Ghostwalk

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Extract

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Chapter 1

Over the last two years, as I have tried to tease out the truths from the untruths in that series of events that seeped out through Elizabeth's death, like lava moving upwards and outwards through salt water from a tear in the sea bed, I have had to *be* you several times, Cameron Brown, in order to claw myself towards some kind of coherence. Sometimes it was – is – easy to imagine the world through your eyes, terribly possible to imagine walking through the garden that afternoon in those moments before you found your mother's body in the river. After all, for a long time, all that time we were lovers, it was difficult to tell where your skin ended and mine began. That was part of the trouble for Lydia Brooke and Cameron Brown. Lack of distance became – imperceptibly – a violent entanglement.

So this is for you, Cameron, and yes, it is also for me, Lydia Brooke, because perhaps, in putting all these pieces together properly, I will be able to step out from your skin and back into mine.

Alongside Elizabeth's body floating in red in the river, there are other places where this story needs to start, places I can see now but wouldn't have seen then, other beginnings which were all connected. Another death, one that took place around midnight on 5 January 1665. That night, Richard Greswold, a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, had opened a door onto a dark, unlit landing above a staircase in Trinity. A draught caught the flame from the lamp in his hand, twisting and elongating the shadows around him. As a thin stream of blood began to trickle from one, then both of his nostrils, he raised the back of his hand and wiped it across his cheek, smearing the blood into streaks, then fell forward, very slowly, into air, falling through the palest of moon shadows cast through casement windows. He fell heavily, his body

twisting and beating against the steps and walls. The lamp fell too and bounced, making a metallic counterpoint to the thuds of flesh on wood. By morning the blood from the wound on Richard Greswold's head had run through and across the uneven cracks of the stone flagging on which he died, making a brown map like the waterways across the Fens to the north, the college porter said, prising a key – the key to the garden – from the dead man's clenched fist. Encrusted blood, as thick as Fen mud.

Greswold's death was bound up with Elizabeth's. She came to know that before she died, but we didn't. Two Cambridge deaths, separated by three centuries, but inseparable, shadowing each other. Richard Greswold. Elizabeth Vogelsang.

Elizabeth Vogelsang drowned in September 2002, the first of three deaths that would become the subject of a police investigation four months later. The police took a ragged testimony from me, which I gave in answer to the questions they asked and which were recorded on tape in a windowless room in the basement of Parkside Police Station by a Detective Sergeant Cuff on 16 January 2003.

'All the interview rooms are occupied this morning, Dr Brooke,' he said, struggling to find the right key as I followed him down grey corridors. 'So we'll have to use the central investigation room. I'm afraid it's not ideal, but it is at least empty this morning. There's a staff training morning – health and safety. We have about an hour. This is not a formal interview, you understand. We'll do that later. Just a chat.'

'I don't know whether what I have to tell you will take an hour,' I said. My nerves were jangled. I wasn't sleeping. I was still waking in the middle of the night angry with you, and with me, but I had enough self-possession to know that I would have to be careful and alert here at Parkside Police Station. Very alert. They had arrested Lily Ridler.

'We will have to see you again, Dr Brooke, without doubt. You will be central to our enquiries.'

That's how I came to see another version, their version. Well, not quite *see* but *glimpse*. The central investigation room at Parkside Police Station was filled with filing cabinets and four desks with exaggerated curves sweeping in different directions; over to the right, a magnetic whiteboard

ran the length of one entire windowless wall. Cuff pulled up a swivel chair for me on the other side of his desk, carefully clearing away papers and notes into a drawer and locking it. A collection of objects and photographs had been attached to the whiteboard with magnets. Curled around those objects were a series of questions, names, lists and arrows in coloured marker pens in different hands. I couldn't see very much from where I was sitting so, when Cuff went to retrieve a file from another room I slipped the digital camera out of my briefcase and photographed it. A risky act driven by nothing but a terrible bereaved curiosity.

A white magnetic board written on in different hands in different colours and a series of photographs – three dead bodies, one woman drowned in a red coat, two men with their faces slashed, a wall of graffiti, several photographs of mutilated cats and horses, the house at Landing Lane, a photograph of Lily Ridler, next to some other people I didn't recognize – animal activists, I assume – and a photograph of a pile of shredded paper. When I call up the photo in my laptop and increase the resolution I can pick out details. If you go close enough you can just see that the blue pen lists two of the murder scenes: staircase E of Trinity College and St Edward's Passage. And if you go very close, right up into the right-hand corner – it took me a while to spot this – there's a photograph of me next to a photograph of Sarah. It was that photograph of me that you carried in your mobile, filed away carefully, so that no one would find it. The one you took on Holkham Beach. They must have gone through all the files in your mobile to find that. Underneath someone had written my name. Lydia Brooke.

Yes, that whiteboard was the sketchy beginning of the police version of what came to be known as the Cambridge murders. Murders that would be discussed in Parliament and produced as evidence to support proposed draconian measures in the Serious Organised Crime and Police Bill, which were finally instrumental in changing British law. Yes, we were making legal history but, of course, we didn't know that then.

That first conversation did take the best part of an hour because Cuff had so many questions about my relationship with you, what I had been doing in Elizabeth's house, how I had come to know the family, when I had last seen you, what we had talked about, what you had been wearing and the context for that message I left on your phone. Cuff, who affected

a relaxed nonchalance composed, I guessed, to make me drop my guard, summarized my answers and wrote them all out on lined police paper before reading them back to me in a continuous story, which he had somehow made from my fragmented answers. I signed it as a 'true account'.

A few months later I tried to put together a more coherent description for the lawyer representing Lily Ridler in the court case. She asked me to write down everything I remembered that might have been relevant to the case, from Elizabeth's funeral to the days of the trial. I had no ambivalence then about its truth or about its beginning and ending. That came later. I typed it out in Kit's study looking down over the summer garden, two hours a day, until it seemed about right. Although it read sequentially, I didn't write it sequentially. Memory doesn't work like that. I kept remembering things as I wrote, things I had thought until then were inconsequential, which might have been 'relevant', so I went back and tucked them into the story – little details, thoughts, surmisings, speculations.

I've always wondered how the two stories – the ragged one I put together in answer to Cuff's questions and the one I wrote in Kit's study for Patricia Dibb – ended up being so different. It wasn't as if I falsified anything. For the police my story was only part of a much bigger narrative, made up of perhaps twenty witness accounts, so the prosecution knitted together all those reports and circumstantial evidence in chronological order, and bit by bit against and between them, my story got pulled in several directions, like a magnet moving underneath a piece of paper sprinkled with iron filings. When set together with all those others, my story took on a different shape and it was the composite version, pulled, filtered, dragged and kneaded, that the jury agreed to. It was pretty damning once they'd finished with it, damning enough to convict Lily Ridler of murder and send her to prison for the rest of her life. A tight story, she said to me the last time I saw her. Impenetrable now. A closed case.

The story kept on changing. When the court issued a press statement and the newspapers distilled it back down to the size they wanted, with all the appropriately dramatic, suspenseful moments, it fitted neatly into columns of small type. One journalist even made a timeline of events in which these two murders were simply a notch in the straight passing of time through Lily's life, like a single-track train with stations that

began with her birth and ended with her arrest. She was charged with three murders and sixteen acts of unlawful animal killing and mutilation, but because they couldn't pin Elizabeth's death on her, she was convicted of only two murders. Once they'd added those killings to that timeline, and filled in the details about her grandfather and her parents, Lily Ridler had become a psychopath, a monster. Now, nearly two years later, Lily is dead.

So if we thought it was finished, we know it isn't now. The ghosts have not been laid to rest after all, you see, not yours and not hers. If they were to question me again I think I would have to say that I see it differently now – the connections, I mean. Time does that. There were missing parts then, a historical dimension that no one asked any questions about and which, then, I could only half see.

What was missing? The seventeenth century was missing. But how do you say that to a policeman who has just switched on his tape recorder to record the words 'Parkside Police Station, 16 January 2003, interview with Dr Lydia Brooke.' How do you say: 'There's a missing witness account and a missing suspect . . . Sergeant Cuff, the seventeenth century is missing. And you need to talk to a man called Mr F.'

How do you tell him that you think there's a link between a woman scholar found drowned in a river in Cambridge and a man who fell down a staircase nearby three hundred years earlier? Not a simple causal relationship but something as delicate as a web, one of those fine white skeins you see around the tips of grass stems in the spring when the dew is heavy.

A crow has just flown off my study roof, launched itself into the air to my left down over the garden, just as the right-hand corner of my map of Cambridge has curled itself noisily away from the wall. The syncopated sounds of the scurrying of crows' feet on roof tiles and the curling of old paper is enough to make one think that there might be something else in the room beside me as I write. Which of you restless people is it? What do you want with my story?

No. If Elizabeth were here she would say that history is less like a skein of silk and more like a palimpsest – time layered upon time so that one buried layer leaks into the one above. Or like a stain in an old stone wall that seeps through the plaster.

What would Cuff have said or done if I had told him that he needed to know about the man who fell down the stairs of Trinity College on 5

January 1665, the fall that stained the floor, the stain that leaked through Elizabeth's life and Lily's, that held us all together, in thrall? Cuff would not have known the significance of the date – 1665 – or at least I don't think he would have done. 1666 might have rung some bells: the year the Great Plague abated in England and the Fire of London ravaged the capital in its wake. He might have remembered that from his secondary school history classes.

If I had told Cuff about Greswold and about Isaac Newton's complicated friendship with a Mr F, he wouldn't have written any of that down. He wouldn't have considered it relevant. A man falling through air and shadows in Trinity College, 1665. A secret friendship between two young men, forged in alchemical and mathematical calculations. How could that have any bearing on a series of murders in Cambridge that took place between 2002 and 2003? If I had suggested that, Cuff would have raised one of his thick black eyebrows and his pen would have paused in mid-air. Elizabeth Vogelsang would have understood. Cuff wouldn't.

Lily went to prison because the seventeenth century was missing from her court records, from her story. Her timeline needed to be longer, much longer, and there were many sidelines and tracks, twistings and turnings and yes, it was a labyrinth, a skein of silk that began to weave itself in 1665, three hundred and thirty-three years ago.

I've been thinking about labyrinths this summer. Ariadne giving Theseus the thread so that he could find his way back out of the labyrinth away from the black flesh-eating void of the Minotaur. Unravellings have to start somewhere. Now that I see how connected everything is for the first time, I know that the threads between Isaac Newton and us were all attached, like the ground elder under Kit's soil.

That summer in which I wrote my story and yours for Patricia Dibb, Kit and I declared war on the ground elder that had taken over her flowerbeds at Sturton Street. As we began to dig, we could see how each of those separate plants, uncurling above ground, was joined to a great network of root systems underground. There was no point in digging up *part* of it; you had to pull up the whole thing and if you didn't, it would start reaching out again in the wet darkness of the soil. Another green leaf curling up a week or so later. Grace, Kit's elderly neighbour, leaning over the chicken wire fence, uttered her warnings about the impossibility of ever killing it off. She had spent fifty years trying, she

said. Break those roots just once, she'd say, and the wound on the root will make scores of new shoots.

From my study in the attic of Kit's house, I looked down on the long stretch of her garden, with its rose beds and gravel path twisting through tall shrubs and Mexican orange blossom, and imagined the ground elder stretching itself luxuriously under the lawn, under the iris bed, unseen in the dark. We had pulled out most of it by the end of June but a root or tendril here and there would have clung to the root systems of other plants – the iris bulbs, the tubers of the gladioli – so I knew we would see it again.

As I write, Grace's grandchildren play in raincoats on the trampoline under the apple tree. Before the rose garden and the shrubs and the trampoline and the shed, before any of that, the elder had made its way up through the orchards that stood here for centuries, before Kit's house and before all the others in this terrace were built. Kit has a sepia photograph in her kitchen of the building works for her street, a skeleton row of houses being built on the orchards. Before the orchards, there were marshes here to the south of the city, south east of Newton's Trinity College, and the ground elder would have rioted then in the wet earth, unrestrained. Before the orchards and marshes, Roman farmers and the gardeners of Roman villas built on this land would have kept it at bay or used it in herb gardens to make soups and broths or to cure their gout. Builders found the remains of a pretty villa under the road only a stone's throw from here – three rooms with painted plaster walls, bright red, yellow, green, grey, and deep blue, some patterned to imitate panels of marble, a tiled roof, mortar floors, glass windows, under-floor heating built on blocks of imported chalk. It was probably the last house on the edge of the settlement, marking the boundary between civilisation and the marshlands.

Every cut in the ground elder root is a failure; every cut will make a redoubling of effort necessary. That's how I came to understand Isaac Newton's fear of sin, I think, and how embroiled Mr F became in Newton's name, and how neither of them could stop what they had started, and, finally, I have come to see how the consequences of their seventeenth-century acts twisted and turned their way to us, underground and overground, splitting and redoubling. Organic and botanical.

My story, both of my stories, the police tapes in Parkside Station

and the typed account I wrote for Patricia Dibb, began with Elizabeth Vogelsang's funeral.

Now, Cameron Brown, I am starting to tell it again so that I can make you a thread for your labyrinth. Yes, I am putting the seventeenth century back into the picture. I hope you can hear me.