up, his face was tight as tanned hide. He found her aquamarine pumps lying neatly next to each other, almost as if they'd been left outside a hotel room for the boot boy. When he tried to pick up the shoes he discovered the heels had been driven into the packed earth. Her patterned ankle socks lay nearby like discarded glove puppets. He tried to clamber into the ambulance but the medics wouldn't let him anywhere near. In that instant his face betrayed the realisation he was never going to see his child again except in a closed casket. When he climbed back into his car to follow the ambulance to the county hospital he was already weeping.

A newspaperman also arrived, not the local hack but, from the markings on his vehicle, some State reporter. He read the scene, took a picture then found the Deputy standing between him and the wreck. Deputy Bernard said a few words, stroking the butt of his police issue handgun as he did so. The reporter packed his camera and fled it back to his office.

Then the Deputy noticed me.

I'd no idea how long I had been sitting there, in Dad's dusty truck surrounded by those late summer fields. I waited until he tapped on my window before rolling it down. I answered everything he asked in a flat monotone. My mind was too busy trying to process what I'd seen and trying to decide what I should or shouldn't feel about it.

“Did you see the accident?” he said.

“Yes I did.”

“Did you not try to fetch help?”

“I didn't need to. Other folk were taking care of it.”

“Do you know who was in the car?”

“Tommy Brady and Sandra Meyers. She's Dick Benton's girlfriend.”

“Did you check to see if either of them were okay?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Like I said, other people were there.”

“Didn't it bother you? Don't you think you should've checked for yourself?”

“I didn't make them race the train and I'm not their folks. If they want to do something dumb that's up to them. What difference does it make what I feel? It won't make them any more or less hurt.”

The Deputy slapped the door with an open palm. “Didn't you even step out of this goddam truck?”

“No, why should I? It wouldn't have made any difference.”

Deputy Bernard took a deep breath. I was beginning to feel like some kind of criminal and I didn't understand why.

“Go home, Miriam,” he said in a quiet voice. “If we need you for anything we'll call your Pop. Just get your ass out of here.”

Dad was taking a nap on the sofa when I got back to the farm. A score of letters, forms and bills lay scattered on the rug. His custody battle with my mother was sucking the energy out of him and whatever face he tried to put on the situation, things were going to shit. Even I could tell that. After cleaning myself up, I checked the refrigerator to make sure he had something for supper, made a bologna sandwich for myself then headed down to the Outpost on foot. The day was spent, the first of the stars sprinkled out, and a twilight hush had settled over everything. I smelled the air.

Nothing is any different, I thought to myself. *Nothing*.

Nobody said anything much over the next few days. Nobody had to. Sandra Meyers had been dating the same guy since they both started high school and it was a done thing they'd get married as soon as they'd graduated college. They'd been practically inseparable, at least until Tommy Brady separated them. Two lives wrecked by a single dumb race. Some of the Outpost kids even cried about it.

The way I heard it, Wendy Martin and a couple of her high school hangers-on tried to put it about that Tommy was blameless, it was just a typical teenage thrill ride gone tragically wrong. The wrecked car was marked 'Police Evidence' and tucked into a sheltered corner of Sheldon's auto boneyard. Much nudging and daring among the local kids followed. Eventually two of the bigger boys bullied Sheldon's nephew into filching a spare yard key and sneaking everyone through

the gate after hours to look at the mess. Like his uncle, the nephew knew a good thing when he saw it and stated charging a dime for entry, or a quarter if someone wanted a piece of metal from the wreck. Though Sheldon couldn't prove what was going on he could still sniff out a stunt. The next time his nephew brought a pair of voyeurs into the yard they were greeted by a Doberman on a long chain.

The Culver Creek Crash, as it came to be known, fired the local jocks into even greater feats of daring. Girls, it seemed, were getting harder to impress. Finally Deputy Barnard started cruising Culver Creek road with a mind to arrest anyone engaged in hotrodding. All through the following week the Outpost rattled to the sound of over-tuned engines racing along the blacktop. "They can't beat the trains so now they want to run the lights," Jessie observed. "Wait until they're old enough to go into the army. They'll get all the danger they want."

Meanwhile the wreck sat untouched, quietly rotting on its busted tyres. Sheldon had moved it next to Tommy's old car, the one his mother trashed with a sledgehammer. Despite everything, Tommy hadn't given up on driving. You could see the longing on his face whenever he walked the five miles from his farm to the Outpost. His fingers curled as if gripping a steering wheel, and he kept peering out towards the railroad. Maybe he was replaying the whole thing in his head. Maybe if given another chance he would try to beat the train again, though the Deputy himself had made it clear he wouldn't let Tommy near the place. For whatever reasons he never trusted Tommy, even before the accident.

"We'll see that boy on the road again one day," Jessie said from her place of knowledge behind the bar. "Don't give a nickel for what happens when we do."

For weeks, Tommy stomped around the Outpost, his attention on the ground and a halo of emptiness around him. His busted finger was swathed in bandages like some cartoon injury, and a purpling of bruises had spread across the left side of his face. Rumour had it that Dick Benton was going to come after him for killing his girl, but the idea of some college jock trying to take out a Midwest farm boy was too foolish to warrant consideration. Tommy had already been formally interviewed by the Deputy and some big inquiry was due, involving Sandra's devastated parents, some lawyer guys, the railroad company, the police and who else knew. Tommy's face appeared in the paper right next to a photo of Sandra Meyers, smiling in her prom queen outfit.

The weather broke midway through the last week of the month, bringing a swathe of rain from the north that was a cool blessing to our parched land. I spent hours in my bedroom, polishing my sunglasses in the flickering gloom. A single smear and I had to do that pair again. Every so often I'd get up and try some on, wafting back and forth in front of my mirror to see how I looked.

A knock. It was Dad, and he said someone was at the door. For me. As I squeezed past him onto the landing, he laid a hand on my shoulder. "Try to be gentle," he said.

When I saw who was waiting on our porch I actually dropped the dime store pair of shades I'd been grasping. "Well, I can't say I've seen much of you lately," I said. "Been hiding out till it all blows over?"

"I need your help," Wendy Martin said.

"Help? With what? The police already questioned me. I had nothing to do with Tommy's behaviour."

She squeezed her white mommy gloves between her perfectly manicured fingers. The rain had plastered her corn coloured hair in vicious lines across her cheeks. Mascara had given her clown's eyes and her dress had turned into a sopping shroud that clung to the contours of her body. *She's always had a fat ass*, I thought crazily. Both legs were caked to the shins in mud. Had she stumbled here from the Outpost?

"He's walked into the Ghost Land." Her voice was so slender I could barely hear it above the rain. "I tried to stop him but there was nothing I could do. He said it was best for everybody, that's it the only way he'd ever get away from the Outpost."

"What? Tommy's no Missionary. How did he get in? He doesn't know where the best gaps in the Fence are."

"He paid Milo a hundred bucks to show him a route. Milo wouldn't be talked out of it. He was only interested in the money."

I digested this for a moment. "So, if you couldn't do anything, what makes you think I can?"

"You've gone deeper into the Ghost Land than any of us. You can go and fetch him. He'll come back with you."

"Oh? Why?"

"He was always sweeter on you. I'm not pretending otherwise."

“It's not up to me. I didn't make him walk in there. You did this, Wendy, and we both know he won't come out again. You had to get all bubble-headed girly and say “Ooooh, how *fast* can you drive, Tommy. I bet you could really *beat* that train if you wanted to. Only he had to go and sweet talk Sandra Meyers to get in his car, otherwise it might've been you ended up in the morgue instead.”

"Miriam, I know you'll help. There ain't no one else."

“*There ain't no one else,*” I sneered. “You turn up at my door on a shitty night, walking out of the rain with a sour kitty look on your face, and ask me for help. Some might say you have a nerve.”

Rainwater blurred the strands of hair sticking to her face. "This ain't the time..."

"Isn't it? The moment you wiggled your ass in his direction any real friendship between myself and Tommy was finished. I'd call that a nerve in the most basic sense of the word. Compared to what some folks might've done I figure I've been reasonable about the whole thing.”

She threw her gloves at me. They struck my chest and flopped onto the porch. “You're happy to take folk into the Ghost Land, but you won't fetch anyone out. Is that so, Miriam? I've heard about some of your clients. The ones that ain't never been seen again.”

I grabbed Wendy's chin and rubbed my other palm across her mouth, smearing lipstick across both cheeks. Cherry red, the colour Tommy picked for her on her fifteenth birthday and which she'd worn on special occasions ever since. She sank to her knees in her mud coated stockings and out-of-town pumps.

“You got any money, hun?” I said, standing over her. “I'm a Missionary. We all are, and we've never done it for free. You pay up and I'll happily walk into the Ghost Land and right out the other side, and pick up any piece of trash for you on the way.”

“I haven't got any money. Dad put it all in a college trust. I can't believe you're saying this.”

“Then why should I risk myself to rescue our mutual true love?”

“Because, you freak, you *like* it in there.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“On the surface my daughter isn't remarkable at all,” Marshall says. “At kindergarten she seemed like everyone else only minus the habits. She never picked her nose, sucked her thumb or twiddled her hair. At Junior School she went through all the tears and tantrums on cue, grew up with all the topical poster boys adorning her bedroom wall. She had the sleepovers, the crushes, the regular friends with whom she appeared to do regular things. Her grades were not spectacular but entirely fine and all her cosmetics came straight from Avon. She read all the right magazines and listened to all the right music. Her bookcase was a lesson in fashionable nonsense. Heck, from the time she turned seven I could picture her husband, her house and her career. Even when she misbehaved it was as though she followed some mental script. She lived in a safe kind of way.”

I let him talk it out. I'd heard all their stories: the failed, the cheated, the ones who believed life was conspiring against them and if they could just find the right thing in the right place everything would be different. There were the fatalists too, and the thrill seekers. Where the former were concerned, it was funny how those who thought they had nothing left to live for suddenly rediscovered a purpose in life once I'd led them in so far. The Ghost Land has a knack for winnowing out the insincere.

“She brought home a string of limp-wristed boyfriends who shook my hand then sat and watched TV with her,” Marshall continues. “They always asked dumb questions and said pretty much the same things about themselves which I almost immediately forgot. To be honest I couldn't tell them apart, which caused all kinds of fireworks when they phoned asking for her and I called them by the wrong name. 'Daddy, can't you even *remember* who I'm seeing at the moment?' she once asked, to which I laughed and said, 'Tell me what's memorable about any of them.' But it was okay, you see? Forgettable men have their uses, as the daughters in many successful families might tell you. I never realised, at that time or any other, that Stephanie had every cause to be laughing at *me*.”

We're back on the main highway. By my reckoning Claywood is about a mile distant and so far everything has remained quiet. The sky has returned to its deep ember glow. I turn to check on Marshall. His hair is sticking up in curious tufts. He catches me looking and tries to smooth it down.

“How are those town shoes bearing up, Mr Marshall?” I ask. “Your feet must be twinging by now. If you want to rest this is a safe spot.”

“I want to get to this ghost town of yours first. I haven't had much of a chance to think about my feet. You had me going back there, at the house.”

“I didn't do anything. You made your own mind up about it.”

He pinked at the cheeks. “Do you get off on cranking people up?”

“Like I said. I didn't do anything.”

“You've been doing this a long time. Many years in fact, yes?”

I nod. “On and off.”

“What do your parents think about you creeping around in here making a living out of the desperate?”

“My mother left home when I was a child.”

“And your father?”

My father does what a lot of men do. He complains a great deal.”

“Is he cruel?”

“He doesn't treat me any worse than he treats himself.”

“That's not what I asked.”

“He doesn't fiddle me under the blankets if that's what you're supposing. I left home when I was in my teens. It seemed like a good idea at the time. I couldn't share the Ghost Land with my parents. I took myself away because I couldn't cope with my Dad jumping down my throat every time he believed I was looking at it, or thinking about it. Neither could I be a gingham-clad country girl spending my life strangled by my own apron or stuffing preserves into glass jars”.

“You escaped.”

“No. I swapped one environment for another. It's not the same thing. Why are you asking me all this?”

A little of the tenseness has left his face. “You pumped me for information, so it's only fair. I'd like to know more about the girl who's leading me through her crazy world.”

“It won't make any difference to the job.”

“But...”

I stop and wave him into silence. A crackling sound is rising out of the ditch on the far side of the road. . Up till now our route has been closely bordered by a fence, one of those wire and wooden post efforts that enclose thousands of acres of thousands of farms across the country. Some of the posts have rotted, but the fence remains mostly intact. Fifty yards ahead it disappears into the ground. Twenty yards beyond that it re-emerges and continues in an unbroken line. On the other side of the road, poles carrying power cables to Claywood have tilted or tumbled. Electricity is still on in parts of the Ghost Land. Maybe the crackling is from one of the cables, partly exposed and leaking sparks into the ditchwater. Maybe not.

A breeze is kicking up from the east. I'm up on the balls of my feet, sniffing, checking the surroundings.

Marshall stands beside me. "What's up?"

"Can't you see it?"

He shrugs. "An empty highway. A broken old fence. Some lopsided poles. Abandoned land beyond. What am I supposed to see? Bugs Bunny?"

I swing my backpack onto the ground, loosen the top flap and rummage around inside. A small soda bottle. That will do. I lob it in the direction of the sunken fence. It hits the edge of the road and is swallowed by it. Ripples spread across the asphalt.

"Shit. Do that again."

"My backpack isn't bottomless, Mr Marshall. We'll find another path."

"Maybe it's just a hole in the ground. Subsidence, or something like it. This highway hasn't been maintained for decades. That could be a pond of mud coated with dust. An illusion, like that old Hollywood trick where crumbled cork was layered onto water to make it resemble quicksand. The fence posts could've fallen in and rotted away to nothing. You can't tell for sure at this distance."

"I don't care what you think it is. We find another path."

He catches my gaze. I think its the first time we've made eye contact since we met and I'm startled by it. His irises are dark at the pupils, then lighten to a greeny-grey gauze.

“How will you know when it's safe?”

I have to laugh at that one. “I'll know.”

“So,” Marshall says, “I still can't get over the weird way you walk. It's like you're rationing your body movements.”

We're back on the highway and making fair time. “I told you, I was clumsy growing up. I've spent half my life sitting on my hands. Awkwardness in the Ghost Land can get you into trouble.”

“Has that helped you cope in the big wide world?”

“I can't apply what I've experienced in here to the world outside. They're completely different things.”

“So if this place disappeared what would you do? What reason would you have to live? A semi-estranged father? A room in a two-bit town? Doesn't sound like you could hold a regular job. From what I've seen, you're dispassionate enough about people to make good hooker.”

“I made my way in the city for long enough. Because I had to, I guess, even if it emotionally tore me to pieces. I came back because it was the only choice open to me at the time.”

“Did you miss the Ghost Land?”

“No. In a way I took it with me.”

He laughs, but there doesn't seem any cruelty in it. “How'd d'you figure that?”

“At first, I stayed with my mother in a perfect house in a perfect part of the city. Her neighbours had a beautiful garden. They spent hours on it. The lawn looked like it had been trimmed with nail scissors, and their flowers seemed always in bloom. Usually they got a gardener to look after it while they were on vacation, but the guy took sick, had to be hospitalised. The garden lay untouched for three weeks and during that time it got some kind of infestation. The bushes growing by the bedroom wall were smothered in what looked like cobwebs. It was amazing how fast it happened. I was desperate to have a closer look. In the end I snuck through the hedge. What I found were caterpillars. Tens of thousands of them. They were on the wall right up to the gable. You could barely see the windows for the darned things. By this time all that remained of the bushes were some vague outlines under layers of this weird gossamer stuff. Everything looked

so *alien*. Needless to say when the neighbours returned with their transatlantic sun tans and tacky souvenirs they blew a fit. All the vegetation at that end of the house had to be chopped back to the roots and the walls dusted with bug powder. They went about in a daze for weeks afterwards. You'd think they'd been burgled or assaulted. In the end that garden never got fixed. The 'For Sale' sign went up and they were out of the district before Thanksgiving. Just shows you what impact a little disruption can have on some people's lives.

“As for me, I spent hours looking at it every chance I got, wishing something weird like that would happen to my mother's house. It was as if the Ghost Land had somehow reached beyond the Fence and touched something, yet everyone insisted it was just a bug infestation. I guess I wanted to find something freakish.”

Marshall halts to catch his breath. “Seems there are as many crazy stories outside the Ghost Land if you look for them. Yet here you are. Was it the experience you had in here as a child, or an epiphany? What's the attraction? Is it the risk, or are you punishing yourself? If so, is it because you've always been different, that you're some sort of criminal because of it? From what you've said, it almost seems you were made to feel that way.”

“Serious questions, Mr Marshall. Again, why the interest?”

“It's the way you talk. Sometimes I feel you're reading to me from a script, one you prepared a long time ago. Maybe this is just a hobby to you, your equivalent of painting or music. Or maybe you don't really like being alone. Leading clients into your world could be a way of getting company on your terms, without the commitment. Maybe if I get to know you I can better understand what Stephanie thought she'd find here. Are you religious by the way? Most of the shitkickers in this part of the country are.”

“If being able to conceive of things beyond the end of my materialistic nose is religion then, yes, I'm religious. I like mysteries. Once we know everything what is there left to do? As for reading from a script, I'm just a paid guide, remember?”

“You're beginning to sound like Stephanie towards the end. I didn't encourage my daughter to go into the Ghost Land. I'd never have been able to stop her if she had her mind set on it. That was something I learned too late. She didn't understand the concept of other people's business. If she was interested in

something then it became *her* business. I now believe she was like that from the time she left the cot. She didn't just live life, she sharpened it, and I was too busy or dumb to notice. Everything had to have an edge, a stimulus, something to get excited about. Sometimes she even provoked situations because the day to day of existence bored her. All this 'typical teen' image she projected was an act. She behaved that way, not because it was who she was, but as a way to get the things she really wanted. Even the boyfriends were a front. Who knows how many years she was yanking my chain, doing sweet-little-missy things to see how I would react. I guess she was getting tired of it though. 'Pretending to be normal' was how she put it. As soon as she heard about the Ghost Land it was inevitable she would come here. Maybe she's found a place to belong at last. Or maybe if it has changed her outwardly she would be able to look at me in a different light. Maybe I would become more tolerable to her."

"Tolerable?"

Marshall shakes his head. "I think she got tired of it all. Stephanie didn't start smoking pot like those hippies over in San Francisco, or go on anti-war demonstrations, or join the Communist party, or even let fast boys drive her around in their souped up cars. Her rebellion took place inside her head and heart. Her mind took her places I daren't think about."

"What makes you sure you can fetch her out of the Ghost Land.? Supposing she doesn't want to come?"

"There are no Shangri Las on earth, not even scary ones. She needs to understand that."

We encounter the river of vehicles about half a mile outside Claywood. They sit in neat lines on the asphalt. Not crashed, or in the ditch, or in any way damaged apart from the colours time had painted on them. Cars that would've been the pride of any auto dealership two decades ago. Pickup trucks, lacking the dents and rough-and-tumble of the farms. An RV, curtains drawn. A school bus. All empty, as if they'd simply rolled to a halt after their occupants had been raptured into some enormous gestalt. The place stinks of rust and perished rubber.

Marshall paces the stretch of road, leaning between the vehicles. "No tire trails, no signs of trouble. They're just sitting here." He peers through a side window. "Nothing inside. No lunchboxes, books, not so much as a chewed up

wad of gum. It's like a crap episode of *The Twilight Zone*. A highwayload of people just gone.”

I watch him tramping around like an FBI agent sweating over a crime scene. No doubt theories are scuttling around inside his skull.

“I like to talk stuff through, okay?” he says, as if catching my own thoughts. “It helps me concentrate, to figure things out as you said. Think of it as my putting together a jigsaw puzzle, every sentence providing another piece towards the solution.”

“In that case welcome to the biggest jigsaw puzzle in the world, Mr Marshall. Is that what you aim to do? Solve it? Do you think the picture you'll end up with will be the same as the one on the box lid?”

He stops pacing and faces me. “Have you never asked any of these questions yourself?”

Of course I had. Did the people here share some kind of pseudo epiphany, a form of mass hysteria, or were they abruptly evacuated? Did they leave their cars, lock them and walk right into waiting trucks? Is all that remains a bunch of pickled brains in a lab somewhere? There are no signs of panic. No bullet holes or evidence of a scuffle. I haven't seen a single human body.

“Whatever happened to them, maybe they wanted it to happen,” I suggest.

“Yeah, right, like wanting to get abducted by a UFO? “When exactly did all this occur? Daytime? The middle of the night?”

“I don't remember. The sky was a strange colour, different to what it is now.”

“And you saw your boogey-thing?”

“Yes.”

“You weren't ill or anything afterwards?”

“I'm not sure what I was, but my parents did wonder for some time. I can't tell you for sure if it was night. I was barely out of diapers. Maybe the Ghost Veil woke us. Or perhaps it was winter, or something covered the sun. I seem to recall it being dark.”

“Yet you remember what you saw in there clearly?”

“I'll never forget it. When you witness something like that, things like day and night don't matter any more.”

He spots something glinting in the grass. I follow him over. A puddle of tarnished shrapnel. “Car keys,” Marshall says, kneeling. “Dozens of them. Like they've been confiscated and ditched here.”

.”

Marshall straightens, eyes narrowing. “You said it's dangerous to go into the houses. Maybe it's all part of some quarantine.” He's inches from me now. The urge to push him away is overpowering. “If all the people in this area weren't evacuated then where are they, Miss Tasker?”

I take in the vehicle graveyard, the metal carcasses made fuzzy under layers of breeze-blown dirt, the flat tyres, the empty seats. “You really believe the military or the CIA can disappear the populace of an entire town right off the map?”

“Yes, I guess they can,” Marshall says, “but this was long before my daughter came here. She must have found shelter somewhere.”

“There is no shelter, Mr Marshall. The Ghost Land wriggles into places. You saw that in the church basement. It's the same everywhere.”

Marshall kicks up a broken piece of asphalt and lobs it towards the school bus. It bounces off the hood with a hollow 'thunk' and disappears over the other side. “They even took the kids.”

“Do you want to continue?”

I hear him grunt. His hair is sticking up in places again, but if he's noticed he makes no effort to smooth it down. “Have you ever left anyone behind,” he says, “on these guided tours of yours?”

“I'm not talking about leaving anyone behind. I need to know if you're set on continuing this journey.”

“That depends. Are any skeletons jiggling around in that great show of not-caring you're putting on? Is this the furthest you've taken a client into the Ghost Land?”

“No, some have gone deeper.”

“Then we go on.”

He waits for me to take the lead. I experience an odd shiver as I pass him, knowing he's watching me. The cluster of abandoned cars peters out and again we're walking in the middle of the empty street. The same weeds seem to be growing out of the same cracks, and our feet have picked up cataracts of dust.

The edges of Claywood are beginning to resolve themselves in the ember painted distance.

“Did your community lose a lot of people here?” Marshall asks. “Were any of your friends among them?”

“Most of those living in Claywood were out-of-county folk.”

“I guess from your tone you don't miss them much.”

“Many were from the west coast, working contracts and living the country dream. Never fitted in with us. Earned a pile of money and had nowhere much to spend it. You're going to see the remains of nice houses and big cars. The Outpost had nothing to offer. With us you have to be about fourth generation before you can even be considered local. Our turf was never for the likes of them.”

“You hicks probably cast them as city-slickers.”

“Maybe.

“You talk like one yourself. Did you realise that?”

“My Dad said I was educated beyond my intelligence.”

“Not nice.”

“He was getting at my mother.”

“I wonder if all parents get intimidated by over-eloquent kids. Stephanie was like that too”. Where most teenagers would just shrug if you asked them something, she would give you an entire exposition. Everything had to have meaning, and deep meaning at that.”

I nod. “My father had similar notions, or maybe my mother did. I can't rightly recall. Perhaps deep down they thought the same in their own conflicting ways. They suspected the Ghost Land changed me in some ways during the few seconds I was exposed, but in other, fundamental things I was already different. My father took that hard. He wanted to blame the Ghost Land for every quirk in my character he didn't like. A thirty mile scapegoat outside his own back yard. Maybe he even thought the Ghost Land had damaged my brain. The fear was there, though he tried to fight it.”

“How do you feel about this 'difference'?”

“I've accepted it. My body gave me no choice. Or the Ghost Land gave me no choice, depending on your point of view. Because I've been this way since I was young, I don't notice any loss. Normal parenthood is something that seems to

happen to other people. You are what you were born. Or made. Fathers take it harder. I understand. The family line, cutting the thread that runs from the past, from our distant ancestors, which is funny because Dad doesn't even know who his great grandfather was. Laying blame on something you don't understand is a lame excuse for things going wrong in your life. So I guess it's all down to me. Dad believes I can't have healthy children. By that I suppose he means they'll turn out like me, or worse. I've no hankering to put it to the test.”

“Does the Ghost Land attract lunatics or make them?”

“Now there's a question, Mr Marshall. If the Ghost Land didn't exist would I be *normal*? If I didn't have the parents I did would I be *normal*? Sometimes even my Dad wasn't so sure. 'I guess it might always have been in you, Miriam. It just needed something to kick it into life,' was how he put it. We were all confused. I guess I had to be given a label, and that label was 'autism', which to some people is just the same as 'retard'. A part of me wanted a normal medical name, if only to prove I wasn't mad or evil, but doctors try to reduce everything to numbers. You can't do that with the Ghost Land? It's a different sort of math.”

“You weren't told it was all in your mind? Shrinks in New York get paid hundreds of dollars for telling their patients that.”

“It's not in my mind. It's in my *brain*. A physical difference that's nothing to do with upbringing. You could say I lived in a family paradise compared to some of the kids who went to my school.”

I'd thought a lot about it. Is my brain broken? Is it wired differently? If the latter, what makes that so bad? Am I really any different from someone who's fetched a brick across the head? Or maybe it's the other way around. My brain could be too good. I've heard stories about people like me being gifted. Why doesn't it occur to people we might be advantaged, not disabled? It's the old thing, isn't it? Something is different so it must be wrong, it must either be corrected or locked away. That's the real reason the Fence was built around the Ghost Land.

“Are you saying this is the only place you belong?” Marshall's voice has changed tone. Cynicism or something else?

“Yes, and why not? The Ghost Land is my right-side-up world. A certain build to your body might give you an advantage in sport. Why can't a differently structured brain give an advantage in other things? Why all this talk of damage? I can enjoy the same books and movies as other folk. As a kid I sometimes liked

to pretend I was from another planet. It helped explain why I didn't fit in, and let me imagine I had a place to go.”

“Is this your 'other planet'? A place you feel happy?”

“I feel *capable* here. Perhaps my capabilities, I won't call them gifts, were always inside me, waiting to be freed as my father suggested.”

“And this so-called freakzone did that?”

“Does the Ghost Land change physical laws, or does it simply have more? Did it change me so I could perceive them? Did it open parts of my brain that otherwise would've remained locked? I have questions too, Mr Marshall.”

“Are you claiming it somehow enhanced you? What about those those zombies back at the church? They didn't come out any better for the experience.”

“Perhaps they didn't have the right mental ingredients. If I'd merely suffered a burn or a broken leg a great many things might have turned out differently.”

“It's the toxins. *They've* changed the physical properties of things. This is chemistry, nothing more.”

“Maybe. Everybody had their own ideas, remember. Everybody fought over who was right. The Ghost Land isn't one thing, it's a hundred different things gathered together in one place. Maybe the Ghost Land didn't just open up my mind to its possibilities. Perhaps it opened my eyes to myself. People are wary of things they don't understand, and that includes my head. Outside of here they only see the bad me. They don't focus on what I'm good at.”

Claywood opens up its brick and shingle arms to embrace us. We pass swoops of shattered branches, brush and turned-to-parchment leaves strewn across the road in the hands of some invisible, airborne tide. Once neat houses lie in still neat rows, some roofs collapsed inwards, not by some inexplicable ghostly phenomenon, but the sheer weight of time. Children's swings, abandoned footballs, a lawnmower standing to attention on a long-gone-to-wild patch of grass. Windows open to catch a gone away summer breeze, porches sagging, picket fences lying like broken teeth on the dust-deep sidewalks.

“Well what do you know?” Marshall says. “A real ghost town.”

He laughs at his own joke. We skirt a tall pile of unidentifiable junk and emerge in front of a low, brick building with hole-scattered walls. And there it is.

Marshall stops. As I expected he would. He tilts his head to one side,

forehead knotting into a monobrow.

“What's that ticking?” he says.

CHAPTER TWELVE

It didn't take long for things to unravel. People got too confident, or stupid. It seemed every kid above eighth grade saw themselves as a Ghost Land expert. Too many people were going in there and not enough coming out again, or they were returning with maladies the nearest health centre couldn't even put a name to. Self-proclaimed 'guides' got so used to their own exaggerated storytelling they overlooked the real dangers. They were always eager to invent names or labels to add to the mythos. Milo took a client to a sinkhole that had formed in the back yard of a farmhouse. The client fell in, though Milo insisted she jumped. "She laughed all the way down," he claimed. "Who knew what was going on inside her crazy head?"

The hole became known as the Laughing Pit. "You can still hear her," Milo claimed whenever he found an audience, "giggling somewhere at the bottom of the pit". And he would go on to suggest that maybe it wasn't just a hole in the ground, that the ghost of the laughing girl was imprisoned down there with *something else*, or that the hole itself was possessed of some form of malevolence. In truth the client had likely broken her neck and was beyond rescue, but that on its own wasn't enough to stop people blundering around. Those who lived next to the Fence, or the farmers whose fields the Ghost Land had carved up, didn't know any better. One of Jed Coleman's bullocks busted into the Ghost Land and got itself stuck in a ditch. Jed bravely, or stupidly, managed to throw a rope around it and haul it out with his tractor. Later in the week he lopped its head off and put its haunches on the spit for the harvest festival. When his friends gathered for dinner they coughed out the meat. "It tastes funny," was the general opinion. Jed, who'd been spit roasting beef for as long as he'd been farming, agreed. Nobody knew how to describe exactly what it DID taste of, just that it wasn't right, and at the time no one other than Jed knew where that bullock had been.

Grumblings that *something must be done about that place* grew as the countryside spun into Fall. Other kinds of people started turning up at the Outpost. Those searching for the missing, or who thought the whole thing was some grand adventure like going on a ghost hunt or exploring an abandoned factory. Cash fodder for the dumb guides. Even some out-of-towners tried to muscle in on the bucks by selling phoney maps or offering tours 'around the

Fence'. Some lead pellets blasted up a few asses eventually dissuaded most, but the Pilgrim-hunters, as we called them, wouldn't be put off. They drifted around town, always damp-eyed, always clutching a letter or photograph, with whispered questions spilling out of their mouths. "Have you seen this person? Do you know where they've gone? Do you know what might have happened to them. Please, take a look at this picture. Just one look is all."

It couldn't go on. And it didn't. A group of intrepid explorers, or stupid jerks depending on your point of view, looted a clutch of houses beyond the Fence for all the toys and trinkets they could carry. These were hawked around the Outpost for nickel and dime beer money. Halloween parties across the county were disrupted as youngsters discovered the terrible surprises lurking within their trick-or-treat gifts. Screaming fits were thrown, kids banged into furniture and each other. One girl threw up after opening the brightly-ribboned gift on the table in front of her. She fled the room, catching the table cloth and knocking everything to the floor. The gift turned out to contain a colouring book and crayons which spilled in multi-coloured innocence over the dining room tiles. The doctor's surgery was overwhelmed with pin cushion boys and girls dripping blood onto the linoleum, or children so bound up in Band-Aids they resembled parcels.

The gifts themselves looked okay. Perhaps it was something on them or in them, or maybe mass hysteria leading to all those injuries as one nurse tried to suggest. In any case no parents were affected, and before long everything was gathered together and burned. Within days, the Fence began to resemble a wall, and the first of the makeshift noticeboards went up. It was as though some line had been crossed. The money didn't seem important anymore. Ghost money, some started calling it. An entire shift of thinking had taken place, where something fun and profitable became a wicked thing to be feared.

"The Ghost Land isn't good or bad, it's just *different*," I tried to explain in Jessie's back bar one evening. "You can't take people in and let them start stumbling around. You have to *know* the place."

But the community closed into a tight knot. Talk of Tommy Brady's disappearance whispered around the Outpost like a malevolent poltergeist. I never heard anything directly but people began to stare at me in the street and mumble to one another, as if I'd forced Tommy Brady into the Ghost Land at gun point, that it was my fault he was still in there, maybe lost, injured or dead. Was

my life second to his? Did they have a right to assume I'd risk it for Tommy?

The Pilgrim trade dwindled and the Outpost kids went to school or back to helping on their parents' farms. But not me. Word got around. Miriam Tasker was still leading people into the Ghost Land, and taking them further than anyone had gone before. Nobody seemed surprised. Folk knew what had happened in my childhood. I was a Ghost Girl, and the Land was calling out to its own.

I'd just emerged from the hardware store and was kicking dust up in the street. The store's owner, Mr Johnston, had frowned at the cash I offered for my meagre pile of supplies as if it was blood money. "Wendy Martin ain't been back to work in days," he told me. "I heard she won't eat or come out of her room, on account of that boy."

I politely asked why he thought that was any concern of mine. He clenched his fists and I thought he was going to hit me.

"Tommy was sweeter on you than he ever was on Wendy. Everybody knew that. You did too, from the time you were first graders. You had no right to let him go, to let that asshole Ping Pong rip up his life. You should've took care of him."

So there it was. The Midwest farm mentality, thrown in my face by some dusty old store owner with a frayed green apron tied around his waist. Everyone lived in the county, everyone married in the county. Kids were practically betrothed to one another from the age of ten.

I leaned back and sucked in the thick air of this old, wooden framed building. It hadn't likely changed in forty years with its spilling-out closets, broken shelves and cobweb-starred lights. Each corner bulged with every thing a farmer could ever want, from tools their granddaddy's once used to rubber coated boots that had stuck together with age. In dusty corners lurked deliveries from years ago, still packed and with their yellowed shipping labels. "Tommy wanted out of this shitkicker hole and he got out," I said. "Doesn't matter how he did it. I don't figure I've any right to go hauling him back."

Mr Johnston didn't hit me as I thought he might. He picked up all my stuff from the counter and returned it to whatever shelf or trunk it came from. He didn't do it all at once either, but one at a time, putting something back, then walking across the greasy plank floor to fetch something else. He didn't say a word as I stood and watched but that was fine with me. I'd never had much to say

to this man in the years I'd lived here and I guessed talking or complaining wasn't going to achieve much now. When he was done he went back behind his counter and stood with his arms folded across his apron. We waited like that for half a minute or more.

“Don't you want my money?” I said at last.

“You're welcome to buy whatever you like just as soon as you're ready to treat other folks like human beings and start behaving like one yourself.”

“I don't know what you mean. It's like you're all aliens talking in some weird language that I don't understand. You work in loops, round and round and back again. Why all this complicated stuff? Honestly I don't understand how you people think at all.”

“We don't know how you think, Miriam, and frankly neither does the rest of the world.”

“You say that like it's a bad thing. Why do I have to be the same as you? Just because I'm different does it follow I must be bad? Don't you realise how you look to me? You all think the same, talk the same, live the same and you'll probably all die the same. Why have I got to be interested in farming, or motherhood, or any of that stuff? What makes my beliefs or wishes any less worthy than yours?”

“It's what everyone else does.”

“Well fine, Mr Johnston, I guess I'd better go and eat shit because fifty billion flies can't be wrong.”

“You've got no call to talk to your elders like that.”

I flung my arms in the air. “Do you want me to pretend? Should I say things I don't mean just to please you? Where's the honesty in that? Where's the *sense*?”

And that's why I found myself on the street, stomping up the pavement and trying to work out how to tell Dad he wasn't getting his supplies. *Smack*, down came my left foot. *Smack*, down came my right. I didn't know whether I wanted to break the asphalt or both my ankles. I swear that if some weeping Pilgrim-hunter approached me right then I'd drag them by the hair right into the Ghost Land in front of everyone, reinforced Fence or not. And just when I thought it couldn't get any worse I heard the low purr of the Deputy Bernard's police cruiser drawing alongside me. I kept my head down and didn't stop walking.

“You agitated about something, Miriam?”

I stopped, suddenly, forcing the Deputy to brake. “What if I am?”

“There's those who say you've plenty to be agitated about.”

“Everybody talks about everyone else all the time. It's that kind of place.”

“You seem to know mighty much for a fifteen-year-old.”

“Like I said. It's that kind of place.”

The Deputy sat framed in the open passenger window. He'd always been a fit man, but recently his belly had started squeezing against the bottom of the cruiser's steering wheel. He wore cross pendants around his neck too, lots of them, so they jangled into one big spaghetti of gold and silver. Pictures of Mary, Jesus and all the saints were taped across his dashboard, and looking past his shoulder I saw three different editions of the Bible, some tracts, and a copy of what looked like the Catholic catechism.

To be fair, Bernard had a chunk of Hispanic blood in him and, like the rest of his family, he lived his faith. It had been a constant source of sometimes not-so-good-humoured banter between himself and Sheriff Freemantle, who liked to refer to what he called, “Those darned Pope people.”

Nobody proved more evangelical in his disbelief than Corey Freemantle. He was what most folk liked to call 'a real local lawman,' which meant in his spare time he usually did what was natural for most people round these parts. At night he went to Rolly's bar, swigged beer, shot pool and talked baseball with the other men. He'd chew over any other subject just as nice as you please so long as you didn't get him boiled on religion. One Christmas somebody remarked on the novelty Santa hat he'd perched atop his silvery grey hair. The story was legend.

“Pagans had a whoop-up at this time of year long before the Pope got his hands on it,” he declared. “Those bare-asses had the right idea if you ask me. Took pleasure in the things of the earth. I put my faith in my country, my cruiser and my 12-gauge.”

“How come these Bible folk rile you so much, Corey?” he was asked.

“Why not let them be? Sometimes you come across as tight jawed as them.”

He laughed and lifted his shot glass. “Put it down to missionary fervour. If I weren't such a goddamned pillar of this community I'd love to go up that Baptist church on Sundays and curse those fools before and after the services. I can't stand their weak smiles and promises to pray for me. 'Wake up,' I'd tell them.

'Open your mind.' Forty years I've worked on the force, and I've seen things to make a man laugh or barf. I've come across people you wouldn't expect to see see outside one of those softcover novels they sell at the Mini-Mart, but the only spiritual adventure I've ever had lay at the bottom of a rye glass. I only switched to beer on account of my gut."

Despite Freemantle holding court in Rolly's like some kind of flush-cheeked Buddha he believed in his uniform and never fooled around when wearing it. Call him what you liked in the bar, but disrespect him on duty and you'd be disrespecting his badge and country. He and Bernard might have had their spiritual differences but according to the county they were a good team. In recent weeks they'd taken to patrolling the Fence, Freemantle in one direction, his Deputy in the other. It was no secret they were helping to reinforce it, or order it reinforced, whichever way you wanted to look at it. One night Bernard had a problem at his end and tried to raise Freemantle on the radio, but the Sheriff wasn't answering. We heard this from Jessie. She was tired, losing business and blaming the Ghost Land. More than once she'd talked of selling up. According to her, Bernard thought the Sheriff might be helping some farmer tote logs to beef up the Fence – most of this technically illicit building was done in darkness – but Bernard had what he called “the hunch”. His own problem would have to wait. He drove those dirt roads like a hotrodder and found Freemantle's cruiser three miles on the other side of the Outpost, parked flush against the Fence with the door open and cabin light on. There was no sign of any disturbance. Bernard climbed out of his own car and drew his service pistol. The hiss of Freemantle's radio was clear in the night, but as the Deputy approached he heard another sound, a low mumbling. Freemantle's cruiser turned out to be empty, the headlights and ignition switched off. The muttering sound was getting louder, and coming from the shadows a few yards further up the Fence. Bernard clicked on his torch and pushed through a pile of scrub, the gun still in his hand. He found the Sheriff on both knees with his face pressed to the Fence, muttering gibberish through the cracks. Freemantle turned, blinking, in the light, red bands across his face where the wood and other junk had pushed against it.

“What going on, boss?” Bernard said.

“The ears,” Freemantle said. “The ears are listening.”

“What ears?”

“They want to cross over, but I've talked them out of it.”

Bernard found himself sniffing the air, but couldn't catch any scent of hooch. He listened, but sound had fled the place. Even the bugs were silent around the Fence.

“I can't hear anything.”

The Sheriff climbed to his feet, dusting grass and splinters from his knees. He paused, shook his head. “Get that light out of my face. Why're you here anyway? Ain't you supposed to be patrolling the other side of the boundary?”

The Deputy lowered his torch. He told his boss that someone had tried to break through the Fence and left tools behind. A patch of blood lay near the hole.

“Stubborn dumbasses,” Freemantle said. “Can't turn your back on that place for a minute without someone wanting to go and hurt themselves. Alright, let's go. I'll fetch my cruiser later.”

Not more than two sentences were exchanged between the officers on the drive over. As Bernard said later, “the hunch” told him to keep his mouth shut about the Sheriff's odd behaviour. In any case the investigation into the 'incursion' passed off routinely. Some west coast Beatnik had tried to tool his way through, cut his head open on a sliver of wire and was caught at the county clinic getting his scalp stitched up. Business as usual.

Except that image of the Sheriff kneeling at the Fence, face shoved so hard against it his mouth was a puckered distortion, never left Deputy Bernard's mind. *The ears. The ears are listening.* He took a trip up to Rolly's one night and found Freemantle wasn't there, hadn't been there in some days. “We were getting kinda worried,” the bartender told him. Bernard used the payphone to call into the station. Freemantle wasn't there either and hadn't put in for any overtime, so far as the dispatcher knew. Bernard hung up, got in his family station wagon and drove to the Fence. He parked the car at the side of the road, killed the headlights and pushed his way through the last patches of scrub. It was a moon-bright night and Bernard's shadow was stark on the dirt. Ahead, the Sheriff's cruiser was parked in exactly the same spot. Lights off, door open.

Bernard returned to his own car and drove home. He kissed his wife, hugged his kid and went to bed. How did you report someone like Corey Freemantle? The man was a legend in the local force and a goddamned *patriarch* in this county. He could force a felon into submission by sheer presence alone.

That place has got to him, Bernard later admitted thinking, while his wife sighed through her dreams beside him. *Maybe he got too close, maybe something seeped through the cracks and hooked him.*

Deputy Bernard didn't get much time to mull over what he should do. Two nights later Corey Freemantle was found among the garbage bins behind the drug store. Blood stained the dirt beside him and rye bottles spread in a crescent around his polished police shoes. "They came through," he said. "I tried to talk them out of it but they wouldn't listen anymore." He was dead before they put him in the ambulance.

Bernard gave a statement and, the Outpost being the place it was, everybody soon knew. Now he was sitting looking at me, *that crazy Tasker girl*, like my skull would crack open and something horrible climb out.

"You still leading people through the Fence, Miriam?"

"What makes you say such a thing?"

"You seem kind of comfortable for an ex-farmer's daughter."

"There's not much around here to spend anything on. If you want to talk money go speak to my Dad."

The Deputy seemed even more anxious, fidgety. I figured he'd sooner be sitting in a stuffy office doing paperwork than talking to me. "Did the Sheriff ever ask you to do anything?"

I laughed. I couldn't help it. "I'm sorry about your boss, I really am, but that's no reason to take it out on me."

"You aren't sorry for anything, and I don't know what you've got to laugh about. If I ever catch you coming in or out of that cesspit you're going to spend a long time drinking from a tin cup, and I don't care what age you are. Maybe that seems amusing right now, but a few years down the line the most exciting part of your day will involve a bird taking a dump on your head in a fenced-off exercise yard."

He gunned the cruiser's engine and left me choking in a cloud of dirt. I watched him go, my fingers crushed into fists, wishing this whole excuse for a town was a piece of paper I could rip up and scatter to the wind.

Dad looked up when I walked into the kitchen. The room smelled of sore coughs and stale coffee. Papers littered the table in front of him, and his eyes were stained with grit.

I sat opposite. “What's happened?”

He pushed a letter towards me. “Another setback atop of a heap of setbacks. My wife is determined to get her wish and be your mother again.”

I saw the lawyer's logo, and the neat lines of type blacking the pages. “I have to go, don't I?”

He swept a hand over the papers. “I don't know how to fight this any more. The fees are backing up and I'm in hock up to the hilt. I can't mortgage the farm because it ain't worth diddly squat thanks to that poisonous hole next door. My savings are about dried up and my farm machinery is trashed. I was hoping to hold her off until you came of age and could make your own mind up about things, but if I lose our home she'll get you, and if I ignore a court order and wind up in jail she'll get you again. I'm out of time, Miriam. I'm sorry.”

“Then I'll go.”

“As easily as that?”

“The time's right.”

He nodded. “It won't be easy for you. The city's a different place, different from anything you've known.”

“I've seen it on TV,” I said, “and I know what 'different' is.”

“It doesn't have to be for long. Just until you're legally an adult. Then you can come back.”

“I don't want to come back.”

He'd put his head in his hands and at first I believed he hadn't heard me. When he did look up you'd have thought some crazy dog was sat in front of him. “What d'you mean by that? You'd never willingly stay away from all your Ghost Land buddies.”

“Pilgrims are not my folk. I have nothing in common with them, or anyone else around here. Why should I?”

“That darned place altered you. It changed you to your core. You could no sooner leave it for good than I could stop drawing breath.”

“So everybody keeps telling me. Maybe it's time I proved them wrong.”

“You've never so much as stayed overnight anywhere else. Outside that shit

hole, the farm has been your whole life.”

“No, it's been yours.”

“That's how you see it? You've no loyalty, no thanks, no appreciation of any kind? I can pull a truck out of a ditch, but a mother isn't something I can conjure out of the backyard dust. Nor can I fetch your mind back from whatever skewed place it's gone.”

My voice was rising. I couldn't stop it. “I didn't break your marriage or ruin your lives. Don't blame me. Or the Ghost Land. Mother refused to feel guilty about me. She refused to accept I was in any way her fault. I know you feel that way sometimes too. You've hinted enough times.”

“We didn't keep our distance, Miriam. You pushed us away. We even thought that was what you wanted. You're lucky I never let the doctor send you to some lunatic place. How'd you like to be strapped to a gurney and have an electric current run through your head?”

“Why didn't you then?”

“Because I knew it wouldn't do any darned good. It's true isn't it?”

“What *would* do me some good? Filling me full of pills until my brain blew up? Try to do with me what they tried with the Ghost Land? Put me into a labelled slot? In their minds, being different and being crazy are the same thing. The question has always been the same. Did the Ghost Land mark me? Really? Or am I just like this anyway? Maybe you can't cure it any more than you can cure someone with one arm.”

His fist banged the table. His coffee mug tipped and went rattling. “That place has got its fingers into you. It won't let go. You don't want it to let go.”

“Then why am I leaving?”

“There's no refuge, Miriam, no Candy Mountain. Wherever you go you'll take your problems with you, like an infection, and you'll take the Ghost Land with you too. The world isn't wrong, it's you, and this big thing about not belonging isn't going away. You can't mould life the way you want it.”

“Maybe I can, away from here.”

“And what if you can't? Where will you run to? You've used the Ghost Land as an excuse for too many years to avoid thinking about your future. You could find a good man, maybe raise kids. Or try at least.”

“Daddy we've been over this before. Remember what you told me?”

“But nobody can know for sure. I'm not aware of you even looking twice at a boy apart from Tommy Brady, and look what became of him. Maybe things have changed. All sorts of stuff is possible. With a healthy man your kids might come out okay. You should at least try when the time is right.”

“Did you want any more children with Mother? Did you ask her for any more? Were you frightened of what she might say? Or was I the one who killed the notion? It's not fair to expect me to go flirting with another sun-kicked country boy trying to impress with his hard muscles and corn-dog smile. I guess you think he can snatch me off to the middle of nowhere, get me to live in a shack and spit out four brats?”

“It's clean, honest living.”

“You sound like a T.S. Eliot poem. I don't suppose you even know what that is?”

“Your mother loved poetry. Her dresser was stacked with books.”

“I read them all.”

“It doesn't mean you know everything.”

I felt my mouth thin. “Mother was right about one thing. You stink of oil and gas, d'you know that? If I lit a match you'd go up like a pitch dipped torch.”

“Don't use words like that with me, girl. If you can't say something with civility don't say it at all.”

“What else am I supposed to do? Everybody wants me to see things their way, but nobody seem willing to see them from mine. Why are you so set on the farm anyway? The Ghost Land stole most of it and what's left is a patch of dirt. I don't see why I should sweat my life away for its sake. The clerk in the bank downtown lives better than we do. You don't see calloused hands or patches on his pants. He's not forever looking at the sky praying for the right weather at the right time. He wears shoes, him and his children, not boots a chain gang wouldn't put on their feet.”

“This life's good enough for us.”

“Says who, Dad? Says who? Are you just staying here to give the Ghost Land the finger?”

“No.”

“Well his poor farmer business doesn't wash with me anymore. It's not what I want. Leaving scares me, but being stuck in the one place forever is even worse.”

I have to make myself do this, or I'll be fretting all my life. I want to go and look at a mountain, the way Tommy Brady did, only I don't need some crazy kid like Ping-Pong to try and help me do it.”

“The mountains are out of reach. Always have been for the likes of us.”

“For the likes of you maybe.”

“I warned you. Don't give me that kind of talk at my own table. I don't know what manner of country you think you're going to find out there. We hauled ourselves out of one war only to jump right into another. Our young men are spilling their blood in some shitty foreign nation on the other side of the world, and you think you've got a right to complain. Is this land not to your liking? The air not good enough? Are my remaining wheat fields some minor inconvenience you want to bat away. There have to be better reasons, and better ways, to leave.”

“I already tried those, Dad. Remember?”

He shook his head. “I never pleaded with your mother when she left and I'm not about to plead with you. I go on my knees for God and nobody else. That was another thing your mother and I never saw eye to eye on.”

“I don't expect you to change. You vote Republican because your Daddy did and his father before that. You've no real idea who our leaders are and know dipshit about their policies. If one swore to declare war on the rest of the world you'd still trot down to the voting place and mark a big fat 'X' next to his name. These politicians depend on people like you. No wonder mother left. She knew what she believed in.”

“What kind of girl are you? What kind of daughter?”

“What sort of father are you?”

That would've fetched me a clip across the ass with his leather belt when I was younger and for one crazy moment I believed he was going to unbuckle it right there in the kitchen. I thought about what I might do if he tried. He was a lean man, my father, and I didn't doubt the strength in those knotted muscles. We'd never come to blows in the past, leastways not in a real sense, but I always got the impression that if I wanted to kick up some dust with him that would be just fine. But this time he sat and took it the way someone might suffer a drenching in the rain or a hornet sting in summer. Bad things happened, and sometimes they happened between father and child.

He sat back, and entire centuries lay in his sigh. “There's no middle ground

with you, Miriam. You either close right up or go over the top.”

“Don't try pushing your 'normal' things on me. What you see and what I feel aren't necessarily the same. I know a lot more about me than you do.

Whatever strange bundle of forces created me, I know I'm not crazy.”

“You're not crazy, honey, just damaged.”

I stood and scraped the chair back under the table. “I thought I was gifted. Anyways, I'm leaving tonight. Call Mother and tell her I'm coming. I'm sure she'll be happy.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“It's the Tick-Tock.”

“What's that exactly?” Marshall says. “A clown? A wind-up robot? An atom bomb on an endless countdown?”

“A slang term given to an object inside that building. I don't know what the object itself is or what it's for.”

“You've not been inside?”

“No. I've only seen a home movie of the interior.”

“A home movie?” Marshall chuckles. “You honestly can't tell me anything more than that?” I'm sorry but I'm hot, scratchy, and my feet are beginning to hurt. I'd give half my ass for a bottle of talc. We've gone a lot further than you said you needed to, Mr Marshall. The money is nice, and I'm sure I could make good use of it, but right now dollars have no value.”

“Why shouldn't we go further? You still seem confident. Can we find my daughter or not?”

My face has formed a grin. I'm glad I can't see it. “I've never had a dissatisfied customer.”

“I'll hold you to that.” He turns back to the building. “What is this place? A clinic?”

“A swimming pool.”

“Really? Out here in the back of beyond?”

“Townfolk wanted their offspring to be healthy and competitive. Local businesses and the PTA raised much of the money to build it. There were whispers the rest came from other sources. The government, or maybe the military.”

“Keep them happy, eh? If covert stuff was going on here then that would certainly figure.”

“Farmers in the district wanted to organise a bus to bring their kids, but the Claywood residents invented some knotted excuse not to let them in. I guess they thought their little darlings might catch something. Some folk reckon this town got what was coming to it.”

“And this object, it's some kind of device?”

I shrug.

Marshall tilts his head. "I can hear it clearly."

"I guess it kind of plays in your head."

"Where is it? In the basement?"

"At the poolside."

"What does it look like?"

"I'm not sure. A box of some kind. The home movie was filmed by a terrified man wearing a flung together Ghost Land suit he could barely breathe in."

"A suit?"

"Rubber boots, waterproof overalls, an army jacket and a gas mask. He thought it might give him some protection, and maybe it did. Few others have made it this far and nobody else has gone inside. The pool is filled with something, and its dangerous. See these holes in the walls? The brickwork is rotting from the inside out. After he made it back Milo, the guy who shot the movie, nearly went crazy. It was days before he would even talk to anyone again."

"I want to see it."

"I thought you might."

"I won't go too far, and if I feel bad I'll come out right away. But I *have* to see it, you understand?"

"Yes, I believe I'm beginning to get the picture. I'll go with you as far as the entrance. From what I can remember of the layout, beyond the reception desk and changing rooms are a pair of glass doors leading directly into the pool. You can get a bellyful of whatever you want to see through those. If the building falls down around your head, that's your bad luck. Likewise if you open the doors and go inside I won't just leave you, I'll run."

"Okay," he rubs his gloved hands together. The front doors are standing wide. As we approach we're greeted by an odour of wet mould and things left too long. I halt by the door frame.

"This is as far as I go. You can get your peekaboo over there."

He walks past the sagging reception counter. Damp strips of plaster and peeled away paint turn to mush beneath his shoes. Ahead, the glass doors are a pair of rectangular, cracked spectacles blotted with green mould and white, cloudy spiderwebs that seem to be growing out from their centres. The building sighs

and settles around Marshall. Flakes of dust and off-white paint drift around his shoulders.

I'm holding my breath. It's like standing in a lab watching a rat head towards the bait and wondering how the experiment will pan out. Half of me wants something to happen, if only to shut his skeptical mouth up. Disbelief is fuelling his courage. He passes the changing rooms without a glance and now he's at the doors, pressing his face against the tainted glass. He gasps. I let my breath out too, and before I can catch it again the idiot is pushing his way into the pool.

“Marshall, get out of there *now*.”

A sour odour floods the reception area. Already I'm backing towards the parking lot. Marshall is hurtling towards me, hand covering his mouth. We burst out into the orange light. Milo had been wearing a mask. He wouldn't have known.

“I guess I deserved that,” Marshall said, sinking to his knees on the asphalt.

“I guess you did. The doors, did they close again behind you?”

“I believe so.”

“And the Tick-Tock? Did you see it?”

He nods. “At the far end of the pool, just like you said.”

“Are you going to be okay?”

His face is flushed. His eyes wet. “I was right all along. Some kind of bomb, full of chemical agents and hallucinogenic shit. This one must have been leaking. Folk probably dragged it in here in desperation, maybe thinking the water might make it safe. The pool lining would be ceramic. That's what's keeping it contained, but it was too little too late. The place is full of the stuff.”

“You believe all that came out of one small container?”

“I don't know. Maybe it was concentrated and mixed with the water. It was mostly black, but with all sorts of colours swirling around in it that came and went as I watched. I could hear some kind of weird sound underneath the ticking. Like someone blowing down a cardboard tube. The stuff was *moving*, slopping towards one end of the pool then back towards the other. That's not all. The ceiling is oozing downwards in the middle like it's been melted from the inside. Some kind of black weed is dangling from it. Vines that've been poisoned maybe.”

He tries to get up, his knees shiver and he flops back down again. “Maybe it's not just a chemical weapon, but a biological one. There could be organisms in it. It might even be alive in one sense. You're not looking at any kind of ghost here, but a government sponsored Frankenstein monster.”

“A bomb? Really?.”

“There's no spooky shit involved here. It was a military convoy sneaking through the night, or a covert lab. Something went badly wrong, spreading shit everywhere. People either died or were whispered away. Your missing population, or whats left of it, are probably shitting in their nappies in tucked-away sanatoriums all around the country. All this 'Missionaries' and 'Pilgrims' business is just a side effect of an enormous bad trip. For all I know Stephanie could be holed up with a bunch of pot heads thinking they're on an extended vacation in Wonderland.”

“What about the ticking? After all this time?”

Marshall waves his hand. “The ticking could be a broken timing mechanism looping around endlessly. For all I know the damned thing could be nuclear. Maybe the air of mystery surrounding this place was deliberately cultivated by the military or CIA. All these so-called Pilgrims could be willing guinea pigs. Maybe they don't want to clean it up when they can observe what happens to the likes of us.”

Marshall's face suddenly turns an awful puce colour. Before I can move, he keels to one side and barfs all over my boots. There isn't much in his stomach to lose.

“Am I poisoned?” he gasps, squinting up at me from the dirt.

I kick most of the mess off my footwear. “I doubt it. You've worked yourself into a frenzy. We both need to rest. Let's get away from here.”

I help him to his feet. This time he's steady. “I can't quit,” he says. “Not yet.”

“I guess not. Can you walk without help?”

“I'm fine. The feeling has passed.”

We stumble out of the parking lot, neither of us looking back. The ticking dwindles until it's gone, and the smell has been flushed out of my nostrils. But I can still sense the place, squatting in its crumbling patch behind us. The Ghost Land is a world of light and dark, and that spot is one of the darkest.

Marshall has crossed a threshold. This can only end one way. He was building up to it on our journey here, I could see that, and the possibility of his turning back only flickered a while before dying. He's on a mission now, one that I suspect he, consciously or unconsciously, was on before we took a single step into the Ghost Land. How much of this agenda still involves his daughter is hard to say.

We stumble into the centre of Claywood via a strip of parking lots, the fitted paving stones slick and devoid of weeds. A boiled sun sits low in the sky, deepening the orange tint on the wide main street. Tenuous layers of cloud whisper across its face. Directly ahead, rows of ornate street lamps march off into the distance like points in some perspective painting. Marshall's found both his legs and his breath. "We'll rest here," I tell him.

He grimaces. "Sure? Want to pick a romantic hotel?"

"I mean right here, Mr Marshall. I want plenty of flat, open space around us."

"Wouldn't we be better locking ourselves in somewhere a bit more comfortable?"

"That would depend on what we might be locking ourselves in with. Those buildings aren't necessarily as empty as they look."

His eyes take in the mostly vacant lots, the few cars scattered here and there shrouded in dust and suffering the occasional flat tyre. Structures of all shapes and hues jostle each other on either side of the street.

"This whole place is inert," he says. "Nothing lives here."

"Do you aim to go looking?"

"I know, I know. You won't come searching for me and you won't care. Yet I've seen nobody, not a living thing. At best it's like walking through a carnival ghost house with the power switched off. Now you want me to spend time hunkered down beside a parking lot with nothing but your word a boogeyman might be out there somewhere. Can't we at least break into a car and give ourselves a scrap of shelter?"

I shake my head.

"There you go again," he says. "What's it going to do? Blow up? Eat me? Are you frightened I'll demolish your carefully constructed mythology?"

I point to the Post Office across the street. “See that telephone kiosk? The booth squatting outside the main entrance? Somebody had the bright notion of ringing the number up.”

“Was there an answer?”

“The caller got a response, though whoever gave it and whatever they said drove him crazy. I mean real batshit out of his mind. Nobody tried it again..”

“Drastic.”

“If you can ring in, something can ring out.”

“Okay maybe some nut jobs *are* here, living in the drains or in basements, still tripping out of their skulls on the shit that leaked from the bombs. Like I said, chances are we'll find my daughter hanging out with a bunch of decrepit hippies.”

I straighten my pack. “Come with me. I'll show you something.” I start off across the street, not looking back. Presently I hear the flap-flap of Marshall's long woollen coat as he hurries to catch up. A halo of blackened, dead-blown leaves, dirt and long-ago litter halo out from the phone booth's base. Grime opaques the glass. “Take a look,” I tell him.

Marshall squints, careful not to touch the mould-spattered window. “I can see something dangling in there. The receiver. It's off the hook. It's swinging back and forth like someone just dropped it.”

“Anything else?”

“It's out of shape, like a plastic toy warped over a fire.” He backs away from the booth and shrugs. “So what? The kids in my neighbourhood went through a phase of burning out payphones for kicks.”

“Except nothing else in there is burned, or missing, or out of shape. The directories are still sitting on the shelf.”

“Like I said. So what?”

“Can't convince you of anything, can I?”

“I'm paying for the privilege of being cynical. You've been coming here a long time. You've been more exposed to the toxins. Maybe that makes you able to imprint your ideas on me, like hypnosis or some other kind of suggestion. This could be *your* world I'm experiencing. I'm not an out-and-out skeptic. Stuff happens and sometimes we can't explain it. Either we don't have the tools or the brainpower, but I don't intend to shrink my reality into your tiny universe.”

Marshall gestures at a nearby store window. “Look at those clothes. Yesterday's fashions at yesterday's prices. A time capsule. Maybe in another decade or so they'll come back into favour.”

I start back to the parking lot. “We better make camp.”

“*Make camp?* You're beginning to sound like a cowboy movie.”

“With you as the black-clad bad guy?”

He laughs. “Yeah, and you as Calamity Jane.”

I dump my backpack on the asphalt, sit cross-legged and rummage for my canteen. The water is still cool and washes the Ghost Land dust from my tongue. I hand it to Marshall, who vigorously rubs the neck with his kerchief before taking a long swig.

“So,” he says, still standing. “Have you been doing this almost all your life?”

I peer up at him through half-lidded eyes. “No. My parents split when I was a kid. I went to live with my Mom in my teens, and ended up working in the city for quite a number of years.”

“Really? How did you manage without your Ghost Land fix?”

“Daytimes weren't so bad. Work blurred one week into another. On weekends I slept a lot, or read, or lost myself in whatever trash movies I could find on TV. Night time was different. The city put on a different mask – a ghostscape all of its own. Among the lights, the reflections, the shadows and black alleys, you could imagine anything happening. I spent hours at the window of my apartment looking across that steaming hive of sights and sounds. I could populate it with anything I wanted.”

“Funny, I can't imagine you doing any job other than this.”

“I was good at accounts. Figures, patterns, arrangements all fell together in my head. My difference, my *retardness*, gave me an advantage.”

“Then what brought you back?”

“Events, circumstance, opportunity. As if a period of time in my life had come to a natural end. I went there as a teen, and never had a particularly good relationship with my mother. She meant well. I suppose she wanted to help me get by in society. But I didn't ask for her type of society, and nobody asked whether it suited me.”

Marshall scratches his chin. “So you rebelled?”

“Teenage children are rebellious by nature, so I've been told. But to self destruct in order to defy your parents is taking things too far. I'm too selfish for that. So I adapted, got by. It wasn't easy. People got upset because I was honest. I said things the way I saw them. I never understood the point of telling people you're fine when you're not, or saying someone's dress looks lovely when it resembles a pair of drapes. Why should I be dishonest just to please someone else? It makes me feel dirty in my head. Yet when I worked in the city, people did that every day.”

I rest my palms on my knees. Some of the tiredness is letting go of my body. Talking like this to Marshall is weird. My “illness”, if it can be called that, isn't a taboo subject, not for me anyway. “I went through a phase of thinking I was some kind of monster because nobody liked me or they got riled at the things I said, even though to me they were the most innocent of remarks.”

“So maybe you're looking for answers of your own.”

“Maybe so.”

“Did you adapt to the Ghost Land, or did the Ghost Land adapt you to suit itself?”

“Good question, Mr Marshall. If I've been touched by this place, it made an outsider of me. Or revealed something that already existed. In the Ghost Land, real world conventions, prejudices and consequences don't matter. I've never pretended to be anything. I'm just me, and I don't want to change. I'd lose myself.”

He seems to think about that for a moment. “Is the risk itself the attraction? Or are you punishing yourself? If so is it because you've always been different? That you're some sort of criminal because of it?”

“If I die here it would be better than fading away in my bed like most of the farmers do. I've no other legacy.”

“Things must have been tough for you at school.”

“Other kids stopped teasing me when they realised I didn't care.”

“Is that true? It didn't bother you at all?”

“If it did, things were quickly put right.”

“You had someone looking out for you?”

I don't get embarrassed often but when I do, the tips of my ears go bright red. I hold my head in my hands until the moment passes. "Maybe. What about you? Wife? Girlfriend? Lover? Is Stephanie's mother still in your life?"

"Girlfriend?" He shrugs off his coat. Underneath his shirt is plastered to his skin. He catches me staring. "What?"

"I thought you'd never take that off. I couldn't imagine you without it. I thought the lining would be jammed with handkerchiefs and tick-tack stuff."

"I'm sorry to disappoint."

"Who doesn't like a mystery?"

"We're stuck in a place miles from anywhere normal and you call my coat mysterious."

I shrug. "I guess you're a little bit of mystery I brought in with me."

He rummages the depths of that infernal garment and produces a tiny oblong box. The cardboard is creased and scuffed around its edges. Most of the writing has worn off. "Pink ribbed special," he declares, holding it up. "I keep it for emergencies."

"This emergency has been a while coming," I observe. "How long have you had that? The box is falling to bits. What's the rubber like? All shrivelled and dessicated I'd guess."

"That says you all you need to know about the current state of my love life. I've been told I'm too intense, too single-minded. I think that's a gentle way of informing me I'm selfish. I still carry this condom around as a self-joke, a mockery of the notion that I might have *any* kind of relationship, let alone a meaningful one."

He tucks the coat under his arm and hunkers down beside me. "My daughter was an accident. At business school I got all party-drunk and ended up in the sack with a classmate I didn't even like very much. I swore during sex and it had nothing to do with banging the headboard or taking her to the threshold of the pearly gates. The condom had burst and I had to fish the pieces out of her like I was raking a trashcan for a butt. She sat on the edge of the bed and sobbed for the next hour while I mumbled stuff I didn't believe about how everything would be okay and the rubber had caught most of it. She got pregnant, of course. Our families were big on always doing the right thing, so we did, even though it turned out to be wrong. Funny thing is, she was only there on a one year secretarial

course.”

He tugs his gloved fingertips. “I wouldn't pretend to be a good husband, but I thought I could make it as a father. I didn't care enough about my shotgun wife to worry about letting her go, but I wasn't going to be beaten on custody without a fight. As it turned out, the fight came from the one direction I didn't expect.”

I try to put a bit of sympathy into my voice. “Believe me, Mr Marshall, I know all about the father and daughter thing. My expertise comes from first hand experience.”

“It must have been some experience to drive you away from home, from your precious Ghost Land,”

“I just needed to be somewhere else.”

“Yeah, Stephanie said that too.” He coughs. “So tell me, do you like being alone? Is leading clients into your world a means of getting company on your terms without any commitment?”

“I think I've told you already. It's a job, one I do well.”

He doesn't answer, but instead glances at the sky, then takes in the rooftops. “Is this the centre of it all? There's no sign of any explosion or accident. Am I wrong in thinking there's even such a thing as a 'centre'?”

“No, you're not wrong. Every storm has an eye. It's beyond the end of the main street, in the civic park.”

He examines my face. I've no idea what he's thinking. “Have you been all the way across, to the other side?” he asks.

“Across the entire Ghost Land?” I shake my head. “My clients always find what they want long before then.”

“You know where Stephanie is, don't you? You've always known.”

“I know where you can see her.”

He stands and pulls his coat back on. “Then let's quit playing any more games. Take me. Now.”

We walk down the middle of the street like a pair of gunslingers in a lost town. Store fronts stare implacably at us, whatever secrets they might hold remaining intact. Occasionally I think I might see something moving beyond the dirty glass, but the orange sky makes a theatre for the eyes. Marshall looks fixedly ahead, hands in pockets, seemingly having lost interest in our surroundings. This is the most focused I've seen him. Or perhaps he's just trying

to hold back excitement.

“I'm going to get the answers,” he mutters. “All of them.”

Claywood residents were big on civic pride. The street opens out onto a square with a cracked statue of Washington standing on a plinth in the middle, surrounded by a halo of brittle vegetation. No cars occupy any of the marked parking spaces, where battered meters stand vacantly on rusted poles. The attempted exodus began right here.

On the far side of the square stand the sculpted metal park gates, lying forever open. A jumble of broken branches lay festering on the Olde Worlde cobbled path. A lamp post pokes above the junk, like an invitation to a forgotten Narnia. All sorts of feelings are slewing around inside me. Kent Marshall, in his big coat and New York shoes, has gotten inside my head and I almost hate myself for letting him do it. I've given out parts of me I never intended. Pilgrims don't ask about *my* life, they're always too full of themselves. Some start the moment they pass through the Fence, gabbling about all the events in their lives that brought them to this moment as if they were the only thing of consequence in the whole universe. But what Marshall can't understand is there's nothing left of the person I used to be. Everything's worn away, eroded. The only path left to me is the one I'm now on.

Together, we enter the eye of the storm.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Dad had made sure my bedroom faced away from the Ghost Land. I'd never rest otherwise. My one small window looked out over a thousand shades of nothing. Sleep was a fickle visitor for me, but Dad's bat-ears wouldn't allow any sneaking downstairs to haunt the night time yard. I had been allowed a penlight, or maybe a candle if Mother was confident I wouldn't burn myself out of my own bed. With those I'd cast light patterns across the walls and ceiling, creating ghost suns and ghost moons whirling around in an infinite cosmos.

I looked around at my chosen-to-be bare walls, my bookshelves now holding nothing but sunglasses, my closet filled with whatever clothes I felt I could get away with wearing. There had been dolls once, a good collection of them, garnered from yard sales and end of summer fairs. I'd held on to those until I was ten, when Dad said, "You're getting kind of old for dolls, Miriam."

"They're my people," I'd explained. "I can make them what I want."

I'd gone outside to do my chores and when I returned the dolls had been spirited away. I said nothing at the dinner table. Their little plastic or Bakelite faces remained in my head, in the worlds I'd created for them, for as long as I chose.

I sat on the edge of my bed and rubbed my face. The echoes of the conversation I'd had with Dad still rattled inside my ears. I'd lived in this place all my days and nights. No sleepovers, no motel rooms, no tents pitched under starry skies. Every day I'd done more or less the same chores in the same way at the same time of day. The Ghost Land was the only wobble in that constant, and I clung to it. The city would just be another Ghost Land, I reasoned with myself. Another new landscape. Another new world. I could adapt to it.

I had issues enough with this town. I saw those issues in every shingled roof, each patch of scrub. I couldn't live here anymore, not the way Dad wanted me to. Every question I asked had turned into an invitation to criticise. I made my traps and walked right into them. He gave the push but I fell down the slippery slope of my own volition. "Why don't you teach me or show me what I should do?" I once said, and he'd replied, "You should already know", but I didn't. In the end I decided, wherever possible, to just stick to my *own* rules.

I heard movement on the landing. Dad going to bed. Not even willing to see me off, probably convinced I wouldn't even make it as far as the bus halt. The look on his face told me. That same look he'd had when I'd tried to run away by stealing his truck, only to run out of gas a few miles down the road. He believed that wherever I tried to go I'd always run out of gas, always have to come back. And there would be a lesson for me.

The Ghost Land owns you and it's never going to let you go.

Even in my darkest times I'd never thought much about suicide. Some might argue I didn't have to with the Ghost Land squatting beside my yard like some big cyanide pill, but they didn't understand it the way I did. Neither did Tommy Brady's mother. From what I heard, she mostly spent her days staring out of the window, crying endlessly as if she could expect sympathy from God or fate. "I'm waiting to die," was her comment on the whole thing. I'd rather go over a cliff or take a long walk into the ocean before getting into that frame of mind. Her farm had gone to shit around her and she probably wouldn't even feed herself if the community ladies didn't look in. She didn't understand that Tommy hadn't killed himself. He'd simply gone somewhere else, which was his supposed dream all along.

No doubts. I'd catch the rattletrap bus to the county capital then board the Greyhound. I pulled out the zippered cloth bag from under the bed. I normally used it for bringing whatever small stuff we'd needed back from the Outpost. When I peeled it open, a smell of grease and old potatoes wafted around my head. I stood and ran my hand along the bookshelf, tipping the sunglasses into the bag. That done, I opened the top drawer of the dresser, reached past holed socks and scrunched up pants, and grasped the wad of Missionary money I'd 'banked' there. Half went on top of the sunglasses and the rest was stuffed into my jeans' pockets. My last act was to pull on the shitkicker boots still flecked with Ghost Land dust. I didn't even bother closing the bedroom door behind me.

Outside it wasn't properly dark, at least not cellar dark. A dim glow hung across the fields and the night was breath-thick with moths. I felt them brush across my cropped hair, my ears. It was sinfully hot for the time of year. At the gate I turned right, away from the Outpost and towards the inter-county highway. Dad couldn't stop me. He didn't have any legal right any more. I had Mother's

telephone number scrawled on a corner of newspaper. The cost of a dime would fetch all the help I wanted.

Dad wasn't a bad man, I suppose. Once, after I'd helped him nail a few loose shingles back on the roof, he told me he was proud of the work I'd done. In the course of our hard lives together he said a few other kind things, but that was the one I always remembered as if, in my mind, in my memory, I wanted to soften the cut-glass lines of his face and take the knife blade out of his voice. After all the things he'd said about the Ghost Land and what he thought it had done to me, it was kind of funny that, in the end, he'd lost me to his ex-wife.

I picked my way along the narrow, weed-choked track. A breeze kicked up and filled my eyes with grit. A hundred yards to my right, the Fence ran into the darkness. The ground rose here, allowing me a glimpse over the top. Something flickered, vanished, flickered again.

I stopped and put my bag on the ground. An optical illusion, that was all. Moisture in the air or the headlights reflecting from the highway. I waited a minute as the air thickened around me. Then I got a better look, and it wasn't a trick, or my brain throwing a fit, or atmospheric humidity, or any other bit of jargon the KJWI weatherman might hook out of his notes. The light was blue. A brittle, icy blue like lightning cracking open the sky or a photographic flash that never fizzles and dies. Pilgrims called it the Lighthouse and watching it for any length of time made you sick. Weather had no effect. It could cut through mist and rain as if they weren't there. Claims were made that it didn't register on the colour spectrum, that the blue isn't any hue known on this earth. Nor could anybody pin down the source.

I waited as it glided towards the top of the Fence, stopping about twenty feet short. I twisted to look at the ground behind me. A distorted shadow, hunched and jagged-edged, threw itself across the dirt.

“You don't own me,” I whispered.

I snapped up my case and started walking, my back to the light, eyes half closed. My surroundings gradually faded into darkness as the Lighthouse returned to whatever incomprehensible path it chose to weave. Ahead, traffic scuttled along the highway, a road that had never troubled itself with the Outpost, that merely served as a connection between other places, places normal folk preferred to go. There was always some farm truck, runaway or bleary-eyed

travelling salesman kicking out gas fumes whilst dusk rolled into dawn and back again.

At the roadside my outstretched arm, capped by a cocked thumb, threw a pointed shadow which grew then shrunk with each passing set of headlights. A car pulled over, a lumbering, beat up old station wagon with missing hubcaps and a rattle in its metal throat. One of the headlights was bright, the other flickered like a flashlight beam in dense fog. In the backwash from the dash, I could make out two people sitting up front. I pulled open the rear door and ducked inside. Empty beer cans rolled out from under my feet. My hand caught something that felt like old sacking and a cloud of dust puffed into my face. Everything smelled of dog piss and dried mud.

“Appreciate the ride,” I muttered.

“Going far, missy?” A woman's voice that made me think of warm oatmeal.

“Anyways near a bus depot will do.”

“Next town's about fifteen miles up the highway. Be glad to take you that far.”

“Yeah great.”

The car pulled back onto the blacktop. I let my head loll back onto the top of the rear seat. Both eyes still felt gritty. In the dash light my benefactors were green-tinted phantasms. The driver was middle aged with close cropped hair. Maybe ex-army, though his chin was starting to droop. The woman sitting next to him looked like an apple pie mom. Thick spectacle frames gripped her temples either side of a clipped bob hairdo.

“You from around these parts, honey?”

“My Dad has a farm. I'm going to see my mother. She doesn't live with us anymore.”

They glanced at one another. “Well, we're going to a funeral. My name's Myra and this here,” she gestured at the driver, “is Mr Edgware. God named him well because, I tell you, people keep edging away from him. At the bar. In the supermarket. At whatever public place he takes a mind to visit. Edgy and wary, that how he makes folks feel, yet there's not a single thing he says or does, when you watch him, that warrants such behaviour. Ain't that weird?”

“Come now, Myra,” Mr Edgware piped up. “Ain't no call to go telling her that.”

“Course there is. I'll never get tired of that yarn.” Something dropped into my lap. The smell of bologna and pickle wafted across my nose. “Are you hungry darlin'? I make a pretty mean sandwich.”

I realised I hadn't eaten anything since breakfast. The day's events had beaten the appetite out of me. I thought I'd take a polite nibble but my belly woke up, reached up my throat and just about swallowed the sandwich whole. Myra laughed. It sounded like a bear cub getting tickled. “Anyways, we got a funeral ahead, as I said. Both his Mom and Pop. Passed within a few hours of one another”

“I'm sorry.”

“Don't be. The Edgewares were the most unruly bunch of unkempt trailer trash ever to disgrace a neighbourhood. Noise, noise, noise every night, and he was 80 and she 82. When old Bob finally died everyone thought *That's it, the crone won't last long without him* and neither she did, and now they'll turn to smoke in the Lawson Crematorium. Peace, blissful peace. Then the daughter moved in with Bob's grandkids and now it's noise all over again. Ain't that so, Mr Edgeware?”

“He wasn't so bad, Myra.”

“Are you *kidding* me? When he lost the sight in his other eye, everybody told him he shouldn't drive anymore. Well, you can imagine his response to that. *My brother's nephew is blind and he's only just started driving.* So that old Chevy went right on farting about town. Bob's driver's license was so old I reckon it had been carved by Moses.”

She started laughing again. I glanced out the back window. Nothing. No cars. No Outpost lights. No Ghost Land. Myra caught me looking. “Ain't that strange place around here someways, the one all the crazy folks come to?”

“No,” I said. “There's nothing around here. Not any more.”

“Fair enough, darlin'. Sorry there's not much air in this wagon, though come winter it's colder than an Eskimo's whorehouse.”

And that was it. I laughed too. I laughed loud and hard. Something inside me, something I'd never been sure was there, opened up and I let it all out. Myra started too, and even Mr Edgeware in harsh, deep guffaws. We drove on, taking our laughter into the night with us, and leaving the Ghost Land far behind.

I stood in front of the square lawn with its perfect, snip-snip grass and looked at the place I'd been sentenced to. A symmetrical doll's house of gables, fake shutters and perfectly lined shingles, all squatting in a patch of real estate with hundreds of other gingerbread structures. The roads were laid out with mathematical certainty and I had the impression that if a rogue leaf so much as dared waft across its spotless surface a this-is-my-life's-mission groundsman would swoop out of nowhere, snatch it up and disappear it into some civic void.

True, if you looked close there were some differences: little things, like the colours of their porches or the number of chimneys sprouting from the gables. A few garages sported basketball hoops above their doors. I'd sucked it all in during the taxi ride that brought me here. When I'd phoned ahead and told Mother I was on my way she sounded a lot less smug than I expected. At the bus station I was met by some guy with my name on a piece of card which he held above his head as everyone spilled out onto the concourse. Ace Cabs, he said he was with. "Where's my mother?" I'd asked, and he looked at me and my clothes as if I'd just asked him to pull a Twinkie out of his butt.

I didn't say much during the journey, I guess I was too busy staring at everything. Books and TV hadn't prepared me as much as I'd hoped. I suppose it's the difference between looking at a painting of the Great Wall of China and actually standing on top of it. Softened by my naivety, perhaps, the driver started telling me stuff about the neighbourhood. The city was ringed by such places, he said, for folks who were happy enough to work downtown but didn't actually want to *live* there. As we took one turn after another, though one street that looked pretty much like another, I felt like a rat scuttling through stone pipework.

Knocking on that door was one of the hardest things I'd done. When it opened, Mother immediately gushed over me as if I hadn't aged a single year since Dad had transported her and her luggage out of our yard. I stood on her porch in the same clothes I'd left home in. A patched pair of jeans, shitkicker boots - the smallest size the Outpost store had - and one of my Dad's shirts tied at the waist with the sleeves rolled up. For her part, she hadn't changed that much, perhaps looked a little softer like an ice cream that has lost its edge in the hot sun. "Come in, *come in*," she said, not using my name or offering a hug. "Let me show you round the place."

I let her usher me inside. The hallway smelled of lemons, the patterned tiles squeaking under my soles. She showed me her parlour, dining room, the kitchen all full of clickety-click appliances. She didn't ask about my journey, or whether I was hungry. She seemed nervous, twitchy, like an agent desperate to clinch a sale on a house nobody really wanted. It all looked so *barren*. No shoes piled by the door, no engine parts leaking oil onto old newspapers, no tobacco smoke or odours of strong coffee.

“I'll take you upstairs. You'll like your room.”

What I got was a neat little dime-a-dozen motel room with lemon drapes and a Pollyanna coverlet smothering the bed. Brushes were laid out on a dressing table, pictures of who-knew-what blistered the walls and a bookcase, pregnant with volumes, dominated the corner. Before I could stop her, Mother eased the case out of my hands, laid it on the bed and flipped the top open. She stared at the money and the bundle of entangled sunglasses.

“This is it?”

“Yes.”

“You didn't bring any clothes?”

“You wouldn't like anything I brought.”

“Did your father give you that money?”

“No it's mine. I got it doing... odd jobs.”

“Maybe it should be put somewhere safe.”

I slapped the lid of the case closed. “I'll look after it just fine.”

She took a deep breath. The entire room seemed to sigh with her. “You're right, Miriam, I daresay I wouldn't like anything you brought with you. I've spare slacks and a blouse you can use until we fix you up with something better.”

“I'm taller and thinner than you.”

“You'd be surprised what your Mom can do with a needle. You'll give me credit for that at least. Brett will be back from the office later this evening. In the meantime if you want to jump in the tub the bathroom's next door. We actually have hot water. Lots of it.”

She was right. I found a shiny white bath big enough to bury a cow in, with plumbing that didn't rattle or groan when you turned on the faucets. And water, so much hot water, enough to soak and soap every speck of grit out of my pores. When I climbed out I felt like some kind of fluffy toy, and the huge towels were

softer than my bedsheets. Somehow it didn't feel honest. Back in the bedroom I took down all the pictures and piled them in a heap on the floor. Hairbrushes went into the bottom drawer of the dresser and a pair of my sunglasses placed on top in front of the mirror. That was as big a territorial claim as I wanted to make. The vase of flowers I left. When your life has mostly been filled with farm colours, the vivid purples, blues and reds created a retinal kaleidoscope.

I sat on the edge of the bed and took deep breaths. Something was building inside me, a numbness mixed with excitement and a slap of fear. The enormity of what I'd done, perhaps. *Always afraid of change, always afraid of staying the same.* That was me. I got up and twitched the lemon curtains. An alien landscape sat outside. Roofs behind roofs and beyond, more roofs. Square cut yards, pretty fencing never designed for use on farmland, people living in each other's laps and breathing each other's smoke. Kids splashed in a round plastic pool. Men cut patches of grass that wouldn't feed a goat. Gleaming cars lay parked in asphalt drives.

Tiredness lumbered over me. I hadn't slept at all on the bus. I went back to bed and stretched out on the coverlet, still wearing nothing more than a bath towel. My dreams weren't up to much, just a midnight blue horizon with a ghost light suspended perpetually above it, shining its brittle ice-like illumination. When I woke there was still light in the sky. A blanket had been laid over me, and my clothes, which I'd folded over the back of the dressing table chair, were gone. Instead a blouse, slacks and slippers had been placed in a neat pile at the foot of the bed.

They fitted well, I had to admit, and the materials felt smooth and clean against my skin. Mother had worked her promised wonders. In the mirror I could almost pass for a girl. I brushed a little neatness into my all-over-the-place hair then went downstairs. The unease had settled for now. I felt okay. Maybe I could make this work.

And then I met lover boy in the hallway. Honestly my intentions had been all good. I'd tell Mother what a fine job she'd done with the clothes, maybe charm her into a bite to eat, talk about the neighbourhood over food and coffee. But I looked at this guy, and at the collar and tie he wore, and I thought *who goes about the house like that?* There was no sign of the weirdo who'd stolen my mother, no

appearance of the person my Dad told me looked like he'd gone through a threshing machine and thought soap was a county in Alabama. This one wore spectacles and shiny shoes that wouldn't last a mile in the Outpost's dusty lanes. At some turn he'd 'gone respectable' which was no compliment at all.

He held out his hand, stiffly, and said "Hello Miriam, welcome home," in a hundred-dollar-voice, all the while looking at me like he'd just lost his last nickel in a high stakes poker game. He said I didn't have to refer to him "Dad", which I had no plans to do, and if I wished I could call him "Brett", which I had no plans to do either. The hand hung suspended in the air between us. I actually felt myself take a step backwards.

"This isn't my house and it's never going to be my home," I told him. "You're certainly not my Dad and won't ever be. You're someone who cheated on my real father and used a lawyer to force me across your doorstep. If I ran away I suppose you'd get the cops to fetch me back. So I guess I'll have to stick it out for now. But the moment I turn sixteen I'm out that door, and there'll be nothing you can do about it. You won't ever see or hear from me again. I'm not saying this because I have the sulks. You probably think I'll come round because the thing you did to Dad is what happens sometimes between adult people. Well you've got me a year or so and if it takes that long to prove I mean what I say then that's fine."

"Miriam..."

"Don't touch me. Not ever. You didn't buy the right to do that."

I went outside, sat on the front lawn for an hour and let them thrash that out. When Mother came out to confront me later I demanded she tell me if anything I said wasn't true. She asked me if I knew what 'tact' meant and I said it's a soft word for lying.

"It's fine," she said. "You're tired. Leaving that old farm is a big wrench for you."

"I'm not so tired as I can't mean the things I say."

Her expression flickered. She asked me politely to come inside and I did. I was getting bored anyway.

I wore the clothes they bought and ate the food put in front of me. They didn't say grace over dinner, and they didn't go to church. I wondered if they'd completely

forgotten the past, if they could imagine anything beyond the four corners of their noisy world. My plate was painted with all colours of fancy food and my wardrobe filled with scarlet, green and yellow. I wanted to keep my hair short. I insisted on it, and said I'd cut it myself if need be. She gave me ribbons and hair bands, and all sorts of stuff to try and girl it up a bit, but I couldn't stand them touching my skull. She didn't object to my sunglasses, except when I wore them in the rain, and if anyone asked she said I had an eye infection.

Mother worked in a city art gallery that drew maybe a dozen visitors a day. Some days she'd take me with her to show there was more to life than working on a farm. She was exhibiting a series she called 'abstracts' which was mostly a bunch of weird landscapes painted in funny hues. I peered at them for hours. They were little windows into other worlds, worlds seen through crazy eyes and crazy minds. I asked if I could have one for my bedroom but Mother laughed and said each painting cost more than her entire house.

The city itself was a contradiction. A paradox even, and one that was surprisingly agreeable. I'd never in my life been surrounded by so many people who knew so little about me. I wasn't any clueless Mr Deeds coming to town. As I told Dad, I'd seen movies on TV, read magazines, learned about New York, Hollywood and D.C. in school and books. But the smells, the clamour, actually helped to create a bubble I could surround myself with and walk the streets with anonymity. My senses had found a playground. From city block to city block my nostrils filled with coffee smells, bacon, gas fumes. I was a pig rolling in a swirl of sensation, yet I could cut parts of it off with a mental flick of my brain. In the vacuum of the Outpost, anything stirring within its dust choked limits was a distraction, an intrusion even. You could have secrets here. And keep them.

Dad wrote once a week in words that looped and flowed into one another. Big words, that swallowed up paper and fattened the sides of his envelopes. I suspected mother of steaming them open before handing them to me, but I couldn't prove it and certainly never caught her. He wrote about the weather, which rarely changed, the gossip around the bars and farms, of which there was little, and a hope that I was doing well, which was as close to an expression of love as he ever wrote. He never asked after Mother, concocting clumsy ways to get around the subject, and expressed no interest in what I'd done or the places I'd been. I remembered him saying once, "If it ain't farming it ain't real work".

These were duty letters we exchanged, like putting up with a crochety uncle at Thanksgiving because that's what families did.

At Mother's house I became nun-like in my behaviour, rarely leaving my room except for chores, which I was happy to do. A familiar routine. I worked my way through everything Mother left on my bookshelf. I'd also taken to washing my clothes in the bathtub and hanging them out of the window. That gave her neighbours something to talk about. As I saw it, what I did was none of their business.

Encounters with lover boy were rare as he seemed to spend most of his waking hours at whatever office he worked at. I always wore sunglasses when he was in the house so I wasn't obliged to look straight at him, even on the rare occasions he wanted to speak to me. His efforts at sparking conversations always meant talking about my past life, how I'd filled my days, whether homeschooling had agreed with me, or whether I'd had many friends. The fact was, he didn't know much about anything and I always felt that he was sneering a little, that to him I fitted the cartoon of every country cracker he'd ever read about or seen in the movies. At first I wondered why he put up with me at all, why he didn't just haul me through the door by my hair and boot my stubborn butt right back to the country. I wasn't good at reading faces, in fact I was hopeless at it, but something in his eyes still suggested he wanted to do just that, and he was only holding off for a special reason. And I was stupid enough to think it was because of Mother.

One other thing they did was talk about me as if I wasn't there. Maybe I'd been so successful at diminishing myself, of staying in my room, or sitting on the lawn, or walking endlessly around the block, that they simply forgot I was around. One night they were on the sofa wrapped around each other like a pair of sheets with the TV flickering in the corner. I don't think the programme itself was important. They'd watch any old stuff so long as they could make out when it suited them. Whenever they had a serious discussion it always took place in the kitchen. They'd talk, have coffee, then talk some more, almost like a verbal boxing match with breaks between rounds.

“No point in talking to her about the farm, Brett,” Mother said in their latest exchange. “That place never changes and she knows it.”

“The sooner we get her into the right place, the sooner we'll all be happier.”

“Be patient. It's taken years to get Miriam away from there. It might take years again to undo all the damage that's been done. We can't rush into things now.”

“I've given her a big enough chance. I accept that such a wrench would prove upsetting for anyone, but she's so downright weird. She seems determined to go on acting like some inbred hillbilly straight out of the woods. Whether I leave very early, or come home very late, I always catch her in her night pants staring through the backyard windows. It's like she's looking for something, or there's something out there only she can see. This is the city, not some backward poke hole, and we're not equipped to deal with teenagers who have special problems.”

“I know, but...”

“This was your idea Alice, remember? You said it would be for the best, and I've spent enough of my time and money over the years because I believed, and still believe, you're right. She's not a jack-in-the-box you can just close the lid on.”

Mother sighed. “Yes, it's for the best.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I didn't know people could live like this. They were all too perfect, like movie actors in some huge studio set. Mowing the grass was probably the toughest thing anyone did. I laughed aloud when I heard the girl two doors down spent more dollars on getting her teeth fixed than my Dad would on a pickup truck.

I never thought of myself as having much of a mean streak but I felt like throwing an empty soda bottle over one of those fences just to break the perfect symmetry. Instead I made my way through those days wiry, sun-darkened and trying to mind my business. I understood the neighbours had been asking questions, that Mother had words and the questions stopped. But curtains twitched on the rare times I left the house, so I took to standing, hands on hips, outside their windows until that stopped too.

“I wish you wouldn't go wandering about the neighbourhood,” Mother said.

“Why? Don't you want people to see me? Are you afraid I'll meet boys, get asked to dances or taken to the movies? That I won't be able to cope and make a fool of myself? Or you?”

In honesty, I wasn't too much taken with the boys around here. They were all overfed and pale, and drove around in the shiny convertibles their Daddies bought them. I overheard one say, “There goes that weird chick,” and the blonde beside him sprinkled into giggles. I had learned how to satisfy myself in the hot, wriggling dark, and more often it was Tommy's face I saw when I did it. No guilt or shame, it was something I felt *entitled* to.

My bedroom walls still wore no pictures, posters or pennants. When Mother insisted on redecorating and asked what colours I wanted, I said white would do fine.

“Miriam, it'll have no character at all,” she protested.

“It doesn't matter,” I said. “It's just a place I sleep.”

People were confusing because of the way they communicated, verbally and physically. Right up to my teens I didn't know how to properly use the words “Please” and “Thank you”, and had only limited awareness of the many social cues I had to respond to in order to keep people happy. If Mother didn't entirely understand *why* I behaved as I did, at least she had an idea of *how* I behaved. When lover boy presented me with a list of household chores he wanted taken

care of, I looked at him like he was stupid.

"Miriam can't do things your way," Mother explained. "She has to do it her way or it doesn't get done." What other chores I could actually undertake in such a perfect household was a mystery. Mother's kitchen was full of fancy appliances and looked cleaner than our county medical centre. Fortunately, lover boy crumpled up the list and threw it at the waste basket. It missed.

"Fine," he said. "Let her idle around the house all day. I wonder her father didn't beat her every shade of blue up at that farm. Perhaps she didn't care."

I closed my eyes and felt the blood pumping in my neck. I was always aware of the physical changes that heralded a meltdown, of the chemicals swishing around in my brain. When the anger came, I'd go to the quiet places. I climbed the stairs to my room, put on my darkest pair of sunglasses, and paced the carpet. Ten minutes later I heard the front door slam. A few moments after that, Mother appeared in my doorway.

"Miriam, I thought you'd have grown out of this by now."

"Grown out of what? The person I am?"

"The person you were. I can't say I was overly optimistic, but the hope was there. I believed you should be given a chance, but look at yourself, look at this room. You won't even make an effort."

"I make a huge effort every day. Staying here drives me nuts."

She flapped her hands and shut the door. I plucked a pencil from the bedside table and scored three diagonal marks across my forearm. "*Damn you, Tommy Brady,*" I hissed.

For the next couple of days I slipped about the house like a Missionary leading a Pilgrim. Silent, watching my steps. Everything was a hazard. Don't touch, don't move anything. Even brushing against the walls of this little ghost house was something I avoided.

It soon became clear that, where I was concerned, my pretend parents had *plans*. Lover boy told me, after I'd eaten supper in my room again, that he'd signed me up for a special college which he would pay for. A respectable way of getting me out of the house, I thought. I didn't know why he believed my going to classes here would work any better than the ones back home. He did try to explain, though. He said that since I had "special needs" I'd require special treatment "to learn a proper sense of responsibility." I pointed out that I was

staying with them under force of law and would happily go back to my father's farm if it came to it, which was a lie of course, and even if I didn't I'd be looking for a place of my own just as soon as I was old and able enough. "That's okay," he said, "the college will give you your own special room. You don't have to be here anymore."

That gave me plenty to think about, and that's just what I did, right through most of the night. In the morning I asked Mother if she could drop me off at a city library before she went to the gallery. I didn't care which one and I'd be happy to spend all day there, I said. At first she was hesitant, as though something she'd planned wasn't working out. I knew she'd had to cut her hours at her beloved gallery because, according to her, it wasn't right to leave a girl my age alone in the house. I don't know what she thought I'd do, maybe set the place on fire or something. Folk my age happily ran their Dad's farms if the old man had been on a bender the night before or had to go out of the neighbourhood. I was ready to argue my case when her face changed. She said okay, that she'd draw out any books I wanted and if I got hungry I could grab a snack at the coffee house next door. She started telling me how I ought to behave but I cut her off by insisting I knew what a library was. I wanted to stay on her good side, though, so brushed my bobbed hair, put on a primrose dress and a pair of cream coloured flats, and asked if I could borrow her peach lipstick. We had a weird girly hour getting ready then she drove me into town in her blue VW. I'd once asked if I could visit her gallery as I always wondered what people actually *did* in there and how they earned an honest wage from it, but mother looked almost panicked at the suggestion. I never mentioned it again.

The sun pounded out the kind of sleepy heat that, back in the Outpost, would see old men taking naps on their porches. How the city smelled depended on the time of day. Soot, gasoline, river water, or old breakfasts. Mother deposited me on the library steps and promised to pick me up in four hours. I said make it five. Inside the hall of whispers, I lingered by the reception desk for a while. Not just my eyes but, I guess, my whole head had to adjust. The mote-sparkled light, the rows of volumes, I could sense the *gravity* of the place. A library existed in the Ghost Land but I'd never gone near it. Too many stories of books biting Pilgrims. But where to start here?

"May I help you?" A woman who looked like a coloured-in version of

Donna Reed in *It's a Wonderful Life* peered at me from behind the desk. "Is there a particular subject you're interested in?"

I took a breath and told her. I even used the name the doctor had given me all those years ago. The woman frowned as if I'd just ordered a pumpkin sandwich. She took in my yellow dress, my made-up face, then coughed and swivelled around to what I supposed was her card index. Perhaps she thought I'd want teen books or stuff on home husbandry.

"We don't have much," she said at last, "and most of those are academic papers published in volume form."

"Can you get more?"

"I'd have to send a request to the National Library of Medicine in Washington, though some of the material is written in a foreign language and hasn't been fully translated yet. I hope you're serious about this, young lady."

"You might say my future depends on it," I said. "I can come back tomorrow. Or the day after. But I'd like to make a start now."

A desk in a hushed corner. A modest selection of books. The librarian also insisted on giving me a dictionary. "No offence, but you might need it," she said. I sat and read, as each hour ticked-tocked into the next. The librarian looked in on me a couple of times, to see I was doing okay. I was getting some kind of strange feeling off her, but I couldn't figure out exactly what. All sorts of emotions were coursing through me right then, fear, anger, astonishment, changing with every printed page. When I was finished, exhaustion rolled through me. I didn't understand everything in those volumes, even with the help of the dictionary but, like a slowly developing photograph, a picture was forming.

I walked back to the front desk and tried to hand back the books. My hands were shaking so much I dropped one onto the tiled floor.

"Never mind, I'll get that," the librarian said. "Just put the rest on the counter."

"I'm sorry..."

"It's okay. You've been reading non-stop for hours. You must be tired."

"Yes, tired, that's it."

"Come back Thursday, I'll have more books for you."

"Fine."

I waited on the library steps. It hurt to swallow, and a headache was

beginning to pickaxe a tunnel through the back of my skull. When mother pulled up at the kerb, I climbed into her VW without comment. She was bright as a squirrel.

“Did you have a good time?”

“Yes,” I said. “I’d like to go again.”

She was happy to oblige me. Delighted in fact, that she could spend all day at her gallery without having to worry about what I might be doing to disgrace the neighbourhood. Lover boy seemed to approve too. In fact he seemed a little smug about everything. He stopped whining about chores, or me standing at the parlour window whenever he happened to pass through the living room.

The librarian got what she promised and, when she had the time, helped me with some of the passages I didn't quite understand. On my fourth visit I ran out of books, but she wasn't done with my education. I had a feeling she'd been keeping a particular eye on me, concentrating on my habits, the way I spoke, even the manner in which I walked.

“Come and sit in the office for a while,” she said. “Marjorie, my assistant can take care of the counter.”

I was more curious than anything, so I sat in a bucket chair in a cage of filing cabinets while she offered me coffee or a soda.

“Coffee,” I said.

A rare smile. “Country girl?”

“Yes.”

“You obviously can read very well, but I bet you had a tough time at school.”

“How would you know that, ma'am?”

“It's more than just your accent.” She poured two cups and sat opposite me, crossing one leg over another and tying her fingers into a pink knot in her lap. The coffee was hot and strong enough to paint a fence with, nothing like the decaffeinated shit lover boy liked to concoct. Dad would've loved it. “I've noticed other things, little things. The words you use, the way you move sometimes, the instances your gaze flies away when you're being spoken to. I've seen it before, and I know you're not ploughing through all that stuff for any kind of college project.”

“Where have you seen it before?”

She leaned back and, for a moment, her attention wandered to some long ago thing. When she breathed in, it felt like she was sucking all the air out of the room. I took a glug of coffee and waited, wondering if I was in some kind of trouble.

“I was told my brother should be considered dead,” she began. “I’d already had some kind of inkling this might happen. His photographs disappeared from the family album, his room was cleaned out and repainted, his school yearbook fed to the incinerator. That was the strangest part, the school yearbook. George had been sent home from classes so many times the idea of him keeping any kind of good memories was almost perverse. So he was sent to a 'special school', and I never saw him again.”

She sat up and placed her hands on her knees. “I remember when it started. He didn't talk the way other kids did. He said their games were stupid. He couldn't sit in school without everything being perfectly straight. The desks, the chairs, the books. Nobody threw hysterics the way he did if something in his world wasn't right. He was a champion at it. No form of punishment worked. George shrugged it off like a minor inconvenience. At home it wasn't much better. He devoured books and paced about endlessly repeating passages from favourite works. When Mom once tried to get him to eat liver he said, 'Why do you buy this shit when you know I hate it?' She did her best I suppose, though talking to him didn't seem to help. 'He won't look at me when I speak,' she said, sobbing over the kitchen table one night. George's entire life seemed to be one big knot of frustration. When he started banging his head off the wall, they took him to a doctor, and do you know what he said? 'Why do you hate your son?' That's right. He tried to blame my parents. He then advised them to commit George to an institution and move on.”

She reached behind her, plucked a framed photo from her desk and laid it in front of me. A colour picture of a boy, maybe nine or ten, with a bowl haircut and a red and white striped t-shirt. At first it looked like any average family keepsake, but I saw that the boy's smile was a little too wide, and his eyes weren't focused on the person with the camera.

“I fished that out of the bottom of the trash,” the librarian continued. “It was the only one I found and I've kept it ever since. I suppose the hardest thing to come by for the parents of special children is hope. Doctors have little to offer.

Most of these 'special schools' they recommend are just one brick short of an asylum. Some are coming round to a different point of view but not quickly enough, and in the meantime I've no idea where my brother is or what's been done to him. I don't even know if he's still alive."

I wondered if I should say something reassuring, or hold her hand. She seemed to catch the thought and shook her head. "It's my parents I feel sorry for in a way. Dad simply couldn't cope. He refused to believe that any son of his could be, in his words, retarded. He was a businessman with a respectable city job. Such things happened to the working class, immigrants or coloured people. So he simply disappeared George out of his life and, to my knowledge, never thought of him again."

"Do you have any other brothers or sisters?"

Another shake of the head. "They didn't seem to want any more children. Maybe they were afraid it would happen again."

I put down my coffee cup. "I was lucky I guess. In my neighbourhood they say doctors are able to stitch up your arm but can't get inside your head without doing worse damage. I got a good doctor, some temporary guy from out of state. As for school, you get all types out in the country. Some farm-raised kids were so backwards it was a wonder their eyes didn't meet in the middle. But that's okay, that's something people could understand. I was the wrong kind of 'different'. Sometimes my teachers thought I was being ornery for the sake of it. The only thing that stopped me getting permanently excluded was being good at some parts of my schoolwork, though I would sometimes argue my old schoolmaster into the floor. His replacement didn't rap my knuckles or lock me anywhere. She started taking notes, and that's why my Dad took out of class in the end."

"Do you wish you were different?"

"I don't want to change. I don't want to lose anything. Just because my head works in a different way doesn't mean I should be held hostage by it."

"If you don't mind me asking, and heaven knows I've probably told you more than I should, just how urgent are these studies you've been doing?"

"Let's just say people hoped things would become easier as I grew up. Instead I seem to have become an even bigger problem. One I think they want to fix for good."

I faked a good mood when I climbed into mother's car and kept things light all the way home. My attitude seemed to tickle her and we were swapping jokes by the time we pulled up. That sliver of flint was still in her eyes though, and I knew that even if I started living the life of a young suburban saint it was already too late. I kept out of lover boy's way, borrowed a transistor radio and spent the evening in my bedroom, wearing sunglasses and quietly pacing the rug in my stockings. My mouth worked hard at its rehearsals, and I turned the radio up in order to keep my secrets. I sensed it was going to happen within the next day or so, the air had thickened that much. I didn't go to the library, but sat outside the house and watched the hired gardener pull weeds. I knew he thought I was a freak so we didn't trouble each other with conversation. After supper I made sure I was wearing the right kind of dress and waited in my room while voices fluttered through the plasterwork. When I was called downstairs, I was as ready as I could be. Lover boy was sprawled on the sofa, mother stood beside me. I waited as he explained that everything had been arranged for my special college, that I'd be leaving at the end of the week with all my transport paid for, and that they'd bought me a nice new case in which to pack my things. He reached behind the sofa and laid it on the carpet in front of me. A deep cherry red, with flowers printed in one corner. His smile was that of a gambler with a winning poker hand.

“You touched me,” I said.

The smile thinned. “What?”

“You fumbled under my dress when mother wasn't around, warned that if I told anyone I'd regret it.”

He'd sat up. “What the hell is this?”

“I know you like to go out to the yard for a cigarette, I've seen you when I've stood at the window. Suppose a few burns turn up on my arm. What about bruises? They could appear in certain places.” I was aware of mother squeaking at my shoulder, but my entire attention was tunnelled onto lover boy's rapidly reddening face. “Maybe the cops will believe it, maybe not, but the neighbours will know, and if there's one thing people in this pretty little rabbit warren love to do it's talk.”

“You ungrateful little shit.”

“Ungrateful? I don't understand. I didn't ask for any of this. You made me come here. You decided on planning the rest of my life. You made the mistake

of assuming that because I'm different I must be stupid. I know what happens at these 'special colleges'. I'm a blot on your life that you can't afford. You wanted me here in the hope that if I couldn't be cured, I'd be tucked out of the way in a place you'd know I couldn't return from to haunt your lives, your wonderful careers. You'd even convince yourselves it was for my own good, that you'd done the 'right thing'. Being on the farm was never enough.”

Lover boy's fingers uncurled. “Well, Alice,” he said to mother. “I guess you've brought this walking, breathing bomb into my house and let it off without thinking of the consequences. As well as being ungrateful, she's obviously immune to the hopes and expectations of others.”

“Why should I try to please you?” I butted in. “Do you try to please me? Why am I the one who has to change? I've put a notch on my bedroom wall for every day I've been forced to stay with you.”

Mother recovered enough to put a hand on my shoulder. “So what is it you really want, Miriam? The farm? Your father? Or that forsaken wasteland you both live next to?”

I shook my head. “You can't see me for your stupid labels. You can't understand the Ghost Land. It's not *all* in my mind, or something I could control if only I tried harder. I'm not going back to the Outpost, but I'm not staying here either. My birthday's coming up. I'll get a job, a room. I promise I won't bother you with so much as a postcard, now or ever. Do we have a deal?”

Mother brought newspapers so I could spend time scanning the small ads. I mostly kept to my room, though if I wanted to see somebody about one of the ads Mother was willing to drive me. She continued to feed me and do my laundry. My sixteenth birthday was marked by a parcel from Dad slapping onto the porch. When I found a pair of Levis lying among the torn wrapping I vowed to wear them like a second skin until even the patches fell apart. My so-called parents gifted the suitcase they'd been planning to send me away with. Lover boy never said a word to me again.

Eventually I found myself standing in front of a Mom and Pop hardware store in a neighbourhood where the cars were a little older and occasional cracks snaked across the asphalt. A crumpled newspaper page with a circled ad was

clutched in my hand. No primrose dress this time, or lipstick, or hairbands clutching my scalp. My Levis would be my ticket.

I told them I was raised on a farm, and described the hardware store back in my home turf. Though I never came out and lied about actually working there, I sort of *suggested* that I knew what needed to be done. The old fellow who ran the place with his wife looked me up and down, nodded, and gave me the job. I could use the place above the stockroom to bunk down. They gave me some stuff to make it nice.

Nobody noticed me much. I rarely spoke to the customers. I became as much a part of the store as the paint pots, timber offcuts or grass seed, and that suited me. I could concentrate. I could let my thoughts go where they would, and not have to talk about someone's cousin's college graduation, or how someone else's son caused a fender-bender on his first driving lesson. If I had to serve a customer, I went into what I called 'working mode'. I was polite, efficient, and in control.

Dad was surprised but pleased when I wrote and told him. I had that store turned from the blown out contents of an old tea chest into a neat parcel of efficiency within weeks. I also I had a head for figures, in a big way. The numbers scratched in Pop's dog-eared ledgers fell into place in front of me. I was as comfortable as I could be. The months ticked on.

But it couldn't last, and didn't. Mom and Pop were getting too old. After two and a half years I was practically running the place for them. Time flies, I found, whether you're having fun or not. They were selling up. But it was okay. News of my paperwork prowess had gone down the line. Mom and Pop had a nephew in the city who needed a junior clerk in their accounts department. "It'll be perfect for you, Miriam. He even knows where you can get a cheap but decent apartment."

I guess I didn't have to argue too much about that, though what I got was a desk in the corner of an office typing pool and a closet for an apartment. A lumpy bed, a bathroom, a hissing TV on top of the dresser, which served as the only company I chose to keep. The faces of the great and the unknown. At work I could feel anonymous in a room full of people. I was better at paperwork than even I realised. I could concentrate on it the way nobody else could and had an

eye for errors that drifted right past the rest of the office staff. So I checked letters, filled in forms, collated orders.

Some of the more extroverted tried to be my friends because they thought I should have friends. Anything else was inconceivable. They never troubled to ask me what I wanted. The job paid badly and I lived cheaply. I ate my food from hot dog stalls and washed my clothes in the shower. A few office Samaritans expressed their concerns about a young woman living alone in the city, but nobody ever bothered me. Maybe it was my face, or the way I stomped along the pavement or office corridors, seemingly on some permanent mission. When I couldn't avoid interaction, I trained myself to walk and talk like them, to smile at all the right cues and, when approached, to discuss whatever the day's topic happened to be. I pretended not to notice the gossip, or the mild jibes about the strange girl with the country twang working by herself in the corner. I suppose it was akin to performing in some kind of play or movie where everyone had a copy of the script except me.

Routine, when properly employed, can blur months into years. The harsh bob haircut I wore came unexpectedly into fashion then was quickly gone again. My dresses and expression remained equally plain, equally angular, though I wore pants when I could and happily faded into the city brickwork. The city itself was happy to swallow me. Standing in an after-work doorway, rain fuzzing down, soaking up noises and diffusing the traffic lights and neon into vague, crystallised shapes. Each building a world, each window a land within that world, a peppering of Ghost Lands atop groaning foundations. A dozen different architectural styles of a dozen different decades. The apartments in Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, splintered and spread around two blocks. Alleys and litter, and the eyes of feral cats glowing predatory in the gloomy corners. Light, or lack of it, could make anything warm, sinister, threatening or safe. Back street lights puncturing fire escapes. Searchlight attics pointing white and yellow fingers to the sky. The Ghost Land was always there, in every angle or corner I couldn't quite see around, at the end of every dark-swallowed alley. I was forever walking towards it.

My twenty first birthday was spent in an all-night Irish diner where they were happy to give you as much coffee and as much privacy as you needed. For a joke I'd bought a plastic vase and flowers, and had set them on the table in front of me. The large card my office colleagues had given me sat next to it. It was full of

names. No messages. They'd signed it the way they might sign a memo or timesheet. A job to be done. My birthday gift, elaborately wrapped in a little square box tied with ribbon, turned out to be an espresso cup. Just the sort of thing you'd buy when you'd run out of ideas.

I had a card from Dad too. It was yellowed around the edges and still bore the Johnson's Hardware price sticker on the back. Inside I found a twenty dollar bill. I sat and stared at it for minutes, running my fingers along one side then the other. The accompanying letter wished me all the best. 'You seem to be doing well for yourself in the city,' he'd written. I must have said something aloud because the waitress stopped and glanced at me. Dad didn't mention the Outpost, or my former schoolmates, or whether Tommy Brady had ever appeared again. Maybe they still held me to blame. I'd been so angry at Wendy Martin that night on our porch, trying to tell me what I should do concerning someone she claimed was *her* man. But what if I had gone after him and brought him back out? What if I'd stayed there?

Though I did my best, the office job was never going to last. The work itself was easy. Everybody was so stuck in their holes they couldn't think of any better way to do it. They slaved all year at stuff they hated and the limit of their dreams was a two week vacation in Florida. Yet they got promotions and I didn't. I've always had a very strong sense of injustice, and it was hard not to let it show.

"You could do a lot better in your career, Miss Tasker, if you took the time to say hello to people and ask how they're doing," the boss said to me when I was doing nothing more controversial than fetching a cup of water.

"Why should I?" I said. "You all talk, and talk, and talk but you don't ever *say* anything."

"It's common courtesy."

"I've tried, but it's a waste of time. Everybody thinks the same, speaks the same, lives the same and will likely die the same. I don't see why my skills should be overlooked just because I'm different. It's a business, not a freaking social club, yet you all attack me with your voices. I don't mind *things*. *Things* can't talk to me, can't keep asking or making demands, can't tell me that I'm doing wrong, or am rude, or don't understand such and such. Why don't you just concentrate on the paperwork I'm putting out instead of worrying whether I've said hello to so and so, or asked after such and such's new baby?"

He started to reply, but it was already too late. I was probably being unfair, I knew, but at the time I felt every word. I stood in the corner of the office, wreck of the water cooler fanning across the carpet and the ripped up remains of whatever memo had been shoved into my hand still clutched between my fingers. Packing my few personal possessions into the bottom of a cardboard box took less than a minute.

The next two months were a daze of back street slinking, bars who didn't give a shit what age or gender you were, and rolling around in too-long-unwashed bedclothes. The thought of working in another office made me sick. A junior clerk's wage doesn't stretch far in the city, even with my frugal living, and I was hurtling head first towards a rock wall. After a long day scaring ducks in the park I returned to my apartment to find a new lock on my door. Our block was being fumigated and we all had to get out. I was already four weeks overdue on the rent.

"I'm owed," the landlord said, "and I don't want you to think you can punk out on me just because the bug men are coming."

He told me I couldn't collect my stuff unless I paid. Instead I went to the nearest bar and sat drinking the dregs of my severance pay. Some guy started talking to me. A nondescript figure in an unremarkable suit. I don't think he was hitting on me, he just wanted an ear, so I got talking back. I ended up telling him where I was raised, and what lay beyond the Fence bisecting our yard. "Do you think you could get me in?" he said.

I put down my drink. It was the third he'd bought me. "What?"

"You just said you're from the Claywood area."

"Claywood doesn't exist anymore. It's just a name on old maps."

"The place it turned into, you must know all about that, living so close."

"It's not heaven, Mecca, Shangri-La or the start of the yellow brick road. Getting caught could land me in trouble."

"Miss, from the way you are right now I'd guess you're already in a shitload of trouble. If you can do it for me, if you can get me in, others might be interested. Maybe it's worth seeing. Maybe it isn't. Either way, the bucks are there if you want them." He unfolded a stack of bills from his wallet and placed a business card on top. "Let me know. Soon."

After he'd gone I went to the bus station, got change of a ten dollar bill and called Dad.

“You run out of gas again, Miriam?” he said.

“Yes,” I said. “I’ve run out of gas again.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Beyond the rusted gate, in a rumble tumble of crumbling bricks haloed by a tangle of brown, desiccated thorns, we pick a path along a twig scratched pavement half swallowed by moss. Shrubs gone bad tug at our coats, and the stink of too many decaying years swamp our nostrils with a sense of abandonment. A caricature, a comic haunted house garden plucked from the celluloid of a Universal horror fest. Marshall walks beside me whenever the path allows. I can smell him, even above the decay. Rich, man-sweat pours into that dusty eternally-flapping-about his-ankles overcoat.

“It looks like my uncle's back yard,” he says. “The old buzzard never took a set of clippers to it in his life.”

And in some ways Marshall is right. Nothing black or chitinous covers the overgrowth. It is an honest jungle, one a team of civic workers could clean up in a week. Overhead, the orange hue is leaking from the sky. In its place leaden clouds gather in a thickening blanket. I'm reminded of rainy days in the city.

Marshall doesn't say anything else. Of course it's all a trick. We aren't leaving the Ghost Land as some Pilgrims had believed in the past. We're merely crossing a boundary, a no man's land. A dozen yards of grace before the heart of the storm. We pass a public bench, chewed by thorns. A fountain, the basin choked with tree droppings. Just around that corner...

Marshall halts. He looks at his shoes, seemingly debating whether to produce that infernal handkerchief and wipe them again. His mouth is working, filtering thoughts before turning them into words.

“What's the matter?” I prompt.

“I keep thinking about that church.”

“Father Joe's church?”

“Yes, and that weird congregation. How many of them made it this far?”

“They're not my Pilgrims. Some were led by others, some blundered around in here by themselves.”

“You don't know any of them?”

“My clients always get what they want. The church is a hospital ward for broken Pilgrims, people who didn't know what they were doing and got swept back out to the threshold. Litter, that's more or less all they are.”

“What happened to the priest?”

“He walked into the Ghost Land too. Some in his parish claim it was to rescue lost Pilgrims, others that he wanted a showdown with Satan. He saw something, felt something, I don't know. The Ghost Land changes people. Not like a bereavement or an epiphany, or even a brain injury that suddenly makes you enjoy pickled eggs when all your life you've hated them. It rewires them to their core. Your daughter obviously wasn't turning out the way you wanted, so are you hoping the person you find will have different values from the one who went in? Your values, or at least something approximating them? A last grasp at hope?”

He holds out his hands, palm up, fingers unfurling like petals. “I tried everything. The right schools, the right friends, the right counsellors. Yet she turned out wrong. So wrong. A man in my position can't allow that. It's more a question of blood than business. Our kind have to be bred. You can't permit chance to poke a finger into your family name. Everyone understood that. Everyone except Stephanie. She was the crack in the dam, the trickle that would become a flood. The damage had to be repaired at source.”

“She's your daughter.”

“Exactly. She's my daughter. You still don't get it, do you? Hicks like you never do. You breed without forethought. You don't care what mixes with your blood.”

“Maybe you didn't want your daughter to come out different. Perhaps you didn't want her to come out at all. You could be here to make sure she never bothers you again.”

“I said I wanted to find her, I didn't say I wanted to bring her back.”

I take a step towards him. “But you could live with her being dead, couldn't you, because that would take the matter out of your hands? Perhaps you'd even view it as a punishment for her not bending to your way of things? What a relief that would provide. After all, you're not a failure if fate intervenes, are you? Only instead of fate it was the Ghost Land. You didn't send her here so it wasn't your mistake. The fact it was Stephanie's mistake reinforces your view of her, so you're a winner twice over. Only perhaps it wasn't a mistake after all?”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“Maybe she didn't defy you in coming here. Maybe you encouraged it.

After all, unlike other institutions, this one doesn't cost thousands of dollars in fees. When you saw those photographs you must've panicked. She was still alive. What would happen if she came out? What would it do to your life, your career, any relationships you may have?"

"And you would know about that, would you?"

"Yes, Mr Marshall, I know all about it. Is that why you kept saying I was like Stephanie towards the end, why you kept picking away at me? To discover what she found here that turned out to be so much better than living with you?"

He folds his hands back in. "*You* never had to live with *her*. In the end, she was like an alien being moving through a room full of furniture. We were the desks, tables and chairs of her life. I used to berate her for wearing her clothes inside out, but she kept insisting she had to get the seams and tags away from her skin. She was always bad at sports. I don't know if it was down to poor coordination or her being a sore loser. Any kind of socialising became a challenge."

"You couldn't cope?"

"My business necessitated hosting some very important people. Receptions were held every week at my house. She was contemptuous of most of my closest associates, but I couldn't exactly lock her in the attic. Despite what you said you'll never understand my reasons for being here. Just do what I'm paying you to do."

I suck in my breath and start walking. A moment later I hear the slap of his feet behind me. The path zigzags between gutted flowerbeds. Whatever had grown there long turned to mulch. My pace increases. There is nothing in this borderland to hurt us.

"If you were in a maze how would you find your way out?" Marshall says.

"I'd keep taking left turns."

"You might end up going in circles."

"The math is different here."

"Do you have kids yourself? I'm genuinely curious."

I can't stop myself. "If I had they'd likely be taken away. My Dad believed the Ghost Land tainted me, if it didn't leave me barren altogether. I don't think either of my parents were sweet on the thought that any children I had might end up like me. You're right in one sense, Mr Marshall. Family relationships are toxic. Fathers and daughters, husbands and wives. Sometimes they chew on each other until there's nothing left. So yes, I will do what you hired me to do. You'll

find your daughter, for better or worse, some place ahead. Congratulations. You'll be a real Pilgrim. Maybe someone will write a poem for you and post it on the boards.”

“You really are like her in a lot of ways. It must have caused you a lot of trouble.”

I flex my shoulders. The backpack is starting to chafe. “People started blaming me whenever anything went wrong in the community. I don't smile much or go in for those social things the Baptists like to organise, so I guess that makes me the bad guy. In a chicken house I'd be the one the others would try to peck to pieces. I remember every word, every look. My choices seemed stark: either get my brain fried in an institution or thrown in jail. Either way folk wouldn't have to sweat much over my condition any more.”

“But that didn't happen, obviously.”

“No it didn't, and that was down to luck.”

“Do you hate everybody?”

“I'm not a Vulcan from *Star Trek*. I don't lack feelings, in fact my emotions can run rampant. But hate doesn't come into it. I couldn't understand why people didn't see the same things I did. I thought them stupid. And they thought me the same. These days my kind and their kind tolerate each other's existence under a clumsy truce.”

We turn the corner. Marshall, to his credit, tries not to react. He sees it, he thinks about it, and then he speaks. “Is this the centre of it all? Is this where it *happened?*”

The sky has turned a glacial blue, a blue that seems to stretch, darkening, to the heart of the universe. Everything stands out in stark relief. Shrubs, hedges, bent-over pocket trees, shrouded in a not-quite snow, frost, paint, popsicle plates. An intensity that seems to scratch your eyes to the backs of their sockets, with white puff clouds suspended unmoving above this bright, brittle place. Everything - the weeds, the grass, the dusting of trees around the edge - has turned a glittery white. You shiver just looking at it.

Marshall reaches out a tentative foot and presses it onto the whitened path. I don't try to stop him. His shoe leaves no footprint.

“What is it?” He bends over to examine a leaf turned forever into some jagged sculpture. “Manna from heaven? Divine frosting? Chemicals? Some sort

of alien blowout.”

“We can walk on it, as long as you stick to the path.”

“No way around, huh?”

“It wouldn't make any difference.”

“It might have made me feel better, and that's something isn't it? I guess I'll just have to take your word again.”

“You go first. I want you where I can see you.”

Marshall doesn't argue. Maybe he's learning at last. He takes a few careful steps then settles when nothing jumps out to bite him. “A winter wonderland from the nuthouse,” he mutters. Our feet are noiseless on the path. No crunching sounds, nothing. His attention is everywhere. He's looking for his crater, his ground zero, his trigger point that'll show him where and how it all began. Anything will do: a hole in the ground, a pile of busted canisters, perhaps even the dried out corpse of a mad scientist lying among the shards of broken test tubes.

Near the middle of a small picnic area, bent backwards and bristling, is something resembling a cross between a twisted cactus and a sea anemone. Marshall steps off the path to have a closer look.

“Don't go near it,” I warn. “It's a Sticker. You only find them here.”

“What will it do to me?”

“Are you kidding, Mr Marshall?”

The Sticker is a headache in itself. It's well named as any solid object sticks to it. *Anything*. The first Missionary to stumble across this horrible plant was lucky only to lose his gloves. The second lost most of the skin off his palms. Some genius tried lifting one with plastic tongs and those stuck as well.

“I don't know what it was before. Some sort of shrub I guess. But the white stuff has reacted with it. *Changed* it. Please move away. You've come too far to do something dumb now.”

He steps back on the path, squeezing his gloves together. “Is there anything good in this place? Is it just a trash heap full of a dozen horrible ways to die? Your Pilgrims must be looking for something better than this.”

“Everyone's looking for something, including you.”

“I don't believe in miracles. What I do remember is seeing a movie where a pilot was drinking soda and threw the empty bottle out of the plane. It soft landed in the middle of the jungle, at the edge of a tribal village where the natives had

little contact with the civilised world. At first the villagers didn't know what to make of this strange object that had fallen from the sky. They'd never seen anything like it. Soon, however, they found all sorts of uses for it: carrying water, grinding seeds, rolling out dough. Even a mould for jewellery. They considered it miraculous. Soon everyone in the village wanted to make use of this 'gift from the gods'. It led to arguments and conflict. Tensions the natives had never experienced before. Their whole slant on the idea of 'property' was different to ours. In the end it was decided the object must be cursed, and a tribesman was sent out to cast it off the edge of the world, which in his case turned out to be a foggy cliff. That's all your Pilgrims are doing. Worshipping empty soda bottles dumped by the military with little thought about where they left their trash."

"Is that what you believe your daughter is doing?"

"I don't know and don't much care. Maybe you're right, I didn't want to find her. I got you in here under false pretences. I wanted to come into the Ghost Land for my benefit. I wanted to face it, challenge it, debunk everything about it. The scientists were right. It can't exist in the way you claim, but you want it to be real because outside is a world of broken hopes, broken dreams where the sun rises and sets in the same old way.. Once we see through the tricksters, supernatural events always turn out to be oh so natural."

"So you don't want Stephanie to have found her Shangri La? You're a real loving parent."

"What would you know about love? I've listened to you for hours. You've never loved anyone in your life. I bet any sex you ever had was just another bodily function like eating a cheeseburger or taking a shit. So go on, show me your boogeyman, your showstopper, the real heart of everything, and prove to me I haven't wasted my time or money or this trip to a crappy Wonderland. I pretty much said it at the beginning and I'll say it again, in my book you're just another goddam shyster."

I feel my lips peel back against my teeth. I don't know whether I'm smiling, grimacing or about to bite him. It doesn't matter, all the proof of anything he could ever want is a few steps away. "Come with me," I say, and my voice is a smooth but utterly chilled ice cream. I sound challenging and seductive even to myself, and I still get surprised sometimes with the messages my voice is capable of coming out with. I lead this time, through the dregs of the park. Stickers dot

the white grass, implacable in their tortured shapes. We arrive at a place where a hedge has long collapsed and rotted to threads. The land falls away before us, tumbling to a broken wall, an alley and a row of compact backyards. The white coating stops in a surreal border a few yards from where we stand. Everything beyond is just dirt again. The bottom of the slope is strewn with the remains of the devoted, and the houses beyond the backyards are nondescript in their small, faded uniformity.

“What are those things?” Marshall says, gesturing at the shapes.

“Can't you see? Don't you want to see?”

“They could be piles of rags, old newspapers, a wind-blown flotsam of street rubbish and old leaves. Stains on the ground.”

“I guess I should have brought my binoculars after all.”

His voice tightens. “Where is Stephanie?”

The back door of one of the houses opens. “There,” I say, pointing.

From here, taking the most direct through the centre of the Ghost Land involves traversing that alley. Even veteran Missionaries were said to balk at this option. The bolder ones used to demand a triple bonus. Most of those bolder ones are dead. Missionaries and Pilgrims alike have been known to take their chances clambering through adjacent gardens. But that back door will always open and, once you've seen what comes out up close, there's no turning away. In fact, so startling is a first encounter that you might not even realise what you're looking at. It is one of the most horrible things in the Ghost Land. Or the most beautiful.

Scientists, of course, would put their own label on it, as if naming everything could give them a better understanding of the Ghost Land or, even more ludicrous, some sort of control over the area. A “recursive temporal loop” is the one of the fancy phrases I heard in the early days of the Fence, when folk like Kent Marshall thought it was a military experiment turned topsy turvy, and using a few weird names would encourage people to leave things alone. True, the figure repeats exactly the same motions. Its face, hands and body haven't aged but the shoes have worn off its feet and its clothes have turned to string rags. Heavy rain can soak it like it soaks everything else. No “time loop” would do that. I've heard that, if you can get close enough and still survive, you can hear its short, ragged breath, though it's all just rumour. Nobody knows whether it's even really alive.

Clients always react the same no matter how much you try to prepare them. Some even call to it or wave. Now and again they might pick up a rock. That's when you slap them down. Don't throw anything. Pull as many faces as you like, yell yourself hoarse, but don't physically interfere. Because whatever caught this could catch you.

Picture the first client I brought this far. A desperate carpet salesman called Bob Moffat. Husband, teenage daughter, family dog. Except the wife had walked out on him and taken the other two with her. Poor Bob run himself into near penury trying to find them. Newspaper ads, appeals, private investigators. The police where of the opinion that, as there were no suspicious circumstances, they just didn't want to be found and if Bob wanted to spare himself more grief he'd better get used to the idea. What Bob actually did was to light out of town in a hired car and scour all the bordering counties. He arrived at the Outpost when small talk was rife and snippets of illegal video footage were changing hands in the conspiracy market. Like many Pilgrims his logic was simple. His missing friend/relative/wife/criminal business partner was nowhere else to be found, so they must be in the Ghost Land. He nearly got into trouble for trying to bribe a lawman to take him inside. All he could say was, "They won't let me go in there. They won't let me find Mary." Then he found me, or I found him.

Bob Moffat stood pretty much where Marshall is now. The back door of the house opened. A middle aged woman ran out. Glasses, bob haircut, waistline going to fat. She ran down the garden path, peering in all directions. Then she hurried back inside and closed the door behind her. Then she came out and did the same thing again. And again.

"Mary," Bob Moffat said, the sound almost strangling in his throat. With a wide smile, he stumbled down the slope, arms wide in a net of expectation while the last of his money sat fat and heavy in my pocket.

Now the figure reaches the bottom of the garden, peering off into some unknown horizon. Marshall has stepped backwards, his hands out and circling in front of him. "It's a hallucination. You've put some sort of shit in my drinking water."

"Look at her. That's Stephanie isn't it? The white gown, the long dark hair. The flower clinging to her scalp."

"You're seeing this too?"

“Just like the photograph you showed me.” I don't tell him that I always see what the client sees. That whenever I've been here alone the figure remains just that, a vague human shape with worn-through shoes and rags flapping from its shoulders. “This is what you wanted, wasn't it? The closure you claimed to need?”

“It looks like her. It even moves like her.”

“I told you. I always give my clients what they want.”

“And how many ended up in that church with the crazy preacher?” He gestures at the distant figure. “You think I would fall for such a carnival trick? Maybe it is her. Maybe you're colluding. *Hey, lets strip Daddy of a whole chunk of money and give him such a scare he'll never come looking for me again.*”

“Come on, Mr Marshall. It's the old obsession. You're trying to clean things up in your life the way you wipe your shoes or polish your car. Stephanie is a weight on your back. By coming here, she got away from you before you had her battered into the shape you wanted. You can't live with that, and you won't let it go. Especially as she may have found a better place, a world that suits her and not you. Who really sent you those photographs of your daughter? Was it a threat? Blackmail even?”

“I wasn't expecting to come this far.”

“Did you expect Stephanie to be dead? From the beginning?”

“Dead. Or different. Or simply gone.”

“Go on. Tell me. What do you *see* down there?”

He's seriously backing away now, arms windmilling as if he's trying to push aside some overwhelming force. “The Ghost Land is no Shangri La, no Mecca, no area of divine or spiritual revelation. It's a dump. A trash heap. There's nothing there except the dregs of an experiment gone wrong and a dozen stupid ways to die.”

A Sticker sits a half dozen paces behind him. His attention is fixed on me, his face flushed, triumphant, as if he's convincing himself more of his own righteousness with each second. “I don't believe. I *won't* believe. You'll have to find other suckers to scam. I'm going to walk back the way we came and I bet nothing happens to me. You're just some bitter spinster who can't have kids and likely can't find a man to try and give you one.”

Close enough.

I push him backwards onto the Sticker. He looks startled for a moment, but he hasn't realised what I've done to him. *Really* done to him.

“What's the matter with you?” he says.

“I can't afford you in my life, Mr Marshall. I'm sorry.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“There is another world. There has to be. I can't exist without believing that. I can love. I can *and I will*.”

I start to walk away from him. I hear him try to follow but he can't. He struggles to remove his coat but he can't do that either. He is caught in the Sticker's embrace, and it has him to the core of his spine.

“What did I ever do to you?” he cries. “What did I ever do to any of you?”

His voice is fading now as I approach the slope. The figure has disappeared back inside the house but it'll re-emerge. It's always here for those who seek it. I step past the shapes on the patchy grass, their once beautiful smiles lost to decay. The devoted, the seekers, the Missionaries and Pilgrims. I saved you all.

I sit cross-legged near the wall that separates the alley, beside the remains of Bob Moffat. I'm patient. My faith is absolute. The door opens and out it comes, hurrying along that broken garden path, peering towards an infinite horizon.

“I believe,” I say.

And it begins to change, the rags being replaced by a farmer's shirt and a pair of scuffed jeans. Skin fills out its knotted arms. The face becomes rounded and ruddy with health. Sockets fill with blue eyes. Fair hair, the type that always looks kissed by a permanent sunrise, sprouts from the skull.

I clasp my fingers under my chin. My smile is beatific.

“Tommy...” I whisper.

THE END

REFLEXIVE ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

The criteria for Asperger's according to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* involve impaired social interaction manifested by poor eye-to-eye contact, facial expression, body posture, and gestures. They are characterised by repetitive behaviour coupled with an extremely focused range of interests and activities. To quote the Manual:

“They are often physically awkward and socially tactless. They seem to be perfectionists but often live in chaos. They know more about some obscure or highly technical subject than seems possible – and go on and on about it. They may seem to lack empathy, and are often accused of being stubborn, selfish or even mean. They can also be extremely loyal, sometimes painfully honest, highly disciplined and productive in their chosen field, and expert in whatever they decide to be expert at.”²

In Section 1 of this essay I consider the physical differences between the autistic and non-autistic (neurotypical) brain, what effect these differences will have on autistics' perception of the world around them, their methods of processing that information, and the consequences of having such a condition in the period explored by my novel when autism was much less understood than it is now. I shall be looking at the nature vs nurture argument, contrasting environmental and genetic factors, and touching on the issue of supposedly bad parenting. I will also look at how these physical differences may fuel an autistic's creativity and, in particular, drive him or her to write.

Section 2 looks at the alleged links between Asperger's Syndrome (AS) and creativity, with examples given of writers considered geniuses in their field who are purported to be on the autistic spectrum. I will examine some of the problems associated with retro-diagnosing past authors, as well as considering how some of

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American Psychiatric Association (APA) (1994) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (revised 4th edition), Washington DC: American Psychiatric Association.

the claims made concerning these authors tie in with my own experience, both as an AS sufferer and writer.

Section 3 examines the treatment of Asperger's sufferers in three examples of contemporary fiction, the way in which AS traits are handled by the (non-AS) authors, and the techniques used to make ostensibly unlikeable characters sympathetic and engaging for the general reader. I will also consider deficiencies in these treatments caused by the demands of current market forces and the lack of personal experience of AS on the part of the writers concerned.

In Section 4, I deal with the AS sufferer's desire to find 'another place' where they feel they can belong, or where their traits will give them an actual advantage. I will look at the idea of an 'autistic landscape' and offer both fictional and real life examples of toxic, possibly alien places which prove a draw for a certain character type.

Section 5 offers an in-depth explanation of the choices I have made when crafting the character of Miriam Tasker and the landscape – The Ghost Land – which has played such an important part of her life. I link these choices to the previously examined literature and expand on some of my decisions regarding which autistic traits I decided to include and which to omit. I will also examine some of the stylistic techniques employed to give the feel of an AS sufferer's point of view, again while still ensuring the non-AS reader remains engaged.

In the Conclusion, I look at the current state of autistic literature, diagnoses and the idea that autism has, in some respects, become fashionable to the extent of generating a subculture. I also summarise the artistic advantages AS can give an author and the manner in which those advantages can benefit literature as a whole.

1: ALL IN THE MIND?

Identifying physical differences between the AS and neurotypical brain and the alterations such differences bring about in perceptions and social interactions offer an insight into how these can be used to advantage in fiction. This includes the effect AS traits have on the work ethic and the desire, in the case of the AS author, to engage in art as a substitute for deficiencies in other areas.

Autistic author Temple Grandin is currently one of the most influential spokespersons on the autistic spectrum, having featured in the *Time 100's* list of *Heroes* (2010), made numerous television appearances, published widely on the

issue and became the subject of an award winning semi-biographical film (*Temple Grandin*, 2010). In her co-authored work *The Autistic Brain* (with award winning science writer, Richard Panek) Grandin explains how, in recent times, large strides have made in the field of autistic research thanks mainly to neuroimaging, where physical differences between spectrum and non-spectrum brains can be more easily identified.³ This has made diagnosis simpler, but by no means foolproof. MRI only became widely available in the 1980s. Before that autistic *traits* had been identified and listed by Leo Kanner, who published papers on the subject in 1943. Kanner presented the case of eleven children who he felt shared the same symptoms: “the need for solitude, the need for sameness, to be alone in a world that never varied” (Grandin 2013, Pg 5).

At the same time Hans Asperger, from whom the term “Asperger's Syndrome” derives, identified a subset of symptoms such as “a lack of empathy, little ability to form friendships, one-sided conversations, intense absorption in a special interest to the extent that they can talk endlessly about their favourite subjects, and clumsy movements”. He dubbed them “little professors” (Grandin 2013, Pg 15).

There is a claim that environmental factors play a role in autism. According to Steve Silberman, possible contributors could include toxins, car exhaust fumes, the mother's lifestyle during pregnancy, vaccines, drugs. Genes may also act in concert with environmental exposures, which may result in genetic damage, or a specific genetic mix that comprises a particular individual with autism. Some genes have even been given nicknames: “The brat gene”, 'The drinking gene”, “the vulnerability gene”, “the risk gene” and even “the responsiveness gene” (Silberman 2015, Pg 99). The “nature or nurture” argument is always present. Does environmental oversensitivity lead to “orchid children” (Ibid) who flourish or wilt depending on whether their circumstances are conducive to growth or not? Much of this would be new territory during the period my novel is set, However Asperger himself was in no doubt that autism was passed down through the family tree (Ibid).

Other factors include parental obsessiveness, with fathers and mothers who are not usually warm-hearted and who are preoccupied with scientific, literary or

³Temple Grandin and Richard Panek (2013) *The Autistic Brain*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, Chapter 4 *Lighting Up the Autistic Brain*, Pg 21-50.

artistic abstractions. A genuine interest in people is limited. In a *Time* magazine interview Kanner claimed that autistic offspring were often the product of parents defrosting just long enough to produce a child (Silberman 2015, Pg 198). This might have given rise to the notion that it always the parents' fault, and that autism is latent until triggered by poor parenting, resulting a dark age when psychiatrists falsely blamed “refrigerator mothers” for causing their children's autism by providing them with inadequate nurturing (Ibid 2015, Pg6).

With so little known about the condition in the early years, and given the number of failed or incorrect diagnoses, parents would shift their child from doctor to doctor hoping to get the 'right' diagnosis. The spectre of brain damage was often raised, and it was such a diagnosis that actually allowed author and speaker Temple Grandin to avoid being institutionalised (Silberman 2015, Pg7).

In some respects Grandin is a conformist. She talks about “socialising” autistics, affecting the trajectory of their lives and training, if not moulding them outright, for society. In fact society seems to be everything, and a place in it appears to be the ultimate goal. Indeed she talks about learning to try to please (Grandin 2013, Pg 183, 191-6).

However no matter how much recourse to statistics Grandin makes, there are always those who fall outside her percentages. The idea of intervention, the notion that the earlier the intervention the greater the potential effect on the trajectory of an autistic person's life (Grandin 2013, Pg 40), might merely be a form of autistic shepherding. In my experience most, if not all, parents have plans for their children anyway.

Grandin warns teachers, parents and therapists to avoid getting locked into labels because they are not precise (Grandin 2013, Pg 102), yet later on defines different types of autistic thinkers by using labels, possibly because of her scientific training (Ibid, Pg 197). It is not possible to diagnose autism in the laboratory. Such work is subjective and behaviours vary between the affected. (Ibid, Pg 4-5). In this sense Asperger's sufferers can be as different from each other as neurotypicals. They can perceive things differently, have alternative perceptions and strengths.

A brain that has a different method of interpreting sensory information can result in a radically altered world experience. The autistic would literally be living in an alternate reality (Grandin 2013, Pg 70). Grandin quotes an interesting

phrase with reference to overstimulation: “intense world syndrome” (Ibid, Pg 84), to which the autistic brain's response might be to rapidly limit the individual into a finite number of obsessively repeated but secure behavioural routines. The world was certainly changing fast in my novel's 1969 and earlier setting. In this case we have the “world changing too fast” situation, also quoted by Grandin, in which the autistic's response might be to withdraw, partially or completely, from their environment (Ibid, Pg 84-5).

For some autistics the jumbled barrage of sensations can't be filtered or tuned out (Grandin 2013, Pg 36). Only a person experiencing sensory overload can give an accurate description of that experience, but disorganisation of the thought processes due to that overload might make such description difficult (Ibid, Pg 77).

Study results demonstrate that the measure of intelligence in autistics varies considerably depending on the type of test. Some favour pattern thinkers more than visual thinkers. Importantly, one research group concluded that intelligence has been underestimated in the autistic population, though actual savants only account for around 10% (Grandin 2013, Pg 118-119).

According to Catherine Best, Shruti Arora, Fiona Porter and Martin Doherty in their paper, *The Relationship Between Subthreshold Autistic Traits, Ambiguous Figure Perception and Divergent Thinking*, it has been “posited” that autism is not a “deficit-only model”, and that the autistic mind contains “islets of preserved or even superior ability”. The paper quotes a Happe and Vital study from 2009 which provides evidence that autistic traits “...were more pronounced in children reported to have talents outstripping older children”.⁴

The paper goes on to state: “It has previously been speculated that in order for a complex genetic disorder to remain within the population there must be advantages conferred on individuals who inherit some of the traits of the disorder but not the full-blown clinical syndrome,” and “The high incidence of special talent in some people with autism is consistent with this claim” (Best, *et al*, 2015, Pg 7).

The model was adjusted for age and gender. The study doesn't state how this was done, only that it resulted in a small improvement. There is a greater

⁴Catherine Best, Shruti Arora, Fiona Porter, Martin Doherty (2015) *The Relationship Between Subthreshold Autistic Traits, Ambiguous Figure Perception and Divergent Thinking*, Stirling: University of Stirling, electronic edition, Pg 1-2.

proportion of male than female AS sufferers, however the actual proportion is not given.

I have mentioned how modern neuroimaging techniques have laid bare actual physical differences between the AS and non-AS brain. A specifically, or differently, wired brain might confer a bias in visualisation and perception that will allow it to make a “creative leap” (Grandin 2013, Pg 131). Contributing to such a creative leap in an autistic writer could be an alternative point of view, an unexpected emotional, or lack of emotional, response in a character, background objects and observations brought to the fore, a true and almost brutally objective view of human beings and their relationships, spotting that special 'tree' in the 'forest', or arranging words and phrases in a way neurotypicals might never consider.

People with autism are good at seeing details, but tend to prefer “objects to faces” (Grandin 2013, Pg 33). This perhaps allows them to see something a normal person might overlook. According to Grandin, studies have repeatedly shown that autistics perform much better than neurotypicals in the “something's-hidden-in-the-picture” type of game (Ibid, Pg 122). Autistics often see the trees before recognising the forest, for which Grandin quotes the research term *local bias* (Ibid). This can boil down to how you view something or, perhaps more importantly, how you label it. A scientist, for example, might label your beloved pet dog as *canis lupus familiaris*, but to you it's “your beloved pet dog”. The difference between seeing what is literally there and what is figuratively might help create an artist, or at least a particular type of artist. It may or may not follow that the figurative view is the emotional one (Ibid, Pg 101-116).

The brain can compensate for autistic deficiencies by generating new connections. In some cases this may result in certain areas becoming over connected, with benign side effects which may result in extra creative ability (Grandin 2013, Pg 31 and 36). Remaining with the trees and forest analogy, an autistic forest might not necessarily look the same as a neurotypical forest. Temple Grandin mentions a definition of 'creativity' that made an impression on her: “...a sudden unexpected recognition of concepts or facts in a new relation not previously seen” (Ibid, Pg 128). She doesn't claim that creativity is an inevitable product of autism but she does believe the condition makes a certain type of creativity more likely to emerge (Ibid, Pg 129). Autistics can break the rules and

employ the less obvious. No paradigms, no preconceptions, no expectations – just plenty of surprises.

Grandin quotes research that claims autistics are better at seeing “pure pattern” rather than “social pattern” (Grandin 2013, Pg 121), but are those patterns instantly recognisable in fiction? The challenge for a writer on the autistic spectrum is to alter those patterns to create something different, something special, without alienating the reader. Grandin asks what a totally normal brain would be like, a brain that is average in every way; “Pretty boring”, is her conclusion (Ibid, Pg 103). Experts once thought that any strengths demonstrated by autistic people were merely “fortunate byproducts of bad wiring” in the brain. But then the idea was raised that these strengths were not the “*byproducts* of anything”, but instead “the *products* of wiring that's neither good or bad” (Ibid, Pg 117). Despite some positive results, research uncovered studies which routinely emphasised only the “negative aspects of autism” (Ibid). This reflected a medical system full of what Grandin has termed label-locked thinkers, and people who “...get so invested in a word for something they no longer see the thing itself” (Ibid, Pg 102). Label-locked thinking carries dangers as well as limitations. Autistic traits must not necessarily be thought of as either positive or negative, but simply accurate. I agree with Grandin that the way an autistic looks, whether it be angry, sad or delighted, is not necessarily a reflection of how they actually feel. That confusion can lead to people being bumped from one neurological disorder subcategory to another. I had to wait until I was 42 before being successfully diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome.

In *An Anthropologist on Mars*, physician Oliver Sacks writes about the unconscious reprogramming of a “supremely efficient” adaptive brain.⁵ Defects can actually bring out latent powers and release a creative potential when the brain's system is forced to take other paths which may lead to growth in particular areas. This plasticity can allow the brain to create a new organisation and order free from a “rigidly defined norm”, and result in affected individuals reaching out to life not despite perceived defects but because of them. A “radically altered brain” and reality allows each individual to create a world of his or her own, an inner world and a “deeply altered” self which cannot be comprehended purely by behavioural observation. (Sacks 1995, Pg xiii-xvii)

⁵Oliver Sacks (1995) *An Anthropologist on Mars*, London: Picador, Pg 5.

The relationship between nature and nurture has proved a significant issue in recent years (Grandin 2013, Pg 171). I've heard the argument that if you put in enough hours you can be good at anything. However if that were the case we'd have a lot more musical maestros, literary geniuses and sporting heroes than we do. In the same way that longer limbs, a better ear for melodies, or a good eye for detail can bestow advantages in certain fields, so can a specifically wired brain. A counsellor I spoke to before I was diagnosed with Asperger's was convinced that without my particular mental condition, whatever that condition turned out to be, I would be unable to write in the unique way I did. However I am not especially brilliant at mathematics. Maths is very precise. My view of things tends to be more interpretive. I could never be a computer programmer, for instance, but as a writer I can successfully create entire worlds within my head and people those worlds. Indeed, details and patterns are given different emphasis by different autistics and manipulated in different ways. For example an autistic painter might apply vibrant colours to objects that wouldn't normally possess them. A brain focussing on words won't reach the same conclusions as a brain focussing on pictures. I have mentioned neuroimaging, which has established the existence of two visual pathways in the brain, each processing different information. Do some people consistently use one pathway significantly more than the other, no matter the task? Would this make them a more gifted painter or writer than someone with no such bias? Again there is no solid consensus, and it's prudent to remember all the practice in the world won't necessarily turn a clod into a ballerina.

I've discussed what I consider Grandin's 'conformist' views regarding moulding people for society and preparing them for advancing in that society, also about learning to try to please. She says: "Don't make excuses"(Grandin 2013, Pg 192). I couldn't disagree more. In my view being on the autistic spectrum *is* an excuse for non-conformity. Grandin seems to paint a very meek cog in the social wheel. Though an autistic can certainly devise strategies to function in society, it shouldn't mean subsuming his or her entire self to that society. Instead of getting embroiled in a fight, Grandin suggests going off somewhere quiet to have a cry (Ibid, 194). This, in my view, will allow any bully to get the better of you, which is something neither I nor the AS protagonist of *The Ghost Land*, Miriam Tasker, would allow.

Grandin's thinking seems restricted to specific parameters, possibly because she is a scientist. If the different types of autistic thinkers can pool their strengths something impressive can be created, she argues, though I'd be afraid of a 'decision by committee' situation. Nevertheless in the strength-in-difference vs conformity area, both may have their parts to play.

SECTION 2: THE AUTISTIC CREATIVE

Given the physical differences between the autistic and neurotypical brains, and the subsequent perceptual and interactive differences associated with these, how would an Asperger's author be affected in the approach, attitude, and execution of his or her craft?

A number of writers who, through the centuries, were ultimately considered literary geniuses have also, in recent times, been associated with Asperger's Syndrome. According to psychiatrist and autism research consultant Michael Fitzgerald examples include Hans Christian Andersen, George Orwell, Bruce Chatwin and Simone Weil. These are considered along with other writers, and artists from other fields, in Fitzgerald's book, *The Genesis of Autistic Creativity*.⁶ However in many cases such observations could apply equally to competent artists who, though not sharing the same level of greatness, have made unique and significant contributions in their area – or at least have the potential to do so. Michael Fitzgerald, in the opening paragraphs of his book at least, seems to rely on argument-by-quotation. In his introduction, he mentions the original description of autism by Leo Kanner in 1943, then focuses specifically on the traits associated with Asperger's Syndrome. He then uses these as a criteria to demonstrate why he believes the artists covered in this work were motivated, shaped, inspired or even hampered by these traits. We are told how Asperger himself wrote of 'autistic psychopathy', which seems to play out quite frequently in the lives of those described.

Fitzgerald says: “When first put forward, the idea of an association between autism and *artistic* creativity may seem a contradiction in terms” He goes on to claim that: “In autism and Asperger's syndrome... creativity is usually associated with mathematics, physics and engineering, rather than the various branches of the

⁶Michael Fitzgerald (2005) *The Genesis of Artistic Creativity: Asperger's Syndrome and the Arts*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

arts.” He says that explaining the apparent contradiction isn't easy, that the association “can't be explained fully”, but it's “possible to make a start” (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 9).

I would argue that there is little or no evidence for such a contradiction given that Fitzgerald himself sets out to comprehensively demolish the notion in his subsequent examination of artistic genius. Whilst I would agree that Asperger's Syndrome can generate a persistence which aids artistic success I have no personal experience of actual 'workaholism' being an aspect. Certainly there are examples of Asperger's shaping excellence in science and engineering, as Temple Grandin describes in *The Autistic Brain* (2013), but Grandin does not exclude any possibility that the same might apply to the arts.

Fitzgerald makes the claim that: “Persons with Asperger's Syndrome live very much in their own intellects” (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 9-10) I feel 'live in their own worlds' would be a broader and no less accurate statement, as the intellects of those with Asperger's shape their behaviour, and perception of, the physical world. He goes on to say that: “The Asperger ability to focus narrowly on a topic and resist distraction is enormously important” (Ibid, Pg 10). I agree, but this shouldn't necessarily be conflated with “workaholism”.

In 1962 Krevelen and Kuipers described an inability “...to distinguish between dream and reality”, and “...a lack of child-likeness... being old fashioned in word and gesture.”⁷ Yet Fitzgerald describes a child-like immaturity in almost all of his featured artists, an immaturity that is also present in the novel characters I shall be examining later in this essay. As a child's brain grows certain skills may be pruned, possibly to create a well-balanced adult mind. Within the autistic spectrum such pruning may be incomplete (Fitzgerald 2013, Pg 24), though a perceived immaturity might hide another motive. Also just because someone with Asperger's may dream of a different world where they can comfortably belong I have as yet no evidence that they are unable to differentiate between that dream and the world around them. Indeed it is the challenges in the real world that inspire the dream in the first place.

In many of the examples considered by Fitzgerald, Asperger's can accomplish tasks through developing their own methods as opposed to the ones

⁷A. van Krevelen and C. Kuipers (1962) 'The Psychopathology of Autistic Psychopathy.' *Acta Paedopsychiatrica* 29.

they are taught, which can cause friction in the classroom. Such persons show signs of original intelligence, are tied to solitary pursuits and do not necessarily find their schoolmates' play appealing (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 10-11). My own experience is that, though classroom friction certainly does occur, such play is not automatically excluded, especially if it involves a heavy imaginary element, and that greater difficulties can be encountered in the adult social world.

Fitzgerald disagrees with the argument that person's with Asperger's Syndrome have no imagination. Person's with Asperger's have a “vast imagination of the autistic type” (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 12, my emphasis), and such imagination is driven by common feelings of discontent and conflict. Apparently there is no tradition of happiness going hand-in-hand with genius in Western culture. Great artists with Asperger's succeed in building bridges between imagination and reality, whilst still being able to distinguish between them. Indeed it is important to disabuse the “pernicious stereotype” that autistic people are lacking in creative imagination. (Silberman 2015, Pg 17)

Fitzgerald says: “Classical psychoanalysis does not explain a developmental disorder such as Asperger's syndrome, where hereditary factors play the major part” (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 12). Whether accurate or not, the idea that genius and madness are closely allied is not a new one. Gregory (1987) says that persons with Asperger's: “...have access to aspects of the mind's functioning from which those who live more staid and conventional lives are excluded, and that it is this access which gives their work both its flair and its sense of risk.”⁸

On the issue of genes and hereditary traits, Fitzgerald says : “...nature is insufficient on its own without some nurture” (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 16). It may be arguable whether there is such a thing as a 'writer's gene' but talent must have some biological basis otherwise, as I have posited earlier in this essay, all runners would be Olympic champions and all musicians would be as gifted as Beethoven. Fitzgerald contends that creative genius can be handed on in part but never in full. He says: “The mystery of creativity and the awesome nature of genius remain to be fully explained” (Ibid, Pg 14).

Hans Asperger's “autistic intelligence”, hardly touched by tradition or culture, often does not show itself at school (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 15). Many of the creative geniuses examined in his book did poorly at school. Instead of absorbing

⁸ R. Gregory (1987) *Oxford Companion to the Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

the knowledge of others they create their own knowledge. Autistic knowledge can be: “linguistic, spatial, musical or logical” (Ibid, Pg 15). An important step was recognising the serious limitations of standard IQ testing, and the claim that IQ has no actual relationship to adult achievement. Yet Fitzgerald goes on to say: “Nevertheless, creative genius probably requires an IQ of 120 or more on standardised tests” (Ibid, Pg 15).

In the matter of genetics it does not follow that everyone in a family lineage will be equally gifted. We have certainly had talented family musicians and performers, though talent isn't necessarily passed on in all cases. So again, how much does a complicated mix of inherited traits and environmental factors feature in the equation?

Although Asperger's Syndrome is a hereditary condition, Fitzgerald, in my view, confirms the idea that geniuses do not necessarily beget geniuses. In fact the odds are against it. My character, Miriam Tasker, isn't necessarily a genius in the accepted sense, but she is unique in what she does, a uniqueness that bestows on her an expertise – or 'autistic knowledge' - that very few at best can share.

Nevertheless Fitzgerald sets out to show that inborn capabilities are the key to understanding genius. He does not state whether this applies to all Asperger's creatives, not just those considered to be of genius level. The phrase “Asperger savants” is used, referring to “...persons with high-functioning autism or Asperger's Syndrome who produce work of genius” (Fitzgerald 2003, Pg 20). So is the level of creativity demonstrated by Asperger's artists automatically down to savant skills, which are apparently more common in autistic spectrum disorders? Fitzgerald quotes a figure which states 1 in 200 on the autistic spectrum possess genuine talent (Ibid, Pg 21), but no comparison is given with neurotypical artists, rendering the statistic moot. Also the degree of talent demonstrated within the savant skills apparently has no bearing on a person's actual level of intelligence. It is claimed this is due to modules in the brain which act independently of its usual information processing capacity. Consequently, modules of the brain concerned with talent, or rather talent of genius proportions, are linked biologically and genetically. Most savants are autistic, however a big difference exists between low IQ savants and high IQ Asperger's savants (Ibid, Pg 21).

Asperger traits such as an inability to forget or filter out irrelevant material can bestow an advantage in the shape of a more comprehensive “store of visual

images or forms". These so-called talents can be linked by a "sixth" or "super" sense. Allegedly this system of sensing is present in everyone at an early age but is gradually lost by most people as they replace it with a system of interpretation. This changeover does not occur in the autistic (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 23).

Fitzgerald is aware of criticisms regarding linking genius with Asperger's and diagnosing deceased individuals, though doesn't offer any examples. He argues that the hindsight of current knowledge allows evidence to be better examined, and that such a "psycho-historical" approach can prove credible (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 25-26). My observation so far is that a lot of this current knowledge remains incomplete or inconclusive and, as a consequence, some of his arguments are equally inconclusive.

In the case of Asperger's Syndrome and writers, it is possible to experience major difficulties in social relationships and still be a literary genius. This might seem odd given that much of literature is concerned with the very relationships Asperger's sufferers have such problems with. However this doesn't necessarily prevent accurate observation on the part of the Asperger's author, nor impact on their ability to write about it using fiction or imaginative literary forms (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 25). If persons with Asperger's are "tied to solitary pursuits" (Van Kreveken and Kuipers, 1962) then writing would prove an ideal expressive form.

Talking again about the originality of thought in persons with high functioning autism, Fitzgerald says: "There is no doubt that in a literary sense there is something distinctive and unusual in their literary works. They produce a kind of autistic/Asperger type written language and dialogue". He also says that writers with Asperger's: "...often have an idiosyncratic perspective on the world that readers find very novel and illuminating..." (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 28).

Consequently you don't have to be Asperger's to become a writer, but it can lead to a particular form of writing that is unique to Asperger's. Fitzgerald gives several examples of writers he believes possessed Asperger's traits. He describes author Jonathan Swift as "...longing for the world's rewards but could not respect the world's rules. He was 'out of tune' with people... He could not see the consequences of his actions and showed a gross lack of empathy... He had an aspiration to be of the world but not in it" (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 31). These traits are present in whole or part in all the creative geniuses Fitzgerald goes on to examine, and yet all produced highly regarded works. This again raises the

interesting Asperger's conundrum as to how artists so out of kilter with the normal thread of humanity can produce works that are appreciated by that thread.

Shouldn't non-Asperger's sufferers feel as alienated by the work as they often are by the artist? It might be argued that the AS artist is capable of 'putting on a front' artistically as they sometimes find themselves obliged to do socially, and this may be the case for some. But in my view genius requires honesty, and I don't believe a true artist of whatever flavour would compromise their work to that extent.

With Hans Christian Andersen, Fitzgerald appears to contradict himself when he describes this alleged Asperger's sufferer as having a fragile self-esteem which was "...easily crushed by people around him" yet also possessing a sense of self-grandiosity and a need to control that borders on the narcissistic (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 46). Is the self-esteem issue restricted to the real world, whereas the need to be in control only manifests itself in the autistic alternative world? In the case of Andersen, depression was an issue, a problem shared by most of the creatives covered by Fitzgerald in this work. Suicidal thoughts may manifest themselves in significant mood swings. I don't agree with Fitzgerald's claim that person's with Asperger's syndrome probably experience difficulties in their search for a sense of meaning to their life because he himself demonstrates that, in the case of Asperger's creatives at least, their art provides a strong sense of purpose.

Was Andersen lacking or losing his sense of self-identity? This may refer to a purely autistic identity divorced from any empathy with non-Asperger's humans. The alien, or stranger-in-a-strange-land feeling. Fitzgerald refers to this as the "phantom or 'autistic' self" (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 48). He claims that Andersen fits a perfect description of a man without an authentic self, but does this mean that authenticity can only be judged in non-Asperger's terms? From an author's perspective it's important to consider the notion that Asperger's people are "often atheoretical, and the incomprehensibility of their world may be reflected in their writings" (Ibid, Pg 53).

Herman Melville was another voracious reader who was "...obsessed with becoming a writer" (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 53). He was also described as having a keen perceptive ability, and shared Andersen's wanderlust which, according to Fitzgerald, indicates "autistic novelty-seeking" (Ibid, Pg 54). He was also clumsy but very visual with a sharp eye, and "While writing, the thoughts were teeming and tumbling through his brain" (Ibid, Pg 54). From my own perspective as an

author with Asperger's, I have been described as having 'A head full of words'. Fitzgerald contends that Asperger's Syndrome benefitted Melville as a writer as it helped his observational abilities and to focus on his work. On the question of imagination: "He (Melville) had a highly fertile imagination; contrary to received wisdom, persons with Asperger's syndrome are capable of this" (Ibid, Pg 55).

Fitzgerald says "...a person with Asperger's Syndrome has a capacity for enormous imagination" (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 65), and cites Lewis Carroll as an example, though this imagination may be immature in nature. Asperger's Syndrome allegedly helped turn Carroll into "...one of the greatest writers of children's stories of all time". Another example of what I would term the 'Asperger's advantage'.

However the Asperger's sufferer's difficulties in empathising or fitting in socially with others might, in some cases, be "interpreted as inhumanity" (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 70). Asperger's creatives can be interested in certain places or items, but not necessarily the people connected with them. A naivety in relationships and "propensity for unrequited love" (Ibid, Pg 71), are present in persons with Asperger's.

On the subject of Asperger's people having different perceptions of the world about them, William Butler Yeats had an "...obsession with a higher order of reality" and that his "poetical statements disparage earthly life" (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 73). If Fitzgerald's diagnosis of Yeats is correct then this is especially pertinent as people with Asperger's have trouble dealing with "earthly life" on a daily basis. Decisions can be more influenced by personal interests, such as astrology in Yeats's case, than emotion.

There is some evidence that a number of Asperger's people may possess diffuse or multiple personalities. Beyond that, it is also possible for Asperger's sufferer's to "grow and develop" (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 77), and for their specific traits to become less obvious as they either weaken or are brought under better control. Indeed, utilising these "masks" can help an Asperger's person either distance themselves from reality or, conversely, reach out and communicate with people in a way usual Asperger's behaviour would render difficult (Ibid). Finding the "central self" of a person with Asperger's is difficult because "this is a central deficiency" in Asperger's (Ibid, Pg 84).

Sigman and Capps (1997) say of autistic people: "While they are often able

to come up with adequate, albeit strange, accounts of social and personal situations, the process is laborious, operating outside of intuitive notions about how they and others ordinarily feel and think in various situations”. This results in the 'Asperger's work' with its observant but unusual perspective. As Sigman and Capps go on to say: “...even the most intelligent autistic person cannot compensate for their limited access to a commonality that is effortlessly entered by most of us as we give conventional narrative form to life experiences”.⁹

Persons with Asperger's have to learn social skills that come naturally to others. From an intellectual, creative perspective they also have to come to a forced understanding of others which can probably lead to a certain 'oddness' in their work, an oddness that can provide an advantage in terms of creating interesting material. For example, philosopher A.J. Ayer was obsessional in that he “always had to be writing something” (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 142). He worked in a “world of his own – clearly an autistic world”. His last volume of autobiography is described as containing: “...a large cast of characters, but they sometimes remain merely names” (Ibid, Pg 143). For an Asperger's sufferer, lack of empathy and understanding of fellow human beings might make it difficult to differentiate between them in a written work, however it needs to be determined how much of a challenge this also poses for authors in general. “...Ayer had a great mastery of language, as persons with Asperger's Syndrome often do” (Ibid, Pg 144), and he “put on various identities in order to connect with people” (Ibid, 145). Unfortunately he expressed a lack of empathy even with core feelings such as love or grief.

Creative people with Asperger's Syndrome tend to start anew rather than building on others' work. Hans Asperger noted that children with Asperger's Syndrome were capable only of forming their own strategies. The notion that emotional immaturity and creativity are linked is a bold claim. However meltdowns do occur. Sights, real or imagined, are never forgotten. Relationships are a problem. Yet despite gloom and depression, people with Asperger's can be humorous, charming and witty. They “...don't follow the beaten path” (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 94).

A high functioning autistic can have a huge impact on other people. A

⁹M. Sigman and L. Capps (1997), *Children with Autism*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

secret of success for such an autistic is the ability to withdraw at will from the world and, as the compulsive observer, remain seemingly oblivious to all outside distractions. So what features of Asperger's Syndrome in particular might also foster artistic success? Previously described traits not only assist the Asperger's creative to engage fully with their art, but to offer an entirely unique perspective on that art. Autistic art may also provide a form of therapy to help Asperger's sufferers cope with depression, their longing for a sense of immortality, and their confusion when dealing with the challenges of the non-autistic world.

Michael Fitzgerald's method of retro-diagnosing writers by taking collected knowledge and applying it to the DSM IV (1994) has found an advocate in writing instructor and literary critic Julie Brown, who in her book *Writers On The Spectrum*¹⁰ takes a similar approach to some of the authors Fitzgerald examines, e.g. Anderson, Melville, and Carroll. Indeed Brown, who has a son on the autistic spectrum and teaches writing to students with Asperger's Syndrome, cites Fitzgerald throughout and uses similar research methods. These involve studying biographies, autobiographies, letters, diaries and histories in order to "...gain insight into their writing processes" and to look for commonalities. Brown also teaches a self-designed course called Autism in Literature, which "...focuses on books written by people on the spectrum" (Brown 2010, Pg 10).

Brown's purpose in this book is to analyse the way Asperger's Syndrome impacts the various aspects of the writing process, and she is in no doubt that such influences have created a "...rich, beautiful subculture" (Brown 2010, Pg 9). She claims that the influence of Asperger's Syndrome on the writing process is "undeniable" because "writing is a process that transfers one's thoughts and feelings onto the page" (Ibid, Pg 13), and autism itself directly affects those thoughts and feelings. As an example of the Asperger's author's methodology, Brown cites a collage process, whereby instead of writing a text from start to finish, the author will write disjointed bits and pieces which are finally brought together into a coherent whole (Ibid, Pg15). From my perspective this is a credible claim, as it is exactly the way in which I compile my first drafts.

In the introduction to this essay I raised the question of how an Asperger's author can engage a non-Asperger's readership. The problem of audience is one

¹⁰Julie Brown (2010) *Writers on the Spectrum: How Autism and Asperger Syndrome have Influenced Literary Writing*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers (Kindle edition).

Brown addresses directly, especially as she believes “... the author with autism is less likely to be thinking about the reader's needs than a neurotypical writer would” (Brown 2010, Pg 17). This is due in part to social impairment, i.e. lack of understanding of the reader's perspective, communication issues and difficulty in providing “accessible meaning” (Ibid). In other words, writing that is primarily self-centred.

However Brown argues that, for the autistic author, the writing process “...becomes a lifeline that seeks to connect the author to the outside world” (Brown 2010, Pg 19). Also, the Asperger's author's “...stubborn resistance to using traditional forms in the expected way can lead to brilliant, highly original texts” (Ibid, Pg 20). She even supports the notion that it is the neurotypical view of narrative that may end up being challenged as understanding of the autistic's methods of expression become better known (Ibid, Pg 22).

Michael Fitzgerald claims “...the vast majority of persons with Asperger's Syndrome do not have talent of genius proportions, but then neither do the vast proportion of normal people – the 'neurotypicals'” (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 241). But does Asperger's Syndrome *automatically* bestow creative talent in *any* proportion? Steve Silberman turns to Hans Asperger himself who said: “It seems that for success in science and art, a dash of autism is essential. For success, the necessary ingredient may be an ability to turn away from the everyday world, from the simply practical, an ability to rethink a subject with originality to as to create in new, untrodden ways.” Asperger went on to suggest that the role played by autistic people in the development of culture has been unappreciated, partly due to the stereotype of so-called idiot savants (Asperger quoted in Silberman 2015, Pg 103).

Although both Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger identified autism in the 1940s, and provided descriptions that were hardly bettered after 50 years, Asperger did not share Kanner's view that the condition was a disaster. According to Oliver Sacks, he believed it could bring positive attributes such as a “particular originality of thought and experience, which may lead to exceptional achievements in later life.” Also children with Asperger's Syndrome are often of normal if not superior intelligence compared to neurotypicals, with fewer neurological problems (Sacks 1995, Pg 234). Unlike those with classical autism, people with Asperger's Syndrome can tell us of their experiences, inner feelings

and states (Ibid, Pg 235).

What has more recent data provided? In 2015 University of Edinburgh researchers discovered that genes associated with autism are also linked to higher cognitive ability particularly in tasks requiring non-verbal hands on intelligence (Silberman 2015, Pg 273). The previously mentioned Stirling University study also aimed to "...assess the relationship between autistic traits and divergent thinking in a non-clinical sample" (Best, *et al* 2015, Pg 7). Such traits were narrowed down to a "triad" of impairments, namely in the domains of social behaviour, communication and, critical to the question of creativity, imagination. However the resultant paper defines lack of imagination in autistics, not as any inability to dream up worlds, characters or scenarios, but a manifestation of "restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities" as specified by the American Psychiatric Association (2013).

The Stirling paper describes a "paradox of creativity in autism", and defines that paradox as, on the one hand, autistics being disadvantaged by cognitive and behavioural rigidities of the condition and yet, on the other hand, their cognitive styles actually proving conducive to creativity. In this case divergent thinking is defined as "a cognitive component of creativity" (Best, *et al* 2015, Pg 1). Tests cited in the research examined a sample of 312 participants who had filled in an online questionnaire. Much use is made of the Subthreshold Autism Trait Questionnaire (SATQ). A divergent thinking test example involved considering alternate uses for common objects such as a brick or paper clip. The frequency of commonplace answers was defined as "fluency". High levels of autistic traits were "significantly" associated with low fluency on divergent thinking tasks, but also with "high numbers of unusual responses" (Ibid, Pg 1-2).

Consequently, evidence suggests non-Asperger's people seek common solutions to problems before attempting more complex or unusual methods. Autistics, however, are likely to take a novel approach from the start. This could be due to selective impairments in the broad range of semantic processing that neurotypicals initially rely on. In other words, certain impairments can, in fact, bestow a creative advantage through forcing Asperger's Syndrome sufferers to use alternative strategies. The parts of the brain responsible for generating unusual responses are, in Asperger's sufferers, either unimpaired or superior. However: "This speculation awaits specific test" (Best, *et al* 2015, Pg 8). Nevertheless,

from the beginning the key assertion is: “Generation of novel ideas is a prerequisite for creative problem solving and may be an adaptive advantage associated with autistic traits” (Ibid, Pg 1).

In terms of authorship, Michael Fitzgerald talks of famous autistics who demonstrated a flair for creativity their own special field. The Stirling paper elaborates by attesting that despite an “...overall decrease in production” results may be “...qualitatively superior” in terms of original responses (Best, *et al* 2015, Pg 2), though no claim is made that Asperger's authors are likely to be more or less prolific. Certain branches of the popular fiction mass market may demand conformity, a specific set of parameters tailored for an equally specific market, which may conflict with the original and unusual thought responses of the autistic creative.

However unique problem-solving traits might assist an Asperger's author to overcome writing issues such as writer's block, writing a character into a dead end, an inability to see how the story might develop, or the avoidance of cliched plots and situations. Good plotting in fiction is a form of creative problem solving.

Oliver Sacks asks whether autism is in itself a necessary ingredient of art. Most artists are not autistic, nor are most autistic people artists, but the coming together of the two makes possible an interaction “...so that the art takes on the strengths and weaknesses of autism”, but is unsure whether it can be termed a distinct “autistic art” (Sacks 1995, Pg 231). He writes about: “A selectivity of attention so intense it could create a world of its own, a place of calm and order in the chaos and tumult” (Ibid, Pg 242). Also “Rimland... reiterated his belief in a link between autism and genius, suggesting that children with the syndrome inherit 'a double dose of the extreme ability to concentrate – to narrow their attention to a very fine point, like a searchlight, to illuminate with great intensity a very small matter” (Silberman 2015, Pg 333).

Asperger described “autistic intelligence” which he viewed as “...a sort of intelligence scarcely touched by tradition and culture – unconventional, unorthodox, strangely 'pure' and original, akin to the intelligence of true creativity” (Sacks 1995, Pg 241). Sacks points out that: “Too much emphasis has been placed on the negative aspects of autism and insufficient attention, or respect, paid to the positive ones” (Ibid, Pg 276). But could those positive aspects

actually be hampered by treatment? Poet Robert Lowell talked of being on lithium for his manic depressive disorder. Though the treatment made him feel calmer and stabler, he found that his poetry had lost much of his force. Temple Grandin also had to calm down otherwise her body “would destroy itself”, however she sometimes missed the emotions and “frenzies” she once felt (Ibid, Pg 261). Grandin doesn't want to lose her autism. “It is possible that persons with these traits are more creative or possibly even geniuses... If science eliminated these genes, maybe the whole world would be taken over by accountants” (Ibid, Pg 278).

An Asperger, or other high-functioning autistic, may be drawn to the written word as a means to preserve a notion of immortality, and it can give a sense of urgency to their creative work. Grandin said: “I've read that libraries are where immortality lies... I don't want my thoughts to die with me... I want to have done something... I want to leave something behind... know that my life has meaning” (Sacks 1995, Pg 282). Compared with low-functioning autistic savants, for whom major artistic creativity may prove unreachable, autistics of the Asperger type may be capable of such major creativity (Ibid, Pg 281).

SECTION 3: LIKING THE UNLIKEABLE

In this section I look at how Asperger's Syndrome sufferers are portrayed in conventional fiction, the dangers of stereotyping or inaccurately portraying Asperger's characters, the degree of success with which these characters are described by non-Asperger's authors, and techniques used by such authors to involve the reader when one of the main characters lacks empathy, social skills or even likeability. I will also give further consideration of 'Asperger's fiction' as a trend.

On the surface an Asperger's sufferer may seem a poor choice for the leading character in a novel intended to engage the sympathy, support and interest of the reader, especially as those with Asperger's are frequently perceived as lacking sympathy themselves. Autistics can be described as feeling “...they are one big exposed nerve” (Grandin 2013, Pg 33).

According to Fitzgerald, Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes was “...the autistic creation of an autistic mind” (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 80), which would seem

to indicate that Asperger's authors can create popular characters even if those characters display traits which would not be considered normal or usual. However there appears to be a danger that any odd quirk or flaw in behaviour can be associated with Asperger's Syndrome. Fitzgerald compares Asperger's people to Doyle's creation by saying: "They have acute powers of observation – they are 'lookers' and can see small details that other people would miss..." (Ibid, Pg 85). Interestingly, Holmes's nemesis, Moriarty, is described as an "autistic psychopath" (Ibid Pg 86), meaning we have a series of stories where both hero and villain are on the autistic spectrum.

To give a sample of how Asperger's are treated in contemporary fiction, I have chosen to examine three novels where an alleged sufferer is the principal character. The first example is Mark Haddon's Whitbread Book of the Year winner *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time*.¹¹ This concerns Christopher, a 15-year-old boy who, in investigating the killing of a local pet and writing a book about the incident, uncovers startling family secrets.

The initial descriptions of Christopher read like a list of traits taken from a manual on the autistic spectrum. When describing incidents, Christopher is precise over the timing, distances and other variables involved. However emotional descriptions are lacking. He describes hugging the dead, bleeding dog on a neighbour's lawn, then shortly thereafter tells us how nice wet, cold grass feels. There is no prioritisation. To Christopher, writing about the grass is as important as writing about the dead dog. His teacher at the special school he attends tells him that book readers care more about people than dogs, yet he finds that "...some dogs are cleverer and more interesting than some people" (Haddon 2003, Pg 6). Again, he is unable to prioritise people over anything else. Such lack of empathy can lead to an equal lack of tact in human interactions, with sometimes dramatic consequences.

Christopher's disability seems in places too severe for Asperger's syndrome and I would argue that many of his symptoms fall further down the autistic spectrum. He is supposedly 15 years old but wets himself, attends a special needs school, is uninformed to the point of ignorance and expresses himself like an eight year old or younger. He cannot understand jokes and seems naïve about sex.

¹¹Mark Haddon (2003) *The Curious Incident of The Dog in the Night-Time*, London: Jonathan Cape.

Often, he can't put words or phrases in context. In some respects he is more of an autistic savant. Interestingly the cover blurb for the paperback edition of the book (Vintage 2004) labels Christopher as an Asperger's sufferer but there is no actual use of the term in the narrative. Haddon himself says on his own website¹² that he regrets the term being used and it wasn't an intended label for his character. Nevertheless the Asperger's characters featured in the other novels examined in this section are described in a very similar, and indeed sometimes identical, fashion. So to what degree is a non-autistic, like Mark Haddon, capable of understanding a sufferer? Of course it could be that Haddon has merely employed artistic licence and merged traits from other conditions on the spectrum purely for dramatic effect.

Such effect sometimes verges on the shocking. Christopher doesn't actually mention his mother is dead until well into the book. When initially informed she was taken to hospital he says, "Can we visit her?" (Haddon 2003, Pg 29), not 'What happened?' or 'Will she be alright?'. No shock, just the same hard practicality he demonstrated with the dog.

When Christopher meets a policeman and policewoman, he describes tiny flaws in their clothing but says nothing about their faces. When they question him about the dead animal he is more upset about being questioned than by the killing itself. Christopher experiences trouble from the police because he isn't behaving in the way neurotypicals expect, or they are misinterpreting his reactions altogether, a point Temple Grandin covered in *The Autistic Brain* (2013). Like the Up is Down world for autistics Grandin describes, Christopher claims he actually calms down when informed he is being arrested "...because it is what policemen say on television and in films" (Haddon 2003, Pg 11), and it's something he can understand. His further assertion that he actually likes policemen seems contradictory given that he hits one under stress.

Again, survival in society can depend on training – quite often self-training. Because of their inability to prioritise information, Asperger's need to be given precise instructions. The same applies to prohibitions. As Christopher says, "When (his teacher) tells me not to do something she tells me exactly what it is that I am not allowed to do" (Haddon 2013, Pg 39). However because Asperger's are so literal in their thinking they can sometimes find a loophole in the

¹²www.markhaddon.com/aspergers-and-autism

instructions which they have been given, especially if those instructions are not comprehensive enough. In this way, Christopher is able to convince himself that he can continue investigating the dead dog even though his father has forbidden him to do so.

In the same way Asperger's can suffer sensory overstimulation, they can suffer mental overstimulation also. Christopher ties this in with lying. He says, "If I think about something that didn't happen I start thinking about all the other things that didn't happen" (Haddon 2003, Pg 24). This, in my experience, can lead to a nasty mental loop in which it can sometimes be difficult to distinguish what's real and what isn't. This can become so bad it can impinge on a person's physical as well as mental ability to function. Again, the author has to take care not to turn their character into - in the eyes of the reader - a monster with whom it would prove impossible to relate.

Christopher creates a refuge by putting his hands over his ears, closing his eyes and rolling forward until his forehead presses the ground. At times he resorts to groaning, as if to block out the world. Yet like Temple Grandin, Christopher finds expression through mathematics and science. He claims to dislike "proper novels" because they employ similes and metaphors he can't understand (Haddon 2003, Pg 5), yet this claim proves to be untrue. He does like murder mystery novels because they contain puzzles which he can work out.

Interestingly, bearing in mind Fitzgerald's remarks concerning Sherlock Holmes, Christopher quotes the fictional detective: "The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance ever observes" (Haddon 2003, Pg 92). But Christopher observes them. He is able, like Holmes, to detach his mind. With his eye for detail he would make a good Holmes himself. He says: "Most people are lazy. They never look at everything. They do what is called *glancing* which is the same word for bumping off something and carrying on in almost the same direction... And then they would stop noticing anything because they would be thinking something else like, 'Oh, it is very beautiful here,' or 'I'm worried that I might have left the gas cooker on...'" (Ibid, Pg 174-175). Then he continues: "...most people are almost blind and they don't see most things and there is lots of spare capacity in their heads and it is filled with things that aren't connected and are silly... But if I am standing in a field in the countryside I notice everything" (Ibid, Pg 178). Again, not a flattering view of humanity in general, but in a later

section I examine how this particular trait bestows my character, Miriam Tasker, with a better chance of survival in the Ghost Land.

When Christopher looks up at the stars he feels no poetry, romance or sense of wonder. Only hard science. And his point of view seems, from his perspective, so inarguable that there's no room for any other theory or opinion. Yet despite his lateral thinking and mathematically inclined brain, Christopher is able to imagine himself in fanciful situations with problems that he can solve through what seem to him interesting, logical, but not necessarily practical means.

Physical journeys are different. He is usually incapable of walking further than the end of his own street. A fear of change, but hatred of routine, can cause a dilemma in Asperger's sufferer's. Often, school is too conformist for them to feel comfortable. Fortunately Christopher's teacher understands him to a degree. She can cope with him. She has broken through the veil of his autism.

On the matter of spirituality, Christopher seems unable to conceive not only of God but of anything outside our known universe. His view of human death is typically dispassionate. "What actually happens when you die is that your brain stops working and your body rots" (Haddon 2003, Pg 43). He thinks this is okay because your molecules become part of other things. Author Mark Haddon is a self-described atheist and appears to be using Christopher as a mouthpiece, with not always successful results. In fact while Christopher's viewpoint can be very literal it is not necessary logical. His whole worldview seems to be based on a form of psuedo-Darwinism where stuff just happens, people are animals, and complex things invent themselves by accident due to hereditary errors. In fact he says, "...human beings are just an animal and they will evolve into an animal, and that animal will be cleverer and will put human beings into a zoo, like we will put chimpanzees and gorillas into a zoo. Or humans will catch a disease and die out or they will make too much pollution and kill themselves and there will be only insects in the world and they will be the best animal" (Ibid, Pg 204).

A tremendous lack of empathy with human beings is demonstrated here, something that a neurotypical reader may have difficulty engaging with. Christopher talks about people as if they were a different species. Again there is no concept of spirituality or any room in Christopher's worldview for conflicting arguments. Whilst I feel Haddon has exaggerated particular Asperger's traits, it certainly explains Christopher's stilted interactions with others. He doesn't

understand the point of certain human emotions, or at least the context in which these emotions are experienced. Though he is willing to talk to his teacher about things that make him feel sad, he doesn't see why he should feel sad about his supposedly dead mother because to him she isn't real. In other words feeling sad isn't logical because it won't change the situation. When he describes his mother there's no usage of the word 'love' or any other emotional insight. His only knowledge of love seems confined to the practical checklist he keeps for defining it.

Difficulties at school, with parents and with peers can leave an Asperger's feeling they will never achieve anything. Fortunately, their near obsessive single-mindedness can overcome this challenge. Given that Christopher is often irritating, Haddon is careful not to alienate readers who might find themselves exasperated *at* Christopher as well as *along with* him. They might not fully understand the boy's thinking, but can sympathise with some of the problems he faces, and gain new perspectives on things they previously took for granted. Christopher is the definite stranger in a strange land.

So, unlikeable and irritating as Christopher is, how is the reader expected to empathise with him when he is unable to empathise with anyone in turn? I suggest that, firstly it's because anyone can find themselves in an excruciating situation and can sympathise with that, especially if the situation occurs in public. Secondly, Christopher has a clear idea of what he's going to achieve and the determination to pull it off. As he says, "And I know I can do this because I went to London on my own, and I solved the mystery of Who Killed Wellington. And I found my mother and I was brave and I wrote a book and that means I can do anything" (Haddon 2003, Pg 268). And with that, Christopher shares the aspirations of almost everyone.

However, what if an Asperger's sufferer is accused of a serious crime or, in the case of 18-year-old Jacob Hunt in Jodi Picoult's *House Rules*, accused of murder, and has their case compounded by their apparent lack of emotion and literal thinking?

An Asperger's can be disarmingly, and sometimes catastrophically, honest. It's a situation where a trait, normally considered a virtue, can actively work against someone. An Asperger's will say exactly what they're thinking with no regard to tact or diplomacy. Not only will they notice that a hair is growing on a

woman's upper lip, but there's a likelihood he or she will actually mention it in front of the person. Telling the truth without thought of tact, context or circumstance can get the Asperger's into trouble, and yet they are unequivocally *telling the truth*. A trait that would normally be held up as a virtue (Picoult 2010, Pg 206).

Everyone might face Asperger's type struggles from time to time, but none of those traits impair a non-Asperger's ability to make judgements. In the case of Picoult's Jacob: "You might be thinking that [he] doesn't fit your impression of a person with a diagnosable neurological disorder. He's smart, he doesn't look *crazy* in the colloquial sense of the word. So how can you be certain that Asperger's is a valid neurological disorder, and not just the latest label du jour for a kid with problems. How can you be sure Asperger's provides an explanation of his behaviour at the moment a crime was committed – instead of just a fancy legal excuse?" (Picoult 2010, Pg 587).

An Asperger's needs to learn social skills in a similar way they learn mathematics or history in class, and in public social situations may need constant prompting as to what is or isn't correct behaviour. This can be compounded by the Asperger's inability to understand why other people don't share the same degree of interest in particular subjects which he or she does, and in turn this can lead to inappropriate, badly timed or out-of-context conversations (Picoult 2010, Pg 71-72). In places a reader may well cringe at the the situation the Asperger's has found themselves in, feel irritation at what seems like their immovable arrogance, or experience out and out dislike at the unfriendly and antisocial behaviour.

An American/foreigner trying to understand the UK version of English, where familiar words can mean something entirely different, might struggle. Consequently we can become irritated by the lost, foreign tourist who can't speak our language very well. This is what Asperger's can feel like in the sense of having to work so hard at the things that come naturally to others, "...because I'm just a tourist here. And it's a trip with a one-way ticket" (Picoult 2010, Pg 184).

Trying to behave or communicate in a way that will be understood by non-Asperger's, trying to show the inside of their mind, to stare directly into the questioner's eyes can be "...like having strips of my skin pulled off from the inside. Like needles in every nerve centre of the brain" (Picoult 2010, Pg 248-

249).

These problems with interaction are not limited to strangers. Close peers and family members can encounter problems empathising with or understanding the Asperger's seemingly irrational thought processes. Consequently a mother can fail to understand her own child, though that does not mean the child is loved any less, even if a son has been accused of murder and the parent feels their child might be guilty. In this case there is a danger of the focus shifting from the AS to a hard-done-by parent or relative. Jacob's own mother says: "I look at my son and I see a monster. I'm just not sure if that's his real face or if it's a mask made of Asperger's" (Picoult 2010, Pg 191). This is an effective technique on the part of Picoult as it allows the reader, who may have trouble empathising with Jacob, to connect with the parent.

Is there any way a reader can empathise, or root for, an apparent psychopath? Asperger's can drive parents to absolute distraction, but this is alleviated to a degree by the fact the parents have some understanding of the condition, and sometimes have coping mechanisms in place. An Asperger's can overreact when confused and respond violently to what he or she perceives as provocation (Picoult 2010, Pg 93), leading to the question as to whether parents would want such an individual sharing a classroom with other students. Some parents may have to cope with difficult children who are not necessarily on the autistic spectrum, so the potential for empathising with the situation is there. Also, because the Asperger's sufferer has difficulty in empathising with others, it doesn't follow that a neurotypical can't empathise with the Asperger's.

What about the Asperger's own perspective? Inviting the reader into their world, as opposed to merely describing their behaviour from a neurotypical perspective, is one way of invoking sympathy.

"This is where I go when I go: It's a room with no windows and no doors, and walls that are thin enough for me to hear everything but too thick to break through... I am pounding to be let out but nobody can hear me... To a country where everyone's face looks different from mine, and the language is the act of not speaking, and noise is everywhere in the air we breathe... I am trying to communicate, but no one has bothered to tell me that these people cannot hear... To a place where my body becomes a piano, full of black keys only... when everyone knows to play a song other people want to hear you need some white keys. This is why I come back. To find the white keys" (Picoult 2010, Pg 110).

Asperger's Syndrome can be likened to a kind of death, where the deceased person can't respond or communicate. Where they have "...gone to another place". A room with no doors or windows, a country where nobody speaks the same language. "...being on the other side of dead isn't that different from having Asperger's" (Picoult 2010, Pg 167).

Asperger's do appear to experience significant emotions. But are these feelings genuine? "Maybe the membrane between someone with Asperger's and the rest of the world is not a shifting, invisible seam of electrons but, instead, a see through partition that allows only the illusion of feeling, instead of the actual thing" (Picoult 2010, Pg 256). People may not identify Asperger's with having a disability in the same way they might someone in a wheelchair, or who's blind, or possessing a more classic form of autism, and consequently might not feel the same degree of sympathy or empathy.

In terms of Asperger's Syndrome and core emotions, love is considered analytically. If a set of physical reactions to a certain person fit a standard definition, or checklist, then it may be love, though the Asperger's is not sure whether this is actually the case, and may have difficulty differentiating between different forms of love (Picoult 2010, Pg 456). Because of the importance love plays in the human experience, and the fact it has been a mainstay of literature and other media, the Asperger's view might come across as abnormal to the non-autistic.

Other issues facing the non-autistic reader might arise through a primitive fear of the unusual, the unknown. Of something alien. Asperger's might feel, or even be perceived, as if coming from another planet. Some autistics have such a strong sense of their ineradicable differences from neurotypicals they are led to regard themselves "...almost as members of another species". (Sacks 1995, Pg 264) An Asperger's may appear deliberately rude or unfeeling because they are both intelligent and articulate, and consequently must think and experience the world the same as everyone else. Any claims to disability on their part might be met with a dismissive, "We all have our problems". When an Asperger's does something socially positive it may have happened by accident, what he considers a purely logical act might be interpreted as something more benign, simply because a neurotypical is projecting their values onto the Asperger's (Picoult 2010, Pg 396-397).

There's a difference between being mentally retarded and socially retarded. Likewise there's a difference between "...being socially awkward and being clinically diagnosed with Asperger's" (Picoult 2010, Pg 325). The notion of being socially out of place and viewed with suspicion is not new in literature. For example author Albert Camus portrays a man who falls under suspicion due to his apparent lack of feelings concerning his mother's death and subsequent funeral.¹³ Camus never claims that the character is suffering from any specific disorder, and the reader is never entirely sure about his true motivations, even after his apparent contempt for the rest of humanity is revealed at the very close of the story. Given Asperger's behaviour the reader may expect a similar outcome in a novel where an Asperger's is the focus, and this may successfully build tension in the course of the narrative. It also offers the author scope to take advantage of the reader's preconceptions and effect a surprising denouement.

Camus demonstrates how lack of emotion in the face of death is almost a deal-breaker for someone perceived as being different. In the case of Jacob, the attorney's response sums up Asperger's alienation: "Well, that's not how the majority of people think. Most people, confronted with the photographic evidence of the autopsy of someone they loved would get upset. Maybe even cry" (Picoult 2010, Pg 479-480).

An AS might come across as an automaton. In certain aspects of life image is crucial. "The truth is, jurors might want to be fair, but their gut instinct about a defendant has a great deal to do with the verdict rendered." (Picoult 2010, Pg 424). This gut instinct can be skewed by the Asperger's appearance of emotional indifference. Likewise the gut instinct of the reader.

Jacob's mother sums it up. "But I watched the faces of the jury as they stared at Jacob, and I saw the same expression I've seen a thousand times before. That mental distancing, that subtle acknowledgement that there is *something wrong with that boy*. Because he doesn't interact the way they do. Because he doesn't grieve the way they do. Because he doesn't move or speak the way they do" (Picoult 2010, Pg 501).

The Asperger's character, and perhaps author where relevant, is on trial by the reader. The character might be confused by their situation. "What if there's nothing wrong with me?" Jacob says. "What if the reason I act like I do and think

¹³Albert Camus (2013 edition) *The Outsider*, London: Penguin Classics.

like I do is that I'm left out all the time? If I had friends, you know, maybe I wouldn't do things that look strange to everyone else. It's like bacteria that grows in a vacuum. Maybe there's no such thing as Asperger's. Maybe all there is is what happens when you don't fit in" (Picoult 2010, Pg 494). The 'we all have our problems' mindset can extend to the Asperger's himself.

Sympathy in the reader is sought by emphasising the 'misunderstood' aspect, or the idea that an Asperger's is psychologically incapable of deliberate cruelty. As well as being understood, the sufferer also misunderstands, particularly when it comes to social cues or "...those unwritten rules that other people seemed to pick up as if they had a social radar device that was missing from my own brain (Picoult 2010, Pg 523). Everyone has a copy of the script of life except the Asperger's, who has to try and learn the lines as he goes along.

With an Asperger's, the positives – all the things he or she may be good at, can get swallowed up by the negatives, including the fact of the autism itself. Jacob's diagnosis changed the way people regarded or interacted with him, and not in a good way (Picoult, Pg 549). Yet knowledge and understanding can penetrate this barrier for both the Asperger's and the neurotypical, allowing the positives to surface again and perhaps adding to the notion that everyone has at least a sliver of the autistic in them. (Ibid, Pg 519).

Asperger's may be in this world, but that does not prevent them longing for another. A place where they can be understood, where they can fit in – belong. A world that works according to the rules, concepts and perspectives that operate within the Asperger's' mind. Not a kind of care-home world, but one where they can work and live productively without feeling like outsiders or aliens. A world that may prove as fascinating to a neurotypical as an alien world in a science fiction story.

Jacob talks about "...years of imagining I'm an alien in this world – with senses more acute than those of normal people, and with speech patterns that don't make sense to normal people, and behaviours that look odd on this planet but that, on my home planet, must be perfectly acceptable..." (Picoult 2010, Pg 539). Conversely, this is all a strange world to a non-autistic. A world of wonder in some respects, perhaps? The idea of a place more receptive to Asperger's, and vice versa, is explored further in the next section of this text.

In Jacob's case the reader discovers that he's innocent, that he only appeared

guilty because he was holding to the absolute letter of the truth, and holding also the 'house rule' that he must look out for his brother no matter the consequences. He has done everything wrong – from a neurotypical perspective – in order to do what is right given his literal Asperger's perspective, and feels justified in doing so. He says triumphantly: “To all of those experts who said that because I have Asperger's I can't empathise: *So there*. People who can't empathise surely don't try to protect the people they love, even if it means having to go to court” (Picoult 2010, Pg 600). And: “I'd do it all over again” (Picoult 2010, Pg 603).

An interesting plot turnaround, where the character who appears as the villain turns out to be the hero, a trope widely used in all branches of entertainment media, yet it is the Asperger's element that gives this story its unique twist. Asperger's Syndrome almost becomes a character in itself.

Anne M. Martin's novel *Rain Reign*¹⁴ provides a better initial clue than many other books as to the nature of its contents. The title is a homonym, which proves to be a particular obsession, or at least one obsession, of the work's 14-year-old high functioning autistic Rose Howard.

Asperger's traits are certainly present in Rose's clumsy attempts to make eye contact, in her slavish adherence to what she believes is right, and her need to work out whether people are being literal or not when they speak to her. Nevertheless, despite the initial subtlety of introducing these symptoms, or differences, the reader is informed outright on page 6 that Rose has Asperger's Syndrome, which removes some of the mystery concerning her later behaviour. Not informing readers so early in the narrative might have left them intrigued as to the reasons for Rose's actions, especially as the author has gone to such efforts to portray her issues.

Rose's situation is concentrated around the effects of Hurricane Susan – based on the real Hurricane Irene - which caused devastation after an unexpected turn inland, plus her relationship with her father Wesley, and the dog he found and brought home for her, an animal she names 'Rain' due to the word being a homonym with 'Reign'. Indeed, Martin begins her novel by launching into examples of homonyms and their meaning. These explanations and accompanying listings might make it difficult to engage the readers unless they themselves have a particular fascination with words.

¹⁴Anne M. Martin (2014) *Rain Reign*, New York: Feiwel and Friends.

Like Mark Haddon's character Christopher, Rose's relationship with her parent is troubled. Wesley sincerely tries to do the best for his daughter but her traits often irritate him to the point of anger and in odd cases threatened violence. Like Christopher, Rose seems unduly handicapped for a high-functioning autistic. Despite her fourteen years her thoughts are often naïve and shallow. She talks and behaves like a pre-teen, and not the fourteen-year-old she actually is. She has a special teacher, though in this case she plays a lesser role than in Haddon's novel. One of the ways Rose is portrayed as being different or special is the provision of this teacher and attendance at a special class. Rose's father was told that a regular school might not be the right choice for her. He is concerned that she may be labelled, be put in a room for “retards” (Martin 2014, Pg 21). Whenever she feels things aren't going right for her, Rose hits herself with a shoe or picture. Such meltdowns are such an integral part of the Asperger's experience it would be difficult to suppress them entirely. Rose certainly has tantrums in class, where the option to step into the hallway to calm down is available to her. Asperger's sufferers can and do hit themselves whilst in the grip of a meltdown.

There is an inflexible logic to Rose's mood swings when rules don't appear to be adhered to. After all, what is the point of making rules if you don't stick to them? But Rose seems unable to distinguish between someone deliberately flouting rules or simply making a mistake (Martin 2014, Pg 42). Her thinking is fixed. At school, Rose has the same lunch every day and won't vary it. This is too extreme. An Asperger's likes routines, but can get bored with the same thing day after day like anyone else. Each week two different kids from Rose's class are chosen by her teacher to be her Lunchroom Buddies.

“Usually when she announces the buddies no one says anything” (Martin 2014, Pg 45), Rose explains, a very subtle demonstration of Asperger's alienation. Rose's experiences on the school bus give a useful insight into this alienation. Other kids walk up the aisle and pass the empty seat next to her. She is bullied, called a retard, has spitballs thrown at her (Ibid, Pg 34). Yet this provokes no autistic meltdown or any of the emotional stress associated with Asperger's. Ultimately it is Rose's obsession with road traffic rules, and her frequent inability to accept that other people have different values from her, that results in her exclusion from the bus.

Like Haddon's character Christopher, Rose makes lists. Again like Haddon,

Martin may be portraying Asperger's Syndrome as non-sufferers perceive it, as opposed to what Asperger's is really like. This raises the danger of stereotyping. Rose has been kept back two semesters because "...no one is sure what to do with me at school" (Martin 2014, Pg 5), which was certainly not my experience. This raises the spectre that Asperger's children are automatically perceived as being somehow retarded and could support a stereotype of the young sufferer.

As with Haddon's Christopher, Martin's character explains things with an overcooked, and often inaccurate, degree of pedantry which may prove distracting for the reader. Nevertheless, the narrow, often obsessive interests of the Asperger's sufferer are quickly raised, though Rose's efforts at utilising conversation starters concerning subjects outside of those interests often fail. She tends to describe her surroundings in tiresome detail. There is no colour, no imagination.

Rose claps her hands over her ears and screams when she hears the fire alarm (Martin 2014, Pg 8). Though Asperger's can be sensitive to specific sounds, this, like much of Christopher's behaviour, seems extreme, and possibly more typical of a different form of autism. There appears to be a danger of the borders between different conditions on the autistic spectrum blurring, so that in fiction their traits become interchangeable.

Like Christopher, Rose is narrating her account as a true story, a 'book'. Similarly, she does not necessarily bestow any more importance to people than to animals. She says: "A character doesn't have to be a human being: a character can be an animal, such as a dog named Rain" (Martin 2014, Pg 10).

Martin then launches into a description of Rose's foundling dog. At this stage there is no real story here, merely a series of precise descriptions interspersed with homonyms. However the love of a dog, or a pet in general, provides common ground for the non-AS reader and they can relate to elements of the dog's behaviour Rose describes in such detail.

Rose says: "Rain and I have routines. We like routines" (Martin 2014, Pg 11). Her pedantry, though often distracting, provides clues to her domestic situation. Despite Rose's difficulties in communication, she has learned to read her father to the extent of knowing when it's safe to approach him. This introduces an element of threat in her day to day life, but again there is no emotional inference beyond the insertion of a few homonyms.

Early on, the narrative launches into the rules of homonyms, with the disclaimer that if readers continue they might actually become interested in the subject. However Rose also adds the note: “If you are not interested in homonyms at all, stop reading here and skip to Chapter Four” (Martin 2014, Pg 14).

Many readers may be tempted to do just that. Her treatment of homonym lists, and her compulsion “...to write the words perfectly without making any mistakes”(Martin 2014, Pg 15) even if she ends up crying as a result, falls into the realm of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)¹⁵, which again blurs the boundaries of conditions on the autistic spectrum. This may lead to a confusing perception of AS in readers unfamiliar with the spectrum.

Rose continues to offer the reader the option to skip chunks of her story. This goes against the idea, already put forward by both Haddon and Michael Fitzgerald, that Asperger's sufferers brook no disagreement and tend to tell people what they should be doing, or believe in, as opposed to conceding they have a choice. Consequently Rose's attitude is not entirely convincing, and the option may be an excuse on the author's part to dump information onto the reader. In fact this section reads more like a textbook than part of a novel. Eventually Rose even says: “I guess that's enough about homonyms for now. You probably want to get on with my story anyway...” (Martin 2014, Pg 18).

Nevertheless, Martin presents a realistic depiction of an Asperger's sufferer's clumsy efforts at engaging in conversation and forced eye contact. Other people's response to this is also typical, involving eye rolling and sarcasm – which the Asperger's is frequently oblivious to. Rose considers her questions to be perfectly serious, and takes the answers she receives in a literal fashion. But she is trying to do things 'right' within the parameters of what she has been taught. Sometimes it can work without Rose entirely understanding how.

Realistically, some of Rose's perceptions are acute, particularly her hearing. She says: “I hear lots of things I'm not supposed to hear, and lots of things nobody else is supposed to hear...” (Martin 2014, Pg 39). Specific mundane sounds can prove a serious distraction for Rose: “I hear clicks and humming and whispers” (Ibid, Pg 40).

¹⁵Obsessive Compulsive Disorder: “...a common mental disorder in which a person has obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviours” NHS Choices (www.nhs.uk), accessed 7th September 2017

Rose's emotional responses to rule-breaking are exaggerated, again suggesting a blurring of the lines between autistic spectrum disorders, or perhaps a blurring in the perception of these disorders by an uninformed non-autistic.

Another important element in Rose's life is Uncle Weldon, the too-good-to-be-true relative who is always, kindly, caring, understanding and ready to stick up for Rose even against his own brother. The reader may prematurely conclude that this is the sort of father Rose should've had all along, but his increasing involvement is awkward and often predictable. The author seems to suggest that it is possible to be completely immune to the irritations and exasperations Asperger's sufferers regularly, and often unwittingly, cause.

It isn't until Part II of the book that the approaching Hurricane Susan is brought into the plot and suspense begins to build for the reader. However this tension is immediately broken by inclusion in the narrative of more lists. Asperger's do not necessarily think in lists. Immediately afterwards, when Rose keeps telling herself that the hurricane won't hurt them because they live inland, the suspense is resumed because the reader suspects, and indeed the evidence suggests, the hurricane will indeed hit.

Asperger's can have ways of doing things that may not seem logical to others. However 'Asperger's logic' dictates that these are the best methods to use to achieve an outcome satisfactory to the sufferer. Consequently Rose often engages in what I would term 'gunshot thinking', a stream of mental non-sequiturs. An interesting dynamic occurs when her father, consciously or not, starts using her speech mannerisms results in a sort of verbal tennis match. It's as if her Dad is getting his own back in playing by her rules.

In the aftermath of the storm, Rose observes the damage without any apparent reaction. Finally: "I draw my breath in tight" (Martin 2014, Pg 88), when she sees the swollen stream. Readers – younger readers in particular – could wonder how they might feel in such a frightening situation, but Rose's limited emotion might seem alien. She can't even be sure if she's suffering signs of panic. In *The Ghost Land*, Miriam seems initially ambivalent towards the supposed ecological disaster that has taken place on her doorstep, and unconcerned about those who may have been caught up in it. Her subsequent and growing interest seems entirely self-serving. In Rose's view, her father has committed the unforgivable act of letting her dog out in the storm without a collar,

leading to the animal going missing. Despite Wesley's explanation that the dog was let out because: "She had to pee" (Ibid, Pg 89) and that she was expected to come straight back in, Rose constantly nags her father over it. She is, to a degree, capable of self analysis and finding justification for her feelings. Despite the ruin the hurricane has wreaked on the neighbourhood, she's only concerned with her routine and her missing dog. The inference, arguably an obvious one, is that she identifies more with the pet than she does her father. Despite generally accepting Wesley's authority as a parent there is little evidence that she actually loves him. I will look at the question of Asperger's love in due course, as it ultimately plays a significant part at the end of Miriam Tasker's Ghost Land journey.

Martin does not seem to have considered the possibility of Rose panicking or losing her temper over her dog's disappearance given her apparent ability to relate to the animal. Rose tries to deal with the dog's loss by analysing the situation. But her stress still manifests itself in her blurting of prime numbers. As discussed, emotional 'meltdowns' to the extent that the sufferer is unable to function are a common Asperger's trait. Nevertheless Haddon's Christopher could prove both caring and uncaring towards the titular dog in his story. Is this a symptom or trait of Asperger's love?

Rose is nervous about going back to school after the storm, but can't explain why she's nervous. Continual feelings of anxiety and nervousness is a part of the Asperger's condition, and the author handles this well. Finally, Rose asks what happened to the people whose homes were destroyed. When told they were living in shelters, she says: "I'm glad the people aren't dead" (Martin 2014, Pg 118). This successfully shows that an Asperger's sufferer's concerns and priorities can be mixed up, but aren't necessarily absent. Rose's gladness is sincere, and this may draw a warm reaction from the reader.

When Rose thinks she has located her dog she experiences a 'positive meltdown' where all her typical traits are instigated by joy and not stress. Some of her reactions would be shared by non-Asperger's people with a similar level of excitement. When she goes to pick the animal up she says, on entering the office, "I don't pay any attention to the people in the chairs. I'm only interested in the man behind the desk" (Martin 2014, 152). But this is not due to her Asperger's. It would arguably be the behaviour of any young person in the same situation. Consequently the reader can empathise.

Yet Rose is not happy when she has her dog back. The animal's microchip proves she belongs to another family. Asperger's can be selfish and self-serving, and lack empathy with other people, but this demonstrates a conscience is present, thereby giving readers an important insight into the condition. Also readers might be able to identify with Rose's dilemma, and wonder what they might feel in the same situation.

Suddenly Rose knows what the other family must feel at the loss of their dog because she has felt the same thing herself. She has *learned*, in this situation at least, to empathise. She decides she must track down the original owners. She puts this down to the need to obey the rules, but the reader may suspect this is not the only reason. Asperger's don't always follow the rules if the rules don't suit.

One of the greatest moments of tension in the book occurs, not during the storm, nor when Rose gets the dog back and decides to look for her proper owners, but in another confrontation with her father. Rose is entirely unable to see his point of view, and again labours the point about letting the dog out during the storm. Her father struggles with his temper, but in this instance the reader won't necessarily take Rose's side. She is irritating, unable to recognise when she is provoking people up operates to an Asperger's logic that is not always grounded in common sense. Her father doesn't want to hit her because he doesn't want to be like his own father (Martin 2014, Pg 192). The reader may be divided, and the author handles the whole thing skilfully, demonstrating that the Asperger's sufferer doesn't always perceive that they are wrong or in any way to blame.

In many respects, Martin succeeds in engaging the reader, offering some understanding concerning Asperger's Syndrome, and weaving a competently plotted story. Rose is not so much affected or controlled by her traits as defined by them. However, she has no apparent ambitions, nor does she dream of another place where she can be in control or enjoy a better feeling of belonging. She seems to live only for the moment and has little interest in the things that concern a modern teenage American. She has no friends, her only peer interaction taking place in her special class at school. Every indicator suggests Rose lacks imagination. In fact the only indication that Rose strives for anything at all is when she succeeds in thinking up more complex homonyms. Haddon's Christopher also had special days, dependent on things or occurrences that might seem trivial to non-autistics people. Yet Rose doesn't seem to dream of another

place – her perfect world. She seems to have a by-the-day existence with little in the way of ambition. There is no mention of Rose having any old toys, games, make-up, things with which she can create whole worlds and exercise control over. I feel this is a major error as it reinforces the stereotype of the imagination-lacking Asperger's.

Yet the book also promotes confusion and, due to its overcooked depiction of autistic traits can give reader's an inaccurate impression of Asperger's Syndrome. In all the fiction examples examined here, they can be perceived as home wreckers, their behaviour contributing, or being directly responsible for, the breakup of a marriage. The description of these traits can distract from the narrative as much as add to it. In her favour the author does not use the usual plot mechanisms to create a climax, but instead alludes to Rose's own condition.

Research methods given in the preface/afterwords of all three novels cited here involved spending a brief period of time at an autistic institution and interviewing one or two members of staff, and one or two young Asperger's sufferers. However, because people are diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome it does not follow that all sufferers are the same, or that they display the same range or concentration of traits, yet the entire Asperger's experience ends up distilled into a single fictional character. Consequently everything ends up exaggerated, vivid, over-coloured, and the sufferer can come across as more disabled than he or she might be in real life. This can certainly result in dramatic fiction, but at the cost of reinforcing stereotypes, a blurring of the lines between the various conditions on the autistic spectrum, or giving a skewed perspective entirely of autistics. Characters are seen to write numerous lists which are printed in the novel's text, which may do little to advance the narrative. However it is a specific dramatic situation and the Asperger's unique responses to it that drive the story: a murder trail in the case of Jacob (Picoult 2010), a hurricane and missing dog in the case of Rose (Martin 2014), and a dog's murder in the case of Christopher (Haddon 2003). It is also interesting to note that all three main protagonists are teenagers. However this doesn't necessarily mean that Asperger's traits fade as a sufferer gets older, merely that with social training and experience an Asperger's might better cope with 'pretending to be normal'.

SECTION 4: AN AUTISTIC SPACE

Asperger Syndrome sufferers are obliged to exist in a world/society for which they seem unfit (Silberman 2015, Pg 17). The desire of the Asperger's sufferer is for a different world, one in which they can belong and which operates under their terms. This section offers an examination of toxic places, or different worlds, in both real life and fiction, and the people that might be drawn to them. The inclusion, or creation, of such worlds may help 'Asperger's fiction' to engage the reader, and the desire for worldbuilding might draw Asperger's sufferers towards artistic mediums which permit this.

A good example of worldbuilding from an allegedly Asperger's author can be found in Lewis Carroll. When describing Carroll, Fitzgerald says: “Undeniably, his genius rested in the primacy of his imagination...” (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 56). Up until 11-years-of-age Carroll lived completely detached from the world in his own “veritable 'Wonderland'” (Ibid, Pg 57). Carroll himself said, “My constant aim is to remain, *personally*, unknown to the world” (Ibid, original emphasis). On the question of legacy, Carroll worked relentlessly to produce writing that would be classed as: “...purposeful, serious works which he hoped would have lasting value” (Ibid, Pg 59). Temple Grandin, in common with a popular perception of Asperger's, found creative release through science and engineering, and Carroll expressed an early interest in machines and devices. He was considered a first-rate mathematician with a logical mind. Yet he created Wonderland.

Steve Silberman interviewed Nick, an 11-year-old autistic boy who claimed to be building an imaginary universe. Nick had already mapped out one world and populated it with both mythical and alien beings, yet in the real world he didn't have a single friend of his own age. (Silberman 2015, Pg 8)

I have discussed the idea of Asperger's people feeling like aliens on their own planet, with Grandin quoted as saying she “...reversed the usual perspective by saying she felt like an anthropologist on Mars” (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 129), and the “...alien metaphor undoubtedly corresponds to 'autistic alienation'” (Ibid). Consequently it is very feasible that those on certain parts of the autistic spectrum may yearn for a place where they don't feel so alien.

Fitzgerald also claims that persons with Asperger's are “...attracted to the supernatural and esoteric subjects” (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 79). This may form part of the attraction other worlds hold for the autistic, and part of what they might

seek within its boundaries. Strong spiritual feelings could reflect the desire that more should exist than the immediate, physical world, that there should be another realm, another place to go. In fiction, Haddon's character Christopher understands that the pictures in his head are all of things that really happened, but he also acknowledges that other people have pictures of things that aren't real, specifically imagining that they're in another place when they are sad about something. Better places, where they feel "calm and peaceful and happy" (Haddon 2003, Pg 98). He doesn't dismiss this. In fact he likes to imagine he is an astronaut alone among the stars with no one else for miles around, or that he's controlling a self-powered submersible that can traverse any part of the sea bed and go places he "...can never be found" (Ibid Pg 101).

So can there be a 'right land' for Christopher? He has a favourite dream which recurs not only at night but during waking hours as a daydream. In it most of the world's population dies off due to a virus which affects only neurotypicals, and is spread through neurotypical behaviour. He says, "And eventually there is no one left in the world except people who don't look at other people's faces and who don't know what these pictures (of faces) mean and these people are all special people like me" (Haddon 2003, Pg 242). And even those like him are seldom encountered because, like an obscure jungle tribe they are shy and rare. He goes on to say, "And I can go anywhere in the world and no one is going to talk to me or touch me or ask me a question. But if I don't want to go anywhere I don't have to..." (Ibid, Pg 243). This then is Christopher's world, a place he can belong and fit in because it is a world he can understand, a place which to a degree exists under his own terms.

Science fiction might offer a refuge for the autistic, where they "...might find themselves more at home on impossibly remote, imaginary worlds" rather than the real "alien" world they found themselves trapped in (Silberman 2015, Pg 246). Science fiction fandom offers means of gaining social acceptance and status outside the usual channels, with fan-attended Conventions and jargon bordering on an obscure language in its own right. (Ibid, Pg 240). The science fiction community is a haven for autistics (Ibid, Pg 223). Indeed, Hugo Gernsback, pulp magazine editor from the 'Golden Age' of science fiction appeared to have Asperger's traits, and might be considered an "undiagnosed Aspergian" (Ibid, Pg 228, 241). It might therefore be argued that science fiction itself is 'Asperger's

fiction' (Ibid, Pg 239).

Science fiction also offers a wealth of examples of strange areas that bend people's perspectives, or draw certain types of individual. The novel *Roadside Picnic*¹⁶ by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, subsequently made into Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Stalker* (Mosfilm, 1979), offers an interesting perspective on the 'forbidden zone' tale. The toxic area described in the book is the result of an alien visitation which has left the very laws of nature twisted. 'Stalkers' are looters who negotiate the dangers of the Zone to hunt out exotic, and often dangerous, artefacts to sell on the black market. They are also physically affected in that they can only father mutated children. However the movie is far more ambiguous in the nature of the Zone, with the people drawn to it having more personal motives for penetrating its interior.

*Mythago Wood*¹⁷ by Robert Holdstock postulates the existence of an ancient forest where myths and folklore come to life. Unlike the militarily patrolled wall surrounding the Zone in *Roadside Picnic*, there is only a token barrier in the form of a fence preventing anyone from entering the forest, though the area only seems to accept the 'right' people into its heart. Similar themes can be found in Brian Catling's more recent novel *The Vorrh*¹⁸, which also features an ancient forest. In this case the area involved is vast, and people can be physically changed by the different reality encountered within. The centre of this forest is believed to contain answers to some of the most profound questions humanity has posed, but not everyone is capable, or indeed worthy, of finding the path to its centre. There is no physical barrier preventing people from trying, and a city has grown beside the area to exploit the timber resources at the forest's fringe.

Finally Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy*¹⁹ describes an isolated zone called "Area X" where reality again is affected, though in this case the cause is some awful, Lovecraftian-style horror lurking at its heart. Specialists sent in on missions can also be affected mentally and physically. Though there is no wall or fence as such, a form of alien/supernatural forcefield makes entry difficult, even through a known 'gate', and the area itself is capable of expanding.

In the examples given above, the principal characters are not only affected

¹⁶Arkady and Boris Strugatsky (2007 edition) *Roadside Picnic*, London: Gollancz.

¹⁷Robert Holdstock (2014 edition) *Mythago Wood*, London: Gollancz.

¹⁸Brian Catling (2015) *The Vorrh*, London: Coronet.

¹⁹Jeff VanderMeer (2014) *The Southern Reach Trilogy*, New York: FSG Originals.

by their 'zones', they are often defined by them. However real-life toxic areas can offer environments just as affected or dangerous as their fictional counterparts. In the American state of Pennsylvania a coal seam caught fire and is still burning decades later. The mining town, Centralia, at the heart of the district was mostly abandoned and demolished, or fell to ruin.²⁰ Smoke continually seeps from the ground or cracks in the roads. All attempts to quench the fire have failed, yet some diehards insist on remaining and the area, despite the danger and numerous warning signs, remains a draw for a proportion of the curious and thrill-seeker alike.

The 1940s Foster Grant factory scandal in Leominster, New England, the manufacturing of plastic sunglasses left, according to locals, a green foul-smelling haze in the air, turned the river different colours, left a coating of PVC particles on gardens and caused a burning sensation in residents' throats. Consequently Leominster became known as the “Polluted City” (Silberman 2015, Pg 402). One mother even dubbed it “The Twilight Zone” (Ibid, Pg 405). This and other incidents of chemical poisoning, including buried barrels of industrial chemicals in nearby Woburn ten years earlier, led to a perceived rise in cases of autism among children living in the affected areas, though firm proof of this seemed elusive. Nevertheless, the case became known as the “Leominster autism cluster”, and other “autism clusters” began to appear where environmental poisoning had taken place, one such example being Brick Township in New Jersey after millions of gallons of septic waste had been dumped in a landfill over the course of a decade (Ibid, Pg 402-8).

One of the best known and more recent examples is the 1986 Chernobyl disaster in Ukraine. Guided tours can occasionally be taken around Pripjat, the abandoned Soviet model city built within sight of the irradiated nuclear reactor, provided visitors avoid certain areas and don't stay in one place too long. A woman is famous on the internet for driving around the zone on a motorcycle, Geiger counter strapped to her belt.

Yet of course there is the darker side. Nobel Prize winning author Svetlana Alexievich's *Voices from Chernobyl*²¹ provides insights from those caught in the affected area during the nuclear disaster, the subsequent health consequences and

²⁰A good resource for information about Centralia is www.centraliapa.org

²¹Svetlana Alexievich (2006) *Voices From Chernobyl*, New York: Picador.

the issues caused as a result of having to abandon their homes. Another of Alexievich's works, *Chernobyl Prayer*²², provides open and honest accounts from professionals and peasants alike. Those living within the Exclusion Zone experienced the physical effects of contamination. Hens' combs turned from red to black, an entire vegetable plot turned white "...like it was dusted with something" (Alexievich 2016, Pg 50). Making cheese proved impossible because milk wouldn't curdle properly, and an orchard full of apples had to be abandoned. In fact, "Something had gone wrong with nature" (Ibid Pg 62). The day to day landscape of the Soviet peasantry had turned into something alien. "In the first two days after the accident, pine trees turned red and then russet" (Ibid, Pg 178). Looting was rife, with dangerously contaminated items being stolen, taken home, or sold in markets. Geese and ducks walked around a red puddle in the middle of a village. Cars were contaminated and had to be abandoned (Ibid, Pg 214).

Those in the affected Chernobyl Zone talked about taking "...a leap into a new reality" (Alexievich 2016, Pg 25) beyond both knowledge and imagination. Churches filled up with believers and non-believers alike, all trying to find answers that neither science nor mathematics could provide. The experience of Chernobyl defied description, a situation that had never been found in any book or movie.

Changes in perception, both real and imagined, took place. People reported seeing things, ghosts of dead spouses, shadows that disappear. One person claimed to have seen poppy plantations in the Zone, and settlements of drug addicts; another saw "...a cat with three tails; there was a portent in the heavens on the day of the disaster..." (Alexievich 2016, Pg 161). All tales they believed must have something at their origin despite the disapproval of skeptics. It wasn't just adults whose perspective was altered: "Children draw pictures of Chernobyl. The trees in the pictures grow with their roots in the air. The water in the rivers is red or yellow. They cry while they are doing their drawings" (Ibid, Pg 216).

As for those who find some connection there: "The Zone pulls you in. Like a magnet. I'm telling you. Saints preserve us! Once you've been there... Your heart is drawn to it" (Alexievich 2016, Pg 105).

Many high-functioning autistic people are fond, sometimes to the point of addiction, of alternative worlds, imaginary worlds created by other people, or

²²Svetlana Alexievich (2016 translation) *Chernobyl Prayer*, London: Penguin Classics.

worlds they have imagined themselves (Sacks 1995, Pg 263). Sometimes these alternative worlds can be found in this world. In this section I have given some examples of abandoned toxic areas, but there are many more, particularly in the USA and former Soviet Union. Townships that have been rendered poisonous due to mining, or rendered unsafe because of sinkholes, or missile sites abandoned in out-of-the-way places. The concept of the ghost town is not new. Many have been hushed up, forgotten about, or simply disincorporated from the civil register. Often there is only a nominal barrier and a few warning sign to dissuade the curious. The Chernobyl Exclusion Zone has military checkpoints and patrols, but a number of the original peasants have returned and are living there, despite knowing their health could suffer because of lingering radiation. The patrols issue warnings but make little or no effort to evict them. It is 'their world', and preferable to the 'other world' beyond the fences. Centralia too, still has its residents, who prefer the smoke and devastation to anywhere else, and will not be moved by any token police presence. The boundaries of such places are easily breached by the determined, and the authorities don't appear to make too much fuss. It is under these conditions, as I demonstrate in the next section, that the Ghost Land endures.

SECTION 5: MIRIAM TASKER AND THE GHOST LAND – WHY AND WHEN

Here I will discuss the choices I made when crafting the novel, the degree to which I have included Asperger's traits while trying to avoid the pitfalls of stereotyping, the world I have constructed within the narrative, and the period in which it is set. The extent to which these choices involve Asperger's isolationism and the Asperger's desire for a different world are examined, as are my treatment of the toxic area itself and the extent to which it serves as a prop for the narrative or as an 'autistic land' in its own right.

The Ghost Land involves a young woman leading a businessman into a remote, toxic area ostensibly in search of his missing daughter. However both, consciously or subconsciously, have other motives. They are damaged people with serious father-daughter issues. Both have endured challenging lives and relationship problems due to their difficulty in relating to others. Can a damaged place provide answers for damaged people?

Chief protagonist of the novel is Miriam Tasker, the 26-year-old daughter of a farmer whose property was mostly swallowed by the Ghost Land, as it has become known. Whilst a young girl, Miriam was caught in the events which led to the creation of this seemingly hazardous area. Her father blames this exposure for his daughter's perceived unnatural behaviour which becomes marked as she grows older, particularly in her inability to form meaningful relationships with others. "That darned place altered you. It changed you to your core" (*Ghost Land*, Pg 140), he tells her. He can't countenance the idea of having produced a child who labours under a neurological disorder, in this case Asperger's, of which little was known at the time. All Miriam's peers are expected to become farmers or wives of farmers, and subsequently mothers.

Miriam knows little about her client save that his daughter entered the Ghost Land some time before and hasn't come out. Miriam is initially disinterested in her client's personal life and affairs and is only concerned that he possesses sufficient mental strength to make the trip. She has no expectations of any friendship, bonding or sharing of common ground beyond completing the job. However the businessman has issues of his own, issues that are reflected in his perception of the area in which they are travelling and his reactions to it, forcing Miriam to interact with him in ways which were neither desired or anticipated.

The parts of the novel dealing with this journey take place in the American Midwest during the Vietnam War and at the end of the Nixon era. Consequently the characters have no access to smartphones, laptops, or GPS systems. When they enter the Ghost Land they are entirely isolated. But, given that they are isolated to an extent in the outside world, how much difference will this make, given that Miriam may already exist in her individual Ghost Lands? For her, the Ghost Land may serve as a form of refuge where she can be 'different' without consequence. Miriam has a job to do in accompanying the businessman through the affected area, but to an extent his presence will always be intrusive. However as Asperger's sufferers can prove overtly sensitive to certain sensory inputs, so the Ghost Land has the potential to provide Miriam with a treasure of stimuli she wouldn't find outside its boundaries.

The only official barrier marking those boundaries is a chain link fence. The Ghost Land has been hushed-up, disincorporated, deliberately forgotten except by the 'Pilgrims' - those seeking answers, missing relatives, a Mecca of

sorts, or merely thrills. Reinforcement of the Fence was carried out by the locals to suppress both fear and temptation. Only the most desperate, or determined, of Pilgrims now haunt the settlement at the Ghost Land's edge. And Miriam is there to give them exactly what they want.

Given Asperger's sufferers' difficulty in socially integrating with neurotypicals it doesn't automatically follow that they can empathise with each other. All the communication issues remain in place. In the case of the novel's characters the problems with Miriam are two-way. Though ambiguous characters exist in fiction many stories are still delineated into good-guy, bad-guy protagonists, with the human tendency to label anyone who is different or considered anti-social as 'bad'. Again we have the challenge for both author and reader. Two unsympathetic characters existing within their isolated worlds travelling through a larger isolated world. Can they do anything other than misunderstand each other? Can the reader do anything other than misunderstand them?

As an Asperger sufferer Miriam's childhood in the 'normal' world would have proven especially fraught, especially as both Kanner and Asperger observations weren't published until the 1940s and translations took a while to appear across the Atlantic. By the time she reaches adulthood Miriam understands that whatever has made her the way she is, it isn't going to change, and that her relationships with other people are likely to remain tested. As she explains to her client, Kent Marshall: “These days my kind and their kind tolerate each other's existence under a clumsy truce” (*Ghost Land*, Pg 186).

Facial-recognition difficulties are prevalent across the autistic spectrum, consequently Miriam often can't understand what people are thinking through expression or body language. She's had to learn to look for the proper cues and try to respond appropriately. Of her city work colleagues she says: “I trained myself to walk and talk like them, to smile at all the right cues and, when approached, to discuss whatever the day's topic happened to be” (*Ghost Land*, Pg 178).

Miriam's sensory oversensitivity provides an actual advantage in that she can sense things in the Ghost Land that neurotypicals or non-autistic spectrum wouldn't normally notice, especially certain sounds, objects, markings, or structures that are displaced or simply look 'wrong'. As she explains: “Those who

don't know the Ghost Land always look for familiar things, things they understand, and because of that everything else is overlooked” (*Ghost Land*, Pg 56). This is why she is such a successful guide. As I discussed earlier in this essay, too much of a trait can cause severe disability, but a little bit can provide an advantage.

Perceived lack of empathy or interest in other people prevents Miriam from becoming emotionally invested in her clients. As previously mentioned, structural differences in the brain have led to some autistics being described, interestingly, as feeling they are one big exposed nerve, with even human voices posing a threat. Miriam exclaims at one point, “You attack me with your voices. I don't mind *things*. *Things* can't talk to me, can't keep asking or making demands, can't tell me that I'm doing wrong, or am rude, or don't understand such and such” (*Ghost Land*, Pg 192). Preferring objects to faces is a typical Asperger trait. Miriam is on edge outside the Ghost Land but, despite any perceived dangers, is generally relaxed within it.

One issue I decided not to specifically resolve with regard to Miriam's condition is the question of blame. Did exposure to the alleged toxins in the Ghost Land physically change Miriam when she waddled into it as a child? Was it her father's age at the time of Miriam's conception? Or medicine in her mother's bloodstream? Or a combination of those? Nobody would know for certain back then, and as the issue has still not been definitively resolved I decided it should remain ambiguous, thereby letting readers form their own opinions.

Miriam's father insists on blaming the Ghost Land, not his failed and entirely mismatched relationship with her mother, for Miriam's odd behaviour, but he has no proof that she wouldn't have grown up like that anyway, a fact which haunts him. As Miriam explains to Marshall: “If the Ghost Land didn't exist would I be *normal*? If I didn't have the parents I did would I be *normal*? Sometimes even my Dad wasn't so sure” (*Ghost Land*, Pg 129).

Miriam's father even fears the Ghost Land may have caused brain damage to his daughter, a diagnosis that was initially given to Temple Grandin. Miriam herself addresses this in one of her many exchanges with Marshall:

“Is my brain broken? Is it wired differently? If the latter, what makes that so bad? Am I really any different from someone who's fetched a brick across the

head? Or maybe it's the other way around. My brain could be too good. I've heard stories about people like me being gifted. Why doesn't it occur to people we might be advantaged, not disabled? It's the old thing, isn't it? Something is different so it must be wrong, it must either be corrected or locked away" (*Ghost Land*, Pg 130).

Miriam's parents aren't entirely able to cope with her condition and the usual parental plans for her are at best, notional. This may have bestowed more freedom on her than many other children, though school was a different matter. Grandin almost states the obvious that putting autistic children in the same classroom as non-autistic kids is a mistake, and throughout his book Fitzgerald outlines the difficulties Asperger's creatives experienced at school. The person who is not the same is going to stand alone. As a child, Miriam's perceived attitude certainly caused problems with her schoolteacher who tells her father: "She brings her habits into class, Mr Tasker. Give her a subject she likes and she won't keep quiet. Try getting her to talk about a subject she's not keen on and she won't utter a word. Miriam is not a shy girl. In fact she can prove very animated over any number of things. But she's a disrupting influence, and the class as a whole will suffer" (*Ghost Land*, Pg 44-45).

Hans Asperger examined prodigies who were doing badly in school because their mannerisms and failure to obey instructions was interpreted as wilful insurrection. (Silberman 2015, Pg 93) Miriam is certainly "...immune to the expectations of others" (Ibid 2015, Pg 98), and her teacher certainly believes putting her somewhere 'more suitable' would be for her own good, a belief shared, ultimately, by Miriam's own mother. Reflecting on this, Miriam tells Marshall:

"What *would* do me some good? Filling me full of pills until my brain blew up? Try to do with me what they tried with the Ghost Land? Put me into a labelled slot? In their minds, being different and being crazy are the same thing. The question has always been the same. Did the Ghost Land mark me? Really? Or am I just like this anyway? Maybe you can't cure it any more than you can cure someone with one arm" (*Ghost Land*, Pg 142).

To use one of Fitzgerald's examples, philosopher A.J.Ayer was a clumsy boy given to reading. He developed "...a rich, consoling and rather narcissistic fantasy life" (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 137). Typically, he hated school and was severely bullied. A possible obsessiveness was mixed with identity diffusion. An

unpopular boy, he dealt badly with teachers, one of whom described him as an “oddity” (Ibid, Pg 139).

Ayer also allegedly had a “...certain indifference and contempt for some quite respectable but old fashioned ways of thinking” (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 140), which is exactly Miriam Tasker's view of her Outpost community. Fitzgerald makes the claim that: “A person with Asperger's syndrome has no choice but to be narrow in their philosophy” (Ibid, Pg 142).

After an intense discussion with her teacher, Miriam's father pulls her out of class. Taking her home, he explains: "You can't go back to school... I don't trust that teacher, and the other kids don't understand how special you are. They won't do anything to your face but they'll point and say stupid things behind your back” (*Ghost Land*, Pg 48).

Fitzgerald also claims courage is a common feature of people with Asperger's, a courage that, for example, drove Hans Christian Andersen to travel to faraway places. Miriam and her client, Kent Marshall, touch on this when Marshall says, “It must take a lot of courage to do this for a living” (*Ghost Land*, Pg 79), and Miriam replies, “Courage? I don't even think about it, though I'll never be reckless enough to think the Ghost Land can't hurt me because I have a good sense of it” (Ibid).

Miriam would certainly not agree with Grandin's 'conformist' view. As she says of other people: “You all think the same, talk the same, live the same and you'll probably all die the same” (*Ghost Land*, Pg 135). It's not that she's always anti-social, sometimes it's fear of a world she doesn't always understand, that bombards all her senses day and night. As she explains:

“I don't have an Off switch for this. Information comes at me from all directions, often scrambled. I spend much of my time trying to make sense of it. I hunt out puddles of quiet. Blank spaces, an empty corner of the yard, the space under my bed. I can sit and stare at a blank wall and colour it with worlds beyond dreaming, or turn everything down to a silent spot of white. Sometimes it seemed everyone was shouting, not just with their voices, but their eyes, their gestures, and busy, busy faces that I didn't understand” (*Ghost Land*, Pg 40).

It's not that Miriam can't respond to certain things, it's that her response is the opposite to what would be expected from neurotypicals, with the inevitable misunderstandings this might trigger. For autistics Up is Down and Down is Up.

The Ghost Land is Miriam's right-side-up world. Outside it every detail, every sound results in a sensual cacophony. She's had to learn to prioritise everything she experiences. But as well as stimulus, the Ghost Land can also offer a 'blessed silence'.

I decided to make the Ghost Land itself ambiguous in nature. The effects encountered within may be purely the result of toxins that have changed the physical properties of things. In other words it is chemistry, nothing more. Nevertheless, though the effects in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone were caused by radiation, people within still claimed quasi-supernatural experiences. Miriam wonders whether the Ghost Land changed physical laws, or did it simply gain new ones? Did it change her so she could perceive them? Did it open parts of her brain that otherwise would've remained locked? The Ghost Land itself may well resemble an autistic brain where nature is wired differently. Behaving in unexpected ways. On the issue of mortality and legacy, Miriam may well wish to leave her mark on the Ghost Land. Kent Marshall asks her: "Is this your 'other planet'? A place you feel happy?" (*Ghost Land*, Pg 131). Miriam is well aware of how her upbringing, her condition and the Ghost Land itself has defined her.

When crafting Miriam's character, I wished to avoid burying her under a pile of autistic traits to the degree that a reader could tick them off a list as they were encountered. As not all Asperger's are the same, I decided to fold a selection of pertinent traits into the text in a much subtler way. For example on the question of motor clumsiness, Marshall notices that Miriam moves differently inside the Ghost Land than out. Or as he puts it: "You walk like you've got a pine cone up your ass" (*Ghost Land*, Pg 78). This is a survival mechanism, in the same way that Asperger's sufferers can learn specific skills to help them function in society.

Fitzgerald tells us that Lewis Carroll was considered peculiar looking and had low self esteem even to the extent of describing himself as "vile and worthless" (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 53). Miriam went through a phase where she thought she was some kind of monster because nobody seemed to like her or they got upset at the things she said, though from her perspective they were completely innocuous.

The Ghost Land may well have made Miriam what she is, or she might have chosen its environs in which to act at her fullest potential. Her Ghost Land

skills help her cope with, if not avoid altogether, the chaotic outside world. In this sense they 'save' her.

According to Fitzgerald, author Jonathan Swift decided that no one must ever have the power to hurt him. “He was an emotional bully, through a mixture of deflected desire, and contempt, and self-contempt” (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 32). Miriam is self-critical – and arguably self-hating – to the extent that as a child she marked her wrists with pencil strokes whenever she believed she made a mistake in class. Depression is another common Asperger trait, however in Miriam's case this is often displayed as introversion. She always says things as she sees them. She doesn't understand why people can be nice to each other's face yet prove so disparaging behind their backs. Though Miriam will admit to having 'black days' she has never attempted suicide because some aspect of the Ghost Land is always present in her life. If she chose she could walk in and never come out again. In fact the Ghost Land is Miriam's 'antidepressant'. At one point Marshall asks her: “If this place just disappeared, what would you do? What reason would you have to live? A semi-estranged father? A room in a two-bit gin joint? It doesn't sound like you could go back to any kind of regular job. From what I've seen you're dispassionate enough about people to make a good hooker” (*Ghost Land*, Pg 124). Miriam is essentially entering the Ghost Land for herself. Clients are merely her excuse for going in – a means of raising money to survive whilst outside it. Does the Ghost Land help focus a diffuse identity?

The Ghost Land is cut off from society, and therefore cuts Miriam off from the problems society presents. The only means of communication is a highly dangerous telephone kiosk in the middle of an abandoned town which Miriam always makes a point of inviting her clients to use – a test to see if they can cope with being separated from their 'normal' world. As I pointed out at the beginning of this section, a journey into the Ghost Land is one of isolation. Miriam certainly feels more in control in there, yet she retains a degree of pragmatism. She will never be reckless enough to think the Ghost Land can't hurt her simply because she has a better sense of it.

I have already touched on how people with Asperger's are often attracted to the supernatural or esoteric subjects. This could help explain Miriam's deep personal connection with the Ghost Land. In the case of her client, Kent Marshall, it transpires he has an ulterior motive for entering the area, one which is directly

connected to this idea. As for the 'Pilgrims' who are also attracted to the place, they may, to a greater or lesser degree, also lie on the autistic spectrum. Is it a Mecca for the autistic? Is the Ghost Land itself 'autistic'?

Miriam herself says: “If being able to conceive of things beyond the end of my materialistic nose is religion then, yes, I'm religious” (*Ghost Land*, Pg 84). According to Fitzgerald, William Butler Yeats had a “...deep love of Irish myth and landscape” (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 66). The Ghost Land has its own myths, its own series of urban legends regarding its origins and what lies within its boundaries. Miriam certainly finds something, not necessarily beauty, appealing within its tainted landscapes. Where she is concerned there not only exists a physical barrier between herself and the Ghost Land, but a barrier of misunderstanding between herself and her peers. Apparently Yeats “...attempted to build bridges to connect himself with humanity” (Ibid, Pg 70). This, Fitzgerald says, is a typical Asperger's aspiration. Miriam's attempts to 'cross the fence' between herself and others have usually proven difficult if not altogether fruitless.

A naivety in relationships is common in persons with Asperger's. This has a profound effect on Miriam's relationship with her schoolmate, Tommy Brady, through much of her childhood and teens. Not quite love, not quite friendship. In fact she is not sure whether she is capable of love, or afraid of it. She experiences little in the way of sexual relationships and is often repelled by the notion of casual sex. Temple Grandin had never knowingly fallen in love and could only guess as to what it might feel like. Relationships were baffling and too complex to deal with. She was never sure what was being communicated, and what the correct response might be, but was aware that there were things missing from her life. She said: “The emotion circuit's not hooked up – that's what's wrong” (Sacks 1995, Pg 272-3). Ultimately any deep personal or sexual relationship in the 'real' world might prove difficult for Miriam (Sacks 1995, Pg 226), and that such things may only be found within her own world. From her perspective, profound feelings may merely be concepts as opposed to stirring any real passions within her (Ibid, Pg 280). However Asperger's/neurotypical relationships are not out-and-out impossible. Gisela and Chris Slater-Walker describe the challenges of their life together in *An Asperger Marriage*²³, explaining how Christopher was

²³Gisela and Christopher Slater-Walker (2002) *An Asperger Marriage*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

diagnosed with Asperger's eight years into married life. The couple were obliged to accept, and work with, the knowledge they would never have an intuitive understanding of each other, and that they would need to live with what many regarded as a disability that simply wasn't compatible with the traditional view of marriage.

Fitzgerald says: "One of the greatest mistakes of psychiatry researchers in the 20th century was the excessive (and almost exclusive) focus on categorical diagnosis. This error put a lot of psychiatric research off course. In my clinical practice I observe that many persons with ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) have features of Asperger's syndrome that are often missed. Failure to intervene with Asperger type features as well as the ADHD can lead to failure in treatment" (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 105).

This would have proved a big issue for Miriam as she grew up, given her own difficulties at school and the lesser understanding the medical world had of Asperger's compared to today. A former teacher of author Bruce Chatwin, alleged by Fitzgerald to have Asperger's, said he was "...running away from himself by travelling" (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 105). Or as Chatwin's wife put it: "...he was constantly gyrating on his own axis to cause a sensation, to find a sensation" (Ibid). Miriam, by contrast, doesn't try to run away from herself as she believes any problems will merely follow you. However she ultimately needs to go somewhere due to an Asperger's need-routine/hate-routine dichotomy. As she puts it: "I made my way in the city for long enough. Because I had to, I guess, even if it emotionally tore me to pieces" (*Ghost Land*, Pg 124). If not the Ghost Land, then the city, where she spends a number of years living and working. But even then, "The Ghost Land was always there, in every angle or corner I couldn't quite see around, at the end of every dark-swallowed alley" (*Ghost Land*, Pg179).

Fitzgerald quotes art critic Robert Hughes (1982) who said Chatwin "...liked the offbeat. He liked the monstrous. He liked things that suggested an inadvertent crack in the seamless world of cause and effect" (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 106). This has already been described this as autistic novelty-seeking. For Miriam the ultimate place such a 'crack' can be found is the Ghost Land. Chatwin apparently had a fascination "...with crazed people out of their context, for the ambiguous, the odd, the peculiar" (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 104). Those whom Miriam leads into the Ghost Land are likely to live or think outside of the

mainstream. Is she leading them to her personal Mecca in a bid to connect with them, to 'convert' them even? Kent Marshall, on the other hand, seems to believe it provides her with an endless supply of novelty-seeking trips.”

With regard to the Ghost Land Miriam regularly reminds Marshall that she is the expert. She tolerates no disagreement from clients as arguments can get people killed. Whilst working in the city, she also experiences difficulty tolerating her work colleagues. As she puts it: “The work itself was easy. Everyone was so stuck in their holes they couldn't think of any better way to do it” (*Ghost Land*, Pg 192). Of her employers she says: “I worked for them. They mistakenly assumed I lived for them” (Ibid). In fact her boss tells her: “You could do a lot better in your career, Miss Tasker, if you took the time to say hello to people and ask how they're doing” (Ibid). Kent Marshall has his own controlling attitude, which leads to some intense exchanges within the Ghost Land. With her client, Miriam is very much on an equal conversational level, which she sometimes finds unsettling.

An odd or unorthodox appearance is another Asperger trait of note. Author Simone Weil dressed in “clumsy clothing” (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 132). Miriam follows little of the clothing conventions for a female of her time, though these had loosened considerably by 1969. Weil was uncoordinated and physically awkward with dyspraxic tendencies and an equally awkward gait. Sometimes self-disparaging, she had a “...growing interest in the redemptive value of suffering” (Ibid, Pg 134). Consequently she had a tendency to cultivate her own suffering. She also had a spiritual epiphany at Assisi. In my novel, Kent Marshall asks Miriam: “Was it an experience you had in here as a child, or an epiphany? What's the attraction? Is it the risk? Or are you punishing yourself? If so, is it because you've always been different? That you're some sort of criminal because of it? From what you've said, it almost seems you were made to feel that way” (*Ghost Land*, Pg 125).

Weil herself claimed that truth abides in a transcendent realm “to which only the truly great minds have access” (Fitzgerald 2005, Pg 135). The thought of being excluded from that realm mortified her. Are Asperger's people 'truth-seekers'? Miriam may well find that her personal truth lies in the Ghost Land, or that the truth behind its actual existence is something she ultimately hopes to find within its boundaries. It makes her feel 'worthy'.

As discussed, Miriam can certainly adapt to the environment of the Ghost Land in ways that non-Asperger's people are either incapable of or cannot do quickly enough. On a subconscious level Miriam may not agree to take any client into the Ghost Land, but only the 'right' ones, the ones who to a greater or lesser degree, share her perspective of the area. And she might lead some deeper into the territory than others depending on the level of that perspective. On the surface, Kent Marshall seems to hold an entirely opposite perspective in comparison to Miriam, but is as passionate about his own motivation for being there. Ultimately it is that opposing view that impinges on Miriam's world, and results in her leading him to the very centre of the Ghost Land, if only to prove the 'rightness' of her world view.

I have also discussed some of the ways in which Miriam's novel approach to problem solving helps her operate in the Ghost Land. She ponders on the strange combination of forces she believes must have created her. Just as Temple Grandin fears a cure for her autism would result in the loss of her creative force, Miriam is in no doubt about her sense of self, and fears that change would destroy that self.

Given the rather overdone portrayal of Asperger's sufferers in the fiction examples presented in this essay, I decided that Miriam should only exhibit a limited number of Asperger's traits, some of which are subtle. In many respects she is not likeable, but her unique circumstances and environment – her unique Asperger's perspective of things and methods of dealing with them – can make her narrative compelling. In other words the *alienness* of both herself and the Ghost Land is the selling point. A misunderstood Alice in a twisted Wonderland.

Miriam gives the reader her perspective throughout. It is her views, her beliefs, her understanding of events, her sense of right and wrong that the reader is privy to. The novel is effectively her 'memoirs' and, as she tells us in the first chapter, "...my view is all there is" (*Ghost Land*, Pg 13). It is this certainty that Kent Marshall picks at during their Ghost Land journey, and which ultimately precipitates the climax at the story's conclusion. Also, because Miriam is so poor at interpreting body language she has to rely on speech to communicate, which leads to some very long exchanges between herself and her client. Marshall accuses her of sounding like a travel guide or reading from a script.

If a 'membrane' can be said to exist between Asperger's and other people,

then a physical membrane also exists between Miriam and the Ghost Land in the shape of the Fence, a membrane she has considerably more success in penetrating. It is both her unique perspectives of the normal world, and her journey through the skewed landscape of the Ghost Land, that I believe generates a sufficient air of mystery and intrigue that will compel the reader through the story.

Miriam's 'skewed' perspective on other people is also a source of drama. Haddon's character Christopher can tie feelings to diagrams showing a sad or happy face but is unable to understand other expressions. This is exacerbated when the things people say don't necessarily match their expressions. Miriam has trained herself to understand some of these but still has the capacity to misconstrue, often with calamitous results, yet Asperger's can often communicate successfully in a non-social capacity. For Miriam this means 'slipping into professional mode' which, coupled with a natural affinity for numbers, allows her to keep a city job. However difficulties with eye contact is a significant Asperger's trait, and Miriam is aware that if she gets the body language wrong she can carry that error through to the rest of her interaction with that person, sometimes compounding the error.

Indeed, Aspergers can get into trouble because they're not always aware that what they intend to do can *cause* trouble. When Haddon's Christopher claims he always tells the truth, he is simply confirming his lack of tact and empathy, i.e. he will say things as he sees them irrespective of whether his observations will affect, or especially upset, other people. He may be logical, but he often lacks what a neurotypical might define as common sense.

Miriam, possibly because she is older and more experienced, is more self aware. "People got angry because I was honest. I said things the way I saw them. I never understood the point of telling people you're fine when you're not, or saying someone's dress looks lovely when it resembles a pair of drapes. Why should I be dishonest just to please someone else? It makes me feel dirty in my head. Yet when I worked in the city, people did that every day" (*Ghost Land*, Pg 153). And yet, in order to survive society, autistics may take on aspects of those they come into contact with, either through speech, gestures or other mannerisms, but at the heart of this 'autistic mimicry' may lie a hunger for identity, a need to mirror or take in other personas. Nevertheless a 'real self' lies within the autistic (Sacks 1995, Pg 223), a self that Miriam feels may only be found within the

boundaries of the Ghost Land.

The rules of life have always been out of Miriam's reach, but in the Ghost Land the rules are different. Scientists abandoned study of the area because it apparently falls so far outside the parameters of their methodology that in the end they simply refused to acknowledge it. Miriam, on the surface at least, is fully accepting of its perceived quirks. Her client, Kent Marshall, professes to be a skeptic. Both seem to hold their viewpoints to the exclusion of everything else.

Where others are concerned, Miriam believes people deliberately slot themselves into a specific 'life mode' and rarely make the most of their own potential. To simply live, work, have children and die is not enough. She is spiritual because she believes it opens every aspect of existence to boundless possibilities. In this regard she finds justification in the Ghost Land. For Kent Marshall, however, the idea that the Ghost Land contains elements that contradict his own view of the universe is an affront. He does not accept the possibility of inexplicable things that may turn human knowledge on its head. In this regard his claimed search for his missing daughter is merely a cover for his real motivations in entering the Ghost Land. He wants to face 'the unicorn' and debunk it to maintain his worldview. He can accept nothing else, nor can he exist in any other reality. At the beginning of his journey, however, he may not even be fully conscious of this, and only confronting the polarising opinion of Miriam brings it to the fore. Marshall at one point accuses her of basically imagining every unusual phenomenon in the Ghost Land, but doesn't necessarily have the courage to support his skepticism. For Kent Marshall everything in the Ghost Land *must* be natural. For Miriam everything there could be *anything*.

One of the biggest threats that Miriam faces in her life lies entirely outwith the boundaries of the Ghost Land, a spectre that haunts her right into her teens, and that is the threat of institutionalisation. In her parents' eyes, Miriam was not the perfect daughter they wanted, and they had no knowledge of how to grieve for this missing child other than to try blaming each other, or themselves. Disability ruins such a cherished dream, as does the realisation that parents' ambitions can't be projected onto an autistic child. Instead it is, from their perspective, the child who is considered "toxic" (Silberman, Pg 443-444). Miriam's parents were never able to open up to the 'positives' of Asperger's. If there was no acceptance of blame, then there was denial. In the real world, parents sought out Leo Kanner's

opinion because they refused to believe that any child of theirs could be mentally retarded, a condition historically associated with immigrants, working class and coloured people. (Ibid, Pg 178) Yet Leo Kanner often blamed cold-hearted parents for inadvertently causing their children's' autism, making it a source of shame and stigma while misdirecting autism research for decades. (Ibid, Pg 188) He also suggested that these 'frosty' parents, from whence came the term 'refrigerator mothers', might have tried to substitute art and creativity in their children's lives for nurturing love. (Ibid, Pg 192) Although Kanner was later able to formally acquit parents of any wrongdoing using words that many desperately wanted to hear (Ibid, Pg 301), parents ended up going from clinic to clinic “doctor shopping” for their child (Ibid, Pg 273).

Autism was considered a universally devastating condition with parents told to prepare themselves for the inevitable shipping off of their child to an institution. (Silberman 2015, Pg 42) In wartime, or just after, 'disappeared' children were exiled to the margins of American society, and confined to these institutions without “...anyone knowing who they really were” (Ibid, Pg 179). Removal of children to such places even gained a label: *parentectomy* (Ibid 2015, Pg199).

Silberman says: “The hardest thing for parents to come by for children in the 1960s was hope. Clinicians had little to offer beyond the standard advice to institutionalise the child and quietly remove their pictures from the family album. Most psychologists in America were still convinced that autistic children were constitutionally incapable of learning. They viewed training and conditioning in terms of “training an animal” (Silberman 2015, Pg 279). Information on autism during this period was scattered, with much of the clinical literature not written in English. What “little was out there was speculation” (Ibid, Pg 268).

Ultimately, “The precipitating factor in infant autism is the parent's wish that his child did not exist.” (Silberman 2015, Pg 207) Once in an institution a child could be subjected to a regimen of drugs, ECT and experimental treatments that bordered on torture. In the 1950s one such institution, Letchworth, was essentially a Bedlam for children, with residents packed into overcrowded, joyless dormitories. It wasn't until the early 1970s that this, and another such institution on Sten Island called, Willowbrook, were effectively 'exposed' and shut down following a public outcry. Adults fared little better, with state hospitals carrying

wards for “adult retardates” (Ibid, Pg219). Miriam might even be faced with the threat of forced sterilisation to prevent giving birth to retarded or “socially inadequate” children (Ibid, Pg 237). This was a fear her father openly expressed (*Ghost Land*, Pg 4). Yet an autism diagnosis could depend on the perceptions of a particular doctor (Silberman 2015, Pg 293). Miriam was fortunate to see a locum who recognised the signs. Just as the right school and speech therapist rescued Temple Grandin from “the abyss”, i.e. institutionalisation (Sacks 1995, Pg 258), so Miriam's interim doctor rescues her. This is doubly important as from the days of Hans Asperger, women on the autistic spectrum had been “virtually invisible” to clinicians. (Silberman 2015, Pg 438)

Confusion was fuelled by Kanner's autism and Asperger's Syndrome, despite being ultimately classed as distinct conditions, sharing some traits. At the time of Miriam's childhood Asperger's paper had still not been translated into English (Silberman 2015, Pg 349). Rumours that Hans Asperger, who died in 1980, was a Nazi may have made clinicians reluctant to cite his material (Ibid, Pg 400). According to Oliver Sacks, “No two people with autism are the same; it's precise form or expression is different in every case. Moreover there may be a most intricate (and potentially creative) interaction between the autistic traits and the other qualities of the individual” (Sacks 1995, Pg 238). Ultimately the different aspects of the autistic spectrum generated too many labels, often badly applied (Silberman 2015, Pg 399). By 1958, the competing labels used by different clinicians to describe forms of childhood schizophrenic syndrome led to a 'cult of names', which in turn stoked confusion, but “‘Asperger's' sounds so much better than 'retard’” (Ibid, Pg 352).

As I have discussed, parents keen to find reasons behind their child's autism were willing to blame a toxic environment. However there is increasing evidence that autism is, in some cases, genetic (Sacks 1995, Pg 236). Parents who find their child receding from them may still be tempted to blame themselves, to make superhuman efforts to hold on to a child who inhabits a seemingly unimaginable, alien world (Ibid, Pg 237). Or to use the option recommended by clinicians, in other words, commit their child to an institution and move on (Silberman 2015, Pg 266).

After the emergence of the phrase 'toxic parenting' another label appeared: 'toxic child'. Kanner observed a child “...who seemed more engaged by inanimate

objects than by his own mother, which seemed to flout the most basic instincts of the human species” (Silberman 2015, Pg 170). An autistic girl who moved among other children “...like a strange being, as one moves among the pieces of furniture of a room” (Ibid, Pg 175). And yet Miriam's attitude is not entirely dissimilar. When her own mother walked out of the family home, Miriam didn't overly miss her. Later, when legally obliged to go and live with her mother, Miriam discovers that she and her new partner covertly plan to have her institutionalised, or sent to a special school as they put it. Confronting them, Miriam says: “You wanted me here in the hope that if I couldn't be cured, I'd be tucked out of the way in a place you'd know I couldn't return from to haunt your lives, your wonderful careers” (*Ghost Land*, Pg 176-177).

Yet her mother genuinely believes it is in Miriam's best interests. While investigating Miriam's condition, her mother and lover may have been exposed to scare stories concerning violent and manipulative autistic behaviour and the consequences of leaving it untreated, a situation described by Steve Silberman. (Silberman 2015, Pg 311-313).

Asperger predicted in 1938 that low-functioning children could mature into high-functioning adults if kept out of institutions and allowed to develop their gifts (Silberman 2015, Pg 216). He saw threads of genius and disability inextricably linked through a sufferer's parental history and complex genetic roots. However Asperger also noted that parents and relatives were often highly accomplished, but that inherited gifts could come at a cost (Ibid, Pg 188-189). Yet if an Asperger's sufferer is good at a particular task then their traits might be tolerated to a certain degree, or even overlooked. Certain environments might provide “...elaborate playgrounds for an extraordinary mind” (Ibid 2015, Pg 251-252).

CONCLUSION

I have attempted to determine whether Asperger's Syndrome automatically leads to a creative mindset, whether it is the different perceptions generated by Asperger's traits that leads to the expression of an alternative or unique form of art, and to what degree the Asperger's aspects of single-mindedness and obsession can fuel the perseverance often required for artistic success. Ultimately this

influences how I can use my own autism to inspire unique stories and channel the traits into an effective expression of art, and guided my choices in crafting both the characters and environments featured in *The Ghost Land*.

A large proportion of human communication is deemed to be non-verbal. As described, Asperger's sufferers get caught in awkward social situations due to skewed body language, poor eye contact, tactless remarks, missing social cues and inappropriate vocal tone. Most of these problems are rendered redundant with the written word unless the author specifically describes them as occurring between two or more characters. However the author's autistic-coloured perspective can certainly come through without conscious effort as feedback and reviews of my own historical novels, which I mention in the Introduction, have attested.

Problems persist with international classifications of autism. None of the criteria exactly describes every individual with autism. Autism presents in a myriad ways; every individual with autism is different and unique. Current methodology may still not be reliable enough to provide a definitive answer to the questions I have posed. The Stirling University study mentioned in this essay, for example, relied on an online questionnaire, but are online surveys only filled in by a certain type of person? If so could this group prove truly representative? Would a self-report be honest or accurate? Could an ASD sufferer be, to a degree, in denial regarding the extent of their traits? Could such a self-assessment be anything other than subjective? Reliance on autistic participants to complete the SATQ accurately may be affected by difficulties with forms and surveys due to prioritisation, flexible argument or POV issues. Also: "Respondents to the first phase had a higher average level of education and were less likely to report a diagnosis of an autistic spectrum disorder" (Best, *et al* 2015, Pg 5). Yet we are not provided with compelling evidence to support this.

Some tests still throw up ambiguous results, and some aspects of the American Psychiatric Association's Manual are subject to controversy, e.g. melding Asperger's and Tourettes Syndrome into a general condition, and classifying "...gluttony and hoarding as psychological conditions" (*Sunday Times* 2015). The Stirling study didn't account for participants' full scale IQ, but claims "...the evidence suggests that divergent thinking is not related to age or IQ" (Best, *et al* 2015, Pg 8).

However the researchers in this instance maintain the tests they have

employed “...have been shown to have good levels of reliability and validity” where fluency and elaborateness were concerned (Best, *et al* 2015, Pg 4). Nevertheless allowances had to be made for the “...skewed nature of many of the variables” (Ibid). The study also admits: “The ability of the present study to explain the 'real-world' creative talents of people with autism is limited” (Best *et al* 2015, Pg 8) and “Further research is required to confirm the role of executive processes in the generation of unusual responses by people with high autistic traits” (Ibid, Pg 9).

Is there further room for error? Even given today's greater understanding of the condition, misdiagnosis, or misunderstanding of the subject may still prove an issue, and obtaining a correct Asperger's diagnosis is a problem that hasn't entirely gone away. I have highlighted many of the disadvantages manifested in the treatment, both clinical and social, that sufferers received before the condition was better understood. With the threat of institutionalisation now mostly removed, sufferers should now find themselves in a much friendlier environment and society.

Earlier in this essay I examined novels that present a stereotypical view of Asperger's sufferers. These have the potential to contribute to misunderstandings, with possible consequences if this trend in fiction continues. I am not yet convinced that non-autistics can successfully write a definitive novel about autistics. This is why, in the case of *The Ghost Land*, I considered it necessary to give a much lower-key – though by no means less important – depiction of Asperger's behaviours. Granted, I have looked at ways in which Asperger's characters, created by non-Asperger's authors, can engage with non-Asperger's readers, but for the purposes of my research I felt it was important to explore fiction written *by* Asperger's sufferers as well as works *about* persons with Asperger's. Interestingly I have had little success in this, with neither Waterstones, the university bookshop, Amazon or even Google offering any suitable titles. However it should be noted that Julie Brown, using her method of retro-diagnosis, alleges the Herman Melville character Bartleby, from *Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street* (1853) displayed Asperger's traits.

By contrast, non-fiction books about the spectrum, especially by those living with Asperger's, proliferate. For the purposes of this essay I have chosen not to undertake an in-depth examination of such biographical pieces as I live with

Asperger's on a daily basis, and am specifically interested in fictional representation. Changes in awareness of the condition occurred rapidly, resulting in autism almost becoming fashionable with the term “on the spectrum” used as a blanket description for a diverse number of traits, especially in the USA (Silberman 2015, Pg 39). In more recent times autism was behind the MMR vaccine scare, and the mistaken belief that diet could be an important factor in both causing and treating children on the spectrum (Ibid, Pg 64). Alternative treatments became big business in the first years of the 21st century, often supplanting primary healthcare. Hans Asperger's “lost tribe” gained recognition only to be confronted with the idea that they were victims of a global autistic epidemic (Ibid, Pg 260, 381), an epidemic that started growing its own lore. (Ibid, Pg 409). Types of autism started to be diagnosed in children who, in the past, would have fallen under the blanket of 'mental retardation'. This would have contributed to the apparent rise in the number of cases. (Ibid, Pg 390) “After studying autism for decades, medicine had failed to come up with a gold standard for treatment” (Ibid, Pg 70).

The *DSM-IV* handbook itself was a huge earner, possibly helping to make Asperger's Syndrome 'fashionable' and opening the door to publishers for a slew of books and other material, either about living with the condition or stories where Asperger's was a major element (Silberman 2015, Pg 400). This led to a bandwagon of retro-diagnosing famous historical creatives with a fashionable disorder and the generation of “autism stories” (Ibid, Pg 39-40) with Michael Fitzgerald's and Julie Brown's books offering examples.

Autistic research has certainly made progress since the late sixties when my novel is set, yet there is still no hard and fast consensus. The first international conference on Asperger's Syndrome was not held until 1988 (Silberman 2015, Pg 397). Underdiagnosis of autism in minority communities continues to the present day (Ibid, Pg 273). I believe this grey area is large enough to accommodate a place like the Ghost Land and a character like Miriam Tasker.

The current “moving goalposts” nature of autistic research makes it difficult to draw definitive conclusions (Silberman 2015, Pg 389, Pg 391). However evidence so far suggests that, though autistic traits may not automatically confer creativity, they generate the perspective and problem solving abilities that original, and arguably unusual, creativity requires. As discussed, Hans Asperger

saw a tendency towards “autistic thinking”, a self-centred rumination and retreat into fantasy where affected children pursued their own goals tenaciously (Ibid, Pg 98).

Asperger suggested that a “dash of autism” is essential for success in science and art (Ibid, Pg 422). Asperger's traits can be found in various degrees in the normal population (Ibid, Pg353). An Asperger's story, or indeed author, has the opportunity to tap into that, to make an attempt at gaining that necessary edge of empathy to provide compelling reading. Blurring of the boundaries between autism and eccentricity can fuel the notion that autism is on the rise, and it may be difficult to not only differentiate between Kanner's autism and Asperger's Syndrome, but between Asperger's and normality (Ibid, Pg21).

Asperger's isn't just a syndrome, but a whole mode of being, an identity that isn't so much concerned with being disabled, but different (Silberman 2015, Pg 430). Hans Asperger's idea was that people with Asperger's traits are “...standing apart, quietly making the world that shuns them a better place” (Ibid, Pg 450). In the late 1990s a new label was coined, one much kinder to the autistic community: *neurodiversity* (Ibid, Pg 450). Neurodiversity may be equally crucial for human life as biodiversity, and with autistics becoming more visible due to improved awareness and diagnostic techniques, it may be possible that the world itself is becoming more autistic. However general attitudes towards autism may take longer to change. Autistic people constitute one of the world's largest minorities (Ibid, Pg 454, 458, 469). “The process of building a world suited to the needs and special abilities of all kinds of minds is just starting...” (Ibid, Pg 474).

Even by 1995 no theory had as yet encompassed the whole range of autistic phenomena. “Our insight is advancing, but tantalisingly slowly. The ultimate understanding of autism may demand both technical advances and conceptual ones beyond anything we can now even dream of” (Sacks 1995, Pg 235). An example of 'moving goalposts' can be found in Oliver Sacks' immediate reaction to Temple Grandin's 1986 autobiography *Emergence: Labelled Autistic*, which he treated with suspicion. “How *could* an autistic person write an autobiography?” he wrote. “It seemed a contradiction in terms” (Ibid, 1995, Pg 241).

When writing about autism in 2013 Temple Grandin herself said: “Twenty years from now, I think we're going to look back on a lot of this diagnostic stuff and say, 'That was garbage’” (Grandin 2013, Pg 116). The purpose of this thesis

was to investigate whether claims of autistic links to creativity were more than heresay, what positive evidence existed for these links, and to see how this evidence tied in with my experience both as an Asperger's and an author. Gleaned information was also used to shape my decisions in crafting *The Ghost Land*. The moving goalposts nature of autistic research is reflected in my novel's ambiguous ending. Miriam may either have found salvation or doom, refuge or a trap of her own making, freedom in her own special world or a place within an entirely different sort of institution – the Ghost Land itself.

Ultimately, we don't have to like Asperger's characters, though from a storytelling perspective their situation offers plenty of scope for conflict/resolution scenarios. We just need grounds for understanding, to recognise that Asperger's sufferers are different and try to do things 'right' within the parameters of what they have been taught. We can then become enthralled by the new worlds they present.

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