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Forbidden Line

Written by Paul Stanbridge

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Paul Stanbridge

FORBIDDEN LINE

GALLEY BEGGAR PRESS



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In memory of my brother Mark, 1979–2015

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, events and incidents are used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

PROLOGUE

Varied and numerous are the effects of lightning strike upon the person.

Among the more extraordinary we must include Martin Luther's sudden decision, in rejection of the marriage arranged by his father, to join the Augustinian hermits at an Erfurt monastery following that electrical fulmination, on the second day of July 1505, which threw him to the ground in the woods close to Stotternheim.

(Lightning, it is said, lies at the origin of all life. Lashing primordial rock through volcanic gas, the initial abiogenetic spark, synthesising in one small transgressive leap across the line dividing the inorganic from what-may-be: the possibility of all life on earth. By curious chance, the Indo-European cultures make correct identification as a result: their thunder god the king of all gods.)

Consider then this low hill, on a midnight, beside the dark hulk of the decommissioned water tower, at the heart of an East Anglian town, here: an upward streamer, a pretty capillary of purple fire, reaching up from the head of him. From the swagging belly of the cloud a jagged line of light cast down through the storm, angling this way and that, branching off into lesser channels, zagging over the rain-soaked town, following the path best prepared for it by the ionizing air; this stepped leader choosing at the final moment not the lightning rod of the tower but the streamer – the man – until the two meet in a kiss of opposites,

and the great cloud discharges itself deep into the earth through him, and the air around the jagged channel superheated to the temperature of the sun explodes in celebration.

Varied and numerous are the effects of lightning strike upon the person, none perhaps so unusual as the sudden acquisition, by the man struck, of such a power of memory as might be capable of the formation of entire cultures, though he lie as good as dead in the street this night.

I

Then came the rising of the sun seeking out the edges of things. Redeeming the town of its nightstorm: the mazy light. The grey dawn stirring into retreat, cat-like withdrawing round the many corners of the town; day-made angles emerging. The town draped over the hill, and the sun building shadows in its streets. The buildings making shape in the clarifying air. The hill and the wet lowland meadow beyond and the river dividing it. The shadows forming, creeping down the buildings; the streets now still, and the river running its course. The streetlights switching off; the windings of the town declaring the day.

There, emerging out of the dawn-grey light, visible for miles around, the shallow apex of the water tower; high within it, two men.

From that morning on, the hermit tends to his unconscious patient. Unwrapping the linen cloth, he cleans and reapplies unguents to the wounds, binds on fresh bandages and boils the old in a great copper kettle. Pale the body he washes as if an alabaster Christ, or the Christ Himself, for he values the life of the patient inordinately. In whispers he tells of what they will achieve, though he has yet to learn his name. Urging his patient on to recovery through three days and nights he administers a light broth to his unmoving lips. Words of his grand orations drift through the large iron chamber in which he makes his home, no less fragmentary than the shards of experience which the patient's unconscious mind places

before itself; each of these latter tumbling, turning through free space, as if the ur-matter of an unmade personality; similar, one to another, only in the aimlessness and sourcelessness of their drifting predicament – the lightning strike re-making him.

The third night. The patient wakes into a delirium of smashed memories, of auditory and optical hallucinations. Phantom shocks travel down his limbs to his peripheries, where they fizz and sputter and eventually spend themselves. Like clouds before the sun, memories come and go. At times there is her face and nothing else, the green eyes, beautiful in the way an ocelot's face is beautiful; or else not her, but instead a pale yellow corn field rustling all around him in waves and the sense of love somewhere amorphous inside and waiting to be brought out by some as yet unmet particular. A child and adult at once, he dwells in all times concurrent. He travels through innumerable moments, and feels repeated again and again the great vertiginous rush of being born into himself, a surging up into the present moment, though not yet into consciousness. Delirious moans echo all night from his mouth through the dark space as the hermit his carer works at the desk under lamplight, parsing the great discourses of the West until they collapse, the words falling down soundless as autumn leaves.

It was on the morning of the fourth day that Isaiah Olm came out of his fever. The fear within subsided, and dawn brought gradually a soft grey light into the strange room through the small aperture above his head.

He opened his eyes: an iron chamber, perhaps forty feet in length and breadth, with a spiral stairwell opening up at its centre like a navel. The only light came through the jagged hole in the ceiling close to one of the walls above his head; the walls themselves not so much walls as a ribcage: great sheets of iron, attached with huge domed rivets one to another, and at each junction, every few feet, triangular iron ties running from the ceiling down to the floor. The metal sent reverberations popping and creaking through the broad shallow chamber as it heated gradually in the growing morning. He attempted to move, but could not.

Isaiah closed his eyes and let his head fall back. The beads of sweat standing on his forehead quivered; the wet hair at the nape of his neck he felt vividly cold. Every sense experience was involuted with pain – as if pain was the sole index of livingness.

From some unseen place in the dull far reaches of the cell he heard someone mutter to himself, the voice familiar though unplaceable. Indistinct words reverberated through the chamber and drained down the stairwell.

Again, Isaiah forced open his eyes. The ancient paint lay thick around every joint and sheet and rivet, or else flaked off in great rusted crusts to reveal the strata of many repeated paintings. A bed of sorts lay rumpled towards the centre of the cell. Deep into his flank – a jab of pain.

Again, mutterings came from the dark side of the room; something fell, and great acoustic disturbance ensued, running round the cell, amplified by the vast metal soundbox he appeared to be in.

Again, Isaiah attempted to move. He managed to turn his head a little as the crashing continued unabated, and look into the gloom. Upon the triangular metal ties which supported the walls of the chamber had been contrived a makeshift system of shelving; this ran all along the walls, some of it an advanced state of collapse, though managing still to bear up an assembly of every imaginable object: vessels of infinite variety as to shape and size; instruments both mechanical and musical; books of every dimension, as well, perhaps, as of every subject; assorted haberdashery, bibelots, trinkets, knick-knacks, bric-a-brac and what-have-you, all of manifest inutility; scraps of broken machinery which thrust teeth and claws into the air as if through the portal of some bestial mausoleum; offcuts of metals, plastics, rubbers, woods, fabrics; canisters of gas and liquid, many leaking, and forming with the substances contained putrefied cumuli of filthy spume; pipes and cables coiled sinuously into precariously nesting mounds of disorder; tools of menacing design and proportion. The light of the morning flowed through the ragged hole in the roof, though could not penetrate to the far reaches of the cell, such were its proportions and the intricate tangle of matter within. Dust coated thickly every surface upwardly aspectant.

There came a shout from the far reaches of the cell, and the commotion finally ended.

A slithering sound, and slow steps towards Isaiah, until:

This figure emerged out of the farther darkness:

Donald J. Waswill.

He carried a pocket knife in one hand and dragged a frayed duffel bag over the ribbed iron floor in the other. A thin old man, still muttering to himself; Isaiah looked him up, and looked him down. Was it a man?

—So you are awake! he said to Isaiah. I wonder if you know my face.

He brought this part of his body close to the eyes of his patient for inspection.

Isaiah answered with a barely perceptible shake of his head. What lines it had upon it! Ancient, and narrow like a knackered old ass's; a long face of the driest paper, or of leather, as to the books and their covers which he lived amongst as hermit. The eyes an extraordinary yellow.

—But your voice, said Isaiah. The sounds——

—It is as the blackbird's, is it not?

Not knowing what to say to this, Isaiah said nothing at all.

—Anyway, said Don. I will introduce myself to you. I am Don Waswill. And before I even know your name, I can tell what you are thinking: you are thinking that there is no possibility that this bag is big enough to hold all that we need to carry.

He held the shabby duffel bag up for inspection. Isaiah lay there immobile, hearing every word this man said play back in his mind in a scrambled mass of repetitions. What had happened? Can a mind become so disorganised as to disengage from time? Concentrating with effort, he wondered which was the judicious and which the injudicious word of reply. In the end, he said simply his name.

—But people call me Is. Where am I?

—Ha! replied Don, and, throwing the duffel bag on to the floor, he sat on a low stool beside Is's makeshift bed and began cleaning the blade of his pocketknife.

Is listened as the old man's exclamation echoed in the interior of his listening mind. Time was all rucked up, grit in the gears, something very wrong. For a distraction he looked around the room again. Where *was* he? What kind of a place had such walls, floor, ceiling. It was the belly of an iron whale! He turned back to this Don, who cleaned and sharpened and cleaned again his pocket knife with whetstone, oil and rag, smiling or frowning at the inward weather of his thoughts. A reposeful silence filled the room, save for the occasional clang of the expanding iron and the faint hush of passing traffic which found its way over the Roman wall of the town, up through the gently rustling trees, and into the hole high in the roof, full of sibilants like the push and drag of a distant sea over shingle.

—You kept calling out *Ruth* last night, said Don. What is Ruth?

At the mention of her name, the habitual bright openness of Is's face turned in upon itself, shrank back, fled like a frighted mollusc, and then ingloriously expired, as if in a cloud of its own ink. O sorrow.

Don wiped a streak of black oil on to his rag and tested the edge of his knife with a thumb.

—What is Ruth? he repeated.

A great sigh emanated from his patient's mouth as the question echoed through the crystalline chambers of his now-vivid memory. O time.

—She is – was – my wife.

—Ah, said Don.

—She kicked me out.

—When? asked Don, hastily adding afterwards: (Not that the past has any reality to it).

—The day I——

He faultered.

———the last day I remember. The day of the storm. She says I'm not a man.

—Ha! said Don again, this time with genuine joy. Ruth, or perhaps Ruthless.

—She is both.

—Well, you needn't worry about any of that any more, said Don, inspecting the curve of his knife's blade first one way then the other against the silhouetting light of the improvised window above.

—But what about my children? If I become a man, perhaps she will take me back.

Don gave late echo to the earlier sigh of his patient.

—I am ill-equipped to advise you on the subject of women. Rumour has it that the touch of a woman is akin to the chrism, though I have long been an heretic of love both conjugal and passionate, as will my excommunication here to this solitude you find me in attest.

Don cast his eyes about the lowly den as if in confirmation of his words – words which piled up in the convalescent's mind like pebbles hushed up against the shore by a gentle wave. There was most certainly something gone wrong in his brain.

—I wonder, Don continued with mischief in his eyes, how it is that you plan on becoming more of a man. You would need to know what constituted a man in the first place.

Isaiah shrugged with only the muscles of his face.

—Aren't there an infinite number of ways of obliging her? You could be indolent, hateful, cowardly, spiteful, warring, drunk. Where is the model for a man in this day? In any day? Isn't the whole history of man suffering from a surfeit of, well, *men*. But don't talk to me of history, that disgusting imposter. Perhaps Wife Ruthless meant that you should be *less* of a man, and thereby more of a *mensch*.

—I've never really known what she meant about anything, said Is.

—Such is the nature of words, said Don, as well as of marriage. But not for much longer! Fame beckons! And there will be time enough to discover how to be less or more of a man, whichever way your fancy takes you, for we shall be some weeks at our task (not that weeks have any real existence). We must prepare ourselves!

—Prepare?

—For our adventuring!

Is looked at the man before him in perplexity, who had risen and picked up the duffel bag again.

—I want to go home, said Is, and he struggled and failed to move.

Don looked imperiously down at his patient.

—You have nowhere to go, no time to be there, and, owing to your injuries, no means of transit. You should cease struggling, for it will benefit you naught, unless you enjoy pain.

—I want to go home, said Is again, and he struggled and failed again.

—You have no home, said Don in a violent outburst, dropping the heavy whetstone which he had used as an instrument of gesticulative emphasis on to the iron floor and causing a thunderous boom to travel round the chamber. Is stopped immediately: the admonitory words travelled also round the chamber of his mind. When would this distortion to time clear?

—Your place is at my side, adventuring with me, to the salvation of Being! said Don. It is decided that you will attend me, and be my servant, unto our very great glory. The lightning has proclaimed it!

Is looked into the striated face of his host – which peered aloofly down upon him, suffused, as it seemed, with some obscure notion of its possessor's unique grace – and began crying. Don again dropped the duffel bag and leapt to Is's side.

—What in the name of St. Isidore of Seville is happening to your eyes! he said. They are melting!

—You are mad, said Is, whose tears flowed unabated.

—I will appear mad to you, and so I will be accounted by everyone else from the point of view of the rat-hole of our civilization, an insult to rats as it happens. But I am not the one with the melty eyes!

As Don fussed about him, Is allowed the tears to flow down his cheeks; and in fact even if he had wanted to, he could not have stopped them, so complete was his grief, and so completely was he unable to move. Don settled beside the man he would call his friend, reached out to the rivulet upon his cheek, and touched it. A droplet formed upon the tip of his finger; he tasted.

—Salt!

—Please tell me where I am, said Is in a voice so plaintive that Don took pity on him, though not without the following preamble, as necessary as it is informative.

—Neither duration of Time nor extension in Space have any real existence, and so your question is nonsensical. But as you were not to know that, and as there is salt coming out of your eyes, and as you are an injured thing, I will formulate a reply according to common parlance: you are in the tank of a water tower.

Is's tears ceased.

—Jumbo? he said.

—If by Jumbo you mean Colchester's decommissioned water tower, then that is precisely where most people would take you to be (though I can only reiterate that they would be in error, for the reasons outlined earlier).

Is stared up at the iron ribs of the room without listening to Don. Jumbo! He was actually within its tank! The building he had looked at across the town of his birth every day; every day witnessing the shallow apex of its coppergreen roof atop the red brick arches – a lovely meeting of colours – appearing to move about the town as he made passage through it, as if a ship moving across an expanse of sea, nearer, then farther, then nearer again, continually rotating its planes into new orders; but no, not a ship, more of a harbour, for this, the water tower, was the image that intoned home to his sentimental heart.

—Jumbo, he said again.

—It is not a bad place to make one's home, said Don.

Indeed it was not. Is felt calmed by the notion that he was up in the sky above the town inside Jumbo; the pain that resided in every joint of his body lessened a little.

—Have your eyes stopped melting now? said Don.

Is nodded.

—Then I hope you don't mind if we discuss what needs discussing: packing.

Once more he reached down and picked up the enormous duffel bag.

—Packing? said Is.

—Packing for our adventure. Even though there is no such thing as the future, it pays to be prepared. And as my servant, you will feel the want of the necessary equipment more than me.

—Servant?

—Yes, servant. But protest not; I saved your life. And you'll be ten times the man that even Aristotle was when we've achieved our aim, and Wife Ruthless will curl up on your lap like a cat.

Is made visible articulation of scepticism through the use of the muscles of his face.

—You are welcome to go grovelling back to Wife Ruthless in your current state, said Don. Though even if she takes pity on you she'll undoubtedly spurn you before the next time the moon comes laughing round to you for having pleaded pity in the first place. Serve me, attain fame, and then you should have the pick of all the Ruths of the world.

Again the weight of that word hit Is deep in the chest. The line of his thought was beleaguered with images, words, textures, colours. Ah, Ruth. Worse by far than the pain at his side, whichever chemical it is which confers sorrow to the human heart again spurted deep into his tender interior.

—How much more or less of a man do I need to be? said Is.

—I cannot know. It is only upon concluding our adventuring that all things shall become knowable in the twinkling of an eye. Understand this: if you serve me, you will be ameliorated, and thereby cease to be the abortive specimen of mankind which you – along with everyone else – currently are. Wife Ruthless will witness your transformation, and she would be a fool indeed not to turn to you as if you were the sun.

—But Ruth hates the sun.

—And she a sunflower, Isaiah! Did not the inward folds of my rhetoric imply the heliotrope? Good Christ, it seems everything must be spelled out to you.

—Spelling wouldn't help; I can't read.

Don looked deep into Is's eyes.

—You, he said, are a miracle of perfect ignorance. It is this which makes you indispensable; the lightning chose well. Now say you will attend and serve me – the busy bee has no time for sorrow.

Is looked back into the yellow eyes of the peculiar man before him. It was true that he had no home – the echo from the door she had slammed ran down the street like a thunderclap. Faces appeared in the windows of the terrace to observe him in his shame. Love was, love was – no different to this physical suffering, except in its exquisiteness.

—I will do it, he said.

The yellow eyes flashed with pleasure.

—But why me? said Is.

His newly acquired master stood up and began moving about the chamber, gathering items from its recesses and throwing them into the duffel bag he dragged behind him.

—Tell me why it has to be me? repeated Is.

Don continued to move about the room.

—Tell me!

Don stopped fussing at his desk, leaned heavily on it with both hands, and turned.

—I cannot tell you.

A blank look on the servant's face. I cannot tell you. I cannot tell you. I cannot tell you. These repetitions were a nuisance, that was for certain.

—Why not?

Don scratched the grey whiskers of one gaunt jowl.

—This is no good at all, he muttered to himself. I cannot keep breaking my oath.

—What oath? asked Is. Or I won't come.

Silence filled the iron chamber as Don engaged in internal contention. He turned back to his desk and the shelves above it where thirteen large books of identical proportion and design stood in a line. He raised a hand and let it travel down their spines.

—You are a devious one, Isaiah. Know that this is the very final time I will break my oath: the solemn covenant between myself and my blessed Science, and the compact between my bride Time and I that forevermore I foreswear the notion that past and future have any reality. But before I go on and tell you this I wish to establish a covenant or compact between ourselves that you will serve me unto the ends of the earth.

—Okay, said Is.

Don looked at the wall for a time and mumbled sceptically to himself. Eventually, he relented.

—For many, many years, he began, I have lived and worked in the tank of this water tower at a single enterprise, and have sustained myself with rainwater and by catching the birds of the air for my food with snares. In just two weeks more I shall have been working on my *Encyclopaedia* for precisely Twenty-One years, which concludes its period of writing, this being the hallowed number at the very heart of my project. The book, when completed, will furnish the reader with the necessary knowledge to reject all falsity and live in truth. I will then put into action its teachings to the end that all Being shall be redeemed!

—It is absolutely true, continued Don, that there is no such thing as the past or the future, and that the myth of Cause and Effect which underlies all human reasoning, discourse and science is the greatest delusion in the history of the universe (though it is equally true that history cannot and does not have any real existence). Humanity has enslaved himself within the furrow of his reasoning, and now finds himself squeezed and squeezed by these self-imposed limits, though he enjoys being thus swaddled, for it makes him feel safe, and he calls it by the name Progress. By contrast, the true nature of the interaction of all entities in the universe is founded upon Chance. There is no preceding and proceeding; there is no chain, golden or otherwise. O Chance, thou very great Thing! And so at the conclusion of the writing of my great *Encyclopaedia*, whose progress has been mediated by Chance over a period of Twenty-One years of unerring work, we shall depart, and Chance

shall attend us like some tutelary spirit, directing us to the means by which all Being may be redeemed!

Is looked with weary-eyed perplexity at Don following the completion of this speech.

—Now here's where you come in, Don continued. By long meditation I have trained the mechanics of my eye and the chemistry of my visual cortex to process the percepts it gathers from the phenomena of the world at a speed far in excess of the capability of the starling or house-fly. This capability allowed me to witness from the walkway at the top of this water tower the number of times a cloud passed its electrical contents through you to the earth.

—Lightning! said Is.

—Know that a single bolt of lightning is the visible manifestation of numerous electrical discharges, and that you were struck not twice, but twice Twenty-One times.

—Twenty-one?

—Isaiah, I would ask that you refer to the hallowed number as Twenty-One rather than twenty-one in future.

—Yes.

—And call me sir. It is fitting.

—Okay. Why Twenty-One, sir?

—Because it is the length in centimetres of the spectral line of the hyperfine transition of hydrogen, of course! It is an irrefutable fact that the number Twenty-One is in some way the key to the restitution of all Being. You were struck by lightning twice Twenty-One times, though this enormous water tower with solid copper lightning conductor running its full length, from the pachydermous wind vane at its tip, deep down into the water table below, stood beside you. What are the chances of that happening? But Chance it was that chose you for me! In addition to this, I have become aware in but a few brief interlocutions with you that your ignorance is so entire that you are as similar as an adult of our time can be to mankind before he invented the means of constructing his infernal written record, and thereby that abortive offspring History.

Now, as I already mentioned, it will be precisely Twenty-One years since I first realised the significance of the hyperfine transition of hydrogen for the restitution of Being in fifteen days (not that I believe that days have any real existence; 'day' being merely a convenient way of referring to one rotation of the earth upon its axis – which, itself, is in actual fact an impossibility, owing to the non-existence of numerous non-entities to which the common mind bows its too-malleable credence). And so, in short, fifteen days time is when we shall depart. Until then, you should rest while I continue working, and we'll be primed and prepared when the 'day' comes.

—Will I be okay then, sir?

—You will mend, said Don. There is some severe burning to your wrist where the lightning vaporized your watch – witness the dangers of a belief in the reality of linear time! – and a nasty hole in your side. But I have been administering an unguent of pork fat, thornapple, elder and primrose twice daily to your burns. Soon you will be healed. And very soon afterwards, you will have the very great honour of carrying the work itself, my *Encyclopaedia of Being, Synthesised in Accordance with the Eternal Verities Delineated by the Spectral Line of the Hyperfine Transition of Hydrogen*.

Here, Don gestured in a proud sweep before his bookshelf at the thirteen large volumes arranged there.

—Yours?

—That's right. These thirteen books began their existence as the 1928–33 edition, with Supplement, of the *New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, a most pernicious work in its definitions, though it be a valuable storehouse of historical forms. As everything which is wrong with the world can be reduced to what is wrong with *words*, I have taken the 440,000 words within these volumes and merely corrected each entry with an encyclopaedic account based on the eternal lesson offered by the hyperfine transition of hydrogen. In short, my work is written tinily in the margins of these books. You should guard them well when you are their custodian.

All of a sudden the whole iron chamber became filled with the impossibly loud sound of a ringing bell. It clanged in a panic, and then settled into a gentle peal; a faint whooping sound came from without.

—Ha! said Don, and he went from his desk over to the wall beyond, where he stilled the bell – pulling slack the cord threaded through its cannons – and then drew it down, to the end that as if by magic there was delivered through a pipe in the roof tethered by its foot a fat and healthy wood pigeon. Its wings woofed hollowly at the air, stilled, and then woofed again in quick grey thrusts with the panic of the bird.

—Luncheon! said Don.

And the word rang through Is's mind to infinite iteration.