



Escape From Paradise Island

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A Short Story

Michael Graeme

Crime doesn't pay. That's what they try to teach you in prison, and fair enough, I might even have left there one day determined to go straight except suddenly I was on an island in the China Sea, gazing at a beautiful girl in a yellow Bikini. So maybe it had been worth it after all. But careful now! You had to avoid thinking things like that because they'd a nasty habit of dissolving into reality and you'd wake up right back in that stinking grey cell: five years of your life already erased, with another two to go, and all because you'd never been able to resist the puzzle of a pretty motor car!

I pinched myself. So far so good: I was still there, still on Paradise Island - at least that's what the others called it. I stretched and soaked up the sleepy heat. I'd been here a month already and was still unable to believe my luck. They call me Jamjar, by the way, after the old Cockney rhyming slang for car. It had been my badge of honor among criminals that a car hadn't been made that I couldn't take,... but then like my old dad used to say: there wasn't a criminal who wouldn't eventually be caught either.

The girl had risen from the azure sea and was trotting over white sands towards me now. She was all light and lovely, like in a T.V. advert, but as she came closer I saw the sunken look around her eyes and the protruding bones of her skinny ribs - things you never saw in T.V. adverts, things that reminded you how fragile beauty was. Sure, it was easy for me: if I didn't make a success of things here, I'd just end up back in prison; if she failed, she'd be dead in a year.

She called herself Summi. She was the daughter of a Tokyo businessman and came with a history of secure rehab stretching back to her teens. I guess at first her problem had just been the habit, but then it would have been the means to pay for it and the increasingly desperate methods. Sure, I'd seen it all before, seen many a bright and pretty girl ruined by junk and I knew there wasn't anything anyone could do about it, but still I feared for her.

She caught me looking, then smiled and waved. She liked me, I thought, but I wasn't exactly the alpha male around here so I'd never made it obvious just how much I liked her in return. Then, right on cue, the alpha male came jogging up, bare chested, square jawed and handsome.

They were a mixed bunch here, all nationalities, both men and women, all mingling freely. It took some getting used to, I'll tell you, and I wasn't sure it was a good idea because it caused a lot of behavior that I could only describe as tribal. All the pretty females were the property of the alpha male, you see? Until he'd checked them out, no other guy dared go near them. Of course, we weren't actually allowed to - you know - or at any rate if we were caught at it we'd be put on a plane and sent back to prison. But if it *had* been allowed, well, I was pretty sure who Summi would be doing it with, whether she wanted to or not, and it wasn't with me.

The alpha male was called Jackson. He'd been a financier from Arkansas who'd fallen foul of greed and ego. Okay, so a financier doesn't sound like your average amoral alpha male, but he was a mean piece of work, and bigger than anyone else, both in muscle and self-belief. Me? I was afraid of taking my shirt off, partly on account of my skin which, after years of prison, was the colour of Tippex and likely to burn under a tropical sun, but mainly it was because I'd no physique, and I didn't want Summi to think I was a weed.

So, I sat there under the shade of a palm-tree watching them. There was Jackson: laminated smile, powerful thighs and a chest you could land a 747 on. Summi was beckoning to me, bless her, and mouthing something like "come on", but I went all bashful and shook my head. Then Jackson cut in on purpose and eclipsed my view of her. It was okay: it worked both ways. Jackson thought I was his buddy, but I was only using him while we were there. When you weren't that big yourself, you always cosied up to someone else who was. I wasn't proud of it but, like anywhere else in the penal system, it was a question of survival. Letting Jackson have Summi was a small price to pay for being left alone by the other meatheads.

A bell rang, low toned and sonorous, and the quiet air seemed to vibrate in sympathy. Recreation hour was over: it was time to return and the monks didn't like it if you were late: they kept you out of the courtyard during meditation and made you sweep instead. Now, I liked the meditation even though I couldn't make head nor tail of it - but I never complained - not like the others, see? It was just common sense that you had to keep on the right side of the monks, if only because they were the ones

who appeared to be in charge. And make no mistake, though they looked placid enough floating about the place in their robes, I'd seen them doing their martial arts in the evenings and it wasn't the slow motion ballet like in the movies: there'd been sweat and bruises, and the occasionally bloody nose. Sounds a bit strange? Well, it wasn't like any other prison I've known: things were more open and the rules were vague, but you didn't mess with the monks - there were even rumors they could knock you over just by thinking about it.

I hung back a moment, hoping the others might jog across and join me - well Summi at least - Jackson could go and hang for all I cared, but he wasn't for rushing, and Summi was such a gentle creature she was caught like a little bird in the palm of his hand while the big stupid ape fingered her plumage. I hoped they wouldn't be late. Things didn't make much sense here for sure, and Jackson was pretty blunt when it came to saying so, but it was obvious to me that if we could only pass our time without getting into trouble, there had to be a chance we'd be tasting freedom sooner, rather than later - otherwise what was the point?

I waited a bit longer, but I was cutting it fine now. What Jackson got up to was his own business, but it wasn't right that he led Summi astray as well. This was her last chance to grow old and wise, as opposed to dying young and stupid. And the bit that really got to me was the fact that she wasn't really important to him - there were other women here, more his type, and they all seemed willing because Jackson was - well - Jackson.

I gave up in the end and, disappointed, I returned alone, climbing the steps from the beach, past the hostel where our little dorms lay dotted by the terraced pathways. Then I climbed on up to the walled monastery that overlooked it all. There, Master Yi was waiting, a venerable old gentleman, sitting cross legged on a rush mat in the meditation courtyard. I thought I was late, but it was okay - the old man just liked to watch us coming in. He was reading something in our expressions I guessed and I bowed to him as I'd seen the monks do. I didn't know if it was correct, but at any rate it seemed polite. Master Yi responded with a faint nod and the same placid smile he always wore. Don't get me wrong - my motives were purely selfish: I wanted him to be thinking only good things about me, things that would ensure my time went well.

After a little while the gates to the courtyard were closed and I felt my stomach tighten. Jackson and Summi were still missing. Damn! I took a deep breath, then let it go. At least it was cool in the courtyard, which was hung over with awnings for shade, and I reasoned it was better to be sitting down in there for the afternoon, instead of pushing a broom in the sun.

Poor Summi!

Altogether, there were around two hundred inmates on the island - no murderers or anyone like that, no really evil people - mainly just thieves and swindlers and dope addled opportunists. Some were like Jackson, still cocksure of themselves, and viewing their brief time in prison as a bit of bad luck. Then there were the emotional cripples who seemed to have lost track of the real world altogether. You could tell them by the way they held themselves, like they expected blows to be raining down all the time. And then there were others like me, silent eyed, used to staring out into a long stretch of time.

There weren't two hundred of us in the courtyard of course - more like fifty, and it was getting less every day. It had seemed strange at first but no one actually made you do anything, and you could just take yourself off round the other side of the island if you wanted,... the monks wouldn't stop you. But this place was the only shelter, the only bit of civilization in an otherwise uninhabited wilderness. You couldn't escape, and most had worked that out by now - the absentees always came back by mealtime.

A couple of monks went up front and removed the curtain that had been obscuring a sculpture. It was made of a pale sandy stone, and depicted a guy sitting cross legged - at least I thought it was a guy. He didn't have bosoms or anything, but there was something feminine in the curve of the hips and in the shape of the face that made him look kind of half and half, you know? There was a piece of cloth around the loins so it was impossible to tell for sure. The eyes were gently closed and he was smiling.

Jackson called the expression smug, but I didn't see it that way - it was more dreamy to me. Anyway, the idea was just to sit there, two hours in the morning and again in the afternoon. Master Yi had explained on our first day that we didn't have to look at the statue, but if we were puzzled

about what it was we were supposed to be doing, we'd only to look at it and find the answer - where or how exactly, he didn't say. It was pretty boring of course, and most inmates couldn't manage more than ten minutes without fidgeting. If that happened a monk would come, tap them on the shoulder and usher them outside to sweep: Master Yi liked it quiet and calm for those who remained.

Now, me? I was good at sitting: an hour or two was neither here nor there. And there was always the puzzle. Any car thief likes a puzzle. That was the lure of it: how to beat the security. The ride?... well, that was just the payoff. Having to hand the car over to the middle man was the least attractive part, and the money - well that was almost embarrassing, but hey: a guy has to make a living!

My last job had been a high spec Lexus - just for the practice: took it from right outside the owner's flat in one of those classy gated communities. The security had been satisfyingly tricky, and the ride well worth the trouble. I'd left that beauty without a scratch, across town where the rozzers had been sure to find it - except, I'd misjudged the security cameras - and of course my mug was well known. I'd expected a couple of years, but the judge had been a miserable old curmudgeon who'd described me as a plague upon society, then given me a seven stretch. I'd been horrified, not just by the severity of it, but by the fact that you could apparently get as much time for stealing a rich man's car, as you could for murdering a bum.

The memory of that day in court came back to me as I tried to settle into the meditation. There was also the thought of Summi, sweeping the walkways in the sun - unless Jackson had talked her into bunking off for another swim. It was no good: I just couldn't relax.

After a couple of hours, Master Yi tinkled the little bell to say our time was up. The gates opened and all us weary meditators groaned with relief and shuffled out, blinking, into the glare of the sun - except, this time I made sure I was the last one past Master Yi. I gave the old guy a polite bow, and asked him for help. Master Yi, smiled and beckoned for me to sit. Meanwhile one of the monks moved in closer, hovering in case of trouble, I guessed.

"It's just that I really want to get it," I told him. "It's like a puzzle, and

I've always had a way with puzzles. You twist them this way and that, and eventually, with a bit of thought and some patience, the puzzle comes apart. But not this."

Master Yi answered: "It's not that kind of puzzle, Jamjar. It's more a way of seeing that there's no puzzle in the first place. It's a feeling, nothing more, a sense of how to be, rather than a sense of what to do."

"I see," I said, though I didn't see at all. "And the clue is in the statue?"

"Yes."

"But... couldn't you just tell us what it is?"

Master Yi smiled wistfully. "There are no words to describe it. The answer will come when you are ready to feel it."

I ran the words around inside my head, waiting for the tumblers to click, but it was no good. Jackson would have said the old man was just taking the Mick - but I wasn't so sure.

"This feeling, Master Yi,... can you tell me why it's so important?"

"Well, once you get that feeling, you're free."

My eyes popped open at that: "You mean free to leave?"

Master Yi nodded. "Free in many other ways also."

"But what's to stop any of us from just lying about it? I mean we could say we've got it, when we haven't."

Master Yi chuckled. "You can't tell lies and expect to be free, Jamjar. And, you know, I wasn't born yesterday!"

"I'm not sure I understand any of what you've told me. But you've definitely given me something else to think about."

Master Yi nodded thoughtfully, then motioned for the attendant monk to come closer. "I think it's time we showed Jamjar to the fishpond," he

said and there was a strange twinkle in his eyes as he spoke.

The monk nodded, then beckoned for me to follow. As I rose however, I realized the monk had a bosom and that he was not in fact a monk, or indeed a man, at all.

"I'm sorry," I said after we'd walked a little way. "I didn't know there were lady monks here."

"We are not generally visible," she said.

"Sorry, you'll be a nun, not a monk, I suppose."

"I've never really thought about it," she said. "I am what I am, whether it has a name or not."

She spoke gently and seemed amused by my expression. I imagined I'd been confused by the fact they all wore the same robes and all had shaved heads - but she not only looked like a woman, she moved like one as well. How could I not have noticed before?

I was to call her Sister Jade, she said.

She led me through a narrow gate and then I was led up a long flight of steps, to a higher level of the monastery. I could feel the sun burning through the back of my shirt but eventually we entered a dim passageway and came out into a cool courtyard, surrounded by shady apartments. In the middle of the courtyard there was a shallow pond with a tinkling fountain. Huge goldfish swam lazily.

There were other inmates here, apparently living in the apartments but I didn't recognize any of them. Some looked up and nodded politely. Others seemed content just to sit and contemplate the slowly moving fish. They were different, I thought, older perhaps - there were books and board-games scattered about, and the gentle sound of conversation. There was not the same roughness about them - no alpha or beta males that I could see - just contented men and women. They seemed more, ... cultured.

I thought of Summi. If only she'd not fallen in with that idiot Jackson,

she might have been here with me, in the company of this gentle woman, these gentle people. And Summi needed gentleness.

"You look sad," she said. "Most people are happy when they come here for the first time."

"I didn't mean to appear sad. It's very beautiful. I was just thinking of,... someone."

"Do you like it here?"

"Yes. Very much."

"Then you may collect your belongings and move into the apartment on the corner if you wish."

"I can? But why?"

"Because Master Yi permits it. You may come here, or stay below with your friends. The choice is yours."

"I don't understand."

"You have progressed to a higher level," she said. "You have been rewarded."

"But all I did was ask a question."

"Sometimes that's all it takes. It depends on the question of course."

"And are there other levels, other places hidden away?"

"Yes, there are many."

"Does this mean I don't have to meditate in front of the statue any more?"

"You must always return to the courtyard for meditation, if you wish to be free."

"Can I bring others with me here - a friend perhaps?"

"No. That is not permitted."

"May I ask why?"

"Because they have not earned it."

I made my way back to the dorms which were pleasant enough, very open and clean, but I had to admit they weren't as sublimely attractive as the shaded apartments. I should have been very happy with the privilege, but I wasn't. In fact, I was afraid.

In any penal system it's dangerous to be shown favour, and suicide to wear it like a badge. The meat-heads waste no time in bringing you back down to just below their level. Anything could do it - reading a book they thought too highbrow, or even cutting your hair in a certain way. And if I moved up to the apartment, I'd still have to come down for the meditation, and mix with the others. It would only be a matter of time before I was snatched behind a wall and given a good kicking. And Jackson? Well, I reckoned Jackson might be the one who organized the kicking.

It also bothered me I'd never seen the inmates of those apartments before. They obviously didn't mix with the lower level scum like me, maybe for fear of their upper class highbrow skins - yet unless they visited the courtyard for meditation, they could not be free either. A terrible thought struck me: did that mean they would never be free?

Summi was sitting a little way off, her body sagging under the heat. She looked worn out. She'd been sweeping the terraces all afternoon, unlike Jackson who'd simply refused the broom, then gone off to sun himself on the beach. I was about to go to her when Jackson came trotting up to me.

"Hey Jamjar," he jibed. "How was the meditation?"

"Oh,.. the same."

I wanted to tell him he should try harder to be there, that he shouldn't

lead Summi astray, but of course I was afraid to.

"You okay buddy? Someone been messin' with you?"

"I'm all right. It's Summi I'm worried about. She looks ill, don't you think? Maybe we should tell someone."

"Tell the monkey's, you mean?"

"Maybe,... I've heard others say that when they've been sick the monks have fixed them up really well."

"Listen, Jamjar, we tell them nothing, right? How long have you been inside, boy? She's just tired is all. We'll take care of it, okay?"

I sensed the irritation in Jackson's voice and knew to leave it. "Sure,... you're right. Listen, have you noticed that some of the monks are women?"

Jackson's face cracked into a grin. "Women? No way. You ask me, that meditation's playing tricks on you."

I was about to explain but held back, feeling I'd perhaps said too much already.

"Trust me, you need to bunk off more," said Jackson. "You don't do nothing you don't have to, right?"

"Sure,... sure."

Jackson bounded off again and Summi looked up expectantly as he passed, but he barely seemed to notice her. Then she smiled at me, and we sat down together.

"Been sweeping?" I asked.

She nodded slowly, like her head was heavy and difficult to balance. "I don't mind doing it, it just makes me ache, that's all. Why won't you swim with us? The water here is the best."

"Oh, I'm not much of a swimmer, Summi."

"You could just splash around a bit."

"I'm afraid of getting out of my depth, I suppose."

"We've not much to worry about with Jackson around."

"You're right," I laughed. "He'd soon pull us out of trouble wouldn't he? Summi, listen,... you've been here longer than me,... have you ever seen anyone released?"

She thought a while. "There's never any big announcement. You know how quiet things are here. People just disappear. Why?"

"Well, I came here thinking this was somewhere we stayed for a while, towards the end of our time, a sort of rehabilitation center - that if we did well we'd leave sooner, but if we mucked about, we'd be sent back to ordinary prison to complete our full term."

"I'm sure that's the way it is. What are you thinking?"

"I believe if we do really well here, we can go home straight away,... but, have you ever thought,... that if we don't,... we'll stay here for ever?"

"No Jamjar, that can't be right. I know it's strange here: vague rules and not much idea what's going on - but it's all very,... humane. The monks are kind. And people do leave."

"But do they leave, or are they just put somewhere else?"

She shivered. "Don't talk that way. It frightens me."

I slept little that night and in the morning I decided the best course was to lose my privileges before anyone found out about them. So, I went down to the beach with Jackson and Summi, and though I kept my shirt on, I waded out and splashed around in the shallows. Then, when the bell sounded for meditation, though it hurt, I ignored it.

Later on, when we all returned to the monastery, we found the monks waiting with brooms. I was offered one, but Jackson refused it for me and took me back to the beach. Only Summi accepted the broom and began to sweep. This was apparently okay by Jackson because sweeping was women's work.

I felt for her: she wanted to please Jackson, and now she wanted to please the monks, and in a sudden flash of insight I saw how her whole life had been a compromise between the conflicting demands of others - wanting to please everyone, and destroying herself in the process.

I didn't stay long at the beach, but returned to the monastery, following the terraces to the little gateway that led to the secret apartments. With every step I took I was hoping I'd be stopped by one of the monks, and it worried me that I wasn't. Finally I came to the little gate and found Sister Jade sunning herself. She smiled and spoke softly as I passed:

"What has been gained cannot be lost, you know? It's like a branch in the road: once you know it, you can no longer not know it."

Well, that was fine then. I could only hope that no one else knew that I knew it!

Resigned to my fate, I found the fishpond. It seemed even more beautiful than before. The inmates looked up at me - not in an aggressive way, but welcoming and kind. There was an air of calm; some played chess and backgammon in the dappled sunlight while others talked quietly. I knew I'd be safe here, that there would be no more need for sucking up to the likes of Jackson; I could just be myself.

But I would never be free!

An elderly gentleman ambled over. "Will you be joining us, do you think?" he asked.

"It's very tempting," I replied "It's so tranquil."

"Yes. We all seem to be of a certain kind here. I'm sure you'd fit right in."

"Do you ever get down to the beach? I mean with the others,... it's good to swim."

The old man turned his eyes away and allowed them instead to follow the lazy movements of a goldfish. "We tend not to venture to the beach," he said. "I'm sure the others would be quick to take offence at our,... differences."

"And the meditation?"

"We don't go there either. You can meditate here of course, though the monks say it's not the same."

"And, do you mind my asking: how long have you been here?"

"How long? Oh,... I forget."

I was dumfounded: "I thought every convict counted the days to his release."

"I've lost track," he said. "Does that surprise you? But it's not really like prison at all here, not at this level of the game."

"But you're not free!"

The old man shook his head in a sagely way. "Well, what is freedom?"

"Easy," I said, having heard all this philosophical nonsense before. "It's going where you want, when you want. It's being free to,... well, to make love as you please, and not be afraid all the time."

The old man thought for a while. "It's true, the men and women are not permitted to - well - you know. But there are other things in life besides that: a good book and a game of chess, for example."

But where was the freedom if they were afraid to go to the beach? I liked the beach: I'd miss it!

"I was told there's another level," I said. "Somewhere you can progress to from here."

"Oh, I don't bother about things like that any more. If there's another level, no one speaks of it. There are many levels I'm sure, and one of them may be the way out, but I can't say anyone's ever found it."

"Perhaps people just disappear, without your being told that they've moved on. I mean, who vacated the apartment I'm to have?"

"That was old Aristotle. He passed away. It's a pity - he was a good chess player. Do you play?"

I came down from the fishpond, to find Summi still sweeping the terraces. The hollows around her eyes seemed deeper. I told her to sit down, then picked up her broom and swept for her.

"No need to do it so hard," she said, as she watched me. "You're just making the dust fly."

But I was angry and I worked it into the broom. "There's an easy way out of here," I said. "I know there is, but you can't be fooled into accepting their privileges. That way you'll never be free. It comes from here, from this level - and you can't think your way out either. It's not that sort of a puzzle."

Summi didn't understand, so she said: "It was fun, when you came with us to the beach this morning."

"Eh? Oh, sure I enjoyed being with you,... and Jackson. Summi, forgive me for asking this, but you're very sick, aren't you?"

She averted her eyes and clutched her arms around her thin body. "It's just that I can't stay clean for very long," she said. "I have to find the secret, Jamjar, or they say I won't get better. Freedom will just kill me. Until I can find it I'm better off here. I'm just so much more myself, even sweeping these terraces,... . happy being with you,... and Jackson."

I carried on sweeping while I plucked up the courage, then paused again. "If I swim with you tomorrow, and all week, will you come and meditate with me next week?"

She parted her lips in surprise, as if I'd had made an unexpected declaration of love. "Oh, Jamjar,... it's just that - well - me and Jackson, we think that's all nonsense."

Or rather Jackson said it was nonsense and she was afraid to have her own opinion. "But will you?"

"You'll swim?" she asked.

"I said so, didn't I?"

"I mean really swim? Take your shirt off and wade out and all?"

"Well,... okay then."

She was on the verge of accepting. "I still don't know," she said, meaning that she might, if she could find a way of pleasing me without displeasing Jackson. I saw it, and felt bad for having pushed her into such a dilemma. Why couldn't people just let her do as she pleased, without making her feel guilty whichever way she turned?

The following morning on the beach I peeled my shirt off to the accompaniment of a mock fanfare played by Jackson on a make-believe bugle. Summi applauded, jumping up and down with girlish delight, and then we headed out into the sea. The water was shallow and warm. I kept testing my depth but eventually relaxed and began to swim, pulling an untidy crawl to Jackson's powerful, perfect strokes.

At one point I wasn't looking where I was going and collided with Summi, feeling for a moment her soft derriere squashed against me. She laughed, thinking nothing of it, but the contact caused me to shiver with delight. It was a long time since I'd been with a woman. She'd felt exquisite, but I distanced myself in a hurry because Jackson was quick with his jealousy,... and I still needed him.

So, I kept my end of the bargain and defied the monks for a week, avoiding the meditation and refusing the broom. But on the first morning of the following week I told Jackson I wasn't feeling too good and that maybe I'd try the meditation again, if only to get some rest. Summi stood beside him, and she knew well enough what I was thinking - that

this was her cue to step away from Jackson's side and come over to mine, but she couldn't even look at me. That hurt - even though I'd known all along I was expecting too much. Jackson called me a few names, but good-naturedly, because we were still buddies it seemed, and then he led Summi to the beach. She might as well have been tied to him by a leash.

I watched them go, then waited an hour, until the bell sounded to call everyone back. The more dutiful inmates came trotting up, but Summi was not among them. I waited until I could wait no more. I felt a terrible heaviness: she wasn't coming. It had been stupid to hope that what she'd really wanted for herself, was to be with me.

I was the last to enter the courtyard, just managing to slip through as the monks closed the gates. Master Yi caught my eye and smiled, but I couldn't respond: I was too miserable to care whether the old man thought good of me or ill. We were down to just ten inmates, and I gave an audible sigh when the curtains were removed from the statue. Then I sat the full two hours, barely hearing the termination bell, and I sat on for another hour, then another and another, quite alone - just me and that damned statue. Jackson was right - there was something insulting about that smile.

Darkness fell and still I sat. Then Sister Jade appeared carrying a candle which she placed before the statue, so that its features became animated in the dancing light. It was strange - it was only candle light but it caused the smile to become a frown at times, before letting it flicker back into a smile again, sometimes mirthful, sometimes serene.

She did not leave me, but sat to one side, as if waiting. And then, quietly, she said: "Anger will not bring a resolution. As a solver of puzzles you should know this. The more angry we are, the further away we move from what it is we want."

"Yea? Well, I also know that when there's anger you should purge it, and that's what I'm doing."

"One can never purge anger, Jamjar, only find the means to rise above it. Why haven't you moved your belongings to the apartment yet?"

"Because it's a trap. There are people up there so content they can't even remember how long they've been here."

"Is contentment not a kind of freedom?"

"Not when they're so content they're afraid to risk being truly free."

She nodded. "You were wise not to take that path. Master Yi has instructed me to admit you to the next level. If you are willing, please meet me by the fishpond tomorrow morning."

I shook my head. "No more levels. No more making me think I'm important, when I'm not. There could be ten levels or a hundred maybe, but they're all false."

"Just because one path leads to a trap, it does not mean all others paths are the same."

"Yes they are. None of your paths lead anywhere. Freedom's simpler than all of that. It comes from here. I might take a hundred years, or it could happen in a moment. So,.. no thanks."

"I can only show you the way. It is for you to choose whether or not to take it."

She rose to leave, but I remained, still burning inside. Then she said: "She was coming, you know?"

"What? Who?"

"Summi. She had made her choice, and was coming, but you know how weak she is. She fainted climbing the path from the beach - too much swimming perhaps?"

She'd been coming to me. I felt a wave of elation that was immediately swallowed down by guilt and worry. "Is she all right?"

"She's resting in the infirmary. She'll be all right."

"Only if she can stay clean."

"She has already taken the first step by choosing what it is that she wants."

"You won't trick her with the apartments, will you?"

"No," she said. "That is not her path."

She left me then, but still I remained, although I realized now my anger had gone - not purged or spent, but magically resolved. Summi had found a way of defying Jackson. She had risen from the sea and been coming to me. Then I caught the smile on the statue. It seemed steady now and for once it matched my mood. I actually felt like that smile. The smile summed me up and I copied it, mirroring the smile upon my own lips, and letting out a deep sigh. The smile came inside of me, smiling love and warmth into every atom of my body. Then something within me moved and realized Master Yi had told the truth: it was something that could not be shown, or explained.

Only felt.

When I finally returned to the dorms, Jackson was waiting, sitting on my bunk. "Long session, buddy?" There was an edge to his voice. If Summi had walked away from him, then his ego would be hurting, and he'd need someone to take it out on. But what if he'd known it was me who'd put her up to it?

"Hi Jackson. Look, I heard the monks took Summi."

"Did they?" Jackson didn't seem concerned - that was good then?

"It's what I heard," I went on. "Anyway,... I think I've worked it out. I know how we can all get out of here."

But Jackson wasn't listening. "I'll get Janine to swim with us tomorrow."

"Janine?"

"New girl - dark hair, gorgeous ass."

"Ah!" Summi was forgotten then. "But, I was saying.."

"I know what you're saying Jamjar, but that's all bullshit, do you understand? This meditation stuff, it's just a way for them to control us. Well I'm swimming in the morning, buddy, and so are you. No more of this crap, right? You wanna rest, you sleep on the beach."

And it came to me then, why it was that Jackson liked having me around - because there was nothing like a scrawny guy for making a muscular one look good in front a woman.

"Sure, Jackson." I'd got away with it then - just about and the only thing eating Jackson was the same as always, his need to push people around in order to feel good about himself.

In the morning I asked one of the monks if I could see Summi but I was politely refused. She was mending the guy assured me, and I would see her soon. Then I was reminded that Sister Jade was waiting by the fish-pond.

I made my way up slowly, thinking I'd perhaps join Jackson on the beach later, but Jackson didn't seem so polite any more, and I'd a funny feeling our days as buddies were numbered. I arrived to find Sister Jade sitting with Master Yi, the pair of them conversing quietly by the water. A few inmates were lounging in the early sunshine, but there was a cool, comfortable emptiness about the place.

Master Yi looked up jovially. "Are you ready for the next level?" he asked.

"You're just going to show it to me, right? And then I get to think about it before doing anything?"

"Of course. You know how it is, Jamjar: the thinking is the most important part!"

"And what about these poor devils?"

Master Yi looked around and sighed. "Most will never be truly free,"

he said. "But we still have high hopes."

"And the others?" said Jamjar "My friends? Down there."

"Ah,... the melting pot of life. There are many possibilities down there. Don't worry, everyone finds their way if they want to,... some however, travel much further than others in the process."

Sister Jade rose and beckoned for me to follow. She led me through a maze of passageways that eventually came out onto a terrace on the other side of the island. Below, I could see a long winding pathway which led to an azure shore. There was a jetty and a small boat with a sail being made ready.

"The question is this," she said. "Do you have the courage to get on that boat not knowing where it might be taking you?"

"Whoa! Master Yi said I could think about this before deciding on anything."

"Well, you can think about it now. But the boat will be leaving with the tide. And there may not be another for a long time."

"Where will it take me?"

"I am not lying when I tell you I do not know."

"Am I free?"

"Jamjar, I truly do not know."

It sounded like another trap, and I didn't have much time to consider it. Jackson would be waiting on the beach now. If I ran, I could maybe still patch things up and put everything back the way it was between us. But what if the boat really was taking me to freedom? Could I afford not to chance it? There was no sense of privilege here,... more an invitation to take an insane leap into the unknown.

So,...

I walked the path, thinking I could always turn back, and maybe if I walked slowly enough the tide would turn and the boat would go without me, then I could say it wasn't exactly my fault. But the tide didn't turn and the boat waited. There were monks to help me aboard, strong arms and serene smiles,... then the lines were cast off.

I had made the leap.

It was a while before I noticed Summi resting in a hammock on deck, her head upon a pillow, her face ashen, lips dry and cracked.

"Is Jackson not coming?" she asked.

"No," I told her, barely able to hide my delight. "It's just me." But then my brain starting working the puzzle. If I was with Summi, it meant the boat wasn't sailing us to freedom, because she would die on the outside. The boat was taking us somewhere else. For a moment it felt like I'd fallen for another trick, allowed my attachment to Summi blind me to the obvious. I could almost hear the trap slamming shut - but then I remembered the smile of the statue, remembered the feel of it and realised the sound was not of the trap shutting, but of the trap opening.

"Jackson didn't get it," I said. "That's why he's not here."

"But why am I here, Jamjar? What did I do?"

"You made a choice yesterday."

"To be with you?"

"No, to come back to yourself."

"But I'm not ready to go home yet."

"Don't worry, Summi. We're not going home."

The boat carried us out into the wide ocean. It was exhilarating. It didn't matter any more what the destination was, I thought, because one place is as good as another, when you wake up one morning to find that you're already free.

From the same author on Feedbacks

Love is a Perfect Place (1999)

A short story by Michael Graeme - a twenty minute read: He scooped some water up and drank. It astonished him. It tasted like he imagined the most perfect water should taste, but it was a sensation spoiled by the queer fact that he wasn't thirsty even though he had walked for hours under a hot sun.

"Perhaps we don't need food,... or water," he said. "Only when it pleases us."

He looked around then at the land and he felt a chill. What manner of place was this? And what manner of being had he become?

The Enigma that was Carla Sinclair (2004)

I was not completely unhinged. She was just a computer program, a crude simulation - at best a never ending animated cartoon with only one character and no story line. But she was "something",... She was a hobby I suppose you might say. Other young men had hobbies, equally obscure, though perhaps more socially inclusive. They collected camera gear, they went fishing, raced cars or drank themselves stupid. Me? I coded in my bedroom. Same thing? Well, not quite. You see, while other people's hobbies took them out of themselves, mine enabled me to climb deeper inside.

Lively Custard (2004)

Short Story - a 25 minute read: Rogue trees are popping up all over the little town of Frinton-cum-Hardy and the residents have begun speaking in metaphors so mixed and mangled, poor Armitage, connoisseur of all things bookish, finds he no longer understands his mother tongue. And if all that isn't enough his young protege, Jenny, from the Books Galore Emporium is having "uncle trouble"!

A Moth on the Moon (2004)

Most people - except the conspiracy theorists - know the United States landed a man on the moon in 1969. What's less well known however, is that the British beat them to it, in 1947.

The Choices (2006)

A fifteen minute read:

I am sitting here in the lounge-bar of the McKinley Arms Hotel, by the shores of Loch Lomond, and I am staring out into the twilight at my choices. I have been this way before many times and I always seem to go wrong at this point, so you must forgive what must seem like fastidious caution, but I simply have to get it right this time!

Push Hands (2008)

Phil and Penny were made for each other - the only problem is they are married to other people. When they meet at a Tai Chi class they quickly realise the depth of one another's loneliness and need for a sympathetic ear. Fearful of the consequences, they go to elaborate lengths to avoid each other but their paths begin to cross with chance-defying regularity, pulling them ever more deeply into one another's confidence. Is this evidence of a mysterious power at work, or should they simply have an affair? Middle aged and married for a long time, their apparently unavoidable relationship causes them to ask serious questions of the meaning of their lives and their marriages, and finally to demand that their families respect them for who they really are. But will their families recognise them? Can they even recognise themselves?

Push Hands is a full length novel, complete and free to download.

The Man Who Could Not Forget (2008)

A Short Story by Michael Graeme (a fifteen minute read):

...I have a problem with my memory. It isn't that it ever fails me - quite the opposite in fact. Indeed, my recall of events from all but the earliest years of my life is truly photographic, so there was little doubt in my mind the woman before me now was the one who had stolen the book....

The Magician of Monkton Pier (2009)

Joshua is navigating his eco-boat, The Mattie Rat along a dark and stinking stretch of the old canal through Monkton - a city overwhelmed by gangs and gun toting militias. Joshua's seen it all before: urban decay, corruption and the death of hope.

Living on the water, and with no need for money, he's usually able to slip unnoticed through these dark town stretches and into the green beyond. But when he's tricked into picking up a pair of

enigmatic hitchers, Joshua knows there's going to be trouble in Monkton.

In spite of his best efforts, the wily old Waterman is about to become an accomplice in the biggest magical stunt of all time. And if the world no longer believes in magic, well, it only has itself to blame.

Crystal Says (2009)

A twenty minute read: So, I'm standing in this crop circle, down in Wiltshire, England, and there's a girl dangling a crystal from the end of a chain. She's very pretty, so I'm thinking I'll have to find a way of overlooking the fact she's probably also some kind of crank if I want to take advantage of the situation here,...

Katie's Rescue (2009)

A thirty minute read: It felt odd, driving into Raworth, because where I come from Raworth does not exist. I know that stretch of road, you see? It dips down to the river Warfe, crosses over by the old bridge, then rises up the dale on the other side. Ordinarily there's just a steep wooded ravine and a picturesque waterfall on the river but, like I said, on this occasion, there was also Raworth,...

The Summer of '83 (2009)

Well, that's middle age for you: you either grow up, grow into it, accept its imperfections, its disappointments, and grow old grumbling at someone, or you ruin yourself on a mad fling with a girl half your age that you know won't last, and then you grow old alone and with only the walls to grumble at.

In the absence of any other alternatives, I know which of the two I prefer, ... but what if there was a third alternative?

The Man Who Talked to Machines (2010)

You have to talk to them, counsel them, mesmerise them into stillness before you set foot anywhere near them. And, though I may not be considered wholly sane, at least I have a reputation for the way I talk to machines.

Pandora and Melanie (2010)

My dear Richard, I apologise for the delay in writing to you but it's only now I am beginning to come to terms with the implications of your discovery, and also the news of your collaboration with the woman known to you as Pandora,...

The author joins in with the doom and gloom and predicts the end of the world, but as you might expect, there's an upside to every situation.

Rosemary's Eyes (2010)

A short story about life, and death: Rosemary was by the house, feeling her way among the delicate stems of a clematis, her light touch seeking the beauty of its tissue-thin blooms. She paused at our approach and looked towards me, her eyes passive, waiting. Then she reached out, inviting my embrace. And when she gathered me in her arms, she raised her lips to my ear and I felt her whispered words, hot and curling against my skin.

"Don't be afraid," she said. "Look into my eyes once more."

The Road From Langholm Avenue (2010)

A story of unrequited love, of unexpected love, of love lost, and found again. With divorce and redundancy looming, our hero, Tom, is left facing middle age with the feeling that he made a wrong turn somewhere in his past. Then, as if things aren't bad enough he's inexplicably haunted by memories of Rachel, a girl he had a crush on at school. With emotions bubbling up to the surface he realises the old business with Rachel has never really been forgotten and that before he can find a way through his crisis, he's going to have to journey back in search of his deepest past. Tom sets out to find Rachel and, regardless of her circumstances, do the one thing he couldn't bring himself to do a quarter of a century ago: ask her on a date. But things don't quite go according to plan. Tom discovers a lot can change in twenty five years, but that some things remain exactly the same. And when it comes to the business of unrequited love, even those closest to him are not immune. This is a full length novel - complete and free to read. It is not a teaser or a taster.

In Durleston Wood (2010)

A middle aged romantic, Richard Hunter has hit the buffers. Divorced and estranged from his children, he trains as a teacher and

takes up a post in his home village at his old Primary School. Never more than arm's length away from a nervous breakdown and hopelessly in love with his headmistress, Richard seeks solace in his boyhood haunt: Durlleston Wood. But the wood now hides a secret, a mysterious woman kept hidden there as the apparent "property" of a villain - or so she tells him. As he learns more of her fate, and her plan to transfer her "ownership" to him, he tells himself this is the last thing he wants, while wondering if it isn't actually something he needs more than anything, that far from destroying him, rescuing her could be the one thing that stops him from going under.

This is a full length novel - not a taster or a teaser.

The Lavender and the Rose (2010)

Matthew Rowan finds himself drawn to a secluded valley in the English Lake District where he meets Amanda, mistress of Crag-side, a cottage nestled deep in a fold between high fells. On the surface it seems like the ideal refuge from a world gone mad, but what he doesn't know is that the house sits at the epicentre of a magnetic anomaly and has a reputation for playing strange tricks on the mind of anyone who sleeps there. There's also something peculiar about Amanda, who calls herself Beatrice and leads a secretive life dressed entirely in Victorian costume. *The Lavender and the Rose* is an unusual love story, an erotic adventure, and a spiritual odyssey. It's also a psychological mystery whose resolution will require Matthew to question his understanding of the nature of human identity, and even reality itself.

The Singing Loch (2011)

Scott Matthews, a disillusioned city worker, finds himself drawn into a bizarre corporate conspiracy. From the ruthless greed of '80's London, to the austere beauty of Western Scotland, Scott begins to unravel the threads of an enigma dating back centuries, while gradually falling under the spell of the mysterious and forbidden Singing Loch. Here he discovers love, enlightenment, and ultimately a truth more startling than legend.

The Last Guests of La Maison du Lac (2011)

Writer Richard Graves arrives at La Maison du Lac, a remote hotel in the Swiss Alps, where he hopes to find the inspiration to begin

the most important story of his career. It's here he meets the enigmatic Gabrielle, a beautiful Frenchwoman rebelling against her over-protective parents.

As he comes to know more about Gabrielle he realises he must rescue her, and that the story he must write is the one he finds himself living. The story will be a far cry from anything he's attempted before, with nothing appearing to be as it seems, including Gabrielle herself.

As their story unfolds, Richard's instincts tell him that only a tragic ending is going to make sense, and what follows is a desperate battle between his desire for a lasting happiness, and the seemingly darker intent of his muse.

At times mysterious, romantic and erotic, this is a journey that will take Richard and Gabrielle literally beyond the edge of reason, where the only guarantee is that neither of them will view life, or love, the same way again.

This is a full length novel, complete and free to read. It is not a taster or a teaser.



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