

Threads

Susan Ann Wright

Submitted to Swansea University in fulfilment of the requirements for
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Swansea University

2024

Abstract

Despite cultural differences, beliefs concerning the possibility of life after death are widespread, as is the concept of fate as an external force. However, the inevitability of death does not produce agreement about its significance. When considered through the lenses of religion, mythology, philosophy, psychology, science and fiction, theories concerning the ending of life are as contradictory as they are diverse. This project examines the effects of death on the living through the psychology of loss and bereavement, neuroscientific discoveries of brain function, religious and philosophical approaches to immortality as well as the evolution and role of myth in making sense of existence. By placing Greek mythology alongside twenty first century life, the novel aligns myth with lived experience, demonstrating that humanity's inevitable fate evokes the coexistence of the mystical and supernatural with the reality of grief.

This submission consists of two parts. The creative component is a novel, in which the Greek Goddess of fate ends one life and then fails to end another. In the subsequent narrative, both she, and those affected by her actions must find their way through complex emotions and beliefs related to the prospect of death and its aftermath in order to come to terms with their new reality. This is then followed by a critical exegesis exploring the themes outlined above.

Declarations

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed.....

Date.....

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

Signed.....

Date.....

I hereby give consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be available for photocopying and for inter library loan, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organisations.

Signed.....

Date.....

The University's ethical procedures have been followed and, where appropriate, that ethical approval has been granted.

Signed.....

Date.....

Contents

		Page
1	Acknowledgements	1
2	Threads	
	Chapter 1 Atropos	2
	Chapter 2 Moira	7
	Chapter 3 Paul	14
	Chapter 4 Nancy	19
	Chapter 5 Candace	24
	Chapter 6 Atropos	29
	Chapter 7 Jack	35
	Chapter 8 Hades	40
	Chapter 9 Candace	46
	Chapter 10 Atropos	51
	Chapter 11 Moira	57
	Chapter 12 Atropos	63
	Chapter 13 Paul	69
	Chapter 14 Moira	73
	Chapter 15 Nancy	78
	Chapter 16 Paul	82
	Chapter 17 Atropos	87
	Chapter 18 Jack	92
	Chapter 19 Moira	99
	Chapter 20 Atropos	104
	Chapter 21 Jack	109
	Chapter 22 Candace	115
	Chapter 23 Nancy	118
	Chapter 24 Paul	124
	Chapter 25 Atropos	128
	Chapter 26 Moira	132

	Chapter 27 Paul	137
	Chapter 28 Atropos	141
	Chapter 29 Jack	148
	Chapter 30 Candace	154
	Chapter 31 Nancy	159
	Chapter 32 Paul	164
	Chapter 33 Moira	169
	Chapter 34 Atropos	173
	Chapter 35 Paul	180
	Chapter 36 Jack	184
	Chapter 37 Robin	191
	Chapter 38 Jack	196
	Chapter 39 Candace	203
	Chapter 40 Nancy	208
	Chapter 41 Persephone	214
	Chapter 42 Candace	220
	Chapter 43 Jack	224
	Chapter 44 Moira	229
	Chapter 45 Atropos	235
3	Fate, Faith and Fiction: How the Mythology of Immortality Relates to the Psychological Impact of Death	
	1 Introduction	240
	2 Why Write about Death?	246
	3 Death Grief and Magic	251
	4 Fate, Faith and Free Will	260
	5 Metaphors, Myths and Archetypes	267
	6 Imagination, Immortality and Meaning	275
	7 Threads	280
4	Bibliography	288

Acknowledgements

Firstly, thanks are due to the many bereaved clients who trusted me enough to share the emotional outfall of their grief during my time as a therapist and inspired me to write about bereavement. I am grateful to Tamsin Gabriel, Dawn Morgan, Anne Nicholson, Katy Van Haefton, Jennifer Seaton and my husband David Wright for being willing to read and provide feedback on their differing experiences of *Threads*. Finally my sincere thanks go to Alan Bilton for his unfailing encouragement and the rare ability to present criticism in such a way that it was always experienced as positive.

Threads

1 Atropos

A fizz of fury rises, sparks the ichor in my veins; the scissor blades gleam with purpose. The nerve ends of my fingers are screaming and I would make the final cut in less than a heartbeat should it please me. Instead, I savour the moment, slide a forefinger over the engraving just above the pivot; the beautiful coiling calligraphy of my name, Atropos: she who may not be turned. But now, Clotho grasps the rim of the drive wheel, pulls her spinning wheel close and sets to work. The instant she fixes the first twist of thread, I lunge forward and cut the unspun silk. The satisfying sound of honed edges grinding together and the exquisite finality of the blades' snap never fails to give me pleasure. The thread of life is severed; the child is dead before it lives. Ha, now I have their attention.

Lachesis and Clotho stare at the remaining fibres, draped feather-light between them. Their eyes follow as I hold the scissors up to the light and a wisp of gold caught between the blades, glistens as it flutters away, the briefest of lives. Clotho clenches her jaw and throws the hank of golden silk back into her basket. Silently, I return my scissors to the leather sheath that hangs from my belt, while Lachesis glares at me, brandishing her measuring stick.

“So, you dare decide the measure of a life?”

I do not speak.

“You have usurped my sacred duty. Here take it.”

“I will not: the golden thread was cut before it was spun and therefore not ready to be measured.”

How many times must I unleash my anger before my sisters give me the respect I am due? Less than an hour ago, I heard them whispering about this imminent birth but as ever, they failed to include me and I am seething at the omission. It's true that the beginning of life is Clotho's domain; for every new birth, she rummages through her basket of yarns, a profusion of coloured threads - cotton, linen, wool, silk, cashmere, hemp – all tumbled together. From these she selects the qualities each mortal shall possess and the dispositions that will drive them. To my mind, this arbitrary approach is dubious to say the least; she would benefit from a little more forethought, and a proper discussion of alternatives. The impact of her random choices on people's lives is often a problem, not to mention the ramifications that I have to contend with at the point of death.

My sisters have always ignored my opinions and undervalued my work. Lachesis – she always was indolent - sits there with her hands resting in her lap, her measuring stick at her feet, watching Clotho as she rattles away with her treadle, spinning abilities, habits and characteristics into life. From time to time there is a pause while they discuss the measure of each lifespan and what needs to be accomplished before its end. They are only interested in birthing and living; death is wasted on them.

To my mind, death is the very pinnacle of my creativity, the culmination of mortal experience, rich with the significance that reflects my status. In comparison, the mere duration of life is irrelevant. In any case, the selection of an appropriate death really needs to be considered from the start; it should fit the overall lifestyle. There are myriad ways to die and since each mortal has but a single end, it should be perfect; and I have been honing my skills as well as my scissors for aeons.

Without proper knowledge of my sister's plans I can find myself having to eke out someone's life in an extended illness when it would have been more appropriate for them to die young; or I might end up urging someone into suicide when they have never shown the slightest inclination for it before, purely to end their life at the allotted time. Not that I care about pain and suffering, but I do like things to be right. If someone has led a rich and full life and enjoys the limelight, maybe I'll give them what they want by ensuring a dramatic end: to die on stage perhaps, a literal final curtain. On the other hand, I might just finish them off while they are eating breakfast and thwart their aspirations to grandeur.

Multiple deaths can be tricky to manage: warfare of all kinds, plagues and pestilence, 'natural' disasters such as earthquakes. Then there are shipwrecks, car crashes, machinery malfunctions, not to mention mass poisonings from pesticides and the like. With these I need to grasp hold of clusters of lifelines and cut them in bunches. Sometimes multiple death events are necessary so I can catch up with a backlog but they can be requested by one of the gods as a punishment for some despot who's got too big for his boots; some of these tyrants even believe that they are gods themselves!

People with murderous intent can serve my purposes too and serial killers are sometimes useful although they are apt to confuse matters, not least because they believe themselves to have godlike powers and they can't easily be dissuaded from their own mistaken ideas about who should die. Most of my work however, involves keeping an eye on the deterioration caused by illness and determining the perfect moment to cut the thread.

There are wonderfully intricate and pervasive diseases, causing all sorts of issues with vital organs and while medical professionals spend their time alleviating symptoms and prolonging lives, I take pride in timing my final cut with absolute precision.

Why, Zeus himself has commented on a particularly well-orchestrated piece of my work. There was once a playwright by the name of Aeschylus, with a pate as bald as a bare rock who spent his entire life outdoors to avoid the prophesy that he would die from a falling object. It took skill, accuracy and knowhow to summon and command an eagle to drop a tortoise onto the poor man's bald head, cracking open both tortoise and skull, and acquiring for the bird a double feast of brain and tortoise meat. Even though Zeus admires my skill, unfortunately my sisters do not. I look at them both now and Lachesis reaches across to Clotho's basket and lifts a single strand of the golden silk with a fingernail and proffers it towards me.

"It would have matched the hair on the head of the baby's father."

She runs the shining fibre between her fingers and I know she is thinking about what it took to produce it: each silkworm pupa yields half a mile of thread, a thousand creatures are boiled alive for a hank of silk. Death is embedded in every exquisite strand - which is how it should be of course.

"Who was the child anyway?"

Clotho eyes me as she replies.

"The unplanned offspring of teenage parents."

"Surely sister dearest, all births are perfectly planned by you are they not?"

"Of course. And every lifespan perfectly measured."

Clotho nods towards Lachesis who stands up, her bare feet moving silently across the marble floor to where the tapestry of life is displayed. She pauses from time to time to place her hand on portraits and events from long ago, tracing the ancestry of the dead child through to the present. When she reaches the place where the weft stops, she stands still and contemplates. The image shows the mother clutching her belly, wild eyed, the scene beautifully worked. The drape of the sheets is particularly fine and Lachesis feels the precisely lain threads with an elegant forefinger. Her expression is impassive; now she trails her finger away from the girl towards another lifeline nearby. It is a family scene; a man, his pale face yellow against the purple velvet upholstery of the chaise longue upon which he lies, a woman plumping cushions and a blonde teenage boy. The weaving is exquisite. The

tableau depicts the man's final days, but my scissors will remain sheathed and his death must await my say so. Still bent on avenging their disrespect, I leave him as he is, so they must stretch the thread of his life ever more thinly.

A sudden guttural murmuring outside the window causes us to look towards a gathering of crows, their hoarse cries signifying the death of a mortal. While I watch, one of their number veers away, circles round and comes up to the sill, perching as if waiting for something, his head on one side, listening. As soon as I let him in, he drops to the floor, his claws clicking on the marble as he walks to where I had been sitting. Before I know it, the little wisp of golden thread that my scissors had cast beneath my chair is secreted away inside a tail feather and he is gone.

I watch him swoop away, heading earthwards with the tiny wisp of a life that never happened. I wonder what mission drove him, what urge possessed him. The birds seldom engage with mortals without our command but it isn't unknown and they do have the capacity to act for themselves. They are orderly creatures and like things to be in their rightful place. Down there of course, they are known as messengers of the gods. I wonder what message he intends to give, and to whom; the mother of the child perhaps? What would she make of the little scrap of golden thread? Or the fair father, what of him? The ways of the mortal world are mysterious and I am curious.

Clotho and Lachesis are still looking at Athena's magnificent tapestry of life and I rejoin them just in time to see the dead baby fade away and finally disappear into deep shadow. The dying man and his family remain as they are although their facial expressions are perhaps a little more strained. They will have to wait longer for his final farewell; even though the thread of his life is as thin as gossamer, I will not cut it yet.

"Oh, Atropos, you shouldn't have altered the natural order of things, there will be repercussions."

"And how is that of any concern to me? The god of the underworld may be the one to call for an additional soul to his flock, but it is in my gift to deliver it."

"But to offend Hades is to bring his wrath upon us – who knows what he might do?"

It is then that a wild and thundering growl assaults our ears, rising up from the deep, far, far below the mortal world; it echoes around the room, bouncing off the walls. No sooner does it cease than it starts again, three times in all. It is the howl of Cerberus the

three headed hound and I am certain that my uncle Hades knows what I have done. I must hope that my ability to charm is as strong as ever, or prepare myself for a battle of wits.

2 Moira

Sometimes she stared at the shape of an ankle or followed the rhythm of someone's footsteps, but more often than not she noticed shoes: worn down or dirty ones, high heels or flat black lace ups, scruffy trainers or sometimes even flip flops. The moving feet belonged to people walking home from the station at the end of the road, an endless stream of strangers. Moira didn't know if any of them were aware there was a basement bedsit below them but that didn't matter; she liked not to be seen, and she liked not knowing who they were. They were no more important to her than the weather.

Feeling an itch on the back of her hand, she looked down to see a trickle of blood where she had been picking at the skin, and pulled the sleeve of her sweatshirt down to cover it. There were holes around the cuff where her nails had too often pulled at it, and she let her thumb remain in one of the fraying gaps at the end of each sleeve and clasped her hands around her knees. Her bare feet on the crumpled quilt were small and slender and her toes curled under and straightened several times, feeling the familiar softness of the fabric. Unusually her grey eyes were without the heavy black eyeliner that she liked, her long black hair was tangled, and half an inch of light brown roots showed along the parting. She began humming to herself, a little tuneless tune that nobody would have recognised and her face was quite blank, as if she felt nothing at all. She had no idea how long she'd been daydreaming like this but there were hardly any people outside the window now so she knew it must be towards the end of rush hour; maybe six thirty or perhaps as late as nine, and still she hadn't sent the text to Jack.

On the bedside table her phone buzzed once, probably nothing important and she ignored it. She unclasped her numb fingers and waited for the feeling to come back but now her hands were shaking. In fact her whole body was shivering badly. She gritted her teeth and stood up. A trickle of blood ran down the inside of her leg and onto the white sheepskin rug and Moira watched it seep into the soft wool for a moment before moving across to the bathroom. She stood in the shower for a long time, letting the warm water run over her, not recognising the swollen breasts and soft stomach. She wanted to stay there until her whole body had been washed away, gradually eroded, drip by drip, tiny particles vanishing down the drain, and eventually emptied into the sea. Then the water suddenly ran cold and Moira turned off the shower and went to get dressed, still shivering. It was only two days since the

birth, but she didn't want to think about that. She turned on the T.V. and let pointless sounds and sights fill her ears and eyes.

It seemed to be some kind of panel game although Moira had no idea of the rules, and neither did she care. Her mind understood nothing. Instead, she let it wander where it wanted, focusing here on a deep voice or an upturned nose, there on the pink of someone's lip gloss, a badly applied fake tan, the red jacket of the presenter, the glittering studio lights, the open mouths of the audience when they laughed. How weird people were, in a crowd like this, they seemed like aliens. If these were really people, she didn't feel like them at all, not any more. She had become something else, something empty.

Her eyes kept coming back to a small point an inch or two from the top left hand corner. What was that? Standing up to get closer, she blinked a few times but she couldn't tell if it was a reflection of something in the room, a mark on the T.V. screen or something on the camera lens. The longer she looked she thought she could make out a child's swing moving slowly to and fro, although there was no child sitting on it, no small body leaning back, with his legs thrust forward to make himself go even higher.

A piercing howl in the distance startled her and she turned off the TV and went to the window. Maybe it was a dog or perhaps a fox. There it was again, a wild and angry sound, and then a third time, then nothing more. It seemed as if whatever it was howled for her too. She had no voice to express this, no way to speak about this confusion, this pain, this bloody mess, this loss, this pointless waste. She looked down at her phone and finally pressed send on the text to Jack. It went to the sound of an arrow, but she had no idea whether it would hit its mark. Then she stood up, savagely pulled open a drawer, hauled out the baby clothes, the nappies, the bag with the soap and baby powder, all of it. She pulled a black plastic bag from under the sink and stuffed it all inside, tying the handle so fiercely she tore it. Afterward she shoved her feet into a pair of trainers, tucked the laces down the side, pulled on a puffer jacket that was much too big and pulled the bag up the stairs to the front door. The rain felt right and she turned her face up towards the light of the lamp post taking a moment to watch the falling droplets come towards her at strange angles, letting the water drip down her face like tears. Then she heaved the black bag over her shoulder and strode along the now empty street. A couple of streets later she tipped the bag into a large yellow skip.

Free of her burden, she carried on walking. With her hands in her pockets and her head down, she concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other, over and over again. She stared at the wetness of the pavement, the shades of grey with an occasional reflected light from a streetlamp. From time to time she sidestepped a puddle or a broken paving slab, but mostly she kept on walking. Eventually, there were no more street lamps and the paving stopped so she walked on the verge. Her way was briefly lit by the headlights from a car that hissed its way down the wet road towards her; as it drove slowly past, she wondered how the driver could stand the loud booming music that leaked uncomfortably into her ears. After that there was nothing but the sound of her own footsteps; she was alone.

She walked on, her eyes getting used to the darkness along the unlit roads. The rain turned to drizzle and then stopped, and now the moon appeared from time to time, to light her way. Even so, she had to be careful; the grass verge was uneven and there were tussocks and ditches to be avoided. After a while, she took to following the white line down the centre of the road instead, thinking that she would have plenty of warning of any car coming. For mile after mile the hedgerows were higher than her head and she wondered what was behind them. When she eventually came across a gap, she pushed the hood of her coat back, crossed over the road, and climbed onto the bottom rung of the gate to peer into the field beyond. A huddle of sheep tucked behind the hedge gave an occasional grumbling murmur and one or two of them looked up at her, wary and ready to move so she stepped down again and left them to it. By now, her feet were soaking wet and her shoes had begun to rub but she didn't have much choice but to keep going. With weary shoulders, aching feet and blue fingers, she trudged on. The cold was bearable, ordinary. She had to hold her teeth together to stop them from chattering; which stopped her from noticing any other feelings. Being cold, wet and tired was everything, and took a lot of energy. Knowing why she was walking, where she was going or how long she could carry on didn't matter, to keep going was more than enough.

Despite trying so hard to block everything out; from time to time, her self-imposed mental fog would clear, letting something else come up. Try as she might to push it away, it would appear. For minutes at a time, the emptiness filled her, made her legs heavy and crushed her ribs, so that she had to hold her breath until it passed. Then taking a deep gulp of cold damp air she would walk on, as purposeful as if she had somewhere to go, until the next time caught her and she curled over hugging herself. This time it went on for longer and

she managed to breathe through it. When it was over, she speeded up, and soon she could see lights ahead that meant she must be nearing the edge of the next town. Perhaps she might find somewhere dry to rest for a bit. Soon she was walking on pavements again, along a small parade of shops. The street lamps had long since gone out and the wind was beginning to pick up. Overcome with tiredness, she sat down in a shop doorway, turned her back to the wind as best she could, pulled her wet jacket tight around her, leant her head against the door and let her eyes close. In spite of the cold, her exhausted body gave in to sleep and her troubled thoughts and emotions faded. The next thing she knew, her shoulder was being shaken and it was daylight.

“You can’t sleep here love, you’ll catch your death.”

Moira looked up to see several chins that belonged to a woman in a shiny green raincoat. When she stood up, Moira could see that the coat reached down to the top of a pair of red wellington boots, one of which had a piece chewed out of it. The woman looked at her, hands on hips, her keys dangling from one finger.

“How come you ended up sleeping here in my doorway?”

“I don’t really know, I just walked for a long time and then stopped.”

“Well you’d better come in and join me for a cup of tea or something, you look perished.”

Moira followed her into the shop, trying to stop her teeth from chattering.

“My name’s Nancy by the way. What’s yours?”

“Moira.”

Nancy threw back her head and laughed. “Well I never! Of course you are.”

Moira blinked at her, mystified.

“Here, we’ve got a few minutes before I need to open the shop. Let’s have some tea and I’ll explain.”

With Moira seated on the only chair in the tiny kitchen, Nancy leaned back on the old fashioned radiator which creaked and groaned as it came to life. With one hand on the radiator, Moira stopped shivering and sipped the scalding tea while she let Nancy’s chatter wash over her.

“I knew when I got up this morning that something was afoot. I felt it in my bones and I said to myself that something would happen today. People don’t believe in such things, but I know better.”

She tapped her nose with a finger while Moira wrapped both hands round her mug and relaxed a little.

“I come from a long line of special women; we know things that other people don’t and we can see and hear things that most people can’t.”

She paused for effect.

“Anyway I knew you’d be here. Well I didn’t know it would be you but I knew it would be somebody. Then, when you told me your name, that was it. You’re meant to be here today and I’m meant to get to know you. It’s fate. That’s how it works. There are signs everywhere if you know how to look for them.”

She stopped briefly to take a noisy slurp of tea.

Moira made no comment, and Nancy continued.

“I bet you don’t even know what your name means do you?”

Moira shook her head.

“Destiny, it means destiny. Don’t you see?”

Moira didn’t but Nancy carried on regardless.

“You turning up here like this just proves it. We were meant to meet each other.”

“But why?”

“Who knows? There are greater powers than mere mortals like us.”

“Oh I don’t believe in God.”

“I’m not sure I do either but I do think there must be something out there other than ordinary human beings. You can never know for sure, but there are signs.”

“What signs?”

“Oh you know, coincidences, things we can’t explain.”

Nancy reached into the cupboard for a packet of biscuits and offered one to Moira, who shook her head. Nancy shook the packet in front of her, making it rustle, insisting, until Moira eventually took one and crammed it in her mouth as if she hadn’t eaten in days, which she hadn’t. With Nancy absentmindedly dunking and dipping and Moira methodically working her way through one biscuit after another, the packet didn’t last long. Nancy managed to keep talking between mouthfuls of biscuit and sips of tea, and when the biscuits were gone there was no stopping her.

“Take you being here for example. Something happened in your life that set you off in my direction; and at the same time here I was, desperate for someone to help me in the

shop; then you fell asleep in my doorway and I knew I had to come in early for some reason and here we both are. See? I even bought these biscuits yesterday just in case.”

She waved the empty packet at Moira who gave a tentative smile, the first she had given anyone in a long while and her face felt strange. She rubbed a hand over her jaw and yawned.

“Right then, let’s get those wet things off and get you properly warmed up. Stand up dear would you?”

Nancy looked at Moira with her head on one side for a minute or two then moved over to the clothes rail, picked up a pair of loose cotton trousers in blue, a multi-coloured long sleeved top, an orange woollen jumper and a pair of thick turquoise socks.

“Here try these on.”

In the changing room, Moira looked at herself in the assortment of textures and colours, unlike anything she would have chosen for herself, and decided that she would go along with it. Perhaps she’d feel different in different clothes. By the time she came out, Nancy had found a pair of backless embroidered leather slippers for her as well.

“Not really for outdoors but they’ll have to do for the time being, at least until your own shoes are dry.”

Nancy pulled a feather duster out of the cupboard in the manner of a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat, and handed it to Moira.

“Here you are dearie, give me a hand would you?”

Moira, generally being a good natured soul set about dusting. It was no easy task since the shop was crammed from floor to ceiling. There were mirrors and lamps, glass cases full of jewellery, shelves with baskets of polished gemstones, rows of little bottles, a whole rack of witches and wizards and a few brass Buddhas for good measure. In between was a rail of brightly coloured trousers, skirts and dresses and another one with vests, tee shirts, jackets and jumpers. A huge basket at the end of the rail overflowed with socks. On the walls there were pictures of green and blue skinned goddesses, intricate mandalas, astrological signs and post cards that said things like: Believe in yourself, Nothing is impossible, You are more powerful than you know and You can’t have a rainbow without rain. Every remaining inch of wall was ornamented with dream catchers and coloured scarves. On the counter there were boxes of tarot cards, a bowl of good luck charms and a pile of beaded bangles. To one side was a cork board with haphazardly pinned business cards for various therapies and

treatments, most of which Moira had never heard of. There was acupuncture, aromatherapy, reflexology, reiki, aura reading, kinesiology, tarot, palmistry and bizarrely a card offering ironing services.

Nancy who had moved on to sweeping the floor was still prattling on.

“It feels like you belong here at The Cauldron already doesn’t it?”

“The Cauldron?”

“It’s the name of my shop dear. Didn’t you notice the sign?”

Perhaps she didn’t need an answer because she didn’t wait for one.

“Look at the time, I’d better get you settled at home before I open up the shop.”

Moira was about to protest but Nancy didn’t give her a chance, scooped her by the elbow and led her out of the door, holding on to her for the short walk round the back of the shop, through an alleyway to a small end of terrace house. The front garden, though extremely small was crammed full of flowers and shrubs, not to mention a sundial, a bird bath, several different sized gnomes and a swing suspended from an apple tree. Had she been here before? It seemed familiar, but she didn’t have time to think about it because Nancy ushered her inside, told her to make herself at home while she made up the bed in the spare room.

Her new embroidered slippers made marks on the dusty kitchen floor as Moira trailed through, noticing the piles of crockery on the draining board, stacks of magazines and books on the table, dusty jars and bottles full of all sorts of strange things on a long shelf, a collection of small decorative tins on the window sill and a row of painted plates hanging above the door. She wandered into the living room and perched on the edge of the single armchair waiting for Nancy to finish what she was doing upstairs. By the time Nancy poked her head around the door, warmth and weariness had already worked their magic so Moira barely noticed Nancy cover her with a large multicoloured crocheted blanket before setting off to open the shop.

3 Paul

Getting dressed in the dark was a longstanding habit. When he was still working, Paul liked to spend the silent early morning hours contemplating the day until he was ready to get going. Besides, in the dawn half-light he could easily find what he needed: an organised man, he put his clothes out the night before. Pants and socks on top of the chest of drawers, a crisp white shirt on a hanger swinging from the handle of the top drawer, black suit and tie on the back of the door to the bedroom. He dressed methodically and always in the same order, transforming himself from his just-woken-up state into the well-groomed, professional that he used to be. Being at home all day felt wrong. How he missed the regularity of the daily commute, the pleasure of planning the day ahead, the satisfaction in the achievement of a precisely balanced budget, the sense of certainty from week to week. Gone was the promise of a new day that used to spring him out of bed; getting up at all was a challenge, getting dressed unbearably tiring and it felt like years since he'd worn a suit. Nevertheless, he felt at ease in the dark and quiet just before the daylight seeped in between the curtains, not yet knowing if the day would turn out to be a difficult one.

As usual, he'd slept fitfully; uninterrupted sleep being a luxury he barely remembered. The aching muscles and joints, the random shooting pains, the cramps and the on-off nausea affected him less during the day when he could find ways to distract himself. At night however, the moment he laid his head on the pillow, he was overcome by waves of discomfort, with rare bouts of fitful sleep to relieve it, against the torment of Candace's quiet regular breathing. It had always been his habit to wake early and today was no different, he'd peered at the clock in the half light and deemed it to be morning; slid out of bed and dressed with as little huffing and puffing as possible. Yesterday's clothes that were laid over the back of the chair would have to do: a pair of jogging bottoms and a tee shirt, easy to manage. Candace turned over but didn't wake as he padded out of the room in his socks, and made his way down to the kitchen.

As he switched on the kettle, he noticed that the phone plugged in beside it had a new message. Before realising that it was his son Jack's phone and not his own, he picked it up and tapped the screen. A new text read simply: 'He died'. He frowned at the number as he returned the phone to its place. Who had died? Why did this unknown person text Jack with such a thing? He peered at the number, going over and over the digits as if with a bit of effort, he might recognise them, but then he thought he heard movement upstairs, and

quickly put the phone back. Sipping his tea, he stared at his own phone on the table in front of him for quite some time, his fingers tapping with a nervous habit that Candace found particularly annoying, especially since Jack did it too. Then hearing no further sound from upstairs, he called the number which rang for a long time before going to voicemail.

“This is Moira, leave a message if you want.”

It was a voice that began brightly but tailed off into silence as if a message wouldn't be welcome. Moira, Moira, Moira: where had he heard that name before? He had a vague recollection of a girl coming to the house looking for Jack a few months back. This had been odd since Jack hardly ever brought anyone home; if he remembered rightly, Jack hadn't asked her in and she'd gone away again. He wished Jack wasn't so secretive about everything; was this usual with teenagers? Perhaps it was just that Jack knew that Candace wasn't likely to take kindly to him inviting someone in, in fact most of the time Jack himself was more than she could take.

Paul tried to remember if he'd ever really believed that Candace would come to terms with Jack being with them; it was a big ask, he knew that. It hadn't been easy for Paul to become a proper father either but he'd hoped that they would get used to being parents, work it out together. It was a second chance for him. He and Jack's Mum had been an unlikely couple and far too naive to realise how unsuited they were, let alone do what it took to co-operate, being together was enough of a challenge without the addition of a baby into the mix. She'd left soon after Jack was born, needed her freedom she said. From time to time she'd turn up asking for more money and Paul felt obliged to give what she asked for in return for an occasional glimpse of his son. It had been enough. It was the best he could do, until the day everything changed.

That was ten years ago now and Jack had been just seven when Paul took the phone call about the car accident that killed Jack's mother. What else could he do? Jack was his own flesh and blood after all. It wasn't that Candace had exactly refused to accept Jack into their home but it was obvious she wasn't exactly pleased. As for becoming a stepmother she hadn't ever really taken to it. Back in the early days of Jack being here, Candace had been withdrawn and quiet, and while Paul had been concerned about her, what choice did he have? At seven, Jack was energetic, careless, unpredictable and his favourite word was why. He questioned everything constantly, until Candace refused to answer and suggested that perhaps they should send him away to school? He needed company his own age and

professional adults who understood children. After all they could afford it. This particular suggestion had provoked an argument that went on for some weeks until Paul agreed to talk to Jack who merely shrugged as if he didn't care one way or the other and Candace got her way. Paul had insisted on Jack coming home for the weekends although he didn't always want to come. Had it been a bad decision overall? He'd seemed to be doing okay until recently hadn't he? But then neither he nor Candace had much idea about what to expect.

But he was more worried about Jack than he wanted to admit, even to himself. Apart from brief forays into the kitchen, these days Jack spent most of his time in his room and refused to go anywhere with Paul or Candace preferring to stay at home alone. He didn't seem to have friends, he never wanted to bring anyone home. Was that normal? If Paul remembered rightly, at that age he'd had friends hadn't he? And now this mysterious message from Moira? Who was she and how did he know her? Where did she fit into the picture? He looked down at his phone and wondered again about the message. Was she the girl who'd called at the house that day? She'd not been very talkative if he remembered rightly. There'd been a brief conversation with Jack on the doorstep which Paul couldn't hear followed by the sound of her footsteps crunching across the gravel towards the gate and Jack's bedroom door clicking firmly shut behind him. Who on earth could have died that Jack would possibly need to know about?

Paul hated a mystery, disliked unfinished business. He picked up yesterday's crossword which still had a couple of clues that he hadn't yet fathomed out, and filled in the offending gaps. It was surprising how often a night's sleep, no matter how inadequate, could provide answers the following morning. He leaned back with a satisfied sigh and wondered whether to eat something or not. He wasn't really hungry but he had been steadily losing weight, even before the chemo, and he thought he probably should make an effort, perhaps something small wouldn't set off the nausea. He reached for the tin, extracted a couple of rich tea biscuits and nibbled them slowly. He flicked on the radio, tuned to a classical music programme and let the sound soothe him until the door suddenly opened and he sat up with a start. His 'good morning' to Jack got a grunt in reply and he watched without comment as Jack opened the fridge and drank milk from the bottle, let out a belch and grabbed his phone.

"I've been looking for that everywhere!"

He looked accusingly at Paul.

"I haven't touched it."

Paul was aware that he had in fact touched Jack's phone and he did feel a little guilty for snooping, nevertheless he watched Jack's face while he scrolled through his messages. There was a significant pause before he put it in his pocket with a slight grimace.

"Anything interesting?"

"What's it to you?"

"Oh don't be so touchy, I was just trying to make conversation."

"What's the point of that? There's nothing to say, everything's boring."

He reached for a chocolate biscuit which he shoved into his mouth while peering into the open larder. Finally settling on a packet of cereal, he proceeded to put handfuls of it into his mouth

"Jack, do you have to do that?"

"I've got to eat haven't I?"

"I just wish you'd be a bit more..."

"A bit more what?"

Paul shook his head and Jack answered himself.

"A bit more like what *she* wants."

Paul sighed.

"What she says goes. She hates everything I do anyway. She's always nagging about something."

"Oh, Jack, I do wish you'd make more of an effort to get on with her. It would make all our lives so much easier don't you think?"

"That's typical of you."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, it's always about what she wants. Nobody cares about what I want."

"Oh for goodness sake, Jack, that simply isn't true."

Jack stood up, tossed another handful of cereal into his mouth, and mumbled through the mouthful.

"She's no right to tell me what to do, she's not my mother."

"Stop it now, that's enough. She'd be hurt to hear you talk like that."

"What do I care."

Jack stormed out of the room, brushing past Candace who was just opening the door. She stared after him with raised eyebrows, came over to give Paul a half-hearted peck on the cheek then set about making coffee.

“What’s up with him now?”

“I’m not really sure. Something’s worrying him.”

“What can he possibly have to worry about? He only cares about himself.”

“To be honest, I don’t think he’s very happy, I just wish he’d open up a bit and talk to us more.”

“You must be joking, I don’t imagine he has anything worth saying.”

“It would be useful to find out what goes on inside his head though. I’d like to understand him better.”

“Oh, for god’s sake, he’s uncouth and ignorant, like most teenage boys, what’s to understand?”

“Hmm.”

“What does ‘hmm’ mean?”

“It’s never as simple as that is it? There’s more to it, I’m sure there is. I think something’s wrong.”

“I’ll tell you what’s wrong. He’s got no manners and his attitude towards me is appalling. If you ask me, he takes after his mother.”

“Oh Candace, his mother has nothing to do with it. As a matter of fact, I think he probably finds you intimidating.”

“Oh, don’t be so ridiculous.”

“If you didn’t get so annoyed with him, perhaps he’d be a little more cooperative.”

Candace’s expression said more than words could have done, and Paul knew when to leave it be. There were moments like this when he felt more sympathy for Jack than he would admit. By now his original hopes for being a family had dissolved into a dogged determination to be a good father to Jack, which seemed to infuriate her all the more.

4 Nancy

Steam rose from three large pans, fogging Nancy's glasses; her eyes were teary from peeling onions, her fingers stained red from chopping beetroot. On the shelf above the sink were large glass jars containing dried berries, seeds, stems, roots and lichens she had foraged, but today she was experimenting with vegetable dyes, for the wool that she'd spent all winter spinning. After much stirring and swirling of the hanks in the coloured liquids, adding a pinch of this and a spoonful of that, the yarn was dyed to her satisfaction and she lifted out the pink, gold and olive results for rinsing. This done, she draped them carefully over a folding airer, just outside her back door where she knew it would remain in the shade until the early afternoon. It wouldn't do to let the sun bleach out the colours she'd spent so long developing. Two hens were about to enter the kitchen and she automatically barred their way with a practised foot against the door jamb. They grumbled to each other as they pecked their way along the shrubbery instead, only to be shocked into silence by the sudden arrival of a crow in their midst, which caused even Nancy to let out a little shriek of surprise.

The crow surveyed his surroundings, turning his head from side to side and blinking. A gust of wind ruffled his chest feathers but he remained where he was, throwing a disdainful glare at a curious chicken that immediately retreated. The crow tilted his head and took three deliberate steps sideways, as if edging towards the kitchen. Nancy reached across and was about to shut the door against him but he leaned his head forward, arched his wings and complained loudly, beak wide, red throat exposed, and she backed away. Suddenly he launched upwards towards her shoulder, but at the last minute veered away to perch on the guttering directly above her. With his head on one side, he seemed to be listening for something, from time to time shaking his head or nodding. Perhaps what he heard was beyond the capacity of human ears for Nancy heard nothing other than the wind in the trees and the hens going about their business. Whatever he could hear seemed to agitate him and he began pacing back and forth, picking out clumps of moss with his beak and tossing them down as if searching for something. At one point he picked out a particularly large piece that narrowly missed Nancy's open mouth as it dropped. She staggered backwards and fell, pulling the airer on top of her as she went down. Swooping towards her, screeching at a volume too great for such a small creature, he landed just beyond her feet. Nancy kept still and faced the unblinking bird, who, now silent, was calmly

preening a tail feather, from which he extracted a small fibre. Nancy held out her hand for the tiny piece of gold silk thread.

“What’s this then? Some kind of message?”

He didn’t offer a reply of any kind, relying on the thread to tell her its story. It lay soft and light across her palm, no more than an inch long but it seemed to glimmer with a faint light, making her hand glow. Fascinated, she was totally absorbed for a few moments and when she looked up again there was no sign of the crow and the little piece of gold thread had vanished. Thoughtfully, she went inside, shut the door behind her and leaned back against it, staring at the ceiling, oblivious to Moira standing there, brandishing a wooden spoon trying to tell her that the soup that was gently simmering at the back of the stove was nearly ready. It took a while for her to come out of her own thoughts and turn to Moira.

“Well, I must say that smells delicious.”

“Good, it’s ready, I hope you’re hungry. Anyway, what was all that racket?”

“Just a crow dearie, come to show me something.”

“What?”

“A token I think, from the other side, but I wasn’t meant to keep it. It wasn’t meant for me. He probably brought it to me because he thought I would understand the message.”

She screwed her face up, trying to work it out.

“But I don’t get it, not yet anyhow. Usually, I’m pretty good at reading signs but he was so loud and so full of himself that he made me quite flustered, then I fell over and the airer fell over, I couldn’t possibly tune in properly. It’s so frustrating.”

“Never mind, no harm done is there?”

Moira handed Nancy a bowl and a spoon, scooped in a ladle full of thick tomato soup and cleared a small space on the table. They sat in companionable silence blowing on each hot mouthful but Nancy was absent-mindedly scratching her head and getting soup in her hair. Moira handed her the tea towel to wipe it off.

“Why don’t you tell me exactly what happened and maybe the answer will come to you.”

“Hmm. Well as I said he was very loud and determined to get my attention. He’d brought something for me to see.”

“Brought something, what kind of thing can a bird bring? It can’t have been very big.”

“No dear, it wasn’t very big, it was a tiny piece of golden thread, but I’m sure it was important.”

Nancy gave Moira a shrewd look.

“What?”

“Perhaps it was for you.”

“Why me? What would I do with a piece of thread? And anyway, where had it come from?”

“All I know is, that bird was determined to make me see it, he wanted me to know something.”

“But that doesn’t make sense, what would a crow want to tell you? Why would it?”

“Well, crows are messengers.”

“Messengers!”

“Yes. And of course they can prophesy the future.”

Moira looked doubtful.

“Don’t make that face. I’m telling you he wanted me to understand something; that little piece of thread was glowing with significance. And, the more I think about it, the more I am convinced it was for you.”

“Oh Nancy, that can’t possibly be right. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Things don’t always make sense, but it doesn’t mean they’re not true.”

“But why would a crow have anything for me? And how can a crow possibly tell the future?”

“Well, I’m not so sure they necessarily know what the specifics are but they can certainly be an omen.”

“An omen?”

“Yes, a kind of warning or a hint of something in the future.”

“Have you ever known that to actually happen, or do you just believe that it does?”

Nancy put her spoon down and leaned forward resting her folded arms on the table.

“Let me tell you a story.”

Before Moira could cast any more doubt on the idea, Nancy launched into her tale.

“This is a true story that happened to me; I know it was a long time ago, but I remember it as if it was yesterday. I was sixteen.”

“I can’t imagine you at sixteen.”

Nancy chuckled.

"I was a lot thinner, I can tell you that, but I don't have any photos, there was no-one to take any back then."

"Go on."

"It was the last day of school and I was pleased to be leaving it behind; all those pointless rules, I never did understand what they were for."

She looked at Moira who was smiling at her knowingly.

"I'd decided to walk home rather than take the bus, it took me about an hour but I didn't mind, I wanted to make the most of the feeling of freedom before I got back to my chores at home."

"So what happened?"

"I was a good distance from the school, about halfway home, walking along one of my favourite streets with its huge plane trees every few yards, like sentries guarding the houses. Quite big they were, and some of them had such enormous roots that they were lifting the paving slabs at their base. I used to think they'd pull themselves out and walk away one day. I rather hoped they would, because they were badly treated."

"Badly treated, how?"

"People from the council used to come every year and cut all the branches, leaving them with just knobbly stumps, like they'd had all their fingers chopped off."

"Oh, Nancy, that's horrible."

"Yes it is, I used to pat their trunks on my way past, they seemed so sad; but I knew that their lives were long and their roots were deep, they'd outlive us all. Anyway, where was I? Oh yes, walking home. I had just come to the end of the trees and a crow dropped to the lowest branch of the tree right in front of me and I stopped. He looked at me very deliberately, and slowly turned his head from side to side. It was a weird feeling, he was telling me something; I knew that all I had to do was open my mind, so I did. It was like thoughts were coming into my head that weren't coming from me. I just knew then that Mum had died, but also that she was fine and I would be fine."

"But how could you be sure?"

"It's hard to explain but I absolutely knew what had happened. There was no doubt."

"I see."

Nancy laughed.

“Which means that you don’t really see but you want to humour me.”

Moira smiled back at her and began to clear the table. Her readiness to keep things tidy surprised Nancy because she never noticed the mess. When Moira had arrived, there were few surfaces with space to put anything and all the cupboards and shelves were already piled higgledy piggledy; she’d told Nancy she thought it was a miracle that things didn’t get broken more often than they did. Moira was beginning to make inroads into the chaos though. She’d spent several days clearing out cupboards and putting things to rights, and Nancy had even been persuaded to get rid of a few chipped mugs. Moira’s need to put everything in order gave Nancy a great deal of amusement since she herself didn’t care a jot. As she’d told Moira, quite often she’d spend ages searching for something she needed, but she never minded. She liked to accidentally come across things she’d mislaid, it was a pleasant surprise, made life more interesting.

With her elbows on the table and her chin propped in her hands Nancy watched Moira at work. She’d been with Nancy for almost two months now but still she wouldn’t be drawn on who she was, where she came from or what she was running away from. When Nancy asked her, she merely shrugged or smiled and said ‘what does it matter’. But Nancy knew how to bide her time; she also knew that the two of them had been brought together for reasons she hadn’t worked out yet.

5 Candace

The secateurs were sharp, and Candace deftly trimmed back unwieldy twigs and dealt with untidy side shoots. She clipped off occasional rosehips, and a single dried bud that clung to the end of its dead twig. Perfectly formed and fragile as tissue paper, it had never bloomed; she turned it over in her hand, admiring its perfection before letting it fall into her trug with the rest. When she had begun pruning, the sun had been warm at her back but the rapidly darkening sky was now releasing occasional raindrops. Sniffing she pulled her pashmina closer round her shoulders wanting to finish what she'd started. The garden had called her out, she hated to see it untidy, and now she was almost finished. By the time she'd snipped the final twig, the intermittent rainfall had become more insistent and she was increasingly aware of a thorn embedded into the side of her thumb. Typical. She hurriedly dropped the trug in the greenhouse and holding her pashmina up over her head, made a dash across the lawn to the house.

The French windows were wide open and the rain was blowing inside onto the silk rug and had left drops on the polished floor. Damn. Candace pulled the doors shut behind her, removed her shoes, and straightened the rug with a bare foot while she tried to pull out the aggravating thorn with her teeth. Eyeing the mug of cold tea and folded newspaper, crossword uppermost, that were neatly placed on the coffee table, she sidled past Paul who was lying on the Victorian chaise longue, gently snoring. Picking up her garden clogs as well as the mug of tea she carried on through to the kitchen, searching for a pair of tweezers which she eventually found, hidden amongst a random collection of pens and pencils in a jar on the windowsill. It took a while but she'd finally removed the thorn when the phone rang. She returned the tweezers to the jar and waited for the answerphone to kick in.

"Good afternoon, this is Jack's housemaster. I'd like to arrange a meeting with both of you to discuss a few recent issues. If you'd be so good as to call the school, I'd like to speak with you as soon as possible. Many thanks."

Candace switched the kettle on, staring out of the window while it boiled. So Jack has been having 'issues' has he? That might explain a few things. Is this something Paul knew about? Typical of him to keep it to himself. She and Jack didn't get on well at the best of times but he'd been particularly obnoxious lately: offhand and abrupt to the point of rudeness when he wasn't hiding away in his room. That boy was turning out to be a waste of

space like his mother, just as she knew he would. She'd just poured her tea and sat down at the kitchen table when Paul shuffled wearily into the room.

"Do you want tea?"

"No thanks. Who was on the phone?"

"The school. They want to speak to us about some issues."

"Oh."

"Is this something you knew about?"

Paul sighed and sat down at the table.

"Oh dear, I wonder what's going on with him."

Candace rolled her eyes.

"Don't be like that, he's unhappy and I worry about him."

"Unhappy my foot. He's lazy and spoilt. Anyway what's been going on?"

"There have been a few absences."

"And what does he have to say for himself?"

"Well, apparently there was an incident."

"What sort of incident?"

"He says there was an argument."

"What kind of argument?"

"Another boy accused him of stealing and he lost his temper, and there was a fight."

"Typical."

"Oh Candace, don't be so hard on him."

"Hard on him! Give me the chance and I'll be hard on him. He gets away with murder as it is."

"Oh, leave the boy alone."

"Do you know what I think? It would be better if we did leave well alone; then he'd carry on with this behaviour and end up getting expelled. It might teach him something about consequences."

"For goodness sake, he just needs to find his feet that's all."

"You're too soft on that boy. You've always spoilt him, ever since...."

"Ever since what? Go on, say it."

"Well, you can't deny that ever since he's been with us you've tried to wrap him in cotton wool."

“His mother died, for god’s sake.”

“I know, I know. But it was ten years ago. All I’m saying is that he’s old enough to take responsibility for his actions, and it’s about time you stopped mollycoddling him.”

“Candace, I’m too tired for this now, leave it, I need to rest.”

“Fine, you go and rest then.”

Candace kept her back to him as he eased himself to his feet and left the room, closing the door quietly behind him which irritated her more than if he had slammed it. The dispute had left a sour taste that pursed her lips and creased her forehead. Paul was a good man but there were times when she longed to be shot of it all, now more than ever. Oh to feel like herself again, free of the responsibility that should never have been hers. It wasn’t as if she hadn’t wanted children once, but after the third round of IVF treatment failed, they’d agreed to stop. She’d been depressed for a long time after that, couldn’t work, could hardly get herself out of the house. And then Jack had arrived, as if to emphasise her inadequacy, just when she was beginning to come to terms with it. It felt like all the joy and spontaneity had been sucked out of her. Why should she have to put up with another woman’s child? He wasn’t anything to do with her. Just because fate had taken his mother away, why should she be forced to take him on? It had taken her years, literally years to persuade Paul to send him away to school, and even then he’d insisted on him coming home at weekends. Honestly, Paul could be really stubborn sometimes. Why was life so difficult? She yearned for a different life, the one she might have had, should have had in fact. What she could have achieved in the last ten years if only she’d felt well, if only she hadn’t been saddled with Jack. Ever since the day he arrived, she’d felt wrong footed, awkward, unable to relax, even in her own home; and as if being forced to take on a seven year old wasn’t enough, now there was Paul’s wretched cancer to contend with. He’d never been terribly energetic at the best of times, but what little spark he had, was now seriously dimmed. He was turning into a frail old man before her eyes, and no doubt all this stress would develop into another of her headaches.

Not for the first time, she wondered how it had come to this, what other choices she could have made. Considering her options was becoming a regular pastime. Did she really have a choice though? Could she find it in herself to leave Paul, start her life anew. Surely she should be able to afford a small apartment, anything would be better than living like this. It had been a long time since she’d felt like herself. What had happened to all that

creative energy that she used to have? She'd been full of ideas and always on the go. She'd never been depressed before. It was only after all the business with IVF. As if that wasn't bad enough without having to take on Jack. It just added insult to injury. It had been one thing after another ever since. It was about time she thought about herself for a change. What about her own wishes and wants? Surely she'd given Paul and Jack enough of her time and energy. God only knows where she might have been by now if it weren't for this millstone of a life that brought her spirits down every single day. It was so infuriating. So many opportunities had been missed: the exhibitions she could have contributed to, the commissions she could have completed, the awards she could have won, the artists she could have collaborated with; all that early promise, lost forever, along with the youthful energy to pursue her career, and for what? Getting together with Paul had proved to be more than she'd bargained for; she hadn't reckoned on the price of marriage being so high. It was about time she put herself first for a change. Why shouldn't she? She was fed up with feeling miserable, it was about time she asserted herself, did what she wanted for a change.

Leaving the half empty cup of cold tea, she stood up abruptly and went upstairs to the little attic room right at the top of the house where what remained of her previous life had been stored ever since depression had stripped her of any inclination for creativity. The attic room had been untouched for years and she contemplated the pile of dusty cardboard boxes piled against one wall, the stack of picture frames, a row of portfolios arranged in order of size, numerous plastic containers wedged up against a precarious mountain of black bags stuffed to bursting. She eased her way past an easel, two embroidery frames and a small bead loom that were entangled together and reached for one of the unfortunately unlabelled cardboard boxes. She looked around for something to cut through the packing tape; a bent coat hanger would do. As she ripped into the box, the numerous hanks of yarn that had been crammed inside spilled out. She picked them up, looped them one by one over her wrist and held them up, enjoying the juxtaposition of colours before hanging them over an old wooden towel rail that stood by the window. The second box contained a selection of small embroidery frames and two lamps, along with a wooden pencil case with a sliding lid that contained an assortment of needles and embroidery scissors. This she placed on the dressing table by the window.

She stood for a few moments contemplating the room, evaluating the space, imagining. Up here, she'd be able to escape for hours at a time, switch off from the rest of

the household and try to get her life back, remind herself who she was, get her creative juices flowing. It might make all the difference. The very thought of it lightened her mood. After all, it wasn't really Paul's fault was it? She did feel a twinge of sadness at the prospect of leaving him, especially now he was so ill. So if things improved after he got better, she'd stay, and in the meantime she'd be preparing herself for the future. Yes, that's what she'd do.

She'd spend the next few days organising things to her satisfaction while contemplating what she might want to take on as a new project. To this end she equipped herself with cleaning materials, raided the garage for various tools, then retreated upstairs. She tied her hair up in a scarf, took a deep breath and set about removing the mirror from the old dressing table which took a while because the screws were rusted, but she managed. With the mirror gone, it would make a nice little desk by the window. She commandeered the chair from the main bedroom which she promptly sat on to admire her handiwork. She ordered new shelves to cover the walls and after several days of unpacking, reminiscing, sorting and arranging, she was finally satisfied with her new working space. Paul left her to it, probably relieved that she was busy and not venting her frustration on him. As for Jack she avoided him altogether although to be honest, that wasn't difficult since he didn't want to be in her company either.

She was already planning a series of floral studies, using silk and organza offcuts she found in one of the boxes; appliquéd, beaded and embroidered, they would be as rich and beautiful as she could make them. She would immerse herself in colour, shape and texture and blot out everything else from her mind.

6 Atropos

Flower garlands festoon the walls, enormous terracotta amphora filled with lilies and larkspur sit in each corner, on the tables crystal bowls are bursting with yellow crocus and purple violets, and a single narcissus is laid by each place setting. It must be spring on the earthly world, time for my Aunt Persephone to make her annual visit. The flowers are in her honour.

Two serving girls struggle under the weight of a large silver platter piled high with pomegranates. Seeing me, they almost drop their burden but it is eventually positioned at the head of the table alongside bowls of ambrosia and urns of nectar. A little half-hearted bob is aimed in my direction as they leave. I shoo them away with the flick of a finger: why bother to chastise them? Then the topmost fruit teeters for a moment before dropping to the table. I fail to catch it as it traces a path away from me along the mosaic floor, coming to a stop beside a pair of elegant sandaled feet.

Persephone reaches down for the fruit and smiles; her perfect lips unpainted, her skin glowing. Tiny creases at the corner of twinkling green eyes express her genuine pleasure in seeing me. The auburn curls that reach her waist are tied up with a narcissus bloom just above the ear on one side. The yellow and russet combination is divine! She releases the clasp of her sylvan green cloak and lets it drop, catching it behind her and laying it over a chair. Beneath the cloak, her robe with its intricate folds and pleats must be a new fashion, for I have never seen anything like it. She twirls for me to see how it moves, and promises to have her favourite seamstress create one for me.

Still holding the fallen pomegranate in her hand, she takes a seat and motions to me to do likewise. Picking up a knife from the table she splits the fruit open, revealing the shining red seeds and uses the point of the knife to lift a few and drop them into my outstretched hand. I adore the taste, sweet and tart at the same time.

“Did I ever tell you why the pomegranate is so important to me?”

Of course I’ve known the story since childhood but never heard her recount it. We sit together and she hands me the pomegranate so I can eat while I listen, the melodic power of her voice carrying me with her into the past.

“I was just a girl then, overprotected, bored and secretly yearning for adventures. One beautiful sunny day, my mother Demeter and I were in the flower meadow. Oh it was lush with cornflowers, poppies, cowslips and buttercups.”

She leans back and closes her eyes.

“The warmth was glorious and subtle fresh scents of summer, delightful. We were making a flower crown for my eighteenth birthday. Demeter had already plaited corn stalks into a circlet and it was my job to thread the flowers. Then the sound of a distant horn called my mother away to some task or other – something to do with the imminent harvest I expect. She left me with her usual warning to be wary of strangers. I lay back into the long grass and listened to the bees gossiping with each other as they moved from flower to flower, wishing that something interesting would happen. It was a while before I noticed a much louder rumbling sound that made me sit up. It seemed to be coming from the ground beneath me and it built to a thundering crescendo whereupon the earth itself ripped asunder to reveal a vast chasm from whence hurled a chariot driven furiously by a wild and handsome god.”

“Weren’t you frightened?”

“My dear Atropos, I was young and beautiful and ready for love, whatever my mother thought. This was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to me! He curled his arm around my waist, drew me into the chariot beside him and drove into the ground so fast that when I looked back the entrance had already closed behind us. It was a rattling riotous ride and we hurtled on for some time before finally coming to a halt somewhere in the furthest reaches of his underground domain. There, my kidnapper released the sweating horses and helped me down from the chariot. When he saw that I was still clutching the flower crown, he took it gently from my hand and placed it on my head.

“There, fit for the queen of Hades.”

I was smitten from the very beginning. I liked how his mouth lifted upwards at the corners, echoing the curl of his beard. O, how beautiful he was!”

She laughed with such joy that I almost wished that my vocation would allow me to experience such things. I brushed the thought away and Persephone continued her story.

“I spent many happy months exploring the vast extent of Hades’ kingdom and learning about his work. Of course the place and the man are synonymous. Both he and his kingdom have dark corners as well as beauty. It is said, by those who do not understand, that he is cruel, not so. He simply does what he must.”

She looks at me shrewdly.

“As must you Atropos.”

I ignore the remark and beg her to tell me more about Hades' realm.

"My favourite place is the Elysian Fields. This is where the good souls find rest after death. It is so peaceful and the souls are good company. In fact it was they who first heard the calls for me from above ground some months after my arrival there. The cries were faint but persistent; and the spirits around me turned as one towards the sound. It was at one moment a despairing wail and then it became an enticing song, the familiar lilting voice singing to me as it had always done. My dear mother was searching for me. Only then did I become sad and despondent, lost my appetite and became pale. I must have looked ill because Hades eventually agreed to release me back to my mother for a visit.

The first time, he took me himself. It was a sombre journey and we didn't speak much. The horses didn't even break sweat but walked slowly in a gentle rhythm. We stopped for a while by the river where we sat on the bank with our feet in the water watching the ripples. Hades reached into his cloak and brought out a small red fruit resting in his palm. It had a tiny crown on the top. It was the first time I had seen a pomegranate, and I thought it was so pretty. He told me that there are golden copies used by kings on earth as a symbol of power. Then he split it open to show me the clusters of shiny red seeds inside, bursting with life and fertility, the very essence of what it means to be alive and to generate yet more life. He offered me a few of the seeds encouraging me to taste them. That is what changed everything although I didn't know it at the time.

When we broke through the earth to my previous home I was shocked to see that the fields were laid bare, and no flowers grew there - even the trees were leafless. Nothing could be heard but the sad wail of my mother searching for me, deep in grief. I reached down and lifted a handful of the cold earth to my face. All around me the living world had come to a stop and I realised how much I missed my mother. I had been so involved in my new life that I assumed that the world above ground had continued as before. How wrong I had been! Her grief for me led her to abandon everything.

Oh, you should have seen it. The lush meadow I had left behind was unrecognisable; just bare soil with a few limp, brown grasses. No bees, no butterflies, nothing. Tree skeletons stood like macabre warnings, their fallen leaves turned to mush, even the hedgerows were dead. A few despairing field mice scurried away but they were emaciated. Even the most versatile scavengers and carrion feeders were ragged and thin. And, you wouldn't believe how utterly cold it was. I have never known anything like it. And the rain! I had no idea it

could be like that. This was no warm shower like those we are used to here, but sheets of water, huge droplets turned to ice, battering the world.”

“What did you do, how did you cope?”

“I found a disused camp that had long since been abandoned, a makeshift shelter of animal skins spread over wooden posts. I crawled underneath and waited for the storm to abate, but the rain when it finally ceased, was superseded by bitter winds that howled across the landscape. Soaked to the skin, with my fingers turned blue, I was in shock. Faced with the horror of such desolation I curled myself in a ball and wept. I have no idea how long I lay there but when all my tears were spent, I became aware of a faint sound. My ears tried for some time to identify it as a bird call or animal cry. I sounded like nothing human and certainly not like anything one of the gods might have made. It was a hollow repetitive voice like no music I had heard before. This was a lament, doleful and grief stricken, accompanied by a lyre. I yearned to get closer, it plucked my heart strings and pulled me towards it; my mother’s song that had drawn me all the way back from Hades. I staggered a little on the rough ground but followed where it led. After a while, I was able to sing the counterpoint to the tune. We sang to each other across the world and by the time we came face to face at last, the sky was as clear and blue as your eyes.

When my mother and I embraced, our tears mingled and fell as one. As each drop wet the ground, a tiny green shoot emerged. She took my hand and walked me to a waterfall nearby. We stood together beneath it, letting the sparkling water wash us clean. As warmth returned to my fingers and toes we danced in the water and every splash contributed to the greening of the earth, leaves unfurled on the trees, and the spring flowers began to rise. There were snowdrops with delicate green tracery on their white petals, yellow narcissus, pink anemones and blue muscari, purple iris and delicate cyclamen. We laughed with pure joy.”

“Then what happened?”

“Well, I was torn between my mother who was dear to me and the husband I loved more than anything. Fortunately for me, he is a wise man.”

She pointed at the pomegranate in my hand.

“You remember I told you I had eaten some pomegranate seeds just before I left to find my mother? A pomegranate is a powerful iconic symbol of the fecundity of life itself. It resides in Hades for good reason. This precious domain provides for those who have come

to the end of their allotted span; they need time to rejuvenate and enrich their souls with potential for their new existence. The end of one life is the beginning of another. Always.”

She pauses and looks thoughtful until I prompt her with a touch.

“It is my sacred duty to live in both worlds, to remind Hades that there is life above and to remind my mother that there is death below. These two states are opposite sides of the same coin and must coexist. I am the conduit between them both. So it is that I live half the year in Hades and half the year with my mother. Each time I return, the land comes to life; she allows it to flower, set seed and provide for the future and when I go to my husband and attend to the souls, winter returns. The cycle of earth-bound life is forever tied to the loss and return of a goddess’ daughter. My husband and my mother’s love contrive both death and rebirth.”

I chew the last of the sweet, shining seeds of the pomegranate, letting the juice run slowly to the back of my tongue. Persephone takes the empty shell of its skin in her hand.

“Ah, the outer covering is bright enough, crowned as it is, but the inside is abundant and gleaming with life, rich and red like the blood of all women. Whosoever tastes these garnet coloured seeds and desires the lush fruits of life is under my protection.”

Persephone smiles, hooks her arm around my elbow and leads me to the window.

“My dear niece, we need to speak of other things.”

She takes my hand in hers.

“I hear you have been getting into trouble. What were you thinking?”

I ignore a twinge of trepidation, and remain silent.

“You were foolish to risk the wrath of Hades.”

“And my sisters are foolish to drive me to do it.”

Persephone speaks quietly now.

“The child whose life you ended before it began cannot access his rightful place because he did not fulfil his destiny. He resides now in a place that should not be his. And the old man who lies at home dying still, has relatives that wait for him on the other side. They stand by the river Styx peering through the fog but the ferryman does not come. He only brought the child because it was so helpless. He did not get paid for that either.”

I fold my arms and edge away from her.

“My dear niece, there are repercussions.”

She takes my chin in her hand and turns me to face her.

“You must take responsibility for your actions. Things must be put right. You must act.”

“What must I do?”

“It is not for me to say. It is for you to discern.”

“How must I do that?”

“By your wits, your tongue and your duty, and with the help of the living.”

“What can mere mortals do for me?”

Her eyes closed and I heard again the sound of the three headed dog Cerberus howling far below. The sound was drowned out by the fanfare of trumpets that ensued and the procession of pages bringing more to the feast. Persephone gave a gentle pressure to my arm and whispered in my ear.

“I must go now but please take heed to what I have said. Your temper is not more important than your duty. I will be here for you when you need me.”

Left alone, I remind myself that I too am a goddess and it is my powers that are under threat. Why should I not do as I please? I retreat to my chamber to prepare myself for the feast. Six serving maids are waiting to attend to my preparations. A new gown has been made for me, woven from the finest and palest blue silk, the colour so subtle the eyes are tricked into believing it is made from the sky itself. I choose a fine golden chain for my waist and jewellery to match. Two of the maids spend time glossing and braiding my hair, coiling it on top of my head, the gold entwined with blue ribbons. When they are done, I contemplate myself in the looking glass. I stand tall and raise my chin a little. A hand mirror gives me a profile view which confirms to my satisfaction that every aspect reveals a deity.

I will command respect and adulation as befits my role. It is my power and my duty to determine the end of every life and no-one shall gainsay me. No-one, not my sisters, not even the god of the underworld. I will go down to Hades but it will be of my own volition.

7 Jack

A deep groan rumbled up from underneath the heap of bedding, which seemed to heave into life as Jack worked his way to sitting up. Annoyingly, he'd been dreaming about a baby. A baby of all things. What a bloody nightmare. He wished he'd never met Moira in the first place. How could he have been so stupid? He should've known better than to get mixed up with her, should've got out of it before things went from bad to worse. Even though to begin with having her around was okay, she was far too needy; like she expected him to be at her beck and call 24/7. In the end he stopped picking up her calls and ignored her texts. If he played it cool for long enough, she'd get the message wouldn't she? Except she didn't. She only turned up at the house looking for him, said she was pregnant. He said it was nothing to do with him. She said she was going to keep it and he said: good luck with that. He'd told her straight and that was that, except that a tiny doubt that niggled at him from time to time. What if it was his? It annoyed him that not only did he keep thinking about it, but now he was dreaming about it too. In any case the kid had died hadn't it? It was all over. Nothing to worry about any more, nothing to think about, nothing to dream about.

Bleary eyed and more than a little hung over, he reached for the glass of water on the floor beside the bed, only to realise that a fat black fly was swimming around on the surface. He almost retched but managed not to as he flicked the offending creature out of the water and onto the floor where in ever decreasing circles it struggled to relaunch itself. He watched it for a while wondering why it would bother to keep going, half drowned and obviously seriously damaged. Much like himself he thought, stuck here, unable to get away; he gave a cynical self-deprecating smile aimed at a non-existent audience. He liked an imaginary audience did Jack; aside from guys at school whose motives for watching him were usually mean, and his dad whose attitude smacked of treading on eggshells, and Candace who only wanted to find something wrong, it seemed his only real admirer had been poor sad little Moira. How pathetic was that?

The fly was by now on its back, circling on the spot and buzzing fitfully. Jack slammed the now empty glass down on top of it, smearing its corpse between glass and floorboard. Another life ended. He rolled over onto his back and stared at the ceiling; if only all problems were so easily sorted. His life had been full of annoyances of one kind or another ever since he'd lived here. Then he heard the rumble of his dad's car pulling out of the garage and crunching its way down the gravelled drive towards the gate.

“Shit.”

He’d missed his chance for a lift into town and if he didn’t get a move on, he’d be late for his appointment.

“Shit, shit.”

He showered and dressed in what was for him record time. Normally prone to a fair bit of preening, he allowed himself the bare minimum to look okay today so that he could get down to the road in time to catch the morning bus into town, It was more that he could stand to ask Candace for a lift, he’d rather put up with the passengers on the ten o’clock bus. In spite of having to run the length of the drive, he did make it to the stop just in time. By the time the bus reached him it was already packed and he had difficulty squeezing in. He grudgingly shuffled down the aisle, ending up wedged among a group of hi-viz jacketed workers and was forced to listen to their inane conversation. During a brief pause in their chatter, he became aware of being stared at and realised from their faces that he was the butt of a joke. He glared back at the idiot with the smirk with as much superiority as he could muster until the guy looked away. He’d discovered a talent for supercilious looks since he’d been at school, a skill he’d developed in response to any question he didn’t want to answer and as a way of keeping people at a distance. How he hated that place: rules, rules, rules. He’d like to escape, do something completely different, and earn some decent money for a change, do as he pleased. Doing what though? He had no idea what he might be able to do; there weren’t many jobs, not round here, and where else would he go? It was annoying to be dependent on the old man for money and he wouldn’t get his inheritance from his mother till he was twenty one. By god he’d have some fun then for sure. Buy himself a decent car, go travelling maybe. He pictured himself sitting at a pavement café, somewhere sunny, with a group of cool people, envied by passers-by.

Daydreaming had relaxed his grip on the rail and as the workmen shoved past him to get off at the next stop; he swayed awkwardly and came dangerously close to falling into the lap of a sour-faced woman passenger who fended him off with her handbag. How grim would that have been? He turned his gaze on her too and watched with some satisfaction as she looked down at her lap for the remainder of the journey.

When the bus pulled into the town square it was a relief to finally get off. He was particularly pissed off about the bus. It was about time he had a car, after all, he’d taken his driving test and passed, but there was no likelihood of him being able to afford one, not

even an old banger, which could have been quite cool. Anything would be better than putting up with public transport. Apparently, Dad and Candace wanted him to learn to stand on his own two feet, to save up and buy a car for himself; so he'd have the benefit of being self-sufficient, independent. Ha, no doubt this had been Candace's idea. He was pretty sure he could have wheedled a loan out of Dad. Only now he couldn't make too much of a fuss because the old man was ill. Why did everything have to be such a pain?

He made his way down to the end of the high street, crossed the road, headed down a narrow side street and round the corner where a shiny black sign bearing a heavily detailed drawing of an ornamental sword pointed the way up a set of concrete steps to a firmly shut shop door. A paper sign taped to the inside of the glass explained that the tattooist had been called away to some kind of family emergency and wouldn't be back for an hour. Damn. He sat down on the top step and lit a cigarette cupped in his hand against the wind, and when the first drag hit his brain, he relaxed and softened his shoulders. It had come to something when it took a fag to make him feel better. Life could be such a bore sometimes. How long had it been since he actually felt really great about anything? Probably before he came to live here, and unfortunately his memories of anything before that were becoming increasingly hazy. There'd been holidays with his mum, of which he remembered lots of sunshine and beaches and a series of different friends that they'd spent time with but by now everything had pretty much blended into one long blurry summer. Their lives had moved from a big house where her parents lived in Scotland to a tiny flat in London to an apartment in Paris and back again so nothing felt fixed, even attendance at school had been intermittent and nobody had cared too much about it either. He stared into the distance, half aware that he was attracting some attention from a group of schoolgirls on the other side of the street. He flicked his hair back and smiled in their direction, generating a satisfactory reaction of giggling and nudging as they continued down the street. He dropped the cigarette, ground it under his foot and glanced at his watch.

Just then, a harsh cry emerged from the throat of a big black crow who had been watching him for some time from a vantage point on the rooftop. It continued, insistently until Jack looked up. Satisfied that he was paying attention, the crow dropped to the ground, a glossy black tail feather in his beak. Puzzled, Jack walked down the steps, not sure what to make of it, and cleared his throat in response, sounding like an echo. The crow carefully and deliberately placed the feather at Jack's feet and took a step backwards. Jack stared and the

crow remained where he was, nodding towards the feather from time to time and looking questioningly at Jack. Mystified but fascinated Jack mirrored the bird's head tilt and smiled. This was interesting. He liked birds but he'd never had one come to him directly like this. Mostly he'd watched the ones in the garden at home, but he'd also been to a falconry demonstration once and seen a hawk catch a shrew. That had been amazing. There was something fascinating about their intelligent eyes and the way they did as they pleased but were always aware of danger. The crow hopped forward and nudged the feather with his beak, moving it closer, his beady black eyes intent on Jack's face. As Jack crouched down and reached to pick it up he arched his wings which made him look more menacing and Jack almost pulled his hand away. The bird folded his wings into place, hopped backwards and waited until Jack picked up the feather whereupon he gave a satisfied squawk in Jack's direction and took off for the branches of a nearby tree. Jack watched him go then looked down at the feather in his hand. Almost hidden among the downy barbs at its base was a tiny yellow thread twisted into the black. Peering closer, he picked it out carefully between thumb and finger and held it up. It looked like a blonde hair, perhaps one of his? But if it was, how had it come to be stuck in the feather? On closer inspection, this tiny filament was finer than hair, more gold than blonde and it reminded him for some reason of his mother. The memory of her had all but vanished, diminished into a series of well-worn family occasions: birthdays, Christmases, holidays, that all seemed to merge into one brightly coloured celebration. It was as if his life then had been all lightness and warmth, whereas now it was anything but. He felt hot and angry and helpless and he clenched his jaw until it ached. Jack shook his head to get shot of the feeling and peered at the little gold thread that had laid itself into one of the creases in his palm. It had a weird luminous quality, but perhaps that was just his eyes watering. Although he didn't know it, the thread lay along his lifeline, neatly connecting his past to his future. He wrapped his fingers around the thread and thrust the fist into his pocket just as he heard the door behind him being unlocked; running up the steps he pushed open the door with his other hand.

The tattoo guy apologised and asked him to take a seat while he got things ready. Seated, Jack stretched out his long legs, leaned back and sighed, his arms hanging loose on either side of the chair. The little silken thread unravelled from his palm and fell to the floor unnoticed while he looked at the range of inked designs on the table in front of him and compared them with a drawing on a piece of paper he had brought with him. He wanted it

to say something about him, show his individuality, represent his need to get away and be himself. Meanwhile, the little golden thread wafted out of the open door, lifted on an updraught and was caught in the upper branches of the tree where the crow could be heard calling, for all the world like a lost child, far, far away.

8 Hades

A substantial figure in this land of wraiths and spirits, Hades moves with a lithe easy gait, his cloak rippling behind him as he strides along the corridor to the reception room. At the far end, on a dais sits a throne, made entirely of precious metals and studded with jewels hewn from the earth beneath the palace. Those who enter the room must walk its length, contemplating the immense power of the lord of the underworld who sits before them. Hades seats himself, staff in hand, his faithful dog at his feet.

Cerberus has one head relaxed with eyes closed, one alert and facing the door and the third tilted towards his master. His serpentine tail coils around one leg of the throne itself. Hermes, the wing footed messenger enters the room, his hovering feet making the tiniest flutter, enough to cause Cerberus' three sets of eyes to turn towards him and a single ear to raise. Hermes is accompanied by Atropos, clad in white silk. Making a deep flamboyant bow and with a smirk on his face, Hermes takes his leave. Atropos stands silent before her uncle, a slender figure, with a sullen but uncowed expression. For the time being she merely looks around her, weighing up what she sees. There is much to admire in the décor, Persephone's choices no doubt. The colours are understated, the fabrics unusual and the furniture, though minimalist, shows exquisite workmanship; and everything draws the eye to the throne itself. She gives the slightest nod of approval which goes unnoticed. After several minutes of silence, Hades stands, raps his staff on the floor and Cerberus stretches himself, his huge black claws extended as he readies himself to do his master's bidding. As he moves, he rucks up the carpet and Atropos is nearly pulled off balance. Unabashed, she directs her vivid blue eyes towards her uncle. He smiles.

"Your aunt's idea I'm afraid. Personally, I'd prefer stone floors, far more practical."

"I daresay, the god of the dead would prefer a practical approach."

He narrows his eyes, unsure if I was being disrespectful.

"Come with me, I will show you my kingdom."

Atropos says nothing but follows, doubtful about his motives but curious at the same time. Few Olympian gods ever visit this place but Olympus is rife with gossip about it, even if it is seldom true. After a near silent walk through a maze of corridors they eventually emerge into open fields. Is her uncle always so taciturn?

"Those must be asphodel I suppose."

He nods curtly. The flowers extend as far as the eye can see, clumps of pale bluish grey, fading into the mist; the further they go the deeper the mist and the more dense the flowers. Some of them reach to her shoulders and she plucks a single star shaped bloom, the size of a coin and holds it in her palm for a moment before crushing and dropping it.

Cerberus growls, prompting Hades to turn to face her.

“I see you have a disposition for destruction.”

“Well it keeps you in business doesn’t it?”

“Indeed it does, but this is my domain and I will not have you break with the order of things.”

They walk on and gradually Atropos becomes aware of the sound of voices in the distance, a whispering murmur. There is no joy in the sound, no lilt to uplift the spirits; rather it is delivered in an endless dirge-like monotone, and she wonders whose vocal chords might produce such dull sounds. From the mist, row after row of sorrowful wraiths gradually emerge, their physical form difficult to distinguish from the mist itself. Theirs is a disconsolate and dreary state, where neither anguish nor delight intervene. Hades regards his niece and clarifies for her.

“These are the dullest of souls; neither heroes nor villains. They deserve neither Elysium as a reward nor Tartarus as a punishment. They merely exist here, as they did in life; achieving nothing, attempting nothing, playing safe. They chose a living death in life and they continue here much the same.”

“But what’s the point?”

“The point, is that we reap what we sow, gods and mortals alike. Even you.”

He looks at her with narrowed eyes, as if sizing her up.

“Yes, even you.”

She holds his gaze until she feels a strange sensation around her ankles. Looking down, she sees a cluster of smaller, paler wraiths entwining her legs, a beseeching quality to their movement, though they make no sound. Unsuccessfully, she tries to brush them away with a swish of her skirt. However, after a brief retreat, they continue as before.

“Who or what are these?”

“These are the souls whose lives were stopped before they began; the miscarriages, the stillbirths, the children who didn’t make it beyond birth.”

“Why do they have no substance?”

“It is nurture that gives them substance, and they receive none. Perhaps you should take an interest in them.”

“What do I care about them? They are nothing to me.”

“One of them should not be here, not for many years yet.”

“So, what does it matter?”

“These are *my* subjects Atropos, it matters to me.”

The force of his voice flattens the surrounding foliage for a distance of several metres.

“And you who had the temerity to gainsay my laws must make amends.”

He strikes his staff on the ground three times and the wraiths vanish.

“Where did they go?”

“To be with some of my longer serving subjects for a while, to learn and to develop, and perhaps gain a little substance. Enough of them. Come, we will meet the ferryman.”

Atropos smelt the river before they reached it, this cold, dank place, entrance to the underworld, guarded by Charon, who stands before them in his filthy robes. He bends down to pat Cerberus on all three of his heads, his hand licked by three rough tongues, leaving clean marks on the skin.

“How are you today boy? I see you’ve brought the boss with you. Several boatloads of new souls due today, so I’ll need your help.”

All at once he notices Atropos and stands up to his full height, a nasty gleam in his eyes.

“Have you come to pay what is owed to me?”

“I do not carry coins; they are for mortals.”

“Then how will I be paid for carrying the child whose life you ended before it began? There are consequences to your actions.”

Atropos shrugs and turns away but Hades touches her on the shoulder and gestures for her to look along the length of the bank. Here there are items from the earthly realm that have washed across to Hades and become caught up in the mass of tangled roots and slime. As her eyes accustom to the gloom, she can make out four pale feet amongst the debris and dead fish, these belonging to two insubstantial bodies sitting along the bank, their eyes straining to see through the fog in order to catch a glimpse of the earthly side. The silence is so thick she can hear it, while the swirling mist billows and fades in constant

movement, with just enough light on the other side to keep the watchers watching. A momentary lifting of the gloom reveals a heavily wooded copse. It seems that there might be figures moving among the trees but the mist closes in again - perhaps they were mistaken. Each time this happens, the watchers lean forward, only to draw back again with a despairing sigh. On the other side, beneath the dense woodland, it is dark even in daylight and Atropos thinks they would do better to rely on their ears than their eyes to identify travellers.

“Why do they still have human form?”

“Tis a temporary device, only while they greet the newcomers can they be seen in this way. Afterwards, they will revert to their wraithlike form; unless they can find a way to do something significant enough to warrant a move to the Elysian Fields.”

“Who are they seeking?”

He gives her a piercing look.

“You know who they wait for.”

Atropos folds her arms and tightens her lips.

Hades shrugs and turns away from her. He and Charon walk a short distance away to talk of other matters leaving her to seethe. Eventually she can bear the slight no longer and interrupts.

“Death is mine to deliver.”

“And the dead belong with me.”

“And?”

“Mortal men cannot live forever.”

“So?”

“So, you must do your duty and cut the final thread of his life. If men lived forever like the gods, what do you think would happen?”

“How should I know?”

Barely containing his anger, Charon snaps back.

“Why, there’d be no space for anyone!”

“And why is this any concern of mine?”

It is Hades’ turn to respond in clipped tones.

“The cycle of life and death on earth keeps everything in balance, for them and for us.”

“How so?”

“Ours is the way of eternity; we exist, just as we are, now and forever.”

“And what of them?”

“They are the reason we exist.”

Atropos raises an eyebrow.

“Their meagre lives are ours to command. They provide us with purpose, you should understand that more than anyone.”

Hades regards his niece with an expression of disappointment that she interprets as pity. Turning her head away from him, she misses the amused look on his face, and she is too busy throwing him a sharp riposte to hear the click of his fingers.

“Death may be the price they pay for living, but the chosen moment is always mine.”

At which a firm hand grabs her elbow and pulls her roughly forward; half walking half gliding, Hermes only lets her go when they are a considerable distance away. Atropos shrugs him off angrily.

“By what right do you dare accost me?”

“Not only by the command of Hades, but on the order of Zeus himself, I am here to remind you that your transgression must be rectified within a proscribed time limit; and I see that you are wasting time indulging your pride and defying your uncle.”

“Pshaw...If Zeus wasn't full of pride himself, none of it would matter.”

“Nevertheless you need to think about how you are going to handle this unless you are prepared to suffer his punishment.”

“Who are you to tell me what I should do?”

“As you well know, I Hermes, am herald to Zeus, divine shepherd, guide to the dead, god of prophecy and divination, and guardian of birds of omen.”

He clicks his heels together, removes his helmet and bows.

“Huh, and the rest. What about god of trade and trickery, language and wiles?”

“Come, come now, are we not both divine? Wiles and trickery are in your nature too are they not?”

“What if they are?”

“If they are, then you have the wherewithal to deal with this. Let me show you something.”

He leads her across the soft green sward towards the far corner where his famous flock is resting in the shade.

“Tell me what you see.”

These are no ordinary sheep; their impeccable pedigree and immaculate condition proclaim them to be of a higher order than any earthbound animal. Hermes reaches for his caduceus with its two snakes entwined around the shaft and taps it lightly on the ground. The huge ram feels the ground vibrate beneath his shining hooves and turns his head with its magnificent curled horns towards Hermes and Atropos. The ewes are silent in anticipation. The magnificent beast lowers his head in deference and Hermes reaches for one of the numerous lambs gambolling around the edges of the flock. He holds it aloft, bleating piteously and the ewe to whom it belongs has panic in her golden eyes.

“I see a lamb.”

“And nothing else?”

“I see you have power over it.”

“As did you when you cut the thread of a new-born life.”

“So?”

“You sacrificed that life on a whim did you not? And yet you are a goddess of fate. What has become of the proper destiny of the child and his mother? And the man who yet lives beyond his own lifespan? Is he to be immortal?”

Hermes lets the lamb go and they watch as it runs bleating towards its mother; sheep and goddess equally inscrutable.

9 Candace

An afternoon without hospital appointments for Paul, and no other commitments meant that Candace was free to work and was taking advantage of the last of the evening sun streaming through her attic window onto her embroidery: a complex work, part sketch of the garden below and partly an expression of her mood during the last few months. The range of pale blues and greys was astonishingly large, from the palest greens of the early morning mist to the heavy purple shadow spaces, accompanied by a bilious lemon yellow sun seemingly too dominant for the gentle hues below. She contemplated her handiwork and took up a warmer yellow thread, laying it across the lower left hand corner to compare it with her favourite rose bush. Then she lowered her chin to peer over the top of the glasses that hung on a chain around her neck and looked out again.

Paul must have persuaded Jack out into the garden because they were sitting side by side on the bench in the rose arbour just below her window. It seemed that Paul was talking though it looked as if Jack wasn't really listening. He was pulling the petals off one of the yellow roses one by one. How destructive. Since the very beginning, from the day he'd arrived he'd been spoiling things, ripping things apart. And it seemed she could do nothing about it and Paul didn't believe in punishment. Even before Jack arrived she'd felt increasingly anxious about such a big life change but on the day they buried Jack's mother and Paul went to fetch his son, she knew those changes would be worse than she'd feared. Paul had been late home, hours later than he said he would be. Usually he would call out to her when he came back into the house, a sing song calling of her name that always made her smile. That day there had only been the click of the key in the lock and the soft thud of the closing door that magnified the silence. She'd bitten her lip, held herself still without breathing as if she could stop time and thus evade fate; even so she was acutely aware of the heaviness in his step, weighed down as he was by the burden that was to become hers too. She'd stood still, waiting, expecting at any moment a greeting, an arm around her shoulder, but instead he'd gone past her, straight across to the sofa and she'd watched him lean over and gently lay down the sleeping child he'd been carrying. Only then did he turn towards her.

"Oh, there you are."

She looked at him doubtfully, acutely aware that most of his attention was directed towards his sleeping son. She too turned to look at the boy, observing the unkempt blonde

hair, the rather grubby jeans and tee shirt he was wearing and the expensive trainers on his feet. She felt no connection to him, not even curiosity, just a vague sense of distaste. The boy stirred slightly and the compassion on Paul's face as he looked at his son gave Candace a twinge of anxiety. A few short weeks ago, her world had been familiar and comfortable. It only took one event to change everything, one moment when fate took control, sent one car spinning into another and ended the life of Jack's mother. Paul whispered:

"He's our responsibility now."

When Jack opened his wide blue eyes and looked at her she'd felt awkward, scrutinised. How was she supposed to respond? She'd looked down at her hands and clasped them tightly together. How on earth would she be able to cope? She knew nothing about children apart from having been one once, and that was no help was it? What could she possibly say? Paul smiled.

"Poor little chap, he's been through such a lot and he hardly knows us."

Seven year old Jack had sat up and looked around the room: taking in the pictures on the wall, an ornate gold clock on the mantel piece above the fireplace, curtains held open with thick silk ropes with tasselled ends. He'd got down from the sofa, reached towards the crystal bowl full of roses in the centre of the coffee table and extracted the only pink bloom amongst the yellow and white ones and held it out towards his new stepmother. Just as she wrapped her fingers around the stem and was about to take it from him, he pulled his hand back and laughed. When she opened her hand, there was a smear of blood where a thorn had caught the skin. She put her finger to her mouth and understood that his action had been a deliberate marker of his place in this house. She felt that some warm, trusting part of her had condensed into something hard and tight in the pit of her stomach. The gleeful expression on his face had affected her more than she cared to admit. How could she have felt so intimidated by a child? Even now, ten years later, she still felt uneasy in his presence and was still inclined to interpret his behaviour as a personal insult.

She turned away from her thoughts, away from the inaudible conversation between Paul and Jack just below her window to focus on her work, but it wasn't long before she was interrupted by the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs and the door to her room was flung open.

"What have they been saying about me?"

"Who?"

“You know who, those sadistic staff from the cell block they call a school.”

“Don’t exaggerate. They are concerned about you.”

“Huh, don’t make me laugh.”

“Jack, you really need to start taking your work more seriously.”

“What’s the point of that?”

He picked up a polished stone from a basket on the table, held it for a moment as if about to throw it and Candace almost ducked, but he dropped his arm and rolled it between fingers and thumb, all the while looking directly at its smooth surface and then put it down again. How was it that he always managed to unnerve her. Not for the first time, she wondered how Paul had managed to produce a son so unlike himself. In so many ways Jack was like his mother. Although Candace had only met her a couple of times, she was aware that she too had been restless, never satisfied, with a way of walking into a room as if she owned it, tossing her blonde hair off her face and getting on Candace’s nerves - and every time Jack did it, it reminded her. Jack continued to pick up and put down some of the curios from decades of collecting: a wooden puppet, an elaborate African beaded neck ornament, several dolls in national costume, a mother-of-pearl box containing tiny crystals, a gruesome statuette of the Hindu goddess Kali, a miniature teddy bear no more than two inches high with moveable joints, a Tibetan singing bowl and the bleached jawbone of a sheep with a series of amber beads fixed into the tooth sockets which he held up to his face and matched its deathly grin.

Then he reached for a pile of old sketchbooks and began to flick through them; they contained pen and ink studies of found objects from nature that she’d done years ago: grasses, lichens, and feathers mostly. Candace gritted her teeth and willed him to go away. Everything about Jack irritated her: his lack of consideration, lack of motivation, lack of direction, his inability to stick to anything and most of all that he was here at all.

“Oh do leave things alone.”

She took the pile of books from him and placed them carefully in a box on the floor by her feet, but she stood up suddenly.

“What the hell is that?”

Jack smirked, put his hands behind his head in a pose and stuck his leg out to one side, pointing his toe so that his ankle was exposed. Upwards from his ankle now sprouted a delicately feathered black wing, as if he was about to take flight.

“Whatever possessed you to do such a thing? You do realise it’s illegal don’t you?”

“It doesn’t matter, I’ll be eighteen next birthday.”

“That’s not the point though is it? It wouldn’t be you getting into trouble over it.”

“I thought you’d like it.”

“Whatever gave you that idea?”

“It was based on one of your drawings after all.”

“What’s going on with you? Why can’t you just stick to the rules for once? There’ll be hell to pay at school.”

“Oh, who cares about school, I’ve had enough of it. It’s all pointless: rubbish teachers and boring lessons; I’d rather work on a building site.”

“Don’t be so ridiculous Jack.”

“What’s ridiculous?”

“The idea of you doing anything that requires work and effort.”

“Think what you like, I’m done with school, I’m going to get a job.”

“Huh. I doubt that very much.”

“You’ll see.”

“Oh for goodness sake, you’d never last five minutes.”

“You have no idea what I’m capable of.”

“Anyway, what do you mean it was one of my drawings?”

“Keep your hair on, I only borrowed it. Here I’ve brought it back.”

He was about to hand her a piece of white paper with the original drawing when he spotted a large gilded frame containing a heavily embellished embroidery, propped against the wall near the door. It was a rather lush still life after the manner of the old masters, resplendent with the gleaming wing feathers of a dead raven, the glint of candle light on fish scales, apples tumbling from a silver platter, a cut glass decanter containing amber liquid and a single pomegranate cut in half, exposing its brazen scarlet ripeness. Jack ran a finger over a wing rendered in fine black silken thread. Candace sucked the air in between her teeth. He looked at her.

“What?”

“I’d rather you didn’t touch it that’s all.”

Looking straight at her, he moved his hand around the heavily carved frame before dropping his arm to his side, then stood with his arms folded, peering closely at the

stitching: the dead eye of the bird, the limp body of the fish, the lush ripe apples and juicy pomegranate.

“What’s it all about?”

“What do you think it’s ‘about’?”

“I dunno, that’s why I asked.”

“I don’t suppose it would make sense to you even if I explained.”

He shrugged and pointed to the amber liquid glinting in the facets of the cut glass decanter.

“What’s this supposed to be?”

“What do you think?”

“How should I know?”

“It could be either deadly poison or the elixir of life. Make of it what you want.”

“Which is it?”

“The clue is in the title.”

He peered closely.

“Nature Morte, what does that mean?”

“It’s French for ‘still life’ but it means ‘dead nature’. Everything is dead and dying, even the things that look as if they’re not.”

“Hmm. Why do you want to stitch dead stuff?”

“What I work on is up to me, I don’t have to explain to you. If you don’t like it you don’t have to look at it.”

“I think it’s gruesome.”

“Do you know what Jack? I have no interest in what you think. Shut the door on your way out.”

“Shut it yourself.”

10 Atropos

Through the keyhole, I can see my sisters huddled together over what looks like a large picture book. Lachesis is seated and looking up at Clotho, her glossy black hair falling straight and long below her waist. In an unconscious gesture, she reaches for a handful of it and pulls it over one shoulder the better to look up at Clotho. Our older sister is tall, her pale freckled arms reach above her head to retain her soft rose-gold curls in a clasp before bending over, the better to see the book. They are both smiling. With each new page there is fresh laughter. I can stand it no longer and march into the room.

“What’s so funny?”

Startled, Lachesis looks up, shares a look with Clotho and swivels round. The smile on her face is welcoming but Clotho’s less forgiving feelings are not displayed.

“Oh, do come and look. These are from the human world; they’re very amusing. It’s a book of paintings and artefacts depicting the gods. Apparently, they think they know what we look like. See here’s one of Hermes, with his favourite ram - he’d like that - shows off his physique; and here’s one of Persephone and Demeter surrounded with flowers.”

“This is a sad one of poor little Elpis stuck inside Pandora’s jar after all the rest of the evils have been inflicted on the world.”

“Poor thing, she’s meant to represent hope and she looks quite hopeless.”

“Let me see.”

I take the book and flick through several pages, aghast at what I see.

“Look at this one, and this!”

The first picture entitled ‘The Morai’ depicts three miserable old crones covered in cobwebs, in a dark and dank looking hovel; the other shows three impossibly buxom, bare breasted wenches, with lascivious smiles, badly drawn and garishly coloured, labelled ‘Goddesses of Destiny’.

“Do they think we are old or ugly or crude or all three? Don’t they know the gods don’t age?”

“Apparently not”

“But that’s outrageous.”

“Oh, it’s just a bit of fun. We can’t alter the limitations of human minds. Come, sit with us and tell us what you’ve been up to all day.”

“Do you really want to know?”

“Of course we do.”

They speak in unison and I have their full attention for once.

“I have just returned from Hades.”

Gratified by their shocked and eager faces I smile from one to the other.

“Oh do tell, what’s it like down there? We want to know everything, and especially what he’s like.”

“Who?”

“The great man himself, lord of the dead.”

I bask in their desire to hear what I know, but I can’t keep up the suspense for long.

“Well, he is very handsome of course, but his kingdom is strange. Some of it is beautiful, most of it is not.

“Did you get to see Tartarus where all the wicked souls end up?”

“No, thank goodness. He just wanted to point out what happened after my little ‘snip’.”

“And?”

“That half-baked little soul is wandering about not knowing which way is up, and there’s a couple of miserable looking relatives by the Styx waiting for the old man I should have finished off. Besides which, I had to contend with a lecture from Hermes, putting his oar in and insisting that I make amends.”

“Oh Atropos, now you’ve got Hermes on your back as well as Zeus and Hades, and he has eyes everywhere, you need to be careful.”

“Yes, yes, I know, I know.”

“You really need to take this seriously.”

“I wish everyone would stop telling me what to do and let me make my own decisions. As for Zeus, Hades and Hermes...Do you know what I think? I think they are much too full of themselves; they’ve all got egos so big that they can’t see beyond their own self-importance.”

“Shhh, you can’t say things like that.”

“I will speak as I wish or what’s the point of being a goddess?”

Clotho and Lachesis look at each other, half in admiration, half in trepidation.

“My dear sister, what are you going to do? Even you can’t bring the dead back to life.”

"I know, and I can't end the life of the old man until the child has lived."

"Certainly not, it would put everything out of kilter and set the world awry."

Lachesis considers her measuring stick and taps it thoughtfully on her thigh.

"If you could only find a way..."

"Do you know what? The only way I'm going to work something out is to learn what makes them tick. I need to understand how they live and what they think if I am to have any hope of finding a way out of this. I'm going down there."

"Do you think that's wise?"

"Whether it's wise or not is irrelevant, it's necessary. How else can I decide what to do? I need to see for myself what happens when I act on my own volition, what difference it makes, if any. I want to find out what happened to them, what they did next and why they did it. Everyone keeps telling me I've unbalanced things. I can't restore any kind of order unless I can see what's gone awry. Besides, I'm curious to know what they make of it all, learn what they think about dying. I'm pretty sure they don't see it the way we do."

I walk over to the tapestry of life.

"Which is the girl - the one whose baby is adrift in Hades? Is this her?"

The tapestry shows her in a garden, almost hidden by the profusion of shrubs and flowers that fill every inch of the small space in front of a small terraced house. An older woman in brightly coloured clothes is sitting precariously on the swing suspended from an old apple tree. They appear to be smiling.

"What's her name?"

"Maira I think."

"What insolence! How dare she take our name in vain?"

"Well, perhaps her parents were honouring us by calling her a name that means fate."

"I doubt it. Anyway, who's that woman she's with?"

"Some necromancer I think."

"What kind of necromancer?"

"Oh, you know, one of those that dabbles in everything just in case it leads them to the truth."

"What truth?"

"Eternal truths."

“What can they know of truth, or eternity?”

“Some of them try to find out.”

“There is precious little scope for understanding such things in a mere lifetime.”

“My dear Atropos, I don’t suppose you understand much about mortality either, even though you’ve been ending lives for aeons.”

“They live, they die, I daresay there’s not that much for them to know. Anyhow, I intend to go down there and find out.”

“Find out exactly what?”

“As I said, find out what makes them tick, then work out a way to fix my little difficulty.”

“Don’t be so reckless, you can’t just disappear down there and hope to put things right by yourself.”

“I can and I will.”

“Oh Atropos, don’t be ridiculous, I know what you are like when you get like this.”

“Get like what?”

“Being impetuous, doing things without thinking them through. It can only lead to more trouble. Besides, we need you here.”

“I’m glad you finally admit it, but there won’t be any trouble, I’m not stupid, I know what I’m doing.”

“I’m not sure that you do. I mean it; you need to be very careful.”

I roll my eyes and Lachesis and Clotho exchange another look.

“What?”

“If you are determined to do this, how will you travel?”

“Oh, I haven’t decided yet.”

“You can’t go as yourself.”

“Why not?”

Clotho has a slight frown as she considers her words.

“Well, firstly you mustn’t attract the attention of any of the gods. Some of them can be horribly prickly if they think you are dabbling in their affairs. You never know what they might do when roused. Secondly, if you’re going to interact with humans you need to think about the effect you might have on them.”

Lachesis chips in.

“Sister dear, you might not be as bright a flame as Helios, whose daily journey across the sky, lights up the world, but you are a goddess and you will be too much for mere mortals.”

“How do you think I should I show myself then?”

“Of course, the traditional method is to transform into an animal.”

“What would you prefer? A reptile, a bird, a fish or a mammal?”

“Ooh, I’m not sure.”

“Something to suit your character, then.”

“A gentle cooing dove perhaps.”

“A bear more like!”

“What impression do you want to give them?”

“Hmm, I will be interesting, beguiling of course, and beautiful.”

“And what do you want to be able to do while you are there?”

“I need to be able to listen in on conversations, understand how they think, and gather information so that I can work out a strategy.”

“Hmm, you probably need to go as some kind of domestic animal if you want to insinuate yourself into their lives in a major way.”

“How about a goat? I can see you with a lovely little beard.”

“Maybe a mouse or a rat so you can spy on them from a distance?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Okay, okay. How about a cat?”

“A black cat?”

“No, no, a white one. Some mortals believe that black cats are unlucky.”

“It’ll take some planning.”

“Oh that’s you two all over, forever planning, organising and measuring. Can’t you ever do anything spontaneous?”

“Spontaneity is all very well but if you want to learn what you need to put things right, it will take time.”

“Well then, since time means nothing to me, that won’t be a problem. In any case, there’s no time like the present.”

Clotho and Lachesis give an identical shrug of the shoulders with upturned palms which has the effect of goading me into action.

“Now is as good a time as any don’t you think?”

With closed eyes I turn my attention inwards to focus on the transformation. To begin with I feel only a slight tingling but open my eyes to see that already there is a blurring and softening of the edges of my limbs as I begin to fade into the surroundings, followed by a slow shrinking into a much smaller outline. This is a strange rather than a painful sensation, a tightening and narrowing as I condense. I bend onto all fours and curl into myself while my insubstantial feline form becomes increasingly solid and real. I manage a faint meow with my new throat and swish of my white furred tail as I jump to the windowsill. I look back at my white silk robe in a crumpled heap on the floor and see Lachesis and Clotho stare at each other, unsure whether to be amused or horrified. I also see that on the tapestry of life there is a small white kitten with blue eyes looking outwards and in an instant I am gone.

11 Moira

Moira was half awake, half dreaming about the coffee shop where she used to work. The busiest day was Saturday because this was when the older boys from the boarding school were allowed out. By eleven o'clock the cafe was full; most of the tables were taken by groups of boys trying to outdo each other with remarks about the girls serving their drinks. Their noisy banter and the teasing made Moira feel uncomfortable especially when it was directed towards her. She never really learned how to throw it back at them like some of the other girls did. She was more attracted to loners, preferring to project her romantic fantasies onto someone at a distance, quietly. Jack had been perfect, blonde and slightly scruffy rather than dark and handsome, but nevertheless suitably silent, and more often than not, alone. She could watch him without being noticed because he hardly ever looked at anyone. She thought he looked sad and wondered about him so when she overheard that he lived with his father and stepmother because his mother had died, she saw him as troubled and rather romantic. Obviously, he was so bound up in his own problems, he would never think to talk to her; it would be up to her to make the first move.

From then on whenever she saw him, she made a point of smiling at him and after a few weeks of doing this she added a 'hello' until it began to seem to both of them that they knew each other better than they did. Eventually Moira was rewarded with a nod in return and she persevered until Jack seemed to accept that she might be okay to talk to. She knew eventually that he'd realise she existed. Neither of them would remember their first conversation - which was probably to do with who liked what music and which bands they liked - because what was really going on was far more subtle. Jack's attitude had gradually softened in the face of Moira's constant easy going smile. She took to joining him at the end of her shift and as the weeks went by they had become a couple without Jack realising quite how it had happened.

Once their relationship was no longer based on Moira's wishful thinking, she had to get used to the reality that was Jack. She'd fill his silences with constant chatter, which he mostly ignored and she'd pretend not to mind when he didn't call her when he'd said he would; she'd held onto her hopes, come what may. She thought of him as deep rather than admit that he often sulked. She was nothing if not determined and since her need for him to be what she wanted was as strong as ever, by sheer effort she believed she could make happen what she wanted to happen. She would make him really fall for her. Now she had

longer term hopes: the two of them together, always. She'd never had a family, not one that she really belonged with anyhow. A series of foster carers didn't really count did they? As for Jack, she knew he wasn't happy at home, and he'd been sent away to school. That didn't sound very caring did it? Surely they both deserved to be a proper family one day, her and Jack.

On the day that everything changed, Moira's fantasies were stopped in their tracks. She'd dared to mention something of her plans for the future. His reaction was difficult for her make sense of, partly because her mind was clouded by her own excitement but also because he had backed off. He often did this when confronted directly, hated being asked for an answer or an opinion. His expression was blank and she hadn't the faintest idea what he was thinking.

"Well say something then."

"What do you want me to say?"

"I want you to tell me how you feel about it."

"Feel about what?"

"Whether you see a future for us, together."

"What do *you* think?"

"I don't know, that's why I'm asking you."

"I think..."

There was a long pause.

"What?"

"I think you're off your head."

He walked away there and then and left her standing. He'd never been reliable at the best of times but now he hardly ever replied to her messages and more often than not he would fail to turn up even when he'd said he would. Eventually she stopped expecting to see him again although it took a lot longer to stop hoping. It was a few weeks after this that Moira realised that she was pregnant. Whether she had merely forgotten to take the pill – even subconsciously - or whether it was a deliberate act of fate, who can say? In any event, a baby had been conceived and she had to tell Jack. She braved going to the house, but knew straight away that he wasn't interested, he didn't even invite her in. He was angry, said it was nothing to do with him and it was up to her to decide what to do about it. He'd shut the door on her then, and the echo of his words sat with her for weeks afterwards because from

then on everything really was up to her: the changes to her body, the visits to the antenatal clinic, the excitement of a scan, the worry about being able to cope alone. Perhaps it always had been up to her, even though a secret corner of her mind hoped that once the baby was born, he would come round and they would get back together again.

It all seemed so far away from her current reality, living here with Nancy. Even so, her dreams often included Jack, sometimes a presence, sometimes just a voice in the distance. On this particular night she woke with a start, jolted out of her usual dreams, her heart beating fast as she strained to follow a sound. But now there was nothing but a faint breeze across her face like the gentle touch of the lover that she missed. What was it that had woken her? It felt like something or someone had arrived, the click of the garden gate, perhaps? She blinked in the half light. Where was she? Confused she stared at the skylight and watched the darkness gradually move into the early morning as she slowly eased herself back into the present.

She looked around the little attic room that Nancy had said was hers now: the old chest of drawers with the bottom drawer that wouldn't shut properly, the dressing table with a glass top that stood in front of the window, its chair topped with a plump cushion because the seat had a hole in it, a faded child's drawing sellotaped to the wall, and one of Nancy's rag rugs by the bed. None of these things belonged to Moira. What would it look like if she had chosen for herself? She had no idea. How could she know what 'her' room should look like. Her old basement bedsit was dark and dull and she'd never paid much attention to it; just somewhere to lay her head at night, occasionally brightened by Jack's presence. It all seemed such a long time ago now. It was time she stopped thinking about the past.

Reaching for a dressing gown hanging on the back of the door, she tiptoed downstairs and made herself a mug of tea, then opened the back door. With her hands warm on the mug of hot tea, she breathed deeply and leaned against the doorframe, her dreams and memories exorcised by the early morning chill. The sky was threaded with vapour trails and the fast moving clouds, rapidly changing their colours and shapes before her eyes were hypnotic. She listened to the sounds of Nancy's hens burbling to themselves in their shed at the bottom of the back garden.

Smiling, Moira put her mug down on the step and slipped her feet into Nancy's garden clogs, sidling past several sheds in varying degrees of dilapidation. These provided storage space for the shop, a repository for the treasures Nancy had amassed over decades,

as well as a place to put all the household items that no longer had a use. The door of the chicken shed was stiff with damp and tricky to open, but Moira finally managed it. One by one, the chickens tiptoed out; their heads tilting in jerky movements, beady eyes bright with intent. They followed each other towards the hedge, scratching and pecking in the boggy ground. After a brief flapping of wings and fluffing of feathers they disappeared under the hedge and into the field, while Moira stood on tiptoe to peer through the pale mist rising from the dewy grass. At the lower end was a small stream, in full spate after the heavy rain and inching its way across the field towards the garden.

Nancy had told her that it would never reach the house because of an ancient incantation she had used; that and an offering of flowers to the water spirits. Nancy's prophesies and spells kept Moira amused and entertained, and the longer she stayed here, the more she was tempted to think that there might be a grain of truth in it after all. Nancy was so sure about what she believed; it was easy to get caught up in it. Besides, listening to Nancy was an easy way to keep Moira's history at bay. There was always something to do, something to talk about, preventing her past from intruding. She tried to hold onto a belief that her real life began when she woke on Nancy's doorstep; that the time before that moment didn't exist; neither did she have any reason to think about the future. Ticking along from day to day was enough.

As she turned away from the hedge, something brushed against her bare leg and startled her. She looked around but could see nothing. Just what was going on here? Refusing to be spooked by it, she turned back towards the house. By the time she got there, Nancy was already up and brewing coffee.

"I see you let the hens out. Thanks"

She gave Moira one of her looks.

"You were up early today."

"Yes, something woke me."

"What sort of thing?"

"Nothing really, I thought I heard something."

"What sort of thing?"

"The gate maybe, just dreaming I expect."

"Dreaming is never 'just'. Whatever it is, it always means something."

"Always?"

“I would say so.”

Moira shook her head in mock despair and smiled.

“Just you wait and see young lady, one of these days you’ll find out.”

Just then, something white flashed past the still open back door.

“Well would you look at that?”

The two women came out into the sunshine to be greeted by the sight of the small white cat who had stationed herself a little way away from the back door. She turned to face them with unblinking blue eyes, as if she had been waiting for them. With an exclamation of delight, Moira moved forward, but the cat immediately arched its back and bared its teeth, letting out a furious squeal. Moira backed away. Making soothing noises, Nancy reached down to grasp the cat and was bitten and scratched for her pains. Moira and the cat watched the trickle of blood that ran down the back of Nancy’s hand and dropped onto the grass.

“Oh, dear, are you okay? Shall I fetch a plaster?”

“It’s alright dear, it’s only a scratch, I’ll be fine. She’ll come round. She’s here for a reason, I’m sure of it. Anyway, white cats are lucky.”

“That scratch doesn’t look very lucky.”

“Maybe not, but I’m sure it signifies good fortune, for you perhaps rather than me.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Do you know, I’m not really sure, but something about that cat’s behaviour was deliberate, she was watching us, she wants something from us, I’m sure of it.”

“Oh Nancy, she was probably just lost and hungry. Why don’t I try her with that left over fish from yesterday?”

“If you like.”

The cat sniffed at the saucer of fish suspiciously before flipping the dish with a paw and walking away, tail held high. Fastidiously the cat made her way around the garden until she found a sunny spot where she sat and began grooming herself. As if imitating the gesture, Nancy licked the back of her injured hand

“Well puss, what are we going to do about you? I wonder where you came from, who you belong to.”

“I think she belongs to herself don’t you?”

“Yes, I think perhaps she does.”

“Do you think she’ll visit us again?”

“I think that she’s here for a reason, she’s here to stay, for as long as it suits her.”

Satisfied, the cat eyed them both warily in case either of them should attempt to come near. Moira bent down and wriggled her fingers on the ground to attract her attention. The cat watched but made no move to come nearer. Then a yapping dog could be heard, answered with a deep growl from a bigger dog further down the street and the little white cat fled down the garden. Nancy and Moira waited for a while then went back into the house, leaving the door ajar behind them.

12 Atropos

Surrounded by long grass and unable to see more than a few inches in any direction, I jump wildly hoping to see further and get my bearings though it costs me more in energy than I gain in knowledge. Apparently these cat's eyes can't see very far, and nor do they distinguish most colours: everything looks vaguely greenish grey with the occasional patch of blue. This I hadn't bargained for. Irritated by this inauspicious start to my adventure I pace back and forth for a while, keeping both ears alert for anything untoward.

I should have had a word with my cousin Artemis before I left. We always got on rather well and I haven't met up with her as often as I might. After all, she often manifests as a cat and I once visited her temple at Ephesus. I remember, I had arrived at sundown, the great staircase and the marble columns glorious in the evening light; looking out across the town, I stood for a moment to remove my sandals before going inside. There were cats everywhere, moving like dancers around the columns, stroking the marble with their tails and placing their feet with such elegant precision, each step part of some ineffable choreography. Occasionally one of them would deign to accept a brief touch from a passing worshipper. Disdainful and proud, they were undoubtedly creatures of Artemis.

Entering the temple by the huge cypress doors I remember admiring the carvings: every flower and lattice, every finely worked curve and swirl was polished to perfection. Inside the temple, the central space was dominated by the great statue of Artemis herself where worshippers knelt at her feet to present their meagre offerings in return for prowess at the hunt or an easy labour to bring forth a child. She took it upon herself to ensure a proliferation of wildlife and spent much of her time in remote mountains, forests and marshes. It is said that she joins the nymphs, naiads and dryads there to engage in wild lascivious dancing although I don't know the truth of it.

At the foot of the statue a kneeling pregnant woman was praying ardently, her head bent in submission, her offerings of honey cake and fruit, jasmine and amaranth flowers arranged in front of her silver platter shaped like a crescent moon. Circling her was a particularly beautiful cat with pale gold fur and yellow eyes. I took a step towards them but the cat looked directly at me and I waited. When this beautiful feline did come towards me, I reached down to stroke her, knowing full well that she would stand as tall as I do when she chose to reveal herself. Then, rising to her full height, Artemis was there before me, feet

planted, a bow in her hand and a quiver at her shoulder. A vivid scent, wild and fresh and feral emanated from her.

“So, what do you think of my temple?”

“It’s beautiful, a magnificent tribute to you. But I’m curious, tell me about your feline courtiers.”

She smiled.

“What do you want to know?”

“Why cats?”

“Cats have many talents.”

“Such as?”

“These mild and gentle creatures are also voracious hunters.”

“I see.”

“They need food of course but also there is the thrill of the chase. Besides they are excellent mousers.”

“Do you choose them or do they choose you?”

“Both. We are all who we choose to be, just as you are.”

“It is said that they are full of curiosity, is it true?”

Artemis smiled.

“They are, and as you know, it can kill them.”

“And do they have nine lives?”

“Not so much nine lives as nine near death experiences.”

“And what is it like to know the ninth and final one?”

She took her time before replying.

“Living as a cat allows me to experience the very edge of death, to come close to those shears that hang from your belt. After all, as everyone knows, both hunter and hunted are their most fully alive in the moment before death.”

I asked no further questions and we spent the rest of my visit peacefully enough, exploring the woods and spending leisurely musical evenings. I wish I’d asked her more, it would have been useful now. I’ve only been living as a cat for such a short time and already, I miss the sharpness of the sight I had back then. How I miss the freedom of having full use of all my senses. How strange to be in this tiny body, so lithe and supple and yet so limited, stuck in the long grass and unable to find my way. But perhaps there are compensations;

standing and stretching, I notice that every rustle, every buzz, every grunt and squeal in the meadow and the distant voices of Moira and Nancy are clear as a bell. Ears that attune to the tiniest sound are a delight, as is a nose that picks up every aromatic nuance along the way, tempting me to stray from my mission. Maybe the limited vision won't be a problem after all.

When I reach the garden I climb the fence, though there is barely any purchase for my claws. There is satisfaction in reaching a height that few creatures can manage without wings, and from the fence, I make the jump into the apple tree, all the better to survey my new surroundings. From here I can look down on them both, and I do, but when they go inside the house I descend from the tree in silence, stand by the door and wait for them to emerge. Alas, it is difficult to maintain my intention to ingratiate myself into their lives when instincts decree otherwise. Whether these urges are true to all cats or merely this one, I will never know. The inner battle will take a while before it settles so that I will be able to live alongside Moira and Nancy. In the meantime I must observe what I can from a reasonable distance.

I already know that these women are without the barest essentials for a civilised existence, their living arrangements are minimal and their clothes are rough and ugly. The girl Moira has a good figure, but covers herself in denim trousers with a long baggy hooded garment over the top and ugly boots on her feet, either that or some of Nancy's fanciful knitting. Whereas Nancy herself goes for shapeless clothes that fail to flatter despite what I can only assume are gaudy colours that my cat's eyes cannot see - fortunately. Her hair is unkempt and hard to control. She clips it up but loose strands are always falling round her face. There is not a cotyla of finesse between them. Perhaps it's the absence of servants, or maybe they are just tasteless. Watching them, I find myself wondering what it is like to grow old, physically old. I have of course existed for eons myself but I don't age. We gods remain as we are. Nancy must only be fifty years old or thereabouts and her face is already worn, her waistline expanding and she wears glasses to combat short-sightedness. They don't seem to benefit her much because she peers over the top of them much of the time.

Enough of their tedious lives, I need to discover the significance to them of the premature death of the child. Moira is the key; that much I know, so I have taken to observing her more closely. She gets up in the morning and goes to bed at night. She does what is asked of her, never goes out alone and seldom offers an opinion. Her face is pale and

sad, there is a nervous edge to her and I have never heard her laugh. Yesterday, I managed to coax her outside the house by standing in the half open doorway and looking back; eventually, she joined me in the garden. It was a relatively warm day and unusually, her arms were bare although her hooded top was still tied around her waist. She looked at me with a perplexed expression; I don't usually endure company, let alone encourage it.

When we reached the chicken shed, a small grey mouse emerged from underneath; catching sight of me, it froze. Suddenly, I was all feline. I tapped it with a paw and it moved then stopped. I slapped it again to get it going and chased it. I caught it in my teeth and let it go. It ran, I chased, it stopped. I held it firm until I decided it should move. I teased it into running, then tapped it into submission. Enlivened by the chase, for once I relished being a cat: the taste of warm living fur on my tongue, the certainty of being in control, the risk of letting it go, only to catch it again. Eventually I got bored by its pathetic tactics, limited to standing still or running away, until eventually it tired and froze more than it ran. I could hold back no longer, crunched into the bones with teeth that were made for the task, allowing a stream of warm blood to ooze across my tongue and down my throat. I looked up to see Moira staring at me in horror. It was not lost on me that I had for the second time killed something before her eyes.

Her eyes glistened with tears and she swallowed. She seemed to crumple in front of me. Hunched over, she hugged herself and let out a single groan. Fascinated, I watched her as closely as I had previously watched my prey. She sobbed, great big heaving cries that racked her body and she slid to the ground, huddled over her knees. Her face was mottled red and her eyes were swollen, snot dripping from her nose which she wiped with her sleeve. I sat beside her grooming myself, waiting for her to stop. It took a long time. In fact she was still sniffing when Nancy came back from the shop. They moved inside the house and sat together on the sofa sipping tea while I watched from my vantage point on the outside window sill, listening through the open window.

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

"I don't know."

"Well, take your time, love, we've got all the time in the world."

If cats could laugh, I would have. As it was I merely shifted my position and kept my amusement to myself. I watched Nancy put an arm round Moira's shoulders which set her off again.

“It’s such a shame.”

Nancy looked at her but didn’t ask anything, just waited. We both waited. Why on earth these mortals don’t just say what’s on their mind was beyond me. If you’ve got something to say, say it - surely? After what felt like ages, she came out with a few muffled words interspersed with sobs so that even I could hardly hear.

“The cat killed a mouse.”

“Oh Moira, that’s what cats do.”

Quite what the problem was with that I have no idea but at least Nancy seemed to retain a degree of rationality.

“It was horrible and cruel and I couldn’t stop crying.”

“I know, it’s hard to understand.”

“The poor little mouse looked terrified, and then it was gone.”

Quite right too, to my way of thinking. A cat will do what it must. As do I. The implication that I was in some way wrong is an affront. I stretch myself out to my full length and hone my claws a little on the window frame which attracts their attention. I was fascinated by how Moira screwed her face up as if she was going to cry again, but she managed to get out a few words.

“Oh Nancy, I felt so helpless and hopeless. I couldn’t do anything to make it better. Not the mouse, not anything.”

“Not anything?”

“Not even my own baby.”

Nancy looked at her with a mixture of concern and surprise.

“My dear girl, what happened?”

“I was pregnant you see and the baby died just after he was born.”

Nancy sat still and quiet, shocked into silence no doubt. Weird how my moment of anger at my sisters should have such an effect. My powers evidently extended into places I hadn’t even considered before. Moira was still going on about how hard it was to understand what had happened.

“I didn’t know how to cope. I didn’t know what to do. Nothing felt right any more. I had to get away.”

“And you ended up coming here?”

“Yes.” She whispered so quietly that Nancy had to strain to hear her.

“What about the father?”

“He didn’t want to know.”

“What about your family then?”

“I don’t have a family, I grew up in care.”

“I see.”

“I’m OK here aren’t I? You’re not going to want me to leave are you?”

“Of course not, and I’m glad you told me about it. It’ll be easier from now on don’t you think?”

Nancy paused.

“No more secrets.”

Moira leaned across and hugged her. They sat like that for ages, with Moira emitting the occasional sob. After a while I got bored, miaowed from the window sill, and stretched and yawned as pointedly as I could. Moira wouldn’t look at me but Nancy stood up.

“I think we could all do with something nice for tea, how about fish and chips?”

Aha, I think it might be time for me to commit to living inside the house with them after all.

13 Paul

Sparkling with dew, the lawn was imprinted by Paul's bare feet as he walked from one flowerbed to another. Choosing to feel the chill was an unlikely pleasure, but he relished it. Today was a day to be felt - who knew how many he had left? Paul stood for a while, his hands in the small of his back easing his body upright, admiring the branches of the Magnolia tree in the centre of the lawn, its leaves getting ready to drop. It had been the first major purchase for their garden and he remembered pacing the grass back then to find the best spot to plant it. How many years ago? Candace had done a drawing of it every year for some years and he had hung one on the wall of his office to remind him of home. Tch, where was it now? Languishing in a drawer somewhere probably. He'd admired the waxy flowers, the way they burst into bloom from their soft silver buds, proclaiming their own magnificence. He ran a hand over the bark. How extraordinary it was to think that Magnolias were a species so ancient, they'd been there with the dinosaurs. This tree was in its prime, but such longevity was a painful reminder of his own imminent departure from the world. It was more than likely that he wouldn't see next spring's floral display.

The lifespan of the tree struck him as curious. No doubt it would outlive him, by a hundred years perhaps. And what would be the point of that? All those years, for what? To end up providing logs for a fire or to be shredded into sawdust for pet litter? What a way to end up. He peeled off a small piece of loose bark and felt its dry rough edges against the soft pad of his thumb. What about his own death? Should he be buried? Perhaps inside a gleaming wooden coffin with shiny brass handles. Given enough time, both he and it could slowly rot beneath a tastefully carved headstone. Perhaps family and friends would visit, bring flowers and a cloth to polish the marble; lift moss from its crevices and shed a tear for him. The piece of bark fell from his hand. On balance though, he thought he'd rather be cremated, simpler somehow. The urn containing what remained of him might be given a place of honour on the mantel piece or more likely stashed at the back of a wardrobe because no one could agree what should be done with the ashes. He smiled to himself. Why was all this imagining so compulsive? Perhaps he was just trying to grasp a future that wasn't to be his. Candace would have told him he was being maudlin but it was impossible to stop. He could ask Jack to make sure to scatter him somewhere nice. Jack could probably be relied upon to do what he wanted, especially if Candace didn't agree. Then again, maybe

there were other options. There were certainly laws concerning the disposal of bodies and he had no idea how these things were done.

How had it come to this? When had he become this person who could contemplate his own death? It certainly wasn't evident at his original diagnosis. Back then he was certain that he would live, sure that he could overcome this. After all he was fit for his age, wasn't he? He'd been healthy all his life. This cancer was to be a joint project between the knowledge and experience of his oncologist and his own doggedness. Given time and expertise, this thing would be vanquished. No doubt about it, or so he'd believed then. Persistence had always worked for him before, why shouldn't it now? His working life was a case in point wasn't it? After all the posts he'd applied for and didn't get, there were the extra hours he put in, a willingness to keep going, reliability. Hard work and patience had always paid off, eventually. To his way of thinking it was this persistence that brought him a job for life and a decent pension, with a few decent bonuses along the way. The world of finance suited him and he prided himself on never failing to deliver what was required. If he worked and waited long enough things sorted themselves out, at least in the workplace. Unfortunately, that approach hadn't worked during his brief relationship with Jack's mother. It had taken him a while to realise that she had a different way of being in the world. She'd been difficult and demanding, liked things her own way, frequently lost her temper and sometimes disappeared for days at a time. He had no idea what to do to make things better, and then shortly after Jack was born she'd gone for good.

Left to himself again, life was calmer if a little dull. Then he'd got together with Candace. He'd known her a long time before when she'd been an art student working a summer job at the office where he then worked. Everyone liked her, she was colourful and lively, she made everyone laugh with her wild stories. He wasn't sure if they were even true but she was fun. Then she'd left to go travelling and he'd forgotten about her. It was only when he saw a picture of her in the local paper that he recalled who she was. He wondered how she was doing and on the spur of the moment, with nothing better to do, he had gone to see the exhibition of her latest work.

What did one wear to an art exhibition? In the end he'd worn his work suit but chose his most flamboyant tie, the pale blue silk one with dark blue dots. The small gallery in the high street, flanked by an antique shop and a delicatessen was at the more pretentious end of town. Paul seldom came this way and when he peered in the window he found the array

of brightly coloured ceramics bizarre and the paintings incomprehensible. He wondered what Candace's work was like and whether she would remember him.

He walked through the shop to the gallery at the back. His footsteps felt horribly loud and he immediately felt out of place. His own choice of pictures was limited to family photos although above the mantel piece at home there was a print of the Hay Wain that had belonged to his grandmother. Working his way methodically around the exhibition he looked dutifully at each exhibit. He hadn't known that Candace's work was all made of fabric and yarn, they weren't paintings at all. He wondered why she chose to work this way, it looked a lot more effort than paint. Some of them were huge pieces with lots of dangling threads and beads that didn't look like anything at all. Others were tiny framed embroideries of flowers and sunsets. He was peering at a particularly delicate cornflower when he heard whispered angry voices at the front of the shop. Feeling rather embarrassed and not wanting to intrude, he didn't look round until he heard the door slam followed by a much louder voice:

"And, you needn't bother coming back."

Candace was standing, red faced and furious at the door of the shop. She put the closed sign up and marched to the gallery doorway. It was only then that she noticed Paul standing there.

"Oh I thought everyone had gone."

She leaned back to get a proper look at him.

"Goodness, it's you. How did you get here?"

"The usual way, I opened the door and came in."

She laughed.

"Actually, I saw your name in the paper and thought I'd pop in. Is that OK?"

"Of course it's OK you idiot, why don't we go out for some lunch and you can tell me what you think?"

That's where it all began, with Paul a willing listener who demanded nothing. As their relationship evolved, he offered stability and regularity and she brought variety and fun. She used to joke that between them they made a perfect well-balanced human being. Not so balanced now though. Overcome with self-pity, Paul was turning into a sentimental old fool obsessed with his own ill-health, and as for Candace... she wasn't much fun these days.

Paul sat down on the metal seat that circled the girth of the magnolia, and massaged his icy feet, feeling the burn of returning sensation. He wriggled his toes, waiting for the

bloodless skin to turn pink, and thought about the day when his heart would stop and the blood would no longer circulate. What it would be like to die? One moment breathing as usual, the next, gone. It was impossible to imagine non-existence, and yet there were times when he yearned for it. No more treatments to torture him with their catalogue of miserable side effects. How wonderful it would be to stop living, right here, right now, instantly. Not for the first time, this thought was overtaken by terror, a deep all-pervading fear of the unknown, fear of nothingness. He began to tremble and within a few moments his whole body was shaking uncontrollably and he hugged himself tight until his fingernails dug into his upper arms so hard they drew blood and tears were pricking at his eyes. When a tentative hand touched his shoulder he looked up to see Jack, silhouetted against the sky.

“You okay Dad?”

“Not really, but I’ll be fine.”

“Your feet must be cold. Why don’t we get back to the house?”

“Wait, let me sit for a minute, I need to get myself together first.”

“Why the bare feet?”

“It’s meant to be good for the immune system.”

“Even in the cold?”

“I think so.”

“Are you sure?”

“Well, maybe not.”

Just then, high above them a passing crow made a harsh repetitive kraa, kraa. Peering up through the branches, Paul and Jack watched it circle and then land on a slender branch which swayed under its weight. Dropping branch by branch to a lower perch, it looked at Paul, then looked at Jack, moving from one to the other and back again.

“How extraordinary, it’s as if it wants to tell us something.”

“Maybe it does.”

The crow cried out again, as if in exasperation at their lack of comprehension, then lifted its wings and took flight. It swooped low, once, giving them both another meaningful look before soaring out of sight. As Jack and Paul made their way slowly back up to the house, from the vantage point of the crow, the trail of footprints on the grass marked a figure of eight - infinity.

14 Moira

On her first morning in sole charge of the shop, Moira had sold six things, and was feeling rather pleased with herself. A group of small children with their noses pressed against the window had been admiring the glittering crystals with their reflected rainbows. Moira watched them tug at their mother's sleeve as they looked at her with pleading expressions until eventually they came into the shop, not letting up until she bought them each a magical sparkly creature: a unicorn, an angel and an owl. On their way out they collided with two schoolgirls not much younger than Moira looking for a silver good luck charm to help them pass their exams. They spent some time deciding between a horse shoe and a four-leaved clover, but since they were determined to both have exactly the same, ended up with a four-leaved clover as there was only one silver horse shoe left in stock. Moira remembered to make a note in the book for Nancy to order some more. Then there was a rather drab little woman in a grey mac who couldn't remember what she'd come in for. She reminded Moira of Nancy, who often came into a room and forgot why she was there. Moira smiled to herself and suggested that the lady should go out and come in again. Her second attempt made her none the wiser but she was attracted to the colours of Nancy's brightly coloured crocheted hats. After much trying on and discussion of various shades of orange and purple she settled on a particularly subtle stripe that was the result of several batches of beetroot dye. Moira said it was perfect for her and the woman said it made her feel years younger, and whatever it was she'd originally come in for probably wasn't as nice as her new hat anyway.

Enjoying herself now, Moira was rearranging the display in the window where the crystals had left empty spaces when she noticed that the people outside had stopped to look at something. A woman holding a little girl's hand, was pointing and heads were turned in the same direction. Moira's eyes followed the woman's finger towards the shiny black bonnet of a hearse inching its way down the high street towards the church. The funeral car with its gleaming windows edged forward so slowly that Moira had time to see that the coffin in the back was child sized. The little casket was so small that she had a clear view right through the car windows to the other side of the street where a tall and slender young man wearing black skinny jeans and a leather jacket was leaning against a wall. It was only when the car had gone and the Saturday shoppers carried on moving as before, that Moira let out the breath she had been holding and saw that the young man wasn't Jack after all. A

few minutes later when Nancy bustled in with armfuls of shopping, Moira was leaning against the wall staring into the distance. Neither of them spoke while Nancy plonked the bags on the counter, put the closed sign on the shop door and gave Moira a knowing look.

“Let’s have a lunch break shall we?”

“If you like.”

Moira’s voice was quiet and her face had a distant look. Nancy began rummaging in the bags on the counter. She had to wave the sandwich box right under Moira’s nose to get her attention.

“Maybe you’re not hungry today.”

Moira smiled and took one of the sandwiches.

“Sorry, I was miles away.”

“So I see,”

Nancy reached into one of the bags, took out a pile of small boxes, removed their lids one by one then emptied a collection of elaborately plaited corn stalks onto the table.

“What do you think of the new line?”

There were loops and stars, hearts and fans, bells and hoops even small animals and figures. Moira picked one up and marvelled at the fine workmanship as she turned it over in her hand. No more than six inches high, a little golden woman, all made of spirals with ears of corn for hair and arms flung out sideways.

“Who’s she?”

“She’s a corn dolly.”

“What’s she for?”

“In the old days she used to be a gift to the gods at harvest time, to ensure a good crop the following year.”

“Oh.”

Moira twirled it round in her hand.

“She reminds us that new life will return to the world after the winter.”

Nancy took the little corn woman and returned her to the box, and without looking up said:

“So are you going to tell me what happened today.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you look like you’ve seen a ghost!”

"Maybe I did, at least I thought I did."

"Why don't you tell me about it? Talking of ghosts diminishes their power, even living ones."

Moira's voice was hesitant.

"There was a funeral going past and everyone stopped to look, and I saw someone standing on the other side of the road. I really thought it was him."

"Who dear?"

"Jack."

"And, who's Jack?"

"He was the father of my baby."

She stopped and stared into space until Nancy prompted her to continue.

"So, are you going to tell me about it?"

"I don't know if I want to dredge it all up again."

"If there's one thing I do know, it's that talking about things isn't so much dredging up as clearing out. You never know, you might feel better. Come and sit here by me."

"I've tried so hard to carry on and pretend it never happened, to forget the whole thing, surely it's better just to move on."

"I don't think you can let things go without letting them out."

Moira looked doubtful.

"Why don't you give it a try?"

"But what good can it do to bring it all up again?"

Moira could hardly bear it to think about it, let alone talk about it to someone else. Once she started surely she'd never be able to stop. She'd fall apart completely. Then what? But Nancy was persistent.

"Look Moira. You can't go on forever pretending it never happened. It's still there with you isn't it, no matter how much you pretend. In any case, you're not on your own any more. That makes a difference doesn't it? A problem shared is a problem halved they say."

"I suppose so."

"Why don't you try. We can see how it goes and you can stop if it gets too much. Why don't you start by telling me how you met?"

Moira swallowed hard, gave up the battle to keep her painful secret and the words came tumbling out all in a rush.

“I was working in a coffee shop back then, not far from the boarding school near the church. The older boys used to come in sometimes but Jack was usually on his own and I used to chat to him sometimes, I thought he might be lonely like me. I liked talking to him. He never said much but he didn’t make comments about me like some of the others.”

“And?”

“One thing led to another I suppose, we went out a few times and sometimes he stayed over at mine. He was supposed to be at school but sometimes he’d sneak out and come over. It made me feel special, that he would do that to come and see me.”

“So what happened?”

“Then he seemed to change, backed right off, stopped answering my texts, not turning up when he said he would. He just seemed to fade away.”

“And then?”

“Well, the next thing was, I realised I was pregnant.”

“My dear girl, you must have been terrified.”

“I was, I didn’t know what to do, I went all the way over to his parents’ house to talk to him but he wouldn’t let me in. Said it was nothing to do with him.”

There was a long silence until Nancy spoke softly.

“Why don’t you tell me about the baby.”

Moir’s face brightened momentarily but tears weren’t far behind.

“I wanted him, right from the start I knew I would keep him no matter what. I always wanted someone to love and look after, I’ve never had a proper family you see. And once I got used to the idea, I loved being pregnant, people were kind to me and I was so looking forward to being a Mum.”

“And then?”

“When I went into labour everything happened so fast. I managed to get a taxi to take me to the hospital but I had no idea what was going on. I remember wanting to walk around and then wanting to lie down. I couldn’t settle. Nurses came in and out, I think there was a doctor asking me questions at one point. It was as if the whole world had gone blurry and I couldn’t think straight. Everything was pain. Nothing else mattered. They were telling me to push. Then there was some kind of problem and they couldn’t get the baby to breathe and then he was gone.”

Her lips pressed closed, she sat looking into the distance, until Nancy gently prompted.

“So what happened next?”

“They wanted me to stay but I discharged myself and went home. I stayed for a few days in the flat until I couldn’t stand it any longer.”

“And you ended up here.”

“Yes, I’d been watching the TV all day and then things began to feel strange. I was seeing things and hearing things that weren’t there and I knew I had to get out. I just couldn’t stand it any longer. I had no idea where I was going so I just walked.”

“Quite right too. You needed to come here. It was written in the stars. Feeling, seeing and hearing things was probably the spirits guiding you here.”

Moira attempted a smile and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

“Come on, help me put these corn dollies back in their boxes, we’ll display them tomorrow.”

Moira tried to hide a yawn, but Nancy wasn’t fooled.

“There, that’s better. I’m not surprised you’re tired, it takes a lot of energy to relive a painful past. And I should know. Why don’t you get off home now and I’ll finish off here.”

As she turned to go, Nancy handed Moira a smooth polished amethyst from a nearby shelf.

“Here love, take this with you, it helps to dispel anxiety and relieves sadness.”

Moira smiled, but took the stone anyway. She liked the feel of it in her hand.

15 Nancy

Nancy was leaning over to read the words on a tombstone and as she stood up again, she ran a hand gently over the head of an old stone cherub. She liked to spend time in the churchyard catching up with old friends, which is how she thought of the spirits of the dead, or so she told Moira. Of course she hadn't known any of them when they were living as this was a very old graveyard and no-one had been buried here for decades. One particular tombstone was a favourite, 'the last resting place' of somebody's child, dead since 1864. Eliza Jane or 'Lizzy' as Nancy called her had been barely a year old at the time. It had been a while since Nancy last visited, and she was concerned that the spirit of the child might have been lonely without their chats. She was curious as to whether this child and Moira's child had ever met on the other side. She closed her eyes and tried to summon their spirits but there was no response; she did hear a faint cry in the distance, but maybe that was just the sound of the organ inside the church where the organist was practising.

As he got into his stride, the sounds became recognisable as music and Nancy let it draw her inside the church. In the doorway, she stood transfixed by the sound so big and full that it seemed to be made from the air itself. Half an hour later when it ended, it was as if the silence was as loud as the music. She had never heard anything like it. The shuffling of papers and a few soft footsteps broke the spell and Nancy watched the organist collect his music and exit through a small door towards the front of the church. She looked around her at the piles of hymn books at the table near the door, the rows of old wooden pews with their cross-stitched kneelers, the ornately carved lectern, the altar with its silver candlesticks and gold embroidered cloth. Looking up at the life size wooden crucifix with painted blood trickling down from the wounds, Nancy shook her head and turned to the stained glass windows. She had no idea what the Latin inscriptions meant, but the colours were pretty, and she liked the way the sun shining through the glass made patterns on the stone floor. But this was a place built to make people feel small, Nancy thought, feeling insignificant herself beneath the pillars that reached to the roof, and the windows that were so high above her head. However did they manage to clean them?

Church-going hadn't ever been part of her life. Nancy grew up surrounded by superstition, not religion. Her beliefs, that were her grandmother's and her mother's before they became hers had been passed on for generations. Oddments of common sense were mixed up with a great deal of magical thinking and more than a drop of 'better be on the

safe side'. She avoided walking under ladders or stepping on cracks, never opened an umbrella indoors or put shoes on the table, was horrified by a broken mirror, and she always touched wood when hoping for something. What would happen if she didn't do these things she hadn't really thought about but the habits had become part of her. As a child she had played with tarot cards and Ouija, experimented with casting spells and learnt to read palms.

Her gran used to read tea leaves and although Nancy knew how, she hadn't done it in years, mainly because nowadays nobody made tea in a pot. She remembered Gran peering into the cup with a frown on her face, looking up at Nancy in surprise and telling her she would one day have a daughter to look after. Since this prophecy hadn't come true, Nancy decided that it must have been symbolic rather than literal, and took to mothering anyone who would allow it. Moira was the latest in a long line of waifs and strays both human and animal that had entered and also left Nancy's home when (as others whispered) her mothering became too smothering. Thinking of tea leaves reminded Nancy that she could do with a cup of tea herself, prompting her to walk out of the church, where a large magpie that was perched on top of a tomb was busy demolishing a snail. The significance of the lone magpie wasn't lost on her; it was 'one for sorrow, two for joy' and she couldn't see another. Perhaps there'd be more during her walk back.

Surrounded as she was by graves, she fell to wondering about the spirits of the dead whose mortal remains were buried here. She knew they wouldn't have physical substance any more but nevertheless, since she could sense them, they must exist somewhere. Imagining how it would be after death was a regular pastime of hers, although she was particular about the stories she chose to believe. She dismissed the idea of the grim reaper with his black cloak and scythe: Death wouldn't be so gruesome and ghostly. Surely it would be overseen by female energy. Of course it was feminine. Women brought forth life and therefore it was only right that they should take it away. Besides, in Nancy's world, there were few men of any significance. She had never met her father and had no brothers. There had been a brief affair in her teenage years, or at least that's how she referred to it although it really was no more than a crush. Then there had been that nasty business with a drunken uncle but she preferred not to think about that.

She'd been a latch key kid, her Mum and her Gran doing long shifts as machinists at the factory down the road while Nancy got used to her own company. She read a lot, found all sorts of things in the library, some of it unsuitable according to her teacher; at least, that's

what she told Nancy's Mum. Nancy was fascinated by stories of magic and mystery. However, her mother never went to another parents evening after that because soon afterwards she became ill. Nancy was about twelve then and since her Gran was in a home and losing her mind, she just carried on going to school and looked after her Mum at the same time.

One day when she was looking for a needle in her grandmother's old sewing box, among the cotton reels, balls of wool, crochet hooks and an unfinished set of lace doilies she'd found an old pattern book inside which were some loose papers covered in scrawly writing. These were recipes for brewing vegetable dyes. Curious, Nancy took to collecting snags of wool that sheep had left on the fences. She borrowed more books from the library, taught herself to spin and persevered with her dyeing experiments until she got them right. Later she cadged whole fleeces from the farmer, and knitted scarves with her unevenly spun coloured yarn and sold them to people she knew.

First Gran died then Mum, by which time Nancy was eighteen so she just carried on without her, taking a job at the factory herself although she never liked it much. At twenty one, she inherited the gift shop from her uncle and handed in her notice. Now she had somewhere to sell her homespun knitting. In their spare time some of the machinists from the factory made rag dolls and baby clothes for her to sell at the shop. She made birthday cards from pressed flowers and offered tarot readings. Other local crafters brought in pottery or jewellery and the shop gradually filled up until it became the eclectic jumble of clothes, birthday cards, ornaments and oddments that it was today.

Oh, well, she'd better get back and see how Moira was doing. Poor kid, barely more than a child herself, what a terrible thing to go through at her age. It was about time she experienced a bit of looking after. A strange girl though, very quiet and reserved, it took a lot to get her to open up about anything. She was easy to have about the place though, went along with most things and was becoming a real help at the shop. How upset she had been about that dead mouse, and how strange that she thought she'd seen her ex across the road, or thought she had. Interesting how things happen. Moira had seemed better afterwards but it didn't take much to send her back into her shell. Perhaps Nancy should do something, have a word with the ex-boyfriend perhaps. No, maybe something more subtle, a spell for righting wrongs, to restore balance. It would be tricky to accomplish, for all sorts

of reasons. She couldn't bring the baby back but she just might be able to do something. Get the father to own up to his responsibility. Jack wasn't it?

Lost in thought, it was a while before she noticed another magpie standing on top of a particularly ancient tombstone, so old that the lettering had long since been obliterated by a combination of weather and lichen. She stood up with her hands on her hips and looked it in the eye.

"Well, well, it's you is it? Two for joy, thank goodness."

But then a second and third bird arrived, lined up together like a deputation of some kind.

"Three for a girl and four for a boy."

"You've brought your cousins to see me then? What is it? What do you want me to know?"

The two of them began what looked like choreographed movements where they criss-crossed each other, stopped here and there to peck the grass and every so often jerked a head towards Nancy as if they were discussing her. The pathways they made in the wet grass, were like shiny threads, each with its own characteristic trajectory that briefly entwined with another before continuing its singular pattern until one by one the birds returned to their perch on top of the tombstone. Then she looked again at the pattern they had made which looked like some kind of script. If it was writing it was in a language she didn't understand, or maybe she did. She walked a little distance away and looked again. It wasn't writing at all, it was a picture, a symbol of something. She couldn't quite put her finger on its meaning, something about balance? No, something unbalanced, at odds that needed to be corrected. Something she needed to do. It was all the confirmation she needed, for which she thanked them and watched them fly away one by one. Just like people she thought; they come, they make their mark and they go away. But they never tell you exactly what they mean, you have to be able to read the signs.

The folded newspaper with its crossword uppermost had few of the clues completed and even those were tentative. Why did everything have to be so difficult? Paul had never been afraid of a challenge but no matter how much effort he put into thinking it out he got nowhere. Time was when he would have completed it before breakfast, not any more. He flung the paper down and let his mind wander; so much easier to let the thoughts go where they would than to make the effort to focus. He opened the drawer of the bureau to return the pen and noticed a photograph wedged into the side that was stopping it closing properly. He reached in to pull it free and was aware of how bony his wrist was and how thin the fingers that protruded from his sleeve were and how saggy and crumpled the loose skin of his forearm was. He didn't recognise this deteriorating carcass that was now his. How had it come to this? Wellness and vigour were once a given, nothing remarkable, not worth noticing. He wished he'd paid more attention, taken time to enjoy his youth and health. Had he ever consciously taken pleasure in being well and pain free? Probably not.

He looked at the photo. It must have got stuck long before he'd moved here; the bureau was one of the few pieces of furniture he'd brought with him. The image in his hand confronted him with what he no longer was, fit and healthy. He'd had presence then, a reserved but distinguished look about him with a hint of self-deprecation; it was a rare picture of him with Jack's mother, holding their sleeping baby. Nothing of that picture remained: Jack's mother now dead and buried, Jack grown up and now there was Candace. He looked up at the mantel piece where there was a photo in a silver frame taken much later of Paul and Candace with a seven-year-old Jack in his new school uniform, one of the few pictures of all three of them. Although still relatively youthful, everyone had rather strained expressions. If he remembered correctly, there had been an argument just before. If a picture were to be taken now Paul would be unrecognisable as the same person, a frail man, older than his years, heading for death with so many aches and pains that he could hardly tell one from another. Cancer was always there, interfering with his every waking moment to a greater or lesser degree. Sometimes the pain was so severe, he could think of nothing else, it became who he was. Then when it let go just a little, the fear that took its place was sometimes worse. At night he shook with it, sleepless for hours until exhaustion intervened. He hadn't told anyone that he both wished for death and was paralysed by fear of it. Candace didn't like to hear talk of dying, not the reality of it anyway. She spoke as if it was a

philosophical concept rather than an inevitability, which was all very well for her; she wasn't confronted daily with the imminent likelihood of leaving this world for good.

At the sound of the doorbell, his thoughts followed the clatter of Candace's heels along the hallway towards the door. In his mind's eye he saw her step across the herringbone design in shades of grey and white. There had been another argument about those Italian tiles. No matter that Paul would have liked something brighter and to his mind more welcoming, Candace had been adamant that it should be neutral: 'tasteful' as she described it. After that, when it came to questions of decor, Paul confined himself to an occasional suggestion, the rebuttal of which he would acknowledge with a deferential smile. Easier to let it go, what did it really matter? Candace could be quite forceful although she wouldn't have admitted it, not even to herself. The visitor, whoever she was, followed Candace down the hall and into the living room.

"This is Nancy, from The Cauldron shop. Apparently she wants to talk to us about something."

"What?"

Paul tried to sit up straighter and winced as he did so. He was aware that Nancy was watching him and felt the need to explain but Nancy put a hand on his arm and assured him that he needn't get up. In fact she could see what was troubling him.

"Cancer isn't it?"

He nodded, mystified by this woman. What did she want? Why did she kept looking round as if searching for something?

"Is he here?"

"Who?"

"I think his name is Jack."

"What's he done now?"

"That's not for me to say."

"Well as it happens he's not here."

"Oh dear. I was so sure I had to come here now. Perhaps I was mistaken. You see, I've got a new assistant at the shop, and..."

She stopped abruptly and looked towards the door.

"Isn't there a dog?"

"No, we don't have a dog."

“Oh but you must have, I can feel his presence. He has an odd name that I can’t quite catch.”

Candace rolled her eyes but Paul spoke.

“As a matter of fact I did once have a dog.”

“What was he called?”

“He was called Cerberus, after a mythical three headed dog with a snake’s tail.”

“Oh yes, of course he was.”

Paul carried on.

“It was a bit pretentious, I know, but I’d been reading Greek mythology at the time. According to the story, the original Cerberus was supposed to prevent the dead souls from leaving the underworld by scaring them witless. Mind you, mine was a peaceful old thing, with only the one head and wouldn’t have scared anyone.”

Nancy patted Paul on the arm again and leaned towards him.

“You said ‘he was’, has he passed?”

“Passed what?”

“Passed over to the other side.”

“Oh you mean has he died. Yes quite a few years ago now.

“Perhaps you’ll see him again one day. They say dogs go to heaven too you know.”

“They do?”

It was Candace who responded.

“How do you know?”

Nancy tapped the side of her nose.

“I’ve got inside information you see.”

Paul and Candace looked at each other sideways, but Candace persevered and wanted to know how many dead dogs she’d spoken to.

“Quite a few I think. They send messages back to their owners.”

“But how can you possibly understand the meaning of all the woofing and barking? Or do they learn to speak in words when they’re dead?”

“Oh, I think you’ll find that they communicate in a different way, a kind of telepathy. I can pick up on their emotions, the love they want to send to their owner. I know, I know, lots of people don’t believe in it, but it’s something I have some experience of.”

Looking at their expressions, Nancy smiled benignly.

“Oh well if Jack isn’t here, perhaps I’d better be getting off.”

“What was it you wanted him for? Can we pass on a message?”

“No, no, that won’t be necessary at all. It’s just that I needed to see for myself... oh this must be him.”

She reached across to the mantel piece and picked up the photo of Jack at seven years old. She peered at it for quite some time and appeared to be muttering something under her breath while making shapes with her fingers on the glass. Candace and Paul exchanged mystified glances. Eventually Nancy returned the picture to its place and looked from one to the other questioningly.

“Shall we ask him to call you?”

“There’s no need. It’s only that I wanted to hear what he had to say before I ... You see I’ve only got one side of the story and there are some things that my psychic powers don’t pick up on. I’m not sure why. Oh dear me, never mind. I expect it will work itself out naturally in its own good time. There are powers greater than mine at work here. Oh and I hope you’re feeling better soon.”

She patted Paul on the arm once again and followed Candace to the door.

Without the distraction of Nancy, Paul succumbed to a wave of tiredness. Surely, all this therapy and medication was prolonging the agony unnecessarily. It was one thing to endure painful treatments if you could be sure of a cure but quite another to go on and on like he had been doing, feeling no better, and with no guarantees that he ever would get better. It didn’t seem worth it. He was sick of feeling groggy and muddled but these mental wanderings had become a regular feature of his days, and it seemed strange to him to think that he had once been clear thinking and analytical, prided himself on it. After all, that’s what made him so good at his job. Surely the gods must have it in for him, keeping him going like this. Why would they though? Maybe he had done something bad that deserved punishment. But of course he didn’t believe in all that.

When he looked up again, he was surprised to see that it was dusk and Candace had switched on a table lamp, giving the room a cosy feel, and although it wasn’t cold, Paul felt shivery. The table had been laid and the cooking smelled good but it was unlikely that Paul would be able to eat much, maybe just a small bowl of chicken soup, something comforting. Candace was a good cook.

“Has she gone?”

“Yes, she’s been gone a while.”

“Did you find out what she wanted?”

“Not really.”

Candace reached into her pocket and brought out a small card.

“She gave me this though.”

“What is it?”

“Offering her services as a medium.”

“Good heavens, how weird. Where did she say she was from?”

“From that Cauldron shop in town.”

“Her dead dog story was amusing though, and I hadn’t thought about old Cerberus in ages. Funny she seemed to know about him don’t you think?”

“Oh Paul, it’s all nonsense and you know it is, she was stringing us along.”

“She seemed a friendly soul though.”

“Huh. I think she was after something. And as for her incomprehensible prattling about Jack, what are we to make of all that?”

“It’s probably nothing important. Just a harmless busybody I expect.”

“Oh, you can be so gullible sometimes.”

Paul pushed his half empty bowl of soup away and sighed. In fact he had rather enjoyed the novelty of the woman chattering on about the afterlife even if it was about dogs. He would have liked more such conversations, a chance to share ideas about what it might be like. After all, whatever happens when we die, he’d be the one to know about it sooner rather than later. Birth, life, death, it all went by so quickly. Candace’s efforts to pretend that death didn’t really exist only made it loom larger. She seemed determined to believe that nothing had really changed for him, that things would carry on as they always had done. It was as if she assumed they would all live forever, or at the very least, that the end would be a long way off. Then again, it was odd that she often put death in her pictures: dead flowers, or decaying fruit or some such thing. Pity it was all so abstract, he sincerely wished she’d let him talk about the reality of his own end. He knew it wasn’t far away, at the culmination of his life, he wanted to be ready.

17 Atropos

Smitten with foreboding I am lying beside a sleeping Moira beneath the open skylight. There is something afoot. I sense the night sky holding its breath as the dark clouds roll in, riding the skyway in angry spurts above us. A portentous golden halo shadows the fullness of the moon as the stars wink out one by one. The first heavy drops fall silently, but as the ferocity increases to a fervent drumming on both glass and roof, I shiver and Moira wakes. Nancy appears at the door, her knock drowned out by the torrential rain, but she enters the room clutching a window pole just as the first violent crack of thunder shakes the house. She tries in vain to pull the window shut as forked lightning splits the sky and the fire and fury of the gods descends upon the house. The wind hurls the skylight fully open with a loud clang that shatters the glass and with a wild yowl, I hurl myself downstairs and out through the newly installed cat-flap. There is a deafening thunderclap and a final vicious lightning strike, which cleaves the apple tree in two. I am summoned.

Finding myself back on Olympus I calm myself. After all it is merely my father displaying his considerable powers for all to see, which he does whenever he thinks he is being disrespected, and no doubt he will make me wait. I am used to it though and it will give me space to think. Nevertheless, despite being neither cold nor fearful, I am shaking. In order to fully divest myself of the effects of transformation I must shiver until everything 'catlike' is gone. My fingernails are still a little claw-shaped despite the golden polish and I shake my wrists vigorously. Taking a few deep breaths, I am finally released and fully myself once more. From where I stand on the highest peak of Olympus, I take in the view, all the way from the rocky terrain at my feet to the blue waters of the sea, far, far below. As Helios drives his chariot low in the western sky, the last of the evening light burnishes the world around me with rosy gold. It is beautiful here and quiet, the perfect space to heal the vestiges of feline wounds. I conjure a loose garment from spider's webs decorated with dew. For several days, I sleep beneath the stars, using the daytime to wander at will, taking time to ponder my recent experiences. It seems that I had barely begun my mission when Zeus' furious storm propelled me back here without so much as a by-your-leave. He'll soon be here to speak with me no doubt – in the meantime, I shall get my thoughts in order.

What do I know so far? I've learnt a few things about being an earthbound feline, a few more about my adopted humans and perhaps a revelation or two about what it means to be a goddess. It was fortunate that I had plenty to keep my mind occupied beyond the

concerns of an animal or I would have been bored witless. Apparently cats like to take things easy. There was a great deal of sleeping to be done, interspersed with odd urges to undertake frantic and meaningless activity. Daytime was mainly taken up with lazing, dozing or idling which turned out to be surprisingly pleasant. The gods may have many faults, but they are not lazy as a rule and I quite enjoyed the opportunity to explore a bit of indolence. But after dark everything changed for me, the lure of the outside world at night was a craving like no other; a need to be out there in the moonlight, with eyes that come into their own in the darkness. Oh, the scent of earth, life in the undergrowth bursting with a dazzling array of delights to be explored, a veritable cornucopia! I can see now why Artemis regularly transforms herself into a cat.

The daytime dozing was useful; even half asleep, one twitch of an ear picks up more than Nancy and Moira imagine. Already an experienced listener at keyholes, I am well-versed in the nuances of body language and inadvertent meanings, and with the addition of feline auditory talents, I absorbed a great deal of information which will take time to digest. I found Nancy amusing with her mix and match clothing, the jumble of colours, random shapes and crude textures. Can it have been a style she intended or was she attracted by colour and sparkle, childlike, without an eye for sophistication or beauty? Still, she had a primitive respect for the worlds beyond her own, with her fortune telling and spells, which was something at least. And, this odd woman had taken Moira in, albeit treating her like a long lost child, which come to think of it, she was. Moira had come along at the right time to benefit from Nancy's mothering instincts. How odd – that she should take the girl in - why take on the responsibility of someone she didn't even know - what was in it for her? I Why would anyone want to do such a thing; even for a goddess it would be a great deal of effort for little reward. Whatever it is that drives a mortal woman to caring when she doesn't have to is a mystery to me. For a goddess, motherhood can be a dangerous game, you have to watch your back all the time, so stressful. Even though the children born to the gods are wonderfully capable right from birth, they are known for their violent disposition, especially those in the direct blood line of Zeus. Think of Hades taking off with Persephone like that, Demeter driven to distraction, causing all sorts of unforeseen mayhem to the state of the Earth. And here was Nancy, never had children of her own, choosing to play the part by looking after Moira, and seeming to enjoy it. These humans must have a strong instinct for nurture, that's for sure. As for Moira, she's still yearning for her dead child, you'd think she'd

be grateful for not having to rear it herself, and as for its father, why would she be moping about him? Fickle, like all men. Moira has a great of potential as far as I can tell. This young woman has more steel in her bones than many a lesser god, even though she doesn't know it yet. But why she got so upset when the mouse died was utterly bizarre. The mouse would have died anyway at some point, as would the child. Where's the sense in it? All men are mortal aren't they? Every man and woman who has ever lived has either died or is going to die. All the disbelief, the denial and the clinging are senseless. What is it with these people? What's it all for?

Even though I've been ending lives with my shears for an eternity, I have never thought to question it. What this might mean for the work that my sisters and I are responsible for, I have no idea. I suppose that my sisters have continued to spin the lives of mortals in my absence, though none will have ceased while I've been away. Their lifespan's measurements will have to be revised. However, the deaths must wait a while longer, since I have other plans. But first I must speak with the king of the gods. Where has he got to?

There is a faint crack of thunder in the distance, and I assume that he is on his way. Then before I have time to ready myself he is standing in front of me.

"So, you heeded my call for once."

He towers above me, implacable, immovable, while dark clouds swirl above his head.

"I had no choice since you chose to intervene in my mission."

"Such insolence."

"You may be my king as well as my father but I make my own decisions. Besides I was carrying out some important research."

Zeus pounds his staff on the rock and a roe deer and a salamander bounce several hundred feet away from where we stand but I keep my footing.

"Research? Is that what you call it?"

"I do."

"And yet you abandon your sisters, knowing that their work depends you?"

"Surely they can continue as usual while I am gone? I will catch up when I return."

Zeus raises his voice.

"The living are already accumulating in hordes. There is chaos. Hades is impatient and Charon waits by the river Styx, growing more angry by the day."

"I know, I know."

“You do not know.”

Thunder echoes around the peaks and the clouds overhead darken to match his eyes. I change tactic, look up at him with my head tilted and my sweetest smile, with my hands open, offering the merest of shrugs. It is a gesture I have used to my advantage since childhood. Ever susceptible to a demure look from a woman, even his own daughter, Zeus laughs out loud. The clouds disperse and he seats himself on a large flat rock.

“Well, well, you are a chip off the old block aren’t you?”

“I daresay I am.”

“Come, sit by me and tell me what you intend.”

“Since I can’t bring the dead child back to life, I thought I’d give an old man a bit longer than his allotted span. Doesn’t that provide balance? Surely, one soul is as good as another in the land of the dead. Does it matter to Hades which souls are garnered for his kingdom?”

“It is a matter of natural law. He whose death was ordained is still living, and the dead child will never fulfil his destiny. What’s more, it is a crime to end a life before its time.”

He speaks more softly

“But I will hear what you have to say before I make my decision.”

He runs his fingers through his magnificent beard, and I drop my bombshell.

“Father - I intend to discover the meaning of death.”

He stands up, rises to his full height, hands on hips, a colossus with a sense of humour. His roar of laughter blows the clouds north over the top of the world and beyond, causing a brief flurry of snow on a small island in the south pacific, much to the surprise of the inhabitants. When his mirth is spent, his face grows serious again and he makes his proclamation as if to a vast crowd.

“You shall have one hundred earth days, some of which you have spent already, and I will appoint another to do your work while you are gone. There is one condition. At the end of this time, the old man must be dead and buried and the spirit of the dead child must live.”

“But the spirits in Hades can never leave...”

“Then you must find a way. Furthermore, if these things do not take place in the allotted time, you shall be banished to Hades where you will serve your uncle, for a hundred years.”

In a flash of lightning, he is gone, his laugh echoing inside my head until it is eventually superseded by the rustle and whirr of awakening night creatures and I whisper to myself.

“Bloody gods.”

18 Jack

Jack was sitting at the kitchen table wishing his father would shut up. Yes, he knew what could happen to people with cancer but he wished he wouldn't go on about dying all the time. He badly wanted to put his fingers in his ears.

"You see, I've been wondering lately what it will be like. There'll be this emaciated body lying there dead, all pale and stiff, but I won't be in it any more. No beating heart, no blood circulating, everything stopped, once and for all, brain turned to mush. Makes you wonder about the mind doesn't it? Where do thoughts come from and what happens to them after death? If we knew where the mind was...that'd be something wouldn't it? Maybe my mind will carry on generating thoughts after I'm dead. I imagine them floating about like dreams. What do you think?"

"I don't know what to think."

"Candace bought a dream catcher once, said she liked the colours. Perhaps you could hang it up and catch my dead thoughts. Who knows? By the way have you ever been to the Cauldron shop?"

"No, why would I?"

"It's just that the woman who owns it came looking for you."

"I can't imagine why."

"She did seem a bit mad, said she could talk to dead animals."

"That's just weird."

"Well she seemed to know about my old dog."

"She's probably just a batty old woman."

"Maybe, but I couldn't help wondering about it. She said she could sense him in the house. I'd like to think there's something after we die. Aren't you curious about what happens?"

"No."

"Perhaps you should be. It's a fascinating topic."

"I don't think so. Anyway I'm off out."

"Where are you going?"

"Just into town."

"What time will you be back?"

"Not sure. Whenever I decide."

Paul looked at his watch.

“There won’t be a bus for a while yet.”

“I’ll walk then.”

Jack grabbed a jacket and walked off down the drive and into the road. Anything was better than listening to his Dad’s morbid rambling. Left or right? He stood a moment, then swivelled on a heel and struck out to the right, keeping his eyes downwards on the uneven verge. Not that there was much to see: various shades of mud, tussocks of rough grass, and sodden leaves turned to mush. Occasionally he was attacked by a bramble; its prickles pulling at his sleeves, though last year’s blackberries had long since shrivelled and dried up. He ploughed on regardless. After a while he took to walking in the road, which was easier but he had to dodge the cars. A sudden gust of chill wind, stopped him in his tracks and he zipped his jacket right up to the neck and turned up his collar but it didn’t make much difference, he was still cold. He was just about to get going again when he saw that he was about to tread on a dead bird by his feet. He nudged it with the toe of his boot and watched it roll a few inches onto the road. Its eyes were dull, its tiny curled feet, pathetic at the end of its twig legs, even the feathers that fluttered a little in the wind didn’t make it look anything other than dead. So this was what Dad had been going on about, an empty body, probably crawling with bugs already, gradually being eaten away to nothing. Suddenly, he bent down and grasped handfuls of grass to cover it over. He stared at the little heap of fresh green, as he slowly rubbed his damp hands on his jeans. What did that feeling remind him of? Something he didn’t want to think about, and mostly he managed not to, but in the back of his mind was a vague memory. There were mounds of mown grass, flowers and a wooden bench. Was it real? Perhaps it was just a dream or a photograph he’d seen, and yet, he’d wiped grass off his hands then too, he was sure. What did it all mean? Almost without knowing he was doing it, Jack crossed the road and turned back towards town. These vague memories jostled in his mind with fragments of overheard conversations. More and more coming to him as he walked.

“He doesn’t cry...”

“Hush now, he’s young, leave him be...”

“Best to forget...”

When a pickup truck pulled up alongside and offered him a lift, he was startled but took up the offer and climbed in.

“Penny for em mate.”

“Sorry, got a lot on my mind.”

The driver shook his head as if he doubted it, but in any case, Jack’s mumbled replies were barely heard over the noise of the engine and regular bleats of complaint from the sheep in the back of the truck, so for the rest of the short trip neither of them spoke. When they arrived at the cattle mart on the outskirts of town, Jack mouthed a brief ‘thanks mate’ and gave a half-hearted wave as he got down. He had to work his way carefully around the deep ruts and muddy puddles, while from the back of the truck, six pairs of brown eyes with blank expressions watched him. Keeping his hands in his pockets and his own eyes to the ground, he gritted his teeth as he made his way past a row of smirking farmers in flat caps and wellies. Unfortunately, just then a fully loaded cattle truck trundled by; its huge wheels whirring as they strove for traction in a particularly deep rut, spraying him with slurry, to the sound of gleeful chuckling.

Jack didn’t look up but kept on moving; it was as if his legs knew where he was going, even if his head didn’t. Not far from the cattle mart, tucked away at the edge of the park he found himself at the cemetery. The gates were wide open and he stood for a bit peering through the entrance, not sure what he was doing here; it was all very orderly, row upon row of marble and stone. When he did go inside, he took it slowly, looking all around as he ventured down the path. Some of the older headstones were tilted at odd angles as if jostling for position: a ramshackle regiment of the dead. He strolled slowly up and down the rows, at one point stopping to watch an old man polishing a black marble slab with gold writing on it, but he didn’t look up. Jack went on, rolling his eyes at some of the inscriptions, many of the dead people had apparently ‘fallen asleep’ or were ‘angels’ or some such nonsense. Flowers were everywhere: pots, vases and urns galore; anything from fresh bunches still in their wrappers to rotting brown blooms as well as some particularly garish plastic arrangements. And why were these whacking great slabs necessary? He stopped at the end of a row to contemplate a single headstone that had sunk into a dip in the ground, looking as if the earth was clawing back one of its own - like something out of a horror film. This one was thick with lichen, its wording long since worn away. Jack put a hand out and felt the roughness of its surface, as cold and cheerless as death itself. Whoever was buried here had been long forgotten, which made him wonder what was the point of all these heavy tombstones which lasted so much longer than the bones underneath them. A white

haired woman carrying a white plastic bag was coming towards him and he stood to one side to let her pass. She smiled at him and he surprised himself by nodding in return. Being here seemed to make them kindred spirits somehow.

A few rooks, wheeling above the large yew tree in the corner of the plot cawed argumentatively before resettling into the branches and for a while, Jack walked along looking up instead of down until he reached a dense hedge that bordered a separate area. Finding his way around the hedge, he came to an area with small square slabs, set flat into the ground; these must be cremations rather than burials. He turned to see a series of even smaller plaques set into a stone wall, and he knew without knowing how he knew, that this would be where his dad would be placed, with a simple statement etched in brass: In loving memory of, and the name and date. Not much for a life. He wondered if he'd want to visit, not sure what to expect or what might be gained from coming, only that perhaps he should. Hey, not much point in staying here right now though, and he made for the side entrance that would lead him back to the main road. On the way, his attention was grabbed by yet another separate plot where the graves were decorated quite differently: a gloomy stone teddy bear, toys and windmills, brightly coloured stones and some even had photographs on them. These must be children's graves. There was one at the end that looked freshly dug, The heap of soil was soft and loose and it had white stones placed round the edge of it. In the middle, pushed into the soil was a milk bottle with a single white rose in it, but its leaves were black-spotted and curled with disease. Jack swallowed, a lurching sick feeling took hold of him, and he clenched his jaw and screwed up his eyes to stop them watering.

Hearing laughter behind him, he turned to see two small boys chasing each other between the graves. As they came nearer and spotted him, they wheeled off to one side and the biggest one leapfrogged over a gravestone. The smaller one attempted the same trick but didn't make it and landed face down in the wet grass.

"Poor bugger."

Whether Jack was talking about himself or the fallen boy or the dead child in the grave in front of him was unclear. Perhaps it was all three. As the small boy stood up and tried to wipe the mud off himself, Jack looked down at the congealing slurry on his own shins from the cattle mart incident and realised he was cold as well as muddy. Might as well keep moving. When he reached the bus shelter he leant against the rear wall, arms folded and head down, contemplating the patterns made by the chewing-gum deposits at his feet,

that were not so different from the blobs of lichen on the gravestones. He only looked up when the almost empty bus drew up beside him and he climbed on.

While he was still making his way along the aisle, the bus jerked forward and Jack fell awkwardly into the nearest seat. The bus made its way along the high street, stopping briefly at the square to pick up two old ladies and a woman with a very small baby in a sling, who sat across from Jack. The two old ladies were cooing over the sleeping child and the young mother was smiling, a protective hand gently stroking the baby's tiny fingers. Jack turned away and looked out of the window, clenching his fists in his lap and finally allowed himself to think of Moira. Just at that point the bus was passing the shop with the cauldron shaped sign outside. He could have sworn it was Moira standing there cleaning it, but maybe he imagined it.

The bus squeezed under the railway bridge with a few inches to spare, drove straight past the new housing estate but stopped again outside the factory entrance with its giant sewing machine on a plinth by the gate. Three women running and waving just made it onto the bus. Breathless but vocal once inside, their expletive laced complaints about too much work and not enough staff brought Jack out of his reverie and he turned to look, quickly turning back when one of them caught his eye. There was one more stop at the college situated at the outskirts before leaving the town behind and heading into the countryside. The lanes were narrow in places and the hedges high but once they moved out into the open, Jack could see that a particularly low lying field was flooded and he was amused by the huddle of disgruntled sheep in one corner balefully eyeing the bus as it went past. The newly refurbished country hotel with its art nouveau gate was his cue to get off at the next stop, but it might just as well have been a piece of rusty corrugated iron for all the attention Jack paid to it. Alighting from the bus without acknowledging the cheery 'have a nice day' from the driver he kept his head down until he reached his own gate. When he did look up, he was taken aback to see his father leaning on the gate waiting for him.

"Look at the state of you lad!"

Jack shrugged.

"Well why don't you come and sit in the sun with me?"

The wooden bench that caught the last rays of the sinking sun each evening looked pleasant enough and since Candace was nowhere to be seen, he thought he would sit in the sun for a bit after all. He even pretended to be interested in his dad's favourite roses, the

stories about where they came from, who chose them and why, relieved that he wasn't still going on about dying. But after a while the stories fizzled out, and Jack was surprised when Dad suddenly asked:

"Got a cigarette?"

"When was the last time you smoked Dad?"

"Oh, let me think, about twenty five years ago probably."

"Well, why start again now?"

"Why not? It won't kill me any more than I am already dying will it?"

"I suppose not."

"Anyway, don't try to tell me you don't smoke. Candace might be fooled but I'm not."

Jack laughed and offered him the last cigarette in the packet, which he lit, took a drag, was immediately overcome with a coughing fit and promptly handed it back.

"We can share. A whole one's probably a bit much for me after all this time. My head's spinning."

They sat in companionable silence staring into the distance and passing the cigarette back and fore between them, until Paul spoke again.

"Where did you go?"

"I got a lift into town from a farmer who dropped me off at the cattle mart, then I got the bus back."

"Is that all?"

"Well, if you must know I ended up walking round the cemetery."

Paul gave him a quizzical look, took a final drag of the cigarette and flicked the butt into the nearest flowerbed but whatever he was going to say remained unspoken. He was interrupted by a muffled squeak and some movement of the foliage, followed by the emergence of a small white cat with a field mouse in its jaws. The cat sneezed and dropped the mouse which promptly scuttled away. Drawing herself up to her full height, with forefeet raised, the cat's eyes focused on a bumble bee that she ineffectually tried to bat with a paw. She dropped back onto all fours and padded across to Jack and Paul, seated herself calmly at Paul's feet and proceeded to lick the fur on the front of her leg.

"Well I never!"

"You've found a new friend Dad."

Paul reached down to stroke the soft white fur and the cat nuzzled her head against his leg before calmly continuing with her grooming routine.

19 Moira

On her hands and knees, red faced and elbow deep in suds, Moira was gripping a large scrubbing brush with both hands, pushing it hard and making soapy circles across the kitchen floor. Her hands had been wet for so long they were irritated and sore but she wouldn't stop. Even when Nancy came in and tried to squeeze past the table and chairs piled up against the wall, Moira kept up the rhythm of her movements in time with her breath. The bright colour of the tiles had been hidden under a layer of grime for so long that even Nancy had forgotten what they looked like. Moira looked up briefly through tangled strands of hair, tucked them behind one ear with a soapy finger then carried on without speaking. Nancy, still trying to get past, broke the silence.

"Can I just..."

Moira let out a sigh and sat back on her heels.

"You might as well say it."

"Say what?"

"I shouldn't get so wound up."

"Actually, I was going to say how lovely the tiles were looking. But, I can see something's got to you. Whatever is it?"

Moira stood up, almost slipping on the wet floor but managing to catch herself by holding onto the table, from which she took a copy of the local newspaper and brandished it in front of Nancy, her forefinger stabbing at a picture on the front page.

"Look. Just look. These people don't deserve to live, treating defenceless creatures like that."

Nancy looked down at the article about a police raid on a breeding cattery where it turned out that many of the animals had been stolen. Several emaciated cats had to be put down, while the remainder were taken in by animal charities. Those with microchips were returned to their owners, and homes were being sought for the rest.

"Yes, it's very sad. People can be cruel sometimes."

"It makes me so angry."

Together they looked at the horrific photographs, cats that looked ill, or worse - starving; all unkempt and unloved. A burly RSPCA worker in a uniform was holding two bedraggled kittens up towards the camera, one in each hand; one black, one white.

"Oh dear...is that what you think happened to our cat? You think she was stolen?"

“Think about it, she never came back after the storm did she?”

“Well, no, but we don’t know where she was before she came to us do we? She might have gone back to her original owner.”

“I just don’t believe she would have left us like that. Anyway I hate these people, they make me sick. I hope they rot in prison.”

Nancy said nothing.

“Say something then. Don’t you even care?”

“Moira, dear, of course I care. You of all people should know that, but getting angry doesn’t change anything.”

“But it’s not fair is it?”

“No it isn’t. But there are things we can do.”

“Not more of your stupid spells, How do you know they even work?”

“Maybe they do and maybe they don’t, but it’s worth trying isn’t it?”

Hot and near to tears, Moira’s hands were shaking. When Nancy reached across to touch her arm, she shrugged her off.

“Why does everything have to die? It’s horrible.”

“I know, it can be hard to take sometimes.”

Moira sniffed sadly.

“Now then, why don’t I give you a hand with this floor?”

Nancy rummaged in the cupboard for a mop and between them, they finished the floor. The regular slish and swoosh of the process felt soothing and by the time it was done, Moira had calmed down and Nancy suggested they make the most of the sunshine and get out into the garden.

The old apple tree was still splayed across the lawn where it had fallen when the lightning struck it, the night the cat disappeared. It was old and gnarled and had bright green moss down one side of what remained of its trunk and the bigger branches that lay all about were encrusted with eau-de-nil coloured lichen which Nancy hoped would make a good dye. The tree had been riven entirely in half, with just a few inches of stump still standing. Moira and Nancy had been stepping awkwardly around it in order to get in and out of the garden ever since it happened. Nancy’s collection of gnomes, wind chimes and fairies were completely buried and the bird bath looked as if it was broken.

Clad in wellington boots, warm jackets and bobble hats, they shooed away several disgruntled hens who had been rummaging amongst the heap and set to work. The smaller branches could be easily clipped and soon filled an old dustbin. Nancy found a saw to tackle the thicker branches; it was a bit blunt but they managed between them, taking it in turns to work up a sweat, then stacked them neatly by the side of the house. It took most of the afternoon and they were still only about half way through. Even then, the larger branches and the split trunk would have to wait until a Nancy had a word with a kindly neighbour who happened to own a chainsaw. Moira began pulling out some of the things that had been buried underneath. Unfortunately, the bird bath was now in several pieces and would have to be got rid of but some of the fairies and most of the gnomes would be fine after a lick of paint. Something to do on a winter's evening perhaps. Moira was tugging at a thick rope that was caught up in the branches; it took some heaving to get it free but she managed to pull out the old swing with its battered wooden seat.

“Nancy, I thought you said you'd never had children?”

“ I didn't.”

“Why did you have a swing in your garden then?”

“Oh, it was here when I moved in. When the children from next door were little, they used to come in and play on it sometimes. I liked watching them. They're all grown up now of course. It's been rotting away for a long time.”

Moira frowned and stared into the distance.

“What is it?”

“Oh I don't know, the swing reminded me of something, I'm trying to remember where I saw it.”

“Was it from the past or from the future?”

“Um, I don't think it's possible to be reminded of something from the future, that doesn't make sense.”

“It most certainly is possible, and it makes perfect sense. It could be a premonition you see. It'll be trying to tell you something.”

“Oh Nancy, you always think everything means something.”

“Everything does”

“How do I know what though?”

“Just give it time. Let the memory settle.”

"It's just a swing; swinging by itself."

"And?"

"It just seems sad, an empty swing. And now this one too will be firewood."

Nancy stood with hands resting on the rake, and waited a while before speaking again.

"Nothing lasts forever. Everything must go sometime."

Moira sighed.

"I suppose it must."

"Of course. But we're still here aren't we? We'll be around for a while yet I daresay. And whatever the future brings, we'll find out when it happens, if not before."

Moira laughed.

"I'm sure we will. Do you know what? I think I've spent so much time here with you now that I'm beginning to think there might be meanings in things too."

"Excellent, we'll have you reading tarot cards before you know it!"

They worked on until dusk and Nancy found the old incinerator behind the shed.

"Let's have a bonfire of all the odds and ends that we can't use for logs."

Nancy set some screwed up paper and twigs at the bottom and they filled it to overflowing before putting a light to it. The pair of them stood in its glow, watching the flames flick through the branches, listening to the crack and spit as the fire took hold. From time to time they threw more in, sending clouds of smoke skywards. The smoke swirled and spiralled upwards making shapes against the sky like wings. Nancy screwed up her eyes to make out the shapes more clearly, to be sure what she was seeing.

"Look, look, what does that look like?"

"I can only see smoke."

"Don't you think it looks like a phoenix?"

"A phoenix, isn't that some kind of mythical creature?"

"Yes it is, it's a very special bird."

"What kind of special?"

"It's an interesting story. It lives for five hundred years, then at the end of that time, it just sits on its nest and bursts into flames. Then, it flies out of the fire, brand new, a young bird ready to begin another five hundred years."

"Wow, that is quite a story."

“And what’s more, if you see one it means that you or someone close to you will be reborn.”

“That’s just nuts! People can’t be reborn.”

“I think you might find that they can, we’ll just have to wait and see.”

20 Atropos

Paul's hand is dry and crumpled, hardly anything between the skin and the bone. I hear a faint crackle as my ear folds beneath his fingers. Again and again, he runs his hand over my head and down the back of my neck. Curled up at his feet, I lean into it, enticing him to speak.

"I guess life is simple for you Puss, minute by minute, day by day, week by week. Do you ever think about where you've been, what you've done?"

I offer a faint purr.

"How many of your nine lives have you had?"

If only he knew! Inwardly I smile, urging him to continue.

"They say what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, but what if 'it' hasn't killed you yet? What if 'it' is still working on it? Eh? What would that mean eh Puss?"

Yes, what does it mean if this man is still here? That's what I'm here to find out. I tap his leg with a paw.

"And why now? Is now ever a good time to die? If I'd known all along when my time was up, would it have made any difference? One thing's for sure - if I had any say in it, I wouldn't have chosen this long drawn out process, hanging on to life by a thread. There's no point to this half-life, is there? I mean the feeling ill, the lack of energy, this waiting, endless waiting. But who knows? Is there ever a right time to die?"

What an idiot! Everyone knows, the right time for anyone to die is when I say so. But of course he doesn't understand. He looks down at me with those sad, soft eyes.

"And what comes next? Judgement day perhaps, weighing up the good deeds against the bad, right against wrong; then again, how do we know what's good or bad, apart from the obvious things. There's only what we agree with or disagree with. One man's meat is another man's poison..."

Just as it's getting interesting, the door opens and in walks Jack, looking somewhat disconsolate, judging by the droop of his shoulders. Or maybe he always looks this sour.

"Hey Jack, come and join us. I could do with someone else to talk to; Puss here isn't up for conversation."

"What do you want to talk about?"

"I've been thinking about life."

"That'll make a change."

Paul ignores Jack's comment and carries on.

"You know, life's a funny thing. You think it goes on forever even though you know full well it doesn't. No matter what happens, you think there'll be time, endless amounts of time. Time to do the things you want to do, to sort out problems, put things right, to improve yourself, make amends - unless you're a pessimist of course. Candace says I'm a pessimist but she's wrong; a realist is what I am. I look at all the facts before I do anything, rather than jumping in without thinking and assuming everything will be fine. Carelessness - that's the worst thing. I prefer to plan, that way you're more likely to make things work out. Don't you think?"

Jack makes a non-committal sound half way between clearing his throat and 'hmm'. I look directly at Paul eye to eye, willing him to carry on, which he obligingly does.

"Most people don't know what courage it takes to be cautious: to take your time, regardless of what people think, to believe in your own way of doing things. I've been a man of moderation throughout my life, prided myself on it. I've worked at this, tried to be reasonable, not be careless, think before I act, to do what's right, whatever it takes. I wanted to be sensible. Is that wrong? I don't think so. But then again, it niggles me that I'll never know who I might have become if I had made different choices. But it's too late now."

His voice tails off and I shuffle with irritation. Is this man ever going to stop with the self-doubt and self-pity?

"How do I know that it's better to be careful than to be reckless. Supposing things were different Jack? What then?"

"How do you mean different?"

"Oh, I don't know. What am I saying? Could I have been different, done things differently even if I had wanted to? Would this have been possible? Is it really a matter of choice? Am I the way I am for a reason? I don't know. Maybe it's just that I want more from life because I don't have much of it left."

"Don't we all."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"You're not the only one who wants more from life you know."

"But you're young, you've got all those opportunities ahead of you."

"Huh. Chance'd be a fine thing."

"Really?"

“There’s loads of things I’d do if I had the chance...or the money.”

“I thought you told Candace you were going to get a job and earn some money.”

“Too right I am. I’m sick to death of putting up with her sarky comments, it’s getting boring.”

Ah, humans! Jack wants a life he doesn’t have the guts to pursue and prefers to blame other people for his lacklustre existence, whereas Paul wallows in thoughts of what his paltry life might have been! Why neither of them does anything about it is beyond me. What do they think life is for? Why don’t they just do as they please? I certainly do.

“Oh Jack, I’m sure you’ll find a job. Besides, you’ve plenty of time to make something of your life. You’ve got years in front of you, but it’s much too late for me now. For me it’s a question of regrets.”

Jack makes a wry face.

“For goodness sake Dad, what regrets have you got? I always thought you had a pretty good life.”

“Right now, I regret everything - all the chances I never took, all the interesting places I never saw, all the people I never got to know, all the fun I never had, all the things I never said and now I never will. Only now, I want something more, now I want time to try it again, do things differently. If only I had a future to look forward to. Oh I wish I was young again like you, with everything before me, free to imagine what my life could be. Aha, then you’d see...”

“Um...”

“Maybe I could have been a passionate man, who lived life - as they say - to the full. What if I’d gone travelling, taken up motor racing, run a marathon every day for a week, explored the wild jungles of Borneo or had numerous affairs with beautiful women? What if I had courted the friendship of the rich and famous or mixed with powerful people? What then eh?”

Jack laughs.

“Sounds like fun!”

“Well it’s all down to you now Jack; after I’m gone you can pick up where I left off. You can do what I never did; experience everything that you can while you’ve got the time and energy to really live. Before you’ve had time to store up regrets about missed opportunities.”

Jack shakes his head.

“But what if I can’t? What if some things just aren’t possible? What about bad things you can’t do anything about? What about stuff that’s already happened?”

“Oh, Jack, we can’t change the past can we? We can only go forward. If I’ve learnt one thing, it’s that we can’t undo what we did.”

He pauses, looks thoughtful.

“But I do know that we can make peace with the past.”

“Yeah, but how? Things don’t always work out do they?”

“No, but that’s no reason not to have a go is it?”

“But what if it makes things worse?”

“Well then, you try again. In my experience, in time, regret becomes softer round the edges, less about guilt and more to do with sadness. And that’s a very different thing.”

“Still not much fun though is it?”

This is getting interesting now. I keep perfectly still while I wait to hear what he’ll come up with next.

“Lots of things are painful. Like when you lose something or someone, it hurts. And, I think that has to happen.”

“Why?”

“Because over time, it changes. It becomes bearable. It becomes part of you, all mixed up with the part that cares.”

This is such a strange concept to me: all this pointless suffering. Jack is looking at his father intently and I am willing Paul to say more.

“When my older sister died, I thought the worst that could possibly happen, had happened. I was a older than you were when your Mum died, I was twelve. I didn’t speak about it but the pain of it was terrible. I thought I’d never feel right again.”

“But you did.”

“Yes, I did. Over time the hurt I felt became less fierce and less frequent. It still appears from time to time, and then it’s like I’m back there as a boy, alone in the world, missing her. These days the pang only lasts for a moment, it’s gone as quickly as it came, but now I treasure these moments of remembering; they are special, painful and loving at the same time. She meant a lot to me and I wouldn’t wish the sadness away now. It’s part of

who I am. Loving her and losing her taught me a lot. Life has to move on one way or another.”

He smiles at Jack’s expression, a mixture of doubt and confusion, reaches an arm round his shoulder and leans in to hear his question.

“How long does it take?”

“It takes as long as it takes, like everything else. But it’s only now I can see that everything that’s happened in my life was for me to make of it what I could. It’s made me who I am. And now I want to make the most of everything that’s left for me, and I think you should do the same.”

“Even if I hate the things that have happened to me?”

“Even if you hate everything about it, even if it hurts.”

“Even if you feel really bad?”

Paul laughs.

“Especially if you feel bad. What happened, happened, we can’t change it, but we can try to make something good come of it by being different afterwards. After all, if I *had* lived a wild and exciting life instead of playing safe all these years, perhaps by now I would be sitting here thinking of nothing so much as peace and quiet. I might be quite content to lounge about and philosophise a bit. Who knows?”

“But how do you decide what to do?”

“I don’t know Jack, but I’m beginning to think that perhaps it’s better to learn from experience than try to think it all out.”

Jack is looking doubtful and I decide to intervene by leaping up onto Paul’s lap and he pulls me up to his face, nose to nose.

“What do you think Puss? Shall I go wild before I die? How long have I got left?”

I look back at him. You’ve got as long as I decide old man. Not a second more, not a second less. And then I curl round to lick the fur of my tail, good grooming is important.

21 Jack

Since job opportunities open to Jack were few and far between, he was beginning to regret having said anything about getting a job but he certainly had no intention of going back to school. Now he felt under pressure to apply for any and every local vacancy, which is how he now found himself sitting in the tiny office of the manager of the sewing factory assuring him that he was conscientious, enjoyed being part of a team and understood something about the clothing industry. Since none of these things were in fact true, he was trying to appear enthusiastic about the prospect of working in a boring old factory with a load of old women, and all the time smiling politely.

Apparently, there was no time like the present to get started so he donned a green overall several sizes too big and prepared to spend the next two hours 'learning the ropes'. 'The ropes' turned out to be: making tea to meet the supervisors' exacting demands, trundling wheeled bins of fabric pieces from the cutting table to the machinists, taking finished articles from the machinists to the packing department, unpacking orders of thread and storing them on the shelves in order of colour, sweeping the floor, and last but not least showing no embarrassment at some of the ribald remarks directed towards him by some of the women. The trial run was deemed a success and he was offered the job, and he surprised himself by feeling pleased. That'd show Candace.

When he got home, he found his dad in the garage running a duster over the already immaculate paintwork of the classic car that he hadn't been able to drive since he'd been ill.

"Hey, guess what Dad?"

"What?"

"I got a job."

"You did? Well done."

"It's only at the factory but it's money, it'll do for now."

"Congratulations. Do you fancy a drive?"

"If you like."

"Why don't you hop in the driving seat?"

"Me?"

"You passed your test didn't you?"

"Yeah but..."

"But?"

“But I haven’t driven since then.”

“About time you did then.”

Jack didn’t need to be asked twice and settled into the leather seat, peered at the instrument panel in front of him while running his hands around the wooden steering wheel. Paul pulled open the passenger door and sat beside him, awkwardly extending his legs, then zapped the sensor to open the garage door and handed Jack the keys.

“I’m not supposed to drive on all this medication, and Candace doesn’t like to mess her hair but the old girl needs a run out. The car I mean, not Candace.”

A glimmer of a smile appeared at the corner of Jack’s mouth, developing into a full blown grin when the engine started up with a deep growl that rumbled through them both. Carefully, he took his time to ease the elderly sports car out into the drive. Wow - Dad’s pride and joy, polished to perfection and rarely allowed out to face the elements, and he was driving!

“Let’s get out to the dual carriageway and you’ll be able to put your foot down.”

“Right oh.”

Jack wasn’t going to argue. He’d better get moving before Dad thought better of it and changed his mind. By the time they reached the main road, he was getting used to the way the thing handled. When he pushed the accelerator, the car surged forward and the wind buffeted his face, making him feel truly alive. Even the ancient suspension seemed to give him a sense of connection with the road itself, the power beneath his feet was exhilarating, like flying. The sensation was oddly familiar, and after a while he remembered why. He must have been about six years old and his mum had been with him then and in a weird way, it felt that she was with him now, egging him on. Just like Dad said, the memory of her was both sad and happy at the same time. Dad was turning out to be more interesting than he’d thought. And what was all that about him wanting a different life, wishing he’d had more excitement. Glancing at him now, he tried to figure out what was going on with him but he couldn’t tell if he was gritting his teeth at Jack’s inexperienced driving, or trying to stop his teeth from chattering. Brilliant that he’d let him drive though - and now he knew where he was heading. He could almost hear his Mum’s gleeful laugh at the idea of it.

When they arrived at the beach, he drove straight along the sea front and parked at the far end. Hey, it was only a short walk from here, he thought, even Dad with all his aches and pains should be able to manage it. It took a while to get him out of the car; his legs had

stiffened up, but after a few deep breaths of sea air and Jack's arm to hold onto, he seemed okay. The few yards to the fairground entrance were managed by stopping several times to look at the view. Jack was trying to be patient but fizzing with the idea of what he had in mind. Paul smiled at him.

"Out with it lad, where are we going?"

"Rollercoaster. I must have been about six the last time I went on one."

"Oh."

Jack looked at him.

"If that's okay with you?"

"I guess so."

A loud clash of pop songs from a decade ago bombarded their ear drums; each ride seeming to hurl its music towards its neighbour, high pitched shrieks adding to the racket. Jack laughed and didn't notice his father wincing at the cacophony. Only when they were waiting in the queue for the roller coaster did Jack become aware that his dad perhaps wasn't as enthusiastic as he was.

"Are you sure you're okay with this Dad?"

"I think so."

"We don't have to go on it if you don't want to."

Paul took a deep breath.

"I think I do want to."

Jack looked at him as if to say 'do you really' and Paul assented by paying for them both. Finally locked into their seats and ready to go, Jack squeezed Paul's arm and it was as if they were both six years old, a couple of kids, emotions jumping back and forth between excitement and fear. And then they were off. First the slow climb to the top during which Jack managed to coax a smile from Paul. A brief pause at the summit, a deep breath, then the increasing speed of the headlong plummet, cold air pushing them back in their seats, the squeals of other passengers ringing in their ears, followed by the slow haul upwards again, then a series of slightly smaller drops until they finally came to a stop, back where they began.

As they heaved themselves out on wobbly legs, giggling like the kids they once were, they stood for a while watching a group of small children queuing for candy floss, peering

into the whirling drum while the stall holder twirled each long wooden stick, gathering pink sugar strands.

“Shall we?”

“Yeah, why not.”

The eating process was trickier than Jack remembered, each mouthful as insubstantial as sugar coated air. It was tiresome and delightful at the same time, but impossible to avoid sticky faces and fingers. Remembering Dad’s precious car, Jack suggested that they go down to the sea to clean up. Salt would be better than the stickiness of sugar. Aware of his father’s frailty, Jack steered him carefully down the steps and onto the sand where they wove their way around groups of determined beachgoers, huddling behind windbreaks while their braver bare-limbed children built sandcastles. At the water’s edge, Jack bent down, ran his hands through the surf and sloshed salt water across his face. Looking up he realised that for his father to do the same thing might just be a step too far, so cupping his hands he scooped up more water and held it up to him. Paul shook his head and insisted on getting down himself. It took a while, but leaning against Jack, he managed to get onto his knees and splash his own hands and face.

“You’d better give me a hand up Jack. It’s not as easy as it used to be.”

Jack grabbed his arm and despite a couple of slips into the soft sand his efforts eventually succeeded in getting Paul to his feet. With damp shoes and socks, they headed back up the steps for a stroll along the old fashioned seafront. There were amusement arcades, ice-cream parlours and gift shops. They paused at a rotating stand of picture postcards: scenic views of an impossibly turquoise sea, brightly coloured cartoons of fat ladies in striped bathing suits complete with rude jokes about honeymoons and vicars. Inside the shop, they laughed at the tawdry souvenirs that Dad said took him back to the sandcastles and donkey rides of his own long forgotten childhood. He picked out a garish orange-brown donkey with a woebegone expression on its face and salt and pepper shakers hanging from its saddle

“Do you think Candace would like it?”

Jack laughed.

“I doubt it.”

“Don’t you think she might enjoy a bit of kitsch?”

Jack was dubious but Paul bought the donkey anyway, and had it gift wrapped for good measure. By the time they got back to the car it was late afternoon and the sun was low in the sky. They were in for a chilly journey home. Jack's fingers were soon completely numb but he surprised himself by not minding the discomfort at all. He was however aware that even though Paul had folded his arms and put his hands into his armpits his shivering was becoming increasingly severe. Jack yelled to him:

"You okay Dad?"

The shouted reply came back through chattering teeth.

"I'll be fine."

After a while, Paul extracted a frozen hand from his left armpit and reached into the glove compartment for an old battery radio which at full volume could barely be heard at all. Then they sang along to a series of old Beatles numbers, finally giving up on the radio and relying on memory, humming any words they had forgotten. It helped to take their minds off the cold so by the time they'd run through their repertoire of Beatles' songs, they were turning into the gate.

The roar of the engine diminished to a faint rumble as they drove into the garage, and Jack felt a pang of loss as he handed the keys back. Paul was looking weary and a little blue with cold.

"Come on, let's get inside."

Jack took his father's elbow and helped him up the front step and into the house. Ten minutes later, they were drinking tea in front of the Aga and slowly warming up, each thinking their own thoughts. Tapping his fingers on the table to bring them back to life, Jack smiled across at his father.

"Thanks Dad."

"You enjoyed it then."

"Yeah, it was cool."

"Good."

"I haven't had such a good time in ages. How about you dad? It wasn't too much for you was it?"

"To be honest, I wasn't sure to begin with. As a kid, was always scared of fairground rides."

"And now?"

“Hmm. Actually, I was just thinking that there are things that can kill you and things that make you feel alive, and sometimes they are the same thing.”

“I think that’s the point of a rollercoaster isn’t it? To feel scared of dying and thrilled to be alive at the same time?”

Just then the cat emerged from her latest hiding place, sidled past Jack with a flick of her tail and leapt into Paul’s lap as if to establish her rightful place.

“I guess it reminds us that life and death are never very far apart.”

The cat twitched an ear and purred contentedly.

22 Candace

When Candace returned late, she found Paul fast asleep at the kitchen table with his head resting on folded arms, next to a pair of damp socks that were draped over the Aga. His feet were bare and there was a tell-tale dark seepage at the bottom of his trousers. Gritting her teeth, she picked up one sock in each hand and deposited them in the washing machine. There was a trail of sand across the floor, and cursing under her breath, she went to fetch the dustpan and brush to clean that up too. Noticing the cat, curled up on his lap she eyed it warily. She watched it stretch lazily and drop to the floor whereupon she opened the door to shoo it outside but it refused to move from its current vantage point under the table. Creeping forward, she made a grab for it but the cat yowled and jumped sideways. Then she grasped a tea towel and lunged forward again trying to capture it but the cat dropped low on her belly and shot past Candace who unfortunately tripped on her own tea towel and ended up on her hands and knees. She and the cat glared at each other from opposite sides of the room.

Paul sat up.

“What are you doing down there on the floor?”

“That bloody cat will be the death of me.”

She stood up brushed sand off her knees with an expression of extreme distaste and waited for Paul to say more, which he didn't.

“Once and for all, will you please get rid of that damned animal?”

She saw something glitter for an instant in Paul's eyes, but his voice was gentle.

“She's just a cat, can't you just let her be?”

“This is my home and I don't want to share it with any wildlife that decides it belongs here.”

“Come off it, she's hardly wild!”

Rubbing her bruised knees, Candace begged to differ.

“Anyway, where have you been all day?”

“Out.”

“Out where?”

“Down to the seafront with Jack.”

“How on earth did you get there?”

“It's okay, Jack drove.”

“What? You let him drive? Is he even insured?”

“Probably. Don’t worry I’ll check before we do it again.”

“Again? What do you mean again?”

“We will be doing it again, I need to spend more time with my son. Besides, it was the best fun I’ve had in years.”

Candace sighed.

“That’s all very well for you to say but you really need to be looking after yourself properly. You need to build up your strength not tire yourself out on mad escapades just to humour Jack.”

“As it happens, it was my idea not Jack’s.”

“Oh for god’s sake what are you playing at. You’re being stubborn and childish and it doesn’t become you.”

Paul groaned.

“What does it matter? Who knows how long I might have? I might as well make the most of it.”

“Oh, don’t start that again. The treatment seems to be working now. You’ll be fine as long as you take care of yourself.”

“By doing what? Cocooning myself in this house for the rest of my time on this earth? It’s my life, what’s left of it, and I want to live it.”

“By behaving like a spoilt teenager?”

“Oh Candace, that’s not fair.”

“I hate to hear you talking like this, you’re making a fool of yourself.”

“I’d rather die a fool who tried to live than remain a living corpse.”

“Stop it, stop it. How can you talk like that?”

“I’m just being truthful. I’m dying and I’m trying to come to terms with it.”

“You’re just making yourself miserable. You need to be more positive, isn’t that what the consultant said to you?”

Candace waved a hand towards him as if to end the discussion and to brush the very idea of death away and spoke with a much conviction as she could muster.

“I’m sure we’ve both got years ahead of us.”

Paul shook his head and reached for the package on the table in front of him.

“Anyway, I bought you a present. Here.”

He took the gift wrapped box out of its paper bag and placed it on the table, whereupon, the cat jumped up as well. At Candace's frown, Paul scooped the cat under one arm onto his lap while Candace undid the ribbon. She paused before opening the box, very much aware of being watched by both Paul and the cat. She hated being put on the spot like this, disliked surprises, especially when it appeared to be given as a sop to her mood. She was so tired of all this. Tired of Paul being ill, tired of their regular miscommunication, tired of having to cope with it all, tired of trying to be positive all the time. Everything was set to wind her up, everything was infuriating. Slowly she slid the lid off the little box and lifted out the china donkey.

There was silence for a while as she turned it over in her hands, then she detached and replaced the salt and pepper shakers, before putting the whole thing back in its box. There was a brief internal battle between saying something non-committal and saying what she felt, when the cat sneezed. Candace pushed the box back towards him.

"What were you thinking?"

"Okay, okay. It was a joke, I thought you'd find it amusing."

"I don't want to be amused and I don't want that animal in here."

"Okay, okay."

Paul went to take hold of the cat with both hands but she was too quick for him and leapt off his lap, shot through to the living room and retreated under the sofa, out of sight and inaccessible but still very much the focus of Candace's thoughts. What was it about that cat that upset her so? She was annoyed with herself for being rattled by it. She knew she was being unreasonable, but it was yet one more thing come to show her that she wasn't as important to Paul as she should be. As if Jack wasn't enough, now there was this cat taking up even more of his attention. It obviously offered Paul some kind of comfort that she herself was unable to provide, but it was the sense of entitlement exuded by the cat that got to her, the look of superiority in its eyes was unbearable.

Her righteous fury felt enervating and she was even more determined to persist in her war against the cat. She slammed the door as she went out.

23 Nancy

An assortment of small glass, pottery and metal containers adorned every available surface, and into each one, Nancy dropped a nightlight that she pulled from a brown paper bag in her hand. Then, reaching behind one of the display cabinets, she pulled out a candle snuffer in the shape of a witch's hat, a folded dark green chenille cloth and a long wooden box with one taper in it.

"Oh that's lucky, we've got one left."

"I would have thought it was unlucky that there was only one left."

"Might as well look on the bright side don't you think?"

Moira smiled and went over to help Nancy haul out a folding wooden table which was heavier than it looked. After a great deal of heaving and heavy breathing, they managed between them to set it up in the centre of the shop. Using her sleeve, Nancy carefully wiped the dust off it, reached underneath to check the leaves were properly set; then with a flourish, she violently flapped the cloth, launching more dust particles into the air as it settled onto the polished surface. The chenille was faded on one side and had what looked like moth holes dotted here and there and its square corners drooped unevenly from the circular table. Nancy smoothed the surface with her hands, trying to even it up and a few threads from its fringe fluttered onto the floor. Finally, in the centre of the table she placed a shallow glass bowl of water into which she placed a handful of pebbles and floated a single nightlight nestling inside a little wooden box. Perched on the counter, Moira watched Nancy light the taper then touch it briefly to each wick until the space was filled with soft glittering light. Finishing with the one in the bowl, she blew out the taper; and a thin spiral of smoke curled upwards, leaving a faint smell of burnt cotton.

"What's the bowl of water for?"

"It represents the four elements that make up our world: pebbles from the earth with air, fire and water."

"Oh."

"But of course there's another element outside of what we know."

"Which is?"

"The realm beyond this one. I'm hoping the spirits will join us from the other side."

"The other side of what?"

Nancy laughed.

“Well, I don’t know why we say that, but really it’s another world, the spirit world, where we go when we die. If all goes well, we are going to hear from some dead souls.”

“I see,”

“There now, we’re all set. The ladies’ll be here shortly. Be a dear and pull the blinds down in the windows would you?”

Moira hopped down from the counter and leaned into the window space to do as she was asked, just as the door opened and a trio of women bustled into the shop. Nancy walked over to put up the closed sign and she and Moira set up the rickety folding chairs around the table while the women watched.

“Welcome, welcome. Stick your coats over the counter if you want. Do come and sit down. This is Moira by the way.”

There was a fair bit of creaking and squeaking as they settled into chairs that looked a little frail for their human cargo, but eventually everyone was settled. Nancy beamed at them all.

“It’s been a long time hasn’t it?”

She looked around at their expectant faces and patted Moira on the wrist. Moira looked at the four pairs of hands on the table in front of her and brought her own slender fingers up to join them.

“Yes dear ladies; it’s time to consult the other world again. I’ve had a sense for some time that they’re ready to get in touch. We must create the best possible environment to welcome them.”

Moira was puzzled.

“Who are they?”

“Well that depends. I won’t know in advance who’s going to come forward.”

“Are they ghosts?”

The ladies tittered.

“I wouldn’t call them ghosts, I prefer to think of them as spirits. Ghosts have a bad press don’t they, all clanking chains and moaning. What’s happening here is nothing like that at all, nothing to be frightened of.”

Moira’s expression was hard to read; doubtful but perhaps a little curious at the same time. Nancy smiled warmly at her and she didn’t ask anything else.

“Let’s see who’s ready to talk to us shall we?”

Nancy leaned back into her chair and closed her eyes, breathing slowly and evenly, focusing her attention inwards.

“Wait, wait. Please, one at a time... Yes but I can’t hear when you all speak at once... Oh it’s you is it... Can you please calm everyone down ... Thank you. Now, who’s first?”

Nancy was frowning, tilting her head as if straining to hear.

“Oh it’s Ted, hello again.”

The smallest of the women leaned forward, chin in hands, her bony wrists exposed.

“He sends his love and says give the grandkids a hug from him.”

She beamed at Nancy.

“Is there anything else?”

“Oh yes, he says make sure you eat properly.”

The woman pulled her sleeves down and placed her hands back on the cloth.

“Tell him I miss him.”

“He knows, dear, he says he knows.”

Nancy paused with her head turned sideways.

“Wait, I can hear something else. What is it? Sounds like somebody sawing. Does that mean anything to anyone?”

The largest of the women wriggled on her seat, causing it to creak alarmingly but she remained in place.

“My brother was a carpenter. Could it be him?”

“He’s nodding, I think it’s him. Was his name Bert?”

“No, not Bert, Bernie”

“Ah, yes, Bernie. He’s holding up his hand.”

“Right or left hand?”

“Right, why?”

Eagerly Bernie’s sister leaned forward which made her chair wobble but she moved back and planted her legs more firmly to just in time to avert disaster.

“How many fingers are there?”

Nancy frowned.

“Four fingers, one thumb, as usual!”

“Oh, how wonderful.”

“It is?”

“You see, he lost a finger, in a sawing accident, it seems that he’s got it back. How wonderful.”

“He says to tell you he’s having a great time and not to worry.”

“Oh I can’t tell you how pleased I am to hear that.”

The woman sighed and dabbed at her eyes with a crumpled handkerchief that she pulled out of her pocket.

The third woman’s face was blotchy with crying and from time to time one or the other of her two friends put an arm around her shoulder by way of encouragement. Now she hunched over and burst into full blown sobbing. One of her friends mouthed to Nancy ‘her little dog, run over, only last week’.

“Oh I’m so sorry to hear that. No wonder you’re in such a state. But, it might be too soon dear. He might still be in shock himself especially as the death was traumatic. Why don’t you come again in a few weeks’ time and we’ll find out how he’s doing then?”

The poor woman sat back in her seat, continuing to sniff from time to time. Nancy held up a hand to them all for silence.

“Someone else is coming through. Greetings my dear. Who are you and what do you have to say to us?”

There was quiet for a while and everyone began to fidget. Nancy raised her hand again to make them still.

“Jess?...”

Nancy looked at Moira and took her hand.

“What is it?”

“Jess... for you.”

“But I don’t know anyone called Jess.”

“A young woman. Well, she was a young woman when she passed. Anyway, she knows you.”

“Well I don’t know her.”

“Wait a minute... Oh I see... There are things she wants you to know.”

“This can’t be right. What can a dead woman I’ve never heard of possibly have to tell me?”

“Let’s find out shall we. It’s been a long time; it’s difficult for her to speak. Shall I ask her to show me?”

Moira looked dubious but curiosity got the better of her and she nodded.

“She is in a sunny garden with lots of flowers; a beautiful paradise, she has been there a long time waiting for someone to come through to her. Oh, and there’s a small child with her but he’s not hers.”

“What happened to her?”

“She was killed in a car crash.”

“Oh.”

“Her son was in the car too but he survived and she misses him terribly.”

“That’s very sad, but I don’t see what any of that has got to do with me.”

“Hush, let her explain in her own way.”

Nancy now had the full attention of the three women and Moira was leaning forward in her seat.

“She’s showing me pink carnations.”

“Why? What does that mean?”

“It means the love of a mother for her child; the love she cannot give to her own child, not directly anyway. It also means gratitude.”

“Gratitude for what?”

“She wants to thank you.”

“Me? For what?”

“I’ll ask her to tell me directly if she can. You want to thank her?... Thank her for? ... Oh I see.”

Nancy reached for Moira’s hand with a gentle expression on her face.

“She wants to thank you for your son.”

The colour drained from Moira’s face and she would have tipped over backwards if Nancy hadn’t caught hold of her and put an arm around her shoulder to keep her steady.

There was silence for a while until Nancy judged it okay to carry on.

“She is showing me a golden haired boy, showing me how much she loves him.”

Moira’s eyes were brimming with unshed tears and Nancy waited and took Moira’s hand before she spoke.

“Your baby is her only connection with her son.”

“But that doesn’t make sense.”

“Yes, my dear, it does. Your son is with his grandmother; your baby’s father is her son; yes, yes, I’m sure I’ve got that right; she’s smiling and nodding to me.”

Moira wriggled uncomfortably in her seat.

“I don’t understand.”

“Of course, this is all new to you and it takes a bit of getting used to. Most people don’t have the chance to experience such things. You’ll need time to take it all in.”

Nancy kept a close eye on her for the rest of the evening. During all the tea drinking and chatting among the three visitors, the oohing and aahing over Nancy’s latest creations, Moira was very quiet, although she managed to nod and smile appropriately. It was only later when she and Nancy had the place to themselves again and were clearing up that she asked:

“Did he look happy?”

Since the roller coaster ride, something had changed for Paul; it felt like a wake-up call, a change of gear for him. That night he had slept extremely well, notwithstanding the row with Candace; in truth, he was quite enjoying sleeping in the spare room, going to bed when he liked and getting up as early or late as he pleased. This particular morning was a late one. He had been reading till the early hours and didn't wake until after Candace had left the house, probably on some mission to promote her work somewhere, and Jack was no doubt at the factory by now. Judging by the half-drunk cup of coffee on the table, he'd been running late as usual. Perhaps Candace had given him a lift but he doubted it.

Rummaging in the kitchen, he found a single slice of chocolate gateau in the cake tin which he decided would make a perfect breakfast, that and a cup of strong coffee, with added cream and a spoon full of sugar. An appetite for sweet things was a new discovery which no doubt Candace wouldn't approve of if she knew. He smiled to himself as he licked remnants of icing off his finger, relishing the rich chocolaty sweetness. He idly flicked through the pages of the local newspaper with its usual collection of non-events, but the pontifications of local dignitaries and the latest rivalries between football clubs failed to engage his interest. However, when an item on the small ads page caught his eye, he reread it several times before carefully tearing it out and folding it into his wallet. After a leisurely shower, he dressed in several layers. Although he was feeling more energetic, he was still very thin and felt the cold, besides he had discovered that bulking up with several layers of clothes gave Candace the impression that he was putting on weight and stopped her nagging him to eat. He topped off his outfit with a trilby hat that he hadn't worn in years, before picking up the old briefcase that he hadn't used since he left work. Then he tucked it under an arm, thrust his hands in his pockets and went out to the garage. The car gleamed. There had been far fewer occasions when he felt up to driving in recent months, but she was more regularly polished than ever. He backed her out and headed into town, parking at the leisure centre so that he could walk across the park and through the alleyway to the high street.

He'd always liked people-watching and had often wiled away a spare hour here in the park on a sunny afternoon. It was nice to wander without an agenda of any kind and he gave in to an impulse to sit for a while on his favourite bench in the community garden. It felt right to savour what gave him pleasure in the time he had left. Who knew how many days remained to him? He closed his eyes and listened to the squeaking wheel of a wheelbarrow,

the slice of a spade into soil, the crunch of boots on the path, a cluster of sparrows twittering to each other and occasional voices. In the distance, the traffic on the high street hummed its way onwards to wherever it was going. He breathed in the green smells of the garden and thoughtfully ran a hand over the well-worn leather of the briefcase on his lap before rising to his feet to continue his walk. He took the well-trodden path around the perimeter of the park as far as the stream. It didn't usually warrant being called a stream because in the height of summer it wasn't much more than a ditch, but today it was rippling along at quite a pace. Paul followed the path across the little wooden bridge and stood for a while looking down into the water beneath him as it swirled against the bridge supports and rolled over the rocks. Slithers of weed shone green below the foam. It looked inviting. He was startled by the sound of someone's footsteps right behind him and looked round to see a young woman standing there. Seemingly, she too had been absorbed in her thoughts because she backed away as if she hadn't expected him to be there. He continued on his walk and thought about how odd it was that someone could stand next to you in silence and think their private thoughts and you wouldn't ever know anything about them. He wondered what she was thinking and what she thought about him, if anything. By the time he reached the entrance to the alleyway at far side of the park he turned to look back and the girl was standing on the bridge looking into the water as he had done.

The briefcase swung from one hand, its weight giving him momentum as he made his way through the alleyway and into the high street. Here, there were a great many more people about, strolling in uncoordinated groups weaving their way through. He stepped into the throng, manoeuvring his way between them, sometimes with the crowd and sometimes against it. Strangely, it felt to him like a dance. He'd never been much of a dancer, but something about the swerve and sway, the spaces that appeared in front of him, the way he altered his pace to match the flow, made him feel in tune with life. He was so focused on the movement that he almost missed the doorway he was looking for and had to backtrack a few paces.

Peering into the window of the pharmacy, he admired the display with its rows of blue and brown apothecary bottles, the brass weighing scales, and the collection of medicinal ingredients used in ancient times: laudanum, lead, eucalyptus, lavender, salt crystals, castor oil, ginger and wood ash. He wondered what would have happened to him had he lived then, how would his cancer have been treated? By bloodletting, leeches, snake

oil or some such thing, he imagined. But would that really have been worse? He pushed the door open and walked into the shop. It smelled of perfume which made him sneeze and the white coated woman behind the counter looked up.

“Can I help you?”

“Yes, I think you can, I am returning these.”

The woman peered over her spectacles as Paul undid the briefcase buckles and folded back the leather flap. Lifting the case above the counter he tipped out an assortment of small white packets into a mound on the counter, the total collection of his medication.

“Here you are, I won’t be needing this lot anymore.”

The woman blinked at him and took a step back, beckoning to the pharmacist.

“I can’t be doing with all the side effects, you see. I’ve had enough. I’m going to take my chances without.”

“But...”

“Good day.”

He doffed his hat with an unaccustomed flourish, stowed his now empty briefcase under an arm and left the shop, leaving the two of them staring after him open mouthed. By god, he felt so much better. Doing what he pleased was proving to be a real tonic. Next, he thought he’d try the new coffee shop a couple of doors down, a particularly rebellious choice since caffeine was also on Candace’s banned list. The counter looked as if it was made from old pallets, and there were tin cans full of cutlery by the till. He ordered an Americano with hot milk and allowed his sweet tooth to decide on a flapjack as well. What the hell. He chose a table in the far corner by a window that was made from old treadle sewing machine like the one his mother had once owned. In the centre was a chipped teapot that served as a vase for a spray of freesias. Sipping his coffee he watched the crowd go by, continuing their mysterious interweaving that had the effect of looking purposeful, clustering together and drifting apart again, much like the water under the bridge, rushing who knew where. It would continue whether he was part of it or not, but for some reason this didn’t make him feel sad.

A van pulled up outside the newsagent opposite and he watched the driver carry a stack of magazines tied with string, one in each hand; they looked heavy and awkward and the man had to turn his body sideways to get through the door. All that paper, all that life being written about, all those stories and events, for what? What did it all amount to in the

end? And then he remembered the advertisement he had cut out of the paper that morning, extracted the little piece of newsprint from his wallet, and smoothed it out on the table in front of him.

He took another sip of coffee and a bite of flapjack, pulled his phone out of his pocket and placed it next to the piece of paper and looked from the phone to the paper. He reached for the phone then changed his mind several times before he eventually entered the number given on the advertisement. A slight flush suffused his face as he waited for an answer. He spoke at length with the person on the other end and then wrote a time and date on his hand with a biro that lay on the table. Was this what life was all about? It very well could be.

25 Atropos

In the greenhouse, I am curled neatly between a pile of broken terracotta pots and a stack of seed trays, having been shut in by Candace while Paul was still asleep. There's a smell of soil and damp which is not unpleasant, reminding me of Olympus after heavy rain. I stay where I am for now, although I'm perfectly capable of getting out through a broken pane; even if I have to enlarge the break by causing a spade handle to fall against it. It is warm under the glass and the buzz of an insect battering itself against it provides a companionable backdrop to my thoughts.

It appears that withholding the fatal cut to the thread of Paul's life hasn't removed the prospect of his impending death from him, in fact it has magnified it. Death looms large and he talks about it constantly. The unexpected extension to his lifespan isn't experienced by him – or anyone else for that matter - as a gift, which is odd. You'd think they'd be grateful. Until very recently, he's been moping about all the time with a woebegone face, while Candace ignores him or makes a ridiculous fuss about anything he does that she doesn't like. Zeus, that woman! Talk about two faced, genteel on the surface and seething with resentment underneath. Heavens above, the jealousy that emanates from her is tangible; puts my fur on end as soon as she comes anywhere near me. Not that I'm unfamiliar with others' jealousy, being a goddess, it pretty much comes with the territory.

I shake my head and flick an ear at the troublesome bumblebee that finally found its way into the greenhouse.

What Paul must have had to put up with from Candace over the years! Maybe she'd have preferred him gone. And yet, and yet... She's in complete denial, pretends it isn't going to happen. Why would she do that if she actually wanted him gone? Cowardice perhaps? Can't bear to think about it? Yes that's more like it, keep your head in the sand and it'll go away. Haha. What nonsense.

Then there's his recent change of attitude, less doom and gloom, more fun. Where did that come from? Is it Jack's influence? I don't think so, it's more as if Paul is carrying Jack along with him – since Candace won't join in. The closer he is to his demise, the more intensely alive he becomes. The less time he thinks he has, the more he values it and the more he strives to experience it more vividly. He knows that his lifespan is decreasing daily; but he is wise to put his trust in the fates to decree the moment of death. As he says himself, what will be will be, it is out of his hands except his choice to relish whatever remains of his

life. I guess the monotony of his drab life finally got to him so that he might as well do exactly as he pleases with whatever time he has left. Well why not! Good for him. I wonder what he'll get up to next; I know he had something in mind when he left the house this morning. The new lease of life that I inadvertently granted him is proving rather entertaining. I think I might do it more often, although I've no idea what my sisters would say about it, or my uncle Hades for that matter. Still, when I've found out what it all means, I'll be able to justify it. But for now I need to show a certain person what I am made of. I will not be disrespected, neither will I be harried by my inferiors. It is time to teach her a lesson she will not forget, time to wreak a little havoc, and show a little of my power.

Without further ado, I jump up onto the potting bench, tip over a little trug full of dead roses and nudge the handle of the leaning spade so it crashes into the already broken pane of glass. Easing myself to one side to let the broken glass fall, I cast an eye across the gap, leap through the hole, avoiding the sharp edges, adjust my body in mid-air and land on all four feet a little way away from the greenhouse. I make a jump into the shrubbery and from there wend my way towards the house. Standing perfectly still, my eyes track from Candace who is seated by the leaded window of her studio just under the roof - to a narrow ledge of an upstairs window - to the roof of the porch - to the rose arbour and then to the garden bench. I measure the distances and easily make the windowsill in five precise leaps. My effort is rewarded when Candace glares and lunges towards the window. The old latch is fiddly and she struggles to open it. I watch her, taking my time before dropping back down to the ledge just as she finally gets the window open. Unhurried, I return to the lawn via the porch, the arbour and the bench and proceed to lick smooth a ruffled area of fur on my shoulder. Candace is a poor shot and the items from her windowsill that land on the lawn are nowhere near me. I spot the scissors upended in the grass, the pieces of broken bowl, and the book splayed open across several worm casts, shake my head and briefly look back at the window over my now perfectly groomed shoulder before disdainfully walking away.

During rest of the day, I keep well out of sight, biding my time; after all, I have an infinite amount of it. Though I may be masquerading as a cat, a goddess is not to be trifled with, and I will accept nothing less than adoration from a mere mortal. My anger is to be savoured, tended and grown, seeding my revenge. By the time night has thrown her blanket of darkness across the garden, and the moon has passed its zenith, I am ready to make my next move. Adept at stealth and silence, I move through the shadows to the house, only

once turning my head from the direction of my prey towards the sound of a distant siren; its plaintive cry adding a suitably mournful note to the early hours.

I enter the locked house via a window with a broken catch that drops me into the larder. I am able to manipulate the door handle by launching myself from a top shelf, pulling down on it with my forepaws, and as it opens, I fall into the kitchen. As ever, I land on all four feet, take a moment to orient myself before moving silently through the house and sidling into Candace's studio. Jumping onto the desk, first I ensure my escape route by lifting the latch and pushing the window wide open. Then I survey the room for useful artefacts. Aha: a bottle of Indian ink, with its stopper not fully pushed in which I take my time to gently nudge over, so it releases its stopper and the dense black pigment in its suspension of liquid, flows out. Patting the bottle causes it to roll, sending ink in several directions across the desk where it seeps into a pile of rough sketches, meanders through a heap of silk threads and begins to darken the polished wood of the desk itself before trickling softly over the edge to the floor. The drawing pen with its wide nib spatters further droplets as it rolls off the desk and lands nib down in the pile of the carpet. I jump to the floor, pad through the stain, weaving an intricate trail of footprints.

Satisfied, I turn to the embroidery frame. The beautifully worked rendition in black thread on an amber ground is based on Greek pottery. I am appalled and impressed in equal measure at the fact that I and my sisters are the subject of her embroidery. It reminds me of something, someone, what was it? Ah, yes, the story of Arachne, a mortal weaver who had the temerity to compare her skills with the goddess Athena herself, then ashamed of her irreverence, hanged herself, but at the last moment she was given a partial reprieve, transformed into a spider, doomed to weave her webs forever. Such is the predicament of a mortal who dares to emulate the gods. As for Candace's disrespect, I have something else in mind. The tightly stretched embroidery in its frame is perfect for scratching and I set about doing so with as much vigour as I can muster, cleaning the ink from my fur, polishing my claws, leaving trails of threads to hang down and several holes ripped in the fabric. Mortals do not go unpunished for harassing the gods, as Arachne found out to her cost. My final task is to demolish the treasures on the window sill; some are pushed onto the desk to roll in the ink while the rest are eased through the window to meet their fate amongst the thorns of the roses or smashed onto the stone paving. As a final flourish I sweep a paw across the desk and a paperweight, three books and lamp teeter over the edge with a satisfying crash.

Surveying my handiwork for the last time, I make my exist through the window via the same five precise leaps that I accomplished earlier and slink down the garden to wait in the shrubbery. When light streams through the window and raised voices carry across the shadows of the garden, I am satisfied that the trail of devastation resulting from my night's work had the desired effect and I set about grooming myself back to perfection.

In her dream, Moira was in the middle of a field of white flowers calling to her lost child. Because her baby was never named, there was no shape to the sound, but nevertheless, she called. It was like the cry of a bird, carried on the wind, and far, far away a small golden haired child peered into a pool of water, listening.

Moira burrowed deeper into the bed and suddenly struck with an aching period pain, she curled up, hugging her knees. Half asleep, the fierce repeated pain reminded her of the second stage of labour, when her baby was about to be born, and she clenched her jaw and tried to will the pain away but each time it came, the memories came too. Woozy, she opened her eyes and stood up until dizziness dropped her back onto the bed and she turned her face to the pillow. When she woke the second time, with tears wet on her face she wondered if she was going mad. Surely by now these memories should be less vivid, she should have been able to put them behind her. There was no point in going over and over it, it wouldn't change anything. No matter how much she told herself to stop thinking about it, the memory would come anyway. Now she was wide awake, too restless to lay there a moment longer and although it was early in the day, she got up, dressed quickly, tiptoed across the landing, smiled at the gentle snoring as she passed Nancy's room and made her way downstairs to the front door.

Quietly she stepped away from her dreams and her troubled thoughts into the chill morning air, blinking at the brightness of the sun that hadn't yet risen above the rooftops. A walk might do her good. The movement helped the pain and the change of scenery refreshed her mind. She'd always liked the high street with its parade of shops, so different from the town she'd lived in before which was all chain stores and charity shops. She took her time, sauntering along the pavement looking in shop windows. Here was the butcher's window with its plastic pig's head and gleaming empty trays with neat rows of plastic greenery in between them, the greengrocer's with its battered wooden shelving waiting for its covering of fake grass that would be piled high with baskets of produce. The shoemaker's window that was spotlit to show off a moving model, his arm with its little hammer rising and falling but not quite hitting the nail on the heel of the boot in front of him, while on his china face was an expression of pure boredom. The bright lights of the minimart with its pile of metal baskets just inside the door was pleasingly ordinary next to the smart façade of the delicatessen next to it, with its bunches of fresh herbs, teas with

unpronounceable names and a blackboard listing obscure foreign cheeses. Much further down was the art gallery, and Nancy's place, The Cauldron.

A sudden painful twinge caught Moira by surprise and she walked across to sit down for a minute on the steps underneath the clock tower in the centre of the square. When it chimed the hour, she felt it as well as heard it. Each strike was still resonating when the next one began so that it seemed as if each new peal had the effect of stopping the previous one, until the last. The eighth and final toll went on reverberating, hanging in the air like a memory until all its energy was spent.

A clock had struck the hour just before Moira's baby died. This too remained hanging in the air, no matter how much she wanted to forget it. It happened, it's done, can't be undone, people told her: sometimes these things happen, it's nobody's fault, you'll get over it, you'll move on from this, you're young, you'll have another child one day. Some of them even said maybe it was for the best. But there was no best about it. It was all too much, how could she ever make it okay? Looking up at the sky, seeing the clouds scudding across the blue, she thought about nature and wondered why things had to die, and whether there was something about her that had caused it to happen, something she had done to deserve it. With that a deep sadness settled its weight across her shoulders, and her head drooped, her downcast eyes settling on the florist shop over the road. A woman came out of the doorway with several shiny buckets hung from each arm and proceeded to place them along the little courtyard outside her window. She continued toing and froing, firstly with a watering can which she emptied into the containers, then with armfuls of flowers; shades of pink, red and orange that she nestled among fronds of greenery. When the display was complete, the woman stood back to admire her work. Sensing eyes on her back she turned to look but Moira's face was blank and gazing into space.

When the clock chimed once for the half hour, Moira stood up and walked across to the shop. The florist called out to her.

"We're not open yet."

"Oh, I know, I just wanted to look."

The woman came out and smiled at her as Moira gently touched a spray of tiny white flowers.

"Baby's breath."

Moira was startled.

“What?”

“Baby’s breath, that’s what the flowers are called.”

Impulsively she leaned forward, pulled out a single spray and handed it to Moira.

“Here have it.”

Taken aback, Moira looked from the flowers in her hand to the woman’s face.

“Their proper name is Gypsophila Paniculata, but ‘baby’s breath’ suits them much better don’t you think?.”

“I suppose so.”

Moira frowned and the woman smiled at her reassuringly but Moira turned and walked away, clutching the wet stem against her so that a tiny rivulet of moisture ran down the front of her coat. What was it about walking that helped? Ever since the night she had walked away from her old life and ended up in Nancy’s shop doorway, walking had become a regular habit. The rhythm of it eased her state of mind and she went for a walk most days. She usually went to the park, sometimes following the path, at other times taking a random direction and seeing where she ended up. This time she meandered slowly, talking in what was around her. She thought she had explored all the hidden corners by now, but today she discovered one she must have missed. Now the hedges had been trimmed she could see a stone wall with an elaborate iron gate. A notice explained that this was a community garden, cared for by volunteers. She pushed the gate open and walked into a cultivated plot which must have once belonged to a manor house that no longer existed. At the sound of the gate opening, a man in a baseball cap looked up briefly before continuing with his hoeing.

Moira walked around the edge, alongside the wall, occasionally bending down to read the labels on the plants. In the far corner was an overgrown area, very different from the organised flowerbeds and neat rows of the vegetable plot. The notice said that they were rewilding a part of the garden to encourage insects and birds. The thick foliage encroached onto the path making it difficult to negotiate and Moira had to ease herself carefully past some giant stinging nettles in order to get through. Pushing the greenery carefully to one side she found herself in a corner where long grasses were interspersed with flowers that Moira didn’t know the names of and she picked a few of them to add to the spray of baby’s breath that the florist had given her. To one side of her was a wooden post with a metal plaque set into it on which was written the word Elysion. She had been standing there for so long staring at it that the gardener called over to her.

“You all right love?”

“Yes, I’m okay thanks. What does the word mean?”

“What word?”

“Here, on this plaque, it says Elysion.”

“Oh, I’d forgotten about that, it means paradise. Someone put it up in honour some of the volunteers who retired I think.”

“Oh.”

She put her hand onto the plaque with a thoughtful expression and the gardener returned to his work. What was going on? She was reading significance into everything. It must be something to do with the dream she’d woken up with. This wasn’t like her, maybe she was ill. But it niggled her, hadn’t Nancy said something about paradise at the seance? Oh dear, Nancy’s wacky ideas must be affecting her more than she’d imagined. She strolled away from the garden mulling things over, letting her feet take her where they would until she arrived at the little wooden bridge at the edge of the park. There was a tall man standing on the bridge, hunched over the rail, peering into the stream; he seemed totally absorbed. She watched him for a while, noticing how thin he was. When he eventually realised she was there and looked up, she could see how pale and gaunt he was and wondered if he was ill. He lifted a weary hand towards her as he walked away.

With the bridge all to herself, she leant over the rail as he had done, looked down into the water and allowed herself to really think about her baby for the first time since he had been taken from her. She remembered his tiny body, his perfect hands and feet, his sweet face with eyes closed as if he were only sleeping. He had been a living part of her body for all those months and then he was gone; his life ended at the very moment it had begun. She could not, not for a single moment regret that she’d had him. Only then had she felt valuable, purposeful and truly alive - even his death couldn’t take that away. She looked down at the flowers in her hand and not knowing that she was going to do it, one by one she dropped them into the fast flowing water below and watched them drift downstream: a long line of nature’s perfect creations floating away, swirling and tumbling, on a journey towards their inevitable end. Then she turned away and left the park.

Back home, she was even more quiet than usual. Nancy was about to ask a question but Moira’s expression stopped her. There was a fierceness to her that Nancy hadn’t seen before and although she had always been quiet, now she was firmly shut inside her own

thoughts. Those thoughts, if Nancy had been able to read them would have revealed little more than questions. Since the night of the séance Moira had been torn between wanting to believe in life after death and wanting to write the whole thing off as nonsense. Nancy seemed so sure of everything, it was difficult not to be carried along with it. Even Moira had a mental picture of Jack's mother with her grandchild in that sunny meadow. And yet, this picture could just as well have come from a picture somewhere that both Nancy and Moira had probably seen in a book or something. It bothered her though. But what if it was true? What if Jack's dead mother was with her dead grandson? And where were they now? What did it all mean?

27 Paul

The cover of the notebook was dark green leather, with the letter 'C' embossed in gold in the bottom right hand corner, its pages rich as clotted cream. It was a notebook that Paul had given to Candace some years ago and she'd never used it. He'd retrieved it from the waste basket where it had ended up after the cat had got into her studio and caused all that damage. He wondered what had got into the poor cat, something must have put the wind up her, it was so unlike her. Now adorned with paw prints on several of the pages, the notebook had fewer pages on which to write. Paul didn't mind though and he kept the book by his bed with his favourite pen. Part diary, part notes of random ideas and part 'to do' list, his words were written in the old fashioned way with a proper fountain pen using midnight blue ink. Serious items such as reviewing his will and planning his own funeral had been relegated to the back page. His writing was neat and orderly for the most part but as he flicked through the pages he noticed how the slope of the letters had become more pronounced as he went on and the lines of words filled the pages from edge to edge as if to make sure all the available space was used. Items on the 'to do' list that had already been accomplished had been ticked with a curling flourish: roller coaster ride, get Jack driving, ditch the medication, insist on keeping the cat, walk barefoot, get up when I feel like it, go to bed when I feel like it, drink coffee, eat cake. Today however was to be a major event; it might even be the start of a regular part time job.

He arrived early and there was plenty of space to park the car. Carrying a small bag, and with the same anxious mix of fear, trepidation and excitement that he had about the roller coaster, he entered a side door of the slightly run down Victorian building and made his way up the stairs as he had been directed. He found himself in a spacious room on the first floor, greeted by a charming woman who was 'eternally grateful' for his prompt reply to her advertisement. The echo of their footsteps in the empty room with its high ceiling made him feel very small and vaguely reminded him of school. Enormous cast iron radiators – that got so hot you couldn't touch them as he remembered - were situated beneath window sills that were at shoulder height so all you could see of the world outside was sky. In the centre of the room was a low dais, on top of which were various props, blankets and cushions. As the students drifted in, chose their places and prepared to get to work, the woman showed him to a side room where he could change.

It was no bigger than a broom cupboard but he managed perfectly well but when he returned to the big room, wearing nothing but a dressing gown, his earlier optimism was seriously dented. He made himself concentrate on the feel of the wooden floorboards under his bare feet. Taking a deep breath he stepped up onto the raised platform and looked around at the circle of easels and eager faces. For a moment, he froze but managed to overcome his stage fright and drop the dressing gown to one side. When the tutor asked him to move slowly, turning, bending, stretching, leaning, crouching, he needed to concentrate, which helped. Staying in each position for no longer than thirty seconds, kept him focused on his next move rather than his nudity. The room was silent except for the scratch of charcoal on paper and the occasional cough. Then he was asked to hold poses for ten minutes at a time: leaning with one elbow on the back of a chair, with legs nonchalantly crossed, standing legs akimbo with hands on hips, hugging himself with head turned to one side, hands clasped behind his back with one leg forward. He was warm in front of the bright lights and beginning to feel at ease, even pleased with himself. Perhaps he would spend more time without clothes at home. After all, what did he need clothes for when the house was always warm? Why limit himself to baring his feet.

However, a half an hour seated pose caused him a few problems and he realised he would need more padding under his bony hips. He was vaguely aware of quiet conversations between the tutor and the students, discussing his bones, how useful it was to be able to see the structure of his skeleton so clearly. Never had the knobs of the vertebrae running snake-like up his back, or the two bones of the forearm that crossed to accommodate a twist or the complexity of his ankles and wrists been so thoroughly scrutinised. There were more people in this room looking at his body than had seen it in the whole of his life, and yet he felt comfortably anonymous.

At the break, once more in his dressing gown, he walked around to look at the drawings. How thinly covered were these charcoal bones, how gaunt the face, how tense the shoulders. How unnatural he looked in his nakedness. Had he ever truly felt that he belonged in his own skin? Even as a child? Probably not. Anyway, before his body finally succumbed to death, he was pleased to put it to good use. He hoped that evidence of the new attitude that he was trying to cultivate, would show up in someone's drawing at some point. It would be nice to be portrayed as carefree and at ease before leaving the world for good.

Now he prepared himself for a couple of hours in one position by lying on his side in the recovery position, wedged around with cushions, facing half the room and his back to the other half. A few of the students moved their easels around to find a preferred viewpoint. As the clattering and chattering gradually ceased, Paul's body settled more deeply into its pose, softening and easing the muscles in the neck and shoulder and across the face. Already his mind was beginning to drift into that pleasant state halfway between thinking and daydreaming.

For the first time in many months he felt entirely at ease. He felt ageless and pain free. The little white cat came into his mind and he had the strange impression that she had something to do with it. They do say that pets are good for the soul but it was more than that: it was as if she had chosen him. How could that be? He wouldn't dare mention it to Candace...or would he? Would he be prepared to talk about these ideas, regardless of her derision? He sighed and must have moved slightly because there was a momentary pause in the sounds of drawing around the room. Remembering where he was, he smiled to himself at the sheer unlikelihood of his being here. He wondered what Candace would have thought if she had seen him, his naked body receiving the gaze of a room full of people. She must have been like these students, once upon a time. She'd never mentioned that she'd done life drawing but he supposed she must have. Without moving his head, he looked up to the window, to the blue of the sky. The clouds were moving quickly and he tried to imagine them as strange creatures like he had done as a child. Lost in their continuous shapeshifting he was amazed how quickly the time seemed to pass. Even during the break, he had kept his newfound composure, moved and stretched the muscles that had gone numb quite unselfconsciously and then wrapped himself in his dressing gown once more to stroll round the room and see what they'd made of him. When he eventually settled himself back into position against the chalk marks that the tutor had made at key points on the floor, it took a while to get into exactly the same shape as he had been before and he even managed a direct conversation with several of the students who needed him to move a little here and there to make sure he matched their drawings. He surprised himself by feeling empowered rather than vulnerable. If he could do this, surely, he could do anything.

Afterwards, fully dressed once more, he stood with the tutor and students while they discussed their finished work. When he looked at the various renditions of his body, he saw that each drawing expressed something of the individual artist as well as the model.

Nevertheless, it was his hands, his feet, his posture, his face, his expression that had been captured. This is how they each saw him, and if he died tomorrow, something of him had been captured on these sheets of paper, and if any of these students were to become famous, Paul's naked human body might one day be seen by other people in other places. But that would be for fate to decide. For now, these smudgy lines were enough.

28 Atropos

With an ear to the door, I listen to Lachesis and Clotho discussing the thread of someone's lifespan. Lachesis holds it up to the light and I can see that the fibres are worn very thin, with fragments falling away. The quiet subdued colours that ordained the way of life, inoffensive greys, mellow shades of amber and the palest verdigris were flecked with tiny slubs of acid yellow and what appear to be an inky stain seeping from the inside out. Lachesis beckons Elpis. Apparently, at the behest of Zeus himself, this very minor goddess has temporarily assumed the role that is mine. As she stands up, her blue silk gown, dark as the night sky reveals layers of richly embroidered sprays of white starflowers, each bloom with a shining crystal bead at its centre. A moonflower graces the heavy braid of sable hair down her back. As she walks towards my sisters, her carefully controlled smile offers little warmth. She seems out of place here, altogether too dark, too quiet. It is time for me to make my entrance.

"Greetings."

I make a formal bow with a flourish of my arm.

"Atropos! What are you doing here?"

"Aren't I permitted to visit my sisters now?"

"Of course you are, it's just that we thought you were going to be away for a longer. Did you know we had Elpis to help us while you were gone?"

I nod briefly towards her and I am pleased to see that she bends one knee in an almost-but-not-quite curtsy. The acknowledgement is barely there, but since it came from a fellow goddess, perhaps it is worth more than it seems. I give her the benefit of the doubt, for now. Elpis for her part appears a little disconcerted by my reappearance and I hope she thinks I am here to monitor what she's been doing. She'll have done her best of course, since being here at all was at the request of Zeus himself and she daren't go against his command: you never knew where that might lead, and I speak from experience. Nevertheless, ending lives is specialist work and she is not right for it. Her domain is the future, the anticipation and expectation of what is yet to come; it wouldn't feel natural to her to end lives and curtail possibilities. But this in itself would amuse Zeus no doubt.

"My dear Elpis, how do you find it, taking my place?"

"I do my best but it's difficult for me."

"How so?"

“It is not easy for me to remain here in one place all the time, I am used to being on the move. I travel a great deal.”

“So you find the beauty and luxury of the palace here tedious?”

I note that she stutters a little in her reply.

“No, no of course not but I do like to be more involved in the day to day working of human affairs.”

“You do?”

My sisters and I look at her with surprise. Why would she want to do that? I can see she is trying to suppress a smile.

“What amuses you?”

“You do, the three of you. Your relationship fascinates me. My own siblings are so widely dispersed I seldom see any of them; even though I do have to intervene sometimes in the repercussions of their meddling. But you are so much more connected with each other. You work together, you sometimes speak for each other, you look similar; you are so obviously sisters. It seems right when all three of you are together.”

I’m not sure if she is trying to flatter me but I appreciate the suggestion that my sisters are not right without me. It’s a pity they won’t acknowledge it too.

“Why Elpis that’s an interesting thought, but I really do need to talk to my sisters.”

Lachesis and Clotho laugh the same laugh.

“You haven’t changed then Atropos, you always did like to do the talking. What have you come to tell us?”

“Everything. You’ve no idea how frustrating it is to only be able to purr or growl. Listening is all well and good but I could do with a conversation.”

“Ah, but a conversation requires listening as well as talking.”

“I assure you I can do both.”

“I’m sure you can when you put your mind to it.”

“Especially when you’re stuck with a cat’s larynx!”

“That’s enough teasing; show me what you were looking at.”

Lachesis passes me the thread and I run it through my fingers, feeling its unevenness, noticing how ragged it becomes towards the end, observing the specks of mustard and blue-black bleeding through the core of the fibre.

“What does the yellow and indigo signify? Where does it come from?”

“We’re not sure.”

“Whose lifespan is it?”

“The man who’s not yet dead, Paul, the one you’ve been staying with.”

“It wasn’t like this when I left, what’s happened to it?”

Elpis cleared her throat meaningfully.

“It might be down to me.”

“You? What have you been doing?”

We look at her in surprise as she takes a deep breath and lets it out again in a weary sigh.

“Alright, I’ll explain. I don’t suppose you know much about my interconnection with humanity. Do you know anything at all about my history, or what I do?”

We look at each other questioningly.

“No, I didn’t think so, no-one ever does. Do you even know my other name?”

Clotho replies:

“Of course we do, the gods have many names, we ourselves are also known as ‘Morai’, and, we know your other name is ‘Hope’, but we know very little about you. Do tell us your story if you will.”

Clotho takes Elpis’ arm and leads her towards a plush sofa inside an alcove at the other side of the room while I roll my eyes and reluctantly follow behind Lachesis, leaving the stained and flecked thread where it is. Once we are all seated in our favourite cosy corner and looking at her expectantly, Elpis stands up again.

“If you don’t mind, I’ll walk while I talk. I was once held captive for a long time and was barely able to move. Ever since then I have hated to be still.”

Clotho touches her arm in sympathy.

“Oh, by all means, walk as much as you like but do tell us your story.”

She paces up and down, gesticulating as she speaks.

“It all began with Prometheus.”

“The god of fire?”

“Yes Prometheus took it upon himself to give the gift of fire to humanity and Zeus wasn’t happy about it.”

Lachesis comments.

“I’m not surprised, it was a bit underhand of him.”

“Yes, well perhaps that’s why he’s called a trickster. Anyway Zeus was so angry that he was determined to take his revenge.”

I smile inwardly in recognition of my father’s style and Elpis continues.

“Like many unscrupulous powerful people, he knew that the most satisfying revenge was subtle and long drawn out; that the greatest pain would be inflicted on Prometheus by harming those he cared about.”

“Ooh, good plan.”

“Atropos!”

My sisters speak in shocked unison and Elpis frowns but carries on.

“Since Prometheus was close to his brother Epimetheus as well as being very fond of humanity, Zeus decided that his revenge would be aimed at all of them.”

“So what did he do?”

“First he arranged for the creation of a woman so beautiful that Epimetheus could be guaranteed to fall in love with her.”

“Oh, yes, the lovely Pandora.”

“So, Epimetheus fell in love with Pandora and she with him, and before long they were making wedding plans. So... just before their wedding day, Zeus came to see Pandora and gave her the gift of an earthenware jar.

“That doesn’t sound like much of a gift.”

“He told her it was a very special jar and that she must take good care of it. What’s more it was tightly sealed and he said that she must on no account open it, not ever.”

“But that was just guaranteed to make her want to open it and find out what was inside.”

“Of course, but since she was in awe of him, she didn’t like to ask too many questions, so she accepted it gracefully. What’s more, she didn’t know that I and all of my brothers and sisters had been sealed inside the jar.”

She paused for effect.

“That must have been awful.”

“Awful isn’t the word. It was horrendous! We called and sang to be let out but no-one heard. It was dull and crowded in there and my siblings were bored and irritable. Being children of the night, we didn’t mind the dark, but there was a lot of bickering, pushing and shoving. They were a bad tempered lot, still are, we are all named for our qualities: violence,

deceit, misery, want, starvation, blame, ruin, discord, hardship, disease, pestilence, pain, lies, dispute, war and murder.”

“So how did you manage to escape?”

“Well, as Zeus no doubt predicted, curiosity got the better of Pandora and one day she broke the seal and lifted the lid. My siblings wasted no time elbowing their way out but being the smallest, I was trampled to the bottom. Once they’d all gone I made my own way up to the top but by the time I got there, Pandora slammed the lid back on leaving me trapped inside. That’s how all the ills and misfortunes were unleashed on humanity just as Zeus had planned. Prometheus and his brother Epimetheus were utterly distraught as you can imagine.”

“So, how did *you* get out?”

“Zeus came to realise that one of humanity’s ills was missing and so he did eventually set me free.”

“So what is it exactly that you do? We know that your siblings wreak havoc on the world, but what mayhem do you inflict? Isn’t hope reputed to be a positive thing?”

“It is true that I can provide anticipation of better times to come, and support people to have courage to get through the bad times.”

“But surely those people would think that’s a good thing wouldn’t they?”

“Not always. Hope too can be a torment.”

“How can that be? Surely hope is looking to the future, hope is imagining something better; hope softens the difficult times.”

Elpis let out a harsh and humourless laugh.

“Like most things that have anything to do with the gods, hope has two sides.”

“How does that work then?”

“Apart from the few people that dabble in fortune telling, the future is unknown to humanity; indeed it should not be revealed in advance. Therefore, any expectation of the future is inevitably a false friend. Hope is not reality, it is mere imagination, a pretence, not a guaranteed future. I am often followed by disillusion and disappointment.

“So it’s a bit of a gamble really?”

“Hope can be useful to those who know how to handle it but it can also come with foreboding already bound up in it. Either way, it’s my role to inflict the full range of delusional aspirations.”

“All this sounds a bit tortuous; personally, I prefer a clean cut and a neat ending.”

I pick up my shears and snap them in the air.

“That’s rich coming from you. Paul didn’t get the ending he was supposed to, did he?”

I shrug and return to the question of the added colours.

“So what are the specks of yellow and indigo in his lifeline? How is it your fault?”

“I bestowed on him a few drops of hope. The yellow shows little sparks of intention, spontaneity and impulse; indigo is the creeping emergence of old memories, the dawning comprehension of death itself.”

I am reluctantly impressed.

“Yes, he did exhibit both optimistic impulsiveness as well as foreboding at times.”

Elpis sits down beside me.

“So you have seen first-hand how it works. But I am curious too, what have you found out so far? Have you worked out how to put everything right? I really could do with getting back to my own life soon.”

“It’s hard to be sure. As you know, Paul spends most of his time either ruminating on his situation or chasing amusement, while his wife pretends it won’t happen and he will be fine.”

Elpis laughs and it dawns on me that she has intervened with Candace as well.

“Oh, I see, that was you was it? Giving her false hope?”

“Of course”

I shake my head and continue.

“Before my visit to Paul, I spent some time with the young mother, Moira, and the woman Nancy. Their response to the death is curious. It’s as if the girl wears blinkers much of the time, refusing to acknowledge what happened. But then again, suddenly, she’ll have a meltdown over nothing. Meanwhile, Nancy clucks around her like a mother hen, and tries to get in touch with the dead.”

“Are you any nearer to knowing how to put things right though?”

“It’s complicated. There are laws of nature that I must abide by; it would be nigh on impossible to release a spirit from Hades back into life, as far as I know. Besides I’m not sure that bringing the child back to them would be welcome after all this time. What on earth

would they make of it? How would they cope with it? Anyway, Moira would have to get pregnant again or adopt it from someone else and that is an unlikely scenario.”

“Couldn’t she just look after the child if it belonged to someone else next time round? Be a babysitter or something?”

“Maybe, but there’s still the problem of getting the wretched spirit back to earth. Perhaps I’ll have another conversation with Persephone down in Hades. It’ll make a change from being four legged.”

“Do be careful.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Keep in touch. Let us know how you get on.”

“I’ll get the job done, I have to.”

Elpis smooths the thread of Paul’s lifeline in her hand.

“I hope so.”

“I don’t need hope, just my wits and little help from an insider in the land of the dead.”

29 Jack

Towards the end of yet another day in the factory, Jack was hoping to hide in the canteen for a bit before catching the bus home. When he got there, the room was empty and most of the chairs were upended onto the tables while a woman in a blue overall was mopping the floor half-heartedly. Head down, he got himself a can of coke from the vending machine in the corner and made his way to the single remaining table with its chairs the right way up. He was startled to realise someone was already sitting there. The huge bunch of keys next to the mug of tea on the table told him it was the factory caretaker. He looked up from his newspaper and winked at Jack.

“Be my guest mate. Plenty of room.”

Jack sat down opposite him and pulled the ring on top of his coke and took a noisy slurp. His companion was gazing into space, quietly humming a tune. The repeated melody wormed its way into Jack’s head and it bugged him that it seemed vaguely familiar but he couldn’t place it. The woman with the mop was now chivvying them both to move so she could finish the floor in time to catch the bus home. The caretaker stood up, swept up his keys with a flourish which was when Jack noticed the crucifix keyring and realised he had been humming a hymn tune, which he now launched into at full volume.

“The Lord is my Shepherd...”

“Give it a rest Sid, the boy doesn’t want to listen to you.”

“How do you know? He might enjoy a good old fashioned hymn tune. Better than all that pop music that young people listen to. Besides, we all need the good shepherd, don’t we lad?”

Jack shrugged.

“Take it from me, there comes a time for all of us to wake up to the truth and the light.”

He nudged Jack with an elbow.

“Even you could use some good news, couldn’t you?”

To Jack’s relief, the loud bell that meant the end of their working day interrupted and he was able to dash off without answering and join the stream of chattering workers out through the factory gates. He was the last to get on the bus and had to squeeze himself next to a particularly large woman who was too wide to fit into a single seat; Jack kept his head down while she talked over his head to the woman across the aisle. By the time he got to his

stop, he knew a great deal more than he wanted to about the shortcomings of the women's husbands. He was relieved to get off, even though he was sure he could feel their eyes boring into his back. Against his best intentions, he looked back towards the bus as it pulled away and received several kisses blown in his direction, much to his horror. He turned rapidly into the gate and once he was out of sight of the road he stopped to take a breath. It had been a weird day, he wasn't quite sure how he felt about it: out of sorts, certainly; uncomfortable and a bit confused; and now he had that stupid hymn tune running through his head and he didn't even know that he knew it.

He went straight up to his room where he kicked his shoes off and lay on the bed. So work was proving to be way more tiring than he had anticipated. The factory was as strange to him as another planet. Its people decades older, the reasons why things had to be done a certain way was a complete mystery. Old habits perhaps? Who knew? It was beyond him. The main thing was the prospect of getting paid. At least that was something, and it got Candace off his back. But, he kept thinking about the caretaker - Sid wasn't it? As far as Jack could tell, people weren't usually that friendly towards someone they didn't know, it was a bit unnerving. What could possibly make someone so cheerful all the time? As for his 'good shepherd' and 'good news'. What was that all about? Neither Dad nor Candace was religious and apart from lessons at school, Jack didn't really know much about it. It had always seemed rather dull although he quite liked the Cathedral he'd visited once on a school trip, with its carvings, candles, vaulted ceilings and spires. It had been quite impressive if a bit remote from normal life, especially the stained glass windows which he didn't really get. He remembered one of them featured Jesus wearing rather elaborate red and gold robes, carrying a lamb under one arm and surrounded by dopey looking sheep. He'd thought at the time that the clothes looked a bit daft for shepherding. Anyway wasn't the guy supposed to be a carpenter? What were all the sheep about? It all seemed a bit fanciful. Round here the sheep farmers sped through the fields on quad bikes, sometimes with a couple of sheepdogs running behind, which looked a lot more fun.

He was vaguely aware that the house phone was ringing but by the time he decided that no-one else was going to pick up, and thought perhaps he might go down and answer it, it had already stopped. A few seconds later, his own phone launched into its latest ring tone and he reached across for it. He wasn't entirely happy about answering it when he realised it

was Candace on the other end but he thought he'd better, there'd only be trouble later if he didn't.

"Hello."

"Hello Jack, Is Paul there?"

"I don't think he's in the house, he might be down the garden somewhere."

"I do wish he'd take his phone with him."

Jack thought that the reason he often didn't was probably to avoid calls like this one, but he didn't say so.

"Are you still there?"

"Yes, I'm here."

"Well will you go and ask Paul to call in and pick up the grocery order, I won't have time. He should be able to manage that."

"Okay, I'll tell him."

"Don't forget."

Before he could reply, she had hung up. His earlier mood shifted in an instant and he grumbled to himself as he sat up to put his shoes back on. Why should he have to do what she wanted? She treated him like a servant sometimes. It was infuriating. The sooner he could leave and get his own place the better. He stomped down stairs and into the garden where he eventually found Paul at the far end, with trousers rolled up and his bare feet covered in mud. He seemed to be talking to himself, and as he got nearer, Jack could see that he was peering into a clump of purple flowers and calling to a non-existent cat. He looked up.

"Oh, it's you. I was hoping to find the cat, she's disappeared. She was fond of this catnip bush. If I were to find her anywhere, I thought it would be here. Strange I know but cats do love it."

"No more strange than you at the moment."

"Yes, I must look a bit odd."

"What *are* you doing out here?"

"Well it is supposed to be good for one's health so I thought I'd give it another go. Actually, I quite enjoy it, you should try it too. Come on, get your shoes off."

"No chance. Actually I came to give you a message from Candace."

"Oh, how did she sound? Is she still mad at me?"

“She didn’t say, but she wants you to pick up the groceries, she’s going to be late back.”

“Well since I’m in no fit state, would you mind doing it?”

“In your car?”

“Yes, of course in my car. Here you go.”

He reached into his pocket and threw the keys into the air which Jack deftly caught on their way down.

Jangling the keys as he walked towards the garage reminded him of Sid from the factory with his crucifix keyring and his singing. The tune had got into Jack’s head and he began humming it as he headed for the grocer’s shop. It felt quite apt really as he drove past the sheep field, although there were no shepherds to be seen, wearing crimson and gold or otherwise. The chuckle that rose in his throat ventured out of his mouth and caught him by surprise. Since when had he been amused by what was in his own head? What was happening to him? Must be the effect of the new job, or perhaps it was the driving. A new self-image as a working man sitting behind the wheel of a particularly cool car was firming up inside his head. Life was definitely improving. He spent the rest of the journey picturing himself driving into work every day, the admiring looks from strangers as he drove past, perhaps offering Sid a lift home. Things were looking up.

He pulled up outside the little grocery store on the high street. There were double yellow lines but he looked down the road in both directions and couldn’t see the traffic warden so he reckoned he’d have enough time to dash in and pick up the groceries and be gone before he or she turned up. Unfortunately, the shop also served as a social centre for several of the more elderly regular customers and he had to wait while one of them in response to a cheerful ‘How are you Mrs T’ from the shopkeeper, answered in a great deal of detail. Jack fidgeted while she recounted several visits to the doctor, the effect of her various medications, not to mention the lack of visits from her children. By the time she’d finished, been helped with her credit card payment and had her bag packed for her, Jack had reverted to being negative and took his own box of groceries with extremely bad grace. This caused the shopkeeper and his assistant to roll their eyes at each other and they both smirked as the traffic warden approached, but Jack dropped his box onto the passenger seat, climbed in the driver’s side and leapfrogged up the road before the traffic warden with her pen poised had managed to make a mark.

Now he was rattled, his earlier good humour gone and there wasn't the slightest suggestion of humming a hymn tune. In his haste to get away, he missed a turning and ended up taking a much longer and very winding route home. Now miles from anywhere and not sure if he was lost or not, he found himself driving very slowly along a lane so narrow that the hedge on either side brushed the sides of the car. It would have been impossible to turn round, and he desperately hoped that nothing was coming the other way since his reversing skills weren't great. In fact he found himself muttering under his breath, over and over again.

"Oh, God, don't let there be anything coming."

It must have been a good fifteen minutes until he could see the road widening out in front of him. He blew out a lungful of air and relaxed back into the seat looking at the rear view mirror, seeing the narrow lane winding back the way he had come; maybe he looked for too long, maybe he closed his eyes for a second or maybe he blinked at the wrong moment, in any case the next thing he knew, there was a sickening thud as the car hit flesh and bone. What the hell was that? A rabbit? A bird? Horrified, and unable to think clearly, Jack carried on and in the rear view mirror watched the sheep lying in the road diminish in size until he went round a bend and it disappeared from view. Typical that something awful like this would happen just when things were getting better. Every single good thing that ever happened to him was spoilt by something awful. Far better to expect the worst, at least he'd never be disappointed, except that he always was. Life was determined to ruin everything for him. Why else would a sheep run out in front of him and get itself killed? Stupid creatures, sheep, the way they stared at you; their alien eyes with their unfathomable expressions. Perhaps he was jinxed. The more he thought about it, the truer it seemed. He drove the rest of the way home extremely slowly, waiting for the pounding of his heart to slow down, which it just about did as he pulled into the gate. Seeing him drive in, Paul walked up to meet him just as he parked the car. One of the front mudguards had a slight dent and there was blood smeared across the number plate. Paul went pale.

"What have you done?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I didn't see it whatever it was. It just came out of nowhere."

"What? Where?"

“Up the road.”

“Show me.”

With Jack silent in the passenger seat; his father drove, his bare muddy feet slipping on the pedals. He pulled over in a layby and they both got out of the car. They made their way over to the sheep in time to see its final death throes, its leg pumping the air as the eyes gave a final flicker and the head dropped. Guts were strewn across the road, bloody tire tracks trailed into the distance and Jack vomited into the ditch. They drove home again in silence.

30 Candace

Running late, Candace walked fast, wishing she'd worn flat shoes. In fact it had been the boots that had delayed her. Since they had proper laces that needed to be threaded through eyelets almost all the way up the shin, it took more time than she had allowed, and although they were wonderfully elegant, and the blue and green leather went perfectly with the embroidered peacock feather across the back of the jacket, the heels were too high for comfort. However, they were worth every penny of Paul's money after everything she'd had to put up with: Paul's behaviour, that nasty business with Jack and the sheep, not to mention the wretched cat, and comfort wasn't everything was it? The pain in her feet, echoed the pain in her heart at the thought of the black paw prints across her favourite Persian rug, the shredded embroidery that had taken such painstaking concentration, not to mention the visits to the Victoria and Albert and the British museums, the series of preliminary sketches, the worked colour sample pieces, all of which had taken months of effort.

Still seething, when she reached the gallery she was goaded further by the sight of a tabby cat in the doorway sunning itself. Sounding not unlike a cat herself, she growled at it, which sent it scurrying across the road, narrowly missed by a passing car. Candace made a face at the state of the windows which could have done with a clean, and let herself in. Then she put her things down on the desk by the door and looked around the room. It was a mix of local talent on show: amateurish vases of flowers, some competent landscapes in oils, a few recognisable portraits, a collection of brightly coloured abstracts, a few pieces of jewellery and some ceramics as well as her own embroideries. She noted that the rather dull watercolours in ridiculously ostentatious frames that had been produced by the chairwoman of the committee took the most prominent place on the end wall. Much to her irritation, her own work was situated in the furthest, darkest corner. Gritting her teeth, she proceeded to alter the lighting so that the embroideries were properly lit. She was tempted to rearrange some of the paintings but in the end decided that it would cause more problems than it solved. Instead, she returned to the desk, checked the sales book, tidied the photocopied lists of exhibits then picked up the pile of printed postcards that featured the dreary watercolours and put them in the desk drawer.

Since the beautiful boots were still pinching her feet, she was much in need of tea and a sit down. In the kitchen, eschewing the chipped collection of mugs in the cupboard she found a single china cup into which she placed a few fresh peppermint leaves she had

brought with her, poured boiling water over them and watched the liquid slowly turn green. Holding the cup with both hands, she walked back to the desk and sat down. Since no visitors had arrived yet, she felt justified in putting her feet up on the desk while she drank her tea. It wasn't long before she had to put them down again though when a couple of young women with small children came in. They ignored Candace and made their way slowly around the display. To begin with the children were quiet but it wasn't long before boredom set in and they took to racing each other around the space, with ever louder shrieks accompanying the thunder of feet. Candace's disapproving glare was completely ignored and she asked the women politely to take control of their offspring. This they seemed unwilling or unable to manage and Candace was obliged to ask them to leave before one of the exhibits got broken.

The confrontation didn't help her mood although it had taken her mind off the state of her feet. So, with aches and pains momentarily forgotten, she took a stroll around the exhibition herself; taking her time over each item, mentally grading them, coming to the conclusion that her own work was perhaps too good for this motley collection. She moved into the back room where there was a separate exhibition of drawings done by art students from the local college which hadn't been there before. Stopping to look at a particularly well executed figure in charcoal, she was intrigued by the way the bones beneath the skin were rendered; it was like an anatomy drawing, the standing figure like a living corpse. She gave an involuntary shudder and turned to the next work which was focused on the face, and stepped sharply back in surprise.

The face belonged to Paul. This emaciated figure, reduced to mere flesh and bone, was her husband. She stood there open mouthed for some time. How had it come to this? Yes, he was older than she was, and he'd always been thin, but this figure was unrecognisably skeletal. It had been so long since she'd seen him without clothes, she hadn't known. Or perhaps it was that she didn't want to know. This was horrible. What possessed him to do such a thing? Why hadn't he said anything? It seemed she didn't know him at all.

It was only when she heard the door open to another visitor that she walked back into the main gallery and almost fell into the chair, barely managing a 'good morning' to the nondescript man in the grey coat who was peering myopically at the embroideries. Why would Paul go and do something like that - blatantly expose his frailty? He'd always been such a private person. How could he find this acceptable? She sipped the rest of her tea

while her thoughts ran on. What on earth did he think he was doing? What had happened to the predictable, amiable husband she used to rely on? He seemed to have undergone a complete personality transplant. It was bad enough, risking his health by trekking off to the beach with Jack, but this was utterly bizarre. Life modelling! What on earth was going on? Had he gone completely mad? Unless the cancer was affecting his brain, perhaps it was some kind of dementia, which might explain a few things.

It was all so disheartening; especially now, just as Jack was reaching adulthood and hopefully leaving soon, just when their life together could be picking up, everything was falling apart. And as for that bloody cat that he seems to have adopted... She had just about had enough. The door clanged as the visitor left without buying anything and the idea of spending the rest of the afternoon trying to be pleasant to potential customers felt like too much. Impulsively, Candace put the closed sign on the door and quickly left the gallery. She really needed a bit of space, some time to think, to calm down, work things out. She made her way down the high street back to her car, her pinched feet forgotten, and headed out of town. She had no idea where she was going but she felt a strong urge to find some open space, free of people, cats, husbands, stepchildren and everything else that made her life so miserable. As she drove over the common it began to rain and she pulled into a layby, switched off the engine and dropped her head onto the steering wheel. A strangled scream emanated from her throat and buffeted against the car windows leaving her ears ringing. The windscreen wipers squeaked back and forth echoing the thoughts that battled against each other inside her head and she spoke aloud through gritted teeth.

“I’ve just about had enough.”

Not sure what she was doing or why she was doing it, she flung open the car door and peered blinking into the rain, letting her makeup do what it would. The world around her wavered through the mix of rain and tears. Was that a figure leaning against the wall? Perhaps it was just a shrub. She was imagining things now; it must be all the stress. The only bodies up here apart from her own belonged to sheep. As if on cue a baleful bleat seemed to comment on her misery. She pulled the door shut again and the little embroidered butterfly that hung from the rear view mirror swayed as if someone had flicked it. She watched it until it stopped, placed her hands on the steering wheel, one on top of the other and lowered her head pressing her forehead hard into her knuckles.

Why did everything have to be so aggravating? Her husband apparently losing his mind as well as his health, egged on by his feckless son. She continued the mental list of his transgressions: his refusal to take his medication, his insistence that it was better than feeling ill all the time, not caring if it killed him sooner, not eating properly, his reckless behaviour. Life modelling for heaven's sake, what was he thinking? Where did he get the stamina for it when up till now he hadn't had the energy to so much as empty the dishwasher or put the rubbish out. He was becoming as idiotic and childish as Jack, what with the fairground rides, and even letting Jack drive that 'classic' car of his. That was doomed to disaster before he ever got behind the wheel and ran over that sheep; apparently there had been blood and gore everywhere and hell to pay with the farmer. Whatever had possessed him to let Jack drive?

And as for that bloody stray cat that he adopted, refused to see that it's a vicious, violent little bitch, that shouldn't have been allowed in the house in the first place. Now it's taken up residence, gets treated like a goddess, even after it's ruined at least a year's worth of hard work. Then he has the gall to say that it's only a cat, don't be so hard on her, she doesn't know, if you only treated her with a little kindness, she'd like you! No chance. That really was the last straw. Enough's enough. It was all too much.

Candace cried properly then, for the first time in a very long while, letting out all the anger, despair, frustration and misery that could be mustered inside one person. She began to unravel and now she'd started she couldn't stop. It went on for a long time and it felt like vomiting a lifetime's bile. Snot ran from her nose, eye makeup dribbled down her cheeks, her face reddened and blotched. She raked her nails across her scalp as if to extract every last trace of it from inside her mind so that she might cast it far away from her. The sobs continued until she drove herself hoarse with it.

"That's enough!"

She stopped abruptly, unsure if the words had emerged from her throat or her mind, stumbled out of the car and stood with her face upturned to the soft drizzle and let herself be calmed. It felt purposeful although she had no idea what the purpose was. A huddle of sheep revealed themselves against the drystone wall, eyeing her as if she were as alien to them as they were to her. She watched as one by one, they heaved themselves onto their feet and lumbered away, their bodies top heavy with wool and their rear ends swaying

above their spindly legs. Not one of them looked back at Candace. It was as if she didn't exist.

She wandered a little way along the path they had taken but her high heeled boots weren't much use on this terrain and she returned to the car. She drove slowly on the way back home, taking her time, choosing the longest route she could think of, not wanting to re-enter what she'd left behind. When she eventually reached home, she sat on the doorstep to unlace the beautiful blue green boots that were now ruined, eased her burning feet out of them and went to find something to fend off her emerging headache.

31 Nancy

A pile of boxes on the counter hid Nancy from Moira's view as she came in the shop, so when a loud sigh arose from behind the pile, she let out a little squeal and put her hand to her mouth.

"Ooh, you made me jump. What are you doing hiding behind there?"

"Well, I wanted to sort out this new delivery but I came over a bit strange so I sat down."

"What do you mean - a bit strange?"

"I'm not sure, I just feel a bit spaced out, woozy."

"Oh dear can I get you anything?"

"No, I'm sure I'll be alright in a minute, I'm just going to take it easy for a bit."

Moira reached into the already opened box and pulled out a new pack of tarot cards still wrapped in cellophane."

"Oh these are different."

"They are nice aren't they? I thought I'd try out some of these new ones, so much more decorative. Perhaps they'll sell better."

Nancy took the pack, removed the wrapping and shuffled the cards several times.

"Do you want to practise on me and tell my fortune?"

"Perhaps. I'm not attuned to them yet though."

Moira bent down to pick one up that had fallen on the floor. Nancy took it from her.

"What falls to the floor comes to the door."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that this card must be significant for us; me because I dropped it and you because you picked it up."

Moira looked at the picture of the flaming tower with people falling head first.

"Well I hope the house doesn't catch fire and we have to jump out of the upstairs windows."

"Of course not, that's not what it means."

"What then?"

"Something sudden and unexpected is going to happen, and, like the lightning strike in the picture, it will be a big shock. It is a reminder that we need to change, a hard shove that forces us to think and behave differently."

“It doesn’t look like much fun.”

“It’s not meant to be, it’s about being willing to take on a big challenge and learn from it.”

Nancy frowned and sat down suddenly. Moira looked at her sharply.

“Are you okay?”

“Oh it’s nothing, a bit of a headache.”

“Let me get you a glass of water.”

“Thank you dear.”

Still staring at the card in front of her, Nancy put her other hand to her head, but the pain would not be soothed and then the flames in the picture began to move before her eyes. Unable to bring the card into focus again by holding it nearer and further away, she blinked a few times and looked around but now the whole room was blurred and her head was feeling decidedly strange. Her fingers went numb and she dropped the card. It spun as it fell and hovered for an instant before sliding along the floor and coming to a halt by the kitchen door. When Nancy keeled over sideways on the stool clutching at the counter as she fell, she pulled several boxes and most of the remaining cards down with her. Now unconscious, she didn’t see Moira return from the kitchen holding a glass of water and stand for a moment open-mouthed, staring down at the card with the picture of the tower that lay at her feet.

Neither did she hear Moira panicking down the phone to the emergency services because by then Nancy was far, far away, standing in a queue of people, none of whom she recognised. It wasn’t exactly raining but the air felt damp and the ground beneath their feet was muddy and there was a chill wind. Nancy leaned to one side and peered forward but the queue stretched as far as she could see. She had no idea what they were all waiting for but she stepped back in line with a puzzled frown on her face. The queue inched slowly forwards and she shuffled along with the others; it seemed the only thing to do. Having no idea how she got there, she thought about asking one of the others but didn’t want to look stupid so she kept quiet, and tried to listen in to their conversations. These however were not very helpful, being mostly comments about the weather, the length of the queue and grumbles about the delay. After she had been standing there for some time, her legs began to ache and she looked down to see that one of her knees was swollen and bruised. What had happened to her? She also had a painful head and when she felt the places where it hurt,

she found a lump just above her eye. Someone behind her in the queue asked if she was okay, to which she smiled weakly and wobbled a little. The young man took her arm to steady her and she noticed that he had a broken crash helmet hanging from his elbow. He followed her gaze and explained.

“Yeah, I was doing a hundred and twenty when I lost it.”

Nancy asked him what he had lost but he just laughed.

A woman in front turned to look. She was wearing nothing but a swimsuit and was holding the hand of a small naked child who kept bending down to dig in the mud with a plastic spade. The woman must have been chilly and Nancy wondered why she was so inappropriately dressed. The young man and the woman began chatting about speed boats but Nancy couldn't follow the conversation, she was still feeling rather dizzy.

Behind her she could hear grumbling.

“Oi, don't shove.”

“Ow, that hurt.”

“What's the hurry?”

“Who do you think you are?”

As the noise got louder Nancy could see a tall thin man elbowing his way through, waving a walking stick aloft. It seemed he had no hesitation in using the stick if people didn't move out of his way either. His face was red and his jaw was clenched and from time to time he growled. Nancy and the young man moved aside to let him through and he would have clouted the child if the woman in the swimsuit hadn't swept it up in her arms. They could hear him muttering as he carried on through the crowd.

“I've just about had enough of this. For goodness sake, I didn't suffer a lifetime of good behaviour to end up in a bloody queue! Let me through I say.”

A bald woman behind Nancy shook her head.

“I'm not so sure he was ever well behaved, whatever he says.”

“Do you know him then?”

“Yes, he was in the same hospital as me, going through chemotherapy. I used to see him from time to time.”

She patted her shiny head.

“I'm hoping it'll grow back now we're here, because I left my wig behind.”

Nancy however, had no idea where she was or how she got there and she wished someone would explain.

“Move along now, keep an orderly line please. Make sure you have your fare ready.”

Nancy whispered to the reckless motorcyclist but he just tapped his jacket pocket as if to say that he had his fare but Nancy had no money with her. As they shuffled forward she could hear splashing but there seemed to be a mist rising from the water and she couldn't make anything out. The stick-waving man was nowhere to be seen and the swim-suited woman with the child had gone too. The motorcyclist and the wigless cancer patient were waiting at the end of the jetty and Nancy watched as they too soon disappeared into the fog. She could just make out the splash of oars growing fainter and fainter as the boat moved away.

Nancy looked down at the black water and shivered. Not knowing what else to do she carried on waiting. Her head was fuzzy and she couldn't think straight. Her face was screwed up in a frown. Where was this place? Why was she here? Where was the boat going? What would happen if she couldn't pay? Then the mist momentarily parted, the boat reappeared, and the mysterious rower had rested his oars and was holding out his hand for her money. But, now she could hear someone calling her and she turned to look back to where the voice was coming from which annoyed the boatman.

“Oi, you. Where's my fare? You don't travel without paying.”

Nancy stared at him.

“Come on, hurry up woman.”

“I'm sorry, I have to go back, someone's calling me.”

“There's precious few go back from here, it's the end of the line.”

“But it sounds urgent, I must go back.”

As she turned away from the river to work her way back along the queue she heard the ferryman complaining loudly.

“Bloody time wasters.”

She didn't recognise the voice that was calling her, but it sounded urgent. She hurried, but the terrain was difficult and several times she almost fell when her knee gave way. She hauled herself along by grabbing branches on either side of the path. Now there was more than one voice.

“Come on dear, come back to us.”

“Can you hear me?”

Nancy tried to reply but the words wouldn't come. There was a fork in the path and she stood still for a moment trying to work out which direction the voices were coming from.

“Can you open your eyes for me?”

She didn't realise that she had them closed but she couldn't see the owners of the voices so perhaps she did. The chilly wind had dropped and it was calm and warm now.

“I think she's trying. That's it Nancy, now, can you squeeze my hand?”

The voice again, now it was whispering close to her ear.

“It's okay, you're in hospital, we think you had a stroke.”

It didn't make sense, how had she got here? Where was the queue, the river?

“Is she responding?”

“I'm not sure. You can't always tell.”

The two nurses looked at each other and one of them patted Nancy's shoulder and the other stroked her hand.

32 Paul

“You must be joking.”

“You never know, you might enjoy it.”

“You’d never get me up in one of those things.”

“Why ever not? It’ll be amazing.”

Paul had been looking forward to another adventure and wanted to include Candace this time, hoping to improve the relationship between the three of them via a shared experience. It appeared that the balloon flight he had booked wasn’t going to be an experience to appeal to her after all.

“Why don’t you give it a go, you might find you enjoy it. I’m sure Jack will.”

“Huh, if he’s got any sense he won’t go with you either.”

Jack who had been listening outside the door and had no idea what they were talking about opened the door and walked in.

“Go where?”

“Your father’s got another stupid idea in his head. Go on, tell him.”

Paul sighed.

“I booked a balloon flight for the three of us as a special treat.”

“Some treat, to be floating up there in nothing stronger than a basket; it’s highly dangerous if you ask me. In fact why didn’t you ask me *before* you did such a thing. Why you persist in these ridiculous escapades I can’t imagine.”

“Candace, don’t you see? I want to feel alive. And since presumably I don’t have all that much time left on this earth, I want to make the most of it, have a bit of fun while I still can. Life will be over soon enough.”

“Oh don’t be so morbid. You’d be perfectly well if you’d stuck with the treatment.”

“Yes, yes, yes, so you keep saying, but I’ve made my own choice.”

Candace shook her head and Paul turned to Jack.

“What do you say? Fancy a balloon ride?”

“Cool.”

“Candace, why don’t you come with us; after all, it might be the last time I have the chance to do something like this, and I did want to share it with you and Jack.”

Eventually after much cajoling in this vein and some non-committal and supposedly encouraging grunts from Jack she agreed to go with them. From then on, Paul took to calling

the outing 'a family adventure' which he truly hoped it would be, convinced that once they were aloft, Candace would come round. Surely she would be able to see what an amazing opportunity it was. She used to love new experiences. In the past it had been he who tended to hold back. In fact he could remember in their early days together when she had laughed at him for being uncomfortable with the idea of jet skiing on one of their holidays.

So, on the appointed day, the three of them, armed with coats and scarves - presumably it would be cold up there - made the journey to the launch venue. Candace drove, Paul navigated and Jack sat in the back staring out of the window. The conversation on the way pointedly avoided any mention of balloons or flights because the look on Candace's face was enough to prevent any expression of excitement or even any discussion about the quickest route so Paul kept quiet. This unfortunately meant that they were already running late when they arrived and by the time they'd parked and found where they needed to be it was all rather a rush. Perhaps this was a good thing, since they were then swept rapidly along by the process of embarkation. After tickets were checked, a brief health and safety talk given, and a detailed explanation of how to get into the basket and how to behave during take-off, they had no time to think let alone talk. As the basket tipped them right way up and left the ground the sound of the overhead burners filled their ears and they were on their way.

By the time they reached a thousand feet above ground with the balloon still rising, the few white dots that could be seen on the chequered green below were barely identifiable as sheep. Paul stole a glance at Jack but said nothing. Sheep were still a sore point. Candace, was looking upwards into the cavity of the balloon and her fingers were white on the edge of the basket. She turned to Paul.

"It isn't natural to be up here."

"That's what's so amazing about it. How else could we get a sense of what it might be like to be a bird."

"At least they're not having to hang up here in a flimsy basket underneath a piece of fabric filled with hot air. And it's probably a fire risk."

"Oh, Candace can't you just relax and enjoy the view?"

"You must be joking. Think how awful it would be if the whole thing malfunctioned. How could you have come up with such a ridiculous idea. I wish I'd never agreed to come."

Paul reached across to put an arm around her shoulder but she shrugged him off.

He felt a little crestfallen but determined to make the most of the trip, turned his attention outwards across the shrinking landscape as it scaled down into a living map. Their continuing path skywards lifted his thoughts onwards and upwards into wide open territory; how small and insignificant the earth seemed, and how infinite the space around and above them. He felt powerful, godlike and while his spirit was uplifted, his body eased and relaxed, and his mind was soothed. The tightly wound ball of worries, concerns, difficulties and fears began to unravel. Even dying felt like a right and proper process, he would do it perfectly when the time came; Candace would be fine, she was young enough to move on into the life she wanted; Jack would grow up, find his way in the world as we all must; and best of all, he, Paul would no longer be responsible for any of this. His only task was to live the rest of his life, and by god he would relish every moment that remained to him. He was also beginning to discover that conflict and argument could be invigorating. What a life! If he died at this very moment, it would be perfect. His thoughts were interrupted by Candace.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if the whole thing crashed out of the sky and killed us all.”

Determined not to let her interfere with his own outlook, Paul didn’t reply but turned to Jack.

“You okay? You’re not saying much.”

“I’m fine.”

The pilot began pointing out landmarks and commenting on the technicalities of flight which both Paul and Jack found more interesting than either of them might have anticipated.

“I hope you don’t mind me asking but is your wife okay? She looks a bit under the weather.”

“Don’t you mean over the weather?”

“What?”

“Up here, we’re above those clouds.”

The pilot laughed and Jack smiled but when Paul looked towards Candace she had her eyes closed and was muttering under her breath; she seemed to be praying. When she opened her eyes again she addressed the pilot.

“I’m not sure I like being this high up. It doesn’t feel natural. People aren’t meant to be up here, the sky should be for creatures with wings.”

“What about planes?”

“What about them?”

“Are they meant to be up here? Surely if we have the brains to invent ways of flying we should go for it. We’ve put men on the moon. In comparison this is old school!”

He smiled encouragingly at her.

“People have been flying balloons since the eighteenth century and accidents are extremely rare. I’ve never crashed one yet, been doing this for years.”

Candace looked doubtful.

“I know what you’re thinking, there’s always a first time eh? I daresay there is, a first time I mean. But life ain’t worth living if you don’t take a few risks. I love it up here. First time I came up I was spellbound, never wanted to do anything else.”

Jack interrupted.

“Why do the burners keep stopping?”

“That’s how we control the flight. More heat more height.”

“Oh.”

Paul nudged Jack and began gleefully pointing out the coastline and the tiny specks that were boats on the water, loving the strangeness of it all.

“It’s so amazing to be up here - so high up.”

“Yeah, weird.”

“Look, you can see the whole county from up here, or at least it seems like it; such a beautiful evening for it too.”

“Good call Dad.”

“You glad you came?”

“Yeah, this is fun.”

Candace disagreed.

“Come on Candace, let it go, look at what we can see from here. Just look at it.”

He pointed to the horizon where the sun was throwing shadows across the fields, and tiny roads wound their way from farm to farm, village to village. The taller buildings of the town were already silhouetted in a jagged line across the sky. As they drifted closer, they could see more detail, the criss-cross layout of the housing estate, the church at one end and the chapel at the other, the bigger houses with their larger gardens, the flat roof of the hospital block at the edge of town and the tree lined roads leading to open countryside.

Candace gave half a smile and Paul thought it was probably because their trip would soon be

over rather than showing that she was enjoying herself. He was glad Jack seemed to be getting something from it though. It truly was amazing to be held up here with nothing more than hot air; not looking through a window, not seeing it through the glass filter of a plane window, being actually in the landscape. Fantastic. He could stay up here for hours and never get bored. Looking down he could now see birds zigzagging above the landscape below. They had already begun to lose height, and what had been distant dots became tiny animals, rectangles became edged with hedges, miniature villages arose until very quickly everything was full size and they were skimming a few feet above a ploughed field. When they finally hit the ground, the balloon dragged the basket sideways for several yards before finally coming to a stop. Candace was shaking so much she could hardly stand, and Paul, who was a little shaken himself grabbed her arm as they staggered to their feet. They watched Jack help to roll up the balloon and load the kit onto a trailer then there was a lift in the truck to take them back to their car. It was a silent ride, each lost in their thoughts. Paul was relishing having had another new experience, grateful that he was still well enough to manage it and in awe of the never-ending richness of life.

Deep in thought, Moira didn't notice the hot air balloon drifting across the sky above her as she walked to the bus stop, neither was she aware of the old man already standing there.

"Cheer up love, it might never happen."

She looked at him without smiling and he turned away. She hated that. What gave him the right to assume she should be cheering up? She didn't say it but she wanted to tell him in no uncertain terms that 'it' had in fact already happened, more than once in her life and that she had every right to look miserable. How dare he?

A huddle of kids with skateboards were pushing and shoving their way into the bus shelter, and it felt like there were far too many people in the small space. Moira stepped away from the old man and the boys and leaned out into the road to see if the bus was at the corner yet. As she stepped back onto the kerb, she almost tripped over a skateboard that one of the boys had let go. As he reached for it, he grinned and elbowed the ribs of his friend. Moira gave them an irritated stare which they returned, unfazed. Another boy took a packet of markers from his pocket and began drawing faces on the timetable. The old man said nothing, just edged away. If Nancy had been here she'd have said something, cajoled them into good behaviour, or tried to; but poor Nancy would be doing no such thing for quite some time. What if she didn't fully recover? Would Moira be expected to look after her? It was one thing to move in with her and help out with the shop and everything but it would be different if Nancy needed nursing, how would she manage? And what if she didn't get better?

When the bus finally arrived, the boys took up the back seat and Moira sat as far away from them as she could, behind a couple of elderly ladies, handbags clasped on their knees, ardently talking over each other. It was oddly soothing listening to their chit chat.

"Well I told him..."

"You never went and did it?"

"I bloody well did. And I took the old girl with me.."

"What did he say to that then?"

"Let me tell you..."

They leaned their heads in close to whisper then pulled apart again.

"You brazen hussy..."

"Well why not, it's only a bit of fun, got 'em all going I can tell you."

“Glory be! I wish I’d bin there.”

The bus rattled through town, the two women rabbited on, the boys teased each other at the back and the old man looked across at Moira from time to time. She shut them all out by closing her eyes and the tight knot in her stomach brought her thoughts back to Nancy. She got off the bus a stop earlier than she needed to, giving herself a bit of time to clear her head while she walked the last half mile. Ten minutes later, she was weaving her way through the overfull car park towards the hospital entrance. Squeezing around a particularly badly parked car she nearly tripped up the kerb onto a grassy verge. Feeling shaky she sat down abruptly on a nearby bench and waited till she felt calmer. It was the first time she had been anywhere near this place since she was here as a patient herself and now she was feeling increasingly sick at the memory of it. She’d always hated hospitals but after a while, she managed to pull herself together and made herself walk briskly towards the main entrance.

Faced with people going in and coming out of the revolving door she stopped. A pregnant woman asked if she needed help, and Moira shook her head and backed away. This was the exact place where she’d been bent double, overcome by powerful contractions until a receptionist came out and found her sitting on the ground. She and a porter had hauled her up and into a wheel chair. Terrified and shaking, no sooner had she begun to breathe again after one contraction, than another had overwhelmed her, she felt lost inside her own body, out of control with no idea what to expect next. They were talking to her but she couldn’t think, couldn’t understand what they were saying. The journey down corridor after corridor was surreal, as if she was nowhere. Then there were several moments waiting by a lift, where she fixated on a photograph of some lady mayor in full regalia holding a pair of scissors up to a red ribbon, poised forevermore but never making the cut, her expression unfathomable, like everything else in life.

Moira shook the memories away, took a deep breath and stepped forward to be swallowed up by the big revolving door. She couldn’t tell if the start-stop-start was her own awkwardness or the door itself staggering as it moved her round before finally depositing her inside the building. There was nobody at the reception desk and the signs with their bewildering medical names were confusing. There were corridors going off in three directions and she had no idea where she needed to be. A man in a brown overall with an

identity badge round his neck asked her which ward she wanted and she didn't know. She was close to tears.

"I'm here to see my friend; she fell."

"Did she break any bones?"

"I don't know."

"I expect she's in the orthopaedic ward, down the end of the corridor and turn left."

"Thank you."

Hesitantly, Moira walked the length of the corridor, peering into side doors and trying to remember whether it was orthopaedic, oncology or ophthalmology that she was looking for. Everything seemed to begin with 'O'. At one point she heard a baby cry and stopped suddenly. A group of people that had been walking behind, passed either side of her and carried on down the corridor. It took her a while to unfreeze and get moving again but she did it; remembering to breathe and reminding herself that all that was a long time ago now and she was here in the present and had come to see Nancy.

After several missteps, having to ask the way twice more, she found her way to the orthopaedic ward, only to find that Nancy wasn't there after all. Bewildered, she stood where she was for several minutes, letting the sounds sink in: rubber wheels on polished floors, the hum and whirr of machines, quiet voices, the faint squeak of a door hinge, a distant siren and a vague smell of disinfectant. Why is it that smells bring back so many memories? She thought about her baby son and tears escaped her eyes. Blinking them away, she looked around her and slowly retraced her steps back to the reception desk. She needed to focus, she was here to see Nancy and all these memories weren't helping. She told herself to get a grip and find out where Nancy was. The receptionist who was now at her post, directed her towards the lift which would take her up to Intensive Care. As she got out of the lift, the same old picture on the wall confronted her, the lady mayor, still frozen in the moment, about to cut the red ribbon. If only Moira could have frozen the moment just before her baby's birth. But fate had something else in mind for her, and also for Nancy she reminded herself. So she stepped forward once more, this time finding her friend without further problems, on her own in a side room. Strangely, Nancy seemed hardly there at all, frail and old, and shrunken. Barely recognisable as the woman whose bright energy Moira had come to take for granted. She sat down by the bed and wondered where the Nancy she

knew had gone. She watched her sleeping face for a very long time, but nothing flickered, nothing moved.

“You can talk to her you know.”

“Can she hear me?”

“We don’t know for sure but she might. It might be a way for her to find her way back from wherever her mind has gone.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Perhaps it doesn’t matter what you say, it might be that she can hold on to the sound of a familiar voice and bring herself back. It can’t do any harm and it might just help.”

“Oh.”

Moira sat for a while, not sure how to start, and then she just opened her mouth and began.

“Nancy. It’s me, Moira. But I guess you know that, if you can hear me. I don’t know what to say to you but they told me it might help so I’ll just talk. You’ve been such a good friend to me, from the minute you found me in the doorway of the shop, you cared about me in a way that nobody else ever did. I think you are the first truly good friend I’ve ever had; and you’ve taught me so much. Not that I agree with everything you believe in but you never mind that I don’t, and you’re always so cheerful and optimistic, you’ve given me a life I couldn’t have dreamed of. We’ve had fun together haven’t we? Please don’t leave me now. I’m so grateful for everything you’ve done for me, perhaps it’s my turn to be a good friend to you in return. I’ll look after you when you come home while you’re recovering.”

Moira stroked the back of Nancy’s hand hoping that she could feel it and that it would remind her of connection and of friendship; and at the same time she was willing her to regain consciousness. If the sheer force of intention could do it Nancy would have opened her eyes.

“I wish I knew where you are. I hope it’s not too far. I’m lonely without you, come back soon won’t you? It’s weird at home, so quiet. Oh, and of course, you were right about the tarot card with the tower on it weren’t you? Something sudden and unexpected did happen, and it was a huge shock, and we are having to cope with everything changing aren’t we? I want to talk to you about it, I miss our chats and I want to hear what you think about all this. Oh, Nancy, wake up soon. I miss you. I don’t know what else to say except I’ll come back tomorrow and see how you’re doing. Get well soon.”

34 Atropos

Persephone and I are lying on loungers, sipping ambrosia from silver goblets. Our view overlooks the Elysian Fields which are bathed in soft early morning light enhancing the silvery white flower heads of asphodel. So beautiful.

“Why don’t you tell me what you’ve discovered?”

“I’m not sure I’ve discovered much, their world is as incomprehensible as ever.”

“What’s the mystery? Surely they just live their short lives to the end and when they die, others take their place.”

“But they don’t see it like that. They think that a meagre life with a limited span is significant.”

“Significant?”

“Take Jack, he thinks what happened to his mother makes him unique, as if he’s the only person in the world to have lost a parent. He says that life isn’t fair, as if fairness is an entitlement. He spends his time complaining about his lot, thinks of nothing but himself.”

Persephone laughs.

“Isn’t that what we do?”

“Ha ha. I suppose we do. They’re not all like that though, for example, Moira’s quite different.”

“Different how?”

“Things aren’t ‘fair’ for her either but it’s as if she suspects that the worst is inevitable but hopes it isn’t. Hope is quite pernicious don’t you think?”

“Ah, Elpis at work.”

“Quite.”

“So what does she do with this fear and hope?”

“Sometimes she’s lost in thought, sometimes completely overwhelmed by grief, sometimes laughing with Nancy. It’s a mystery.”

“Hmm.”

“But lately she seems more settled; less cut off and less emotional, all in all much calmer.”

“Perhaps it’s the effect of time passing.”

“Maybe. In any case calmness is far less interesting to observe.”

“Yes I can see that it wouldn’t be as entertaining. How about Jack’s father and stepmother?”

“Actually, Paul’s turning out to be quite entertaining. I’ve been quite surprised at his capacity for recklessness and as for Candace, she’s struggling with it because he’s not behaving as she expects; and she’s venting years of pent up frustration.”

“Ah, angry at life itself then?”

“Yes, can you believe it? She had the gift of life bestowed on her and yet she’s annoyed with most of it. My sisters’ work goes unappreciated.”

“What’s she angry about?”

“Lack of control: things not going her way and people not doing what she wants.”

“You mean she thinks that she actually has the power to control what happens?”

“Yes, ridiculous isn’t it?”

Just then the sound of distant laughter reaches us and Persephone stands up to get a better look.

“Shall we go and see who is so amused this morning? I think you’ll find it interesting.”

“Me? Why?”

“You’ll see. Come and meet them”

Curious, I follow Persephone, and an occasional smothered giggle draws us towards a group of children seated in a circle listening to woman telling stories. As we draw closer, the children fall silent, round eyed with awe at our presence, while the woman struggles to her feet to make a clumsy half curtsy. There is something about that wayward blonde hair and the faintly petulant expression that is familiar to me.

“Do I know you?”

“I don’t think so Ma’am.”

“Well tell us something about yourself, and I will be the judge of that.”

The woman bows her head and places her hands together in a gesture of supplication which I rather like but Persephone takes the woman’s hand and smiles, discouraging the formality and prompting her to lose enough of her wariness to speak.

“My name is Jess, and this is my grandson and some of his new friends”

She gestures towards the children.

Ah - so this must be Jack’s mother and that must be Moira’s child.

“And why are you telling them stories?”

Jess looks surprised at the question.

“Why? Because we all love stories. They are the best entertainment in the world.”

I smile to myself.

“And are they the best entertainment in Hades?”

Jess frowns.

“I’m not sure how to answer that, I don’t want to presume. I am grateful to be here with the children.”

“And what do you make of us all?”

“Persephone is very kind.”

“What about Charon and Hades and Hermes?”

She curtsseys again and Persephone intervenes before she can speak.

“Come, come Atropos, stop teasing. The poor woman will have little enough to do with my husband and his acolytes and as for Hermes, you know very well he goes his own way. Besides it is not fitting for a mortal soul to comment on the gods.”

“And what do you think of the fates and of me?”

“I know that you have brought my grandson to me.”

I am pacified a little but I want to know more of this woman.

“Speak to me of what it is like to be here.”

“I can only speak for myself and the children, and we all like story telling”

“Well then, tell us if you are happy here?”

“There is sometimes joy.”

“And what of pain?”

“Now I’m here, my body doesn’t feel pain but my heart aches just the same.”

“Perhaps this ache is merely a memory, and not real at all.”

“Oh no, it is real, and I treasure my memories, they are such a comfort.”

I am puzzled.

“So how can a painful memory be a comfort?”

“Because it keeps the people I love close to me.”

I shake my head in disbelief and give a sideways look to Persephone.

“And what can you tell me about this child?”

“He arrived here less substantial than a shadow. They all do, the poor little souls need nurturing back to health.”

Moira's child looks at me with his father's eyes.

"Child, what do you know of your mother and father?"

He points a little way away towards a glittering body of water and Jess explains.

"On a clear day, when we look into the pool of Mnemosyne we can see them."

Persephone adds:

"All knowledge is stored there."

"So does he believe that his mother or father will join him here soon?"

"Ma'am, we cannot know the future."

"I should think not, the future is in the hands of the gods alone."

I move towards the pool followed by Jess and the children. Their chatter and laughter are mildly unnerving, I have never liked the unpredictability of children. I wince at the occasional squeal of joy as a loved one is spotted and I lean forward over the water to see for myself. The pool is smooth and still; but beneath its calm surface a sequence of images flows upwards and bursts into bubbles on the surface. Here a face, there a house, sometimes a family group and occasionally the sound of a conversation, muffled by the water. Moira's child is now sitting on the edge with his feet dangling in the water; tracing the edges of some of the images with the point of a twig. Although he is aware of me standing behind him, he doesn't look round. He whispers something and I ask him to repeat it.

"I wish I could go back."

"Aren't you happy here?"

"Yes, but I'd like to go and see her for real."

"What is your name child?"

"Jess calls me Robin, she says I am colourful and curious."

"Robins are fighters though."

He looks at me with his head on one side for a moment before going to join the others, and I turn to Persephone.

"How come they remain children?"

She looks fondly at me, but hesitates, takes me by the elbow and draws me far enough away for our conversation not to be overheard.

"I have never before spoken to anyone of what I know of the laws that govern Hades and I am reluctant to break that silence. What I am about to tell you is not to be divulged elsewhere, ever. I need you to promise me."

“Of course. My lips are sealed”

“These young souls remain children to retain the possibility of being born again. If their life purpose was not fully completed, they can - in extremely rare circumstances - be sent back.”

I am stunned.

“You must say nothing of this, not even to your sisters. Not ever. Even Charon doesn’t know.”

“But how can they get back across the River Styx?”

“They are carried by one of the four winds.”

“Oh do tell. How can such a thing be arranged? If I could get the child into a new life, all I’d have to do then is cut the final thread for Paul, and Zeus would leave me be.”

“It can only be done at my husband’s behest, but he seldom grants such a passage.”

“How can he be persuaded? What must I do?”

“Leave Hades to me. First there must be a suitable host, and they must agree to an exchange of souls. I will leave you to think about it. Let me know who the recipient will be and I will arrange things. But first we need to speak to the child again.”

“Robin, come here and speak with us.”

Jess ushers him forward.

“Tell us about your time down below.”

“I was born, that is all.”

“And what is it like to be born?”

“It is like this.”

He points into the Mnemosyne pool; I lift a handful of water and as it gradually drips between my fingers, the experience of Robin’s birth seeps into my mind. It begins with the rhythm of a beating heart, his, hers? All sensations are neutral. Sounds are felt not heard and there are no sights but imaginary visions, only the sway and swirl of colour. Waking and sleeping are much the same. A kick or a lurch does not identify as self, not for a long time yet. Untouchable, curled and contained, fattening, growing, moving or still, waking or sleeping this soul is content. In the allotted time, he fills the space entirely, perfectly, until squeezed, crushed; he is slowly, slowly forced down, moulded, pushed; his very bones must move so that he can emerge into life. There is no choice. This is Clotho’s work. Now ready to

expand his lungs, to take in air, to breathe, to live, but before his eyes can open, everything stops. Life ends and his spirit floats, lifts away and he is here.

“Hmm, intriguing. And would you want to do it again?”

“I’m not sure. Not like that.”

“How about a visit then? Would you like that?”

I pick up a twig and drag it across the surface of the pool, leaving a sequence of ripples in its wake. Something has been disturbed; and with a throaty gurgle an indistinct image bubbles up from the depths. As the water settles and smooths, the picture clarifies and we see Nancy lying in a coma in the hospital bed with Moira sitting beside her. Robin leans over to get a better look and almost falls in. I pull him back and he laughs delightedly, so I take him by the hand and walk a little further away, out of earshot.

“Do you really want to go down there to see them?”

He looks up at me and nods.

“Well then, tell me, could you become that woman?”

He frowns, not understanding. I persevere.

If you could drop into this woman’s body and bring it to life, would you do it? Make it your own?”

He stares.

“Could I really do that?”

“Would you want to if you could?”

Robin looks doubtful and a little worried.

“Is it allowed?”

“Supposing it is, do you think you could become this woman?”

“What would happen to her spirit if I did?”

“She would come here.”

“Would she be alright here?”

“Are you alright here?”

“Yes.”

“So?”

“I think she’d like it here.”

“Does that mean you want me to arrange it for you?”

“Will I come back here again later?”

“Of course.”

“Then I would like to go down and see her for a while.”

Gingerly, I pat him on the head.

“I’ll see what I can do. You must tell no-one.”

I shoo him back to the rest of the group and Persephone and I head back to the palace. I can feel Jess watching us and look briefly over my shoulder. She drops her eyes back to the children and I know she doesn’t trust me. Her problem, not mine.

Once out of sight, we tune into the sound of birdsong and Persephone begins to sing. Her voice is like no music heard on earth; light as gossamer and sweet as honey, floating on the breeze. It is a lyrical call that causes all the songbirds to stop whatever they are doing and pay attention. She persists and after a while raises a hand whereupon a small brown bird flutters down to perch on her forefinger. He appears to be listening intently to the sounds she makes, then he puffs his chest, lifts his wings and flies off in the direction of the world beyond the Styx.

If he hauled himself up from his bed by the window, Paul could see Candace as she busied herself in the garden. He envied the ease with which she rose to her feet from being on her knees. Clad in baggy old trousers and an ancient waterproof jacket with her hair tied up in a multi-coloured headscarf, she looked unusually relaxed. She picked up her bucket of weeds and strolled over to the compost bin but before tipping them in, she stood for a while with her head on one side, listening, and he wondered what she could hear. Birds? Insects? Traffic? A plane? What? She looked relaxed. He had almost forgotten that she could be like this. With him she always seemed to be annoyed. He was used to her moods but he didn't know how to change things. It was easier to keep out of her way. To look at her now and to see her busy in the garden was an unexpected pleasure and he wished they could be the way they used to be; if only she wasn't so easily irritated. He'd never understood why things bothered her so much.

And yet, being the butt of a woman's fury was familiar, it seemed ordinary; his mother too had been an angry woman. According to her, it was a miracle he had been born at all, implying that a 'miracle' was a deeply flawed concept. Even now, he could still see her furious face and jabbing forefinger telling him off for something, though he hardly ever knew why she got so angry with him. There had been that time when some bigger boys had pushed him into the ditch and laughed as he'd heaved himself out slipping and sliding in the mud and trying not to cry. He must have been an easy target. But their laughing had been easier to bear than his mother's angry slap across his legs when he got home. If it hadn't been for his sister, his life would have been unbearable. He'd tried to be what his mother wanted, he really had. It had taken him a long time to give up on the idea that their bond could be what he'd wished it could be. Even as an adult, there were still occasions when he wondered what he could have done to make things better. Better for him? Better for her? Anyway it was far too late now, she'd been gone a long time.

Shortly after she died, he'd met Jess and his life shifted into a different gear. Jack was born, Jess became a Mum and everything changed. But it wasn't long before she too left him and he was alone again, wondering whether his mother had been right and he was a waste of space after all. He didn't so much pull himself together as just carry on as usual regardless of how he felt about anything. He built his life upon routines and habits, as comforting and familiar as an old pair of slippers. The days went on and he carried on living. He learnt to

cook the things he liked and he hired a cleaner to do the things he didn't, his working hours were regular and his holidays were usually spent at home. His mother and Jess faded away into the past along with other youthful things and he moved on, he was alright. He rekindled his love of classic cars, bought an old wreck for a song and learned to repair it. It took years of trial and error, hours studying manuals and days spent at rallies where he could quiz other enthusiasts, to reach the point of finally being able to drive his own car on the road. It was expensive to run but he was proud of himself and that was more important.

But there was that one day that brought everything flooding back. He'd been driving to work early one winter morning. The frosted empty streets were dark although the rising sun threw an occasional shaft of low light onto the road. He was enjoying having the beginning of the day to himself, and perhaps he had been driving a little faster than usual, or maybe he wasn't properly awake, after all he'd left the house without even a cup of coffee. In any case, he thought he saw his mother standing in the road. As he swerved, the tyres hit back ice and the car spun out of control, launching him into some other dimension, a strange in-between space where there was all the time in the world for the car to turn full circle and glide to a stop. The whole thing had taken no more than a few seconds but it felt like he had been to the edge of death and back again. Shaken to the core he'd turned the engine off and waited for normality to resume. Why her? Why then? Did she want him dead? Was that it? If so, why hadn't the car crashed? Was he actually meant to die but somehow hadn't? Did this mean that someone else would have to die in his place? Was that why Jess' life ended in the car crash that changed everything? Was it her doing? Was it some kind of punishment? It often felt like it. Why were women so difficult? It was all so tiresome. Candace too. She had never taken to Jack even after all this time, she still resented him. Why? Why? And now he had less energy than ever to try to figure it out.

Looking out of the window again, he saw that Candace was no longer there, and a twinge of anxiety arose. He wondered how it would be for her when he was gone, to wherever we go when we die. What would she do? Would she be happier without him? What would happen to Jack? He supposed that he and Candace needed to have a serious talk. That would be a first. He reached for his green notebook and reread his list of what needed to be done; at least he'd managed to get his will finalised. That was something. He noticed how faint and shaky his handwriting had become, yet another sign of poor health. He picked up his pen and wrote underneath: still dying, still struggling, still living - just.

Candace must have come into the house because he could hear her talking downstairs but he was too tired to try to make out the words. Everything exhausted him now. He knew that the remission was over and cancer was creeping up on him again, taking hold of his body more firmly with each day that passed. A profound weariness made everything a huge effort. With a sigh, he dropped the book, fell back into the pillows and closed his eyes.

Drifting in the half dreaming state just before sleep, he was aware of himself lying there, his breathing made a soft purring sound, and he thought of the little white cat. Faint noises came and went, merged with whispered voices and the clatter and shuffle of a group of people walking across a hard floor. Then the dream took him over completely.

“Come along. This way, this way. Keep moving.”

The command came from their tour guide, a handsome young man holding aloft a furred umbrella which he threw up in the air and caught by the ferrule, continuing to twirl it with one hand which Paul thought was rather clever. As it spun, the crook of the handle became a pair of wings and the green and black striped fabric split into two snakes, writhing in formation around the central shaft, their forked tongues flicking upwards towards the wings. Paul knew this heraldic staff was a caduceus with magical properties. The young man let it slide through his hand, so it hit the floor with a loud rap whereupon all eyes turned towards him.

Their handsome guide was clad in a short tunic that showed his well-muscled body to advantage and Paul could see that he had small white wings growing from each shoulder blade with a matching set adorning his hat and each of his golden leather boots. Whether it was because of the wings, Paul couldn't tell, but he moved fast, and the small party had to run to keep up. There was a fair bit of jostling within the group and not wanting to compete for space, Paul fell back, until he was quite a way behind the others but this warranted a sharp reprimand from their guide while they waited for him to catch up. They had reached a grand doorway with enormous carved wooden doors which their guide pulled open with a flourish as if they weighed nothing at all. Removing his hat, he bowed low towards whoever was in the room beyond but by the time the little group entered, whoever it was had gone. Putting his hat back on his head, he announced to the group:

“This is the banqueting hall. You are forbidden to touch anything.”

He led the group right around the huge table, laden with a feast the like of which Paul had never seen. There were platters piled high with unknown sweetmeats and fruits, silver flagons and crystal decanters, all lit by enormous candelabras, with more candles than Paul could count. Like a fascinated child he reached across and to touch the damask table cloth when the caduceus was launched at him. He lifted his arm to protect his face and one of the snakes bit him. He recoiled clutching the sore place and the snakes kept up their menacing glare in his direction even though the caduceus was back in the hand of the guide. His voice boomed so loudly that most of the visitors covered their ears.

“It is imperative that you obey.”

He took a deep breath.

“On pain of death.”

Still clutching his sore arm, Paul felt somewhat aggrieved but didn't dare say anything. He was distracted by a slight breeze that was blowing through a small window that opened into the next room. The fine muslin curtain billowed and flapped, giving tantalising glimpses of what lay on the other side. The crowd shuffled together and elbowed each other to see. Their guide leaned on the sill and a melodious female voice could be heard.

“Why Hermes, how delightful to see you.”

“Good afternoon ladies.”

After a brief whispered conversation, he stood to one side and beckoned, inviting only Paul to come nearer, much to the disappointment, not to say resentment of the rest of the group. Hermes pulled the curtain to one side so that Paul could see into the room.

“The fates have something to show you.”

A magnificent tapestry covered the walls as far as the eye could see, which made him think of Candace. All around were baskets of coloured yarn, several spinning wheels, and a range of looms. Three goddesses were huddled over something. Paul tried to clear his throat to speak but could only muster a strange croak but they looked up at him and nodded as if to say yes. Yes to what? One of them was holding up a fine gossamer thread so that it glistened in the light, as insubstantial as a spider's web. Another seemed to be measuring it and the third was brandishing a pair of gleaming scissors. Then everything went dark. The next thing he knew, he was standing in the open air at the edge of a river, hearing his sister's voice calling to him from the opposite bank.

36 Jack

Jack rather enjoyed his occasional trips outside of the factory during working hours. This time he'd been asked to help Sid with a few local deliveries.

"Come on lad; let's get this show on the road and God willing we'll be able to knock off early. What do you say?"

"Sure."

Jack's typical one word answers usually called for a clap on the back or a nudge to the shoulder from Sid, which always startled him but no longer made him feel awkward. Sid's job had turned out to be a bit of everything: caretaker, handyman, delivery driver, and person to go to for anything else that needed doing. He seemed to know everything about everyone and took it upon himself to keep Jack up to date on the latest gossip about his fellow workers together with a regular dose of religion.

Since Sid didn't mind being the one to do all talking and was in fact quite entertaining, his chatter during the drive suited Jack. Along with the usual factory chit chat there was often singing, sometimes philosophy and occasionally even a brief sermon. Jack wondered which it would be today. Anything could set him off. It just so happened that they were driving through the back lanes which prompted Sid to make a comment about having seen a dead sheep by the side of the road at this spot.

Jack kept quiet but Sid carried on with his ideas on the subject.

"Makes you wonder why these things happen, don't it? Course, that sheep would have died anyway at some point, like all of us."

He shot a look sideways at Jack.

"What's up mate?"

"I don't want to talk about it, that's all."

"Don't want to talk about what? Sheep? Death?"

"Neither."

"Neither eh? Everything has to die sometime."

"I know, I know."

"They're not there to look pretty, they're mostly there to feed us. I didn't think you were squeamish."

He paused.

“You’re not vegetarian are you?”

“No.”

“Well then, you need to get used to the idea of a dead sheep.”

“It’s just that I...”

“Just that you what?”

Against his better judgement, Jack blurted out:

“It was me okay, I was driving Dad’s car and I ran into that sheep.”

“You?”

“It wasn’t my fault, I didn’t see it.”

“Oh.”

Sid patted Jack’s arm and continued sympathetically.

“Oh well, all part of God’s plan I daresay. Hope it didn’t suffer too much. Prob’ly munching grass somewhere in heaven, if that’s where sheep end up, looked after by the good shepherd eh?”

He elbowed Jack in the ribs but getting no reaction, launched into all five verses of ‘The Lord is my Shepherd’ with his left arm conducting himself until they arrived at their first drop off.

“Right oh, since you’ve got youth on your side, you can do the lifting and carrying and I’ll stick with the driving. It’ll be quicker if I can keep the engine running outside while you nip in with the boxes. Mind you get a signature though.”

Their calls were mostly to up-market dress shops in all the small towns in the area as well as the occasional fancy boutique in a smaller village. They’d begun with the furthest away and were now working their way back towards the factory, so far managing to keep out of the way of traffic wardens and they were both looking forward the end of their shift. Their final call was to a gift shop, not far from the factory itself. As the van pulled up onto the double yellow lines right outside the shop, Jack already had the boxes on his lap and leapt out. He glanced up at swinging sign above the window to check it against the chit in his hand and pushed the door open with an elbow.

Holding the armful of boxes in front of him he made his way to the counter and waited while the girl finished what she was doing before looking up at him.

“Can I help you?”

“Oh.”

He was taken aback to realise that the girl in front of him was Moira. She didn't look anything like the skinny girl with big black eyes that he remembered. She'd put on a bit of weight, her hair was different. She seemed older than him now although he knew for a fact that she wasn't. Feeling rather stupid, he held onto the cardboard boxes and said nothing. She gestured to him to put them on the counter which he did, then remembering what he was there for, he thrust a piece of paper towards her which she ignored.

“So, you're working now then?”

He shuffled awkwardly, and dropped the piece of paper on the counter.

“Er yes. How are you?”

“Fine thanks. You?”

“Alright I s'pose.”

“Did you get my text? You never replied.”

Jack coughed.

“I guess you still didn't want to know.”

“That's not ...”

“Not what? Not your responsibility? Not your problem?”

The sharpness of her tone reminded him of Candace and rather than face her, he turned to go. She waited until he reached the door before calling out.

“Don't you need this?”

Waving the signed docket, she smiled as he came towards her and the moment he leaned across the counter to take it, she raised her other hand and slapped him hard across the side of his face. The sound of it surprised both of them and froze them in the moment for several seconds until Jack backed away, claspng the paper in one hand and holding his other hand to the increasingly livid outline of her fingers on his cheek.

“Anyway, thanks for the delivery. See you around.”

He pulled the door hard behind him with a violent clang, aware of her watching him as he clambered back into the van beside an impatient Sid who pulled away before he'd got his seat belt fastened.

“What was going on? You were ages. Chatting up that girl were you?”

Jack scowled.

“Turned you down did she?”

“Leave it will you. She’s just someone I used to know.”

“Well whoever she is, she’s rattled you.”

“Oh give it a rest Sid.”

Jack was feeling shaken, especially since he’d thought he’d put the whole Moira thing behind him.

“What’s up with your face?”

“Nothing.”

“Look at me.”

“What?”

“Looks like a slap round the face to me. Did she do that?”

“Yeah, okay. Now just leave it will you.”

“She must have been really mad at you. Whatever did you do to upset her?”

“Nothing, she’s just angry.”

“About what?”

“Just leave it alone can’t you, it doesn’t matter.”

Sid was about to pursue his line of questioning when the wail of a siren and the flash of blue lights from behind prompted him to swerve off the road onto the verge to let the speeding ambulance pass. Jack grabbed the dashboard as they jolted along the grass.

“Bloody hell, they’re in a hurry!”

“Poor bugger.”

“Who?”

“Whoever’s inside!”

Jack’s phone pinged, a message. Apparently he’d missed a call.

“Anything important?”

“I doubt it. It’s from my stepmother.”

He shoved the phone back in his pocket without reading it. They were both quiet the rest of the way, and since it was almost time to knock off, Sid dropped Jack off at home on his way back to the factory. Jack called a brief ‘thanks mate’ and marched up the drive to the house. Surprisingly, the house was silent although Candace’s car was there. He ran upstairs, discovered that Paul wasn’t there either and from the landing window he stared down at deep tracks in the gravel where a vehicle had turned in a hurry. It had evidently been a tight turn because there were tyre imprints in the flower bed and one of the rose bushes was

lying in the mud. He finally checked his phone and the short message from Candace read: 'at hosp with P'. Not knowing what to think or what to do, he walked slowly back downstairs to the kitchen. He stood for a while staring into space, his stomach knotted, his thoughts confused and his hands clasped tightly together up to his mouth. It was only when he realised that he had been biting his thumb so hard that he had drawn blood that he sat down at the table and tried to calm himself down. Not bothering to turn on the lights his fingers scrolled through his phone flicking through image after pointless image in an effort to distract himself. Eventually he slammed it face down on the table in front of him and put his hands to his now throbbing head. When the phone rang and he saw that it was Candace calling, a lurch of fear ran through him.

"Is that you Jack?"

"Yes."

"He's gone Jack. Your father died before we even got to the hospital. They couldn't revive him."

She spoke slowly and her words tailed off into silence.

"I don't know what to say."

Apparently she didn't either because she hung up. Jack was left holding the now silent phone to his ear until he suddenly threw it across the room where it hit the corner of the Aga, before cracking open on the floor and lay there giving out a high pitched whine. He stared at it while something deeply buried slowly welled up inside him. All the bile and fury and fear and loss and shame and horror and self-loathing bubbled up to the back of his throat where it came out as a deep growl of rage that split him open and spurred him into action. He stamped on the offending phone, then he picked up one by one: the radio, the china fruit bowl, three slate table mats and a glass jug, and hurled them at the implacable Aga.

A second powerful wave shook him and, infuriated that the glass jug hadn't smashed, he kicked it across the room. Then he pulled open the top drawer and deposited a mound of cutlery on top, followed by the contents of the spice drawer so that some of the jars broke open and strewed their orange, red and yellow powders on top of the rest of the mess. Why was everything so bloody unfair? Why? Why? Why? He swept an arm across the table, felling the salt and pepper pots, which hit a jar of pens which rolled into a vase of dead carnations, which in turn hit an art deco lamp leaving a pile of smashed items on the

floor, except for the lamp which was still connected to the socket by its plug and hung just above the rest, flickering. Still fizzing with anger he edged round to the far side of the table, pushed and lifted and heaved with all his strength until he managed to upend the whole thing. It made a satisfying crunch as the glass jug finally shattered and shards of glass skittered to the four corners of the room. He fell back into the carver chair with a satisfied grunt and let the thoughts come. Why me? Why did it have to be my dad, as well as my mum? Why, did it have to happen? What is it all for? What about me? What happens now?

He spotted the wine rack with its rows of gleaming bottles, ran his eyes upwards to the collection of different whiskeys, and decided that now seemed as good a time as any to get drunk. He stood up, grasped a couple of bottles by the neck, and went up to his room ready to let the booze blot everything out.

In the early hours of the morning, he woke, just making it to the bathroom in time to throw up. His head was thumping and his mouth was so dry he couldn't move his tongue. Vowing never to drink again ever, he staggered down to the kitchen, tiptoed round the mess and managed to find some aspirin and pour himself a glass of water. It must have been a trick of the half-light but he thought he glimpsed someone standing to one side of him. He held his breath, and turned slowly, glass in hand. What he saw then was enough to make him drop the glass, but it merely shook and slopped water onto the floor. The man standing in front of him looked like a pale marble statue in a museum, perfectly still, apart from the eyes which were dark brown and looking directly at Jack. Around his shoulders like a monstrous scarf was a ram with magnificent curled horns. He carried it with ease although it must have been heavy. When it let out a sullen bleat, Jack jumped backward. By the time he had regained his balance the image in front of him had faded away leaving only a faint smell of sheep.

What was that? Had he been dreaming or hallucinating? Was it the booze? It must be something to do with the sheep he'd run over, surely, but what did it mean? Jack dumped the glass in the sink then went round the entire house switching on all of the lights before going back to bed.

By now he was wide awake, at first fearing more visitations then battling a throbbing head but as the aspirin began to take effect, he calmed down enough that self-doubt, shame, guilt and self-hatred could worm their way in. Everything was awful, he was a hopeless, useless waste of space. Other people coped with problems in life, but not him. His

headache served him right, his own fault, stupid, stupid. Life itself was surely a punishment for the crime of being himself. His misery drove his thoughts in ever decreasing circles, their sharp stabs precisely targeted to inflict the most damage, until, weary to the bone, he fell asleep once more. Unconscious thoughts and feelings about his father coiled around his heart, the rawness of grief tightening its grip. Now he really was an orphan.

37 Robin

The little brown bird with Persephone's song in his heart crosses the Styx without mishap and once he reaches the earthly side of the river, he heads deep into the woods where Nancy's spirit is still wandering, while her body in the hospital bed waits for her to return. Dishevelled and bewildered, she mutters to herself as she goes. The avian messenger watches her veering from one path to another, taking her even further into the woods where Helios the sun god seldom probes beneath the canopy. There are no other birds here, and when he bursts into song, Nancy stops her meandering and looks around her. Rippling cascades of sound jump from high to low and back again. With a flourish of trickles and gurgling scales he reaches a crescendo before fluttering across to a low branch where his little black eyes blink at Nancy.

"Oh!"

She steps back and her voice cracks as she speaks.

"What have you come to tell me little bird? Has someone died? Who was it?"

The bird tilts his head as if listening for something. He fluffs up his feathers a little, as if to remind Nancy of his significance, or perhaps the importance of his message for her.

"Who is it?"

He trills at her and she leans back cupping her ears with her hands to better catch the melody but stumbles over a tree root and ends up on the ground, winded and speechless. The more he sings, the clearer his meaning, the tune becomes words and the words become the tune.

"Would you like to see old friends and relatives? Those who have gone before you?"

Nancy is wide eyed and he clarifies with just touch of impatience.

"To see them face to face again?"

"Of course I would."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Then I have delivered my message."

With a swoop and a chirrup, the bird zigzags aloft to the topmost point of a nearby tree. He keeps a beady eye on Nancy as she struggles to her feet, sees her look down at a small piece of metal that has stuck to her palm, and turn back the way she came. He makes

sure she rejoins the end of the queue by the river, with the coin to pay the ferryman in her fist, and only then does he take flight.

Meanwhile, the spirit child Robin waits by the pool, unsure about his conversation with the goddess who promised him a visit to his Mama. Does she mean it or is it a trick? He doesn't really understand what she means about the old woman, but it makes him feel sad to think about it. He would prefer to go as himself. Still he supposes that isn't possible for some reason. He spends a lot of time searching the pool for answers. He is obsessed by the images, stories, memories and futures that he sees. The vast histories of the past and the infinite possibilities of the future, burble to the surface only to sink back into the sediment of everything that was ever known. He is desperate to hold onto what he likes and let go of what he doesn't, but there is no controlling the relentless roiling cycle. And the woman and his Mama are nowhere to be found. He can't really name what he feels, a kind of wistfulness, homesick for a home he never had, yearning for what he missed although he doesn't know what it might have been. Whatever the fates had in store for him once is now buried in the slime at the bottom of the pool.

He sits hugging his knees and drops his head, engrossed in his disappointment until a sudden cool breeze on the back of his neck blows his hair over his face and he shivers; this is odd because it is never cold here in the Elysian Fields. A fine sprinkling, small as pin pricks touches his bare arm and he lifts up his face to the almost imperceptible droplets that are falling from the cloudless sky. A scattering of pink and white petals swirl around him; what is this? Standing up, he gathers a handful and lets them drop through his fingers. Damp gusts thrust at him and breathe down his neck; a repetitive whooshing sound matches his quickening heartbeat and he can't believe what is happening. Pushing his hair off his face he stares up at a huge winged figure that is swooping and diving across the sky, in acrobatic loops and figures of eight, then with a final flourish the being makes a perfect landing, folds his wings and takes an ironic bow.

"At your service."

"Who are you?"

"I am Zephyrus, at the request of the goddess Atropos, I have flown from the western reaches of the earth, lifting moisture from the seas and blossom from the trees and, I am here to carry you earthwards."

Before Robin can ask anything else, he is scooped up, flung over a shoulder and they are soaring aloft. They fly fast: whirling, swooping, falling, tumbling and he can't tell which way is up and he is soaking wet. But once they are out of sight, the manoeuvres that provided a smoke screen to hide their departure are over and their flightpath straightens and smooths out. Now he is lying face down and his hands are clutching at feathers. He blinks a few times to get the rain out of his eyes and peers downwards. Far, far below he can briefly see the dark ribbon of the Styx before the mist closes in again. As they wend their way ever eastwards, their pace changes frequently, they run the gamut of breezes, gales and storms, hurricanes, cyclones, typhoons. There are times when the heat that rises from the deserts enables them to ride ever higher until like Icarus they plunge downwards once more, skimming across the sea, calling up Poseidon's white horses and sending them thrashing towards the shore.

The oceans are strewn with reed boats and longboats, galleys and junks, four-masted warships, clippers and yachts. Later there are steamships and liners, cruisers and speed boats all bobbing like corks in the wake of the west wind and his spirit passenger. As they pass through time's loopholes they blast through history, geography and physics; oblivious to worldly laws. They travel over ice mountains and desert plains, impenetrable forests and rolling hills, islands where the trees bow before them only to rebound to their full height as they pass. Less resilient trees crack and break, sending nesting birds skywards in flurries of squawking feathers. All manner of life on Earth feels the transition of Zephyrus and shivers in recognition of something godly passing by. As they slow down to begin their descent, a herd of cows get the wind up and gallop across their field like racehorses. Robin reaches out to catch a wisp of a spirit from a dead sheep that coils up towards them but he misses it. The lick of flames from a garden incinerator jumps skywards as if to reach them, then contrite, drops back, dowsed into submission. A woman battles to keep her apron round her knees and watches helplessly as her rotary washing line spins so fast that she can't catch it, and her basket of wet washing tips over. Children in the park shriek with fear as the roundabout they are riding picks up speed, and their tiny hands cling on for dear life. The weather vane on the church spire spins wildly as they come in to land at the hospital and Zephyrus' voice whispers through Robin's psyche like the rustle of grasses.

"Here."

With a powerful squall, a window is flung wide open blowing Robin inside, then with a kick of his heel against the window by way of a farewell, Zephyrus is gone. A nurse walks across to the window and pulls the catch firmly down. There is no way back.

Robin's spirit slowly settles and acclimatises to where he finds himself. He can hear the nurse talking to Moira about probabilities and worst case scenarios; and he sees that Moira is holding Nancy's hand and gently stroking the back of her fingers though there is no response. Nancy's heart still beats and her lungs are breathing, but her face is empty, there is not a spark of animation. Robin finds the regularity of the whirring, clicking, and occasional bleeps of the machines that keep Nancy's body going soothing, calming him down after the tumult of the journey. These ambient noises blend with random sounds from outside the building: snippets of conversation, an aircraft on its way somewhere, a slamming van door, music from a car radio, from which a simple tune worms its way inside. Wordless at first, but it is familiar, perhaps a lullaby. Still stroking Nancy's hand, Moira is humming softly. She and Robin wait for the words to come to her.

*Sleep my child and peace attend thee,
All through the night
Guardian angels God will send thee,
All through the night
Soft the drowsy hours are creeping
Hill and vale in slumber sleeping,
I my loving vigil keeping
All through the night.*

This tune was familiar to Robin, it had first come to him muffled through his mother's body during the months before his birth. Hearing it now made him feel safe and he let himself float along on the sound waves, slowly drifting towards his second chance to meet her. As the final note faded, Robin's spirit slipped in through Nancy's nostrils. He followed the warm pathway down into the lungs and began his slow expansion outwards. As the flow of his psyche entered the brain he experienced a backwash of Nancy's thoughts vying with each other to get expressed. They had evidently languished here for some time while Nancy's spirit journeyed elsewhere. It took a while to align himself with everything before preparing to gradually connect to every part of the comatose body. When it was done, he

rested, taking stock, getting used to the new space, grateful for the peace of being in a coma while he slowly grew himself into this woman, inch by inch, becoming Nancy.

There was so much to get used to before risking full consciousness... at first becoming aware of internal rhythms, a gradual transition into femininity, learning how this particular female body worked. He didn't have decades to get used to it, he had to acclimatise rapidly and it took all the energy he could bring to it, to gather himself into Nancy's history, her life story, her beliefs, hopes and motivations. After three days, she was ready to open her eyes, which she did at night when no-one was watching. After four days she moved a finger. By now remembering that the number seven is significant, she chose the seventh day to make herself known. After another week, she was home.

38 Jack

As Jack pushed his way through the swing door into the factory canteen he was met by the clatter of cutlery, the scraping of plates and people talking louder and louder as they tried to hear each other over the din. He winced and put his hand to his head before grabbing his usual coke and sandwich and joining Sid who looked up from his plateful of pie and chips.

“Where were you this morning Jack?”

“Don’t ask.”

“You look awful, out on the town were you?”

“Not exactly.”

“Looks painful though, hangover is it?”

“Hmm.”

Sid changed the subject.

“How’s yer stepmother doing?”

“Hates me.”

“Surely not.”

“Surely yes. Had a bit of a melt down and now she’s chucked me out. I’ll be sleeping in the car.”

“Who had the melt down, you or her?”

“Both of us I reckon.”

“Grief takes us all differently son, let her be, she’ll do it her own way. And how about you? Are you coping?”

“I’ll be okay.”

“Well, you’re welcome to come and stay with me until it all blows over between you and her. You’ll want to sort out your differences before the funeral won’t you?”

“I dunno.”

Sid carried on with the last of his chips, speaking between mouthfuls.

“Look, you can’t be sleeping in the car, you’d be better off with me until you can sort yourself out.”

“I s’pose.”

“Does that mean you will?”

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

"Yeah, thanks."

"Stay as long as you like son, plenty of space and it'd be company for me. You'll have to earn your keep though."

"What do you mean?"

"Do your fair share of the cleaning, washing up 'n all. I don't have many mod cons."

"Sure."

"Right then, it's a deal."

He reached a hand across the table and Jack shook it.

"Do you know what I think?"

"What?"

"I think you need a break, something different to think about. Why don't you come with me to the bible study meeting at the church tonight? Who knows, you might learn something useful."

"Hmm, I don't really think it's my kind of thing."

"How can you know if you've never been? Anyway, what else have you got to do? Might as well give it a go eh?"

Jack shrugged

"Right, that's settled then. I'll come over to your place at 6.30, we'll pick up your things, and go straight there. You can come back home with me after."

By six thirty that evening, Jack had managed to collect what he thought he might need and shove it all into a couple of cardboard boxes he found in the garage. He had no idea where the suitcases were kept. When Sid pulled into the drive he stuffed the boxes onto the back seat and within a couple of minutes they were on their way. There was no sign of Candace but they'd both heard the front door slam behind Jack as he left the house.

Several times, Jack opened his mouth as if about to speak and then stopped. Sid waited, keeping his eyes mostly on the road but stealing an occasional glance sideways.

"Sid, can I ask you something?"

"Sure. Spit it out."

"That day you dropped me home, the day my dad died. Well, I saw something in the house."

"What sort of thing?"

"A person. Not a real person, not from this day and age anyhow."

“What did he look like?”

“Tall, pale, dark eyes, practically naked.”

“And?”

“And he had a bloody great ram draped round his shoulders. What do you make of that?”

“Perhaps it was the good Lord come to tell you that your dad was with him now.”

“I don’t think so, because he had wings on his hat and wings on his shoes. That ram was giving me dirty looks too. I thought he must have come to punish me for running over that sheep.”

“What did he say?”

“He didn’t say anything, and after a while he just vanished. I don’t know what to make of it.”

“You’re probably just stressed.”

“I hope you’re right. I thought I was going mad.”

“Noo. You’ll be fine. There’s a lot going on in your life, you’re bound to find it hard. You’ll be okay when things settle down. Its early days boy. Yer dad isn’t even buried yet.”

“So you don’t think it’s anything to worry about then?”

“No I don’t. Come on now, you need to get out more, take yer mind off it all for an evening. Besides, they’re a nice group.”

“Who are?”

“The people you’re going to meet this evening, all different types of people, all ages. We have some good discussions, I can tell you. It gets quite heated sometimes.”

Sid chuckled but Jack was wishing he hadn’t agreed to come. They arrived in plenty of time and Jack learnt that the minister was called Dominic but preferred to be called Dom. People arrived in ones and twos, chattering as they took their coats off, waving across the room to each other and finding their seats. A few of them noticed Jack and nodded or smiled towards him in a friendly way but it didn’t make him feel any better. He tried to cover up his awkwardness by memorising people’s names as they introduced themselves, knowing he wouldn’t be able to and he wished he hadn’t come. During the introductory prayer, at a surreptitious look from Sid, he closed his eyes until the final ‘amen’. Then there was rustling and throat clearing ready for each person to take their turn reading from the text that was tonight’s topic. To Jack’s dismay it seemed that the discussion was to be about sheep. He

couldn't get away from the damned things. At 'I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep' Jack shuffled in his seat. The chair, which was a bit wobbly, scraped on the floor but no-one looked at him except Sid. Jack wondered if there was anything in the bible about a sheep giving its life rather than the shepherd.

Dom explained that it was Jesus who was the shepherd and people were the sheep. A skinny woman in serious looking glasses, said that she didn't like to think of herself as a sheep, they were pretty stupid after all. Several others nodded in agreement, and Sid commented.

"Well compared with God, we are all pretty stupid aren't we? I'd say the difference between a sheep and a shepherd is about the same as the difference between people and God. It's just a different level."

The woman in glasses pursed her lips but said no more.

Dom pointed out that in any case, this story was from long ago, maybe today Jesus would have used a different metaphor, something more relevant to our lives now. Back then, in Palestine, shepherding was dangerous and difficult work, twenty four hours a day, protecting the flock against wolves and thieves without any modern conveniences. Perhaps if he were here now, he might use a different image, perhaps a nurse taking care of her patients rather than a shepherd taking care of his sheep.

"After all, Doris, you've recently been in hospital haven't you? Perhaps this might be more meaningful to you."

Doris looked blank and Dom ran his eyes round the group, settling on Jack which prompted him to blurt out the first thing that came into his head.

"Shepherds, sheep, nurses, patients, I don't get it, what does it all mean?"

"Thank you Jack, for reminding us, it is the *meaning* that's important. Can anyone explain the meaning of the story?"

A little old man at the back, raised his hand and Dom nodded at him to continue. He spoke softly with a twinge of an unidentifiable accent, all the while turning his flat cap in his hands.

"Aye. What I tek it ta mean is that no matter who we are or what we do, our own good shepherd cares for us. All we need to do is heed the call and follow."

Jack was none the wiser.

"Thank you Jim, so what does it mean for us to 'follow'?"

This wasn't a question so much as an opportunity for Dominic to launch into a lengthy explanation.

"This means first of all that we believe in Jesus, who will save us from death and lead us to eternal life; and secondly that we follow his example in how we live our lives."

"Not easy that bit."

Everyone laughed.

"No it's not easy but worth striving for don't you think?"

Jack was puzzled.

"What do you mean save us from death? We all have to die."

"Yes, it's true that our life here ends, but if we follow Jesus, we can live for ever with God."

Jack's mind ran on, trying to work out whether he was able to believe such things. Up till now, he'd preferred not to even think about what might happen when we die, but what with the sheep getting run over and Dad dying not long afterwards, not to mention Moira's baby, it felt like he had no choice but to think about it. Perhaps he'd feel better if he came to some definite idea of what he did believe. After all, he'd listened to Dad talk about what death might be like enough times. He wished now that he'd been more willing to join in with those chats. It might have been a chance to really think about it, or at least not to be so screwed up about Paul's death when it happened. It all seemed so final. Here one day, gone the next. Was Dad with God? Anyway, what about other gods, the ones in the stories and computer games? How did all that fit in? The discussion continued back and forth for the rest of the evening making Jack more confused at the end than he had been at the beginning so when things moved on and everyone was standing around drinking tea and eating Doris' much praised Victoria sponge, he was distinctly relieved.

He was pleased when they got back to Sid's, and grateful for Sid putting him up, but didn't quite know how to be. He had no idea what to expect, and apart from his religion, he knew very little about Sid. He was curious to find that the house was small and sparsely furnished although relatively clean and tidy; not that he'd have cared if it wasn't, it was a relief to have somewhere to go, he had no intention of grovelling to Candace to let him come back. Sid showed him to the spare room and left him to settle in - as he put it.

"There'll be cocoa and toast if you fancy it in about ten minutes. Come down when you're ready lad."

So he did, and discovered a capacity for sociable chit-chat that he didn't know he had and after a while surprised himself by laughing at Sid's terrible jokes and after a while found himself answering Sid's questions.

"So why don't you tell me how come you've ended up here? What happened between you and your stepmum?"

"Well, the fact is we've never got on. She hated me right from the start."

"How come?"

"I was seven when my Mum died but she and Dad were divorced when I was a baby."

"So you ended up living back with your Dad after your Mum died?"

"Yeah and he was married to Candace by then. She couldn't wait to get rid of me so they sent me away to school."

"So how was that?"

"Well, I just sort of got on with it, I didn't have a choice did I?"

"And you were seven years old?"

"Yeah, just a kid, what did I know?"

"It must have been hard for you."

"I dunno really, you just do what you have to, don't you? In some ways I was glad to get away from them."

"I hope you don't mind me asking, but do you remember much about your mum?"

"To be honest, I don't remember anything much at all really, only that everything seemed brighter, more fun back then. There were always people and parties. Coming to live with Dad and Candace...everything felt gloomy. I guess I must have been worried, frightened even, but I'd never have admitted it, even then; it doesn't do to show weakness, I soon found that out at school."

"So how come you ended up leaving school and working at the factory?"

"Getting a job meant I'd have some money, besides I hated school and by then everything had got more complicated."

"I know what you mean; life does sometimes get complicated doesn't it? Girlfriend problems I should imagine?"

"Sort of."

Was it something to do with that girl in the shop?"

"In a way, but I'd rather not talk about it."

Sid gave him a long look but didn't pursue it.

"You get off to bed now, and I'll wash these cups ready for the morning."

The bed was comfortable and Jack slept more soundly than he had in a long while, although his dreams were full of sheep.

39 Candace

The world turned, bringing a chill that would not be assuaged. Despite the best efforts of the Aga, and any number of fleecy clothes, Candace remained frozen. The relentless cold that had pervaded the house ever since Paul's death, had turned her fingers permanently blue. Neither the occasional creak from the house as it tried to warm up nor the barely audible voices on the radio penetrated her mind, clouded as it was with its own layer of hoarfrost. She thought she heard a key in the door but nobody came in, nobody called out. Not now, not any more and she left the phone to ring.

Hours, days went by unnoticed and even when the temperature rose a little, the incessant rain turned Candace's world greyer than ever; the house and carefully chosen furnishings and pictures became dull, their colours sapped by the gloom. The patter of drops on the window was a signal to draw the curtains, a familiar action, unthinking, automatic, shutting out both day and night. Indifferent, she was living in permanent dusk. Alone in the house, she was at one with its emptiness. Even with her eyes open, she could feel the dark enfolding her like a shawl, whispering soothing sounds at her ear; perhaps they were words or merely dreams. Often sleepless, she wandered around the rooms at night, exploring the spaces that were once occupied by Paul. She sat on the purple chaise longue and felt his absence there; she ran her fingers over the newspaper with its unfinished crossword and left it where it was. Ghost-like, her white-clad figure drifted from room to room, her mind empty. The door to Paul's wardrobe was ajar, its interior light offering a faint glow into the room so that Candace's forehead creased into a puzzled look. Her hand lifted as if it was about to push the door shut, or perhaps pull it open, but unable to make a choice, dropped back to her side. At some point she'd have to sort out the contents of the wardrobe, sell things, donate them or throw them away but such a task seemed impossible to contemplate and she pushed the door firmly shut as she turned away. It was as if Paul's death had solidified her disappointment in life and fixed into her bones. She crossed the landing but she didn't go into Jack's room. There would be nothing for her there but a need to eradicate his presence, and she didn't have the energy for that; not yet.

Time seemed to cease its relentless drive forward as she whiled away the lonely hours, in the mysterious space between being fully conscious and barely awake. Here there was no hunger and no thirst although sometimes she found herself eating or drinking; no thoughts and no feelings, just a vague sense of movement until sleep intervened. The bed

no longer served its purpose, its pillows stayed undented, its sheets unwarmed. She slept wherever she was: in an armchair, spread-eagled on the floor, or with her head laid on her folded arms on the kitchen table. When the heating kicked in and the plumbing creaked and groaned its way into the early morning, she stirred, turned her head and sat up, ruefully massaging her dead forearms into life.

The cleaner had put the kitchen to rights after Jack had done his worst but the art deco lamp had a crack across its coloured glass and the china fruit bowl had a large chip out of its rim. They remained on the table alongside the deep gouge across the wood that hadn't been there before. Candace ran her thumbnail along the groove as far as she could reach, then drew her hand back thoughtfully. She would insist on him paying for the damage. Anger brought energy with it and she stood up purposefully for the first time in several days. Her mindset shifted into something more manic, more focused, that demanded action.

She looked down at the pyjamas that she'd been wearing for a week underneath Paul's dressing gown that was way too big for her, the one he had been wearing when he died. She showered, changed and made herself listen to answerphone messages from well-wishers and from the undertaker. They wanted details apparently, to know what she wanted for the funeral. How could she know such a thing? What would Paul have wanted? She had no idea. Cremation or burial? How on earth could she make a decision like that, it didn't bear thinking about. She reached over, turned the still burbling radio off and announced to herself that she was going for a walk. Rummaging about in the cupboard under the stairs she found a hat and a scarf as well as an ancient sheepskin coat. Good god, when had she last worn that? It felt heavy on her shoulders but she wore it anyway, She pulled on a pair of thick socks and pushed her feet into a pair of wellington boots. Not the most elegant of outfits but at least it was warm. A brief shaft of sunlight and a cessation of the rain drew her out and she shut the door behind her, thrust her hands in the capacious pockets and set off down the driveway to the road.

Despite the cold, the fresh air felt good and it was a relief to be away from the house, away from the row with Jack, away from Paul not being there, and most of all away from herself, mindlessly drifting. What was happening to her? How was it possible that Paul was gone for good. There was no chance now of resolving their differences, no future where they might work things out afresh. Everything was left in the air, so much unfinished business. There was no place where she could find him now; no way for them to understand each

other better, to discover what they might have become. Too late. How could he have left her like this? How could she live with this?

She felt she was being funnelled into whatever lay ahead. The road was narrow and the hedges were high, and a slight downward slope compelled her onwards. If only she could keep going long enough she'd end up in a faraway place, a place she didn't know, where she would be a stranger. How would that be? She could leave her existing life behind. She could become anyone she chose. Would she have the stamina for it now, to forge a new life for herself; the one she should have led all along, the one with a wide social life, full of creativity and like-minded people, and no responsibility for anyone but herself. Was that such a bad thing? Had that been too much to ask?

As she walked on, her body began to generate a little warmth which relaxed her shoulders and she looked up ahead. The lane sloped downwards to the next village where the last of the late winter sun turned the church spire pink and the roofs of all the houses shades of silver, while poplar trees cast long purple shadows across the village green. She stopped and reached into the inside pocket of the coat where she used to keep a tiny sketchbook and pencil which were still there. There were few enough vehicles but she leaned back into the hedge just in case and began drawing, recording lines and shadows, making note of colours. Even as she worked, the shadows inched away and she redrew several times, layer upon layer. So engrossed was she that she didn't notice how cold she had become until the pencil fell from her blue fingers. Shoving both pencil and sketchbook back into the pocket she turned once more for home.

The act of drawing had brought her back to the present and she was feeling more connected to the world around her to the extent that when a farm truck approached, too fast for the icy road, she gestured her dissatisfaction to the driver as it swept past her. Her action was invigorating and it made her think about the sheep that Jack had driven into and she got annoyed all over again. She couldn't understand how Paul could have been so calm about the whole episode; his precious car and his precious son went together apparently. He'd even left the car to him in his will, not that she'd have wanted it anyway, it was a nightmare to drive, cost a fortune to keep on the road and it was uncomfortable. As for Jack's latest episode, what would Paul have made of the reckless violence, the utter disregard for their home and belongings. Such outrageous behaviour, was unforgivable, senseless and criminal. She'd half a mind to press charges against him.

Anyway, enough of all that, forget about Jack. The light was going and there were no street lamps in the lane, she'd better get a move on. She upped her pace, her frustration diminished a little and she made an effort to think about Paul, his good qualities, his kindness and generosity. This was much easier for her now that he'd gone, and she lost herself in memories as she walked. Why was it only now that she could remind herself of the good times. The times when they laughed together, the endless discussions about the garden, his appreciation of her cooking, the easy relationship that they once had. He had loved her in his way, gentle and loyal, regardless of her frequent dissatisfaction with something or other.

It took her a while to realise that the sensation against her thigh was her phone vibrating. It took her even longer to reach it under the layers of clothing and when she finally managed to answer it, the caller had rung off. She didn't recognise the number but since she had had to work so hard to extricate the phone she decided to call back and see who it was. It turned out to be the undertaker who surprised her by being a woman. After a brief conversation about an appointment time, the woman, who introduced herself as Renée, asked how she was. Candace was amazed to hear herself telling the truth.

"To be honest, Renée I'm struggling with everything right now. This is the first time I've been out since Paul died. I have no idea what to do with myself, I can't think straight and I barely have the energy to get up in the morning. In fact I often don't."

"Don't be too hard on yourself Candace, may I call you Candace? Even an expected death can be a terrible shock. It takes time to take it all in. What you are experiencing is perfectly normal."

Candace let out a humourless laugh.

"Whether its normal or not, I've just about had enough of feeling terrible about everything."

"Well, why don't you tell me a little bit about your husband. We need to start planning and you never know, it might help to talk."

Without thinking too much about it Candace began to explain how Paul had been behaving in the weeks leading up to his death, how annoyed she'd been.

"He was secretive one minute, acting like a kid the next, letting Jack drive his car, joyriding rollercoasters and hot air balloons...taking up modelling for goodness sake. All that must have been a side effect of abandoning his medication, surely? He was usually so

sensible, so cautious, didn't like new places, new experiences. I should have done more to find out what was wrong with him, to calm him down."

"Goodness, he must have been very active. I daresay fairgrounds and balloons could have been for his son's benefit but you say he took up modelling? That's unusual at his age. I thought models were all young people."

"Well, this was life modelling."

"Life modelling?"

"Yes, standing naked in front of a room full of students so they could draw him."

"Well, that is certainly unusual!"

There was a hint of 'Lady Bracknell' in her tone that made Candace smile and then she began to laugh. The undertaker began laughing too and before long they were both at it. The more they laughed, the funnier it seemed and the more hilarious it became. Each time one of them stopped to draw breath, the sound of the other one still chuckling set them off again into another round. Finally, sanity prevailed and the gales of laughter diminished and gradually stopped. Eventually, Candace got her breath back sufficiently to speak.

"Thank you for that; apart from aching ribs, I feel a lot better."

She re-confirmed their appointment for the following day and walked the rest of the way home in a very different frame of mind. By the time she reached the gate she was feeling almost warm. Once inside the house, she hung up the old coat, kicked off the wellington boots and headed straight upstairs to her studio. Determined to stop feeling sorry for herself and wanting to find her way into a new kind of normality, she sat for a long time in her favourite place by the window, letting the reminiscences of Paul and their life together flow in a steady stream. This time, instead of going round in frustrating circles, they made it out of her mind and onto pages of notes and into a few preliminary sketches. This she would develop into a major work of art; it was her way of expressing their life together, in the best way she knew how and it would become her tribute to Paul.

40 Nancy

Snoring softly, Nancy was sprawled across the sofa in front of a boring television cookery programme, not even recognising the presenter: who was she? She had been watching one of her favourite crime dramas for possibly the fifth time when she'd dozed off. She woke herself with a particularly loud snore and sat up. The camera was zooming in on something being poured into a bowl, the ribbon of liquid reflecting the colours around it. The sight bothered her for some reason and she fumbled around for the remote control grumbling to herself in frustration. Moira peered round the door at her.

"What's up? Did you call me?"

Nancy shook her head and began rubbing her hand across her forehead.

"Hey, what's the matter?"

Moira sat beside her and handed her the remote which had fallen on the floor.

"You need to keep calm, you're still recovering."

"I can't. There's something I... "

She stopped then tried again

"It was in the water..."

"What was in the water?"

She looked at Moira with a puzzled expression.

"You were."

Tears of frustration arose in her eyes.

"But it's no good I can't remember."

"Remember what?"

"The woman's name."

"What woman?"

"The kind lady who read the stories."

"Where? When? Do you mean in the hospital?"

"No, no, no. Wait a minute."

She smiled.

"It was Jess."

"Jess?"

"Yes, definitely Jess."

Moira frowned but thought she'd better play along.

“You mean the woman from the séance?”

Nancy looked bewildered.

“What?”

“You know, from that evening when we had the séance in the shop. You said she had a message for me.”

“Séance? Shop?”

“Yes, when all the old ladies came over...”

Moira felt tears brimming and leaned over to put an arm round Nancy’s shoulder.

“Why do you need to remember her?”

Nancy sniffed and dabbed at her nose with a tissue.

“She’ll still be waiting for me by the pool.”

“What pool?”

Nancy would not or could not say any more about it. These muddled moments of confused memories were happening more and more often and she knew that Moira was worried about it. She could tell by the way she tried to distract her.

“Why don’t I fetch your knitting, you still haven’t finished the hat you were making for me. Here.”

Nancy looked down at the balls of coloured wool and needles as if she’d never seen them before, and ran a finger over the stitches.

“No, no, no. I can’t.”

“Well what would you like to do?”

“I don’t know.”

“Oh Nancy, you looked after me when I needed help, and I want to be here for you.”

Nancy looked at her blankly but Moira persevered.

“You took me into your home, a complete stranger!”

“Did I?”

“Yes you did, and it’s my turn to look after you for a while.”

“But it was you who looked after me, before.”

“Before?”

“Yes, yes, before. You kept me warm and safe for a long time, then I went to the place with the flowers and the pool.” She paused. “And then Jess looked after me.”

“Well, I think you must have been dreaming. Anyway, I’ve been thinking about the shop.”

Nancy looked down at her hands said nothing.

“Maybe I could open up a couple of days a week to start with, keep things going until you’re well enough to come back to work.”

Nancy lay back on the cushions and sighed. Moira gave up trying to involve her, placed the control for the TV beside her and went to make tea. Left to herself again, Nancy buried her face in the cushion, soothed by the soft texture of it against her cheek. Her head ached but that wasn’t as bad as the overwhelming feeling that she wasn’t herself. She felt awkward and slow, uncomfortable in her own skin. She looked down at her hands and didn’t recognise them. Irritated, she stood up and holding on to the back of the sofa to steady herself, reached for a book. It had a nice pink cover like the one that Jess had read from but it wasn’t the same. It was full of tiny print that swam in front of her eyes and she closed it and put it on the coffee table alongside a small table lamp with a multi-coloured glass shade which she switched on; the blue, orange and yellow glass made coloured shapes on the surface of the table and she traced her finger from one to another making wavy lines in the dust. She peered at the end of her finger and frowned. Everything seemed strange to her, there were lots of things she couldn’t remember and she was so tired all the time. And as for the dreams... it was as if they were more real than the room she was sitting in. How could that be? She shuffled over to the window and leaned her face on the glass which felt cool against her cheek where tears had left a salty trail. Idly, she stroked her finger across the sill and looked out into the garden to see a small white cat sitting by the stump of the old apple tree methodically grooming itself; then it suddenly stopped and looked at Nancy. It remained perfectly still, its eyes unblinking until Nancy looked away. When she looked again the cat had gone and she knew it was significant, it was just that she couldn’t remember why. She was still standing there gazing at the place in the grass where the cat had been when Moira came in with the tea.

“Have we got a cat?”

“Well, there was one that adopted us for a while but I haven’t seen her for ages.”

“Oh.”

Not knowing what else to ask and not being sure that she would understand the answer anyway, she picked up a pencil and put it down again, placing it carefully on the base

of the lamp, but it rolled off and fell onto the floor. What were all these things for? Why didn't she understand? Where was this place? Who was she? The only certainty was Moira, whom she could depend on, only Moira, who was now by her side handing her a mug of tea.

"I don't get it."

"What don't you get?"

"All of it, everything."

She clasped the mug in both hands and slurped noisily before putting it down again and making a face.

"Do you know what? This tastes horrid."

"I'm sorry, I did it how you usually have it."

"Well I don't like it anymore."

Nancy put the mug down and clasped and unclasped her hands, then brushed them across her lap as if wiping something off, looking increasingly tense and uncomfortable.

"What is it now?"

Unable to find the words, Nancy opened her mouth several times as if to speak then closed it again. Suddenly, she sat up with a bright smile and declared that she'd decided.

"Decided what?"

"It needs to be put right."

"What does?"

"My name."

"What's wrong with your name?"

"I need my real name, don't I?"

"I thought Nancy was your real name."

"Perhaps it was, but it's not right anymore."

"Whatever would you change it to?"

"Robin."

"Robin?"

"Yes, yes, that's much better, isn't it?"

"I'm not sure."

Moira said no more about it and as the days went by, Nancy became increasingly clingy and childlike, taking to following Moira everywhere she went. On days when she was calm and her behaviour a little less erratic it worked fine. Most of her customers were local

and they had come to know Moira and they understood that Nancy wasn't well and were pretty accommodating to any odd behaviour. She was often sleepy, and since this gave Moira a break, she suggested that they should bring one of the armchairs into the shop so Nancy would be comfortable while she dozed. They pushed it up the road to the shop together, laughing at the strange looks from passers-by, which reminded Moira how long it had been since they had shared a joke or even a smile.

By the time they got the armchair installed, it was almost lunchtime, Nancy was already dozing and Moira took the opportunity to slip out to get them a sandwich, making sure to lock the door on her way out. Having been waylaid in conversation at the café, she was worried that Nancy might have woken so she ran all the way back, let herself in and at first could hear nothing but the sound of her own breathing. The armchair was empty, Nancy was nowhere to be seen and there were boxes strewn everywhere. On the verge of panic, she was about to call out when she heard a giggle from the far end of the shop where she found Nancy sitting on the floor, leaning against the counter with her legs outstretched.

“Oh...there you are.”

She had a lap full of tiny crystal angels which she picked up one by one and held up to the light. Entranced by the sparkles, she beamed at Moira like a delighted child. For an instant that's how Moira saw her, as an infant. The reflected light from the little crystal angels turned the white in her hair to blonde, and the straggling wisps escaping from their hairgrips seemed to curl softly round her face, smoothing the skin around the innocent wide smiling eyes and bringing a dimple to her cheek. Moira knelt down beside her friend, reached her arms around her and hugged her tight. Nancy relaxed in her arms, put her head on her shoulder and began to hum a gentle tune. It was the melody that Moira had sung to her unborn child all that time ago, *'All through the night'*, which brought tears to Moira's eyes. She found it hard to join her voice with Nancy's at first, but gradually she overcame the sadness that cracked the sound in her throat and she was able to sing the words to Nancy's tune.

The two of them rocked together in time with the song until Moira was sure that Nancy must have fallen asleep because she had relaxed into her arms completely and now Moira was struggling to hold the weight of her. She shifted her position and tried to get Nancy to wake up but she fell back onto the floor with a thud and the little angels scattered

all around them. Her face was turned away where her head had hit the floor, her eyes stared unseeing at the ceiling and she was completely still, no longer breathing.

The door of the shop opened with a clang and Moira looked up. A strong wind must have blown it open because she could see no-one there, not straight away. The sun was low in the sky and shining directly towards her so even when she blinked she could only just make out two hazy figures standing there, a man and a woman. They were insubstantial and the light behind them seemed to glow through them, but their presence filled the room. The man was tall and slender, and when he reached his arms out it looked like he had wings; surely it must be a feathered cloak of some kind. He pursed his lips deliberately and let out a soft sigh that reached Moira like a like a soothing breeze on a hot day and ruffled Nancy's hair gently round her face. This mysterious male figure stepped towards Moira who was protectively cradling Nancy's head in her lap. The wind that emanated from him swirled around them more strongly and half a dozen small petals mixed with cool droplets fell onto Nancy's immobile face.

Now the woman stepped forward to join her companion, so bright, it hurt to look at her, as if she was made of daylight. Moira put her hands to her eyes and bowed her head. Nancy's face felt burning hot to Moira's touch and she was being battered by a wind that grew fiercer by the second. Then suddenly, the light softened and the wind retreated and when Moira dared to look between her fingers, she could see that the woman was carrying something that she handed to her companion as they turned to leave. The last glimpse she had was of a small child on his shoulders, as plump and smiling as a cherub from a church window, waving to her. A pang of sadness pushed Moira to stand up and start towards them, but when she reached the door, there was a brief commotion, followed by a whooshing sound, and an explosion of light in a golden halo that slowly dispersed into the empty sky.

41 Persephone

Standing a little distance from the palace gate, Persephone is waiting for Atropos. She can still sense the air of disquiet that has emanated from the direction of the Styx ever since Zephyrus made his secret foray into Hades. She is watching Charon who she can see on the far bank, gesticulating angrily. With a glare directed at the people in the queue he pushes them out of the way with his staff and works his way down to the water's edge. He makes the crossing alone this time and with an ill-tempered grunt he tethers the boat to a hefty tree before clambering up the riverbank. Stopping for a moment, he peers into the distance and seems to sniff the air, then with a curl of his lip he stomps across the field towards the palace, muttering to himself as he goes. At the entrance he is greeted by Persephone.

"Welcome Charon, what brings you here today?"

"I need to speak with Hades."

"I'm sorry but he isn't here; he's with Zeus on Olympus. Can I help?"

Charon's eyes narrow under fearsome black brows and his knuckles whiten on his staff but Persephone merely smiles.

"Won't you join me for tea? My cook has been working on a new recipe for Angel cake, it's light as a feather and the flavour is divine."

"Well that's ... fitting."

"Indeed it is. Come, shall we sit on the veranda?"

He follows, unconscious of the swamp odour that emanates from his person. His robe is damp and the mud-encrusted lower edges leave a trail of sludge across the floor. Persephone rings the bell for the maid, seats herself upwind; even the gobbet of mud on her golden sandal doesn't change the sunny smile she directs towards him. A small bamboo table stands between them upon which the maid has placed a fine bone china tea service and the acclaimed angel cake. Persephone hands him a generous slice topped with pomegranate syrup and cream.

"Now my good man, why don't you tell me what troubles you?"

Charon waves his fork with some force.

"Mark my words, there is something awry, and I will get to the bottom of it."

"Whatever has happened?"

He gives her a knowing look but Persephone nods towards the cake.

“Do try it, I don’t suppose you get cake very often and I’d love to know what you think of it.”

His fork hovers over the cake for a moment but he puts it down again.

“First, let me ask you something.”

“Of course.”

“How can we be sure that all is well, that all souls are where they should be, that none have gone?”

“Gone? How could they go? We both know that dead souls do not return to life.”

“Well, something is going on, I can feel it.”

“I assure you that my husband keeps a good watch on his kingdom. There has never been a need for a census.”

“But such a thing would provide assurance that order is preserved.”

“Is my husband’s word not enough for you?”

“Perhaps, but he is not here to give it.”

“Do you doubt him then? Do you think he lacks the wherewithal to rule his kingdom as it should be done?”

Charon drinks his tea in silence, his filthy hands clasping the fine translucent china.

“Come, come, Charon; as my husband’s most faithful and longstanding comrade how is it that you have come to doubt him?”

“There are whispers in the wind, that’s all I know.”

He forks a large piece of angel cake into his mouth and his face takes on a beatific expression.

“Whispers! There’s no need to be suspicious. There is always gossip, you of all people know that.”

He takes another mouthful of cake and a dribble of syrup escapes his mouth; it runs down his chin to be scooped up with a filthy finger and licked clean.

“My good man, it isn’t like you to take an interest in tittle tattle.”

He runs his tongue around his lips, takes another delicious bite and speaks with his mouth full.

“Tittle tattle, as you call it, almost always contains a grain of truth.”

She laughs.

“What do we gods care for a grain of truth here and there? We act as we must. Since the birth of time, it has been decreed thus. We are honoured and worshipped for wielding the powers we are given. Please don’t trouble yourself with these suspicions; Hades alone is accountable for his kingdom. Come, finish your cake and I will gift you the rest of it. Even as we speak, the dead souls queuing by the Styx await your beneficence. Your devotion to your duty and your aeons of loyalty to my husband are invaluable. What else is there to say? Well then! I respect your judgement and I thank you for bringing your concerns. I believe your fears are unfounded but nevertheless, I will talk to my husband as soon as he returns.”

He appears to be somewhat mollified and graciously accepts the rest of the angel cake in a silver casket to take back with him. As soon as he has gone, Persephone looks up to see Atropos who has been keeping out of sight.

“Oh, there you are. And I didn’t save any cake for you.”

“So I saw.”

“Ah well, needs must, he had to be pacified.”

“Do you think he knows?”

“Nothing concrete, just a vague unease it seems. I’ll get Hades to reassure him. Anyway, how are you? Your mission is complete is it not?”

“If you mean that Paul is here in his rightful place among his ancestors and that Moira’s child lived again for a while, then yes my mission is complete.”

“And have you spoken to Zeus yet?”

“No.”

“He gave you a hundred days didn’t he?”

“Hmm.”

“Time must be nearly up.”

Atropos looks into the distance and bites her lower lip.

“Don’t you want to rejoin your sisters?”

“To be honest, I’m not sure.”

“But what alternative is there? Zeus will surely not countenance your absence for any longer than that which was decreed. And then what? Banishment here for a hundred years? I should warn you that my husband is a slave driver much like his brother, you wouldn’t have the freedom to come and go as you do now.”

“Yes, yes, I know all that but I set myself the task of discovering the meaning of death.”

“That was a bit rash wasn’t it? Perhaps there isn’t one, after all, things have always been this way, that’s just how it is. You’ve always accepted that before. What’s different now?”

“It’s hard to explain.”

“I’m sure you can try, you’re not usually lost for words.”

“No, I suppose not. It’s just that I’ve seen mortals up close now, and learnt things about them.”

“Like what?”

“It bothers me that they are so...earnest.”

“Earnest?”

“Yes, they’re so committed to living. They’ll go to enormous lengths to hang on to life if they can. I know it’s strange but I’ve come to envy them.”

“What?”

“Yes, I envy their determination to ensure their meagre futures.”

“Goodness, why ever would you do that when your own future is infinite?”

“I know, it doesn’t really make sense, but there’s something about the effort they put in that intrigues me. Look at Paul for instance - the closer he came to the end, the more he relished what little life he had left. The less time he had available to him the more passionately he pursued living to the full. Perhaps if we had limited time, we’d make better use of it. For us it’s always more of the same, nothing much changes does it? We fill our time with repetitive trivia.”

“But we have important work to do don’t we?”

“Yes, yes, I know but there’s no progression, it’s always the same, we just do what we do and then do more of it. It feels dull in comparison with humanity.”

“Don’t you enjoy the privileges that come with being a goddess?”

“Of course, but I’ve never been without them so how can I really know what mortality would be like? Even when I was a cat, I was still a goddess.”

“Oh dear. Now you are beginning to worry me.”

“Well, you wanted to know.”

"I'll admit I am curious but what you're saying is most disturbing. What about all the suffering; you don't envy that do you?"

"Mm, I suppose not."

"Think about Moira, she's suffered a great deal, you surely wouldn't want that, or anything close."

"No I wouldn't want it but there is another side to it."

"There is?"

"If you think about it, even though she was deeply unhappy, she's experienced things I never will. And she's changing."

"How do you mean changing?"

"I think what she has learnt has fundamentally changed her. For a start, she worked out how to deal with anguish, how to come to terms with her loss. She grappled with it at first by keeping silent, trying to put it all behind her. And when that didn't work, she eventually opened up to Nancy. She's earning about grief, learning about relationships, learning what she's capable of."

"Which is?"

"I think her grief has taught her that she is someone who cared deeply about what happened, still cares, and what's more, experiencing the depths of misery has strengthened her."

"Strengthened her? How?"

"She's more balanced, more at peace. All that despair was like a stepping off point towards something else. She accepts that there are both good times and bad; neither pleasure nor despair last for ever. In fact, nothing lasts forever in their world."

"Especially not relationships."

"Well that depends. I think her love for her child will last. Then there's her friendship with Nancy of course, two very different people who supported each other for no reason that I can see. That lasted. She still thinks about her dead friend."

"What about Jack then?"

"Of course that relationship is over, but although he ended it I think she has accepted it and moved on."

"What makes you say that? I thought she was distraught about it."

Atropos laughed.

"I didn't tell you did I? Apparently, when she saw him again, she slapped him - good and hard! I'm telling you she really is a changed woman."

"Haha, good for her."

"That's what I thought, but I think she's been able to change *because* she suffered. Like Paul, she values life all the more."

"But that's horrific, you don't mean to say that you want pain and suffering yourself? Now you are really worrying me."

"No of course not, don't concern yourself about me, I'll live forever and nothing will alter that. I don't have a choice any more than they do but I'll have to live with the knowledge that I too am limited. Even though my scissors have ended countless lives, Paul and Moira have lived and learnt in ways that I will never be able to. I see that now."

"Oh, Atropos, this isn't like you."

"Nonetheless, I want some of what they have and it's a shame I can't have it."

"My dear girl, please stop this. I know you'll get over it. You need to get back to normal, forget this nonsense, your sisters need you."

"Well, need me or not, they don't respect me."

"Oh, Atropos, I'm sure they do. Besides, it is your duty as a true goddess, and you and I both know you do an excellent job."

"That's as maybe, but I'm not respected for it, neither amongst the gods nor down there."

"But people on earth believe in you."

"How do I know they believe in me?"

"With every snip of those infamous scissors of yours, somebody dies. At every tragic accident, every fatal illness, every funeral, and with every ounce of grief, they believe in you. Why, they regularly pray to you."

"Pray for me to desist from my work."

"Maybe they do but it's worship nevertheless, reverence at least."

"Ha! If that is true then maybe it's time I got back to my sisters after all."

42 Candace

Candace raked her fingers across the hairbrush and pulled off as much hair as she could grasp, aware not only of how much of it was on the brush but also how many white hairs there were amongst the dark. She looked at herself in the dusty bedroom mirror and ran a hand over her head causing yet another hair to drop into her palm. If it went on at this rate she'd end up bald, it must be all the stress. She glanced at her watch and stood up; it really was time for a change, and she was ready for it.

She arrived early for her appointment but it was pleasant enough to sit and wait, listening to voices muffled by the buzz of a dryer, watching one of the girls deftly managing to cut the fringe of a small girl without poking her in the eye, while her doting mother looked on. Women with their heads adorned with foils were reading magazines, calling across to each other from time to time to point out some piece of gossip. The scent of hairspray and shampoo merged with jolly pop music, and swirled around the numerous black and white photographs that filled every available piece of wall space. The photos were stills of glamorous stars like Audrey Hepburn, Natalie Wood and Marilyn Monroe, all fur coats, pearls and dark lipstick. Large gilt mirrors in front of every chair reflected the pictures and the customers back and forth across the room. Candace felt like a foreign tourist here, visiting some remote island with its own strange culture and customs, it was so long since she'd bothered to have her hair cut. So much easier to just screw it up in a clip or hide it under a scarf. The hairdressers themselves were clad entirely in black, apart from their rainbow fingernails.

With her head over the backwash, Candace was aware of nothing but the fingers massaging her scalp and the warm water washing away both suds and stress. It felt so very soothing that when the girl invited her to sit up she opened her eyes with a start. She was guided across the room to a chair in front of one of the huge gilt mirrors.

"What are we doing today then?"

The girl held her eyes in the mirror and Candace was amused to see a surprised reaction flicker across the girl's face when she replied.

"I'd like it chopped short please, and coloured."

The surprise shifted into glee as they pored over colour charts and the other girls chipped in too. It was like the weight of years dropping to the floor and the resulting choppy look really suited her face and made her hair look twice as thick. But what she liked most of

all was the deep auburn colour with the bright green highlights. It looked amazing. She felt like a new woman. A woman ready to go to her husband's funeral, wish him a final farewell and move on into whatever else life might bring her.

Back home, Candace contemplated her options for what to wear. All black didn't cut it, it made her look sallow. Of course Paul had never minded what she looked like which had been at times both a frustration and a relief. He'd always told her to wear what she was happy in, even though she was seldom entirely happy in anything she wore. Still shaking her head, she pulled out several possibilities and laid them across the bed. She couldn't have defined what her criteria were but certain items felt right and others didn't. One by one she returned most of them to the wardrobe without trying them on, leaving a simple shift dress in emerald silk with matching suede shoes that she had paid a great deal of money for and had only worn a few times. The dress was really too thin for the time of year but she had recently bought a beautiful black tweed jacket that fitted her perfectly. Did she need a hat? Probably not, the new haircut was enough in itself. Was a funeral like a wedding she wondered; was the widow supposed to wear something old and something new?

The last funeral she had been to was for an old school friend, shortly after Jack arrived; she didn't remember much about it apart from spending most of the time explaining to Paul who everyone was. Fortunately they'd managed to find someone to look after Jack, otherwise they'd have had to drag him along with them too. Once upon a time, she'd hoped that with Jack away at school, she and Paul could get their relationship back, like it was before; but it never did. Was this something that always happened in a marriage? Had she been wrong to expect that spark of connection to remain the same? She'd never quite been able to feel the way she had at the beginning. But, it wasn't all down to her, he'd changed too, hadn't he? The longer they'd been together, the less she seemed to really know him. Was it that she'd misjudged who he was all along? Or was it that he'd changed so much that he became unrecognisable as the man she married. Since he died, she'd been recalibrating, rethinking what their relationship was, what it meant to her and why they were together at all. They were opposites in so many ways and yet now she thought about it perhaps they hadn't been so different after all. Both fussy, with fixed ideas, a liking for things to stay the same. But she had never known him to be angry like she was sometimes. Most of the time he had been quiet and forgiving which she wasn't. Then again, his last few months on this earth had been very different, when he'd been undertaking all

those mad escapades. That had been a very personal thing that definitely excluded her, or was it that she'd excluded herself long before then? Perhaps she'd never know for sure.

No matter that Renée persisted in assuring her that all this soul searching was perfectly normal it didn't make it any easier. She was compelled to work it out, to understand who Paul was, to see their relationship as a progressive whole. She needed to make sense of it all, to contain it, to figure out what it all meant, even if it was only for her own peace of mind. Above all she wanted to make his life, and especially their life together, mean something, even though he would never know.

Standing in dress and jacket in front of the mirror she realised that she probably needed to brighten her face, some lipstick? She hadn't worn makeup in days, or was it weeks? She seemed to have lost her sense of time along with her ability to know what to do and how to do it. She had surprised herself at how easy it had been to let go of control and let Renée organise everything. Decisions about clothes and make-up were as much as she was able to manage. She worked on her face with care and precision, her appearance as immaculate as it had ever been. Her face had aged well and her makeup was expensive and subtle. During the time she'd spent not looking after herself, she'd lost weight and she liked the new look. It was time she pulled herself together and began to embrace the advantages of widowhood. She turned herself sideways and gave a final look over her shoulder at her reflected self in the mirror before leaving for the funeral.

She drove herself to the crematorium, and by the time she got there, it was already crowded, it seemed that everyone Paul ever knew must be there. As she came in the door, Renée ushered her to her seat at the front. She was surprised at how many people had made the effort to turn up, distant relatives, old colleagues, some art students from the life drawing class, even the park keeper. Jack was sitting some way away from her on the other side of the aisle and she avoided his eye although she was very conscious of his presence. She hadn't forgiven him for trashing the kitchen, and since he'd left, she spoken to him all of three times: once to arrange for him to collect some belongings, once to tell him that Paul had left him the car, and he'd called her once to suggest a choir to perform at the funeral. It seemed he'd joined some church or other, which seemed out of character but she was being magnanimous and reluctantly, she agreed to the choir, provided that they didn't sing anything too religious. With Paul gone, she had no-one to argue with about Jack and she was at a loss to know what she ought to do about him. She didn't want to be accused of

excluding him but she was annoyed at having no choice but to give in to him. She didn't believe for one moment that he'd turned religious and she had no idea what Paul would have thought about it. He'd probably have let Jack have his way.

She glanced across at him now, awkwardly hunched over with the fingers of one hand tapping on his knee. As if he could feel her eyes on him, he looked up at her and the quizzical expression on his face could have been his father's. She turned away and focused on the celebrant who was running through a potted history of Paul's life, mostly facts and dates, references to his achievements at work. The sum of a life. What did it all add up to? Nothing but vague traces in people's memories remained, which didn't seem enough to represent the wholeness of a person like Paul. She wanted more for him than a name on a plaque. She wanted to show the world who he was, what he stood for in his quiet way.

There was a scraping of chairs as the choir rose to their feet, and moved to the front to face everyone. Candace was relieved that their songs were neither religious nor too sentimental. Leaning back in her seat she was suddenly aware of all the people behind her and there was a moment when she felt terribly alone. As she watched the coffin jerk its way out of sight to the sound of the choir and disappear behind the curtain, she released her shoulders and took a deep breath. The choir were singing 'What a Wonderful World' but now the voices shifted to an upbeat tempo, and Candace found herself feeling uplifted in spite of herself. Paul would have loved that, she thought and glanced at Jack who was smiling his father's smile. Life would be different from now on, she was sure of that.

Jack woke up to the sound of loud singing; prompting him to pick up a pillow and jam it over his ears but it was no match for Sid's version of 'Amazing Grace' which could penetrate the thickest feathers and the densest polyester. Jack groaned, his room at Sid's place was tiny and the walls were thin. Since the funeral, Jack and Sid had settled into an easy-going routine that suited them, at least most of the time. It was a novelty for Sid to have someone else there, and he did like to chat. Jack did his best to listen and chip in when he could, although sometimes his mind wandered and his replies weren't as on the ball as they could have been. If Sid noticed, he never said anything. The singing from downstairs stopped and he yelled up to Jack.

"Hey, Jack, I'm doing bacon and eggs, ready in ten minutes."

Why did Sid have to get up so early, even on a Saturday? What was it with old people? Dad had been the same. Jack groaned into the pillow and rolled over. Then he remembered that this was the day that he'd arranged to pick up the car. He was planning to take it out for a drive somewhere before coming back here. The thought of the car and the smell of frying bacon was better than Sid's singing at getting him out of bed. Sid might not have been a Michelin chef but he could cook a mean fry up; a man of many talents, as Jack was finding out. How come a guy like Sid was always so cheerful? But maybe it was beginning to rub off on Jack because when Sid drove him over later to pick up Paul's car, he couldn't stop smiling. Perhaps life wasn't as bad as he thought.

It was a bright but chilly morning and when Sid dropped him at the gate he waved him away with a smile. Determined to avoid Candace, he crunched his way up the gravelled drive straight to the garage, jangling his keys and blinking in the sunlight. Strangely, he thought he could hear a knocking sound coming from inside. He paused, listening. There it was again, a kind of scratching, tapping. He wondered if the cat had got locked inside the garage. Come to think of it he hadn't seen that cat for quite some time, not since before Dad died. He pressed his ear to the door but heard nothing and gingerly pulled the door open. Once inside, he peered around but seeing nothing out of place, he leaned across and stroked the gleaming bonnet of the car as he had so often seen Dad do. It was Jack's car now. That felt weird. Leaving his hand where it was, he began tapping his fingers thoughtfully, his nails clicking on the hard surface. It sounded a bit like the tapping he'd heard; he did it again and a memory of Dad sprang to mind, crossword in front of him, gazing into space, absently

tapping his fingers. Jack looked down at his own hand moving in time with what he was seeing in his mind's eye and frowned. It was as if his fingers were Dad's fingers; a peculiar sensation that made him wonder if his grandfather had done the same, and his great-grandfather and his great great grandfather, all the way back into the distant past. Perhaps he was only the latest in a long line of finger-tapping men, he was part of that history, he belonged.

Smiling to himself, he reached across to open the door and with a sudden flurry of feathers and a squawk a crow flew up from behind the car, marched across the bonnet, stared at him knowingly then flew out of the open doorway. Jack ducked as it whizzed past him, with a final shriek directly into his ear. So that was what had been making the sound he'd heard. Jack held his breath for several seconds and felt his heart beating in his chest. This reminded him of something. What? Blowing out a big sigh, he opened the car door, sank into the leather seat and closed his eyes. When he opened them, his warm breath had misted up the window and he put a hand up to the wet glass. There was something about the movement of his hand, the blurred view, the runnels of water drops rolling down the window that reminded him of something. What was it? He had done this exact thing before, he was certain. It must have been cold then too because he could remember the feel of cold wet glass under his finger, at another time, on another car window. How old could he have been? It came back to him in a flash of squealing brakes, spinning, the grinding of metal on metal, being jolted against his seat belt, and then silence; that is until the sirens and the voices and the door opening, and being hauled out by strangers. And yes, there had been a big black bird on the verge. He had stared at it for a long time, its blackness, its stick legs, its beady eyes looking back at him. It didn't move away, just tilted its head from time to time. He had carried on watching it as he was led away. Was that how it happened? When his mother was killed and he wasn't? He didn't know he remembered, they'd said it was how the brain coped, by forgetting. Had he been at her funeral? If so he had no memory of it. He could barely remember her face, only from photographs which didn't count. She'd become no more than a picture, flat and inert. It was as if she'd never been there with him, he'd had to learn to be without her. He made a wry face at memories of the early days when Paul was at work and Candace was always too busy; he'd learnt to keep himself to himself, to be wary. He distrusted most people, especially other kids with their sympathetic mothers, and he distrusted life, after all the world was a dangerous place, it killed people. Sometimes there

had been nightmares, always the same, falling into an empty void with no-one to catch him and nowhere to land. He was always by himself in these dreams and now Dad was gone as well, he really was alone.

There was Sid of course; who was always in a good mood, it was bizarre. How was that even possible? Jack didn't think he'd ever been happy in that way, never carefree, light-hearted, not even as a kid. He supposed it must go with the territory, having no mother, stuck with a stepmother who hated kids. It was all very well Sid saying that one day there would be a very different life, an afterlife, but he couldn't imagine it, couldn't believe that his Mum and Dad existed in some other dimension, no matter how much Sid assured him it was so.

He ran his hand over the worn leather seat and thought about how many times Dad had sat here, changing gear, steering, braking, thinking, smiling, talking, laughing, even singing. His presence had seemed so solid, as certain as the ground beneath his feet, but not any more. His fingers wouldn't be tapping the steering wheel along with the music, his hands wouldn't be polishing the paintwork or burnishing the chrome; his foot would no longer be braking or accelerating. Jack rubbed his eyes which seemed to be watering. Then, he started the engine and drove slowly down towards the gate. He hadn't wanted to drive the car since the sheep episode, but today felt different, it was his car now and it was something to connect him with his Dad. It felt like an ending and a beginning.

"New year - new start."

He spoke aloud, an echo of Dad's voice saying what he had said every New Year's Day as far back as Jack could remember. He hadn't thought much of it at the time, but now he wondered if he'd meant anything by it and if his mother had said it too. He felt a dull ache in the middle of his chest and a familiar feeling of gloom descended. He shuffled in his seat as if to shrug it off, only partially succeeding. Determined to focus on his driving, he pulled into the main road and then he heard a whisper inside his head.

"Go for it lad, she needs a run out. She's all yours now."

How come he could hear Dad's voice? Was he just imagining it or was it his own voice sounding like Dad? Maybe he was going mad. Wasn't that a sign of madness, hearing voices? If it was Dad, perhaps Sid was right after all about life after death? He wasn't too sure that it would be a good thing even if it were true. Even if people who had died were still around - somewhere - what difference would it make? He'd still be alone here and now,

always had been, well except for... Yeah, that one time he'd let his guard down, got too close. He had to admit that being with Moira had been fun at first but he'd soon felt out of his depth, floundering, not knowing quite how to be. He'd spent his whole life up to that point fending people off and although he'd liked the fact that she wanted to be with him, at the same time it bothered him. And then, her getting pregnant was way more than a step too far. He could barely handle himself, let alone her and a baby as well. She came to mind then, as she had been that day, tearfully asking him not to go. He'd had to get away from this crying girl; it was too much, way beyond him. He'd left, it felt like self-preservation, but the part of him that knew he was a coward cringed. He'd tried so hard to put it all behind him. Then there'd been the shock of seeing her again. He put his palm to his face, feeling the sting of her slap. The thoughts were running away with him now, and he couldn't stop. What about the baby? Her baby would have been his too of course. For god's sake, how did that make any sense at all? Thinking about his own father was one thing, quite another to imagine being one himself; and yet he had been, even if it was for hardly any time at all. What had it been like for Moira? He didn't want to know and yet he did. Best leave it be, he told himself as usual, don't think about it, put it behind you, move on. How could dwelling on death do anything other than cause more misery? His face sank into a grim expression and the sky clouded over to match his mood.

He found himself driving slowly along the seafront, having followed the route he'd taken with Dad all that time ago, and parked near the entrance to the pier, which was closed. Looking across in the direction of the fairground, he could just make out the skeleton of the empty roller coaster through the trees. Remembering the time he and Dad had ridden it, he wondered if he had been happy then - fleetingly perhaps. He got out of the car and took in a big deep breath of the cold wind that then blew him along to the steps down to the beach. A particularly large herring gull turned its head to glare at him from its vantage point on top of an overflowing waste bin. He flapped his arms at it but it just stared. There were few people and the tide was far out. The wind battered his face with fine sand and he clamped his lips together as he strode along. The horizon had vanished into a greyish blur and the distant sound of the waves whooshing out and back again was as inevitable as death itself.

Wherever Dad was now, if he was anywhere at all, he wouldn't solid like he used to be; he must be a kind of fluid nothingness, like the air and the sea. Abruptly, Jack sat down.

It felt right to let the damp seep through his clothes, chilling his bones. He had no idea how long he sat there staring out to sea, but he heard his own muffled groan as if it came from someone else. Further along the beach, two small brown dogs, way ahead of their elderly owner raced along the increasingly narrow strip of sand, chased each other in and out of the water, slithered across clumps of seaweed, and skittered towards Jack who remained perfectly still as they approached. Thrilled to find something unusual, the dogs nosed around his feet, yapping excitedly, which prompted their owner to speed up his walk.

“Okay boys I’m coming, what’ve you found?”

He peered at Jack.

“Bloody ‘ell. You look awful mate.”

Jack looked at him, shrugged, and struggled to his feet, while the two dogs bounced back and forth barking all the while. He brushed himself off as best he could although the last few waves had gone right over his feet. Shivering badly, he made his way back to the car and wondered what would become of him. It had been too easy to drop back into this gloomy state. He drove back slowly, parked outside Sid’s. Oh well, better go in.

The sight that greeted him was Sid ironing a shirt, wearing nothing but a towel, and singing at the top of his voice ‘Always Look on the Bright Side of Life’ and Jack surprised both himself and Sid by laughing wholeheartedly. Perhaps moods didn’t last forever after all.

It was the anniversary of the day that Nancy died, a whole year ago, and Moira was feeling restless. Looking round the shop, all she could see were memories of Nancy: her face in the mirror, her smile on the lips of a little silver witch, her feet in the rainbow socks by the till and her voice in a pack of tarot cards. The dream catcher in the window spun every time she looked towards it as if Nancy herself was trying to get her attention. Eventually, she got the message, shut up shop early, hung the closed sign at the door and walked out into the sunshine, the dreamcatcher spinning madly in the corner of her eye as she locked the door and put the key in her pocket. A sudden gust of wind sent her in the direction of the new exhibition at the art gallery a few yards down the high street. Gingerly, she pushed open the door and went inside. The woman at the desk who had striking auburn hair with green highlights, nodded to her with a smile and left her to meander around the exhibition. There was glittering jewellery on brightly lit glass shelves, weird and wonderful ceramic teapots that you'd never want to soil with tea, brightly glazed asymmetrical vases that looked as if they shouldn't be able to stand up at all, polished wooden bowls in exotic woods showing off their elaborate whorls, intricate baskets with fancy plaited borders, lush wall hangings dripping with beads and the final most spectacular exhibit of all, an enormous piece of textile art that reached from end to end of the long wall of the gallery.

Moira slowly walked the length of it, stopping from time to time to look more closely at the detail. It was a huge piece of woven and embroidered fabric depicting a wild juxtaposition of people, places, objects and events. The early parts of the work were monochrome as if taken from old photographs, hazy like distant memories; then there was a rather formally staged group arranged like a family tree with embroidered lines connecting father and son and a dotted line joining the father to a woman standing a little way away, all faceless apart from the father. Moira stared at the boy, and couldn't resist reaching a finger to touch the silky threads that formed his hair.

Behind them was a frantic mangle of metallic thread that revealed a twisted broken body sprawled half in and half out of what looked like a car crash. Streams of shining crimson drew the eye onward from the gruesome scene and into the manicured borders of a rose garden beside a perfect lawn with a glorious magnolia tree at the centre. The pink and cream detail of the flowers was remarkable. Beneath the tree was a bench upon which were seated two male figures, deep in conversation. Moira stood for some time with a thoughtful

frown on her face, peering at their identical posture, each with a hand on one knee, fingers lifted.

The next scene was a rather elegant interior with a deep purple chaise longue, such a rich colour next to the perfectly rendered gleam of the polished wooden legs; a table lamp cast a gentle light that emphasised the subtle sheen of an oil painting nearby. All this contrasted strongly with the sharp clinical edges of a hospital, a mix of bustling routines and cleanliness, all in white and chrome and green surgical gowns with a meticulously detailed stethoscope, hypodermic needle and scalpel. Above this, floating as it were aspirationally high, was a maroon classic car, as long and sleek a phallic symbol as anyone could imagine. In the distance was a gaudy fairground full of light, colour and movement. Red, yellow and gold horses spun on their carousel so fast they were a blur next to a giant Ferris wheel and a roller coaster slowly weaving its way into the distant trees where it dropped into the dream world of a bedroom. There, a little green notebook lay on a table next to a pen and a pile of sticky notes and the window opened onto a perfect blue sky where a hot air balloon drifted by.

Along the edge were various farm scenes, fields of sheep and cows, country lanes and cottages. Inside them was a complex and detailed border showing what Moira took to be statues, rows of little naked men, each in a different pose. In each corner was a square depicting a white cat, sleeping, stretching, leaping and in fight mode with arched back and claws exposed. The cat had piercing blue eyes and it reminded Moira of the little cat that she and Nancy had looked after for a while.

Apparently the artwork was a tribute to the artist's husband who had died a year ago. There was no detailed written explanation merely the title 'Une Grande Nature Morte'. Every time she looked, there was something else that she had missed the first time round. She was fascinated by the detail, the sheer scale of the thing. It was extraordinary. She turned to speak to the woman sitting at the desk.

"Are you the artist who made this?"

"Indeed I am. Do you like it?"

"I think it's amazing."

"Ah but do you like it?"

"I think it's very clever and interesting."

The woman smiled.

“I know some of it is quite disturbing. My husband’s life was complex. ”

“I didn’t see you in it.”

“That’s because it’s his life not mine. My experience of these things was different. It’s about his life, but it’s my work.”

“So I suppose you are in it then.”

“I guess so. I am there in every thread of my work. After all it’s me stitching the story together, trying to make sense of it all.”

“And have you?”

“What? Made sense of it all? I think perhaps it’s the trying that’s more important.”

Moira looked thoughtful and stood back from the artwork, leaning against the wall so that she could see the whole thing.

“It’s strange to see someone’s life altogether like that; it’s only when you can see it joined up that you know how the pieces fit, as if everything that happened is part of something bigger that makes perfect sense.”

Candace stood beside her and at that moment the door opened and light streamed in across the floor and up the wall, illuminating the final scene of the work where a display of white flowers adorned a gleaming wooden coffin and a long leafy strand wound its way skywards. As the door shut again, and the light dimmed, it looked as if the strand had been abruptly cut down. When Moira moved in for a closer look, the little white cat in the corner of the border seemed to wink. She turned to Candace and was about to comment but she had already moved away to greet the person who had just come in the door.

Moira was surprised to see Jack standing there, looking very much older and almost unrecognisably smartly dressed. It was an awkward three way conversation: Moira introduced herself to Candace as Jack’s ex-girlfriend and Candace introduced herself to Moira as Jack’s stepmother, and Jack looked from one to the other and said nothing. It was Moira who broke the silence.

“So, have you come to see the tapestry?”

“Tapestry?”

“Yes the artwork here.”

She gestured behind her and Jack sheepishly replied.

“Er, no. Actually, I came to pick something up.”

He turned to Candace.

“Did you bring it for me?”

She reached behind the desk and pulled out an old leather briefcase which she handed him without comment.

With a brief ‘thanks’ and a nod to Moira he turned to leave. She too left the gallery and followed him to the bus stop where she watched him get into a beautiful sleek maroon classic car that was parked there. As he was about to pull away she leaned over and tapped on the windscreen making him jump.

“Any chance of a lift?”

She had no idea why she had done such a thing, having no wish to spend any more time in his company. It felt as if her arm had moved of its own accord, and Jack just stared at her as if he’d seen a ghost. She opened the door and climbed in, manoeuvring the briefcase onto her lap.

“I think we need to talk don’t you?”

“Maybe.”

“We can talk while you drive.”

“Where to?”

“You can drop me off by the crossroads at the end of the woods.”

“Are you sure? There’s nothing much up there, miles from anywhere.”

“I’m meeting an old friend.”

Jack looked dubious but didn’t comment.

“Is this your car?”

“Yep. It was my dad’s, he left it to me.”

“Nice.”

She paused.

“What’s in the briefcase?”

“Old photos of my Mum and Dad apparently. She didn’t want them.”

“Oh.”

Jack kept his attention on the road.

“I’m not sorry I slapped you.”

“I don’t suppose you are.”

“And what about you, are you sorry you left me in the lurch?”

“I didn’t know what else to do, I couldn’t handle it.”

“Well at least that’s honest.”

“It must have been awful for you.”

“It was.”

She looked directly at him.

“I survived. I’ve learned a few things about life. And death for that matter.”

“Yeah, me too.”

They said no more for the rest of the journey until Moira pointed out where she wanted to get out.

“Do you want me to wait for you?”

“No, I’ll get the bus back thanks.”

She stood for a while and watched him round the bend and as the sound of the engine faded into the distance, she was aware of how very peaceful it was. She could see the narrow path that would lead her through the woods and once she’d set foot beneath the great canopy of branches, the rest of the world disappeared. As she tuned in to where she found herself, listened to the faint whispers around her and felt the warm air on her skin, her face relaxed into a smile. She set off at a steady pace, but frequently stopped, distracted by the bright orange berries of a cuckoo pint almost hidden by nettles or an iridescent beetle making its laborious way up a tree trunk. The path stretched before her as far as the eye could see, parts of it overgrown with brambles that had to be carefully negotiated; or muddy places that she scrambled around, and a fallen tree to clamber across, but nothing stopped her for long.

At one point the sun came out from behind a cloud, casting dappled light onto the path in front of her. In the midst of it she stopped and looked up, watched the gentle movement of fluttering leaves against the blue until her neck ached and she lowered her gaze again; such a magical place, ever changing and renewing itself, lush with life. A robin swooped towards her, looping from tree to tree, finally perching at eye level about a metre away. It opened its beak and began what sounded like nothing so much as a conversation in a language she didn’t understand. He repeated his song more than once, putting his head on one side to wait for her reply.

“Hello little bird, what have you come to tell me?”

He flew ahead and then stopped again, waiting for her to catch up. This he continued to the end of the path and he watched her as she climbed over the stile into the field

beyond the woods. Having seen her to her destination, he flew back into the woods, leaving the sound of his song to echo in her thoughts as she walked on through the field, following the rise of the land to the highest point. A large rocky outcrop provided her with a seat from where, on a day like today, she could see beyond the fields as far as the town itself. Nancy had always said there was magic up here, and now she was part of it. Her ashes scattered to the four winds, apart from a small amount that Moira had kept with her and had made into a pendant to remind her that death is part of life.

Nancy's funeral had taken place on one of those days towards the end of winter when the sun was warm enough to remind you that spring would eventually arrive. It had been surprising how many people had come to see her on her way. People, from other shops in town, machinists from the factory where she bought some of her supplies, the ladies who came to the séances and for readings, regular customers as well as a distant cousin that Nancy herself had never met. More than a year since then and nearly two since Moira's child had died. She came up here to think of him too. She imagined him with Nancy wherever they might be, and finally, she felt at peace.

45 Atropos

“Fate is a funny thing don’t you think?”

Clotho and Lachesis respond in unison

“Oh Atropos!”

“Well, sometimes I wonder...”

“Please don’t. It usually means getting into trouble”

I persevere, waving my scissors to get their attention.

“I think it’s strange.”

“What is?”

“Well, here we are spinning and measuring lives, determining when they will cease, controlling what they can’t manage by themselves.”

“And?”

“Well, I would have thought that they’d appreciate us more, be grateful for us taking over and making it easy for them. It’s unfair that they call us cruel don’t you think?”

“I daresay that’s how they see it. Although, maybe they’d like more say in their own destiny.”

“Can you imagine how that would be? People randomly choosing to live for hundreds of years, or killing themselves or each other when things got difficult; there’d be mayhem; no order, no sense of balance at all.”

“It is well for them that we are here then!”

“Yes, I know, but a little more appreciation or even worship, wouldn’t go amiss would it? Where are the temples to the fates? Artemis, Athena and Aphrodite have temples don’t they? Not to mention Zeus, Apollo and Poseidon.”

“Oh, Atropos, we all know they’re just vanity projects.”

“Well you may think me vain, but in my opinion we deserve one at least.”

“I don’t suppose Zeus would countenance that do you?”

“Why not? We are goddesses are we not? Do we not deserve recognition?”

Her sisters look at her aghast.

“You wouldn’t dare suggest such a thing.”

“Watch me.”

A faint rumbling indicates that the man himself is not far away, and I am keenly aware that I haven’t spoken with him since my return. The floor beneath our feet vibrates

with increasingly violent tremors and more than one set of footsteps can be heard approaching. Hermes flings the door open and with a deep bow and a flourish of his cape, announces Zeus. Clotho stops her spinning wheel, Lachesis lays down her measuring stick and I sheath my scissors.

“I do wish you wouldn’t do that Papa, you can be quite alarming sometimes.”

Hermes gives me a sharp look but Zeus merely chuckles. He fills the doorway and manages to make it look too small for such greatness. Hermes holds his caduceus at arm’s length, and the snakes writhe in their endless figure of eight, flicking their spiteful tongues. I ignore him and smile sweetly at my father.

“How kind of you to visit.”

“Good day to you my triumvirate daughters. Tell me, now that order is properly restored, how do you find it?”

“All is well father and we are glad to have Atropos returned to us.”

“Yes, she does a good job when she puts her mind to it, but I’ll wager she didn’t discover what she went looking for.”

“Ever the gambler my dear father. And what would you wager?”

He frowns but there’s a twinkle in his eyes and he gestures to me to continue.

“I discovered a great deal as it happens.”

“I expect you are grateful then for the leave of absence I granted you”

I think to myself that I would have done it with or without his permission, but know better than to mention it.

“Indeed I am thankful for the time away. It served me well.”

“Then tell me, did you find what you sought? The meaning of death wasn’t it?”

I cut sharply across his barely hidden chuckle.

“Of course. Did you doubt me? I am your daughter after all, surely you would expect no less.”

“You’ve got cheek, I’ll give you that. So tell me what you found.”

I take my time to gather my thoughts; this is to be no ordinary report of everyday activities, it is to take the form of a major pronouncement from the mouth of a goddess. I make them wait, and when Clotho drops a pin, it rings like a gong for me to begin. I keep my voice low and serious and speak with conviction.

“The meaning of death is inextricably linked to the meaning of life.”

“And what might that be?”

“It is all one. It is what it is. That’s all we can know.”

“Even the gods cannot know more?”

“Especially the gods! The people down there know more about meaning than we’ll ever know, much more. Why, they can give meaning to anything. In fact, their capacity for creating meaning is extraordinary. It has been fascinating to observe.”

“So tell us about the people you watched, what did you find?”

“The findings are theirs not mine. For example, Paul discovered that fear and dread can be balanced with pleasure, and each is enhanced by its opposite.”

“Go on.”

“Moirra, the child’s mother discovered that the meaning of grief is love.”

“I see. And what about the child’s father?”

“Ah, Jack. He is still discovering that curiosity will take him further than apathy.”

“Now you are beginning to sound like the oracle.”

“I should hope so.”

His booming laugh echoes round the chamber and I wait until I have his full attention again.

“Don’t you think it might be good to gather some more of this creativity and meaning-making for ourselves?”

“If you are thinking of more mad escapades, I’m afraid the answer is no; it’s time you focused properly on your work.”

“Of course father, our work is of vital importance.”

I pause for effect.

“So important that it should be validated on earth, provide a focus for veneration of the gods.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“A shrine perhaps. Or maybe a small temple, your generosity being legendary. Perhaps it could be sited in the town I visited. I’d like to keep in touch.”

His eyes narrow.

“An utterly inappropriate location. Quite ridiculous.”

“Where then?”

He runs his hand across his beard and glances at Hermes which prompts me to spot an opportunity.

“Of course, Hermes has at least three temples dedicated to him and you might want to consider that there are three of us.”

“Very well, you shall have three temples, one at Corinth, one in Sparta and one in Thebes, and let that be an end to it.”

“Oh thank you so much, that will be wonderful.”

“I should hope so.”

With that, he sweeps out of the door with Hermes in his wake and the three of us are left to ourselves looking one to the other.

“Why Atropos! I never thought you’d do it.”

“I do what I set my mind to.”

“Well it is time for us set our minds to work don’t you think? It is far too important to be interrupted again. Elpis tried, but she wasn’t able to manage the task it the way that you do.”

Pleased at the acknowledgement, I pick up my scissors and begin to polish the blades with a piece of silk. After a while, the familiar, even rhythm of Clotho’s spindle, invites me to lean across to see whose life is being spun. It is a rather attractive multi-coloured thread to which Clotho adds new colours as she goes along while Lachesis, her measuring stick idle, also watches our sister’s fingers deftly manipulate the strands. I pick up an earlier section, the colour of bruises, black and purple and yellow which fade into grey for several yards but now are enriched with bright colours and look across at my sister.

“Aren’t you going to measure?”

“There is no rush, she’s got years yet to live.”

“Who’s lifeline is it?”

“I’d have thought you would recognise it.”

I peer at it more closely and run my fingers back along the thread to where I can now see a tiny slub of golden fibre that appears just before the black section.

“Oh, it must be Moira.”

“Indeed it is.”

“There is much happening in her future.”

“It’s about time, don’t you think?”

“Perhaps you are right.”

“What about the father? Jack? What have you prepared for him?”

“There are possibilities. I’m considering these.”

Clotho pushes another basket heaped with mixed fibres towards me and pokes it around with a finger; there are shades of white, cream and beige with occasional tiny pieces of black fleece.

“It’s rather dull isn’t it? Apart from those little pieces of gloom.”

“He needs time to settle into the routine of adult life, learn responsibility before he’ll be able to do more.”

“No colour then?”

“Not for a while yet. All in good time.”

“And Candace? She weaves her own path does she not?”

“Indeed her future path is smooth, she fits into the life she has without complaint. Look, you can see in the tapestry of life, she sits by her window like the lady of Shallot.”

“No mirror though and no knight in shining armour.”

“Indeed not. And what’s more interesting is that her work is vibrant, and lively, not a single death-related image to be seen!”

“Well her destiny was as she wished it, was it not?”

“Yes but more than that, it became suffused with meaning in the end.”

We stroll across to Athena’s great work where all history is woven. The family scene where Paul lay dying is now complete and peace prevails. With our backs to the window, engrossed in our thoughts, we fail to notice the crow fly in through the window until a loud ‘kraa’ apprises us of his presence. Having our full attention now, he walks solemnly towards us across the marble floor. I crouch down to his level, holding an outstretched hand towards him, and he deposits a tiny gold thread into my palm. He waits to see me lay it carefully into the earlier birth scene in the tapestry where the new-born child with golden hair floats above a river, puts a chubby hand to his head and seems to smile.

Fate, Faith and Fiction:

How the Mythology of Immortality Relates to the Psychological Impact of Death

1. Introduction

“Death entails the irreversible loss of those essential characteristics which are necessary to the existence of a living human person and, thus, the definition of death should be regarded as the irreversible loss of the capacity for consciousness, combined with irreversible loss of the capacity to breathe.”¹

It is said that “life is a sexually transmitted terminal disease” and so far, around 109 billion people on earth have experienced death.² So, “when death comes like an iceberg between the shoulder blades”³, how do people deal with the mystery of non-existence? What is the psychological impact of mortality? What is the significance of belief in fate? How does imagination contribute to accepting the unknowable? What is the purpose of magical thinking? In the absence of facts, what part does fiction play in finding meaning in the concept of death? It is these themes that underscore my novel and which I intend to explore in this exegesis.

Different cultural responses to these questions are to be found in religions, philosophies, psychologies and science as well as fiction, but without definitive answers, the questions remain. Those facing death commonly refer to fate. Why me? Why now? Who is responsible for this? Thus driving a need for the personification of some kind of agency that is accountable. Despite having no religious or other beliefs about such manifestations prior to the death, those taking part in bereavement therapy regularly report paranormal experiences. When directly confronted with the death of a loved one, and striving to comprehend their permanent absence, there is often a strong sense of the continuance of life, prompting perhaps the concept of an afterlife.

The novel evolved as a way of developing these diverse threads with specific reference to textile themes. It takes as its starting point the creative impetus and destructive motivation of the mythological fates who spin life itself and ultimately end it. It considers the

¹ A code of practice for the diagnosis and confirmation of death (Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, 2008) p. 11

² <https://www.prb.org/articles/how-many-people-have-ever-lived-on-earth/>
[Accessed 13/01/23]

³ Oliver, Mary, *Devotions, When Death Comes* (New York: Penguin, 2020), p. 285

relationship between mythological depictions of immortality and human responses to both the prospect of dying and the process of grief. The fates provide an overview, separated from the reality of human experience, in that they observe from an external viewpoint. From their perspective, human beings are viewed dispassionately but with curiosity. By comparing the actions and beliefs that might be displayed by beings with unfettered power and will, with the reactions and thoughts of those who have no choice in what happens to them, the implications of the concept of fate are shown from both sides. In order to reinforce the divergence of these two viewpoints, the human characters of 'Threads', are portrayed within the twenty-first century culture in which they live, whereas the immortal gods exist in an alternative world conjured from Greek mythology. The choice of Greek mythology is pertinent because of its familiarity within European and British culture and language; from an Achilles heel to a Midas touch, the stories are well known and the *dramatis personae* instantly recognisable. Since they are free to act on their impulses without restraint, they represent the desires and urges of the subconscious mind as outlined by Carl Jung as far back as the early twentieth century. His archetypal explanation for the gods of ancient Greece sowed the seeds for understanding Greek mythology in terms of psychology. "The archetype is the introspectively recognisable form of a priori psychic orderedness"⁴. Since mythological deities arise from human psychology, they serve as universal models of humanity's behaviours, instincts and personalities albeit with freedom to express their desires at will. They represent the unalterable archetypal aspects of the psyche that are true for all, as opposed to the psychological propensities that vary according to the individual and their circumstances.

The research outlined in this exegesis provided the theoretical endorsement for the portrayal of various psychological responses to death and its aftermath. Sid's religious conviction and its impact on Jack, Paul's internal philosophising and Candace's denial, Moira's handling of grief at the loss of her child and the subsequent loss of her friend, as well as Nancy's search for connection with a spirit world, all demonstrate some of the ways life's unknowns can be managed. It is the lack of certainty about what, if anything, comes after death, and which specific aspects of our psychology might drive the idea of an afterlife, that drove my exploration of these issues, and this knowledge gap provides the impetus to

⁴ Jung, C.G., *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle* (London: Routledge, 1955), p. 140

create a fictional answer. The separation of the two worlds in 'Threads' reflects the separation of conscious thought and unconscious belief, between symbolic archetypes and unique individuals.

The identities of the characters originated in visual images: Atropos spitefully wielding her scissors, Moira distraught in her basement flat, Jack monosyllabic and sulky, Candace with her fastidious choices of furnishings, Paul's business suited anonymity, Nancy's colourful chaos and Sid humming a hymn tune. From there they evolved as the story progressed, becoming more rounded, acquiring depth through their experience but also through their observations of each other and in particular by being observed by Atropos, their actions viewed through the prism of her narcissism. Although societal and cultural norms require the curtailment of inherent selfishness and wilfulness, it does not negate an opportunity to take pleasure in a goddess doing as she pleases and getting away with it. I wanted her to be enjoyable if not likeable.

The machinations of Atropos, who chooses to effect one death and deny another, compels all of the human characters to face aspects of death or dying. The reality of death for each of them is filtered through their individual beliefs, assumptions and doubts, and expressed through their individual thought patterns, spoken language and emotional reactions. Whether they live with grief or are fearful of dying, place their faith in medical science or believe in life after death, they are all trying to assuage their anxieties and manage their sorrow, whether consciously or not. The psychotherapist Irvin Yalom expressed the view that "Death anxiety is the mother of all religions, which in one way or another, attempt to temper the anguish of our finitude."⁵ Whether circumstances are controlled by a higher power or determined by a logical sequence of cause and effect or are entirely random, there is no doubt that death cannot be prevented, and there are limits to the human capacity to make choices and decisions concerning it.

On-going debate about the nature of free will is perhaps as certain as death itself. For the characters of 'Threads' as they negotiate their way through trauma, fear and grief, their feeling of free will is diminished, regardless of their individual beliefs. As Jack's thoughts reveal "Far better to expect the worst, at least he'd never be disappointed, except that he always was. Life was determined to ruin everything for him."⁶ This way of thinking had

⁵ Yalom, Irvin, *Staring at the sun: Overcoming the Dread of Death* (London: Piatkus, 2011), p. 5

⁶ Threads p.152

become habitual and seemed to offer little respite from his unhappiness. Whether or not he has the free will or the ability to control his emotions is arguable, but the gods are renowned for their unrestrained emotional outbursts, complete with thunderbolts. Uncontrolled physical and emotional reactions serve a purpose psychologically as well as dramatically. In valuing the diversity of humanity's emotional responses to death I also wanted to contrast what can so easily become the sheer tedium of grief with moments of connection or humour as typically occur in life; when Candace is able to laugh with Renée there is a physical release that cannot be achieved in any other way. Funerals can be full of laughter alongside deep sadness.

In order to ensure that the complexity of each character's thoughts and feelings could be explored, it was appropriate to keep each chapter specific to one person's viewpoint. Like Barbara Kingsolver's *'The Poisonwood Bible'*⁷ or William Faulkner's *'As I Lay Dying'*⁸ each chapter in *'Threads'* is allocated to one character, emphasising the validity of each person's interpretation of their circumstances. This also meant that the patterns of speech and thought processes, especially those expressed through an inner monologue could be unique to them. Regardless of their actions and personal attributes, they are equally deserving of being understood. Because the narrative is written chronologically, it was important to ensure that the character arcs continue alongside each other, and that each chapter ends in a way that enables it to be picked up again several chapters later. Within the overarching narrative concerning the major characters, additional stories were included for the purposes of context and to enrich the mythological parts of the novel. These additional stories include pieces about Persephone, Artemis, Elpis, Hermes and Zephyrus.

In terms of linguistic style, The Gods and Goddesses, although flippant on occasion, use more formal language to reflect their status, whereas the chapters dedicated to the mortals use more everyday speech. My intention was for the language used to be accessible but also apposite. There are also specific pieces that aim to capture something of the essence of the experience of birth and of death, for example the sensations of being born, accessed by Atropos during her interaction with Robin; "In the allotted time, he fills the space entirely, perfectly, until squeezed, crushed; he is slowly, slowly forced down, moulded,

⁷ Kingsolver, Barbara, *The Poisonwood Bible*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2008)

⁸ Faulkner, William, *As I Lay Dying*, (London: Vintage, 1996)

pushed; his very bones must move so that he can emerge into life. There is no choice.”⁹ I wanted the words to capture the inexorable nature of being born, especially when the child is heading for immediate death. By way of distinction, the moment of Nancy’s death needed to describe something of the joy at the moment of birth that was missed before. “The reflected light from the little crystal angels turned the white in her hair to blonde, and the straggling wisps escaping from their hairgrips seemed to curl softly round her face, smoothing the skin around the innocent wide smiling eyes and bringing a dimple to her cheek.”¹⁰ Both events signify a crucial shift from one state to another.

I also used language that originated in a poem to describe how Zephyrus carries the spirit of Robin back across the Styx to the mortal world, describing how “they run the gamut of breezes, gales and storms, hurricanes, cyclones, typhoons” before “they plunge downwards once more, skimming across the sea, calling up Poseidon’s white horses and sending them thrashing towards the shore.”¹¹ This lyrical style can be contrasted with Paul’s take on the more peaceful hot air balloon experience “Their continuing path skywards lifted his thoughts onwards and upwards into wide open territory; how small and insignificant the earth seemed, and how infinite the space around and above them.”¹²

The characters of ‘Threads’ share a need to make sense of their experiences, and in the absence of certainty, ascribe meaning to their lives via the way they interpret what happens to them. Whether the creation of meaning is personal or cultural, religious or atheist, aesthetic or philosophical, both the gods and mortals in ‘Threads’ do ultimately reach a greater understanding of what it means to them. “A person’s relationship to death, the intensity of his attraction to it, his fear of it, the type of defence built up against conscious awareness of it, the symbolic meaning given to it, all these greatly affect and shape the personality of both an individual and of a culture.”¹³ Of course individual and cultural responses to death have been represented in myriad ways by authors for centuries. From Leo Tolsoy to Max Porter via Albert Camus and William Faulkner, the subject matter is not new but the interpretation is always individual. Central to the story of ‘Threads’ is the

⁹ *Threads* p. 177

¹⁰ *Threads* p. 212

¹¹ *Threads* p. 193

¹² *Threads* p. 166

¹³ Gordon, Rosemary, *Dying and Creating: A Search for Meaning* (London: The Society of Analytical Psychology, 1978), p. 3

psychological effect of fate and my reading of authors who have tackled other worldly or mythical themes has contributed to my thoughts on ways in which this may best be achieved. These have included among others: Margaret Atwood, A.S Byatt, Neil Gaiman, Joanne Harris, Barbara Kingsolver, Max Porter, Donna Tartt and Jeanette Winterson and specific references to their work are included throughout this essay. They have enriched my leisure and inspired my work. I therefore chose to write a novel I would have wanted to read, within the broad genre of magical realism.

2. Why Write About Death?

“All that surrounds us comes from death, every part of every city, and every part of every person.”¹⁴

As a therapist working with bereaved clients it was interesting to discover the commonality of supernatural experiences following a death. Unexplained sounds, sensations and visions seem to be a regular occurrence regardless of any prior experience of such incidents.

Whether these paranormal events attributed to the person who died are valid or not, it prompted a question as to why this might occur and what benefit it might provide other than to retain a tenuous connection with the deceased.

Currently there is little extant analysis that addresses the role that the supernatural might play in coming to terms with loss. The few articles concerning religious or non-religious views of the supernatural related to grief, are published in ‘Therapy Today’, the monthly journal of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy and also the quarterly journal of their spirituality division ‘Thresholds’. In comparison there is a wealth of material pertaining to the nature of death, bereavement and life after death.¹⁵ Historical and current sources from pre-eminent bereavement specialists focus on how best to support the individual to process their grief. Studies in cognitive science seek explanations for belief and faith and explore the conflict between religion and science, neuroscientists observe brain function, philosophers consider existential questions or the concept of immortality, while historians review the nature of religious faith. Although not specifically addressing the role of the supernatural in coming to terms with death, these discrete subject areas do contribute to the awareness of a multi-faceted picture of the paranormal in the context of grief, and lead to the development of a rationale and potential benefit for holding such beliefs. The lack of absolute certainty about what occurs after death has enabled supposition to thrive. We may claim ownership of an immortal soul, venerate ancestors, have faith in a god or gods, or claim that everything is the result of random chance and that humanity itself is an accidental event without meaning. Nevertheless, belief in an afterlife is

¹⁴ Doughty, Caitlin, *From Here to Eternity: Travelling the World to Find a Good Death* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2019), p. 231

¹⁵A search on Amazon yields over 60,000 books on the subject of death, 50,000 on bereavement and 10,000 on life after death.

widespread across many cultures as is faith in a greater power. When life feels like an implacable force over which we have no control, there can be a strong sense that something more powerful is manipulating events. Despite the vagaries of specific faiths and cultures, the concept of a god is recognisable to believers and non-believers alike and we can identify with stories about them whether or not they are fictional. Story tellers have riffed on their themes for hundreds of years and fabricated archetypes, stereotypes and even caricatures to offer a temporary certainty about the unknown. In particular, Neil Gaiman in his novel 'American Gods'¹⁶ references many religions including Egyptian, Greek, Norse and Christian together with stories from folklore and mythology and aligns them with the modern gods of technology to deliver a story that pulls them all together and explores their similarity and relevance to lived experience. 'Threads' makes use of some of the gods from Greek mythology to show how their stories retain psychological significance for current society.

The effect of hearing or reading stories has been proven to affect the brain in similar ways to living through events for real. Vicarious experiences are powerful. "Like mythology, an important novel is transformative. If we allow it to do so, it can change us forever."¹⁷ Given the potential impact, it is not surprising that in Wales, Bibliotherapy has been a recommended treatment for various mental health conditions for more than twenty years. "The basic premise of bibliotherapy is that information, guidance and solace can be found through reading."¹⁸ Though most of the recommended books are designated as self-help books, personal experience from working with clients shows that fiction and poetry can be equally beneficial. "At their most magical, stories can challenge and disturb our existing frames of reference, our accustomed map of the world, and shift us away from our limited thinking towards new learning and discovery."¹⁹ The ready capacity for identification with characters we read about is aided by the propensity for inferring meaning, the readiness to suspend disbelief, and the capacity to relate our own interior life to that expressed in fiction. The fate of the characters may be determined by the author, but readers bring themselves to the task. Once the words on the page are taken into the mind of the reader their meanings belong to the reader in a way that is personal to them. "Readers have to live with a novel for

¹⁶ Gaiman, Neil, *American Gods* (London: Headline, 2005)

¹⁷ Armstrong, Karen, *A Short History of Myth* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2018), p. 154

¹⁸ McNicol, Sarah and Brewster, Liz, eds, *Bibliotherapy* (London: Facet Publishing, 2018), p. xiii

¹⁹ Owen, Nick, *The Magic of Metaphor: 77 Stories for Trainers and Thinkers* (Carmarthen: Crown House 2001), p. xiii

days or even weeks. It projects them into another world, parallel to but apart from their ordinary lives.”²⁰ Perhaps this explains the popularity of fantasy and magic in fiction. “If in magic realism as we have established, the magical is presented as part of everyday reality, then the distinction between what is magical and what is real is eroded.”²¹ Anything becomes possible.

With ‘Threads’, I wanted to align everyday reality with the magical, juxtapose truth with imagination, and show what might be gained from being mortal and what may be lost through immortality. The association between the ordinary and the extraordinary is of course a common feature within magical realism, often with reference to Greek mythology. This is perhaps not surprising, since both the English language and British culture have been imbued with influences from ancient Greece for centuries. The Greek gods are particularly well placed to provide a recognisable alternative world that reflects our own. Besides the well-received non-fiction titles such as Natalie Haynes’ ‘Pandora’s Jar’²² and Stephen Fry’s ‘Mythos’²³ the plethora of current fiction that references that world demonstrates its continued relevance, from those novels that retell the original stories such as Madeline Miller’s ‘Circe’²⁴ or Pat Barker’s ‘The Silence of the Girls’²⁵, to those that bring the gods of the magical immortal world into the present day such as Neil Gaiman’s ‘American Gods’²⁶, and Donna Tartt’s ‘The Secret History’²⁷.

As a magical realist novel, ‘Threads’ seeks to enrich the ordinary with the extraordinary by comparing the sensory world that is made up of everyday experience with a world that exists in the imagination. In this context, the ‘fate’ that befalls people is defined as an irrational personality rather than a nebulous external force. Often portrayed as crones, the three fates of Greek myth, Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos control both lifespan and death, and as such they breach the boundary between what is finite and what is infinite. The link between the two worlds is one sided in that Atropos crosses into the mortal world and back again but although the mortals cross into the world of the gods at the point of death, during

²⁰ Armstrong, p. 153

²¹ Bowers, Maggie Ann, *Magic(al) Realism* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 67

²² Haynes, Natalie, *Pandora’s Jar: Women in the Greek Myths* (London: Picador, 2020)

²³ Fry, Stephen, *Mythos: The Greek Myths Retold* (London: Penguin 2018)

²⁴ Miller, Madeline, *Circe* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018)

²⁵ Barker, Pat, *The Silence of the Girls* (London: Penguin 2019)

²⁶ Gaiman, Neil, *American Gods* (London: Headline, 2005)

²⁷ Tartt, Donna, *The Secret History* (London: Penguin, 1993)

their lifetime they do not. This distinction differs from other magic realist novels that deal with Greek mythology. For example, in 'The Secret History' the mortals pursue ways in which they may be able to interact directly with the gods. In Joanne Harris' 'Orfeia' a mother falls into the underworld to find her dead child. In A.S Byatt's 'Ragnarok' the thin child is a vehicle for the mythical to connect with the everyday world. The girl experiences wartime in the real world in parallel with her reading of the Norse myth of the end of the world.

Unlike novels such as Margaret Atwood's 'The Penelopiad' and Jeanette Winterson's 'Weight', that focus on retelling Greek myths, albeit in innovative ways, I chose to reimagine the goddesses of fate to suit my narrative. Although usually depicted as crones, since they are goddesses, I made them youthful. In other representations, Atropos is described as the eldest of the three fates, but the personality that emerged while writing her seemed best suited to a petulant youngest sibling, whom her older sisters are inclined to scold. From the very beginning she shows satisfaction in the process of death and is preoccupied with being the centre of attention. "The satisfying sound of honed edges grinding together and the exquisite finality of the blades' snap never fails to give me pleasure. The thread of life is severed; the child is dead before it lives. Ha, now I have their attention."²⁸ She is entitled, arrogant and lacks empathy, embodying those attributes that human beings frequently deny in themselves. Her chapters are written in the present tense to reflect her narcissistic omnipotence and also the fact that eternal life doesn't experience time as limited.

Atropos' ending one life prematurely and denying death to another provides 'Threads' with a starting point for each mortal character's journey through life. As a way of exploring alternative routes through different kinds of grief, the story is told from each protagonist's point of view. Despite the challenge of ensuring the flow of the narrative is not interrupted, multiple viewpoints had the benefit of giving equal access to the introspection and emotional depth of the major characters as they respond to their circumstances. The individual psychology that drives each person's behaviour ripples outwards, affecting those around them. For example, the differing interpretations of their situations by Paul and Candace, or Moira and Jack, emphasises their individuality as well as causing conflict between them. By giving each of them their own voice it was possible to explore multiple interpretations of events more comprehensively. The psychological state of the protagonists

²⁸ Threads P.2

drove the development of each character arc and is demonstrated through both their actions and their thoughts. Their reactions, emotions and behaviours in response to their particular circumstances provided the opportunity for increased self-understanding as they evolved throughout. The strand of each life entangles with the others but it is Atropos whose story entwines them all together into the complete thread that comprises the novel.

3. Death, Grief & Magic

“A person’s relationship to death, the intensity of his attraction to it, his fear of it, the type of defence built up against conscious awareness of it, the symbolic meaning given to it, all these greatly affect and shape the personality of both an individual and of a culture.”²⁹

To the living, it seems inconceivable that consciousness should cease to exist just as it is impossible to comprehend non-existence before birth. Although the fact of death is understood perfectly well, its finality is unimaginable. It is often thought of as a distant event, that occurs in extreme old age after a long and healthy life. For many people living in developed countries death is not evident in day to day life. People no longer hold vigils for the dead, and seldom wear black as a sign of mourning. According to Rachel Clarke, a medical specialist in palliative care “In today’s developed world it is possible to live an entire lifetime without setting eyes on death[...]”. As far back as 1978, Rosemary Gordon was saying that “Modern man had come to regard death as at best a regrettable inconvenience, or the result of human inefficiency; at the worst as an obscenity and an outrage”.³⁰ Death is seen as some kind of aberration that has been removed from everyday life and handed over to medical professionals. What Rachel Clarke refers to as “the medicalisation of mortality” is seen as normal. There is an increasing expectation that life should be prolonged at any cost and that if somebody dies, it must be someone’s fault. But as she affirms, “Death cannot be defeated and its deferment comes at a price”³¹, that price being medical treatments that may be painful and reduce the quality of the life that someone may have remaining to them. In ‘Threads’, when Paul decides to forego his medication it is in order to avoid its side effects so that he can experience some joy and exuberance even at the cost of shortening his life, he prefers to engage fully with what little time remains to him rather than continue trying to prevent the inevitable. For Candace, his action is incomprehensible; it is more important to her that his life should be prolonged, thus deferring the necessity for her to have to face his death. Unable to accept what his death might mean for her, she denies both to herself and to him that his illness is terminal. A study of widows by the psychiatrist and grief specialist Colin Murray Parkes, illustrates this phenomena. “At one level of awareness, these women

²⁹ Gordon, p. 3

³⁰ Gordon, p. 4

³¹ Clarke, Rachel, *Dear Life: A Doctor’s Story of Love Loss and Consolation* (London: Abacus 2020), p. 207

knew very well that their husbands were dying and they dealt with that knowledge by splitting it off and continuing to think, and to some extent act as if they were not.”³² By denying the imminence of Paul’s death, Candace is able to avoid, at least temporarily, the anxiety engendered by the prospect of his death and the inevitability of her own. There are few in the western world who would be prepared to exercise their curiosity and contemplate their own ending as directly as the Buddhist monks who visit charnel grounds to observe the dead, in order to confront their mortality and seek to understand the nature of impermanence. As Irvin Yalom says “Our existence is forever shadowed by the knowledge that we will grow, blossom and inevitably diminish and die.”³³ His book seeks to delve into the reality of mortality in order to allay fears and better savour the preciousness of life.

In the West, people are perfectly capable of attending a funeral and yet never contemplating their own demise, at least overtly. There are many who avoid being reminded of its constant presence by never reading or watching the news and refusing to discuss its possibility. Then there are those who are determined to overcome death, with cryonics, the process of freezing the corpse in the hope that in the future science will have a cure for death. And, there are also people who challenge death by risk taking, undertaking feats that are literally death-defying. Some suicides have been directly attributed to a wish to avoid the fear of death, a way of taking back control. It has also been suggested that seeking excessive wealth, celebrity or fame is an attempt to achieve a kind of immortality. Others take comfort in the fact that their genetic history continues within their children, so something of themselves continues after their death. Although Candace’s inability to have children combined with her ensuing depression, led to an overall sense of life being meaningless, she was unwilling to face the prospect of it ending. It was only the shock of Paul’s death that prompted her to produce a major piece of work that resulted in peace of mind and perhaps acceptance of her own finitude. “The twin motives of affirming the correctness of our world views and demonstrating our personal worth combine to protect us from the uniquely human fear of death.”³⁴ But probably the most prolific solutions to the prospect of death are the many beliefs and religions that promise everlasting life.

³² Murray Parkes, Colin, *Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life*, 2nd edn (London, Penguin, 1998), p. 65

³³ Yalom, Irvin, *Staring at the sun: Overcoming the Dread of Death* (London: Piatkus, 2008), p. 1

³⁴ Solomon, Sheldon, Greenberg, Jeff and Pyszczynski Tom, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* (London: Penguin Random House, 2015), p. 9

Whether like Dylan Thomas we “rage against the dying of the light”³⁵ or like Henry Scott-Holland in his well-known funeral poem, remain assured that “death is nothing at all” all those who experience the death of another, must make their way through incomprehension towards the beliefs and choices that will help them come to terms with the loss. Bereavement has been the subject of much research, and since the stages of grief outlined by the Swiss American Psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in in 1969 in her book ‘On Death and Dying’³⁶, theories have continued to evolve. There has been much debate about whether there are in fact sequential stages, whether grief should be seen as a medical condition, what is normal and indeed ‘abnormal’ grief and whether therapy is either necessary or helpful. Since Kübler-Ross’s stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, others have described similar phases of mourning such as Colin Murray Parkes’ numbness, pining, disorganisation, despair and recovery and William Worden’s ‘tasks’ of grief³⁷ which suggest that the grieving person has some autonomy. Phases and stages suggest inevitability and a lack of autonomy whereas ‘tasks’ imply that the bereaved person has agency and can act positively to move forward.

Although stages, phases and tasks play a useful part in normalising an experience that can seem overwhelming, grief is inevitably personal. In 1996, Virginia Ironside refers to “the unhelpfully rigid current thinking on bereavement³⁸ and emphasises the individual nature of how grief is experienced. For someone in the throes of the more painful or despairing aspects of grief the possibility of recovery can seem impossible; and it is common to think that to let go of the pain is somehow disrespectful or unloving. As Colin Murray Parkes points out “The pain of grief is just as much a part of life as the joy of love; it is perhaps the price we pay for love, the cost of commitment.”³⁹

The many autobiographical books concerned with grieving, show the creativity of the human mind in trying to come to terms with progression though grief. Many are eloquent and thought provoking, others reassuring or unsettling, and all are a way of confining the wildness of grief into the pages of a book. Joan Didion, Rachel Clarke, Virginia Ironside and

³⁵Thomas, Dylan, *Miscellany 1* (London: Aldine Press, 1963), p. 31

³⁶ Kübler-Ross, Elizabeth, *On Death and Dying* (Suffolk: Chaucer Press 1984)

³⁷ 1)To accept the reality of the loss, 2)To work through the pain of grief, 3)To adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing and 4)To emotionally relocate the deceased and move on with life

³⁸ Ironside, Virginia, ‘You’ll Get Over It’, *The Rage of Bereavement* (London: Penguin 1997), p. xi

³⁹ Murray Parkes, p. 6

Abi Morgan write personally about the trajectory of their raw emotion, during the time after a death or terminal illness of someone close to them. They are individually descriptive, evocative and painful, and show how grief can be experienced. Max Porter's 'Grief is the Thing with Feathers' shows grief itself as a crow, giving it an identity of its own, Crow being a metaphor for a grief that exists outside of himself and as yet not amalgamated into the psyche. His use of words expresses the chaotic fluctuations of emotion during this time. Helen Macdonald too conflates her grief her at the loss of her father with her experience as a falconer, using her connection with the bird to explore her emotional transition to the other side of mourning.

My intention with 'Threads' was to show several ways of managing grief to reflect the individual concerned. For Moira, who was already emotionally fragile by the time she gave birth, her ability to handle childbirth and the subsequent death of her baby is compromised and she is traumatised by the experience. She is hyper-alert and not sleeping. Her focus is narrowed down to the single purpose of getting away, as if by leaving she can escape the truth of what has happened to her. Still in shock, she rejects the whole painful experience and puts physical distance between herself and everything that might remind her of it. She displays the common traumatic reactions of: "hyperarousal, constriction, dissociation and helplessness"⁴⁰. Trancelike and directionless, she walks, until she finally arrives on Nancy's doorstep. It is as if, since she had no control over her baby's death, she surrenders control of her life completely. Her numbness echoes the irrevocable deadness of her child.

Jack's reaction to her text about the death of the baby, is mixed. There is relief of sorts, but the overriding feeling is confusion. Since he had no emotional attachment to the child, he doesn't feel sadness, or even a sense of loss and isn't sure what he is supposed to feel or think about it. Since his mother died when he was young, his feelings became congealed in a mixture of fear, resentment and self-doubt. His emotional self-knowledge is limited and he seldom articulates how he feels. The death of the baby together with Paul's terminal illness triggers a release of deeply embedded memories and a visceral emptiness.

The impact of Paul's openness to his own death forces Jack to become aware of Paul's feelings, to eventually discover his own and begin to let go of the resentment he holds

⁴⁰ Levine, Peter A, *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma* (California: North Atlantic Books, 1997), p. 132

against life. Although not naturally expressive, especially about feelings, Jack does eventually become more self-aware. Not only is Sid a catalyst for this by forcing him to engage in life, but his subsequent visit to the graveyard, his violent reaction to Paul's death, and his vision of a ghostly figure of Hermes, all contribute to emotional release so that when he drives to the beach, he is able feel his feelings, and face the depth of his emotions. Feelings cannot be negated for ever, emotions will be expressed eventually. As reported to Caitlin Doughty in her book on death rituals around the world, "I pay my bills. It is the same with feelings. When the feelings come, the fear of death, I must feel those feelings, I must pay my bill. It is being alive."⁴¹

In 'Threads', the expression of feelings is demonstrated directly through behaviour, conversation and via the inner language of thought. In particular, Paul is prone to contemplating the fact of death, trying to face up to what he doesn't yet know. The use of internal monologue, spoken aloud to Atropos as a cat, his personal writings in his notebook, his increasingly open conversations with Jack, his clashes with Candace, and the symbolic references to death all play a part in showing his state of mind. I wanted to demonstrate this process, the creativity shown by someone desperate to express what is inexpressible. His urge to capture what death means to him is similar to the experience of many former clients.

Not only Paul's terminal illness and the death of Moira's child but also Jack's mother's demise all have far reaching effects. Everything is interconnected to a greater or lesser degree, each death changes the surrounding lives. The ripples of his mother's death generate Jack's ongoing resentful moods and inability to maintain a relationship with Moira, Paul's need to indulge his son and Candace's refusal to accept him. "Death doesn't just take someone, it misses someone else and in the small distance between being taken and being missed, lives are changed."⁴² Jack's unconscious coping strategies became normalised and inevitably affected his future relationship with Moira, causing its ultimate failure. As David Howe explains in his book on attachment theory. "Relationship experiences in infancy and early childhood influence how people behave in later relationships."⁴³ Jack's capacity to

⁴¹ Doughty, p. 151

⁴² Albom, Mitch, *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* (New York: Hyperion, 2003), p. 48

⁴³ Howe, David, *Attachment Across the Life Course: A Brief Introduction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2011), p. 39

remain aloof in his relationship with Moira was forged long before he met her. As a motherless child, he had to learn how to make himself amenable to his new carers, to comply with their needs in order to gain a limited feeling of personal security. "Children can be tolerated by otherwise rejecting care givers so long as they do not make too many demands. As a result, children learn to contain their feelings. Their affect is over regulated. [...] Avoidant children, although in a state of arousal and anxiety, therefore either deny or do not communicate their distress."⁴⁴ Jack was obliged to cultivate a self-sufficient persona that belied the still wounded child within: denying his need for affection and rejecting his vulnerability. Withdrawn, sullen and dissatisfied, he disowns his true feelings, which limits his ability to comprehend others' emotional needs, least of all Moira. With all his unresolved issues he is barely able to deal with a relationship at all, let alone face the responsibility of fatherhood. The death of the baby and Moira's need for support is beyond his emotional capacity. Paul's imminent demise is confirmation in Jack's mind that the worst always happens, possibly as the result of some kind of universal malevolence. It is only when Jack is confronted with having caused the death of a sheep that he is jolted out of his habitual ways of thinking. As Sophie Sabbage says in her book on Lifeshocks: "...there is also a place and purpose for being stopped in our tracks, stunned into sorrow that surrenders all our claims on life until they sift through our fingers like sand."⁴⁵ The series of lifeshocks that begins with the death of the baby finally forces Jack to face up to the loss of his parents and feel the pain of grief for Paul and for the death of his baby son.

Alongside grief, the process of coming to terms with loss includes the mystery of what actually happens afterwards. Contrasting views of life after death are evident between Nancy and Moira. Whereas Moira has given it little thought until the death of her child, Nancy has throughout her life been sure that there is an afterlife and that she can communicate with people who have died. Although dubious, Moira is curious about Nancy's conviction that there is life beyond death.

Those who have undergone clinical death and have been brought back to life report remarkably consistent experiences and often retain a subsequent conviction that there is an afterlife. A near death experience or NDE, is defined by the OED as "An unusual experience taking place on the brink of death and recalled by a person on recovery, typically

⁴⁴ Howe, p. 44

⁴⁵ Sabbage, Sophie, *Lifeshocks: and How to Love Them*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2018), p. 336

an out-of-body experience or a vision of a tunnel of light.”⁴⁶ Research in this area is problematic, partly because people’s experiences cannot be verified but also there is often an assumption that what cannot be proven must be hallucinatory. “Unfortunately we have a longstanding practice of criticizing those who look outside the traditional medical box.”⁴⁷ However, given the proliferation of such anecdotal tales, it is no surprise that there has now been a major study of 2060 patients from 15 hospitals that was coordinated by Southampton University in 2008. The AWARE (AWAREness during REsuscitation) study examined a broad range of mental experiences of dying. Researchers tested the validity of conscious experiences with objective markers to attempt to ascertain whether participants’ awareness during out-of-body experiences corresponded with real or hallucinatory events. The results were intriguing but not conclusive. “Thus while it was not possible to absolutely prove the reality of meaning of patients’ experiences and claims of awareness [...] it was impossible to disclaim them either [...]”⁴⁸ Studies in this field have led to books being written that are aimed at the lay reader such as Bruce Greyson’s, ‘After, A Doctor Explores What Near-Death Experiences Reveal About Life and Beyond’⁴⁹ as well as more spiritually based books such as Deepak Chopra’s, ‘Life after Death, The Book of Answers’.⁵⁰ It may be true that the reason for studying the possibility of life after death is a way of denying the fact of death but it may also be another way to overcome fear of it. Whether fear is always the primary driver of behaviour is arguable. Indeed, the Dalai Lama says in the Foreword to ‘The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying’ “Knowing that I cannot escape it, I see no point in worrying about it.”⁵¹

But striving to comprehend what happens when someone dies requires mentally separating the once living person from the dead body. How can someone no longer exist? “Grief is a heart-wrenchingly painful problem for the brain to solve, and grieving necessitates learning to live in a world with the absence of someone you love deeply, who is ingrained in

⁴⁶ *The Oxford Dictionary of English*, ed. by Angus Stevenson 3rd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 1185

⁴⁷ Kessler, David, *Visions, Trips and Crowded Rooms: Who and What you See Before You Die*. (Hay House, United States, 2010), p. 3

⁴⁸ <https://www.southampton.ac.uk/news/2014/10/17-worlds-largest-near-death-experiences-study.page> Accessed 16/3/22 para 1 and 6 of 10

⁴⁹ Greyson, Bruce, *After, A Doctor Explores What Near-Death Experiences Reveal About Life and Beyond*. (London: Bantam Press, 2021)

⁵⁰ Chopra, Deepak, *Life After Death, The Book of Answers* (London: Rider, 2006)

⁵¹ Rinpoche, Sogyal, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (London: Rider 1992), Foreword

your understanding of the world. This means that for the brain, your loved one is simultaneously gone and is also everlasting, and you are walking through two worlds at the same time.”⁵² The brain is capable of holding these two seemingly contradictory beliefs at the same time with equal conviction. This experience is written about by Joan Didion in ‘The Year of Magical Thinking’.⁵³ After the death of her husband, she describes how she couldn’t give away his shoes because he would need them when he returned, that she didn’t want other people to know he had died because that would confirm that he was dead, “There was a level on which I believed that what happened remained reversible.”⁵⁴ This mental state where two realities co-exist, one factual and one imaginary is rightly labelled magical thinking.

The rationale for this seemingly incompatible dual state is explained by recent neuroscientific research. “If someone close to us dies, then, based on what we know about object-trace cells, our neurons still fire every time we expect our loved one to be in the room. And this neural trace persists until we can learn that our loved one is never going to be in our physical world again.”⁵⁵ The process takes time, while the brain adjusts to the new circumstances, trying to make connections that no longer exist. “At times closeness with our deceased loved one feels incredibly visceral, as though they were in the room here and now. At other times, [...] simply stolen from us entirely.”⁵⁶

Not only is the brain experiencing two realities at the same time during this process but it takes on the additional task of rationalising the cognitive dissonance. The brain is capable of generating numerous explanations for the problem of death. After all, “Reality is an active process that always involves our consciousness. Everything we see and experience is a whirl of information occurring in our minds, shaped by algorithms [...] that create brightness, depth and a sense of time and space.”⁵⁷ The neuroscientific concept of ‘predictive coding’ suggests that experience is only ever contained within our minds; our sense of reality is a personal interpretation of the world. “It’s an exciting and controversial

⁵² O’Connor, Mary-Frances: *The Grieving Brain, The surprising Science of How we Learn from Love and Loss* (New York: Harper Collins, 2022), p. 5

⁵³ Didion, Joan, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, (London: Harper Perennial, 2006)

⁵⁴ Didion, p. 31

⁵⁵ O’Connor, p. 7

⁵⁶ O’Connor, p. 33

⁵⁷ Lanza, Robert, MD, *Beyond Biocentrism: Rethinking Time, Space, Consciousness and the Illusion of Death*, (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2016), p. 123

framework that argues that the brain's whole business is in predicting reality based on our own expectations."⁵⁸ If the reflections of the imagination are our only reality, then perhaps it is reasonable to presume that the deceased is there and not there at the same time.

It is unsurprising therefore that human beings are drawn to use their mental capacity for experiencing two realities at the same time for fictional purposes too. What are predictive coding and magical thinking if not storytelling? Magic realism as a genre may have only existed since the early 20th century but it surely arises from the human capacity to make sense of internal reality. In magical realist writing, "Its distinguishing feature from literary realism is that it fuses the two opposing aspects of the oxymoron (the magical and the realist) together to form one new perspective."⁵⁹ At the core of 'Threads' is the entwining of visceral experiences of grief with a mythological fantasy, making them equally 'real'.

⁵⁸ Alderson-Day, Ben, *Presence: The Strange Science of the Unseen Other* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023), p. 111

⁵⁹ Bowers, p. 3

4. Faith, Fate & Free Will

“During a lifetime it is common to identify with the body in which we exist and the mind that serves it. However, religions of all kinds offer alternative versions of how the essence of a living being is other than physical.”⁶⁰

There are many examples of people having a strong sense of someone or something inexplicable being present, that doesn't exist in normal reality. A felt presence, whether visual, auditory or physical, according to individual circumstances is variously described as a ghost, a spirit, a being or entity, energy, god, or simply the mind playing tricks. The reasons behind belief in something 'other' perhaps lie in a specific capacity of human mental processes, the ability to draw inferences from uncertainty, a desire for explanations and a search for meaning. For Carl Jung writing in the 1950s, meaningful coincidence for which he coined the term 'synchronicity' contains a psychic factor outside of any principle of cause and effect, and such events must be interpreted and meaning inferred from a different point of view entirely. “Absolutely unique and ephemeral events whose existence we have no means of either denying or proving can never be the object of empirical science.”⁶¹

To describe sensory experiences in words is not only subjective, but can only be an approximation, and there is no guarantee that what is seen, heard, touched or tasted by one person is experienced in exactly the same way by another. Differing perceptions combined with personal, cultural, medical or spiritual beliefs ensure that there is a wide variance in interpretation of such phenomena, but they are inextricably linked to the person experiencing it. In his research into experiences of what he refers to as 'presence', in a range of different contexts, Ben Alderson-Day writes: “They are other, and yet they are us – echoed, reflected, and transformed. They are what can come forth when times become strange or pressured, when we lose track of where we begin and where the world ends. Their origin gives presences that feeling of significance and familiarity, for they are that scaffold when all is otherwise lost.”⁶²

In 'Threads', after Paul's death, Jack's vision of Hermes represents the turmoil of his mental state but also indicates a symbolic crossover point between the real world that Jack

⁶⁰ Levine, Stephen, *Meetings at the Edge* (New York: Anchor, 1984), p. xiv

⁶¹ Jung, C.G., *Synchronicity, An Acausal Connecting Principle*, (London: Routledge, 1955) p. 9

⁶² Alderson-Day, p. 228

still inhabits and wherever Paul might be. Jack thinks he was hallucinating or dreaming whereas Sid assumes it is the work of the Christian God that he worships. Sid sees the world through the lens of his faith, trusting that whatever happens, a greater power is in control and can be called upon for help in times of difficulty. Jack can see the benefit of religion in providing an explanation, and appreciates the offer of social interaction, but he is unable or unwilling to trust in what Sid sees as a self-evident truth. Jack's capacity for trust has been severely curtailed by the events of his life, and he is limited by his belief that he has no control over what happens to him. For Sid, everything happens for a reason, but for Jack it is a question of 'why does it always happen to me'. The idea that whatever happens is controlled, is a comfort to Sid, even if he doesn't understand why. Jack however, feels as if everything that has happened to him was against him in some way. He lays the blame on external factors, as if there were some natural law that brings certain events together to deliver his fate. His saying 'it's not fair' carries an implication that there is the possibility of fairness, which in turn suggests that someone or something is awry and life 'should' be other than it is. Jack struggles to comprehend life as it happens to him, and is consumed by a vague sense that something indefinable is lacking. He expects the worst and Sid assumes the best, both anticipating the future but through different filters.

Since humanity evidently does not have control over everything that happens, it is easy to assume that something or someone else must be. Historically it appears that humanity's favoured approach to anything supernatural and therefore inexplicable, lay in religion. Described from an anthropological point of view, "Religion is about the existence and causal powers of non-observable entities and agencies. These may be one unique god or many different ones or spirits or ancestors or any combination of these different kinds."⁶³ But religion is not only concerned with beliefs, it affirms the culture in which it exists and its conventions and rituals are as diverse as any political take on how society should be organised. There are both official and unofficial religions and not everyone who attends the specific rituals of their state religion believes in the tenets of its faith; for example the 17th century French philosopher Blaise Pascal, who said that since it is not possible to prove or disprove that God exists, we would be prudent to live as if he did. Religions are not always chosen; they can be imposed and religious gatherings can be merely part of the social order

⁶³ Boyer, Pascal, *Religion Explained: The Human Instincts that Fashion the Gods, Spirits and Ancestors*, (London: Vintage, 2002), P. 8

of a community and serve a different purpose. “Since we’re constantly on the brink of realising that our existence is precarious, we cling to our culture’s governmental, educational and religious institutions and rituals to buttress our view of human life as uniquely significant and eternal.”⁶⁴

But despite appearances to the contrary, not everyone holds such beliefs. “For example, an atheist does not usually believe in the existence of immortal souls, life after death, ghosts or supernatural powers. Rather the atheist is almost always a naturalist, believing that there is only the natural world and not any supernatural one.”⁶⁵ Interestingly, Atheism is not new, and did not arise from modern scientific thinking as is sometimes supposed. The word atheist has its origins in ancient Greek and meant ‘godless’. Tim Whitmarsh states that his book on atheism in the ancient world “is in part an attempt to excavate ancient atheism from underneath the rubble heaped on it by millennia of Christian opprobrium,”⁶⁶ There are also those like Richard Dawkins who are antagonistic to the very idea of deity. “I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been or will be invented.”⁶⁷

The range of views on the subject, and the vehemence with which they are articulated, suggests that the need for answers is a pressing one. The fate of all human beings is to die and the routes to coming to terms with that fact are numerous. Sid’s religious beliefs and Nancy’s new age ideas contrast with the outlook of Paul, Candace, Jack and Moira, who have no specific religion but neither are they entirely convinced atheists. Rather, they are questioning and still trying to work out what they do believe, in reaction to the circumstances in which they find themselves. In part, the novel is intended to prompt the reader to do likewise, but also to take pleasure in an imaginary world that does not purport to exist in reality.

In antiquity, the common view was that the nature of things was fixed, and the behaviour of both objects and people required that they could not do other than behave in the way they were meant to. “For the ancient Greeks and Romans, Fate was a vaguely-defined power which controls all beings, the gods as well as men and women; it does not

⁶⁴ Solomon, Sheldon, Greenberg, Jeff and Pyszczynski Tom, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life*, (London: Penguin Random House, 2015), p. 9

⁶⁵ Baggini, Julian, *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2021), p. 4

⁶⁶ Whitmarsh, Tim, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World* (London: Faber & Faber, 2016), p. 11

⁶⁷ Dawkins, Richard, *The God Delusion* (Transworld Digital; Special edition 2009), p. 57

decide events from day to day, but long ago fixed every thing that was and is going to happen.”⁶⁸ Predetermination was a given and even the gods were subjected to it.

Perceptions altered gradually as thinkers discovered new ways of understanding the world. It was the Stoics who suggested that the universe was subject to natural laws such that “everything which happens has antecedent causes which form a chain reaching back as far as we care to trace it”⁶⁹ with the possibility that this process was controlled by something, there was a power behind the stream of cause and effect. The existence of fate was not disputed, only whether or not it was controlled by God. Historically, notions of free will were entirely absent. Human beings made choices and decisions day to day, but this was not the same as having complete freedom of will or the ability to counteract fate. Over time, the idea of unpredictable events being the result of purposive actions by god or gods took root. As religions continued to evolve, they varied in the degree to which God’s power was presumed to rule. Early Christians believed in an all-powerful God who controlled everything. “We should not forget that even Christians like Augustine or John of Damascus had no difficulty in thinking that the right way to characterize our relationship to God is to say that we are slaves of God.”⁷⁰ However, the requirement incumbent upon Christians to make moral choices, to choose between good and evil, necessitated freedom of will. “And, largely due to the influence of mainstream Christianity, it (free will) came to be a notion which in one version or another gained almost universal acceptance.”⁷¹ Despite believing himself to be inherently sinful and in need of salvation, a Christian must strive to overcome his original sin and of his own free will choose to return to God.

It is at the point where the human capacity for autonomy meets the unpredictability of life where fate resides. As the end result of a sequence of events, fate is either deemed to be predetermined by unknown powers or viewed as an inevitable, logical consequence of previous events. As Sam Harris describes in relation to someone carrying out a murder. “If I had his genes and life experience and an identical brain (or soul) in an identical state – I would have acted exactly as he did, There is simply no intellectually respectable position

⁶⁸ Cowburn, John, *Free Will, Predestination, & Determinism* (Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 2007), p. 145

⁶⁹ Frede, Michael, *A Free Will: Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought* (California: University of California Press, 2011), p. 18

⁷⁰ Frede, p. 16

⁷¹ Frede, p. 12

from which to deny this. The role of luck therefore appears decisive.”⁷² Our selfhood is forged in our past history, tempered by our experience of life and coloured by our thoughts and emotions so our actions always have a cause. Thus we cannot act other than the way we do and whatever happens is outside of our control. So, if the causes of our fate can be revealed in our genetic and environmental influences and our future predicted, perhaps we must decide for ourselves whether we believe that life is a matter of volition or chance. “We have to think of the agents of choice as being us: the whole people that we are. These whole selves sometimes do things consciously, sometimes unconsciously; sometimes after thought, sometimes automatically; sometimes on the basis of reasons; sometimes on the basis of emotion or instinct”⁷³

There are internal factors that may hold the key to understanding fate. Writing in 2019 Hannah Critchlow says “It turns out that there is still some power in the idea of fate, though not in the sense that the ancient Greeks understood it, as an external force. In its twenty first century incarnation, our fate is buried within our physical selves, in the hard wiring of our brains and our genetic inheritance.”⁷⁴

Investigations into consciousness in the early part of the twenty first century looked into the extent to which actions are initiated by the brain. Benjamin Libet’s study showed that a decision to act is less conscious than previously supposed. Activity in the brain’s motor cortex can be detected before a decision is made to move. At the point when the choice is made, the action is already underway, which brings into question the capacity for free will. What this proves in terms of autonomy is open to debate but it gives credence to a determinist view: “The doctrine that all events, including human action are ultimately determined by causes regarded as external to the will.”⁷⁵

According to the philosopher Sam Harris, free will is an illusion. “Thoughts and intentions emerge from background causes of which we are unaware and over which we have no control.”⁷⁶ For him, this indicates that the concept of ‘free will’ is fundamentally flawed. “Unconscious neural events determine our thoughts and actions – and are

⁷² Harris, Sam, *Free Will*, (New York: Free Press, 2012), p. 4

⁷³ Baggini, Julian, *Freedom Regained: The Possibility of Free Will*, (London: Granta, 2015), p. 24

⁷⁴ Critchlow, Hannah, *The Science of Fate* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2019), p. 7

⁷⁵ ‘Determinism’, in *The Oxford Dictionary of English*, ed. by Angus Stevenson 3rd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 478

⁷⁶ Harris, p. 5

themselves determined by prior causes of which we are subjectively unaware.”⁷⁷ While he doesn’t deny our capacity to make choices, he nevertheless states that: “The next choice you make will come out of the darkness of prior causes that you, the conscious witness of your experience, did not bring into being.”⁷⁸

Julian Baggini however asserts that “To insist free choice always requires conscious deliberation is to demand more than even our subjective experience suggests we need.”⁷⁹ There are actions that require conscious thought and others that don’t. He introduces into the discussion the difference between reasons and causes. “If I turn on the light, the cause of it coming on is the movement of my hand, which flicked a switch and turned on an electrical current. But the reason is that I wanted to find my book. [...] Reasons and causes both explain why things happen , but in very different ways.”⁸⁰ This suggests that volition is more complex than Libet suggested: the moving of the hand may be automatic but the decision to read the book is not. The connection between the brain and the body is just one factor in the process. “It seems to make sense then, that a pivotal property of consciousness is that you can have more or less of it: a continuum.”⁸¹

How much thought or feeling goes into a decision depends on the particular choice that is being made. The extent to which we care about or ascribe value to what we do also has an impact on that choice. Certainly our genetic history and environmental influences will affect how we think but we always have the potential to do otherwise than we did, next time around. “The point about holding them responsible is not about looking back to what is done and dusted but looking at who they are now and making them realise that because they had all the knowledge, skills and tools available to have done otherwise, they could and should do better in future.”⁸² What’s done is done but the future can be different. Humanity may be inconsistent in its beliefs, suspend its disbelief and attempt to circumvent the fact of death but whether we see ourselves as answerable to god or struggle against the workings of the natural world are merely alternative ways of addressing the issue. The mortals in ‘Threads’ must cope with what life has dealt to them, using their innate skills and capacity

⁷⁷ Harris, p. 16

⁷⁸ Harris, p. 34

⁷⁹ Baggini, Julian, *Freedom Regained: The Possibility of Free Will* (London: Granta, 2015), p. 49

⁸⁰ Baggini, p. 41

⁸¹ Greenfield, Susan, *The Private Life of the Brain*, (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 168

⁸² Baggini, p. 145

for reason alongside their automatic emotional responses. Atropos representing the perceived wilfulness of the concept of fate, demonstrates its seeming lack of concern for the emotional well-being of those affected, as well as its capricious unpredictability. Whatever fate is, it is an important part of the human experience of life. As Hannah Critchlow says in the epilogue to her book on the science of fate: “My work on this book has confirmed my conviction that fate is still meaningful, and that it’s located at every branching junction in the vast connectome of our brain, generated as each and every synapse, trillions of connections, spark and fizz with our brain’s staggering awe-inspiring power.”⁸³

⁸³ Critchlow, p. 226

5. Metaphors, Myths & Archetypes

“Metaphors are mirrors reflecting our inner images of self, life and others. Like Alice, we can go through the looking glass and journey beyond the mirror’s image, entering the domain of creative imagination where metaphoric imagery can become a key that unlocks new possibilities for self-created ‘in-sight’ and therapeutic change.”⁸⁴

On the subject of death, the language of metaphor is both prolific and euphemistic. It may be ‘the end of the road’ or ‘the final curtain’ but the dying person is also said to ‘kick the bucket’, ‘bite the dust’ or ‘pop his clogs’, and thereafter be ‘meeting his maker’ or ‘pushing up daisies’. Research in 2019 outlined in Neuroscience News⁸⁵ explored the connection between literal and metaphorical use of words and the results showed that metaphors activate the sensory motor regions of the brain and are rooted in concrete experience. This suggests that the connection with the physical body aids comprehension, so that in the examples above, the words kick, bite, pop, meet and push relate to tactile experiences, whereas ‘the end of the road’ and ‘the final curtain’ are visual. This capacity for mentally representing one thing in terms of another appears to be important in supporting comprehension and retention of information.

The ability to describe experiences using different images makes it possible to change how we see the world. “Metaphors are not simply poetic or rhetorical embellishments, but powerful devices for shaping perception and experience.”⁸⁶ Metaphor is regularly used for therapeutic purposes. By exploring clients’ use of language and supporting them to reflect on the meanings of their specific choice of words, it is possible for them to effect a significant change in their thinking and reframe their viewpoint. For example, during bereavement therapy, clients sometimes describe themselves as ‘broken’, with an implication that their emotional state cannot be ‘mended’. One way of dealing with this might be to take the metaphor further and discuss what ‘broken’ means to them and how the separated pieces may come together. It might be relevant to introduce the idea of the Japanese practice of mending broken pottery with gold, known as kintsugi⁸⁷ which enhances

⁸⁴ Kopp, Richard, R. *Metaphor Therapy: Using Client-Generated Metaphors in Psychotherapy* (Philadelphia: Taylor and Francis 1995), p. xiii

⁸⁵ <https://neurosciencenews.com/metaphor-meaning-eeg-10979/> [Accessed 19th May 2023]

⁸⁶ Owen, p. xv

⁸⁷ <https://www.britannica.com/art/kintsugi-ceramics>

the value of the item to a higher level than before. How might the client's loss contribute to their life as a whole? How has their experience of grief added value to their character? Such a visual metaphor can be extremely powerful and continue to offer the client a sense of their own strength. "As a perspective on psychotherapy and as a classification of intervention strategies, Metaphor therapy advances the view that metaphor is central to the process of change in psychotherapy."⁸⁸

The metaphors we use may be crucial to a sense of personal reality, but many such mental images are common to all. These psychological features that we share were described by Carl Jung as the 'collective unconscious', as early as 1916 and about which he continued to study and write. "In addition to our immediate consciousness, which is of a thoroughly personal nature, and which we believe to be the only empirical psyche[...]there exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited."⁸⁹ The potential therapeutic benefits of recognising a shared consciousness were mentioned more recently by the neuroscientist Hannah Critchlow writing in 2019 "[...]there is value, to my mind in constructing a neuroscientific argument for an innate collective consciousness, and for humanity's potential for altruism and compassion. If we can integrate this concept into our thinking we may be able to shift in the direction of collective action to tackle global issues or, more simply, to listen to our neighbours 'opinions."⁹⁰ Certainly, there are commonalities between human beings regardless of cultural background.

Jung suggested that the collective unconscious comprises symbolic forms that reflect hidden aspects of the self, called archetypes, that influence behaviour. "The archetypes are formal factors responsible for the organisation of unconscious psychic processes; they are patterns of behaviour."⁹¹ However they are named, images and symbols appear to be fundamental to the psyche, and it is these universal descriptors that provide the basis for myth. It seems that not only do we understand myths because they are part of our collective unconscious, but also we can learn to understand ourselves better through myths. As the therapist Richard Kopp points out, "Understanding personal and transcultural myths may

⁸⁸ Kopp, p. xvii

⁸⁹ Jung, C. G., *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 43

⁹⁰ Critchlow, p. 220

⁹¹ Jung, C.G., *Synchronicity, An Acausal Connecting Principle*, (London: Routledge, 1955), p. 29

help us see both the universal and unique in others.”⁹² Ken Dowden, although doubting the existence of a collective unconscious argues that if there is any validity in the concept “that we recognise how fundamental and deep seated are the images that surface in myth.”⁹³

The significance of a myth is acquired not only through alignment with the psyche but also its capacity to be adapted, to be made relevant to a particular time and place. Of course, there are cultural differences as well as similarities in the meanings attributed to specific symbols. For example, crows are sometimes seen as a bad omen and sometimes as messengers of the gods and the crows in ‘Threads’ serve both these purposes. Elaborations and/or simplifications throughout centuries of retelling have enriched the evolution of myths. Thousands of years of embellishing or pruning specific features may have transformed the stories but they retain a central meaning. Mythical tales continue to reflect both the individual and society at large and have survived the transition into new media. There are still heroes and villains, good and evil, although they may be robots or aliens, animals or inanimate objects that are specific to current society. Both the stories and the archetypes still work because they are in essence about ourselves. These perennial tales lend themselves to reworking because although the stories contain issues that are significant and relevant to human lives, and as such they remain open to alternative interpretations. As Phillip Ball states, “Leaving possibilities open, enables myths to acquire potency”⁹⁴

He makes the case for classifying some more recent stories as myths. “As classical myths did for the cultures that conceived them, modern myths help us to frame and come to terms with the conditions of our existence.”⁹⁵ All myths are constructed in relation to the problems and anxieties of the time in which they arise. In the context of modernity, mythical themes may include medical science or space travel more closely aligned with current obsessions and since religious adherents are fewer, creations such as Dracula and Batman do not enter the realm of godliness. Myths remain as a way of making sense out of chaos, normalising and rationalising complex natural phenomena, providing a sense of permanence where there is none, and they are a valuable resource for the psyche. “Myth is where we go to work out our psychic quandaries”⁹⁶

⁹² Kopp, p. 156

⁹³ Dowden, Ken, *The Uses of Greek Mythology*, (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 32

⁹⁴ Ball, Phillip, *The Modern Myths* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), p. 333

⁹⁵ Ball, p. 4

⁹⁶ Ball, p. 19

Myths have arisen from our commonality, representing human experience as it is and as we would wish it to be. They provide models for and ways of seeing life's events, for ultimately for understanding life itself. They reflect the stages of life from birth to death and the natural world in which we live but also offer the possibility of another plane of existence. According to Karen Armstrong, "Like science and technology, mythology[...] is not about opting out of the world but about enabling us to live more intensely within it."⁹⁷ Myths are a cultural force and unlike religion, do not require faith, its gods disregarding worship. Reality is lifted above what is objectively known, then continually revised and refined. When something or someone reaches 'mythical status' their significance is immutable, as if they have transcended the ordinary and become godlike. Not only are they supernatural beings worthy of admiration but also guardians of whatever troublesome issues we wish to divest ourselves from. Mythical characters are frequently amoral, behaving in ways that counteract the norms of societal interactions, while still representing what is essentially human.

The Greek myths have been written down in poetry and prose since the time of Homer as far back as the 8th century BC and conflate the history and mythology of the society in which they evolved. The predominantly male, writers, philosophers, poets and dramatists tended to focus on military exploits, heroic deeds or powerful leaders and would reference the gods for dramatic purposes. Indeed the use of 'deus ex machina' suggests that the gods were seen as powerful plot devices. "Poems that described the doings of the gods were, it is not in doubt, extremely common in Greece."⁹⁸ However, these are gods without religion; there are no sacred texts or dogma. "The Greeks lacked sacred books, but they certainly did not lack myths."⁹⁹

Greek epic poems explore a sequence of military conquests and subsequent uprisings that reflect the history of the area. The network of city states that constituted Greece in ancient times comprised various cultures in a constant state of flux. The culture was one in which piety was deemed a virtue but where temples and palaces were built on a grand scale in order to reinforce the status of whichever great leader happened to be uppermost at any given time. What appears in the literature to be an egalitarian society

⁹⁷ Armstrong, p. 3

⁹⁸ Parker, Robert, *On Greek Religion*, Cornell University Press, 2011. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/swansea-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3138105>, p. 20

⁹⁹ Parker, p.2

wasn't quite what it seemed. "Public affairs, that is to say, were intended to be not just of concern to, but physically decided by, the citizenry as a whole meeting 'towards the middle' to discuss, debate and thrash out what they took rightly or wrongly, to be the common good, the public interest of the city and its citizens."¹⁰⁰ However, the vast numbers of enslaved people, the high percentage of inhabitants of the countryside, and of course the women, had considerably less opportunity for their voices to be heard, either in public discourse or religious matters. Their views about their society and their religious practices are minimally represented.

In 'The Odyssey', Homer wrote about this diverse group of city states, adept at trade and seafaring, highlighting a significant shift away from stories primarily about rulers. "Although much of 'The Odyssey' was borrowed from the great near-eastern epics, and from the Greeks' own past, nothing like this had appeared before. It marks the beginning of the autonomous self."¹⁰¹ It speaks of the power of the individual making choices of his own rather than being entirely at the mercy of the gods. The increasing focus on the individual encouraged poets and writers to be more expressive of personal thoughts and feelings and to focus less on praise and adulation. "This conception of the individual as locus of their own power, free to choose the life they wanted, rather than being slave to the whims of tyrants, fates and gods was revolutionary."¹⁰² The religion of the ancient Greeks, being without a holy book, had no doctrines. However, relations with the gods included rituals such as sacrifices, processions, performances and festivals. People prayed for wishes to be granted, visited temples to specific gods, consulted the oracle, or called on a particular god to oversee an event. Hermes, for example "attends as a witness to agreements and truces, to oaths sworn between contending parties. He can act as herald, messenger and ambassador." The connection with these gods was sometimes one of piety but just as likely to be concerned with placation or remonstrance. According to Stephen Fry in the Foreword to his book 'Mythos', "The Greeks did not grovel before their gods. They were aware of their vain need to be supplicated and venerated, but they believed men were their equal."¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Cartledge, Paul, *Ancient Greece: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011), p. 133

¹⁰¹ Nicholson, Adam, *How to Be: Life Lessons From The Early Greeks*, (London: Harper Collins, 2023), p. 65

¹⁰² Storr, Will, *The Science of Storytelling*, (London: William Collins, 2020), p. 81

¹⁰³ Fry, Stephen, *Mythos: The Greek Myths Retold*, (London: Penguin, 2018), p. ix

The gods represented the workings of the universe in physical form, and provided an explanation for how and why things happen the way they do. The gods of Greek mythology whether they are believed to literally exist or not, have familiar characteristics and typify what we know about humanity itself. As archetypes, they encapsulate particular qualities or experiences and simplify the concept of what it is to be human. They emanate from the internalised thoughts and feelings about ourselves. “The archetype does not proceed from physical facts, but describes how the psyche experiences the physical fact.”¹⁰⁴ Archetypes are universally recognised as symbolic representations of aspects of character and were studied extensively by Carl Jung as being an integral part of human psychology. Jung’s original archetypes comprised an outward persona, a hidden shadow, the male and female principles and a unified self. These four gave rise to many more, for example: mother, innocent, rebel, ruler and victim. What Jung called archetypes, were embodied in both the mortals and the gods in Greek myth. However, the immortals have the additional function of being aligned to natural forces and the elemental powers of nature. Thus Zeus wields thunderbolts and Helios drives the chariot of the sun across the sky each day. Stories of these gods have endured for thousands of years because they describe who we are and the powers we would like to have. “In myths about the Greek goddesses, every goddess has different qualities and values , and as a whole, they include the full panorama of human attributes, including such attributes as competitiveness and intelligence.”¹⁰⁵ The Jungian analyst and writer Jean Shinoda Bolen agrees that we use archetypes purposefully to symbolise the meanings of emotional states. “Meaning is what we experience subjectively when what we do with our lives engages our archetypical stirrings and yearnings, which are sources of joy and grief.”¹⁰⁶ It is the nature of being human to try to understand our experience, especially where it is highly emotionally charged. There is a need for a framework to make sense of chaos and turmoil, handle fears and doubts and provide an alternative reality to the messiness of life. Archetypes give substance and shape to formless instincts and at the same time connect what we understand consciously with what we feel intuitively.

¹⁰⁴ Jung, C.G., *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 154

¹⁰⁵ Bolen, Jean Shinoda, *Goddesses in Everywoman* (New York: Harper, 2014), p. xvii

¹⁰⁶ Bolen, p.xix

Archetypes as represented by the Greek gods are more than the stories of their exploits, they are an expression of both the inner and outer aspects of consciousness. They are practical beings who use their supernatural skills to manage the natural world and each other as well as humanity. “The Olympians had very human attributes: their behaviour, emotional reactions, appearance and mythology provide us with patterns that parallel human behaviour and attitudes. They are also familiar to us because they are archetypal; that is, they represent models of being and behaving we recognise from the collective unconscious that we all share.”¹⁰⁷

Both the mortal and immortal characters in ‘Threads’, represent specific archetypes and each of the women have a mother role, Nancy taking care of Moira , Moira grieving her dead son, and Candace as stepmother to Jack. In various ways they echo the story of Demeter whose daughter Persephone was abducted by Hades. “Demeter is the maternal archetype. She represents maternal instinct fulfilled through pregnancy or through providing physical, psychological, or spiritual nourishment to others. This powerful archetype can dictate the course a woman’s life will take, can have a significant impact on others in her life, and can predispose her to depression if her need to nurture is rejected or thwarted.”¹⁰⁸ Candace is also connected to Athena in her role as goddess of crafts. “As an archetype, Athena is the pattern followed by logical women, who are ruled by their heads rather than their hearts.”¹⁰⁹

The character of Jack is more concerned with potential, as he doesn’t yet recognise his own abilities or take responsibility for his actions. He is connected with Hermes, protector of shepherds and thieves, a messenger, trickster and charismatic liar, who is frequently the cause of trouble. “Hermes is the spirit that sets the soul on fire. In this context, Hermes is like the wind that blows over smoldering coals at the centre of a hearth, causing them to blaze up. In the same way ideas can ignite deep feelings, or words can make conscious what has so far been inarticulately known, illuminating what has been dimly perceived.”¹¹⁰ Jack’s impact on both Candace and Moira, runs deeper than he can imagine.

¹⁰⁷ Bolen, Jean Shinoda, *Goddesses in Everywoman* (New York: Harper, 2014), p. 15

¹⁰⁸ Bolen, p. 171

¹⁰⁹ Bolen, p. 78

¹¹⁰ Bolen, p. 115

Atropos, being the arbiter of death itself is central. She is a killer but it is the precision and skill in wielding her scissors that give her the greatest satisfaction. Death must make sense. As elemental forces, the gods in 'Threads' drive the events that deliver internal psychological change for each of the human characters as they respond to the situation in which they find themselves. We are both internal and external creatures with the capacity for converting binocular vision into a single image. We are formed by the archetypes hidden within our psyche as well as the cultures within which we live. "We each need to become conscious of both in order to make informed choices about what we do with our one precious life."¹¹¹ And by extension, how we deal with the prospect of death which is everyone's certain fate.

¹¹¹ Bolen, p. xviii

6. Imagination, Immortality & Meaning

“A novel, like a myth, teaches us to see the world differently; it shows us how to look into our own hearts and to see our world from a perspective that goes beyond our own self-interest.”¹¹²

Of all the culturally specific ways deemed appropriate to dealing with death and managing grief, it is often the most familiar customs that provide the highest degree of comfort. From our earliest ancestors, there is evidence to suggest that a connection with a spirit world of some kind is valuable; indeed, “The earliest evidence of anything like mythological thinking is associated with graves.”¹¹³ The nature of our shared humanity is such that notions of supernatural beings are found all over the world and culturally specific rituals are seen as vital to managing both the reality of death and its mystery. There is reassurance in familiar processes, routines and words, and the more they reference a world other than our own, the more significance is attributed to them. The link between death rituals and the supernatural is more than a need for connection, rather it expresses the need for a sense of something greater than ourselves. “A ritual is the enactment of a myth. By participating in a ritual, you are participating in a myth.”¹¹⁴ As such we need to take a leap from the everyday experience of the world into the world of imagination in order to engage with the mythical.

We need to be able to think about experiences we have not had and develop ideas about circumstances we have never known in order to generate the concept of the supernatural. The human capacity for imagination, to think not only about what exists in the world and can be seen, heard or felt, but also to be able to reflect on abstract concepts is a complex mental process. In his book ‘Affect Regulation, Mentalization and the Development of the Self’¹¹⁵ the psychoanalyst and clinical psychologist Peter Fonagy and his colleagues coined the word ‘mentalisation’ to describe this capacity to think about thinking. This enables us not only to identify with what someone else may be thinking or feeling but also to think in abstract terms and to imagine things that do not exist in reality. Mentalising is what makes both mythology and religion possible. “Without the capacity to imagine that

¹¹² Armstrong, p. 155

¹¹³ Campbell, Joseph, *The Power of Myth*, (Hamburg: Anchor Books, 1991), p. 89

¹¹⁴ Campbell, p. 103

¹¹⁵ Fonagy, Peter, Gergely, Gyorgy, Jurist, Elliot, L., Target, Mary, *Affect Regulation, Mentalization and the Development of the Self*, (London: Routledge 2004)

there is another, transcendental, parallel universe inhabited by spirit beings, it is not possible to have a religion of any kind.”¹¹⁶

The mind must necessarily be selective of the enormous range of data available to it and it appears that exceptions to the norm are more easily remembered. It is the unusual and unaccountable occurrences in life that provide an opportunity for the mind to fill the knowledge gap. “People do not invent gods and spirits, they receive information that leads them to such concepts.”¹¹⁷ Pascal Boyer and Justin Barrett ran a series of experiments to discover whether unusual concepts are more easily recalled. They give examples of ‘a man walking through a wall’ being recalled more easily than ‘a man with six fingers’. “Barrett and I also found that violations of ontological expectations – as found in the templates for supernatural concepts - are recalled better than what we called ‘mere oddities’”¹¹⁸

The non-material aspects of life are more noticeable and therefore readily acquire significance. Meaning is inferred from unusual occurrences that befall people, leading them to question the causes, specifically in relation to themselves. “People are understandably concerned with the particulars of each case, not its general aspects. Hence the value of supernatural explanations, which are relevant to the particulars of the situation.”¹¹⁹ There is a connection here between an individual and unseen, unknown forces that indicates a need not only for an explanation for events, but also a relationship with something mystical, a yearning for magic. “That we have evolved capacities for social interaction means that we tend to represent morality and misfortune in a very special way which makes the connection with supernatural agents extremely easy and apparently obvious.”¹²⁰

Aside from the mysterious powers that are attributed to supernatural sources, the most ubiquitous quality that supernatural beings possess is that of immortality. Despite humanity’s attempts to increase longevity, find ways to project themselves into the future through creative works or genetics, or belief in an immortal soul, immortality itself remains tantalisingly out of reach. We have found numerous ways of offsetting mortality but the idea of living forever remains intriguing, even if in the realms of fantasy, although explorations of

¹¹⁶ Dunbar, Robin, *How Religion Evolved and Why it Endures*, (London: Penguin Random House, 2022), p. 116

¹¹⁷ Boyer, Pascal, *Religion Explained: The Human Instincts that Fashion Gods, Spirits and Ancestors*, (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 194

¹¹⁸ Boyer, p. 92

¹¹⁹ Boyer, p. 225

¹²⁰ Boyer, p. 193

immortality frequently outline its potential problems. Christopher Hitchens on his experience of living with terminal cancer, reflects on his own mortality and ends his book with a quote from 'Einstein's dreams' by Alan Lightman which suggests a lack of completion for a life without end. "No-one ever comes into his own...Such is the cost of immortality. No person is whole, No person is free"¹²¹ This idea of immortality as stagnation is also explored in the novel 'All Men Are Mortal' by Simone de Beauvoir, whose protagonist discovers that because he cannot die, eventually, everything ceases to matter to him. "But that day, Rome no longer meant anything to me, I saw neither victory nor defeat, only a meaningless fact. 'What difference does it make?'"¹²²

If immortality seems pointless to those who contemplate it, finding meaning in life can perhaps be defined as a way of coming to terms with death. As Bruno Bettelheim points out in the introduction to his book on fairy tales, "If we hope to live not just from moment to moment, but in true consciousness of our existence, then our greatest need and most difficult achievement is to find meaning in our lives."¹²³ It is through finding meaning and purpose that we come to understand our existence. A century ago, the concept of 'Individual Psychology' developed by Alfred Adler¹²⁴ assumed that "We experience reality only through the meaning we ascribe to it."¹²⁵ He believed that an individual exists and makes meaning within his or her specific social context. A colleague of his, the neurologist and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl¹²⁶ subsequently built on Adler's work and devised his own therapeutic model according to his belief that people's central motivating force is the search for meaning. "For the meaning of life differs from man to man, from day to day, and from hour to hour. What matters therefore is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment."¹²⁷ His theories were developed during his incarceration in Auschwitz during which time he was able to observe that in such extreme situations, to choose one's attitude is the only freedom. "We must never forget that we may also find

¹²¹ Hitchens, Christopher, *Mortality*, (London: Atlantic Books, 2013), p. 93

¹²² De Beauvoir, Simone, *All Men are Mortal*, (London: Virago, 1995), p. 207

¹²³ Bettelheim, Bruno, *The Uses of Enchantment*, (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 3

¹²⁴ Alfred Adler (1870-1937) a contemporary of Sigmund Freud who developed his own theory of *Individual Psychology*

¹²⁵ Adler, Alfred, *What Life Could Mean to You*, 3rd Edn (Oxford: Oneworld 1998), p. 15

¹²⁶ Frankl, Viktor, (1905 –1997) Austrian neurologist, psychiatrist, philosopher, author, Holocaust survivor and founder of *Logotherapy*

¹²⁷ Frankl, Viktor, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Washington Square Press 1984), p. 130. (The original was written in German in 1946 and translated into English in 1959.)

meaning in life, even when confronted with a hopeless situation, when facing a fate that cannot be changed”¹²⁸. The very essence of our identity is forged in the stories we tell about ourselves. As Dan P Mc Adams explains more recently, “Meaning must come from within ourselves and through our own actions. With each thought, word and deed we define the self.”¹²⁹ According to him, it is the personal stories that we tell ourselves that define who we are and make sense of mortality. “To make meaning in life is to create dynamic narratives that render sensible and coherent the seeming chaos of human existence.”¹³⁰ But rather than validating ancient myths or the concept of universal consciousness he sees this as an ongoing developmental process, set against a specific cultural background. Similarly, Bruno Bettelheim explores how fairy tales are linked to the stages of child development. “The child, as he develops must learn step by step to understand himself better; with this he becomes more able to understand others, and eventually can relate to them in ways which are mutually satisfying and meaningful.”¹³¹

We align our experience with the stories we hear or read in order to identify ourselves. In fairy tales and mythological stories, the so-called negative emotions such as desire, hate, rage or jealousy can be safely explored, and their power given free rein. Emotions that society rejects can be safely projected onto the gods and untoward events can be attributed to them. When people are consumed by emotion, the unconscious comes to the surface, exerting its will and exhibiting its inherent fears and desires. In ‘Threads’ when Jack unleashes his anger after Paul’s death by smashing up the kitchen, he reveals the depth of his pain and his inability to contain it. Jack’s vision of Hermes reminds him of his own powerlessness and guilt. In both instances, there is a strong sense of something more powerful than himself, that he can neither control nor explain.

This power, this otherworldliness is experienced differently by Nancy. For her it is benign and a helpful source of guidance or comfort. Although, when it comes to it, her stroke forces her to face the prospect of her own death. Her visit to the Styx is not part of her previous understanding of the afterlife and consequently she finds herself alone and confused. For Paul who knows he is in the process of dying, he tries to puzzle it out

¹²⁸ Frankl, p. 135

¹²⁹ McAdams, Dan, P., *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self*, (New York: The Guildford Press 1993), p.165

¹³⁰ McAdams, p. 166

¹³¹ Bettelheim, p. 3

intellectually, he has no direct sense of another place. Both Paul and Candace see death as the end, which he is trying to face and she is trying to deny.

Death may generate trauma, grief, fear or sorrow, but it is only by facing the finality of it that the characters in 'Threads' are ultimately able to come to terms with their lives and their own mortality. At the beginning of the story, each character is living as if life were endless, behaving according to assumptions, beliefs, feelings and habits they have accrued up to that point. Their personal reality is viewed through the lens of their history which defines how they see and understand their circumstances. For Paul, whose way of life hitherto has been one of gentle tolerance and prudence, his terminal prognosis is a wake-up call, that forces him to not only think about his life's imminent end, but also to reflect on his past, how he has lived his life and how he has reacted to those close to him. It is his innate passivity that comes to bother him so that as the remainder of his life diminishes, he begins to doubt his earlier assumptions about the necessity to be cautious and is haunted by the potentially interesting experiences he has hitherto avoided. In order to make his life stand for something meaningful, he becomes increasingly proactive in his choices, developing a stronger sense of autonomy and purpose that expresses who he wants to be. He decides, like the title of the poem by Dawna Markova that "I will not die an unlived life."¹³²

¹³² Markova, Dawna, *I will not Die an Unlived Life: Reclaiming Purpose and Passion*. (San Francisco: Conari Press 2000)

7. Threads

“Sewing is a way to mark our existence on cloth: patterning our place in the world, voicing our identity. Sharing something of ourselves with others and leaving the indelible evidence of our presence in stitches held fast by our touch.”¹³³

The familiar metaphor of life as a thread is a central theme of the novel, relating to both structure and content. Although Atropos provides the inciting incident by cutting the thread of the life of Moira’s baby, and it is she who is thereafter tasked with correcting the outcome of her actions, the narrative resolution requires all of the major characters to evolve as part of their psychological journey.

Central to the novel is the concept of Athena’s great tapestry of life that constantly alters to reflect reality, a notion that represents the overall pattern of existence and the stories that are made of human lives. The use of yarns and fabrics within the novel, suggests the interweaving of the lives of the protagonists as well as the sense of an overall design. At the end of the book, the goddesses’ discussion about use of colour in spinning the threads that represent Moira and Jack’s future, evinces the creative possibilities within any given lifeline.

When Atropos describes how death is part of silk production, it befits her role in ending lives; it also denotes how silk is expensive and luxurious, fit for a goddess. By way of contrast, Nancy’s use of spinning, dyeing and knitting is down to earth and less than perfect, although these practical skills prove her independence and capability after her mother’s death, illustrating her connection to her family, her history, and to the natural world. Candace’s return to her embroidery work, demonstrates her reconnection with her own nature, whilst her embroidery of Paul’s life story is the summation of her connection to him, providing a way to explore her grief and at the same time exorcise her sense of regret. One might also suggest that in some way, she is also attempting to keep death itself stitched up and contained. It is Candace’s final tribute to Paul that shows how the threads of his life (at least from her perspective) worked out. But there are limitations to her knowledge of him, and she is of course biased by her own prejudices. Nevertheless she can pour her feelings into her work and in doing so, come to terms with what happened and bring herself back to

¹³³ Hunter, Clare, *Threads of life, A History of the World through the Eye of a Needle* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2020), p. 298

what will become her own life. By embroidering his story in her own way she achieves a kind of catharsis and a sense of completion, freeing her to move on with her own life in the way that she wants. In this sense, her work is as much about her as it is about him.

Atropos' relationship with life's threads is destructive rather than creative, although she too sees her work as a creative act. The thread is spun, measured and eventually cut, so the ending of life is entirely in her control, the personification of fate. Viewed as an individual, fate can more readily be argued with, and railed against. It seems that civilisations across the world have produced such versions of fate, from ancient Egypt to Scandinavia to India and Africa as well as Greece. Human beings are masters of association, joining up the dots of partial information and making sense of random events with the creative ability to turn abstract concepts such as fate into metaphoric goddesses. Ultimately, one is forced to accept that the concept of fate is psychologically useful and meaningful. Despite the Morai usually being depicted as embittered old crones, 'Threads' emphasises the apparent capriciousness of fate, and depicts the powerful emotional energy generated by it, which implies youthfulness and strength.

Atropos, secure in the knowledge of her own power, is aware that even Zeus cannot control fate. "As king of the gods, Zeus is more powerful than all the other gods combined, and his will has a unique status [...] Nevertheless, Zeus has no more power than the other gods to determine the span of an individual life."¹³⁴ The versions of Zeus and Atropos portrayed in 'Threads' represent a certain kind of parental relationship. He is controlling, she is rebellious and the relationship between them is a power struggle, although, like many daughters, she is able to manipulate her father.

The psychology of interfamilial relationships plays out in other aspects of life on Olympus too. The emotional dynamic between the three sisters, common between same sex siblings, provided the basis for demonstrating the competitive resentment that can so easily trigger an impulsive reaction. Atropos' act is uncontrolled and the childishness of her behaviour is disproportionate to the severity of its consequences. Her spontaneous urge to assert herself in response to a perceived slight from her sisters, gives weight to the commonly expressed view that death is random and that its timing is inappropriate, which in this case is demonstrably correct.

¹³⁴ Raphals, Lisa, 'Fate, Fortune, Chance, Luck in Chinese and Greek: A comparative Semantic History', *Philosophy East and West*, 53. (2003) 537-574 (p556)

Depicting some of the many ways that people cope with death as well as differences in beliefs about it, was a way to demonstrate that there is no single route through grief, instead stressing that the process is always personal. Faced with death, and pushed into previously unexperienced emotional turmoil, people are forced to face up to their finitude, and to consider their beliefs concerning the possibility of life afterwards. Nancy faces death through her certainty that there is a spirit world, believing that there are signs and omens to prove it and ways to communicate with the dead. Candace attempts to ignore the prospect of death, whilst Moira tries to run away from a death too painful to remember. There is the salve of religion for someone like Sid, or the meditative, rational thought process that suits Paul. Then there is Jack's chaotic refusal to engage with it at all until he is forced to. Each of these differing psychological responses needed a voice of its own.

Paul, whose sense of wellbeing was hitherto defined by predictability and safety, when confronted with the prospect of his life ending, chooses to explore new experiences and to become more daring. By exposing himself physically, his beliefs about his own personality are challenged, his dying body still able to play host to new experiences and sensations. He also wants to connect with his more youthful self through Jack, doing so by letting go of his emotional grip on the car that is his pride and joy. Rather than remaining earthbound, Paul wants to metaphorically and literally take to the skies, sharing his discovery about the value of living well rather than living long. The balloon ride means a great deal to him, enhanced by the fact that he doesn't know how much time he has left. Both before and during the flight, he sees the bigger picture, as it were, grasping the insignificance of humanity and in doing so receiving an overview of the living world. However, Candace's past experience has brought her disappointment, so she expects the worst and has come to distrust what life brings her. With low expectations and in denial about Paul's prognosis, she can only focus on danger and feel nothing but discomfort, floating in this 'alien' environment. It is only when Paul eventually dies and she must face life on her own that she is able to come to terms with her situation. It is by expressing feelings through her work, she is able to free herself from the past and look forward.

As the novel evolved, each character became more fully formed and by giving them their own chapters, I was able to ensure that each person's story retained continuity. I regularly extracted all the chapters for one person and read them as a separate story which helped to make sure that each thread was consistent to that character and was focused

specifically on that individual. Each revision emphasised the qualities of that person and ensured that their way of thinking, speaking and behaving was appropriate to them, whilst ensuring that the central storyline also progressed without being diminished. As the characters evolved, their personae and their voices also became clearer. Nancy needed to be kind and little chaotic, Moira needed to be naïve and at the same time tough, Jack needed to be resentful, aggressive, stubborn and reticent to reflect his age and his history, Candace needed to be bitter and angry, Paul to be thoughtful, philosophical and sensible while Sid provided kindness and easy going confidence.

In contrast, the gods and goddesses are more formal, exist in the present tense and are written in the first person in order to emphasise their difference from the mortals and their elite status. As imaginary manifestations of existing mythological deities, they could play a role as connected to or divorced from reality as required. As creations of human minds, the gods inevitably reflect aspects of humanity's foibles and represent what is envied as well as what is decried in human society. Having fewer limits to curtail their activities and with the benefit of eternal life they have more freedom to express their will, no matter how outrageous. Unfettered by moral imperatives, they are nevertheless controlled to some extent by natural laws. These relate to such unchanging events as the sun rising and setting, the effect of the seasons, and the lives of animals. The Greek gods reflect the society in which they were created and so the gods are subject to a patriarchal and hierarchical society with conflicting figures unafraid to wield enormous power. In this context, the goddesses must use indirect means to achieve their goals. Atropos is devious and manipulative but she can be charming, and she is curious. In her guise as a cat, her personality is blended with the feline qualities of independence and fastidiousness which turn out to be not too dissimilar to her own. It was interesting to combine an animal with a goddess and also to merge the characters of Nancy and Robin after she suffered a stroke and he returned to life. This was an opportunity to explore the connections between two much more disparate characters. The differences between a goddess and a cat are perhaps not so divergent as between a very young male child and a middle aged woman. Cats are renowned for their independent outlook and elegance but the mismatch in experience of life between Nancy and Robin was stark. The repercussions of the stroke rendered Nancy less capable than before, and her mental acuity was diminished which gave a space for Robin to co-exist in her body, and for her to exhibit child-like behaviour.

The emotional tone of the novel alters in connection with specific circumstances but the intention was to provide an opportunity to connect with the range of emotional responses exhibited by the characters. These range from Moira's heartfelt sense of connection and loss when Nancy dies to the relief of laughter that Candace displays in her connection with Renée to the repartee between Atropos and Zeus, as well as Sid's well-meaning kindness and optimism. The mythological characters have a satirical quality and provide most of the levity. As the work progressed, the Olympian world of outrageous behaviour, infinite power and eternal life, was enriched by anecdotal stories within that realm such as tales about Persephone, Elpis and Artemis, showing the wider reaches of mythology. These demonstrate slightly more emotional depth amongst the gods although their circumstances are considerably less tragic than those of the human world. It takes a great deal more time and energy for the earthly characters to come to terms with loss and follow the trajectory of their own grief process, to the point where their spirits are eventually lifted. However, the impact of the experience becomes part of who they are, it changes them, whereas the gods do not essentially change.

Any direct relationship between the realm of the Gods and that of the living characters is constrained by the fact none of the human characters relate to that specific version of an afterlife. None of them are familiar with Greek mythology or believe in an afterlife peopled by such gods. This lack of connection was important in order to emphasise the disparity between the two realms, between known and unknown. The only direct reference to Greek mythology is in Paul naming his dog Cerberus. For mortals, there is no crossing into the other realm except through death. Only dead souls can cross the Styx into Hades and only Robin, Nancy and eventually Paul do so. From Olympus the mortals are viewed without much interest and although initially it is Atropos' misdemeanour that requires her to cross the boundary, once there, curiosity keeps her there. She provides an overview of humanity. Her reflections on the human condition are both limited and enhanced by her goddess status. The differences between goddess and mortals are shown in sharper relief through her opinions. Even though Atropos can cross into the human world, she can never fully understand their perspective, she can only see their circumstances from the viewpoint of a deity. By keeping the living human characters separate from and unable to directly communicate with the gods the everyday sense of realism was retained, especially when contrasted with the fantastical realm of the gods.

Since we cannot know for sure what happens when we die, any description of an afterlife or an alternative realm is a created one, even for those who believe in its reality. It exists in the category of 'mythos' which characterises intuitive and imaginative modes of thought as opposed to 'logos' which signifies the reason and pragmatism of everyday life. This dichotomy is epitomised in the two worlds of 'Threads', where the opposing forces of Gods and mortals, life and death, mind and body, imagination and reality provide a baseline from which to explore their differences, similarities and connections. The border between the material and the spiritual is breached in order to question the relationship between conscious and unconscious experience, and notions of rational and irrational belief. The philosophical underpinnings of the novel are humanistic in essence in that it is the human values, interests and potential together with their drive to understand and come to terms with their predicament that steers the narrative. But, it is Atropos, an outsider and someone who will never die, who is able to describe what she discovers more clearly than the other characters who are bound by their beliefs and the limitations of their circumstances. Curious about what she can never experience Atropos remains a paradox, causing death but unable to experience it.

Ultimately, she must delve beneath the mere fact that death exists and open her mind to contemplate the thoughts and actions of the human protagonists. She must observe carefully and acquire a degree of empathy in order to understand what she sees. Paying attention to the information she obtains, clarifying where she can, she is able to draw conclusions and make sense of their experience. From the outside, human behaviour is puzzling, but the need to know and to understand, to find out what things mean, is embedded in the psychology of gods and humans alike. Because the role of the brain is to simplify and explain the vast amounts data available to it, drawing meaning from the sequence of life's events comes naturally. Whether correct or not, humans are adept at inferring motives from each other's behaviour and the propensity for story telling is inherent. It is how we make sense of life, so fiction is an effective vehicle for exploring themes of death and fate, how and why they are so closely linked, and what purpose is served by such an alliance.

Since the mystery of non-existence remains, there are endless opportunities to whet the appetite for information, especially through fiction. There can be an emotional satisfaction in reading such explorations even though purely imaginary. When the

imagination is captivated and emotional connections are made, there can be a significant beneficial effect. The psychological impact of the fear of death can be counteracted to a lesser or greater extent and the emotional need to apportion blame is served by fate. The concept of fate whether as a literal entity or merely a descriptive idea, provides a receptor for negative emotions such as anger, hopelessness or lack of self-belief. The pain of grief is ameliorated by magical thinking which also serves to highlight the possibilities that may exist after death.

The archetypal concepts that are hard wired into our thinking ensure that mythology remains relevant. The behaviours and emotions that we aspire to and those that we deny within in our own psyche are exemplified by mythological beings. They typify what we already understand and contribute to our acceptance of what is unknowable. The questions that surround death and dying can be answered in many ways by both mythology and fiction and both can provide solace, or at the very least, food for thought. Through the medium of the characters on the page, a novel provides access to the mind of the author thus creating a relationship between reader and writer. This indirect connection exists for the duration of the book, and at the end of the final chapter the relationship will cease. "The primordial relationship between reader and writer presents a wonderful paradox: in creating the role of reader, the writer also decrees the writer's death, since in order for the text to be finished, the writer must withdraw, cease to exist."¹³⁵ And, much like a bereavement, thoughts and feelings about a story can remain, and may continue to have an impact. We need to learn to manage endings of all kinds, perhaps as a precursor to negotiating the inexorable path towards our own death. People must handle their own fears and concerns and come to terms with the fact that they too will one day cease to exist.

Amongst the endless speculation about death and what it may mean, human creativity ensures that individual and cultural beliefs co-exist, in public and private thoughts, in arts, science and religion. As Candace discovered for herself and Rachel Clarke wrote "What we call death is a marriage of the physical fact of our finitude with the roving, unbounded human imagination."¹³⁶ Existence is all the more precious for being limited; as Atropos discovers, the value of life is connected to its brevity. There is something about that fact that life is terminal that evokes a determination to make it worthwhile. Paul's existential

¹³⁵ Manguel, Alberto, *A History of Reading*, (London: Harper Collins, 1996), p.179

¹³⁶ Clarke, p. 172

realisation is therefore akin to the ship's captain at the end of 'Love in the Time of Cholera' who was "[...]overwhelmed by the belated suspicion that it is life, more than death, that has no limits".¹³⁷ All living things are integral to the cyclical nature of life and death, as the two are inherently entwined. As Albert Camus says of the protagonist of his first novel 'A Happy Death' "But before losing consciousness, he had time to see the light turn pale behind the curtains and to hear, with the dawn and the world's awakening, a kind of tremendous chord of tenderness and hope which doubtless dissolved his fear of death, though at the same time it assured him he would find a reason for dying in what had been his whole reason for living."¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Marquez, Gabriel Garcia, *Love in the Time of Cholera* (London: Penguin, 2014), Kindle Edition p. 348

¹³⁸ Camus, Albert, *A Happy Death*, (London: Penguin Classics, 2002), p. 102

Bibliography

Death and dying

- Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, *A code of practice for the diagnosis and confirmation of death* (Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, 2008)
- Albom, Mitch, *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* (New York: Hyperion, 2003)
- Alvarez, AI, *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (London: Norton, 1990)
- Athill, Diana, *Somewhere Towards the End* (London: Granta, 2009)
- Atkinson, Kate, *Life After Life* (London: Black Swan, 2014)
- Bates, Sasha, *Languages of Loss* (London: Yellow Kite, 2020)
- Black, Sue, *Written in Bone: Hidden Stories in What We Leave Behind* (London: Penguin Random House, 2020)
- Chopra, Deepak, *Life After Death: The Book of Answers* (London: Rider, 2006)
- Clarke, Rachel, *Dear Life: A Doctor's Story of Love Loss and Consolation* (Abacus 2020)
- Cline, Sally, *Lifting the Taboo: Women, Death and Dying* (London: Abacus, 1996)
- Didion, Joan, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006)
- Doughty, Caitlin, *From Here to Eternity* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2019)
- Duncan Rogers, Jane, *Before I Go* (Rochester Vermont: Findhorn Press, 2018)
- Earle, Sarah; Komaromy, Carol; Bartholomew, Caroline, *Death and Dying: A Reader* (London: Sage Publications Ltd 2008)
- Gersie, Alida, *Storymaking in Bereavement* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 1991)
- Greyson, Bruce, *After, A Doctor Explores What Near-Death Experiences Reveal About Life and Beyond* (London: Bantam Press, 2021)
- Gordon, Rosemary, *Dying and Creating: A Search for Meaning* (London: The society of Analytical Psychology Ltd., 1978)
- Hitchens, Christopher, *Mortality* (London: Atlantic Books, 2013)
- Holinger, Dorothy, P., *The Anatomy of Grief: How the Brain, Heart and Body Can Heal After Loss* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2020)
- Ironside, Virginia, 'You'll Get Over It', *The Rage of Bereavement* (London: Penguin 1997)
- Jarrett, David, *33 Meditations on Death* (London: Doubleday, 2020)
- Kessler, David, *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief* (London: Ebury, 2019)
- Kessler, David, *Visions, Trips and Crowded Rooms* (California: Hay House, 2010)

Kübler-Ross, Elizabeth, *On Death and Dying* (Suffolk: Chaucer Press 1984)

Levine, Stephen, *Meetings at the Edge* (New York: Anchor, 1984)

Levine, Stephen, *Who Dies?, An investigation of Conscious Living and Conscious Dying* (Dublin: Gateway, 1986)

Macdonald, Helen, *H is for Hawk* (London: Penguin, Random House, 2014)

Mannix, Katherine, *With the End in Mind: How to Live and Die Well* (London: Collins, 2019)

Maté, Gabor, *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction* (London: Penguin, Random House, 2018)

Menzies, Rachel, E., and Menzies, Ross, G., *Mortals, How the Fear of Death Shaped Human Society* (NSW Australia: Allen & Unwin 2021)

Morgan, Abi, *This is Not a Pity Memoir* (London: John Murray, 2022)

Murray Parkes, Colin, *Bereavement, Studies of Grief in Adult Life* (London: Penguin, 1996)

Myss, Caroline, *Sacred Contracts: Awakening Your Divine Potential* (London: Bantam, 2002)

O'Connor, Mary-Frances: *The Grieving Brain, The surprising Science of How we Learn from Love and Loss* (New York: Harper Collins, 2022)

O'Farrell, Maggie, *I am I am I am* (London: Tinder Press 2018)

O'Mahoney, Seamus, *The Way we Die Now* (London: Head of Zeus, 2017)

Rinpoche, Sogyal, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (London: Rider 1992)

Shepherd, Richard, *Unnatural Causes* (London: Penguin, 2018)

Solomon, Sheldon, Greenberg, Jeff and Pyszczynski Tom, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* (London: Penguin Random House, 2015)

Suddendorf, Thomas, Redshaw, Johnathan and Bulley, Adam, *The Invention of Tomorrow: A Natural History of Foresight* (New York: Hachette, 2022)

Thomas, Dylan, *Miscellany 1* (London: Aldine Press, 1963)

Worden, William, J., *Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy, A Handbook for the Mental health Practitioner* (London: Routledge, 1991)

Mythology/Greece

Armstrong, Karen, *A Short History of Myth* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2018)

Ball, Phillip, *The Modern Myths* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021)

Barthes, Roland, *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 2009)

Bettelheim, Bruno, *The Uses of Enchantment* (London: Penguin, 1991)

Bolen, Jean Shinoda, *Goddesses in Everywoman* (New York: Harper, 2014)

Campbell, Joseph, *The Power of Myth* (Hamburg: Anchor Books, 1991)

Cartledge, Paul, *Ancient Greece: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011)

Dowden, Ken, *The Uses of Greek Mythology* (London: Routledge, 1992)

Fry, Stephen, *Mythos* (London: Penguin, 2018)

Haynes, Natalie, *Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myths* (London: Picador, 2020)

Miller, Madeline, *Circe* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018)

Nicholson, Adam, *How to Be: Life Lessons from The Early Greeks* (London: Harper Collins, 2023)

Tolkein, J. R. R., *On Fairy Stories* (London: Harper Collins, 2014)

Warner, Marina, *From the Beast to the Blonde* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1994)

Psychology/Philosophy/Religion

Adler, Alfred, *What Life Could Mean to You: Alfred Adler on the Psychology of Personal Development [1931]* (Oxford: Oneworld 1998)

Alderson-Day, Ben, *Presence: The Strange Science of the Unseen Other* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023)

Baggini, Julian, *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2021)

Baggini, Julian, *How the World Thinks* (London: Granta, 2018)

Baggini, Julian, *Freedom Regained: The Possibility of Free Will* (London: Granta, 2015)

Bolen, Jean Shinoda, *Close to the Bone* (New York: Scribner, 1996)

Boyer, Pascal, *Religion Explained: The Human Instincts that Fashion Gods, Spirits and Ancestors* (London: Vintage, 2001)

Cowburn, John, *Free Will, Predestination, & Determinism* (Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 2007).

Chopra, Deepak, *Synchrodestiny: Harnessing the Infinite Power of Coincidence to Create Miracles* (London: Random House 2003)

Critchlow, Hannah, *The Science of Fate* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2019)

Dawkins, Richard, *The God Delusion* (Transworld Digital; Special edition 2009)

De Botton, Alain, *The Consolations of Philosophy* (London: Penguin, 2001)

Dunbar, Robin, *How Religion Evolved and Why it Endures* (London: Penguin Random House, 2022)

Esfahani Smith, Emily, *The Power of Meaning: Crafting a Life that Matters* (London: Penguin Random House, 2017)

Frede, Michael, *A Free Will: Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought* (California: University of California Press, 2011)

Fonagy, Peter, Gergely, Gyorgy, Jurist, Elliot, L., Target, Mary, *Affect Regulation, Mentalization and the Development of the Self* (London: Routledge 2004)

Garrett, Greg, *Entertaining Judgement: The Afterlife in Popular Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015)

Gersie, Alida, *Storymaking in Bereavement, Dragons Fight in the Meadow* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 1998)

Greenfield, Susan, *The Private Life of the Brain* (London: Penguin, 2000)

Harari, Noah Yuval, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (London: Penguin Random House 2011)

Harris, Sam, *Free Will* (New York: Free Press, 2012)

Hartley, Linda, *Somatic Psychology: Body, Mind, and Meaning* (London: Whurr, 2004)

Howe, David, *Attachment Across the Life Course: A Brief Introduction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2011)

Jung, C. G., *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 1991)

Jung, C.G., *Synchronicity, An Acausal Connecting Principle* (London: Routledge, 1955)

Kearney, Richard, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (London: Routledge, 2003)

Kopp, Richard, R. *Metaphor Therapy: Using Client-Generated Metaphors in Psychotherapy* (Philadelphia: Taylor and Francis 1995)

Lamott, Anne, *Dusk, Night, Dawn* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2021)

Lanza, Robert, MD, *Beyond Biocentrism: Rethinking Time, Space, Consciousness and the Illusion of Death* (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2016)

Law, Stephen, *Humanism: A very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011)

Lorca, Federico Garcia, *In Search of Duende* (New York: New Directions 1998)

Markova, Dawna, *I Will Not Die an Unlived Life* (San Francisco: Conari Press, 2000)

McAdams, Dan, P., *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (New York: The Guildford Press 1993)

McGoldrick, Monica, Shellenberger, Sylvia and Gerson, Randy, *Genograms: assessment and intervention* (New York: W.W.Norton, 1985)

Moore, Thomas, *Dark Nights of the Soul* (London: Piatkus 2012)

Moore, Thomas, *Care of the Soul* (London: Piatkus 2012)

Mosak, Harold and Maniaci, Michael, *A Primer of Adlerian Psychology: The Analytic-Behavioural-Cognitive Psychology of Alfred Adler* (Philadelphia: Taylor & Francis 1999)

Owen, Nick, *The Magic of Metaphor: 77 Stories for Trainers and Thinkers* (Carmarthen: Crown House 2001)

Parker, Robert. *On Greek Religion*, Cornell University Press, 2011. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/swansea-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3138105>.

Sabbage, Sophie, *Lifeshocks: and How to Love Them* (London: Coronet, 2018)

Stavrakopoulou, Francesca, *God, An Anatomy* (London: Picador, 2021)

Suddendorf, Thomas, Redshaw, Jonathan, Bulley, Adam, *The Invention of Tomorrow: A Natural History of Foresight* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2022)

Tallis, Frank, *The Act of Living: What the Great Psychologists Can Teach Us About Surviving Discontent in an Age of Anxiety* (London: Little, Brown 2021)

Whitmarsh, Tim, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World* (London: Faber & Faber, 2016)

Wolf, Tony and Franks, Suzanne, *Get out of my life* (London: Profile Books, 2012)

Yalom, Irvin, *Staring at the sun: Overcoming the Dread of Death* (London: Piatkus, 2011)

Writing

Ackerman, Angela and Puglisi, Becca, *The Emotion Thesaurus* (Writers Helping Writers, 2019)

Auerbach, Erich, *Mimesis, The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, New and Expanded Edition, 2013)

Bowers, Maggie Ann, *Magic(al) Realism* (London: Routledge, 2004)

Brody, Jessica, *Save the Cat Writes a Novel* (California: Ten Speed Press, 2018)

Le Guin, Ursula, *Steering the Craft* (New York: Mariner Books, 2015)

Oatley, Keith, *Such Stuff as Dreams - the Psychology of Fiction* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011)

Maass, Donald, *The Emotional Craft of Fiction* (Ohio: Writers Digest Books, 2016)

Storr, Will, *The Science of Storytelling* (London: William Collins, 2020)

Wood, James, *How Fiction Works* (London: Vintage, 2019)

Miscellaneous

Bradshaw, John, *Cat Sense, The Feline Enigma Revealed* (London: Penguin, 2014)

Hunter, Clare, *Threads of life, A History of the World through the Eye of a Needle* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2020)

Manguel, Alberto, *A History of Reading* (London: Harper Collins, 1996)

McNicol, Sarah and Brewster, Liz, eds, *Bibliotherapy* (London: Facet Publishing, 2018)

Oliver, Mary, *Devotions: The selected Poems of Mary Oliver* (New York: Penguin, 2020)

St Clair, Kassia, *The Secret Lives of Colour* (London: John Murray, 2018)

Atwood, Margaret, *The Penelopiad* (London: Canongate, 2018)

Byatt, A.S., *Ragnarok* (London: Canongate Books, 2011)

Camus, Albert, *A Happy Death [1971]* (London: Penguin Classics, 2002)

Cather, Willa, *Death Comes for the Archbishop [1927]* (E-BOOKARAMA, 2019)

Clarke, Susannah, *Pirenesi* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020)

De Beauvoir, Simone, *All Men are Mortal [1946]* (London: Virago, 1995)

Erpenbeck, Jenny, *The End of Days* (London: Granta, 2014)

Faulkner, William, *As I Lay Dying [1930]*(London: Vintage, 1996)

Gaiman, Neil, *American Gods* (London: Headline, 2005)

Homer, *The Odyssey, [8BC]* Translated by Robert Fagles (London: Penguin, 1996)

Hua, Yu, *The Seventh Day* (New York: Vintage International, 2016)

Kingsolver, Barbara, *The Poisonwood Bible* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008)

Marquez, Gabriel Garcia, *Love in the Time of Cholera [1985]* (London: Penguin, 2014) Kindle Edition

Michaelides, Alex, *The Silent Patient* (London: Orion, 2019)

Mitchell, Judith Claire, *A Reunion of Ghosts* (London: Fourth Estate, 2015)

Moore, Brian, *Cold Heaven* (London: Johnathan Cape, 1983)

Myers, Benjamin, *The Offing* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020)

North, Claire, *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August* (London: Orbit, 2014)

Okri, Ben, *The Famished Road [1991]* (London: Vintage Digital, 2015)

Perrin, Valérie, *Fresh Water for Flowers* (New York: Europa Editions, 2020)

Porter, Max, *Grief is the Thing with Feathers*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2015)
Roffrey, Monique, *The Mermaid of Black Conch* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2020)
Saramago, Jose, *Death at Intervals [2005]* (London: Penguin, Vintage Classics, 2017)
Sebold, Alice, *The Lovely Bones* (London: Picador, 2003)
Setterfield, Diane, *Bellman and Black* (Orion, Digital original edition 2013)
Swift, Graham, *Here We Are* (New York: Scribner, 2020)
Tanizaki, Junichiro, *A Cat, A Man and Two Women* (London: Daunt Books, 2017)
Tartt, Donna, *The Secret History* (London: Penguin 1993)
Tolstoy, Leo, *The Death of Ivan Illych [1886]* (London: Penguin 2016)
Winterson, Jeanette, *Weight, The Myth of Atlas and Heracles* (London: Canongate, 2010)

Journal Articles

Raphals, Lisa, 'Fate, Fortune, Chance, Luck in Chinese and Greek: A comparative Semantic History', *Philosophy East and West*, 53. (2003) 537-574
Alford, C. Fred, 'Responsibility without Freedom: Must Antihumanism Be Inhumane? Some Implications of Greek Tragedy for the Post-Modern Subject' *Theory and Society*, 21. (1992) 157-181

Websites

<https://www.artofdyingwell.org>

<https://www.hospiceuk.org/our-campaigns/dying-matters>

<https://www.lifedeathwhatever.com/>

<https://www.theoi.com/>

<https://www.thesap.org.uk/>

<https://www.thoughtco.com/artemis-of-ephesus-116920>

<https://www.stroke.org.uk/>

<https://ourworldindata.org/births-and-deaths>

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/understanding-grief/effects-of-grief/>

<http://lithub.com/why-stories-make-sense-of-our-lives-and-relationships/>

[Accessed 2nd April 2022]

<http://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Europe/Greeks-Romans-and-barbarians>

[Accessed 10th August 2022]

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2011/nov/03/greece-europe-cultural-eurozone-crisis>

[Accessed 10th August 2022]

<https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/deaths-per-day>

[Accessed 15th August 2022]

<https://neurosciencenews.com/metaphor-meaning-eeg-10979/>

[Accessed 19th May 2023]