

Dead Letters

By

P.J. MURPHY

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Chapter 1 – If You Want to Find Me...

Most people assumed that Richard's disappearance was a publicity stunt, but I knew better. He would have never lowered himself to that. No, something terrible must have happened.

Besides, his publisher didn't seize the opportunity to release another novel while the talk was all conspiracy and kidnap. Pretty soon, the critics sensed that enough time had passed that it was now appropriate to reappraise his work and, well, criticise. The window for new material passed quickly. Before long, nobody was talking about Richard Debden – and if ever they did, it was to point out that he had a history of instability. It's disquieting how easy it is to write off a life without any real explanation.

After a few months, the police drew a line under the matter, finding no evidence of foul play. They deemed it unlikely that this was an insurance scam, since he had no life insurance. There weren't any terrorists, human traffickers or drug cartels in the picture either. They did note that Richard had emptied his bank accounts after

vanishing, but apparently that isn't unusual when someone doesn't want to be tracked down.

'Sometimes people just decide they want to disappear,' they told his parents. 'In most of these cases, all you can do is wait. They come back in their own time.'

Statistic-hungry, I looked it up. In ninety-nine per cent of cases, the missing person is found within a year. That's probably why, three-hundred-and-sixty-six days later, his family held a small service to commemorate his passing. They did it partly to tempt him to reveal himself. The Richard I knew could never have resisted the drama of reappearing at his own funeral.

It was nice to be invited, but I felt a nagging disappointment throughout the ceremony. Main point: he didn't turn up. Besides that, the whole thing lacked grandeur. Was this truly the send-off my friend deserved – thirty-or-so of us gathered in the chapel of a minor Cambridge college? Was that the sum total of the impact Richard had made on the world? It should have been a cathedral, all rich velvet and black, with standing room only and a tearful throng gushing into the court outside. Those were the funerals of Richard's stories. Tragedy and unbearable loss. Rivers of tears. That was the send-off he deserved. Not this, this... mediocrity.

This wasn't a funeral, though, was it? That was the root of the problem. No one knew how they were supposed to behave. Were we mourning? No, they had billed this as a celebration of Richard's life. I, for one, wasn't ready to accept that it was over.

I sought out Richard's parents to offer my condolences. Mr. Debden had sunken eyes, and his pursed lips were hidden beneath an overgrown grey

moustache. Mrs. Debden flapped a black handkerchief around as she spoke. Her face was pale, and she rarely made eye contact. But, overall, they seemed to be coping well. They had been trained for this moment by Richard's various crises.

I left soon afterwards and skipped the 'informal' drinks proposed by some old university friends who had opted, callously, to seize the opportunity for a reunion. I couldn't face the conversation, the theories about what might have happened to Richard, nor the image we'd settle on of him somehow riding off into the sunset when, deep down, most people believed he was dead. He was unstable, wasn't he? He'd threatened to end his own life before. It had only been a matter of time.

I didn't have any desire, either, to hear the rehashed tales of his youth: the drunken exploits, the bruised mornings. Everyone would be careful to overlook the fact that all those stories were from at least eight or nine years ago when we lived together in this city, before graduation scattered us back across the country. Those past few years, I had only communicated with Richard via the odd email, the shared link, or comment on a status update; the internet's imitation of friendship. I knew that if I stayed it would become evident that I – like everyone else – had failed him.

I had booked a room in town, so I was stuck in Cambridge for the night. I decided to kill a few hours wandering around, visiting places that reminded me of Richard. I stopped by the green where he would share his love of poetry every Saturday morning, reading aloud to people hurrying from one shopping centre to another. Next, I visited the square where we queued to graduate, and he vomited into a drain to the delight of

the enthralled tourists. I walked back along the river, passing boathouses where we offered ourselves as sacrifices to our college rowing team's honour on the toughest, coldest mornings known to man. I hadn't been there in ten years, but Richard's writing, inspired by the architecture, had kept those places alive for me. In a funny way, I felt like I had still known him through his novels, over those past few years. He just hadn't known me.

It was dark when I got back to the hotel. Saturday night revellers were roaming the streets, but it was too early for sleep. I had resolved to lock myself in my room and dip into the minibar until the world became hazy. It would be my personal tribute to Richard: the alcohol and prescription medication that had at times liberated and at others confined him, the oblivion to which, one way or another, he was now consigned.

Amy caught me waiting for the lift.

'You didn't think you'd get away without saying hello, did you?'

Her voice was richer than I remembered, but it retained its playful lilt. I turned and saw that she looked the same as before, just mellowed, with laughter lines around her lips and slight stains beneath her eyes.

My heart leapt, but my brain clamped down every muscle. I wasn't ready to face her. Amy was Richard's long-serving girlfriend and medium-serving ex. If Richard really was dead, she was the closest thing he had to a widow.

Except... except, she always found a way to surprise me.

'Hello... wow!' I blurted out.

'Try something new, Chris. I've had that reaction all day.'

Amy had changed her look. Gone was the severe bowl haircut she sported throughout university. She had grown out her hair, and it suited her. More significantly, she was visibly pregnant. Usually, I would avoid jumping to this conclusion, aware of the social *faux pas* possible in this age of refined sugar, but this was beyond question. Her weight gain was almost exclusively centred on her belly, to which her hands moved instinctively as I gazed at it.

‘Congratulations?’ I ventured.

Amy rolled her eyes. ‘Epic fail!’ Still, she took my hand. ‘Come on, we’ve got some catching up to do.’

She led me to a table in the corner of the hotel bar, where she had been waiting, apparently, for “hours” (I remain unable to reconcile her timeline of events, but let’s not dwell on it further here). This place was all marble and felt-lined benches. We were alone, thanks to bar prices scandalous enough to drive away all but the most desperate of alcoholics.

Amy slid herself along the bench and let out a great sigh.

‘Everything’s so much effort these days!’ She stroked her fingers over her bump.

I rubbed my stomach, which had also grown noticeably larger since the last time we saw each other. ‘Tell me about it.’

When I returned with the drinks (a double gin and tonic for me, just the tonic for her), I asked her, ‘So, how many months?’

‘Twenty-eight weeks,’ Amy said. Then, noticing that her answer had started the cogs in my brain whirring, she added, ‘That’s seven months. Baby’s due mid-October.’

‘And the father?’

‘He was born in January.’

‘Come on! Who is he?’

‘His name’s Claude,’ she said grudgingly. ‘He’s a photographer. We met a few months after Richard and I finished, and, well, things just grew from there.’

‘Apparently.’

Amy laughed. ‘You haven’t changed, have you? It’s good to see you. How long has it been? A few Christmases now...’

‘Work’s been non-stop. I’ve had to pass up on so many get-togethers.’

The truth was I hadn’t seen her or Richard since they split up five years earlier. It was nothing personal; I hadn’t seen anybody else, either, not apart from family or work colleagues. My job had a lot to answer for.

‘You managed today, though.’

‘I had to.’ I took a sip, reflecting on this. ‘Richard always had a way of pulling us together.’

Amy smiled wanly. ‘Most of the time.’

The same qualities that made Richard great fun to be around made it impossible to stay. I remember one spring, the first vaguely warm day of the year, he organised a gathering for Amy’s birthday. This must have been a year or two after we graduated. He insisted on preparing the first barbecue of the year, boasting that he would be the only person in the country out in their garden with kitchen utensils in hand. I remember him enthusing over the phone about how he was going to put up a tent to shelter us from the wind. I humoured him, wary of getting too involved.

When I arrived, he was in the tent. From the back door of their flat, I listened to his sobs over the heavy rain. Amy stood there with me. Her eyes were weary.

There would be no consoling him.

In the end, he and I drank ourselves into unconsciousness in the tent, pontificating to each other about life, death and the pointlessness of it all. Amy went to bed, gathering strength for the swing back the other way.

It wasn't astonishing that they split up, but I couldn't imagine how it had happened. Amy always had a way of coping, and Richard – even in his darkest hour – was a captivating person to be around. The colours were always that much brighter with him, and the contrast much starker. Every object had a black outline, as in a comic book. You experienced everything to its fullest extent. *Everything*.

'I didn't expect to see you here,' I said.

'Me neither,' Amy replied, 'but when it came to it...' She paused, before changing track. 'So, what do you make of Richard's disappearance? Any theories?'

I took a long sip of my drink. 'I'm sure you've heard more than enough theories today.'

'You'd be surprised! We've talked about everything but. It was strange, like people were afraid to mention him. I don't know if that's because they think he's alive or dead.'

'And how is everyone?'

Amy took an inward breath. 'The uni bunch? Same as ever, really. It's funny how we fall into old habits when we're together, like no time has passed at all. We joked around a lot. It was all fine. I left when Shelley got out her guitar and started singing a song she'd written for Richard. Something about a "Flame in the Breeze." It sounded vaguely familiar.'

I nodded my head in sympathy.

'Ben's still in investment banking,' Amy continued.

‘Somehow, he managed to get a promotion out of the banking crisis, so he’s getting even richer, shifting around non-existent money. Dave’s a florist now, though I suspect that might be an MI5 cover. He was never really that good with his hands.’

‘Thus speaks the voice of experience.’

Amy glared at me. ‘What happens in freshers’ week stays in freshers’ week.’

‘I never agreed to that,’ I said. ‘And you? What have you been up to?’

‘I’ve been around here, lecturing mainly, a couple of exhibitions.’

‘...and that’s how you met Claude?’

Amy nodded. ‘What about you, Mr. *“Work’s Been Non-Stop”*? What is it exactly you do that’s so important? The last I heard it was something to do with traffic.’

‘Still is,’ I said. ‘But you don’t want to hear about that.’

‘Come on! You’ve got to tell me *something* about yourself. Seeing anyone?’

I shifted uncomfortably. Despite the pretext of discussing careers, Amy was more interested in my romantic life. It was the same with my parents, who did little to hide their concern that I had chosen a life of celibacy, and that the prospects of grandchildren were next to zero.

‘I’m between girlfriends right now,’ I said.

Amy laughed. ‘You’ve been using that line since we were eighteen!’

‘It’s a good line!’

‘Whatever, Chris. You know, now’s the time. Believe it or not, you’re at your physical peak. If you don’t do something now, it’ll be too late. In a few years,

everyone will have paired off, and you'll be old and lonely and waiting for people to divorce so you can pick off the scraps.'

'Thanks,' I muttered. 'That's a lovely thought.' It was, without a doubt, time to change the subject. 'Anyway, you haven't told me what *you* think happened to Richard. When did you see him last? How was he? Any hint he might disappear off the face of the planet?'

'For that, we need another round.' Amy held up her empty glass. 'Same again. Actually, make it a double!'

I gestured to the barman, who seemed a little perplexed when I ordered a double tonic water, but he went ahead and poured it anyway. Amy waited until the drinks had been brought over before she said:

'I haven't spoken to Richard since *Pursuit into Shadow*.'

'Ah,' I said. 'I wondered if it might be that.'

Pursuit into Shadow was Richard's most recent novel, published almost four years earlier. It was a departure from his previous work, which was consistently high fantasy featuring elves, dwarfs, orcs and trolls – rip-offs of *Lord of the Rings*, basically, but the crowds still lapped it up. *Pursuit into Shadow* was a fantasy piece, too, but it contained only a handful of characters. The monsters that usually inhabited his worlds were gone, replaced by an ever-present sense of menace. The story followed General Avadar, head of the Royal Guard, pursuing his missing ward, Princess Saria, who was abducted in the first chapter. Avadar tracked her captors, persevering long after everyone else had given up. He faced every challenge and endured every hardship, all the punishments that flesh and spirit can bear. By the end of the book, he was a mere shadow of his former self. And Saria's spirit was corrupted a little

each day by the dark force that held her and sought to make her its own, body and soul. Page by page, her innocence faded, her eyes darkened, and her body became a puppet to the desires of darkness. When the two finally came face to face, they no longer recognised each other.

Pursuit into Shadow was written the winter after Amy left Richard. He locked himself in his flat and wrote until he had expunged all the bitterness and all the despair. A break-up album in the form of a novel. Richard imagining Amy in the arms of another.

‘It terrified me,’ Amy said.

‘You read it?’

‘I didn’t have to. It was all over the media: the “true meaning of his words.” Even if I could have avoided that, I had well-meaning idiots phoning to see how I was getting on.’

‘That’s the thing about being involved with an author,’ I said. ‘Your dirty linen gets washed in public, no matter how cryptic they try to make their writing.’

Amy shook her head. ‘It wasn’t my dirty linen. It was his. He came across like some kind of maniac. Do you have any idea how frightening it is to be loved so obsessively?’

I smiled. I’ve no idea why. ‘No, I don’t.’

‘Other men I’ve been with, it’s never been like that when it’s ended. Maybe the odd phone call or drunken visit. I could cope with that. Not Richard. He never did any of that regular stuff. He just holed himself up and wrote things he would never have told me straight. It was like he couldn’t pursue me himself, so he sent one of his characters to do it.’

‘Writing was the only way he could express the things he felt. Setting it in a different world somehow

liberated him. 'That's why I was so worried when he told me he was stopping.'

Amy sat up. 'He told you what?'

'We were emailing, you see, right up until last year. Stupid stuff, mostly, but towards the end, he told me he'd had enough of writing. He said *Pursuit* would be his last novel; there was no way he could follow it. You were asking me about theories earlier. Well, here's mine: the way I see it, only a limited number of things could have happened to Richard. He had no money troubles and enough prescription medication that I couldn't see him getting involved in other drugs. There's no way he's been kidnapped – who would pay the ransom, and what human trafficking ring would have him? No, he's either taken up the life of a hermit, or he's done something stupid to himself. Writing was his coping mechanism. Ever since I got the news that he'd gone missing, I haven't been able to shake the feeling it wouldn't have happened if he hadn't stopped writing.'

Amy reflected on this for a few seconds. Then she smiled as though she had satisfied herself of something.

'Can I tell you something, Chris? First, you have to promise me you'll keep quiet about it.'

'Of course.'

Who was I going to tell, exactly?

Amy moved in close and lowered her voice to a whisper. 'He didn't stop writing. I have it upstairs in my room. *Dead Letters*. Richard Debden's final novel.'

* * *

Richard Debden's Disappearance: The Facts.

DEAD LETTERS

Thus is headed the first sheet of the reporter's notebook I bought especially. I turn to it now, in one of many bouts of procrastination I'll have before I finish writing this all down. I intended to use it as an investigative tool, rather than a writing aid, but it was a waste of time, even for that purpose. In total, I managed to fill only five pages with thoughts and clues before consigning it to the same drawer I keep all the other part-filled notebooks I've bought over the years.

I was lucky to gather as much information as I did, cobbling it together mainly from titbits his mother and Amy fed me. Richard managed to keep his private life very private. Still, there's some helpful information in there:

Last seen: 5th July (Public Library). Richard lived alone; the last contact with his parents was their bi-annual phone call.

Bank activity: Several large cash withdrawals in April-June. Accounts emptied 27th July. Police unable to confirm identity of individual behind these transactions.

Disappearance reported by: Richard's agent – calls unreturned for two weeks.

Holiday plans: None known.

Connection to shady characters: Unknown.

Potential leads: Dead Letters.

* * *

Amy closed the door to her hotel room and rattled the latch into place. She gestured towards the package on the bedside cabinet.

'It came in the post the other day. With this.'

She handed me a piece of paper, folded in two. It was fine, heavy – the kind of paper they used for love

letters in the days before email murdered romance. In fountain pen, the sentence, “*If you want to find me, search within these pages.*”

In the weeks that followed, those words would come to haunt me.

‘The address is in the same handwriting,’ Amy said. ‘It’s definitely Richard’s.’

‘That means he was still alive last week.’

‘Assuming he didn’t write it earlier and get someone else to post it.’

I sat on the bed to take a closer look at the package. It was still clothed in brown paper, torn open carefully. I sought out the postmark. Peterborough. Very little help there. I had temped one Christmas in a sorting office, so knew how they work. Peterborough was the main hub for a big chunk of East Anglia.

Inside, the pages were bound together with a length of string. The title page was blank, apart from the words, DEAD LETTERS *by* RICHARD DEBDEN. He was never all that good at titles.

‘You should tell the police about this,’ I said.

‘Probably,’ Amy said. ‘But I doubt that would get us very far. They interviewed me, you know? A complete box-ticking exercise. “Does Richard have any enemies?” Such a strange question. I can’t think of anyone I’d describe as my enemy; the notion seems positively medieval. And they spent most of the time repeating – over and over – that if someone wants to be lost, there’s little they can do to find them.’

‘Even so...’

‘No,’ Amy said firmly. ‘They wouldn’t check anything out. They’d just tell me that this package proves Richard is still around, playing tricks on us, wasting police time. You’re the only one that can help.’

‘That’s why I came today. That’s why I waited for you.’
‘Me?’

‘I haven’t been able to read a single page. I can’t, not after *Pursuit*. Imagine if it’s more of the same, just more deranged. But maybe you can play his game.’

“‘*Search within these pages*’?” I said.

‘It’s pretty literal, I admit,’ Amy said, ‘but there’s not a huge amount of room for interpretation, either. This novel will lead us to Richard. If you can’t do it, no one can. Next to me, you know Richard better than anyone.’

I blinked. How could that be true? Not now, not after all this time. Back at university, maybe, when the three of us did everything together. It felt natural, you know, even though they were a couple. I never felt like I was intruding, just enjoying time with two friends I loved equally. In retrospect, I wonder whether they enjoyed my company as much or were just too polite to tell me to piss off and give them some privacy. Maybe I was a curiosity to them, a distraction, a substitute for having a pet. At the time, I didn’t care. Even after university, we were inseparable during those first few years after being released out into the world, with no parents or educational timetables to bind us. Those days had long since passed.

‘You want me to read it?’ I asked unenthusiastically.

Don’t get me wrong – I was desperate to get my hands on those pages – but everything about this seemed wrong. We couldn’t keep this secret, not if there was a chance Richard was still alive somewhere. The police, with better resources and techniques than us, could locate him in half the time we would need. Was I honestly ready to take on the responsibility of finding him? And what about his family? Surely, they

had a right to know?

Despite all this, I noticed my fingers picking away at the knot in the string binding the pages. I had just about got it undone when Amy laid her hand on mine.

‘Not here,’ she said. ‘Take it away with you.’

I looked up at her, thinking at first that she was joking. Yes, Richard must have burned some serious bridges with *Pursuit into Shadow*, but could she honestly not bear to read a single word he had written?

‘I do want to know what’s in there if it helps us find him,’ she assured me. ‘But right now, I’m not sure I could make it past the first line.’

I retied the string in a bow and pulled the brown paper back over the pages. Only then did I realise that there had been a third presence with us in that hotel room. With his words covered, Richard was gone again, and Amy and I stood alone. I noticed for the first time how fatigued she appeared.

We looked at each other for a few seconds. Neither of us knew entirely what to do. Then Amy started to rub her hands across her belly.

‘Well,’ I said. ‘I’d better let you sleep.’

‘Yes, you should,’ she said, and she kissed me on the cheek.

* * *

I went back to my flat in London the next morning and didn’t leave the house again all day. I read the entire manuscript, from its prologue through to the resonating three letters, END. I tore my eyes away only when the ache from my prone body became a distraction from Richard’s words, and my stomach yelled louder than my internal narrator.

I finished Richard's novel in the early hours of Monday morning. By then, I had migrated from the kitchen table to the sofa and finally to the bedroom. I rolled over like a glutton, fully sated, and stared at the ceiling; the blanket of mountain ranges in the plaster. I felt again that Richard was with me, just as he had been in that hotel room, and that he had been standing behind me all day as I read, looking over my shoulder and occasionally berating himself on a typo or grammatical error. He was in the chair in the corner of my room, just out of sight.

Sleep began to nibble at the edge of my consciousness; my thoughts tangled. Richard's hold on this reality weakened and, before long, I was alone. Not long afterwards, I dozed off, dreaming of *Dead Letters*.

Richard's final novel was about a boy evacuated to the countryside during the closing years of World War Two. Timothy was a ten-year-old, unable to forget a trauma that had rendered him mute. He met Imogen, a little older, an orphan who had been living in a forgotten room beneath the village post office. Brought together by the shadowy Postmaster, who directed their errands, the children delivered messages to ghosts, releasing them from limbo. Timothy and Imogen became firm friends as they liberated the lost souls of the village.

At first, I was confused by the change in the direction of Richard's writing. He was an established purveyor of high-fantasy fiction. Even *Pursuit into Shadow*, for all its emotional heft, had sorcery, swordfights and princesses in distress. *Dead Letters* had more in common with *The Railway Children*. Its narrative was cast in the deep reds and browns that photographs and costume dramas have conditioned us

to believe were the primary colours of the period. If that wasn't change enough, the idea of the main characters being children, rather than weathered heroes, was cause for enquiry.

None of that mattered.

After a few pages, Richard's words began to trigger something in me. I had approached the novel as a forensic analyst, primed to pick it apart for clues but, pretty soon, I got caught up in the story and forgot all about that. Still, Richard was never far, a shadowy presence across those pages. The writing was tinged with loss. I could picture Richard at his laptop, thinking back to all the things he regretted in his life. More than once, I cried. Would this be my final connection to my lost friend?

That's why I made a point of finishing the novel before turning in for the night. I needed to truly experience *Dead Letters* before I could begin to analyse it. I would start the following morning afresh.

Before taking another look at the first chapter, I made a point of showering and eating properly. Theories had formed as I dreamed. I returned to Richard's account of Timothy's first encounter with a ghost, reflecting on the scene and the poor spectre's tragic story. I thought about Amy, about how and why she feared Richard's words.

A little later, I phoned her.

'Do you have any idea what time it is?' Amy said.

I glanced down at my wristwatch. It had barely turned seven.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I've been reading Richard's novel, and I guess I lost track of time.'

A few moments of silence.

'I'm sorry,' I repeated. 'It's just... I think I know

why Richard sent you the manuscript.'

'You know where he is?' Amy was wide awake now.

'Not exactly.' I hesitated. I hadn't planned out this conversation properly. Finally, I settled on: 'Are you free today? Can we meet?'

'I don't know, Chris. It's difficult. Can't you just tell me over the phone?'

I gulped down my incredulity at her lack of enthusiasm. 'This is important.'

Wasn't it her that set me down this path? How could she bail on me so early? Now, of course, I realise that her actions had been less about passing the baton than the bomb.

'Listen,' I assured her, 'it will only take a few hours. I'll pick you up and take you there.'

'Where?' Amy's frown saturated her tone.

'Please,' I said, 'just trust me.'

* * *

I didn't tell Amy where we were going and refused to answer any of her other questions – mainly because they were all variations on the theme of "Have you found Richard, then?" I consented only to give her an overview of *Dead Letters*: its setting, story and characters. Nothing about my interpretation.

I had taken the day off work, reasoning that with the little sleep I'd had, I wouldn't be much good to anyone. I rejuvenated myself a little with coffee from the motorway services, and arrived at Amy's around lunchtime. It was another hour's drive from her house near Cambridge to our destination. She rustled up some sandwiches for the journey.

Amy must have had her suspicions as we

approached Colchester. I considered blindfolding her when we got out of the car but decided it wouldn't be a particularly socially acceptable thing to do to a pregnant woman. I'm not sure which part of my brain thought it might be okay for one that wasn't.

I led her along a path bounded on one side by a thick hedgerow and the other by an orchard. The leaf canopy blocked most of the sunlight, so the air was dank with English summer. Amy found it tough going with her "extra baggage." She complained that I hadn't told her to bring appropriate footwear. Whenever she protested, I tugged her by the hand and, when that didn't work, I reasoned with her that she had come this far; she might as well finish the journey.

When, finally, we reached our destination, she crossed her arms and pouted. It was just like old times.

'May I ask a question now?' she said.

I ignored her. I had been preparing this script in my head all the way there. 'Do you remember this place?'

Amy shrugged.

'The three of us came here,' I prompted. 'One summer. We'd had too much of the city, so we just got in Richard's car and drove. He said he knew this place from a childhood holiday and wanted to share it with us.'

Amy was unreadable behind her dark sunglasses.

'Don't you remember? We had a picnic under one of these trees. Stayed here for hours.'

'Yes, I remember,' Amy said at last. 'What's the point of all this?'

'It's in the novel.'

I pulled out the page in which Timothy and Imogen received instruction from the Postmaster, and read aloud:

"Besides the Roman road, proud and bold, lies the path you must take. It threads between two cottages and tunnels through the trees, down to the valley.

"There, a lake lies forgotten. A boathouse is rotting. Anglers hunch like gargoyles on wooden jetties, reanimating at the whim of the fish. The summer bugs cloud eyes, moving in with a sound like fighter planes. In the distance, a farmer's gun pounds.

"There, in that sacred place," said the Postmaster, "there you will find him."

"This is the place, isn't it?"

Amy pondered this for a while, wandering off and swinging around a tree like a child lost in a fairy paradise at the end of the garden.

This spot was beautiful. Beyond the orchard, the foliage revealed a body of water perhaps five hundred metres in width, entirely still and tranquil. We had stopped at one corner of the lake. The footpath continued to our left, accompanying a stream. The banks were shrouded with reeds and overhanging trees, making way here and there to small jetties. This site must have been popular for walking and fishing, but at that moment we were alone with the leaves, the water and the fragile sky.

"This is the place," Amy said.

Her voice was frail. I reached out and touched her shoulder.

"Please, just listen to this for a while. Then we can go."

I guided her to a toppled tree trunk next to the water. When I was sure she was sitting comfortably, I

turned to the next page and read to her from *Dead Letters*:

“He waits in the place she used to weep,” said the Postmaster. “Years now have passed. The tears are long since dry, and the flowers that once adorned his grave have long since withered. He is timeless now. All that has passed.”

Imogen led Timothy through the orchard and down to the lake. The ground was damp underfoot. The cloven hooves of the workhorses had cut through the turf, exposing the dark soil beneath. Leaves whispered in the wind. But it was not this sound that occupied Timothy’s attention. He could hear it now, stronger as they approached the lake: the sobs of a soul condemned to such stillness.

“When people pass through here, they see the beauty,” said Imogen. She tugged at Timothy’s hand when she felt him lag behind. “And they feel sadness, but they don’t know why. That is your gift.”

Timothy saw it then. Down by the water, a willow had split at the trunk, torn apart by the weight of its sorrow. There, the spectre sat. Its back was hunched, and it stared out across the water. Its form was ill-defined, all grey and shadow. Whenever Timothy looked away, it took him a moment to refocus and pick it out from the background.

“Can you see it?” said Imogen.

Timothy nodded. Couldn’t she?

“Where?”

Timothy slowly raised an arm and pointed.

“On the tree?” said Imogen.

Timothy nodded again.

She grabbed his hand and led him closer. “It’s important to remember that they have no interest in harming you. Ghosts are too caught up in their moment, their reason for being here. That’s why they cannot let go, and it’s why this one will barely see you.”

True enough, Imogen’s precocious voice had done nothing to stir the spirit from its contemplation. Its back still was turned; its round, mournful shoulders were the edges of a rock that could be moved only by forces far stronger than two children.

When they were just a few metres away, Imogen stopped and turned to Timothy.

“You have the letter?”

Timothy rummaged inside his jacket. Fingers trembling, he pulled out the envelope that the Postmaster had given him.

“Go,” she instructed. “Deliver it. It’s your task, not mine. You have the sight.”

When Timothy hesitated, Imogen planted her hands on his back and pushed with all her might. A few steps later, solid land gave way to bog. He was close now.

Still, the spirit did not stir.

Imogen sighed theatrically. Then she snatched the envelope from Timothy’s hand and marched onwards. She stopped at the tree’s exposed roots and coughed loudly, like a duchess demanding service.

“What’s it doing?” she whispered to Timothy.

Even had Timothy been able to speak, fear would have bound

his lips. The spectre had indeed noticed her. A weathered head appeared around those great shoulders, and the ghost studied her. At least, that's what Timothy assumed it was doing, for its eyes were no more; they were giant, empty pits.

Upon seeing the envelope in Imogen's hand, the ghost pushed itself off the fallen trunk and onto its feet. Timothy was well used to looking up at people – he was small, even for a boy his age – but the ghost seemed to have a presence greater than any man he had ever met. Fortunately, it had no interest in them, only in Imogen's letter. It seemed to recognise its power. It reached out a great hand and took the paper. Then, returning to its resting place, it sat down heavily and tore open the envelope.

Timothy was drawn into those hollow eyes as they flicked across the page. As he delved deeper, he saw everything. He needed no Postmaster to recount this poor creature's story. But how could he understand it? How could a boy comprehend the strength of a love that death could not diminish?



They often came to this special place, husband and wife, in life and death. For hours, they would stare out at the water, her still in this world, he passed to the next. She could feel his spirit stronger there than in the cemetery, where his remains were rotting. He would run his fingers through her hair as they looked out upon the exquisite stillness. Though she could not feel his touch, she was all the sadder for it. In their sadness, they

were together once more.

While some wounds are never fully healed, their pain diminishes. Stifled beneath the detritus of time, they may still pounce now and then, but ultimately their potency fades. Her visits became less frequent, yet there he remained. His pain was as fresh as the moment the world wrenched him from her, for time means nothing to ghosts.

Exasperated by her absence, he made his way one day to the house they had made their home. He was startled to see colour for the first time since his death. This house was no temple to their love – all dusty, still and silent, air sombre with the whisper of memories. She received guests; she entertained. Her pensive moments, alone and transfixed by the sun moving slowly across the window shutters, had become as rare as her visits to the lake.

He began lying beside her at night, observing how his presence troubled her dreams. Sometimes, when she was with others, he sat beside her and touched her leg. Her cold shiver thrilled and saddened him. Very soon, it was all he existed for. Other times, he would dislodge their wedding photos just slightly where they hung. When she straightened them, she could not avoid his image. That was all he needed.

A year after his death, a room became available attached to the school where she was employed. She readied herself to leave their home. This, he could not allow. He thought about the life she would lead without him, of how he had become just a memory to her. The house, too, would betray him. It would pass hands to others, and new memories would imprint themselves upon it. With the carpets replaced and the walls repapered, the

story of their love would be gone. His story would be gone.

So, one night, after his wife had retired to bed, he spread his arms and touched the tips of his fingers to the walls. He drew himself up to his full height and drank in the power of his connection to the building. With one act, its memories would be exposed. The photograph albums and love letters in the box in the attic would be revealed for all to see. This would be the final testament to their love.

First, the plates toppled from the shelves.

She woke.

Then he set the doors of the kitchen cupboards to slam.

She leapt from her bed, wrapping her nightgown around her.

Plaster tumbled from the ceiling, kicking up thick dust. Cracks gashed the walls.

She fled. Floorboards flicked up to trip her.

His roar rattled the windows until they shattered.

Before bringing it down, he waited until she was clear of the building. The structure crumpled, a corpse with all the bones removed. It stood now as he wished: a great twisted memorial for all to see.

As he stood in the rubble, surrounded by the destruction he had wrought, he noticed his wife shiver in her tattered nightdress. That changed everything. How he wanted to hold her, warm her, tell her that everything would be all right. All at once, guilt flowed in, which could never diminish because she would never be able to hear him say he was sorry.

So, he returned to the lake, where he remained, not for love

or sorrow or loss anymore, but as penance.



Timothy returned to his body as the ghost finished the letter. It let out a great sigh. The leaves in the trees billowed like linen on a washing line. Then stillness. The spirit was gone.

Then something even stranger was happening to him. Second by second, the clarity diminished of what he had just seen. He usually had a perfect memory, but with each passing moment, it became harder to picture the form that had towered above him only a few moments earlier. Soon, the afterimage faded from his brain.

At the confusion on Timothy's face, Imogen said, "That's the way it is. You lose them like memories, but more quickly because these are memories you were never supposed to have."

I stopped reading and looked up at Amy, who was still perched on the fallen tree. Sunglasses shielded her eyes, but they did not conceal her emotions entirely. She slipped an index finger under the rim and wiped away moisture.

'Are you okay?' I said.

Amy nodded. After a while, she said, 'He's done it again.' Her voice was higher in pitch than usual.

'Done what?'

Amy laughed bitterly. 'This place was very special to us. We came back here without you a few times. We shared something here, something that bound us together. That's why he set that chapter here. To trigger something in me.'

‘He’s trying to send you a message. Something he couldn’t say to you in person.’

‘That he’s sorry?’ Amy said. ‘Yes, I got that one. Another one of his one-sided takes on what happened to us. I think that’s why he’s always liked writing – there’s no one to answer back.’

Of all the reactions I had anticipated, I hadn’t considered that Amy would shrug off Richard’s words, condemning them as just another parting blow. But then, what do I know about relationships?

‘So, what he wrote doesn’t mean anything to you?’ I said.

‘Of course it means something!’ Amy snapped. ‘It’s just not the whole story, that’s all. You don’t understand. You couldn’t. Things got really bad between us towards the end. It got to the point that Richard was paranoid about the slightest thing, like everyone and everything was pulling me away from him. There was this unwritten guilt he painted me with. You can’t live like that, not forever. I knew it would crush him if I left, but we couldn’t carry on like that. It’s the hardest thing I’ve ever done.’

I reached out to touch her, but she was out of arm’s reach.

‘It was only afterwards that I realised how far we’d retreated from the world,’ Amy continued. ‘You cocoon yourself. It’s like a defence mechanism. It took me a long time to get back to talking to people, to having some form of normal human interaction. Maybe he never came back from that place.’

‘Maybe,’ I said.

I was looking across the water, thinking about how isolation can be a sanctuary and a prison. This was the place.

Amy followed my gaze.

‘Do you think this is what he meant by that note?’ she asked. ‘*If you want to find me, search within these pages.*’ We’ll find pieces of him, memories, locked away in there.’

‘Probably,’ I said. Then, I confessed, ‘A part of me hoped we’d actually find *him* here. It was too much to expect, I suppose.’

‘Certainly for chapter one.’ Amy began to ease herself to her feet. ‘Come on, let’s get out of here.’

I stepped forward to help her get down, but she didn’t take my hand. Her fingers were sticky with sap, so she stopped and rummaged in her handbag for a tissue. She didn’t see what I saw: why the tree was bleeding – recent damage. A design had been carved into the wood.

An envelope.