

*symbols and stars  
softly go down in the  
evening pond*



*The  
Last Gold  
of Decayed  
Stars*

*Colin Insole*



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*'At night I found myself upon a heath,  
Thick with garbage and the dust of stars.'*

Georg TRAKL





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# *A Secret in Illyria*

*The fleeting patterns* of colour on a redstart's wing, glimpsed on the edge of the oak wood, or the call of a stone curlew, heard on the mud flats at dusk; these cruel and tantalising images, vivid yet transitory, recall me instantly to my days in that strange town. Or, its echo comes, in late summer, with the ringing of the angelus bell, and all the perfumes and silences of its occult nights return.

I have learned not to speak of the town in the company of family and friends – kind and forbearing as they are. Their plattitudes and light humour taint its secrets and purge its magic. They laugh and make sport of its wonders.

Alone, I remember those who came in spring, with the migrations of the birds, or those blown in, fleeing the chill of the Bora. Their faces rise up in dreams and I hear again their voices – forgotten tongues and dialects and the songs of poets, long consigned to footnotes and to dust.

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Illyria: the name slips in and out of history, protean and shadowy as its allegiances. Each age shapes and moulds its clay and then forgets, as the uniforms of the marching soldiers fade. And the town of Enchalium is itself, on the hinterland, sometimes drawn into the Kingdom of Illyria, or exiled by a slip of the map maker's pencil. But it is the fulcrum around which past, present and future whirl and spin – the silence at the centre of the bobbins, with their twisting threads and rattling looms.

At the twilight hour, our steps wet with evening dew, we passed through the yellow rose garden of the Golden Sisters, along the pathways and alleys of memory, where the trees are full of voices, to the darker woodland. There, the flushes of colour, fade and die. And the flux, the clamour and the urgent voices of the exiles, are brought together in strange harmony. The town is timeless – a haven for the lost and rootless of Europe. We met and gathered under the shelter of the Countess and she called us 'The Eagles from the Sea'.

Today, tending my compact little garden, in an English market town, seems empty and mundane, when I remember the colours and fragrances of Enchalium's secluded alcoves and the roll of its reed beds, flowing like water, in the wind.

The letters from the town, come more fitfully now, and their tone is melancholy and sombre. One last secret of my time there remains. It would appal my family. They would feel betrayed and their jokes would turn to derision and contempt. Only Anna can visit Enchalium, for only she can enter its past.'



## *A Secret in Illyria*

Anna Rhulen had never read beyond the opening page of the journal her grandmother, Maria, had bequeathed her, nor studied in detail, the photographs, each with their own observations, of her life, before the Second World War, in that Italian town, on the Adriatic Sea.

But she alone, amongst her family, had tried to coax the old woman, into speaking of her past, as she sat, defiantly smoking her dark cigarettes, tipped with gold and softly crooning the words of a ballad. It originated, not from Italy but from the Danube basin of the Black Sea. Its secret was grudgingly confided and Anna understood intuitively, that her grandmother's silence was a kindness to her, as happily married couples refrain from boasting of their children's triumphs and accomplishments, in the presence of the barren. And she feared that her prosaic, but tolerable life, with all its tired compromises and petty surrenders, would be diminished and palled, if she read of Enchalium.

But the words of the journal burrowed and insinuated themselves into her quieter moments – the twisting pathways, that disappeared amongst the hills and trees, she saw from her commuter train window and in the words of obscure poets and dreamers, in the books of her grandmother, dusty and untouched by her family.

On a wet evening, in late March, she waited in a post office queue, her glance skimming over a display of greetings cards, and an image, on the fringe of memory, recalled the journal.

The cards specialized in plundering old family photograph albums, bought in junk shops and auctions, and lampooning the anonymous black-and-white dead, with humorous captions and speech bubbles. The brash modern world made sport of their quiet celebrations, the dignity and sobriety of their clothes and their gaucheness and innocence. And there, amongst the seaside jaunts,

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charabanc outings and picnics, was a photograph she recognized from her grandmother's box. It showed a formal seated group of about twenty people, of varying ages. Their clothes ranged from the simple to the extravagant but their bearing was aristocratic and proud. On the edge of the group, was her grandmother, in her early twenties; her hand lightly touching the arm of a young man, holding a guitar. The caption read: 'Hoity-toity! There's always one section of the crowd too posh to join in the Mexican wave.' It was published by a firm called 'Enchalium Marina Souvenirs'.

Anxious to remove them from public mockery, she took the card and its duplicates to the counter.

"Aren't they a giggle?" said the cashier. "Look at that bunch of snobs – so much up their own arses, they can't lighten up and crack a smile."

Anna hid her irritation at the woman's glib and facile remark, but on her way home, her anger and self-reproach grew. The cashier had assumed she would share her views, joining the consensus of scorn and superiority towards the unfashionable dignity of those her grandmother had loved. She resolved to study the journal, to visit the town of Enchalium and to find what remained of its secrets and magic.

Her grandmother had never displayed any photographs of her husband. The family told of a whirlwind romance, in the early months of the war and his subsequent posting to France, with the British Expeditionary Force. He was reported missing, presumed dead, defending the Ypres-Comines canal. When she inherited the package, Anna had hoped to find his picture but there was none.

The journal was housed in a box or casket, embossed with a motif, she had scarcely noticed before. In the bright glare of day, or under electric light, its pattern was faint and subdued. But she

*A Secret in Illyria*

viewed it by firelight and a plume of hidden colours seemed to animate its lines. They formed a head, of smoky gold, surrounded by birds; their plumage indicated by little flashes of blues, reds and yellows. And inside the box, hidden in the last page of the journal, was a brooch of hammered gold, in the form of a flower. At first, she thought that it was broken, its clasp missing. But when she held it to her dress, its layers moulded and flexed, and held firm.



# *Le Ballet Des Fuyardes*

Folded neatly around the journal was a hand-drawn map of the surrounding area of Enchalium, with its network of branch line stations and footpaths, annotated by her grandmother, with tales and enigmas. Here were clues to the neighbouring towns and villages, each with their own secrets and mysteries, only partially explored.

She had hoped to travel to Venice and then board one of the sleepy trains that meandered to the coast, stopping at every halt and village. But when she studied the modern map, the railway was gone. The old tracks, like filaments and veins in a leaf or limb, were dried and atrophied. In their place, were the yellow lines of sepsis – the motorways and trunk roads.

She had booked a room in the ‘Enchalium Marina Hotel’, for an entry in the journal indicated that once, it had been home to a theatre, much loved by her grandmother.

## *Le Ballet Des Fuyardes*

'Like the dancers or soubrettes, we chose our costumes with care and ceremony when we attended the weekly 'Ballet des Fuyardes'. The Countess opened her wardrobes for us – shelves and corridors of antique dresses and uniforms, perfumed still with the old ballrooms, soirees and courtyards.

Invariably, the men chose loose-fitting cotton shirts from the reign of Louis Philippe, suggesting both the intimacy of a lover's tryst or the prelude to a duel of honour. All but the older women, dressed for seduction, with kohl and drops of belladonna to enhance our eyes; our dresses from the bordellos of Paris and Venice. For the dancers, driven themselves by desire, were spurred and inflamed by the passions of the audience.

They had come, drawn from the backwater towns of Europe, bringing the essence of their countries' souls in their dance – the gawky clumsy girls and the pale inhibited youths, their awkwardness transformed into something trancelike and ecstatic by Madame Degare

In the aftermath of the Great War, she had arrived in Enchalium, with her son, a scene painter, and a ramshackle quarrelling ensemble, comprising violinist, pianist, drummer and clarinetist, and a collection of battered gramophone records. Their titles were handwritten and for needles, she used slivers of bone, ivory and mother-of-pearl.

Rubbing the limbs of her dancers with a mixture of berries, potions and elixirs, so that they gleamed like wrestlers, she pricked their arm with the chosen needle, their blood catching the fire of the melody. With such frenzy and such grace, they danced, those shy naive creatures.

And she reinterpreted the classical repertoire. The roles of Odette, Odile, Rothbart and Siegfried were interchangeable, the

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outcome uncertain. The whim or mood of the audience and dancers would lead the lusts and eroticism, or the celibacy and spiritual quiet of the story.

There was a magic in the brushstrokes of the painted backdrops. We were drawn beyond the vanishing point to walk the chambers and corridors of Siegfried's palace, or pass beyond the lake of swans to the forest and overhear the dreams of wild cats and hibernating bears. I have climbed the hills of forgotten towns, looked into the waters from their bridges of iron and stone and heard the whispers of their tales and legends. I have passed through the courtyards and cloisters of secluded chapels, to the sound of bells, as the limbs of the dancers touched and trembled.

The ballet was loved by all. The nuns, from the order of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary – the Golden Sisters, who grew yellow roses for her icon, on holy days, attended. Often, the dancers' exertions and trances induced collapse, and a sister or debauchee might bathe the limbs and faces of the exhausted. Chastity and depravity touched and smiled at each other. We welcomed the occult, the mysterious; the holy and the profane.

But our innocence and candour made us vulnerable. We assumed that we were immune from the prurience and censure of the modern world.

I learned by letter that he came in the post-war years – a rich man, like so many before him. And he sat in the ballet, so reserved and restrained, eating violet cream chocolates, chosen so that he would not disturb the sound of foot on floor. 'The Commodore', he was called, with his passion for yachts. His Austrian father had been a successful doctor of the mind, who moved to London and married well. But the Commodore was English, a puritan and materialist, a Malvolio, come to reign in Illyria and be 'revenged



## *Le Ballet Des Fuyardes*

upon the pack of us'. When he bought the lease of the theatre, the town was lulled by memories of his countrymen who had visited Enchalium – Browning, Lord Byron, Ruskin and Burton. But the Commodore had the soul of stone. Madame Degare and her son were dispatched, the building was gutted and rebuilt as the Enchalium Marina Hotel.'



Although geographically located in Italy, the modern resort of Enchalium might have been situated in Spain, the south of France, or any of the post-war playgrounds of Europe and the Middle East. The old families and trades, had long migrated to the cities, their homes and businesses seized and converted to souvenir shops, boutiques and restaurants. The timeless architecture of church, manorial villa and courtyard had been erased and the ancient rhythms of speech and dialect, silenced. Only scattered remnants of the old town remained, subsisting on its fringes, or in its secret places, unknown to the permanent residents – the tax exiles and pleasure seekers.

The guests at the Marina Hotel, attracted by the town's sporting complexes and facilities for sailing and yachting, paid scant attention to the framed photographs that hung in their bedrooms, depicting Olivia, Tybalt, Shylock and other characters from Shakespeare's plays of Northern Italy. They were a legacy from the early post-war years, when the hotel was built and some grudging concession was made to its Illyrian past. But a keen eye would have noticed that they wore the fashions and hairstyles of the 1920's and 30's. The same portraits, their names interchanged, appeared throughout the corridors and chambers of the hotel, interspersed

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with coloured images of yachts, golf courses and all the bright paraphernalia of the resort. Along with the plastic and vinyl that masqueraded as oak and leather, and the anaemic yellow of artificial roses, they were a part of the false memory of the town, that distorted, cloaked or obscured its past.

The hotel's resident staff - migrant workers or dissatisfied souls, drawn by the resort's wealth, were exiles and runaways, like their predecessors. The old town, with its occult memory and kindness, would have drawn them into its mysteries and written their stories. But there was no shelter in this false palace of plastic imitation and wax flowers. Numbed and exhausted by their duties, they fell asleep, their features sagging, like the flopped faces drawn on children's balloons. The memory of the old backdrops of the ballet remained in the walls and they too passed beyond the lake of the swans and into the forest. The briars were overgrown and tangled now and they wandered lost and in darkness. On the fringes of the trees, where once the candlelit palaces had glittered under starlight, they blundered into a network of dank subways, abandoned warehouses, concrete walkways and bridges. The passages and corridors led to blind alleys, inaccessible iron staircases that curled around the rooftops, or gaping chasms, overlooking an endless tide of motorways, where the shells of the ruined palaces were marooned in wasteland. In the grey moonlight, faces appeared briefly in the warehouse windows, part of a vast silent throng that swept over the bridges, before re-tracing their steps in a dizzying spiral. Each one was alone, self-absorbed in the restless panic to escape the unending vertigo of subway, corridor and teetering stairwell. Their lips moved as they slept and their faces were like masks, shrivelled and yellow.

*Le Ballet Des Fuyardes*



The hotel guests did not notice the chambermaid, with hair like marsh grass, who, with deft hands, performed her duties quickly, almost as an afterthought. Hidden in her uniform, were paper bags, each marked with the names of secret creations: 'The Shy Abbess', 'Lovers, Hidden by Autumn' and 'The Dancers of the Grey Leaves'. Alone, with an artist's eye, she searched and scavenged the discarded detritus of the guests' lives – the scrapings from hair brushes, abandoned lipsticks and tissues, stained with make-up and tears. She sifted through their possessions, careful not to disturb items of value, as if taking an inventory in the room where a corpse lay. For these were the chambers of dead souls – shiftless, restless things that flickered and scurried in the dreamscape of the dying town. At night, she listened at keyholes and heard their murmurs, as they too joined the throng that wandered the maze of warehouses, subways and bridges.



# *The Haven of the Golden Head*

On leaving the hotel, she made a detour to a nearby square, the occasional canvas of an artist, whose work appeared on pavements, walls and all the facades of the dying town, baffling and infuriating its authorities.

The jaded sons of wealthy socialites were watched and suspected and so haunting were the brief glimpses of other worlds and lost times, that crude imitations were sometimes daubed. But the eyes of the police could not distinguish between the art of a master colourist and the crude glosses, vinyls or the banality of an aerosol spray. On the glass of a sports hall, he had painted the mythical blue flower of Novalis; a month's preparatory work of relentless pounding of the lapis lazuli, and mixing beeswax and gum arabic to purge the impurities. And on the ceiling of a fast food restaurant, he had depicted the night sky, with the stars hanging like marigolds – a blue vault of heaven; the firmament, a mask, hiding what soared behind the stars.

Her instinct proved correct. On the white stone of the town's tourist information office, appeared a series of sketches. An eagle,

## *The Haven of the Golden Head*

at first, a tiny speck, solitary in an empty horizon, loomed larger as the series developed, its wings beating against a gathering storm. It soared over a forgotten townscape which she recognised as ‘The Street of Banished Time’, where faces appeared in the windows, peeping with malice and greed, like cartoons of dwarfs or gnomes in a child’s picture book.

She smiled as she recognised the figures as caricatures of the town’s elite. But in the final picture, their smirks and grins were contorted into the grimaces of the truly mad. Their little stick hands clawed at their faces as shards flew and sparkled in the air, but whether of bone, glass or gold, she could not distinguish. An echo of their insanity was reflected briefly in the gaping stares of tourists and the owners of the souvenir shops. But already, a uniformed gang of beefy security guards was hosing and scouring the pictures.



On the fringes of the town, were several acres of inhospitable marshland, once known as ‘The Wilderness of Shimmering Reeds’, or more secretly as ‘The Haven of the Golden Head’, but dubbed by the newcomers as ‘The Blight’. Where scrubland bordered mud flat and the landscape blurred into a haze of water, grass and salt marsh, a long ramshackle house stood, hidden by vegetation.

As its gate creaked, an ancient head, anxious and furtive, appeared at a window, like a flawed stone face, consigned to an inaccessible back wall of a cathedral. But recognising Francesca, the chambermaid, the mask softened and soon she heard padlocks, bolts and chains unlocking.

Inside, the house was a labyrinth of narrow tunnels, surrounded by mounds of books, wooden boxes of ephemera and piles

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of glass, brick and rubble. Here lived the Keeper, a collector of the arcane and mysterious, which he wove into patterns and maps of the town. Too old and too fearful of the town's censure and clamour, he relied on the chambermaid to scavenge for objects, rumours and manifestations of the strange and abnormal.

Arranged around his desk, were the journals and ledgers, where he kept the pulse of the town. 'The Chronicle of Dreams' recorded the whispered memories and cries of the hotel sleepers, as she eavesdropped on their troubled nights. In 'Fragments of Forgotten Verse', he had noticed, long ago, the anomaly of snatches and phrases from the works of lost poets that appeared as misprints in newspaper articles and advertisements. Or, they were blurted or spluttered involuntarily, in public places, and the speakers blushed, ashamed, and apologised, as if they had uttered obscenities. The memories and imprints of the old town seeped through, disturbing and unsettling the newcomers.

On the edge of his land, was a large mound of earth, covered, according to season, in flowers, lichen or straggly vegetation. It was in the shape of a head and its features, which winked, smiled or seemed to draw breath, as the wind blew or shadows formed, diverted and fascinated the chambermaid. He paid it little attention but in spring and early summer, the marsh birds and butterflies, seemed drawn to it, pecking and sucking at its blooms. But Francesca insisted that the creatures were nurturing and feeding the head. To her, it was a genius loci of the town and in winter, she brought bunches of purple grapes, like giant opals, which she stuffed into the aperture that formed its mouth.

He remembered the prewar skies, dark with the clouds of migrating spring birds and the rituals of their spirals and corkscrew

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dives. They came now, only in isolated groups. And in this dry barren spring, he awaited their coming with growing unease.

This evening, in the twilight glow of sunset and swaying reed beds, russeted and reflected in the salt pools, the marsh was deserted. But there was an uneasy vigilance in the Keeper's eyes, as he scanned the horizon. Through binoculars, he had watched the increasing tide of visitors from the town, who scried the land, taking readings and measurements. He recorded the movements of each one, in a book 'Strangers and Intruders'; the handwriting becoming more frenzied and illegible with each day.

He sensed a terrible danger to the memory of the old town, something that threatened to obliterate even the faint echoes and outlines that resurfaced. But as he studied the patterns and fault lines, he struggled to identify the source of the peril.

At night, he dreamed he controlled a vast loom-like machine, with a maze of skeins and bobbins that hummed and whirred, at bewildering speed, weaving a cloth of intricate design that bemused and baffled his senses. Shapes formed in the weave – Francesca and her creations, the head of flowers that winked as the wind blew and the flight of waterfowl on the marshes. And other images, cold and white, but faraway and intangible, intruded into the design. But their significance eluded him. As he watched, tiny cracks appeared in the loom's wood, the thread seemed to fray and the whole fabric began to tremble. His hands fumbled to steady and correct the turbulence but he knew that all was unravelling. The foundations and walls of his house were shaking, soon to be engulfed in a turmoil of flying bobbins, whirling cloth and strangling thread.

Francesca described in detail the series of sketches by the pavement artist, whilst he took notes.

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“Are you sure it was an eagle? No other birds came?” he asked.  
“And the spinning shards – were they of glass, gold or bone?”

She shrugged. “A solitary eagle, its wings riding the thunder and beating over The Street of Banished Time. And the clock tower pulsed, like a diseased limb, swollen and leprous.”

“His visions are confused and fragmented, like broken glass and the images are distorted and illusory. I cannot understand them. But an eagle suggests someone from the distant past, when we were known as ‘The Eagles from the Sea’. And I am the last – a broken-winged dabbler in ponds. Perhaps it is one of the dancers, grown old and rheumy, coming home to die. And we will be together at the end – two old flightless fowl, building our nest out of paper, rags and rubbish. And your own dancers – do they master their rhythms?”

“There is a fierce urgency in their step,” she said. “The music seems to creep across the water, pausing and sighing as if to catch its breath. And they strain their bodies to draw in its last echo. All my sweet sad dancers.”

But he said no more, knowing both the sweetness and the sadness of their dance.





# *The Street of Banished Time*

The journal and the sepia photographs had evoked streets of colour, shadow and the subtleties and interplay of light on alleyways and houses, where forms and faces were blurred and insubstantial. But Enchalium was now a white town, where the sun burned without shade in this unseasonably hot spring, bouncing heat back from the glass and whitewashed facades. The reflections of the sun-scorched tourists appeared as if seen through a migraine haze, throbbing and distorted. And the sickly white of the buildings, seethed and bubbled, as of sepulchres, about to crack and seep their filth into the dry streets. From the windows of the hotel's courtesy express coach, Anna had sought the map's outlying villages, but only ghost trails were visible as it sped down the motorway – brief outlines, as if shaped by a finger, miming patterns on the glass.

From a cupboard, housing bed linen, Francesca studied the new guest, as the porter carried bags to her room. Strands from her long black hair, scraped from brush and pillow, would adorn her

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latest tableau, 'Mourners at the Shrine of the Pariah'. Her dancers would bow their heads in obeisance, as the wind caught the perfumes and smudged tears she would bring. And she would whisper to them, this woman's dreams, empty and profane. But her reverie was broken as she glimpsed the flower brooch. Its straw-coloured gold reminded her of the spring blooms, like yellow hair, on the mound of the Keeper. She understood, with her artist's eye, its antiquity and affinity with the old town. And she knew, that to scavenge from this guest, was taboo.



Next morning, from her hotel window, Anna looked down the sun-bleached street and tried to match it with her grandmother's photographs. Its contours had been filleted to sharp clear-cut lines but the blurred shadows of a scene entitled 'The Street of Banished Time', hinted at a likeness, although the clock tower in the original picture had been replaced by an advertising monolith. The old woman had pencilled landmarks on the picture's reverse - 'The Inn of the Silent Sisters', 'The Café of the Mandoliers', 'Wolf Moon Bridge' and many others.

Outside, finding that the street had been renamed 'Spinnaker Way', she studied the journal for clues.

'On the hill of the tower, the hour strikes, the mechanism whirs and a figure emerges from the clock face. It changes, growing older with the day, from cradle to drooping senility. And at midnight, the little scene is enacted and the stage is empty. As darkness falls, each stroke of the bell is more sombre and charged with melancholy. The midnight bells are funereal and their echo is cracked and hollow.

## *The Street of Banished Time*

But it is at the hour of sunset that the view is most numinous, here on 'The Street of Banished Time', in this borderland town. The facades and roofs of the shops and houses, shift in the half-light. It is a looking glass world – and I see my reflection in puddles or in a window – part of the procession of the living, the dead and the unborn.

In the distance, three nuns scurry back to vespers, and in the gloom, their images sputter and waver. They might be goldfinches, fussing around a seedpod or stray courtesans, hastening after a Roman legion or Napoleon's army, in the months before the clock was built.

He came to the town in despair, a master clockmaker from Spain. For years, he had laboured at his art, fashioning a rococo design, with every intricacy and graceful ornamentation, selecting and rejecting bricks for the tower. When the scaffolding was dismantled, his entire village assembled to marvel and to hear the bells ring. A day later, a stray company of Wellington's army arrived. A single cannon shot, fired not in anger, but in sport, broke the tower. The drunken soldiery laughed and joked in its ruin and passed on. The clock tower of Enchalium is more austere and its bells speak of mutability and decay.

In the colourist's garden, we drink wine, under the shade of a mulberry tree, until the moon rises and the figure in the clock is bent and stick-ridden. The gatherings of dry leaves and flower petals rot and are trampled underfoot and we remember the passing generations. It is the custom, that each exile or traveller, picks a flower, or in winter, cuts a sliver of bud or bark. And on the wall of his house, to symbolise their presence in the town, he paints the bloom. The colours, weathered by wind and rain, fade, but the old sections of the wall are left untouched. They reappear at times, tracteries of memory, or return in dreams. And dragonflies settle on

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the wall, feeding on the ghost flowers. Ten years ago, I picked a violet, its petals shrivelling even as the colour was mixed.'

Anna followed the line of shops and identified the colourist's former house, now a novelty emporium; its wall and garden demolished to accommodate a car park. In the window display of the souvenir shop, were model birds and animals, encrusted with false scaly shells, like itching scabs, ripe for scratching to the raw. They were diseased little creatures and blowflies, lazy and satiated, as if their maggots were already burrowing into the hidden flesh, buzzed on the hot glass. Some of the faces of the figurines were familiar and, at the back of the shop, she saw a gallery of photographs, once owned by the colourist, of his prewar guests, each with its own mocking caption. Shoppers, who bought the parodies, were invited to match them with the original and if successful, they were given a free greetings card.

Anna did not notice that she was followed into the adjacent restaurant by a young woman with hair like marsh grass. Francesca had slipped into the room whilst the new guest dined. She had pored over the journal and the little stack of photographs and her curiosity was aroused.

The eyes of the young waiter, serving coffee, were tired and swollen, for in the small hours of the night, he had quarrelled with his girl. Breaking in his sleep from their embrace, he had sung again, in an unknown tongue, the lyrics of a ballad, strange and sad. And his hands, clutching at his shirt, her birthday gift, had torn the fabric and he had called her by another name.

Having brought the cups, his hand plucked at his sleeve, compulsively, as if a stray feather or loose cotton fibres were attached. Francesca, poised between silent observation and the risk of an embarrassing rebuttal, chose her moment.

## *The Street of Banished Time*

“This was once ‘The Café of the Green Thread,’” she said, joining Anna and pointing to the building on her photograph. “The waiter has lapsed into the old customs, before this decor of bright plastic and the pictures of power boats and racing cars. The hidden timbers have absorbed centuries of song and conversation and its stories soak into the fabric of the building. And the young man is not without chivalry.”

She paused, unused to having an audience other than the Keeper. But Anna encouraged her to continue.

“During the uprisings here, in the 1850’s, an Austrian army officer, billeted in the town, brought his mistress, acquired many years back, in a remote Dalmatian village. He was a cocky martinet, all spit and bluster, and he kept her secluded. His regime in the town was arbitrary and vicious, but short-lived, for an assassin’s bullet stopped him on Wolf Moon Bridge. His mistress, evicted and homeless, and speaking no language understood in the town, was befriended by the café patrons. An attic was furnished for her and she scraped a living, singing her strange ballads, sewing buttons and mending the shirts of the café habitués. Her work was shoddy and her thread rarely matched the cloth. But nightly, the men took turns to fray their collars or feign a lost button. Many would have taken her to their beds but she held aloof from them all, dying young. They found her one night, wrapped around the bloodstained coat of her old lover and buried her with it in the churchyard by the Chapel of the Saints’ Tears. And sometimes here, those waiters, who retain some rare spark of kindness and gallantry, pick at imaginary threads on their sleeve or catch the unknown lines of a song in the lazy platitudes of a diner.”

“My grandmother writes of a river in this town, with many paths and hidden places. But when I asked the hotel receptionist

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for directions, he pointed to the harbour, with its walkways and restaurants, overlooking the marina. And when I studied the town map, the river has been excised. No memory of it remains,” said Anna.

“Only one person knows the river, in all its manifestations. But he has grown hermetic and wary of strangers. If you wish, I will arrange a visit but we must not surprise him.”



# *All My Sweet Sad Dancers*

The river permeated her grandmother's journal. Its creeks and inlets were places of festival and celebration, and the ballads and stories of its boatmen accompanied their pleasures. In her hotel room, the next morning, whilst waiting for Francesca to lead her to the Keeper's house, she read aloud to herself an extract:

'The paths to the river wind and twist, changing subtly with the seasons. For the trees and bushes are moulded by the art of the topiarist. His peacocks, elephants and jungle cats are not clipped and static like dead stuffed things but creatures of blood and sinew. The branches and foliage ripple with their motion. Hidden arches of wings may open and lead to a secluded pool of swirling water and birdsong - a place for contemplation or lovers' tryst. Or, in winter, the path shining with frost and cobwebs, we pass through the skeletons of trees, shaped like the antlers of some vast herd, to the warmth and companionship of the boathouse. We catch trout and gudgeon, roasting them on fires and drink sweet yellow wine, until the sun sets.

## *The Last Gold of Decayed Stars*

One evening, in early autumn, the path tangled and meandered into a strange darker woodland. Here were countless blooms of meadow saffron, naked and lilac, their stalks twisting up, reaching for the light, like flowering snakes. The Countess tells me it is a potent and secret herb, used by the dancers in their ecstatic contortions.'

Francesca led Anna through the quiet backwater lanes of the town to the marshes. She was surprised to see the Keeper, at his garden gate, anxiously peering down the narrow alley, in anticipation of their visit. Inside, he pored eagerly over her photographs and skimmed through the pages of the journal. But his eyes kept returning to the brooch she wore. Finally, he spoke.

"The river has been bricked and concreted, its path diverted by dams and roadworks. But it bubbles under one of the streets of chalets and self-catering apartments of the health seekers, a twisted and angry spirit. At its flood, roaring under the pull of the new moon, it disturbs and stops their banter about golf and sailing. A deep silence falls on them, an emptiness of soul and a sense of loss; of things they know not, but dimly perceive, like the breath of roses, sensed in a dry and dusty thoroughfare. Francesca listens to the idle talk of doctors and hears them joke about the rumours and myths, told by their patients. The inhabitants of those apartments are prey to sudden morbid illnesses that strike the most lithe and hearty. I have tracked the patterns of disease." He pointed to a pastel-shaded map.

"This charts the cancers of bone and blood, and the sudden stopping of breath that seizes and paralyses them. It is said that the buried rivers of London are closely linked to hauntings, poltergeists and apparitions, that footsteps or 'the swishing of a silk skirt' can be heard in the troubled houses above. But in the town of Enchallium, where the occult has been sanitised and whitewashed, it



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manifests itself in outbursts of mania or melancholy. Francesca eavesdropped a conversation between medical students on the spectacular breakdown of an American matriarch, who conversed in a strange clipped tongue. She noted down the words as they recalled the insults she had flung at them and the female doctor who sedated the poor woman. She called them ‘mischpoche’ and ‘tshowachani’. They are words, meaning ‘riff-raff’ and ‘witch’, from the ancient German thieves’ slang, with its roots in Romany and Yiddish.”

And he remembered the auburn-haired little harlot from Hesse, who arrived in the dying months of the Weimar Republic, and broke the heart of a young English painter, with her wit and scorn.

“But the boathouse, of which you spoke, remains. It is the theatre for Francesca and her creations.”

The girl was outside in his garden, picking vegetables and he leaned forward and whispered, “The poor creature was born years out of her time. She struggles like a fledgling bird on a parched beach, her wings unformed. The white walls of this cruel town bear down on her, unflinching and unending.

“Her mother came to me heavy with child, from the east, when the walls and barbed wire fell in 1990. She had heard of the town’s magic from her own grandmother. But seeing its fall into decay, unhinged her. She gave birth and abandoned the child to me. I raised her in secret and she learned the lore of the town’s past. But she credits me with a greater wisdom than I possess. I was born in a small town on the Black Sea and as a youth, walked in Histria, the silent white city of the dead. There, amongst its vast streets, I understood and felt nothing but the slip and fall of the dying peoples. I came to Enchalium, a singer and collector of ballads, craving life and civilisation. I found love and happiness here but never penetrated its

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secrets. I was no dreamer or thinker – but a mere observer, deferential and content. And now I chronicle its decline with the same failure to catch its pulse and echo. My only distinction is that I am the last. I am a hoarder of ruins, picking at scraps, undeserving of the title of Keeper, given me by Francesca, who has a truer instinct for the soul of the town. Her native wit and cunning enable her to maintain her job at the hotel but there is a madness in her that you will see when you visit her home.”



A hidden desecration of the town, unforeseen, even by its planners, caused the river’s course to divert underground. It roared unseen, swamping the cellars of The Street of Banished Time, where the possessions and momentos of the old town’s inhabitants had been hurriedly buried, when their properties were seized. Its passage continued through the discarded ruins of The Chapel of the Saints’ Tears and its graveyard, before coming to rest on the shore of the boathouse, secret home of Francesca.

And on that shore, a bulwark of time, between the old world of colour and sentience, and the dead world of clamour and emptiness, above, she delved amongst the mud and flotsam. With each tidal surge, came the cargo of bones, broken glass, the torn remnants of dresses and fragments from the diaries, libraries and manuscripts of the poets and dreamers.

From the decaying rafters, she assembled and hung her gallery of the lost, arranging the characters with an artist’s care, matching skull to arm, dancer’s foot to elegance of finger. And she adorned their nakedness with rags and river weed and the stolen hair from the hotel. Their mouths, she smudged with lipstick and wiped their

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cheeks with the dust and sweat of the living. The sockets of their eyes, she filled with shards of stained glass and they glowed again with ultramarine and pearl – the irises and tears of the saints. The skeletons of river creatures embellished their hair – tiny white molluscs and the shells of snails, whirling yellow and black in intricate spirals. Sometimes, a silver brooch or a gold earring would gleam in the mud and these she fixed to the jagged bone or weed. Buttons and trinkets from the hotel, were sewn into the clothes, like the remembrances left by mothers, handing over their children to the founding hospitals or orphanages.

One gallery housed the poets, the solitudes and the devout. But her purest art was reserved for the lovers, who gripped each other, tied together with ferns and knotgrass. And when the wind blew, they moved, thigh on thigh; a copulation, solemn and stylised; a stately sarabande or gavotte, as if blown by the songs of the poets and the sweet breath of the whores and dancers from the Ballet des Fuyardes.

From the recesses of the boathouse, she had salvaged a wind-up gramophone and records, a memory of the old customs. And the cracked strains of violins and mandolines gave rhythm and melody to the lovers' dances – a music of the bones, where once, their melodies had played to the beat of oars and the songs of the boatmen. From the Keeper's tunnels, she had brought golden candlesticks, and in the gloom, the dancers' eyes glowed again with fire and passion. As their bodies swayed, their reflections were mirrored in the river, garlanded like Ophelia, but with nettles, daisies and thistles. The music sighed across the water, drifting upwards with the perfumes of their step to the golf course above, where the players paused, unsettled, and saw skeletons swinging from the boughs of the trees.

# *The Guttering of the Lamps*

In the boathouse, Francesca said, “The Keeper tells me it is chance and the river’s underground flow that wash my dancers to me. But there is meaning and order in the sifting of the bones. And I am sent fragments of poems by an unknown admirer. I scan the faces of the passing crowds, hoping to see him, but he is wary and secretive. He has seen my art for he writes of the sighs of lovers, whispering in the branches and the entwining of their frail arms. He tells me my body is ‘a hyacinth’ and our silence ‘a black cave’. He speaks often of colour and the dark sadness of birds and small creatures – he knows of my favourite for he wrote ‘The Song of the Captive Blackbird’ for me. And he knows the ways of this town for he writes of its decaying and crumbling stars.”

And she handed Anna a keepsake book in which she had pasted the muddied scraps of postcards, letters and manuscripts. Buried in cellars for decades and carried by the river’s surge, isolated phrases were barely legible. But the power and intensity of their words shone like stars. Daily, the book was embellished with a fresh garland of hedgerow flowers or winter foliage. Her chains of tangled

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daisies, dandelions and grasses, withered and faded, even as she tied and wove. Their stains and juices impregnated the pages, clouding the remaining words of the verse; an accumulation of dried leaves, petals, dust and running ink.



The few discernible images Anna had seen in the mud-spattered scraps of paper that comprised Francesca's collection of love poetry, triggered a memory from her grandmother's reflections on the Countess, whose powers and influence extended far beyond those of a rich and generous socialite. Climbing the stairs to the surface, she sat, under the shade of a willow tree and read:

'Engrossed in our revelries and in each other's arms, I do not feel that we understood the lineage of the Countess. But in the grey years that followed, I have sometimes seen her face in the friezes and vases from Ancient Greece or her eyes in the work of goldsmiths from Byzantium. Millenia ago, her dynasty gazed on the waters of the Bosphorus or the Aegean Sea, and I picture her crest, a golden head, surrounded by birds in flight, on the prow of those ships, as they sailed to the outposts of Europe, bringing their culture and civilisation. She was the last of her line and my own photographs of the lost, are but footnotes in comparison with her ancestry. She has watched the rise and fall of towers, cities and empires and her eyes held the memory of Europe ingrained, like the bones of the mountains or the imprint of forest in tree ring and leaf mould.

I learned a little of her work when we were alone together in her library, discussing the lost soldier.

Every autumn, at the velvet hour, when the bells rang and the grey leaves were reflected in the river, he came to us; the pulse in his

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blood, the same instinctive pull, as the birds in spring. The Great War had damaged him irrevocably. He carried a photograph of a young woman, her eyes quizzical and suspicious, as if she anticipated the years of separation and the coming loneliness. 'I am looking for home. Have you seen her?' he said, asking the same question, year on year. His manner was quiet and patient. And the sound of the bells, mournful and timeless, drowned the noise of shells and gunfire in his head. I believe our town was but one refuge amongst a hundred on his cyclical journey. Other villages offered their own respite with their festivals and rituals. He spoke of the vendange in Frontonnais and the harvesting of cider apples in Normandy. Each year, the photograph became more frayed and dog-eared, his eyes wearier and his hair greyer. As an honoured guest, the dancers offered him their nights. But he shook his head and held the photograph of his wife, whose name he had forgotten. And in time, he came no more.

"She is long dead," said the Countess. "For I have read her story in this section of my library, where no light is ever quite the same. The books are bound in the colours and fragrances of the old territories. The plumes of light are carried by the wind from the rivers and the mountains and pervade the pages. The troubled and the damaged can find great consolation here. A French soldier returned, after the war, to Verdun. But, so great had been the shelling, that all trace of his home and its nine neighbouring villages, was erased. No brick, tree or memory remained in the wilderness of mud. But in these volumes, he was able to re-enter their world. The minutiae of the lives of those he knew and loved, continued. They married, played, fought and grew old. The rhythms of the seasons, with all their little festivals and holy days, were revealed to him. He remained with us for a decade, until the last book was read, before walking quietly into the night.

## *The Guttering of the Lamps*

“Also collected here, are the legends, rumours and dreams of the exiles. You will find much to divert you, but as a casual visitor, do not think you can return the next day, to reread or collect notes. The light changes, the stories fade, to be replaced by other tales.”

At the entrance to the manorial villa of the Countess, were two lamps in the shape of a crescent moon and the star, Vega, named from the Arabic, for a swooping eagle. When we rowed back at night from the island of ‘The Temple of Anahita’, they were visible, far out to sea, and their light shone on all the highways, leading to the town, as a sign of welcome to the exiles and travellers.

In the fervency of our youth, I feel that sometimes, we were blind to the occult, in the landscape and natural world of the town. But the Countess told me that the patterns of the seasons and the mysterious migrations of the birds, were inextricably entwined with its art, hospitality and sense of the divine. ‘In Byzantium,’ she said, ‘the goldsmiths gave life and breath to their artefacts. Their flowers and birds of hammered gold and silver were living creations. They were given voices and power by the incantations of the dreamers, philosophers and seers. The legacy of those ancient times was carried to Europe and remains in places like Enchalium; towns on the hinterland, havens of civilisation protected from the chaos and clamour of the encroaching world. My own emblem is the golden head, surrounded by birds. And you have seen, in spring, the spirals and whirls of waterfowl, on the marshes, drawn by that very image. In other places, the occult is sited in the patterns of stone in cathedral and synagogue or the peal of bells from a remote village church; the secret dancing floors of grass and stone, hidden deep in forest; or inaccessible rooms, in the heart of the ghetto, where time and memory are fluid and baffle the senses. But these sacred places are threatened by the modern world. One by one, they fall,

## *The Last Gold of Decayed Stars*

like crumbling stars and the ancient patterns are trampled and broken.'

And to the end, she worked to gather her sea eagles in one last muster and wrote letters to the little men of power, to spare the best. During the Spanish Civil War, her entreaties rescued an artist and a writer; one Fascist, one Republican, from the firing squads. I remember them, separated by a locked door, quarrelling like crows, until the old magic of the town, enchanted and quietened them

But her powers were waning. She spoke with rare anger and regret of her failure, in October 1914, to bring home an Austrian poet, imprisoned in Krakow. The military and the doctors of the mind, ignored her appeals, as if conspiring against her. His suicide followed soon after.

She showed me a number of the postcards he had sent her, each with verses and a sheaf of manuscripts, collected in the prewar years.

Her end was banal. When the war finished and the east was in thrall, Enchalium was to be a haven, a last redoubt. But she was struck down by a motorbus, bringing sightseers. Her property and estates were auctioned and the town passed into shadow when her lamps were guttered. Those bargain seekers and souvenir hunters, paying trifles for wonders, did not comprehend their power. Her music boxes, of memory and evocation, playing tunes from forgotten towns, the melody varying according to time, season and light, were toys for a lady's dressing table or child's playroom. And her botanical collections of seeds, with hidden and arcane properties, lost to the modern world, were burned.'



# *The Ecstasies of the Mannequins*

“Does anything remain of the manorial villa?” Anna asked Francesca. And the girl led her through a path, near to her shoreline, where the remnants of the Countess’ gardens, now overgrown scrubland, revealed the corpses of the topiaries. Their wings, feathers and fur were entangled in sprawling vegetation and there was a rankness, a smell of corruption, as if the creatures were decaying, slumped together, in an open grave. Francesca had sculpted a few of the bushes, in forlorn tribute to the old glories, but her art had created the birds and beasts, of omen and horror, from her own nightmares; distorted Calibans, whose fevered eyes, stared and jutted. They were a fitting canopy and backdrop for her dancers, who bowed and genuflected a little, in the wind, as the pair entered the boathouse.

Francesca sniffed the air, inspected her creations and pointed to one of the lovers. The toe bones had been painted a deep crimson and the figure seemed to grip its companion with renewed fervour.

“The colourist,” she said. “He visits in secret, for my creations inspire his own art. And in thanks, he embellishes and decorates

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my work. He is a descendant of the man whose house was seized. The Keeper supplies him with rocks, minerals, dyes and beetles – the tools of his art. But I have never seen him, nor do I know in which cellar, cave or shed, he lives.”

Close by, was a patch of waste ground, where sixty years ago, the headstones, memorials and statuary from an old graveyard had been shattered and dumped, leaving a desolation of headless angels, stone faces and floral tributes. But verdigris, lichen and the silver of spiders’ webs gave patterns of colour and intricacies of design, unknown to the world above. And the seeds from the tributes and offerings, had rooted and flowered, giving bizarre and luxuriant garlands and crowns to the forgotten.

“Here, where the meadow saffron grows, I gather my herbs and tinctures,” said Francesca. “I rub its essence into the pillows of couples at the hotel. The juice acts like belladonna, but with greater potency. When they look into each other’s eyes, they see my dancers, in all their ardour. They writhe and twist in the agonies and ecstasies of the hanged. Their lusts spent, they mumble the lyrics from my book. They walk then, in their sleep and write the verses in lipstick upon the mirrors, seeing their own reflections of bone and seaweed. And they wake and loathe themselves and each other for the bitterness and sweetness of the poems they cannot understand.

“My art is as painstaking as the colourist. This morning, I plan to sketch the mannequins, whose jerking puppet limbs and gaudy painted bodies inspire the clothes and adornments for my living creations. Would you like to see my models?”

Anna was surprised that the girl led her to the marina, where the town’s wealthiest and most celebrated inhabitants, basked on their yachts or sauntered between boutique and restaurant.

## *The Ecstasies of the Mannequins*

“See how the women mince and simper, preening and patting their hair, and the men respond, flexing and tightening their muscles. They’re all twitches and tics, the involuntary spasms of the amputated limbs of frogs and toads, prodded with a stick, on a scientist’s slab. And such fragrances they waft, of chemicals and sprays, soon corrupt and rancid on sweat and flesh. I have my tinctures underground, purer and more enduring, perfumes matured by river, worm and rat.

“They see me, a miserable ragged creature and think I come to gawp and admire. And sometimes, one will sneak a glance at my sketches and flattered, bare her teeth in condescension. Have you seen their teeth? They are without blemish, so white and pristine, they are not human. They are the teeth of plastic dolls and cardboard advertising dummies. But in my gallery are all colours – algae and lichens of luminous greens and yellows. And the river mud gives life to the bone as it shifts from red to black and grey. These strutting mannequins are the empty dead, covered with facades of flesh and hair. I resurrect their souls for my bright dancers; the thinkers and poets, who spoke in fire; the quiet nuns, rapt in their devotions and the lost, dreaming of homes, that are no more. And when a sea breeze blows, their heads nod and bow and they speak of wonders, that only I can hear. The secrets of the dancers are more arcane and noble than the scrapings and raspings of the mannequins.”

She pointed to a man, hunched over a laptop, and sketched rapidly.

“That one pretends to be a banker, shifting fortunes, as he taps. He is my priest, a craven solitary spirit. He hid alone, in the cellars of an inn, in 1915, as his congregation was massacred by the Turks, and sought redemption and solace in Enchaliium. He sways naked from my rafters, held up by river grasses, a grave and solemn dancer and waits only for his robes of seaweed and rags.”

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“I recognise that man,” said Anna. “He’s a famous footballer, changing clubs every season, for millions.”

“I have enough sketches and photographs of him,” said Francesca, dismissively. “His neck bends and his lips kiss the sponsor’s badge on the cloth of his shirt when he scores a goal. His mouth gapes with all the lying imperfections and deceit of the mannequins. I will give him the stooping elegance of bone, his lips will commune with the dust of saints and angels. His pretty companion though, yawns behind his back. She slumps like a tired doll, her limbs and hair pulled by a peevish child. She is my shy abness; her eyes, heavy with sleep, working her rosary by candlelight.”

She closed her sketch book and the pair passed through the crowds, back to the hotel.



A dry fierce wind from Africa blew. Once, it would have echoed faintly in the chapel bells, sending a resonance of chords and strange harmonies, or rolled in the topiaries of the Countess, giving voice to the bestiaries. But in the dying town, burglar and car alarms responded; a chain reaction of repetitive inhuman cacophony. And from the marina, all the paraphernalia of advertising hoardings, false flags and sponsors’ banners, rattled and shook. The faces of tourists and sightseers were creased and skewed, their vision scoured by dust and grit. Only the goggle eyes of the shell faces were wide open; hideous gnomes, staring boldly at a blind world. And underground, the fleshless bodies of the dancers, brushed and entangled, and in the soft breeze, they seemed to whisper and their stained glass eyes glowed again and exchanged secrets.

# *The Chapel of the Saints' Tears*

Francesca had studied the commentary on the back of one of the photographs and waved an airy finger in the direction of a distant building.

Encouraged, Anna read aloud her grandmother's words:

'It is the custom to visit the statuary of 'The Avenue of the Autumn Silences' alone. For conversation, even the unspoken understanding of the wise, intrudes and disperses insight and reflection. And the figures themselves are turned inward, avoiding both the gaze of the curious and their companions, as if reliving their failures. It is a gallery of the solitudes, those of unfulfilled promise, who lapsed or fell through folly, madness or ill fortune. Medlar leaves fall around their feet, orange turning to brown, and the untouched fruit blets and drops and all returns to nothingness. But it is a place of comfort and recalled memory. The regrets and former cowardice of the statues evoke a humility and affinity with their lives. A recollection, long-buried, of my father, home on leave from the trenches, came back to me. I was four years old and he carried

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me on his shoulders, through a land of lakes, birdsong and dragonflies. Whilst Mother laid out the picnic, he fashioned a horse, like the ones he tended in France, that pulled the guns, out of moss, grass and brushwood. Its head nodded and its tail swished. We took it home and placed it on the mantelpiece, above the fire, to remember him. Within a week, we received the letter of regret from his regiment, telling of the sniper's bullet. The horse shrivelled and faded slowly, outlasting him by a month.'

Anna's stay at the hotel, allowed her access to most of the town's amenities. Encouraged by the distant view of statues from a golf course, and hoping to find 'The Avenue of the Autumn Silences', she approached. But these stared brazen-eyed, in bold white stone, demanding admiration and awe. Theirs was a brutal confidence, a swagger of clenched fists and sunlit stadia. They honoured the town's hierarchy; its patrons, planners and sponsors, and the figures yearned for the rites of obeisance and homage.

In the bar, she showed her photograph. And they humoured her and smirked behind her back. But one man, sat apart from the others, did not laugh. A month ago, he had sliced his ball into a dense copse that bordered the most remote hole on the course. And as he searched, walking further into the trees, he remembered returning home from school, aged nine, to the drowsy smell of privet blossom, the dance of damselflies around the pond and his own uneasy reflection in the water. And the moment had hung, gathering with anxiety as he waited in the empty house, missing the familiar smells of dinner cooking and his mother's singing. But it was his father, grave and broken-voiced who came, with the news of the speeding car that had mounted the pavement, as she walked home from shopping.

He had emerged from the trees, ball in hand, babbling the long-forgotten words of the ballad that she crooned, as she laid the table.

## *The Chapel of the Saints' Tears*

*'You'll break my heart, you warbling bird,  
That wantons through the flowering thorn.  
You mind me of departed joys,  
Departed, never to return.'*

But the memory offered no comfort or reconciliation. In the barren landscape of the white statues, it festered unresolved and lingering. His strange fey behaviour had persisted and his friends and partners, muttering their excuses and platitudes, shunned and avoided his company.

The little knots of men and women, grouped around the bar, passed the photographs around, guffawing and shaking their heads. But one card changed their mood utterly.

The supernatural, in all its forms, was either shunned or dismissed with laughter, like the ridiculed images of the old town. But there was a fear of the holy, that passed beyond mockery. Amongst her photographs was one that showed the icons from the Chapel of the Saints' Tears. The townspeople could not endure them. 'These images resemble the worst obscenities daubed on our walls by the criminal,' one of the golfers had said. 'You should not show us such perversions for they are proscribed in this town.' There was a dangerous childlike fanaticism in his manner and Anna feigned her apologies and left.

Alone, she read her grandmother's observations on the lost church.

'The fierce protection offered by these obscure and beautiful saints, depicted in the windows and iconography of the chapel, are at their most potent, by candlelight. The pale glow gives a fervour to the gold surrounding their faces and the blue of their eyes has a passionate intensity. Here is shown Saint Eulalia of Merida, thrown

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naked and dead into the streets, to shame and humiliate her. But snow fell, gentle and unseasonal, to cover her body and confound her murderers. I have seen moths settle on her tears, as candlelight catches the liquid pearl, and on the eyes of Saint Dymphna, killed by her father, in his rage. They are the protectors and patrons of runaways, exiles and the lost, seeking comfort in the chapel and those that violate their gentle sanctuary, invoke a terrible love, savage and just.

In the wake of the Napoleonic Wars, from Idria, braving the mountain passes and fleeing her father and a brutal suitor, a young waif came to the town, barely alive. She was sheltered and hidden, in a house near to the river and she brought flowers and burned candles to Saint Rose of Viterbo, herself a pariah, refused by the Poor Clares, and seeking solace in the friendship of birds. But the men came for her, ransacking the cottage and tracking her to the chapel. The eyes of the saints fell upon them, cold and beautiful, and they could not move or withdraw their gaze. They were discovered at dawn, paralysed and blinded, and despatched by cart.'

Like the buried river and the memory of the ballet, the imprint of the chapel burrowed into the dreams of the newcomers. It had survived the first wave of post-war destruction, remaining untouched and neglected, and visited only by the dwindling band of stragglers, before they too were banished. For the Commodore had a secret horror of the eyes of the saints and refused to sanction their destruction. He loathed and feared their power and beauty but in his dreams, he was visited by the scenes of their martyrdom and saw himself amongst their tormentors, axe or sledgehammer in hand. Alone, he visited them and pictured the plumes of colour arching as he smashed the glass of their eyes, imagining the twisted visions in the broken shards, of their blood and tears.



## *The Chapel of the Saints' Tears*

He shunned the smoky recesses, where candlelight on the gold had cast its mysteries and shadows, and installed electric light, harsh and sterile. The eyes of the saints hardened and he saw himself, reflected in their cold tears, diminished and empty – a eunuch figure, excluded from their beauty.

His health and sanity declined and his son, known as 'The Captain', assumed the running of his business and estates. The old man died, with the glow of stained glass from the chapel, filtering patterns into his sick room, babbling a verse from Job.

'Let the stars of twilight thereof be dark, let it look for light and have none, neither let it see the dawning of the day.'

The Captain personally supervised the chapel's destruction, wielding a hammer to its windows and brickwork. The dust rose in clouds; striations of prayers, memories and whispered confessions, intermeshed and tangled with the glass fragments of eyes, tears and flowers. He buried them deep, excavating caverns and chambers, where the hidden river took them and washed them, like stars, to the shore of Francesca's home. But in that first frenzy, tiny particles of coloured dust, had seeped into his lungs and brain and he was never quite free of them. In the heated outdoor swimming pool, he had built on the site of the chapel, he swam vigorously, breathing hot white air, trying to purge their visions. Their images returned to him, in fleeting rainbow colours, as sun and water filled his eyes. And although he brought mistresses to his villa, for prestige and show, their faces palled and seemed coarse and vulgar, alongside the memories of the bright saints. The young women sensed his unease and indifference, and puzzled, saw his face asleep; the yellow shrunken mask of those who slay and martyr, and re-enact, in dream, their violations.

Instead, he sought comfort and physical relief in the empty beauty of the white statues which lined his pool. Manufactured by

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machines, from computer specifications, they depicted male sporting icons. But they were curiously emasculated and androgynous – hollow angels with dead stone eyes.

But his horror of the mysteries of the old town and the fear of inheriting the madness that had taken his father, had given him an intuitive understanding of its magic. He had studied his own family archives, dating back to the years when his grandfather practised psychiatry. They included the case history of the Austrian poet, Georg Trakl, and the letters and postcards, sent on his behalf, by the Countess. These documents, which hinted at the occult and numinous qualities of Enchalium, had both enchanted and scandalised his father, the Commodore. Like the generations before him, he was drawn to the town, where both the carnal and the ethereal were embraced and celebrated. But when he arrived, he viewed it with modern eyes; fearing and distrusting the holy, recoiling from the profane, and desiring only material success.

The Captain understood the enduring power of the Countess and her world. His plans and obsessions drifted inexorably towards ‘The Blight’, recognising the drab marshland as the source of his malaise. And he knew of the Keeper, his house and the ugly mound of earth that bordered his land. As night fell, both men lay awake, their minds wrestling against each other, in the darkness, wary and fearful.



# *The Temple of Anahita*

At the house of the Keeper, Anna spoke of the golfers' reactions to the chapel.

"One of the holy places, shown on your photographs, remains untouched," he said, pointing to a scene depicting an island, covered in thick vegetation, perhaps a mile from land. On the reverse was written:

'A feathering of oars beat time to the peal of bells from the shore, as the Hay Moon rose. A fishing boat washed past us, and acknowledging our tryst, the Lombard ballad of passion, intense and fulfilled, was sung, to the accompaniment of accordions. The path to the temple is well-worn, by the centuries-old step of lovers. And in the crevices of the red rock, deep in the cave, are their tokens. Our locket is violet-shaped, and the strands of hair, golden and black, are entwined.'

"It is the Temple of Anahita - a shrine to the Persian deity, founded by wanderers, from that country, in the Middle Ages," he said. "There, at dusk, by rowing boat, the young and the nubile, go

## *The Last Gold of Decayed Stars*

to consummate their love, to spend the night together, alone in each other's arms. The rite is unknown to the modern inhabitants."

"I should like to visit. Have you been there yourself?"

"Only once. But now, this scarecrow body of mine, propped up by sticks and covered by rags, is unfit for the journey. Francesca will take you. If you find any token, left by your grandmother, please retrieve it. You would not be committing any act of violation."



Francesca handled the boat with practised assurance. The island's shore was littered with the detritus of revellers' picnics and beach parties.

"They dare not venture into the trees," said the girl. "They have the unbelievers' fears and terrors of the dark."

The temple was a secluded cave, close to the seashore, but approached through a maze of gorse and briars. Waves beat against its edges. Embedded in the rose-coloured rock, were countless lockets of gold and silver, fashioned in the shape of birds, butterflies and flowers.

"Here amongst the foam and pulse of the tide, their limbs coil and entwine and their lips mimic the dances of the soft moon. And when their passion is exhausted, they dream of the ecstasies of all who have gone before. Their voices are in the tide and their faces in the seaweed and the patterns of the red rock," said Francesca. "I come here when the new moon rises and wait for my lover, who sends me his verses. It will not be long and tonight I will return."

Anna recognised her grandmother's locket from the same straw-coloured striations as her own brooch and it yielded easily to her touch.

## *The Temple of Anahita*



They returned to the mainland and Francesca slipped away to her boathouse. Alone with the Keeper, Anna mentioned the girl's lover.

"She believes that the fragments of verse washed up on her shore, are addressed to her," he said. "I haven't the heart to destroy that illusion. I feel it would break her.

"And at night, she dresses in the style of the photographs from my archives, naked under her coat of rags. Her eyes are black with kohl, belladonna sparkles on her eyelids and her auburn wigs are made from the combed fur of street curs and alley cats.

"And she waits alone in the cave, to consummate her love for a poet, four generations dead. She has looked into the rose-red rock for her own image and seen nothing. The island itself is threatened. Daily, they dredge the seabed to provide deeper water for their yachts and soon, it will be inundated by the flood."

He paused. "Did you find your grandmother's locket?"

She held it up to the light and opened its clasp.

"The strands of hair still entwine and grip and the colours are not faded," he said. "I am the young man, seated next to your grandmother, in that photograph. Your own mother was conceived on the night we rowed to the temple, as the countries of Europe converged to declare war. She returned to England soon after. Custom and the fear of her family's censure, led her to fabricate a husband and war hero. Once the lie was sown, she could not return to Enchalium."

An hour later, after their memories and silences had finally been exhausted, Anna returned to the hotel. From a window, the Keeper scanned the horizon. The skyline, once a distant roofscape of tile and brickwork, that shimmered with the hour and the

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season, was scarred by the masts of the yachts and the white towers, each bearing the company logo or emblem. And that night, he dreamed that those towers were lumbering imperceptively towards him, their distant hum rising to a crescendo of concrete and metal.



Sunset fell on the marsh, turning the reeds a shimmering crimson and briefly, the mound of earth seemed shot with gold, its eyes and mouth burning like the icons of the lost saints. Its glow stretched lazily across the town and touched the white statues by the pool, where the Captain sat alone, studying an architect's plan. He dreamed of a vast stadium of speed, where only the moment mattered. Machines, electronics and the brain of the driver, were connected and fused. All thought and reflection were banished. The tall white towers, stacked to the horizon, would blot out all the equivocations of twilight and sunrise. The heat would bear down on a shadowless arena; the sun or the floodlights shining on metal and the chrome colours of the racing cars, motorcycles and the advertising hoardings, which changed every few seconds – colours without resonance, association or meaning.

It was the feeling of oblivion he attained when he drove his powerboat, surging far out to sea, in an exhilaration of petrol and vibration. Returning once, as night fell and the sea churned before him, he had glimpsed Francesca, rowing to meet her lover. He was unsure, in the ecstasy of motion, whether she was real or some twisted vision of one of the saints, weeping tears of pearl for a lost paradise, recalled through shards of broken glass. Concrete, chrome and the roar of machines would obliterate them all.

# *Sea-Nymphs Hourly Ring Her Knell*

Overnight, the wind rose to storm force and the high spring tide was funnelled towards the shore. Francesca had fallen asleep in the Temple of Anahita, waiting for her poet. She dreamed that their faces were part of the tableau of lovers, in the rose-red rock. His gold locket was mignonette-shaped and casting aside the tawdry wig of animal fur, he had curled a lock of her yellow hair around the strands of black, she had plucked from his head. As they lay in each other's arms, she heard the sighs and murmurs of their forebears in the cave, stretching back over the centuries. She recognised the Keeper's voice, vibrant and resonant, before disappointment and defeat had rendered it broken and cynical. And she smiled as she heard accent and language unfurling back through time. The emphasis on syllables changed, with flourishes or guttural clicks, until her understanding of individual words, blurred. Only the meaning of their song remained. Her lips played with sound and she resolved to astound the Keeper by repeating ancient phrases and excerpts of

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lost tongues. As the water rushed into the cave, their voices rose and seemed to echo in the shells and seaweed, resonating on the red rock.



The machines moved at dawn, advancing on the marsh from all sides. Diggers, cranes, drainage systems, earth shifters and those that disgorged asphalt and concrete, lurched forward, swaying in the high winds. Their tops bore the emblems of the white statues, empty ghost heads that proclaimed the company logos and abstract mission statements. They were hollow parodies of the living flower head of the earth mound, and its eyes of reflected gold had entered and infected the dreams of the company directors. Their nightmares had fashioned the images, which staggered forward, in clumsy jerking motion, like the arrival of a circus or fair, of giant mechanical grotesques, to perform its stilt dances to an empty storm-tossed arena.

A digger, with the chubby face of a bloated baby, its maw gaping wide, was joined by an elongated cherry picker machine, with lights, that in the mist, resembled a disembodied pumpkin head, grinning with broken teeth. Another group, with high towering empty windows, echoed a bombed city landscape, abandoned by its people, where contorted and broken buildings formed the shapes of mouths, devouring their own brick.

The men inside the machines, appeared tiny, like clockwork automata; comical figures, that pulled levers and jinked, as if their mechanisms had jarred and were limited to a few convulsive twitches. Their sirens and klaxons sounded to the remains of the night sky. They would pluck out the fading stars like cheap glass beads and puncture the anaemic sheep's bladder of the moon.



*Sea-Nymphs Hourly Ring Her Knell*



From her hotel room, Anna had heard the first rumblings of machinery and hastened to the Keeper's house, where from the garden, they watched the destruction.

Overseeing the operation, the Captain ordered that the mound of earth should be cleared first. The initial scything motions of the digger, stripped away the soil to reveal the white roots of vegetation that swathed around the skull of the head, like folds of mummy cloth. Under the teeth of the machine, they swirled and unwrapped, and the tiny automaton, that jerked at the controls, shielded his eyes with his stick hands, for briefly, he saw flesh ripping and figures of bone, dancing in the trees.

The head was fashioned from hammered gold and inlaid with minerals, that shimmered in the half-light, as if the muscles of the face and mouth, pulsed and breathed. Its eyes were closed in sleep, as if the creature dreamed of its birth, millenia ago, as the sun rose, throwing pink light onto the waters of the Bosphorus. The eyes opened and for a moment, the Captain glimpsed the secrets of their artifice; the holy fires of Byzantium and heard the incantations, spoken by the astrologers and seers.

The digger struck again and the head split, casting a spiral of golden shards into the air, like dying stars. The blow struck at the foundations of the Keeper's house. Its walls, buffeted by the wind, collapsed, like the bones of an extinct museum specimen, propped up and abandoned in a derelict room; its glues and fabrics, dried and shrivelled.

And the patterns, clues and unanswered riddles of the Keeper's maps, charts and speculations were revealed to him in all their

## *The Last Gold of Decayed Stars*

painstaking futility. Dwarfed by the exposed accumulation of paper, rocks and glass, he longed for the company and wisdom of the strange child, who had grown and gathered flowers on the head of the mound, and brought purple grapes in tribute. As the shards of gold, spun and whirled, his senses unravelled. Anna reminded him of someone he had once loved and their faces blurred and merged.

But he could connect or interpret nothing. Instead, phrases from his library came to him, like the loose scrapings of hair from a brush. And the faces from his past, appeared again, reflected and distorted by the broken gold.

“What country, friends, is this? Such starved ignoble nature, nothing thrive. As scant as hair in leprosy. Where’s Francesca? She’s dead as earth. Sea-nymphs hourly ring her knell. Nothing alive. An odour of abandoned emptiness. But Maria, we two alone will sing like birds i’ the cage. The dance is broken. Our step is palsied and trembling – a waltz of sticks and flaking bone. You great cities. You dying peoples.”

And with those words, looking into the eyes of Maria, as beautiful as when she had left him, nearly seventy-five years ago, and seeing reflected, his own decrepitude, he staggered into the chaos of his home and was engulfed in its ruin.

Tiles, timber and the mounds of paper and glass, were seized by the wind, and they rose in sweeping gyres towards the town and out to sea, like the ghosts of the marsh birds. The hands of the little stick men, in their machines, clawed at their faces, as the shards flew, until nothing remained of the Keeper and his house.

An emptiness came over the dry lands; an echo from Histria, the dead city of the Goths and the Romans, on the Black Sea, to this birdless wilderness on the Adriatic. The storm winds and tidal surge swept into the town, causing fissures in the buried cellars.

*Sea-Nymphs Hourly Ring Her Knell*

The river broke through, a grey dead thing, its songs and sweetness, long departed. It was a Lethe water, turning the facades of concrete and plastic, the colour of ash.

In the Street of Banished Time, the looking glass memories, that had resurfaced, fleeting and elusive, were shattered. And the tourists and sightseers, saw instead, reflected in the shop windows and lifeless water, that the buildings seemed to sprout leprous cauliflower tumours, and their gutters hung like dead limbs. The street twitched in apoplectic spasms and the eyes of the shell creatures rolled, as if tickled from within by their maggots.

The quiet hinterland of the boathouse, where Francesca's creations had dreamed, prayed and made love, was broken. They were carried on the flood, a pageant of dance and ecstasy, down the atrophied street and onto the marina, where the mannequins gawped and wondered at the lost colours. And they saw themselves, their false clockwork gestures and gaping smiles, transformed by bone, stained glass and the tears of the saints.

An empty howl of rage, impotent and self-pitying, passed amongst them, like the cry of dogs, tethered and moon-fevered. In the dead town, shapes and memories were fragmented and meaningless. Images from their childhood collided and overlapped with those of the town. The faces of parents and relatives were shrunken and doll-like; shell-encrusted things, taunted by jokes and mocking captions. Or, they appeared in the guise of animals; family pets or stuffed toy bears, with eyes of glass or buttons.

And when the last of the old Europe had passed from view, into the sea; the banality of the moment, devoid of memory, love and beauty, returned. The stained walls of boutique, restaurant and gift shop were scrubbed and the flotsam from the river, removed and buried.

## *The Last Gold of Decayed Stars*

At the hotel, Anna returned to her room, still wearing the jacket she had pulled on, as she hurried to the Keeper's house; packed and settled her account at reception. As she reached for her purse, something fell to the floor. It was her brooch, its folds lifeless and unresponsive to her touch. She opened her grandmother's locket and the strands of hair were dry and grizzled; the memory of the gold dying as the shards of the head dispersed.



When the tidal surges, in the cave of the rose-red rock, had finished their sport with Francesca, she was washed into the little rowing boat, that clung stubbornly to the shore. The gold and silver lockets of the lovers, covered her nakedness and, as night fell, and the boat drifted out to sea, they shone like stars. Sea eagles watched their glow, from Trieste, to the islands of Sibenik, past the Otranto Strait and the Ionian Isles, as the boat rose and fell, braving the waves. And under the moon and stars, that had seen the creation of the head of hammered gold and listened to the incantations of the dreamers of Byzantium, it came to rest on the seabed, amongst the sea wrack and memory of the old world.





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of Decayed Stars*

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