



Katie's Rescue

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a short story

by

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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.

It was a pretty little Dales village with an old fashioned garage, a tearoom, and a scattering of lovely stone-built houses. Then there was the Parish Church, a Post Office, and the Dun Bull - a white rendered, black beamed coaching inn. The first time round, I knew something was wrong but I drove on, hoping it would all fix itself if I just ignored it. I crossed over the bridge and picked up the road on the other side, but ten minutes later I was driving down into Raworth again, having mysteriously looped back on myself. So, rather doggedly now, I drove through again, only to find myself once more looping back into Raworth.

It's not the first time this sort of thing has happened to me. It's hard to explain, but now and then I'll sense a shift in my frame of reference, and before I know it I've blundered into a place that seems perfectly plausible, but it's clearly somewhere I don't belong. It sort of sucks me in and holds me there for a while. Anyway, this time around I did the sensible thing, and pulled over onto the Dun Bull car park in order to wait it out.

It's best not to panic in situations like this because when realities get muddled up they usually have a way of settling back on their own if you let them. This means keeping calm, because the fewer waves you make with your emotions, the quicker you'll get back to normal and be on your way again.

I don't mean to sound like an expert here because I'm not. In fact I'm not sure how it works at all - if it's just that we're only equipped to deal with a certain degree of *otherness*, or if it's the experience of our own reality that actually dictates the kinds of places we're susceptible to falling into. Either way, there are only ever minor differences between one and the next, so you'll always find you can function quite well, if you remember to keep your head. The cars on the car park looked regular enough - a few makes I wasn't familiar with, and the registration plates were coded differently, of course, but it all seemed contemporary, and quite acceptable to my senses - no bug eyed monsters or flying elephants, or other nonsense like that.

I stepped out of the car and stretched my back. The atmosphere was calming and pleasantly warm - a lovely summers' afternoon in a Dales village, down by the Warfe. What could be finer? It was seductive, and I found myself reluctant to let it go. I fancied I could see ripples in the fabric of things, a bit like the ripples on the Warfe - all sun spangled and pretty. I breathed out slowly, felt the ripples spreading, the lovely vision fading. Any second now it would be gone. It was a pity, and I wanted to hang onto it for a while longer, but like I said, I didn't belong here so the best thing was to let it go.

"Gimme your keys!"

"What?"

Suddenly it all snapped into focus and I spun round to find a guy threatening me with a tyre iron. Could this really be happening? He was wearing a business suit and a tie, so he was not exactly your average mugger, but he was excited - the tie at half mast, his shirt laps dangling, and he was flushed and sweating.

Behind him was a young woman - also smart in a dark fitted suit. She had short auburn hair and bookish spectacles. She seemed to be trying to restrain him, though without going so far as to actually touch him, as if he were somehow unclean. In such a quiet place as Raworth, all of this seemed more than a little surreal.

"No, Mr Parker,... " she was saying. "This is not the way!"

"Be quiet, you silly cow!" then to me, again, louder: "KEYS!"

Before I could think about it, he was coming at me. My keys were in my hand. He made a grab for them, snatched them, gashed my fingers in the process, which had me backing away in pained surprise and before I could recover, he'd jumped into my car and was driving off in a cloud of dust. The woman trotted after him as best she could in her tight skirt and heels, then stood with a look of disbelief as he raced away over the bridge and up the hill on the other side of the river. He'd apparently abandoned her.

She walked back to me, embarrassed, and unable to quite meet my gaze. It wasn't her fault - she'd tried to stop him, but clearly she felt awkward now, like an accomplice. Then I realised: they didn't belong here either! They'd been trying to break out of the same loop! I gazed at her in amazement, relieved it happened to others as well; it made me feel less strange of a sudden.

"I'm sorry," she said. "He's completely lost it. If it's any comfort his car's over there." She nodded to a big black Mercedes. "The keys are in it. I suppose we could just help ourselves?"

"Well, it's tempting, but I don't think it'll do us any good, do you?"

She sighed. "I suppose not."

"How did you know I wasn't from, ... well, ... around here?"

"We sort of guessed by your registration plate."

"Ah, of course. And you thought, what, exactly?"

"Well, Parker thought your car might be different, somehow - not, ... well, ... cursed or anything."

"Okay. I think I can see a weird sort of logic in that. But you should try to think of this as less the result of a curse, and more of an entanglement. I take it it's your first time?"

"Yes. We've been here since yesterday afternoon."

"That long?"

This was interesting! The most I'd ever managed in a place like this was a couple of hours. It was possible to draw things out for days then, and all a question of what? Focus? Might it be worth trying? This wasn't of any interest to her though; she just wanted to get out of here.

"Where did you sleep?"

"I didn't," she replied. "I sat up in the car all night - at least the part of it he wasn't driving us around the same bit of the Dales, searching for a way out." She gave me an anxious look, wondering perhaps if I was to be trusted. "Are you saying this has happened to you before?"

"It's becoming a bit of a habit for me, yes."

She closed her eyes and put her hands up to her cheeks, then shook her head in weary bewilderment. "I was hoping I was losing my mind," she said. "That would have been easier to explain, ... or that I was somehow dreaming it, ... I mean you hear of lucid dreams don't you?"

Faces were appearing at the window of the inn. We were creating a scene, and I suspected that once the locals started latching onto us with their curiosity, it might delay our exit even more as we became ever more entangled in their reality. For myself I was in no particular hurry, and would gladly have traded places with her for a while, but she clearly felt she'd been here long enough, so I felt obliged to help her if I could

"It's not a dream," I told her. "And you're not losing your mind. This is something altogether more remarkable. It's distressing, I know, but things have a way of righting themselves, so you mustn't worry. What's your name?"

"Katie."

"All right, Katie: For the benefit of our audience, very casually, smile like you know me, ... that's good. Now walk with me."

I never thought to tell her my own name. It didn't seem worth it. We'd most likely be out of there in no time, I thought, and never meet again. I should have told her, though, but as we moved off, the moment seemed to pass and I just let it go.

Parker had a real problem! His inflated ego was holding him captive, and he really needed to calm down otherwise he'd never escape, but he'd stolen my car and I wasn't much concerned with his welfare now. Katie was different though. She was a gentle soul and I was sure she just needed to be quiet for a while. By the time I sat her down in the tea shop, she was already starting to relax and open up a little, and I was sure she'd be on her way soon enough.

"We were travelling back from a conference in Scarborough," she explained.

"Scarborough? You were coming home by the scenic route then. This is miles out of your way."

She gave a wry smile. "If you knew Parker, you'd understand. Anyway, once we came to Raworth, I had a feeling things weren't right."

"I know – me too. How many times did you drive through?"

"I lost count," she said. "Look, this is just a crazy idea and don't take me seriously or anything but what if we stole another car,... a local one."

"Wouldn't work," I assured her.

"You've tried it?"

"Heavens, no. I borrowed a bicycle once, that's all. A local conveyance will get you out of the village, I think – it'll stop this looping back all the time – the same if you just walk, but that's not what we want is it?"

"So, what do we do then?"

"Like I said, it'll happen on its own. It's just a question of relaxing into it. As a last resort there are,... well,... techniques."

"Techniques?"

"Relaxation methods, maybe even a bit of hypnotic suggestion as a last resort, but I'm sure it won't come to that."

I ordered tea and scones from the waitress. She had a friendly face and an engaging smile, but this same friendliness just made things appear all the more sinister to Katie who merely eyed the girl suspiciously.

"There's something else you should know," I said. "Where we come from, it's still the same time as when you left. And the time doesn't move, until you go back. It's like you've hit the pause button. Okay? So, no one will be worrying about you back home - if that's what's upsetting you."

This seemed to comfort her a little. "It doesn't explain how I got here though."

"My guess is there are slightly different versions of the same reality. Normally they're all separate of course, but now and then they seem to intersect. I don't know what keeps us fixed in one place as opposed getting swept across into another, but I suspect some of us are just less well screwed down, that's all."

"And that's supposed to cheer me up?"

I was only confusing her now – better change the subject, then: "Here: have some scones."

"I'll be sick. How can you eat?"

"It's best to just go along with things for now. And drink. You're dehydrated. You look terrible."

"Oh? Well, thanks very much!"

After a while there came the sound of my car being driven hard. It flashed past the window and vanished in the direction of the Dun Bull. Moments later, I saw it climbing up out of the village; it looked like he was going round again.

Katie took a deep breath, cradled her hands around the teacup, then took a long pull at the tea.

"Better?"

She drained the cup, nodded, and I poured her another.

"I'm assuming Parker's a colleague?"

"Boss, actually."

"Really? What's he like to work for?"

She wrinkled her nose. "He's a bully and a lecherous sleaze."

"Ah." I had an uncomfortable thought. "Does that explain the quiet country lanes?"

"I'm afraid so. He's been trying it on all week. The roads are so lonely around here – I was glad to see Raworth,... I mean at first."

"And is he always so,... assertive?"

"Well, I've never seen him hijack someone's car before, but,... well, let's just say I'm not surprised. When normality breaks down people can revert to savagery very quickly."

"Not all, surely! I mean, look at us. This is very civilised, don't you think?"

She managed a smile, which I found encouraging. A sense of humour is a valuable asset under any circumstances. "It's odd though," I went on. "I wouldn't have thought people like Parker were susceptible to falling through. They aren't prone to moments of detachment, you see? Me? I

drift off all the time. It's no wonder I keep finding myself in places like this."

It could have been her of course; she could have been prone to it, like me, and anything she was touching or anyone she was with at the time simply came tumbling through with her. And now? Well, perhaps Parker's ego wasn't just preventing his own escape - it was preventing Katie's too: I remembered the way everything had snapped into focus as soon as he'd demanded my keys. Emotion, pain, anxiety: it locked you in all the more.

My finger was still bleeding a little and I was holding a napkin over the cut. Katie seemed only just to have noticed this. "I'm sorry" she said. "You're hurt. Let me see?"

She rummaged in her bag for some sticking plasters and began to apply them. She explained that she was the first-aider in her office, and assured me my wound wasn't serious. She had lovely fingers, long and slender with pretty little pointed nails, and a delicate manner that I found most endearing, but she was also wearing a wedding, engagement and an eternity ring, which triple underlined her unavailability. This had obviously not troubled the randy Parker but I was relieved by it because she was an attractive young lady, and though I had not dared to trouble myself with the fairer sex for a while now, I remained as susceptible as ever.

"Have you any children, Katie?"

She nodded. "A little boy." Then her face cracked and the tears began. It was the hardest thing of all: a mother separated from her child. I tried to console her. "You'll see him again. I promise! Have you a picture?"

She produced a wallet with his photograph. He was a charming little chap, perhaps two years old, a bright smile and shining eyes. This was also bad. You needed to remain detached you see? You had to fool yourself into thinking you didn't care one way or the other if you went back, or remained - desiring anything at all, *anything*, disturbed the emotions and delayed your escape.

Detachment is easy enough for a footloose and curmudgeonly misanthrope like me, but a young mother like Katie? How did such people ever escape these places? Or did they find themselves trapped for ever, somehow learning to adapt and survive, yet for ever feeling themselves to be alien, and grieving for the loss of the life they used to know? I felt a shiver. It was a horrible thought.

My car came around for yet another circuit. How stubborn he was! He'd already spent half the night searching for a way out that he was never going to find, and now he looked set to do it all again.

"I think we're going to have to get away from here," I told her.

"Well, obviously," she said. "But how?"

"No, I mean Parker's attitude is preventing you from escaping. His panicking ego is sending out waves, muddying the water for you - do you understand?"

"I think so."

"I'm wondering, if we can make our way along to the next village, you'll no longer be disturbed by his influence, and you can make your exit from there."

She thought about this for a moment, then shook her head. "I can't go back without him."

"You may have to."

"But how would I explain it? We were seen leaving a conference together. Then I turn up on my own with no sign of him anywhere, and with no explanation that anyone in their right mind would ever believe?"

She was right: that would be no good at all! I gave her a smile - no sense in upsetting her even more by telling her I was running out of ideas now. I couldn't leave her trapped here, but getting him out as well seemed, frankly, impossible.

"We may have to settle in for a while, then," I said.

"What? But for how long?"

"I'm not sure. Until things calm down by themselves, I suppose."

"You seem so calm already - you won't,... go back without me, will you?"

"The emotional ripples coming off you are probably preventing that."

"Oh,.. I hadn't thought. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry. I'm in no hurry. I'll see you back safely, then make my way home in my own time."

I sought out the waitress, by the counter, in order to settle up. I'd none of the local currency, but I knew from previous experience card payments were okay and came without the inconvenience of a bill showing up on the other side. Anyway, I figured I might need some currency eventually, and asked if there was a cash-point in the village - oh, and an hotel. The cash point was by the post office, she told me. There was no hotel as such, but she said her father had some rooms for rent next door, and there was the Dun Bull of course.

I took the liberty of securing the rooms. It was a holiday let and I took out a week's lease, with the option of a further week if I needed it - I wasn't feeling terribly confident at this point, you see? Then I had the task of breaking all of this to Katie. Her reaction was understandably dubious:

"I'm not sharing a room with you!"

"It's not *a* room. It's a holiday apartment - more than one room, you see? Look, I know you're a married woman with a husband and a lovely little boy waiting for you, so you needn't worry, truly,... it's just somewhere we can hang out for a while, in comfort, or would you prefer to spend another night sitting in the car? "

This seemed to persuade her. "Well, if it's only for a little while,..."

"Good. Now, have you a suitcase in the car?... Then can I suggest you go and fetch it? Meanwhile, I'll see what cash I can draw from the machine."

I found the cash-point and drew out my limit. The notes were similar to the ones I knew - the same Queen's head, but the colours were different, and I was intrigued by the twenty-five pound denominations. Inside the post office I was able to purchase a map of the area, at least this version of it - just to get my bearings - and I was careful to hide this in my pocket, in case Katie should think I was still mulling over the idea of persuading her to leave Raworth for somewhere quieter. Well, all right, that's exactly what I *was* thinking. It was possible, you see, that if she escaped the tsunami of Parker's egotism, and I managed to get her back on the right side of reality again, everything she'd brought with her, *including* Parker, would simply follow her across in the same way it had followed her here. It was risky though - it might be different with people, and Parker's block-headedness would hold him prisoner, leaving her in the lurch on the other side - just as she had feared.

She was sleeping when I returned. The holiday let was actually a small terraced house, next door to the tea room - two bedrooms, a low ceilinged living room and kitchen with gorgeous views out over the river. Under any other circumstances, this would have been idyllic. I looked in on her briefly, drawn by the ragged sound of her breathing. There was something,... I don't know,... endearing in it, I suppose. She was on top of the bed, where she'd flopped down, exhausted, so I curled a corner of the duvet over her and pulled the door quietly shut. It was

possible she'd slip over while she slept. I prayed it would be so, because otherwise her situation was beginning to look hopeless.

I left her a note, then went up to the Dun Bull. There, I found Parker's car and left him a message on his windscreen, telling him I had his keys and if he wanted them back he'd find me in the bar. The place was all varnished panelling and fake horse-brass. It was a typical mid-week, quiet, some families in the dining room having an early tea, some locals at the bar having an after-work drink while they watched sport on the big-screen. I ordered two glasses of the local brew, then settled at a table with the map.

I felt perfectly at home to be honest - it was like being in a foreign country - an attractive unfamiliarity in the details, but underneath, it was all basically the same. I had no one I was anxious to return to, which I suppose gave me less of an incentive, but that was my problem, and I'd deal with it in my own way, though admittedly, avoiding women like the plague was hardly going to improve matters was it?

I heard my car slewing up aggressively outside. I guessed it was running low on petrol by now - the tank had been nearly empty anyway, and that was before Parker got his manic hands on it. He must have read my message because, moments later, he burst in like someone spoiling for a fight and came straight over to me. I was sure he was about to make a scene, so I disarmed him by thrusting a pint glass into his hand. Then I led him outside.

"I want my keys," he said.

It was a lovely evening, the sun settling lower over the dales, and spilling out a soft yellow light. I barely heard him as I tried to take it all in. "What? Oh,... well, you give me mine first."

He tossed my keys onto a bench. I tossed his keys back at him, then told him to drink up - that the next round was his.

"I don't drink," he said, and to emphasise the point, he tipped his beer out onto the grass. He meant this as some sort of insult, I suppose, and I was dismayed, not because he'd hurt my feelings, but because I'd planned on getting him drunk. Can you think of another way of getting someone as screwed up as this to relax? I'd imagined tanking him up the point where he was barely sensible, and then pitching him gently into his own reality with a bit of hypnotic suggestion. (did I mention I was a stress counsellor and hypnotherapist?)

He didn't say anything else, but he was breathing hard and his face was red with a rage he couldn't give vent to. He most likely thought I was an idiot, and simply wanted to shout at me, but he couldn't because

he was still wondering if I knew something that might help him. It was also a measure of his self centredness that he hadn't asked after Katie yet.

"You really need to calm down," I told him. "You're struggling against something you don't understand."

He wasn't listening though. My words just sounded strange to him: "Who are you?" he demanded.

"Me? I may be the only hope you've got, and I'd just as soon leave you here, so you need to listen carefully because I won't be repeating myself."

"I heard you. I need to calm down. Well I'm calm, right? So what now?"

"You don't even know the meaning of the word!"

It was hopeless. I could feel the attitude sparking off him, and the whole of reality that surrounded him was tightening its grip on all of us. Then Katie appeared and my heart sank! I'd been hoping her brief slumber would see her safely home – but even that hadn't worked. What on earth was I going to do with them?

She'd changed into a pair of blue-jeans and a pink top. There was a delightful softness about her, which embarrassed me and I tried not to think about it because – well, she was married wasn't she? Anyway, I don't think she was pleased to see him, and he barely acknowledged her. She sat at the bench and made me feel childishly favoured when she graced me with a smile, so I was emboldened enough to sit with her. From what she'd told me about him, I wanted to protect her, though I should have covered it up better because he picked up on it in that instinctive way bullies have of discerning the vulnerabilities of their victims.

"So,... " he said and there was something initially sinister about his grin, but he hid it quickly. He looked at me, then Katie, took a deep breath and lowered his eyes. "It's always been a problem," he began. "I know I come across as a bit abrasive, but I get results. That's what I'm paid for. I know I upset people, but it's just my way. It's not personal."

Katie said nothing. She could hardly look at him, though I was pleasantly surprised and thought he sounded genuine, even a little contrite. Had I misjudged him? Was he really the lecherous sleaze she'd made him out to be?

"Have you ever done any meditation?" I ventured.

He gave me a sneer.

"But there must be something you do to relax. Do you play golf? All businessmen play golf. There must be a golf course around here. I could give you a round,..."

"I don't play golf."

"Something else then?... "

He drummed his fingers on the table, and was looking intently at Katie in a way I can only describe as filthy – so maybe she was right.

He went on: "You say I need to be calm, right? Relaxed? Blissful? Profoundly stilled and all that crap?"

"Yes, yes. That's exactly it – though plain old relaxed will do nicely." I nodded encouragingly. "Well,... there *is* something that usually does the trick."

I was a bit slow, but began to get the idea from the way he was still looking at her. It was when he said: "So, how about it, Katie?" that I finally got it. He couldn't be serious! Katie gave a shudder, then stood up and walked away, hugging herself. "Dream on," she said.

He called after her. "Don't be like that! You want to get home, don't you? See your little boy? Well, the better job you do for me, the greater the chances of it working out for us both."

"You creep. She was right: you're an animal."

He smiled: "Woof, woof. Come on,... can you think of a sweeter way? It's perfect. I've been after her all week - but she's a frosty one. And I don't hear you telling me it wouldn't work – so there's a chance it might, right?"

"Forget it. It isn't going to happen. Look there are a million ways it can be made to work and that particular thing would be the very last on my list – out of sheer decency if nothing else."

"We'll see. This pub looks okay. Do they have rooms? I'll book myself in. You can tell her where to find me."

"She doesn't need you. It's you who needs us, remember? I can have Katie out of here in ten minutes, and without her - you're trapped. Do you understand?"

"Why haven't you done it then?"

"What?"

"Could it be that things might be a little hard to explain, if she turns up and I don't?"

"Rest assured, my friend, we'll work out a plausible explanation for how we came to leave you behind."

I was bluffing though, and I think he knew it.

"Just send her over when she's ready," he said.

I found Katie at the house. She'd lit the wood-burner and was sitting in front of it, staring into the cherry red of the flames, hugging her knees

to her chest, and rocking to and fro like a child. I had to get her out soon, or she was going to be damaged by this.

"Is it true?" she asked. "Might it work?"

"Don't even think about it."

"So,... it might then!"

"Well, it's a while since I was last with a woman – so I can barely recall the precise details to be honest but,... . No! Just forget it! There's no rush. Remember what I said: no matter when you go back, even if it's a year from now, it'll still be the same time you left. And it's better waiting than making a sacrifice like that!"

"But can't you feel it? The longer we stay, the firmer a hold it's getting on us."

"That's because you're still anxious. Back at the bar, I managed to relax a bit and I could feel things shimmering. I could have let go. You'll feel it the same way, I promise." I was lying, of course; I could feel things taking a hold of me as well – the only difference was, I didn't seem to mind any more. The place was welcoming me in with open arms, and the feeling was mutual.

"You should have done it," she said.

"I promise you, I've no intentions of leaving you here alone."

"Well, there's only one way then, isn't there?"

"No. You'd never forgive yourself. You're a married woman!"

She looked at the rings as if she'd forgotten they were there, then slipped them off. "Actually, I've not been married for a while now," she said. "I only wore them because I knew I was having to go away on business with him, and everyone knows what he's like. I thought it might hold him off a bit. Anyway, there we are. So,... it wouldn't be so bad, would it? Just another mistake with a man I should have known better than to go with in the first place."

This was getting worse. She *wasn't* married? She was attractive, vulnerable,.. and available,.. oh, here we go again! The sooner I sent her back home the better, but there *had* to be another way!

"You can't do it, Katie. I won't let you."

"You can't stop me. Anyway - what's it to you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why should you care?"

"I don't care,... I mean I do. Of course I do,... but,.."

She raised her eyebrows, and not in a pleasant way. Indeed I rather got the impression I'd displeased her, which was puzzling. She sighed. "You don't want him to have me, because you want me yourself."

"What? Aren't we running a little bit ahead of ourselves here?"

"It's too late to play the innocent now. I knew it! Booking us into this place,... very cosy! And to think I trusted you."

"That's absolutely *not* true."

"I admit your approach was more subtle, and it might have worked in the end, but really, there's no difference between the two of you at all!"

Now that hurt, being lumped under the same heading as the lecherous Parker, but there was no time to defend myself. She rose suddenly and flounced away to her room, slamming the door on me.

I was flustered and grumbling to myself over her ridiculous accusation, also feeling a little guilty that there might have been an element of truth in it – not that I wanted to get her into bed of course,... it was just that the thought of her company here in this pleasant old house for a while had,.. well, cheered me up a little.

I took out the map because I didn't know what else to do, and I tried to lose myself in it. It was odd, looking at the land - the same river, the same hills and valleys, but different names, slightly different roads. On closer inspection though, some of the names *were* familiar. Burnsall Bridge was the nearest, a village a little lower down the valley, a curious pocket of semi-normality that engaged my curiosity. There was a good footpath that ran along the banks of the river, and I reckoned it was only about an hour away, on foot,...

"Actually, I didn't mean that," she said.

I'd not heard her come back, and I flinched in surprise. "Eh?"

"I'm *really* sorry. You're not like him at all. You were just trying to keep me safe. You're kind. But why should you care if I go with him or not?"

"I don't know, Katie. All I can say is that I desperately don't want you to, that's all. Anything that involves compromising your own morals, your own feelings, can't be right, can it?"

"No, but sometimes, in the real world, we have no choice."

"This isn't the real world though, is it? At least not our real world, and it seems silly to go making the same mistakes here as we do everywhere else."

She looked at me thoughtfully. "You worry me," she said. "You're too content here for my liking. There's no urgency about you. It's as if you intend settling in."

"Nonsense."

"Renting this house? Buying a map? That sounds like settling in to me."

"These are merely sensible precautions."

"I've been thinking about some of the things you've said and suddenly everything makes a different kind of sense to me."

"Oh?"

"If I'm not mistaken, you have a broken heart and disappointment written all over you, but escaping into this place is not the way to mend anything. Do you understand?"

Like she would know! What could be a better place to run to than somewhere none of it had ever happened? I tried to avoid her eyes but she sat down in front of me and looked at me with penetrating closeness. "I'm right, aren't I?"

"Possibly... but it was years ago. It may be that I'm still sensitive about certain things and I seem to be better off on my own."

"There's only a small part of you believes that's true," she said. "The rest of you is lonely. Don't lose yourself in here – I can't think of a lonelier place to be on your own than this."

"That's because you have someone to return to. It's all the same to me. Maybe that's why I keep slipping through to these places,... I'm unconsciously willing it."

"That's nonsense. Why am I here then? I didn't will this. I didn't want it! What cruel purpose could there be in this?"

"Purpose? Katie there is no purpose to anything. Reality simply *is*, and that goes for whichever reality you happen to be in at the time."

"Well, I'd rather not think that way if you don't mind."

"Okay then, let's go with your idea of a purpose: like you said: what possible purpose or meaning could there be in this for you? It's cruel."

"I don't know yet. I'm confused about it. For you though, it seems obvious."

"Oh?"

She smiled. "You had to fall through in order to rescue me."

"Well,... that's nice of you to say so, but if it's true I'm not making a very good job of it am I?"

"I've a feeling I'm not helping much either. What do you suggest we do?"

"Well, I think we're beyond simply trying to relax now. It's going to take some visualisation, and suggestion - hypnosis, really – nothing scary though - but I need to get you away from Parker first." I tapped the map over the position of Burnsall Bridge. "I was thinking this should be far enough."

She closed her eyes and placed a hand on top of mine. "All right," she said. She thought for a while and seemed to come to a decision. "I know you're not in any hurry to leave, but it's different for me. I have to see my little boy again and that's the only thing that matters. So, let's go."

"What about Parker?"

"I've no idea how I'll explain things when I turn up without him, but I'll think of something. I can always claim amnesia. They may suspect foul play, but they'll never find a body, because, well, there won't be one will there?"

We left the house, made our way across a meadow, and down to the river, but something else was nagging me now: If two came through, but only one went back - how did that work? There would be an imbalance surely? Time was getting short, the shadows lengthening towards dusk, and we appeared to be rushing headlong into something neither of us understood properly.

"Katie, wait,... this doesn't feel right. We should think about it some more."

"What? But you were so sure of yourself a moment ago."

"I know, but what if it only makes things worse? You were with Parker when you fell through - you should be with him again, to maintain the balance."

"Balance? I don't understand, but I'm willing to let fate play a hand here. Let's just see what happens." Then she pointed excitedly: "Look!"

There was a rowing boat, resting on a shingle bank. One good shove and we could be floating downstream and in Burnsall Bridge in a matter of minutes! I still wasn't sure about it, and trusting things to fate didn't strike me as such a good idea, but she was already pushing the boat out towards the river.

"Wait,... this is crazy."

"Maybe,..."

"We could be drowned."

"No, that would be stupid."

"Stupid?"

"We didn't fall through a hole in reality just to get drowned in a river. That would be,... . banal, meaningless,... stupid!"

"But it happens. People drown. There's no rhyme nor reason to it."

She was teasing the boat into the current now and I was trying to hold it back. Then I became aware of someone bearing down on us. Thinking it might be the owner of the boat, I was preparing my apologies, but it

was Parker. He was breathless and sweating. "You wouldn't be thinking of going anywhere without me would you?"

He must have been watching from the Dun Bull and was afraid of being left behind. Katie was stricken. He looked so smug. It seemed he intended keeping us close!

I'm not sure how I did it, but I landed a punch in his gut, and as he doubled over I hefted him in a sort of fireman's lift and dumped him into the boat. He looked up dazed, rubbing his head. Meanwhile Katie had grabbed the oars out of the boat and used one of them to give it a good shove. The current did the rest, sucking the boat into mid-stream, carrying it, and him, swiftly away. He looked at us with big eyes, lost, panicky, stumbling about and rocking the boat ominously. I almost pitied him.

Katie stared after him, horrified. "What have I done?"

"He'll be okay."

"But a minute ago you were worried about us drowning in that thing."

"He won't drown."

"Why not? How come he's different?"

"Because you were right. It would be banal."

"Now you're just trying to cheer me up."

"Possibly... but it's too late now. Anyway – he's gone. He'll most likely wash up lower down stream. He'll get a bit wet, that's all. Serves him right. It means we can stay here now."

We sat down by the river and watched the boat disappear around a bend in the distance. By degrees I felt the atmosphere beginning to settle out as Parker's disruptive influence receded, and a comforting vagueness returned.

"Do you feel that?" I asked her.

"Yes,... it's amazing,..."

"And look:"

"It's all shimmery,.. and,... oh, it's lovely!"

"Won't be long now," I said. "Try not to let it enchant you too much. In fact, you'd better close your eyes." Then I gave her a hug, because – well – there's nothing like the feel of another human being for reassuring you, is there? And pretty soon she'd be disappearing back to her life, and I'd never see her again. We stayed like that for a while and then she must have felt herself slipping because she said: "Promise me, you won't try to stay."

"I promise. I'll try to catch up with Parker first, make sure he's okay. You never know, I may get through to him eventually. Then you'll have nothing to explain will you?"

Anyway, with her laying there on my shoulder, I closed my eyes too and began to murmur a relaxation script,... *you are feeling heavy,... you feel yourself sinking,...*

She went with it quietly. I felt her draw back, and I thought she was about to slip through so I decided to open my eyes because I was curious to see what it would look like, whether she'd just disappear, or go all shimmery like everything else, but she took hold of my hands at the last minute and when I opened my eyes she was still there, or rather, it seemed,...

... she'd pulled me through with her.

We were two miles downstream in a little teashop in Burnsall Bridge, holding hands across a table strewn with the remains of lunch. We hadn't come far in distance but things had a different tingle to them, so I guessed we'd swapped realities again and therefore left Rarworth behind. But this wasn't home. This was somewhere else entirely.

Katie was wearing a cute beret and a little red woollen jacket of unfamiliar styling, and there was this kid sitting in a high-chair at the same table as us, squealing the place down while he rubbed tomato sauce into his hair. We both looked at him in stunned silence, both of us for very different reasons. I noticed she was wearing rings, but these were different to the last ones, and I was unable to shake the feeling they were mine.

"This isn't right, Katie. I'm sorry."

She looked at me, puzzled. "It's not?"

"It's,... I don't know. This is really weird,..." I looked around, trying to get my bearings, and I realised I was floundering in the tide of a life I'd no sense of ever having lived. Clearly, it *was* a possibility – but surely rather an unlikely one!

"Why did you do that?" I asked her.

"Do what?"

"Pull me through like that. That's really confused things! This is,... well,.. I don't know what it is. It's like a compromise, a best fit of all the probabilities, a most likely scenario. We should try again."

She looked at the boy, her heart melting. It was definitely her child, and there was no way she'd ever leave him again. But where did that leave me?

She leaned over and squeezed my hand. "Let's see how this goes for a while. I'm sure we'll muddle through."

I tapped my finger against her rings, and raised my brows, in case she'd not noticed yet, but she chuckled. "I know. Funny isn't it? Who would have thought it? But that was a lovely hug you gave me,... it just felt so,..."

"Whoa, listen,... don't get me wrong, I was merely being,..."

"No, *you* listen, mister: this slipping in and out of reality has nothing to do with detachment – or I could never have left *him*. I've not had a moments' detachment since the day he was born." She shook her head as if she'd just realised something. "Don't you get it. This is not a compromise. It's not a best fit, or a make do. This is the only thing that makes any sense at all,... to either of us."

"What I said about you falling through in order to rescue me: I was wrong. It was me who fell through in order to rescue *you*."

"Katie, this is hardly a rescue. In case you hadn't noticed, we're in real trouble here."

"No. You *were* in trouble. You had no connection, nothing binding you in life at all. You keep yourself all sealed up and aloof – I mean I don't even know your name! It's as if you're afraid of handing it out in case people can start calling you by it and interfering in your private little world. No wonder you kept dropping out of the bottom of reality! Well,... I think we can help you with that."

I noticed she had said *we*. I looked at the squealing child - snot and sauce dribbling down his face - and I rather doubted the pair of them were much of a solution to anything, but then she took her glasses off and made the most appealing eyes at me, and the child was quiet for a moment, beaming sunshine through the mess,... and for a second the idea seemed ridiculously attractive,... then just ridiculous.

"Katie,... that would be a *really* bad idea. And if you were thinking straight, you'd realise it too."

She looked crestfallen. "Oh! Do you think so?"

"All that stuff you said about me,... well,... some of it may be true, and if you did rescue me, then I'm very grateful, but we don't exactly know each other do we – I mean we only met this morning."

She was admiring her rings. "But it looks to me as if we've been married for a while. How long would you say? Three years? Four?"

"All right, it seems as if we've set down in this place already with a bit of history, which is really weird, and we've some catching up to do. But what if I turn out to be your worst nightmare? Have you not thought of that? What if I'm the husband from hell?"

She was shaking her head. "We didn't fall through two versions of reality to wind up sitting at this table, for there to be any bad stuff between us. No. This is going to be perfect,... trust me!"

It was the craziest thing I'd ever heard.

I began to search my pockets.

"What are you doing?"

"I was looking for something with my name on it. I just wanted to make sure it was still what I thought it was,... I mean before I told you."

"There's no need, if you're intending skipping out the first chance you get."

I could see the river through the window, and I wondered if about now was the time Parker should be coming floating downstream to interrupt us, hollering for help and creating a scene. It was impossible of course, wasn't it? I mean, Parker had never existed here. To my surprise however I discovered I was afraid he really *would* appear and ruin this moment, this chance of a life,...

With one wary eye on the river, I said: "Erm,... my name is Richard."

I wasn't sure how long we could sustain this, but things felt pretty firm, and something told me neither of us would be leaving here in a hurry, but I reached out and took hold of her hand,...

... just in case.

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!

Escape From Paradise Island (2007)

A 25 minute read by 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 back 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!

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,...

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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