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MIDNIGHT LAMP



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Something In The Way

On a beach on the Pacific coast of Baja, Mexico, two small boys were exercising the tourist-horses. Shore birds in bewildering variety played chicken with the waves, racing in and out above their reflections in the wet sand; over the dunes a turkey vulture coasted on broad black wings. All else was lost in a shining, opalescent haze. Into this stainless world there came a young woman, emerging from the mist as a stick-thin figure with a raggedy cloud of red hair, yellow suntan that gave up at the base of her throat, and an expression of dogged, mutinous calm. The boys galloped towards her, shouting in Spanish as they drew level, did she want a ride? 'No!' she shouted back, in English. 'Not now, and not the other fifty times you asked me.' The boys laughed, the big brown horses danced on the spot, wheeled around and thundered away.

Fiorinda continued her promenade, noting sandpipers, sanderlings, busy little dunlins, elegant terns, whimbrels, dowitchers and curlews; ooh, possibly a marbled godwit. The mist, parting ahead of her, disclosed three fishermen in shortie drysuits and parkas, hauling on a net. A handful of flip-flopping things glittered in the long expanse. *Plenty more fish in the sea*, she thought, is a concept to bemuse the children of this century.

Ideas and memories rose up and fell away like the spindrift. The pale sweep of the sands reminded her of Tyne and Wear, the cold north-east coast of England, where she had found friends, acceptance, a reason for living, after she had escaped from her hateful childhood. But this beach at the end of the Western World was more beautiful and more desolate: and there go the pelicans, one, two, eight, fourteen of them today, in stately procession just above the blunt sawteeth, out where the ocean turns navy blue and solid. South in the morning, north in the evening, regl'r as clockwork. What do they do down there? When I've lived here a thousand years, I'll take my shoes and follow them. But now she'd reached the upturned, derelict fishing boat which marked the end of her habitual stroll. She sat down in its shelter and rubbed her cold bare toes.

So here I am, back in the modern world, after seven years in fairyland. Traffic fumes, cable tv, air travel, internet connections, swimming pools, movies – and everything that happened to us in those strange days vanishes like a dream ... I think it was a dream. My boyfriend was never the king of England. The European Crisis was a global-economic-meltdown sideshow. My father didn't rip Sage to pieces, on the beach at Drumbeg.

Some events hadn't vanished with the spindrift. It was still true that Ax Preston the guitar-man, radical rockstar, had become a significant figure in the Crisis, and that he'd been kidnapped by terrorists while on a mission to the USA ... Must be, because she distinctly remembered coming here to Mexico in a big aeroplane (first time she'd been on a big plane in her life), and going to Mexico City so that Ax could make a deposition, which had not been comfortable, because some of the gang were still at large. But the Justice Department had needed Ax to come over in person, and said they'd pay the fares: a convenient offer. The former rulers of the Rock and Roll Reich had been wanting to get away, and they were very broke. The deposition business hadn't taken much time. So now they were on the Baja, having wandered right across Mexico because Sage remembered surfing on this coast, long ago. There was no surf at this season, and no swimming, because the water was ice-cold. No scenery either, and April weather barely distinguishable from a chill spring in Margate, apart from the fearsome UV.

But here they had come to rest.

The flank of the old boat was warm against her spine, as if it had already sucked up heat from the morning sun, though the air was still cold. She leaned back, with a sigh of deliberate content. A glimpse, out of the corner of her eye, forced itself on her attention. She must turn her head. She must see a hole in the sand, which had been smooth a moment before. Something was lying in the bottom, in a crumpled heap. It was her green and white kimono, the kimono she'd worn the night she gave herself to the dead man, in trade for her friends' lives. She was sure that gown had been burned, but there it was, sand clogging the skirts. The sight of it made her feel as if someone was pouring concrete down her throat.

Fiorinda gazed, stubbornly. The hallucination was nothing, except for the choking feeling in her mouth. But the kimono turned into another beach, under a dark sky. She could feel the weight of Sage's broken body, dead in her arms. A hundred perceptions rose up: a thousand, uncountable, each with its specific freight of sensation and emotion; many of them vile, horrible ... and oh, God, I'm not really in

Mexico. Oh, God. The very bad thing could be happening to me, *right now*, and me blanking it out.

She set her teeth, breathing shallow, until the kaleidoscope steadied and the sea and sky returned. But the world was made of paper, it felt like nothing. If she moved her head, it was like trying to see into the corners of a room in a dream.

She wasn't sure when she'd first realised her happy ending was fake. She knew there'd been an incident at Tyller Pystri, when Sage had been well enough to travel and they'd gone down to Cornwall to complete his convalescence. Something had happened, the illusion had been shaken, and since then she'd been living in paper-world. What did I do? I know it was wicked, but I don't remember . . . She was afraid to study the immediate past too much. There were gaps in it into which she might fall, and lose her grip completely, *completely*. She had enough trouble tackling the episodes that came of their own accord, and broke the scenery up, and forced her to face the truth—

When she was thirteen, in the first really terrible year of her life, Fiorinda had discovered, or invented, a place inside herself: where she could go to escape and recover her strength, hiding in the aeons between one moment and the next. She'd tried in vain to do that trick since she'd found out she was in paper-world. Something blocked her, and dimly she remembered she had made this bargain with her father, *you must not leave your body*. Apparently the promise had followed her, on her flight from reality, and thank God for that because—

So this is where I am. Sage is dead, Ax never came home . . . and I am in hell, with the dead man fucking me. But I am keeping my father sweet, and protecting my people. I will go on fighting, she thought, gazing at sea and sky. One day I will wake up from this, in bed with your carrion disguise, dear Father, and only seconds will have passed. One day you will defeat me, and take us all to hell. I know that. But until then, *fuck you*.

Ha. Other alternative: I'm just a little mixed-race girl from Neasden, whose rock-god absent father came home to make her pregnant, and she ended up in a padded cell—

She stood up and started walking back, reflecting detachedly that she didn't believe and couldn't make herself believe the padded cell option. Was this a plus or a minus, she wondered? She felt it was a plus . . . All you can go on is what makes a situation bearable. I think I'm better off convinced that I had lovers once, and that I'm serving a cause.

The fishermen were gone. Three dolphins were leaping where the nets had been. She paddled in the punishing cold water, and what's this?

What's this round flat purple furry thing? Hey, *it's a sand-dollar!* This is what they look like when they are alive! She picked it up. The purple fur was made of tiny wriggling tentacles. It's like a . . . a flattened-out sea urchin, a fused starfish. How cool! A myriad bewildered little fingers wriggled. She set the creature back in its watery home and watched it drift down to the sand feeling like a gentle god.

I must never tell them. If they are dead, at least my darlings don't have to know it.

She straightened, and looked up: and *there*, not on the painted sky but far, far off in the darkness of her soul, she glimpsed the shining limb of a different answer, which for a moment she knew was real, absolutely *real*; but she could not reach it.

Something in the way—

Ax had been talking to Smelly Hugh about Para, Smelly's oldest daughter (named *Paralytic*, as that was what her father had been the night she was born). She now called herself *Paradoxa*, sensibly enough. She'd dropped out of hedgeschool baccalaureat and announced she was joining a hardline Gaian group; she would no longer be using clothes, or articulate language. She'd told her bewildered parents she wanted to recover from the disease of being human. 'She loves animals,' said poor Smelly. 'An' she's dead clever. Me and Ammy, we thought she might be a *vet*. But I don't get this. We're the leaders of the Rock and Roll Reich, we're supposed to set an example. I'm not bein' a fascist dad, Ax. I jus' want her to do somethink worfwhile, not sittin' on her bum—'

Ax knew Para quite well, and doubted if anything would deflect the young woman from her course, but he'd made soothing noises, and the hippy paterfamilias had seemed comforted before he winked out of sight. Smelly Hugh's a punk philosopher. He doesn't think twice about the miracles of technology. He zooms over to Mexico on the astral plane, smells the ocean, and zooms right back to London—

'You din't mind me calling? Ammy said I shouldn't. She says, they're on holiday, leave them in peace. But I thought, Ax won't mind—'

Smelly's old lady was sharper than her helpmate. Thanks for trying, AM.

Alone on the water margin he sat turning the b-loc headset in his hands, wondering if he should chuck it in the sea. Hugh's earnest, fractured groping after Utopia brought back too vividly the multitude of others, the people Ax had served, the forty million lives he had tried to hold in his hands . . . The taste of failure was like bile in his mouth. He felt that he would never be free of it. Back in England now, the suits

had finally accepted that he was not going to change his mind. He had been dictator, a temporary measure for a very rough patch. He was not going to stay on as a rubber stamp for the neo-feudalists. Ax knew that the secret rulers had approached his brother Jordan. They fancied another rock musician Green Head of State: an easier model, who would take the perks and shut up. Jor was reportedly tempted by the job. He'd already taken over the band. All their lives, anything Ax had that looked good, Jordan had to muscle in and grab it . . . Reportedly, he was holding out for his big brother's approval. Ax was determined to avoid that conversation, but—

He had to choke down the pain and fury, because Fiorinda had appeared in the distance. They walked towards each other, herding scurrying birds between them, until they met in a whirling crown of silver wings.

'Hi,' she said, with the faraway eyes and otherworldly smile that cut his heart in two. 'What are *you* doing out so early, mister?'

'Smelly Hugh decided to give us a wake-up visit. Sage was asleep, so I came out here. Fuck. I told them, don't call us: we'll call Allie *once a week*, to prove we haven't been kidnapped. I should switch off incoming, we wouldn't miss it.'

The bi-location phone was a spin-off from the Zen Self quest, what they called fusion consciousness science over here. The technology was unknown in Mexico, so the phone was useless for anything except satellite-phreaking: but that was no loss. They didn't have anyone they wanted to talk to in the New World.

'Don't do that. There might be a real emergency and we wouldn't know. You should have come beachcombing. I found a live sand-dollar, and I *think* I saw a marbled godwit—'

'You're kidding. Sure it wasn't a Common Loon?'

They followed their own footprints through the dunes to the fishing camp called El Pabellón, where they'd been staying in one of the cabins for a week or so. It was off-season, and sports fishing in steep decline: hard to say what most of the people were doing here really, except maybe hiding from creditors; or the police. The painter lady was under her striped awning, catching the morning light like Monet. Nothing moved in the township of middle-aged bikers. The little tent belonging to the teenage runaways had fallen down again, leaving them asleep but shrouded like dead bodies. The Clam Diggers, (not genuine campers but locals, here to harvest shellfish for the restaurant trade) were at work, monopolising the standpipe. Nevada and his old lady, proprietors of a wagon-ring of strangely assorted, half-derelict vehicles, were

up and about, toting shotguns. The kids were not in sight. The Nevada dogs stood up and woofed.

'Hi, youse guys,' called Nevada's buckskinned and gypsy-bloused old lady. 'You been on the beach already? How's the world looking?'

'Same as yesterday,' Fiorinda called back. 'Sand. Birds. Sky. Sea.'

'She's a poet, and she don't know it,' remarked snaggle-toothed, draggle-haired Nevada, grinning his shit-eating grin. 'Hope she don't blow it. You guys coming to the shindig tonight? You'd be very welcome.'

They laughed, and said maybe, and passed on.

When they reached him Sage was reclining on the cabin's only sunbed with a sketchpad: but he'd made the coffee and cooked the eggs. They berated him, and agreed between them silently he *mustn't* be left alone. The moment you leave him alone he starts doing too much. And so another quietly busy day begins. That's the last of the cinnamon buns: better review the exchequer. Would you care to initial these accounts for me, Mr Preston? Why certainly, Ms Slater . . .

Later, Ax walked up to the Transpeninsular Highway, to the little shack-store beside the Church of the Holy Family. The cinder cones of San Quintín floated over the north-west, the cows in the beaten-earth field by the track were contemplating a vivid load of surplus tomatoes that had been dumped for them. Now that's something you don't see every day . . . Wonder if they like the taste? Of course, if you tried to buy tomatoes for human consumption around here, it cost an arm and a leg. The death-wish contortions of post-modern agribusiness were no longer Ax's concern, thank God, but he stopped to stare: thinking about a yacht called the *Lorien*. What a boat, thirty knots under sail, and endless other passionate details, whispered through the long hospital nights (the intensive care unit in Cardiff, that was the setting he remembered) . . . I want Sage to have his yacht.

I'd buy you a jet-plane, baby, I've had it with green austerity—

But they had no money, and soon this was going to be a problem that Ax must address. Sage and Fiorinda must never be asked to go on stage again. They must never be asked to *work* again. Ax would have to make a living. What are my skills? Ex-dictator, former rockstar, horrendously in debt . . . This needs thought.

Make a list: One pack flour tortillas (NB, not the brand that tastes of soap). Maize meal for Fiorinda's excellent stove-top corn bread; eggs. Veg, whatever they have fresh. Tinned fruit, any kind but pineapple

which we all hate, the cinnamon buns she likes. Little elastic bands to mend the Nevada kids' stunt kite. What's the Spanish for that?

I wonder exactly how much a boat like the *Lorien* would cost?

Fuck it. We won't starve. We can live on clams and steal the cows' tomatoes.

It dawned on him that he'd started to think in terms of never going back to England. What, *never*? What, just vanish from the screen . . . ? He turned his face, to avoid getting choked by dust as a blue off-roader compact rumbled past him, and looked after it; idly curious. US plates, surfie stickers in the rear window, longboards on the roof. There aren't any waves, he thought.

New campers? They better fit in with the ambience.

The driver of the compact pulled up at the entrance to the fishing camp and got out. Above the gateway, which possessed no gates, a marlin leapt in blue and white mosaic, leprous with deleted pixels: flanked by red and yellow butterflies. A hand-painted sign advertised cabins, RV hook-ups, cocktails, firewood, surf-fishing, drysuit hire and HORSE rides . . . Beyond the gateway a row of battered *talapas*, straw-thatched beach umbrellas, stood outside a flat-roofed, pastel building, possibly a bar. Nothing stirred when he peered into the dark interior.

'Anyone home?'

No answer, only the sound of the ocean.

Cautiously, he explored. The scurvy RV camp was noontide silent. There were dish-aerials, most of them big enough to be illegal; a recycling plant beside a midden of scrap plastic and metals. Stacks of dessicated clam shells, pyramids of beer bottles, a skeletal *thing* made of thousands of old pens: ballpoints, felt-tips, gel-tips, rollerballs. A large grey iguana stared him out, sideways, from under one of the trailers; everything had an air of post-futuristic dereliction and outlawry. Two of the dogs in the biggest compound (command post?), stood up, rattling their chains: a German Shepherd and something like an Irish Setter, but bigger, with deeply malevolent yellow eyes. He retreated.

Beyond a mutant tamarisk hedge, festooned with sun-drained rainbow pennants, he found a row of cabins. The first had a shiny jeep and a boat-trailer outside. The rest were padlocked and clearly unoccupied, except for the one at the end. He listened, glanced around and moved closer. There was a towel hanging from a line, a dishpan of murky water, full of submerged underwear. A sketchpad, held down by a slab of plastic-cased hardware, lay on a trailer-park sunbed that had seen better days.

Doubt assailed him. Why would they be living like this?

He bent over the pad, careful to touch nothing. On the top leaf there was an unfinished portrait, male, half profile . . . and the hardware, he realised, was a portable videographics desk, of alien but hi-spec design. Oh yes. What do the English say?

Gotcha.

Out on the beach, beyond the gap in the dunes, there were figures in the landscape. Kids ran around; local people were digging clams. He tipped his straw hat onto the back of his head and strolled. Below the tideline a tall, very slender white guy was playing a ball game with a young woman whose ragged red hair whipped to and fro, like the pennants on the tamarisk hedge. She was wearing a body glove and knee-length denims. The man wore a loose white shirt and pants that accentuated his willowy height and languid movements. His hair was cropped yellow curls, eyes invisible behind aviator shades. Each of them wore a ring on the third finger of the left hand, but he couldn't get a good look. He watched the game.

They ignored him, but not in an unfriendly way.

'D'you mind if I ask a question?'

The young woman turned on him a mask of beaten gold, pierced by a pair of eyes like clear grey stones – so like the cover image on her second solo album that his mouth went dry with excitement. Yellow Girl. It's really her!

'Go ahead. It'd better not be difficult. We have no brains.'

'Why are you playing cricket, with a softball and a baseball bat?'

He was pleased with himself for spotting the game. That should have an effect.

'Oh, tha's easy,' said the languid giant, planting the bat in front of his stumps – which were stalks of bleached tamarisk root, capped by clam-shell bails. 'We don't have a cricket bat, an' if we used a smaller ball I would never hit it. I'm useless.'

'He's lying,' said Fiorinda. 'We found the bat. We had a proper baseball, which we bought in Ensenada, but our demon bowler, er, pitcher, managed to bury it in the Pacific. It's over there. If you'd like to fetch it for us, we'd be grateful.' She pointed out into the ocean, smiling at him with great charm, and chilling strangeness.

'You guys are English, aren't you?'

'Yes.'

'I recognised the accent. We haven't seen many tourists from Crisis Europe the last few years. Things have quieted down over there now, I guess?'

'Much quieter,' she agreed. 'Practically back to business as usual. Except for Italy and, um, a few other hot spots.'

'England's still revolutionary, though, isn't it? But you're allowed to travel—?'

'As long as we promise not to eat at McDonalds.'

'Okay—' he said, nodding politely. 'The name's Harry. Harry Lopez.' He held out his hand. They smiled, but didn't take it. They didn't offer their own names.

He went back to the campground and looked into one of the toilet blocks. The showers and the stalls had plastic curtains, no doors, but everything was clean. He tried turning on a faucet and leapt back, cursing. The water was *boiling*. A little Mexican girl had appeared at the uncurtained door to the outside, a black and tan puppy in her arms. She stared at him, scandalised.

'These are dire and troubled times,' he said to her, shaking his scalded fingers. 'This could be the end of days. Do you believe that?'

He tried the other faucet. There's something about F and C . . . Fuck! Also boiling.

'This is the *ladies'* room,' said the little girl, in Spanish.

'Do you have an office? *Oficina?*'

'Strange bloke,' said Fiorinda, meaning the man in the straw hat. She had called a halt. Sage was obediently lying down on their rug, while she sat beside him on the sand. They watched the world go by.

'I dreamed of Fergal again last night.'

'Oh yes?'

Sage didn't know what to make of this development. Fergal Kearney, the Irish musician, casualty of the lifestyle, was the man whose dead body had been used by Fiorinda's father as his instrument of torture. She refused to talk about the horror she'd suffered: she had never known the real Fergal, why had she suddenly started talking about him?

'He was sitting by my bed,' said Fiorinda softly. 'I didn't *see* him, but he was there, in my mind's eye. It wasn't a nightmare, Sage. I felt that he was on guard, keeping bad at bay. The strange thing is, I still thought he was my father, same as before: and in my dream I didn't mind. You know how all the people around you are really just patterns created by firing neurons in your head?'

'Mm,' said Sage, carefully neutral.

She laughed, cold and sweet, and took his hand with chilling deliberation. 'Hey, I'm not saying you don't exist. I'm just saying,

obviously that's what ghosts of the dead must be, too. Phantoms of the mind. My father is dead, and I killed him—'

'Er, as I recall, *I* killed Rufus, babe—'

'I helped to kill him, and I bloody well think I had a right. But I believe I want him to forgive me. I think when I imagine Fergal by my bed, on guard, it's my mind's way of telling me we did okay, that night at Drumbeg. We rescued Fergal from hell, and he's grateful, and we even did Rufus some good, somehow. Is that very soppy?'

'Fee, you are amazing.'

'Thank you so much . . . Sage, what'll I do about not wanting to be famous any more? All the time we were trapped being leaders of the revolution, I was secretly thinking, *fuck this, I need to tour Japan*. Now I can't stand the idea, and it's not just a career problem. I need to redefine myself. I'm scared to have no grand plan. I think I'll fall apart.'

'Nyah. Remember what you told me, about never being Aoxomoxoa again? People talk a lot of crap about facing up to big life changes. Why bother? Spend a few years in denial. Then you can tackle accepting the obvious when it's old news, and hurts less.'

'Did I tell you that? I am a vicious brat . . .' She sighed. 'Well, benign neglect, that's how I'm dealing with the *other* major problem, about never having a baby. But—'

Fiorinda had been sterilised without her consent when she was thirteen, after she'd given birth to her father's child, the little boy who had died at three months. The treatment had been meant to be permanent, but reversing it might be possible—

'You don't know you're never going to have a baby.'

'Yes I do, Sage, because I'm never going to try. How could I have a baby? It was okay when I thought my father was just some bastard of a megastar who didn't mind seducing his own daughter. Now I know what kind of weird monster he really was, how could I possibly want to pass on those genes?' She frowned at the sparkling ocean. 'Unless, um, unless as I sometimes think, I imagined the whole thing? I don't mean the Crisis, or running the revolution, I mean, the rest of it—?'

She'd let go of his hand. He took hers, ready to back off the moment she flinched. But she would not. His touch seemed to comfort her (a handclasp, arm around her shoulders). He hoped that was a good sign.

'Sorry, babe. You didn't imagine it. It was all real. I was there, trust me.'

'What crocks we are,' said Fiorinda, after a moment. 'The three of us. Me with my gross memories and my monster of a dead dad. You, had to come back from heaven and never going to be the big strong king of

the lads again, and Ax, with his post-hostage stress; and what's worse, he doesn't believe in saving the world any more. Oh, Sage, do you think we can ever make him happy? Just you and me?'

'Yes.'

'Did I say, also completely penniless?'

'Hahaha. I don't mind being broke. I like it.'

'Oh sure, my one-bowl, one-robe pilgrim. What about the yacht, hm?'

'Tha's different.'

She smiled at him tenderly and tugged his hand to her face, rubbing his knuckles against her cold cheek. Ah, my darling, he thought. My sweet girl. You make such a brave show, but you don't even know I'm here.

They folded the rug, collected their bat and the softball, and went to look for Ax.

On quiet nights they would play and sing on their terrace, after dark, for their own amusement. The shindig drove them indoors, but then the hermit crab, which had been lost in the cabin for days, started to make excruciating ragged-claw noises. The Baja heaves with geo-thermal power, but the fishing camp electric light was low and peevish. They searched under beds and in corners with their wind-up torch, to no avail, and decided to go back outside. The Clam Diggers chorus was rendering Beatles' Greatest Hits, backed by a miserable machine-beat bassline, and constructive interference from the old bikers' Jazz ensemble. The communal bonfire painted orange shadows above the tamarisks, the Nevada dogs howled, the Pacific sighed. The former rulers of England sat shrouded in rugs and watched the bold cactus mice from the hedge hunt for scraps.

'I don't know where the fuck it hides,' grumbled Ax. 'We haven't *got* any furniture. Oh, look at that one. Commando mouse—'

'We should build them an obstacle course,' said Sage.

'We should join the shindig,' suggested Fiorinda, cheerfully, 'since we're going to get the benefit of it anyway. I bet Mr Strange with the straw hat will be there. The Nevadas are always looking for new blood.'

'I'm tired,' said Sage. 'Don't feel like it.'

Ax caught his eye in the light of the camping lantern. Silently, they'd agreed not to worry about the man in the straw hat. Say nothing to make her anxious. But fear brushed him with a stealthy hand, and suddenly he realised what unbelievable good fortune he still possessed. Just to be with them, to be *alive*, and loving them—