

“Am I not the helmsman here?’ I called out. “You?” asked a tall, dark man and passed his hands over his eyes as though to banish a dream. I had been standing at the helm in the dark night, a feeble lantern burning over my head, and now this man had come and tried to push me aside. And as I would not yield, he put his foot on my chest and slowly crushed me while I still clung to the hub of the helm, wrenching it around in falling. But the man seized it, pulled it back in place, and pushed me away. I soon collected myself, however, ran to the hatchway, which gave on to the mess quarters, and cried out: ‘Men! Comrades! Come here, quick! A stranger has driven me away from the helm!’ Slowly they came up, climbing the companion ladder, tired, swaying, powerful figures. ‘Am I the helmsman?’ I asked. They nodded, but they had eyes only for the stranger, stood around him in a semicircle, and when, in a commanding voice, he said: ‘Don’t disturb me!’ they gathered together, nodded at me, and withdrew down the companion ladder. What kind of people are these? Do they ever think, or do they only shuffle pointlessly over the earth?”

Franz Kafka, “The Helmsman”

ONE

SWIMMING LESSONS

Antony Green was a devious child with a subversive sense of adventure. He dabbled in far more than was known. Any discoveries — mischievous transgressions of adult rules and applied English order — were counted as youthful exuberance by a too-kindly parental perspective. At age of six, Antony was intelligent and owned a highly developed sense of play. Imaginative, a leader in all sorts of games — the army soldier, the explorer, doctor, thief — Antony's scenarios tended to be surreal, insights unique and only to be seen with his peculiar eye. He had a habit of conscripting his younger sister Audrey in his games. She, at four years, was greatly amused by her brother. The children's parents feared a bad influence, but it was difficult to separate them. *Pay no mind*, they dismissed, *the boy's just trying to get our attention*. However, he was *very* difficult to ignore. He could not be switched off, as a light. He was to be heeded. So, when the boy wriggled in the crushed rumper seat of the family motorcar, on that summer Sunday in 1953, and whispered into Audrey's ear, his words spilled over, filling the bones of every passenger...

"There's something in the car," he said, with a growl.

It was a jest, but also a revelation.

The cranked windows curled wind into hair, leaving the girls in tangles and the boys bracing.

If the motorcar were to crash, a whole generation would end. Winsey Green, the oldest daughter at sixteen, was followed in years by two boys — Windham and Dexter — and preceded by the three younger siblings: Clifford, Antony, and littlest Audrey. The family rested like fragile, fresh eggs on the white vinyl seats of their import, father and mother clutching hands near the wheel. No one complained. No one cried, or fussed, or teased. There was no evident spark for this sickening feeling, Antony's words giving a foggy voice to their thoughts.

There was just *something*. Something in the car.

"Turn back," it warned, at different points during the daytrip, moving in relay. Each passenger would open a mouth, lips cracking, a warning ripe and ready to roll over their tongues. *"Turn back."* They were all fearful of an argument — of having to defend the command with no evidence to support it. The words crawled back into their stomachs, where they stayed, unspoken.

It was the same beach every time. Only a short drive from the Greens' house on Dooley Boats Road, standing in the small southeastern village of Dorry, was this treasured spot. Simon Green, age forty-one, along with his wife and their six children, enjoyed this beach more than any other family in England. Every Sunday of the summer, they would load their brood bright and early, drive the countryside to the coast, and stay the whole day 'til sundown. The floorboards of the import would return littered with sand, the children tucked tightly in the back, lying asleep on each other's shoulders. Those were the best days.

Simon Green considered this particular beach to be his own property. On occasion, they may find another family already bathing, or a lone squatter in filthy rags, but this wasn't often enough to deter Simon. From his slim wages, he had only the deed for the shabby two-up in Dorry to pass along to his children — nothing else except his jazz records. The beach was the best part of his inheritance, he told himself, and at least something precious he could leave behind should he suddenly be killed, even if it was only windblown memories.

On this particular Sunday, the waters of the English Channel were unusually rough. Mrs. Green, a loving but studied wife, had tried to talk down the idea of a day at the beach, but Simon was insistent. He didn't care for the weathermen. All that sun, all that sand, and a moment away from the bookkeeping offices of Winton, Wallace, & Smith, were just too difficult to refuse. "We're going," he declared at a quarter past nine, "so start packing the sandwiches and that yellow umbrella."

Mrs. Green was not the kind to argue. Simon was due his moments of leisure. They were too far apart nowadays. If he wanted to go to the jazz clubs, or to the beach, she would acquiesce. Her husband worked fourteen hours a day in those maddeningly strict offices. By the hour of his arrival home, she'd be too tired from tending to the children to really be of much use to him. She wanted to show how much she appreciated his presence. Agreeing was her consolation. There had always been a hint of distance in her husband's eyes, but he had the ability to listen and the desire to love. The children were of such a range, and he had no obligation to embrace them, yet there was never a discernible tuning in his affections. He loved them all equally. (*Well, maybe Audrey a little more*, thought Mrs. Green. As expected, she supposed, Audrey being the youngest and Simon's only natural child. The rest were from another man — Mrs. Green's first husband, thankfully gone from their lives.) Antony was rambunctious, a boy who liked to crawl over people and speak his own language, but Simon was patient even with that. The man enjoyed this bond between little Antony and his daughter, Audrey, despite disciplinarian implications. She now had a playmate. Simon was a father even to Winsey, who was by far the worst behaved and at the cusp of womanhood. He always had a moment to discuss the papers, or boys. He was human, in a way Mrs. Green would have liked to be — in a way she admired. She felt cold by comparison, and often shut away her feelings —

(Like this buzz of nervousness, unexplained, as she spread the jam on the bread for the picnic basket. The argument was raging in her head, registering this strange, quiet concern, needle shifting to a mild abatement. *No matter*, she thought, *Si is always right... he always is, you know...* followed in the car by that voice, saying, *Turn back.*)

Mrs. Green loaded the basket with eight sandwiches, water flasks, two tins of sardines, crackers, cheese, and a pint of

beer for her husband. Then she took the basket and placed it into the boot of the family car. She smiled at everyone as they piled inside, Antony and Audrey barely awake but laughing. Clifford sat on his mother's soft lap, and Simon started the auto's ignition. The five in the back were cramped, but quiet, as they pulled away from the house and took to the country.

They arrived alone on the beach.

Simon Green plunged the metal pole of the yellow umbrella into the sand, letting it fly open and cast a shadow over the sand. The umbrella had taken on a territoriality. The yellow of the Greens. "*This is our beach,*" it declared. "*We claim it.*"

The inlet was quite extraordinary for three reasons:

First, the sand was pure gold and composed of very few rocks. This allowed the children to run about barefoot, without worry of cuts from coils. It was like stepping into the warmest flesh, as if the beach was alive.

Second, the beach felt very contained. There were high cliffs on either side, like bookends. Shorn rocks hid the path to the roadside. The cliffs themselves were remarkably jagged, and their breaks sticky with moss. It looked almost tropical, not at all like the beaches of Wooster or Liberty.

Lastly, the beach had breakers in a semi-circle thirty meters out. Simon swam to them once and discovered they were stone and cement pillars leftover from the war against the Germans. The army must have noticed this small hole in the perimeter of England's defenses and had decreed to plug it up. These pillars were not serious battlements, though. After all, the beach itself wouldn't hold anything more than an expeditionary force — a compliment of Nazi spies at best — but in wartime it probably seemed necessary.

(On one visit, Simon took an hour to make sure there were no hidden landmines. He didn't want his children losing feet or legs or worse. *Maybe that's why we're alone so much*, he thought on that particular visit, suddenly frightened. *It's because the beach is not safe.* But his fears were soon assuaged. There were no mines. He knew the

devils from his days in the war. If they were once there, the army must have come and pulled their wires, leaving the breakers to weather out in the water, left to stand because of shifted priorities.)

The wind was a harsh one. Whipping. Simon took note of the crashing on the water as the waves hit and then rolled over the army's stones. *The breakers won't hold them back today*, he thought.

"I don't want anyone going out more than knee-high, you hear?" he shouted to the family. The boys all moaned. Simon made eye contact with each of them. Antony, Dexter, and Windham all met his glare and nodded. Clifford pretended not to hear until his father walked to him and laid a hand on the boy's shoulder. "You hear?"

Clifford gave a shy nod and slid his trousers to his ankles, revealing his bathing trunks beneath. "Yes, Dad," Clifford replied, frustrated, letting the words get wound in his shirt as he pulled it over his head.

Mrs. Green began to relax. She watched her husband's concerned brow and listened to his stern words to the children. Her chest rose and fell with a sigh of relief. Simon was not being as reckless as she had feared. She fluffed a blanket onto the sand and took a seat. She was not wearing a bathing costume, but skirt and blouse, and always preferred the shade of the umbrella to the surf and sunshine. Simon returned to his wife as the children scattered in all directions. Once in her arms, she folded him into her bosom and leaned back on her elbows, tired for the first time that day.

"I feel like someone's given me a potion," she whispered in his ear.

He almost didn't hear her from the wind. "A potion?"

"Yes, for sleep."

"I could sleep," he nodded in agreement. "Who should go first?"

"Why don't you be the first," she said, knowing that he must be drained from the drive. "I'll watch them." It wasn't long before he was asleep, laying back on the stuffing of the picnic basket as the sun snuck from the umbrella, catching

his legs. It was so peaceful. Mrs. Green could see all of the children. They were obeying their father, staying close to shore. They were good.

She began to nod and soon slept in her husband's arms, happy.

Like a potion.

UNDERWATER TRANSPORTATION

Audrey was trying to build a castle out of wet channel sand, but it wasn't going very well. It was more of a plain lump. Her orange bathing suit was dropping from her shoulder and she irritatingly righted it. Antony ran out along the perimeter of the seawater, taking great steps. As left and right foot sunk into the grain, each left a print. Stepping out of the water, he returned backwards, retracing, and it looked quite odd. Audrey gave a laugh. Her brother heard this over the spray, met her eyes, and sensed his own ridiculousness. He laughed just as hard.

The two children had been oblivious for many minutes until that laugh. It's not that they were fighting; they rarely did. Between the other siblings was a constant quarreling, the subjects being time in the bath or portions for dinner. *(It was mostly a question of space. All the children shared a single mattress — a large and uncomfortable slab made by their distant uncle as a wedding gift. That hard bed covered the entire room, increasing the closeness and the resulting depression. The three oldest children were secretly plotting escape — saving pound and pence for imagined flats of their own. Audrey and Antony were too young to know or want this freedom. For them, liberty was being able to stay up fifteen minutes past bedtime.)* No, for the two youngest children, this brief separation and silence on the beach was Audrey's punishing the boy for his earlier commentary. The goose pimples, called to the skin by the mention of *something in the car*, were still with her, and, for some deep reason she felt she should avoid her brother. She did not like it when Antony tried to frighten her. It was cruel. Crueler than cruel. This was not a time for the frights.

Audrey had just celebrated a birthday. She was happiest when singled out for affection, now that she was beginning to understand the rarity. Although her mum and dad could not afford a very expensive gift, they gave her a new bathing suit, handmade with fabric from the stitcher.

Mrs. Green felt the gift appropriate, a symbol of their good times near the water.

Mrs. Green treasured connections. She liked the *idea* that her children would be her friends when they were older. They scrapped, but their unity at the beach gave her promise. Audrey was very quiet, almost sullen, but there was something in her eyes — greatness, Mrs. Green liked to think, a destiny beyond their small country village. *Maybe in London?* She would miss her adopted daughter when time came to set her loose upon the world, but would thrill at sharing the world over a telephone. This desired relationship would not come with Winsey. Mrs. Green's oldest daughter was already drifting. The connection would have to come from Audrey. Her habits may change, and her street address, but she would never actually leave. The girl was good. She would not abandon.

Antony came to where his sister sat splayed on the beach and stared at her until she looked up. He started into a game — "I'll be an African explorer," he said, "you be my guide!" He took Audrey by the hand and hauled her to her feet. Leading on, his rolled hands imitating a spyglass, he called out, "By Jove!" (*He had learned well from radio broadcasts — fictional tales of adventure in the Congo.*) "I do believe I see a tunnel!"

He pointed for his sister to see, but nothing registered — only the moss-covered cliffs boxing the beachhead. Scheming, Antony marked the whereabouts of the family. Mum and Dad were under their yellow umbrella, sleeping; Winsey was throwing a tantrum as waves eroded her sand angel, her green bathing top folding down to show the line between her breasts; Clifford sat knees-up, looking out at the army barricades in the surf; Windham was doing his best to stay warm — a blanket pulled around his shoulders, peppered with sand up to his knees from a venture out and a hurried return. Audrey was at his side, waiting for Ant's move in the game. "Let's go exploring," he said and darted in the direction of the crag — opposite from his family, far from the ladders leading to their motorcar.

"No, Ant, we're supposed to stay close."

Antony did not turn. "It'll be fun," he said.

Audrey's small legs and feet were soon joining, afraid but trusting, as her brother led her to the end-point of his imaginary spyglass. The wind and spray must have temporarily blinded her, *for there it stood*, just as Antony had observed from afar — a tunnel, cut by a natural fault in the cliff, through the rocks and around to an unseen end. The breeze dusted the floor of the tunnel with soft sand, free of pebbles and human prints. Both children looked back at the family, now a hundred meters away — simply dots. The two children were not yet being missed. Antony turned sideways and put a foot into the fissure.

"No, Ant!"

"Shush, Audrey — we're exploring."

"You'll get into trouble."

This rang a bell. Trouble to a six-year old came in a variety of forms — some not too harsh, others with more impactful consequences. He did not want to have his supper revoked, or the next trip to their beach denied, but ahead of him lay something he had never seen on the beach before: *a way out*. The thought of leaving was strong. His parents had caused nothing to stir these runaway feelings, yet, once he found the exit, there was an undeniable tug. There didn't seem to be anything harmful in the passage. There were no overhanging rocks or dangerous waves — nothing his father had warned against. In fact, he had only spoken of the undertow. This was a technicality Antony could overcome. He put another foot inside the fissure —

"Ant!"

"Come on — let's see where it leads."

They found their route together, disobeying orders and in knowing violation. Audrey was driven by a concern for her brother's safe passage. She wanted to make sure he did not leave her sight. At each turn of the rock, she had a whiff of retreat — of waking their sleeping parents and telling. But the boy would call out some remembered line of dialog from a radio adventure, and she would transform into the hired shirpah of a British cartographer, handing

over invisible binoculars or bottles of imaginary water to quench his Saharan thirst.

The path took an upward turn, then went down again.

It became quite narrow at one point, and the two barely squeaked between, Antony snagging his brown bathing trunks, causing a tear near the waist elastic that he did not even notice.

Then, at last, there was a widening, and they were again on the beach.

Because of the cut of the land, their first estimation was that they had gone in a circle. This beach was nearly identical to the beach of the Greens, except absent was the yellow umbrella, and their family. A rush came into their blood — a fear that they had been gone too long and were left behind. Antony, being good with the clock, dismissed the notion: it had only been ten minutes, surely. Not long enough for an abandonment, a search for the missing, a surrender.

"Look, Audrey!" he shouted to alleviate his sister's mounting panic. "We've found *another* beach." She took several seconds to morph her blanched expression into raised eyebrows. "Oh?" she said, questioning, not quite yet believing. "Hidden from the road."

Antony cocked his gaze over his shoulder. It was true — the rocks behind were in a complete vertical shore, reaching nearly fifty meters into the air, protecting this flat and clean beach in complete camouflage. This one was roughly the same size as the first, but, to the children, the water seemed bluer and calmer. Antony could tell the sand hadn't been touched. "No footprints," he said, and kneeled to dust off his brow and examine the grains. "We're the first." He rose again, smiling. Taking his sister by the shoulder, he grandly waved his hand across their view, and declared, "As the first explorers on this beach, it is our right to name it. For England. What shall we name her?" Audrey began to speak, but Antony cut her off — "I hereby call you the Beach of Sir Antony Green!" he shouted to the sea, before removing his sandals and running for the water's edge.

Audrey stayed. "Don't go in the water, Ant! Dad said!"
Stopping on the wet sand border, he called back, "No, it'll be all right. Do you want to swim, too?"

"No!" she yelled.

Antony could no longer hear her, as his ears were clogging with the crash of a wave, bigger than expected but still tame compared to the waters of their family beach, where the army barricades made things rougher.

Audrey stepped forward as Antony took a dive under the water and came back up laughing.

"Cold!" he shouted, but the wind took the word and Audrey did not hear it. She called at him again to stop and come back. Her words, too, were lost. Her throat was just not strong enough to carry — so young, the wrong frequency — not enough to overcome the saltwater in her brother's ears. He took another dive.

A third time he came up, standing chest-high in the surf. "Audrey! Come quick! I've found something!"

This she heard, and took three more steps in the direction of the water.

"Something's down here — " he called, adding another, mismatched sentence that seemed to come back to her with static. He was gone again in the water, his excitement barely contained. To her, it was as if he had said there was a train under the water, which could not be right.

There are no *trains* in the ocean!

He would not come up a third time...

THE WEIGHT OF A BODY

"Did you see the evening paper, dear?" asked Alison Falliher from the arch of her newly wallpapered kitchen. "A boy has drowned!"

John, her husband, glanced up from his desk, where he sat drumming his fingers, expectant of tragedy. Usually on Sundays he had some sort of bad news *thrust* in his face. He was getting accustomed to it. "Anyone we know?" he asked. His wife crossed the tile to the carpet, the steps from her house slippers changing in pitch; he knew to meet her eyes.

"No, I don't think we know them," she said. "From Dorry, says the paper. The name of Green."

"Common name," he sniffed. "Probably a hundred Greens about the county."

Alison pushed down her mouth, letting her wrinkles spread, parenthetical, and lingered beside her husband's chair, even after he turned his head to the blotter. "Maybe it's one of the Greens we met at the last policeman's picnic," she conjectured. John made an indefinite sound. Retreating back into the rabbit-hole of the kitchen, Alison began to rinse the dirty plates. "We met a couple by that name, didn't we, John? Green? The picnic?" Her voice sounded muffled behind the plaster walls, easy to ignore, but she kept on. "Do you think it could be one of the same?"

"Noooo," John replied, negation drawn out as one would deny a child candy. "Don't think so at all." (Alison got like this quite often. It irritated. She made connections that weren't there. Her husband knew better from his line of work, skills sharpened to ignore these wild guesses.) John finally answered completely. "*Those* Greens were from Marsden. I remember that bit. Fairly far from Dorry." Because he could sense his wife's wheels still turning, even at this separated distance of desk to sink, he put in a final nail: "*Those* Greens also had no children." John heard the clink of dishware as Alison ran the plates and spoons under the water and slid them onto the drying rack. *Why had he*

sat at his desk? John couldn't remember. He had been on some mission, but his wife's mention of the drowning had distracted him. He humphed and tightened the press of his trousers. Alison finished and joined him in the main room, giving a loud sigh as she flopped into the woven fabric and stuffing of the largest chair. John could tell she remained disturbed. "How did he drown?" he asked mercurially, to appease.

Again, she sighed, heavier this time. "Went out into the tide, I suppose. How do most people drown? Lost his way. It's just a shame, when a child —"

"Yes," he interrupted, nodding, slightly annoyed that she would let her mood be so colored by the death of a boy she had no chance of knowing. A reprieve came into his thoughts: "At least it won't be *my* case. They won't call me to investigate that one. Not my district." The mention of his work as inspector put a stop to her. Momentarily, he was thankful, but then regretted his impatience.

During supper, she had been, for the first time in months, hopeful about the state of their marriage, their life together. Alison had even laughed at a joke John made about the neighbor. She had worn her red blouse and skirt, the formality of dressing for supper, like the many discontinued customs of their marriage, dropped and now unexpectedly resuscitated. John had complimented her. She did not return it. *And why should she?* He wore the same brown shirt and checkered trousers, his style unchanged since they had met at a seaside hotel three years before. The effort at dinner had not been his; she was making amends to him, although he didn't know the reason for this change of wind.

Yet it dissipated again, her efforts failing to reap the intended, unspoken rewards. She gazed down in her lap, sad.

"Maybe we should go on holiday?" he suggested with sudden quickness, a surprise even to himself.

She laughed at him. "What, John, you hear about a boy drowning and you want to go for a swim?"

"No, no. Not that at all. I was just — well, you know how the mind goes. I was thinking that the boy was probably on holiday with his family, and how we haven't had one in quite some time. It might be good to, you know, get away — "

Alison flipped her hem over her opposite knee, covering her bare leg, suddenly cold. "Maybe," was all she said in reply, letting the word fade to distraction as she stared out the open window to their overgrown garden.

Turning his desk chair, wheels creaking against the wood floor, John felt tired. He took his mind back to the pile on the desk and tried to remember why had sat down in the first place.

Sticking out of the letters was the very thing he sought. "Here — " he said to his wife, "A letter's come in the post. It has your name on it."

Alison didn't budge but kept her eyes at the window. "Who from?" she asked without energy.

Spinning the letter, John looked for the sender's address. "Doesn't say. It just has your name printed on the outside. *Alison Falliher, 22 Blue Bottom Dell, Burnby.*" Alison moved her face back to her husband as he held out the envelope. She rose to her feet and crossed the room to take it from his fingers. "Quite the mystery," he said with a quick up and down of the brow. For a few seconds, she did nothing with the envelope, just gave it a glance and returned to the chair, legs crossed, quiet again. John observed for a moment more, but she remained stagnant. Her eyes returned to the window, and soon the letter was out of her grip and set upon the high table beside her chair, ignored. "Well?" he prodded. "Aren't you going to open it?"

"It's probably from the church," she sighed.

John scrunched his mouth, stood from his seat, and went into the kitchen to spoon some more sugar for his tea. He popped his head out, hand stirring the lump until it dissolved. The letter remained neglected on the tip of the table. Another moment, and he was off to the toilet to read about the drowning, having found the paper open to the story on the countertop.

Lazily, Alison rested her hand on the chair-arm, glancing around the empty room. She had not even been aware of John's leaving. *He can be so quiet sometimes*, she thought. *Quick to disappear. It's in his nature.* With finality, she gently drew the discarded letter back to her face, examining it, the sharp printing of her name a cartographer's precise rendering, the lines carefully plotted. With a tug on the end, and a tearing, she had the end open and was shaking out the contents into the net of her skirt. Inside was a folded sheet of paper, half-size, made of a sturdy weight. She tucked the ripped envelope next to her arm and unfolded the paper.

He's not drowned, it said.

Meet me at St. Peter's Church, Harp's Row, Burnby, at 3 o'clock tomorrow. Alone. I'll tell you everything I can.

Alison read it a second time, a third time, and with each repeat her heart gained speed. It took a moment to register her emotion: bald-faced *fear*. She was terrified. Her mouth opened to call for John – he could help her decipher the contents of this mysterious letter! But a faint voice inside got the better of her. *Alone*, the note said. In her husband's profession, clues like this spelled danger. A boy drowned and a letter found. *Trouble*. She tore the letter in half and buried it in the waste tin of the kitchen before John's exit from the toilet, the newspaper spooled under his arm and quickly discarded. (She had jumped when he opened the swinging waste tin lid and thrust his paper inside.) When he again passed through the front foyer, it did not take her husband long to see that the letter was missing from the tabletop.

"What did it say?" he asked.

Alison shrugged. "Nothing. It was empty."

"An empty envelope?"

"Yes, strange. Someone must have mailed it accidentally, just stamping and addressing it without bothering to stuff."

His face changed from acceptance to suspicion. Alison heeled away in the direction of the study (*'for a book to read,' she lied*), and she felt John's eyes at her back. The man was too good in his work. It wouldn't take much skill to know she was hiding something. "I'll have a word with the postman," was the last thing John said before she turned the corner, went into the study, and began to shake.

That night, she didn't sleep. John was under quickly, and snoring, and that made it even more difficult to rest. *He's not drowned*, said the note. The phrase echoed in her skull. Several things were vexing her: First, how did someone know she would read that story in the evening newspaper? It was just a local, and the mention was not on the front page. Stories like a boy drowning several towns south might not have even been published. Second, how did the writer of the letter get her name? Her address? Who was she to anyone? She would have discounted it as childhood prank, but it was most certainly an adult who had written that note. Quite a difference between the mature script of an adult and the crayon scrawl of a child. Maybe there had been two drownings in the paper that day, by coincidence. One was the child, and a second of someone else, a story she had missed. Was it that she read the *wrong* story? She had, after all, not finished reading the articles, having stopped at the one about the boy. Maybe an adult drowned whom she had known — *a family friend*? A suicide? Plots and theories began to bloom in Alison Falliher. *What if it's murder? Or attempted murder reported as suicide?* She badly wanted to get out of bed to retrieve the *Standard* from the waste tin, but thought better of it. John would feel her wriggling out of bed. If he found her snooping through the trash, unfolding the noisy paper, he would surely become more suspicious. That voice continued telling her to keep him out of it. *Alone*, it had

said — *plainly said*. She had been taken into confidence. Silence was best... for now. John could be so very nosy.

THE INDEX

A few minutes past two o'clock, Alison Falliher locked the door to her home and headed in the direction of town. Burnby, where she had lived the three years since marrying John, was no better or worse a village than she was accustomed. Being raised in a township outside of London, the city a few hours drive north, she was used to these typifications — a narrow house on a narrow street with a narrow walkway and everything very proper. Although Burnby was considered by her family to be the country, it was really just the same as every other village, as she tried to tell them in her infrequent letters. There was very little crime, very little bustle, very little to go on about. It was just any street in any English town.

In fact, she was not unhappy with the place. She was not unhappy with her life. Her recent spells of doubting and moodiness had become more chronic but, in her opinion, had yet to overtake her. John may say otherwise. She did get a sense that she in some way offended him. When they had met and made love within hours — the crash of affections during a mutual and sudden romance — John had seemed changed by the tryst. Although they were more infrequent in their lovemaking, there was never a complete wash of tenderness. It still remained; she had that impression. John was just such a serious sort. Alison was a bit more carefree, a product of a university education and multiple suitors prior to John. She had resisted marriage until the age of thirty-five (much to her parents' chagrin), but she regretted nothing. When she finally took up with John, returning on his arm to introduce him to her mother and father, she took great pride in saying he had been married before and was a widower. It meant the man was experienced with the wants of women. He would be happy to have her, and he would have a sense of her needs.

He had been "broken-in." Adding that he was a police inspector was a special bonus, especially for Alison's father, who was quite fond of mystery programs broadcast over the BBC. Her father and her eventual husband had spent hours talking together in the front room about John's past cases. Alison found them all strangely unremarkable. Dry. Yet the telling made her father happy. With her once-red hair having softened to a faded auburn, gone curly since her youth, Alison tried to preserve her figure by walks around the town while John was about the county trying to solve various crimes.

The church mentioned in the letter, St. Peter's, was well known to her. She had never set a foot inside (John having a patent disregard for Sundays and the Church of England), but often she would pass to the sounds of the organ playing, and wish she were a Christian.

At a little before the hour, she wanted to turn back. Waiting outside near the priory, eyes on her wristwatch, she felt underdressed for entering a church. She wore a wool skirt and a white blouse, hosiery and undergarments, but flat shoes — not the kind to work in this setting. Also, she wore no face powders or perfume. *Why do I want to look pretty?* After all, if this is a serious matter, the drowned boy, or even were to be the boy's mourning father (one of her guesses), romantic escapades were not in her future. However, she had an urge to be presentable, as if on an important bank interview that could affect the course of things. It was not something she would take casually. Deciding that it was too late to turn home, Alison finally carried her body up the steps and through the grand doors of the church.

The foyer construction of wood beams and stained glass was quite pretty. The windows had been made with care and craftsmanship (*stories of the bible*). Her heels clacked on the marble floor, announcing her arrival in the echo of the high ceiling. She looked again to her watch: 2:59. One minute to the ghost. *Mr. Marley, are you there?* she thought, and smiled. A few paces forward took her past the brace and into the aisle, surrounded on either side by

twenty lined pews. She let her right hand drift over the pointed wood of each row's end, like a boy putting a stick to a fence, only without the ruckus. Her shoes on the green carpet leading to the pulpit, the organ, the proscenium, and the choir loft, Alison waited stone silent, expectant...

3:03 p.m.

This ghost clearly does not have a watch,
she thought.

Suddenly,

in a loud and fierce harangue,

one of the dressing rooms to her left came swinging open, and out tumbled

a man in black clothing. He fell flat on his backside and groaned in hardship, as the dressing door got stuck in his shoe and he tripped again while trying to wriggle free.

Alison quick-stepped forward, rounding the first pew and opening her arms. "Are you all right?" she asked, breathless from being startled.

The man kicked a leg and got his weight behind it. His knee cracked as he pushed, but soon he was standing, padding the marble dust from his clothes. He wore the costume of a clergyman, white collar immediately catching Alison's eyes as they moved up to his soft face. He was young, only early thirties, with baby cheeks and bushy hair. "Sorry 'bout the fuss," he apologized, looked behind him, and extended his hand to be taken.

Instinctually, she gave him a shake. "That was a nasty spill," she said.

The man looked back to the box. "Yes, well, s'pose..."

After letting go of her hand, he continued rubbing at his shoulder, making a grimace, prompting Alison to ask, "Are you sure you're not hurt, Vicar?"

"Oh, I'm not a clergy," he said with straight face. "Nothing of the sort. These are just my clothes." He smiled at her and gave a tap to his temple. "Tell you what, I'll give them back when I'm finished. Make it all right." She gave him a quizzical look. In sympathy, he nodded and lifted his hand to shush her unspoken questions. "Now, now, now," he started, "it will all make sense in time. First let me start by saying I'm so glad that you came today. Bit of a surprise, I know, with my letter and all, but — "

"You're the one who mailed that letter?"

"No, I just put it in your box. I don't trust anything so important to the post. But I know what you're meaning — it's a matter of semantics, isn't it?"

"But it had a stamp," she said, remembering.

"Not canceled," he added, with a point. "Hopefully your husband did not notice. Putting a letter in a married woman's box is likely akin to adultery — " (*Here, he looked to the pulpit of the church...*) "They frown on that in a place like this, you know. I did my best to get you to meet me. A note was the only way I could think. I had a very short window of opportunity." The man took a pause, glanced to the doors of the church, and then flopped down in the far right pocket of the closest pew. He swung his arm around the bevel and crossed his legs tightly. With his open hand, he gave a scoop to the spot beside. "Come. Sit." He caught Alison's roll of eyes to the exits. "Don't worry, we're alone. No one will walk in. Not this time of day." Still, she did not take the offered seat. "Ah," he said with a tick, "older woman, younger man — puts one off. Rings of *scandal*. A vicar — at least by appearance — on a bench with an attractive lady. But just never you mind about that, Mrs. Falliher, I am well aware of my... moral responsibilities, even though you are quite becoming." He was trying to be charming, to put her at ease.

Slowly, handbag slung over her shoulder, Alison slipped into the place beside him. In quiet, they sat for a long moment. Finally, she *had* to speak, if he was to not. "How do you know about the little boy who drowned?" she asked, feeling ridiculous.

He winked. "I have my sources." This did not appease. "Very well," he continued, "I found out about the boy from his younger sister — a girl named Audrey. The boy is very important to me, but his sister even moreso. I want to help her, and you're the only way I know how."

"This is a laugh, isn't it?"

"Not in the slightest."

"How do you even know this Audrey Green?" Alison asked. "You're not in Dorry, and I don't think the two of you are playmates. You look to be in your thirties."

"A good guess," he affirmed, "I'm thirty-three." With this, his eyes went up. "At least I *think* I am. That's what the switch said — 'Kevin Hockleed, 35.6251453.11.' But I may have those last numbers botched. I read them very quickly. Other, more important facts were drawing my attention at the time. He was over twenty-one, anyway. Of that, I am certain."

Alison gave a nervous laugh. "You're joking," she said. "What switch?"

"They're called switch indexes, if you want the full term. They're codes marked in the walls. Lines and lines of numbers beneath the wires, telling all, all to be told — a secret source of information, if you know how to read them. And there's not just the name and age. There are a slew of other details about a person — time, place, appearance, relationships, occupation. Everything about a life at a crucial opening moment — it's been recorded, you know. Bloody perfection. You can sometimes make adjustments, but I prefer to follow the codes on the index. Simpler. 'Course, this Kevin Hockleed fellow was said to be dour today, but I just couldn't pull that off, now could I? Not when meeting such an important person as you, Alison."

"Important!" she scoffed, dismissing the rest of his rant. "You must have been looking for my husband, John. *He's* the important one. He's with the police, you know, as an investigator. I'm just his wife."

The vicar gave a *tsk-tsk*. "Importance has nothing to do with how you make your money. Importance means

you're *involved*. And with this bit of business, you are most certainly *involved*."

Alison swallowed and hugged her handbag. "Involved in what?"

"In this drowning." He saw her fix. "Alison Falliher, I can bloody well read your mind: *he's mad*, you're thinking. *How could I be involved if I've never even heard the name Antony Green before I saw it in the evening paper? And I wasn't anywhere near the coast yesterday morning!*" Her expression changed, so he knew he had got it right. Leaning forward, he placed a hand on her knee and she did not pull away. His face was too stoic to intone mischief. "You're *involved*," he stated, "because your name is on one of those switches, too."

Moving back in place,
he again put his arm around the bench
and began to whistle.

He cocked an ear to the echo. "Wow — sounds smashing in here — that must be a *very* high ceiling." He stopped the melody for only a moment. More whistling, more ignoring. "Bet the organ sounds wonderful!" Back to whistling. Alison was getting annoyed. "Know this tune?" He blew out a few more bars.

"It does sound familiar, yes."

"Name it," he ordered, still going on — *tweet, tweet, tweet*.

She gave a groan and a toss to her hair. "*Life Is A Puzzle*," she answered, the title easily rising to her tongue. "My husband and I had it played at our wedding." Hockleed kept whistling. "It's not a very good song," she added. "John liked it, and so did my mum, but — "

The man stopped his whistling, lips still puckered, and again moved into blacker territory. "Alison," he said, "you must make me a promise. It's a serious promise, and don't think I won't know if you fail to keep it. I am choosing *you*, dear girl, to help me save what's so easily spoiled. There are those who wish to cut me off from the tunnels, to have it

to themselves. They can't fall into enemy hands. Greed, glory — these things have no place in what I'm trying to protect. Together we can stop an old friend of mine from doing the wrong thing. Will you help me? I'll give you the tools you need. I've never found a switch that will stay open long enough for me to do the job proper. Plus, I'm in no shape for a battle. So I'm enlisting. Your switch — I like what I see, but you're not opening up for many years. I can't wait that long. I've found an important clue and I need a body to seek it out. I think it will give our side the advantage. You must trust me. This is more than a game. *'Life Is A Puzzle,'* indeed, my lady. And this here... is one of the corner pieces:

*You must find
the author of that song."*

She narrowed her eyes. "Why would I care?"

"Because whoever it is, he can help protect you."

"Protect me?"

"Yes. There's someone else in the tunnels. He hasn't found your switch index yet, but I'm afraid he will. It won't take him long. He's a bungler — thinks one thing is another — but he's tenacious. He'll get to you soon, maybe your husband, too, and then you'll be in serious trouble, Alison." Again, he wore a stony face, and leaned into her. "It's *important*, Alison. You are *involved*. You may not know it today, you may not know it tomorrow, but if you don't act, awful, awful things will happen." She was going to laugh, but the man's plea contained genuine emotion. He was not acting. "Listen," he said, giving a glance around the church sanctuary. "I've only got a few more minutes. This switch isn't open for very long, but it was the only other one in Burnby — aside from the postman yesterday. I know you don't believe me. I know I have no proof. If you don't take action, terrible things will happen. Find the man who wrote *'Life Is A Puzzle.'*" Hockleed stood from the bench and

moved nervously in the direction of the dressing door. "I'm sorry I can't be more clear. I'm sure you have many questions. The answers would just confuse you even further. If you doubt me, here's this: I'm going to give you a name, and that name will prove to you that I am right. I'm not sure where it's going to pop up, but I am certain it will, and soon. Somewhere.

The name is

Robby

Holliday.

Remember it." The vicar known as Kevin Hockleed put his one foot into the dressing box and began to pull the door behind him. "Remember it," he said once more with a look, which melted to a smile, and an easy disappearance into the dressing door, like an escape artist readying for a trick...

After only a few seconds, the latch was again raised and the vicar stepped out and into the sanctuary of the church.

Alison gave a blink from her spot on the pew.

Hockleed no longer wore that relaxed face, that charming manner. Instead, he slumped his shoulders in depression and spoke in a low and sleepy voice. "May I help you?"

Alison couldn't think to speak. The man seemed utterly different — not in identity, but in disposition. *Dour*, he looked. The word came to Alison's mind. "Are you mad?" she asked the vicar. "We have just been speaking the last five minutes, haven't we?"

The vicar appeared confused. He gave a slow shake of his head, then a tilt, gaining an insight. Vicar Hockleed thanked her for her kindness. "Thank you, dear child," he said, incongruous with their ages, and gave a wink. Near to his hip, Alison noticed that the vicar held an empty flask of whiskey. She began to add it up. The vicar wobbled a bit.

He was dead drunk, and Hockleed was thanking her for covering with this convenient lie. Having fallen asleep in the box, away from the eyes of the parishioners, he appreciated her discretion. This silent agreement to tell anyone who asked that they had been speaking of spiritual matters, gave him hope that she would keep this secret. “Thank you,” he said once more, before leaving her alone in the chapel.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Alison Falliher did not tell her husband of the conversation with Vicar Hockleed. How could she explain such a thing? A letter in her box; switch indexes; two moods in one man, so very different. Instead, while John was away to investigate a farming matter, she borrowed her neighbor's motorcar and drove the hour to Dorry. There had been a notice in the *Standard* about a funeral for the drowned boy, Antony Green. It was to be at eleven-thirty; she would be back before John even noticed.

Dorry was much the same as Burnby. It had few buildings, fewer shops, and was the same population and circumstance — one of many sleepy English towns near the Channel. There had been an address for the church in the newspaper notice. Alison found it by pulling over her motorcar and asking a butcher, alone in his shop, hacking away at a liver. Once arrived, she did not go inside to see the services. She had been at one-too-many churches already this week. After the rolling sound of chorused voices, singing a longing hymn of Heaven and its practices, a throng of about thirty mourners poured from the chapel doors. Wearing black, their uniformity against the white concrete of the steps was striking. They crossed the lawn to the waiting parade of autos. Alison felt the need to vanish, as the grieving family of Antony Green touched kerchiefs to their eyes and threw lasting, hard-pulled hugs around waists and shoulders. She was an intruder. It wasn't right that she should be seen. If only she were capable of invisibility.

Finally, a symmetrical four-man team carried a short casket out of the church and slid it gently, with only one conspicuous bump, into the mouth of a waiting hearse. The first car was stuffed with the parents and the children: a mother in veil, weeping, and a father in black necktie and suit, shushing. Three sons of ascending age tried to be respectful of the moment, but seemed to also be struggling over the possession of some toy. A pretty teenage girl with

brown hair and a tight-fitting dress snapped at the boys. They soon were at their stations on the runner.

In the middle of this scene stood a small, red-haired child, face down-turned and distant. Alison sat forward to better see her out the car window. The child was no more than five years old and she held her mother's dress. She was quickly taken onto a lap, disappearing into the hearse for the drive to the cemetery.

Alison followed the procession to the heart of Dorry Fields, under the arch of a Christian-named plot, Saint Michael's, where the dozen autos parked along the way of marble stones, a fresh hole waiting in the ground with three diggers surrounding. *Terrible to lose a child*, thought Alison. Although there was sympathy, she could not feel empathy, being barren herself, which made her eyes cloud even more. The vehicle doors opened like waking flowers. Those in attendance hung near the treeline as the tiny casket and the family moved forward across the dirt mat. Alison suspected not all in the crowd were relatives. There were other interlopers, like her, who had been braver and gone inside the church. There were people who had read the story in the paper and had wanted to be a part of it. Maybe they had lost a child themselves. Maybe they were just voyeurs. She felt safe in exiting her car and joining the crowd. Scanning, she expected to find Vicar Hockleed, but he was not around. Two older women spied Alison in her slightly brighter dress, and made whispered comments. A prayer was said and the boy was lowered into the ground.

If he's not drowned, thought Alison in remembrance of Hockleed's letter, *this is an elaborate show*. She watched the pallbearers, how they easily carried the coffin, and considered the possibility that it was empty.

Alison's eyes were continually drawn to the little red-haired girl, who clung like an African monkey to the hem of her mother's skirt. The child did not weep. *Too little to understand, the dear girl*. Death was incomprehensible to children; it barely made sense to adults. The girl was probably just curious of where her playmate had gone and why he had not returned from the cold waters. The girl

finally abandoned the side of her mother and found root next to her teenage sister, who displayed hardness not affected by the funeral.

Alison had had enough of this misery. A glance to her watch-face told her it was time to go or else she might miss John's return. Turning the key in the ignition, she was the first to buzz out the lane of Saint Michael's.

When she unlatched her door in Burnby, the shopping list she had compiled throughout the week sat waiting on the countertop, forgotten. She had neglected to buy the groceries. In all this — the church meeting and the funeral — this chore had slipped her mind entirely! It was very late in the afternoon, and John would be returning in less than an hour. He would wonder where his supper was, why his cigarettes had not been restocked, and how she had spent her day if she did not accomplish any of her daily responsibilities. In a rush, she jotted down the last few necessities she knew were needed and hurried to the market.

Thirteen items.

Thirteen things...

that would change the course of her life.

It seemed such a simple mission: go to market. When she returned home, laying the two brown paper sacks on the small table of their kitchen, she checked the time: 5 o'clock. No John yet. The farming case must have had a break. He was probably off to chase a lead, to question someone involved. *Involved*. The word came back to her. Kevin Hockleed had said that yesterday. The man was mad, and that was that. Insane, he must be. Such a story! The whole day wasted!

As Alison unpacked the groceries, she began to feel relief. *Shopping had been her only errand, the only chore to need her attention — not finding some tunesmith, some poor composer of a wedding song, a tune no better than a child's lullaby.* Despite her recently wandering mind, her sense of displacement, she harbored no ill feelings toward her husband. These preoccupations with sedentary existence

were the normal growing pains of a three-year marriage, and not some call to adventure. "Pish posh," she said aloud in the kitchen, placing oranges into a crate near the icebox. She had no connection with Antony Green, or his red-haired sister. It was probably the beginning of some criminal mischief — con-artistry, as the cinema would say. These things happen in the pictures, or on those radio shows her father admired so. They did not happen to real people.

At the bottom of the sack, she found the handwritten receipt for her purchases along with her original shopping list. She double-checked that she had gotten everything.

Rabbit.

Check.

Oranges.

A dozen.

Bread.

Loaf of white; loaf of rye.

Bacon.

Eight strips...

This verification continued down the list:

Yams, ham, oil for cooking, lettuce, lemons, iodine, duck, apples, yarn. She had gotten it all.

Now what can be made for supper?

Alison went to crumple the list and toss it into the waste tin (just as she had done with the letter from Vicar Hockleed, just as John had done with the notice of the drowned boy) when something odd struck her. She read the list once more. She could not bring herself to destroy it. *Had she missed something?* Her thoughts told her she had. Pulling a pencil from the jar next to the stove, Alison sat at the kitchen table and marked each and every particular.

rabbit,

oranges,

bread,

bacon,

yams...

ham,
 oil for cooking,
 lettuce,
 lemons,
 iodine,
 duck,
 apples,
 yarn.

Alison Falliher looked up from her list and shook her head. She could not believe it. It was an anagram. Put the first letters together.

R-O-B-B-Y-H-O-L-L-I-D-A-Y.

Robby Holliday, it said.

The list she created herself, with no one else present. Thirteen dissoluble fragments assembled over days, with no attention paid to their being set-down, only far-apart grabs for the pencil to make a note. And the first letters of each said that remembered name: *Robby Holliday*. With no mind to it, she wrote a coda at the end:

now I understand

For she did. She had to find the man who wrote "*Life Is A Puzzle*," the man who was to be her protector, as her life was in danger, and would never be the same...

ALARMS

She made her decision quickly, without weeping, building the resolve of a soldier drafted into war. If only Alison had made a recording of her conversation with the vicar, that would at least be something to cling to. She wanted to be sure of his words, now that action was imminent. Only Vicar Hockleed's warning, two days old and fading, stayed with her: *he'll get to you soon, maybe your husband, too, and then you'll be in serious trouble.*

John had still not arrived home. Alison checked the clock and dropped her list and pencil. *Mrs. Abberton!* The name came into her thoughts. Out the door, she ran to the house on the corner. Mrs. Abberton, the neighborhood piano teacher, was just finishing a lesson and sending a young girl away with an armful of music and an order to practice. Alison gave a courtesy hello, caught her breath, and asked if she could be invited inside.

"Would you happen to have music for '*Life Is A Puzzle*'?" asked Alison once over the threshold, cutting short Mrs. Abberton's idle talk about the weather reports. "It's important. I want to look at it, please."

Mrs. Abberton, over sixty years in age and with wire spectacles precariously strung on the tip of her nose, opened her piano bench and thumbed through a stack of music. She retrieved a fistful. Her fingers loosened sheets from the pile like a bridge player fanning the cards of a deck. Seeing an edge caught on a paper rip, Alison reached out and freed a stapled three-pager. She opened it to read the title and credits. It was the very song she was seeking. "*Life Is A Puzzle.*" The word *Standard* was printed under the title. No name was listed for its author.

"Do you know whose song this is?" Alison asked it loudly, so as not to be misunderstood.

"You mean its writer? No..." Mrs. Abberton puttered, thinking back. "I once heard... from an older student studying the song for a wedding... that originally it had been published under a pseudonym... that it was really by

someone quite famous, a man who did not want people to know he had written such a silly song. But now I can't recall whom the student mentioned. My apologies, dear girl. This person may have got it wrong, you know. Students often try to distract me with stories when they don't want to practice." She continued to tap her chin, trying to think of either the name or yet another anecdote. Alison waited, hoping the name might come. Finally, the piano teacher let her fingers touch the last page of the score. "Perhaps you can try writing to the publisher in London?"

After the start and abrupt end to another chat about the weather, Mrs. Abberton apologized one last time for her failed memory. She chose to make amends by letting Alison keep the music. Alison stuffed it into the pocket of her skirt, offering thanks.

"I have several copies," explained the teacher, "and that's my least favorite arrangement." Mrs. Abberton seemed about to ask Alison why she even cared about the song, why she seemed so in a hurry. However, the telephone rang and Mrs. Abberton was soon involved in a conversation. Alison was able to slip away unnoticed.

Returning home, Alison collected a single bag of clothes — practical things, well worn, nothing too precious, fabric wrinkled. As she did this, an itch started. She was forgetting something very important. Alison stood over her open suitcase and bit her nails. She didn't pack any nice dresses, or jewelry. Was *that* what was bothering her? She sloughed it off — this was no time for a party dress. She didn't have a mind for appearances. Alison recognized this inclination as the same from St. Peter's — the need to look presentable — but as before, pragmatism took hold. *They'll have to take me as I am*, came the thought, and it surprised her. *They?* Just before leaving, she had to sit down on the sofa of the great room, her carpetbag resting under her arm.

I'm still forgetting something, said a voice.

(Turn back.)

Should she take any more clothes? Any more money? She had only sixty pounds saved in her jar, but Alison got the impression she was not to be gone long. When in London, she would ring John by telephone. No farewell note, she decided, even though he was deserving of some sort of explanation. Evidence, she suspected, would be used against her, her bloodhound husband pursuing clues to bring her back. True, John could check with Mrs. Abberton (if he learned of his wife's visit) and guess Alison's destination as the music publisher. Or he might ask questions at the Burnby bus station, or broadcast a description through official channels and have her traced. He was good at those things. There was also a guilt that she should try bringing him with her. This business was more his line — investigation. Yet the vicar had been very specific: *alone*, he had said in his letter. Hockleed had made no mention of John being conscripted, only that he may be in danger. This adventure was hers and no one else's. Fear accompanied this notion, but also empowerment. She had been called.

Alison gathered her strength, and her bag, and left for the bus shelter to catch the 7 o'clock to London.

It wasn't until the hydraulics of the bus door were hissing to close that she remembered what she had forgotten, and identified that ping in her brain which had made her so unsatisfied as she locked her front door.

The list!

Alison had left her shopping list sitting on the tabletop! A clue left behind. John would see it when he returned home. She almost asked the bus driver to turn, but it was too late. They were pulling away.

At this moment, John was probably home and wondering where she was. He would be patient for a few hours, thinking she was on an errand. He would open the cupboards to see that the shopping was already done, and then start to worry. He might ring a family friend for a brief

and polite enquiry. "Is Alison 'round? No? All right, thank you. It's nothing, thanks... She said she was going out, but I just can't remember where. Apologies for disturbing your dinner..." Something like that. It wouldn't be until the August sun was disappearing over the trees that John would start to panic. *Had he said or done something wrong?* He'd scour their rooms for a note ("I've left you for another," or the like) only finding the plain grocery list. John might even throw the list into the trash without a spark. (On the bus, Alison retracted this last image, the driver jarring the eleven passengers with his turn onto the main highway. No, John would not throw away the list. He would never discard *anything* that could give him answers, no matter how cryptic. It was his nature. In time he may even decode the anagram and find Robby Holliday. She knew his skills. Alison only hoped she would beat her husband to the punch.)

She smiled, but then frowned. *Is Robby Holliday the song's author? Now why didn't I think of that before?* Another second and she dismissed the notion. *Hockleed would have said as much if it were true. He would have said, "Go find Robby Holliday." But he didn't. He wanted her to find the song's writer.* They were two separate people; she became fairly certain. She had a vision of this Holliday person as 'the bungler' mentioned by Hockleed. Yes, she thought, *that's probably what the vicar meant.* Alison gave a winded sigh. She was feeling the guilt. John would be weeping in his pillow now, but eventually he'd discover her whereabouts. She would ring him from London. It was the decent thing to do, as she did love him in a faded-flag sort of way.

Yet, this was not to be. She would never make that telephone call...

"Can I see your ticket?" asked the driver over his shoulder.

Alison was seated in the front of the bus, within earshot. "Pardon me?" she asked, unsure if the driver had been directing his question at her.

"Ticket, please."

She had her fingers in her handbag before she thought to say it: "But... you've already clipped my ticket."

The driver was fat with stringy gray hair, wispy around the ears. He wore the powder blue uniform of his profession. He smiled at Alison. "Just want to see something, ma'am. Don't mean to be a bother."

Alison shrugged and handed him her ticket.

Taking his eyes from the road, the driver turned the ticket on its side and read the number imprinted on the cardstock. "Yes, just as I figured," he said, nodding and handing back the slip. Alison examined the ticket to see what had been revealed. Her name wasn't on it, just numbers and the logo of the bus line, but her heart leapt at the possibility of detection. The driver sensed her confusion, so he began to explain himself. "Along the side, read there: 18, 15, 2, 2, and 25 — see those numbers up top?" Indeed, she did. "Now look at the bottom. 8, 15, 12, 12, 9, 4, 1, 25. Do you know what those mean, ma'am?"

She did not, but took a guess. "Ticket identifiers? I mean, I bought it at the booth and this is what popped out. I assume it's some sort of code. Means nothing to me." Feeling this conversation was nothing more than a bored driver anxious to speak with a woman in proximity, she became impartial. Alison was not in the mood for flirting, even if it was only one-sided. The driver was not a handsome man — quite unattractive, actually. His big, pudgy hands along the leather notches of the wheel, his work boots scraping the gas to brake for a slowing motorcar, were distracting her. Alison turned back to the window, hoping he would drop his dissemination.

But he continued...

"Those codes mean the schedule times, bus numbers — cryptic, like, but not without a reason. That way, if someone finds your ticket dropped in the gutter, they won't be able to come and ride in your place. They don't know the start point or the terminus. There are also some individual markings. Sometimes the machines guss-up and double print. It's rare, though —"

"It all sounds very complex," was all she could think to say over top of his chatter.

" — but you know what I started noticing?" the driver forged on, his eyes focused on passing a black lorry hogging the lane. "The numbers never go above twenty-six. This was — well, maybe a year ago. The start of it's fuzzy, you know. I didn't like to take me mind or me eyes off the road, but I'm good at double-duty — thinking one thing and doing another at the same time..." (*Alison's glanced to the remaining bus passengers and noticed five of them had fallen asleep, and the others were too far to hear this talk over the bus motor.*) "So," continued the driver, "if each one is less than twenty-six, then they must be related to the alphabet. And you can assemble words from them." He gave a happy nod to his reflection in the long mirror above the dash. "Mostly it's just nonsense. Not even a proper word. I'm always happy when it amounts to something, like a part of speech. Occasionally, a name, even. But today! Today's a big one. Twice in one day, I've seen the *same* words. Two little words — " The driver whistled a quick bar of "*Three Little Words*," which did not really fit his discovery, then waited for Alison to show a reaction. Slowly, she retrieved the clipped ticket from her handbag, and again reviewed the numbers. *So he wants a game of it?* she wondered half-heartedly, and started decoding:

"Eighteen. Well, that's an 'R', isn't it?
Fifteen — an 'O.'
Two 2's — 'B—B'
And twenty-five..."

The top of the ticket was done,
and she already knew the rest.

Robby Holliday.

Alison practically threw herself out of her seat to the board beside the driver. "This says 'Robby Holliday!'" she

exclaimed, thumb and forefinger wagging the ticket beside his face.

The driver smiled. "Yeah. Twice today. I do it to pass the time, see what words pop up. But even when it's a word, it's never twice. And now it's not only twice, but a name, too! And a famous one at that." The fat man could tell that this last had not fully registered with Alison. "Robby Holliday — that scientist. Works with germs, I think. Saw 'im written up in the London paper once, and it was pretty interesting, really. I've always been fascinated with germs. Plagues. That sort of thing. I can get a bit sheepish 'bout me health." He gave a touch to his heart, then a wink with his eye. "Not all us drivers is dumb. Some of us see things. I'm observant, the wife says. And I must be ta catch two tickets identical on the same day, the same run."

Alison tugged at his shirt. "The same run! The man with the matching ticket is on *this* bus?"

Alison's enthusiasm took the driver by surprise and he suddenly grew quiet. He gave a nod to the rear of the cabin. "Sure. The rider in the very back, 'gainst the toilet. I can see him. Sleepin'."

Alison looked over her shoulder. Indeed, there was a man, head resting on the jostling bus window, the glass slightly ajar so the wind ruffled his hair. She could only see the man above his shoulders because he was blocked by the bus seat in front of him. Alison noted his tweed jacket and open collar, and guessed his age as ten years greater than her own. The rider also sported an out-of-fashion mustache, black, curly at the ends, as if waxed. "He looks like a train robber," said Alison to the driver, with a smile.

The driver gave a closer look using the mirror.

"Yeah," he agreed, and added, "dastardly."

The two smiled together. Alison touched his arm. "You are a *very* observant man." He beamed with the compliment. Glancing at her ticket, she stood and gripped the bar above her seat. Arm-out, she slid the bus ticket into the shirt pocket of the driver's uniform. "Here," she said, "go home and show your wife. She'll get a kick. I

don't think I'll be needing it again, will I?" The driver shook his head. Alison turned and started to the rear of the bus.

Suddenly concerned, the driver asked, "Are ya going back there?"

"Yes," she replied. "I'll tell him the story of your discovery. Maybe he'll be amused."

The driver watched her go, his proud smile fading at the sight of Alison's wedding ring. *Dastardly*, he thought, using his mirror to watch the man in back. The fat driver was regretting having said anything at all.

BUS ACCIDENT

Alison hated to disturb. The man with the matching ticket appeared soundly asleep, though the bus had only been on the road an hour. As well, there was something off-putting about him. He had a hand inside his jacket, down deep, where one might hide a weapon. Blowing out each sleeping breath, the tips of his mustache twittered. *Good Lord, Alison*, she said to herself, trying to be calm, *he's not the bloody Ripper, is he now?* "Pardon me," she started, but he did not stir. Leaning over the empty seat of the aisle, Alison gave a light tap to the man's sleeve. Not a flinch. She tapped a little harder.

At this, his eyes sprang open!

Alison put a hand to her mouth.

The man bolted upright and his hand came free from his coat, letting a tin box fall out of his pocket to crash on the bus floor. The catch of the box came undone and white tablets rolled about his feet. "What? What?" said the man, angrily, not looking to her but instead bending to scoop up the stray pills. He had everything righted before paying any attention to the cause of such trouble, having not heard any of Alison's apologies. The woman's eyes went back to the driver, who cautiously reviewed the event from his mirrored perspective. She saw concern in the fat man's eyes. The driver sought the reason a man would disappear so long under the seats, and he was glad when the body finally surfaced. "What?" said the tweed man a last time, exasperated, fists to his belt.

Alison started to speak, but shut her mouth again quickly. She felt like a schoolgirl approaching her crush — the responses the same, but the instinct quite different. Her knees told her to sit, so she did, on the empty bucket beside. A question popped into her head. "Do you know who wrote the song *'Life Is A Puzzle'*?" The expression on his face remained static. "You know — " she pressed, singing the main line in a soft voice:

*"Put me into place,
The picture is complete
Life is a puzzle..."*

...not a very good singing voice, I know." The strange man continued to stare at her, blinking once, twice. "Do you know who wrote it?"

"No, it's fine," said the man, one step behind. "Holl," he said, and this made the woman smile.

"The person who wrote that song is named Holl?"

He shook his head. "No, no," he explained further, holding out his hand, "That's *my* name. I'm Robert Holl. I'm sorry, I don't know who wrote that song. I was just saying your voice was fine, and my name is Holl."

Alison slumped her shoulders and puckered her mouth — sad about not having her question answered. In a beat, she changed to a pleasant smile and shook the man's hand. "I'm Alison."

"Playing trivia?"

Alison looked to the front of the bus, at the passengers. "What, with them?" She gave a laugh at the absurdity. "No, no, no, I — " but then stopped speaking, for it was a very difficult thing to explain. "The driver and I were just having a bit of one-upmanship. I had stumped him with that one, but couldn't give him satisfaction because it seems that I've forgotten the name myself."

"I don't listen to music," he said flatly.

"Say," she started, omitting the details of her ticket and the two Robby Hollidays, "your name, Rob Holl, is very similar to a man who works with germs — a man named Robby Holliday, did you know that?"

The man scratched at his temple. "There are a lot of Robert Somethings in England. I'd say a good three hundred thousand. And Holl isn't that uncommon, you know? It's Welsh."

"Oh, is it?" she said, pretending to sound interested. "How fascinating."

"Not really," he replied, shooting her down. Looking out of the window, the two of them passed through an uncomfortable silence. The bus whizzed past their first marker for London, the sign lit only slightly by a spot lamp, as the sun was nearly set and evening upon them. The cab of the bus was dark, and the driver, in anticipation of the coming night, switched on the dim line of bulbs running the length of the interior. It did not add much illumination. "Won't be long now," said Rob Holl as he took note of the remaining distance.

"Yes," said Alison, checking her watch. She was planning to telephone John as soon as she found a hotel. Hopefully, he would be groggy, tired from sleep or the lack thereof, and wouldn't press her for too many details. She would tell him that she'd not be returning for a few days, and that he shouldn't try to find her. This would make him nervous, but it would have to do. She would be certain to use a public phone box, as John had friends at the telephone exchange. "What's in London for you?" Alison asked the stranger, anxious now to get her mind off her obligation.

"Oh, I'm meeting an old friend of mine from the infantry. We fought together. He was my commanding officer, and he's offered me a job."

"That's nice. My — " (She was about to say that her husband was in the war, that he fought bravely and had a pin in his leg, but rescinded — it felt unwise to bring John's name into the conversation.) "I knew a few men in the infantry," was all she got out. He looked at her, catching her obvious redirection. Her eyes went down to the tin box he held in the clutch of his fingers. Holl realized she was staring and, without an explanation of their potency or remedy, placed them back inside the pocket of his tweed jacket.

Just then, the bus entered a long traffic tunnel, and the sparkle on the window of headlamps and lorry lights gave the interior of the bus a horrorshow flicker. In this strobe, Alison saw the face of Rob Holl change from that of a distant and dispassionate man to one brimming with

newfound strength. He righted his back in his seat and gave a self-satisfied snap to his jacket as if he were pleased with something. Upon exit from the tunnel, even his voice seemed to have a new color, as he said:

"*Life Is A Puzzle*' was written by an anonymous jazz composer, probably in late 1949. For a period of time, the tune was relatively unknown, unpopular, mostly due to the declining interest in dance bands. Then, early in the decade, the number started to be worked into the playlists of various modern orchestras, especially popular with The Georgy Ray Big Band. Many arrangers in Europe enjoyed adapting the melody — a simple sequence of notes yielding unending combinations — to their own signature sounds. An article written in *Bandleader Magazine* detailed this phenomenon, September 1952. The song now seems to have found permanent popularity among the wedding crowd, being used in place of certain hymns, an attempt to modernize the Christian ritual. The author remains unknown, although the publishing house in London claims to make payments to the copyright holder at regular intervals, refusing to disclose the name of the receiver."

Rob Holl turned to the woman beside him, and gave a second snap to his coat.

"Lord!" cried Alison. "For not caring for music you're like a bloody encyclopedia, aren't you, Robert? If you knew all that, why didn't you say so in the first place?" She gave wink. "I could have won my trivia." She put the brake on her jocularly, as he was giving her a glare, one that was suddenly quite frightening.

Holl turned an eye to the driver, whose face was away from the mirror and concentrating on the road and the approaching lights of London. "I didn't say," he began, "because a few minutes ago the Rob Holl you were speaking with did not know all that bunk. I know because I have a mind for such useless facts found in treacly newspaper articles, and, more to the point,

because I'm not him anymore..."

Hand out, Holl grabbed Alison by the neck and pulled her under the bus seat. She didn't have a second to scream, it was so sudden. His rough hands quickly crushed her windpipe and spun her neck and she fell heavy into his lap. (The driver wheeled over to the secondary lane and his eyes drifted back to his passengers...) Holl lifted the woman and laid her head on top of his shoulder, adjusting her broken neck so she appeared to be sleeping. When the fat driver's eyes caught Rob Holl's in the rear-view, Holl gave an oh-so-casual and irritated roll of the eyes to signify that the girl had come to chat yet ended up asleep on top of him. (The driver gave an inward laugh. *People get so sleepy on a bus*, he thought, eyes again moving to the highway.)

At the London junction, when the driver had stabilized the ramp and the people were off-loading, the man known as Rob Holl would leave Alison's body in the rear toilet of the bus, to be found 12 hours later by a different driver, en route to another town, her matching ticket gone, her name forgotten, a copy of *"Life Is A Puzzle"* in her purse.

PASSENGERS, PARIS-TO-LONDON, 1958

Desmond Havre detested the ninety-minute flight from Paris to London. The sound of the props, whirring, was hard on the nerves. From the moment he received the telegram, he had been nothing but frazzled, and these travels were not helping. Sitting with him on the plane was Claire, half his age at twenty-eight, and quite pretty. Sonny Royce was lucky to have married such a flower. From the moment he saw the two together, in that café — a venue Havre saved for acts wanting longer, more sedentary employment — Havre knew that he was in the presence of two special people destined to meet and fall in love. Their wedding had followed a year later, in a Protestant church just a few streets from Havre's offices in downtown Paris. Sometimes, the agent went to that sanctuary to sit during lunch, as it always reminded him of happiness. The church was better than a restaurant — quieter, more restful, and with this history of friends.

(Not like this plane, shaking. The vibration, he prayed, was not a symptom of engine trouble.)

Out of the plane's porthole, he saw they were now over the water. Once he could see land again, he would feel safer. *Oui, le temps va changer.* It had better. The stewardess passed on his left and he tugged at her skirt. "Excusez-moi, quand atterrisson-nous?"

She checked her wrist: "A neuf heures et demie."

"Merci beaucoup," he said pleasantly, colored by not-so-hidden nerves. She was quickly down the aisle in search of a cup of strong coffee for an American passenger. The stewardess had been kind to not remark on Desmond's seeping panic, his need to fill the air with conversation. Claire put her hand onto Desmond's knee. She smiled but it was a broken one, difficult to fix. She, too, was under a great strain. Desmond tapped her soft hand and assured in English, "Won't be long now." Turning, as if she understood, Claire again faced the plane's window, seeing

the water below. A voice inside Desmond asked the question: *Why did I say that in English?* Claire knew a few words, but they had had literally *years* of conversation in French since they first met. It was their language. In fact, until Sonny Royce blew into Paris, the only time the talent agent used his native tongue was when speaking on the telephone with American performers or booking shows in the English ballrooms. Sonny had learned a few words of French before flying over. He came to Europe prepared, knowing that he would be playing in cafés and restaurants, in jazz clubs and ballrooms where a bit of French would get him what he wanted. But most of the American jazz players learned a few simple phrases and stuck to their own patois of American slang and English phrasing for comfort.

English. Sonny's telegram. It had been in English.

With Claire distracted by the view, Havre withdrew the card he received from the wire service and reread the message. *Sonny must not have wanted Claire to understand the contents. They were to be kept from her. Why else would they be in English?* The agent heeded this implied command by omitting large portions when he translated the directive for Claire Royce. Havre supposed it was possible Sonny simply didn't want any error made at the British telegraph office, so he took the most direct route, the language of the Isle. *But look at this ordure, this confused dreck*, thought Havre with a squish of his nose. It could be Pigmy in this telegram and it would be no more decipherable:

I HAVE BEEN ARRESTED. STOP. IN THE TOWN
OF MARSDEN, ENGLAND. STOP. COME AND
BRING CLAIRE. STOP. LIFE OR DEATH. STOP.

That made sense — it was horribly disconcerting, but at least it followed a certain situational logic. Desmond knew what was expected of him. The second part of the telegram, however, was quite different...

AT 9:03 AM CLAIRE WILL TELL YOU SOMETHING
IMPORTANT. STOP. YOU MUST DO WHATEVER
SHE SAYS. STOP. SHE WILL NOT BE CLAIRE.
STOP. DO NOT FAIL TO LISTEN AND OBEY. STOP.

She will not be Claire? Idiocy. The man's gone to 'horse,' to junk, like the rest of his contemporaries. It was sad to Desmond. He had lost a dozen good players to chemistry. Sonny was probably jailed for being high on some venom, and was out of his mind when he wrote this for sending. *You get one telegram, Mr. Royce, don't blow it on a mystery.* Before booking the flight, Havre had placed a call to the Marsden operator. He was connected to the Victory Ballroom, the establishment Sonny had been scheduled to play the Friday before. There had been no answer on the line. When he tried to get through to police authorities, again the telephone rang and rang. *Isn't anyone in this town?* he thought in frustration. So it was the aeroplane or nothing — his physical presence, or sitting frustrated in his small office, awaiting a telephone line. He would go and get to the bottom of it. *Come and bring Claire.* Sonny had gone missing for five days and now this, in jail. Was it too much to ask for someone to answer the telephone? *Horse!* Havre gave an imagined spit inside his head, disgusted. He thought better of Sonny Royce. How would he ever tell Claire that her beloved husband had rounded the bend and was now like all the rest of those talented junkies, lost? It would be a difficult conversation, but first he had to find out the exact nature of the charges...

Clawing under his plane seat, Havre reached into his briefcase and pulled out his book on English law, dusty from stacking on his office shelf. The edition was old and outdated edition, a relic from his university days. However, he thought it best to do some preliminary study. It was then that he noticed the time.

9:02, the second hand going fast to the mark.

Claire continued to stare out of the window.

Scanning the twenty or so occupants, Havre did a check for proximity — the passengers were spread out in the cabin of the plane. The surrounding French, English, and Germans were paying no mind to he and Claire. Expecting an explosion, Sonny's telegram having put such electricity into the moment... approaching... Havre gripped the arms of his seat. The second hand, rounding...

At 9:03, Claire turned her head to Desmond and spoke in accented but clear English, "Mr. Havre, I have only a little time. I didn't want to damage the switch to get it open. You must listen to everything I say. Do you have a pencil? You may need to write this down — " Havre's jaw was practically unhinged, the fold of flesh hanging between his chin and neck, swinging like a turkey's waddle. "Please, there's very little time!" Claire pressed, though she did not raise her voice.

The talent agent moved as instructed, popping his briefcase and freeing a small square notepad with a pencil through the rings.

"All right, then," said Claire at his side. "Five years ago, I sent a woman named Alison Falliher on a mission. She was on her way to London when she was murdered by Rob Holl, a vile man my friends and I can't seem to get rid of." Desmond was ready with the pencil above the paper, but did not make any motion to write. "Come on, Mr. Havre, you should be making yourself a note. I don't want the same thing to happen to you and Claire that happened to Alison. *Alison Falliher*, yes, write it down. And *Rob Holl*, too. You must avoid this Holl at all costs as he will kill you. When you get to Marsden, you must find a man named Philpot and he will tell you what to do. Do you understand?"

"Yes, yes," said the agent, scribbling as fast as he could with the stubby pencil. "Philpot — yes, yes... I've got it." The agent came to a dead stop and cocked his head at Claire. "Wait — no, I don't... I don't understand in the slightest!"

Claire gave him a show of her teeth, easy, and put her hand again on the man's knee. There was a hard squeeze

behind it. "I've got Alison Falliher back in the game, but it wasn't easy. I had to find the right switch index, and it took time. She may not catch up with you in 1958, but I'm hoping she does. We're running out of time and all the switches will be closed. Just do this one thing, Mr. Havre. I'll do the rest. Find this Mr. Philpot. It's a matter of life or death..." Claire lifted her hand from his knee and started to turn to the window.

"No, wait," Desmond pleaded, sweating now. "I don't understand, I — I'm..." Claire was ignoring him, back in her original position, dreamy, her body relaxing. "Sonny?" said Desmond in a whisper. "Is that you?"

The girl heard this and was prompted to turn. "Quoi?"

"Claire?"

She gave a quizzical look. "Claire?" she echoed. Cross-eyed, she was utterly at a loss. "Je m'appelle Claire. Il ne faut pas boire d'alcool!" She looked down to his feet, where the two tiny bottles of wine he was served at flight's beginning rolled between the heels of his shoes.

"Pardonnez-moi, Claire." Havre was deeply embarrassed.

"C'est tres facheux!"

"Oui. Ne m'en veuillez pas..." He didn't like to see her angry. She was probably as worried as he was. Whatever schizophrenia she was experiencing in this stress, it was something of which he should make a doctor aware. Sonny must have been teaching her English in the recent months. For so long it had been the reverse — Sonny the student, Claire the teacher. Regardless, a doctor should be informed. Face down to the paper and pencil still held in his hand, Desmond again read the names of the strangers. *Alison Falliher. Rob Holl.* He gently tore the paper from the spirals and held the notes closer to his nose. He grunted, somewhat amused that he had followed orders by taking them down. He did not usually like to be forced into something.

Claire turned to him and pointed — they were over land again, over England. They would soon be on the ground.

Desmond nodded, crumpled the paper, and discarded it under the seat with his spent wine bottles.

BODIES

I think my name is Alice now, thought Alison Falliher as a broad slap came across her rump and she spun around to see the face connected to the hand. "That's right, Alice," said the disorderly customer with a scratch to his woolly beard and a wink, "who's yer fave? It's me, right Alice? Good ol' Wally LaCore!"

For a stunned moment, she did not know how to answer, but then a slow metastasizing of knowledge infected her head. Alice Pravel knew exactly who she was. "Yeah, Wally," sassed back the thirty-year-old waitress, "you are my *favorite* customer..." The numbing sting on her bottom was fading, along with the worry that this wasn't going to work. The words of her instructor had been true, just like stepping into a new dress. Mixing a fresh pot of tea behind the wood bar of the Blue Top Pub, Alice surveyed her surroundings and did not like them. She was in a dive, as the Americans would say. The pub was dark and held a dozen tables. There was almost no daylight passing through the deep green and dirty drapes. She was the only waitress. Chin turned down, tugging her blouse, Alice made note of the nicer bosom than she had had previously, and the flatter stomach. In the mirror over the whiskey bottles, she saw that she now had red hair, green eyes on a pretty face, and a lighter frame. *I could get used to this*, she thought, her vanity overtaking her uncomfortable wriggling inside her new skin. The teapot steamed and her mind drifted over the worldly facts of the last four years...

It was now 1957 and not much had changed in England since 1953.

Except for her.

Everything about her was different. John wouldn't even recognize her. On this new voyage, there would be no mistakes. She wouldn't be tricked again, no sir. She was going to listen to that suspecting voice and not get distracted by bus drivers and matching tickets, all those patterns so easily used against her, to distract her from her

mission. This time she was going to find that man, the writer who banked his royalty checks for "*Life Is A Puzzle*", the man that Rob Holl mentioned just before he killed Alison Falliher in such a rude and brutal way. She felt sad for her other self. She was going to miss that life. But this one would have to do, a "companion index" as it had been called. Alison started out strong, but had been stupid. Alice was better than that — younger and wiser. Determination was one of this girl's strongest traits. Alice Pravel also had more street smarts. And this pretty thing had no husband to weigh her down. (This realization made her feel both liberated and lonely in equal dose.) Any moralistic corners Alice had to cut would not impinge on her marriage vows; she had the freedom to act without conscience. There was still danger for John, but unless he went sticking his nose into something, as had been feared, to a degree, her former husband would never be a part of this nasty business. There was no switch index for him — not one that had been discovered, anyway.

Wally LaCore was becoming a bore. Alice came around with the teapot to refill a table of tourists and he once more made a comment. *Had Alice actually found this one bearable?* It was disgraceful. No manners at all.

Luckily, it was almost four o'clock. Her day shift ended and she was free to go. Easily, she knew the way to Alice's flat, not too far from the pub, down the dock road in the town of Dorry. The building held six units, all identical one-rooms with kitchenette and stove, and not much else. The decorating was simple — a painting of a flowerpot, a tablecloth used for a curtain. Tired, she flopped down on the sofa and closed her eyes, thinking of a nap...

A knock came.

Irritated, Alice moved to the door. Chain still in place, she turned the bolt and opened to see the familiar face (familiar to the first Alice, anyway) of Mr. Michael Fletcher.

"Ello, love..." said the hearty man, much her elder, with a singsong lilt.

"Evening, Mr. Fletcher."

"Have you got any ice?" He grinned through the gap of the door. "Making myself a drink and forgot to refill the tray. Bloody stupid, really."

Alice knew Fletcher to be harmless, so she moved the chain to the right and let it dangle on the door as she opened her apartment. Her back to him, she was at the icebox before she felt a sudden sting.

Stupid girl! This neighbor may have been harmless to Alice Pravel, but he isn't necessarily harmless to Alison Falliher. He could be someone else entirely now — like you are.

She quickly opened a drawer and pulled out the ice pick. Alice checked Michael Fletcher's face. He was still politely waiting by the door. Manners, at least. No prowling Wally LaCore. Satisfied and with a weapon in hand, she pulled free the small door to the icebox and lifted a chunk out of the plastic bowl. Her icebox was badly in need of a defrost. "I've only got chipped," she said. "Don't have any trays, sorry."

"S'allright, love. Chipped is fine. Man like me don't care." Aggressively, she stabbed the pick into the block and let the shavings fall into the sink. "That's enough, Alice. That'll do me."

Alice was glad — the move hurt her arm. She placed the shards into a foggy plastic bag and walked it to where he stood. Alice looked into his eyes. Although he had been drinking, probably all day, as was his remembered way, Michael Fletcher was not an unattractive man. He had graying hair and an easy smile, possessing not one of the dastardly traits of Rob Holl, whose body alone should have warned Alison Falliher he was not to be awoken. Some men just *look* evil. You can sense it. She had been coached to obey these instincts this second time around. But none of these warnings applied to Michael Fletcher. He was a drinking man, but not a violent one. Solitary. He may have been a bit bothersome to this Alice Pravel. There was some irritation in her nerves regarding him, but it wasn't fear. It was just that he asked many favors of her, and she was in

no mood to keep a pet. Alice — the first Alice — tended to avoid such responsibilities, best with a life unencumbered.

"Thank ya, love," Fletcher said as he took the bag of ice from her open hands.

"Mr. Fletcher, can you do me a favor?"

"Certainly."

"Can you call me Alison?"

Fletcher thumped the palm of his free hand in dumb understanding. "Cripes! — You mean to tell me I've botched your name these three months since you've been me neighbor. Have I? Well, I'm a daft old bugger, aren't I?"

"No, it's not a problem. Lots of people call me Alice. I'd just prefer it if you'd call me Alison."

He gave a nod. "Not a problem, Alison, love. Say, why don' you call me Michael? I'm not old enough to be a 'Mister' Fletcher to you."

"Oh, really, how old are you?"

"I'm forty-nine, going on a hundred."

She laughed. His joke was truer than intended. She had guessed sixty. The bottle can be hard on a man — the skin, teeth, and hair aging prematurely. Still, he was not ugly. "Well, then," she said back, "I shall call you Michael." And she reached out and touched his hand.

He gave her fingers a look and he suddenly became shy. She saw something in his face. It was as if someone else was lurking behind him, someone younger, someone smoother. But it did not trigger fear. They stood in the door of her flat for a second too long. "Thanks for the ice," he said again with a nod, and returned across the hall.

After he left and Alice was able to nap on the couch — exhausted from all that had happened and her work at the pub — she awoke actually missing his company. She had detected something inside of him — tenderness, perhaps, which the original Alice overlooked. Fixing her dinner, she ate in complete silence sitting upright in a chair. It was strange being in a new home, in a new body, and not having a panic about it, knowing the habits and environment as if she had lived there for months. Her only trepidation was that she would be discovered, and that the 'real' Alice was

lurking, waiting to come out, just as it seemed with Michael Fletcher — a face under a face. *Maybe he's involved*, she thought. *If only someone on her side were around to ask. Maybe someone had seen Fletcher's switch.* But, alas, there was no reconnaissance. She was alone and she would have to get used to it.

Still...

she was very lonely in that one room

...and a small room, too.

At eight o'clock, she began to twiddle her thumbs while sitting on the sill. *What was exciting for this Alice?* Apparently nothing. The girl was pretty but boring. Alison felt it. From her open windows, she could hear radio music coming from Fletcher's place, wafting out of his own open bevel and into the warm air. She bit at her fingernails, anxiously. She had a notion of going and telling Fletcher of her plans: to wait for the arrival of her friend, when he could get a body of his own, before going off to London (*a stronger plan*, he had decided before finding her a switch. *Two is better than one to face their foe*). Only she would tart the story up a bit — not tell Fletcher of the switches — and make it seem more innocent. At least it would pass the time. Fletcher might be a good ear, a good ally, as she had become herself. (But it might also be dangerous. She didn't want to bring trouble to an innocent man.) Drifting away from the telling, she refocused on her plans...

Alison no longer had the sheet music from Mrs. Abberton, the piano teacher, but she still remembered the name of the publishing company. If it had not closed shop since 1953, it would be the best place to start. She didn't relish running into Holl, who surely lurked in that massive urban beehive, but it was the only lead she had.

As if on cue, the tune from Fletcher's window stopped and another one began. It came in an instant — the recognition. *"Life Is A Puzzle."*

She ran as fast as she could to the door, threw it wide, and crossed the hall, her fist held ready to knock. She stopped mid-motion as she heard from inside, "Oh God," and an irritated groan from Fletcher. Not wanting to wait a

second longer, she wrapped her knuckles above the number tacked to Fletcher's door — #3g. "What!" he called.

"It's me. Alison."

He took no precautions, yanking open his door without the rattle of a chain or a bolt, and gave her a sweetly-surprised and courteous, "'Evenin', there, lassie!"

"What's that playing on your radio?" she asked.

Bottle in hand, swaggering slightly more than on his visit for ice, Fletcher threw his body back in the direction of the radio, which sat glowing on a table beside his sofa. "Oh. That. Is it too loud? See, I just spilled me drink, and I was going to switch the station, but I can turn it off altogether, like — I mean, iffits too loud. Terrible song, that." He detected an offense. "Oh — sorry, do you like that one? Apologies all around — " He bowed a bit; he was drunk.

"It's all right. I just — "

"Say — would you like a drink?"

From her perch at the door, Alice surveyed Fletcher's accommodations. To her genuine surprise, the place was well-furnished and well-tended. It was not luxury, but it was a penny prettier than what Alice had been expecting.

...and the sofa looked comfortable

...and that song was playing.

This may be a sign, she thought. Then again, I thought the bus tickets were, too, and there I ended up... well, waylaid.

Backing from the door, Fletcher tipped his bottle of rum into the chipped ice of his glass and smiled. "Pub's open!" he called, and she could not help but smile. This was no Rob Holl en route to London. This was someone else. She stepped inside his flat and shut the door behind. Soon, he had passed to her a second tumbler and they sat together on the sofa — her sipping, him polishing off — while the last bars of the song faded into another. "You know the man who wrote that '*Puzzle*' song?" said Fletcher rhetorically. "It's a mystery. No one knows. You 'eard that bit before?"

"Yes," she nodded. "A man on a bus told me that."

"Don't know much about music me-self," he said, this familiar denial echoing in Alice, making her head pull away from Fletcher's long fingers along the back of the sofa in learned caution. (She wished she had brought the ice pick, just in case.) He continued: "But I knows about that song because I saw a writing in the paper once... Georgy Ray — know him? Bandleader — killed in '55 by falling under a bloody tube train." Alice made a face. "Yeah," Fletcher said, "nasty business. His band was the first to make that song popular, said the papers. People thought Georgy Ray wrote the song for a while, but I guess he didn't — just used to play it a lot. So, sees, I don't know much about music." He gave a tip of his glass to her, slowing his speech. "But I *do* knows about people falling under trains. My dad fell asleep on the tracks outside Marsden, drunk, when I was a wee lad. That won't be *my* fate. I want to fall asleep drunk... in the arms of a beautiful woman. That sounds a better turn." He raised his tumbler and clinked it to hers; with his intonation, he did not seem to mean Alice as the subject of his comment. It was as if she was one of his mates in a pub, not the pretty neighbor. Alice was relieved at this different weather. She was lonely, not amorous.

Alice reached over and pinched Fletcher on the arm.

"Ow!" he said, a little loudly, and his available hand went to the spot to rub it. "What'd you do that fer?"

She then pinched his leg.

"Owww!" he said louder. "I'm not *that* drunk."

"Do you get numb when you drink, then?" she asked with suspicion.

"Only in me head," he replied, sheepish. "So no more of that, then, hear?" She nodded her head in agreement, relieved, and took another sip of her whiskey. Fletcher was still rubbing his leg. "That bloody hurt."

"Sorry," she apologized.

"You some kind a' nutter?"

"Maybe."

The man gave a broad smile and nod. "Ah, I like that. I've always enjoyed the company of crazies, lunatics, and the like. I think me mum was a bit off. She'd often — and

you'll get a kick out of this — line up all the furniture in threes — " (Fletcher pointed to empty space in front of the sofa.) "Chair. Chair. Chair. Sofa, ottoman, stool. And she'd line them up with a yardstick, so they'd be a perfect distance apart. She was all about the threes. Liked everything in that number. Crazy kook. Dead now." (He touched his chest.) "Heart attack. Glad of it really, though I was but a boy. She spooked me. Horrible to be scared a' yer own mum. Dad, too, he was relieved when she passed. Weight off." Fletcher took a long drink and finished his glass. "What about yers, then?"

Alice dug for the information. There was a blank spot. At first, she started to panic. Not all facts seemed accessible in this body. But then she squirreled out a possible rationale. "I don't know," she answered in thinking haze. "I left them. They *could* be dead. I think they were sick. I'm not really sure..."

Silent, they sat until Fletcher was standing to fix another glass of whiskey. Without her asking, he refilled her tumbler, but only partway. He could sense that she was not of the same build, the same tolerance, and Alice was glad that his intentions were to be social and not to get her unconscious. "We're almost out of ice," he stated.

"Oh — should I got back and get more?"

He seemed happy with it either way, but shrugged and said it might be a good idea. They both could predict a long evening and the need for more ice, even if Alice Pravel's glass would sit idle, ice melting, condensation building, most of the night. Back past her own door, she chipped the block of ice into her largest bowl and stood for a solid minute, thinking. *Should I bring back the pick?* She felt her uniform, the pub maiden's smock still tied around her, forgotten until now. It would be easy to drop the pick into her pocket.

No, she thought, *Fletcher's* someone *all right*, but *not an enemy*. With the bowl of ice cradled as a babe, she again returned to his drunken company, to spend the night.

SUNDAY SERVICES, HALF-PAST NINE

Alice felt guilty for only a day. "Are you part-French?" he asked and she took it as an insult, an inference that she was easy with her lovemaking. Fletcher sensed this turn. "No, don't mean it as a mark against you, just that ya have a trace of an accent."

Alice let out a breath and swung the pan of eggs off the burner, scooping the yolks onto plates before leaving the pan to steam under the faucet water. Her mind went back for an answer. "Yes," she replied, "I do have French in me, I think. My grandmother. I think she was in Paris during the first war." Fletcher took a bite of his eggs, smiling in appreciation. "But I can't imagine that I have an accent." (She tried to listen a bit as she spoke the words; there *was* something there.) "I guess I don't know the sound of my own voice."

Outside of her window, the sun was coming up. Two nights they had been lovers. He was not very good, being drunk, but he was gentle, and had warmth that John lacked. She enjoyed Alice's body, as it was more sensitive to touch. *How I would be criticized, if it were known I had been in this switch less than three days, and have already been drunk and found a lover?* She could justify it, though, because now she was ready to ask her favor.

"Michael," she started, "what do you do on Sundays?"

"Sundays? Why?"

"Just tell me what you do."

He chewed his eggs. "Go to church."

"Liar."

"Sometimes I do. There's the one down the street. When I've had a particularly rough week — or a rough night, as the case some Saturday may be — I go there for a little lesson from the pulpit. Keeps me going."

She touched his hand at the table. "That's sweet."

"Yeah, I'm sweets all around." He imbued the comment with an awareness of his own fragility. Alice liked

this man very much. *How come Alice Number One didn't seem to pay him much mind?* she wondered.

"I want to go to this church in the next parish. You should come with me today."

"It's Sunday, is it?"

She laughed and gave him a slap. "Course it is, silly."

"You talkin' 'bout Dorry Chapel? Over on the Castleton Row? Why, the one next door to our flat is COE as well — not even high church, not even Anglican. Do we have to walk all the way to that other place? That cross-town one is for the dockworkers — not that I mind them, but they're different in a church. I like the one next door. It's quiet. Doesn't smell like people — smells like a church."

She wasn't going to let him off. He was nice and he would agree. "No," she said, "I like the organist. He's very good."

"Ah, but it's a bit cold — chilly — it's only March, Alice. The wind's up. I'll go to services with ya, that ain't the rub, but can't we just go somewheres closer?"

She would not surrender. Despite his excuses, Fletcher eventually took a bath and joined her down the stairs of their building, his coat and hat ready for the walk across town to the Dorry Public Chapel, where the poorest workers of the city went for worship.

The building itself was typical — spires and an arched ceiling, much like St. Peter's back in Burnby, although it lacked any intricate glasswork or rows of dressing boxes. Alice had no worries of a body falling forth from the box and sending her on a mission, or telling her of switch indexes, talking in riddles that would not be understood for some count of time. Instead, it was the organist she wanted to see — he was the one of importance.

As the candles were lit, the pews became stuffed with bodies. Alice and Fletcher squeezed into the last two spaces in the final row of the chapel. There were about eighty people in attendance, neatly dressed and aligned in parallel, leading to the front pulpit where a vicar, two deacons, three altar boys, and the organist poised ready to start the ritual. "Let us begin," said the vicar, and the congregation rose to

their feet, hymnbooks in hand. Fletcher didn't expend much energy finding the psalms and hymns in the books, but he at least put in an effort. Alice, on the other hand, feigned little interest in the proceedings. She peered over Fletcher's shoulder from time to time to mark a line or a verse, but this was just perfunctory. Her eyes remained on the organ bench, and the man presiding...

The organist was rail thin, with blackened hair severely parted. He had a painfully gaunt face — sunken cheeks and a long, hook nose jutting from the center. His ears fanned from his face and served as sturdy locks for his oval eyeglasses as he read the music on the rack in front of him. He wore a black gown and seemed in terrible concentration. At the end of each hymn, chorale, or prelude, the man would sit back on his organ bench and fold his fingers in his lap.

Bit of a bore, ain't he? thought Michael Fletcher. In fact, he reckoned that he heard at least sixteen mistakes in the course of the service — one so bad that the vicar made a face. Oblivious, the organist forged ahead with his playing while untangling his feet from the pedals.

At the end of the service, Alice gave a pump to Fletcher's hand. "I'll be back. Just need to have a word." Before he could stop her, she was working her way against the tide of churchgoers toward the organ riser. Fletcher watched her as she spoke with the man, who was gathering his sheets of music and placing them inside a bag. In the moment of their conversations, the organist seemed to drop his business-like personae and chatted away in a decidedly sunnier disposition with Alice. They seemed like old friends, for a flash, but in the end, Alice walked away without even a shake of the organist's hand.

"What'd you two chat about?" asked Fletcher as they descended the chapel steps.

"I asked him if he knew some friends of mine," she answered, and then added without intonation, "He didn't."

The matter seemed best dropped, as Alice took on a sudden gloom, matching the gathering clouds above the town, signs of an impending rain shower, which was

common this time of the season. Fletcher adjusted the hat on his head and felt very old next to Alice. He was hankering for a drink. Or two.

On the walk back to their building, Fletcher tried a few avenues of conversation, but they always began with fire and faded out like a radio song. It started raining a few streets before home. Without an umbrella, Fletcher removed his hat and held it a few centimeters above Alice's head to keep her dry. She didn't mind that her Sunday dress was getting spotted and would now need a press. Her mind was elsewhere. Arriving in the dry foyer, to climb the steps to their two apartments, they broke by passing a few pleasantries and went to nap in their separate beds.

Odd one, that, thought Fletcher as he finished his drink and set the empty shot glass on the table beside him. The rain was whipping at the windows, and it didn't take him long to become unconscious. Sundays always made him so sleepy...

The two did not see much of each other during the next week. Alice worked at the pub; Fletcher stayed home and got drunk. Once, he knocked and asked if she wanted to join him for a drink, but she declined. His eyes surveyed her room, to see if there was some bloke from the pub she was hiding. He was jealous; he didn't like that. He didn't even have any romantic interest in the younger bird until she kissed him, there on his sofa Friday night. To make love with him two nights running, to go to church and play respectable, then ignore him, seemed intricately cruel. *I bet you it's something that organist said to her,* his mind told him.

Stewing in this, Fletcher played his radio louder and more often to get her attention. One night, a tap came at his door and was momentarily hopeful. Answering, he discovered Alice on his mat. "I'm sorry," she said to him, "I've been rude." He began to interrupt, but she continued. "No, I know it, I have. I was just very disappointed on Sunday. You see, going to that church is an important thing for me. One Sunday I won't be disappointed. One

Sunday will be special. It won't be long. Would you possibly consider accompanying me this coming Sunday as well?" (A look, in his eyes.) "I know, yes, that you have another church you prefer, but it *has* to be Dorry Chapel. I know you don't like it, but I must attend *that church*. Will you go with me?"

He shuffled his feet along the threshold. "I s'pose I don't have any plans," he said in a low voice, wishing, for a spark of time, that he did.

Alice smiled. "I could fix you dinner every Saturday as a reward."

He scoffed: "I'm not a dog. You don't have ta feed me."

"I'm a good cook," she proclaimed then grew doubtful. "At least I think I am." (She was, momentarily, unsure, as she had been with the whereabouts of Alice's parents.) "Saturday, then?" Fletcher gave a nod. Alice thanked him and returned across the hall. She closed the door to her flat and felt her heart, beating heavy. *Don't drag him into it, said a voice inside, there's a chance he's not involved at all — that he's just a man.* But she was attracted to him — as a magnet to metal scrapings. *You pull him into this... and there may be not be any getting him out.* She would be sure to ask the question the next time she saw her friend. *Is there a Michael Fletcher in the indexes, or was it coincidence that he lived across the hall from Alice and used to borrow ice and listen to the radio? Is it just coincidence when "Life Is A Puzzle" gets a spin — does it always have to be a marker? Can't it — on occasion — just be a silly tune? After all, every wedding in England can't have a door, can it?* As Alice lay down to bed that Thursday night, thermostat up and fighting the dying March chill, she found herself wanting more information. It was all still a mystery, like science: you learn one thing, and then another, but you never feel an end to it. Evidence will be collected and theorems proved, and that new theorem will open up a thousand new questions. She was impatient. She prayed, as she had been told that night on the platform near the dead station, after the murder of Alison Falliher, that these tracks did have an end.

Months passed into summer. Dorry Chapel became warmer with each concurrent Sunday service, and the old organist continued to play, serious as stone, concluding each recession with a soft greeting to Alice. If it weren't for the lovemaking, the company, and the easy way Alice hung about his neck, Michael Fletcher would have become very restless. Instead, he found himself growing more fond of the woman — so much younger, prettier, and smarter than he was — and he even remarked to lads at the pubs that he had "a girlfriend." They were all quite amazed. He had all his life been a bachelor. The drink was his only continual companion, and he had found, to great surprise, room for another.

Alice did not seem to want anything, except to keep an eye on him, and she hinted at the hope that he was doing the same.

Someone had granted her company in the form of this fallen man while she waited for that "special Sunday." She was itching for her friend's arrival. Alice had the thought that this waiting resembled two people marrying young, and one would die. The other left behind must be patient until that final rejoin in heaven, and the waiting seems interminable. Time in the tunnels was not as time was for Alice Pravel — the days and months ticking until that last week of May, 1957, through to the day the old organist would change, as Vicar Kevin Hockleed had, on that fateful day two years ago in St. Peter's. It was only a matter of waiting.

SYMPTOMS

On the last Sunday of May, Alice awoke in her bed next to Michael, and thinking of Audrey Green. She had not really dwelled on the girl while in the body of Alice, so she took it as a positive sign that her image should appear on a Sunday. The girl was eight by now, she guessed, and had probably forgotten about the death of her brother at the beach. Her mother and father probably still felt the compounding guilt of the event, the boy wandering off and drowning while they slept. She had an urge to send them a telegram to explain things. But what would she say? To make a proper case, she did not have the words. Besides, she continued to feel like a bystander, an errand girl. *Find the publisher, but wait for me this time. I've found two switches close together*, she'd been instructed. At the time, it sounded like a plan of greater promise than her buying a bus ticket to London, in blind search of a pen name. Yet now, three long months later, she was becoming fearful of the adventure. She would ask him when he arrived (*whenever* he arrived) if they could bring Michael Fletcher as well, as she had grown attached to him. She could hear the answer before asking the question: *No, he's a sot. He'll slow us down as he stops at every pub along the way.* 'He's not the worst of that kind,' she'd say in Fletcher's defense. *No — he may be good, but he'd be a burden and we'd probably get his neck cracked just like we got Alison's cracked. Leave him. He was only meant to keep you company.*

Very well.

She had given up John, and now she was being forced to surrender Michael. It was tragic.

She got dressed for church in her own flat and joined Michael, as was their routine, at the foot of the stairwell. Arm-in-arm, the two headed for Dorry Chapel.

"We're runnin' late," he noted.

She checked her watch. "Yes, a bit."

The two picked up their pace.

"It took you longer than usual to get dressed," he said, not argumentatively, but stating a plain fact. "Is ev'rything all right, lass?"

She put pressure on his arm. "Absolutely fine," she answered, adding an unconvincing nod.

At the service, because of their late arrival (during the procession), they were forced to sit in the last remaining pew at the back, in almost the same spot they occupied on their first Sunday together. Over time, they had worked their way closer and closer to the front. They were considered regulars now, and even got the courtesy of a counted-on greeting from the vicar, who knew them by their names. However, both Fletcher and Alice tried not to mingle much with the congregation. It was usually a quick run through the line and then back to their flat. Fletcher didn't like being down by the dockworks. He once confided in Alice that he used to work there but was given compensation for an injury. He always feared a collision with his former boss, Mr. Levy. Fletcher didn't want to be accused of scamming. However, no one from his former employment was ever present. As far as Alice could tell, Fletcher's only injury was his inclination towards the bottle.

The middle hymn went well.

No surprises there.

The same for the readings.

Alice sighed, and tapped her heel, impatient.

Was this to be the Sunday?

(She could feel it in her very bones. The exact date on the switch had been forgotten, and her friend would have had to double-back to find it. She had very little time to enter Alice Pravel. The wiring was fused, an error of poor workmanship. "I know that organist opens in 1957, but I've forgotten the month," he had said to her in the tunnels, "so you'll have to be patient." Both wished they had the tunnel map. Without it, or a clear memory, it was a guessing game.)

At communion Alice approached the front of the church and kneeled, along with Fletcher. She could see the organist, just finishing the final refrain of "*Surely the*

Presence of the Lord Is in This Place," his left hand playing the swells, missing a note on the great organ, and looking not at all like himself. It was to be *today*. The dream had been a sign!

Fletcher and Alice returned to their seats, and, after a moment of settling in the congregation, the sermon began.

"Gentle people of Dorry," started the vicar in his typically raised and dramatic intonation, "this is a special Sunday, indeed — "

That was all he got past his lips. If the vicar had something particularly 'special' to announce (an event of the Bible, an anniversary of the church), it would be forever replaced in the minds of the parishioners with a horrible shock —

The organist coughed once, then twice, catching the concerned eye of the deacons, before erupting into a near fountain of blood and pus. The force of the third cough put a wad of red into his palm, and even from the back of the chapel, Alice could see the blood roll out from the catches of his fingers and spatter the organ's white keys. Instinctually reacting, Alice shot to her feet, pulling Fletcher with her. She clung to him as a monkey, her short body wrapping tight into his, as the organist rose up, continuing to cough.

An altar boy took the organist's arm.

"Apologies," said the proper old man, weak and embarrassed. He was ushered out the back curtain of the pulpit by the altar boy and one of the deacons.

Alice stood and dragged Fletcher with her. They wiggled out of the row and slipped through the front of the chapel as the people burst into gossip. The vicar tried to shush them and continue with his sermon. From the last trickle to Fletcher's ears, it didn't sound like the people were having any of it. He couldn't linger too long, however, for Alice was tugging him around the rear of the chapel building.

"Where are we going?" he asked, but she did not answer.

At the back exit, she pushed open the door and climbed a short flight of stairs, Fletcher in tow, finally arriving in the private room where the choir would prepare before entering the loft. From here, she could look down on the curtained area behind the chancel and spy on the bleeding organist and his attendees.

"Don't know what's come over me," said the man, holding a soaked rag to his nostrils. "I felt perfectly fine this morning."

The older deacon adjusted the organist's head and spoke to the teenage altar boy. "Run and get Doctor Heath. You know his house?" The boy nodded, eager, for this was better and more exciting than the dousing of candles. "Good," said the deacon, "run along." The boy was off in a shot. The deacon turned to the organist and put his hand on the rag. "Let me see it."

"I don't think it's stopped yet."

"Let me have a look."

The deacon removed the clotting rag and watched as a tear of blood ran from the nose down into the mouth of the man. Slowly, with dreaded concern, he put the cloth back where it had been. Head tilted, the organist looked at him and said in a weak voice, "Haven't... got the bloody plague, have I?" The old man tried to smile at this extremity, but only the apples of his narrow cheeks managed a movement, his smile stuck under the rag.

Alice snatched Fletcher's fingers and quietly descended the stairs. Once out to daylight, they walked quickly, as if fleeing a crime scene. It took half the normal time to reach their home. Alice barreled up the stairs, and Fletcher unlocked his flat, leading his woman to his whiskey bottle. "That was bloody odd, wasn't it?" he said in a lighter tone, although he regretted his choice of swear. She didn't speak, but he noticed her hand was shaking as he handed her the shot. She threw it down her throat and demanded another. "Now don't go turning into the likes of me — an old sot — just because of a sick old man," he jested, pouring her a second shot, which was gone as fast as the first. He didn't like the look of her. Putting down the bottle, Fletcher forgot

all about his own craving and laid his hand on her soft hair. "So the man's a little sick, Alison — I don't think that's cause for all this, now. After all, he's ninety if he's a day. Or at least seventy. He should be retired. Maybe this is his sign from tha Lord above... get thee to a beach."

Her cheeks beginning to flush with color, Alice turned her attentions to Fletcher. "Do you feel all right, Michael? I mean, do you feel sick or strange or anything?"

Fletcher looked to his aging body and then up at Alice. "Right as rain," he answered. "Good as gold." She showed great relief. "Thanks for askin'. Say, how bout yourself, then? You don't look so good. That put a scare in ya?" She nodded, like a child, and folded into his chest. It was half a minute before he realized she was crying. He felt the dampness through his dress shirt, which had no undershirt beneath. Her shoulders shook and he let her have it out.

"What am I going to do?" she cried.

Michael Fletcher didn't have a clue.

SEASIDE

It took her all summer to build the courage. A notice had been printed in the paper that the organist of Dorry Chapel was being laid to rest on Thursday, 7 June, all welcome. It was then she decided, but it took her longer to make arrangements. She would leave Dorry the same way she left Burnby, with no notice, no warning, and no look over her shoulder, only a rucksack full of clothes. At the time, she felt sure on her plan to strand Michael Fletcher at the bottom of the staircase, waiting with his hat and summer Sunday jacket for yet another service at the chapel. Quickly, however, that courage melted into guilt over a second betrayal — first John, now Michael. It was a heartless thing she was doing. Maybe one day she would be able to explain it to them and they would understand. She wept as she crossed the rail tracks to the opposite side of the village, in search of Audrey Green.

Through some enquiries at the local post, Alice found Dooley Boats Road. It was a simple lane of rowhouses a few streets from the river, the homes close together and buttressing the street, constructed by moderate income and the highest expectations. Down at the end of the lane was the address of the Greens, and Alice immediately spotted the small redheaded child playing on the indent of grass between building and curbstone. Alice had to stop and squint. She was shocked at finding her so easily. Alice came closer, holding at ten paces.

"Are you jumping rope?" Alice asked.

Audrey stood upright and clutched to her chest the white rope with red plastic handles, afraid that it was about to be taken away. She did not answer the question, only flattened her chin and became suspicious.

"It's all right," said Alice, smoothing her voice and coming up on the curbstone, "I'm from just down the street. I saw you playing and wanted to say hello."

The child regarded her with rightful distance and glanced back to her house. Alice followed the line of her

gaze. In the windows, Alice could see shadows and hear the rumble of a family getting ready for an outing.

"Are you going to church?" asked Alice.

Audrey nodded her head slowly.

Bending down on one knee, Alice reached out and took the hem of the girl's dress. Audrey did not flinch but pulled the jumping rope closer to her chest. "What a pretty dress you have on!" said Alice in compliment, to break the air. "I bet you'll be the prettiest at the service." This flattery did not melt the girl. An introduction was in order. "My name's Alice. Or Alison. I'm not sure which. I wanted to see you before I left Dorry." Alice had an uncontrollable urge to caress the girl's red hair. Her hand moved slowly from the cotton pull of the dress to Audrey's shoulder-length bob, fingertips working through the bit above her ear, gently, as a mother would. "You won't understand this," said Alice, "but I need to talk to Antony." The girl cocked her head. "I — I'm not sure what you remember about the beach... I was supposed to meet someone... last Sunday, and... it didn't go as planned, you see?" Alice took a pause to assess Audrey's face.

The girl spoke: "Antony's not coming back."

Alice gave an understanding tilt to her head. "I know, darling. I know your mummy probably told you he wasn't coming home when he drowned, but — " Waking herself from this trance, this touch of the girl's hair and her own selfish motivations, Alice pulled away. This business is too black for a child. Alice let her hand drop and stood to her feet. She decided to try the same question from another angle. Something important might pop from Audrey's imagination. It was said the child was keen. "Do you know where your brother is right now?" Alice asked with a snap that sounded much more as interrogation.

Audrey kept her eyes up. "He found a train."

Alice's head took a jump, and she stiffened her legs so as not to slip from the curbstone. "*What* did you say, Audrey?"

"The train," the girl repeated, "the one under the water."

Alice's hand grabbed the jumping rope, and Audrey fell back on her shoes to protect herself. Meaning only to focus the girl, Alice pictured herself through Audrey's eyes — a stranger, threatening, stealing a toy. Both of them shot looks to the Green house. Alice had only a few seconds remaining — Audrey would soon run up the stairs. The girl knew danger. Alice had to ask it: "Have you *seen* him?" It was a serious whisper, and Alice's voice began to quiver with thoughts of Michael, and John, and her frustration at losing the organist. "Have you seen your dead brother?"

Audrey broke from Alice, forgetting all about her rope. Her Sunday shoes smacked each of the five steps to the front door of her home, and, although she didn't call out for her mother, it was clear that she would soon be in her arms, telling of a weird woman on the street.

Alice dropped the jumping rope as if it were a snake and quick-stepped away, back down to the turn of the corner, crying and hoping to disappear. *Stupid, stupid — the girl's too young yet. She isn't numb; her switch hasn't been thrown. She may not even be involved! She's only a frightened child. And I must look a mess... a wreck... a woman at the end of her nerves, a week's sleep lost, rucksack in a bus station locker, ready to go north to Burnby and find John Falliher, the Inspector. My husband.*

Yet, a three-hour ride later, Burnby was not the same village as she left it in 1953. Four years had passed, and John no longer lived in their simple home. Instead (*as she was subsequently told by Mrs. Abberton, the pianist down the street*), he had moved into a small flat near the center of town after the disappearance of his wife, and he had become known about the pubs. *Check them all*, said the supplier of these clues, *you'll probably find him on a stool*. However, the six pubs of the small village were empty of John Falliher, or of any further information. It was only from a stop into the barber's did she find his trail:

"John? Said to me yesterday in the cornershop that he had an investigation up the coast. Some seaside hotel had a burglary."

Alice thanked him. She knew the very spot. It was just as she had once been told: *patterns* — these things come in patterns. Without the barber even knowing the hotel's name, Alice was positive it was the one where John and Alison had met those many years ago, the place where they had fallen in love. It *had* to be the same hotel. As was impressed on her (in part of a lecture for getting herself once-murdered): *There is no such thing as coincidence; it's only a larger pattern you have yet to decode. You should stay away from tickets that say Robby Holliday when you've already discovered the clue in your grocery list, the one I predicted. The first time was a message, to convince you, a second one was trouble. Stay away from these things, at least until I'm there to guide you. Otherwise, we've lost.*

She had done as she had been made to promise, to be watchful and wait for his arrival, and look where it left her! Without a single friend, just as before. The body of the organist would not help her. And it wasn't Rob Holl who committed that particular crime — she knew his style first-hand. This killing was something else, something awful. All she knew was that she had to keep moving. She could be easily found at Fletcher's. Where is a place Alice Pravel might never be found?

To travel there took several hours. She bought a scooter from a boy who was just hanging the sign, "Fifteen Quid." She knew it was a hazard, having no experience with scooters, but it was within the limited funds of her pocketbook, and it was thankfully not a bus. The seaside hotel was south of Whitby along the coast road. The scooter's shakes and uncertainties meant that she could not go at the same speed as a motorcar.

When she arrived, it was nearly ten o'clock in the evening and quite dark on the road.

The hotel was as she remembered — white with a blue top, no signage except for a golden placard on the far left of the three columns: *Matten Resort, est. 1874*. A circular drive entered the property and rounded near an English garden sitting in the center of a great lawn. Two hundred meters beyond lay the cliff edge, with no warnings or cautions, dropping straight off into the deep waters of the Channel. At this late hour, the moon above was full and she could hear the sound of a jazz band coming through the open lattice windows of the dining hall.

Alice dismounted her scooter, removed her helmet, shouldered her rucksack, and ruffled her red hair until presentable. A valet was soon at her side, offering to run the scooter around to the car park. Alice gave him a breathless 'thank you' as the boy handed her a ticket and vanished. She climbed the wide stair leading to the front veranda. Everything was as it had always been — Victorian architecture, traditions intact for seventy long years, the resort exactly as the turn-of-the-century Londoners had experienced it when taking a carriage to the country for a seaside holiday. John and Alison had found the place very special, meeting in 1950, seven years past.

She went into the lobby and was happy with her choice of clothes. Her slacks cut just below the knee, without stockings, and her laced, white shirt had worked well for both her travels and the requirements of the hotel. (This hotel was more casual than others, being so close to the water and the sand, easily tracked on carpets, and she was glad she did not have to open her bag and change into a gown just to speak with the desk.) "Have you any rooms?" she asked the young clerk standing behind the carved hood of the reception window.

"Frightfully sorry, ma'am," said the clerk, frowning. "All of our rooms are taken tonight. It's summer, you know. We had just one room left, but we've just had a fellow phone for it." The clerk went back to his chore at the mailboxes.

Alice frowned and looked about the lobby. Turning once again, she said, "May I inquire on a guest?"

The clerk looked up from his letter filing. "Possibly," he said, with an intonation that money may be required.

She did not offer any of her limited cash but felt prepared to do so. "Have you got a gentleman staying here named John Falliher?"

The clerk, surprised at the name, gave a tip of his head in the direction of the dining hall, the originating spot of the jazz music, distant but carrying. "Mr. Falliher is having a nightcap, ma'am. Are you a friend of the gentleman's?"

Alice shook her head. "I don't think he'd remember me," she replied and excused herself, floating away. The clerk watched her all the way to the restaurant doors, his brow heavy with suspicion. Alice chose to ignore his prying.

At the crook of the colonial window frames separating the dining hall from the thoroughfare she saw a dozen customers seated along the perimeter of a stage, which held four black men playing an Oswald Copping standard — the song a little too loud for the room, but expertly done. Alice did not see anyone who resembled John Falliher. She took a step inside the restaurant and was about to be met by an attractive hostess, who was then waylaid by a customer's insistent tug on her arm. In this moment, Alice scanned the premises once more, and there —

...along the wall...

...in the darkest pocket of the room...

sat her John, drinking. No tea for him. It was whiskey in his glass, she could tell even from this distance, knowing John and the way he tilted the black oil.

The seating hostess was back on course. Alice waved her away. "I'll just sit at the bar," she said to the young blonde, knowing that the glare that passed into the hostess's eyes was of social offense. Disregarding, Alice quietly snuck up behind John, watching him as he polished off his whiskey and gave a flagged finger to the bartender for another round. Alice couldn't bring herself to sit. Instead, she hovered a meter from his back, watching the twisting fabric of his raincoat pinned between his bottom and the pub stool. His coat was dirty; she had the urge to wash the

collar. Rolled sleeves and hair scruffier than she had remembered, Alice felt that John had grown older than the four chronological years since Alison Falliher's murder. (*Does he even know of it?* she wondered. *The body could have remained unidentified all these years, a murdered woman in a bus toilet. He may think I just ran off with a lover. Poor, poor John.*) Alice felt like a ghost, for she was, and it may have been wiser to turn and find her scooter, and lodgings elsewhere, for this was obviously a mistake to raise the dead.

"Problem?" he asked with a slow turn of his head. John had sensed her. She was not invisible, after all. Alice came around, laid her rucksack at her feet, and sat on the adjoining stool. The barkeep was at their end, refilling John's whiskey glass. When the servant had moved again, the piano took a solo, quieting the room from the preceding sharpness of the saxophone. Alice met John's eyes. Nonchalant, he asked, "Do I know you?"

She began easy. "You've been at this hotel before, haven't you?"

He gave a nod. "Once, yes."

"For an investigation."

John leaned back on his stool. "How do ya know about that?"

Alice made up a lie. "I used to work here. Tell me about that time. I want to remember it." He was drunk; he would talk to her. (She was glad this Alice Pravel had a figure.) All the time she spoke, she kept her eyes on his, not letting go of him. *Would he recognize her, even in this body?*

"Well," he began, "I was called here in 1950 — June, I think. Or maybe March. A burglary in one of the rooms. Expensive jewelry for some posh guest. Spent a few days, and I had it figured out." There was an air of congratulatory salute in the way he said this. He tipped his chin in mock toast. "That was all," he ended with finality, a period to the sentence, and drank his drink.

"Nothing else?" she pressed.

"Nope. It was one of the chambermaids. Not a hard one, that." Alice was disappointed. John hadn't mentioned meeting Alison, impressing her with greater details of the case and its conclusion, finally kissing her in the hotel gardens, by the sea, before going off together for a drive along the coast. "I'm here *again*," he said after a lull, stressing the 'again' with irritation, as if this was the last place on earth he cared to pass the time, "at the request of the management. Seems they've had another burglar. They remembered me. They knew I'd keep it out of the papers." John leaned forward and said with a hush, "I'm known for bending the rules..."

"Have you solved it yet?" she asked. "Was it another chambermaid?"

John shook his head. "No, not the maid, but it's done. It was the man himself — stole his wife's money from the safe because he was planning on leaving her tomorrow for a lass back in London. Foolish, though. He left the loot in a sock under the mattress of the room, so when his wife reported the theft, it didn't take much to break him down. They've already brought a car for him. So, as they say in my line, case closed."

As John related these facts, Alice couldn't help but detect his fatigue. Before, even at the most strained twilight hours of their marriage, the hunt for a criminal never failed to excite her husband. Even the smallest incident of petty theft could spawn hours of conversation regarding theories, motives, and plotting. All Alice could think to say to this droll recounting was, "You must be very good at your job."

"S'pose," he sniffed and made quick work of his latest whiskey in one fast gulp. He then gave her a long appraisal, and, for just a second, Alice detected lust. She wouldn't know what to do if he tried to woo her. After all, it was not infidelity — Alison was gone, and this Alice Number Two was of age. But she had thoughts: She couldn't stand it if he made love to her, badly, drunk, and fumbling, without affection or emotion. This body she occupied was a stranger's body. She would only get his anger, which she could sense rising with the color to his cheeks, from the

whiskey, and it would not be the same as it had once been. She reached out and pinched the top of his hand. "Ah!" he said, but did not pull away.

"Did you feel that?" she asked.

"Course I did."

She faced the jazz band as they finished the crescendo. The black saxophonist gave a polite thanks to the crowd and broke for the end of the quartet's set. Several members of the audience took this as their cue to retire to their rooms, the day being done, the show over. A few couples held hands; others were alone; some appeared to be quietly arguing. John had not noticed this, his investigative spirit dwindling with a long day and too much alcohol.

"I've got a very nice room," he said to her, not as a tease, but as a fact. "They give me the best when I'm here. They know my reputation. It's a suite."

"Yes, I remember," she said off-handedly, watching the saxophonist as he fitted his instrument back into its carrying suitcase. When her gaze returned to the man beside her, he was returning the most puzzled expression. She threw some false clarity into her statement: "I remember they used to do that for special guests, from when I worked here... and you must be special, having solved *two* cases for the hotel."

John gave a consensual nod before pulling his billfold from his jacket and signaling for the eye of the barkeep. The young tender waved off the inspector's offer to pay and John put his money away. "Yes," he said to her, "they treat me very well." Pushing, he moved his legs from under the oak and put his boots to the green carpet of the dining hall.

Alice caught his sleeve.

"Are you sure you don't remember me?"

To John, the woman's voice sounded a little panicked, a little desperate, as if under a weight. "No, I'm sorry," he said, and then added, his hand to her hand, stuck on his shirtsleeve, "Are you all right?"

She let go of him. "Yes. I don't mean to keep you." There was a held moment between them. Alice could see in

John that he had not even a glimmer of who she had been — his skills of investigation not switched-on or even searching for Alison Falliher. Breaking, John lifted his coat from the stool and slung it over his shoulder. He said goodnight, and left Alice Pravel in the dining hall, only her and the last of the tourists remaining.

THE LODGER

He found her quickly and wouldn't let go. The boy was no more than twenty-one, not unattractive but with a hardness carved from the lower class. He wore a green jacket and a smile, and introduced himself as Colin. "Blight's the last name, but you can forget all that and call me Colin." Alice gave him a false smile. There was something in his accent and manner that reminded her of Michael Fletcher. Also, something in the way he drank his beer, thumb out and hairy knuckles curled. Alice had been watching him from her corner.

It was Monday, the day after her visit to the resort. She had curled into a booth of the local chip shop, an insignificant establishment down the hill from the hotel, to look for familiar faces, names, or patterns that she could use as an exit. After John had retired to his suite of rooms, she checked her scooter out of the valet and sped away to find local lodgings. There was an opening at a B & B run by an old pensioner (who introduced himself as Mr. O'Connor and flirted heavily as she laid her bag on the hard bed). She slept through most of Monday until supper. Mr. O'Connor had to rouse her with a knock and a cold reminder of the checkout time. When she answered the door, Alice easily sensed that forms of payment might be negotiated. She brushed this away and paid from her purse. The man had none of the charm of Fletcher, whom she was really starting to miss. And, again, in the chip shop, she was trying to be left alone to think, and along comes Colin Blight hoping to bag an older bird.

"What brings ya to the sea?" the boy asked, moving his hot cup of coffee and a bowl of sugar from his own table to hers, taking the seat without even asking permission.

She looked up from her food and smiled. With a clumsy flick of her wrist, she tipped her hot tea onto the linoleum of the small table and the boiling water splashed onto Colin's hand. He jerked, clearly surprised, a bit

embarrassed for her, and in some pain, but he did not curse in her presence. He only smirked and reached across the table to use the napkins from under the silver. The mess was soon cleaned and Colin clicked his fingers for the waiter to refill Alice's cup. "Sorry," she apologized after all this was done. "Did that burn you?"

"Only a smidge," he said bravely.

Good, thought Alice, at least he's not numb.

He repeated his question. "Why the sea, then? On holiday, then?"

"I came looking for a man."

Colin thumped his chest. "Well, you found one! Colin Blight, that's me. Call me Colin, or ol' Col, or whatever you like." (Alice had a laugh at him wanting to be called "old" Colin, for he was clearly just becoming a man.) "So, we're friends, like, right?"

Alice sipped her refreshed tea. "The man I was looking for was my husband." She liked seeing the look on his face as she said this.

"Well, what's with this lookin' for a man, bit, aye, then? Shoulda *said* your husband." The boy shuffled his feet and played with his spoon. She would have to give him credit; he held his ground and did not run. *Funny, thought Alice, Alison Falliher never had all this attention from boys — there must be lust in Alice's eyes.* In her memory, she held the names of many lovers. Amorous men (and boys) must be able to smell the pheromone and it made Alice feel suddenly powerful. "So, didja find 'im?" Colin asked. "Your husband?" (He had known a married girl or two in his days and was not afraid.)

"No," sighed Alice.

"Run off, 'as he?"

"No, not really. *I* ran off, if you must know."

He raised a brow. "Sick a' the sight of 'im, aye?"

"I don't want to talk about my husband," she snapped, which stopped Colin cold.

"All right, then," he said with equal finality, drinking from his own cup, trying to reassess where he should take this. The mention of a husband meant, to Colin, that he

should run right over the subject: ask it, get as much information as possible. That was his usual tactic. But the woman across from him did not seem in the mood for casual chat. Colin had a few subjects in reserve, for occasions just like this, but when he went to open his mouth the waiter was at their table, laying the paper check under the saucer of Alice Pravel's tea. She drew out her pocketbook from the suitcase beside her in the booth and twisted open the clasp to retrieve her money. She attempted to hide her frown, but he caught it.

"You wouldn't want to buy a scooter, would you?" she asked Colin Blight. Colin let his eyes roam the chip shop. The change in subject had thrown him. "I'll sell it to you," she pressed. "I want to be rid of it. It's in good shape and all, but I don't think I'm going to be needing it anymore."

Colin shook his head. "No thanks. I have a lorry back at the hotel."

She sparked at this. "Hotel?"

Colin gave a thumb over his shoulder. "That Matten place up the hill."

"You can afford that?" she asked, and felt bad about the comment. After all, this boy was a little young and a little rough for a stay at such a pricey resort. At the same time, this question betrayed her financial status, which was precarious at best. If she had gotten a room at the Matten, one night would have practically gutted her stash. Mention of the scooter-for-sale, and now this bit, made Colin's face drop, not by the offense of her question but more as he had designs. She could see it in his eye. *Maybe he wanted to rob me?* she thought. *Now he doesn't know what to do since he thinks I'm poor.* Despite this, she did not get the impression that he was very dangerous. She was not completely sure why. There was nothing in his face that was familiar to her — no alarms to signify Rob Holl, or Robby Holliday — only an opportunist waiting for an inside track.

"I've got money," he said with smarm.

Alice laid her coins on the table to pay for her tea and chips. "I believe you," she replied, infusing her words with

careful, colorless emotion. "I thought my husband was at the resort. That's why I'm here. Turns out he's not."

"Gonna divorce 'im?"

She thought about how to answer. "I really already have."

"Left him for someone, aye? Come on, tell ol' Colin yer troubles."

She stacked her coins and took them up again into her hands, scooting to the edge of the booth, ready to pay at the counter. "Well, if you must know, I did leave him for someone, but it didn't work out." (This misdirection of moralistic guilt — the subversion of the marriage vows — Michael and John — gave her a humor inside.) "For the last six months, I've been with a man who talks a lot like you."

"Oh, you mean a *real* man," Colin said with a jibe.

She smiled. "I *mean*... a man from your part of England."

Without delicacy, Colin assessed, "Sounds like you've got a lot of men in your life. One more then won't hurt, aye? Since you've got no plans, except to sell that scooter, why don't you come back with me to the hotel?"

She moved her neck back at the proposition. "You're *quite* bold, aren't you?"

"Not so bold," he tut-tutted. "I haven't even had the guts to ask your name."

"Alice," she answered, and at the same time turned up her own wattage. This rough boy may have been the break she desperately needed. She wasn't going to make it to London without a ride. Perhaps he would transport her in his lorry, or better yet, buy her a train ticket. "And you said you have a room?" she asked in confirmation, with a hand over his, and a lusty smile. The boy couldn't find his room key fast enough...

Alice had to struggle to not be heard as she gathered her stockings, her brassiere, and the rucksack full of money. Praying those last drinks had put Colin irretrievably unconscious, she accidentally bumped her shoes, held in hand over the rucksack, against the

doorframe as she exited. Yet, he did not stir. It was just starting to light outside, and she noted the time: *Six forty-eight a.m.* Since the two of them had not finished until just a few hours before, Colin Blight would be in the deepest part of his sleep, and dead drunk.

His revelry had been youthful and difficult to contain. For Alice, it had been quite different with old Fletcher, who seemed to pass out easily, comfortably. Colin was a dervish as he drank — no solemnity about it. The act had not yet become the addicted ritual of an old soak, devoid of invigoration or romance. In fact, at his young age, it was quite the opposite. Colin did, though, go through a change of mood from bottle to glass as the hours ticked, and it made his hands slippery and his condition hard to judge. Plus, he kept butchering her name — sometimes "Alice," sometimes "Ally," and sometimes, although she did not asked to be called by it, "Alison."

It was around three in the morning
when he took out the money.

"Here's me stash," he boasted, producing a suitcase from his hotel closet. Under a stack of undershirts and socks, the case had a false bottom, for concealment. Colin was proud of this possession and took a long Houdini wave of presentment before showing her what rested inside. Like an American bootlegger, he popped the hidden catch and revealed a dozen stacks of high-pound notes.

"Let me see it all!" she asked with acted glee, pretended avarice, her bare breasts touching the blankets of the bed. She tried to look as wide-eyed as possible, to show that this money, even more than his kisses, made the boy a man. Tipping the side of the suitcase, Colin let the entire pile — some stacks banded, others loose — fall onto the blanket in front of them. They laughed together and she put some to her nose to sniff. "Where did you get it?" she asked.

"It's mine, right and proper," he said.
"Did you steal it?"

"No," he said adamantly, shaking his fuzzy head. "It was a gift."

She didn't believe him, but at the moment it hardly mattered. She would have it all when he passed out. Money was more useful to her than to this drunken boy. She would need funds to survive in London. Colin was indeed the break she was looking for. After all, it may be years before her ally found another switch, and she wouldn't have enough cash to travel, much less get an apartment. In her plan, it sounded simple, as simple as it had been the first time — *find the songwriter by her own devices*. There was to be no more delay. She had to be devious and brave and resourceful if she were to be of use. It had been comfortable to pass time with Michael Fletcher, but now with no one presenting themselves and the organist dead, action was required. Her confidence in this Alice Pravel was growing. The body she inherited had some wits about her, and she wasn't tied to anyone or anything. If John did not recognize her, if he no longer loved her or himself, then courage she must have. Blind courage.

Colin swept the money from the bed to the carpet, where she would drop it into her rucksack when he passed out, as he tried to kiss her toes...

Out the door, down a flight of stairs to the mezzanine, she nearly collided with the saxophonist from the dining-hall show the night before. The black man looked as if he had just awoken with the sun, for he had sleepy eyes. At the end of his lanky, dangling arm he held his instrument case. The man was much older than she, but showed a broad smile as Alice tried to pass him in the hallway. Alice with her sack full of money, he with his saxophone case, made the move comical, impossible in the narrow enclosure. They met faces and gave morning smiles of equal kindness and brevity. Once she was beyond him, he spoke to her.

"Excuse me, ma'am," he said in the flat accent of an American. "Do you know what time it is?"

Alice looked to her wrist, not really wanting to stop her escape but confined by courtesy and the desire to not look suspicious. "It is... nearly seven o'clock."

He tipped his head politely. "Thanks."

The two split apart in the hotel foyer, Alice going for the exit, the musician ambling in the direction of the front desk and the waiting concierge, a tall man she saw early the prior night making rounds.

Rucksack in hand, she was stopped by a strong voice.

"Alice!"

It didn't sound like Colin Blight, but that's what she guessed — he had awoken! to find her and his money gone! She turned to the lobby, expecting to see the boy racing after her, set on revenge.

Instead, it was the red-coated concierge trying to get her attention, the saxophonist in front of him at the counter. *How would the concierge know my name?* she wondered. She had not given it to the duty clerk Sunday night when inquiring about a room, or to the man when she saw him on his rounds, or to that jazzman as they passed in the hallway. She stood at the parted double-doors leading to the circle drive, paralyzed.

"Alice, come *here!*" the concierge said again with a wave. Simultaneously, he handed a white envelope to the waiting musician, who split the seal and looked inside, quickly inspecting his pay. Satisfied with the amount, he went in the direction of the kitchen. The musician didn't appear interested in the concierge or Alice now that he had his wages.

Slowly, heels clacking on the marble floor of the empty lobby, Alice crossed to the oak front desk. "Yes?"

In a whisper, with a look to each side, the lithe concierge — a Southampton man with braces on his trousers and shirt collar done tight — said,

"Alison,

it's me!

I've only got a flash —

this switch isn't open very long."

Alison nearly jumped over the countertop to kiss the concierge (*what a sight that would have been to anyone who knew him!*), but instead she laid her rucksack on the countertop and said in rapid-fire, "What happened to that organist? — He died before you came through, unless I missed you, unless I got the Sundays wrong. I was there every single one, I was — what happ — "

"Hush, no time for that. That switch is gone and I've found another. It's in London, and it's open for the next ten days. A fellow who was robbed and beaten, but back to work, on the mend. Get there as fast as you can. Have you got any money?"

"Yes," she said, tapping the rucksack, "I do."

"Good. Otherwise I'd give you the hotel drawer, but it's better that you have your own. I'd hate to have you arrested for thievery." (*Alice chose not to tell about stealing Colin's right and proper stash.*) "Meet me at the Southwark Bridge in ten days — it's a fellow named Maven who runs a cart underneath the road. A stall for tourists." His face grew glum. "Have you see Holl?" Alice shook her head. "I think he's still in London. He may have gotten hold of a map, so stay sharp." The concierge touched Alice's cheek and said in barely a breath, "Be careful, will you? I've got to go now, this switch is — "

The concierge found himself with his hand on the cheek of Alice Pravel, and at a total, perplexing loss. He let his hand fall away and examined it, as if the hand itself was the cause of the offense. Alice pulled her face back from the edge of the countertop. She slid her rucksack off and slung the drawstring around her shoulder. "I — " the man began in apology, attempting to construct some explanation for his behavior. Alice backed away. He would have to puzzle it out for himself. She was gone to get her scooter. She motored away fast in the direction of London, leaving behind the view of the sea and that boy, Colin Blight, robbed.

TRAFFIC PATTERNS

The scooter did not get her very far. She was speeding on the coast road, steady in the direction of London, with everything she had on her back, when she heard the *put-put* of the engine and felt the slowing of acceleration to a stop. She dismounted and swore.

In her haste, she had forgotten to refill the petrol.

Alice abandoned the scooter in the brush and continued on foot. No car had passed for three quarters of an hour. She began to think she would be stuck on the road the whole night. The sun had already started to disappear. Alice regretted stealing the money. She may have been able to just coax Colin into driving her to London; it wouldn't have taken much work. He'd already started to melt for her. As evidence, she only had to remove her blouse and out came the suitcase full of money. A few more acts and she would have been a passenger. If she had been more expert, she might have stolen his money some night closer to London. She considered this line — would she have then gotten the message from the concierge, if she had, indeed, not been in the lobby at that exact time? She wrestled with the possibility. The original plan may have been to make the concierge leave a note at the hotel, in case Alison came calling. It would seem a smart course, a fair bet if the patterns were heeded. *Or was she being watched?* There was, after all, no guarantee Alice would be passing through the lobby at the exact moment of arrival. It was pure dumb luck — another coincidence, another pattern. It must have been known that she would go to the hotel. Known by *someone*. Maybe it was etched in the switch for Alice Pravel, a pre-destiny not noticed until the demise of the organist. She had only theories.

After a rest by the road, Alice dusted herself off and continued south, her belongings on her back like a transient.

Two cars passed and did not give her the time.

A third car, a Mercedes with a spare wheel on the back and an air of importance, passed her in a blaze but slowed at a point down a hill, turning on the gravel and reversing in her direction. Relieved, Alice flagged the unseen driver, who sat hidden behind darkened windscreen glass. The window crank squeaked and an old gentleman popped out his head. "Are you in need of a ride?" he asked, heavy with a Liverpool accent. The voice did not fit the car.

Alice nodded. "Yes. I'm going to London."

"So's the boy," said the man with an easing of his eyes towards the rear seat of the motorcar.

Barely seen in the black leather of the bumper floated the white face of a child,
ten years of age.

"I'm driving him to see his grandparents in London. Says he couldn't afford the bus." Alice bent at her waist and tried to get a better look. The boy wore simple clothes. His hair was mussed. He blinked at her, but showed no welcoming towards this potential new passenger. It was as if he were elsewhere, the body abandoned as a nonfunctioning shell. "He doesn't speak much," said the driver in a low voice, adding, lower still so as not to hurt the boy's feelings, "Not much company." The elderly man gave a pat to the empty seat beside him. "We'll get you to your London, Miss."

Alice appraised to the man's face. He seemed an average sort — the kind she might have found at Dorry Chapel on any given Sunday, singing off key. Aside from the boy in the back, she did not have any alarms about the offer. Plus, she really had very few options. She tossed her sack into the pocket along the seat and climbed inside the Mercedes. They sped off along the coast at a great speed, headlamps striking the tar.

The man proved to be full of idle chatter. He was, apparently, a retired clergyman named Tate, who lived in Whitby and enjoyed helping people when he could. He spoke of his convictions to Christ and his days under the

direction of Rome, five years in India and another dozen in the Congo, holding services for the shipping companies and the rail lines. Whenever Tate tried to engage the boy in this talk — to preach or to interrogate — the boy blinked but said nothing. This got the man to whispering again, "Only said a couple words since we started. And without them, I wouldn't know what he wanted. Just stares, mostly. Quiet. I've witnessed it before in the church houses — orphans, abandoned. Or beat on. That makes 'em hush-hush. I seen it a million-and-one times, I have..."

And so the ride went, on through until morning.

They stopped for a few hours in the car park of a wayside pub, for sleeping. The old man did the majority of it. Alice was testing to see if the boy would ever fully close his eyes. Although he did *feign* sleep, he would always pop up, blinking, to see if Alice had, herself, gone under or left entirely. The wee hours passed like that, the two of them in a staring contest.

To Alice, there was something inhuman about it.

On their way again, down the coast road and looking for the turn toward the city, Alice started to feel unwell. It first showed as a rising of temperature, and then grew, adding a sour stomach and a slight discombobulation. From the moment Tate awoke, he had immediately started another monologue of banality, and it was continuing as background for Alice's nausea. She wondered how the old man had survived in that early time, alone with the boy, in dead silence, for he was obviously a bit of a chatterbox. Tate was detailing some sermon he gave in Africa when he finally noticed she had gone whiter than even the boy. "Are you all *right*, dear woman?" he asked with concern.

Alice shook her head. "I'll be fine."

Tate reached out and felt her forehead.

"Why, you're *very* hot."

"I am? It must have been the night air. Caught a chill, I suppose. And I'm tired. Didn't sleep. I'll be fine after a while."

They drove another ten minutes as Tate continued to hold his tongue.

Alice began to cough, a hard wrenching from the gut. All Tate could think to say was "dear girl" over and over. At the apex of this awful swelling of stomach, these racking coughs, Alice asked that the car be pulled to the side of the two-laner. She spilled out of her door and coughed and coughed. The boy never moved forward in the rear seat, just watched through the window. Tate swung his legs out and seemed ineffectual. Finally, after a time, the coughing came under control and Alice could finally breathe. Although she could not get hold of her dizzy head or her sour stomach, she suspected her temperature was dropping. The clear August morning air was better than the leather stifle of the car. "Would you hand me my bag, please?"

The old man lifted the rucksack off the floor of the motorcar and came around the engine to Alice. He had nothing but genuine concern in his face. "Have you caught something?" he asked, a hand on her arm. The ex-clergy had flashbacks to India, to the Congo, to tending the natives and the migrants. Just as in his past, all his brave tales were fabrications to impress his congregation, and Tate desired nothing more than to flee the scene.

"No," she denied, "I'll be fine. And if I have a little cold, I don't want to give it to you or the boy, who have been so kind. You — you've gotten me very much closer. Thank you. Why don't I wait here for a bit. I can recover, I'm sure." Alice's brave face lasted only five minutes, long enough for Tate to be assured this course was for the best, and to drive off with the boy. Alice collapsed on the road and vomited twice in the brush. This affliction was so terrible and so sudden that she horribly regretted asking Tate to leave. She needed a doctor; she should have asked for one. (*And Tate should have known that, too, him not sick and having possession of rational sense — the coward; leaving me here.*) As the morning grew later and hotter, she forced herself to stand and dragged her rucksack behind, trying to make progress in some direction, any direction. I felt pity for her. Once on her feet, it was easier to spot cars on the road and for them to spot *her*.

I shouldn't sit down. I'll be invisible.

Once, she heard a lorry pass at a high speed while she was sick in the grass, but no more of that. She would die if she were not seen. She didn't want to disappear into a heap along the motorway. *Where would I be then?* 'Nine days left, nine days left,' she kept repeating in her mind, to keep her focused, but a few times she forgot the purpose of the count, her meeting under Southwark Bridge. *What happens in nine days?* Alice grew wildly paranoid and regretful. This sickness was justice for her theft of Colin's money. Maybe the money rightfully belonged to the boy — a gift, like Colin claimed. Sure, the boy looked criminal, but she had been mistaken before. He was not cruel to her. In fact, he had been quite respectful, despite his youthful appetite for bedding her. Maybe he had been an honest person, after all. Mind-in-muck, she vomited again, and this time blood came out.

What's happening to me?

She thought of the organist...

("Haven't... got the bloody plague, have I?")

She thought back to the church, but her mind was too much a jumble — dehydrated, with feverish thoughts and flashes in her eyes, she again found herself in Dorry Chapel. *Is the boy here? Is he here on this fateful Sunday?* No, it was not possible that the boy from Tate's car had been anywhere near Dorry. Not possible.

Am I dying?

No, it's too cruel. "Too cruel," she said aloud after wiping her beaded brow. *I can't have failed again — not twice. I'm just sick. I've got to recover fast or I'll never make it to...* She had forgotten her destination — and that name! The name the concierge had given her to meet! *And which bridge was it again? In which city?*

Alice wept in the gravel of the road, oblivious to everything around her, the fever becoming more and more consuming.

She didn't even realize that there was a man towering over her, the rising sun of morning flaring his tall figure. From his back, three more men splintered the silhouette and stood beside their motorcar, looking uneasy.

She heard their heavy American voices:

"Christ, Sonny, she shore is sick!" said the first.

"Don't go near 'er now," cautioned the second.

"Not bad enough we get robbed dis morning, but now we gots to play nurse to some hitchhiker?" added the third, frustrated. "Dat ain't right. *I'm* going back to Paris where things are cool. Nobody there getting us into dis trouble." His tone was a balance of whimsy and fright.

The last to speak was the man closest to Alice — the one above, whose tall and loping body shaded her from the sun. He bent, hands on knees, which gave a crack in the bones, and put his warm and callused fingers to her chin, forcing her eyes to meet his. "I've seen her b'fo," said the man in milky voice, "This is a woman from the hotel. I asked her tha time."

In the haze of the road, they continued to shuffle. A question came from one of the other men: "What's she doing out here, then? Dat hotel was fer swells. Dey wouldn't just drop a woman in da middle a' nowhere."

The saxophonist shook his head. "Don't know." He again raised up and gave an appraisal. "We got to get her to a doctor. Dex, clear some room in the back of the car, will ya?"

Dex gave a grumble, but went to work moving the traps and the horns to the already overstuffed boot. "Windy, Cliff, you give me a hand," Dex called out as he did the work, breaking a sweat and tiring of being the laborer.

Putting one arm under Alice's knees and another to support her neck, the saxophonist lifted the sick woman, not caring for her smell or her condition, only that she be moved off the hot tar into the comfort of their car. (*No one even noticed the dropped rucksack, stuffed with money, which was ten meters down the slide.*) Halfway to the car door, Alice opened her eyes and asked, "Why am I sick?"

The sax player looked down, surprised. "Oh — well... s'pose you got a bug, that's all. We'll getcha help, little lady. Don't you fear." As she was placed in the rear, a wave of moans came from the other three, aware of the odor and the possibility of contagion. Clifford looked for something she could throw up in, if needed. In the truest of their thoughts, though, the men knew she looked beyond all that. Those were just symptoms, overcoming her skin and her organs, her face and even her hair, as brittle as confetti. She was burning out. Fast. Rumbles continued from the men as the sax player eased Alice's feet onto the mat and he gave a soft pat to her cheek.

She asked a final question:

"Tell me," she said, "tell me who wrote *'Life Is A Puzzle.'*"

Snickers came from the men — all but the biggest one.

"Why, she's a music lover!" said Dex, glad to have a least one thing on this long morning to laugh about. "Great start to a' tour, huh, Sonny?"

The young boy they called 'Windy' began to hum the melody of "*Life Is A Puzzle*," adding sugar to the saccharine. Clifford tapped the song's rhythm on the car's boot. They were letting out the air, the tension, to their frustrating fix. The sax player remained stoic by Alice's side, sensing the question was more than delirium. It was a key to something.

He spoke what he knew:

*"That song,"
he told her, "was written by me,
Sonny Royce."*

This stopped them cold — the three black musicians froze in their shoes, two with mouths dropped and the one of the men becoming a nail-biter. Alice opened her eyes wide for the first time. Sonny turned to his stunned bandmates and added, "Dat's right. I wrote it when I first come to Europe in '49."

Dex moved forward. "I thought that was one by some nobody working at a publishing house. Or maybe Georgy Ray, as a joke." Dex then looked to his two friends standing beside the car. Both nodded in confirmation — everyone at the scene knew the rumors. Aficionados of jazz, the critics, the lovers, all had spoken. *The song is by a hack, I tell ya, a company man. Too fluff to be by a real jazzman.*

"Nope," said Sonny with certainty, "I had that melody and it seemed bigger than me. It didn't fit. I wrote that tune and Desmond Havre sold it. He suggested I go anonymous. Didn't wanna kill my career in Europe — thing weren't quite my style, see. Turned out it was so popular, it could have made me. Ah, but there'd be no way I'd write more like it. One of a kind, that melody. I wrote every word myself on a scrap of butcher paper while sittin' at my kitchen table. Keep it under wraps, will ya, boys?" He waited until they nodded in agreement, each still adding the pieces together. Sonny went back to his patient. "It's no time to be talking about who wrote what," he redirected, "we've got to get this lady to a doctor. She looks *more* than sick."

And this was true. Alice's face became serene, the face of a corpse, although her heart was beating. She had failed again, but at least she learned something. She would have to leave a note in the tunnels to be found — *a note, yes...* Sonny Royce, a man she had never heard of before, but had managed to find her, not once, but twice, was, in fact, the author of that marker song. Alice Pravel had accomplished her mission.

There are no coincidences, only patterns yet to be sensed.

In repayment, she gave Sonny Royce her own clue. "Audrey Green," said Alice, and she was off, never to find her way back through the tunnels again.

TWO

THE PLAGUE BOY, DISCOVERED

In the spring of 1915, near the corner of Haymarket and Panton Streets, just off Piccadilly Circus, London, a boy was sighted by Doctor Reginald Carlyle, a good man of thirty-three years called to assist a young female patient. As the doctor wound the corkscrew staircase up to the girl's flat, he noticed that he was being watched.

Stone-faced against a street lamp stood a boy, white and ghostly. The doctor's medical instincts were triggered. However, before he could get much more of an appraisal, the boy ran off down the street. Dismissing the lad, the doctor knocked on the door to the apartment.

She's very sick. She can't leave the bed. Can you visit?

...said the note written by Emily Jackson's flatmate.

Carlyle's first diagnosis was pneumonia, and it would be the one that would make the newsagents. In truth, the doctor began to suspect very early in his examination a much rarer malady. The girl remained pretty, even in her state, having wavy red hair and pouty lips. Shoes and a box of dance cards sat in the corner of her bedroom. The flatmate confirmed that Miss Jackson was a dancer at a local hall. "She must have caught something from the men," said the flatmate with a wink, supposing the affliction to be venereal in nature. A test for syphilis did not produce any findings. Emily Jackson coughed and vomited, yet somehow was able to remain afloat, being in such good health prior. Carlyle decided against hospitalization because he feared moving her — dangerous, it was, because the disease might spread to other patients, and impractical due to a shortage of beds. He posted a male clerk from his office at the girl's door to keep away the nosy.

Knowing that time was critical, the doctor, along with two colleagues, visited the place of Emily Jackson's employment, Max's Dance Revue. The small and stuffy

dance hall was brimming with sailors on leave from the fighting in France. They danced awkwardly with young girls in frilly dresses who kissed them for tip money. During the excursion, the owners treated Carlyle suspiciously. He tried to ask basic questions about symptoms, recollections of any unusual dance partners — men emitting signs of strangeness — or men speaking of travels to India and the Far East. After all, this white-hot fever and coughing were indicative of several known afflictions of the Turkish conflicts. A soldier could have brought the worst home to London. Mention of Max's being the start point of such a fire made the owners bristle, and they almost refused — even after the threat of a police enquiry — to give the doctor any leads at all.

As the three physicians were leaving, irritated and consulting over which authorities to alert, the ball-fisted doorman made an off-handed admission: "Emily, she danced with a boy t'uther night, and if ye ask me opinion, 'e didn't look right at'all."

Carlyle bent his ear away from the voices and music of the hall so he could better hear. "What's that? A boy, you say?"

"'e slipped past me while I throwin' out a scrapper, one too drunk fer 'is own good."

"What age would you guess?" asked the second doctor.

"Ten?" said the doorman, in estimation. This got a rise from the three doctors. The doorman continued to think. "White as white in de face." (He swept his hand over his own nose.) "'e jist crossed the floor and went into Em's arms. Couldn't dance a peck. We had a laugh o'er 'im, being short and a babe, and then he slipped out. Musta been an orphan."

The three doctors thanked the rough and continued onto the street. Carlyle told the others of seeing just such a boy outside Emily Jackson's flat. The physicians agreed to notify the attending clerk, as well as any neighbors, to be on the lookout for this child. The boy should try to be detained, if found. At the very least, he might provide a

clue to the origins of the disease, or, at best, a possible cure.

Early the following morning, it was discovered that Miss Jackson had died. The undertakers wanted a cause to type on the certificate, and there was heated discussion among the three doctors over a quarantine. Arguments from both sides were heard, but ultimately it was decided to give the incorrect cause as "death by pneumonia" to appease the mortician and avoid a panic. Their decision was based on the fact that Miss Jackson's flatmate did not appear to have any symptoms, nor did anyone else who came into contact with the boy that night at Max's. This proved to be the right course, as there were no more immediate cases reported.

Periodically, when he could spare time away from his practice, Doctor Carlyle would search for the boy. He was hoping to find him against that same post so that he could capture him and get a sample of his blood. Yet this was not to be as he never saw the boy again. Being thorough in his profession, Carlyle made mention of the boy to anyone who might listen. He wanted to saturate the doctors, nurses, and hospitals with the knowledge that a carrier, in the form of a young boy, may exist in London, and that if there was rumor of his potential involvement in any strange death, Carlyle wanted to be notified immediately.

Between 1914 and 1923, he had six such reports. Each victim was wholly different – in age, in occupation, in prosperity, in propensity. The doctor could find no link between the six. The only commonality was that each death had a corresponding witness to a white-faced boy, someone between the ages of eight and twelve, who appeared between one and two days prior, made contact with the deceased, and then disappeared. Carlyle conducted rounds at the orphanages and public houses, the immigration offices and the Child Wellness Board. There was nothing. They saw a hundred boys a day, now that the Great War had ended — boys who had lost entire families in the shelling on France or Germany. Carlyle even involved a few personal acquaintances in the constabulary, all to no avail.

The boy was simply a harbinger, a phantom. If the doctor had not seen the boy for himself on the street outside of Emily Jackson's, he would think it a fairy tale, conjured from urban squalor.

In 1931, when all suspicious deaths had subsided and this "Plague Boy," as he had come to be called, mutated into an unsubstantiated legend among the impoverished, fifty-year-old Reginald Carlyle published an article of his limited findings in the *Evening Standard*. Instead of being placed within the medical section of the paper, as was requested, it ran in the gossip pages. *Oh well*, thought the doctor, concern over his reputation long abated, *at least they printed something...*

Two days after publication, he received a letter:

Doctor Carlyle:

I've just finished reading your article, "Is There A Murderer In London?" in this evening's Standard, and I must applaud your bravado. To declare that a boy, who appears as Death himself to take his victims, is the cause of a fatal disease, would be very out-of-fashion with these modern times...

(Here, Carlyle almost crumpled the paper and threw it into the grate. He had had enough of insults.)

So, with this in mind, I must tell you that you are correct about the boy. There are even cases caused, I believe, by his involvement which you fail to mention in your article. You may already have these details in your journals but withheld them from publication. I've enclosed nine more obituaries for your review, just in case. They are all the work of the boy. Please, continue your studies, as you may be one of the few

to raise awareness of the Plague Boy, efforts helpful to those who may best benefit. I, alas, cannot be the one to ring the alarm, as I have a personal involvement in the matter. Rest assured, you are on the right course. Stay true!

It was signed, *Doctor Robby Holliday*.

Carlyle kept the letter. He even reviewed the nine death notices enclosed in the envelope. In time, he, too, came to the conclusion that they were all the work of the Plague Boy. Checking the lists of physicians in and about London, Carlyle could find no mention of a Doctor Robby Holliday. The name was also unfamiliar to his friends in the medical community. Perhaps he was an army doctor. Those records would be more difficult to obtain, as he had no connections in the military. If it weren't for the information regarding the nine cases, Carlyle would have thought the correspondence a sham. However, once one comes to believe that there is a boy spreading a strange and highly specific disease, killing only one in every million residents like some on-the-loose strangler, it is easy to believe in a simple letter.

In 1937, Doctor Carlyle was killed in a motorcrash. He never got a chance to meet the man who sent him the letter. In fact, the name Robby Holliday would fizzle in the minds of every man Carlyle told it to. The discoveries of the Plague Boy would be thrown out with the rest of the lonely doctor's belongings. Even the two physicians who had been to Max's Dance Revue would not be interested in the reports. Both were killed in separate incidents while serving in Spain, and the Congo, respectively. When Robby Holliday finally became known for his work in germs, his investigations had already taken a different and far more secretive course...

WEATHER REPORTS

"How d'you know so much about it, then?" said the scruffiest of the bunch, Lester O'Neill, as he tipped his pint into his lip and beard, spilling the head and leaving the foam to stain the brush.

The narrow man at the end of the boards took two steps forward. He had them; he knew it and liked it. He had never been a performer. Attempts at anything other than cruel subterfuge were all fancy, and detected as such. The tick of the lip, the twitch of the fingers, the hiding of the eyes — these were in easy evidence when he was lying. Now, armed with the only truths he knew, this storyteller had a *command* of his audience, and he appreciated that theatrical power known so well by the Shakespeareans of the Royal Company. "I know this," said the speaker, "because I have worked very hard to discover it. There are always traces, detectable, if you put your mind to it. The history of that boy is just one of many mysteries. I cannot describe the other discoveries I have made, as they would crush you, this knowledge. As it nearly did me."

Keith Harwood hung his head, and then let his bottom slide from the cradle of his bar stool. A rumbled laugh started from the middle of his chest. "Bloody good tale, stranger, and I appreciate the tellin'. But none of it true now, izzit? Boy wandering England, making people sick, sought by doctors and the like? And not' a' one done caught 'im? Not bloody likely." This counter argument received a few nods from the dozen men in the room, including Lester O'Neill, who raised his mug. The stranger took a step back to give Keith space. Keith tightened his fists as if beginning a boxing match, but put them down before the idea settled and the wind shifted. The logger was trying his tongue tonight, not his knuckles; he did not want to be misunderstood. Besides, if he chose a brawl, this thin man speaking would be flat in a quarter-second. No challenge there. "Ain't that right?" Keith asked rhetorically, receiving another set of bobbing heads. "Iffin' he were a

true thing — the boy — he'd a' been sought out n' burned. We wouldn't have it, see? Boy may'a not have ever made the papers, like ya said, 'cept once or twice, yet that don' mean the street kin't hear it? The people got a will, and they'd find the child... and they'd kill 'im." Keith humphed; his point was made.

The stranger scratched behind his ear. "I had thought of that as well," he said. "This boy has been seen by respectable sources. Clearly by that Doctor Carlyle, but also by others. These men had no reason to lie, in fact the opposite. If their careers were of any concern to them, they'd keep their mouths shut. I know a thing or two about that. Carlyle and the others were intelligent sorts. Reliable. If they were to declare it, why then it was so. I believe that. And, the *will of the people* has nothing to do with it. The people heard tales of the boy, yes, but didn't possess the skills to capture him. Without any evidence, he's just a legend. There would not be mobs in the streets searching for a *phantom*." The stranger retreated to a seat at the farthest table, under the shaky spiral staircase that led from the lower room into the storage loft above. He concluded, "Don't doubt me. My story is true. *There's a boy in England who makes people sick*. Some die slow, some die quick. He's no fairy tale. He's not a myth. And he's *very* selective of his victims, as precise as a tattooist. Needle and blood."

Keith returned to his stool at the bar and ordered another pint. It was his fifth since arriving at half-past ten. It was going on midnight and he was showing no signs of slowing.

The other men in the room were letting these conflicting theories bounce around a bit, Keith Harwood versus the stranger. They contemplated the pinprick nature of the thing. The odds were starting to be calculated.

Barney Falton threw a dart at one of the three boards against the wall, and the subsequent pivot and drop to the ground, the point unstuck, caused heads to turn in startled irritation.

The barkeep, a thick and curly haired tough with rolls of flesh spilling out of his wet smock and over his belt, helped himself to his first whiskey of the night, his promise to stop raiding the stocks broken.

Three long minutes passed — about a quarter of the time it had taken the stranger to spin his yarn. He had started on the tale of the boy shortly after introducing himself and ordering one pint, which sat untouched by his side on the table. The small talk he had begun with now seemed so insignificant, trivial and boring when compared with the heart of the matter — the boy and the killings. *What had started the stranger talking? How did he even introduce such a thing?* Surely it had not gone from weather reports to death — *snap*, like that. What had been the dark impetus that was navigator to their minds? None of the men could recall (at least those who were trying, those not yet in the bag...)

Just when this cloud seemed to be starting to pass and the boys were ready once more, in their bones, to resume their usual cockfights of Friday drunkenness, lighter conversations of ugly wives and prettier girlfriends, the stranger made one final stab...

"I believe the boy will be here tonight."

Keith slammed his mug down on the wood. "That's just bloody conk, fella, and ya knows it. There ain't no such thing as a *Plague Boy!*" (Harwood's face did not seem as stone as his words. He once more wrestled out of his chair to cover the shiver.) "Shut yer hole — hear me? I enjoy a good tale 'er two 'round the pub, but don't go driving away business — aw, Dollet, why you getting your coat like that?"

It was true: the youngest of the twelve men had bunched the scruff of his coat collar with his wide hand and was pulling the garment from the chair-back, where it had been hanging. "I've got to get 'ome. Late, 'tis, Keith."

Keith's eyes went to the spider-clogged clock and its white face, the hands turning, tacked with a nail behind the bar. Nearly midnight.

"Promised the wife," Freddie Dollet went on, not stopping his preparations as he slipped an arm into the sleeve of his coat. He was minding the hour a little too closely this night. Usually the first out, he was, but never as bad as this. Keith knew it; Dollet knew it; so did all the rest. "I sees ya maybe tomorrows, then, as aowl-ways."

Keith put up his hands in mock surrender. As Dollet passed, a mate named Mosley gave him a hard smack between the shoulder blades to send him on his way. It was a sharp hit, but not criminal. A few of the men laughed. Even Dollet turned and smiled. He knew his next visit to the pub would be a pricey, if there were to be no Plague Boy. It was a risk Dollet had to assume. Maybe he would skip coming Saturday, the next night, (a choice many others would make) and stay home with his family. A tip of his hat and he was out the squeaking door of the Marsden Mill, disappearing into the black beyond. Summer's wind came behind and cleared the stuffiness of the room. The remaining men sucked in the air and then lit fresh cigarettes. All except Keith and the stranger.

"Anyone else wanna leave?" asked Keith, assuming position as captain on this treasonous ship. His tone kept a few weak ones down. But, for the most part, the men wanted to watch how this played. To see if the stranger was good on his promise of a boy was more interesting than the typical crowing. Keith turned on the stranger. "A drink for the man," he offered, swiping a finger back to the tender. "On me." As it was prepared, he walked to the dark corner and pulled around a nearby chair, which needed screws and buckled hard as Keith planted down. "You deserve my respect, there, squire. You have made this an interestin' night. It's not often we get a newcomer at the Mill, but when we do they ain't nearly as *interestin'*. Most don' know what they're in for. We can be a little... territorial, like. Tell ya wot, have ya got money?"

The stranger straightened his jacket, but did not look afraid. "Yes," he answered.

Keith raised an eyebrow. "Bold of ya ta admit it."

The stranger moved forward and said with confidence, "I've wrung two necks in my lifetime. I have no qualms about ringin' a third."

"Is that a fact?" Keith nodded with a down-turned mouth. He was neither frightened nor very amazed.

"So I wouldn't suggest trying to rob me."

Keith patted the man's knee. "No, no. 'Course not. Like I said: You 'ave impressed me. I don' impress easily. Ask any of these lads — " (finger to the lads) "See, whats I had in mind was a little wager." The barkeep came to the table and placed Keith offered drink between the two men. Slowly, he backed away. Keith lowered his chin, and raised his eyes. "The boy comes in that door like you said, I pay you... say... ten quid? If there's no boy by morning — 'cos that's how long we usually stay a'drinkin' — then..." Keith rubbed his thumb and forefinger so close to the stranger's ear that he could hear the callused friction. "A quick ten quid for me."

The stranger stood into the lamplight and smiled down to the seated Keith Harwood. "If the boy comes in that door... you won't be alive for me to collect..."

A knock came at the door of the Marsden Mill.

The men turned to the entrance, away from Harwood and the stranger. A few eyes went to the clock. *A minute past the hour.* Adam's apples moved in throats. Keith looked up to the stranger — even *he* took a swallow. The barkeep reached under the ledge and grabbed fast hold of something. The muscles in his exposed arm — sleeves-rolled — tightened and bulged. Barney Falton gripped the second dart he was about to let sail and turned the point out as a weapon. Lester O'Neill rotated his thick beer glass and calculated how far he could throw it. And the men wondered why they had never asked if the Mill had a back door...

Another knock, and
a crack
to the wood
as it

opened up.

Revealing a young face —

which they all recognized.

"Blight!" said Keith in an angry rush of breath. "What's the bloody idea of knockin', ye bastard!" He then couldn't help but laugh, and this made the others do the same. Nervous release flooded them, and even the thin stranger grinned. The door came fully open and in stepped a young lad in his early twenties, who had dirty hair and wore a surplus military coat, green, too heavy for this summer of 1958. "Wot?" he said, revealing a voice ten years younger than the youngest of the other men, but cut from that same patchy cloth — hard years, low income, a fighter.

Lester O'Neill came right up and shook his hand. "Colin Blight! 'Tis a pleasure, 'tis a pleasure."

Colin cocked his head. "Are ye all sotted? Yer actin' mighty strange. Expecting the constable?" This got a loud laugh — an uncomfortably loud one. Colin shook off the regulars with a wave and made a putter with his mouth. Swinging the door, he gave a hand to the black night. "I've brought a mate with me. Wanted to gives you all warning. That's why I entered slow, came in first. S'allright if I bring him in? I know how you blokes are with new blood."

The laughter stopped. The lads were no longer amused.

"You're *with* someone?" asked Roger Trawley. *The boy!* his thoughts jumped. The dairyman was the nearest to the door and couldn't see a body past the crack.

Colin Blight became even more confused. He didn't like their jitters, very unlike the regulars at the Mill. He had walked into something unexpected. "S'allright, ain't it? Fresh face to brighten the place? The Mill's got its reputation, but, fer this mate we're gonna go easy. Treat 'im friendly now. Bit of a celebrity."

Keith spun his chair around in anticipation of an entrance, feigning open arms. (The thin stranger in the corner saw through to this move's true purpose — the chair

had become a makeshift barricade for Harwood.) The logger gave a wave in towards his body, ready now. "Bring 'im in."

"Is it a boy?" two of the men asked fast, stepping forward, hands out.

Colin held. "You're all bloody *drunk*, aren't you? 'ad a bit a' bad liquor?" He wagged his finger at them as a cross schoolteacher. "Come on, come on. Admit it. You've done yerselves in now, haven't you? A bit early for all that, aye? No, I haven't brought no boy, but this gentleman *here* — " Colin reached back into the night and returned holding the jacket arm of a very tall and very comfortable man who held a small suitcase. He was a Negro, with gray hair in the temples of his short cut, wearing a plain coal-colored jacket with narrow lapels and a white shirt underneath. His tie was a knotted half-Windsor, American in style, pulled loose so it hung in the middle of his chest. "This," said Colin in introduction, "is the great *Sonny Royce*. He's come ta drink. He played ta'night at the Vic, and, like us, he ain't one fer quittin' early."

Sonny Royce gave a nod and a "How y'all doin'?" to the patrons of the Marsden Mill. Taking a few steps inside, he laid his case on the end of the bar and took the empty stool next to where Keith Harwood had originally been planted. He was always at ease in pubs. He was cool with the roughs, too, despite their unusual mood.

Keith turned to the first stranger to get a gauge if he was disappointed that, despite all the baiting, the boy had not arrived. "Looks like you might owe me ten quid," he whispered, ambling back to the spot where his drink rested. Keith finished it fast and ordered another. Through this bravado, the thin man knew that the night was far from ended. He wished he had thought to whisper something back.

You're doomed.
Every one of you.

IS IT HIM?

The stranger heard them rattle, as restless bones in unearthed coffins. Their ugly, disgusting chortles — given over for Sonny Royce's blue jokes and folksy tales — were deafening in the tiny enclosure of the Mill, which seemed to shrink, as did Rob Holl, into his unlit corner. Holl knew the motive for this merriment. It was antidote; it was sun in the clouds, clearing the overcast nature of the Plague Boy and all his implications. Holl was certain that Keith Harwood's wager — *the boy before dawn* — was remembered, filed for collection later by the threat of a fist. *That's all right.* Holl was as sure of it as he breathed. *That fool will be the loser tonight.* This distraction is only temporary. This new arrival won't save anyone...

After an hour, Royce was being coaxed to drag a saxophone from his instrument case — that suitcase by his side when he entered the Mill — to play for this audience of drunkards.

"He's a jazzman," offered Colin Blight, Sonny Royce's younger guide to the hidden Mill. "He played ta'night at the ballroom and was a real killer, he was. Here, show 'em, Sonny — " (*Colin gave a rather hard pat to the suitcase that Sonny had laid on the bar, causing the black man to make a tight face at the slap.*) "Play 'em a tune," Colin goaded, and, for a second, it was difficult to tell if Colin's motives were of a friend or foe. There was a certain heat coloring his compliments.

"All'right, then," agreed the graying musician. He undid the clasps of the case and pulled out his instrument. As the muscles in the musician's neck flexed and the wind went from lung to valve, Holl, in his chair, wished he were closer to the player's neck. *Close enough to strangle.* The noise from the horn was...

too...
loud.

It put elements in the air that didn't belong. The tune was a pub song, and the small audience swayed in appreciation of the choice, whiskey glasses and beer mugs stuck between their hips and lips. (Royce was winning them over. This *American* — who made them weave in their baskets, a trick for the tourists — would have his soon enough. This *American* — who drank as they drank, hard and fast, would not be immune to the boy's arrival. These thoughts gave Holl the patience he needed to pass the time.) As the music played on, Holl drifted in memory to the evening's birth, when that same horn first sounded in his ears...

At the time, he was making his way from the train station to the center of town, distracted by his mission. Then he heard the wafting blow of a horn and the accompanying jazz band, permeating the air of this small town of Marsden.

The Victory, lit the lights —
a ballroom off the town square...

Holl avoided the waiting crowd at the front. It might be dangerous to be seen. He couldn't risk being noticed by someone *involved*. An alley beside the adjacent flower shop was quiet and dark enough for him to slip past and get closer without committing to an entrance. The music kept on — piano, kit, upright, and saxophone — flowing out of the ballroom doors and transoms, luring him like a siren. A part of him rationalized the excursion: he had time; the Mill would not be open yet; he must discover the reason for his attraction to the sound. Nothing is random — everything has meaning and must be observed. He had learned these tricks, if nothing else.

Holl put his hands along the sideboards of the building and felt them shake with the steps of dancers and the booming address system. Making his way further into the dark, he found a wide pipe ending near a window on the upper floor. He tested his footing and swept back his tweed coat. Once up the pipe, twelve meters off the ground, Holl fumbled to raise the window and found it opened easily,

enough to fit his thin body. A leg in, then a shove, had Holl straddling the ledge and the interior floor. He dropped and was fully inside the upper quadrant.

Light from a crack in the opposite door led down the stairwell — a single bulb, dangling, he could see it. It was all he had for navigation. A scan of the surroundings helped him to know his footing. He was in the corner of a darkened bedroom. *The caretaker's*, he surmised, but then revised his supposition. This was the owner's own hovel. A line of dancing shoes, paired and exact, held the ground beside the dressing table. *Man's* shoes. (He discovered a knocked-over water glass on the table underneath the window. He must have hit it as he climbed inside the room. The room-temperature water dotted his splayed hand, but the numbness of his skin disguised the sensation. Holl shook his sleeve dry but did not right the glass.) By a crack of the door, he tried to see down the stairs. This revealed nothing, however, and he heard the end of a song, the jazz combo coming to full stop and grind, leading into the loud applause of a hundred clapping hands — the patrons, satisfied.

When a voice came, distorted through an imperfect microphone, Rob Holl reflexively jumped:

"Thank you very much — you are too kind." The applause trickled off. "We're going to play one more numba for you this set. We hope you enjoyed me and the boys. It's been our pleasure to play for you. On dis last ditty, I'd like to do a dedication. This is for a little friend of mine. Every night, I keep hopin' she'll show her pretty face..." Long pause. (Holl craned forward past the jamb...) *"Anyway,*

*this
is for
Audrey Green."*

Rob Holl was stupefied. A siren indeed. Here was the rush — the realization! There was someone else seeking her. Someone else! Equal parts disaster (*another body in the race, another Olympian to out-run*) and titillation (*what does he know that I don't, and how can I find out?*) polluted Holl's bloodstream.

And it still was there. The poison.

Strangle him, yes. That sounded good.

At last, the drinking song hit a final chorus, mumbled by the men in the room, happy. Sonny Royce ended with a flurry of notes from his saxophone and took a bow to smattered applause, the mere phantom of the hours-gone crowd of his ballroom gig, but appreciative nonetheless. There were several "hear, hears" and a few lads patted Royce on the shoulder. The jazzman seemed humble, and grateful as he gently rested his horn back in the red velvet padding of his instrument case. The hinge stayed open as if the horn was still burning and shouldn't be out of sight until the sparks had died down. Holl had not detected any degeneration in Royce's performance. Ten whiskeys beyond the early evening show, Royce did not display any of the predicted stammer and sway in his playing. His speech, however, was starting to slow. "That... kind, you folks, real kind." He turned to the barkeep. "A round. On me." Royce thumped his chest and pulled out a single five-pounder, which he laid on the wood to be snatched up, the drinks readied.

The barkeep pushed the money back and did his job anyway, setting up the boys. "Save yer money," said the thick-armed man. "You paid us plenty." This was the right thing to do, for there were respectful nods from the drinkers. Even Colin seemed to melt a bit at the gesture. He smiled his first genuine tug — more real than his forced laughter of an hour earlier, guffawing over jokes and much-too-hard attempts to ingratiate. *It wasn't that the boy wanted to be a lap dog; no, quite the opposite*, thought Holl in his observations. He watched the dynamic closely. Holl

calculated that this Colin wanted the jazzman to *fail*. Ridicule, or violence, was a possible intention when the young man swung the door wide and first entered the creaky Mill. But this plan had been tabled — not yet completely out of consideration, but fading. Holl hated this sort of compassion. He would never be so placable.

The hour struck three. Four of the men departed — tight from hours of putting it away, wives setting curfews more giving than Freddie Dollet's, but in existence just the same. A game of cards began between three men, two seemingly too blind drunk to win. Ignoring their state, they continued to bet small coins against insignificant hands and lost in rotating bouts of bad luck. Harwood, his own evening's bet already placed, did not join in the game. His wager was on the table: *the boy at dawn*.

Holl thought it odd that Harwood was completely ignoring him. At the end of the bar, Keith rested on his elbows and talked with Lester O'Neill, Sonny, and Colin in revolving cahoots and arms around shoulders. Not once did the heavy-fisted leader turn a glance to the corner, where Rob Holl had stayed immobile, his drink sitting full on the round table in front of him. Even the condensation on the dirty glass had soaked the table and subsequently evaporated into the air. A piece of furniture, he was. Invisible. He liked it that way. He could just observe.

Two more men departed, a man named Jimmy and another they called Clay at one turn and Phil the next. Holl was confused until the man went to leave, and someone shouted, "G'night, there, Clay Philpot." Philpot grinned and shut the door behind him, in respectful appraisal and with good nature. There was a pinging in Holl as this Philpot — a man of roughly fifty years, paunch stomach, stooped shoulders and heavy beard, wearing petrol station overalls — left their company. It had been this Clayton Philpot, with a deck of playing cards, now at use in the corner game, who had been performing tricks for the crowd — the man was some kind of amateur magician, expert at sleight-of-hand, a Houdini; it had also been Clayton Philpot who said the first words to the stranger, Rob Holl — a bit friendly, a bit close.

('Hello, mate — come in and have a drink.') *Entertaining night, these men have had*, Holl thought in time-killing contemplation. *First some sort of prestidigitation from a local, then my tale of the boy, and last the sugary tunes and dirty jokes of Sonny Royce. Well, their pleasantries would be over soon enough. Methinks.* Holl became grand in his safe position of the dark.

Philpot's exit left behind a little over half the men. Two at cards; five by the bar; and Rob Holl.

An hour until sunrise.

The barkeep tossed one of the card players out into the woods. He had best get home, lest he die of blood poisoning. It was one-part Good Samaritan — pub ethics — and one part rude kick in the arse. Holl wondered how many men got too drunk to find their way back to the path and woke up with their trousers soiled in the surrounding woodlands. At the next tossing, Holl got his answer. "Remember to follow the stream there, Donny, or you'll be picking berries outta yer ears come sun-up!" This advice, given with a shout out the door just before shutting, proved that the barkeep had probably spent many a morning foraging for his customers, and was devising a system. *Pattern detection*, mused Rob Holl, *even in the densest sort of man*. The last card player was saying his own farewells, his game cut short by the condition of his competitor.

At the stroke of the hour, the barkeep turned to the last men standing. "I'm rung," he stated, with a sigh. "Wot if I head out?" he asked the room. It was put as a question for debate.

The men gauged each other's faces. Keith Harwood spoke first, not even looking in Holl's direction, though the stranger was the subject. "I've got business," he said, "so when it's done I can lock up fer ya. Just leave me tha key." Keith gave a nod, as if it were settled.

The barkeep held for a moment, thinking. Agreeing, but not saying so aloud, he turned and pulled a heavy brass key from under the bar and placed it into Harwood's waiting hand. As a last measure of protection, he took a ruler to the whiskey bottles behind the bar and marked the spot

with hard tack, a scratch, unable to be erased. "Don't go over yer share," he said in caution. "And don't let there be any trouble, ya hear." It was good for Holl to hear this tone of parental admonishment, said to someone equally tough but twice as round and two feet taller. There was a trust there somewhere, or this exchange would not be happening. Holl had forgotten all about trust.

Yet as the barkeep zipped his jacket and placed his hood over his balding head, Colin moved forward into their circle. "I'm gonna go," he announced suddenly. He turned to Sonny Royce. "Pleasure. See yas, there, Royce, me mate." The boy's eyes were blurry and red. He was as soused as the rest of them, maybe moreso. He had been holding his own for quite long enough. He wanted to leave the Mill before declining in their estimation by becoming a babbling bore. Colin slapped Royce on the back and the musician spun atop the end stool. The touch was the same Colin had used when he slapped the saxophone case, only this time it was not disrespectful. Instead, it was the most sober gesture he had made in an hour, and he gave the older man a look of genuine respect, that early heat burned away. Colin heeled in the direction of the door.

"I'm stayin'," declared the barkeep just as Colin's foot hit the threshold. "Changed me mind." And just like that, he took off his jacket and hood and plopped down in his spot behind the bar. "Want to sees the end of this one." He gave a nod to Harwood, the standing bet remembered. With a tick, he stood up again. "But first I have to go to the toilet. Back quick." The barkeep laid his unsteady feet on the creaking floorboards and headed for the stall behind the staircase — no more than a pot and a pull chord. The toilet had been overused that night, but as he passed the seated Rob Holl, he tried to remember if he had ever seen this stranger make a trip. The barkeep sniffed and pulled the handle shut.

Colin's mind was not, by nature, as undecided as the bartender's. He was going; that was that. The decision made, he had to preserve himself for the Saturday coming. He often spent daylight in bed, recovering, before heading

off to tend his own bar station at the Victory Ballroom, where he worked evenings. This night had been too long already. He still had Winsey Green on his mind, although his jealousy about her leaving the ballroom in the company of Sonny Royce, with whom she had danced, fizzled. Royce — as Colin became intuitively aware — was not trying to be Winsey Green's lover, as Colin was. The man's intentions were otherwise — not yet known — but Colin's concerns over this lack of information were buried deep beneath the drink. He had a foot out into the dark night, a wave goodbye already in motion.

Royce moved off his stool —

Harwood saw this move by the jazzman and chimed in, "You're staying, too, right? We's just getting started." Keith tried to infuse his tone with sadness.

Royce put up a finger. "Just a sec." He snapped his instrument case shut. "I'm staying," he said in a mumble to his chest, taking a good grip of the handle and letting the case fall from its place on the bar to a spot near his kneecap. "I just want to give this to that kid, see?" Moving out of the Mill and toward the creek, Royce was beyond Holl's sight-range.

Holl finally stood and made his presence known. He wanted to see where the jazzman was going. There was a crack in his knees, and the scrape of his chair legs against the rotting wood of the Mill. Keith Harwood turned to the sound; so did Lester O'Neill. "Awake, are we?" asked the bigger man, and gave a tick of his finger to Lester in appreciation. O'Neill looked for a moment, then turned back to the door. Footsteps could be heard on the path, returning. The trample ended at the door's arch.

Sonny Royce, now without his instrument case, held before them at the entrance. "He'll take care of her," said Sonny with a nod, referring to Colin and Sonny's precious possession. "Working at the ballroom I'll know where to find him if he's a damn fool criminal. Don't want to be weighed down by the case tonight. Let's get another drink." Sonny reached for the tap to pull a pint, but found that it

had been locked by the barkeep when he had not been looking.

"You'll have to use the jars," said O'Neill with a helpful lilt as he went behind the bar and dislodged a fresh bottle of whiskey from the shelving. He noticed the barkeep had not marked this one exact, and they could snitch without consequence. O'Neill got to work filling three shot glasses.

Sonny smiled and let his shoulders slump, satisfied. He was going to once more take his seat on the end stool when he noticed Rob Holl, standing in the bare light of the opposite end.

The black man jumped back, as if seeing a ghost, and asked, "Where did *he* come from?"

His voice was accusing, harsh, a brass-section stab in the lazy room.

Holl did not flinch, but the others did.

"Oh, him..." dragged Harwood between his lips.

"I was invisible, but now you can see me," declared Holl, in carnival jest, putting his hands under his jacket, fluffing his open waistcoat. "Or at least I must have been, as you didn't see me, did you?"

Harwood took the first poured shot from Lester's discovered bottle and turned on Holl, saying weakly, "I saw ya, I saw ya. Just too busy to go chattin'. What's it like, lurkin' there all this time, then? You kin't be havin' fun, mate, not a hint, right? Part of the bloody table."

The toilet door opened and the barkeep took their momentary attention. He gave a nod to Holl, as a pub owner would naturally for his patron, and returned to his rightful place by the bottles. He cleared the last two of O'Neill's shots, not even noticing that he wasn't the one who had poured them. Picking up his rag, he became aware of the broken conversation.

Holl moved closer to the three.

Sonny Royce took a step backward. The jazzman was frightened; this, Holl could understand. A passing stare went between the two men and, for a brief second, it was as

if the others — O'Neill, Harwood, and the barkeep — were already dead, not a part of this world at all.

Keith wanted a response to his question. "'ow's that, then, Mister? No answer, aye, there — what did you say your name was?"

Holl stayed his place, but turned his head to Keith.

"My name's Holl."

"Right, right — that's right. Ol' Holly. How do you feel nows, ol' Holly — nearly morning and no boy yet? You best have that ten quid on you, or you'll be right sorry you made that wager." Keith turned to Lester and gave a wink, which was returned. The big man spun around to Sonny, who was still wary. "Listen to this, Royce, this bloke here, before you showed, bet me ten quid that — "

Footsteps.

Above them.

In the attic of the Mill.

All five pairs of eyes went to the support slats.

One step, then another. Soft.

Holl walked slowly backward to the base of the spiral staircase, climbing the steps with his eyes. The hole at the top was black beyond. Harwood drank his whiskey and then quietly... very quietly... laid the glass back where he had found it on the bar. Lester was making calculations for weapons.

"Who's dat?" asked Sonny in a whisper.

No one answered him.

Two steps, then a third.

"Is it him?" asked O'Neill in a hush. "Is it the boy?"

Keith shook his head. "Probably rats." This was meant to have meat, but instead the words caught in Keith's throat and stayed as soft as the others' questions.

The barkeep echoed the guess, not attempting to defend the unhealthy condition of his dilapidated Mill. "Could be rats, ya."

O'Neill reached a hand over the bar, as if he might grab Rob Holl's arm, though he was much too far away for that. "You — step away from the stairs, will ya?" *(But Holl did not move. He, too, looked as scared as the rest. This was the moment Holl had been anticipating, and now, arrived, he was not so sure he wanted it.)* "Is it him?" O'Neill asked once more, before it started...

Whistling.

The lisping, tuneless gate of a child.

Sonny recognized the melody first, but the others caught it. No one said it, but the forced arrangements of a hundred dance bands clouded their head. *"Life Is A Puzzle."*

A GAME OF OPPOSITES

Sonny shivered so hard his shoulders rocked. It was indeed *his song*. Someone knew it and was calling to him. He thought of the dying woman on the road. It was a signal, yes. To the others in the Mill, it was just a wedding tune, but to the musician, the child whose mouth blew that melody wanted Sonny and *only* Sonny. The black man forced his shoe to take a step and the creak of the floor below made the three men, standing as compass points in the room, turn to see what he was attempting.

"I'll go," Royce volunteered.

He saw throats swallow. A second step in the direction of the spiral stairs, his palms were sweating and he rubbed them on the soft wool of his trousers. He reached the stairs. Looking into the rafters, the swirl into the pitch, the attic of the Mill, Sonny tested the strength of first metal step with his shoe. The bolts moaned, as seas buckling a ship. At his second step, Sonny's shoe sounded a "pang" on the frame, and the whistling...

stopped.

Sonny looked down at the others (for he was now a head taller on the stairs). There was a silent urging from them for him to go on. Their eyes all spoke it. Sonny went higher by three more steps. (Only four more steps to go, as the ceiling was fairly low in the Mill, and he would soon be through the rabbit hole.) Sonny got a whiff of the upper loft — dank, unwelcoming, with a tinge of stale marmalade.

The song began again, only softer now.

The child; a signal.

Into the dark went Sonny Royce, his head, then shoulders, then waist, then knees, then feet, swallowed by the dark hole.

Holl could hear the first firm steps made by the man as the boards buckled overhead. The thin man moved a few steps closer to Harwood, in case of a collapse. He didn't trust the Mill to hold, its weak, hurried construction.

Silence ensued.

The four men — Lester O'Neill, Keith Harwood, Rob Holl, and the barkeep — turned eyes and ears upward in dreaded anticipation.

Not one was watching the closed front door. Their attentions were taken by the exploration of the attic. If they would have looked, they would have seen...

The handle — turning...

The hinges sounded.

Harwood barked back at the door, "Bloody hell — go *away*."

Holl turned his head.

The others concentrated on the stairs.

The wood parted and a whiff of the morning air, starting to ripen, flushed through. O'Neill and the barkeep unglued their eyes from the spiral steps. Their annoyance at the prospect of a returning patron — wallet forgotten, a last bang — were swept away the moment they saw the white hand on the outer knob.

"It's the boy!" cried Lester O'Neill, panic rushing his bones. His hands gripped the rim of the bar. His face went from the white hand, to the growing sight of an arm, then over to Harwood, as leader.

Keith was out of advice, as he was the first to see the face. *The boy*. Eyes wider than a normal boy's, but not freakish, pale skin, simple shirt and trousers, a boy sought by the headmaster, late for primary, he was. His mouth without a frown or a smile. Hand — white as white and the rest of him drained, fearless, unwelcome.

"Bloody hell," Harwood let loose, his bet lost. He had a glimmer that this was a prank, a staged bit of Fagan and waif, and almost said so, but stopped. The look on Holl's face was not that of a flim-flam man — it was of dreaded fear and realization, matched with the others.

Holl knew the real circumstance, how desperate this was. He had expected the boy's arrival to be something else — he had counted wrong! His benefactor — that man in the graveyard — had misinformed him. *Where's the girl? Where was Audrey Green?* his head asked, calculating. *She was to be here, too. That was his experiment: the two together, a*

game of opposites... the Plague Boy and the girl. Audrey Green was —

"It's a trap!" he said, the meaning lost on the other two.

— in the attic! Saving Sonny Royce!

Holl took a step toward the stairs, the corkscrew up to the waterwheel his only hope. He had to get to Royce — he had to get near Audrey! Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the hapless barkeep drop into the furrow behind the bar, his last pint poured, the man infected. At the table, making a quick jump for the rail of the bar, Harwood went down in a heavy heap. Holl's instincts screamed: *The boy's working fast!* Lester O'Neill was trying to defend himself with a whiskey bottle, yanked hastily from the wood billow, ready to smash. It was a failure as the man was wavering, dizzy, starting to crumble. Holl padded his pocket for the map, and he had his first true understanding of the situation. *The map was gone from his jacket!* The map! He even had time to say it out — "The map!" — just as the spell took hold of him. As he felt his face falling to the dirty, splintered, rotten boards below the shaky stairs, Holl looked past his elbow to the boy. The phantom stood against the black trees and disappearing night, perfectly framed in the doorway of the Marsden Mill.

It was the last thing Rob Holl saw before entering the tunnels...

TRAVEL

She was a standout in the white tunnel, her strong but tiny hand pulling Sonny Royce, her red curls flying behind. The shoes she wore had hard heels and she clomped them down as she walked, hurrying but not quite sure enough of her steps to run. In the tunnel's roundness, the sounds her shoes made were enormous; even Sonny's own wing tips had restraint when compared. The dress she wore was one for a birthday party or Sunday service. It was incongruous with Royce's sweat-stained black suit — tie hung and one trouser pocket out-turned — but her attire matched the plain light of the tunnel, as if she were an angel.

"Am I dead?" asked the jazzman.

The girl looked up. "Watch your head."

Sonny bent just in time to avoid a crossing ductwork. He peered over his shoulder to see what he was fleeing. The tunnel behind him grew dimmer and dimmer. *Did I go through a door?* he asked himself, having a vague image that he had. If so, that door was long gone. There was no visible end to the passageway. Waist-high and affixed at regular intervals were white boxes, similar to electrical breakers. They were raised ten centimeters from the rounded surface. Sonny went to touch one as they passed but the girl gave a yank on his hand.

Sonny again turned to his guide, forging ahead on their unknown path. The narrowness of the enclosure was beginning to make him claustrophobic. He felt a tightness coming, nervousness clogging his chest. However, there seemed to be relief in store as the round tube was widening ever so slowly. Sonny also had the sense that he was moving uphill, although he did not feel winded or drained, despite his forty-nine years and sedentary life — pub to practice space being the most he walked while living in Paris, and that was not far.

Fifteen minutes later, they arrived at an intersection of several more tunnels where a long platform, wide enough for ten men, ran the length of parallel tracks. There were

joints and stitches, cuts in the arch of the platform, as if man-made. Sonny marveled. It was much like a tube station, he considered, suddenly missing his first days in Europe, touring London, and hoping that he would see the old town again. The girl in his hand seemed to be resting, for she held her ground on the platform, breathing. "What are you thinking?" she asked, her words echoing on the curved ceiling.

"I was thinking 'bout London," Sonny answered honestly. He wondered why she had not asked her question earlier, as he would have had a more necessary line.

"London? Not Paris?"

Sonny wrinkled his brow. "Well. That, too, s'pose. I hope I get to see 'em both again."

She gave a nod. "You will."

The man smiled. "So I'm not dead?"

"Not yet."

Sonny opened his mouth to ask another question, one from his growing list of absurdities, but a sound distracted him. From the tunnel came a sliding breeze along his ears, as if someone was blowing into them softly. It made him think of his wife, Claire, for she knew that it drove him mad with desire. The breeze grew and grew until it was a strong wind, and it took the hem of the girl's dress, the flaps of his suit jacket, and his necktie. Sonny couldn't see the source. "Wh — " he got past his lips, but then he tightened his face. The wind was blinding.

And then it was there:

A train car, empty.

White.

With two sets of closed doors.

With windows for passengers.

Sonny let out a quick, flabbergasted breath.

The nearest doors came open.

Sonny's mouth hung and the girl continued smiling. She tugged him toward the open doors. At first, he resisted. "Come on," she coaxed in her high, young English voice. "It's all right." She kept up that brilliant smile, pleased at the stunning power of this trick, the train magically

appearing. "Come *on*," she said once more, mixing motherly irritation into the command. Sonny had no choice but to follow, as she appeared to know best.

As his foot crossed over from the platform to the train car, he half-expected the machine to disappear — a Saharan mirage — but it did not. Sonny landed firmly on the steel flooring of the train, painted as white as the rest of the car. (A firmer footing than the spiral stairs of the Mill had been, he thought to himself.) As he bridged the gap and came fully inside the train, Sonny looked down to the rails that spanned the trench, running parallel. These were not composed of earthly spikes and forged iron but gently lapping water held by some unseen encasement. He reconsidered his appraisal of the platform — screws and bolts — for elements of this rail's type were certainly not like any ever seen in any tube station. It was a mix of the known journeyman techniques, but also of something extraordinary. Sonny again blew out his closed lips and let them flap. When the door slid shut on its own phantom power, he jumped, receiving a comforting pat from the girl.

And then... they were off.

Sonny guessed they were moving at a high rate of speed, for he no longer could see the white of the tunnel walls, or the joints, simply an exterior blur and slowly rocking train car. He looked down to the girl. "Where you takin' me?"

From the pouch-pocket of her dress she unfurled a rolled parchment. She turned it around and put it beneath his eyes. "Here — " She laid her finger on a globe to the right side of the document, which sat among a field of similar globes, all connected by a complex thatching of parallel lines.

"Is this a map?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Of this place?" He gestured with a finger to the train car, but inferred the tunnels and platforms.

The girl nodded.

Sonny confiscated the map and gave it a close inspection. His assessment did not reveal any navigational

keys. It wasn't like any map he had ever seen. He was no cartographer. *She must have more smarts than me — I'm no brighter than a girl of, what, ten?* thought Sonny Royce, despairingly. He was growing frustrated; he was reminded of his early days trying to master musical scales. He handed back the map. "You better hold on'ta this," he said and shook his head. She rolled the map but did not yet stuff it into her dress, instead held it in her small hand. "Are you her?" he asked, the big question finally making it past his lips. "You Audrey Green, ain't you?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"No, be square with me. Is you *her*?"

She smiled fully, through with being coy. "I am."

Arm out, he laid a hand on her shoulder. He didn't know why he felt the need to touch her. He did not want her to disappear, now that he had her, but the gesture was also because he felt a sudden connection. "People are lookin' fo' you, little lady," he said. "Yo' sista, for one. She told me so tonight. She works at the ballroom where I played. She's a dancer there. Didja know that?" The girl gave a nod. "Well you should tell her you's all right, hear? And — a girl I met on the road last summer, she said your name before she kicked it. She was sick. She's the second one who tol' me your name, the first being a thug who later robbed me. This girl on the road was askin' 'bout my song, that one you whistled. Did you know her?" Audrey did not offer any information. She looked out the train window as if making an estimation of their progress along the rails, although Sonny could see no markers. The man let his hand drop from her shoulder. "What happened back there? At that Mill? I'm not even drunk anymore. I feel different. You've done sometin' to me, haven't you?"

Audrey gave a squeeze to his hand. "I've *saved* you."

"From what?"

"From the boy. And from Holliday..."

"What boy? And who's Holliday?"

"Robby Holliday. Only he's not Holliday anymore. He's Rob Holl. He's an inspector with the London police. We're trying to stop him."

Sonny gave a look. "We?"

Just then, the windows became sharp-focused and the rocking of the train slowed and stopped.

They had arrived.

Through the glass, Audrey and Sonny turned together and noticed a man with a beard, who appeared to be a handful of years older than Sonny and wore dark overalls. The figure waved to them from the platform. This place was, for Sonny, identical to the one they had just left so far down the tracks. This platform, too, was wide enough for ten men on either side, with branching catacombs of tunnels in all directions, glistening white. The waiting man was auburn-haired, with wisps to match his thick beard and sly smile on his face. He seemed infinitely pleased to see them. The doors swished open and Sonny stepped off the train with another tug on his sleeve from Audrey Green.

Closer to his subject, Sonny recognized the man — he was, in fact, one of the three card players from the Marsden Mill. It was most certainly the same man, the one who had whispered in his ear at that late hour of the Mill, just before his own departure: *"Give your saxophone to Colin... for protection. He'll watch it. Trust 'im."* At the time, Sonny had taken the comment as a local warning, insurance against the wee hours of a rough establishment known for thievery. Sonny didn't want to be robbed; he also didn't want to leave. Better safe than sorry. He knew where he could find Colin Blight if he tried to hock it. However, this gentleman's presence in this strange tube station gave the words a different spin.

What does he know... that I don't?

The man put a hand to Audrey's shoulder. "Good," he said, "You made it. I was getting worried." He then hugged the girl and she folded into his arms. The man had an accent from the southeast tip of England. His collar was undone and the zipper pulled down on his overalls to give a bit of air. Cheeks full of color, he again smiled at Sonny Royce, taking his hand in greeting. "And Mr. Royce, finally and properly... we meet. No longer two strangers at the Marsden Mill. My name is Clayton Philpot." He gave a nod

to the girl. "Welcome to our little army." The man seemed confident, amused, and of good nature, a well-worn and weary soul. Sonny could tell all this just from the way he held his shoulders, the tone of his voice. The man turned again to Audrey. "Audrey, go ahead and do as we planned. Any questions?"

"No. I understand. Goodbye, Sonny!" The girl, without a touch of parting fear, jumped aboard the standing train and was whisked into a cloud along the water rails.

She didn't even hear Sonny calling after her to wait.

"It's all right," assured the man with a rub on the jazzman's coat sleeve. "She's more resourceful than you might think. She accomplished much before I even was involved. She thinks the whole thing's a game — that she's still playing explorer with her brother on the beach." The man began to walk along the platform and Sonny had the impression he was to follow, so he did. Philpot picked up speed and Sonny lagged. The man spoke over his shoulder. "I wish we didn't have to keep splitting up like this — Audrey and myself. We've made a great team until now. But I've been re-assigned to you. Since Holliday learned of the Mill, those switch indexes — O'Neill, Harwood, and dear ol' Roger the bartender — we were worried of some sort of convergence. Times like that are ripe for the boy. Too many switches in a room. Don't like it at all. None of them fine lads at the Mill were open yet — not scheduled to be live switches for another three days. Logging accident would do it. But still... we knew there was trouble. Had to get you out. Don't know what Holliday's game was, though, I'm confused about that. Putting himself in the same room as the boy — the fool likes to take a chance!" Philpot coughed and pulled something from his mouth — a bird feather, which he showed to Sonny and smiled. The jazzman didn't know what to think. "Little trick," explained Philpot. "Didn't you find it amusing? Well, I try. I've studied sleight-of-hand for years. Kind of a hobby." The man put the feather down on the ground with a light laugh and continued walking. "At this moment we're just hoping Holliday'll get lost without that map. He can read them

pretty good now. Hasn't found the most important switches. Thankful for that. Nothing to stop him from trying, though." The man stopped suddenly, realizing he was losing Sonny, both with his details as well as with his speed. He held ground until Sonny caught up. Hand out, he plucked the feather again from Sonny's shirt-collar and winked. Royce looked back twenty paces. The feather was no longer where it had been left on the ground — it had disappeared and affixed itself to his coat. "That's how I did it," said Philpot, pleased. "That's how I got the map from his pocket. Sleight-of-hand." Philpot put the feather again into his mouth, shut his lips and opened them wide. Feather gone. The jazzman was not amused. "I love magic," said Clayton Philpot proudly. "What would the world be like without it?"

Face to face they stood and Sonny looked into this man's eyes as he had done with others in his past, examining for that flash of detection, of connection, a spark seen most recently with Winsey Green at the ballroom as they danced.

"Are you checking my face?" Philpot asked.

Sonny was unsure if the magician's voice intoned offense. The jazzman shook his head. "No." He let his eyes go to his shoes. He had been caught.

Philpot widened. "The old man was right," he said. "You are a wise one, Mr. Sonny. You *should* be checking everyone you see. Did someone teach you that technique?"

"I got it from my mama," Sonny replied. "She always told me that you can tell something real about a person by looking at their face. It's like ya recognize 'em. You see 'em and you know you're meant to help 'em, or be a'scared of 'em."

"Do *I* scare you?"

"No," Sonny replied. "I don't see anything to make me worry. Your tricks seem harmless. 'Sides, you saved me. You and the girl. That's what she tol' me. You seem to be looking after me... and my saxophone."

"Oh, we are most certainly looking after you," said Philpot, definite, as he continued on his way, making Sonny

follow. "There is someone who is very anxious to meet you. He gave us charge of keeping you well. We saw the danger of the boy at the Mill, so Audrey and I worked to get you out of there. She's got that talent, you know, to come and go from the tunnels as she pleases. That's a gift. She's a vessel. She pulled you out of the fire. Unfortunately, though, we didn't think you could bring your instrument, as sometimes those things don't make it through the switch. There doesn't seem to be an issue with clothes, or the occasional hat, but anything larger is rare. If you had lost your saxophone, the world would suffer." From the rear pocket of his trousers, Philpot slid out a folded and flat piece of paper and, when it was shaken open by his hairy hands, Sonny saw it was the same map with the globes that Audrey Green had held on the train. Philpot checked his direction against a split in the tunnels. "Kinda forgetful, I am," said the man in excuse, and moved forward to the wall to read numbers and characters imprinted on one of the breaker boxes that were affixed to the tunnel side. Again certain of his direction, Philpot took the left divert and put the map back into his pocket.

"I thought Audrey took that map with her?" Sonny was now disbelieving his own memory, a trick like the one with that feather. The map was in her hand when she jumped the train. *Wasn't it?*

"Yes, she's got one," answered Philpot. "There are *three* maps. They can make it through the switches as well. I have my map... Holliday had another, but I stole it from his pocket at the Mill and gave it to Audrey." Philpot fanned one hand over another. "Like I said — sleight-of-hand. Not too hard. I would have made a great pickpocket, if I had a criminal mind. I've studied magic for years. I wanted to be Houdini. I ended up a mechanic at a garage. It was my magic, though, that brought me into this mess. Patterns here, patterns there. Lifting a map from Holl's jacket was the least of my tricks. As for the third map, we're not sure where it is. We hope it's in good hands. Audrey's gone to find a hiding place for the one we took from Holl. I suggested the horn of your saxophone." (*Sonny became*

slightly irritated, but then agreed it was a good spot. However, as Philpot went on, Sonny became worried about the consequence. He did not want his precious saxophone involved, to be abused by strangers hiding maps in its horn.) "We'd like to get that map to Winsey Green. She's going to need it. From what we know of the switches, we've only got a few days to foil Holliday and his plans as Rob Holl. But first we have an errand. A little reconnaissance. Are you up for it?"

Philpot did not give Sonny Royce a chance to reply...

They cut across a deepening crevasse of white, a bridge laid over the train track with an engineer's precision. It was in the crossing that Sonny began to realize the extent of this place. His early claustrophobia was replaced by an ebbing fear of the cavern's vast openness — its catacombs and its junctions, several sets of tracks beneath the bridge. Hexagon patterns and waters for rails gave the heavenly construction a decided functionality. "Who made these?" asked Sonny Royce, but did so at a moment when one of the mysterious white trains sped by on a nearby rail, and its wind took his words and scattered them along the tunnels. He was going to ask his question a second time when Philpot yanked him down a branch that greatly narrowed, causing Sonny to bend at the knees. "Do you know where you're goin'?" replaced his earlier question. "Shouldn't ya look at tha map?"

Philpot did not turn but replied with certainty, "Been this way many times. It's one of the first places I discovered. Which turned out to be very lucky." Within a minute they were at a buttress, angling down to a fork of two tunnels underneath their feet. "I want to see if he finds his way out," said Philpot in explanation. "He may not, and that could save us a pile of trouble." Philpot took a seat along the curve of the tunnel wall and motioned for Sonny to do the same.

Once settled, the saxophonist tapped the man's knee.

"Who we waiting for?"

"Holliday," he answered in a low voice. "Or, Holl, as he may appear to us today." Philpot pointed to the right

tunnel. "See, through that tunnel lies the body he was in while at the Mill — an inspector named Rob Holl. It's a very long tunnel. My guess is he's still walking out, trying to find a platform." His finger went to the left tunnel. "And through that one — well, several turns off, anyway — you'll be at the switch of Robby Holliday. They're called 'companion indexes,' tunnels built far apart but linked. One person can move in and out of all three, if they time it right. It's too late for that Holliday body, though, as that old switch has been sealed. If Holliday hadn't been with little Audrey when the boy entered his estate last summer, our troubles would have ended right there. But that was not to be. She inadvertently brought him back with her and he — *somehow* — found a return ticket... his own companion index. Understand?"

Sonny shook his head, and then held it in his big hands. "No. I don't. I don't know a thing."

Philpot smiled back. "You will. The boy is a key. I'll have to tell you about him."

*They both heard footsteps
in the chamber.*

Philpot sprang to attention, watching closely the exit of Holl's tunnel. A resounding echo off the white walls, closer and closer to a solidifying source, finally melted into one heavy pair of shoes. A body was making its way onto the platform. Philpot and Sonny observed from their perch —

Rob Holl — tweed coat, wool trousers, thick-heeled shoes, watch-chain, hair out-of-sorts and mustache fraying — emerged from the mouth of the far right tunnel. Sonny recognized him immediately as the fourth remaining man from the Marsden Mill. When Philpot had talked of Rob Holl, he did not know a face. Now that he saw the man, he again flinched, as he had back at the Mill. His mama's technique was sending strong signals: this is someone to be avoided; this man is dangerous. Sonny Royce could see it in his face, even from this height and angle.

Holl stepped from the tunnel and glanced around the platform. His eyes went to the criss-crossing rail tracks, and he placed his palms on his hips. Straightening, the man looked as if he were about to glance up. If he did, Philpot and Sonny would be in plain sight, with their dark clothes and Sonny's black skin against the pure white of the nest. Sonny drew back his head from the edge, but that would have little impact on the result. Luckily, Holl's hands fell away and he turned to the adjacent tunnel, the one that led to Robby Holliday, as Philpot had explained. Not holding for debate, he was away and gone.

The jazzman sighed.

"I don't like the look of him. No sir," he said.

Philpot agreed in nod and whisper. "Hopefully he'll wander into a dead station and give up. You can move around the platforms and the tunnels without harm, but if you come upon a dead station, that's the end of the line. Audrey's told me about them. Never seen one myself. End of the line. No going back. The tracks end and that's that. I even hear there are towers with guards who see you through. Once we thought Holliday was lost to one. Audrey tried to bring him to one when they first came through the tunnels, to leave him there. She turned around and he was gone. It was a bad break for Alison Falliher. That was the girl you met on the road last summer. She was a recruit, too. Holl wrung her n — "

Holl

came back

out of the left-hand tunnel.

Philpot's face showed anger and surprise. He did not expect a doubling-back. Once more Holl stood surveying the lay of the land. A moment. Then... a return to where he had come, the right-hand tunnel — the index of Rob Holl! Philpot gave a sound, a breath through his nose. "Well he's not going to get very far *that* way," he said

sarcastically. "The boy's had his way with that body. That switch index should be burned shut!"

Sonny grabbed onto this: "The boy!" he said. "What's dis business about a boy?"

Philpot got to his feet, ignoring the question, finally letting his voice rise above his whisper. "Come on. Better get going. We've got a schedule to keep. I can't watch Holl forever as he tries to get back using a burned out switch." He gave a thumb below to the forking tunnels. "With any luck he'll get lost..."

Sonny stood and bumped his head on the low ceiling. "Let's hope we don't get dat same luck," he said, and was again lagging behind Clayton Philpot, away from the splitting tunnels of Rob Holl and Robby Holliday...

STORM WARNING

A trick. Not nice. I'll be back in the game before they know it. Yes. I'll show them. No use going very far anyhow without that map. I worked hard to get that map. Not fair that it should be gone. Did I lose it? I need to return to that Mill and start searching. It must be around the table. Fallen out of my pocket. Under the stairs. That's the only explanation. Ah, I know more about this than all of them. Been studying it for years. I know the meaning of the Plague Boy. I know the patterns, I know the splits — those companion indexes. I even know how to get to the girl; got the plan in my head. Just need to get back there to work it out. I'm sure she's somewhere in the tunnels — or has been recently — but it'd be dumb to go traipsin' all over to find her. I'd just end up at a dead station, and then where would I be? Trapped. I'd have no place to go but to the end. I'm not ready for that. Not when I've been made such a fool of. I can still succeed. It can be my discovery. I just have to stick to the territory I know — stay in this Rob Holl. I can get him going again. I've just got to re-open the switch. Some part of it must still be working. The Plague Boy did his work too fast. He's a calculable lad. Miserable sort. He knew he had ten seconds, if that — four strong men in a room, and he had a lot of work. Better to do it fast than have one go missing, that was probably what his ghostly mind was thinking. Precise, he is, as a scientist — as I am. I know them better than the lot of them. I've got the boy's number. I'll beat him yet. He'll not destroy my discovery. The antidote is out there. I'm coming back to find it. I am.

THE CASE TO BE MADE

He realized when he cradled the telephone that he had made a terrible mistake. The last thing he needed was a nosy parker from London coming down to tell him that everything's been done wrong. Yet, for Marsden County Sheriff Albert Mott, his investigative spirit was too dormant from a decade of inactivity, and he knew it.

The greatest crime to happen during his term was the murder of two Council House squatters. It proved to be the work of an overly ambitious government clerk who thought he'd relieve society of its burden. The clerk worked in the social office where the two victims collected their dole. There had been an argument at the office when the lads were cut from their funding. The nebbish clerk went home, had supper, returned to the office to find the addresses of the men, ambled off, and butchered them. Bloody scenes. Messes to clean. It was a bitter remembrance for the sheriff, one that he never thought would be topped until the case of the Marsden Mill.

Mott arrived around eleven a.m. Sunday at the waterwheel to inspect the bodies. Fire brigade men were already at the scene, strong backs and body boards standing ready to carry the dead along the stream, up the incline, and into the waiting rear of their red engine lorries. As instructed by the presiding constables, nothing had yet been moved. *Wait for the sheriff. He'll sort it out.* Mott was glad his orders had been kept. The firemen's rubbernecking did, however, irritate Mott's nerves. He insisted only the medical examiner and he be permitted inside.

Once through the slanting door, Mott was very thankful there was no blood. The descriptions by the two who had discovered the bodies did not detail the condition of the victims, just that they were not yet stiff and most certainly dead. The clerk who had taken the statements (reviewed by the duty constable and then a photostatic copy driven in an HMP motorcar to Mott's home west of the village) was vague in the most important points and copious

in clutter. For example, there was a whole page dedicated to the two witnesses:

Colin Blight — male, 22 years of age, 123 Bishop’s Road, Marsden. Occupation: barkeep at The Victory Ballroom, Marsden; overseer, Mr. Karl Otter, owner, Victory Ballroom (*consulted for reference; is to present himself by five o’clock, Sunday evening 18 August 1958, or he will be sought by the authorities*). Steady sort; bit of a “rude boy.” Has antecedents of petty crime and occasional violence. Claims he wanted to box professionally. Not heavy enough. Resident since 8 September 1957; let agreement confirms date. Untrustworthy in most matters, but seems sincere in this; claims to “be of no trouble” and did not want to be detained. Pending verification of information, held at MSH until notified to release by higher authority.

Winsey Green — female, 20 years of age, 102 Blue Top Gate, G flat, Occupation: dancer-for-hire at The Victory Ballroom, Marsden; overseer, Mr. Karl Otter, owner, Victory Ballroom (*consulted for reference*). Brown hair; attractive build; short in stature. Would not give information concerning parents’ address. Sullen girl; upset by circumstance; permitted to leave so that she may rest.

Following this editorializing, which presented a clearer picture of the clerk’s own bias than any relevant facts of the case, was a three-sentence description of the events:

The two parties described in this report alerted authorities to the presence of three dead bodies on the premises of the Marsden Mill, Dodd’s Hollow, Marsden, a local drinking and darts establishment. Bodies found approximately one hour after sunrise on Sunday morning, 18 August 1958, and not yet in a state of rigor mortis. Both witnesses claimed to be seeking information on the whereabouts of one Mr. Sonny Royce.

None of the dead men were Mr. Royce, per their testimony.

Investigation commencing; Sheriff Albert Mott of Marsden County has been alerted – 0930 hours Sunday 18 August, 1858, signed Antony Bissell, MSH, HMP, station clerk and acting duty officer.

Sheriff Mott would have a word with this clerk about his reporting skills, which were clearly poor. If he ever wanted to be promoted to constable he would have to do better than that. When the duty constable called at Mott's home and handed him the papers, Mott didn't even have an arm back into the sleeves of his church coat when the obvious questions came into his head: *Who are the dead? What made the two witnesses think to go to the Mill at that early hour? And, for Heaven's sake, who is Sonny Royce?*

At the Mill, Mott took his time inspecting the crime. There were, without doubt, three dead men, only he found them to be stone stiff, which was expected. A medical examiner from the Burnby Hospital, one hour to the north, arrived to give an appraisal of the time of death. To his surprise, it had been less than nine hours. "But listen to this: they've been laying here a lot longer than that," said the man as he bent Mott's ear. "My guess is twenty-four hours, maybe longer." (*"Why would they lay down for so long?"* Mott asked back. *"Do you see any injury? Someone snap their legs?"*) "No," replied the examiner, shaking his head, "the bones seem fine..."

Mott continued his combing. A point was starting to bother him. He contacted Antony Bissell on the fire brigade's radio. He asked the clerk for the originally reported positions of the bodies. (*"I want to be sure they haven't been moved."*) The clerk remembered the testimony of Mr. Blight and Ms. Green: one against the front of the bar, another near the stools, a third by the stairs. Mott thanked the man. He would chastise him later for omitting these facts in his paperwork.

Coming back inside the Mill, the examiner standing off-center of the scene, Mott said his thoughts aloud, "I don't think the two witnesses even *noticed* the body behind

the bar." The examiner craned his neck over the tall wood brace and gave an appraisal. It took him a long stretch before seeing anything unusual. The barkeep had fallen twisted into the basin underneath the kegs. If it weren't for his thick, tattooed forearm and hand, lying helpless against the rubber matting, he *may* have been overlooked. (It had indeed taken a highly observant fire official to locate him when the room was first cracked.) Mott moved beyond the examiner and crossed the room to the spiral stairs. "You don't suppose that there was a body *here*?" The sheriff pointed down to the spot where the chairs parted. It was an opening large enough for a man. The chairs had scraped along the floor and left marks, one chair even leaned on the handrail of the stairs. "My guess is that there were *four* bodies at one time. Yes. The witnesses were quite exact about three, but the positions here do not match what they reported. The two told the station clerk that there was one body by the stairs. I'll wager that they didn't even see that one behind the bar — " (Mott's finger went from point-to-point.) The two men puzzled it out for a moment, until the sheriff spoke again. "Unless... hear me out — do you suppose the one under the bar was once under the stairs, and he *crawled*?"

The medical examiner shook his head. "They were not in a condition to do much. They're quite dead, Sheriff, and have been for some time."

"But only in the last eight hours?"

"Eight or nine. I'll have to get them back to Burnby to exam — "

"A real puzzle, this one," Mott interrupted, shaking his head back and forth. "A real puzzle," he said again. This case was going to be quite different from the Council House stabbings. There may not be any blood about, or any matching confession from a dole clerk, but this crime was just as terrible. Just as dangerous. He knew he needed help. Senses dulled. A body walks. *How is it possible?* He left the scene dumbfounded and signaled for the fire brigade to finish the business of transporting the murdered to the morgue.

...It's the *wrong thing*, he knew, telephone placed back on its hook. He had contacted London — three hours north — to send down a man. Following a brief search of their available lists, it sounded like they had just the soul. There was an inspector in the local counties who had a similar case several months before at the Matten Estates — wealthy housing up the coast — three bodies, poisoned. However, that investigator was buried so deep in his own work that he could not even be found. The dispatcher dropped his initial suggestion and pulled another name from the registry. *Holl*, said the dispatch. *Inspector Robert Holl*. (Came to the district in 1953, was well-regarded, left for a weekend holiday in the proximity of Marsden, required to check in daily.) "Send that one, then," said Mott, prepared for the intervention. "I'll be waiting."

The sheriff's first suggestion when Inspector Holl presented himself mid-afternoon the following day, a Monday, was to reconvene the witnesses Colin Blight and Winsey Green. Immediately, Mott didn't like the face of this man. His clothes fit him too tightly and his mustache was off-putting — from an earlier decade and out-of-fashion. That waistcoat — that tweed — those stammering manners. Mott was no doctor, but he had fears for the health of his reinforcement. Holl shook and appeared quite wan. He seemed to disappear to the toilet more than was necessary. He broke into sweats. However, the man came into Marsden with such strong wind that Mott's trepidation was replaced within a couple of hours by a certain sense of resignation. He had, after all, *called* the man, and maybe these quirks of nature were the very characteristics a metropolitan investigator needed to solve a crime. London had far more murder and vice than tiny Marsden. He would have to trust. "The witnesses?" asked Mott again, fearing that Holl had not heard his suggestion, "Should we call them back for another round of enquiry?"

The tweed man shook his head, as if lost in other thoughts. "No, thank you, Sheriff. I have all I need here."

Holl gave a pat to the file of paperwork laid in front of him on the station house desk. Mott had added to the clerk's initial notes, compiling his own deductions of the scene with the results of the medical examiner. *Poisoned*, read the final line of a lengthy document (although the examiner had confided in being less than confident on this verdict). On reading the notice, Mott ordered two constables to collect the opened bottles, available at the scene, and have their contents sampled and shipped to a laboratory for testing — *results in ten days*. Yet the sheriff felt that this was probably futile. He did not think the dead had the look of being poisoned.

"Have you ever seen a man dead from poisoning?" the sheriff asked the inspector.

Holl looked up from his papers. He appeared irritated at being bothered. "Poison?" he repeated, and the sheriff nodded. "Yes, awful thing; contortion; yes," he mumbled, and quickly returned to purveyance.

The sheriff exited the tiny office and went out to the main lobby of the station house. There stood Suzette O'Connor, the station house secretary, holding down the desk while Bissell the clerk took a supper. Mott slumped his shoulders over the long, tall registration desk, and the girl could tell that there was a problem. She twirled her red hair and leaned an elbow on the countertop. "Do you think it's coming along?" she asked, "The investigation? Now that he's here?" She gestured with the eraser-end of her pencil to the room that held Inspector Holl.

Mott shrugged. "S'pose, yes. Early stages. Seems experienced. I have... well, if you could keep an eye on him..." (He gave a wink.) "...I'd feel much better. I've got to be out of town tomorrow through week's end. I don't think there'll be much to miss in the case between Wednesday and Saturday, do you? I've got a foxhunt. Been invited by some of the HMP whiz kids connected to Lord something-or-other out in the country. I've got no idea how long it will last, the hunt. I hope it's no longer than necessary."

Ms. O'Connor could sense the question and supplied the answer. "We'll be perfectly fine. The dispatch sent him,

didn't they? He *must* have good credentials. Three murders are harder to solve than one. London knows that. They wouldn't send a person who was terrible."

Mott nodded. The girl's calm was helping to make up his mind. He had been torn – to leave during an important case would be a mark if, indeed, something were to happen during his time out of Marsden. However, four short days and a foxhunt could advance him. Even with the disposition of this inspector not quite ordinary, Mott couldn't help but be a little bit jealous. Mott had been to London only three times, and never to consult, always for leisure, his wife in tow. Not recognized as an officer of the Queen, only as a tourist. At least hob-knobbing with the Deputy Commissioner during a hunt might parlay into greater rewards than the deaths of three poisoned alcoholics — which, if Holl did not provide any alternate solution, was how the books would read. *Bad liquor, bad men, good riddance.* Mott sighed and Ms. O'Connor patted his sleeve. "Probably nothing," he said. "The better part of this case is most certainly come and gone, aye? May be weeks more before a break..." She did not try to sway his arguments but let him take his hat from the rack by the door, replace a mislaid chair back into alignment along the wall, and depart the station house for his hunt, with a wave to Ms. O'Connor and instructions on what to tell Inspector Holl. That man's a ranking officer and would be in charge of the constables. "Support him best they can," he added, and slumped out to his motorcar.

Back in the tiny room, Holl's eyes moved up from the pages. He had already forgotten about Sheriff Mott. The car engine outside cranked, tired squealed, and the machine became a distant hum. Holl didn't even notice the ruckus. There were bigger things to attend to than solving a sheriff's case. After all, Holl knew the answers already. *He had been there.* No, Inspector Holl's sights were aimed higher: on how to capture Audrey Green.

SOLDIERS FOR THE QUEEN

Rob Holl discovered the map during his first year in London, in 1954, just four months after hiding Alison Falliher's body in the bus toilet. In the pocket of his jacket was an envelope containing standing orders to report to the London police for "re-assignment of duties." Arriving at the Fulham Broadway tube station of the District Line, he was hailed by a young constable, who recognized Rob Holl from a photograph he held in his palm. The man said his name was Lionel. He had been sent as an emissary to fetch Holl and bring him to headquarters. The man went on, appearing very pleased to be in this Holl's company, remarking that Lionel's chief superintendent, Captain Lorber, whom they were now on their way to meet, had not forgotten Holl's "service in the war." Imprinted in Rob Holl's index were the images of violent skirmishes against the Nazis, brave deeds and pants wettings. Lorber, ten years older than Holl, would be headless if it weren't for his lieutenant, decisive and lucky at a crucial moment. In 1944, Holl pulled the officer's head down and shot three Germans as part of the same, swift gesture. Robby Holliday, who watched all this in his mind's eye as if a decent but fuzzy B-picture playing at cinema, was, even himself, impressed by the action.

(The fading incident made him remember his last body's own small part in the war. Holliday had a makeshift laboratory built apart from his own country home, which he shared with a nurse named Vangel, who worked the neighboring mental hospital and rented a room. The doctor was allowed to wait out the infantry in exchange for partaking in governmental germ development, his effort better spent in the home isle think tanks. Once, though, there had been some excitement similar to Holl's rescue of Captain Lorber. Holliday remembered the vivid, bloody arrival of the nurse one morning, shredded on the side of her body from a stray bomb that had landed near her ward, the explosion letting loose a block of patients into the nearby woods. This

was in 1940, when he discovered the first patterns that eventually led into the tunnels. Those stages of his research were critical; he remembered them now, fourteen years past and in another body. A striking similarity existed between Robby Holliday and Rob Holl — aside from their names — when dwelling on their feelings toward Britain's war with Germany. In both men, there was anger with the war — but only a small percentage of it was patriotism, and almost none of it was the fueled by human compassion. Instead, the anger was because the fighting had interrupted their paths — Holliday his research, Holl his plan to be a civil officer. Now, however, with the assistance of this precinct captain and former military superior, Holl's quest was back on the track.)

Lionel made introductions around the precinct of this new favored son. Rob Holl himself was no more than a detective sergeant, promoted to detective chief inspector within forty-eight hours. Shown favoritism by his war commander, Holl was assigned to several important cases of murder and depravity in London. Familiar with the city from his time as Holliday, he had to play dumb with the names of streets and parks, as this was to be Holl's first foray outside of his home village. He had been a boy from Southampton, where the Cunard ships would depart to waves from water and from land, and little Rob watched them sail. *(That boy didn't have any inkling that he, too, would one day become a vessel.)* Senses heightened from the tunnels, and Holliday's years of pattern detection, most cases were easily solved. He went about his days applying these learned principles, honed in the last twenty years as Holliday, that Holl became a darling — a whiz kid, the best man they'd seen in quite a few years. Captain Lorber bragged about this at parties.

But Holl did not really want that sort of attention. Holl then began to fail, to leave cases unsolved, or hand them off unfinished, so that he might not be promoted too fast. Recognition for police work was not what he sought. Just to look busy, to not be bothered, and to be done with each case quickly so he could do his *real* work.

Captain Lorber often invited his protégé to dinner, but Holl always declined. Not worth the trouble becoming a friend, or attempting to climb the social ranks, for Holl did not want any meddling. Besides, company was not what Holl sought; it was answers.

One of the first things he did was look for any record of Audrey Green. There was nothing. This made sense — it was only the winter '54, and Holliday would not meet the girl until summer '57, when her father would bring her to Holliday's estate in Matten, on the coast, to find the meaning behind a stolen ledger. To be certain of it, however, looking for a name seemed an easy step. He wanted no other 'Audrey Green,' lurking in the directories of London or in the police registries, who might surprise him as he went about his work. He was becoming accustomed to these triplet names, these companion indexes, and these linking bridges between human beings. It was quite a discovery when he made it. It saved him from dissolution as the dead Robby Holliday, and brought him into Rob Holl.

He was getting smarter with each stage of research.

And now the map.

The map.

How did it even exist, when there was so little evidence before it? As Holliday, Nobel-nominated researcher of germs, he had wasted years of his life proving that the patterns in his studies amounted to something practical. He had even sacrificed his sense of touch, gone numb from a damaging fall at his own well washer. He had no sensation in his skin. There had been nerve damage, or so he thought, but he did not know where the physical change started and the mental transformation began. He didn't think Audrey Green had undergone any physical assault, but had come to her own numbness out of knowledge and choice —

"...I think the numbness is an elevation. When you learn a thing, like... swimming lessons. At first, you're all ham-fisted and clumsy, grace coming along with the knowledge of how to move your

arms. The numbness is like that. It's blocking out the physical self in exchange for the elevated self. It's forcing you to concentrate not on your current state of body but on the mental processes of discovery. To change my focus from what hot tea tastes like, to the patterns in the china cup and saucer, to what it's like to be alive without a body. Why, that's elemental, then. I've become a Christopher Columbus for the New World! A sense of something that no one has felt before."

So there was *another* Columbus...

The map proved it.

Holl found it in the drawer of a Mr. Olive.

The man had died at the surmised age of eighty-four, in the winter of 1955, a banker found stinking in his home off Holland Park. The house itself was rather plain and was not well kept. The man had obviously been unable to go downstairs to his sitting room for many years, so he kept to the first floor bedroom, bath, and study — tidied thrice-weekly in rounds by a hired attendant. When Holl inquired about the attendee's name, the only kernel that came to a neighbor's memory was, "James, I think." A second woman remembered that this attendant may have worked on the railway, for she had a minor conversation with this 'James' about how the schedules were created. He seemed to know quite a bit about them.

There was worry that Mr. Olive had been murdered, and perhaps the mysterious James, who came and went by his own key, was the perpetrator. There was some evidence to support this. A rope was tied around one of the old man's ankles, affixed to the bottom bed-rung. Also, a gash on his forehead — not a deep one, but the inspector took note — was telling. Holl ordered the home searched for further evidence. "Look sharp for anything dealing with the railways," commanded Holl to his troops — three constables sent from Bayswater to assist.

The map was found among half a dozen other maps, tagged from sites such as India, the Congo, and closer parts

of England. On these others was the stamp of the British Rail Commission. The critical one, however, had no such stamp. It was much smaller in size, rolled with a string, and seemed to have aged better than the other paper maps that were curled and turning brown. Holl had thrust the map into his inside pocket when the constables turned to the window, the ambulance having arrived to carry Mr. Olive away.

In the end, Holl dropped his investigation of the murder of Mr. Olive for lack of evidence. *Natural or unknown causes*, read the death certificate. There were no inheritors to claim the house and it was given over to a public trust. Olive was apparently a banker of some long-forgotten reputation, so rounds were made to the addresses of former members of the banking board. No one important enough to induce pressure on the magistrates came forward, and the presiding investigation committee, including Holl, was satisfied that it was unable to be solved. Posts still hung in the station houses to be watchful for any railway men answering to "James," although no clues ever surfaced. The body was taken to St. Paul's Churchyard and buried.

Back at his flat in East Acton, Holl dedicated months to the study of his newfound map. Holl's sensibilities, luckily, were not that different from Holliday's, and the two minds melded easily into one concentration. In his journey from one body to another, he had witnessed the tunnels first-hand, and this was certainly appeared to be a map of their spider-web intricacies.

First,

a sequence like this: 18,15,2,2,25.

These were on the map encircling one of the small, blue globes that dotted the map from end-to-end.

Second, a sequence of 8,15,12,12, and 9.

These led along a set of parallel lines going along the top and round in curly cue.

Holl realized how lucky he had been! He had moved from the first tunnel sequence to the second by guesswork

alone — from Holliday to Holl — his senses warning him not to board any of the white trains that came to call after he separated from Audrey Green. He had escaped her by instinct (for she was surely leading him to his doom), so he must escape the trains, too. He could feel it in his bones.

Turn back.

The platforms were quite different in reality than they were on the map, thatched by many alternate routes, places where he could have become confused or lost. Yet he had found the tunnel leading to Rob Holl without aide of this map. That very rare chance where he turned left instead of right had happened, another fated pattern. He was being led on a strange, dark course, guided by a force unseen. There was no other explanation.

The map proved there had been others in the tunnels before Holliday or Audrey Green. And one of these mysterious explorers appeared to be on his side.

GHOST SHIP | PHONE BOX

In late summer of 1955, Rob Holl had a dream about the *Kutaria*, a boat that sailed from the Congo in 1874 and was ravaged by yellow fever. All aboard had died. The dream was a very vivid one, and Holl awoke sweating in his bedclothes. He turned on lamps and had a snifter of brandy, yet he could not shake the horrible images of a captain and his crew, killed, and a ship dashed on the rocks of Dan Tuck, England.

The captain's log, which was recovered and preserved, spoke of the arrival of a boy upon the ship's decks — a pale and plain stowaway who was suspected by the crew to be the carrier of the fever. Doctor Robby Holliday had read a transcription of the recovered journal while at university, around 1914, when he retained a child's fascination with the sea. As Rob Holl, he had forgotten the captain's name but remembered all else. The dream was a point-for-point narrative of the insurrection. Holl was not surprised that so many of the details haunted him, even in this new body, for Holliday was for decades obsessed with the story. As a hobby, Holliday even searched the evening papers for any reference to boys as harbingers of disease. When twenty, Holliday had even corresponded with a Doctor Carlyle, a physician so bold as to run a speculative article discussing theories of a boy, loose in London, who may have been connected with a selective strain. Young Holliday posted a letter revealing other cases so that Carlyle might add them to his burgeoning list — a boy, a death. *(He would never have given this sort of information away in his later years. Any public applause for these discoveries would be attributed solely to Doctor Robby Holliday. Fat lot of good this selfish ethic did him, though. Holliday's body was to end at a ripe age without revelation or recognition in the discovery of the boy, or the tunnels. Now, in Rob Holl, he would have to forget that quest for glory in the medical or scientific community. It would be up to Holl to claim the tunnels as an inspector, not a scientist. He would have to*

work harder to keep the credit.) One of the most significant truths related to this dream of the *Kutaria* was that it served as a warning. This same dream — or one very similar — happened to old Robby Holliday, and it had an alerting affect, for the next day Audrey Green and her father were at his doorstep, having discovered Holliday's name in an accounting ledger.

Someone is coming tomorrow.

The dream tells me this.

Holl would be ready.

Adding to this anticipation and fear, sparked by the dream, he also had a fancy that someone had been in his room, goading him. There may have been a subliminal whisper, and he swatted his ear, as if a fly had landed on it, finishing his brandy and returning to the sheets.

The next day — a Tuesday — Holl went about his regular business. There was no need to stay isolated in his East Acton flat awaiting a messenger. If he were to be visited, it would happen no matter his location or circumstance. However, as the day ended, fading to eight o'clock, he grew depressed. Just as when Audrey arrived on his doorstep in the future 1957 of Robby Holliday, he was beginning to work himself into a corner, on the brink of abandoning all hope that this puzzle would ever be solved. The map, in Holl's possession all these months, was an exhausted clue. He had a few untested theories about the infrastructure, the codes, the globes and rails, but he couldn't conduct any experiments, as he was a living man.

It would take Holl's natural death to offer another chance for exploration with Mr. Olive's map. He was not willing to try suicide, and there was no guarantee that he could carry the parchment into that "other world." (He was optimistic, however, because he wore Holliday's clothes through, being replaced by Holl's tweed on entering the companion switch.) He was desperate for a crack in the code — a way to travel without dying, if that was even possible.

Holl fixed his tea at half-past nine. He tried to read some inherited files by a retired inspector from his manor, hoping that he could catch up on his mundane tasks and possibly stumble on a revelation. There was no such luck. He finished his duties at a quarter-to-midnight.

"It is not to be..." he sighed, and cleaned out his cup.

He left a lamp on as he lay under his covers.

"Not to be."

He closed his eyes and fell asleep.

A loud banging woke him up.

Turning over, Holl cleared his eyes to see the blur of the clock: it was three in the morning, black as pitch outside with only his unswitched lamp giving color.

The sound filling his ears was a highly disjointed-rhythm —

slap slap... slap... slap slap slap...

A hand against boards? Quite near. Holl went to this window. It was raining. Fog was collecting around the streetlamp and the phone box on the opposite corner.

A teenage boy stood pounding the hand receiver against the telephone itself, making a loud knock. Frustrated, the boy let the phone drop, the receiver swinging on its line. He slid open the phone box door. (*These are how phones get broken*, thought the inspector, too tired to make an arrest.) Stepping out of the box and into the falling rain, the teenager looked to the sky for a moment before returning once again to the shelter of the booth. At that moment, the teenager did something very unusual. He lifted the receiver from its dangle and thwacked it against his upper arm, against the opposite shoulder, against both legs, and then his forehead, where, even from the window, Holl could see a knot begin to form, and a bit of bleeding.

Holl gave a short, dismissive laugh and let the curtain fall. *Another fool*, he thought, *one of the million London idiots*.

The inspector returned to his warm covers and had his usual bedside urge for morphia. Ah, *that curse!* — that morphia, which kept the switch open and his body numb but also drove him into mad, illegal searches for the drug, himself a criminal for it, despite his HMP status. Reaching into his table, face turned on the pillow, Holl pulled out his bottle of tablets (stolen from a crime scene) and took down two, without water, into his stomach. Lying under again, he began to feel that numbness returning. He could barely sense the sheets, coating him. They heated his body but did not touch it. He was floating. Sensation gone. The nagging need retreated along with his sense of touch. Momentarily, he was grateful for Holl's addiction. Without it, he would not have been able to be entered; conversely, he applied this to his former self, Holliday: If his original self had not been victim of a nasty fall at his well-washer, would he have been so easily split and manipulated? Would he have traveled this far? No, he was thankful for this numbness.

Numbness.

Numb.

Part of the equation, this.

Allows for travel. Reasons unknown.

His eyes popped open! He threw the covers off and went to the window. The teenage boy stood in the rain, outside of the phone box, allowing his body to be pelted.

Holl grabbed his robe and ran out of his flat, leaving his door ajar. At the ground floor, he opened the main exit and, still in slippers, crossed the street until the lad sighted him. "Are you numb?" Holl asked loudly over the din of the downpour. He knew his voice and his question seemed mad. In his robe and nightclothes, he grew quickly soaked and must have looked a fright.

The teenage boy, however, did not laugh or run.

"Yes," he answered, with genuine interest.

"When did it start?"

The teenager shook the rainwater from his sleeves. "An hour ago, I s'pose. On the tube. How did you know?"

Holl stepped forward and the boy did not budge. "Is the numbness in one place or all over?"

"All over, it's — " he stopped his answer, to point out regions of his body, but then redirected: "Am I going to be all right? Not dyin', like?"

"Someone's found a switch," Holl explained. "Someone's found a switch and has thrown it. Someone's trying to reach me. Come inside, won't you? My flat is just there." Holl directed attention across the street back to his building. The boy looked doubtful. "I won't hurt you," Holl assured, "and it's *quite* important." There was no change in the teenager's disposition, so Holl tried a new tactic. "What you are experiencing, my boy, is a medical phenomenon. You have to be treated right away. I'm a doctor. I know all about it. My name's Holliday." Holl reached forward and firmly took the boy's arm. He was going to use his age, his authority. "You're damn lucky I saw you out of my window. We've been studying this thing closely. It's spreading like wildfire. Come inside. I can help." Holl gave a tug to the boy, and he started to move. The inspector was relieved he had taken the morphia. If he had come out into the street on the brink of a craving, he would have had the shakes. Now, even with his waterlogged appearance, he felt collected and convincing. "Come, come," he said, and practically dragged the half-willing boy into his flat and up to the first floor. "You're damn lucky," he kept repeating as sternly as he could muster, and this seemed to ease the teenager's mind, although this boy was anything but lucky.

A CONVERSATION WITH FOUR BODIES

The teenage boy was in a chair before he spoke again. "Doctor, then, aye?" he asked, his accent of a cockney. Holl could suppose him a rough — slightly drunk, clothes of a Bill Haley follower, hair slicked... affected by the American fashion magazines and the opinions of his girlfriends. Holl let him take the big chair in his sitting room, away from the street and the windows. *At least the boy's wearing leather*, thought Holl concerning the damage to his chair, glad to see the drops bead and run, leaving only the boy's blue jeans and hair to dry.

"Yes," replied Holl, "a doctor."

"Is this flu or somethin'?"

"Something, yes..." Holl snatched a pen from his jar, and his notepad from inside of his overcoat, the long, brown trench lazily tossed across his table upon his arrival home. He flipped the notepad to a blank page, and asked, "What's your name, then?"

"Cogs," replied the boy, and spelled it: "C-O-G-S. Rory Cogs." The boy had been under the care of a constable before, this Holl could tell, as he seemed to fall into the procedure.

"Aye," smiled Holl, "Cog in the wheel, yes, I see the significance. Get me rolling then in the right direction. Ah hah — " (*finger wagging in the air*) "...clever, clever, this thing, yes. Patterns patterns. Try to stay alert. The dream, and then you, *here*. Heed the signs, always the way out. Sit there long enough and the answer will come, won't it, Mister... Mister..." (*eyes to the pad where he had written the name*) "...Cogs, is it?" The teenager looked around the room, wanting to leave. Holl slowed the speed of his speech. *Patience. Slow down, you old fool. Don't scare him off like a Trafalgar pigeon.* (stall, stall) "Why don't you tell me a little about yourself, then?"

Rory Cogs shrugged and ran his fingers through his falling black plume. "Is that necessary, like? Shouldn't we

be phoning hospital? I'm numb. How fast, like, before real trouble? Thought yer performin' an examination, like, check the throat n' ears, me pulse. Right?" The boy smarted and gave a shiver — or at least it appeared as a shiver. His shoulders blurred, and Holl had to put a finger in his eye to clear a lash from sleep. "Yes. Like," he began again, but then tapered away a second time. Then, as if a fresh thought came into Rory's head, his chin went up, and he gave an appraisal to the apartment — the bookshelves, the simple furniture, the untidy clothes laid over the sofa and one of the kitchenette chairs. He shook his head, unsatisfied. "You've let yourself go, Robby," said the rough, in a clear and educated voice. The cockney stuttering had disappeared.

Holl backed his chair up. "I didn't tell you my name."

"But I know it. Yes, I do."

Holl leaned forward, until his bottom separated from the wood of the chair. Stomach buzzing, the wet clinging of his bedclothes peeling from his skin, the collected droplets funneling to the end of one sleeve before dripping to the floor below, Holl took a breath. The *tap-tap-tap* of the saturated robe and subsequent puddle was, for a moment, the only sound in the room.

At last, the inspector spoke.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Not some sewer rat, if that's what you're asking."

Holl pointed at the body —

"You're not Cogs anymore, are you?"

"This switch is open."

"Who are you?"

"Someone who's come to give you a leg up, shall we say? You appear to be stuck."

Holl got defensive. He continued to see the body as a mere boy, half his age, a fraction of his intellect. "I know quite a bit about it! Much as anyone, I would suspect. More. *More* than anyone. I'm a clever sort. I've even got —" (*The map!* he was going to say, but decided better of it.) "...knowledge that others in this game do not. I'm working on a couple of breaks right —"

"Breaks!" exclaimed Rory Cogs. "Listen to yourself, talking like a bloody inspector! You forget that is not *your* body..." Cogs gestured up and down Holl's physique. "Rob Holl's skin is just what you've borrowed, like I'm borrowing this Rory Cogs'. We are wearing human suits. So... you know how to read an index! That doesn't take much, just time at the switch and a bit of brains, but they're more complicated than you realize. I commend you with one thing, though: You've managed to escape the dead stations — so far, anyway — and I'm pleased with that. You can listen to your head. But realize there are others against you. They know what you're after and they want to stop you. They're going to claim the tunnels first, expose them to the world, and then you'll have nothing. Others will take the accolades and you'll be forgotten. You'll die as an inspector for the London police. You'll be just a man."

Holl began to withdraw. "Maybe you're *one* of those people — my competitor," he muttered, "come to mislead me. Devil in disguise." Cogs didn't refute. He kept his glare on Holl until it was returned. Holl read deep into the man's disappointment. With an air of apology, Holl seemed to sense the truth of the matter. "Ah but you aren't, are you? The enemy? You'd stop me right here if you were. Cogs is stronger than Holl — looks like the boy's familiar with a fight or two. I've got a belly, these brittle bones. I'm forty-four. He's probably got a knife." Cogs, opposite him, tapped a spot on the leather jacket and gave a nod. "Yes, yes," said Holl, muttering again in his shirt, "so you must be here to help me. I'll have to trust you. I don't have much of a choice."

Resting his hands on either arm of the chair, laying him open, Cogs gave a broad smile and a wink. "I will teach you things. Techniques. You'll find these things of great value, I'm sure."

Holl shook him off. "If it's splitting, I've already done it. I learned that as Robby Holliday. Splitting — the ability to be in two places at once. I haven't done it yet in this body, but I believe it's possible, with enough morphia in me."

This statement made Cogs' face show confusion. He didn't understand at first. "Morphia?" he asked, thinking a line. "Holl is a morphia addict?"

The inspector nodded.

"Interesting," said Cogs with some glee. "That explains how you've been able to keep this switch open for so long. You see, there is a way to activate a switch, or keep a switch open for longer, by making the body numb. You know this, I'm sure. Think about your time as Robby Holliday — when did the numbness start?"

Holl knew the exact moment. "When I was outside at my estate, just after discovering the patterns. I took a spill and hit my head — broke my fingers, and one side of my body went numb. That was enough — "

"Enough to open the channel," finished Cogs.

"Exactly, and then I kept the channel open by my exploration of the patterns. With my mind. With what I had found out."

"Wrong," said Cogs, the word standing as an insult.

Holl was at first irritated, but, as with his professors at university, he quickly put his mind to finding his own answer. *The morphia*, he thought. *Holliday didn't take that. But he did take* — "Medication!" he said with a snap of his fingers. "For my heart. When I was Robby Holliday I had to take several pills a day for my heart condition — a special medication given to me by a colleague, not a prescription. Do you suppose — "

"That the drug was a numbing agent? Yes," said Rory, "it was. You probably took too much of it, but didn't realize it because of the nerve damage from your fall. You just thought it was all related, ain't that right, guv'nor?" He had slipped back into Cogs' thick accent, to amuse.

Holl kept his head bobbing up and down. "I suppose it's possible. Now the morphia of this Rob Holl is keeping the channel open. The more I take, the more I feel numb, and the switch stays open, you say? Yes, that must be true. It must." Holl added these theories to his already existing ones, but found a snag. "Say, then — what

happened to you, Cogs? What caused your switch to be open?"

Cogs displayed a Cheshire grin, sly and dangerous. "Switches," he proclaimed, "can be altered. They're electrical." Holl pursed his lips in response. Cogs continued, "When you're outside the tunnels, numbing is the way to go. When you're inside the tunnels, electrics do the trick. You probably don't know much about electric switches and electrical current because you studied germs as Robby Holliday and criminals as this Inspector Holl, but you've never studied much else, have you? A switch can have its index rerouted, or split, or whatever may be needed. The person splitting your body into doubles was, in fact, *me*." Holl's face showed shock. "That's right. I first did this when you had become stuck in an attic. Do you remember that? Damn foolish. You had been searching for clues related to the pattern detection *before* you went numb, and the building owner had gone and locked you inside by mistake."

"Yes, yes," said Holl, finger up. "I remember."

"Well I was at your switch, and I split you into two — one *outside* the door and one *inside* the door, so you could let yourself out. If I hadn't, you would have died. You're a very valuable investment. You were making great progress, and I didn't want to see you rotting away before your switch was opened, and you went numb. I have done the same thing a few times since, when I thought it was important to do so. Once when you were talking to Simon Green at your estate, the night he showed up with the ledger. I felt someone should have been keeping an eye on his daughter Audrey, who you had shut out of your lab. It served its purpose, but it was no major feat on my part. You just need to know a little about Thomas Edison, me boy. That's all. E-lectricity. A marvel of invented science."

Holl buttoned up his face. "I'm not ignorant of current," he said in defense. "I've used hydro-electrics in the lab — and relays. I've set up my own batteries and cookers."

Cogs nodded. "Of course you have," he said, as to a child.

"Just didn't apply it to the indexes, that's all."

"Sure, sure. I understand."

"I wasn't in the tunnels long enough. I found this body very fast. Applaud me for that, why don't you? I've got *experience* under my belt."

Rory Cogs waved his hands. "I know that. You're my best man right now, which is why I hate seeing you fritter away in East Acton waiting for a pattern to fall in your lap. It's so depressing. Maybe I'm being unsporting, but I just couldn't stomach it any longer. So here I am, in another switch index that was just a block away from your flat, a boy with no ties, no connections, someone who would not be missed. And I've come to *show* you — "

"What?"

"A way back in. A way to the *girl*."

Holl stood to his feet at the mention. "Audrey Green?"

"You want to find her, don't you?"

"Yes, but I've got to find her in 1957, when she *knows*, when she's gone *numb*. That's two years away! Finding her now at age six would do me no good."

Cogs gave a frustrated shake of his head. "You're thinking of time as a linear thing, doctor, and it is not. The tunnels allow you to move *between* years. Take certain advantages. There's no need for things to go in a straight line. If you wait two years in silence for the child, think of the waste. You'll be beaten to the glory. I wish I had known more myself, as I feel I let you fritter away too much as Robby Holliday. I won't let that happen to Rob Holl. Your enemies have been taught some of these skills, and it's only fair that you shall know them as well. It levels the field."

Holl smacked his palm on the arm of the chair. "What are *your* intentions, sir, if you don't mind telling me? You know that I seek discovery... something I can claim. But I don't think you have the same motivation. Tell me your real name *and* your cause. It's only fair since you know so much of me."

Cogs left his face smiling, superior. “It won’t take much for you to answer your own questions,” he started, “once I’ve shown you what you need. Besides, I am but an unseen general — you are more important. You are a soldier. The glory will go to you. Are you ready to begin?” Cogs, his clothes damp and his leather jacket squeaking, wiped the water from his face, the drops from his hair, and in that passing of the hand, Holl looked very hard to see who was hidden behind. He could not tell...

VISITATION & EXPLORATION

The idea of links between the switch indexes was not news to Robby Holliday. He had spent a large amount of his time seeking these connections. There had been two dance hall girls — Vangel and Emily — and he was convinced, for a time, that Audrey Green may have been the third link between three bodies. He could have presented this to the Nobel commission as irrefutable evidence of connectedness. Such fancy, that was, to think that the girl Audrey belonged in such standard company as dancers. There were times, even, when Holliday tried to refute the theory of multiples as untested and irrelevant to his study of patterns. It was only slowing him down. However, as was clear from the existence of three switches related to his own being — Robby Holliday, Rob Holl, and the undiscovered switch for Robby Holli — there was indeed some support to these ideas. *(That young man — Holli, another bridging name whom Holliday had known from his research — was a switch not yet found, neither on the map or in the tunnels. If he could locate it, he was pretty sure he could enter that body, too, if numb. Holli's switch may not be open yet, but he was keeping the boy in mind — as he may prove useful.)* In the end, he decided to keep the triplet theory intact. If extrapolated, all may be known through this foundation in numerics. Simon Green, as an accountant, had found validity for this theory in the ledger. The discovery of linking switches — companion indexes, as he dubbed them in his continuing notes — proved to be essential in his leap from Holliday to Holl, which kept him alive. He just needed to find a third switch. If Cogs was right, and knew a way back into the tunnels, he might be offered that chance.

"Take my hand," instructed Rory Cogs, hand out from his place in the chair.

Holl took a step forward.

"Come — you can travel in my company. It's part of my own bag of tricks. Learned, over time. Audrey Green has that, too, taught to her by one particularly

unsportsmanlike gentleman. Not many can come and go as they please. I can do a bit, but it takes a lot out of me. And even *I* have to avoid the dead stations." Here Rory Cogs took a pause, then, decidedly, said, "You know, Holliday, Audrey Green is the one who saved you from your house in the Matten Estates. You think you would have lived through the Plague Boy if she hadn't been so generous?"

"The Plague Boy!" This news, of the Boy himself actually being in Robby Holliday's house, was a total shock to Holl.

"Yes, he was at your door, and he took every life in that house, with the exceptions of yours and the girl's. She saved you by bringing you into the tunnels with her. She could have left you behind. Foolish to save you, considering whose side you're on, but children often have a weakness for grandfather figures. Her bigger mistake, though, was letting go of your hand, so you could run off and find the switch of Rob Holl. The boy had to work fast, so you might have been able to get back inside of Holliday, but you waited too long. Oh, but you wouldn't have known that, would you? – That the faster the boy works the greater chance of reinhabiting the body. See – " Cogs tapped his temple, "you learn these things as you go. Research, rumors, and experience. There isn't an instruction book. Your damn lucky I'm helping you." Hand outstretched, Cogs wagged it impatiently. "Come. Take it."

Holl did as he was told, and the world went

white.

Tubes, as he remembered — the ghostly opposite of his sitting room in East Acton. As he refocused on the tunnels, he shut up his fist, angry with himself. He had forgotten his map! "Blast!" he said, rather loudly, and it echoed off the curved walls and the metal sheeting of the nearby platform.

Rory Cogs turned the inspector to face a box bolted to the wall, where a panel had been swung on hinges,

revealing breakers, geometric alignments, isobaric lines, hidden codes and conduits — all blooming from the spot like an untended garden. Imprinted on a placard above was name: *Rory Robert Cogs*. Holl was familiar with the look of the panel, an identical layout to the switch index he stumbled upon when Robby Holliday entered Rob Holl. It was trial and error, but once he found the correct pull cord, he had been sucked inside as dust into a vacuum, to new life. Rory stood across from Holl, his clothes now dry. Holl still was a bit damp, but the heat of the journey, something he had noticed both times now, and the wind, had taken the edge off his condition. It was not like lamplight, or sunlight, this heat, but more resembled friction, of a bullet through a gun, the barrel warm after the shot.

"Are you beginning to forget?" asked Cogs.

"Forget? Forget what?"

"About Rob Holl. About Robby Holliday?"

"You mean their lives?" He thought back to key events in the lives of the men, the first images to surface. "No, I remember both."

Cogs gave a satisfied nod. "Good. That's an important discovery. You absorb all the facts of a *companion index* — I think that's your term, isn't it? It was strings, but you've made the term more clinical in your latest journals. And don't give me that look, Holliday, I've read every one of your notebooks — the ones you kept as Robby Holliday, and the ones you have hidden today in the bookshelf of Rob Holl. There's nothing you know that I don't. *Companion index* — I quite like that." At this comment, Holl did not have an opportunity to be angry. He was violated — his private notes raided — and would curse this man, but it faded. At least his research had been appreciated. Cogs didn't say his suppositions were bunk. He simply said that he had read the notes and knew his definition of a companion index. Holliday must not have been much off course, not if this bloke was stealing terms from him. He would, however, find a new hiding place for his journals when he returned to his flat.

The two of them left the switch of Rory Cogs and walked for some great distance. As they passed platforms, they detected winds from occasional passing trains. Although the machines could not be clearly seen, appearing only as racing distortions with phantom outlines, their wake sucked air in and out of the tunnels and gave away their presence.

Fascinated by the interior of this great maze, Holl did not interrogate Cogs. Once or twice a question would come into his head, only to seep out again as unimportant. The only statement of any value he got past his lips was, "You're not Rory Cogs, I know that. You don't talk like him, firstly. But you are *somebody*, correct?"

"Correct," was Cogs' limited affirmation. Questioned further, he said he was 'an interested party.' The subject seemed closed, and Holl decided he should just follow for now. Cogs, he noted, did not use a map.

At long last, they came upon a place identical in almost every way to fifty other tunnels and causeways they had passed between Rory Cogs' switch index and this new place. Cogs went to a box on the wall and opened the paneling to reveal Rob Holl's own switch index. "This was the one you used to get inside," stated Cogs. "I found it some time ago. I could wire you to split, if I wanted, but I don't see much use in it today. What I'd prefer to do is conduct a little demonstration. It's something you may find useful in the future. Watch closely — " Cogs put his hand into the switch and in slow, easy manipulation, pulled a dangling rod from the box. "Look familiar?"

"Yes," Holl nodded, "that was the rod I removed. It allowed me to enter. I simply gave a guess."

"It was a good one." Cogs replaced the rod into the mechanism. "When you pull this out again, you will once more be Rob Holl, in a room in his flat, at the precise moment we left. Because the rod had been removed in the first place, it was as if time had stopped while you were not inside his body. As I have just replaced the rod, he will be sitting opposite a teenage boy he does not know. They won't have any comprehension of how they got there. Right

now, though, I'm acting as a placeholder for the boy, his own rod out of the circuit. The boy will be comatose until the rod is replaced, or until I return to the body. In order to not torture Mr. Holl longer than we should, I will back away and let you pull out the rod. Holl is still numb from the morphia. He may be groggy when you arrive. What I'm going to do once you're back... is turn this switch." Cogs showed Holl a precise spot on the panel, a switch with three markings. "I'll explain more when I arrive in your sitting room."

Holl felt perspiration starting on his forehead. "Are you sure whatever we're trying will work?"

"It will," said Cogs confidently as he backed far away down the tunnel, so as not to be sucked into the switch index.

Holl looked to his teacher. Nervously, he wrapped his fingers on the panel rod and closed his eyes. "Ready?" he shouted down the tunnel to Cogs — "Here I go!" — and pulled the object from the socket. Immediately, as it was in 1953, he was whipped into that warm vortex, spinning quickly, eyes shut tight against the force of motion. He half expected to arrive on the bus next to Alison Falliher, questioning him about Robby Holliday, a sure sign that she was against him. But instead, the whirl and settle of the journey came to a quiet conclusion in his hardwood chair, safe in his East Acton flat, just as he had left it. He gave a heavy sigh. As Cogs had warned, he felt the sudden rush of morphia filling his mind, and his sense of touch quickly vanished. His clothes were now completely dry.

Opposite him was the original Cogs, frozen.

The boy had a slightly dumb expression on his face, not at all the smirk of his inhabitant, the stranger who had temporarily taken possession.

Only about ten seconds passed and Rob Holl had a second rush of sensation. He felt bloated and thickheaded, and had a series of twitches that started in his fingers and ended in his toes. These tremors weren't epileptic, but noticeable, and when they stopped, there was a second Rob

Holl, identical to him in every way, standing beside his chair.

"Good Christ!" he blurted out, very loudly for that hour of the night, and this was followed by ten seconds of silence and a banging broom-handle on the ceiling of the flat below, telegraphing irritation.

The second Rob Holl was smiling, in robe and slippers, just as the first Rob Holl. "It's me," said the twin. "By moving that key to the second position, a little trick of wiring, and voila! Instant multiple." Holl rose to his feet. He circled the second Rob Holl, disbelieving. "It's a flaw in the electrics," explained the split. "You can even do a third, if you're feeling bold. Sort of like putting a charge to a nucleus, to get the cells to divide, I suppose. Ah, but you probably know more about that sort of thing than me, don't you, Holliday?"

Holl reached out and gave a finger-push to his double, who rocked with the shove. "I don't know a thing anymore," he admitted.

"It's a trick, you see, but a pretty one, don't you think? Now if you need a split you can do it yourself. I wanted to show it to you because that Sonny Royce fellow has been shown, too. You're aware of him, aren't you?"

"Sonny... Royce?"

"He's trouble. Beware. You're my reinforcement — my man on the inside. Sonny is working for our enemies. Ah, but I wouldn't worry much about him right now. You've got the edge. You know more and you can be quite ruthless." The second Rob Holl suddenly jumped and frantically looked about the room. "Good *Lord!*" he exclaimed, getting another echoing broom under his feet, "What *time* is it?"

The first Inspector Holl let his eyes dart to the clock on his mantle. "Half-past three."

Seeing the clock-face for himself, the second Rob Holl walked to the spot and quickly picked it up. "I've got to get back," he said, fast gears turning. "Hold still." He grabbed Holl by the arm and pressed the side of his body up close. Holl again felt those same tremors and shut his eyes.

When he opened them again, there was only one of him left in the room, along with the frozen Rory Cogs. For a second, he didn't know what to do — he had been left alone with a catatonic and no further clues. Just as this thought began to turn to panic, Rory Cogs came to life with a shake. The boy was winded.

"I had to run all the way from your switch back to this one," said Cogs. "I have one more thing to tell you. Cogs is about up — his numbing stops soon. The circuit closes. When I'm gone, you'll have to ring his neck. Don't worry, he won't be missed. I've seen his index, and there's not much left, but I don't want him around here with you. Wait until I'm out, then do it. Here, come up behind me." Holl didn't move. "Come on, come on! There isn't much time! He'll get the jump on you if you're not there to do it first. But wait till I'm out. I'm not much for pain. I'll try to get you more information as I can, more tricks, but I'm under close watch. I think they suspect me." Cogs glanced at the mantle clock, the seconds racing towards 3:33. "All right, then," Cogs ended flatly, "you know what to do."

The minute struck, another shiver and blur — the boy's face dropped, as before, and the confused disposition of an amnesiac began to surface. "Sorry," apologized Inspector Holl as he spun his hands in opposite directions along the boy's head, breaking the neck of Rory Cogs in three places.

1958, A FRIDAY

Talent agent Desmond Harve looked again at the telegram in disbelief, hat-on-head, just as he and Claire Royce exited the plane onto the wet tarmac.

I HAVE BEEN ARRESTED. STOP. IN THE TOWN
OF MARSDEN, ENGLAND. STOP. COME AND
BRING CLAIRE. STOP. LIFE OR DEATH. STOP.

It still did not seem possible — Sonny arrested! Havre continued to be shaken by the flight from France — the height, the props, this turn of the weather to rain... not to mention Claire's sudden change of personality, imparting a flurry of instructions: *You must avoid this Holl at all costs as he will kill you. When you get to Marsden, you must find a man named Philpot and he will tell you what to do. Do you understand?* No, he most certainly did not.

The rain was misting the passengers as they hurried into the shelter of the airport. The terminal was not large — only a landing strip and Quonset. Havre had phoned ahead and arranged for a car to take them to Marsden, which, according to his map of southern England (useful when booking tours for jazzmen) was still another hour away. The car arrived late and the driver helped toss their bags into the boot.

Claire was very quiet as they took to the roads. Concerned, yes, but also stranger since the event on the plane. Havre had not questioned her further about her message, its meaning, or her sources. He hoped reporters would stay clear of the story until he presented himself at the jail. Sonny Royce was not half as famous as, say, Charlie Parker, but a story of an arrest might make it to the wire. That may have adverse consequences on future bookings. Harve shivered at the thought — both for Sonny's lessened income as well as his own commissions.

It was important for Havre to make a respectable impression when he hit town. That was one of his most

remembered points of law from his days of study at Whitby — to always look better than any opposing solicitors. He straightened his suit, dampened from the weather that continued to fog their journey. He shagged out his hair from behind his ears and popped mint into his mouth. Claire loaned him her powder mirror so he could check his shave and knot his necktie.

By the time they arrived at Marsden, Havre felt a little weakness in his stomach, a combination of nervousness and the motion of the car. The driver rolled down the window and asked a woman walking a pram for directions. She pointed to the left and said the names of three streets. Havre hoped the driver was paying attention, as the agent was too distracted.

In less than two minutes they were at the doorstep of the local constabulary. It was a plain box building off the main square, red-bricked with a leading stair-step to the entrance. Havre paid the driver for the journey thus far, and requested that the man wait until their business was finished, as they might need additional services before the day's end. As it was teatime, the driver had noticed a café a few streets back and wanted to circle for a bite. Havre agreed and took Claire's hand to help her out of the vehicle. For the first time since the telegram, she smiled, hopeful that she might soon be with her husband. Havre felt that same relief.

Claire straightened her wool skirt and sweater and brushed the dark hair from her face. Abruptly, she took Desmond by the arm. He thought she was about to have another flash, another personality, but it was simply to say, "Merci beaucoup pour vos efforts, Desmond."

He replied gently, "A votre service," and accompanied her up the short steps into the station house.

They did not expect such a crowd. In the lobby were a dozen constables, five members of the fire brigade, and several plainclothed men, probably inspectors, hats tipped. A wide table had been placed just past the swing of the door, and a map had been unfolded. No one was speaking except for a few mumbles from those furthest from the table

edge. The only other woman, aside from Claire Royce, entered from side hallway, a notepad and pencil ready. The two were not noticed until Havre let loose with a conspicuous clearing of the throat. Heads turned, some quickly, some slowly. A tall man in draping foxhunter's coat stood above the men surrounding the map. He hitched his thumbs in his waistcoat.

"We're looking for Sonny Royce," declared Havre.

"Join the bloody club," said the tall man.

This awkward moment held, until finally the long-coated one came around the table. "I'm Albert Mott — Sheriff of Marsden County," he said in introduction. "And who might you be?"

Havre removed his hat and pulled a card from his pocket. "Monsieur Desmond Havre. I'm Mr. Sonny Royce's agent and solicitor." Havre gave over his card and moved to an open-handed gesture for the woman beside. "This is Claire Royce, Mr. Royce's wife. Sonny sent us a telegram telling us of his arrest."

"You're from Paris?" asked Mott, reading the card.

"Oui!" jumped Claire. "Paris."

The sheriff led the two down the long hallway of the station house to a charge room. He pulled a chair for Claire and motioned that Havre should take the second. After asking to see their passports, Mott leaned against a table that lined the barred windows. His height remained intimidating. Havre braced himself for a line of questions. However, this was not an interrogation; it was a confession.

"We've lost Mr. Royce," Mott exhaled. Claire turned to Havre for a translation, which he gave. (*"Il est ne pas avec les policiers."*) "Last night, he was in the custody of an inspector name Rob Holl — " (*Alarms! You must avoid this Holl at all costs as he will kill you* — thought Havre.) "Both of them have disappeared. Today, I have two more dead bodies. One is a guard who was shot by a pistol through the cell window during the night, and the second the shooter himself, who took his own life by drowning himself in the riverbed while fleeing police. This murderer had no identification." The sheriff made a shameful face and

shaded his eyes. "I left this case in the hands of a man who was unfamiliar to me — this Inspector Holl. From reports by the men booked on with him during the night, he was a very odd bird. He was last seen in Mr. Royce's cell. Had requested to not be disturbed. He was questioning the man about an incident from last Sunday, three dead bodies discovered at the Marsden Mill, a workingman's pub just outside of town. Mr. Royce was also apparently a suspect in a motorcar crash that happened Thursday night. A man was killed in this crash, who, it turns out, is yet another inspector, John Falliher. The driver fled the scene and we think the man may have been Royce."

Havre took a pause to interpret this for Claire, who, with each sentence, grew more and more horrified. By the end she was weeping, and Havre pulled his kerchief from his inner pocket and offered it to Claire.

In an unnecessary whisper, Sheriff Mott asked how long the two had been married.

"Since March of 1953. I was their Cupid, as they say. I introduced them." Havre patted the woman's soft hair, and let her lay her head on his shoulder. "Sheriff, I came prepared for a fight in a court of law. If there's been any illegal act, I can assure you that Sonny Royce is not responsible. I not only say that as his agent and solicitor, but also as his friend. He's a good man." Mott gave a nod, but did not show he was convinced. Havre continued, "He's a gentle sort. As far as I know, he hasn't driven a car since he's been in Europe. Maybe back in Chicago, where he's from, but not here — not in England, nor in Paris where he lives."

Mott raised his brow. "Maybe *that* was the problem. A bit out-of-practice. The car was even a stolen one. It belonged to Karl Otter, who runs the ballroom here in town."

Claire and Havre exchanged words in French, and the woman rose to her feet. With a low wave, she left the two men together in the room.

"She cannot hear any more," explained the agent. "She's gone to take the air. I'm afraid this is too much for

her." Mott nodded his understanding. Havre struggled for a moment with his next thought. "Sheriff," he began, "I have to confess I haven't been in England for many years. I've given up my citizenry. I was born here, I studied law here, but when I moved into entertainment my time was better served in Paris. I bring a lot of American jazzmen over to perform. Yes, some of them have problems with the bottle. Some of them are addicted to narcotics. Sonny... he wasn't immune to these foibles. However, I cannot stress enough that whatever has happened in this town since his performance last Friday night, he is *not* your man."

Havre left the station house, deflated. He requested that he be telephoned if any new information presented itself. All his fighting spirit had evaporated. He had been expecting to arrive at the station house and demand the release of his client. With Sonny missing, he had nowhere to direct these energies. Quietly, Claire and Havre wandered out of the crowded station, leaving the police to draw their net about the town and surrounding counties, planning their maneuvers over their table and map. He felt leery of so many dogs in the hunt — uninformed, unreliable policemen — but there was not much Havre could do about it. His wish was that Mott would believe Havre's account of character, and would phone the Marsden Bed & Breakfast — the same accommodations Havre had made for Sonny's quartet last weekend — if there was a sign.

Their rooms were quite nice, on the ground floor with spiral carpet and two large beds.

Shortly after supper, Claire took medication that made her sleep. Covering his friend's wife with blankets, hat-in-hand, Havre left her soundly asleep in her medicated haze. He was going out to search for a man named Philpot.

Moving down the B & B's hallway, still wearing his Italian suit, misspent for making that first impression, Havre was waylaid by the Scottish woman who ran the house. Havre mentioned he was the agent for the Sonny Royce Quartet. She commented on the courtesy and kindness of Sonny and his band. They had not been the usual rowdy lot (to which she was accustomed, Americans

without manners). Havre thanked the woman for granting the three remaining men of the quartet an extra two nights as they waited for the return of Sonny Royce, the man missing since Saturday morning (only to return as a confessor to a hit-and-run). Havre omitted the scandalous details of Sonny's confinement and subsequent jailbreak (or was it escape artistry?). "There was a girl," said the owner in her thick brogue, "who called on your three in the days b'fore they left."

"Oh really?" Havre prodded, his interest rising.

"She was a cute little thing — 'round nineteen? I believe they said her name was Winsey Green. Dancer at the hall. Had been with Royce the night before, I o'rheard 'em sayin'."

"Not something compromising, was it?" Havre asked in clarification.

The old woman shook her head. "Don' think so. I suspected as much, but then heard his mates saying that weren't true. Those three says the tall gray-haired one had 'im a wife, now. Heard that part quite clear."

"He *does* have a wife," confirmed the agent with a smile. "She's sleeping with me in the room." The old woman eyed Havre's room door, and then looked Havre up and down, in estimation of his character. She suspected infidelities and he did not have the energy to fight her conclusions. He also didn't have the energy to tell her of the police. "Give me more about this girl — did you know her?"

"No, I didn't recognize her. She did pop by once or twice, and telephoned incessantly. Seemed to be trying to find that Mr. Royce herself. Quite anxious about it, I should say." The woman moved closer and winked. "She were the kind that digs claws. Infatuated. Cheeks were red when she showed. Wore skirts too short and bare-legged, too." She moved even closer, until her old bones were nearly pressed against Desmond's suit. "Royce may be married, but... girls like that Winsey Green... aware of their appeal..."

Desmond had no doubt the woman was reading it wrong. He had known Sonny before Claire, and Sonny after Claire, and they were pretty much the same man — in love with music more than any single person, his wife coming the closest to a true note.

"My first husband ran off with a girl," offered the woman with a spit.

Stepping back, the agent felt he had been small-talked enough. He was now ready to ask his question: "Do you know someone in town by the name of Philpot?"

The woman bounced, registering faint emotion Havre could not clearly decipher. "*Clay* Philpot?"

"Yes, I suppose. Is he the only Philpot in Marsden?"

She gave a nod. "The only one I'm aware of. Runs a motorcar garage four streets off, with a cousin and another man. Nice one, that Clayton Philpot. Good lookin', too. I see him walk home quiet often." Havre sensed that this old pryer liked to spy — waiting on the hour a handsome man, possible widower, would pass her gate. Havre, after all, did not see a second husband roaming the halls of the eight-room B & B.

Havre checked his watch. It was a quarter-past four. The man may still be at work under the hood of some vehicle. "Can you give me directions to his garage?" He offered the woman a weak reason, that Philpot was a mate from the war. Havre hoped she didn't see through this lie. It was possible Clayton Philpot had not fought in the war, was only a home air raid warden, and she might know these facts. However, she didn't know the truth of it, for she was steadfastly penciling a map of the streets — left, left, right, between the ice shop and the cannery — without further question.

Outside the B & B, his hired car sat parked at the end of the street. Havre decided against using the driver for this errand. He didn't like the look of him, hadn't since the moment they met at the airport. The driver's eyes were red and he seemed inattentive to their needs. Havre went the opposite direction, so as not to be seen by the waiting man.

THE PURPOSE OF THE PLAGUE BOY

Avoid the boy, a waiter had warned him in June 1957, a second before serving Rob Holl his supper at a restaurant near the Strand. The same warning came from the woman who sat on a bench in Ranelagh Gardens. *The boy has got two this week. Stay alert!* She was back to feeding the swans before Holl had a chance to move his neck. These ghosts were haunting him. He never knew when someone on the tube, or on queue at the grocer's, might turn and say, *the boy*. These scattershot incidents only increased Holl's craving for morphia. The inspector continued to piece together suppositions, clues and leads related to the patterns, the switches, and that momentous conversation with Rory Cogs, whose body now lay at the bottom of the Thames, weighted by books. Holl began a study of electricity and current flow in the evenings, following his full days at the precinct. He read primers and snuck into lectures — large classes where he would not be noticed. On occasion, he flashed his police credentials to interrogate electricians. He befriended workers from British Rail and gained an understanding of track construction and advances in train-car comfort. Holl was preparing himself. His mysterious teacher had been right. It was a shame to waste away in East Acton when there was so much to be done. The inhabitant of Rory Cogs' body knew far more than Holl, or seemed to, and it was irksome. It wounded Holliday's pride. He felt certain he could surpass his mysterious instructor if he only had more access to the tunnels and a stronger schema.

Every day he examined his map, unlocking it from its hiding place under a board in his wardrobe. Having surrendered long ago any hope of decoding it did not dilute his recognition of its continued importance. He must hang onto it at all costs.

Holl kept up his caseload with the London district and was rewarded with a high percentage of convictions. It was slightly hypocritical of him to pass judgment on men who

rung necks or plotted murder, but that was how it had to be. He had to survive, he had to eat, and this was his trade.

In time, he would find his way back to the tunnels, be able to go there in a flash, as Cogs had the night he sat in Holl's sitting room. Holl would know the purpose of the tunnels and how best to announce their existence to the world. It just took perseverance. It would come. The glory would be his and his alone. "*Inspector Rob Holl, winner of every prize in this earthly world.*" All he needed was evidence. The case would be proved in a court, as he did with thieves and murderers. Tunnels have been built, and the human form is nothing but a shell, a house — a possession like a man's shoes. This would be his proven theory. Gone were the days he thought of triplet forms and patterns, now held as only supporting information; the heart of it was the train. The heart of it... was the end of the line.

Since his occupation of Rob Holl's body, he had occasional inclinations of finding his former self, Robby Holliday. The two of them together might be able to pool their resources. However, something did not seem right about this. Twice — once in 1954, again in 1956 — Holl readied his car to drive to the Matten Estates. He would walk right up to the gate and call on his former self. "*Robby Holliday — it is me, Rob Holl,*" he'd say. "*It's the body you will have in a future time. Let me in and I'll tell you what I've discovered.*"

But, alas, he did not go. An insurmountable wall was erected inside his mind. It was *wrong* to see a companion index; he knew this, as deeply as he knew anything. It spelled a danger far greater than any threat of the Plague Boy, or Audrey Green, her powers unknown but seemingly in abundance. Contact with Robby Holliday might just scramble his mind to the point of mush. Paralysis and mental retardation might set upon him. His very nerves might wither and die as grapes at end of a season, left in the nip of early winter. All these images kept him from his meeting.

It was Christmas 1957 and word came that Captain Lorber had taken ill. The men took up a collection for a basket of fruit and a card. Holl signed his encouragement: "Haven't got the bloody plague, have you?" and felt slightly guilty after dropping it in the post. At the man's funeral the following week, in a chapel near Knightsbridge, Holl watched the captain's three children weep in their mother's arms. They were not young, but the love for their father must have been extraordinary. After the procession, Holl turned from the tent of mourners as the body was lowered into the ground, rites given and the heavy emotion too much to stomach.

Away from Holl stood a man digging in the snow-covered ground, not thirty paces from the resting place of Captain Lorber — a gravedigger, gaunt with a bald head and brown coveralls. He spotted Holl's desertion and stuck his shovel in the dirt.

"Holl!" he called out, clear as a morning bell across the frozen lawn of the cemetery.

Holl stopped, the crunch of the snow under his boots so loud that he thought he had been mistaken. *Did that gravedigger just say my name?* The faraway worker did not repeat the call; he stood placid, hand resting on the wood tip of his shovel. At long last, he waved the inspector forward. Holl looked back to the funeral. He was not being watched. Closer he came to the gravedigger until the two were separated only by a waist-high stone marked with the name *Laurel Elizabeth Roman*. It was a child, dates of 1874-1877. *This plot is too old to have a fresh grave*, thought Holl, his years of training, study, and deduction sounding alarms. *This worker should not be digging here*. Standing opposite each other — dark-eyed man and long-coated inspector — they searched each other's face. At last, Holl became aware of a sort of movement below the bone — a smile *underneath* the face of this dour gravedigger.

"You!" cried Holl, his gloved hand on the top of the Roman stone. "It's you!"

"It is," confirmed the gravedigger. "I've been watching you work. I'm quite impressed by your commitment. I

thought you should know... it was always *me* who's been warning you of the boy. I've only been able to work a few switches — only for seconds — but you seem to have heard. You've stayed clear. You listen well."

"Yes, I do listen," said Holl. He let his hand fall back to his side and stepped closer. He was looking directly into the gravedigger's eyes, searching for more signs of that face beneath, for identification. "Tell me your name," he said boldly.

"It's Ecoutine."

"No, your *real* name — not the name of the digger."

The man shook his head, disappointed, then brushed Holl off in a monotone, "I've got more important things to discuss." The digger moved even closer. "This will be your last warning about the boy," he said. "He's been sent to close the tunnels. Do you understand? *To close them.* He's working his way through the open switches, shutting them one by one — permanently. I don't think our friends know this yet. They only know that he's a danger. If you're in this Rob Holl when he arrives, you'll be sent straight to a dead station. There will be no avoiding a train that time and finding a switch back. It'll be the end of you, you hear? Just like when you snapped my neck as Rory Cogs — it's better to be out of the body when violence occurs. Your friend Captain Lorber's switch was just about to open. He was home last Saturday and did himself an electric shock while fixing a lamp. Lorber hadn't told his wife about his numbness. Then the boy arrived on his door, and see what's left of your captain? A bag of bones. I was looking forward to that switch because it was to stay open for thirteen days, enough to really start giving you an education. But the boy got to him first, and there's nothing but a smoking bunch of electrics on the wall of his tunnel. The body is useless."

The gravedigger gave a nod over Holl's shoulder to the tent. The family and Holl's police colleagues were now dispersing, the casket laid to rest in the ground. The throng to the motorcade was a sea of black clothes and down-

turned heads. For a flash, Holl was actually in sympathy. "Who controls the boy?" he asked Ecoutine.

"I don't know," replied the gravedigger with a matching sadness. "My guess is it may be the same force that built the towers at the dead stations. They don't want trespassers. They've sent out the dogs." He held quiet for a moment and blew breath into his cold fingers. "Oh," he said suddenly, "you should know of the girl — that Audrey Green. She's in the game now. She's already met Robby Holliday. She's recuperating in Burnby Hospital from that traffic accident — the robbery and murder of her father after they left you at Holliday's estate. I've been to the hospital but I've made few discoveries. She's pretending to have amnesia. I'm a little disappointed that the enemy has recruited her. I'll have to give her to them, though. They found her first. Fair is fair. But I don't *need* her when I've got *you*, right? Robby Holliday will be finding her again shortly, and bringing her back to his estate."

Rob Holl shook his head. He remembered all this vividly. It was odd to think of actions being taken by his body along the coast when he was really in London, but, as he had once been taught, he had stopped thinking of time as linear.

"I need you to stop her — Audrey Green," said the gravedigger. "If the girl can be stopped, then the boy can, too. If the boy works his way through every switch, no one will be able to get in or out of the tunnels ever again. Those on the outside will remain that way, and those on the inside will have no choice but to go to the dead stations." (*Holl listened to this and thought of the consequences to his discovery. The boy was not only a danger to him, he was capable of destroying every trace of his fantastic find.*) "There will be several switches, all together, all about to open, in a town called Marsden next August. Here — take this piece of paper, I've written it down. It was not easy for me to get this information. I had to trick someone into giving it to me. Both the boy, and Audrey Green, will be there together on that same night, at a pub called the Marsden Mill."

Holl said in panic, "But I can't be near the boy! I'm an open switch. The morphia, you remember. You said to stay away from the — "

The gravedigger gave his first smile. "Be in Marsden next August. If the girl is present, she will save you from the boy. Use the girl to get into the tunnels. Audrey Green may even accidentally lead you to me, if you are so curious. Your work isn't done yet." Ecoutine tugged the handle of the shovel, freeing it from the snow and dirt, and dropped it into Rob Holl's hands.

"I suppose you want me to use this on you?" said the inspector, irritated. "Well I can't! There are at least *fifty* constables — " Holl gave a point to the remaining cars of the procession. He was not far off with his number.

Ecoutine stepped to the left and fell into an open hole, deep as the gravedigger's kneecaps. "No!" he chided, "I just want you to *hand* it to me once I got down here. No need to kill this ol' digger — he hasn't got more than three years in him. I only had you murder Cogs because he was in your flat. This one's not worth the bother. He suffers from a bad memory. Why do you think he's digging in the wrong spot, anyhow? He's supposed to be in across the field. His apprentice will come and tell him as much in about five minutes. Hand me the shovel..." Holl did as he was told, relieved that no bloody business was needed. "Get to Marsden on time," Ecoutine reminded. "It'll work as planned. Do this right, and you'll find me." The man continued digging.

Holl pulled his coat around his ears. The December wind was picking up. "Find you," he nodded, "I will."

THE TWO IN THE CAR

It only took a ten-minute walk before he found the sign:

PHILPOT'S – MECHANICS AND SERVICERS.

The garage door, split and held upon moving rollers, was opened wide to let in the August breeze — no relief, as the early day's rain had dissipated into a muggy summer's eve. Havre was tempted to undo his waistcoat, as he had already started to fan his face with the brim of his hat. He debated a moment before deciding to remove both his waistcoat and jacket. This was, after all, a workingman he sought. He didn't want to come with accoutrements, which may be mistaken for pride. This situation was not the same as a court of law.

There were two cars parked very close together inside the garage — one a black import and the other a compact Austin-Healey, green in color. Havre entered the frame of the lifted door and called out, "Excuse me! Is anyone here?" A few seconds passed without answer. He made a second halloo and waited, his hat swinging, his removed garments over one arm. *This place has no air*, he thought to himself, before moving back out the open door and to the street.

Going around the neighboring cannery, Havre found a weedy lot behind, full of motor parts. He didn't dare go too far into the junk, not with his nice trousers.

He made another call. "Excuse me! Anyone?"

From behind a heap of discarded engines, a man appeared. Thin, wearing a ruffled tweed jacket and splayed collar, the top three buttons open or gone, he was a picture of agitation. He appeared as a caught wolf raiding the chickens. The man stumbled a bit and then found his footing. Combing his fingernails through his wiry mustache, he had jumped at the sight of Desmond Havre, just as Desmond had done with the man's own sudden spring from the pile. Settling, the odd duck righted his posture and asked, straight out:

"What's your name?"

Havre paused. *Should I say? Does it matter?* Seeing no harm, he spoke his introduction quickly. "My name is Havre."

The tweed man thought on this for a moment. In the end, he seemed satisfied. Moving over the automobile parts and scraps of discarded rubber tires, he changed his expression from despair to one more sanguine. "Who are you looking for, then?"

"I'm looking for a man named Philpot. This is his garage, is it not?" The tweed man was nearly upon Havre — close enough for the talent agent to get a better appraisal of his condition. The man was a shambles — hair up in two places over the ears, jacket pocked with burns (*cinder burns?*), and a look in the eyes that spelled madness, or, at the very least, disorientation. And there was something dreadfully wrong with his neck. It was as if he couldn't raise it from a sideways position, a crooked bone or lack of spine. For any man, it would cause great discomfort to hold one's neck in such a way.

As the man went past Havre's ear, he said with severity, "I'm looking for him, too," before disappearing around the front of the cannery. Havre had no choice but to follow. The stranger rambled on without looking back, "I don't know you, do I? I've never heard the name Havre. Not in my research. I hear a bit of French in your voice — are you French?"

"Yes, but I — " (*I'm originally English*, he had started, before being drowned out...)

"French — yes, probably why I don't know the name." A sudden tick came into his face. "French is probably safe. It seems to be only Englishmen giving me troubles. Christian name? — Say it. Come, come."

Havre shrugged. "Desmond."

This, too, seemed to give the man some measure of relief. Continuing around the building, the two were once more in front of the open bay doors of Philpot's garage. Without care for the condition of his clothes, the tweed man knelt in the pit grease off the ramp and scanned under the two broken motorcars. He rose again with stains on the

knees and dabbles on the palms of his hands. He touched his nose and left a black spot. "Not here, not here, not here," he said three times quickly, and then wandered down the street without so much as a wave goodbye.

Havre watched him go. Head shaking and mouth mumbling, the tweed man vanished around the corner. Havre gave a laugh. "Fou," he muttered to himself, in diagnosis.

Suddenly — to his left! — an oil can fell from a rack and cracked against the concrete garage floor. Havre jumped from the opening. The can rolled out the wide doors and into the grass beside the road, leaving an arc of oil as it turned. Havre's attentions went to the innermost motorcar — the black import. A rustle was heard. Foot forward, he eased closer to the green Austin-Healey. He could see nothing. Closer still, his gaze went over the wheel. He could see more of the leather, the seats. Nothing else. A few steps over, past the building support pole and a rack of tools on a sliding stretcher, Havre thought he saw a tuft of hair in the rear seat.

"You!" he called. "I can see you!" The tuft did not move. "Show yourself!"

Havre took another step, thinking next that the hair may be just a pull of the upholstery. He was being foolish, put on edge by the antics of the tweed man. Soon, though, he became surer than ever that it was a human head:

he could make out an ear

and a shaggy sideburn.

The head spun a quarter turn, but still, frustratingly, did not rise above the twin-seat. Havre looked back to the empty street behind him.

"He's gone," Havre said. "That man — he's gone off down the street. So, why don't you be a good lad, and come out?"

At last...

...four fingers of a hand hooked themselves on the front seat and a young man appeared. He looked terribly scruffy to Havre. When fully visible, the door gave a pop and whining squeak and he put his leg outside of the vehicle.

From the same spot, a second skull appeared in the backseat. Havre had to blink to be certain. Sure enough, a man in his mid-fifties was also wrestling his way out of the rumper seat and taking the stuffy air of the garage.

"He's gone then?" asked the lad, checking. Havre nodded. "Thank Christ." The boy let out a hand to the older man, pulling him free from the congested rear seat.

"I could live my whole life and never want to see *him* again," said the old man as he straightened his back. "We've been trying to stay clear of him since last night. I can't believe he found us *here*. We were told we'd be safe. That's why we stayed behind and let the others go ahead."

Havre again looked down the street, to the last known location of this derision and fear. "He seemed harmless enough," Havre said in appraisal, "in fact, quite cuckoo." The look between the two hidden ones said they did not agree. Havre changed his address. "Which one of you fellows is Mr. Philpot?"

"Neither," replied the scruff. "This here's Doctor Rollo, and I'm Colin Blight. Clay Philpot's gone off with Wins — "

The doctor came forward and shushed the young man with a downward wave of his hand. "Colin! Let's not go involving anyone else. Let this man go about his business." The doctor turned to Havre. "Thanks for driving him away. He may have kept looking in the cars if you weren't watching him. But now I think that you should go. We'll take it from here. We can handle Rob Holl."

Havre's face blanched. "*That* was Rob Holl?"

"Yes, it was. Hopefully the police are after him now, and he's on the run." The doctor came forward and, fatherly, put a hand to Colin's shoulder. "Let's not burden this gentleman, Colin, agreed? This is just a man who... who... has perhaps come to retrieve his motorcar from

repairs?" It was a fishing guess by the doctor. He could tell the supposition was wrong by Havre's blank expression. The doctor frowned. Havre put his hand into his waistcoat pocket and was watched with cautious eyes. Pulling free his card, he handed it to the doctor. *Desmond Havre, Brudlow Talent Agency, Paris*. "I was with the police. They told me quite a bit. They seem to have lost my main attraction..." The doctor gave a nod and handed the card to Colin.

"Sonny Royce!" chimed Colin.

"Exactly, my boy. Sonny and the man who arrested him have vanished. But I'm hopeful now, as one of them — " (*thumb over shoulder*) "...seems to have turned up alive and well... in a manner, anyway. Have either of you seen Sonny Royce?" Colin and the doctor shook their heads, graven. "That's not what I wanted to hear. Come with me then — we should tell the police that Rob Holl is still in Marsden. Although I find it odd that they think *that* man is a threat."

The doctor stepped up with earnestness. "No, no, Mr. Havre — he was not like that last night when he had us tied to chairs in his jail! When he had us running from the police, thinking we were going to prison for a crime we did not know. The man is addicted to morphia, but now I think it's more than that. He seems scattered. Maybe he's suffering withdrawal. I hate to even put a guess on it at this point. We were hoping by now that Mr. Philpot would have returned, but he hasn't. At dawn, he left with Winsey Green, a girl who was with us, saying that he was taking her to meet someone and that he would be back before the end of the morning. At noon, Vic Worshaff, who was here with us, too, went off to find his uncle. He knew a few places they might have gone. He hasn't come back, either. And it's nearly supper."

"We should go to the police," said Havre, foot down, with a firm nod.

"No, no," said Colin. "I've had enough of their lot! You won't get me *near* that station."

Havre tried to convince them. He used the strong tone usually reserved for the courts. "Things are different. The police are onto this Rob Holl. There's a sheriff named Mott who seems quite able. He hasn't said as much, but I'm sure he's thinking Sonny Royce is an innocent man." Still, they did not budge. "He had nearly an *army* of constables with him. I'm sure he'll protect you, if that's what worries you — "

"I'm not worried about nothin'," said Colin in fast bravado.

"Then come back with me to the station."

The doctor had his head down, thinking. His gaze went to the feet of the two in front of him, to the left, to the right. At last, he faced Desmond Havre. "I don't see that we have a choice, sir. Philpot has not come back." Doctor Rollo then turned to Colin Blight. "Colin, *this* man can help us find Sonny. That will give us something. I'm worried Philpot's plan has gone wrong. Finding Sonny seems to be our only option."

Colin offered his alternative. He thumbed back into the garage. "Who's for starting one of these bloody cars and leaving town?"

There were no takers.

ODDBODY

By his black car, he stood — the driver. He folded the lapels of his chocolate driving coat and removed the formal cap from his head, laying it on the hood. It was getting onto six o'clock; supper was approaching. He was surprised no one had come out to dismiss him. Invisible, again.

To his left was a small footbridge, wide enough for only one person, spanning a mossy creek that led out of the incline — entrance to a street of row houses, the Marsden Bed & Breakfast perched on the corner.

A noise from the hedges caught the driver's attention.

He walked a few paces from his car to get a look.

From out of a growth of poppies, appeared a man in tweed coat and with a mustache, soaked from his socks to his knees in the running water of the stream underneath the footbridge. He first hoisted up his displaced right shoe, which he clutched in one hand, onto the boards of the bridge. Grunting, he crawled to the surface like a caught fish; the wood rattled with his weight. Steadying himself, he held the banister and gave a second grunt. The tweed man's neck looked lopsided, as if an injury had been done. It did not look healthy. He crossed the footbridge with a limp, tottering and eventually holding at the pebble exit. Rubbing his shoe, the man bent at the back and jerked it onto his exposed foot, ignoring the plain problems of his trousers, torn at the ankles.

"Say there," called the driver. He put up a hand to visor his eyes from the sun, still bright at this hour as it set over the tops of the rowhouses. The tweed man did not seem to hear the driver, fumbling over a puddle left from the rain, landing hard in the mud, soiling himself further as he tried to cross to the cobbled street. "Say there — mate! You — over here!" Now the man heard, and he raised his chin, dusted his hands, and blinked quickly. The driver waved the crawler in. "This way, squire — I think you and me... we should have a word."

Rob Holl hesitated, as he had done with Desmond Havre behind the auto shop. In a hurtful croak, he demanded, "Tell me your name."

The driver opened his arms, as a gentle mother to child, and gave a broad smile. "Barnard," he declared. "I'm the driver for a Mr. Havre." The driver pointed back the ten paces to where the motorcar sat parked, wedged between two less expensive machines. Holl stood his ground, a quizzical look smeared from cheek-to-cheek. The driver gave a bend and another squint to the dirty man. "Christ, squire, you look bloody awful."

Holl looked down at himself. Despite the fuzz in his head, he could somewhat agree, as his socks felt moldy and his trousers clung to his legs, wet through and through with dirty creekwater. Eyes up again, he tried to smooth out the wrinkles in his head. "You say your name's Barnard? Barney, then I suppose. What's your surname, then?"

The driver wagged finger and smiled. "You're good! You're good. Barney Haithcock. Same name as the constable who accompanied Audrey Green to the Matten Estates. Ah, these indexes are thick, but sensible. But you can call me by another name, if that's easier for you to remember. You can call me Rory Cogs, or, if you like, Ecoutine the gravedigger."

Holl's hands went to his own cheeks, where he rubbed at his skin as if to awaken the long misplaced sense of touch; it was not returning. He was numb — inside and out — no changing that. He let his hands drop. "Cogs, you say? The Cogs from London? From '56? And the gravedigger?"

The driver came forward and straightened out his voice, resolute: "The same. Only now I'm this one — Barney Haithcock, hired chauffeur, working while the pay is good. Got to earn a livin', right, Robby?" Fearless, the driver came even closer to Holl, smelling his stink. "You've gone all crackers on me, I see. I think you've done the thing wrong. I'm a little disappointed. Don't want the tide turning on me. You perfected the trick I taught you in London — I admire how you doubled back, threw the

second charge, and entered Holl's body on the Mill floor before his time expired. The Plague Boy had acted too quickly to take you all out, to paralyze the men, but, as you know, there was still a bit o' burn in those candles. The second charge put you back in the body. Ah, but I can tell by your state that your third charge is wearing rather thin. Bad circuit, I suspect. You've tapped the resources too much. Gone back to the same well. You're of limited use now."

The driver suddenly became aware of their exposure on the street. Gently, he led Holl back towards the car, tucking him into the passenger side. "In," he commanded and shut the door tightly on Rob Holl. Around to the wheel, Haithcock plucked up his cap from the hood and took the seat beside, the fabric of his driving coat touching Holl's knee. He tossed his cap absently into the backseat, letting it land on the floorboards.

"I know what you're thinking," said Barney Haithcock, "how do you move around to all these bodies, Mr. Whoever-You-Are-This-Time? Simple. Do you think there's only *one* map? Only I've been wise not to take it with me into each switch index. I've left mine back in the tunnel, outside Mr. Haithcock's switch. I'll get it when I come out. There are actually *three* maps. There's the one you found in Mr. Olive's dresser — this I know because I went looking for it myself, shortly after you were there — and a second one with the old man, and then the one I have. It's really a shame that one of those blokes has yours — Sonny Royce or the girl. They could do a lot of damage. You should have kept better watch."

"If you knew I had the map, why did you send me to the Mill? Do you think one of them had the third? Or were you trying to flush me out?"

"I was experimenting. I wanted to see if you could get the map back to the tunnels when the boy was in the room. Ah, but we failed, didn't we? As they stole your map before the boy came through the door. I was curious for my options, and not wanting to do the work myself."

Holl turned away, his uneven neck creaking as he did so. He was feeling as if he might vomit. A cough came heavy out of his chest, and he shook with it, sweating. When he recovered, he looked back to the smarmy expression of the driver. "I — I was that Holli boy... for a while. I was him but he didn't work. I didn't *want* to use Holl's third switch. I knew it might be dangerous. And... and if I was killed I might end up at one of the dead stations."

Haithcock considered this. "Yes," he nodded, "I knew you were in the boy. He ran his motorcar into a pole and did himself an injury. Numb from the waist up, for a period of several hours, I believe. Why did you have to use *him*? He's not a very good vessel."

Hands out, Holl put his fingers to the driver's lapel, pleading. "*That damn morphia*. I took too much in the station house, trying to keep the channel open. Royce, he tricked me! I wouldn't have fallen for it otherwise, his games. I was trapped in the tunnels. The Holli boy's switch was my only hope to get back at him." Holl became more agitated and pulled on the driver's lapels. "Tell me who you are! It's not fair that I should be in this state! I'm a scientist. It's my discovery. Please," Holl begged, on the verge of tears, "tell me your real name..."

Barney Haithcock slowly took Rob Holl's hands from the driver's lapels and placed them back in the inspector's lap.

Holl clenched his fists. "I could — I could ring your neck, I could!" (*His knuckles became red, the pressure demonstrated.*) "Rob Holl's bigger than you and you've got a bit of weight on — too many pints — you're no Rory Cogs anymore, and I killed *him*, didn't I? What's to stop me from murdering you in this motorcar?"

The driver leaned into Holl and pushed his neck out. "Go ahead then," he said defiantly, "snap my neck, as you did with Rory Cogs and Alison Falliher. Snap my neck and I'll just be that much quicker back to my map, and onto another body. You forget, I've got this game figured out. I've had a head start, you see. You're just a lucky explorer

who's got his foot caught in the door. Stick with my plan, and I'll have you past the dead stations and to where you *really* want to be. Snap my neck and all you have is *me* irritated. You don't do a thing until I say." Haithcock held his space over the gearshift a moment more. Holl was still debating. At long last, the proper conclusion arrived at — muck and anger fogging his head, but sense coming over the impulse — Holl sat back against the car door, defeated. Haithcock rested, satisfied. He gave a wide smile and a fatherly pat to the man's knee. "Good, Robby. You and I are a lot alike. That's why I've recruited you. There are things going on right now that you wouldn't believe. Stay on my course and you will have everything you want. Despite your condition, I do still have a plan for you." From his pocket, the driver pulled out a scratched pocket watch and marked the time. "It's a quarter to six. This switch closes in three minutes. I don't know *why* I cut these things so close. Inside that rowhouse, there's a woman named Claire Royce. She's Sonny's wife. I think she'll be useful. Go in and get her and meet me at this address in London — " Replacing the watch, the driver retrieved a card and handed it over to Holl, who did not yet read it. "Do you understand?"

Holl nodded, but did not look so sure.

Encouraging, Haithcock added, "I know you have this left in you. I'd get her myself but there are no more switches. They boy's destroyed all but the most important. Now, you ring this man's neck as you did the others. There's a revolver in the glove box. You should take that with you. I'd say to shoot me, but I'm afraid someone would hear the noise." Holl reached in and found the revolver. He clutched it, but did not anticipate killing the driver. "It's all right," Haithcock soothed, "I've got to go back and get my map before it's spotted. Too many people roaming the tunnels nowadays. And *this* man can give a description."

"How will I know you?" asked Holl. "In London, how will I know it's really you and not a trick?"

"You'll know," was all the man said before blurring a bit at the shoulders. Holl checked his eyes. The very

muscles of the man's face seemed to relax and tighten once more, not in gesture, but in change of inhabitant. The real Barney Haithcock was returning to the switch.

When the deed was done, the driver strangled and pushed under the wheel so he would not be seen, Holl found a whiskey bottle near the brake. The man had been drunk, numb from great intoxication. Not the best habit for a chauffeur. He would not drive again.

Quietly, Holl shut the door to the vehicle and walked the small build of stair steps to the Marsden Bed & Breakfast. He slipped the revolver into his pocket. Through the front window, drapes parted and held by ropes, an older woman was dusting the front table, not noticing him as he wavered in the darkening street. Holliday looked down at Holl's hands. At first, he did not notice he held the address card, only that his hands were dirty from the sewer tunnel, the escape from the Marsden jail, and another foul murder. Feelings of great misery began to cloud his face, and his lip trembled. In his muddled third switch, he could not tell the proper course. In Holliday's body and that first, strongest switch of Rob Holl, his senses were sharp. Now, however, no patterns were clear. Holli had wrecked everything, that boy's head a jumble. Every thought was metastasized — fused into a giant blend of colors, nothing discernible, no goal evident. *Discovery*, he focused, *discovery*. As he felt tears begin to steam the corners of his eyes, the porch light to the B & B came on brightly. He could see the old innkeeper, her withered face through the window glass. Finally she saw him standing outside, as a cockroach on plain carpet. He was not invisible any longer. His eyes went to the address card:

*James Smith
1 Blue Top Road
London*

THREE

THE JAZZMAN OF 1949

Sonny Royce landed in Southampton on the Cunard dockworks a new man. He immediately liked the air, the smell of England. It was much more satisfying than Chicago, the place where he was born and had lived, in his family's South Side two-up, dead broke in a neighborhood that constantly smelled of trash and last night's liquor. Throughout his childhood, Sonny had been forced to share a bed with his three brothers and two sisters. There was once a seventh child, named Anthony, who drowned in Lake Michigan at the age of six. In the bed, under the covers, brothers and sisters, that life was too crowded for a big, lumbering sort like Sonny.

Even early on, starting at age of eight, he felt this restlessness. It was as if the very air he breathed was not his own — only borrowed, rented at a high price. For two years, young Sonny toyed with running off, possibly to New York City. There was precedent for it in his neighborhood — two young lovers had gone missing, and three little girls from the church had also disappeared, a fund taken up for advertisements in the *Tribune*, "Clues Sought — Help Us Find Our Children." (No bodies were recovered.) Royce was sympathetic with the plight and gave his hard-saved candy money to the coffers. He knew what it was like to lose a sibling, body and all, Anthony Royce never having been recovered from the lapping waters of the lake, washed away one Saturday morning while his parents were asleep. In the end, Sonny decided not to put his mama through that pain a second time. The loss of one son was enough. So, at age twelve, he began to make other plans for escape.

Strangely enough, his ticket came from something he initially disliked: music.

When young Sonny thought of song, it was too often the thick strings and milquetoast voices on their neighbors' RCA Victor, played too loudly through open windows on summer nights. The church organ held limited appeal as well, being cheap, with short pipes and pedals whining like

the sound of ill-played Scottish lullabies. Music was for his mother, when she was blue, and his father, when he was at the jug and tired of the train to Gary, Indiana and the factory.

Then, one day, Sonny skipped school with his older brother Chester. The two boys rode the "L" north to the Aragon Ballroom, where they stood in the alley and listened to a swing band play *"Take the 'A' Train,"* in a little known Fletcher Henderson arrangement, for a mixed audience of colored and whites.

With Chester by his side, ears pressed to the fire door off Lawrence Avenue, a girl snatched Sonny's hand. She was two years older and beside him in the alley. She wore a pearl white dress, landing just below the knees, and had her hair done-up curly red. "Don't worry," she said sweetly, "I just want to dance."

She started into steps, and, awkward about his accelerated height and complete lack of any formal dance lessons, Sonny mimicked. Chester did not, at first, notice his brother's new partner — the girl swinging her billowed skirt and ticking the time with her free right hand, and Sonny, the amiable partner, not nearly as adept with swing time.

"You're good!" she complimented him anyway, and these words caught his brother's ear.

Chester turned to see Sonny and this girl — skin white as paper, whiter moreso from the daylight. Chester held for a long moment, unsure of what to do. The number played on. He crossed his arms and hoped his younger brother would look his way, but Sonny was lost — lost in her steps and her skirt and the sound of the horn section just past the walls of the Aragon, almost drowned by the stomping feet on the invisible ballroom floor.

When the number ended, Chester yanked Sonny's skinny arm back toward the wall. "What you doin' dancin' wit her?"

"We's just dancing!" he snapped back, offended by commands replacing Chester's easy purr. Sonny heard his father's voice, when he was drunk and home.

"She's not your kind, hear?" said Chester. "And she shouldn't be dancing wit you — young as you are." These words had a spike to them that Sonny didn't understand. Their neighborhood was mostly Negro, but he was not afraid of white people. And, besides, there was something about this one; she had a glow. He was not yet old enough to have yearnings for girls; he just liked the way she looked dancing. Without a partner, she continued to sashay along the alley wall of the Aragon as the band started another number. Sonny admired how brightly she smiled and how lost she seemed to be in the melody, her eyes shut, opening just to flutter. He had never witnessed such hypnosis.

Turning, Sonny saw Chester's eyes fixed on her, and Sonny assumed his brother was seeing this same grace. "She's good, ain't she?" he asked.

Chester seemed miffed to admit it: "Ya, she good," he replied snidely and backed to the wall. He ignored them both the next two numbers.

Sonny didn't have the courage to take the girl in his arms again. She was doing quite well on her own. When it was over, and she was tired out, she walked over to Sonny and said with great, honest enthusiasm, "Thanks for dancing!" Sonny stuttered something in return, the awkward compliment of boy not used to the fairer sex. She blushed. "I want to work in one of these halls some day — " She pointed up at the unlit sign which hugged the building corner. "They say that London's got some great, big halls, but they don't know what dancing is — not yet, anyway. Maybe by the time I'm old enough, I'll go over. You like that? Get on a boat and go. Dance over there for a while."

Sonny, as he would remember it, didn't know why he said what he said next. A destiny shaded by human thoughts of longing shoved him at the back. "Maybe I'll play trumpet in one of dem halls," he ventured.

She slapped his shoulder, rolling her eyes. "That'd be swell! You and me someplace like London or Paris. Wouldn't it be romantic?" Overwhelmed with her own talk of plans, she hugged herself tight, in a waking dream. Yet darkness pursed her lips. She had said something

inappropriate, or so it seemed. Sonny stood in the alleyway with his hands in his pockets. Over her shoulder, Sonny could see Chester giving him the evil eye and Sonny gave it right back. The girl was starting to become uncomfortable, and she shuffled her shoes, graceless, the first display of awkwardness since she took young Sonny's hand.

A siren broke!

A police car rolled off the street and plowed away the crowd of freeloaders. I was shouldered in the convergence. A blue-shirted policeman hung out of his window and shouted at the kids standing around. "Beat it!" he said with angry certainty. "Beat it or we'll run you in for vagrancy! We know you kids'r playin' hooky. We'll sick the truant officer on you if you don't get to school!" A second police car appeared at the mouth of the alley, forming a funnel with the first. A vehicle door opened and a pair of broad-shouldered, serious policemen towered over Sonny where he stood. One of the men looked down, but then back up again — *bigger fish to fry*. He undid the clasp on his club, withdrew the stick, and smacked it against his opposite palm.

The red-haired girl started to move away, but stopped long enough to shout one last thing to Sonny. As she got the phrase past her lips, she was herded away with the rest, between the funnel of police cars and onto Broadway. The second car was goosing its siren, and Sonny knew he was no longer welcome. It was time to leave if he didn't want his parents called. The crowd of kids went tearing off, starfish-like, down Lawrence and Hollywood. Sonny felt the press of Chester's hand in his, and he was jerked away.

"Damn!" swore his brother as he strode east toward the train station. "Cops — they always in yo' way." Sonny wasn't paying any mind. He continued to check over his shoulder for the dancing red-haired girl. She had disappeared behind the lot of the Green Mill jazz club. "What'd that girlie say to you?" asked Chester. "I hear her say sump'n' to ya."

Quietly, Sonny answered.

"She said her name was Claire..."

Thirty years later, that afternoon outside the Aragon seemed like a dream. When Sonny landed in Europe, he had a fantasy of finding Claire, now probably in her late forties, but still beautiful, dancing at one of the many halls he would be playing with Georgy Ray and his orchestra. He would introduce himself as the boy from the alley. "Remember me?" he'd say. "We danced together, and the cops came and drove us clean away." The idea made him smile. Here he was slightly amiss in his plans, having gone for saxophone rather than his promised trumpet, but still very close to her prediction. If he was so near, then why shouldn't she be, too? He didn't want to think of her as back in Chicago — fat and living in Rogers Park, or Humboldt, married to an alcoholic man who didn't love her, three rotten children and no desire to dance ever again. *No, not possible.* The thought made him furious, if that were the truth. Such grace shouldn't be crushed by a miserable life. All these years, through often painful and sacrificial instrument lessons, slugging it out with lesser men at jazz dives from Chicago to New York, down to New Orleans and back again to St. Louis, Sonny hoped she had been as diligent in planning her escape as he had with his. He even had a smile thinking she might be on the same steamliner, the *Queen Mary*.

But she wasn't.

In fact, he would file her away within two years of hitting the continent. She was lost. If he didn't find her in all those gigs with Georgy Ray, he never would. It had been a dream, after all. She was in Chicago, or dead in St. Francis cemetery, a life cut short.

Georgy Ray had first heard of Sonny Royce when his orchestra was touring through towns like Memphis, Indianapolis, and Madison. At each stop, he got wind of a kid in his thirties, a bit old for the game, but ripe for the pickin'. He had chops that could make the hair stand on the back of your neck. *You should check this kid, Georgy,* they'd say, *you won't be disappointed.* Veteran Georgy had

heard all of this at least a hundred other times, regarding a hundred other players. There were many hot saxophonists around the States and local reputations were easily carved. *Chops?* Yes. *Innovation?* No. A wide circle of sideman gigs could carry that talk even further, maybe to New York. But it was the *kindness* of Sonny's fans that really affected Georgy Ray. People would talk as much about the man himself as they did about his performance. Sonny Royce was often out in the crowd, with the people, sharing stories and shaking hands. "Where are *you* from? What's life like *for you?*" The man was clearly doubtful of his heavy-hitter status.

The fact that Royce was not in his early twenties, but older and hopefully wiser than some of the young guns, also had appeal for Georgy Ray. The bandleader was sick of picking up contracts on ringers who turned out to be hooked on drugs, or liquor, or worse – women. He'd had enough of fistfights outside of his tour bus over cocktail waitresses. If this Sonny Royce was even half of his reputation, he might help bring some calm to the men during Georgy Ray's upcoming relocation to Europe.

The orchestra had been turning a profit since 1945, but it was getting harder and harder to resist the promise of easy money playing the European ballrooms. Plus, that neck of the woods didn't have the same racial problems as America. Georgy could use a breather from all that. In 1948, he had a call from Desmond Havre, a talent broker living in Paris, who offered to book a smaller version of his orchestra in cabarets and ballrooms throughout the United Kingdom and the continent, if only Georgy would agree to the move. Havre even had recording time scheduled and a line on a record company in Berlin. Georgy agreed to the offer.

He came over, first enjoying his time in Paris with Mr. Havre signing contracts and not being singled out for the color of his skin. But it was London that really excited the bandleader. He rented an apartment to the northwest near Croyley. A piano rental agency delivered his upright the

Saturday after Lent, and it was then he began to be truly inspired.

As he wrote and arranged new material for his European tour, he rang up Sonny Royce, the exchange given to him by a Chicago club owner. "I want you to come to Europe," Georgy said, "to play with me and my band." It was as simple as that. Sonny felt the mysterious Claire was a prophet, for here he had his ticket paid, and all had come true, just as she had said that day. (The trumpet still stuck in his craw, though. He just didn't have the ambrechure for it. Besides, he didn't like many trumpet players. He had a fight with one named Roger Bonnie, a sideman he used on his first solo tour of England in 1957, but fired due to arguments.) Georgy Ray treated Sonny Royce as family. He gave him extended solos, announced his name to the audience during intervals, and introduced him to Desmond Havre and the finest of jazz society existing in Europe at that time. It wasn't long before Sonny was cutting his own records in a small recording studio in Paris, a band of his own assembled, all thanks to the generosity of Georgy Ray.

He even had his mentor to thank for finding the girl.

Claire Royce began as Claire Veber, daughter of Henri Veber, owner of La Fille Verte. The club was a single room, with stage, bar, and twelve tables. On any given night, the place would be stuffed with patrons trying to hear the newest American imports — touring bands, trios, quartets, and quintets — anyone hot who could make them envious of their talent. Sonny played there quite often.

When Sonny broke it to Georgy that he was going solo, a sideman no longer, it was with great fear. However, the bandleader was immediately generous and arranged with Havre a week's engagement at Veber's club, so that Sonny could work on his act. Each night, the hungry crowd of Parisians would applaud, standing on chairs, squeezed by the toilet (an open hole in the ground for both the men and the women), and Sonny would nod his head thankfully after each number. It was a humbleness he would display for most of his performances.

Claire Veber worked in the club. She brought bottles of wine from the underground floor and replaced soaked table linens washed at home during the days. It was hard work for a young girl — all those stairs and that long schedule. Claire knew her father had grown too old for it. She did not speak English, so if Sonny was to have a conversation with her, he had to learn the language. On his prior tours with Georgy, he had picked up a word here and there, but it was hardly enough to get what he wanted, her affections.

She was not the same Claire from his childhood afternoon at the Aragon, but she was immediately striking to him, and her name cemented it. She was pretty; he noticed this first. Ten years younger, with dark hair and attractive bosom, fashionable hemline, leading the eye from shoe to leg. The patrons never missed a chance to stare. The trio Sonny had formed for this debut — including Walter "Windy" Dixon and Clifford Black, two amicable defectors from Georgy's larger American dance band — also let their eyes wander. Royce's attraction was not the same. There was lust, but it was not exclusive. He thought he saw something in her face. Claire almost never looked to the stage, but when she did there was fire. There was *recognition*. It was difficult for him to dismiss. After a set, near the end of the weeklong engagement, he asked Papa Henri if his daughter had a boyfriend.

"She's my little girl," he said in rough English. "I don't want to know of such things!" Although Henri's voice was not absolute negation, Sonny took it as a sign that he should be a gentleman and not pursue.

This held for the next three months. He forgot about the girl and started to travel with a growing quartet, becoming a quintet for a brief summer of '57 run through the clubs of southern England. (The trumpet man was fired on return; the pianist Dexter Johnson became a keeper.) Sonny then did a month back with Georgy's group and cut a record for the same German company that Havre had arranged to take Georgy Ray. "Book me back at La Fille Verte," Sonny told Desmond Havre when he had his feet on

the desk and was finally seeing a space in his schedule. This time he would learn a bit of the language and find out what it meant to be recognized...

SONNY'S TALE

The Marsden jail was no place for the likes of Sonny Royce. The looks of the attending constables, and that man Wrigley who watched the cell door, their suppositions – none were right. This sort of treatment shouldn't happen to an innocent man. The telegram to Havre, the surrender to the police, leading them to think he was the driver of that runaway car down Marsden's high street that took the life of John Falliher — it was all a plot. It sounded bearable in the planning, but uncomfortable in the execution. The bench of his cell was hard. He was lonely. *What had he gotten himself into?* He considered the events of the last twenty-four hours, and how much the world had changed for him. A blink and he was out of the Marsden Mill and to the tunnels; a walk and he was watching Rob Holl's search for a live switch; another blink and he was in the library with Clayton Philpot.

The library.

"We're in London," Philpot had said. "My benefactor, the old man, wants you to stay here until we make some arrangements. He's worried that you won't be safe otherwise."

Royce gave a nervous laugh from his enormous chair. It felt good to sit. The smell of the books around him and the faint odor of a pipe kept him sniffing. "This old man you keep talkin' 'bout. Is he God?"

"Heavens no!" exclaimed Philpot, aghast. "He's a railway engineer!" The magician pulled a deck of cards from his jacket and laid them on the table beside Sonny Royce's chair. Philpot offered no explanation, but the cards were an alternative to reading, if Royce preferred. "There's someone helping Rob Holl," he huffed. "Can you *imagine*? The man's figured out how to use the toggles on the switch indexes and he's gone back into Rob Holl's body — got it working again, even after the Plague Boy. He couldn't know that on his own. Clues like those aren't on any maps. So Holl's body is no longer at the Marsden Mill, laying on the floor,

but causing more trouble than ever. You're to stay here, Sonny, in this library. It's important to the old man that you're safe. He's saving you for later. Get your rest. Audrey and I will collect the others. When the old man's ready, he'll tell me what to do with you, and we'll get you back in the game. Is that all right?"

It didn't seem as if Sonny had much of a choice. He gave appraisal of the library: a private study filled twelve-feet high with shelves and dusty volumes. The room itself was elegant, with oak panels and comfortable chairs. There were no windows. Sonny did not remember entering through the room's door, which Philpot stood blocking with his broad shoulders and body. The jazzman shrugged. *What else could he do?* "Fine by me," he sighed and sunk further in the cushions.

Philpot softened his serious face. "It won't seem long to you. Only a few hours, is my guess." With a handshake, the bearded man was into a hallway beyond, the continuation of the same oak molding and cream-painted walls. The door was shut behind. Two hours and three hands of cards later (plus a half-read journal on railway engineering), Sonny got to his feet and turned the knob of the door. It was locked, although he never heard Philpot or anyone give the key a turn.

Sitting in the jail of the Marsden Station House, Sonny realized he had just traded one form of imprisonment for another. At least in the library he had playing cards and books. He knew this state was only temporary, and Philpot's intensions probably honorable. After all, Philpot was on the side of the Green girls — Audrey and her stepsister, Winsey. He liked Winsey. Meeting her for the first time at the dance hall, his mama's technique gave him insight into her qualities. She was open, as was Audrey, and loveable, just as Claire had been, although with the Greens it was in a fatherly way and not a romantic one. He would do what he could to help them.

However, having agreed to this plan, he began to sense his own immobility within it and wished he had some

distraction. All the station house had to offer was a cold cot and single window to the moon. From his perch, he could look out through the bars. He had checked the trees just before the attending guard planted himself this side of the jail door. Sonny could see the light of Audrey Green's party dress, her giving him the signal. Desmond Havre had received his telegram. *At least that's started*, he thought. Sonny wanted his saxophone. He missed it almost as much as he missed Claire. The dark cell was not the place for him and music would help make this place more like home. He hoped Colin was taking good care of his prize, and that ever-so valuable map, which Philpot reported had indeed been hidden in the horn's belly.

Whoever dis old man is, thought Sonny, I hope he doin' right by us...

It was after Sonny had, at last, fallen asleep on the bunk, that Inspector Rob Holl entered the cells. The inspector looked hazily calm, his eyes very red and the muscles of his cheeks sinking. The inspector was as exhausted. Yet his state also seemed to be fueled. There was chemistry at work. This inspector was not right in the head. Not right at all.

"Sonny Royce," he said with languid command as he touched the metal bars separating him from his prisoner. Once the jazzman had sat upright on the bunk, Holl gestured to Constable Wrigley to step away into his far corner. The lackey did as he was told, moving out of earshot.

Sonny gave his full face to the inspector — this stranger who had appeared in that corner of the Marsden Mill, the observed tunnel electrician who had caused so much worry for Clayton Philpot, the man who had been on scene at the station house to take Sonny's vague confession, to lock him into this dreadful place. He was a threatening presence with wiry hair and moustache, ill-fitting jacket and jitters. Sonny, however, knew his mission and would be true.

The inspector gave a nod. *"You can't get out of here without a body,"* he said quietly.

Sonny didn't change his resolute expression.

Holl moved along the bars, further from the guard's ear.

"That's right," Holl said, "you'll need a body to get out of this place and you won't get one. You'll rot in here, I'll see to that. I'd ring your neck now, but I don't want to chance it. You're very important to someone. I'm not sure why, but I'm not killing you until I understand it. I have a friend, too, you see. He thinks of me as a foot soldier, but I'm more than that, Mr. Royce. I have my researches. I have my investigations. What I discover will be *mine*. I'll put my flag in the land. But I'm going to draw him out with you, and finally I will learn what this tunnel business is about." The inspector moved his face closer, his voice lower. "It's the most fantastic discovery. Once I tell the world I was Robby Holliday, and now Rob Holl, and I have proof, there'll be no stopping me. It will be historic."

Sonny rolled from the bunk and approached the bars. "What makes you think there's *any* proof?"

Holl took a backwards step, a caution coming over him. "*You* can't get out without a body," he repeated. "The man I'm looking for, though, can travel to the tunnels without one. He had me *strangle* him as Rory Cogs, but that was just to prove my commitment to the cause. It was a test of will. As if I hadn't proved it enough! I've worked fifty years and *two* lives to discover what I have already. I need to get Holliday's notebooks back. I need to find the maps. *And I need to find Audrey Green!*"

Holl said the last with piercing intensity. The hair on Sonny's neck tingled. It was all he could do to keep from shivering. This was an evil man. *Lord help the girl. Lord help her.*

"I need her because she's *him*. I'm sure of it now. She can travel without a body. She can go from this world to the tunnels and back again, just like *he* can. So I've got you all in one place. I've got the girl's sister in the lobby of the station house, tied to a chair. I've got two other flounders — a doctor and some skinny lad from town — caught in my

net. And I've got you... Sonny Royce... Now all I need is the girl."

Sonny lifted his hands to the bars, crushing back the ringing menace. The situation did appear dreadful — Winsey, Sonny, the whole lot of them, cornered.

Except Royce knew one thing more:

"You want the girl?"

Sonny said flatly, plan unfolding.

"Well, you've got 'er. 'Cos right 'bout now, Inspector...
she's destroying your switch."

WIRELESS

Holl was through the switch and rolling out into the tunnel. It was not easy to do what he had done. He would laugh if he weren't so winded, the success of it! A snap of his own neck against the jail bars and he was there, opposite her —

The girl! Audrey Green.

When he was again to his feet, she was standing only meters away, ready to turn and run. In one hand she held the map, and in the other a mallet that appeared freakishly large in her small hand. She was indeed going to destroy the switch on the wall behind the inspector, just as Sonny Royce had revealed. Over his shoulder, Holl noted the flapping cover of the switch, opened from his spring forth from the jail. Holl had beaten her by mere seconds. He was joyous — his evidence, no longer missing!

“Stop!” he cried, sensing her next move.

She dropped the mallet and ran. The rubber tip of the tool hit the tunnel wall and nearly struck Holl's foot. He propelled around it, limping in pain from his fall to the floor. At the turn of the tunnel, he saw Audrey's hair whip the collar of her party dress side-to-side as she fled. She was much younger and healthier than he was, but her legs were short — a child's — and also awkward. He predicted her to spill in the causeway. She made it onto a platform just as Holl burst out of the tunnel, finding the structures and mechanisms known from past explorations: the water rails and criss-crossing labyrinth. Already, there was a wind in his ears —

An approaching train, he rightly guessed, coming to collect me.

Audrey Green — the train not coming fast enough — didn't have time to wait. Holl was nearly to her. She squeezed the map so tightly that Holl feared she'd damage it. The paper was already fraying against her legs from her

run down to the opposite end of the platform, the only place she had to escape to.

"Stop!" he called again, but she did not listen until she was forced to an end, hitting the wall of the platform, trapped.

From the corner of Holl's eye, he saw something move across the tracks. He gave a quick turn of the head, just in time to see a man duck and hide behind an opposing standpipe and Siamese connection.

The train's wind grew. Holl's hair and clothes began to flurry, along with the tips of his moustache. Audrey kept defiance pasted on her face, thrusting the map behind her back. She was trying to be brave.

Holl gave another glance to the fat standpipe. "I know you're hiding," he said to the body behind, although he could no longer see the figure. "Is this a trap?" he asked, and then felt the shock of it. *(A trap! A trap! Instead of the boy in the Mill now someone's using the girl. They weren't going to destroy my switch! They've got me to kill myself and if she escapes with the map, where will I be? They're trying to get me onto the train...)* "Why don't you come out so I can have a look?" he called out over the tracks. There was no reply. He didn't expect one. He was trying to bide time. Holl moved forward — *clop, clop, clop* — his heavy shoes giving echo, even above the building wind. "This is a trap, isn't it?" he asked again. "You've got me in the tunnels and now you want me at a dead station. Is that your game?" There was still no answer from the girl, or from the hidden man.

The wind was a fury now. The train would be there any second.

"TELL ME YOUR NAME!" he screamed above the din.

Racing forward, Holl grabbed defenseless Audrey with all his strength, pulling her kicking into the cover of his chest and coat. He applied muscle to the girl's wrists; the map was loosening! He would soon have it.

"Tell me your name," he shouted again, "and you'll have her alive!" Leaning down, Holl said what he knew to be true into the girl's fragile ear — she braced at the

decibels. "You're not *dangerous* right now, are you? You're just a girl! Your friends are tied to chairs at the station and there's no one to get you out, is there, Audrey Green?"

Steam filled the platform and for a moment Holl couldn't see a thing. He could feel the girl's wrists in his hands, but his eyes were fogged with the arrival of the train. The noise ended quickly. A valve let out, hissing, and the air cleared to reveal the white train for travel. Through the plain curtains of the first of three rail cars, *Rob Holl saw his man.*

"The name's Philpot!" shouted the figure in dusty oil-coat and beard, the words stifled and then released by the intervening train. He stood arms akimbo with imposing heft, but they both knew the truth — he was across the platform and could do no good.

Holl took in the name, thinking. After ten seconds, he declared, "I'm not getting on that train! Hear me, Philpot? The game's not up, you know. I don't know who you are, or why you've been helping me, but I want the answers — no more of this!" Near to bone breaking, he pried the map from Audrey's fingers and held it over his head to show Philpot it was now in his possession. "I've got everything figured out. I can travel anywhere I want using the map. I know the companion switches and who's involved. There has to be some evidence I can get back. Don't doubt me, I'll find it!"

Suddenly —

Audrey stomped her foot on Holl's shoe and burrowed between his rounded arms as he tried to catch her. She leaped over the gap and into the open doors of the train car. Philpot did the same from the opposite platform, landing a car behind. Holl held a second too long, stunned, checking that he still had the map in his hand. The doors were snapping shut — the train had its body.

Holl raced forward, map clutched tightly.

"Stop!" he called as he did before, just as impotently.

He barely saw their faces in the glass as they were whisked down the bright tube, away...

"He thinks I'm the one who's been helping him," said Philpot as he pulled the adjoining door between the two moving train cars. Coming to him, Audrey folded into his arms, "I'm sorry," she said. "He came out of the switch so fast. I couldn't — " Philpot looked down and patted her hair. "We'll get him another way..."

Rob Holl did not move for several minutes. Once, he thought he heard another train, but that proved to be a trick of the ears. He unfolded the map in his hand. It was as he remembered, only in a lesser condition. This was not his original map, instead one of the three referenced by the gravedigger. The frays and the yellowed tint of the paper... most certainly not his map. He put it to his nose and sniffed. *Like old books*, his sense told him. This one had been pressed in pages for a long time.

One in a drawer — Mr. Olive at the crime scene tied to his bed.

One in a book. *Who did this one belong to, I wonder?*

Following the lines on the map and his known position, he tried to make it back to Rob Holl's switch index. He had one toggle left. There were three positions in the electrics; he remembered that. He had used one to enter in 1953, had used a second to resuscitate himself at the Marsden Mill in 1958, and he had one more try. His logical mind made him slow in the tunnel and a problem occurred to him:

Could a body recover from the snapping of a neck?

Probably not.

He considered doubling back to the platform, resetting his compass. Again, his eyes went to the map. He blinked, examined it closer, raised the faded parchment to his weak eyes, and saw something that he had not noticed in his first glance.

On *this* map, there were initials.

Touching the sides of the tiny globes overlapping the lines and codes, there were letters written into the spaces. "RR" said one; "WG" said another. He looked for patterns, conjuring the ghost of Robby Holliday and his keen eye for enumeration. Descending in blue, Holl traced the edging with his broken thumbnail, cracked, he supposed, from his fall from the switch. Several parts of his body were aching. He supposed it to be the retreat of adrenaline, the pangs of physical stress from suicide, pushed far to the back of his mind during his chasing of the girl to the platform.

Holl reconnoitered. He had not moved far since the departure of the train.

Down to his waistcoat, he checked his pocket watch and marked the time. It was stopped, near to the mark of his last synchronization before entering the jails of the Marsden Station House to talk with Sonny Royce. 3:33. *This is a place that knows no time, thought the inspector, and that may work to my advantage.* He rested against the curve of a far tunnel, sinking slowly with his face in the map, until he was practically lying on the floor. With each sound in the tunnels, he moved his head to look. He had no real fear. This was no dead station. It did not have the tower blocks. That was how he remembered it. He had glimpsed it before disappearing from Audrey's side, when she rescued Holliday from his house and the Plague Boy, on that day last summer.

End-of-the-line. Not for him. Not yet.

Someone got a map through to Mr. Olive's drawer. I can get this one back. The key is in the maps. I'll find my way to the world, then to that man named Philpot. There had to be one in Marsden. If it was not the same body from behind the standpipe, then it is another linking body. I will kill him. I will shoot him dead or twist his neck. He's too much competition. I'll find all the Philpots and kill them, and that'll end the indexes. He's using the girl, I think. Like I tried to use her back in 1957. She's more than a girl; she's a method of transport. She was probably lurking in that graveyard the day they buried Captain Lorber. All lies, I suspect, about that switch being old and that digger being dumb. The

second I was out of sight, he probably dropped his shovel and left through the girl. Now he's turned on me. Now he wants me trapped. If he's of no use, he shall be dead. Same with Sonny Royce. Same with anyone I encounter. Just get me a pistol.

Breaking, the inspector touched the map.

"RH" said the letters on a far black globe.

A line to another. "RH."

Down the hachure of a meridian — a grand junction.

It did not take him long to find the third "RH."

That was his ticket.

VICTIMS OF CIRCUMSTANCE

Desmond Havre stood on the footbridge, Doctor Rollo and Colin Blight at either flank, gazing at the Marsden Bed & Breakfast. The scene had changed considerably since Havre had left the hour before. Rope and ticker cordoned the house and four police cars blocked the end of the street. Stone-faced constables wandered in and out of the front door aimlessly.

"Who are these men?" asked Doctor Rollo, trying to identify a face from that distance. He was afraid Rob Holl was among the lawmen, again their leader, fixing to tie him and Colin to the closest chairs.

Thinking faster than his older comrade, Blight tugged the jacket tails of the agent and doctor back across the footbridge and down into the tall poppies. When they still did not comprehend, the lad took it upon himself to shove them down by their scruffs until they were hidden. Colin put a finger out to a motorcar parked along the curb. There was a body slumped against the steering wheel where two stray constables supervised photography of the scene.

"That's my driver!" exclaimed Havre. "Is he dead?"

Colin smirked. "He ain't nappin'."

The two others frowned before returning their eyes to the street.

"Something's happened here," stated Doctor Rollo, rather obviously. He couldn't help it. He was chatty when nervous. The doctor's heart jumped at the sight of so many policemen. Hippocratic compassion rolled out of him and, as a physician, he wanted to leave the brush to see if the driver could be revived. He knew by the spin of the neck that the chances were very slim. The body lay over the covering of the wheel. After another bright snap of the flash pot, the photographer pulled the negative from his camera and jogged — almost gleefully, Rollo noted — back inside the B & B.

"Who came with you?" the doctor asked Havre.

Desmond's face blanched. "You mean to England? I came with Sonny's wife Claire." (The agent noticed the mirroring horror in the others.) He was up like a shot above the poppies, exposed from their cover, and was preparing to speed off. He dropped his hat into the tall grass, neglectful. Colin and the doctor held fast onto the agent's coatsleeves to prevent a rush for the house. "I've got to see if she's all right!" Havre pleaded, panic breaking. He spoke to the two in French, a reflex, and let the words quickly dribble away. Colin, at last, had to push Havre to a seat in the grass, for fear of the swaying willows attracting attentions. The doctor was soon with them on his haunches.

"Do you believe us *now*, Mr. Havre?" said the doctor, suddenly not feeling well. "Holl is an *evil* man!"

"Rob Holl did this?"

"I don't doubt it," confirmed the doctor. "He's probably kidnapped her in order to draw out Sonny."

"He's not killed her?"

Colin shushed Havre with a tug on his lapel. "Rollo's guess is well and good, aye? She's collateral. Think'a this as a good thing," he said with a smile. "Means 'e ain't found Sonny yet."

The doctor pouted. "But it means he will soon." Rollo was really beginning to feel disconnected. It was getting harder and harder to ignore this physical distraction. He opened and closed his fists. Familiar, he was, with the signs of a heart attack. He had never felt them first-hand, but knew them from journals and books of medicine. Many of his patients had been put in the ground from this sort of thing — a tingle, some sweating, then call the mortician to confirm the facts: hard life, drink, a life this crushing. "Excuse me," he said to the two in the grass, wiping a bead of sweat that had begun to dribble down his temple. "I don't feel well." Colin lurched forward and caught Rollo by the elbow — the doctor was in a swoon. The doctor fell back onto the seat of his trousers, the mud of the creek bed staining his trousers. Rollo didn't feel this at all, for he had gone quite numb. It had been creeping all night: first signs of it between the houses with Winsey and Vic after the

discovery of the map inside of Sonny Royce's saxophone. Now, the feeling had totally overtaken him — his fingers and his face, his torso and his toes. He was about to speak, but found himself — his inner self, his conscious self — thrust to the rear like a passenger in a packed train car, unable to get out the door at the intended station. "Whhhh," he fumbled past his tongue, stuttering as a stroke patient, before a new and stronger personality crashed into him, and said these words: "Mr. Havre, it's your friend from the aeroplane."

Desmond blinked and Colin let his hand fall away from the doctor's shoulder.

Color was returning to the doctor's face, slowly, and the muscles of his nose twitched as a rabbit's, the skin becoming comfortable. A wind came through and took their coats, rippling the water under the bridge and the willows surrounding. The body looked to his wrist for a watch. Seeing none, then snapping his fingers, mindful, he went into his waistcoat, the place where Doctor Rollo's round pocket watch was kept. He was getting used to the parameters. "I don't have much time," said the doctor in a hush.

Colin gave Rollo a poke. "What's this, then?" he said in gutter suspicion, smelling a rat. "Come on, Doc, bloody spookin' me — "

The body continued, "I have been working at this switch for days, finally got it to crack. Complex electrics on this one. Someone took great care. Men of science are usually better constructed, I've found. Engineers watching their own, I suppose." Rollo turned his face to Havre. "You remember me, don't you, Mr. Havre? From the plane?"

Guilty, Havre rushed to explain away the failure of his own mission. "I looked for that Philpot, but he was gone."

"It's all right," waved the doctor. "I needed him to get Winsey and Vic out of the garage. Two could hide in that car, but not four. I discovered Rob Holl would be coming back. He's done a very dangerous thing. He snapped his neck and stopped Audrey in the tunnels, and he's back in

again. He's got the map and found the companion index for Robby Holli. Used it last night."

At the utterance of the name, Colin once more grabbed the doctor's numb arm. "Robby Holli!" he repeated with urgency, shaking him. "What's wrong with you, old man? I told you all I know about Holli and you're talking like he's mixed up with Holl. Why didn't you say so before — aye?"

Colin Blight continued to shake Rollo, frustrated, until Havre caught his elbow and stopped him. "Don't!" he ordered. "It's not the doctor anymore!"

"That's right, that's right," muttered Rollo. The man shook his head, pleased. "That's why I brought you into this, Mr. Havre. I know your caliber. Smart, indeed. Calm under pressure. It must be from all those years working with entertainers. Only two people in this game know everything that's afoot. But you've got a piece of it, don't you? I'm not Doctor Rollo anymore. I've taken his body for just a few minutes. I'd hate to damage such a fine switch. This business has been going for decades before you had ever *heard* of Robby Holliday, or Rob Holl, or Robby Holli — one in the same if you catch each at the right time. He's a wild card, as they say in certain games. And he's more dangerous than ever. He's starting to turn on his teacher. He thinks it may be Philpot, but by now he's probably learned that he's wrong. Last night, he came through to the tunnels. He found Robby Holli's switch — the third switch in his series. The boy was numb from his car accident, having run a man down on the high street before hitting a pole. His switch was open. He did not need to do what I have done to Rollo — to tinker. Once he was inside the boy, he could not use that body as he had used Rob Holl's, or his original one, Robby Holliday. This boy was dumb. He ran to the station house and fired a pistol into the window, killing a guard when he meant to kill Sonny Royce. We had gotten Sonny out just moments before. Realizing he couldn't succeed in the body, he drowned Holli in the creek to get back to the tunnels. He used the third split lever to enter into Rob Holl — only he doesn't work as he did before. As you have probably witnessed."

Colin and Havre nodded. They had seen Holl's state.

"He was alerted to Claire Royce being at that hotel. I'm certain he's gone to London to find me. You must come to London and meet with the others. They'll all be there. *I Blue Top Road, London.* I'll be waiting. Ask for James."

The voice faded like the volume on a phonograph.

When it had disappeared, Doctor Rollo fell into the grass, unconscious.

ENGINEERS

Holl had her by the ears. He knew there was no getting her out of the hotel without a fuss, so he smashed a vase over the old woman blocking his way to her room. The woman didn't seem to expect violence. She was horrified as the vase came down, and shouted something that wasn't even a word. She laid at Rob Holl's feet with a gash in her head. As Holl went back past her on his way out, she had already started to move, but he didn't hit her again. There were no more vases and certainly no more time. With his hand tight around Claire Royce's mouth, he fled down the street, devil-may-care if he was seen. There was no one to stop him.

He thought a little differently when he saw the line of constables blocking the lot where he had left Rob Holl's motorcar. There would be no getting to that, even with his revolver. (*Six shots — mustn't waste them.*) The trains would surely be unsafe, too. There was a manhunt on, and he was the man. The fox. Cornered. He hoped Sheriff Mott had not learned any new bloodhound tricks from his practice with the fox. Claire started to raise her voice through his fingers. Holl told her to be quiet or he would break her neck, but she showed no understanding. When he freed his grip to pull his revolver from his pocket, she pleaded with him in French. Drawing on Holliday's index, he explained it in her tongue: "I'm taking you to Sonny. Be quiet and we'll get to Sonny. I'm a friend." All this was taken in by the girl but only partially digested. There was fear in her. He wasn't being clear, his language skills as deteriorated as his body. Before she could debate it, the two of them crossed an open field toward the rail tracks outside of the village.

They found a boxcar and were pulled away with the leaving freight, northward.

Sleeping, they dreamed — Holliday of a boy with the plague, the premonition; Claire of her café in Paris, on autumn nights where the windows were open and the cool air almost too much to take but unable to be resisted. She

jolted awake from the scrape on a rail tie. *Opposite her, that man.* Strangely, the fear had begun to drift when the train began moving. Holl, at his end of the train car, lay atop a hay bundle cut from the north fields above Marsden, twitched as he rested.

She did not like him; Sonny wouldn't trust a man like that. The company kept by her husband was not always the most godly, but it was better than this kind – a man neck crooked so far to the right that it appeared broken, although he did not complain of it, and his suit very dirty from their escape. A part of his moustache looked torn away. There was black oil on his nose. His sleep was restless, too. He dreamed with fluttering eyes, grunting "ah" or "ehh" between his thin lips, even when the rail car was not jostling. She thought of how quietly she might open the door and roll him outside, down the grassy hills that lined the tracks. It was dark and probably near 10 o'clock. She considered: Without him keeping this fitful watch, she would be alone, destined for parts unknown in a foreign land. *How would she ever work her way back to Desmond Havre?* As she gauged the distance from her constricted, rusty corner to the latch of the boxcar door, the man awoke. His right hand gripped the short-barreled revolver. His left held a broken tonic bottle he found in the hay.

"Are you him?" he asked in a throaty accusation. Claire didn't move until he said it again in French. Repeated, the words did not make more sense. "We're going to London," said the man, sensing her occupation with the latch. "Sonny's in London. With his keeper."

Desmond? she supplied, hopeful to find the two together. It might suit her to wait. He had not murdered her and was probably keeping her alive for a reason. He only wanted her with him. That, she could stand. His methods were unusual, but he seemed too tired to fly into a rage. She would wait until London. It would only be a few hours by rail, if they were indeed headed in the right direction.

"Have you spotted the boy?" he asked her.

Claire slowly, mutedly, moved her head.

"Le garçon," he said again. "He's around here. He's onto me. I can smell him. Wants to put an end to me. Wants to plug me up." Her kidnapper wheezed and spit phlegm into the haystack behind. "Do you feel sick?" he asked. Claire shook her head. "Alert me," he said, "if you do. It's a sign that he's around..." With that, Holl closed his eyes once more, the razor tip of his bottle resting on his leg, cutting through his trousers and puncturing the skin, just a little. Claire could see the fabric tear as he shifted.

Holl couldn't feel a thing.

ANTIDOTE

Winsey Green was alone. Vic Worshaff, the skinny nephew of Clayton Philpot, had gone in search of news. She sat on a bench near Lexham Gardens, out of the way of any trouble, resting after a long and rocky train ride to London. She was quite tired of trains. The turbulence, once quite relaxing, had upset her stomach. She had been feeling worse since Vic's departure. On the night she first met Sonny Royce in Marsden, she had felt ill then, too. His arrival brought her back to life. The frustration of her situation — trapped in Marsden, a hired dancer at a past-its-prime hall, searching for her missing sister, Audrey — had boiled and taken over her insides. The body revolts when under such pressure, this she knew. Even at the healthy age of twenty, she was not immune. Since two nights before, on Thursday, she had even lost sensation in one arm. (She hadn't let it stop her. Winsey still found a way to foil Inspector Holl's mad plot to imprison everyone she cared for in that dreadful station house, thanks to Colin Blight, whom she missed very, very much.) Here it was, Friday, a day later and usually her busiest night at the Victory Ballroom, and she could not even confirm that it was still operating. After the hullabaloo, the owner Mr. Karl Otter and his girlfriend, Caroline Bixby, had disappeared, not to be found. Winsey did not seek them out. Traitors were no good to them.

At least she had Vic.

Poor Vic.

Skinny Vic.

Smashes a chair on a constable and he thinks he's Valentino. He had grown in her estimation, but not romantically: as a brother, as a protector, his mettle revealed. When he gently told her to wait for him on this bench, and then went for a newsagent hoping for a report on the capture of Rob Holl, Vic kissed her hand, numb from wrist to nails. Sweet boy.

Sweet Vic.

He had left Colin and the doctor waiting at the garage so that he might find his uncle, and ended up not being able to return. His uncle had shoved him onto a train bound for London and that was that. Philpot waved goodbye as the two young disciples watched through the accelerating glass. He bit a quarter in half as a magic trick and spit it back together as the *chug-chug* of the steam built with speed. *Trust me, Winsey Green*, Clayton Philpot had said with sincerity. *Take the train to Lexham Gardens and ye shall see your sister again.* Vic believed in his uncle, the magician, could produce such miracles. "He knows a lot," said the boy as they crossed the county line. "He studies motors and magic — looks for interesting things everywhere. I told you we could trust him to help. Your sister Audrey has told him what's going on these last few days. She must have. How else would he know about the inspector, and Sonny, and us?" Winsey gave a quiet agreement. The boy continued, "It's hard to trust someone you don't know, but that's why I'm here, Winsey. You know *me* — Vic — and I trust my uncle more than anyone on earth."

"It's not wise to trust a magician," she retorted. "You never know what's up his sleeve." Her snotty self was returning, along with her fatigue.

Vic grinned and left the comment without rebuke.

On the bench in the gardens, she missed Colin terribly. She hoped Clayton Philpot would keep his promise to watch over Colin and the doctor. *I will*, he had said, *and so will another friend of ours.* He did not offer a name.

Why Colin? thought Winsey. *What is the attraction to that one?* She had known boys (and men) and for the most part had not been impressed. Colin was different — different, even, than Vic Worshaff, in her feelings. There was something brotherly about Vic, but there was a deeper affection for Colin. She liked the way he looked, even when unkempt. His language was gruff; he always said the wrong things; he did not seem to care for her, and, at times, was downright awful. (Ah, but he did care for her; he had come back to the station; he had sat in her lap and promised:

"I'm getting you out." It had come true, just as he had said — a knight, rescuing her from the tower of an evil king. These actions were proof. They were in love.) *Winsey Laurel Green*, she said to herself on the bench, in thought, *you are in love*. A smile came across her face. How about that? She faced the ending sun of the day, happy, before returning to earth.

Down the path of the gardens, Winsey spotted an old man waking in her direction, a cane supporting him. She grew hopeful, then fearful. Her eyes looked to the faraway street, for any sign of Vic's return. The boy had disappeared, most likely away to another vendor for the evening edition. With a toss, the old man in front of her threw a palm full of seeds at a gathering of birds on the garden lawn. He then turned and wandered away, dusting his hand on his trousers. Winsey sighed and folded her arms, disappointed.

"Hello," said a voice on the bench.

The most wonderful thing in the world was beside her:

Audrey Green, her sister, nine years old with red curls, looking only slightly different than when she last saw her in 1957.

"Audrey!" she jumped and threw her arms around the girl. She hugged her and would not stop. Her embrace was tight, constricting, but she did not let go. The hug was returned and Winsey wept uncontrollably, tears dotting the catch of her dress between her legs and Audrey's own shoulder. "Where have you been? Did you know I was searching and searching for you? I thought you had been *killed*? Where have you *been*?"

Audrey took this barrage of questions with good grace, smiling, leaving her hand in her sister's. She got another hug and laughed.

Winsey couldn't stop crying — she was so very pleased! "I'm glad you're all right," Winsey declared, with wagging of her finger. "Shouldn't scare a girl like that — shouldn't scare your sister."

"People have been taking care of me," said the girl.

"Well, I'm certainly glad of that. Who? Mr. Philpot — Vic's uncle?"

Audrey nodded. "Yes."

"Do you know what's going on?"

Audrey shrugged in answer. "I know we have to stay away from Robby Holliday. He was mean to people. And now he's Rob Holl. He was in Robby Holli but that hurt him to be there."

Winsey, knitting concern, leered over her sister on the bench, and asked, "Are *you* scared of him, Audrey?"

"Yes," said the girl, almost under her breath. "I'm not to go near him anymore. I thought taking him with me into the tunnels was a good idea, but it wasn't. When that boy came to his house, I just wanted him to not be hurt. But now I know Robby Holliday does bad things."

"What boy?" asked Winsey, confused, "What tunnels?"

Audrey Green turned to the gardens surrounding their bench. "*That* boy," she said with a point toward a trellis ten meters past the dividing cobble.

Winsey saw him:

the boy...

a pale apparition standing among the ivy and the daffodils, arms to his side. He was watching the two of them on the bench. He wore dark clothing and a white shirt. His face had no expression, only unblinking eyes trained on the Green girls. Winsey felt a chill at the sight. "Audrey, who is that?" she asked.

"He'll make you sick," her sister explained. "He's been here for the last few minutes. I saw him so I came to protect you. He won't come closer if I'm around."

"Why?"

"He just doesn't. Are you numb?" Audrey asked. Winsey nodded and ran a finger from her knuckles to her elbow, illustrating the area. "Then your switch is open," said Audrey. "I should take you where you'll be safe. Want to come with me?"

Winsey could not stop staring at the boy. He was entrenched in the garden, almost planted, but seemed ready

to strike if he saw an opening. There was a vibration in his presence, so close, and Winsey felt her nerves twitch and her stomach sour. "Audrey?" she asked, "Was that boy ever in Marsden?" Her little sister gave a nod. "He was in the ballroom, wasn't he? The night I met Sonny Royce."

"Yes," Audrey replied. "And I was there, too. I was in the alley when you met Sonny. Protecting you both. That's what I do. I'm an antidote. The boy doesn't come near me. Mr. Philpot says I'm the opposite, and it's a game. I want to make sure you're not hurt, especially now that your switch is opening. You can get very sick. I'm not sure why I do that to the boy — make him go away — but I do. I don't want anyone to get hurt."

For a moment, the sisters looked at the boy, trapped at a distance as if behind an invisible wall. He was a frightening sight. There was something inhuman in his large eyes. He was almost animal. Winsey had seen the look in lions in films about the Congo, a pouncing, tearing, ravaging predator.

Winsey let her breathing return. Her sister held a mystery. She was immune.

"Would you like to see the tunnels?" Audrey asked, very causally.

Winsey shrugged, and could not help but give a laugh. "Sure."

Vic returned ten minutes later, without his newspaper, the bench empty and the boy gone...

CONTAGION

When the rail car arrived at the line's end — a yard in the south of the Thames off the Victoria tracks — Claire Royce perceived she was in lessening danger. Rob Holl, his spirits brighter, helped her down from the door of the boxcar that had carried them this far, and even gave an apology. "Can't do much about the weather," he said as the fog and rain locked on them among the trains, "but I hope you're not too cold." She was shivering and wished for a blanket. "Come, come," he said, and took her by the hand through the parapets, tracks, and quays, and into the field lots outside of the rail yard. Workers were moving about as apparitions in the morning haze, but no one took notice of Holl in his dirty tweed or Claire in her black skirt and shirt. They easily disappeared through a hole in the fencing and traveled the road toward London.

It took another hour to get to Kensington by tube. Holl had a few coins in his pocket — just enough to get a one-way to Holland Park, and from there they walked west. From his watch pocket, the inspector pulled out the address, the one given to him by the driver Barnard Haithcock: *James Smith, 1 Blue Top*. He had never heard of the man, or the street. He was happy, though, that his prisoner was cooperating. Every few blocks, he would speak of Sonny Royce, his whereabouts, his being a friend, 'not to worry,' and she would be quiet. Speaking in her native tongue seemed to help things. She was obviously very attached to her country. It made Holl appear more of a friend to speak French. However, when chatting her up, he would be sure to fumble a word from time to time — words he knew better, grammar he knew better. This kept her off-balance. Some of his mistakes were not even intentional, as he still struggled with the damage in his mind. She had to work to interpret, though he was fluent (and this helped her stay a foot in the dark). *Did he say what I think he said?* Holl could see wheels turn whenever he closed his mouth. The woman would follow him anywhere...

At certain turns, he would consult with people in the stalls and shops for Blue Top Road. One grocer showed him a map, but would not let Holl take it without paying money Holl did not have. Instead, Holl relied on memorization, which was not reliable at all. *This brain!* he cursed. *I want my old mind back.* He thanked the grocer and went northerly. He was getting close to his old neighborhood — Holl's East Acton. *Wouldn't it be justice, he thought, if some central point of this adventure, in fact, were located near my old flat in East Acton?* The goading of Rory Cogs would ring as ridiculous. *Wasting my time? Never. I was where I should have been all along and you sent me off on a goose-chase.*

He could not wait to see this informer again — Philpot? This mysterious puppeteer. Holl severely doubted the identification now — he didn't see any trace of that Philpot when looking into driver Haithcock's face as he strangled him. Whomever the man behind all this manipulation — a new body or someone he had already met — Holl would be sure to stop his life. He sensed an end to the tracks. He was nearing the line's end.

Holl reached inside his coat and drew a finger across the edge of his tunnel map, snapping the paper. This time, it had not been lifted from his pocket.

When he and Claire finally came upon the sign, they had to catch their breath:

BLUE TOP RD E

"Here it is," Holl proclaimed to the woman at his side. She looked tired and thankful. "Quelle heure est-il?" 8:33 *in the morning*, she answered.

Holl again took her arm and, his sense of purpose returning, jerked her down the narrow walk. The houses were well-kept, homes for the captains of industry or the inheritors of generational wealth, each built behind tall gates, fraught with ivy and barricaded by distinctively unwelcoming iron. It was quite familiar to Holliday, reminding him of his residence at the Matten Estates, his

compound his kingdom. The street itself was tree-lined and had fresh black tar. A few expensive motorcars were arranged precisely on the street, parking lines boxing them in. The lamps were lit along the street, their automatic switches not extinguishing them for daylight because of the cloudy weather. Holl took his watchful steps on the lane. There was foliage — hedges and overlapping trees — many places to hide an enemy, or worse, the Plague Boy.

Claire started to ask a question, but Holl shushed her. At this hour, this Saturday morning, the streets quiet. Not a single person walking. Just the two of them, hugging the stone wall of a high-numbered house. "Nine," said the inspector under his breath, spotting the chiseled wood address sign dangling from a post, moving with the morning mist.

"Eight," he declared as he passed another, eyes over to the other side of the row. "Seven." He was getting closer. Holl held Claire Royce's hand so tightly that it was hurting her, although she did not speak. "Five." He walked two more houses without even looking for numbers. *Three Blue Top — the Bixby's*. (Keep walking, almost there.) He knew the house before he even saw the number, carved in the stone pillar holding the gate: ONE.

It was in complete disrepair. It was like a blackened tooth in a perfect smile. It had three floors and a widow's peak. An overgrown English garden filled the front lot and there was a winding pathway to the front door, a place as mysterious as a storybook. Something Grimm. There was a single lamp lit on an upper floor, and both Claire and Holl thought they saw a stooped figure move past the closed curtain. Holl checked the paper given to him by Haithcock. *1 Blue Top*.

Eyes back to the house — the end of the tracks.

Here it was.

"Sonny est dans cette-maison-ci?" asked Claire.

"Oui — je suis positif."

Claire became excited and put her hands to the gate. "Entre-nous, non?" She pulled at the latch, only to find it

locked. Continuing to move the gate back and forth in its clasp, the metal scraped.

Holl rushed forward and slapped her away. "No — stop." Something was wrong. He had his mind set for another trap. Moving forward to the gate, he held the bars, each sunken waist-high into the stone barrier of the gardens, and tried to listen.

He heard the voices of several people, muffled behind the walls of the house. He strained even more. A girl's laugh wafted to his ears, very faint, very far, but audible nonetheless. He scrunched his face and tried to push his head between the bars, to hear better, wetting his moustache at the tips with the dew on the iron. Claire held her place, growing angrier, rubbing the spot of her skin where Holl's slap had made contact. She was piqued, but said nothing more. Neither breathed for several seconds.

From inside the garden, they heard a rustling — leaves, followed by a slow skid along the cobbles.

Someone was moving.

Rob Holl and Claire Royce retreated from the gate. The inspector cupped his pocket to verify the revolver. Another scrape, followed by a winded sigh. *A body walks.* One foot was being pulled by the strength of the other. Before they could even see a face, they heard the whisper: "Holliday," said a man weakly, "is that you?"

Ten paces up the path the door emerged an old man. He wore a black suit, an open bow tie around his collar, a formal cummerbund banded around his thin waist — clothes out of place in the garden. Raised in the back from his shrunken shoulders and straight arms was a draped topcoat. He carried a knotted cane with an elaborate silver ball at the top, his hand firmly wrapped around it as if grown through to the wood. His left foot was being dragged lamely behind him. His head was hairless and liver-spotted. His face was very wrinkled and showed great pain as he walked. He lifted his eyes to the locked gate.

"Can't you get in?" the old man asked in a barely heard whisper.

Claire moved forward. "Ici — s'il vous plait," she said, gesturing to the gate. Her composure was wearing. She watched the man take each slow step, thinking that he might collapse and never find the bars, but, finally, he reached it. In the morning fog of the garden, the thick undergrowth nearly tripping him as he moved into position, the old man took hold of the gates and smiled to Claire Royce. Using the tip of his cane, he thrust upward on the latch. Two attempts and it was off its catch. There was the heavy squeak of the lock, and the garden gate came open. Rob Holl and Claire Royce pushed their way through the opening. "Merci beaucoup, mille merci," said the woman and looked to the lit window of the mansion for signs of her husband.

"Who are *you* then?" asked Rob Holl, straight out, his earlier moment of clarity fading to confusion. Again, he sensed his state, his oddly turned neck, his stink, and wished he could sleep. "Who are you?" he asked a second time.

The old man shut the gate quietly. "It's no use, Robby. They've... they've got us. They've got my map. They've got more switches. And they have the girl. I've nothing to fight them with anymore."

Claire held in the middle of the garden, waiting for the two before she dared to knock. She sensed trouble in the old man's words.

Holl moved closer to the face of the stranger. "Who are you? Tell me now."

"The name is Wallace Valentine."

The inspector digested it. That name meant nothing to him. "Are you Philpot?" he asked.

"No," said the old man, confused. "Robby, I am your benefactor. I'm Rory Cogs. I'm the gravedigger. I'm that drunken chauffeur from Marsden."

"Not Philpot?"

"Philpot's with *them*." Valentine gestured to the house behind. "Philpot is one of *Smith's* men. Come... we'll go

inside." The old man appeared as if he wanted to lead, but, in the end, he used Holliday for his crutch, balancing between his heavy cane and the torn coat-sleeve of the inspector.

"Why didn't you get a better body this time?" Holliday urged as they moved sluggishly in the direction of the stoop. "I mean — you can't do much in *this* old shell, can you? What's your plan, now that we're at the end?"

Valentine blew air out of his nose — part sniffles, part laughter. "You... you don't understand. I'm in this body, because it is *my* body. My travels are finished. I have lost. The game is over. Smith's checkmated me. My plan... is to *surrender*."

Holl stopped dead. He moved his eyes to the door of the house, then again to Mr. Valentine on his arm, lastly looking at Claire Royce, standing impatient. When Holl shook the old man away, Valentine had to shift his weight again to the cane. "This is a trick, isn't it?"

"Mr. Holliday," said Valentine, "there's quite a lot you don't know. Come with me into the house. It's time to meet our foes. You'll understand. Just watch what I do and the stars will align. You're a child in the dark. Inside this house, you will drink from the waters and your thirst will be quenched. You stay outside and fight, and you'll be lost forever in this broken third switch — in Rob Holl. You can already sense it failing, can't you? You've stretched the circuit too thin, my boy. Switches weren't made for bringing back the dead. There are some things that *can't* be rewired. You're on a clock, you are. In that house, you can be helped — *made* to understand. Mr. Smith and I are the only two left now that Mr. Olive is dead. We're the only two who know the full circumstance. I *suggest*... that you follow me... watch me closely..." Valentine stepped onto the first level of the porch, and, with great difficulty, raised one more level closer to the house, unaided. Claire went to him and took his arm for the final step. Holl remained at the garden's edge. "Stay out if you like," Valentine said. "I've given you fair warning. The end lies inside. The game is

finished. Checkmate. You haven't even seen half the moves. This is not a game for pawns."

With a nod from Valentine, Claire Royce reached to the door and lifted the half-moon knocker, letting it fall three times to the surface. It made reverberating smacks along the frame, echoing inside.

Mr. Olive, thought Robby Holliday. Old man, leg tied to the bed, old man of the banks, gash in the head, attendant: James, man of the rail, the picture the picture the picture, can't see it, not at all, the map, the first map, in Olive's drawer with railway charts, the tunnels, the boy, Audrey Green, a game, me, a pawn.

Sonny Royce answered the door, and Claire fell into his arms, happy...

THREE MEN OF THE RAIL

The first thing Robby Holliday saw was the monkey. It was a brown beast, the height of a knee, and it sat in the corner eating something from a bowl. Sonny Royce quickly pulled his wife behind his back, his big arms protecting her, allowing Valentine and Holl to pass into the open space of the foyer. The monkey gave a rasp as the two went past. The animal then leaped onto the stair banister, running on hands and feet to the top turn of the landing. Sonny, in his familiar drawl, announced, "He's in the study." The monkey gave another kick before disappearing around the bend.

Valentine protested. "I can't make it up all those stairs."

"I *could* carry you," said the jazzman, half-joking.

Grunting, Valentine started his ascent, pushing on the banister so hard that it bowed from its moorings.

Holl waited below with Sonny, saying nothing. The black man listened as his wife gave hushed details of their journey: the freight car, the search for Blue Top Road. When recounted and balanced against their imminent 'surrender' (as Valentine had so sadly put it), Holliday was touched with frustration, a feeling of waste. The journey had not been easy, but he had completed it. He had done everything that was asked, but what was the result? *Surrender*. A rickety man climbing rickety stairs to his resignation, too prideful to be carried but too weak to be a victor. This was what remained of his explorations...

It was disheartening.

(Rob Holl, however, kept plotting.)

When Valentine was at the top, the three followed, easily matching him at the turn of a red-carpeted hallway. Valentine followed the sound of soft voices toward the lit study, past paintings of fields, dance halls, sea ships and beaches hung on opposite walls. The old man paused at the last image — a portrait of a boy and a girl — and scoffed before moving again. Holliday also hesitated, recognizing it

as a rendering of Audrey Green, holding hands with a young boy he could not identify.

Taking a deep breath, Holl stepped into the bright room —

The study.

It was a stage of actors ready to begin a scene. There were chairs about and bodies in them.

Winsey Green,

that boy Colin Blight,

Doctor Rollo,

Skinny Vic Worshaff
collected from the park,

Desmond Havre,

Clayton Philpot — a deck of cards cut, thumbing —

and, assembling a puzzle on the floor, little Audrey Green, girl of nine, green eyes up and fingers moving red hair away from her face.

Holl met each of their gazes from his place in the doorway, as if checking off a list. The monkey had vanished. Holl brushed his coat pocket with his forearm, nonchalant. The revolver was still there, hidden deep in the lining.

Valentine himself took no notice of the crowd. He was staring into the room's corner, at the fireplace.

A final figure — his back turned, a hand leaning against the mantle — made Valentine show his only glimmer of satisfaction. The room held silent as this faraway stranger stirred the burning coals; the only sound was the clink of the iron poker against the brick. Flames sufficiently revived, the man at the fireplace slowly rotated

and gave Valentine an understanding nod. He, at last, noted the emotions of his waiting guests, the sight of Rob Holl in the house having put them on edge. Colin Blight removed the cigarette from his mouth and held it out by his hip. This stranger hushed their fears from the corner, with a gentle bobbing of his right hand, and a tip of his head. The gesture was vaudevillian.

Valentine and this man could have been brothers. Both wore formals, both were over seventy years in age (although Valentine was older still, a bit more disheveled, and without that full head of gray hair, combed and slicked, like his host). Both mirrored the same tired eyes. These were two returning from a war...

"Mr. Valentine," said the man by the fire in greeting, "I welcome you to my house." The intonation of his voice was affecting and genuine.

"Mr. Smith," came the cordial reply from across the room. Valentine gave a stamp of his cane — in period, in exclamation.

Smith stepped from his position by the fire and crossed the hearth. He gave a shake to Valentine's hand. Smith did not need a cane to help him walk; Holl took note. *(That was not all he noticed, now that Smith was closer and Holl could get a look at him away from the flicker of the fire. Comparing, Holl saw the opposite directions of their mouths: Smith's was a smile, happy; Valentine's was a frown, defeated.)* "As we agreed," started Smith, "we shall go to the library and make our truce. You can bring your lieutenant. I shall bring mine. I've elected Sonny Royce." Smith gave an up/down appraisal to Sonny, who removed himself from Claire's embrace and stepped to the forefront. She tried to pull him back. Sonny let her stay, momentarily, on his coattails.

Valentine sniffed to the others about the room. "Do your people know about it, Smith?"

James Smith gave a wink. "We've been talking most of the day, but not of that. I've promised them answers if they give me patience. They're full of questions, but I think I've worn them down. You can't imagine the difficulty of getting

them in one room. I want things settled with you before I involve them any further." Smith was glowing. The room was not amused.

Valentine attempted to match Smith's manners, but failed. "Yes," he said, "well," before adding with a last puff, "it might be too late for restraint. It seems you've got me outnumbered, anyway. Only one man on *my* side. Only Holliday. Smart man, he is, but not smart enough to win." There was something fatherly in Valentine's appraisal, but it was also insulting. Holl weighed a defense before deciding to remain quiet.

"Come along," said Smith. "Come along..."

The library.

Soon, the four men were in chairs around the dusty and windowless room, the two old men opposite, Holl and Royce at corner points. Sonny closed the heavy door behind him and felt entombed, just as on his first visit to the library, when sequestered. The red carpeting, the tall shelves, bodies heating the air. It was as if they weren't a part of the house anymore. This was the cabin of a ship at sea, easing from side to side.

"We're surrendering," said Valentine with a nod, "but you knew that, didn't you, Smith?"

"I had hopes."

Valentine surveyed the books boxing them in. "We've been at it too long," he said in reflection. In '33, when we returned from India, we knew it would end like this. I was hoping that *you* would be surrendering to *me*, but you've outplayed me. You have control of all the good switches. I've lost my map. And I'm old and tired. All that's left for me is the eventual dead station, just like our friend Olive. I will *finally* discover what we've avoided all these years: the real purpose of the tunnels. Maybe I will meet who sent that boy to stop us."

Holliday leaned forward. "The boy? *He* doesn't control the boy?" His smallest finger pointed to Smith.

"The Plague Boy — as folklore has christened him — has been sent to shut us down, Doctor," explained their

host. "We discovered that shortly after we got involved. The three of us were stationed in India, working for British Rail...

Wallace Valentine here,
another man named Winton Olive,
and me, James Smith.

Olive controlled the money. Valentine and I were in charge of the tracks. In 1933, we each received a telegram from the British government reassigning us to the Isle. We were told to go to the offices of the Ministry and report to a particular room on the top floor — Room 3. A gentleman none of us had ever met entered the room and handed each of us a map. British Rail, it seemed, had made a discovery in a house across London: a portal... leading into some kind of *railway*. The gentleman said the three maps in our hands were the only navigational recordings of the tunnels. They had been found in the library of the house, tucked in a book. The maps were not duplicates, overlapping only slightly. We were being reassigned from India to England to explore the tunnels and make an assessment. The gentleman then gave us the address of this mysterious house and swore us to secrecy. We have not seen him since. He never told us his name. Olive and I went back three days later to refuse the offer. However, no one knew this gentleman as described. Room 3 didn't exist. There wasn't even a door in the wall where we remembered entering."

Valentine said gruffly, "I convinced Olive and Smith to go through with the assignment. We found the house, abandoned. The gentleman had been telling the truth. There was indeed *an entrance...*"

Holliday spoke his question: "The portal — where was it in the house?"

A silence passed before Valentine turned and answered for Smith. "The fireplace. But Mr. Olive had it sealed in 1944, while Mr. Smith and I were inside. He blew up the portal using dynamite."

"Why's dat?" asked Sonny Royce, horrified at the notion of being buried alive.

"Why? Because the game had begun," replied Smith. "Valentine and I had figured out the switches. We had learned the general rules of the dead stations and the purpose of the trains. We were becoming greedy. My *first* advantage was learning how to manipulate the electrics."

Valentine objected. He was not to be outdone. "*I* learned of the numbing," he said, with a point of his finger from the top of his cane. "That was very important." He turned to Holl. "The numbing — temporary states allowing for travel. You studied that as Holliday. *But I was the first*. My notebooks would *crush* yours with talk of going numb. Yet, only so many switches had this as a variable. Other men might have a switch, but if they don't go numb naturally, or their electrics cannot be changed to simulate it, they are simply people, not vessels at all."

"Like a few of our friends outside in the study — " Smith interrupted with a nod towards the closed library door. "That boy Colin Blight, for one. He's been helping my cause, unknowingly, but he cannot be entered. Others, like Simon Green or John Falliher, were the same construction. We thought that of Holliday as well, but you've proved us wrong, Inspector Holl, but jumping between Holliday, Holli, and Holl."

"He was helped by me," bragged Valentine from his seat cushion. "*I* showed Holl the toggles — "

Smith again cut in. "Another important discovery of electrics, that." (Smith was full of redirection, him and his precious wiring. Sonny Royce and Rob Holl were witness to the hick competition between these two, and began to understand how this game could go on for decades.) "I found the first toggles," declared Mr. Smith. "Olive and I used to have a bit of fun with them. I used them on my own because of Alison Falliher. Once, in a café, I intentionally misled her husband John while in a double-split of Audrey Green. Alison had asked us to try and keep her husband out of it. He was *very* persistent, though. Audrey took him around the London tube, to see if he had

ever understood the tunnels on his own. He showed no recognition. It was difficult to throw him off the scent, but we did it — for Alison. In the end, he knew *nothing*. His conclusions were wrong. He deduced *Audrey* was the Plague Boy." Smith closed his eyes in contemplation of the inspector's fate — the car, killing him. "Mr. Valentine..." Smith continued sadly, "watched me manipulating the toggles as I showed the trick to Sonny Royce. I didn't know he was spying. He *stole* the information and gave it to you, Holliday."

Valentine momentarily bowed his head. "All is fair," he defended.

"It's a dangerous practice when not done properly," refuted Smith. "And look where it's led — "

Holl felt suddenly self-conscious of his bent neck and despicable state. He was Frankenstein's monster, abused electrics, a freak of nature.

Smith continued, "Olive just wanted to be left alone. Valentine and I both agreed to that. He bought a house in Holland Park. I would visit. Olive told me he destroyed his map in a fit of rage. This was clearly a lie, as you, Mr. Holl, found it when you were called to investigate his death. I felt quite a lot of pity for him... Poor Olive. In the end, I'm not sure what he wanted out of life. If he couldn't figure a way to capitalize on them, the tunnels were of no use."

Valentine huffed. "Well, *I* bloody had the mind of a railway man, even if Olive had lost his. Smith, you kept yours, though. We were *both* going to the papers as soon as we knew the tunnel's purpose, to claim them, to go down in history. We had suspicions it was a trick of the Nazis during the war. Paranoid, we were, like the rest of Britain. Foolish. With all Hitler's supposed advancements — V2 rockets and charnel houses — he didn't have the ability to put men inside men, insert stormtroopers in the bodies of the British citizenry. We had a hundred other theories, but, ultimately, our conclusion has to be that those who guard it, those in the tower blocks, those at the dead stations, are the builders of the tunnels. Those... we are not yet ready to meet."

"The dead stations," repeated Sonny Royce.

"Beyond the platforms," said Smith matter-of-factly, as if giving directions, "at the end of the line. Holl, you felt it yourself when you escaped with Audrey Green. That tugging. From a station, there is no return. Except by her. Except by the girl."

"The girl is the key!" exclaimed Valentine from his chair, hanging on the end of his cane. "We found her in the tunnels one day in 1953. Her brother had drowned at a beach and she followed him... *into the water*, finding a way inside. She went to look for him in the tunnels and then she left them again — how, we do not know. She didn't use wires and electricity. She didn't die. She had no fear of searching the dead stations. Smith and I watched her do *everything* we wanted to do. A natural born explorer, she was."

"I took her in after she left John Falliher's care," continued Smith. "Helping my cause gave her a sense of purpose and adventure. She could forget about her past — all that misery. Her only request was that I help her protect her sister, Winsey Green, as the rest of her family were dead — the work of the Plague Boy, and that accident on the road which killed her father. And I protected Winsey Green... from the two of you..." Smith turned to his enemies.

Valentine did not object to this accusation. He sat complacent in his chair, eyes moving from Holl to Sonny Royce, to Smith and back again to his lap. He gave out a hurting sigh. "We became enemies a long time ago, James — against each other since before Olive's death. Since the Plague Boy. Since we've known about there being an end to it — to us. I admit the things I've ordered to be done are terrible. I was no better than Hitler, and Holliday here my Goerbles. When I found Smith had recruited Alison Falliher, the first in league, I was happy when Holliday killed her." The old man looked to Holl, who sank deeper in his own high-backed chair. He did not like being reminded of his deadly deeds. "Holliday — you were already on the track. You, and others, discovered the patterns in the

switches without knowing about the tunnels. This may be a clue to how they were constructed in the first place. And you were already capable of murder. I've read your journals. I know about the nurse you poisoned. You could be very useful in stopping my old friend James Smith. A turning point was the song. Smith here discovered his own pattern related to a silly song called "*Life Is A Puzzle*." If he could find the author, he might have a powerful ally. He sent Alison Falliher on his trail after finding her switch, knowing her skills. You, Holl, killed her and Smith got her back in through another girl named Alice Pravel."

"And then the boy got to her," Sonny Royce added, ending the tale with melancholy. "I didn't know it at da time, but I do's now."

"Yes," agreed Valentine. "The seriousness of it is quite shocking. That's why I impressed on you, Holliday, to avoid the boy. The boy was clearly indiscreet — not choosing a side, sent to destroy. You had only been saved once because you were with Audrey Green. It wouldn't happen again. I believe that someone knew we were in the tunnels and wanted us out. Some force greater than us. That's why I'm surrendering. By surrendering, I might be able to avoid the boy. I'm surrendering to the protection of Audrey Green. I'm too old now. I can't run anymore. I've done something to my leg. My eyes are going. You all are just a blur to me. I think I must be a hundred years old. I can't recall the year of my birth. I had planned to bargain Claire Royce's life for Audrey Green, but I realize that is not the way. I'm at my end. You and I are old, James." Valentine, with great pain, rocked out of his chair and, cane firmly held, slowly moved toward his rival. "I've ordered murders and you've put people in harm's way. That's not the way to treat the discovery of a lifetime."

Valentine reached the end of the carpet and was arm's length from Smith, who sat passive, reaching to his left to raise his pipe from the barrow next to his pile of books and reading glasses.

"On the contrary, Wallace," Smith said in reply, "great discoveries often cause great misery. There's always the

protection of natural rights, parallel with glory. We've been given a gift — a glimpse of the possibilities — and we acted, with Winton Olive, according to the direction of the British government. We have done as instructed by the Ministry — to explore and protect the tunnels. You and I have different methods, but ultimately we've done our job."

Valentine nodded then lifted his arms, and his cane, in a gesture. "A British Rail man to the last."

Smith smiled. "Indeed. A love of it. I have that." Smith struck a match and lit his pipe. "So does that Doctor Rollo, that older one in the study — " Smith doused the match in the air and tossed it to the tray. "You probably don't remember the good doctor, Wallace, but we met Roman Rollo when he was just a boy in India. The three of us were having dinner with Rollo's father, trying to convince him to stay on the sub-continent and finish the rail line through Bombay. Mr. Rollo was on contract like we were. And he turned us down. I didn't understand it at the time. I couldn't comprehend how anyone could give up the railways. But now I know. Rollo's father had a greater strength than any of us. He could *love* better than any of us. He knew there were more important things than parallel tracks." Smith leaned back, laying himself open. At last, with a sigh and a puff on his pipe, he put out his hand to Valentine. "My friend... I accept your truce."

Valentine gave a last shake of his head. "You may be right about love," he said slowly, with great articulation, "but you know nothing of glory..." Valentine met Smith's extended fingers with his free hand, gripping. With his other hand, Valentine popped a wire cap from the end of his cane. The false glove falling to the carpet, revealing a bayonet point. In a matter of seconds, he had the sharp spear thrust into the heart of James Smith. As the tip pierced the clothes, and the skin, Valentine howled back to Rob Holl's corner, "Holliday!"

Holl barely had time to act. His emotions came swiftly, colliding: *an opportunity, a ruse — this game's not up!* This wasn't surrender! It was *attack!*

Sonny Royce lunged at Valentine, pulling the old man down on the floor as he continued shouting – "Kill him — kill Royce and we'll have the girl!"

The cane — that hidden weapon — stayed buried in James Smith's chest, blood spilling onto the man's black waistcoat, the red barely visible if not for the tacky reflection of the library lamps.

Royce put his foot to Valentine, pinning the villain against a stack of books laid near the wall. Reaching backwards, Sonny yanked the cane from its sticking point just as the gun fired. A bullet left the revolver and landed in the spine of a great, big book on the top shelf, opening the pages like flapping birdfeathers. Royce ducked and pulled the cane from Smith's chest just as a second shot hit a crystal lamp, smashing it to pieces, further darkening the room. By the time Sonny came up on his feet, Holliday was fleeing, not even checking to see if he had hit his target. Smith rolled forward in his chair, hands to his bloody wound.

"Why'd you go and *do* that?" Royce said down to the feeble Valentine, this last move played, cards dealt, and a wispy,

"The girl,"
escaping his lips.

Holliday was on her with his revolver —

ELECTRICS

Holl screamed at them as he dragged Audrey Green toward the fireplace. "Stay back!" (He knew there were only four shots left in the chamber — not enough for Smith's entire army.) "Stay back — and let us get into the tunnels." Clayton Philpot and Colin Blight had tried to stop him from grabbing the girl, but Holliday was too fast — he had surprise on his side. Sonny was calling from down the hall and Doctor Rollo went running.

The fire was still smoldering, but Holl didn't care. He kicked away the poker and the broom and made a space for him to enter the grate.

"What are you *doing*?" asked Philpot in earnest. "She's just a girl — let go of her before she gets burned!"

Audrey shut her eyes.

Holl had one foot on the burnt brick, starting to crouch. He forced the girl's head lower than his weapon. The men were circling. Winsey stood on her chair and pleaded, "Let her go!"

Audrey kept her eyes squeezed shut...

She pushed her legs with all her might, and she and Holl fell backwards into the fire.

The world became a whirl — a blur.

It was the same rush as at the Matten Estates, escaping with Audrey Green before the arrival of the Plague Boy at Holliday's lab. They both knew to expect the spray of intense white —

("It was Smith's house," Holliday dreamed, burning with travel, "the abandoned address given over by the gentleman of the Ministry." As Holliday had suspected — the damage from Olive's dynamite had been repaired...)

Holliday tried to keep hold of Audrey's wrist for as long as possible, but he lost it somewhere in the journey. The blistering wind stretched his face, and he sped along for a length of time.

At the end, he had no sensation that he was slowing down. He just *stopped*.

His feet were in pain, as though he had been jumped from a high tree, and he was in a small tunnel, alone. The opening was not far — he could mark it from where he stood. Looking back, he saw the fireplace behind, in reverse, but it was too smoky to see if the others still stood in the room. *Did I come through that?* He clamored to his feet and began moving toward the pinprick hole beyond.

For a while he climbed, up and up with his shoulders slumped. When he reached a platform, he stood for a moment to assess his circumstance. *Have I been tricked? Have I been trapped?* No, he didn't think that was the case. *Then where's the girl? Why aren't they following me?* He checked the standpipe, but there was nobody behind it, waiting to pounce. He had hopes that the Plague Boy had arrived at *1 Blue Top Road* to claim all those who stood in his way. *Wouldn't it be delicious if all those switches were sealed in one fell swoop?* The thought made him giddy.

Holl checked his jacket pockets. The commandeered map was still with him, although the revolver was gone. He unfolded the parchment and began to read. What were his options? In which direction should he go? He knew that some day in the future, before going to the papers with his discovery, he must again visit that house, to see if his theory about the boy getting through Smith's gate was correct. Lovely thing that would be. Indeed. Six dead in a room.

He didn't have time to be involved in a railway scheme. Three old men and their plots. Olive and now that Smith, thankfully dead. You cannot imagine the joy Holliday felt when that second bullet hit Mr. Valentine in the heart, passing through him on way to the bookshelf. A perfect shot. The first.

I don't need him anymore — I've got all the information. I can claim the existence of the tunnels. This is my greatest triumph. I have everything. Even if there was once a document on file at British Rail, and some overseer — the

gentleman from the Ministry — he no longer existed so he could not stand in my way.

What Holliday desired next was a new body. Rob Holl had served his purpose, but this shell no longer worked. The neck was all funny from the snapping. The mind not as clear as it once was. *A new me*, he smiled to himself. *It can be done, with the right electrical expertise.* After all, no one would take this discovery seriously if the explorer were not respectable.

Holliday checked his map...

SURRENDER

A young man of twenty-six — educated, dapper, traveled — by the name of Oliver Milgram worked his way down an aisle at Harrods of London, money in his pocket and time on his hands. He had no obligations, no worries, only a small desire to supper before six o'clock. He was hoping to catch a show at the cinema, if the hour didn't get too late. But first, he must purchase a gift for his brother, whose birthday was the day after next. He entered the cutlery section. A set of good steak knives might be just the ticket. Asking a clerk, Milgram was shown to a display of knives in red cushions — a bit pricey but within his range. He asked the clerk to pull the set down for him...

While at the pay point, a soldier in uniform standing behind a row of plates caught his attention. The lad was a few years younger than Milgram, strapping, healthy, and appeared to be awaiting an arrival. Perhaps a lady friend had gone in search of forks, leaving the soldier to twiddle by the plates. Milgram mused that men often looked lost when left alone in stores. Lonely business, for a man, especially a soldier — all his needs already provided for by Her Majesty. What did *he* know of forks?

However, by the time Oliver Milgram was handed his box, tied in ribbons, he came to realize that this soldier was not twiddling but, in fact, was looking directly *at him*. He would have to pass by the soldier on his way to the escalators. Milgram, as usual when nerves would strike, began to flutter his eyelids. It was a nervous affliction. He had so many ticks of late: the retracting of his hands without mental thought, and his skin, numb for two days running. Glad to have it out of mind while shopping, looking ahead to supper and the cinema, he hoped to forget such irritations. He must try and reduce his heart medicine (*the secret to a healthy heart, said his physician, was a more moderate lifestyle and diet, not several pills a day*). He had better stop exceeding the dose.

The soldier — black haired and square jawed — turned his body to a rack of dishware, but it was hardly concealing. The soldier's face was watching Milgram's ear, even as he passed, and Milgram knew it...

For the bystanders, it was a horrible thing to witness. They would recount it for years, first to reporters and police, then to their families at dinner tables, then, in later years, to their grandsons and granddaughters. "*Horrible thing.*" "Not to be witnessed." "*In Harrods, of all places.*" "I thought twice about shopping the next Sunday, I can tell you that." Some would say it was the soldier who leapt first, but the majority of witnesses claimed there was a blur, some sort of rapid movement of the head, and Milgram was the one to incite. The man first threw his gift box of knives to the ground and swung a wide arm at the soldier's face. Women and wives parted as the sea for a ship's prow. The two fighters grappled, smashing into a table full of plates on display hinges, instantly destroying a thousand pounds in value of the finest English china. The two were evenly matched in the beginning, falling forward into a cash register, the hit appearing to break the wrist of the soldier. Workers rushed to the show floor, intending to separate them — shouting — confused and quite horrified at the viciousness of it. For a minute too long, they held back, scared of entering the fray. The clerks were about to form a coalition when the two opponents cracked the cutlery cases with their elbows, each grabbing into the glass for weapons — for knives. Milgram ended up with only two forks, one in each hand. Leaping at the soldier, he plunged one fork deep into the flesh of the soldier's collarbone — making the soldier jump away to pry it out of his skin. The soldier hurled his knife in defense, but missed his target. The weapon flew into a second glass case that came crashing down. A constable arrived on the scene, trying to intercede, only to slip on the massive destruction of plates and glassware, gouging his hand in the fall. Despite the fork, the soldier charged, understanding the sheer ferocity that Milgram had intended for him. *It was now or never.* Milgram turned to flee the scene. The police would soon be

on them. At the turn of the wares, Milgram's foot caught on a waste tin that had become dislodged during the fighting. He went off-balance — at first controlled, then spinning — his speed too high, his head colliding directly into a bank of champagne glasses, taking out a full wall of crystal. When the noise settled, the shoppers screamed at the sight of blood spouting from Milgram's neck. The broken flutes had lanced him, hitting an artery.

For a second, the soldier, bloody and breathing, watched in horror. He was said to apologize to the witnesses before fleeing the floor, never to be seen again. It is unclear how he left the department store undetected.

*The tunnels were no kinder
to Holliday
than that soldier had been.*

"Royce! I know that was you!"

As the still-bloody Milgram, Holliday kicked at his saving switch — sought with such difficulty, practically conjured from the fraying map — a perfect vehicle for his re-entry into the world. *Ruined*. The body destroyed. Out to the platform, his white train arrived on schedule to take him to the end of the line, and, defiantly, he did not board. "No!" he shouted at the train. "There's another way back!" The train left with only a breeze. He followed along for another switch, going down tunnel after tunnel. The map remained in Milgram's shoe. *Remarkable*, he thought to himself. *The map stays with the soul, no matter the body*. He would be sure to put that in his studies. He was hoping to find a scientist next — a man of reputation. Maybe a high government official? There would be no ambush of such a man as that. That was his flaw with Milgram — an average sort. None of that this round. He checked the numeric patterns of the switches, and the names, time passing without marking, searching for just the right one.

Coming around a bend,
he staggered into Clayton Philpot.

The man was lying in wait. Fiercely, he took Milgram by the shoulders and tossed him like a bag of flour into the nearest switch, catching the man so off balance that he barely had time to know what had happened, before realizing...

he was in Piccadilly Circus.

The throng nearly swept him — eyes still fuzzy and arms seemingly stitched to his side. A young man in derby coat swore at him for standing in the middle of traffic before rudely shoving him closer to the storefronts, out of the wave. Two children looked him up and down before holding their mother's hands tighter and scurrying past.

"Who am I?" Holliday asked and heard the trickle that was his voice. He tried to reach up and put a hand on his throat, but the pain from his arms was too great and it stopped him. "Who — who am I?" he asked again, although no one heard.

Around him, people of all ages and nationalities brushed by, bumping him. He was powerless to stop them. If it weren't for the angry words of the man and the looks of the children, he would swear he was invisible.

Snow was falling and holiday lights were strung on the lampposts and storefronts.

The shop of a tailor had its sign affixed to the corner, near the Piccadilly tube entrance. Holliday moved himself forward; he had to get to a mirror. He found it slow going, as his legs were stiff and heavy as bricks. At the tailor's, he put his hand to the bar and pushed open the door, hearing the tinkle of the bell overhead. A needle-nosed stitcher looked up from his place at the sewing machine. At first he smiled, but this sank, and he bolted to intercept Holliday at the door. "Not you again," said the man as he lifted Holliday's pained hand from the jamb and went to give a shove. "I tol' you, bugger off."

"What's happening?" asked Holliday. "Who am I? I'm in a lot of pain."

"You been 'round here twice already, mate," was all the man said in reply. He pushed Holliday once more out into the street, the shop door pulled tightly behind, before going back to his work, head shaking.

When the glass door shut, Holliday saw what they had all been looking at. A picture of him was caught in the reflection. "No," he moaned. "No, no."

Slowly, Holliday undid the wrappings around his neck — loose fittings of cotton, medicinal swabs. His face was old, horribly old — eighty if a day — but that was not the worst of it. He undid his top shirt button and felt the sting of the winter breeze. "No, no," he said again, before turning to deflect a wave of people along the sidewalk. Two attractive ladies saw his neck and chest, exposed, and they crinkled their faces before ducking and disappearing. Holliday faced the glass.

His skin was burned, not charred, but the smooth middle-ground of healing. He checked his arms and his sides, and then pulled the waistband of his trousers to better see his hips... next his socks to see his ankles. He was burned from mouth to foot as if dipped in a fire, a Tandoori lamb. The damage was probably months old (this he culled from Holliday's days at medical school). It must have been a flash fire — affecting the skin only, for burns this comprehensive would cause any man to die. For some reason, this Piccadilly beggar had been spared. Someone had doused (*a cigarette to his clothes — hooligans in an alley — it was coming to his mind*) a bucket on him shortly after (*hooligans shooed away by a man from a restaurant, twenty dollars and a ride to hospital*). "I'm numb," said Holliday. He tried to know his name, but couldn't.

Tying his trousers, buttoning his shirt, and pulling up his socks, he thought of the map — *it had been in my hand before Philpot slammed into me!* He went back to the spot on the sidewalk where the crowd was the thickest and tried to see if he had dropped the map when entering the body. Every turn, every move, was a new level of pain, suffering Holliday had not felt since his first spill at his well-washer, when his adventures were just that — adventurous, and not

tortuous. Not even the snap of Rob Holl's neck hurt him in this way. He dug through the gutter trash — and *there*, on the ground, wet, he found the map. It had, indeed, been dropped.

"Thank God," he said, and pushed it into his pocket.

A trick. Not nice. I'll be back in the game before they know it. Yes. I'll show them. Probably led me down that tunnel through sound or suggestion. They knew there was a switch there I wouldn't want to be inside. I'll kill them when I see them again — Philpot, that Royce, his wife. I should have shot them with my revolver before entering the fireplace. Winsey Green, Colin Blight, Vic Worshaff. I know the names, and I'll know them in every body I find myself. This burned one here may not win the game, but it's hardly ended. Now that I know the story and the three men of the rail are all dead, I'll get the upper hand. Even over the Plague Boy himself. The others are just meddlers. Valentine made sure I heard the story because I've got a will and a viciousness that he couldn't dare muster. Do you think he would have stuck his cane into Smith's heart if I weren't around to set the standard? I think not. He learned from my dirty work. And he knew I'd be the one to outsmart all those others. I'm his legacy. I'm the one who will claim the tunnels. I'm still in the game.

The burned body was jostled and he turned to curse at whoever was the cause. This time, he wasn't surrendering as he did with that first man in the derby coat. Those who dared trample him — in whatever body he *chose* to occupy — would get a piece of his mind! "You!" he called out, seeing an olive-skinned boy, age of ten, just leaving range of his hipbone.

The boy turned.

He was holding something behind his back.

"What have you got there?" asked the burned man, words nearly drowned in the Piccadilly car horns and a single police siren, sounding northward in Oxford Circus, but approaching.

Slyly, the boy smiled at him and held out his hand.

In it... *was Holliday's map.*

Holliday touched his pocket. He was numb in the skin. He had not felt the thief, but he knew the map was the same as he had only seconds before in his coat. "Give it back, you pickpocket! It's of no value to you. It's sentimental!" The boy held until Holliday leapt and tried to claw at him.

The boy slipped through his arms and around a lamppost, behind the evergreen and ornaments. "We've wired your switch," said the boy. "If you kill yourself, you'll just go back inside this body again. It's a reverse circuit. It was in one of Smith's notebooks. He's never wanted to use it until now."

Holliday was frozen. He stood as if near a pigeon he did not wish to frighten. "No," he said, at first, disbelieving, then with a touch of pleading, "No."

"We're sorry it had to be this way," said the boy, the police siren almost speeding past on the street, its pitch shifting as it cleared the traffic. "We just can't trust you. You've done too much to hurt us."

Holliday asked, "Who are you?"

"Clayton Philpot," said the boy, bringing the map back down to his side. When he shoved it into his pocket, Holliday made another grab for him. But the boy was too fast, darting around a fat German couple holding hands, and then behind a post box. Holliday stepped forward three paces and grew winded. The boy continued: "You'll never die, you'll never reach the tunnels, you'll never switch bodies again. Audrey Green can't save you. The only hope you have is the Plague Boy, should he choose to find you. If there's any justice, he will leave you where you are — " Another grab! Another duck! *The boy is too quick*, cursed Holliday in his borrowed head, *and this body is like molasses*. Philpot started to move further away now, and had to shout, the police siren upon them. "Even if you got the map, Holliday, I'd just take it again! You forget, I'm very good with magic — and that includes picking someone's pocket." The boy ran far off into the crowd, the swirls of

snow blown by the wind of passing cars covering his escape...

Holliday had no choice — he screamed at the top of his charred lungs, causing pain throughout his whole chest, “Stop! Pickpocket! Someone help me! That boy, there!” A few turned to see the cause, but Holliday’s voice was too weak to carry much past the curb. The pitch of the siren broke into everyone’s ears. The few who first heard his calls eventually looked away and continued toward their destinations. “Stop!” Holliday called again, weaker. “Stop him!” The police car had passed, the siren a fading hum. The ghosts of Piccadilly did not heed his voice.

THE LAST WORDS OF MR. JAMES SMITH, RAILWAY ENGINEER

They gathered around his chair. Mr. Valentine, his killer, did not last much past the violence. The bullet from Rob Holl's revolver had done its work. Sonny Royce removed his foot from the old man's chest to find him dead. No one wept for him. Mr. Smith, on the other hand, was a treasure. Clayton Philpot and Sonny Royce returned from their mission only seconds after leaving, time in the tunnels being such a peculiar thing. The rest of their friends held steady about the room, anxious for news. Sonny told of the fight in Harrods; Philpot announced success in Piccadilly. Both men seemed aged by the doing. There was a great sigh from Smith's little army.

Mortally wounded, James Smith slumped in his chair, and spoke to his attendants:

"As it should be, I suppose. I want you to know I'm sorry. Everything. You shouldn't know these things... as I do. Stay with Audrey and you will always be safe. Come here, dear girl. That's it. Forgive me. There are things we aren't meant to learn. You will be cursed — people have and people will... fear you. Your power — the tunnels... It's in your hands because you know better than any of us how to use it. We have all been greedy. Olive, Valentine, Holliday, even me. There are only two who protect the secret — you and the Plague Boy. Him through death; you through life."

Audrey Green kissed the engineer's cheek. She was not sad for him. His strength was slipping away through the hole in his chest. She relieved her sister Winsey's hand on the blood-soaked sheet held to Smith's chest.

"Closer, dear girl. One more secret for you. This one you have to choose to know. It's your brother, Antony. Behind that far bookshelf, there is one last opening. One last tunnel."

This one Olive and Valentine knew nothing of. I have kept it from them all these years. For little Audrey, I knew the identity of the gentleman at the Ministry. I knew him from the Congo. I’ve worked hard to keep his name buried, but now is the time. If you move that shelf, and enter the switch, you will learn where your brother is.”

Audrey had her ear to the old man’s lips, for his words were only a faint hum. Her red curls draped over his cheeks.

“I think you should forget about him. It can do you no good to learn. I leave this choice to you. Enter the switch and you will find your brother — you will find the gentleman of the Ministry. You may not like what you discover. Keep the bookshelf unmoved, and you will be with all your friends, and your sister. I leave the choice... to you... “

THE GENTLEMAN

The men helped Audrey pull away the shelf. Havre and Rollo tossed the yellowed books into a haphazard heap near the doorway, and Colin and Sonny wiggled the wood from its dusty position. Behind, revealed, was a black door wide enough only for the smallest of their group — Audrey Green. She took a step closer and pushed at the panel, which swung open to blackness. Winsey touched her sister's hand. "Don't go in there, Audrey," she pleaded.

Hugging her, Audrey assured, "I'll be all right. If it leads me to Antony, then I have to go. I wouldn't have even known about the train under the water if it weren't for Antony. He's been gone five years."

Colin Blight touched Winsey's arm. "Let 'er go, Wins. She'll be right as rain. Smith said it was her decision and she's made it." His thick voice was harsh in the quiet of the room, but he folded his arm around Winsey and that felt good to her. Vic, from his place to the side, gave a nod to Winsey in encouragement, in understanding. His Uncle Philpot had explained it to him in Lexham Gardens — there were greater things for Vic in the future, there was greater magic. Winsey's place was with Colin. Colin gave his own nod back to the willowy lad and then reached his arm out, tapping the boy on the shoulder, united.

Crowding the room, they waited for Audrey's move. She looked to the faces of her friends — the people that were her family, those who cared about her, those who wanted her safe. "Maybe I should stay," said Audrey to Sonny Royce, who, until now, had remained side-by-side with his wife, quiet. "Sonny? Should I stay?"

The jazzman tipped his head. "Don't know. Maybe you should. Wherever yo' brother is, he's doin' just fine, I'm sure of that. But if you wants to know it all, then you go through that door. Just remember to find your way back. Don't make us go searchin' for you ag'in." Those around the room gave a nervous rise that quickly dissipated. (*Turn back.*) The tick of the library clock was deafening. "Go if ya

wanna know," said Sonny a last time. Audrey moved behind the bookshelf, knelt down, and put a leg through the black door — first one, and then the other, until she was inside, bones and all...

When the black changed to white, a slow pinhole opened and Audrey Green found that her body could no longer move. She lay with her head on a pillow, arms to her side, feet down and jutting from the blankets.

Slowly, she became aware that she was larger than she had been. She was Alice through the looking glass, having drunk the potion.

In her mind was a great fog, her thoughts struggling to become clear above a clutter. The haze in her eyes gradually subsided, moving beyond the posts of her bed to the room itself: a comfortable place, a quiet square box, decorated, with windows open, blowing smells of autumn. Sun came through the drapes and halos were made around the rods and the sash. There was the smell of phonotax in her nose. Audrey attempted to move her head to the right. The muscles were slow to respond. On a sanded oak table sat a water glass, a washcloth, and several bottles of pills. Looking up, the ceiling seemed so very far away, the spackling, white, forming its own patterns, shifting, her sleepy head playing tricks.

"Am I drugged?" she asked, and no sooner were the words out into the room than she realized her voice had changed quite dramatically. It was no longer the high pitch of her nine years, but instead the deeper timbre of a woman. "How old am I?" she said into the air, not expecting an answer.

A man to her left answered, "Thirty three."

A hand folded into hers, but it was not a solid state; it was the touch of a ghost. She moved her eyes from the ceiling and to the nightstand. A gentleman in rolled shirtsleeves and braces, with a receding black hairline and paunch belly, sat next to her bed. In his lap he held something that Audrey could not see, as it was below her range, under the level of the bed. He looked to be nearly

forty years of age and he smiled at her, sympathetically. There was something in this stranger's eyes that she recognized — a face behind a face.

"Are you... are you Antony?"

He gave a squeeze to her hand. She barely felt the pressure. "Yes," he said, seeming thankful for the recognition. "I'm your brother."

"Where am I?"

"In your room," he explained. "This is your house in London. I've been waiting for you to wake up. You've been sleeping more and more. I don't like the prescription they've got you on. You used to be much more alert. Is the pain less?"

Audrey thought about it. She did a survey — toes to head. "I can't feel a thing," she said softly, and then added, "Only my eyelids."

Antony nodded. "I suppose that's what you wanted. The doctors told me it would come to that — constant pain. Maybe sleep is for the best." She moved the covers from her chest and tried to sit upright. Antony gently patted her back down flat, and replaced the covers up to her chin. "There, there, sis. Why don't you stay comfortable 'til you get your bearings?"

"I don't understand," she stated. "Am I sick? Did you drown?"

Antony took his hand away. He started to speak but stopped again, contemplative. "Are you still thinking of that time at the beach?" he asked. "You've really been stuck on that. I've worked it into my story, but I really don't think it has a place. You remember, don't you, Audrey? I went out into the water and got carried away by the tides, only to end up down the drift, alive and well, found by some tourists. It was a scare, but not the end of things. Alive and well, I am. Someone up there must like me. Or must like you, as I've been your caretaker since you took ill three years ago." Antony tried to keep his words pleasant, but Audrey detected a whiff of irritation under the surface. "I've explained this to you many times," he said. "I must have a

word with the doctors about your pills. They play with your memory."

Audrey was stuck on a word. "What story?" she asked.

Antony raised the object from his lap and placed the heavy manuscript on the edge of the bed. She felt the weight of the pages tip her slightly to face him. "This story," he said, a bit prideful. "You know I'm a writer. Books for children. Storybooks. This one's quite involved. I've been reading it to you to pass the time. Has it been three months? Needs trimming but I figured you would get a kick out of it. You've always liked being read to." Leaving the stack of papers on the edge of the bed, Antony moved from his chair and crossed to the far corner of the bedroom. He turned a switch on a large wooden box, and a record fell from the post to the pad, spinning at 33 1/3 revolutions. The needle crackled on the wax. Jazz music started to play a three-quarters time waltz, first the drums and then a melody from a saxophone. "You told me you like the music," said her brother, lowering the volume. "I try to play you something every day. Keeps your spirits up." Antony moved again to the foot of her bed. He seemed very protective when standing over her in this way. In Audrey's head, questions and blurry remembrance collided near her tongue, rendering her mute. She didn't know what to say or do. "Would you like some supper?" Antony asked. "I could fry some vegetables — your favorite. Are you hungry?"

"Where's Winsey?" she asked with strength, ignoring his question.

Antony spoke plainly: "She's in Marsden running that falling down dance hall with her husband."

"Who?"

"Colin. He holds boxing matches on the weekends. She's Winsey Blight now."

"Where's Mr. Otter? Doesn't he own the ballroom?"

"Sold it. Went to America." Antony drummed his fingers on the bedpost. "Are you sure your medicine isn't too strong? You've asked me these questions many times

before." Her brother came around again to his seat next to the bed. As if to pray, he put his hands together, eventually folding down all but the pointer fingers, touching them to his lips. "Audrey," he said, "do you want to go back into my story?"

She turned her head on her pillow to look at her brother. He was so handsome. His features were ripe, his sideburns graying and his hair swept back over the ears, wrinkles on the eyes, the rough look of a man traveled.

"Do you want to be a little girl again?"

She licked her lips. "I'm thirsty," she said, "Water."

Seeming at first annoyed, and then melting, Antony turned his chair to the water pitcher on a service tray, where needles and gauze lay beside a biscuit tin. Antony raised the metal pitcher, dripping from condensation, and filled a short teacup. He held it to her mouth as she drank the top thimble. "Audrey." He said her name again, as to a child. "You liked being in my book, didn't you?" She nodded and turned her head from the drink. "You can go back there. I'll *put* you back. You'll return, and you'll be on a white train platform... a child of nine... your hair red and soft, awaiting your friends to cross into the dead station. Laurel. Your mother. All of your friends. You may do that, or you may stay here with me."

Audrey's eyes grew puffy with redness. She began to cry. "Give me some more medicine," she asked.

"Do you hurt?"

"Yes."

"All right, darling." Antony reached back and tugged the largest pill bottle from the service tray. The scratch of the record entered his ears, the smell of camphor. He lifted his sister's hand to his cheek, the bottle of pills still in his hand. "I want *you* to decide," he pushed. She kept her face turned, her tears littering the pillow. Antony did not have the strength for it. "None of this is real, Audrey. This is just a room you've wandered into in Mr. Smith's house. One of many mysteries. The truth is... you are but a girl."

DEPARTURE

Sonny Royce stood near the main deck of the *Queen Mary* oceanliner, hands thrust deep into the pockets of his wool trousers. Below him on the wharves of Southampton, natives wished them bon voyage. Children, poor and dirty, escaping their schooling for this observance of adventure, waved wide hats and scarves. The anchor line was reeled and the whistle blew. The sound was music to Sonny — a smokestack saxophone, a loud reverberation that struck his chest through to his very heart. The sound felt good with the air. He hugged Claire to his body.

She made a comment about the clouds, moving slowly overhead, hiding the late August sun. Incrementally, they turned their bodies to the ocean as the liner threw its engines into reverse and pivoted out of the docks. It went quickly by sailboats and other vessels, exchanging blows of its horn and leaving a wake as it cleared the port and cut into the Atlantic.

"You're gonna like America," he told his wife. "It ain't Paris, but it'll do for a while. It'll feel good to take a vacation. Desmond'll have us back to work in no time. Gonna do another record. One that's real fine. We'll come back and the first place we'll play'll be your daddy's club."

Sonny said these plans in English; he did not translate. Claire nodded as if she understood, just the sound of his voice making her happy, his inflection a comfort. *She don't need to know the details*, he thought to himself. *We'll take ourselves a vacation, and when we come back across the Atlantic it'll be better than ever*. Havre had only put up a small fight over Sonny's decision to leave Europe. Sonny was glad it didn't take hours of argument. He just didn't have the energy to fight anymore. The sax player shook hands with those in Mr. Smith's house, and was glad to be gone, far away from trouble. He had had enough adventure. Audrey had plenty of protectors now. He was going to get back to doing what he did best —

making music and loving his wife. *Feels good*, he thought, *feels the way it ought ta be*.

In the early morning shine, the two of them stood along the rail with hundreds of other passengers until England was just a thin line along the far horizon.

Claire excused herself to go back to their cabin. She asked Sonny to come, but he declined. There was still more air to take into his lungs, and he had a tune starting in his head he wanted to try and keep there. Going back into the hull might just make it evaporate. He was hoping for a happy accident. Another classic; a song for the soul. They kissed and she went on her way.

Once she was from sight, a voice called his name –

"Mr. Royce," it said, with the snap of an office clerk: friendly but with a mind on business. "Mr. Royce," came the voice a second time.

Sonny tilted his shoulder and to see Karl Otter, the owner of the Victory Ballroom, signaling from the opposite end of the rail. Once recognized, he advanced to shake Sonny's hand, a broad smile not quite matching the perplexed and slightly nervous look in the man's eyes. "We're on the same boat," stated Otter. "Quite the coincidence. Going to America."

Sonny let his hand fall. "Yeah — me n' the missus. We thought we'd try Chicago for a spell."

"Had to get out of England. I know the feeling," agreed Karl Otter. "I'm here with Caroline Bixby. We bought our tickets on Friday morning. I have a few contacts in America from competitions — dancing, the days when I won the cup — they say ballrooms in New York are swell places for a man with two feet. Caroline's quite the dancer, too. She danced at my club. Maybe you saw her?" Sonny gave a nod, but no face came to mind. Otter was being friendly; he didn't want to offend him. "Say," continued Otter, "I'm quite relieved you've turned up. I know that they had you in jail. That Inspector Holl told me. Oh, didn't like him a bit. Strange one, that. But I went to stay with my sister — me and Caroline. S'pose you should know we are to be married. Shouldn't come as a shock to you, but others

might talk. She's half my age. She's down in the cabin. Bit sea sick already. Should be a long twelve days."

Sonny felt he should add some comfort. "She'll get her legs. First time I went th'other way my stomach rolled for a while, but it settles."

Otter smiled. "Glad to hear it."

There was a pause between the two as the loudspeaker made the breakfast announcement. Both men gave subtle, appreciative nods to the menu. A crackle and they were back to hearing the ocean and ship.

"Mr. Royce," said the ballroom owner, tactfully, "I don't suppose you're fleeing, are you? My sister told me that over the weekend there had been quite a lot of constables in Marsden... that the sheriff had returned to reclaim the case. Did they let you go, as such? You can be honest with me, I won't turn you in."

Royce put his hand to the shoulder of Otter's jacket, and straightened it. "They had the wrong man." Otter did not let his face become conclusive. He was hiding some emotion, some fear, but it was not overwhelming. It was contemplative, below the surface. Royce had become very aware of how to read such faces. It was employed on members of his audience, as he would play his saxophone. He would try to read faces, so that he could hit 'em where they lived, nail into their thoughts, dig deeper into Sonny's own self to find that commonality. He felt it worthy to attempt it with Otter. "You and me, Mr. Otter. We're gonna enjoy this trip. There's some things that can't be explained, but we're gonna try. Two of us — we free. The business back in Marsden, it's over and settled. Let's go get some ham and eggs — " Sonny gave a slap to Otter's shoulder and flashed his most open smile. "It'll all be forgotten on the water..."

Leading Otter away in the direction of the kitchens, the tune in Sonny's head was swinging. He pursed his lips and blew a few notes. *Yeah, that's right.* After his belly was full, he'd be sure to find his saxophone and put the notes down on paper. He had to first pull the map from the belly of the horn, but it would come out all right.

There would be inspiration along soon.
Sonny could wait.