

**UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER**

Faculty of Arts

Real Life and Magic:  
An Inquiry into the Expression of Deep Ecology in Children's Literature

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Doctor of Philosophy

April 2014

This Thesis has been completed as a requirement for a postgraduate  
research degree of the University of Winchester.

THE UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER

ABSTRACT FOR THESIS

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For centuries, the significance of storytelling in developing the way we see the world has been acknowledged and analysed. In a time when we are facing such huge global issues as climate change, resource depletion and species extinction, what sort of stories should we tell our children? The truth is that adults have little idea of how to tackle the issues and it seems clear that our attitude towards the natural world has contributed to many of the problems that their generation will inherit.

In recent years there has been a call from many environmentalists to find a new approach to story: one which will help us to form a more life-sustaining relationship with our natural environment. Deep ecology as a worldview offers one way of developing such a relationship through reconsidering anthropocentric viewpoints and extending the sense of the self to encompass the whole of life in all its many forms.

In light of David Abram's call for writers to reconnect the written word with the land, this thesis explores the practice of creative writing in order to express some of the concepts of deep ecology in children's fiction. Specifically it draws out issues of developing a stronger connection with the natural world as reality and of reconnecting logic with intuition. The thesis is comprised of two elements: the first part is a novel for children aged between ten and thirteen years as an experiment in putting theoretical ideas into practice and the second part is a critical reflection on my own experience of deep ecology in relation to the writing of the creative piece.

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No portion of the work referred to in the Thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

I confirm that this thesis is entirely my own work

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Rodney Rodrigues provided the original inspiration for his namesake in this story. I'll always be grateful for his wise counsel and voice of reason, which have somehow reached beyond the grave.

I have been so lucky to have the companionship of two very special owners of four feet: first Morse and now Merlin who, between them, have been beside me 'day after day, the whole day though' (Kipling 1932)

Most of all, I feel gratitude to the more-than-human world for being such an awe-inspiring, precious whole in which to belong.

To the Weavers

## **Creative Element**

***In Truth There Be Dragons***

## Story Outline

*In Truth There Be Dragons* is a novel for children aged ten to thirteen years. It is set in the present.

Shortly after thirteen year old Rodney's mother dies, his father announces that he has decided to accept a new job in Wales. Suddenly Rodney finds himself in a very different environment from the one that he has known all his life in Chennai, India.

By chance, their new home is very near to the place from where Rodney's favourite Uncle, Eustace, sent his last postcard before vanishing without trace. Rodney suspects this is more than coincidence and begins a secret search, following a series of mysterious riddles apparently left by Eustace. As a rather logical thinker, Rodney is baffled by the fact that the riddles seem to be more likely to lead him towards the existence of dragons than to the whereabouts of his uncle, so he pushes the idea out of his mind.

Strange things begin to happen, many of which are linked to a local girl, Hera Abtalverryn, whose deep connection with the land and its wildlife has earned her a reputation for being 'weird'. After a great deal of frustration, which leads him into trouble with his father and some of the villagers, Rodney allows Hera to help, using her local knowledge and her more intuitive approach. Together they solve the riddles, hampered by the efforts of Morley Dreadman, a sinister stranger who appears to be stalking Rodney.

Against Hera's advice, Rodney decides he must follow the map left by his uncle and deceives his father in order to make another expedition into the mountains. When he doesn't return, Hera becomes worried and sets out to find him, deceiving her own mother in the process. She embarks on a long and lonely trek through hazardous terrain, guided only by her instincts. It is when she reaches her lowest ebb that a wolf-ghost appears and leads her to where Rodney is held captive by Morley Dreadman.

In the mountains there is no signal for mobile phones or any means of calling for help and the pair must rely on their own ingenuity and upon each other to escape and find the way home. In the process they discover that Morley has been trying to steal the secret of several new means of generating and storing energy called a Dragon, invented by Uncle Eustace. When they realise that Morley's motivation for doing this is to stop the technology that would significantly reduce dependency on the oil industry, they have a choice to make about how to tackle the problem. Hera's hatred of violence and deceit comes into direct conflict with her

belief that all creatures have intrinsic value and are part of one another as well as the whole of life.

With the final clue, it seems that Eustace has left them the means to resolve the problem but in following it they find more than the Dragon. The experience leads Rodney to question his way of looking at life and helps him to develop an alternative understanding of his mother's death. It leads to a commitment that will shape the rest of his life.

**Part One: Rodney**

One: Sense

Two: Freefall

Three: The Book

Four: Morley Dreadman

Five: A Grave Disturbance

Six: Message

Seven: Undercover

Eight: Ancient History

Nine: Dead Ends

Ten: Initiation

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Thirteen: Finders

Fourteen: Shadows

Fifteen: More Confusion

Sixteen: Breakdown

Seventeen: Ty Talfryn

Eighteen: Paper Dragons

Nineteen: Trust

Twenty: Spirals

Twenty One: Kickabout

Twenty Two: Break In

Twenty Three: Tipping Point

Twenty Four: Honesty

Twenty Five: Making Peace

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Twenty Seven: Mad

Twenty Eight: Vanellus vanellus

Twenty Nine: Meeting Hera

Thirty: No Clue

Thirty One: Darkness and Light

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Thirty Three: White Lies

**Part Two: Hera**

One: Friday

Two: The Way of the Otter

Three: Tracks

Four: Paper Trails

Five: Spirits

Six: The Lake

Seven: Jugaad

Eight: In the Hut

Nine: Seeing Double

Ten: Fire and Freedom

Eleven: Finding Things

Twelve: The Pit

**Part Three: Rodney and Hera**

One: Y Draig Gwyrdd

Two: Rainbows and Shadows

Three: Meeting the Flood

Four: Precious Things

Five: Revelations

Six: Jigsaw

Seven: Mates

Eight: Eternal Life

Nine: Decisions

Ten: The Energy Tree

Eleven: Smugglers



# Part One

## Rodney





## One Sense

His Dad just walked in from work in his suit and dumped it on him as if it was actually good news:

“I’ve got it. I’ve got the job.”

“You’re going to leave India?” said Rodney.

“We are leaving India,” said his Dad, “for a while, at least.”

“I’m not going.”

“You know it makes sense to take this job. It’s the chance of...”

Rodney knew it made sense. Everything always made sense. Except almost everything that had happened in the last six months.

“No lifetime chances in Chennai – is that what you’re saying?” Rodney looked at his Dad - Ravi Ranchandani - local doctor; local hero; local lad made good and going to England.

“Wales,” said Ravi, “it’s the last place your Uncle Eustace was seen alive. That makes sense too.”

Rodney stared at him. Ravi smoothed the knot of his tie so that it lay perfectly between the points of his shirt collar.

“You could always stay with your Aunties if you’d rather,” he said.

“What about Mum?” said Rodney.

“The Aunties will look after her grave. They’re going to bring fresh flowers every Friday.”

Rodney searched his father’s eyes.

“What else can I do?” said Ravi.



## Two

### Freefall

For what seemed like hours, Rodney had been drifting in and out of that strange, watery place between being asleep and being awake. Every time he tried to wake up, sleep dragged him back just far enough to hold him under. Cold was seeping through his bones. He curled his knees into his chest and pulled the cover up over his head. It made an odd, crisp sound, not at all like a duvet. The sound worked its way into his brain just in time to stop another wave of semi-sleep drowning it. What time was it anyway? Robot-like, his arm reached out for his alarm clock. His hand closed around a lump of rock. He sat up, reality flowing in with the mind-blowingly cold air. There was no alarm clock. There was no bed. He was wrapped in a survival blanket on the hard floor of a narrow cave, high up in the Welsh mountains.

Hugging the blanket around him, Rodney shuffled nearer to the edge. It was less of a cave, more of a slit in the mountainside, with an overhang that formed a sort of roof. He looked out across the valley. So close and yet so far away, more mountains loomed like a ring of giants holding hands. Beneath the ledge, the land fell away in a steep slope covered in loose shale.

“How the hell did I get up here in the dark?” he wondered.

All he remembered was the urgent need to sleep and the vague idea that he should find shelter. There was precious little of that up here. He had been lucky to find this place. He took a long breath of cool air and watched the vapour form as he breathed out. He looked at his watch. 04:55. His eyes lingered for a moment on the words *Extreme Time* engraved around the metal casing of the watch. His Dad had given it to him last birthday – his thirteenth.

Knowing his Dad, sleeping in the mountains wasn't quite the sort of extreme time he'd had in mind.

Ever since he could remember, Rodney had dreamt of this place. Not at night but often in the day. The photos his Uncle Eustace used to send from Wales had seemed so cool and quiet compared to the dust and chaos of India. There were a lot of times when he missed Chennai. This wasn't one of them.

Light had begun to seep into the valley. A streak of red and silver stretched across the sky to the east. Rodney took a small, leather-bound book out of his pocket. From between its pages he pulled a postcard. He held it up, comparing the picture to the landscape being revealed in front of him. A thin blue lake shone like a drop of liquid sapphire set into the crown of the nearest mountain. A trickle of water spilled out of one corner. It was so, so similar but it wasn't the same. The lake in the photo was wider, more of a half moon shape, and trees covered the slopes almost all the way up. Rodney slipped the postcard back into the book.

"I'm not giving up," he said out loud, half speaking to the mountain, "I'll find him."

He rummaged around in his backpack. Apart from one crumbly Welsh Cake, left over from rugby the week before, he'd run out of food. He decided to save it for emergencies – that was what Scott of the Antarctic would have done. He yanked the water bottle out of its holder. There were only about two mouthfuls left. Bad planning, he thought. Then again, spending the night in the mountains hadn't been part of the plan. He packed up his stuff and patted his back pocket to make sure the book was safe. Then he began to edge his way down.

He was nearing the tree line. A few metres below the first conifer he could see a sharp ledge followed by what looked like a sheer drop. He hadn't worked out what to do about that one yet.

He put his right foot on a thick, wedge-shaped slate, testing it before transferring his weight. It wobbled then held. Cautiously, he moved his other foot forward and reached out towards a sapling ash.

“Weeeow” A bird called from above his head. A kite? It dipped its wings and drifted deeper into the valley. Rodney strained to see.

The slate shifted. The sapling bowed - then snapped - catapulting Rodney backwards. Suddenly he was sliding on his back. Bumping down the slope, out of control. Grasping at plants and rocks. For a second, a clump of saxifrage held. Then the roots gave way. He slid on, still clutching the purple flowers in his hand. Faster now, his back, elbows, wrists scraping on the rock. His backpack caught and pulled at his shoulders but nothing stopped him falling. Falling towards the edge.

Things seemed to be happening without him now, as if he was watching from a distance. A remote voice in his head was screaming “No!” Instinct made him roll up for the fall. He didn’t feel himself go over, hardly felt himself falling through space. All he heard was the call of the bird. It was as if he was in a capsule – a weightless, timeless, fuzzy place where he didn’t have a body. He hit the ground. The impact drummed through his bones and forced the air out of his lungs.

Rodney lay still, his ribs sucked so tight he felt like he would never breathe again. Don’t panic. Don’t panic. Don’t panic. Gradually, breath burnt its way back through his windpipe into his lungs. Thank you God, he thought, and lay there waiting for the oxygen to find its way into his blood. He flexed his toes and fingers. They all worked. That was a good sign. And he still had his backpack. That was a miracle. Ignoring the pain in his arm, he untangled the pack from his shoulders and let the weight drop to the ground.

Slowly, slowly, he eased himself onto his elbows and knees then stood up to inspect the damage. A rip in his trousers. Blood on his shirt. His lower arms were tattooed with scratches. Not so bad. His watch was okay too.

“Wheeeeeaw” the bird called again, soared for a few more seconds then lifted effortlessly, up and away. Rodney watched it go.

Above him, the mountain was awesome, unforgiving. He brushed off the sudden idea that it was teaching him a lesson. What goes up must come down, he thought, and that was one way of doing it. Now all he had to do was get home.



## Three

### The Book

Home was a place called Llandamair. Well that wasn't strictly true. Home was a place called Chennai in Southern India. Llandamair in Wales was where they were living now.

By the time Rodney reached the big tree by the river that marked the boundary to the village, he was making up stories. If he was going to get away with being out all night it would have to be a good one. He stopped on the bridge and leant over the stone wall. Ripples in the water were bending the sunlight, making stones on the river bed into shapes of animals, gods and gargoyles. The church bell struck. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven.

"I fell asleep and didn't realise the time," he said, "there was this old woman... she'd broken her leg... her dog had been run over... she'd lost her purse."

Suddenly his neck felt hot. He was being watched, he was sure of it. He couldn't resist looking round. A small falcon was sitting on a gatepost on the other side of the river. It was watching him intently. Rodney stared at it. The bird stared back.

"I was transformed into a falcon and had to stay up all night hunting mice." Rodney muttered to himself.

"Merlins don't eat mice, much," said the falcon, "you should go for a few small birds. And insects."

Rodney swung around.

"Who's there?" he said, keeping his voice as low and soft as the one he'd heard. The falcon flew off across the river-bend to the moor.

"Kik, kik, ki, kik" It sounded amused.

Breeze stirred the leaves of the huge oak above his head to whispering and Rodney realised the voice must have been his imagination. Served him right for all that transformation nonsense, he thought. He picked up his pack to go.

“Anyway, you’d better be an owl. Falcons hunt by day.” This time the voice was clearer; definitely female. It was coming from the oak tree. Rodney looked up. He could see a pair of spindly legs dangling from a thick branch.

“What the hell are you doing spying on me?” he snapped.

“Sorry” said the female voice. She didn’t sound it. “I was already here.”

The girl dropped down in front of him, agile as a leopard.

“Don’t worry; I talk to myself sometimes too. You’re Rodney Ranchandani aren’t you?”

“How did you know?”

“Everyone knows.” she said, “Have you thought what it would be like to be a falcon?”

She looked up at the sky and her muscles seemed to twitch, “The breeze under your wings changing all the time, your wings riding every quiver, while you keep your head still, still, holding your prey with the fix of your eyes.”

She gazed at the sky, her head thrown back but never moving. With a slight shudder, she came back to earth and looked back at Rodney as if she had forgotten he was there.

He had seen the girl before. She was in the year below him at school. He’d seen her at break times, often on her own but sometimes with one or two of the other girls. The others always looked as if they weren’t sure whether to include her or to make fun of her. He knew how that felt. It was how they’d all been with him at first but she never looked as if she cared much either way.

“Look, I need to get back. My Dad doesn’t know where I am,” he said

“Okay, see you around.” she said.

“Yeah, see you.” Rodney knew he was blushing. He walked on past her, annoyed at how stupid he felt. She didn’t move.

“Why don’t you just tell him the truth?” she called after him.

He stopped and looked back. She’d gone.

As soon as Rodney turned the corner into Pen Street, something made him think the house was empty. Not that he could have really known. He stood in front of the door and fished in his pockets for his key. He couldn’t find it. So he lifted the brass ship and let it fall, catching his breath as he waited for the moment his father would appear; knowing he would have to find some way of handling the anger, the disappointment or worse still, worry, that he had caused. Nobody came. He opened the letter box and peered through. Light blue carpet in the empty hallway. Spotless white banisters and stairs. The spindle-legged table with the letter rack on it. No sound but the pendulum clock. Tick. Tock.

“Dad?” he called. No answer.

Rodney searched his pockets again, pulling out a couple of bits of slate he’d picked up from the mountain where he’d fallen, a piece of moss he wanted to identify, the piece of string he always carried which now had a shrivelled conker attached to it, a few English coins and an Indian rupee. No key. He opened his pack and turned it upside down. To his relief, the key dropped onto the stone step.

The lock was an old fashioned one. Nothing like the ones they’d had in India. Turn the key, pull down a latch and the door was open. Rodney kicked off his shoes before stepping onto the woodblock floor.

“Dad?” he called again.

The house smelt warm and familiar. But empty. Rodney felt a moment's panic. Oh God, he thought, he must have gone looking for me. He would have found out there was no field trip. Been up all night. Called the police. Deep, deep trouble.

In the kitchen, there was a faint smell of cardamom – but not the smell of a meal cooked the night before and no sign of breakfast either. On a big white plate near the cooker was a note propped up against a foil dish:

*Dear Rodney*

*Cook this at gas 4 for 20 minutes (I think). Don't save any for me. V sorry not here – emergency – back a.s.a.p.*

*Love Dad*

The writing was pretty bad so he must have been in a hurry. This must mean he'd been at the hospital all night. The heart operations he was so brilliant at often took hours. Rodney peeled the foil off the dish - supermarket curry - smelt quite nice considering. He put it in the oven, pushed the knob in and turned the dial to 4. Then he switched the computer on and looked up the falcon. Order *Falconiformes*, species *Falco columbarius*, common name *merlin*. The girl had been right about what they eat as well: small birds and insects. Rodney recorded the Merlin on the spreadsheet he kept for birds and mammals with the date, time and place.

He went back to the kitchen to check the curry. Good job he'd found the front door key, he thought. And he wouldn't have to explain anything to his Dad. Great. Everything was great. Then a thought whacked him around the head. When he had been looking for the key, the book hadn't been there. Rodney checked his back pocket again. THE BOOK WASN'T THERE.

He went through every compartment of his backpack. No book. He tried to think where he could have lost it. Okay think logically, he thought, you checked before you left the mountain and it was there...then you fell. Of course! Why hadn't he checked again? That's

when it must have slipped out of his pocket. He'd have to go back. There was no alternative. He was so tired all he wanted to do was eat the curry and dive under his duvet. No way. He had to get the book.

There was a knock at the door. His mind numb, Rodney walked out into the hall and opened it.

It was the girl. She was holding the book out to him. Rodney didn't mean to snatch but it was in his hands in seconds.

"Where did you find it?" said Rodney.

"I just thought you'd want it back," she was frowning, "special isn't it?"

"A present from my Uncle." Rodney said. He was fingering the impressions on the leather cover, his thumb finding the familiar lines and embossed leaves. "Where..."

"He wrote the rhyme inside the cover." she said. In a small, swift movement, she had taken the book back and opened it to the first page, "Lovely writing". She recited the words without looking:

*My jacket's round me closely wrapped  
Old tattered skin it does protect  
Wherein the future may be mapped  
And one day sought anew*

*It is for you to find a way  
If so you think to choose  
And though I cannot follow you  
You'll step into my shoes*

She raised her left hand and flicked her hair back over her shoulder. Rodney couldn't make her out. She was watching him with dark green eyes, unblinking, like the falcon. He looked down and found that the book was back in his hands, still open at the first page.

"I'm Hera, by the way." She said.

"Funny name." he said; then wished he hadn't.

"After a Greek goddess." said Hera, "Like most of them, she wasn't always nice."

Rodney closed the book and pushed it deep into his pocket.

"My Mum's into mythology and all that," said Hera.

Rodney searched for something to say.

"Have you lived here long?" Well it was better than nothing.

Hera laughed.

"Several centuries." she said. "Was your Uncle interested in dragons?"

"Why did you say 'was'?" said Rodney.

"Sorry?"

"You said '*was*'. What makes you think he's dead?"

"Just the way you were about him I suppose," said Hera, "sorry."

"He disappeared about a year ago, just after he sent me the book. I'm going to find him."

"Great." said Hera, "Can I help?"



## Four

### Morley Dreadman

Morley Dreadman took out a smooth, black leather wallet and paid the taxi-driver in £50 notes. He enjoyed watching the man's face as he counted them into his hand. It was probably the biggest fare he'd seen that year, if not that decade. Morley wasn't accustomed to messing about with trains. This journey had been tiresome enough, even in the 2.5 litre cab he'd taken from London. The driver recovered his cool enough to frown at the absence of a tip and let Morley lift his own suitcase out of the boot before driving away.

Morley stood on the narrow pavement looking up and down the street. It was lined with terraced houses. He sniffed the air like a panther scenting prey but not yet ready for a meal.

Once in his room, he took off his well-cut jacket, pressed navy trousers and striped shirt and replaced them with a pair of soft black jogging pants and a plain black fleece. His hand went to his pocket and pulled out an envelope, pausing for a second to look at the address:

Rodney Ranchandani  
C/O The Post Office  
LLandamair  
North Wales.

He opened the envelope and took out a single piece of paper. He smiled as he read it. How fortunate that Eustace Ranchandani had been stupid enough to use snail mail, thought Morley. Not only did it contain an important clue but it led him to the very place most likely to hide Eustace's secret.

## Five



### A Grave Disturbance

Rodney couldn't settle to anything. There was too much on his mind. He hadn't told his Dad about the night in the mountains and it was putting a sort of distance between them. Guilt or something. His Dad still thought that he had been on a school field trip, which was where he had told him he was going before he went off that day. Rodney unplugged his iPod and shut down the laptop.

"I'm just going up to the church," he told his father.

"Have you finished your homework?"

"ish," said Rodney, "Father O'Keery promised to help me with my history project."

"Take a coat," said his Dad and went back to the paper he was working on. Rodney grabbed his jacket and headed off out of the door.

"See you later," his Dad called out just before Rodney closed it.

Dusk was gathering as Rodney walked up towards the church. With it came a low mist that lay like smoke over the fields. A single star appeared in the fading blue sky. Venus probably, he thought.

As the light grew dim, the voices of the sheep fell silent and all he could hear was the chomp and rip of their teeth on the grass on the other side of the hedge. The lych-gate was about halfway up the hill. Rodney twisted the iron ring and the wooden gate swung open on its oiled hinges. Immediately he caught the dark green scent of yew trees. The crows were loud and vocal. There was something different in the way they cawed in the late evening. A longer, more commanding *whoop, whrup* sound went with the *kraa, kraa* they called in the daytime. Murder, thought Rodney, why are they called a *murder of crows*?

Rodney took his time, looking at the gravestones. He was trying to work out what to do about Hera. The thing was he didn't want help. He wanted to do this on his own. Anyway, the book was supposed to be a secret. Not even his Dad knew about it.

The huge door to the church was unlocked. It always was. Father O'Keery said it was more important to let people in than keep them out. So far the only intruder had been a leveret, a young hare, who sometimes sneaked in out of the rain. There was a rumour he'd been born in the church but his mother had been killed by poachers. That's why the leveret kept coming back they said, he was trying to find her.

Rodney closed the door behind him. The sound was quickly lost in the silence. Inside, the church smelt of old wood, wax polish and damp stone.

"Father O'K?" Rodney called softly.

Nothing moved. There was no light, apart from a few candles lit as prayers and a single lamp hanging over the altar. Rodney walked up the aisle between the pews and pillars, hesitating for a moment to make the sign of the cross. He picked up a candle from the metal box and held it to the flame of one of those already burning. The wick caught quickly and the new flame grew in his hand. He placed it carefully on the rack under a painting of Mary, where it lit the gold and silver paint, bringing her face to life. With an effort, he drove back the questions. Impossible, unanswerable questions. Like what happens after the last shovelful of earth has covered the coffin. About whether his mother minded being left alone in her grave in India. It was illogical even to think like that. She was dead. That was it. An image came to him of a bird flying over her grave on the day they'd buried her. A black kite - *Milvus migrans*. He shoved it out of his mind.

Rodney ducked under a low arch into the corridor that led to the vestry and Father O'Keery's office.

“Father O’K?” he called again.

The door was open. A pool of light shone from the lamp on the desk but there was nobody there. Rodney went back out along the corridor to a small wooden door with iron hinges and a gnarled face carved into the stone above it. The East door. He drew back the bolt. He could never understand why Father O’K bothered to lock the other doors when the main door was always open. He stepped out onto the path. In that short time, darkness had closed in and the mist had risen.

“Who whoooo?” An owl called from somewhere up in the tower. Bats flickered out from under the roof and disappeared into the heart of a nearby yew tree. A few metres down the path, in the shadows, a dark figure seemed to materialise by a large raised tomb.

“Father O’K? Is that you?” called Rodney.

The dark figure stopped what it was doing and stood very still. There was a glint of white as it turned its face towards him. Staring. Rodney could feel his heart thumping at the cage of his ribs. He tried to tell himself not to be such a kid, but his legs were locked and his blood had turned to ice.

Suddenly he heard the crunch of feet on the gravel path from the bell tower.

“Rodney?” Father O’Keery’s voice.

Rodney realised he had been holding his breath. He let it out slowly, trying not to show his relief. He looked back to where the dark figure had been. It had vanished.

“Are you alright?” said Father O’K, “you’ve a face like flour on a pastry board.”

“So it was you!”

“Up on the bell tower? Yes of course it was me. Been meaning to go up there for months, so I have. Thought I’d better fix that loose bit of guttering before the bats went and

knocked it down on someone's head but I nearly broke my own while I was at it. I was sure I'd fixed the ladder securely but it slipped away somehow and I had to shin down the drainpipe."

"Weren't you in the graveyard?" said Rodney.

"If that drainpipe had given way, for sure I would have been. Why?"

"Doesn't matter." Rodney shook his shoulders to get rid of the feeling that all the hairs on his body were wired.

"Hey, did you see the match?" said Father O'K, "21-11 to Ireland. What a result!"

"Flannery nearly lost it with that lineout throw," said Rodney

"Give us a break, the boys played like demons. O'Driscoll will get try of the year, or my gran never grew potatoes."

"Actually I came about that history project. If you have time?"

One of the great things about Father O'Keery was that he always had time. Actually, he didn't seem to do time. He didn't even wear a watch.

They went into the vestry. Rodney sank into the old leather armchair that must have been there all its life because nobody could see how it could have got in through the narrow doorway. Father O'Keery sat in his swivel chair at the desk, rocking perilously on the wheels.

"Synod of Whitby wasn't it?" he said, "Celts vs. Romans in the seventh century!"

By the time they'd finished, the clock was striking nine.

"Dad said not to be late." said Rodney.

"Use the East Door, it'll be quicker," said Father O'K, "I'll see to the bolt. I've still a thing or two to do before I leave."

Rodney heard Father O'K shut the door and draw the bolt home behind him. Outside, the mist was swirling, clearing, and closing in again as only a sea-mist can. It drew back to let a few stars shine. Rodney could just make out the handle of The Plough, the easiest of

constellations. Quiet hung around the graveyard like an inward breath. He was acutely aware of the sound of his feet on the path. Keeping his eyes on the gate at the bottom, he willed himself not to stop before he reached the spot where he had seen the figure by the tomb. His heart started thudding again, he couldn't stop it. His right foot hit something on the path. It clanged across the paving stones. Rodney bent down and picked it up. The stainless steel blade gleamed like silver, even in the moonless night. A garden spade.

## Six



### Message

On the far side of the rugby field was a conker tree with a bench underneath it. Hardly anyone went there, which was one of the reasons Rodney liked it. His sudden popularity was confusing. At first they'd all treated him like some kind of disease. Then he'd scored a few tries in a rugby game. Somehow he had landed up in the team and now everybody seemed to think he was some kind of Jonny Wilkinson. It took some getting used to.

He took the piece of string out of his pocket and wove it in and out of his fingers, knotting it and undoing it again, letting the shrivelled conker rest in his palm. For some reason this usually helped him to work things out. This time it didn't make anything any clearer. He was no closer to finding Uncle Eustace than he had been in India. And he felt more than a bit spooked by the figure he'd seen in the graveyard. Then there was the ladder. He had seen it when he passed the bell tower. It hadn't fallen over, it had been moved. Somebody hadn't wanted Father O'Keery to get down that night.

Lunch break was nearly over when Hera turned up. She didn't say anything, just sat down beside him. Perhaps she's like a cat, thought Rodney, attracted to people who don't like them around. If so, to ignore her would only make her more of a nuisance.

"Hi Hera." he said, without looking up. He slipped the piece of string back into his pocket.

"The thing about cats," said Hera, "is they like people who know about needing space." She got up and walked off – just like that.

"Wait a sec."

She turned around and waved but she made it clear she wasn't stopping. Rodney felt an odd, tight feeling around his ribs. He hadn't said anything about cats out loud had he? He couldn't help noticing how long her hair was. Defiant curls bounced all down her back.

A bell rang over by the main building and Rodney reached out to pick up his file for maths. Tucked underneath it was a piece of paper folded in the shape of a bird, a falcon actually. *Falco columbarius* - he thought - a merlin. He opened it out, admiring the way the head and beak dropped as the wings were unfolded. Inside she had written just one sentence:  
*Have you looked beneath the cover?*

All through maths, the paper falcon lay in his file like a haunting. The teacher cleared his throat.

"What's happened to our glory of the rugby field then Rodney? Not interested in maths now you've found a bit of stardom, is it?"

"Sorry Mr Lomond, I...did I miss something?"

"Several sandwiches of the picnic by the look of you. Pay attention or you'll never be able to count the letters in your fan mail."

Everybody giggled. Rodney blushed but forced himself to laugh it off. He'd never played rugby in his life before he came to Wales and in six short months, all this had happened. It didn't really make sense. But the message in the paper falcon did.

## Seven



### Undercover

The bus home took forever. It stopped in every village and the way it hummed up the hills made Rodney wonder if they'd make it at all. Finally, they crossed the bridge into Llandamair. Rodney caught sight of a girl on a bicycle. She was pedalling like mad past the Oak tree and along the riverbank. Her silhouette was unmistakable.

Gareth Roberts saw him looking.

"That Hera Abtalverryn." he said, "Weird she is."

"How the hell did she beat the bus?" said Rodney, "She must have bunked off early to get here so quickly on a bike."

"She doesn't come by the road," said Gareth "knows all sorts of shortcuts. My Mum says they know this place like nobody else round here. She reckons they know a bit more than they should."

"What does that mean?" asked Rodney.

"Dunno really." Gareth said. He looked surprised to be asked.

The bus stopped at the end of Pen Street. Rodney grabbed his bag and stood up.

"Coming down to the beach later for a kickabout?" said Gareth.

"Don't think so," said Rodney, "there's something I need to do."

He jogged down the road and ran upstairs as soon as he was in through the front door.

No sign of his Dad yet. Good.

In his room, Rodney sat on his bed and flicked on the bedside lamp. He turned the book slowly under the light. The pages were edged in gold leaf and as he turned the book so that the edges were at a right angle to the light, the shape of a long green dragon appeared for

a moment then vanished again as the angle changed. Rodney opened the book to where Uncle Eustace had written the rhyme:

*My jacket's round me closely wrapped  
Old tattered skin it does protect  
Wherein the future may be mapped  
And one day sought anew*

*It is for you to find a way  
If so you think to choose  
And though I cannot follow you  
You'll step into my shoes*

He must have read it several hundred times. It was obvious that the book contained important information. But what? The stories were great but crazy. Most of them were about King Arthur but there was one about St George. Instead of the dragon attacking the people, it helped George to save them. Was the clue something to do with dragons? Too stupid. Uncle Eustace was definitely not stupid. A famous scientist was hardly going to be messing about with fantasy.

Rodney closed the book. He was about to put it down when he noticed a tear about the size of a thumbnail on the spine. It must have happened when he fell down the mountain – it hadn't been there before. He tried to see what was underneath. It looked like another layer of leather but it was hard to see without making the hole bigger. He ran his thumb around the jacket where it joined the patterned paper of the inner cover. It was stuck down firmly. In one corner, there was a tiny globule of glue. He picked it off and rolled it around in his fingers. He didn't know how old the book was but he was pretty sure it was about a hundred years. Would they have used glue in those days?

Rodney took the book downstairs to his father's desk and found the silver knife he used to open envelopes. Holding his breath, he made a tiny incision in the upper right-hand corner of the paper lining, hardly able to believe what he was doing. He drew the knife

downwards. Once he'd cut the paper, the outer jacket came loose. Rodney pulled one corner off and realised that the top cover had been a fake all along. Underneath, the leather looked much older, dry and cracked, and he could see that it wasn't glued but stitched. He pulled the outer cover off completely. A small sheet of paper flew out and landed on the floor of the study. Rodney picked it up. It was a hand-drawn picture of a lake, almost like a map. The crags and peaks around the lake looked like mountains. Above it all were two small green dragons and the words *Llyn Ysbryd*. At last the rhyme was beginning to make sense. It must be the same place as the one on the postcard. All he had to do was find it.

Rodney had an Ordnance Survey map spread out all over the kitchen table when he heard the key in the door. There wasn't time to put it away.

"Hi Dad."

"Planning another field trip?" Something about the way his father said it made Rodney shudder. His voice was like a loaded gun.

"Has something happened?" asked Rodney.

"You might say that, Rodney. A great deal has happened in the last year, has it not?" said his father, "There has been rather a lot to contend with." His face was pale but his eyes were bright with anger.

"And now I discover that my son, whom I have trusted without hesitation, has lied to me." he went on.

Rodney looked down at the OS map on the table. It might as well have been a neon sign saying *GUILTY*.

"I happened to bump into your science teacher at the hospital. Mr Beynon, isn't it?" said his father, "I mentioned how much you enjoy the field trips. Strangely enough, he told me that there haven't been any field trips yet this year. Unfortunate, he said."

Ravi picked up the Ordnance Survey map from the table. Methodically, he folded it shut then handed it to Rodney.

“I suggest you put this away.” he said, “If you go wandering off on your own again, you are going straight back to India to live with the Aunties.”

“I was only looking. It isn’t as if there are snakes or tigers or anything. ”

“Listen to me, Rodney, do not leave the village unless it is on the school bus. Promise me.”

“Okay,” said Rodney.

“Okay what?”

“Okay I promise.”

## Eight

### Ancient History



Sunday morning. They went to Mass. Ravi didn't take communion. He was an atheist really. He didn't believe in any kind of god.

"Why do you come?" Rodney asked him afterwards.

"I've told you before. I promised your Mum."

Rodney wondered whether it was that or whether, like him, his Dad was just trying to find some way to work out what it was all about.

They walked out of the grey stone interior of the church into sunlight. Father O'Keery pushed back an untrimmed branch of yew and came over, still wearing his long black robes with his desert boots and red socks poking out as he walked. Behind him, Rodney caught sight of Douglas Rhys-Davies, the old man who looked after the churchyard. One hand was cupped around the bowl of his pipe while he lit it with the other. His old spade was planted in a pile of freshly turned earth. Even at this distance, it was pretty obvious it wasn't the same spade as Rodney had tripped over on Thursday night.

"Hey, Rodney?" said Father O'Keery, a question somehow.

"I'm good." said Rodney, "I got a good mark for that project. Thanks."

"Ah yes, Synod of Whitby," Father O'K smiled, "hard to believe there were such shenanigans over the shape of a monk's hairdo and the date for Easter," he said, "especially when you consider that Easter was a pagan feast in the first place."

Rodney felt his Dad relax beside him.

"The genius of the Catholics," said Ravi "was pinching all the best bits from other religions."

Rodney flinched but Father O’K didn’t seem to have taken offence.

“I believe I’ve read that Llandamair means ‘church of our lady?’” said Rodney’s Dad.

“Church or place, I think.” said Father O’K. “There was a place of worship here long before the church. The yew trees are the giveaway. That one over there is about a thousand years old, so Douglas tells me – sometimes I wonder if he has been here that long himself.”  
Father O’K drifted away to speak to a woman in a lurid orange dress.

Rodney looked over to where Douglas had been standing a moment ago. He had gone. He had been close to the spot the ghostly figure had been on Thursday night. It looked quite different in the daylight. The tomb stood solid in a sea of swaying daisies contained by a wrought iron railing. A branch of yew reached over the railing, partly covering the verse engraved on the stone.

“Old Yew that graspeth at the stones,  
that name the underlying dead,  
thy fibres net the dreamless head,  
thy roots are wrapped around the bones,” said his Dad.

“I didn’t know you could read Welsh!” said Rodney.

“I can’t. I was just showing off – Tennyson I think – I learnt it at school. That grave you’ve been staring at made me think of it. I’ve no idea what the headstone says.”

“Do you think dead people dream?”

“Sometimes I think it’s life that is the dream, Rodney.” his Dad said, turning away suddenly.

Rodney stood looking at the slab that sealed the tomb. It was slightly askew, as if somebody had tried to move it. Tiny green cushions of moss had fallen off the edges onto the ground.

“Are you coming?” called his Dad.

“I’ll catch you up.”

“Hmm?”

“There’s something...” Rodney saved his breath. His Dad was in another world. Rodney watched him walking down the path, slim in his long navy coat, with his shoulders just a bit hunched. He saw him stop by the lych-gate and turn to look back. Then he stepped out through the gate, closing it behind him with the care and precision that Rodney had always loved.

“A penny for them.” said a voice behind him. The pipe smoke was unmistakable. It smelt of old cabbages and vanilla.

“Mr Rhys-Jones.”

“Young Mr Ranchandani.” said Douglas Rhys-Jones. His hand was in his pocket, where even now his pipe was probably burning another hole. Everyone knew that Doug smoked his pipe against church rules and hid it in his trouser pocket when anyone was about. Everyone in the choir had a pound bet on exactly when his trousers would catch fire. Rodney’s money was on Shrove Tuesday.

“People come from all over the world to see that grave.” said Doug. “Our claim to fame that is. The Poet.” He puffed deeply and started walking away.

“Mr Rhys-Davies, have you lost a spade?” Rodney called to his back. Deaf as a post, someone had said Doug Rhys-Davis was. Perhaps they were right. At any rate, he didn’t turn around.

**Nine****Dead Ends**

At the Blue Fish Inn, Morley Dreadman took off his shoes and put them in the corridor outside his bedroom door. It didn't occur to him to wonder whether the landlady would clean them or not.

He looked out of the window towards the church. Not for the first time, he wished he had employed somebody to do this job for him. Of course, it would have meant finding someone he could trust not to talk but there were ways of buying silence. There again, he had his reasons for wanting to do this on his own. There had been enough trouble already when he had faked Eustace Ranchandani's signature at the Institute.

The problem was that he wasn't getting anywhere. Moreover, he was utterly fed up with this tinpot Welsh village where people didn't even speak English unless you shamed them into it. A small bird was singing on a hawthorn twig outside the window. Morley slammed the window shut and latched it. The robin flew off and disappeared behind a stone bird bath in the corner of the garden.

He moved away from the window and took his briefcase from the wardrobe. As his fingers spun the tumblers of the lock, he mouthed the numbers of the combination - 6691 – the year of his birth, backwards. Once again, he took out the envelope addressed to Rodney Ranchandani. He removed the sheet of paper and read it aloud:

*"Our Lady's place as old as yew  
Like me had many masters  
Where people tied a knot so true  
Or prayed for the hereafter*

*In stony silence here enshrined  
My roof is cold and solid  
But even stones may shift and slide  
And oftentimes before did*

*My turning may a ghost release  
Creature of many a rhyme  
But I would smear your palm with grease  
If you find me in time"*

He crushed it in his fist and threw it towards the waste paper basket. It missed. He picked up a pillow from the bed and punched it hard in the middle. Then he hurled it at the wall.

A few moments later, he walked over calmly to where the paper lay, picked it up, smoothed it out and placed it back in his briefcase.

**Ten****Initiation**

Mr Jarrop brought his hand down on Rodney's desk with a resounding thud. His pen bounced off onto the floor.

"Wake up Ranchandani! Or do you think you know so much already that you don't need to listen in class?"

Ironic, thought Rodney. Sleep wasn't something he was getting much of, even at night. Frustration was filling his head like a balloon pumped with helium. It wasn't just that his Dad had banned him from leaving the village. The map was the best clue he'd had yet. There had to be a way of following it. The biggest problem was that he couldn't find the place on an ordinary map. Actually, he was beginning to wonder if it was a place at all.

*Llyn Ysbryd*. He'd asked a few of his mates but none of them had heard of it. He didn't dare ask any of the teachers in case it got back to his Dad. If he found out about the map and suspected Rodney was planning to follow it, he would carry out his threat to send him back to India. Then he'd never find Uncle Eustace. The bell rang.

"Not so fast!" shouted Mr Jarrop, "Homework. Read chapters one and two of *Mortal Engines*. What is London like in Tom's world? What happened to his mother and father? Make notes..." The rumble and scrape of chairs drowned him out.

Rodney picked up his books and headed for the door. Someone shoved him in the back, hard.

"Changing rooms. Five minutes. Coach wants a word." Rowan Davies - he played scrum half.

The moment Rodney pushed open the changing room doors, he knew something wasn't right. It was too quiet. The squeak of his trainers on the vinyl floor echoed off the white tiled walls. Only a couple of forgotten T-shirts hung on the hooks. No smell of stale kit, no laughter, no voices. He stopped inside the doorway. Just for a second, he thought of running. He even began to turn.

"Hold it." Rowan Davies emerged from behind the wall that screened the urinals. Several of the team followed like flies after a goat. Rodney clocked that Gareth wasn't there. Neither was Geo, Alun or Huw. The boys closed around him in a semi-circle. None of them looked straight at him, except a boy at the back called Darran. He locked his eyes on Rodney's then flicked his head towards the door. Rodney knew it was too late to go anywhere.

"What's this then?" he said. "Where's Coach?"

"We've got a bit of coaching of our own to do." said Rowan.

Rodney sussed the odds. Seven to one. Could be worse. He was nearest the door. And he knew how to look after himself. Chennai wasn't totally city of peace. It wasn't the first time he had been cornered.

He took a few steps forward and squared up to Rowan. Take the leader out and it's over, he thought. No point in messing about with the rest. The scrum half was short and powerfully built. Rodney carried much less weight but he knew from the field that he was quicker. And he was taller. He moved closer so that he was looking down at Rowan. Rowan's eyes dropped for a moment. Then he stepped back, pushed his chest out and pointed at Rodney.

"Get him." he said.

Nobody moved.

Rodney relaxed, only a bit.

“I said bloody get him!” raged Rowan.

The boys surged forward. Rodney went for Rowan. He lunged at him, pushing him back through the others like a ball through skittles. He backed him up all the way to the far wall. He’d caught him off guard. It was looking good.

Suddenly he felt two massive arms lock around his chest. Torny Roberts - the biggest bloke on the team. He played prop and had the strength to go with it. In seconds Rodney was down like a deer under a tiger. Other hands started grabbing and ripping at his clothes.

“Get them all off.” Rowan’s voice was high and hoarse.

Rodney was powerless. Torny was sitting on his chest holding his head back against the floor. He could hardly breathe. Someone else had his legs. They stripped him to his shorts.

“I said get them *all* off.” Rowan stood over him, a strange look on his face.

When Rodney was naked, they covered him from head to foot in hair gel. Then they shook some sort of yellow powder all over him. He coughed and struggled but there wasn’t a thing he could do. They rubbed more gel into his hair then the yellow powder. Then they did the same with his pubes and the hair under his armpits. Acid perfume from the hair gel wrestled with the sickly sweet smell of the powder. He wanted to retch.

As suddenly as they’d started, they finished. They all stood back in a circle as if unsure what to do next. Slowly, Rodney stood up. He took a deep breath. Some of them snatched glances at his body but most of them were looking at the floor. Rowan was staring. What’s the big deal, he wanted to say, you’ve all seen me naked in the shower before. He decided this wasn’t the moment for winding Rowan up.

“Darran, do it.” Rowan said quietly.

Nobody moved.

“Darran!” hissed Rowan. Darran wasn’t there.

“Game over.” said Rodney “Very funny. Now you can give me my clothes back.”

“That’s it Rowan. He’s in proper now isn’t he?” said Huw Bevan. “No problems. Cool it.”

“Nobody gets into this team without my say so.” said Rowan, his eyes fixed on Rodney.

“You hear that? Toryn – you do it!”

He held a small packet out in Toryn’s direction.

Still nobody moved.

Suddenly Rowan erupted. He punched Rodney in the stomach. Three times. Fast.

Rodney crumpled in pain and shock.

“Leave it, Rowan!” hissed Toryn.

“Eat.” said Rowan. His voice was low and threatening as he split the packet open and started to shove the contents into Rodney’s mouth. All the others had backed right off. They looked scared. Rodney didn’t swallow. He looked Rowan straight in the eye. Then he swallowed.

“Pork scratchings” he said. He licked his lips. “Delicious.” He took the packet out of Rowan’s hand and started eating. Suddenly he was laughing. Nearly choking with it.

“Is that it then?” he said through his hysteria. The rest started laughing too, their relief so strong you could have tasted it. One or two of them patted Rodney on the back as they drifted out through the doors. Rowan spat and stomped out.

“They only picked you for the team because of your colour.” he yelled over his shoulder.

Alone, Rodney caught sight of himself in the mirror. Bright yellow. And one of them had taken his clothes.

## Eleven

### Scratchings

Rodney pushed the button on the shower and let it run until it steamed. He stood under the water, his anger running off in streaks of yellow. It ran and ran until the drain clogged up. He scuffed the drain clear with his foot then started the shower again. He was putting off the moment when he would have to work out how to get out of the changing rooms stark naked.

Finally the water ran clear and he let the shower stop. Shivering, he took one of the abandoned towels from a hook and began to rub his hair. There was a big plastic bucket of lost property in the corner. He started to rummage through it, looking for a pair of shorts, joggers or anything that might fit.

He heard the outer door slam. Heavy footsteps. Great, he thought, that's all I need - Rowan back for another go.

"Rodders?" Gareth appeared, breathless and red. "Shit, sorry, nobody told me. We're - I mean - they're not supposed to do that any more. If Coach finds out he'll go crazy." Gareth pushed a bundle of clothes at Rodney's chest.

"Thanks." Rodney checked the pockets. Everything was still there: the string, the conker, the old rupee, even the cash. He started to put on the grey trousers and crumpled white shirt.

"How did you find out?" he asked Gareth.

"Hera Abtalverryn. She got your clothes back too."

“How did she know?”

Gareth shrugged and splayed his hands. He picked up an empty carton from the floor.

“Custard powder. Yuk.”

Rodney looked at his watch. Walking into class late while the rest of them sniggered wasn't exactly top of his list of things to do. He sat down on one of the benches.

“Don't go and take it personally.” said Gareth.

“Sure.” said Rodney. “I bet he stuffs pork scratchings into everyone's mouth.”

“Pork scratchings? Why would he...oh hang on, I get it.”

“What's he think I'm in the church choir for? Undercover agent for Al Qaeda?”



## Twelve



### Misunderstandings

At home Rodney went straight up to his room and opened the computer. His Dad was still at work, which was a relief, sort of. From a photo on the bedside table his Mum looked out at him, her eyes dark and penetrating.

“Don’t worry, nothing I can’t handle,” he said. He straightened the frame then sat down at the computer. Forty-five minutes to get some homework done before choir practice. Choir practice. The choir had almost doubled in size since Rodney had let slip about Father O’Keery’s past as an international rugby player. More than half the school team had joined. It was tempting to give it a miss.

He stared out of the window. From the back of the house, the land rose steeply. Irregular fields scattered with sheep were marked out by stone walls and stunted oaks. There was something mesmeric about watching the sheep’s single-minded munching. Most of them were a dirty cream colour; only the odd black one here and there.

A quad bike roared up the track to the top field and stopped at a gate. The farmer jumped down. A collie dog jumped down after him and headed off towards the sheep, fast and low. The sheep bunched. Rodney pressed the shut down key on his computer and closed the lid. He’d got to face them sometime. Anyway, he had things to do: stuff he needed to find out. If he left now he’d have time to talk to Douglas.

At first the churchyard looked deserted. Crows drifted and swooped above the graves, giving shape to the breeze. There was no sign of Father O’Keery’s bicycle where he always propped it by the gate.

“Good evening Master Ranchandani.” Douglas was standing under the western Yew tree in his own private cloud of smoke. You could see all the way across the cliff to the sea from there.

“Hello Mr Rhys Davies, I was hoping to see you.”

“Who was that funny looking bloke following you along the lane?” asked Douglas.

“Bloke?” Rodney felt his muscles tense. He resisted the urge to look behind him.

“Dressed in smart city clothes. Looked like he was going to come into the churchyard then changed his mind.”

Rodney looked down towards the lych-gate. He couldn't see anybody, only a couple of jackdaws squabbling over something. A wood pigeon landed on the roof of Douglas's tool shed.

“He's lost his bicycle again.” said Doug.

“Father O'Keery?”

Doug grinned. “Him!” Douglas nodded towards the wood pigeon.

“Ru hoo ru hoooo ru hoo.”

“*I've lost my bicycle, I've lost my bicycle* he's always saying – not that he looks bothered.” said Doug, “Not like the collared doves – they've lost their only love. *Where are you?* They say. Over and over.”

“Have you lost a spade?” asked Rodney.

“Funny you should say that.”

“Was it a new one?”

“What would I be doing with a new spade? Found one. Propped behind The Poet, would you believe?”

“That was me,” started Rodney but Douglas didn't let him finish.

“And what right do you think you have to go digging around that grave?” The calm in his face was like steeped clouds before thunder.

“I meant the spade,” Rodney tried again.

“If you’re looking for what I think you are, I’ll tell you one thing - you’re stripping the bark from the wrong tree.” Douglas picked up his spade and stomped off towards the compost heap.

“I only put it there in case someone tripped.”

It was too late. The hunched shape of Douglas’ back was impenetrable. Rodney thought about following him. He was without doubt the best person in the village to ask about *Llyn Ysbryd*. Pointless asking him now, he probably wouldn’t tell him a thing.

The dove cooed those three mournful notes again.

“Where are you?” thought Rodney, the sound seemed to find its way into the most vulnerable spot in his whole body.

## Thirteen

### Finders

The church door was propped open. He could hear someone humming inside.

“Hello Rodney, you’re an early bird.” Mrs Bright was emptying dead flowers into a black bucket. The freshly picked daisies she was arranging couldn’t compete with the rotten smell of the old ones.

“How’s your Da? Working hard as usual I suppose.”

“He’s fine thanks.”

“Choir practice is it? No-one here yet.”

“Mrs Bright, have you ever heard of a place called Llyn Ysbryd?”

She stopped humming and turned to look at him.

“I don’t know where you heard that name but if I were you I’d forget it right this moment.”

Before she could say anything else, there was an agonised shout from the vestry. Mrs Bright dropped the flowers. Rodney ran up the aisle, under the arch and into the corridor that led to the vestry. With surprising speed, Mrs Bright followed.

“Oh my Lord!” she said. Father O’Keery was under the desk, writhing in pain.

“Are you alright?” Rodney said. It was clear that he wasn’t.

“Told you it was bad luck to mention that place.” said Mrs Bright under her breath.

“I’ve gone and trapped my fingers.” Father O’Keery tried to turn his head but his head was wedged under the heavy desk.

“Hang on,” said Rodney.

He crawled under the desk. Immediately he saw that the priest's right hand was pinned down by a heavy flagstone. Rodney tried to lift it but it was too heavy.

"Hang on." he said. He put all his weight behind it and shoved sideways at the stone. To his surprise, it slid off quite easily. Father O'K snatched his hand out and clutched it to his chest.

"Oooph! That hurts so it does."

"Let me see." said Rodney.

The fingers were blotched with white and purple.

"I'll fetch the first aid box." said Mrs Bright.

"Can you move them?" asked Rodney.

Father O'Keery clenched his fingers into a fist then unfolded them slowly. Rodney pointed to a deep stone bowl set into the wall.

"Put your hand in there."

"I like your style." said Father O'K, "If the chill doesn't work, the holy water will."

"What were you doing anyway?"

"My pen. That marbled green one. I've had it since I was at school. I dropped it and it rolled away down the back of the desk."

"Did you find it?"

"No. I did not."

Rodney wriggled back under the desk. The flagstone was still loose and he could see something sticking out from underneath it.

"Got it." Rodney eased himself out.

Whatever it was though, it wasn't the pen. It was wrapped in brown paper, bound in green twine and fastened with a reef knot.

"You'd better open it." Father O'K still had his right hand in the holy water.

Rodney began to remove the paper, careful to keep it intact.

"I bet you're a pain at Christmas." said Father O'K, "Come on, the suspense is killing me."

Rodney pulled a heavy iron key out of the paper.

"Well would you look at that!" said Father O'K.

"What's it for?" asked Rodney.

"I haven't the foggiest. Douglas will know. Probably find he's been looking for it for half a century."

Actually the paper didn't look like it had been down there for anything like that long, thought Rodney.

"Better put that flagstone back or the damp will rise up through your feet." said Mrs Bright.

Rodney knelt down and shoved at the stone. Again it slid easily, almost as if it was supposed to move. He pulled out his hand just in time as it slotted back into place. As he stood up, he caught sight of something resting against the leg of the desk. The green marbled pen.

"Brilliant!" said Father O'K.

Suddenly there were voices in the corridor. Without thinking, Rodney stuffed the paper and string into his pocket.

Choir practice went off okay. It was all routine stuff and the singing was good. It was more than soothing. It was like having the day cleaned out of him.

It was dark by the time they left the church. They all walked out together, joking about one of the new teachers at school. Nobody mentioned the incident in the changing rooms. It was as if it had never happened.

At the war memorial, they split up and Rodney went on alone. It wasn't until then that he remembered what Douglas had said about a strange looking bloke following him. He stopped and looked round. There was nobody. The breeze had stilled but the chill clung to him like a bag of ice.

Around the next corner, there was a narrow alley that ran down between the boatyard and the old fish factory. It was a good shortcut but it was gloomy, with no lights until you reached the end. Rodney hesitated for a second or two then turned into the alley.

## Fourteen

### Shadows

Rodney walked quickly. The breeze was lifting again. He could hear it whining through the rigging of the yachts down on the quay. The dry mud on the path deadened his footsteps. The further he marched along the path, the more the feeling of a presence behind him grew. He willed himself not to look back. Don't think about it; just keep walking, he told himself. It was too late now. With a high fence on one side and the factory wall on the other, there was nowhere to go. He flashed a look over his shoulder. One of the shadows seemed to hesitate before blending into the others. He swung round and stood with his feet planted firmly.

"Who is it?" he shouted. Nobody replied.

Rodney started to jog. Panic was fizzing in his stomach but he kept his pace steady. If he had to sprint, he'd need the energy.

He could hear voices in the boatyard now. Fishermen speaking in Welsh. He was nearly at the end of the path. Suddenly the security light on the roof of the harbour office came on. For about thirty seconds Rodney was running blind, his night vision destroyed by the light. He jogged round the corner and nearly crashed into somebody standing under the lamppost.

"Hera!"

"What's up?" she said.

Rodney looked back the way he had come.

"Quick!" Rodney pulled Hera behind a big green wheelie bin. He held his breath. Hera didn't say anything but melted into the small, damp space behind the bin.

Rodney could hear the man's footsteps. They reached the wheelie bin and stopped. Then they turned back. Rodney risked poking his head out from behind the bin. He just caught sight of the man's back as he headed up the main street.

"Who was that?" whispered Hera.

"I don't know."

"He smelt weird." She said.

Rodney turned on her.

"Why can't you leave me alone?" It was as if something had burst inside his guts. He stood up and looked into her eyes, willing her to say something. Hera could do what she wanted. He'd had enough confusion for one day. He set off after the man, leaving Hera standing there.

Rodney reached the main street and stopped. The man was standing outside the corner shop. He studied the notice board outside the shop for a moment then went inside. Rodney could see through the door that he was talking to the girl at the counter. The door pinged as Rodney opened it but he dodged straight around to the back of a chiller cabinet and ducked down, pretending to read a computer magazine. Neither of them seemed to have noticed him. From there, he could hear what they were saying. He also had a perfect view of the man's city clothes and his posh black shoes, which had mud on them.

Whatever the man had just said to the girl, she shook her head and went off behind the fly curtain and came back with Mrs Bright.

"Ah Professor Dreadman," said Mrs Bright. She rolled the 'r's in professor, as if she was giving the title a special significance. "Asking about The Poet is it? Only one poet buried round here as far as I know. Well, only one famous one that is." She giggled like a little girl, which didn't suit her considering Rodney reckoned she must be at least fifty.

“Oh well. Perhaps you have heard of an old friend of mine?” said the man, “Eustace Ranchandani. I believe he might have visited Llandamair.”

“Well we do...” started the girl, but she was stopped short by a poke in the ribs from Mrs Bright, who had spotted Rodney in the corner.

“Indian gentleman would that be?” said Mrs Bright.

“Well yes, he was,” said the man, “I mean is. Perhaps one of his family...?”

“Oh no,” said Mrs Bright, “nobody of that description round here.”

Rodney nearly choked. He ducked behind one of the stands holding birthday cards and rotated it slowly, making sure he was invisible until the man left the shop. Mrs Bright winked at him, “Well, we don’t want any old body knowing our business, do we?” she said.

## Fifteen

### More confusion

When Rodney got back to the house, it was full of music. A twanging sitar and a woman wailing at high speed - Madcap Moaning he and his dad had always called it. His Mum used to play it non-stop until they teased her so much she had to turn it off.

“Have you ever heard of a man called Dreadman?” Rodney asked.

“Odd.” said his Dad. He didn’t seem to have noticed how late it was. “It does ring some sort of a bell. Why do you ask?” He flicked the remote control and the music drifted into the background.

“Doesn’t matter,” said Rodney, “just something I came across on the net.”

“I would have thought you have more sense than to mess around with those chat room things.”

“Don’t worry.”

Upstairs, Rodney punched the name into Google. *Dreadman*. He worked his way through the list. A Hip Hop artist. An avatar on a virtual site. Deadman’s fingers – some part of a crab you don’t eat. A racehorse called Dreadman’s Silver Dollar. At the end of the second page he found a headline from *Tomorrow’s Scientist*: ‘ENERGY BREAKTHROUGH IS JUST A HOAX SAYS DREADMAN: INSTITUTE OF ECOLOGY AND INNOVATION REFUSES TO COMMENT’. Below that entry was another. It was a press release from a group called *Save It Now*: ‘PROFESSOR MORLEY DREADMAN LEAVES INSTITUTE UNDER A CLOUD OF SUSPICION.’

Rodney hit the link. *Page not found*. He googled *Save It Now*. Up came their home page. He clicked on *About Us*. A radical action group boasting a membership of about a hundred top scientists and ecologists. About two thirds of the way down the list was a name

that made the blood rush in his ears. *Eustace Ranchandani*. Rodney watched his index finger move in slow motion as it tapped the mouse and opened the link.

## Sixteen



### Breakdown

For a couple of weeks now, Rodney had been worrying about the school bus. Tonight it was vibrating even more than usual. The faint hum he had noticed before had developed into more of a whirr. In India, two of his cousins had a business restoring old trucks and Rodney had spent hours helping them fix the engines up. At the first stop, he decided to ask the driver if there was something wrong.

“Look here Maharajah, this bus is nearly forty years old,” the driver said, “I don’t know what you’re used to where you come from but we can’t all have Rolls Royce engines you know.” Which was a bit ironic considering the age of the average bus in Chennai, thought Rodney, but he didn’t say anything.

The whirring was louder and deeper, as if it was chanting a warning that was becoming more and more urgent. As the bus laboured up the hill from Llynglas to Caerbran, there was a loud clanking sound and the floor began to shake. Rodney looked at Gareth, who shrugged his shoulders. All the others were talking and hardly seemed to notice. At the front of the bus, the driver was perspiring as if he was climbing the hill himself.

They were nearly at the top when the clanking became deafening. Suddenly everybody stopped talking. An almighty bang tore through their silence. An iron rod ripped through the floor about forty-five centimetres from Rodney’s left foot. The girl sitting on the opposite side of the aisle screamed. The rod was spinning like a demented python. The bus stopped. The rod stopped turning. It stood motionless and menacing, protruding half a metre through the hole it had torn in the floor of the bus.

A second or two passed, then, in slow motion, the bus started to roll backwards as the iron snake began to rotate in the other direction. The younger children screamed. The driver swore and slammed the handbrake on.

"It's okay," he yelled, "just sit down and stay quiet for a sec." He walked back to the place where the thing had come through. He bent over it and the red patches on his face turned to grey. The way he looked at Rodney, anyone would have thought he had caused the whole thing.

"Prop shaft?" said Rodney.

"Yep," said the driver. His face warmed suddenly as if he'd recognised someone who understood his language. "That's the fella. Flaming support bearing must have given up the ghost. I told them this could happen." The driver winked at Rodney and stood up, breathing heavily, "Right. Everybody off and wait by the side of the road" he shouted, "I'll have to get help."

Outside, the driver took a mobile phone out of his pocket and looked at it. "No signal, typical" he said.

"Try text." said the girl nearest to him. She took out her own mobile and looked at the signal bars. The driver looked blank.

"Here give me your phone and I'll do it for you" she said. "It might work." It did and the reply came back almost immediately.

"There we go kids," said the driver, "they're sending a bloke up here to look at it – should be here in about half an hour." He winked at Rodney again. Rodney splayed his hands. There wasn't anything they were going to be able to do about a prop shaft centre bearing in a hurry.

Everybody sat down on the edge of the road eating whatever they had left in their bags and talking about the noise of the ripping metal and what they thought it was before they knew it was just a bit of the bus that had broken loose and bored through the floor.

"I still think it was terrorists," said a small, skinny boy.

"More like something out of *Mortal Engines!*" said the girl who had sent the text.

Gareth was chatting up a girl called Lucy who looked as if she'd stuffed oranges down her jumper. She kept flicking her hair as if it was in her eyes but it was nowhere near them.

Rodney walked across the verge and sat on a ladder stile looking over the high hills to the mountains. A couple of cars came by and one stopped to see if they needed help but apart from that there was no sign of civilisation. An easterly breeze was blowing off the mountains with few trees to break its power.

"Weeow" The call came from high above Rodney's head, "weeow, weeow, weeow." He looked up to see a single bird, its wings taut and quivering as it rode the gusts.

"weiyow." A second bird answered and joined the first to soar in fitful but determined circles through the wind. Red kites or buzzards? Forked tails tinged red underneath and wings as broad as flexing sails. Definitely red kites. *Milvus milvus*. They'd nearly become extinct from the rest of Britain but here in Wales they had survived and now they were making a steady recovery. Uncle Eustace had told him about them on one of his postcards.

The birds were moving away, drifting down into the deep well of the valley. Rodney dropped down from the ladder stile and started to walk along a narrow path through the heather, following their flight. Exhilaration came quickly with the feeling of freedom. Nobody saw him go.

The path traced the contour of the hill, giving him a fantastic view of the kites. He watched and followed until it fizzled out and a long stone wall blocked his way. On the other

side of the wall, stunted trees formed a low, dark wood. The kites were still circling; mirroring each other's movement in a graceful dance. Their flight was mesmerising. Rodney climbed the wall and straddled the moss fringed stones. Suddenly the birds broke their trance and flew off in a straight line over the wood. Within seconds they had gone.

Rodney looked back the way he had come. The mechanic would have arrived by now or perhaps even a replacement bus. He looked down the hill. A river snaked its way through the bottom of the valley. It was probably the Afon that ran into Llandamair. It wouldn't take long to walk. He might even be there before the bus. He wasn't disobeying his father, he reasoned, just walking home.

He could see that there was a path through the wood but it led up, not down. Instead, Rodney decided to follow the wall down the steep hill, using it to steady his descent. After about ten minutes the wall snaked away to the west. On the other side, through the trees, Rodney could see a dilapidated wooden hut and a wide track leading down. On his side of the wall, the going was becoming rough. It was potted with rabbit holes and clumped with rough grass. He climbed over and jumped down into the cool stillness of the wood. The track was leading in the wrong direction but at least it was a track and at least it was going down.

As soon as he was among the trees, Rodney felt a different sort of energy, not something he could easily describe but suddenly he felt sure he'd made the right decision. Through the faint rustle of the oak and beech leaves, he could hear the sound of fast running water.

The wooded slope opened out onto a grassy track. Holding his watch up to the sun, he checked the direction – it seemed about right. Walking was faster now he was on a level surface. A roe deer leapt off the path ahead and disappeared into the trees. No sign of the red kites. A sharp bend to the right, a sharp bend to the left and Rodney suddenly found himself

standing in front of an archway in a high wall. Oddly, it was made of brick instead of the rough stone and slate used for most of the walls around here. Many of the bricks had initials carved into them. Small turrets had been built at irregular intervals along the wall in concrete and clay. Pictures had been sculpted in cement on the surface of the wall and painted in bright colours: a ship; a tree; a citadel; a wide, tree-lined bay, a mosque; a map of the world. It was crazy. And spellbinding.

“Weeyo”

He looked up.

“Weeyaw”

There they were again. Lower than the clouds but higher than the trees. The red kites. They had to be the same pair.

“Hey! What are you doing?” The shout was accompanied by the sound of bicycle wheels skidding to a halt on the track behind him.

“Oh it’s you.” said Hera.

“Bus broke down.” said Rodney. “I was walking home.”

She laughed, “To India? Llandamair is that way.” She pointed over her shoulder.

“I was planning to follow the stream.” Rodney said, “I’m sorry I spoke to you like that yesterday.”

“You might as well come and meet Ty Talfryn now you’re here. Then I’ll show you a shortcut home.”

“Tee who?”

Hera pushed the gate open and wheeled her bike across a narrow stone bridge. Rodney followed. Water cascaded over a ridge of rock into the pool beneath the bridge then vanished into a mass of brambles. It was loud but rhythmic and somehow welcoming. On the

other side of the bridge was another gate, made of fine strands of metal that had been wrought into tree-like shapes. It wasn't until they were on the other side that he saw the house.

## Seventeen



### Ty Talfryn

It wasn't the size of the house so much as the shape. The bit in the middle was fairly ordinary but at each of the four corners there was a tall stone turret.

"It looks like something out of *Harry Potter*," said Rodney.

"Harry who?" said Hera.

Rodney stood looking at the house. On the hill behind stood a pair of wind turbines, their blades turning casually like a Mexican wave. They weren't the huge, aeroplane wing like blades. From this distance, they looked more like the wings of a bird and the stems were a brown, wood-like fibre.

"Ty means house and Talfryn was Mum's great, great, great, great Grandfather – anyway I can't remember how many greats there are supposed to be – we worked it out once. It also means House of the High Hill."

"Talfryn the Hero? He was one of the last of the Welsh warriors wasn't he?"

"He fought the Catholics. Do you mind?"

"Don't be stupid. It was centuries ago."

A huge dog strolled over, waving its tail. It looked at Rodney through naughty eyes, half obscured by a load of hair.

"Rodney, meet Lopez. Lopez, this is Rodney," said Hera. She seemed different here. More docile. Like a tiger in a stream.

Lopez reached up and licked Rodney's right ear without lifting a single paw off the ground.

"He's enormous," said Rodney.

“He’s a wolfhound.”

They went around to the back of the house. Rodney couldn’t take his eyes off the stones of the turrets and the odd pattern in which they were laid. They looked even older than the hill forts he had seen in India. As they walked around the walls, Rodney counted five sides – a pentagon. There were curtains in some of the windows and he wondered if Hera’s family actually lived in the turrets as well as the house.

“That’s my room,” said Hera. She pointed to a window at the very top.

“Wow.” Rodney couldn’t help it. He tried to imagine having his own room high in a five-sided tower. It was awesome. You would be able to see right down to the sea from one side and all the way to the mountains from the other.

Hera pushed open a huge wooden door and what looked like a black chicken shot out into the vegetable garden. The door led into a sort of kitchen. There were things all over the place. Rodney had never seen such a mess. Funnily enough he liked it though. He found himself thinking that if the house had arms it would have hugged him.

As they passed the kitchen table, a streak of blue-grey fur hopped off one of the chairs. Hera bent down and scooped it into Rodney’s arms. It snuggled against his chest. Its ears seemed to go half way down its back.

“A pet rabbit!” said Rodney.

Hera smiled, “He’s a hare and he comes and goes as he pleases. Come on there’s something I want to show you. Bring Leap if you like. I don’t think he’ll mind.”

She led the way along an oak-panelled corridor hung with zany paintings interspersed with patterned shields and rusty spears until they reached a pair of tall, white doors. Hera opened them. Inside, the walls were lined with books from floor to ceiling. Rodney counted the

walls. Five. They were in one of the pentagonal turrets. He stood in the doorway smoothing the hair on Leap's back.

"That's a lot of books," he said.

"Mum says when she has read them all she'll be ready for her grave," said Hera

"Does she?" Rodney tried to imagine what Hera's mother was like but he couldn't.

Hera was turning the key in the lock of a cupboard in the corner. She heaved out a book nearly the size of her upper body.

"It's the oldest one we have. First published in 1607." She put it down on the desk.

"You mean 1907?" said Rodney.

"1607. This copy wasn't produced until 1648." said Hera.

Rodney looked at the cover. Dark brown leather, decorated with gold leaf. Age had creased it into a pattern of crazed lines.

"Don't you want to look inside?" said Hera.

He lifted the cover and turned the first page as if it was made of sand. The yellowed paper was thick and the lettering elaborate. It was difficult to read because often there was an 'f' where there should have been an 's'.

THE HISTORY

OF

Four-footed Beasts

AND

SERPENTS:

Describing at Large

Their True and Lively *Figure*, their several *Names, Conditions,*

*Kinds, Virtues* (both Natural and Medicinal) *Countries* of their *Breed,*

their *Love* and *Hatred* to Mankind, and the wonderful work of

God in their Creation, Preservation, and Destruction.

Interwoven with curious variety of Historical Narrations out of Scriptures,

Fathers, Philosophers, Physicians and Poets: Illustrated with divers Hieroglyphicks

and Emblems. etc. both pleasant and profitable for Students in all Faculties and

Professions."

“Better put the hare down,” said Hera. Leap hopped off and disappeared out through the door.

A narrow strip of paper marked page 701. About halfway down the page he found the heading ‘Dragons’. Pages and pages of dragons followed: flying dragons, flightless dragons, marsh dragons, swamp dragons, mountain dragons, dragons guarding treasure and dragons terrorising villagers. It was written as if the writer thought dragons actually existed. He read a couple of the stories. One of them was about special friendships between humans and dragons, just like the ones in the book Uncle Eustace had given him.

Through the bay window, Rodney saw something move. A tall, slender lady, her cream and sage-green clothes floating like waves around a yacht. She was carrying an old wooden trug full of garden snippings. She had to be a ghost. The lady walked closer to the window and stood looking in, framed by branches of lime. Rodney stared. She waved.

“How are you doing?”

Rodney swivelled to see Hera standing in the doorway, elbow propped against the frame. Quickly he turned several pages. By the time Hera reached the desk, the book was open at ‘Tigers’. Her face dropped.

“Tragic,” she said.

“Sorry?”

“Tigers. Only three thousand left. Their only real hope of survival is to breed in captivity.”

“Hera, who is that lady?” He looked back to the window. She was gone.

“Lady?” asked Hera.

“In the garden. She waved.”

“In captivity. Isn’t that a horrible thought?” repeated Hera.

“What?”

“The tigers. I hate the thought of them not being able to live as real creatures.”

“You have some pretty exotic pets,” said Rodney.

“We don’t have any pets,” said Hera, “the animals that share this place with us come and go as they please.”

“What about that huge dog?”

“He just turned up one day and decided to stay. We told the police in case someone was looking for him but no-one was.”

At that moment the cream and sage lady came into the room, haunted by Lopez.

“Hello” she said, sweeping Leap up from where he lay on the rug. The hare melted into her arms like a spoonful of syrup on ice-cream.

“Hi Mum, this is Rodney.” said Hera.

“Hello Rodney, I’m Caron,” said the cream lady, “Has Hera offered you anything to eat or drink? I doubt it!”

Rodney thought he had never seen anyone so stunning, then immediately felt disloyal to his own mother, remembering her perfect skin and long black hair. Hera’s mother had the skin of someone who had been outside a lot. Her hair was the colour of autumn bracken and just as wild as Hera’s.

“Did I hear you talking about India?” she asked, “I’ve always wanted to go. Perhaps we should all go together?”

Rodney couldn’t speak.

“Rodney wants to be an explorer.” said Hera, “Like Scott. Or Darwin.”

How would she know that, thought Rodney. He’d never said a word to her about Scott or Darwin.

“Then no wonder you wanted him to see *Topsell’s Beasts*,” replied her mother, transferring the hare to the carpet and putting her arm around her daughter’s shoulders.

“You don’t mind?” Hera asked her, but it wasn’t really a question.

“It’s yours, my love. Your father made me promise you would have it.”

Something about the way Hera and her mother spoke to one another made Rodney feel as if he was eavesdropping.

“I’ve got to go,” he said, “I should have been home ages ago.” He nearly told them about his father banning him from leaving the village but changed his mind.

“Stay for dinner. Then you can read more about tigers,” said Hera’s mother. She had a way of looking straight at him. Her eyes were strong and green.

“Or dragons.” she added.

Rodney knew he was blushing.

“I’d better not. My father is expecting me.”

“Take my bicycle.” Hera insisted, “That way, you might be home before you’re in trouble again!”

Rodney took the bike and rode it hard along the drive, through the flickering shade of the lime trees, wobbling a lot because it was too small for him. He didn’t know if Hera and her mother were watching from the window but he felt they could see him whether they were or not. What did Hera mean about being in trouble with his father? He hadn’t told her anything about his promise. He was beginning to see what Gareth had meant about the Abtalverryns knowing more than they should.

## Eighteen



### Paper Dragons

In spite of everything, Rodney reached home before his father. He was hunting in the fridge when he heard his Dad's voice in the hallway:

"Sorry, sorry, sorry! Wretched meeting just went on and on and on."

"I haven't been home long," said Rodney, "bus broke down."

"Did they fix it?" asked his Dad.

"Err yes, I think so or anyway they sent another one." Rodney spread some peanut butter onto a chunk of bread. "Actually I walked home."

"Oh? How far?"

"Hera showed me a shortcut."

"Hera?"

"Just a girl at school."

"What's she like?"

"Really annoying – never seems to answer a straight question and gets inside my head."

His dad laughed and waved a hand towards the bread and peanut butter "Can I have some of that? I'm starving." he said.

Later, when Rodney took his homework out of his schoolbag, he found a small paper dragon in the outer pocket. When he opened up the wings, a tiny note popped out of its mouth in the shape of a flame. *Any more clues?*

When his head finally hit the pillow that night, it was full of Ty Talfryn and Hera's mother in her sage-green and cream clothes. By the time he woke up the next morning, he had

made a decision. He would tell Hera everything. The book, the map, the spade in the graveyard, the tall stranger in the city clothes, the Google results on Dreadman and Mrs Bright's weird reaction when he asked her about *Llyn Ysbryd*. Just the thought of letting it all out of his brain into the air made him feel lighter but could he trust her?

Then he did something so ridiculously illogical that it made him laugh out loud. He took the Indian rupee out of his pocket, flicked it up into the air, caught it in one hand and placed it on the back of the other. Heads he could trust her. Tails he couldn't. He lifted his hand and uncovered the coin. Heads.

When he put the coin back in his pocket, his fingers touched something odd. He pulled out a piece of brown paper and a length of green twine. It was only then that he remembered putting it in his pocket after they had found the key in the vestry. He was about to chuck it in the waste basket when he saw there was writing on the paper. The shape of the letters and the way they sprawled across the paper was more than familiar.

*I keep my secrets close to me  
I am no open book  
But if you ask with honesty  
I'll tell you where to look*

*His hiding place is where I rest  
A rebel's old retreat  
Though even he would not have guessed  
What lies beneath his seat.*

## Nineteen



## Trust

Surprise flickered across Father O'Keery's face when he saw Hera.

"Will you look at this," he said. He held out his hand with a gleaming key in the palm.

"Is that the same one?" said Rodney, taking it from him. The long stem was wound in finely beaten copper. It twined up around the loop at the top of the key in the shape of a serpent. No, he thought, more like a dragon than a serpent. The dragon doubled back on itself as if it was eating its own tail.

"Douglas said this was the only thing to clean it with." said Father O'K. He pointed to a red and gold tin on the desk.

"Treacle?" asked Rodney.

"Goose grease." said Douglas, who had come to the vestry door so quietly that none of them had heard him, "Evening Master Ranchandani; Miss Abtalverryn," he added.

Rodney turned the key between his thumb and forefinger.

"Work of art." said Douglas. "Don't make things like that these days." He was watching Hera with one eye and looking at the key with the other.

"Um, could we borrow it?" said Hera. She seemed unfazed by the intensity of Douglas's look.

"I don't see why not," said Father O'K, "what do you want it for?"

"I don't know if that's a good idea at all," said Douglas, "That's the property of the church..."

"I thought you said you didn't know anything about it?" said Father O'K.

“Well, that is to say, I don’t think it should be...” Douglas’s hand went to his pocket and a distinctive smell of cabbage smoke and burning wool wafted out into the vestry.

“When will you give it back?” Father O’Keery’s eyes were mischievous.

“Tomorrow.” said Rodney decisively.

“That remains to be seen,” grumbled Douglas. He turned and left, leaving a trail of doubt behind him like pipe smoke.

“You can trust us.” said Hera. Carefully but decisively, she took the key from Father O’Keery’s hand and put it in her skirt pocket.

“Come on,” said Hera, “Let’s go to Ty Talfryn, we’ll be safe there.”

“Safe from what?” said Rodney.

“Dragonslayers,” she said. Rodney laughed. One thing was for sure, he wasn’t going to turn down a chance to see more of that house.

They took another of Hera’s famous shortcuts. A path led from behind the Yew where Douglas had his hut, through a small wood of tangled Oaks and over a set of steps laid into a dry stone wall. As they climbed the wall, Rodney caught a glimpse of Ty Talfryn further up the hill. It was a lot nearer to the church than he’d realised. Hera creaked open a small white metal gate and led Rodney up through a terraced garden along a stone path surrounded by weird sculptures of animals, birds, plants and humans, all intertwined as if they were wrestling or perhaps they were dancing. At the top there was a white cottage with a lean-to porch. Multi-coloured ribbons fluttered across the door. An old man wearing a dark green beret was sitting in front of it on a wooden bench. He was chiselling at an immense lump of stone.

“Hi Dan” Hera shouted out, “this is Rodney.”

Dan looked up. He didn’t say anything. Rodney realised he wasn’t that old after all. A web of scars stretched across the left side of his face.

“Mum says she has some eggs for you.” said Hera.

Dan nodded but didn't answer. He was staring at Rodney. Rodney nodded back, unsure what to make of him. To his surprise, Dan came down the bank to meet them. He smiled and held out his hand. Rodney took it and shook hands formally, making sure he didn't squeeze too hard because he'd seen the scars that criss-crossed his hands as well as his face. Dan reached behind him and picked up a stone, about the size of his thumb. He pressed it into Rodney's hand.

“You're lucky,” said Hera, “it's one of Dan's special charms. Don't lose it.”

Rodney opened his hand and saw that it wasn't a stone but a small piece of coal. It was carved into the shape of an exquisite dragon, which looked as if it had just woken up from a long sleep.



## Twenty

### Spirals

Hera's room was even better than Rodney had imagined.

"Clockwise," said Rodney as they climbed the stairs hewn into the stone at the core of the tower.

"Is it?" said Hera.

"It's the same in the forts in India. It's so that if you were being attacked," said Rodney, "the blokes coming up the stairs wouldn't have been able to get a good swing with their sword arm." He swung his right arm with a small glow of satisfaction that he knew something Hera didn't.

The view from the top was even better than he'd guessed it would be. They sat on a pile of cushions in the middle of the room and Hera unwrapped the key.

"Ouroboros" she said.

"Whatobus?"

"Ouroboros," repeated Hera, "it's a symbol of eternity. The dragon is eating its own tail. It means that life will keep on going over and over again."

"But why would it be on a key?"

"Don't you see- it's all about dragons – the book, the map, the key. Dan knew that when he gave you the charm," said Hera

"How would Dan know anything about it?"

“Why shouldn’t he? Anyway, I don’t remember him giving anyone a dragon before and he must have known you were special because he only ever gives special people charms.”

“That’s illogical.”

“Eustace left you a book about dragons.”

“Forget the past tense, he’s still alive,” said Rodney

“Eustace leaves you a book about dragons and inside the cover of the book is a map with two green dragons on it.”

“And Llyn Ysbryd – whatever that is.”

“It’s a lake. Lake of the Spirits. People are scared of it but they shouldn’t be.”

“You know where it is?” said Rodney, suddenly paying attention.

“Then you find a key under a stone with another clue attached to it and the key has a dragon on it,” said Hera, “It’s about dragons.”

“Where is Llyn Ysbryd?”

“There have to be more clues and I think there is one missing- the one that should have led you to the key. It’s lucky you sort of found it by accident,” said Hera.

“I don’t get it,” said Rodney, “Eustace was a scientist. He was brilliant. Scientists don’t go messing about with clues and dragons and lakes you can’t find. They measure stuff and find the patterns then they write them down as formulae. It’s beautiful.”

“Except you can’t do anything with them unless you are a genius,” said Hera, “You had better tell me more of what you know about Eustace. And about this weirdo who’s been following you. And don’t forget the present tense.”

“Okay, I’ll show you. Where’s your computer?” said Rodney.

Hera looked at him. Rodney looked around the room, the amazing room with five sides and a view over the mountains on one side and the sea on the other and a glass hole in the ceiling through which you would be able to see the stars all night from the pile of cushions that were probably her bed because there certainly wasn’t an ordinary one anywhere to be seen.

“You do have a computer?” he said.

Hera shook her head.

“Some paper and a pen?” he asked.

Hera opened a drawer and took out a notepad and pencil. A folded paper frog fell to the floor. She picked it up quickly and put it back in the drawer.

“Okay, this is what I have so far,” said Rodney. He wrote ‘Uncle Eustace’ on the left hand side of the page and underlined the words. “My uncle was working for an organisation that wants to stop the world using fossil fuels completely by 2030.” He wrote ‘fossil fuels’ and underlined that too.

“He’s your father’s brother isn’t he?” asked Hera.

“That’s irrelevant,” said Rodney, “the thing is that he must have met this Morley Dreadman bloke because they were working in the same place. I found that out on the internet.”

“Do you think he knows your name?” said Hera.

“Who?”

“Your surname is the same as your Eustace’s isn’t it?” Hera was doodling on her own piece of paper, making spiral shapes and linking them together. “Last time your uncle came to Wales, I think he brought something that he wanted to keep hidden. Something he only wanted you to know about,” she said.

“Do you mean the key?” asked Rodney.

“I think it’s something much more important than that,” said Hera. Now she was drawing a dragon with its wings outstretched as if it was about to take off. “And we need to find out what that key is for.”

“Can we just work this out step by step?” said Rodney. His head was starting to hurt. He stood up and went over to the window. Two birds were circling close to the tower.

“Look – red kites!” he said.

Hera glanced up.

“They’ve been coming here as long as I can remember,” she said, “Ty Talfryn is as much their home as mine.”

Rodney dragged his eyes away from the spiralling kites and picked up the key.

“I think that’s what Morley was looking for in the graveyard,” said Hera.

“Red kites?”

“The key,” said Hera, “I think he saw Father O’Keery go up the bell tower. He moved the ladder so that Father O’K wouldn’t be able to get down then went digging around The Poet’s grave. He didn’t know you were going to show up, did he?”

“He told Mrs Bright that Eustace was a friend of his,” said Rodney, “I heard him say it but I don’t think she believed him.”

“Do you?”

Rodney told Hera about the article he had found online, about how Morley Dreadman had been suspected of stealing his Uncle’s work and of faking his signature on some documents. Then he told her about the press cuttings he had found where Dreadman had rubbished Eustace’s ideas about renewable energy and said they were about as much use as a practical joke. Then he told her about his trip into the mountains, his father’s anger at finding out that he had lied about the field trips and the postcard photo that had made him want to go to the mountains in the first place.

“Are you sure you don’t know where Llyn Ysbryd is?” asked Rodney.

“The thing is,” said Hera, “if Morley is here looking for that key, or more likely for whatever the key opens, we had better find it first, and I think you should make sure you don’t bump into him alone.”



## Twenty One

### Kickabout

The paper frog that Rodney found in his pocket that evening contained a simple message: *Meet me outside the church after school tomorrow.*

Rodney sat folding and unfolding the frog, trying to work out how she had made it. The legs folded down in two articulated sections at the same time as the mouth opened wide, just like a real frog.

Since he had left India, life had become ridiculous. It seemed that the Welsh had more heart problems than anyone in Chennai because his Dad had been at work more than ever; the clues Eustace had left were crazy, and the people he had met were unpredictable. Rowan had avoided him since the incident with the custard powder. The others had been almost too friendly. Then there was Hera. And Morley Dreadman.

The dragon charm that Dan had given him was enclosed in his right hand. It felt warm. That was ridiculous too. Why would a total stranger give him such a thing and why would a small lump of carved coal feel as if it was alive? He put it down on the bedside table next to the photo of his Mum. Her eyes seemed alive too and she was dead. What about Eustace? Where was he? In his mind he saw the photo-postcard of the mountain and the lake. That has to be Llyn Ysbryd, he thought, Lake of the Spirits. Is that where you are? Why have you only left me a few silly clues? Why didn't you just tell me what was going on?

His phone beeped a text into his message box. He opened it.

*Hey Rodders, Rowan says we're all down to the beach tomorrow night – you too, right?*

*No excuses- we gotta slay those Llangollen boys on Saturday. G.*

He'd almost forgotten about the big match on Saturday. Just under a week. His biggest so far. He hid the key under a load of socks in his top drawer and got into bed. Two minutes later, he got up again. He removed the key from the top drawer, pulled out the bottom drawer and lifted a corner of the carpet underneath it. The key fitted snugly between the carpet and the skirting board and the drawer still closed perfectly. He took the book Eustace had left him out of his trouser pocket and tucked it under his pillow. Then he went to sleep.

In the morning, Rodney took the book out from under his pillow and placed it carefully in his back pocket. He thought about taking the key to school too but decided it would be safer where it was. The paper frog was sitting on its hind legs next to his laptop. He folded it and put it in the drawer with the socks. On the way out of the door, he had a sudden feeling that he had forgotten something. He scanned his room and saw the dragon charm next to his Mum's photo. On impulse, he picked it up and tucked it into his jacket pocket. It felt warm, familiar.

That evening the rugby team crammed into the front of the first bus. Rowan eyed Rodney then gave him a cool grin. Rodney felt the anger rise inside his gut but pushed it back down again.

"No hard feelings," said Rowan. It wasn't a question. Rodney shrugged and went to sit next to Gareth, who rolled his eyes. The bus was a new one with plastic seats and a hybrid engine that didn't grumble, groan or hum. Rodney found himself thinking wistfully about the time he had walked home after the old one broke down.

As they passed the church, he thought he could see someone cycling down the hill through the pouring rain. The bus stopped a few yards down the lane to let two of the year seven girls off. Hera could be seen clearly now, getting off her bicycle and leaning it against the wall outside the churchyard. Someone whistled under their breath.

“What’s that loony Abtalverryn doing near the church?” shouted Rowan, “I thought her lot worshipped in the woods!” Several of the others laughed and whistled. Rodney felt his neck reddening. Gareth threw him an anxious look. The bus hadn’t moved. Rodney knew he could still get off. He was sitting near the front where Rowan and the others could see him without even trying. Gareth turned around, raised his right hand slowly and started to hum a single note. The rest joined in one at a time until they were all away on ‘the song’, the one they sang in Welsh before every rugby match. Rodney didn’t know the words but he put in the odd one he remembered. The bus set off again. He saw Hera finish settling her bike and look up as it pulled away.



## Twenty Two

### Break In

The rain stopped just as the bus pulled up. It was low tide and the beach was wide and golden. Someone had already set up a goal at either end with some hazel poles and string. Rowan threw the ball in. Everyone dived for it and in the scrum, Rodney hit the ground first, scooping sand into his shirt and shorts but thinking of nothing but the ball. His hands found it and he hauled himself free, noticing for only a second that a tall man in dark clothes was watching from the dunes. Rowan was unaccountably absent. Then, as he ran with the ball, Rodney saw him. He was looking up at the man and he seemed to be winking. Rodney passed to Gareth, who slipped on through the pack and scored an immediate try.

“Yeessss” the cry went up and Rodney braced himself for the hail of slaps on the back and cuffs over the head that went with being a hero once again. They played on until the tide was threatening to float their goals and the game had become more like fishing.

“S’looking good, Rodders,” said Gareth, “just got to keep that up ‘til Saturday and we’re in with more than a chance.”

Rodney was feeling bad about Hera. He wondered what she had done when he hadn’t turned up. It was her own fault, he thought, if she had a mobile phone he could have texted her. The exhilaration of the game was still buoying him up; he wasn’t going to let anything spoil it for now. He pulled his trousers and jumper on over his kit and walked up over the dunes turning the dragon charm over in his hand. It started raining again with even more enthusiasm than before. He jogged on home through the puddles, enjoying the cool of the rain after the heat of the kickabout. Save showering anyway, he thought.

He stood dripping on the doorstep while he fished out his key. The door opened unexpectedly. His father's face was a shock.

"Rodney, thank goodness you are safe," said Ravi.

"Has something happened?" asked Rodney. It was all too familiar. Too much like the day his Mum died. "How come you're home so early?" he said.

"You had better come in," said Ravi, "I'm afraid we have had a visitor and not one who was too welcome."

As he walked into the hallway, Rodney couldn't believe what he saw. There were papers all over the floor and all the drawers were open in the sideboard. The living room floor was the same, with the cushions from the sofa strewn around and books all over the place.

"How did they get in?" said Rodney.

"Through the back window, I think. It wouldn't be that difficult. The question is why?"

"Oh no." said Rodney. He dumped his bag and ran upstairs to his room. The window was wide open His top drawer was lying on the floor and there were socks everywhere. Hardly wanting to breathe, he knelt down and pulled out the bottom drawer. Feeling the way with his fingers, he peeled the carpet back and found the key. His Dad appeared at the door.

"Someone must have disturbed whoever it was because they obviously left in a hurry," said Ravi, "what's that you've got there?"

"It's just something Father O'Keery lent me," said Rodney, "did they take much?" He looked around. It was a mess but all the important things seemed to be there: his mother's photo, his laptop, the poster his friends at school in Chennai had given him when he left, even his watch was lying on the desk.

"That's the odd thing," said Ravi, "I don't think there is anything missing. Your computer is still here and so is mine. None of the things a thief might consider valuable has

been touched. Even those two twenty pound notes I always leave under the pot in the kitchen for emergencies are still there for all to see.”

Rodney looked out of the window. The sheep chomped on, unconcerned. A merlin falcon flew in over the hedge. Two magpies landed on one of the sheep and started to pull ticks off its back.

“Why don’t you change into some dry clothes then put the kettle on while I start clearing up,” said Ravi.

“Have you told the police?” asked Rodney.

“They are equally confused,” said Ravi, “They said they might want to talk to you too but I don’t think they can do very much, especially if nothing was taken.”

Rodney went into the kitchen and picked up a couple of the teabags that had been emptied out onto the work surface. The kettle was just coming to the boil when his Dad walked in.

“Well that is odd,” he said, “That photograph of Eustace I had hanging over my desk has gone. “ He bent down to look on the floor behind the desk. “No sign of it anywhere.”

## Twenty Three

### Tipping Point

At first he thought of avoiding her – it would have been pretty easy to deny ever finding the paper frog anyway - but then Rodney decided to do what Uncle Eustace used to call ‘taking it on the chin’. So in the first break, he went to look for Hera.

“Sorry about yesterday,” he said.

“Where’s the key?” she asked.

“It’s safe, why?” said Rodney.

“We need to take it back,” said Hera. “We promised.”

“It’s already a day late,” she added.

Rodney knew that Hera must have got soaked in the rain while she waited outside the church for nothing but she didn’t say anything about that. He had actually forgotten about the promise.

“Father O’Keery won’t mind,” he said.

“It’s still a broken promise,” she said, “I even came to your house to look.”

“You? Did you go inside?” Rodney felt a bolt of shock go through him.

“There was nobody in. At least I thought there was somebody but no-one answered the door when I knocked. I tried again and again.”

“But you didn’t go in?”

“Don’t be silly. How could I?” said Hera.

Rodney secretly thought that Hera could do almost anything she wanted to but even if she was lying, there was no way she would have left the house in such a state. Anyway, lying was something he just couldn’t imagine her doing. Things started to sort themselves out in his

mind. They flashed through rather quickly but they were forming some sort of shape. Rowan had called the kickabout and got Gareth to make sure he was there. Rowan had winked at the man on the dunes. The man on the dunes had looked a lot like Morley Dreadman and while Rodney was on the beach, the house had been burgled. What neither Rowan nor Morley could have known was that Hera would come knocking at the door because she had expected to meet Rodney and he didn't show up. On an impulse, Rodney hugged her. For someone who should have been furious with him, she was quite unfazed by it.

"So give me the key and I'll take it back tonight," she said.

"I haven't got it with me."

"You do still have the key don't you?" she sounded anxious.

He told her about the burglary at home.

"And you think it was Morley?" she said.

"Who else would it be?" said Rodney. A sudden vision of his bedroom came into his mind. He had tidied it up, carefully putting everything back into its place, except ~why hadn't he thought of it before ~ the paper frog that Hera had given him. He shuddered. If Morley had taken that too, he would know that Hera had asked him to meet at the church. Or would he? Hera hadn't actually signed the message.

"Why did you want me to meet you at the church yesterday?" he asked Hera.

"I think I know where to look."

And now so does Morley, thought Rodney.

"We'd better go this afternoon," he said, "before Father O'K gets there."

"What about Douglas Rhys-Davies?" said Hera.

“There’s no telling where he’ll be,” said Rodney, “we’ll just have to chance it.” Actually, he thought, Douglas and Father O’K were the least of their worries. If Morley had got there first and worked out what they were looking for, whatever it might be, it could already be too late.

That day at school was one of the slowest of Rodney’s life. Drizzle misted the windows of the bus as it finally turned into Church Lane. Rodney heard the subtle change in note as the hybrid engine switched to petrol when the battery ran out of juice. Gareth was sitting right behind him. The bus stopped by the church. The two year seven girls got off as usual. Rodney couldn’t see Hera anywhere.

Gareth nudged him, “You okay, Rodders?” he said.

Rowan overheard him, “Course he’s not okay, he’s not right in the head,” he whispered over Gareth’s shoulder. He gave Rodney’s collar a tweak, “You want to watch the company you keep.” he said.

Rodney stayed on board. The bus pulled away. The drizzle turned to rain. He stopped himself turning back to see if Hera was at the lych-gate as the bus motored on to the end of the lane and turned into Sea Road.

When they got to Rodney’s normal stop he swung his bag over his shoulder, narrowly missing Rowan’s head. Rowan grabbed it and pulled Rodney closer.

“Given you any more of her little paper animals has she?” he whispered. Rodney was the only one getting off here. The driver revved the engine. Rodney looked at Rowan straight, pulled his bag back onto his shoulder and headed for the door. Just before he stepped down onto the road he stopped and turned.

“See ya Gareth,” he said, then turned to Rowan, “And you Rowan.” Above all else, he had to look cool, even if his head was about to explode.

## Twenty Four



### Honesty

As soon as the bus had gone, Rodney turned and jogged back the way it had come. At least the rain might just keep Douglas in his hut, he thought. There was still no sign of Hera when he reached the church. Father O'Keery's bicycle wasn't there either.

As ever, the church door brought the pang that went with remembering his mother. Stupid when she had never been to this church and it was nothing like the one she went to in Chennai. He pushed the door open. He was about to turn right up the aisle when there was a small movement from one of the pews near the back.

"Have you got the key?" said a voice he recognised immediately as Hera's.

He went over to where she was sitting. Two of the pews were separated from the rest by a wooden panel and a small step. The backs of the pews were deeply carved with leaves, animals and knots.

"What are you doing there?" he said.

"Look," said Hera. She took out a small torch, wound the handle a few times then shone it onto the end of the bench. In a framework of leaves, a book had been carved. Underneath it were the words 'In Fides Quaerere'.

"Do you know what that means?" she asked.

"Inquire in faith?" said Rodney, part guess, part remembered from the Latin he'd done at school in India.

"Ask with Honesty" said Hera, "it's our family motto."

"I thought your family didn't come to church?"

“It’s a long story,” said Hera, “they used to come before the rebellion. Talfryn even used the church as a hiding place,” She pulled a piece of paper out of her pocket. It was an exact copy of the rhyme that had been wrapped around the key.

*I keep my secrets close to me  
I am no open book  
But if you ask with honesty  
I’ll tell you where to look*

*His hiding place is where I rest  
A rebel’s old retreat  
Though even he would not have guessed  
What lies beneath his seat.*

“So you think this is the place?” said Rodney.

“Has to be. But I can’t find anything that would need a key to unlock it.”

A faint creak came from the direction of the door followed by a draught of damp air. Hera switched the torch off quickly and they both sat very still. The door clicked back into place and the church remained dark. The only sounds were the clock in the tower and the wind outside. Something brushed against Rodney’s shin. Startled, he put out a hand. There was a warm, earthy smell, which was almost familiar. His hand touched something soft and damp.

“Leap!” said Hera. It was the hare.

Leap made his way to the other end of the pew as if he had been doing it all his life. Rodney remembered the tale of the leveret that Father O’K had told him. Then the hare disappeared.

“Where’s he gone?” whispered Rodney.

Hera had already gone to look. She wound the torch again then shone it at the end of the pew. There was a coat of arms on that end too but the carving was less distinct, more worn. Hera got down on her knees and sniffed at the bottom of the pew.

“He’s here somewhere,” she said. The torch was dimming. She wound it a few times then shone it at the place where she had been sniffing.

“I could just turn the lights on,” said Rodney, “I know where they are.”

“We don’t want anyone coming in just yet,” said Hera.

Rodney looked at his watch. The dial had stored just enough light to shine the time back to him. “They’ll be here soon anyway – Father O’K at least.”

“We’ll have to get a move on then - we need to do this while we still have the key,” said Hera. She sniffed again and sat very still, listening. In the semi-darkness, she looked just like a hare. Then she put her hand down and Rodney saw her slip it into a half-moon shaped hole in the base of the pew that had not been obvious before.

“You’ll have to give me a hand,” she said. She was trying to lift it. Rodney found the half-moon and lifted. There was a soft springy noise as a catch disengaged. Slowly, the whole pew swung backwards, revealing a comfortable hare curled into a hollow in the floor beneath.

“Sorry Leap,” she said. Tenderly, she picked Leap up and put him to one side, revealing a small iron ring.

“Here, I’ll do it,” said Rodney. He pulled at the ring. It felt firm. He adjusted his grip and pulled harder. A lump of stone lifted from the dirt beneath the pew. He pulled again and the stone came out completely. In the hole underneath it was a metal plate. The torch died again.

“Wind it up!” said Rodney, “we haven’t got much time.” Hera wound and in the torchlight he saw the keyhole. He fumbled in his pocket and found the key. He didn’t doubt for a moment that it would fit.

There was another creak from the door and the hare sat up suddenly, sniffing the air. In a bound it vanished into the shadows.

“Quick, the pew!” whispered Hera. She shoved the torch under her arm to hide the light. Rodney retracted the key and together they tipped the pew back into place with a painful clunk. Slow footsteps echoed over the slate of the entrance. Rodney and Hera lay between their pew and the one in front. Rodney could just see the shoes on the feet that were walking up the aisle. Smart black shoes. They stopped several rows ahead of Talfryn’s seat. If I can see him, thought Rodney, surely he will be able to see us when he turns around. A subtle grinding sound came from the other end of the pew then a low thump. He felt Hera tense. In a flash of fur, Leap shot past them and up the aisle towards the door. The black shoes shuffled in alarm.

The church door opened with more than a creak this time.

“Well, Professor Dreadman,” said a voice unmistakably that of Douglas Rhys-Davies, “when Father O’Keery came here, he told me everyone was welcome in this church but I would bet my savings that he was not expecting the like of you.”

Rodney saw the shoes turn to face the door.

“You haven’t got any savings you old fool,” said Morley.

“That depends on what you hold valuable,” said Douglas, “but for now, if you value your life, you’ll get out of here before you join those that rest in the yard.”

Rodney watched as the shoes walked back the way they had come. He heard the door creak open then slam shut. Seconds passed. The clock in the tower ground through more than a minute.

“I think they’ve gone,” he whispered to Hera. “Are you okay?”

“You?” she replied.

They stood up. Rodney brushed the dust off his trousers.

“And did you find what you were looking for?” said a voice. It was Douglas.

## Twenty Five

### Making Peace

Douglas switched the lights on and the church came to life around them.

“Why was Morley frightened of you?” asked Hera. It was a question that simply hadn’t occurred to Rodney. Douglas had ordered the professor out of the church with such authority.

“That story is about as long as the one about your ancestors and almost as unlikely,” said Douglas. Was it Rodney’s imagination or was Douglas grinning?

“And what were you up to?” asked Douglas.

“We came to bring the key back,” said Hera.

“A day late,” said Douglas.

“Someone broke into our house yesterday,” said Rodney.

“You do still have the key?” Douglas was unsettled for just a moment.

Rodney was so tempted to lie. How else were they going to get another chance to keep the key? Before he could think of anything plausible, Hera said “Yes” and held the key out to Douglas. Rodney watched as he took the key out of her hand.

“Ask with Honesty” said Douglas, “that’s a good motto.” He put the key carefully into his pipe pocket and went off towards the door.

“What did you go and give him the key for?” said Rodney as soon as Douglas had gone.

“Think about it,” said Hera, “from what we saw just now, the key is just about as safe with him as it could be.”

“But then we’ll never find out what is under that metal plate!”

“Yes we will.”

"I don't see how."

"You weren't listening." said Hera.

## Twenty Six

### Pointless

Morley took out the penknife he had bought in the fishing shop by the seafront. It was little more than a child's toy but it would do the job. Eustace's face grinned out at him from behind the glass in the photo frame. Morley turned it over then prised the back away from the frame, letting it fall to the floor. The photograph fell with it.

“Yes!” he said, “I was right.” There was writing on the back of the photo. He picked it up.

‘In case you forget what I look like while I am saving the planet and you are mending hearts!’ it said, ‘with love and affection, your one and only brother. Christmas 2010’

Morley cursed and ripped the picture in two.



## Twenty Seven

### Mad

Hera pushed her bike as she and Rodney walked up the lane, away from the church. Clouds scudded in from the sea bringing salt on the breeze to stunt the oaks and crook the hawthorn in the hedge.

“The point is,” said Hera, “we need to find some way of distracting Morley before we go back to the church.”

“I wish we knew exactly what he’s doing here,” said Rodney, “I don’t even dare tell Dad that I think it was him who broke into our house. It would mean telling him a lot more than that.”

They turned the corner. A bicycle was speeding down the road from the cliff with the rider’s head bent low over the handle bars. His right hand was occupied in trying to capture the swathes of black cloth that billowed out behind him. Flapping trouser legs revealed flashes of red sock. There was a squeal as Father O’Keery applied the brakes, the tyres slipped sideways and both he and the bike traversed the lane, nearly wiping out both Rodney and Hera, before landing in the ditch. He stood up, shaking with laughter.

“I knew that would happen one day!” he said.

“Are you okay?” said Rodney, suppressing a sudden convulsion of laughter.

“If rugby taught me one thing, you can be sure it is how to fall,” the priest managed to blurt out. The laughter was strangely infectious. Hera was laughing too. Rodney gave in. It felt great after the tension of the last few days. All three of them stood there laughing like monkeys until Father O’Keery pulled his bicycle out of the ditch and yanked at the saddle to straighten it. One of the wheels was ever so slightly wonky.

"You can't ride it like that," said Rodney.

"Oh that," said Father O'K, looking at the wheel, "it's been like it for ages." He and Hera started laughing again.

"The chain might be more of a problem," said Rodney. It was hanging loose with one of the links broken and the cable for the gears had come loose. Rodney knelt down and reconnected the cable. He pulled a little metal clip out of his pocket, one that he had spotted on the pavement a few days ago and picked it up in case it came in handy. In a couple of moments, he had the chain fixed too.

"Wow!" said Father O'K, "like new!"

"Jugaad." said Rodney.

"What's that?"

"Just a bit of improvisation. You ought to get a new chain or you'll come a cropper again." For some reason that set Father O'K off again:

"Sorry," he said, "anyone would think I'd been drinking up there."

"On the cliff top?" asked Hera.

"I often go up there to think," said Father O'K, "there's no better place on earth to work out your problems."

It had never occurred to Rodney that a priest would have problems. And if he had, he would have expected to find him working them out in church, not outdoors.

When Father O'K had gone, Hera said they should try it - thinking on the cliff top.

"We need to make some sort of plan," she said, "and at least from there we can see anyone coming."

So they turned left and went on up the hill until they got to the gravel car park. It was empty. Only the gulls were scavenging around the bins. There were two paths that led along

the cliff, away from the beach and the town. One was higher and wider. The other was overgrown, narrow and closer to the edge. Without speaking, they chose the narrow one, leaving Hera's bicycle hidden behind a gorse bush.

Clouds still rolled in from the sea but the sky behind them was blue. The sea went on for ever. To left and right, the coast stretched on for miles and miles of cliffs, stacks and caves. Rodney stood as close to the edge as he dared. Waves crashed against the stacks, exploding into white foam. Small black crows wheeled in the breeze, reminding him of Father O'K on his bike. As one pair banked away on a gust, Rodney caught a flash of red.

"Those crows look as if they're wearing red socks!" said Rodney.

"Choughs." said Hera, "They're very special. One of them is probably King Arthur."

Rodney laughed.

"How do you make that out?" he said.

"When King Arthur died, his soul became a chough. Their red beaks and feet are symbols of the blood he lost." She said.

Rodney was about to laugh when it dawned on him that she was actually serious.

"I thought he was supposed to be asleep in a cave somewhere," he said.

"Choughs nest in caves," said Hera, "Look at that one! He's so beautiful – he could be Arthur or perhaps he's Lancelot."

"You don't really believe it do you? I mean the story?"

Hera didn't say anything. She just stood looking out to sea where the choughs wheeled and soared.

"It just isn't scientifically possible," said Rodney.

"We don't know everything, do we?" said Hera.

"That's stupid," said Rodney.

“Okay, what did happen to him when he died?” said Hera.

Rodney looked at her. She was serious.

“What’s death if it isn’t about changing into something else?” she said, “plants become soil, soil grows stuff, animals eat it, then they die and they become soil too.”

“That’s different,” said Rodney, “that’s their bodies. You said it was Arthur’s soul that became a chough.”

“Well where do you think it went?” said Hera.

Rodney felt a huge urge to change the subject. It was like talking to a little kid. And he didn’t have any answers. Nothing that he could explain logically anyway. He looked at the choughs. They were just birds.

“You don’t believe in dragons either do you?” said Hera.

“Of course I don’t believe in dragons!” said Rodney, “they’re just a myth. Like King Arthur.” He’d had enough of this. “We were supposed to be making a plan,” he said, “and this isn’t getting us anywhere.”

“What if Eustace believed in dragons? What if he knew about one? What if he knew where it was but didn’t want anyone else to find it except us?”

“A dragon! Hera you’re nuts, nobody believes in dragons any more,” said Rodney. It was obvious now. They had all been right – Gareth and the others, even Rowan – they had all warned him that Hera Abtalverryn was mad.

“But you believe in Llyn Ysbryd,” said Hera.

“What do you mean?” asked Rodney, suddenly listening, really listening. “Hera, you know where Llyn Ysbryd is don’t you? Tell me.”

“What’s the point?” said Hera. She was frowning but she wasn’t in a strop or anything. She just seemed disappointed. “It’s just another myth,” she said.

“Please tell me where it is – just roughly - then I can follow the map.”

“You don’t get it, do you?” She turned away from him and ran away down the path, perilously close to the edge but sure-footed as a chinkara.

“Hera! Hang on – I’m sorry. I don’t think you’re mad. Not really.”

“You can think what you like. They all can.” said Hera. She slowed down a bit. Rodney caught up.

“Honestly, I am sorry.” He realised it was hopeless. He would have to wait until she had simmered down. If he went on about Llyn Ysbryd, she would close like a clam and he’d never get her to tell him what she knew.

Hera shrugged her shoulders and turned to face the breeze.

“I’ve got an idea for distracting Morley while we look under that pew,” she said, “and Rowan.”

## Twenty Eight



### Vanellus vanellus

The paper lapwing was a work of art. *Vanellus vanellus*. Rodney had to look it up but the bird was such a good likeness, there was no mistaking it from the pictures on Google. One of the wings unfolded at a slightly awkward angle but apart from that it was perfect. One of Hera's best. The message was written under the good wing: *R, meet me by the old hut at the Gwydyr's Cliff. I'll be there before school tomorrow. Make sure nobody follows you. H x*. For a moment he wished she hadn't put the x after the H. Carefully, he tucked the lapwing into his pocket with only the delicate crest sticking out.

Most of the team were already in the changing rooms by the time he got there. As he walked in through the door, he reached into his pocket for a coin for the locker. Out flew the lapwing and landed on the floor. Hastily, he picked it up and stuffed it back into his jacket pocket. He glanced up to see if anyone was watching. Darran was putting his boots on, Rowan seemed to be pulling a new shirt over his head, Gareth wasn't there yet. Only Toryn looked up and said "Hi Rodders, what's up?"

"Nothing much. You?" said Rodney. He took his jacket off and hung it on a peg. He turned his mind to the game. This was the last training session before the big match on Saturday. He kept his head down as he changed into his kit, making sure he didn't meet Rowan's stare. The anger was still warm inside him and he didn't want it to affect the way he played, except perhaps to boost his determination. He breathed and counted under his breath. When he reached twelve he was ready. Cool as the Raita his Mum used to serve with curry. He could hear her voice saying 'yogurt, mint and cucumber – just a little garlic'. She loved to teach

him as she cooked. Imagine the taste, he thought and walked past Rowan onto the pitch. As he passed the pegs, he saw his jacket hanging there with the lapwing's crest poking out of the right-hand pocket.

Afterwards Coach wanted a quick word.

"Tighten up your passes, Rodney; don't hang onto that ball too long. I've a lot of faith in you but you got to make sure you play with the team, see? Your control is superb but sometimes it's about letting go."

"Okay," said Rodney.

"See you Saturday, then."

Back in the changing rooms nearly everyone had showered and was getting ready to leave. There was no sign of Rowan: he must have gone already. Rodney kicked his boots off and took his bag out of the locker. When he came out of the shower, only Gareth was left. He threw his clothes on quickly and walked out with him, laughing at the imitations Gareth always did after rugby.

"Did you see Torny when the ball went wide?" Gareth made a face like a gorilla. "And what about that break? Darran was like: 'urrrgh' and then Jason nabbed the ball from under his chin!" His impressions were so funny they were perfect.

Rodney smiled and dug his hands into his pockets. The paper lapwing was there alright. But now it was in the left-hand pocket.



## Twenty nine

### Meeting Hera

The alarm was muffled under his pillow. Rodney hit the off button as quickly as he could.

Ignoring the bathroom, he tiptoed downstairs and opened the kitchen door.

“Hey Rodney, you’re up early aren’t you?” said Ravi.

“Dad! What are you doing up?”

“Couldn’t sleep – thought I’d have a hot chocolate and make an early start,” Ravi said, “would you like one?” He pointed at the instant chocolate. Rodney nodded. He looked at the clock on the kitchen wall. It was ridiculously early. There was still time. All he had to do was get out of here without creating any suspicion.

“Anyway, where were you off to?” asked his Dad through a mouthful of chocolate.

“I’m meeting Hera before school.”

His Dad seemed to relax, “Hera? Oh that’s good,” he said.

Funny how anything to do with Hera seemed to be okay with his Dad. He hadn’t even met her.

“Strictly speaking, she doesn’t actually live in the village,” said Rodney. He had no idea why he was pushing it when he had just got away with not only being up incredibly early but going out without any real explanation.

“As long as I know where you are,” said Ravi, draining the last of his chocolate, “I have to go. I’ve a paper to finish before my first op and I’ve gone and left the notes in my office at the hospital. Don’t be late for school.”

“It was good to see you,” said Rodney.

His Dad hugged him. Rodney hugged him back. The texture of his suit was so familiar. It made him feel stupidly young and a bit lonely.

“See you later,” said Ravi.

“Yeah, see you later” said Rodney.

The front door closed. Rodney shook off the odd wistfulness he was left with and poured milk onto his cornflakes. Before he could raise the spoon to his lips, the front door opened again.

“Hey, I’ve just realised,” called Ravi, “I could drop you off.”

Rodney thought quickly.

“Right!” he called back, “just give me two seconds to grab my bag.” He ran upstairs, chucked what he needed for the day into his school bag and was in the car before his Dad had fastened his seatbelt. As they pulled away, he saw someone standing on the other side of the road. He didn’t have time to see who it was.

“Where are we going?” asked Ravi.

“Just drop me at the church,” said Rodney, “that’ll be fine.”

“Surely Hera doesn’t live in the church?” said Ravi.

Rodney wanted to laugh. The thought of Hera living in a church was wild. What should he tell his Dad? For the first time, it occurred to him that he wouldn’t be able to tell him how to get to Ty Talfryn, even if he wanted to.

“Actually, I don’t think there is a road to the house,” he said. There must be one somewhere, he thought, he just hadn’t seen it. How else would they have got the wind turbines up there?

“Sounds interesting,” said Ravi. His mobile beeped. He stopped the car and looked at the message. “Perhaps I should drop you at the church after all,” he said, “do you mind?”

“Church is fine,” said Rodney.

He watched the Range Rover drive away and just for a minute thought how impressed his friends in Chennai would have been. Top of the range. Fashionable beyond belief.

“Oof! Can’t your Dad find something that drinks less fuel?” said Hera. She was sitting cross-legged on the stone in the middle of the lych-gate.

“Conversion,” said Rodney, “it only uses petrol when the LPG runs out.”

“Which it will, one day,” said Hera. “Better than oil though.”

“Doesn’t your Mum have a car?” asked Rodney.

“We can borrow Dan’s old Land Rover if we need it. We don’t. Neither does Dan really.”

Rodney wanted to ask about Dan. He wanted to ask about a lot of things but two things stopped him: 1) he probably wouldn’t get a straight answer and 2) if they didn’t get on with what they had to do, they would miss the bus and be late for school. There was only one question that really mattered right now.

“So how are we going to get the key?” said Rodney.

Hera looked across the graveyard towards a small hut just beyond the western-most yew tree. Two grey-brown doves were foraging around the door. They didn’t look at all surprised to see the door of the hut open. Douglas stretched in the sunlight and made some sort of sign as he walked out through the door. The doves followed him and he bent down to talk to them.

“Does he sleep in there?” whispered Rodney.

“Come on,” said Hera. She hopped off the stone and walked straight over to where Douglas was standing with a steaming mug in his hand.

“Could we borrow the key please?” asked Hera, just like that. All Rodney could do was watch as Douglas nodded and went back into the hut. He returned with a small package and handed it to Hera. She thanked him and said something in Welsh. Douglas was frowning but he looked thoughtful rather than unhappy. It was like watching two people in a dream. Rodney was outside looking in. Trying to make sense of it.

When Hera came back with the key, it was like his ears clearing after they had popped in a swimming pool or on a plane. The words from the motto came into his mind, ‘Ask with Honesty’. Perhaps that was all she had done.

“Let’s get on with it then,” said Hera, “before the dreaded Morley works out we’re not doing what it said on the lapwing message.”

## Chapter Thirty

### No Clue

This time there were no disturbances. No creaking door. No Hare. No shiny black footsteps. Rodney and Hera peeled back the pew. Rodney could see the lock that held the hasp in place over the metal plate. Now there was no need for a torch because the morning sun shone through the window in a bright ray that seemed to have been sent especially to light the space beneath the pew. There could be little doubt that they had found the right place. The pattern on the hasp matched the one on the key: a dragon curled back on itself as if to eat its own tail. Hera gave Rodney the key. He knew he should let her do it but he couldn't bring himself to relinquish the key once he had it in his hand.

"Go on," she said, "he's your uncle."

Rodney put the key into the lock. It turned so smoothly. Too smoothly for a lock that hadn't been used for a long time. He lifted the metal plate. That moved easily too. From under it came the smell of earth, stone and something else. Old cabbages, thought Rodney. The ray of light from the window was moving with the sun. It shone into the hole beneath the pew until it couldn't reach any further. Three iron rungs had been set in the stone on one side of the opening.

"It's a tunnel," said Rodney.

"Talfryn's escape route!" said Hera, "So this is where it is!"

"Someone has used it a lot more recently than that," said Rodney. He was trying to stifle imaginings of bones and skulls and other things you might expect to find in a tunnel beneath a very, very old church.

"Let's see where it goes," said Hera.

Rodney looked at his watch. The school bus would be passing the church in precisely thirty minutes.

“What if someone shuts the metal plate while we’re down there?” he said.

“We’ll have to get out at the other end,” said Hera.

Rodney watched as she lowered herself into the hole beneath the pew. He wondered where she got her faith from. As soon as her head had disappeared into the darkness, he followed.

## Thirty One



### Darkness and light

Rodney willed his mind to stop telling him that this was the last place he would ever be, alive.

“Where’s your torch?” whispered Rodney.

“Why are you whispering?” said Hera.

“Just wind up your torch, Hera,” said Rodney, “I can’t see a thing.” He was feeling his way along the wall of the tunnel, trying to squash the panic. The air was surprisingly soft but he was still terrified that it would run out. As he had followed Hera into the tunnel, he had pulled the pew down to cover the hole, taking care not to engage the catch. From within the church, everything would look normal. Nobody would know that they were down there.

“The torch, Hera!” he said again.

“I didn’t bring it,” said Hera.

“What?”

“I didn’t know there would be a tunnel, did I?” she said.

Rodney stopped for a moment, placing one hand on either side of the tunnel. This was it. The space was no wider than he could reach. And he couldn’t even stand up straight. It felt as if the space was shrinking, getting tighter, closing in on him.

“Are you okay?” said Hera. Her voice sounded remote, a long way away, in another world.

“Yeah. I’m fine.” His voice was in another world too. His ears were ringing. He was thirsty. They were going to miss the school bus. They were going to miss everything. He couldn’t see and it was as if he couldn’t breathe. What would happen if he stopped breathing? He put his hand in his pocket to find the piece of string he always carried. Just to touch

something familiar. Instead he found the dragon charm that Dan had given him. His fingers closed around it. He felt its warmth, its shape, its life. He breathed.

“Are you okay?” said Hera again.

“Don’t worry about me,” said Rodney. He found his legs and walked on again, feeling his way with his feet and letting the charm do the real work of sorting out his mind.

Reassuringly, his feet were finding their way up a slope. Was it his imagination or was the tunnel becoming lighter?

“Can you smell the sea?” called Hera. She sounded as if she was quite a way ahead. Rodney could smell something. Surely there was no way it could be the sea? He grasped his way around a bend in the tunnel. Now there really was light.

“Wowowowow!” Hera’s shout echoed as if it was being amplified and whirled back to him.

In just a few more paces, Rodney saw. The tunnel ended in a wide cave. Choughs rose and soared and dived above the waves that licked its entrance. The sight of their crazy red feet and the freedom of their flight made him want to cry with joy. One landed at the entrance to the cave. It looked at them as if deciding whether or not they should be there. Hera said something gently in Welsh and sat down with her back against the cave wall. The chough looked satisfied and took off again into the salt-sprayed air.

“What did you say?” asked Rodney.

“Just told him what we are doing. We’ll have to wait for a while. I think we’ll be able to get out across the rocks when the tide has fallen a bit,” said Hera, “or else we’ll have to go back the way we came.”

Rodney looked away in case she noticed the stupid, horrible tears pressing at the back of his eyes. Now that he was out of the tunnel, the thought of going back into it terrified him.

He looked down at the rocks below and the sea boiling over them. You'd have to be crazy to risk that, he thought.

"It'll be full moon on Saturday," said Hera.

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Gravity," said Hera, "The moon uses gravity to pull the tide in and out. It's about the only science lesson I've ever really understood. I'd always known that the tides are much higher at high tide and lower at low tide when the moon is full but I didn't know why."

"I just don't see how we are going to get down there. The water is still almost up to our feet."

"It will be low water in about an hour."

"An hour! The bus will be long gone." Rodney said, "I can't be late or someone will tell my Dad." Or if Rowan doesn't see me on the bus, he'll make some sort of trouble just to get me back, he thought.

"Right, we'll go through the tunnel," said Hera. She stood up.

Rodney stared at the sea.

"It's a pity though. I thought you wanted to see Llyn Ysbryd." said Hera.

"Stop messing about Hera, that just isn't funny," said Rodney. "How could you see Llyn Ysbryd from here?"

"Magic," said Hera, "But you have to believe it."

"You're being weird again. Come on let's go."

Hera shrugged and disappeared into the tunnel. Rodney took a last look at the water as it swept back over a crescent of rocks in front of the cave. Each retreating wave revealed more rocks, glistening with rock pools and forming a landscape of their own. It was magnificent. It was almost magic. His watch beeped. Twenty minutes to get back along the tunnel, out

through the church and down the lane for the bus. Rodney took one last breath of wonderful light and air then followed Hera into the gloom of the tunnel.

## Thirty Two

### Death and the Mountains

Rowan wasn't on the bus. He wasn't there for Maths either. It was lunchtime before Rodney saw him sitting, glowering, from a table in the corner. Rodney ignored him and got on with his day. There was already enough to make him sweat with the memory of blundering back along the tunnel in the stifling dark then discovering that the pew had been clicked back into place, blocking their exit. If it wasn't for Hera's cool they could still be down there. "It has to open from both sides," she had said calmly: "Talfryn would never have created a trap for himself." But it had been Rodney who worked out how to open it, groping around in the dark for the most logical place for a mechanism to spring the catch. There was even a stone step set into the wall to make sure you could reach to push up the pew.

He managed to avoid Rowan all day and Gareth's Mum dropped him off at the end of the road so he didn't even have to brave him out on the bus home.

As he turned the corner, Rodney's mind drifted back to the walk home from school in Chennai and his Mum opening the door when he got there. Sometimes he would ignore the joy she had always shown at seeing him, shrug off her hug. How could he have known she was going to die?

Thoughts still in India, he reached the house in Pen Street and pulled his key out of his pocket. Something was lying on the doorstep. It was a dead bird, beak open, eyes dull and unseeing. Its black and white feathers had a petrol-like sheen. Surprised at the tenderness he felt, Rodney lifted the head and touched its feathered crest. *Vanellus vanellus*: a lapwing, he thought, same as the paper bird that Hera had made to fool Rowan.

Rodney suddenly wanted to speak to Hera. But she didn't have a phone. That was so annoying. He looked up and down the street. There was nobody about. He took a white cotton handkerchief out of his pocket and wrapped it around the bird's body. Then he slid the lapwing gently under a lavender bush to the right of the front door.

"You okay?" Hera's voice made him jump.

"Where did you come from?"

"What was that you hid under the lavender?" asked Hera.

"Don't look," said Rodney, "It's a bird."

"Let me see," Hera bent down and removed the handkerchief. She stroked the bird's head.

"I think it's a sort of message," said Rodney, "a warning."

"Rowan wouldn't have a clue how to catch a lapwing," said Hera. Gently, she turned the bird over, "Look – no marks, just a broken neck. Probably killed by a peregrine falcon or a crow who couldn't carry it. I bet Rowan just found her somewhere." Hera handed Rodney his handkerchief. "She won't need this," she said, "Let's take her back where she belongs." For someone who loved animals, she seemed strangely unfazed by handling a dead bird. Rodney watched her face: a moment of sadness then she was walking away, carrying it in both hands.

They took the lapwing to the other side of the stone bridge and placed it in a clump of cotton grass at the edge of the marsh. Rodney couldn't quite see why they couldn't have just buried it in the garden but Hera was adamant that the lapwing should be returned to the moor.

"Won't the foxes eat it?" he said.

"Maybe." said Hera.

Rodney remembered the choughs they'd seen that morning, flying so close to the cave that he'd felt as if he was flying with them. He wondered what she would have done if it had been a dead chough on the doorstep. Surely it was nonsense but he had a sudden feeling that a chough should never be left on the moor, away from the smell of the sea and the sound of it crashing over the rocks but for a lapwing it was exactly the right place.

Hera looked up at the mountains and said something in Welsh he didn't understand.

"Translate please."

"I look at you and you look at me. You are so old and we are part of you and must be old too." She said.

Rodney wished he hadn't asked. Every time he started to think she was okay, she would go and say or do something else mad. They were standing quite close to the path he had taken that time he had gone looking for Llyn Ysbryd. It seemed like ages ago. So much had happened yet nothing actually had, not in terms of finding Uncle Eustace anyway. The whole thing was a mess and here they were messing about with keys and tunnels and dead birds and pretending to be part of the mountains. If only his Dad would let him have another go, he could find the lake and then even if Eustace wasn't there, at least he would know.

"Have you ever thought of asking your Dad to go with you?" asked Hera.

"To where?"

"To look for Eustace. You could go together," she said.

"When would he ever get time to go stomping about in the mountains, even if he wanted to? When he got this job, he said one of the great things about it was that it was near where Uncle Eustace was last seen but he hasn't raised even a pebble to find him and gets touchy if I so much as mention it. Any more bright ideas?" said Rodney. And then he had one. It was the brightest idea he had come up with in a long time, perhaps ever.

“Hera,” he said, “do you think your mother would let me stay the night at your place?”

## Thirty Three

### White Lies

Rodney was right about one thing. Hera didn't even have to ask her mother, she just knew it would be okay for Rodney to stay. He was right about another thing too. His Dad didn't mind him being away overnight if he was with Hera and her Mum. Why it was his Dad trusted them so much, he had no idea but he wasn't going to argue when it all worked so beautifully.

However, there was something he turned out to be completely wrong about.

"There's no such thing as a white lie," said Hera, "it's either a lie or it's the truth."

"But I don't have any choice, do I? If I tell him the truth, he won't let me go."

"You don't even know the way," said Hera, "in fact you don't even know where to look."

"We can go over it tomorrow - you can help me work it out," said Rodney. He still suspected that she knew where Llyn Ysbryd was or at least that she thought she did. Hera was looking at him with eyes dark with disappointment. He stared back at her; all he could think about was how he could persuade her to change her mind. "Then Friday is an inset day so Dad will be wondering what to do about me while he's at work anyway so he'll just be relieved when I tell him I'm staying with you. All I have to do is turn up at Ty Talfryn in the morning with my gear, which won't be nearly as suspicious as me packing my rucksack for no reason and it won't be such a lie because I'll be back by the evening."

"What if you're not?"

"I'll have to be because it's the big match on Saturday and they will eat me alive if I don't turn up."

“They’ll have a job if you’re lying at the bottom of a gulley with a broken ankle or glued down in a bog,” said Hera, “anyway, I’m not doing it.”

Rodney thought for a moment. He could ask Gareth instead. But that would mean telling Gareth the whole thing and anyway, he had no idea if his Dad would be so relaxed about him staying with Gareth. Also Gareth’s Mum was the type who would definitely notice if Rodney wasn’t there, and it wouldn’t be difficult to spot in a house with only two rooms downstairs and two upstairs. No, it had to be Hera.

“I bet if you told your Dad the truth, he’d come with you,” said Hera.

Why did he want to do it on his own? Rodney really didn’t know the answer to that, all he knew was that it was the most illogical feeling he’d ever had in his life but he was utterly certain. He must do this on his own. So when Hera said that she would go with him and that she could tell her mother and that her mother could be trusted not to tell his father, the only answer was no.

It wasn’t until he got home and found the note from his father that everything fell into place. There was a big conference on Friday and Ravi had been asked to speak at the last minute, it was a big honour and the kind of thing he’d only dreamt about in India but he would make sure he was back in time to watch Rodney in the rugby on Saturday. ‘What do you think - could you stay with a friend on Friday night perhaps?’ It said at the end. He’d obviously forgotten all about the inset day and now he was going to be away overnight. It was a gift.

Rodney went straight up to his room and opened the cupboard where he kept all his Duke of Edinburgh Award stuff. He snapped the lid off the plastic container where he filed the OS maps in order from South to North and pulled out the one for the mountains North East of Llandamair. Then he took the hand-drawn map out of the dragon book. With the OS map spread on the rug, he placed Eustace’s map over it, aligning North with North. He studied the

OS map for about the ninety ninth time. There definitely wasn't a lake named Llyn Ysbryd marked on it. He took out the postcard, the last one Eustace had sent to India. The lake in the photo was a fairly ordinary shape but he should be able to work out where it was from the contours of the mountains surrounding it. The far end was steep sided with rocky outcrops. Hanging valleys striped the western edge but the south and east sides were formed of gentler slopes, so wherever it was, he would need to approach from one of these directions. He slid the photo over Eustace's map. It was odd that neither lake nor contours seemed to match that well. Perhaps the map was drawn in a hurry. It had to be the same place. On the map, there was a strange little hole in the mountainside not far from where the dragon symbol had been drawn. He couldn't see anything like it in the photo. He put the map away and concentrated on trying to find a lake the right shape on the OS map. There were only a few without names. One of them wasn't far from the place where he'd spent the night on his last expedition. He turned the photo upside down and saw that a small section of the lake was actually more like a beach. If you took this part out of it, the shape was very similar. It was the only possibility. It took Rodney about fifteen minutes to work out how to get there and how long he would need. He'd learnt from his previous trip that he needed to prepare much more carefully. His usual walking pace had been halved in the mountains and he hadn't thought to factor in the numerous stops to check the path and doubling back when he found he was on the wrong one. The paths hadn't been nearly as easy as they had been on the school trips to Snowdon and Cader Idris. So six miles at two miles an hour would mean three hours there and three hours back, add another hour for contingency: that meant seven hours. The days were reaching their longest. That would give him almost fifteen hours of daylight - another reason it has to be now, he thought. A small voice in his head that sounded rather like his mother's suggested leaving it until after Saturday's match. He wasn't going to play well if he was tired and aching after a

whole day's scrambling about in the mountains. But then there was his Dad and the gift of the conference. It had to be Friday.

He looked out at the hillside and the sun shining on the mountains beyond. Some days they looked black and foreboding but today they seemed to be beckoning to him. He packed the box of maps away, keeping the one he would need on top. Then he hid the dragon book, the postcard and Eustace's map, avoided looking at his mother's photo and had one last go at Googling 'Llyn Ysbryd'. Still nothing but fairy tales about lakes and spirits. It was a bit early to check the weather forecast but he had a look anyway. Sunshine and showers. He could handle that.

When Ravi came in, Rodney was just closing the file on his homework.

"Hi Dad, saw your note – all sorted," said Rodney. It was all so easy.

"Well that is a relief," said Ravi, "Are you sure you don't mind? Did you arrange to stay with one of your friends?"

"Just Hera," said Rodney.

"Hera? Oh how nice. I'll give her Mum a call straight away to thank her. Do you have the number or is it in the book?"

Rodney stood for a moment, at a loss. Then he realised that all he had to do was tell the truth.

"I don't think they have a phone." He said.

"Well that is unusual. Perhaps I could email her."

"No computers either."

"Oh. Well perhaps I'll just write her a note after the conference. Do you think that would be okay? Have you had supper yet? I'm dying to tell you all about it. A gathering of top cardiologists from all over Europe, I can't believe they've asked me to speak."

“What will you talk about?” asked Rodney, delighted to change the subject and only half listening to all his Dad was telling him, while they cooked and ate sardines on toast, about the super-conference and all the people whom he’d heard about but never met but now he was actually going to meet them and that he felt it was such an honour to be contributing some of the latest thinking from India.

“But I promise I’ll be back for the big match,” said Ravi, “I wouldn’t miss that for anything.”

Rodney felt a confusing mixture of pride and guilt as he watched his Dad settle down at his desk to refine a lecture he had given in Chennai not long before they left. It seemed like several lifetimes ago.

In his room, he assembled all the kit he thought he would need for the walk to Llyn Ysbryd and hid it under the bed. What to do about food? He couldn’t exactly ransack the larder when he was supposed to be staying at Ty Talfryn. He’d have to stop by at the shop on the way home tomorrow and pick up a few things. Water wasn’t a problem, he had purifying tablets so could use the water from the streams. He felt a surge of joy at the thought of filling his bottle from a waterfall high in the mountains. Briefly, he wondered whether he would see Hera at school tomorrow.

In the event, he didn’t see Hera, which in some ways was just as well. He still hadn’t worked out what he would do about this note his Dad wanted to write to Caron Abtalverryn but there were some things he would just have to work out afterwards. If he found Eustace or even if he only found some better clue about what had happened to him, all that would become insignificant. Actually, he hadn’t any idea what he would find but what he did know was that he had to look. And he had to get there before Morley Dreadman.

It wasn't until he was just about to go to bed that night that he went to pull his rugby kit out of his backpack and found a little bird made out of reddish-brown paper placed carefully on the top. *Milvus milvus: red kite*. He reached down further into the backpack. There was a whole bag of them. All perfectly folded and practically identical.

## **Part Two**

### **Hera**





## One

### Friday

What do you do when you know someone is heading for danger but there's nothing you can do to stop them? What if trying to help means lying to someone who has taught you that it is better to live with the truth than give life to a lie?

Hera lay looking at the stars with the cushions piled around her in a comforting nest. The night was deep and clear but she could tell that the weather hadn't yet made up its mind what to do. Lopez was making gentle woofing noises in his sleep, his nostrils twitching as he dealt with some problem in his own world. She placed her hand near his nose so that its smell would drift into his dream and comfort him. She knew better than to wake a dreaming dog for that is how they work out all the great problems they will face. She wished she could go to sleep and sort out this one of her own.

The thing that worried her most about Rodney was that he didn't seem to understand how anything worked. Except machines, he was a genius with those. And he'd been brilliant at helping her with maths. When she'd been nearly out of her mind trying to get geometry, he'd shown her that she knew how to do it already. He'd made her see that was as simple as what she was doing when she was folding paper animals. Yet sometimes it was as if he was living in a different world from the one she saw all around her. It was like the story they'd been taught at school about someone conquering Everest. Why would you want to conquer a mountain when

the mountain has been there for millions of years and you are part of it just as it is part of you? More importantly, how could you survive in the wild if you didn't understand how things worked? Rodney had gone chasing off after Eustace using nothing but clues that he had pieced together like one of his mathematical puzzles. It just didn't make sense.

Hera gave up trying to sleep and went over to the window. The wind turbines were turning slowly on their wooden stalks; wings and flaps fully extended to turn on every breath of air. The moonlight flickered through them. She could see Dan moving about in the trees as he sometimes did when he couldn't sleep, when the nightmares became too terrible. Tomorrow he would start another sculpture and then he would probably stay up all night for a week or more to finish it.

Lopez stirred and looked around to check where she had gone. He narrowed his eyes in the way she knew meant that he was relieved to see her. She did the same. He stretched out his front paws, contented but alert. Ty Talfryn was never silent but the still of the night was made restful by the proper night-time noises: the wind through the turbines; the settling of the mice in the lofts and the secretive hoot of the owls who kept their numbers down. Hera went back to her nest and curled up with Lopez, his soft biscuit smell close to her.

In the morning, Dan spoke some of his rare words. He spoke in a deeply Welsh way with the words formed somewhere between his mind and an inward breath. He always took his time and no word was ever spoken that didn't combine the air with his thoughts.

"So your friend has gone to the mountain," said Dan.

"Did you see him?" asked Hera.

"Eustace's brother left him off down by the church. Not far from the path up here, I was thinking," said Dan.

"Rodney's Dad?"

“That’s what I said.”

She wondered, not for the first time, if Dan knew where Eustace had gone. If anyone knew, it would be him. Or Douglas Rhys-Davies, of course, but if either of them did know, they were as likely to tell as each other. As likely as a squirrel to tell you where he’s hidden a hazelnut. You’d have to wait for the hazel tree to grow before you were any wiser.

Dan gave her one of his deep looks and turned to go.

“Dan,” she said, “If you wanted to help someone but you couldn’t what would you do?”

Dan turned back and looked at her for a long time.

“I would follow them,” he said, “and I’d make sure that someone I trusted knew where I was going.”



## Two

### The Way of the Otter

Hera chose the things she would take with care. The paths were rough and steep. Too much weight would upset her balance as well as sap her strength. She knew she could rely upon the mountain for water but at this time of year there would be no berries and little other food that she would have time to prepare. Waterproof clothes, walking boots and spare socks, some bread, flapjack, cheese and apples, a length of rope and some bandages. What else? She remembered Rodney's horror at her forgetting the wind-up torch when they were in the tunnel under the church so she squeezed it into the side pocket. The Cross of Caron her mother had given her on her twelfth birthday, she looped quickly over her neck and thought again about leaving a message. She sat down for a moment to think. A whirring sound above her head told her that the solar blinds were closing over the skylight window. Until the sun receded they would drink in its power at the same time as shielding the room from its heat. It must be nearly midday. Lopez followed her to the door, expectant but not hopeful.

"Not you, Lopey," she said, "not this time."

Over the bridge, past Dan's sculptures, a wave at Dan who was head down, working on the latest piece, through the wood of twisted trees and moss-covered stones; soon she was out on the moor and following the river upwards. The merlin watched from a wooden post whose use was long forgotten and nodded as she passed. A tinge of purple-pink coloured the sky over the two mountains, Merynedd Fawr and Merynedd Fach. She headed for the col or pass between them. It was a very long time since she walked this way. Trusting the memory of her feet, she let the suck and thud of her footsteps guide her and watched for the places where

the streams ran deep under the tufted grass. It wasn't long before the hills grew taller, the rush of the streams louder and the call of the mountains stronger.

Where the river split, or rather where it joined from two sources coming downwards while she was going up, she hesitated, wondering which way to go. In the bend of one of the tributary branches the water ran deep into a pool. A flat rock in the shape of a perfect rectangle stood beside the pool like a bench. She quenched her thirst from the stream then sat and looked at the pool, searching for a reason to go one way or the other. A small noise caught her attention on the far side, a clucking sound. With a high pitched whistle, a creature launched into the water, rolling and bucking, then disappeared leaving a rill like a ribbon on the surface. Hera laughed. The otter's head rose as if to take a bow. She clapped. It turned and did a perfect somersault then swivelled onto its back, almost mimicking her clapping, watching her all the time with a half expectant look. Oh how I love you otter, was all she could think. The otter paused in mid-pool and watched her intently, clowning over.

"Which way?" she said. The otter threw a look across its shoulder to the other river branch then dived and disappeared again. She saw it scramble up the bank, give her one last look then ripple off among the sodden grass, moss and stone. The otter's word was as good as any. She set off along the smaller tributary, soon climbing and scrambling as much as walking.

The path began to dry a little with patches of peat showing between rock and heather. On one of these, Hera saw a footprint. She stopped to look. Probably about Rodney's size and certainly fresh enough to be today's. Perhaps the otter was right then, she thought. Whether it was coincidence or not didn't trouble her. At the top of the first climb, she paused and looked back. From here she could see the village and the sea beyond. Ty Talfryn on its high hill looked distant but so familiar. She imagined her mother, doing the things she did in no particular order

but with absolute care and perfection, Lopez keeping her secret and Dan scraping away wordlessly at his stone.

It was hard to see where the path went from here, where the hill dipped then rose towards the mountain. The way seemed to lie across a drift of upland marsh but after the recent rains it was hard to see the way through. Warm as she was from the climb, she began to feel the chill of the mountain air on her cheek and over her fingers. Which way would Rodney have gone from here? He knew so little about these marshes and they knew nothing of him. Would he listen carefully enough for the rumble of the deep, narrow streams hidden beneath the sheep-flattened rushes? She stood looking at the marsh and emptying her mind of thought, letting the land fold her into its being. The croak of a raven, the wind beating through the pass, a collie dog way down in the valley on an isolated farm, the sheep on the opposite side suddenly alert. She looked again at the marsh and saw the way through, a thin band through the soft rush. Too wet for footprints, she was walking on water, moss and flattened wicks of rushes and could only hope that Rodney had chosen this way too.

Once through the marsh, Hera again looked for a path that would take her to higher ground. Her guess was that Rodney would skirt the fell by taking the wider, better worn path around it but she would try to make up some time by cutting across. At the top, she stopped to look back. Now she couldn't see the village or Ty Talfryn, only the high, jagged edges of Merynydd Fawr, the softer slopes of Merynydd Fach and between them a glimpse of blue-grey mountains beyond. The wind had picked up and was coming over the land instead of the sea, funnelling through the gap and hurrying the clouds, which seemed inclined to linger. A band of Goats were grazing in the shelter of an abandoned sheepfold, one standing on the wall looking out over the valley as if on guard. It turned to look at Hera. She looked away and it relaxed and leapt down to join the others. Now which way? Perhaps she had been wrong to take the

shortcut. But she was running out of time. The sun appeared through a hole in the cloud and told her it was near to three-o'clock. No more shortcuts. If Rodney had made it to the Llyn, he should be on his way back soon and it would be so easy to miss one another.

Hera scrambled down the other side of the high ridge and found she had made the right decision after all. She could see a ladder stile that would be roughly in the right place to make it part of the original path. It would be good to be on a proper path again. She found enough stones to get her over another, wetter marshy tract, climbed a dry stone wall then headed towards the stile. Watching the clouds as they formed and reformed over the crowns of the high hills and mountains and dipped to fill the cwms and crevices, she saw that the weather would get worse before it got any better.

At the ladder stile she was relieved to find another footprint and climbed the wooden steps feeling confident. It was as she jumped down for the sheer joy of landing on tufted grass that she saw the second set of footprints, larger, heavier and more recent than the one she had assumed was Rodney's.



## Three

## Tracks

Hera studied the print. At this time of year it wasn't that surprising. Although not many were energetic enough for these mountains, the more enthusiastic hill-walkers would often find their way up here. What was surprising was that the second set of prints was made by someone stupid enough to wear wellington boots to walk such difficult terrain. She breathed out and in and out again, letting her feelings settle down. Hesitation, fear, anxiety, annoyance, the feeling that she had been stupid not to think about the danger, guilt at going off without saying anything to her mother, loneliness, then finally, determination. The prints didn't have to be Morley's, but if they were, no matter how reckless or annoying he had been, Rodney would definitely need help. She began to wish she had asked Lopez to come with her after all. But his legs weren't made for climbing ladder stiles and she had no right to get him into danger he wouldn't understand.

A few paces from the ladder stile, Rodney's tracks led away from the more established path then vanished. Rodney, why in the name of the Earth did you decide to follow a sheep path? She asked the question out loud then saw her answer gleaming not too far away. A lake: still, sheltered and alluring. The sheep path appeared to be the most direct route. It was barely a path at all, pocked with little sheepfoot marks and hugging the side of a slope in its last possible hold before it plunged away towards the valley bottom. Okay if you were a sheep.

Hera looked down. It was everything she loved and more – the textures of the ancient rock, the shades of green, yellow, deep red and brown in the grass and scrub, the sparse, soaring birds and the nearness of the sky – it was life. She breathed it all in for a moment, drew some of its strength; then switched her eyes to the ground in front of her. She would have to watch every step if she was to get to the lake without falling. That was if the path did lead to the lake. The sheep who made it might have had a reason to go to the lake, or they might not. Whatever they used it for, they had made a thorough job of covering any human footprints. Up, down, always hugging the very edge, almost impossibly narrow, the path went its own way.

Hera rounded the sharp edge of a slope scattered with rock. Suddenly, the path petered out in a craggy semi-circle. It was obviously used by the sheep for shelter, since it was littered with their shiny brown pellets. She had lost sight of the lake. It couldn't be far away now. Hauling herself up onto the top of the crag, she saw now why the path went no further. Set into a deep bowl, every approach to the lake was steep and crumbly. Even the sheep didn't bother to go there, it seemed.

From where she stood, she could also see that there was not a living being at the lake except the wind shuffling across the water, the low, matted plants and the myriad of creatures too small to be seen from here. Hera stopped and listened: the wind thrumming over the crags and fluting the rushes; her heart beating hard from the exertion of the slopes, the ever-present, liquid rumble of the streams. She followed the loudest, nearest rumble, found a place where it tumbled over a sharp-edged rock and stooped to drink, cupping her hands and then dabbing its cool on her forehead, neck and wrists. It was a ritual, a connection to the life blood of the mountains that made her feel safer, soothed, more as if she belonged.

It was getting late. Either she had missed Rodney completely or he had decided to go on further. Or something had happened. She thought again about those footprints. She was sure they had been made by wellington boots. What if Dan hadn't been the only one to see Rodney's Dad drop him off? What if Rowan had been following him? Or Morley?

She wandered over to a place where a group of random rocks had fallen into a close ring and sat down on a low ledge cut into the innermost one. It was a natural seat. The wind was increasing all the time, rattling the brittle leaves of the holly that had managed to grow somehow from between the lowest and the highest rock. Its bark was smooth and silver, its branches shaped along the line of the wind, forming a roof over the rocks. It was good to be out of the wind for a while.

One thing was certain: there was no way of getting home before dark now. Trying to work out what to do next was making her head hurt. For each reason for doing anything, there was a counter reason and another possibility. She closed her eyes. It didn't help. She opened them and noticed the intricate shapes of the lichen growing on the rock, pale and green, transforming air and rock into life. The rock itself was comforting and solid. She imagined the centuries it had endured to be here now, with her sitting on it, feeling its ancient spirit touching hers. Time had a different meaning when you thought of it like this. She would go on.

Hera stood up with a sigh and picked up her backpack from where she had propped it in the corner opposite where she had been sitting. Tucked into a crevice and held lightly with a slate was something small, reddish brown and made of folded paper. A red kite. It was pointing upwards, past the lake and on towards the crest of the next ridge.

## Four

### Paper Trail

Considering that Rodney had been so determined to do this on his own, something must have happened to make him decide to use the folded paper kites. Hera had picked this particular bird because she knew it was special to him. Almost a sort of guide, she felt. Red kites were a Welsh relative of the bird that Rodney had seen in India, in Chennai, on the day when they had buried his mother. He had told Hera that the kite had hovered over her grave for several seconds, as if looking straight at him; then wheeled away upwards, towards the mountains. Then he had told her about the red kite that had distracted him so much that he slipped and fell down the mountainside. And he had told her about the two red kites he had seen when the bus broke down on the day he tried to find the way home but instead found Ty Talfryn.

Hera couldn't see why Rodney thought it so important to label the birds, the animals and the plants with Latin names or why he liked so much to count and record them. What was the point in pasting them into boxes, capturing them for zoos or stuffing examples into museums? Who were they when they weren't living out their own role, their own place in the world? In so many ways, Rodney's ideas were as topsy-turvy as a lot of the other folk she knew; yet for all his pinning down of things, his ridiculous limiting of possibilities, his not seeing of what was in front of his nose and his missing of connections, she liked him. She was drawn to him as the clouds were drawn to the mountains, and she knew instinctively that it was as much her place to find him now as it was to belong to the Earth, the Sun, the Moon, and to the land in which she had grown and into which he had ventured unprepared.

As for Morley Dreadman, she found it impossible to imagine him up here in the real world. Much as she knew he must be made of the same elements, that he was part of the

same whole intricate web of being, she could understand his motives no more than she could understand why anyone would put a living creature in a cage.

Before she put her pack on her back, she took out a piece of her mother's nutty flapjack and sat with her legs pulled up to her body, munching it like a squirrel. Then she unfurled her aching legs and set off in the direction the paper Kite was pointing.

For a long time now, the clouds had coloured the mountains grey, hiding their true height. Hera had been keeping an eye on them, watching to see if they were rising or falling, becoming thinner or more dense. From time to time the sun would shine for a few precious moments. Then, as if determined to make the most of the day, it chose late evening to paint the slopes with rainbow colours, copper-red and gold. Hera couldn't help stopping to drink in the last of the light and take in the way the sun seemed to soak into the land. It filled her with a sense of warmth and wonder that she hoped would keep her going through the night.

It had occurred to her when she left the place where she found the paper kite, that Rodney would be using that satellite thing he had on his phone to find his way. Would it know about paths or would it try to take him in a straight line to whatever destination he had tapped into it? She wished now that she'd paid more attention when he'd tried to show her. By luck, she had found a path that followed the right direction and decided to stick to it. To stray from the path when it would be dark in an hour or so would just be silly. When she spotted the next little paper kite, resting in the mossy elbow of a hawthorn tree, she knew that, satellite or no satellite, Rodney must have made the same decision.

The cloud that had been lingering over Merynedd Fawr, was moving closer, becoming darker. As it came, the wind dropped and rain began to fall. Hera quickly put on a jumper and fastened her jacket up to her chin but she didn't pull up her hood. She wanted to be able to hear. The path was rising steeply now and going against the flow of a rock-strewn stream. She

chose footholds carefully, using the rocks as steps. The cloud seemed to bring night along with it. Sounds took on more meaning. Rain filling the hurrying stream, the wobble of a boulder as it took her weight, her breath merging with the night air.

At the top, the path turned abruptly away from the stream. Looking back, she could see the water gleaming as it tumbled over rocks. She stooped to pick up another paper kite. They were so small and the folded paper was tough, its red-brown colour camouflaged in the heather. She was pleased – if you weren't looking for them, you would never see them. But now it was dark, the little red kites were going to be difficult even for her to find. She hadn't thought of that. She wondered if Rodney had. She thought about using the wind-up torch but it would only ruin her night vision now that her eyes had adjusted to the dark. The smells too had become more intense: the wet, green of the upland marshes; the subtle scent of heather; now and again the pungent smell of damp sheep.

A short stretch of springy grass and then she was climbing again, feeling the strain in her calf muscles, thighs and back, looking out for flat boulders, dry rocks that wouldn't slip. Rain was falling harder now, in heavy drops that pasted her hair to her cheeks and dulled her hearing as well as her sight. She was becoming so tired. The path was becoming a stream. Before long there were no dry rocks, only wet ones, often black with slimy moss. Every step was an effort, every decision a difficult one, except the decision to go on. But it was becoming more and more of a struggle. Food, she needed food.

At the top of the next climb there was a dip. Below where she stood, Hera could just make out a solid shape. A couple of steps nearer and she recognised one of the roofless, ruined buildings common to the Welsh hills and mountains. They were special places, memories of the lives that had gone before. Gratefully she made her way down towards it, stumbled through a gap in the dry stone wall that stood firm to mark its boundary, over a threshold spanned by a

beam of ancient oak and collapsed into a place where she was sheltered from the night by a slab of stone and a thickened, whiskery ash tree that had grown within the walls. Too tired to eat any of the food she had brought with her, she slumped against the tree and drew her coat as tight around her as she could. Ash for the spirit, she thought, ash for healing. She thought of the ash logs they burnt in winter on the wood burning stoves at Ty Talfryn and the long, steady warmth they gave. She thought of the bright, many-leaved strands the ash trees produced in Spring and the way they thrived in any place on the mountains and in the valleys. She thought of their love of the streams, the rocks, the walls, the low lanes and the high places. She didn't mean to fall asleep.



## Five

### Spirits

Hera couldn't tell what had woken her. It was strangely quiet. No dripping water from the ledge above. No wind to rock the tree below. No scuffling outside the walls. Only the rush of stream over stone, less urgent now the rain had stopped. She stayed still for a moment, letting her senses come to life, feeling the cold but not fighting it. It had been stupid to fall asleep. If Rodney had turned back, he could easily have walked past this place without knowing she was there. But even Rodney couldn't have walked all night and must have stopped somewhere. With a cold twist of her stomach, she remembered Morley Dreadman. The memory brought a naked fear that she had never felt before up here in the wild. The sort of fear she imagined most animals felt when they encountered humans - creatures who did not follow the familiar patterns and codes, who lived like spectres in a world that they had pasted over the surface of the real one.

For a moment she imagined what it would be like to stay in this place forever. Nobody would know that she was here within the solid stones and the deep folds of the mountains. The problem of finding Rodney had become so huge with the night, the rain, the incredible tiredness and the aching of her limbs. The trail of red kites had fizzled out not long before she had stopped and she had no idea which path to take from here.

A cloud drew back from the Moon. Hera held her breath for a moment. It seemed as if all the mountain was holding its breath too, waiting for a sound.

"Ouoowwaa" The sound swept the valleys and scaled the mountains. I'm dreaming, she thought, there are no wolves. Another wait. And then it came again:

“Ouoowwaaaroo” Longer, more insistent, the howl threw a hook into her chest and pulled hard. Now she knew she was awake. This was no dream, no trick of the wind. She waited, drawing her mind for everything she knew about wolves. Wolves wouldn’t usually attack humans unless provoked. They were animals just as she was, with as much right to be there and to hunt for food. They were intelligent creatures with individual characters, who formed strong bonds with their pack. Wolves had been extinct from these mountains for centuries. People had hunted them, not the other way around.

She listened hard. There was no sound but the breeze and the stream. The clouds were leaving the mountains for the sea, opening up the night sky to stars, planets and the whole, vast universe. A bat was hunting in the moonlight. She breathed. It had been the wind after all.

“Ouoowwaaaaa” This time the howl was so close it wrapped her in its tendrils. Quickly, she looked for somewhere to hide. Then she saw him. He was standing on a wide ledge of flat stone, where a window would once have been. He stood in a halo of moonlight. Lithe and powerful. Definitely a wolf.

Hera melted silently into the stone wall, knowing it was pointless. He was looking right at her, trying to lock her with his eyes. If she tried to run, he would catch her in one stride. Knowing that any animal is suspicious of fear or excitement, she breathed steadily, in and out, trying to conjure calm out of the stone.

The wolf flicked his head from side to side as if making absolutely sure they were alone, then in one liquid leap, landed square in front of her. She watched a flash of green grow stronger in the amber of his eyes. He stared. She had no choice but to stare back. He was mesmerising.

Slowly, slowly, the wolf raised his muzzle and howled again, his front paws barely touching the ground. As he moved, there was a strange effect of the moonlight passing right

through him, like torchlight through gauze. Even in her fear, she was spellbound. She sank to the floor.

The wolf slunk towards her, eyes fixed, until he was looming over her and they were sharing the same breath. She'd often seen animals caught by predators and seen that, at the last moment, they seemed to give up and accept their fate. Now she knew. She closed her eyes, waiting for the claws to tear into her flesh, the teeth to close on her throat. His smell filled her nose, her mouth, her mind, her skin as if her flesh was already a part of his.

He made a long, low huffing sound, like a sigh. Hera opened her eyes. She found the wolf lying at her feet with his ears laid flat along the back of his beautiful head and one long, slender front leg crossed over the other. There was something in his expression that was as if he was expecting something from her. Hera had a sudden compulsion to reach out her hand to touch his fur. She knew if there was a pact of trust to be made, hers was the next move. She took a deep breath and risked it. But her fingers touched nothing but the cool air. She blinked hard. Fatigue can drive you mad, she thought, delirium, illusions.

The huge grey wolf stood up. He seemed real enough.

"Come with me." The words formed in her mind, not so much as language but as understanding, she felt them through her body.

"Come with me." The wolf made a small noise of impatience, almost like a yawn, then turned and strode over to the path that led on up towards the peak of Merynedd Fawr. He waited, looking down at Hera with quiet confidence.

"Right!" said Hera, "I'm coming." Fear slipped off her shoulders like snow off a branch. Without thinking, she grabbed her pack and ran after him.

She found she could move more swiftly now. It was as if she was bound to the wolf by an invisible chord, a lifeline. There was no time to wonder why he was doing this or where he had come from. She just had to keep up.

The wolf leapt, trotted and climbed ever higher, always turning to wait before he rounded a corner or mounted a summit. Hera stumbled behind, envying the effortless agility and strength of those four long legs. On and on they went until she moved automatically, pulled by that invisible string.

Eventually, the moon and stars faded into the pale mauve light of dawn. They were descending now, zigzagging down the mountainside until they reached a huddled group of mountain ash, then down again, a new landscape stretching before them. There, glinting in the morning mist, was a lake, hidden in the midst of the steel grey mountains. It had to be the right lake. After following this wolf all night, after binding her fate so tightly to his trust, she couldn't doubt him.

The wolf slowed and sniffed the air, narrowing his eyes to focus on the long distance. She followed his gaze to glimpse a tiny human figure moving furtively along the other side of the lake. Could it be Rodney? She looked at the wolf for guidance but for the first time, he seemed to hesitate. He crouched low and sleek, alternately watching the human figure and flicking his eyes back to her.

She drew closer to the wolf. She felt no fear now, only love, and awe. But what happened next would haunt Hera forever. The wolf was growing fainter, blurring like an image in an old photograph. He turned his gaunt and pointed face towards her, just as he did when he first appeared from nowhere. Only his eyes were clear, dragging her deep inside him with their stare.

Suddenly, the wolf's legs sagged and he lay down, rolling onto his side with his neck stretched out at a sickening angle. Horrified, Hera ran to him and was just in time to see a wound burnt deep into his muscular neck; the fur stained crimson. Instinctively she reached out to touch him but once again her hands passed right through him. All she could do was watch. As the unforgettable fire in his eyes flickered and went out, Hera felt all that mattered in life slip through her fingers. Then he was gone. Nothing but air remained. She was alone.



## The Lake

Hera sat for several minutes, staring at the place where the wolf had lain. There was nothing she could do but let the sadness seep through her body and the emptiness find its own space inside her. She knew it was a space she would never fill.

It wasn't until she finally stood up to begin the descent to the lake that she realised that the wolf-ghost had also given her something she would never lose. It was as if he had left her something of his strength, his intuition and his bond. Standing on a broad, smooth slab of rock, she looked around the corrie that held the lake. This was the only possible path. Every other side was too steep, too rugged. On the nearest shore was a small, odd section of beach, which obviously filled and drained according to how much rain had fallen. It made the lake look a bit like a sheep's bladder. The thought made her smile. Perhaps it was like a big bladder that filled and drained the mountain.

There was no sign of the figure she had glimpsed when they first crowned the ridge. She tried to recall what she had seen but what she remembered most was the way the Wolf had looked when he saw the human. Was it a natural suspicion of any human who might so easily turn out to be a hunter? Or did he sense something amiss about this particular human? Her instinct was for the latter. Nothing about the person's behaviour or appearance had made her think of Rodney. There was no choice though but to continue. To go back now would be unthinkable.

She shouldered her backpack and lowered herself down onto a small ledge below the slab where she had been standing. The heather to the left of it appeared trampled, revealing

what looked almost like a series of steps. Taking her time, she followed the natural steps as they worked their way down the slope, alternately watching where she put her feet and pausing to check for movement at the lake. The wind had got up again, making a drumming noise along the ridge that reminded her of a herd of galloping horses. It made her feel jumpy, on edge, but there was also something in the wind itself that steadied her. It had a force that felt full of life. Wild and all encompassing, the gusts wrapped around her, pushing her forward at the same time as holding her back.

At the next patch of level ground, she hesitated. The mist had lifted from the lake, which was lit suddenly by sunlight, deepening it to blue with ripples of gold where the wind raked its surface. Now Hera could see a small stone building perched on the opposite side. Unlike the ruined buildings that peppered the mountains, it was intact and roofed with slate. It must be an old miner's hut - something to do with the manganese mines that had been disused for a hundred years. There were stories about gold mining in these mountains too. Perhaps that was why Morley was interested in the lake, she suddenly thought, perhaps it was nothing to do with Eustace at all.

Hera squinted against the sun. There was a movement. She thought she could see the door opening. A cloud shielded her eyes from the sun for a moment and all became clear. A man was closing the door. In the natural amphitheatre of the corrie, the sound was as clear as if it had been in the same room, yet distant with a faint echo. Was it her imagination or did she see him draw a bolt across the door then snap a padlock shut? He was carrying something. A black bag. From the way he held it in one arm and supported it with the other, it looked heavy. For a horrible second, he seemed to look up at her side of the mountain, as if he was looking straight at her. She willed herself to be still as the rock, faded as the heather, invisible as the wind. He looked away.

Now she knew she would need to be silent as well as invisible. If she had heard him close the door, he would be able to hear any displaced stone, tilting boulder or snapped twig. She must think like a deer, use all her senses to plan her moves. Her grandfather had told her once about a stag who had crawled away from a hunter on bended knees to avoid him seeing where it went. The hunter had been left baffled, thinking he had seen a ghost but her grandfather had seen the whole thing from a tree he had climbed when a boy. Now she must be like that stag. She had no doubt that the person by the stone hut was Morley and instinct told her to not to trust him just as strongly as the stag's had told him to distrust the hunter.

Progress like this was slow. It took every possible grain of concentration. With her eyes and ears, she followed every move that Morley made. With every cell in her body, she moved as close as she could to the mountain, imagining herself into its contours and giving herself up to its shape. Morley had put down the black bag and was busying himself with something at the side of the hut. He was so intent on what he was doing that he barely looked up when she missed her footing and sent a slate sliding softly into a bed of moss. She was nearly there. It was time to stop and work out what to do. Was Rodney even here? If he wasn't, why bother to go down to the hut? Somehow she thought he was. She settled quietly into a crevice where a rock looked as if it had been cracked in two, probably millions of years ago. She eased the pack off her back onto the heather. Wait and watch, she thought. Then came a sound so familiar that it nearly made her stand up.

"Weeeeyaw!" A red kite appeared from nowhere, its red-tinged underbelly and forked tale unmistakable. Morley looked up from what he was doing. The bird had soared back across the ridge, out of sight. Morley raised a pair of binoculars and scanned the lake; its shores; the ridge; the slopes. Hera held her breath and waited. He paused with the binoculars

pointing straight at the place where she was wedged into the split rock. He was adjusting the focus. He was going to see her.

“Weeeyoweeow!” Another kite followed the first over the highest point on the other side of the lake, riding the air over the ridge. This one had a feather loose in its tail, trailing slightly as if someone had tried to pull it out. It joined the other bird and together they circled down towards the hut as if closing on prey. Morley let the binoculars drop to his chest and picked up something long and thin from where it had been propped against the corner of the stone building. With an air of confident precision, he aimed it at one of the birds.

“No!” Hera’s voice rang out across the lake, filled the hollow where it lay and scattered the birds. The gun swivelled. She stood pinned against the rock, knowing that he had her in his sights.

Hera saw the scene in front of her as if in a picture. Blue sky feathered with white clouds; the infinite greens of mosses; lichens and grasses; the greys of rock and slate; the deep brown earth; sunlight gleaming gold over lake and mountain. This was her life. Gun or no gun, this man was not going to take it from her.

Screeching like a barn owl, she all but flew down the mountainside towards him. Even a practised sniper would have struggled to get a shot. With no thought to where she put her feet or whether she would fall, she flew. After her night in the wind and rain, she had no way of knowing that she appeared to Morley like a demented spirit, a thing of the wild. All she knew was her fury. By the time she reached the lake, he had lowered the gun and started to run. Seeking somewhere to hide, he blundered up behind the hut, stumbling and slipping in his wellington boots. Hera charged on, not thinking what she would do when she caught up with him.

## Seven

### Jugaad

The lake was still. Eerily quiet. After Hera's headlong flight down the mountain, it was a shock. Small pieces of stone and slate followed her onto the shore. Her shoes scuffed more as she took the last jump down onto level ground and landed, ready for something to happen, she didn't know what. Nothing did. The red kites had vanished. Even the wind was subdued by the deep well of the corrie. She wanted to shout, hear her voice echo; conjure up the breeze with her lungs. But it was too quiet to do anything except pause, watch, breathe. At her feet, by the very edge of the lake was something small and red. She didn't need to stoop to see what it was. The last of the paper kites had a ragged tail, a pointed edge as if someone had pulled at its tail. The water lapped its wing and it lifted, bobbed then floated free, out onto the lake.

Hera looked over at the hut on the other side. From here she could see the door with the weighty bolt and padlock. She knew she should go over to it, slip the bolt and try to break the padlock. But she was frozen by the thought of what she would find inside. She delved deep into her imagination and all she could see was Rodney's body slumped in a dark corner. Weary now, she sat down on the fine grit of the water's edge and unlaced her boots carefully, one hole at a time. Then she took off her socks and tucked them into her boots and waded into the lake. Cold stabbed through her ankles and needled her toes, taking away the hot pain of her long walk. There was still no sign of Morley. The bolt and the padlock stood firm across the door of the hut. The paper kite drifted further, out of reach.

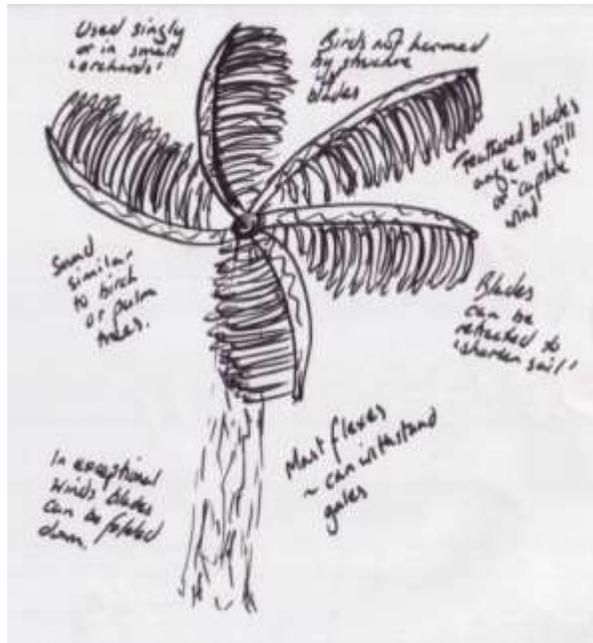
Hera had never been so far from Ty Talfryn, never so far into the mountains. She stood in the lake, letting the cold soak into her being, feeling small and new. It was as if her conversation with these mountains, these rocks and this water had only just begun. Through

the silver water, she could see her feet touching the fragments of rock that formed its bowl, their ancient substance touching her. There were lakes in these mountains where arctic char still lived – a type of fish that had been here since the last Ice Age. They might even be here. No stone walls, no ladder stile: the only sign of humans was the hut. Whatever she found inside it would be recent history. A blink, a blip in time. It would pass and the mountains would still be here, cradling the lake and feeding the streams. Their story was her story now; whatever happened, that would never change. She turned, knowing that from somewhere on the other side of the lake, she was being watched and walked back to where her boots stood muddy on the shore.

In the warmth of her socks and the solid familiarity of her boots, she made her way to the miners' hut. The feeling of being watched was growing more intense but she couldn't see Morley. The black bag he had been fiddling with lay a few paces from the hut. She hesitated. Pieces of paper covered in scrawled words had spilled out of it. More still filled the open bag. It was a leather bag with a polished metal fastening, one that she had seen before, a long time ago. Any hope that Morley had been here looking for a gold mine and not for Rodney was dissolved by the sight of the bag and its contents. She left the bag where it lay.

The bolt was rusty but slid open with very little persuasion. Now for the padlock. It was a big brass one and shiny too. This had not been here in the wind, the rain and the sun for long. She fingered the arch of its mechanism. It felt strong, not to be broken in a hurry. If she could find something like a metal bar, there might be a chance of breaking it open but she doubted it and anyway, where would she find such a thing in this place? A long pin might spring the lock, she had read about people doing that. She missed Rodney with a sudden mournful ache. He would have worked it out. 'Jugaad' she could hear him saying with that smile that was at the same time modest and proud. Jugaad, she thought. But Rodney would collect things as he

went along – things that might come in handy if he needed to fix something, things that might never come in handy at all but were there, waiting for their moment. She had collected nothing because she had always felt that she had everything she would ever need. And here she was. Miles from Ty Talfryn with only the mountains and the lake to help her. The mountains, the lake and the rock. She stopped and breathed and looked, not searching, not asking but open to ideas. Beneath her right foot was a long, odd shaped piece of stone, almost like a bone. It was sharp at one end and blunt at the other. Next to it was a spent cartridge from a hunting rifle. She picked up the stone and hit the place where the arch of the padlock joined the brass housing with the sharp end. Sparks flew out and the sound echoed through the cwm. She hit it again. More sparks. She listened for movement inside the hut. There was none. Her heart fell but her determination increased. Now she turned the bone shaped stone in her hand and shoved the thin, blunt end through the arched pin. Taking another stone from the ground she hit the other end hard. She felt the padlock give but it didn't yield. With a heavier stone, she hit it once again. The padlock fell open in her hand. A red kite cried shrill above her head. The sound of running feet came suddenly from behind the hut. In some other world, not far from this one, she felt the dull thud of something solid on the back of her head and saw the ground rising heavy to her head before the body she had once thought of as hers was dragged over the threshold of the hut. Then her ears found the swoosh of a black hole that sucked away consciousness.



## Eight

### In the Hut

Hera surfaced slowly. It was like being pulled up from a deep, dark well towards a blinding light at the top. Before her sight could clear, smells were working on her mind. A stuffy, dusty smell, the smell of damp stone, a hint of burnt wood and closest of all a warm, familiar smell of waxed cotton and old conkers. She wanted to curl up in that smell and sleep. Someone was talking to her urgently, telling her to wake up, to open her eyes. It was hard. The black hole still wanted her back. Back down the well.

“Come on Hera.” It was Rodney’s voice. Yes, come on Hera, she thought, this is important, you’ve been looking for Rodney. She opened her eyes and her right hand went stiffly to the back of her head. It hurt. The hair was damp and sticky. Of its own accord, her hand revealed what it had found. The fingers were red with blood.

“I think he hit you with a stone,” said Rodney’s voice, “he could have killed you.”

“I think he meant to,” said Hera. She had it now. The image of the lake and the hut, the bolt, the padlock and the bone-shaped stone became clearer, a snapshot of memory. Feelings were arriving in a small flood: relief at seeing Rodney, guilt at the time she had spent wading in the lake while she wondered what to do, fear at being locked in this damp, dark hut with Morley still prowling around somewhere. She looked around. They were slumped together in the far corner of the hut. Rodney was holding her up, her back against his chest, his right arm around her shoulders. She smelt again the waxy fabric of his jacket. There seemed no need to hurry. Everything was slow and syrupy.

“I didn’t know if you were alive,” she said.

“I thought he was coming back to finish me off. I pretended to be unconscious,” said Rodney.

Rodney had changed somehow. His cool, precise way of speaking had a jagged edge as if it was the face of something much more intense and angry. Hera turned to look at him and in the shadows of the unlit hut, thought she could see a cut and a bruise spreading over his left eye. She remembered the spent cartridge at the lake side.

“Are you okay?” She said.

“Actually,” he said, “I am. Do you think you can walk yet?”

Hera didn’t think she could stand, let alone walk and anyway, he seemed to have missed the point that they were locked in a hut made of stone that had probably stood there for over a hundred years. Breaking their way out of here was not going to be easy. She swallowed hard.

“Do you have any water?”

“No. He took my pack.” There it was again: the anger running under his words like a torrent under rocks.

Her tongue and throat felt like pumice stone. She looked around the hut. Someone had obviously been living here not too long ago. There was a chair made of sticks bound with rope, a small table made in the same way, what looked like a heather-filled mattress and a storm kettle. The only light and air filtered in through the gaps between the walls and the roof and the edges of the locked door.

"I think I broke the padlock," said Hera. It was the last thing she remembered but it seemed like another life.

"If you did, he's done a good job of fixing it," said Rodney, "I waited until he'd gone then tried the door. It's not moving."

"There was a bolt. Perhaps if we rattle the door it would come loose." Which still wouldn't solve the problem of facing a man with a hunting rifle and an apparent wish to get rid of them both, she thought.

"Do you think I haven't tried that?" said Rodney, "I don't think he will come back. I think he has what he wants."

"There was a black leather bag. It belonged to Eustace."

"How do you know?"

"I saw the bag. He must have dropped it when I ran down the mountainside. He seemed scared. He ran away and left the bag behind with all the papers spilling out."

"I meant how did you know it belonged to Eustace?" Now the stream of anger in Rodney's voice was growing stronger, more impatient.

Hera stared at him. It seemed like such a ridiculous question. Why wouldn't she recognise the bag that Eustace carried everywhere? The one where he kept all the bits of paper he scribbled on, the weird sketches he made and the photos he took?

"How did you know?" asked Rodney again.

Hera tried to stand up. Her head hurt and she was so thirsty. She had a sudden idea that there might be some water in the storm kettle. The walls began to spin, quite slowly at first; then they speeded up. The black hole was inviting her back. Rodney grabbed her and shoved her head forward until it was almost touching her knees.

“Hera?” Rodney shouted. He was still holding her tight as she swayed slightly while the walls came to a halt and took up their proper places again. Hera vomited, just missing his feet.

“Sorry,” she said.

“Just stay there,” said Rodney. He tipped her into the stick chair with her head tucked forward and went to get the storm kettle. Hera watched with interest. It was the first time he had shown any sign of knowing what she was thinking. He shook the kettle gently.

“We probably ought to boil it first,” he said, pushing out the cork with his thumb. Hera just held out her hand. Rodney sniffed at the canister and handed it over. She sipped. There wasn’t much in there and she didn’t want to be sick again. A momentary taste of metal on her tongue and the water slipped down her throat.

“Delicious,” she said and handed it back to Rodney. He didn’t drink.

“You were telling me about the black bag,” he said “How did you know it belonged to my Uncle Eustace?”

With the water, stale as it was, came a moment of liquid clarity. *Rodney did not realise that Eustace lived at Ty Talfryn.* She thought back, trying to remember all the times they had talked about Eustace – had she ever told him? Why would she? It was so obvious.

“Rodney, where did you think our wind machines at Ty Talfryn came from?” she asked, “Haven’t you ever noticed how different they are from any other sort of wind generation? Totally different from the turbines they go on about at school?”

“Haven’t you seen the other things he designed – the sliding solar shades on the dome over my bedroom that work in all directions, the fins generating power from water in the stream?” she said, “Those were the drawings in the black bag.”

“And now Morley has them.”

“If he took the bag. Perhaps that wasn’t what he was looking for,” said Hera.

“And he has the dragon book and the map,” Rodney looked at her, his eyes even darker in the gloom of the hut, “and please don’t tell me he was looking for dragons.”

“I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t be able to read the map anyway,” said Hera.

“That hardly matters now that he knows where Llyn Ysbryd is.” Rodney’s anger seemed close to breaking its banks.

“He doesn’t know where it is.”

Rodney stared at her. “I led him here! Where the hell do you think we are if it isn’t Llyn Ysbryd?”

“Did you use the map?”

“Yes! Well, that and the GPS on my phone, which by the way Morley has also taken.”

The chink of a moment when she thought they were beginning to understand one another had passed. She could no more see into his mind than he could see into hers.

“Then you haven’t seen what’s on the map either,” she said.

## Nine

### Seeing Double

Hera groped around and found a pencil next to a mound of paper on the little table. It was the sort of paper Eustace always liked best. Bits and pieces left over from this and that. He would score through the used side and scribble away on the remaining blankness, sometimes straying overleaf to cover the used page like the old master painters would when they were running short of canvas. She smiled. She had loved Eustace's visits, loved his instant humour, his bubbling genius and his supreme confidence that things would work out in the end. She worked quickly, drawing a picture on the blank side of a page. Beckoning to Rodney, she held the page up to a narrow shaft of light from the gap between the wall and the roof.

"What do you see?" she asked Rodney.

"That's easy. It's a duck."

"Look again."

"It's still a duck."

"What if these were ears?" Hera said, watching him and willing him to see what she did.

"Well they aren't. It's a beak," he pointed to the long, open beak of the duck. "Hera, you have been bashed on the back of the head with a stone. You were knocked unconscious. This is called concussion."

Hera ignored him. "And this?" she said. She traced the nose of a rabbit looking in the opposite direction. She saw Rodney's expression change. "Where is the duck now?"

"It's gone." Rodney screwed up his face.

"See if you can get him back," said Hera.

"I can't."

"You can. Look – here is his beak."

"What has this got to do with anything?" said Rodney, "Next thing I know there'll be a dragon on the page and you'll have pulled another cheap trick." He grabbed the paper and screwed it up in a ball. Hera took up another piece of used paper and started to draw. It was difficult resting on her knee but she managed to produce something a bit like the map that Rodney had found under the cover of the book.

"Now what do you see?"

"The map of how to get to Llyn Ysbryd. How to get here." He said. "Look Hera. How can you argue about this? This hut is here. Eustace's drawings are here. Morley followed me here. This is the place on the map."

"What do you see?"

"A path through the mountains to a lake called Llyn Ysbryd."

"What if this was the sea instead of the mountains?" Hera traced her finger along the coast, "and what if this was a tunnel?"

"But the scale is all different," said Rodney.

"Of course it is."

"This just isn't logical."

Hera hesitated. It hadn't occurred to her that it should be logical.

"Why did you follow me here?" asked Rodney.

"I thought you might be in danger" said Hera, "anyway, you used the paper kites so you must have wanted me to."

"I was going to follow them back. My GPS wasn't working as well as I'd hoped and I didn't think I'd remember the way."

Hera felt a surge of disappointment.

"I left them where I found them," she said, "anyway, I think we should find a different way back. The same way is too predictable."

Rodney stood up suddenly.

"Can you walk now?"

Hera nodded.

Rodney started to search the hut. Hera joined in. She knew he was looking for anything that would help them get out of there. His search was methodical but desperate. She stood in the centre and tried to see in the dim light. She had never been locked into anywhere before, never been trapped. It made her think how a rat or a mouse might feel. They wouldn't expect to die. They would keep trying to get out, keep looking for a space small enough to escape through. Rodney had unbound a stout stick from the chair and was standing on the table, working away at the gap between the wall and the roof. Hera watched as he found the place where a roof slate was fixed to a rafter. He dislodged it slightly and more light shone through. She could hear that the wind was getting up again and had found its way into the corrie. It lifted the slated Rodney was loosening and rattled their fixings. The smell of the outside was wonderful and she had to swallow the huge lump of panic that was threatening to block her throat. Rodney's stick broke. He swore and came back to the chair for another, stabbing angrily at the underside of the slates.

"What would Eustace have done?" she asked.

"He wouldn't have been stupid enough to get himself into a mess like this in the first place." said Rodney. Hera saw it now. Rodney was as angry with himself as he was with Morley.

"Okay, what would you do if you were Morley?"

Rodney stopped bashing the slates and turned to look at her.

“I would let us out then hide so that I could follow us to see where we went. I mean, if I’d discovered that what I was looking for wasn’t actually here.” He still seemed to be thinking hard. “Do you think Morley knows that Eustace made the wind turbines at Ty Talfryn?”

“Morley has never been to Ty Talfryn and I don’t think there’s anything on the drawings to say they’ve ever been built, let alone where they are,” said Hera. The thing was that Morley hadn’t let them out. He had just left them there to rot. As the fog of concussion cleared from her head, it was becoming harder and harder to keep the panic down; the urge to get out was growing stronger and stronger. Light was coming through Rodney’s hole in the tiles in a long, thin shaft, alive with dust particles. It fell on the door, picking out a row of carvings, faint with age, that someone had made along the wooden cross piece. There were two dragons and a sailing ship. Fire and freedom, she thought. She remembered the smell of old burnt wood that had been in her nostrils when she came round. Eustace must have lit the storm kettle with something. There would be matches or a flint. Where would he have kept them?

“We could burn our way out,” she said.



**Ten**



## **Fire and Freedom**

Together they pulled apart the chair and the table so carefully made with sticks and bound with rope. They made a good pile of dry kindling, which was soon stacked up at the door. Rodney covered them with heather from the mattress. The planks of the door were solid, too solid to break, but the oily substance they had been coated with to protect them from damp would help them to burn.

“We only need a small hole,” said Hera. She hated the idea of setting light to the dragons and the sailing boat. Rodney kicked up a pile of dust all around the sticks. Hera watched as he unwound the fibre from some of the rope and laid it loosely into the firebox of the storm kettle. He struck the flint against one of the hinges, holding the firebox close to it. Sparks flew, settled and died. He struck again, more carefully this time. More sparks appeared and vanished almost instantly in the damp air. Another strike and a tiny glow appeared in the rope fibres. Rodney cupped his hand over it.

“Don’t move.” He said. The glow was spreading. Rodney blew on it very gently. Hera asked the fire to grow for them. It was simple. Fire is as wild as any animal and if you invite it into your life, you must give it respect for its own sake as well as yours. They were asking it to share their lives only for a very short time. Rodney shot her one of those looks that said she was crazy but she ignored it. She gave him a piece of heather to add to the tinder. It lit immediately. She gave him a piece more. It too made the fire stronger.

“Are you ready?” said Rodney. He tipped the burning heather onto the pile of sticks and stood back. The fire began to dance over the sticks and through the heather, heating the

hut and sending crackles through the air. There was a lot of smoke. She hadn't thought about that.

"Stay down low," Rodney told her. Soon the fire was hot and the smoke intense. The door was beginning to burn from the bottom up. She heard Rodney coughing. Hera wanted to cough too but she couldn't. She wanted to close her eyes but she didn't dare lose sight of Rodney's shape through the smoke.

"Now!" yelled Rodney. He charged at the door, ignoring the fire and kicking out with his foot. There was a cracking sound. Rodney charged again and Hera did the same. The wood splintered just above the fire and below the cross piece. She could smell the oily preservative burning and the singed cotton of Rodney's trouser leg. They kicked again and a hole appeared where the planks were weakened by the burning. Again. A bigger hole. A gust pushed the flames inwards, thickening the smoke. Hera grabbed at a plank, hung on despite the heat and pulled until it shifted. She thought she could get through that hole but knew that Rodney couldn't. She reached up and fumbled, fumbled, found the bolt, praying that Morley had not fixed the padlock. The bolt was hot but she worked at it, wiggling, wiggling until it jerked out of its keeper and the door flew open. Gagging, coughing and, mysteriously, laughing, they fell out into the air.

Hera shoved her hand into the lake, almost expecting it to sizzle. It was sore but the cool was bliss. Rodney's face and hands were covered in black, making his eyes stand out like a Halloween mask. They stood there, feet in the water, coughing and watching the fire subside.

"We should burn the whole thing down really," said Rodney, "then he wouldn't know if we were alive or dead."

"Let's leave it be." said Hera. She leant down and dipped her fingers again, doing her usual water ritual, spreading the drops over her forehead, temples and cheeks before scooping

up another handful to drink. She winced as she washed the matted blood from the back of her head. Rodney splashed the smoke off his face and peeled back his trouser leg to reveal a burn on his right ankle. It looked raw and painful.

“My pack is still up there,” said Hera. She pointed up at the crevice where she had been standing only a couple of hours before. “I brought some bandages and there’s some food.”

“I’ll get it,” said Rodney. She waited until he turned to go and walked quickly over to the hut. She stepped over the embers and found the storm kettle. There was a little water left in it, which she poured gently over the remains of the fire, thanking its spirit in Welsh. Then she filled the storm kettle from the lake and placed it carefully in the hut, roughly where the table had been. As she left, she saw that the dragon carvings were still visible on the cross piece of the door and that the boat was still there too, in full sail. With a flicker of joy, she imagined people finding them in the future.

Hera followed Rodney up to the crevice where she had left her pack. They bandaged his ankle, ate the last of the flapjack and cheese, and sat without speaking in the shelter of the rock. Hera’s head was aching again.

“I’ve completely blown it.” said Rodney, “I’m never going to make it back in time for the match now.” Hera was confused for a moment. The rugby! She’d forgotten all about it. The big match was supposed to be today. It might as well be on another planet. The wind picked up, as if to emphasise the point. Hera looked in the direction the wind had come from. Over there, the sky was turning a moody indigo colour, so deep it made her feel she would dissolve in it. Overhead, the blue of the sky was very different, light and innocent.

“Perhaps they’ll delay it for you,” said Hera.

Rodney looked at the ground. He kicked a lump of stone into the heather.

“Yeah, sure,” he said, “and my Dad won’t notice I’m missing when he comes all the way back from the conference of his life to see me play.”

Hera couldn’t take her eyes off the swelling bank of cloud. The wind had veered while they were in the hut. She could smell the salt in the air, feel the pressure dropping. There was a storm on the way and it was coming straight from the sea.

“Let’s get going” she said.

## Eleven

### Finding Things

Perhaps it was relief or some funny sort of reaction to the crisis they were in but Rodney wouldn't talk about anything but the rugby. Hera let him witter on, alternately sounding as if it was the only thing that mattered in the world and beating himself up for letting everybody down. She found it hard to listen when her head hurt and she was struggling to understand so many things. Why had Morley done the things he'd done? How come Rodney hadn't realised that Eustace stayed at Ty Talfryn so many times when he was in Wales? What were they all really looking for? For someone who had been so obsessed with finding his Uncle that he'd lied to his father twice now, Rodney was behaving very strangely. And he didn't seem to have noticed that they were about to be engulfed by a storm. Walking was good though. The rhythm of her feet was soothing. Maybe that was how it was for Rodney too and his chattering was part of the same music. For the first time since she had met him though, she wished he would shut up.

They were near the place where the wolf ghost had vanished. Hera wanted to tell Rodney about him but he was still going on about something Father O'Keery had said about a national rugby match and what to do when the stakes were high. Father O'Keery. What would he make of the wolf ghost? In her mind, she saw Father O'K nod and smile. He wouldn't be surprised by the wolf ghost. There wasn't much that would surprise him.

"He's never lost his sense of wonder, has he?" she said.

"What?" Rodney stopped talking and looked at her.

"It's all so brilliant, so alive to him. Good and bad, he loves it all. Like Mum. And Eustace. They're the same."

Rodney looked furious. Vestiges of smoke still hung on in the lines he made when he frowned. They were darker than his skin. Hera shuddered, not liking his anger much.

“So what about Morley Dreadman? Are we supposed to love him too? All your stuff about all living things having value, imagining we’re all part of one big happy family, all your spooky little rituals – where does all that fit with him?” Rodney stopped and squared his shoulders like a ram.

“I don’t understand Morley Dreadman any more than you do,” said Hera, “and I don’t know what you mean about spooky rituals.”

“I’ve seen you - with the water, with the fire, speaking Welsh to the Choughs, acting as if you are talking to the mountains.”

Hera felt suddenly cold, as if icy water was being poured down her throat, through her chest to fill her stomach and her bowels.

“It’s not that sort of talking.” Hera wanted to say it wasn’t the sort of talking she heard all the time at school, the sort of talking Rodney had been doing ever since they left the lake. She wanted to say that Rodney was one of the few people who didn’t talk twaddle most of the time. How could she explain what she felt so deeply? She wasn’t sure she liked the word ‘ritual’, not in the way that made other people feel excluded or as if she had some special power, it was more about noticing things and opening her mind to the whole of them - to what they really were. No words came to her in either English or Welsh that would describe what she felt. All she could see was the vivid detail of the mountainside, mosses and lichens clinging to the rock, saxifrage plants tumbling from the crevices, boulders carved by glaciers and polished by the weather. About to clamber onto the next rock, she tried to imagine what it would be like to see all this without feeling what she felt; without the constant wonder at life coming from sun, air, rock and rain. Then she saw the scuff marks, as if something had slipped

back off the rock onto the grit beneath. Beside it, a sprig of parsley fern had broken off and lay partly crushed.

“I’m sorry, Hera,” said Rodney, “You’ve been brilliant – I’d still be in that hut if it wasn’t for you and I’m glad you turned up when you did. Honestly I am.” He drew level with her, lifting his right arm as if he was going to put it around her shoulders, then dropping it to his side and just standing there. Hera could feel his warmth, his change of mood. She pointed to the Parsley fern. A beetle shuffled across the exposed rock, seeking protection in the small-leaved plants. “Rainbow beetle?” asked Rodney, he bent down to look closer. Hera could almost hear his mind struggling to find the Latin name for it.

“I think he came this way,” said Hera. The air around them changed as Rodney’s mood swung and settled in a blade-like arc. She breathed out slowly, resisting the temptation to turn around quickly and go back the way they’d come. They were nearly at the top of the ridge between the two highest mountains. Hera’s idea had been to walk along it towards the West in the hope of finding a more direct way back to Llandamair. They would have to make it along the ridge before the weather closed in or they would never be able to see if they were going the right way or not.

“What makes you think it’s him?” asked Rodney, “it could be a keen walker. They might even have a signal on their phone.”

“We haven’t seen another human being apart from Morley,” said Hera. She explained about the footprints and how often they had shown that he had slipped in his Wellingtons. Further up, she could see more places where the moss and lichen had been scuffed. Here and there, plants looked as if they had been flattened and sprung up again but not quite into their proper shape. Then she spotted something else, discarded in the dirt by a loose boulder. It was Rodney’s dragon book. The cover had been ripped off and the binding broken. Gold leaf glistened

as the breeze turned the pages. Rodney saw it at the same time as she did. He picked it up, smoothed the pages and put it in his pocket. The first heavy drops of rain began to fall.

At the top of the ridge they found Rodney's water bottle.

"Empty." said Rodney, "He's chucking out things he thinks he doesn't need."

Hera was looking along the ridge. To the West loomed a distinctive and shadowy shape.

Merynedd Fawr! She felt the warm tug of familiarity. She had known this mountain all her life.

This ridge would lead them home.

But Rodney was looking the other way.

"What's that?" he said. He pointed to something on a scree slope that fell away sharply from the ridge on the other side. Hera pulled her eyes away from the outline of Merynedd Fawr and the mass of indigo cloud that would soon enfold it.

"I think it's my phone," said Rodney. He headed off in the opposite direction. Hera stayed where she was, trying to make out the tapering path along the ridge, willing herself to remember its bends and dips so that when they too became absorbed by the cloud, they would know where to go.

By the time she caught up with Rodney, he had lowered himself onto the scree and was edging down towards the black and orange object he thought was his phone.

"Why would he throw that away?" said Hera, "It can't be very heavy."

"Must have one of his own," said Rodney. His voice was raised against the increasing wind. Rain was falling steadily now. She saw him reach out towards the phone but he couldn't quite get it.

"Be careful!"

"It's okay." Rodney inched down further and stretched out his hand. His fingers touched the phone but it slid lightly out of reach.

“Do you really need it?” called Hera. At this rate, the storm would find them on the narrowest, most exposed part of the ridge.

“The GPS might work and if I can get a signal I can phone Gareth or at least text him.” Rodney let himself slide down, braking with the heels of his boots.

“Hey, there’s another path down here.” He shouted back. Hera could see it too, a wider flatter path than the one above and more sheltered from the wind. It led in both directions. She could also see where someone else had slipped, not long before: someone who was clearly a stranger to the mountains. She looked back at Merynedd Fawr and saw nothing but deep grey and indigo moving towards them. A gust whipped her hair across her eyes then pulled it back again. In her heart, she felt it was saying, ‘I’ve been trying to warn you! What sort of creature are you that you won’t listen to the wind?’ Then, between the storm’s insistent gusts, she heard catches of another sound. A child-like moaning that seemed almost as if it was coming from inside the rock itself. Rodney was still trying to reach his phone. Below him, only just above the other path, she saw the open mouth of a disused mine shaft and the marks of a frenzied skid into its throat.

## Twelve

### The Pit

Hera stared at the mine shaft and the skid marks that led to it. A wave of exhaustion suddenly threatened to overwhelm her. She had been prepared for a long trek home, prepared for a soaking in the storm, ready to ignore her rumbling stomach, sore feet and aching legs. She had not been prepared for this. Disembodied, she saw the picture as if from the air. Rodney clinging to a scree-covered slope above a mine shaft; her own body standing on a path above him: each a speck on the surface of the Earth, an expendable creature in the whole that was life. Another speck, a human being she did not understand at all, lay moaning in the mine shaft. The fourteen billion year old universe probably didn't care too much about what would happen next.

*"Got it!" yelled Rodney. So what? She wanted to yell back, you're reunited with your precious phone that probably doesn't work here anyway. Why can't you see that real life isn't about owning stuff, stuff and more stuff?* But she knew Rodney wasn't really like that and anyway she felt too small now, too insignificant to tell anyone anything. Everything was trivial except the mountain and the storm. Morley in the mine shaft was trivial, the rugby was trivial, even Eustace's drawings and his dragons were trivial unless she could go back to knowing who she was in the world, this world, this real world where creatures lived or died by their instincts. Hearing the wind beating and howling along the ridge, she could understand why people used to think it was Gwyn mab Nudd and his ghostly hoard riding out on a storm. Soon they would all be nothing but cloud.

Shoulders hunched, Hera waited for Rodney to scramble back up to where she stood.

“What did he have to go and take it out of its waterproof cover for?” He said, “It flashes on for a moment but it just goes off again.”

“He’s down there.” said Hera. She didn’t bother to disguise the misery in her voice. Rodney did another one of his ‘you’re mad’ looks. The wind slackened for a few seconds and Hera heard the noise again: the wailing, self-pitying cry from the shaft. “Didn’t you hear that?”

“It’s the wind,” said Rodney.

“Can’t you see the skid marks where he slipped? That’s why he dropped your phone. He was probably trying to use it.” A louder cry came from the mine shaft, unmistakably human this time:

“Oh God.”

Rodney fiddled with his phone, pressing buttons and jiggling the battery about. “Come on, let’s go,” he said, “I might be able to get this working in a bit.” Everything, including the phone, was just getting wetter and wetter. Hera couldn’t see how even Rodney was going to make it work.

“We can’t leave him down there.” she said. But she knew that all she wanted to do was walk away, set off along the path towards Merynedd Fawr or sink into the earth, anything but have to deal with this.

Rodney spoke quietly, his words infused with the anger she had sensed earlier: “He left us in that hut. He has stolen Eustace’s work and heaven knows what else. He nearly shot me and he knocked you out. Are you going to tell me that he has any value to us, the human race or any other life form? Just think about it.”

Hera thought about it. Without Morley Dreadman, all they would have to worry about was getting home. No more thinking he was going to creep up behind them, no wondering if a shotgun was pointing at them from somewhere they couldn’t see. Without him, she could even

revel in the wildness of the storm. It would still be frightening but it would be an adventure, not a nightmare.

“He must be injured or he would have climbed out on his own.” She said, “Maybe we should just tell him that we are going for help.”

“Why should we?”

Hera didn't know. It was Morley's fault that he was down there. It was Morley's fault that she had let her mother down. It was Morley's fault that Rodney wasn't playing in the rugby match. It was Morley's fault that they were in danger now. Every living thing has value. It was the mantra of her life. To take life for food was okay, providing you only took just enough. To protect yourself was okay, providing you used only as much force as necessary. But to leave a being to die when you could do something to save them? She remembered a woman who had come to stay with them once. The woman had hated wasps and said they had no purpose, so she would trap them in a jam jar half-filled with water. The wasps would come to suck the sugar and drown. Hera would spend hours rescuing them with a birch twig. Everything has a purpose. And she was never, ever stung.

Hera started to work her way down the scree slope towards the tumbled wall of boulders that marked the entrance to the mine.

“Hang on,” said Rodney. She saw that he had begun to follow her.

“Morley Dreadman?” Rodney's voice echoed, dull but determined, down through the shaft. Hera had no idea what he would do next. If he had been able to, she could imagine him sealing the entrance with a huge boulder, like a stopper in a bottle, but he was shouting again: “Morley Dreadman!” The shaft wasn't all that deep; it was just difficult to see if you didn't know it was there.

“I think I've broken my leg.” Morley sounded weak, “I can't move.”

“When we get back, we will call for help.” Rodney shouted back.

“Don’t leave me here.” said the pathetic voice, “I can’t stand the pain.”

“I’ll stay here,” said Hera quietly, “I’ll explain to you which way to go. There’s a farm on the far side of Merynedd Fawr called Maes y Cigfran. Owen’s Dad will call mountain rescue.”

“No way, Hera!” said Rodney.

“What else can we do?” Hera knew there was another option, that Rodney could stay and she could go. It would make a lot more sense because, once she got to the other end of the ridge, she would be on familiar ground at least. Rodney could so easily get lost in the storm. But if he stayed here?

“Look Hera, only days ago, you told me that the only reason for all the problems in the world is that there are too many of us being too greedy. If we leave Morley where he is, nobody will ever know we found him and the planet will be saved from the greediest person we’ve ever met. One less guzzling, nasty, self-centred loser.” Rodney didn’t bother to whisper, the words just came out in an angry torrent. “Just give me one good reason why we shouldn’t.”

“Because we are life made conscious,” said Morley slowly and clearly, “No being before us has understood how amazing this world is. If you act in a way that denies that, you fail the inheritance of billions of years. What you give to the world, is the world. She is one in a long chain of idealists. Tell him Hera, that’s how it is, isn’t it?”

Hera folded her arms. For the first time in her life, she wanted to spit. She wanted to spit so accurately that a globule of slimy, bubbling spit would land right in his eye. If she had been in possession of a pot of boiling oil, she would have poured it down that pit. Rodney was looking at her as if he had never seen her before.

Just for a moment, she had felt like a stupid, naïve little girl. Never had the teasing by her school mates, the sideways glances or the wry comments from teachers made her feel like

this. She tried to breathe out the deep red anger that had flown into her mind. It was replaced with the thought of letting Morley rot slowly into the Earth where his flesh and bones would help life flourish far better than when he was alive. But the thought sat like a sour lump in her stomach. She knew that Morley was right, she wouldn't let that happen and neither would Rodney.

"Have you killed Eustace?" she hurled her voice down into the shaft, willing it to work through the wind.

"Eustace? Of course not. He was just a pawn in a game he didn't even want to play. It wasn't his fault and it wasn't mine. We wanted the same things - we just had different reasons for wanting them."

"Do you know where he is?" said Rodney.

"What?" said Morley.

"My Uncle Eustace. Do you know where he is?" shouted Rodney.

"Come down here and wait while the girl goes for help. I'll tell you all about it."

Hera grabbed Rodney by the arm.

"He doesn't know," she said.

"What if he does?" said Rodney.

"Nobody does." Hera looked at Rodney. His face was anxious, excited, angry, thoughtful all in one go. The purple, yellow and green of the bruise was spreading across his forehead, over his eye and down to his cheek. She reached up and touched it. "Do we have any food left?" she asked, turning away from him so that she didn't have to take the pack off her back. Rodney made a huffing sound, opened the fastening and delved into it. He pulled out the bag of dried apple rings and small packet of nuts that she had thrown in as an afterthought.

"This is it." he said. Silently, Hera took them. One at a time, she threw them down the shaft, aiming as best she could in Morley's direction.

"Come on," she said. "We've a long way to go."

## **Part Three**

### **Rodney and Hera**



## One

### Y Draig Gwyrdd

In that moment, Rodney understood something about Hera that was like seeing a tree when its leaves have fallen. In simple outline, rooted in the soil and shaped by the breeze. Everything she did and said came from the very core of her. The things she believed, the way she was in the world, were her through and through. There was no front, no rivalry, no secrecy. She knew who she was and she wasn't afraid of what she felt.

"I'm sorry about the rugby," she said to him, "we'll never make it now."

They came out of the shelter of the crumbling wall into a blast of wind and rain. Even on the lower path, they had to fight to make any progress against it.

"The way you looked at him just now, anyone would think he had made the storm to spite us." said Rodney.

"What?" said Hera. She leaned into him, trying to catch his words before they were snatched away by the gale.

"Morley," Rodney shouted into her ear, "you looked down that hole as if he caused the storm."

"He sort of has," said Hera, "him and people like him. We never used to have storms all year round like this. All the farmers say so – and the fisherman."

"Do you think he killed Uncle Eustace?"

Hera shook her head. They stopped for a moment and turned their backs to the wind. It was bliss to have a break from struggling against it.

"Eustace told my Mum that his ideas would never get off the ground because there were some people who didn't want them to. That's why he kept them quiet, waiting for the

right time, hopefully when a government would have enough sense to see them for what they were," she said.

"But why would anyone stop him?"

"Money."

Rodney was beginning to see some logic. But where was the proof? It would be so utterly stupid of anyone to squash the sort of brilliant simplicity he had glimpsed in Eustace's drawings. Surely even western governments and the oil companies would see the sense in that.

"I don't really understand it." said Hera, "It's just what she said." They turned back into the wind. Merynned Fawr was still invisible. The clouds were the only thing they could be sure of, and the ground beneath their feet. They had been claimed by the sky and blended into everything around them. The wind was slackening but the rain still ran down their faces, dripping off their noses and running off their chins. Hera licked her upper lip. She thought it tasted of the sea, the land and the sky. She shooed off the urge to say she was hungry. They trudged on, not speaking, saving their energy for the way ahead.

Rodney was hungry too. Ravenous. He couldn't stop thinking about the apple rings and the nuts Hera had thrown down the mine shaft. As they trudged on, mud sticking to their boots, he imagined Morley savouring them, devouring every last mouthful and chucking the wrappings on the floor. The thought made him want to growl. He had a sudden, sunlit memory of the Bengal tiger he had seen in the zoo park at Arignar Anna near Chennai. *Panthera tigris tigris*. When he was young, his father had even seen tigers in the wild. Rodney imagined how it would feel to be a tiger between meals. Hungry. Waiting. The raw necessity of having to hunt for a meal. Staying hungry if you failed. His mother had never forgotten that there were hungry people in Chennai. *In this day and age*, his father always said, shaking his head. He decided not

to mention his hunger to Hera. It was hardly going to help. His ankle was sore. He decided not to mention that either. Think of Scott. Frostbite in the Antarctic, he thought, that would be really painful.

“Sorry for giving the food to Morley. It just seemed like the only thing to do,” said Hera.

“How much further do you think?” Rodney ignored the churn of gastric juices in his stomach looking for something to digest.

Hera looked as far ahead as she could. They could only see two or three paces in front of them. But the path was starting to descend more steeply now. They had to skirt great rivulets of water and pick their way through swathes of mud.

“How long do you think we’ve been walking?” she asked.

Rodney looked at his watch. *Extreme Time*, it still said. At least he hadn’t let Morley take that from him.

“Two and a half hours since the lake.” The lake that wasn’t Llyn Ysbryd after all.

“Whatever it’s called.”

“There’s one I’ve heard about called Y Draig Gwyrdd. It’s almost a myth, hardly anyone has been there,” Hera sounded thoughtful.

“Ee Draig Gowearrth?” said Rodney.

“Y Draig Gwyrdd,” she rolled her ‘r’s and softened the ‘d’s to a breath - a smile almost finding its way into the way she said it. Even in English, she made it sound magical. “The Green Dragon.”

Rodney felt the ground lurch. Tendrils of cloud were wrapping his head, binding him into its damp, claggy, timeless self. He wanted to let go, let it take him wherever it would. He was so tired and the burn on his ankle rubbed with every step but there was something...

“There should have been a postcard tucked inside the book but it’s gone,” he knew his words were slurred, “It was the last one he sent to us. There was a green dragon on the map, remember?”

And there was a dragon carved on the door of the hut, thought Hera as she tried to catch Rodney and stop him from slumping onto the last level bit of the path. Had she had been wrong about the map after all? Or was there something else that they were missing?

Whether Rodney had passed out or simply fallen asleep, she didn’t know. She knelt on the wet ground beside him and was relieved to find that his breathing steady and strong. For the first time she wondered if they would make it home. They had strayed into the mountains’ keep and were no longer the property of the human world. She wanted to close her eyes too. Dripping, exposed and mentally worn out, sleep seemed like the only future.

Was it minutes or hours? Hera was only aware of Rodney next to her, still breathing, still warm. She opened her eyes. Grey cloud still hung around them. Perhaps it was only minutes then. Ahead, she could see the path was clearing and, quite close, the shape of Merynedd Fawr, no longer a shrouded, gloomy mountain but one wearing the colours of late spring. She knew she should try to wake Rodney. What if she couldn’t?

Gradually, the landscape peeled out from under the cloud, fresh and serene. Hera sat looking back along the way they had come. Their path was a lip along the edge, crumbling in places and submitting to the dizzying drop. She cradled Rodney, determined to keep him warm but she was shaking now, tired mainly but becoming cold. She tried to let the cold go but it didn’t want to. So she tried to let it in, allow it to be there without fighting it. In it came. Not so bad. Soon she would wake Rodney and go on...

## Two

### Rainbows and Shadows

Hera opened her eyes, letting a dream float away. She had been living in the dream and in the mountains at the same time. Like Lopez, when his ears heard all that happened in the kitchen while a dream twitched his paws through another story. Now something had brought her full attention back to the mountains. A figure was emerging from the remains of the cloud. It stopped as if to focus on the place where she was huddled with Rodney. A drift of panic, useless, touched her and moved on. She watched as the figure trotted towards them. Fluid as a fox, remote as a raven, scarred as the hawthorn that clung to the crags. There was only one person it could be.

“Dan!” she whispered.

Dan checked Rodney’s pulse and lifted his lips from his gums to check the colour.

“When did he last have water?” he asked.

Water. Hera remembered offering Rodney the storm kettle in the hut and him refusing to drink; remembered that she had drunk from the lake while he bathed his ankle and washed his face; remembered finding his empty water bottle. She didn’t need to answer. Dan unclipped a flask from his belt and used his fingers to brush a few drops across Rodney’s lips then used some more to cool his bruise. Rodney licked his lips and his eyes opened slowly. He looked confused. Dan offered him the flask.

Rodney drank and felt life spreading through his body and into his limbs.

“How did you find us?” he asked eventually.

“Tracks,” said Dan, “and Hera’s paper kites, then I just...”

“What?”

“It’s what animals do. They don’t explain it either,” said Hera, “it just is.” She was looking steadily at Dan. Dan nodded and passed an oatcake to Hera and then one to Rodney. It was thick, gritty and delicious. Rodney gulped down another mouthful from Dan’s water bottle. That tasted fantastic too. The sleep had been ridiculously good. With Morley contained in the mine shaft and the silent, solid presence of Dan, everything seemed suddenly okay. More than okay. It was like a new world.

“We left him all our food, told him we’d call for help when we got to a farm,” said Rodney.

“Morley Dreadman is stuck down a mine shaft.” explained Hera, “He’s injured.”

Dan’s face clouded. “Walk on.” He said, “I’ll deal with it.” He was gone before they could argue, back in the direction of the mine shaft. Rodney looked at Hera. She looked away and started to walk on along the path. Rodney remembered a donkey whose leg was broken by a car not far from where they lived in Chennai. His father had dealt with it. He thought of Morley’s gun. He stood for a moment, unsure what to do. He shook the image off and followed Hera.

Merynedd Fawr’s peak had reclaimed a piece of blue sky. The rain had moved on inland and the wind had slivered to a breeze. An arc of glowing colour spanned the valley and painted a small wood on the opposite side red, green and gold. Time stopped. Rodney walked on with Hera and with a feeling that all his life was about now. It was like what Hera had said about Dan had finding his way, not something to be explained. It just was. Magic.

In what seemed like moments, Dan was jogging up beside them. He said nothing. They carried on walking. Rodney noticed that Dan and Hera didn’t speak. There was a sort of rapport between them that didn’t need words.

“Does Dan have a phone?” Rodney asked Hera when Dan disappeared behind a rock for a pee. Hera smiled and shook her head.

Dan reappeared and they walked on, skirting the high part of Merynedd Fawr. A sharp-rocked crag jutted out across the path, blocking their way. They climbed, scrambled and edged their way around it, watching nothing but the next place to put their feet. When they looked up again, they could see the whole way down through the pass between the mountains. Way below, the rain-fed river lay shining and slick.

As they drew on down the pass, the view became longer and clearer. The river had swallowed the fields in the lower part of the valley. Hera saw that the stepping stone ford had disappeared under a rush of relentless water. On the hillside, the house at Maes y Cigfran stood grey and determined. Getting to it would be impossible. The Field of the Raven that had given the farm its name had become more of a lake.

“We’ll have to keep up until we’re further downriver, won’t we Dan?” she said. He nodded. He had obviously known the river was flooded and never intended to stop at the farm.

“Morley will be okay?” she asked, not completely sure what she wanted the answer to be.

“Wasn’t there,” said Dan. He didn’t seem to be surprised about that either.

“But you found the shaft? An old manganese mine?” she said. She remembered how he had returned amazingly quickly. Dan nodded. He never lied.

“Gone.” Dan held up an empty paper bag. Hera recognised it immediately. It was the sort her mother filled with dried apples every autumn. Just like the one she had thrown down to Morley. “Plays tricks, that one.” said Dan, “Never believe a word.”

“Did you look for him, Dan?” said Hera. She knew the answer already but she wanted to check. Dan shook his head.

Rodney looked as if he had walked into a wall. He stopped and just looked at Dan.

“So he is probably following us.” he said, “and he has a gun.” Rodney heard his own words as if someone else was speaking them. Slowly, he realised there was something different about knowing this now. Since he’d faced Morley at the lake - the lake with the name that he couldn’t pronounce but was something to do with a green dragon - things had changed. For the first time since his mother had died, he felt as if he had something to lose. It was something so much more than the pride that he had lost at the lake. More powerful than the fear he had felt when Morley Dreadman had raised his gun and fired. More than the shame he had felt at being locked in the hut. It was the intense, unexplainable feeling that he belonged. That somewhere in the getting lost, the getting drenched, the being frightened and the sheer smallness of himself in the light of everything else, he had become more real, more alive. Not even when everyone had been hugging him and lifting him into the air after a win at rugby had he felt this much a part of anything.

“You won’t shake a shadow,” said Dan. He’d walked on before Rodney could ask him what he meant. Rodney decided to leave it and let this new feeling settle down, find some right compartment in his mind where he could work it out.

They were getting closer now, snaking down the hillside. With each turn back towards the sea, the little village in the distance grew closer and the sea grew wider. They could see the church spire, small as a pencil tip from here. Down there were people driving cars and mowing their lawns and buying things in shops. Down there were schoolmates and rugby matches and his Dad who had come all the way back from Bristol to see him play.

Hera was looking too. She squinted past the wood on the hill to where she knew Ty Talfryn and her mother were waiting. But the wood was dense and green. She tried to imagine her mother in the kitchen, in the library or in the garden but she couldn’t. It was as if

something thicker than the wood was blocking her out. About twenty minutes later, it all became clear.

“Can you see the bridge, Dan?” Hera said quietly. She remembered that the moon would be full that night and with it would come a high spring tide. And there was the river, with the strongest force she had ever seen, gushing down to meet it head on at Llanddamair. Now even Dan looked concerned. He pulled a small pair of binoculars from his coat pocket and pointed them downriver. After a couple of seconds he handed them to Hera. She focused them carefully on the place where the stone bridge had stood for several centuries.

“What’s the matter?” said Rodney. He had been trying to tune in to their way of communicating with so few words spoken. Gratefully, he took the binoculars from Hera. He was surprised to find that his hand was shaking as he tried to focus. Finally he located the bridge. Water lapped over the top of its arches. Another few centimetres and it would be nothing short of dangerous.

“We could go up and around by the far side of the church to Ty Talfryn?” he said. Perhaps he was beginning to get the hang of this - he felt sure that Hera and Dan had both been thinking the same. But then again, it was the only logical thing to do. He gave the glasses back to Dan and watched him tuck them away, neat and sparse. Dan carried no backpack but he always seemed to have just what he needed. The more time he spent with Dan, the more he liked him. On an impulse, Rodney’s hand went to his jacket pocket. There was the dragon charm, warm and distinctive. He didn’t need to take it out and look at it. The shape was enough.

The going was far more level now. It was wetter too. Long dry-stone walls ranged across the low hills, scoring the land into divisions and squaring corners into sheepfolds. They had to slop and slish their way from one ladder stile to the next or shin over walls to land

ankle deep on the other side. Rodney tried to calculate the number of stones piled up into walls across these hills. Millions. All laid by hand and kept up by farmers over years of sheep filled days. He imagined the work, hard but pleasing, laying one stone over the next, finding the best shaped stone to fit. Seeing the wall grow, stones snug and tight, more durable than any brick-built one and made of the land. He wasn't tired any more and the oatcakes had done a remarkable job of shutting his stomach up. All the problems he had to face were getting closer with every step but they didn't seem so bad either. Nothing I can't handle, he thought and for once, he believed it. Behind them somewhere was the biggest problem of all. Morley Dreadman: no longer in the mine shaft but marauding about in his wellington boots. For some reason, the thought made him laugh. Dan and Hera laughed too. He'd never even seen Dan so much as smile before.

Now they were descending again, working their way towards the village from the North side. A small wasp like shape appeared over the sea; the distant sound of engines rising and falling as its blades cut the air and it hovered, red and white, beyond the quay. The coastguard's helicopter. It moved on then turned, back and forth, quartering a section of sea like a sheepdog checking a flock. Without a word, they started to walk more quickly, more purposefully towards the wooded hill of Ty Talfryn.

By the time they got there, they had an idea of just how serious the flooding might be. The little bridge above Dan's cottage was just about passable but the water beneath it had changed its tune for a pickety, troublesome one. It licked the steep banks and doused the roots of the alder trees and knotted oaks.

Dan melted away, back to his wood and stone. Hera knew better than to thank him. She saw Rodney notice he had disappeared and stopped him from following with a tilt of her head.

A flush of warm, beautiful homecoming met Hera as she patted the head of Dan's huge dragon sculpture and let down the leaf-shaped latch on the gate. She knew that her mother would be disappointed in her, even angry with her for going off without saying anything, but she couldn't wait to see her. She felt Rodney tense beside her, not knowing what to expect. His face was slightly pink. They took another couple of steps and Hera stopped. In a moment of sudden realisation, she knew that the house was empty. Empty of her mother. She was not there.

## Three

### Meeting the Flood

Along the inner cliff with the sea still bashing away below and sending salt spray into their faces. No sign of the choughs now. Past the great yew where Douglas's hut stood dark with an air of nobody there. Along the edge of the graveyard to the lane, the church all lit up but no sound of a service. Down the lane where the invisible farmer was whistling his dog, nudging up the sheep in a snaking line, up as far as the fields went, up to higher ground. Right then left then right again, all the way to Pen Street, without seeing a soul but the farmer's dog. At the house Rodney's Dad had been renting since they moved here from Chennai, they stopped. Hearts beating. Rodney wondering would he be there and what would he say and Hera sensing how Rodney was feeling now, now they were down from the mountains, back to all the pressure and the pain of pretending this was the world that mattered. Rodney's Dad wasn't there. Their house was empty too.

Along the seafront, the landscape had become unusual, unfamiliar, the boundaries blurred between land and sea. Lamp posts and traffic signs rose incongruously from the shallows; the platform at the railway halt more like the paved edge of a swimming pool. A two-carriage train stranded further up the track. The blades of the coastguard's helicopter chopping the air, its glass eye scanning the sea. Boats tugging at their moorings, bows down into the highest tide the harbour had seen in recent history. The smell of salt and sea, of peat from the moors and something much less lovely. Rising water from the drains. The swash and swirl of water trying to find a way to go. The carrying of stuff it wasn't supposed to take. The floating wrappers, nappy packets, cigarette ends, odd bits of clothing. Loo paper. *Really?*

“Yes it is,” said Rodney, breaking the spell of silence. The scraps of loo paper floated off, on their way to nowhere in particular.

People were wading about, rescuing things from the café and the shops at the seafront, handing them to one another and passing them further up the street. Some had wheelbarrows and shopping trolleys, others just carried what they could. Two teenage girls were towing an inflatable dinghy full of books and pictures on a long piece of rope.

They sloshed through the car park; saw that the beach was gone; saw the Co-op with sandbanks all along its sliding doors and a sign saying that they would stay open for as long as they could. A woman stepped over the sandbags and made her way towards them. She was clutching two bulging shopping bags in one hand and hanging onto a small child with the other.

“I’m taking these to the church,” she said, when she saw Rodney looking, “for the people who are staying there tonight.”

A notice on the door of the hardware shop said they were giving away free mops and buckets: ‘first come first served’. You’d have to wade in there to get them. Inside, they could see Ellie Bright helping her boyfriend, Sam, to move things from the lower shelves. Then around the corner by the station came Gareth.

“Hey Rodders!” he said, “What’s up?” Rodney saw Gareth take in Hera, their muddy clothes, bog-caked boots and then look again, seeing something else, thinking about it, not saying what: “You two okay?” was all he said.

“Sorry” said Rodney, not knowing what else to say. His best friend in Wales and he’d let him down with all the others in the team. It would take some explaining. He was amazed Gareth was speaking to him at all.

“What?” said Gareth. He splayed his hands just a bit, in the way he always did when he asked a question. Rodney felt really glad to see him. That was weird. The feeling he had in the

mountains was down here too. He still had that same hard-wearing, shoulder-dropping buzz of belonging. Even though he hadn't turned up for the most important ruby match of the century.

"I mean I'm really sorry about the rugby," Rodney managed to say, "what happened? Did Darran sub?"

"Rugby? Wot you talkin 'bout man?" Gareth did his best beat box voice, "who's playin rugby? Just take a look 'round you. What d'you think we're gonna do? Run off and play?" The smile everyone knew Gareth best for spread across his face like a cheese. "Hey, you know what - I know it's not how we're s'posed to feel or anything but I'm loving this. Really, I'm loving it all." Gareth swept an arm along the seafront, the burst river banks, the knee-deep road signs, the people scurrying about helping one another.

"Such a buzz with everyone getting stuck in and that." Gareth's face went serious for just a minute. "Not much fun for these guys though, their houses all wet and smelling of stuff you don't want to think about." He gestured along the sea-front. "Yours is okay, right?" he said.

Rodney nodded. He saw that Hera was smiling but looking around her.

"Have you seen my Mum?" she said.

"Helping people take stuff up to the church and to that loony bin of yours," said Gareth. Rodney flinched but he'd said it kindly enough and Hera didn't even twitch. Gareth was looking at Hera as if there was something he really didn't understand. "How come you don't know?" he said.

And then it dawned on Rodney that Gareth didn't know. He didn't know anything about where they'd been. Knew nothing about Morley Dreadman even existing; nothing about the clues, his Uncle Eustace, the lake, the hut or any of the things that had happened in the past 48 hours. Gareth didn't know that he had missed the rugby because he'd missed the rugby too. All Gareth knew was that there had been a hell of a storm and that people needed help.

“Rowan’s house got it pretty bad,” said Gareth. He pulled a face. “Nothing much left dry downstairs.”

“Have you seen my Dad?” asked Rodney, “he wasn’t in just now.”

“Up at the church too last time I saw him,” said Gareth, “Well, I’m off to see what can be done for Rowan’s Mum, what with her being on her own and all. You coming?”

Rodney had heard that Rowan’s Dad had left the year before and they never saw him these days. Rowan had two little sisters.

“I just need to check in with my Dad, then I’ll come if I can,” said Rodney. Who knew whether his Dad would ever let him out of his sight again?

## Four

### Precious Things

Rodney walked on up to the church with Hera. The lych-gate stood open. The church door was propped open too. Inside, the church was now not only brightly lit but full of people: busy people, children and even dogs. Every space was crammed with people organising things, laying out tables and labelling bits and pieces. It was like a jumble sale but nothing was for sale, it all belonged to someone. They walked through the door and someone handed them each a bun, thickly buttered and sticking to their fingers.

“Thanks,” said Rodney, he took a mouthful and his stomach did a kind of joyful somersault. Food! He’d almost forgotten how little he had eaten over the last couple of days. Hera was chomping hers, looking at it rather strangely but obviously enjoying it loads.

Father O’K was dashing about, red socks moving like pistons and a huge black hoody nearly hiding his white collar. And there, at the top of the aisle, under the pulpit, was his Dad. Smart as ever in his suit trousers but with a thick jersey jumper thrown over his shirt, the knot of his tie just showing at the neck. He was helping Hera’s Mum load a wheelbarrow with somebody’s precious things – photo albums, little china pots and a house plant. Hera’s Mum, Caron, nearly dropped the plant and Ravi caught it, prodded a stem back in place and placed it carefully among the other things. It’s now or never, thought Rodney, I’m going to have to face him some time. At that moment, Ravi looked up and saw him. He nudged Caron who just looked at Hera and smiled.

Hera grinned back through a mouthful of bun. Her mother looked so out of place in the church. Like a woodland flower showing up in a bed of bizzy-lizzies. A wood anemone, thought Hera. She watched Rodney hesitate then move awkwardly towards his father, but his father

was quicker. Ravi stopped what he was doing and took just a few long strides to meet his son, nearly knocking him off his feet with a hug. Hera couldn't help laughing. Rodney's face was just so funny. He looked as if a hairy carpet had just been whisked from under his feet and he'd found himself standing on a sandy beach. Hera stood there, just for a moment, as her Mum came towards her. Then she was in her arms. Soft clothes and the light, grassy smell of her skin. It was how it had always been.

"Oof Hera!" said Caron, speaking in Welsh as she always did when they were alone, "I knew Dan would find you but it didn't stop me worrying, you know?"

"Did he tell you then?" asked Hera. Caron nodded.

"He said you had good reason," she said, "When you weren't back, he came out to find you."

"I'll tell you about it." said Hera.

"We'd better get all this up to Ty Talfryn first. We have a few people to make comfortable. Those who aren't staying at the church hall tonight are going to kip down with us until they have somewhere to stay," said Caron.

The four of them made their way towards the church door with two wheelbarrows full of stuff and a load of sleeping bags and pillows.

"I was thinking I should go and give Gareth a hand at Rowan's – it's all flooded out downstairs," said Rodney.

"A good thought," said Ravi, "but an even better one after you've had a hot bath, put on dry clothes and eaten some proper food."

As they passed the family pew, Hera looked at Rodney and knew just what he was thinking. All the pews were piled high with boxes and bedding. The church was packed with people in a way it hadn't seen for decades. No way would they be able to get into the tunnel

without being seen. No way would they be able to find out if she had been right about Eustace's map. Hera leaned over to Rodney:

"That's twice you've got away with lying to him. Don't you think it's time you told him what's going on?" she whispered. And then she was gone. Leaving Rodney and his Dad to climb into the Range Rover and drive off in the opposite direction.

## Five

### Revelations

The bath was amazing, better than anything. Ravi had even put candles around it like Rodney's Mum used to. Rodney towelled off, feeling his good fortune all the way through his skin. Once he opened the door and stepped out of the steamy cocoon of the bathroom, he would have to decide.

There was a smell of hot chocolate in the kitchen. Ravi sat at the table with his hands cupped around a mug, another mug waiting at Rodney's place with a pile of dhal and rice in a bowl. Rodney drank the chocolate first then got stuck into the dhal. Rich, milky chocolateyness gave way to the simple, comforting taste of the boiled lentils and the rice. Everyday Indian food. 'Simple, quick, cheap and nutritious' he could hear his Mum saying, but she never usually had the chance to finish because Rodney would have chorused it for her as soon as she mentioned the word dhal.

"Thanks Dad," said Rodney, not looking up from the bowl. "I'm sorry."

Ravi cleared his throat. Here it comes, thought Rodney. But it didn't. Ravi didn't say anything, not a word. Hera was right. It was time to tell him everything. He went through all of it: the book, the map, the stuff that had happened at school, Hera going on about dragons, Morley Dreadman and the feelings of fear and failure when Morley had locked him in the hut, how much he'd wanted to be the hero who found Eustace and how he wished he hadn't let everyone down. When he came to the bit about the tunnel and the way you could read the map two ways, as if the same picture could be seen as two different worlds, he hesitated. His father, who had listened silently up until now, waited for a bit then said.

"How interesting."

“Actually,” said Rodney, “I’ve been dreading this.” He waited for a moment. “How come you’re being so nice about it?”

“Am I usually such a monster?” said Ravi. “Thank Hera’s mother, not me. She gave me some very wise advice. I must say that I am beginning to feel extremely glad to have taken it. Certainly, I am enjoying this evening much more than I would have done had I not.”

“What did she say?”

“Never mind that for now. We have been putting together some pieces of the jigsaw ourselves. She is a remarkable woman, that Caron Abtelverryn. I can certainly imagine what Eustace saw in her.”

“What?”

“Don’t ‘what’ me, Rodney,” said Ravi, “Did your mother and I not teach you to speak English properly?”

“At school they say I speak English like an Indian,” said Rodney.

“Exactly, that’s what I said,” said his Dad with a sudden grin.

“But what do you mean about Uncle Eustace and Hera’s Mum?”

“Apparently they were, as you youngsters seem to say, an item.”

Rodney sat looking around him at the kitchen. Instead of the familiarity of the pine cupboards, stainless steel sink and draining board, striped curtains and perfectly clean cooker, he saw a place where nothing was certain any more. Were the shapes on the patterned floor separate? Or joined by the spaces between them? Were the ceramic pots resting on the wooden worktops or were the worktops supporting the pots? He was dizzy with it all.

“And Hera?” he asked, the thought that Hera might actually be his cousin hitting him like a snowball. How much did she know? Why hadn’t she said anything?

“It didn’t seem polite to ask.” said Ravi, “it’s an interesting idea though. The thing is that Caron was able to tell me quite a lot of things I didn’t know about what Eustace was doing before he disappeared.”

“Does she think he is dead?” asked Rodney. It was a horrible moment.

“She has no idea” said Ravi, “but what is more important is that she thinks that is exactly what Eustace wanted. For nobody to know, I mean.”

Before he had got into the bath, Rodney had taken his mobile phone apart and dried out the component parts. Then he had put them in the airing cupboard for good measure. Now he had them in front of him, fiddling around, putting it all back together, piece by piece. It was hardly engineering but it was satisfying to work out how it went. He clicked the battery back in place and pushed the power button. “Pliing” The phone started up. “Pliing” A text arrived.

*Hey Rodders helluva mess down here at Rowans – be good to see ya! G*

Rodney rolled the phone over in the palm of his hand. It wasn’t the latest model, didn’t even do many apps apart from GPS but he liked it. His Dad had given it to him when they came to Wales. He was glad he’d found it where Morley had dropped it, even if it hadn’t actually worked in the mountains. “Pliing”

*Match now next Sat – game on!* Read a text from Coach. Rodney had almost forgotten about the rugby match. So he’d got away with that one too. It really was beginning to feel as if things were lining up in his favour. Odd how easy it all seemed now that things were out in the open.

“Hey Dad, do you mind if I go and give Rowan a hand now?” he said to Ravi.

“Isn’t he the one that did all that stuff to you in the changing rooms? Jelly and something? Didn’t you say he was in cahoots with this Morley Dreadman?”

“Hair gel and custard powder,” said Rodney. It seemed so utterly childish now. “I don’t think he knows much about Morley either – just trying to get one over on me.” Morley probably paid him something too, thought Rodney, but then again looking at the way his family lived it wasn’t so very surprising that Rowan had taken the money.

“It’s your choice, Rodney. Helping someone will never do you any harm, I suppose, even if they have covered you in hair gel and custard in the past. Ha! Couldn’t they think of anything better than that?” said Ravi.

Rodney had a flashback to being force fed pork scratchings but decided not to bother his Dad with it.

“I’ll be back by nine.” said Rodney, meaning it.

“There is one more thing, Rodney,” said his Dad, “you haven’t actually said how you acquired that black eye.”

Rodney took a deep breath.

“I don’t think he actually meant to shoot me,” he said carefully, “he was miles wide but the shot clipped the hut and a big chunk of wood flew off into my forehead.”

Ravi’s attention was suddenly very different.

“He had a gun? Why didn’t you mention this before?”

*Because now you will take this man much more seriously and you will probably call the police and because once they are involved it will be nothing to do with us, with me or with Hera any more,* thought Rodney, trying not to panic.

“I think because Hera and her Mum like to keep themselves to themselves and I didn’t think they would appreciate the police rooting around at Ty Talfryn.” said Rodney *and I’m absolutely sure that Dan would hate it,* he thought.

“Well they won’t be keeping themselves to themselves tonight with half the village staying there,” said Ravi, “although I can see that in some ways it would be the worst time for the police to want to talk to them.”

\*I took the splinters out,” said Rodney as his Dad examined his forehead and lifted the lid on his eye.

“You did a good job. Were you unconscious at all?” Ravi took a small torch out of the kitchen drawer and shone it in Rodney’s eyes. “Follow this,” he said, moving the torch left and right, up and down.

“No Dad.”

“And this man is still out there in the mountains?”

“I told you, Dan went back to find him but he’d vanished.” Since they had been back from the mountains, Morley Dreadman had somehow become less and less real. For no logical reason, he didn’t think that Morley would be bold enough to venture into Llanddamair any day soon. Nevertheless Rodney shuddered. He remembered what Dan had said: ‘You can’t shake a shadow.’”

## Six

### Jigsaw

Hera lay in her room with Lopez's chin resting firmly on her ankles. It was a double gesture from him, one that he was glad to have her back and two that she wasn't going anywhere without him knowing. It was one of the most comforting things she knew.

Sharing Ty Talfryn was a strange experience. This was how it would have been in her ancestor, Talfryn's time with people coming and going; talking, eating, sleeping. Now they had all quietened down after the initial excitement and the big hall was just one big snore. She could almost imagine the walls expanding and contracting like a sleeping person's chest.

All the usual sounds drifted in through the open window: the long whoo? of the owl; the shuttling of wood pigeons, sporadic disagreements between roosting crows and the soft creeping of creatures who had waited for dark to feed. The turbines were almost still with no breeze to lift their wings. Now there was time to go through everything in her head. Time to think about the things her mother had told her: the things she knew and the things she had learnt from Rodney's father, Ravi. Odd how when you put them together, they made a different sort of picture: bits of information with bits of mystery; bits of logic with bits of other stuff that you couldn't explain but felt with just as much certainty.

When the policewoman had come to ask questions about Morley Dreadman, it had been difficult to know what to say. For the first few minutes, Hera had been sure that the policewoman had thought she was making it all up. Then she had spoken briefly to Dan and in those scarce, only half-spoken words of his, he had told her more than anyone else could in a whole day of speaking. A quick check over her radio and she had a description of a man that was suspected of stealing commercial information from a big energy company, whose name

was indeed, Morley Dreadman. All the policewoman had done was made a few notes then disappeared discreetly through the back door, which was the way she had come in. It was only after she had left that it occurred to Hera that she was wearing ordinary clothes and not a uniform.

Hera stood up carefully, relocating Lopez's chin on one of the cushions. He watched intently as she went to the window. With the full moon would have come another strong tide and she wondered how the people at the seafront were faring; whether the houses and shops of the people who were sleeping downstairs would be flooded again tonight. It was just as Eustace had always said it would be. More rain, more storms and more flooding as the Earth lay under a blanket of greenhouse gases and the seas grew warm and swollen with melting ice. All it needed was a little more love, was what he had told her. If people could just remember who they were and where they came from. You would never poison someone you loved, would you?

She thought again about the dragon on the door of the hut by the lake in the mountains, and of the missing postcard. Perhaps they were supposed to go to both places. Perhaps that was what Eustace wanted. Morley had taken Eustace's drawings from the hut. What was surprising was that Eustace would leave them there. If they were so important, wouldn't he have hidden them better? She remembered his long, beech-bark face and eyes even darker than Rodney's. Eyes as deep and clear as the lake of the spirits. Llyn Ysbryd. She'd heard about it often enough but never seen it. You have to find Llyn Ysbryd for yourself, the legend said, take a dip in the pool and you will either come out with the secret of eternal life or go slowly mad.

The owl hooted again. Lopez looked at her.

"Come on then," she said.

## Seven

### Mates

Rodney hardly noticed the long slow hill from the rows of houses down by the harbour to Pen Street. Twice or maybe three times, he stopped and listened. The feeling that he was being followed was hard to shake. The streets were placid now as if grateful for peace after the chaos of the afternoon. The moon was painting the roads and pavements silver, casting shadows around parked cars, street signs and dustbins, where the lights weren't working after the storm. There was so much to think about. Rowan had been so grateful for the help, had even given him a rugby type hug when he left. The house had looked better by the time they'd all finished and they'd lit candles in storm lamps, got the fire going and warmed up some beans on a camper stove someone had lent. Rowan's Mum had been nearly in tears thanking them.

As he reached the front door of their own house, he saw a car draw up outside. There was something official about it and about the way the man and woman got out of the car, checked a piece of paper and walked up to the door. He felt someone walking up behind him, increasing their pace.

"Sorry Rodney," said his Dad's voice, slightly breathless "I just walked down to see if I could meet you. I couldn't quite relax with you being out after dark after what you told me about that man. Not checking up on you, you understand."

The woman who had just got out of the car held up a card about the size of a credit card.

"Dr Ranchandani?" she asked, "my name is Detective Inspector Janey.

Inside the lights were still on and the radio playing. His Dad made tea while they settled down around the kitchen table. The policeman took off his uniform cap and placed it on

an empty chair then started to make notes. The woman leaned forward with her elbows and wrists on the table, hands open.

“We’ve already spoken to Hera Abtalverryn and Mr Rhys-Davies,” she started to say.

“Douglas Rhys-Davies?” said Rodney, “What’s he got to do with it?”

The policeman consulted his notes.

“Um, he has known of Professor Dreadman for a long time,” said Inspector Janey, “not that he had met him until recently but you might say that there is some history that led Mr Rhys-Davies to contact us. Now, Rodney, do you mind if I ask you a few questions?” She asked Rodney but she was looking at his father. Ravi just held out a hand towards Rodney and tilted his head to one side as if to say, ‘your call’. Rodney smiled at him.

“Okay,” he said.

It took a while but he told them about everything except Rowan and except the dragons, which he just didn’t think they’d understand. They both made notes and every now and then, they would look at one another then explain a couple of things. When they’d finished, the policewoman did something completely unexpected. With great care, she took a tiny piece of folded paper out of her pocket and handed it to Rodney.

“It seems a bit irregular but umm, Miss Abtalverryn asked if I would mind giving you this,” she said, “I couldn’t see why not.”

It was a folded paper hare.

## Eight

### Eternal Life

Never had Rodney seen the moon so bright as when he slipped down by the side of the church. A low light shone in Douglas's shed and for a short moment, Rodney was tempted to knock on the door. Instead he went on along the path, putting one foot noiselessly in front of the other to the main door. It was still open. Today had been close to Father O'Keery's dream of welcoming people of all faiths and affinities to his church. It would have been astounding if he had locked the door that night. What was more surprising was that it made so little noise when Rodney pushed it open. He tiptoed over to the Abtalverryn family pew, every rustle of his clothes, every touch of his soles on the slate floor, every breath and heartbeat sounding like percussion. One at a time, he moved the boxes along to another pew. Stooping in the silvered darkness, he found the place. Sliding the fingers of his right hand into the half moon hole, he squeezed the catch. No click. It didn't move. He would have to go back and knock on Douglas's door after all.

"Is this what you are looking for?"

It was Father O'K. He was standing in the aisle, only about a metre and a half from where Rodney stooped by the pew. In his palm, the key gleamed gold, green and silver. Behind him stood Douglas Rhys-Davies. Father O'K put his fore finger to his lips. He held out the key to Rodney.

"Go on," he said, "we'll stay here." Douglas didn't say anything.

Rodney took the key. He turned it in the lock, sprung the catch and flipped back the pew. Down into the tunnel, fumbling for his torch and realising that he had left it behind, feeling his way, squashing the fear back down through his throat, pushing it back deep into his

body and holding it down. Down further, trying to breathe normally, remembering the dragon charm that Dan had given him all that time ago and holding it tight. Dragon charm in his right hand, feeling his way along the tunnel wall with his left. Breathe. Swallow. Breathe. He licked his lips. The smell of salt air. Deeper breaths now. The sound of the sea. No cry of gulls, no chattering of choughs, no sound but the sea over rocks and pebbles. Shoooshlaaaa. The light of the moon found its way into the tunnel and the tunnel opened out into the cave. Shapes stirred as sleeping choughs felt the vibration of his stumbling feet. Bats flitted, missing him by a hair. In shone the moon until it almost seemed there was a path out over the rocks towards it.

Rodney clambered over two ridges of rock and along another, rock pools gleaming, tiny rivers flowing through the cracks. At the very place where rocks became ocean, he could see a half moon shape. A pool. Nobody would know it was there unless they were here at this moment. He looked at the moon again and thought *mad!* Then he stripped down to his shorts and lowered himself into the pool, gasping at the sudden, piercing cold. It was like sinking into the liquid moon. Phosphorescence flickered green across the surface, life flickered through his veins. The pool was deep and clear to the very bottom where the stones passed the moonlight back to the surface.

The cold subsided and Rodney thought how warm it was for so early in the year. He closed his eyes and listened to the night, the sea. When he opened them again, the stars looked suddenly very close. There were hundreds of them and here he was on one small planet surrounded by galaxies of others. One small, beautiful planet. Perhaps unique. And here he was in a secret lake where the water came down from the mountains to the sea to bring what it had gleaned from the granite and the land. At sea the minerals would clean and settle and make shells for small creatures and tiny algae with the wonderful name of coccolithophores, who would play a role in making clouds to carry rain back to the land. And when the creatures

died, their shells would become part of a new layer of chalk, forming on the sea bed. Rodney had never felt so real, so alive. Not just watching, working it all out, but part of it.

A sound, barely audible, filtered across the rocks from the bottom of the cliff. A lanky, wolf-like creature was moving towards the lake. Behind it came another, smaller creature, also on all fours as it negotiated the rocks. The wolf-like creature stopped and lay down. The other continued.

Saying nothing, she slid unfettered into the lake and swam over to where Rodney was treading water. She lay back, letting her feet float level with her body. Minerals from the rocks seemed to find their way through her skin, soothe her limbs and nourish her bones. The whole night sky rolled over their heads in vibrant pictures, all reflected in the pool.

“Imagine what it was like not knowing what they were, not knowing about the big bang, the planets, the galaxies and all that,” said Rodney. “Not knowing that we are made from them. I mean billions of years ago.”

“And them of us.” said Hera, “But I think we’ve always known.”

“Magic.” said Rodney. He gazed down into the pool, storing this time, this sight, this place deep inside him.

“How long can we stay until the tide comes in again?” he asked

“Not long,” said Hera, “and we’d better make the most of it. The sea only goes out so far when the tide is this extreme and that doesn’t happen often.”

Rodney swivelled to look at the sea. It stretched away beyond imagination. The same sea lying calmly out there that only last night had raged and crashed and destroyed the beach and flooded houses and shops and stopped the trains. He dived and ducked back up to look at the cave, knowing that soon they would have to go back along the tunnel. Moonlight reflected from water onto rock face, dancing over chinks and crevices. They were getting cold. It was

time to go. He could see water lapping over the way Hera had come. Lopez was already getting wet.

“Hera!” he whispered suddenly, “see that?”

She could see. A small green dragon painted above a thin chamber just below the mouth of the cave.

They hauled themselves out of the lake and stood shivering, pulling on fleeces with chattering teeth. Lopez rose from his sphinx-like pose and followed casually as they stepped from rock to rock, never taking their eyes off the green dragon.

From here it wasn't difficult to climb into the chamber. It smelt different from the bigger one, less fresh, more salty. Once again, the moon lit their way. Then the chamber ended abruptly, with only a small hole above their heads.

“This must be a spout hole,” said Rodney. He touched the chamber wall. It was odd, not quite like rock. He tapped it. Hollow. Hera was watching, head on one side, breathing in the smell of the returning sea, feeling the tide swell with every beat of her heart.

“We haven't long,” she said. Lopez was already waiting at the entrance to the main cave, making anxious, shuffling noises with his feet. Rodney scraped at the rock. It started to come away in his hands. He looked back and saw that the sea had started to pour into Llyn Ysbryd. Within twenty minutes, he estimated, it would have vanished. He scraped harder and Hera helped. Now Rodney could feel something solid, wooden perhaps. A box: about the size of a shoe box. He lifted it out.

“We'd better take it with us,” said Hera. Leopard-like, she climbed up into the mouth of the cave and reached down to take the box from Rodney. Lopez licked the salt from her hands and her arms, trying to reach her face. Rodney pulled himself up beside her and Lopez treated him to the same relieved greeting.

Rodney took a last look out at the stars, the water, the rocks, the moon and the sky. *So that's where you are Mum*, the thought came into his mind, *everywhere not nowhere*. He took a long breath and felt her in that too.

This time neither of them had brought a torch. The box wasn't heavy. It wasn't even locked. Rodney lifted the lid but all they could see was a waterproof container like the one you might put a mobile phone in when you go to the beach. Rodney carried it back into the tunnel, realising that this would mean sharing their find with Father O'Keery and Doug Rhys-Davies and anyone else who was in the church. He shuffled along, not thinking about where he was going or the dark, oppressiveness of being underground but following Lopez, whom he couldn't see but sense, leading the way.

"You're one of his pack now," whispered Hera.

## Nine

### Decisions

Rodney pushed up the pew and gave Lopez a shove to help him up out of the tunnel. Father O'Keery's face greeted them with more than a little surprise at the sight of a huge wolfhound appearing from under his church. Lopez slouched past and flopped down between the pews as if he had been going to church all his life. Rodney handed Father O'K the box while he climbed out and reached down to take Hera's hand. Between them they clicked the pew back into place and handed the key to Doug, who had been watching them in that careful way of his. Nobody else was in the church. Not even the hare.

Father O'Keery's face was so full of curiosity that Rodney suppressed the impulse to carry the box away to some secret place. He looked at Hera and she nodded. He opened the lid. It was a waterproof container with a simple seal. Inside was a note and a memory stick. Uncle Eustace's writing, distinctive as ever.

*Dear Rodney,*

*If you have found this, you have almost certainly also found Hera. So she will be a part of this too. I am sorry for all the subterfuge and for a few false clues that may have caused you a bit of bother. I've always known that Professor Dreadman will not give up easily. Hopefully they gave him more bother than you.*

*The contents of this box could make you a very wealthy man. Or you could use them in a different way so that the whole world will be richer. I leave the choice to you.*

*Trust Douglas Rhys-Davies - he is an exceptional friend. He too has made a choice so he may be able to help you with your own decision.*

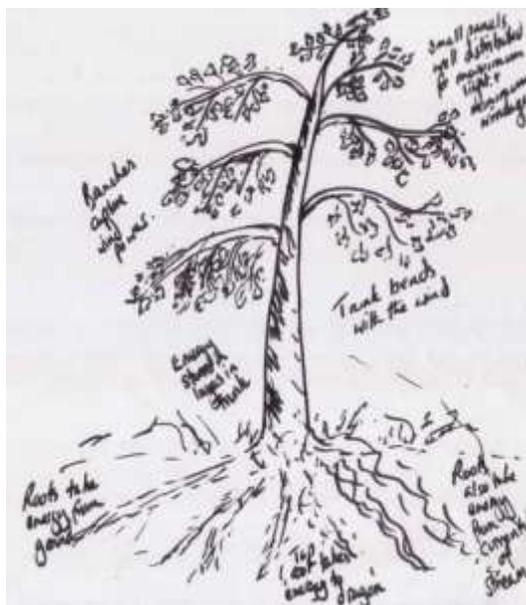
*E*

And that was it. Apart from the memory stick.

“Do you want to use my computer?” asked Father O’K

“I think I’d rather open it at home, if it’s okay with you.” said Rodney, “but what I’d really like is for you all to come with us.”

Doug looked relieved. Father O’K looked ecstatic.



## Ten

### The Energy Tree

Rodney had to give his Dad credit. For someone who had just been through so much that was so unlike his usual days, he was doing very well. When, at nearly midnight, he opened the door to Rodney, Hera, a priest, a grave-digger and a very large hairy dog, Ravi quickly replaced his look of shock with a welcoming smile. He had known Rodney had gone to church but it hadn't occurred to him that he would return with a congregation. Rodney hugged him gratefully. He ran upstairs for his laptop.

Everyone was sitting around the kitchen table with mugs of tea and looking expectant. Lopez was lapping water from a mixing bowl and spilling most of it over the floor. Rodney inserted the memory stick and opened the first document. It contained drawings very like the ones they had seen in the black bag at the lake in the mountains. He closed it, squashing a feeling of disappointment and opened another - 'The Energy Tree' – and a drawing appeared on the screen. The only sound was that of Doug sucking in air through his teeth.

The drawing showed a tree-like structure with trunk, branches and roots all labelled with different things. The finer roots drew up heat from the ground and a long tap root reached out towards the water to exchange more heat. The leaves were flexible solar panels that turned to face the sun. The branches moved to catch the breeze and the trunk transported energy from one place to another.

“It’s genius,” said Rodney, “simple but brilliant.”

“That’s Eustace,” said Doug.

Ravi nodded. “But why didn’t he tell anyone?” he said, “Not even his own family knew about this.”

“There are a lot of companies out there that would like to get their hands on this,” said Doug, “some want to make a fortune out of it and others want to see it destroyed to stop it making them less powerful. Ask Dan but he won’t give you the answer. He carries the scars on his face and hands.” “As if he was the Earth herself,” Doug added under his breath.

Rodney was listening as if they were voices from another room. He was so absorbed in the ideas in the drawing.

“The only problem is that there’s no way to store the energy in this,” said Rodney. “If it isn’t used, it’s lost.”

Doug made a sort of choking sound, “Your uncle said you had the makings of a superb engineer,” said Doug, “go on - open another document.”

Rodney hovered over the document headings: hydrogen cars, sail-powered freight, the hydro fins and solar blinds that Hera had already told him about. He clicked on one he had been avoiding: ‘Dragons’.

More drawings, some complete and others unfinished, then one at the bottom that was more hastily sketched than the others and above it *‘The Green Dragon’*, written by hand.

Immediately, Rodney could see what it was designed to do. A long green snake-like structure that would lie underground, storing energy to be released when needed. It even recycled any waste. Whatever the energy source, it should be able to handle it. A scribbled note beneath it said *NB this is small to medium scale generation – think nature – give and take, never too much.*

“I get it,” said Rodney “forget big power stations and national grid. Just use the best sources for each area.”

Douglas Rhys-Davies’s face had changed from his usual dour, pipesmoke expression to an animated look of absolute certainty.

“Eustace wanted to give it away to communities all over the world.” he explained, “He was trying to find the funds to support it but the likes of Morley Dreadman were being offered money to make sure he didn’t. Once Morley realised that he wasn’t going to get away with stealing your uncle’s ideas, he obviously decided to take the money and try to stop him.”

“How did you know about Morley?” asked Rodney.

“He and Eustace met at a conference when I worked at the Institute of Ecology and Innovation. It was Eustace who introduced him to the Institute, they were friends in those days. Youngsters of course and keen as kale plants.” Said Doug.

“You worked at the Institute?” Rodney was beginning to think he knew nothing about anyone in this village. “I thought you’d lived in Llandamair all your life?”

“I went off to do biochemistry in my twenties. I was researching algal blooms and carbon absorption. But I got fed up with the way things seemed to be going. All about money; nothing about life.” Douglas paused. “Eventually, I came back to do what my father did and his father before him. There’s something eternal about digging graves. Gives me the chance to think.”

Rodney saw what Eustace's note had meant about having a choice to make. He looked at the brilliant, beautifully simple engineering on the screen and the people around the table. He thought of his Uncle Eustace and for the first time felt he understood him. Deep inside, the memory of Llyn Ysbryd stirred. It wasn't really such a decision. All they had to do was work out how to do it.

Hera was trembling slightly, still damp with the chill of Llyn Ysbryd. Lake of the Spirits. She thought again about the legend. Madness or the wisdom of eternity? Whatever happened now, they were both in it, as deep as the Llyn itself.

## Eleven



### Smugglers

Rodney sat with Hera on the edge of the cliff, watching an amazing aerial display from the choughs. Llyn Ysbryd was down there, way below among the rocks, hidden from the cliff and sleeping until the next spring tide. Sleep when it eventually came last night had been bliss. Of course, he'd lain awake for a while wondering how to bring Eustace's plans to fruition. He'd had to stop his brain turning over ideas for constructing the Energy Tree, couldn't even begin to think how the Green Dragon might be made. But he'd known how much his body needed sleep. His mind needed it too. Rest makes fertile ground, his Mum used to say, rest and be thankful. So he had slept a wonderful, dreamless sleep.

Now his mind was racing again. The thing was, he knew he was going to need a lot of help. Help from here and help from India. Help to give it all away. He laughed. Why should that be so very difficult? Eustace hadn't been able to do it but perhaps it would be possible for an unlikely Indian school kid in Wales. The thought made him glow. He looked at Hera. Her eyes were following the choughs, watching every loop and soar. He would need help from her too. She would remind him what it was all about. She wouldn't be able to help herself. If you saw the world the way she did, the only thing you would want to do was look after it.

Out at sea, a single white sail was moving along the horizon. Hera remembered the sailing boat carved on the door of the miners' hut by the lake in the mountains. The lake of the green dragon. *And where did you go, Eustace? She wondered. Have you gone back to the air, the water, the soil and the stars? Or did you sail away from the cave at high water like the smugglers used to when they made up the story about Llyn Ysbryd to keep the villagers away from their secrets?*

Rodney stood up and pointed to a sleek black chough with an especially vivid red beak.

“Do you think that’s him?” he said. “Arthur?”

“I don’t know,” said Hera, “I think that one might be Lancelot.”



# Critical Element

**In chapter one** I give a brief introduction to the call from many environmentalists for a new story, to how deep ecology responds to this and to action research as an approach. I also explain some challenges regarding style, content and focus.

**In chapter two** I open first person inquiry by giving some personal background to illustrate my personal journey into deep ecology, the roots of my questioning and how the creative element of this thesis, a novel for children aged between ten and thirteen years, evolved as a result.

**In chapter three** I explore the idea that it is wonder at the natural world that makes the difference in how humans care for it and look beyond this to deep ecologist and philosopher Arne Naess's proposal that we should be thinking in terms of ontology rather than just ethics.

**In chapter four** I look at perspectives on 'real life' and how these helped to shape plot, motivation and characterization in the creative element of my thesis.

**In chapter five** I question assumptions about communication and look for possibilities for communication between human and non-human characters in the light of deep ecological thinking. I then consider the way we use language, anthropocentric and anthropomorphic representation in stories for children.

**In chapter six** I use a discussion between Richard Dawkins and Satish Kumar to prompt further inquiry into spirituality, magic and science in relation to deep ecology and writing.

**In chapter seven** I draw the threads of my inquiry into a summary of the creative and the critical elements of my thesis. Then I imagine my way beyond the thesis and lead into the next stages of my continuing inquiry.

## One

### Introduction

*“Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love.”<sup>1</sup>*

### Threads

To be a storyteller is to be part of a long chain of weavers, a gatherer of threads reaching far into the past to be spun long into the future. The loom of the mind is in constant, restless motion, creating patterns, old and new. Threads often seem disparate, formed by the mass of experiences, emotions and facts shuttling through the human mind. They spread like mycelia, adapting to their environment and producing diverse, improbable fruit (Swanson in Campbell (2011:47). Just as the fungi to be found in woodlands ingest poisons and turn them into something the earth can use to make new life, storytellers are compelled to gather even that which is most difficult to contemplate and transform it into an offering to the process of regeneration.

Since the truth-seeking minds of children are tempted to root around in the leaf mould and ponder the undesirable, the unpalatable or the potentially toxic, it is strange that relatively few questions have been asked about the stories we tell them about ecology and non-human species. It is also children who have the most genuine capacity to embrace another gift of the storyteller: that of wonder. Storytellers and children share the ability to imagine the best and the worst in life. Unfettered by a worldview often referred to as ‘real life’, they experience the magic of living in all its guises, dark and light.

For millennia, the significance of storytelling in developing the way we see the world has been acknowledged and analysed. Echoing the thoughts of many before him, poet and novelist, Ben Okri, in a short film entitled *Why Do We Tell Our Children Stories* (Now-here Films, 2013), explains that stories are a way of pre-coding our experience of the world and that in telling stories to our children, we are telling stories to ourselves. We shape our reality through

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<sup>1</sup> The first time I saw these words, they were pasted next to the bed when I stayed with a good friend in Bristol. I believe the quotation is from Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet* is inaccurate but I prefer Sarah’s remembering of the words to the original. These slight changes are just what would happen in oral storytelling so I feel happy about passing them on in a written story, with due respect to Rilke.

the stories we tell ourselves and each other. Okri and others carry these echoes into our own time, weaving and reweaving story into the identities of nations, of cultures, of organisations and of individuals.

During my lifetime, there have been many calls for a new story in the light of global crises: calls to give voice to a growing unrest about the way we have come to live in the world; to challenge our assumptions about the way we see ourselves in relation to our environment. Storytellers are called upon to move beyond the lessons of previous generations, disrupting the story of why we are here, how we live and what is most important in our lives. They call upon the reader to look more deeply into their own story of who we are in the world. Thomas Berry (2006:17) saw our story as part of a vast and ancient universe, saying that our current story no longer serves us but we have yet to find a new one. Ursula Le Guin says we have been telling the 'killer story' for too long (in Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996:149-154). Karen Armstrong (2005:149) incites artists and creative writers to 'bring fresh insight into our lost and damaged world'. The Dark Mountain Project calls for writers to 'challenge the stories that underpin our civilisation: the myth of progress, the myth of human centrality, and the myth of our separation from 'nature'.' (Kingsworth & Hine, 2009:18). Joanna Macy encourages us to envision future generations who will want to know the tales that shaped the story into which they have been born (in Reason & Newman, 2013: 5). Resonant in all these voices is a conviction that we need to rethink our place in the world or else we will continue to devastate and even destroy all of life on Earth, including our own species.

One approach to telling a new story, (and in some cases updating older stories that have been hushed by a myth of progress), is to explore a different way of experiencing the world where humans participate instead of control: a world where we are an integrated part of an intricate whole. Deep ecology offers one such way. It reveals a bend in the phase space of our accepted reality. And it is here that I wish to make a contribution to critical thinking about the way we write stories for children. I want to do this because I believe it is important to offer children access to different worldviews at a time when they are likely to become embroiled in those commonly accepted by the societies in which we live. I have chosen deep ecology because it presents the possibility of a more life-sustaining relationship with the natural world and a way of appreciating life in all its many forms. It is not my intention to suggest that it is the only way or that it presents an infallible solution to environmental crisis: I don't think that any one person or group of people knows what to do. The important thing is for us to engage

with the problems and to learn to think together (Isaacs, 1999), stretching our imaginations beyond our current experience and prevailing patterns of behaviour.

In order to do this, there is a need to tap into the new ideas and questions that have emerged with the growth of the environmental movement and the realisation that something is awry in our relationship with nature. Modern environmentalism is usually considered to have developed as a grassroots political movement during the 1960s as attention widened from the conservation of nature to challenging the environmental impact of industrial growth and population increase (Drengson, 1995:1). Deep ecology emerged in the early 1970s partly as a response to this shift in awareness yet, in introducing the term<sup>2</sup>, Arne Naess was careful to describe it as a 'long range movement' seeded in much earlier thinking about the human relationship with the environment and extending to a long term vision for the future. As many environmentalists began to accept the need to work with economic growth instead of against it, deep ecology presented a worldview that challenged even this pragmatic approach by asserting that the purpose of environmental responsibility is more complex than simply caring for the world in the interests of our own species. A fundamental premise of deep ecology is that all life has intrinsic value. Rather than making sense intuitively as it did to its proponents, deep ecology was considered radical in that it challenged the logical arguments inherent in a culture where market forces ruled and heads were turned towards unlimited growth.

There are many accepted works of philosophy and science that would help to inform and consider the issues and arguments. I have not set out to repeat or evaluate any of this work but to build upon it, primarily considering ideas put forward by Naess, Stephan Harding and David Abram. In doing this, I've looked for elucidation and inspiration in the work of many others, included in the bibliography, but these three have informed the basis for my project.

A good place to start is with an experiment in weaving the ideas into practice so I set out to write a novel for children aged between ten and thirteen years as the creative element of this thesis. I feel sure that both inquiry and experimentation will continue and evolve through the rest of my life.

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<sup>2</sup> Naess first introduced the term 'deep ecology' at the Third World Future Research Conference in 1972 (Drengson&Devall, 2008:25)and subsequently in an article for *Inquiry* in 1973: 'The shallow and the deep, long range ecology movement: a summary'.

## Deep Ecology and Children's Fiction

When I explain what I am trying to do, the most commonly asked question is 'what is the difference between deep ecology and ordinary ecology?' The wide ranging nature of deep ecological thinking makes the answer a potentially long and discursive one but in summary, the point about deep ecology is that it takes a further step into the idea that all things in life are connected and encourages deep thought about our own place in the intricate web of life. From this position, not only should we regard life as an interconnected system but we should start from a realisation that we are only one part of that system and neither detached observers nor the central purpose. Founder Arne Naess always referred to deep ecology as a worldview or as a movement rather than a theory, and it is mainly deep ecology as a worldview that I intend to explore in my writing.

How does this worldview change the way we write? How does it affect the way we write about human and non-human characters? These questions can also be extended to writing about aspects of the world that we usually regard as non-sentient. Since they are an integral part of the system, they also have value; therefore such a worldview would change the way we regard plants, soil, rock, water and other features. With a deep ecology worldview it is no longer possible to see anything, sentient or non-sentient, solely as a resource for humans to use at will. Every action would be evaluated for its effect on the whole, every decision made with the fullest possible consideration of long term consequences.

Another of the most commonly asked questions about my research has been 'what sort of children's books exist already that involve deep ecology?' Throughout my research I've had the pleasure of seeking out and reading a great many children's books with an ecological or environmental theme. People have handed me books or mentioned the names of those they loved as a child. Children have made suggestions too. But my best answer to that question remains that I have found glimpses of a deep ecology worldview in a great many books<sup>3</sup> but that the majority of those where it is core to the story are set in the past or the future, in cultures that are gone or fast disappearing, in science fiction or in fantasy. Far fewer relate to the present.

Set in the past, Michelle Paver's *Chronicles of Ancient Darkness* (2004-2009) tell a series of compelling stories about humans living six thousand years ago with a deep connection to the land, without which they would be unlikely to survive. In researching these children's

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<sup>3</sup> More examples can be found in the bibliography

novels, Paver spent time with Inuit groups; learning to practice their skills and hearing their inherited stories. Kit Berry's *Magus of Stonewylde* (2005; 2011) also represents a culture which revolves around the rhythms of the universe and the seasons of the earth. This story is set in the present yet the characters are isolated from the modern world by a high wall and rigorous security. Ultimately, the narrative becomes as concerned with human society and power relationships as it is about a more sustainable, respectful way of living. Power relationships are also played out in Timothée de Fombelle's *Toby Alone* (2008) the story of tiny beings who live in a tree, which is a marvellous way of encouraging the reader to look at the way we live from the outside, almost as we would regard another planet. As a reflection on society it extends to the exploitation of common resources for personal and political gain. Similarly, when I came to re-read *Watership Down* (Adams, 1974), one of the books most commonly cited in my conversations with others about my writing, I realised that, despite his thorough research into the world of the rabbit, Richard Adams was telling a human story of societal conflict as much as reflecting on the human impact on the environment. Although the creatures retain some characteristics of their own species, they are really humans in disguise.

Even in a book as influential as *Ishmael* (Quinn, 1992), which surprised its author by being included in the curriculum in many American schools in order to teach environmental responsibility, the main character is essentially anthropomorphic. There is an important subtlety in the way this is handled since Ishmael, the gorilla who takes the role of teacher, communicates only through his mind and his eyes so that the conversation actually takes place in the mind of a human. Instead of anthropomorphosis, some authors employ transformation to help their characters (and hence their readers) to imagine the world through the eyes of another species, for example Melvyn Burgess (1996) in his children's novel *Tiger Tiger*. Others are prepared to allow animals simply to be themselves, playing a strong role in the story without anthropomorphosis or metamorphosis; nevertheless providing an opportunity for readers to experience something of their worlds. Michael Morpurgo has a very natural way of creating memorable roles for animals in this way in stories such as *Why the Whales Came* (1985), *Kensuke's Kingdom* (2005) and *Running Wild* (2009). It is perhaps Morpurgo's writing that I most admire and I believe this is because it comes from a deep sense of commitment to his readers and to the natural world.

In fact, some of the most tantalising glimpses of a worldview more engaged with nature and the natural environment were written without any conscious intention to express

deep ecology. Many pre-date the term itself, for instance TH White, in *The Sword in the Stone* (1938), had the young Arthur apprenticed to many different creatures and ensured that he finally discovered that he could not succeed in becoming king without the support of the natural world.

In recent years, the majority of children's stories to emerge from increased awareness of environmental crisis have been post-apocalyptic or dystopian, creating a popular sub-genre with books such as *The Carbon Diaries* (Lloyd, 2005) or *Floodland* (Sedgwick, 2000). Sometimes, as Stephan Harding (2010) points out in his review of the film *Avatar* (Twentieth Century Fox:2009), a response to be found in science fiction is a vision not dissimilar from deep ecology. Whilst dystopian fiction might help a reader to imagine 'what if', it also allows a certain logical distance in the understanding that this is fantasy. Portraying deep ecology as a purely utopian vision will also create a distance between the reader and reality. My proposal is to express deep ecology as an integral part of contemporary, everyday life.

Rather like the fossil hunter who chips away at the rock face to find fragments which, no matter how small, provide insights to a much greater story. I still don't feel I have found one complete example of deep ecology in children's fiction but I have come to the conclusion that this in itself is the more important discovery. As our understanding of the human impact on the natural world evolves, it is the act of creative writing with deep ecology in mind that provides the opportunity rather than the purely logical evaluation of the resulting texts.

However, in setting out to express a deep ecology worldview more consciously in a novel for children, I encountered an unexpected problem. I had already discussed the idea informally with local booksellers. All had responded enthusiastically, saying that they felt they had very little of this sort of fiction to offer. I assumed that this would mean that publishers would be similarly excited but, when I tried the same sort of informal discussions with several publishers and agents, they were concerned about how to market such a book, where it would fit on the bookshop shelves and whether it would achieve the volume of sales demanded by their business models. At first this was disheartening but as my research developed, I realised that their concerns served to strengthen my conviction that this is a gap in the field of creative writing for children. I also became convinced that there is a need for innovative thinking about publishing as well as writing in order to stimulate emerging interests and reach smaller markets. In the fiercely competitive world of children's books, this is another conundrum arising from what we call 'real life'.

## Action Research

By the nature of my research, I knew I would need to remain open to random thoughts and encounters, choosing paths intuitively as well as logically. It is important though to make the distinction between abandoning logic completely and striving for a balance of logic with intuition. In practice, that balance has often felt like a 'giddy line' (Browning, 1855: 160) and immersion in the swirling waters of deep ecology has at times meant letting the current take me until I could find a means of sense-making through writing. I needed to allow theory and practice to feed one another so that the creative piece would grow alongside its own critical commentary.

Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (2001:2) explain that action research is 'about working towards practical outcomes and also about creating new forms of understanding'. They describe it as being 'promiscuous in its sources of theoretical inspiration, drawing on pragmatic, democratic and constructionist theories as well as systems theory and complexity theory' (2001:3). This approach offers a way of working through personal as well as participative inquiry with a depth of contemplation particularly valuable to a writer and the flexibility to use non-traditional forms of research enabling the research to 'explore the intersection between academic topics' (Reason & Marshall, in Reason & Bradbury, 2001:417). Those involved in action research tend to refer to their research, ideas and presentations as inquiry, a term that allows for the participative and inquisitive nature of the research. Most importantly, action research leads the researcher to think of his or herself as part of the inquiry as opposed to studying or observing from the outside, just as deep ecology sees us as part of a vast, integrated system.

Reason (2009) prefers to define Action Research as an approach or an attitude to research rather than a methodology, adding that a number of methodologies are employed in its course. One such methodology is the use of cycles of action and reflection so that theory can be tried in practice and practice can in turn contribute towards theory.

Research may be analysed and expressed through any (or all) of four ways of 'knowing': experiential 'through encounter with a person, place or thing', presentational 'drawing on expressive forms of imagery ...', propositional 'through expression in informative statements' and practical 'through learning and knowing 'how to' do something' (Heron & Reason in Reason & Bradbury, 2001:183).

### **Freefall Writing**

Reason and Marshall (2001:417) point out that many students encounter problems in writing up their research. I have been no exception, becoming the author of many versions of this thesis before submission. The biggest challenge has been not so much to capture the wealth of ideas I've encountered and apply them to my writing but to express them in such a way that they keep faith with my original question yet remain free to evolve beyond my own research. The tools of freefall writing (Turner-Vesselago, 2013) provided sanity-saving ways of reaching deep into my consciousness, liberating the intuitive mind to work alongside the rational. Passages that started as ramblings led to greater clarity and, ultimately, this combination of action research and freefall writing has helped to prompt new questions, leaving me with a strangely fulfilling sense of open-ended, restless inquiry. To begin with I regarded freefall writing as a useful set of tools but soon the ideas became an essential part of my practice and part of the thesis itself.

Freefall writing is described by Barbara Turner-Vesselago as a way of writing that allows 'people to engage deeply with writing *by writing*' (2013:12). It is a practice that brings spontaneous experience into the moment of writing through following what Turner-Vesselago calls 'what comes up' without censorship or attention to technique. The 'balance between will and surrender' (2013:13) can be achieved later with the conscious application of more technical skills without affecting the depth of thinking released by the spontaneity of the initial writing. Most important for this thesis was the way this concept gives permission to the whole self (intuitive, emotional, sensuous and rational) to become involved in both the creative and the critical writing. One of Turner-Vesselago's (2013: 27-38)'five precepts' for freefall writing: 'go where the energy is' proved particularly valuable. She also describes this precept as 'go fearward'.

### **Three dragons and a Labyrinth**

The task of writing the critical element of my thesis led me into a labyrinth of fascinating, often complex ideas and then into a struggle with some personal dragons associated with style. Finally, three people guided me to freedom.

Andrew Melrose, my director of studies suggested that the only ideas needed in the critical element of my thesis were those relevant to the creative text, so I have stored the many others as ingredients for the discussions I hope to prompt now and in the future.

Still there were two dragons guarding the way forward<sup>4</sup>. On one side of the path stood a dragon concerned with failure to be 'academic' enough and on the other, one with a dread of writing something nobody would want to read. Eventually I asked myself what it is that I admire about the writing of a friend and colleague, Peter Reason. The answer was simple: it is informative and erudite, yet engages the reader in a genuine sense of inquiry. I decided to hold this combination lightly<sup>5</sup> as an aspiration for writing up my research. Both dragons relaxed immediately. It wasn't until they did that I saw that a third had been standing behind them all along, clutching a knot of taboos to his breast. This dragon was muttering that I shouldn't sound too loving of nature, too spiritual, too unscientific, too unconventional, say anything that could be written off as 'new-age', and it was frightened that at times I would state the obvious. I returned to Stephan Harding's captivating summary of life and the elements (2006: 86-104). If Harding, a scientist, can listen to a 'still, small voice' persuading him of the 'urgency of the task' then surely a creative writer can respond to his provocation to 'consider yourself a conspirator in the effort to find a new language for breathing life back into our experience of the Earth...' (2006:39). I must learn to walk with this dragon too.

So, in keeping with Professor Melrose's advice on focus and in negotiation with my newly befriended dragons, the critical element of this thesis tells the story of the writing of the novel. Mindful of William Torbert's (in Reason & Bradbury, 2001:251) observation that for inquiry to evolve it needs energy from 'our moment-to-moment experience of ourselves', the narrative is traced through my own life encounters with deep ecology and the practice of creative writing. Since reflection through freefall writing became so significant in this practice, I have included examples in the sections typed in italics, others are contained in the appendices.

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<sup>4</sup> I have imagined such problems as dragons since I was a child but it is probably unsurprising that Barbara Turner-Vesselago (2013:93) uses dragons to describe other problems common to writers. As a child who often had trouble sleeping, I would also imagine ways of befriending dragons or at least of better understanding them.

<sup>5</sup> I'm also indebted to Peter Reason for this expression.

## Walking

*Feet finding their own way not plodding but finding. In the moment before the ground touches the sole of your boot there is a space, a sensing of how it will feel: like the silence before the note that Daniel Barenboim talks about as being part of the note, part of the music. Soft thud or tap, lift and space and thud, a different thud this time, a different texture under your boot, the sound and the feeling one. The ground too is waiting for the foot, receives the weight and bounces back, sending waves through the soil, the rock, the roots so that everyone knows you are here. Bugs and beetles, snakes, lizards, frogs and rabbits know you are here; foxes, deer and ponies know you are here; lapwings, curlew and snipe, and from the sound of the rise and the space and the thud, they know who you are, what sort of creature, know whether to go or stay or freeze or listen, smell for more. If you walk here often enough they will know the walking song that is you, the rhythm of your step, of your armswing like a wingbeat, of your breath.*

*The rhythm soothes and rocks, seduces you into the land, takes you further, getting easier with each step, irons out the aches and the sore bits and lures you on, on over the next hill, around the next headland, down that path through the wood, just to see what is there and you don't want to turn back. Only the sole of your boot between you and the earth, bringing you closer, hushing your human drive to do anything but settle into walking through this land where things begin to find you that you have never seen or thought about before. First the bugs and the beetles are there, visible, waiting to be seen and to see. You avoid them on the path or stop to marvel at the shiny armour of the stag, the sharp tips to its antlers and the odd, wise way it moves towards the dead stump and you wonder what the world looks like from down there, so you lie down to try to see. An adder shins away, almost without sound, in fact you realise that it isn't the sound of the snake but of the heather as it receives the snake with a brush of its own brittle stems against one another.*

*On the bridge over the stream, a different thud, the thud of leather on sawn plank and the dull echo of wood over water, a comforting sound, it slows you, asks you to listen to the wind over the water and hear the rippling of the stream. And there, beneath the bridge in the redbrown shingle you see frogs mate, strangely tender amongst the waving weed. Early damselflies are the bluest, greenest, mesmerising, oily colours and you wish you didn't have to describe it as oil because it makes you think of*

*the traffic you can still hear from the distant road but oil is natural too and as you rest your hand on the rail of the bridge, which is warm from the sun, a demoiselle lands next to it and studies you through flying goggle eyes. You wonder what it makes of you and as you try to remember the name of its species, almost mouthing the Calopteryx word, you think it must have more sense than to be thinking only Homo sapiens of you.*

## Two

### Deep Questioning

The earliest conversation I can remember about writing and ecology was with the careers mistress at school. I explained that I wanted to become an ecologist, a writer or perhaps both. Her response struck me as ironic even then: "Well, there's no future in that!" she said. So I rambled through a succession of jobs before stepping onto a career ladder, climbing higher into management, until I found myself tapping on the glass ceiling that still separated women from the top of the airline in which I worked. Despite all of the 'busy-ness'; the companionship of my team; the size of my salary and the thrill of the working environment, I harboured a voice that refused to stop telling me that this wasn't it. This wasn't real life.

Harding (2006: 50-52) describes three interconnected senses of the word 'deep' in deep ecology, beginning with a profound sense of waking up that he terms 'deep experience'. Harding notices that for many this sense lurks beneath the surface of everyday existence until revealed by some shift in context. The accident that followed a period of particular restlessness in my working life created just such a shift. When the car I was driving became involved in a motorway pile-up, I had with me a chart on which I had drawn all the happiest circumstances and events of my life above the line of its progress, and all the least happy ones beneath it. I had illustrated the chart with little sketches in appropriate colours, noticing that all those elements I recalled as the brightest and most fulfilling were connected with the natural world, like-minded people or writing.

When a fireman greeted my return to consciousness with a gentle explanation that they were cutting me free, I had no idea that I was about to enter a period of deep questioning about the way in which I was living my life, which would lead to a conviction that it was time I listened to my heart as well as my head.

Many people talk of near death experiences as life-changing. For me, it was the feeling of being in the hands of something far greater than I, which had a spontaneous effect. I would describe it as an encounter. An encounter in some way with the whole of existence which, try as I might, I could not reconcile with the notion that humankind belong at the centre of everything. Certainly it caused me to feel curious about the nature of the whole but my curiosity was, and is, a state of not knowing, which turns up constant possibilities, thoughts

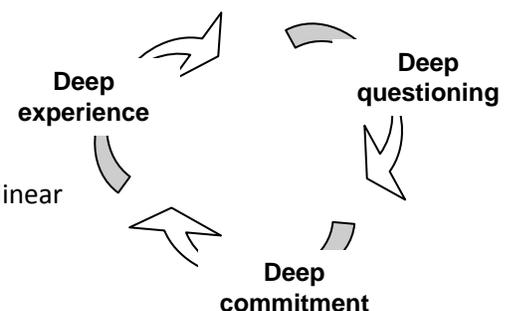
and surprises. Deep questioning took seed not as a desire to understand or explain but as an invocation of my desire to better connect with this natural, universal whole.

Deep questioning is the second of the interconnected senses described by Harding, which he regards as the assimilation of deep experience into how we live our lives. It wasn't so much that I was forced to rethink the way I was living; more that I suddenly had a different space in which to think. More than that, there were times when I couldn't 'think' but had to simply 'be': absorbing my surroundings, allowing my body to recover and letting go of the self-control I had always hung on to so obsessively that I habitually refused anaesthetic at the dentist.

To assist my recovery, my employers gave me what they thought would be a less demanding role, developing a combined approach to social and environmental strategy. Working with Dr Hugh Somerville, whose critical but understanding eye missed very little about the workings of my brain following the injuries incurred in the crash, proved a chance to explore the unease that had taken shape while I had been managing the company's market research and analysis team. I had become convinced that there was a great deal more to measuring success than collecting and dissecting quantifiable data. Hugh shared this conviction. He also shared his wisdom generously, never holding back information or ideas for his own aggrandisement. This was the sort of open collaboration, I realised, which would be needed by anyone who wanted to make a genuine contribution to a more sustainable way of life. I also discovered that, in our society, giving things away can be more complicated than taking a more commercial approach.

I soon discovered that I wasn't alone in distrusting the way in which industry, government or society viewed 'success'. I began to work with business leaders seeking ways of behaving more responsibly towards society and the environment, developing measures that balanced not only quality with quantity but also the rational with the intuitive, although I was yet to learn that Harding (2006:14) believes we must 'reconnect these two severed branches of our psyche' if we are to make any progress towards responding to environmental crisis.

The layers of my questioning deepened beyond my own life and, in keeping with Harding's (2006: 50-52) explanation of the 'deep' in deep ecology, the third interconnected sense, commitment, became more intense. It grew out of the deep questioning that followed deep experience, not as a single linear



process but as many overlapping cycles without a foreseeable end.

If asked to represent this now in pictorial form, I would try to draw something very like Abram's encounter with a myriad of spiders weaving webs in an intricate and multi-dimensional pattern, the whole of which may or may not be sensed or understood by each individual arachnid (Abram, 1997: 17-19).

As my commitment became more firmly embedded in environmental responsibility and strategy for climate change, I signed up for the MSc in Responsibility and Business Practice at University of Bath. Part of the programme was a week-long course on Deep Ecology at Schumacher College in Devon. It was the first time I had heard the term but I immediately realised that the distinction between 'the shallow and the deep' (Naess, 1973) went some way to explaining the confusion I had felt during my childhood about the way people spoke about the natural world: a confusion that had somehow become obscured by a layer of tarmac as I progressed into adulthood. It was at Schumacher, in a bar named 'The Edge of Chaos', that fellow student, Helena Kettleborough, said "I've been searching for stories for my children that embrace at least some of this and I just can't find any." I started writing that night after a walk in the woods near the college. Although the piece that forms the creative element of this thesis evolved from that conversation, the thinly-veiled sermon on human behaviour and species extinction I began that night was only the first of the revolutions of Harding's deep cycle in the time between then and now.

My idea was to raise awareness about species extinction by writing from the point of view of an endangered animal. I chose a dragon because I thought a creature associated with fantasy would allow me to imagine its point of view without inhibition and in turn my readers' minds would be freed from the distraction of 'factual' knowledge. The result was a story called 'The Green Dragon' about the last surviving family of dragons, in which all creatures, including dragons, displayed familiar human characteristics. I was trying to get close to what it would feel like to be denied the opportunity to live a natural life, to mate, to rear young and how it would be to have one's intrinsic value denied. It was years later that I read Paul Evans's advice to nature writers that 'It's difficult not to project ourselves onto nature, but we do wild animals a terrible disservice trying to make them honorary humans' (Evans, 2011).

The dragons' tale was interlaced with that of two humans: Rodney Ranchandani and Hera Abtalverryn. Their story was growing out of my increasing wish to connect with the 'whole' and the feeling of coming home that accompanied my interest in deep ecology.

Looking back, I see that their quest was infinite and worthy as the Arthurian knights: to find environmental salvation and spiritual truth. It was also a journey into wellbeing rather than a novel for children. I was drawing together the threads of all the things that had ever worried me as a child with all the things I had wished to see in the world.

I left my corporate role and struck out as a consultant in strategy for climate change, writing the dragon/human story in my spare time. For a while at least, life was a pleasing fusion of past and present. It is only now that I begin to understand that my original ambition, first scented at school, had thrown out a hook like a smell to a passing dog.

The court case that eventually followed my car accident was supposed to be routine. My compensation claim was handled by a solicitor who came as part of a package provided by the insurance company. She insisted that anything but an award for loss of earnings, loss of pension, reduced lifestyle and faculty would be 'woefully inadequate'. I argued that I didn't need so much. She argued that if I didn't go for a lot, I wouldn't get anything at all.

I doubt if Harding had such a court case in mind as the sort of deep experience he describes in *Animate Earth* (2006), or if Abram would see it as akin to the examples he gives (Abram, 1997: 11-29), and perhaps the similarity to Evans's (2011)'welcome to the world of nature writing' exists only in my mind: 'You're up to your knees in mud and weeds, getting bitten by things you can't identify, in a place that seems to grow more hostile by the minute...'. In court I found myself part of, or at least subject to, a system to which I felt little affinity. It seemed to have everything to do with money and nothing to do with wellbeing and it left me feeling dirty in a way that mud and weeds never have. When I was awarded a sum substantially less than the 'woefully inadequate' settlement that had been offered out of court, I couldn't have cared less. There was only one thing that I wanted: to withdraw from that system and find one that made more sense in a 'more than human world' (Abram, 1997). It meant that I had to manage with a lot less 'wealth' and that I could no longer fall back on what I had previously assumed to be the solid rock of society. During that period of withdrawal from all but my closest friends, wandering for hundreds of miles through the New Forest<sup>6</sup> with my dog, I experienced, once again, a different sort of consciousness. It was as if a veil was being drawn

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<sup>6</sup> The New Forest is rather an old one, named in 1079 by William the Conqueror. Although 'managed' by the Forestry Commission and the National Park Authority, it remains an area where one can walk for miles without being restrained by private land, fences or roads and wildlife has freedom to exist in as near a natural state as we might find in Southern England.

back from the world to allow me to see it as it really is: a way of seeing the world that was much closer to the way I had seen it as a child.

In many ways I remember that as a time of pure contentment. I walked, sailed, swam, reflected and wrote. Wet or dry, hot or cold, windy or still, the weather became an integral part of my life. I would be halted by the sight of a ladybird on a leaf, or sit for ages watching a dragonfly that had landed on my hand. I would fall asleep on the bank of a forest stream watched over by my dog, who was intuitively gentle and respectful towards wildlife. Other creatures seemed to know this and even deer would saunter by untroubled. Time took on a different meaning. My urge to change the world of business was superseded by a feeling that if we could become more alert to the lessons that nature offers in every minute in every hour of every day there would be little need for more. A simplistic notion, which might easily be called unrealistic, but as Satish Kumar points out:

Look at what realists have done for us. They have led us to war and climate change, poverty on an unimaginable scale, and wholesale ecological destruction. Half of humanity goes to bed hungry because of all the realistic leaders in the world. I tell people who call me 'unrealistic' to show me what their realism has done. (BBC, 2008)

It was during this time that I started to question much more seriously the way we write about nature and especially the way we write about nature for children. By now, the dragons in my story had been joined by other creatures: a pair of ospreys, a mountain hare, a black grouse, an otter, a merlin falcon and a rather garrulous bat. All spoke in voices that I had made up for them. The problem was that they had a lot more to do with the humans I knew than with the creatures I encountered out in the forest or even at home in the garden. They had even less resonance with the deep sense of interconnectedness that I had experienced after the car crash, at Schumacher College, in childhood and many times since; which I had set out to express. Once again, I was becoming intrigued with the way that animals communicate, use intuition, adapt and relate to their environment. My writing wasn't doing any of this justice.

I graduated from an MA in Creative and Critical Writing feeling more restless than ever about the role of writers in responding to global environmental crises and determined to experiment with weaving theory into practice. I started my post-graduate research with a strong wish to explore the human relationship with the environment. When a tutor insisted that the scope of this project was far too wide, I felt frustrated. By this time I had formed a habit of taking vexing questions out into the woods with me, allowing them to sit lightly in my

mind without gnawing at them. I wasn't actively looking for an answer but as I stood in a clearing, the words 'The Spell of the Sensuous' came into my mind. It was the title of a book I had been meaning to read for a long time.

It was Abram's challenge to writers in *The Spell of the Sensuous* that helped to focus my research (1997:93-136). Proposing that the development of written language has played a significant role in moving us further from a reciprocal experience with the natural world through detaching both writer and reader from its intimacy, Abram calls for an energetic response from writers:

For those of us who care for an earth not encompassed by machines, a world of textures, tastes, and sounds other than those that we have engineered, there can be no question of simply abandoning or turning away from all writing. Our task, rather, is that of *taking up* the written word, with all its potency, and patiently, carefully, writing language back into the land. (Abram, 1997:273)

For a children's writer this is a challenge indeed. Study almost any contemporary children's programme, video game or film and you will find the pace rapid, the characters impatient to move through the plot and the scene changes swift. This helter-skelter pace is echoed in many of the most successful books, with little room to pause, look, listen, sense and wonder. Yet, given the opportunity, a child's fascination for nature still holds the power to bind them. If the lived experience evoked by good storytelling, written and oral, might lure them beyond the screen of their TV, computer, tablet or phone into a place where they can touch, smell, see and feel the wonder for themselves, those opportunities would increase.

## Three

### Beyond Wonder

*'When people are interested in the "supernatural", they suffer from a remarkable blindness. They don't see the most mysterious thing of all – that the world exists.'*  
(Gaarder, 1997:119)

#### Propagation

If, when I was discussing my future with the careers mistress at school, I had read Rachel Carson's work, I would have been more certain of the absurdity of the response. A profound sense of wonder runs through all five of Carson's books but it is in *Silent Spring* (1963) that she used this most effectively. She used words to thread wonder and science into a story of loss and potential devastation, which became one of the most influential environmental books written in my lifetime<sup>7</sup>. Biographer Linda Lear (2000) explains that 'Embedded within all of Carson's writing was the view that human beings were but one part of nature distinguished primarily by their power to alter it, in some cases irreversibly'.

*Silent Spring* also inspired Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess to deepen his thinking about ecological crisis and means of resolution (Harding, 1997:15). Naess recalled that he had become absorbed in the 'diversity and richness' of the natural world by the age of four, (in Mercier & Silvar 1983: 209-26), developing a capacity for spending hours, days and years in contemplation with nature. His philosophical thinking grew alongside his intense relationship with Hallingskavert Mountain in Norway. Naess felt that the vastness of the mountains inspired an intuitive understanding of how our relationship with nature deepens if we are able to expand our sense of self to meld with the universal whole. Naess was no rambling romantic. As Harding (1997:15) explains, a great deal of Naess's work was done with 'Arctic storms threatening to blow off the roof of his cabin'. What Naess came to call his 'Ecosophy T' (after Tvergastein, the place where he constructed his cabin) was a personal philosophy, rooted in his belief that we need not only ecological science but ecological wisdom embodying our way of being, thinking and acting in the world.

*We teach our children to be strong. We want them to have all that we want and all that we think they want. At what point do they lose their sense of wonder at the life*

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<sup>7</sup> John F Kennedy's response was to appoint a committee to investigate and control the use of pesticides.

*force of the world? Recently I was asked to speak to children from three forest schools<sup>8</sup> as a local author. I had collected acorns and put them into a small wooden box studded with copper. I asked the children if they believed in magic and almost all said, "Yes". I asked them to come and take a piece of magic from the box. Each child selected an acorn carefully – some for perfection and some for unusual shape, colour or size - all held the acorn reverently until they returned to where they had been sitting on the floor. It was only then that one or two said, "This isn't magic, it's only an acorn." I showed them a picture of a mature tree of perhaps 200 or 300 years old and pointed to a slightly smaller one out in their playground. Nature's sleight of hand might seem slow in these days of technological wizardry but most understood the point. They were six years old, turning seven. How long until cynicism takes over? It is not long after this that we start to choose for them a different sort of story, the sort of story that we think reflects 'real life'; expecting them to shed wonder in favour of that which can be counted, analysed and explained. Love of nature is turned into conservation which in turn is converted into numbers.*

Re-reading *Silent Spring* at the beginning of my research not only renewed my energy for writing about ecology but made me imagine what might have happened if Carson had fulfilled her ambition to write for children, propagating the wonder she said she would like to give 'each child in the world ...a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life' (Carson 1965: 42).

Variations in the way we experience and act upon wonder in nature soon began to influence the two main characters in my experimental novel. Rodney and Hera each regard the natural world with awe but Rodney derives satisfaction from seeing examples of individual species, naming and recording them, while Hera is more inclined to feel wonder in them for the way they relate to one another and for their part in the whole of ecology. Rodney regards them from a somewhat detached position while Hera experiences a natural sense of kinship with other creatures and with places. Kinship can be a comforting word but I don't see this as a kinship solely giving comfort.

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<sup>8</sup> Forest School is an initiative where the Forestry Commission collaborates with schools in England and Wales to provide learning in a woodland setting.  
[http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/fr0112forestschooolsreport.pdf/\\$FILE/fr0112forestschooolsreport.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/fr0112forestschooolsreport.pdf/$FILE/fr0112forestschooolsreport.pdf)

It would be easy to analyse Hera's role in the story as a feminist one<sup>9</sup> and it is possible that I have been influenced in some way by earlier reading on gender and the environment in giving Hera the intuitive character and Rodney the rational. Hera and her mother, Caron do show aspects of a nurturing, natural figure. Rodney has lost his mother and my subconscious might have been at play here too, in a way that is somehow symbolic of a masculine disconnection with the Earth but it wasn't intentional. It was more important to the concept of deep ecology that Rodney should have the problem of coming to terms with the death of someone he loved.

So to write Hera's intimacy with the wolf<sup>10</sup> was difficult. I couldn't avoid or ignore the connotations of seduction. In the end, I decided that I didn't want to avoid them because to reconnect with nature is a kind of seduction, which tugs at our more primitive wild core just as any form of seduction will. The only way to write Hera's encounter with the wolf seemed to be one in which she had to face the fear and allow herself to be seduced by it. Seduction does not mean domination. The meeting between Hera and the wolf is a meeting of two beings, two parts of the same whole.

For Hera, even fear is part of her relationship with the world and it carries an innate sense of respect for each creature, each feature of the landscape, each natural element in its own right. It also carries an acceptance of death, not in a passive or fatalistic way but as an integral part of life itself.

## The Edge

Richard Louv (2006:123-131) alerts us to the possibility that children's experience of nature has become censored to exclude danger and fear, and although the facts available to children about ecology, nature and non-humans suggest access to a more comprehensive knowledge than ever before, their learning and ultimately their understanding is limited:

Such information is not a substitute for direct contact with nature, but this kind of knowledge does inspire a certain wonder. My hope is that such research will cause children to be more inclined to cultivate an understanding of their fellow creatures. Sure, romanticised closeness – say swimming with dolphins at an animal touchy-feely resort – may soften some of our loneliness as a species. On the other hand, nature is

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<sup>9</sup> I chose not to sail down a tributary of ecofeminism because I felt it would dilute rather than add to the core purpose of this thesis.

<sup>10</sup> The wolf-ghost in my story is a conscious reference to Aldo Leopold's (1989:130) account of watching a wolf die. Although the original account was first published in 1949 and predated the term 'deep ecology', it is a story often used by deep ecologists to illustrate deep experience leading to deep questioning and deep commitment.

not so soft and fuzzy. Fishing and hunting for example, or the way Nick Raven put meat on his table, are messy – to some, morally messy – but removing all traces of that experience from childhood does neither children nor nature any good. (2006:23-24)

We have so carefully protected ourselves from natural dangers that many people have ceased to associate them with 'real life'. I recognised that it was not enough for my characters to feel wonder at the beauty and complexity of nature. They must stray beyond this to encounter nature without censorship. It was in Wales that I was reminded of this possibility when I made the mistake of climbing a steep mountain path. It was at the top, when I should have been admiring the stunning view, that I realised that we had misunderstood the guiding notes for this walk. We had missed the point where we could have chosen a 'less challenging descent' and I would have to nurse my vertigo down the scree-covered slope that seemed to me as threatening as a sheer drop. A quick look at my mobile phone confirmed that there was no signal whatsoever. I couldn't call for help. I had to stay where I was or face the fear and danger. My story was already set in the Welsh mountains at this stage but I made a firm decision to deny my characters the safety net of mobile phones and satellite navigation when they ventured into the wild.

The truth is that no matter how safe we might feel in our own pocket of civilisation, the wild is never far away. Changes in the weather are one way in which we are reminded of this, especially at sea or in the mountains. Even with the standard of forecasting now available, it is easy to underestimate the speed and regional variation of these changes. Sudden intense cloud cover, impaired visibility, heavy rainfall and rapid increases in the flow of streams and rivers are integral to the character of the place. Not only do such changes add danger to the story, they contribute to an authentic 'lived experience' and of truly coming to know and be part of a place. From the perspective offered by deep ecology, the place itself plays a role in developing the worldview of the person who encounters it. In practice, this becomes more like shades in a spectrum, since each character sets out from within their own personal subjectivity (Abram, 1997: 31-36) and engages with the world in their own way.

Anthropologist Kay Milton (2002: 148) points out that a central assumption in the constructionist approach in social science, that each (human) individual is a product of their social experience, is not the whole story. She argues that what we learn about the world varies according to how we engage with it as individuals:

'This diversity of experience means that some people think of nature, or parts of nature, as composed of personal agents, while others see it as a complex of impersonal objects and mechanisms. It means that some people think of non-human animals as resources for human use, while others see them as non-human persons worthy of moral concern, or respect or punishment.'

Anyone reading this with a deep ecology worldview would probably be nodding until they arrive at the word 'punishment'. The assumption that we can decide when a non-human is right or wrong and determine 'punishment' would place the human species at the centre of the system, in charge or vested with special authority. From a perspective shaped by deep ecology punishing non-humans becomes unacceptable and even 'training' them for our own means becomes alien or at least questionable.

When Rodney accuses Hera of keeping some 'pretty exotic pets', she is surprised and makes it clear that these creatures share the same environment, part of which is her home. Even Lopez the dog 'just turned up one day' and decided to stay. None of the creatures is captive or controlled but part of an extended society to which Hera and her family belong. Hera does not see this as a radical approach; it is the one she has grown up with. It emanates from her experience. Both Rodney and Hera care about the natural world and want to protect it but not only is each character's wish to do this fed by a different way of seeing the world, their specific actions are directed by it too. More than that, the actions and reactions of my characters are the translation of my own (the writer's) spontaneous experience, evolved through memory (Van Manan, 1990: 114) into the act of imagining and expression through the written word. It is a continuous and very intense process, at the same time conscious and intuitive, which can only be achieved through immersion in place, worldview and character.

Naess's often expressed belief that each individual should develop their own 'ecosophy' encourages followers of the deep ecology movement to find their own interpretation of the platform<sup>11</sup> proposed by Naess and Sessions (1985) as a 'sort of filter for the deep questioning process' (Harding, 1997:17). It was in recognition of the many dilemmas faced by anyone setting out to live their way into a deep ecology worldview that I chose to place my story in the present. Tempting as it was to take this into realms of urban gangs, drug related crime and street life, in this novel I opted to stay closer to the worlds I know and love.

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<sup>11</sup> This and a later version devised by Stephan Harding with his students at Schumacher College is included in appendix (i)

Richard Kerridge's (2013) idea that the concept of 'New Nature Writing'<sup>12</sup> rises from the edges between built and natural environments helped to confirm my feeling that this was a good place to challenge the accepted view of 'real life' in our time.

In Wales, the nearness of the mountains to urban settlements provides just such an edge, not only between environments but also between individual experiences of the environment and different ways of engaging with it. Rodney's former life in Chennai where the edges are even sharper - between a way of life being shaped by technology and a way of life driven by survival - gives the potential for further paradox. I wanted to place him in a position where he is more likely to find that he is straddling worldviews in some sense, even if it isn't always consciously. As a newcomer, Rodney is also likely to pay more attention to his environment so that a sense of wonder comes from its unfamiliarity to compare with the sense of wonder that Hera experiences as part of belonging to a place all her life.

### **Connection and contrast**

There is a quality of knowing that goes with experiencing change with a place. Wonder felt as part of 'deep experience' carries more intimacy, more reciprocity (Abram, 1997: 68) than that experienced vicariously through the screens and sound systems of computers, televisions and cinemas. Growing older as a tree's trunk thickens and its branches spread; welcoming migratory birds each year and seeing them gather for their long journey at the end of their visit; splashing in a puddle that comes and grows with the rain then dries to mud, moss and grass until the next hard shower. With our ability to travel more easily, to communicate with one another without going outdoors, comes a distance. For a child, bundled into the car after breakfast over facebook conversations and driven to school, there is little chance to notice that the house martins have left for Africa; that the fieldfares have arrived to pluck the berries from the mountain ash. Even if they notice if the weather is wet or dry, they are unlikely to sense that the wind has veered from south to west or that the acorns are plentiful this year or that deep in the woods, an oak has fallen where it stood for two, perhaps three hundred years. They do not feel connected to these events.

It is this deep sense of connection as well as wonder that I am looking for in my writing: beyond 'the specific sensuous detail' (Turner-Vesselago, 2013:42-47) that lures the reader into

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Kerridge was speaking at Café Ecologique, Bath, 8 Mar 2013. 'The New Nature Writing' is also the subject of *Granta* 102 (2008)

living the experience, it is the expression of both intimacy and estrangement, the moments of connection and the moments of confusion, the facts and the feelings. It was Brian Keenan's description of a bowl of fruit unexpectedly delivered to his solitary, grey-plastered cell (1993: 61-70) that first convinced me of the power of contrast in evoking wonder and creating a deep sense of loss. He may not have been writing about ecology but I found this a lesson so strong that it screams to be included here. I experimented with this in a story called *The Black Box*, evoking the magic of nature by removing all natural features from the setting, giving only glimpses of what had existed before through the contents of a box. I wanted to use contrast more subtly in *In Truth There Be Dragons*, moving through degrees of connection with the natural world. I also wanted to express deep ecology from more than one point of view; showing it as a parallel in the contemporary world rather than an imagined utopia or a concept that resides in another time or another culture.

This meant that my story needed to embrace the day to day world of getting up and going to school, of growing up and making friends in a new place, of playing games and coming to terms with the way people behave. I'm conscious that this also meant giving up some of the ideas I had about writing in a distinctively different way and about hooking the reader straight into the world of deep ecology. These are ideas I would still like to put in practice but they are for the next experiment. For this novel, I decided to draw out just a few of the threads of deep ecology and work with those: the development of a stronger sense of connection with the natural world as reality and the reconnection of logic with intuition. The style of writing would still be a key issue but instead of looking for it to stand out for its own sake, I've sought to write the ideas into the story. In the practice of writing, I set out to notice when I was participating fully in the relationship between me, the place, the characters and my writing, and when I had withdrawn into my assumptions about what kind of book might fit the PhD bill or be accepted by a publisher.

### **Participation**

Abram is specific that we need to find a way of thinking and speaking more akin to oral than written storytelling: 'faithful not to the written record but to the sensuous world itself, and to the other bodies or beings that surround us.' (Abram, 1997:265). He points to the presence of the teller of the oral story within the story whose mind, body and spirit 'live' the story to the audience (in Taylor & Kaplan, 2005:1602) and this in part was my motivation for turning to

Action Research as an approach to my research, in that it incites the researcher to leave the role of detached observer and become an active participant. As Reason (2008:4) discovers in his own inquiry into participation in writing: ‘... the mood of participation shifts from control to participation (Goodwin, 1999), from focussed awareness and conscious purpose (Bateson, 1972) to entering the cycle of emergence, shifting attention to the heart of the interaction, dwelling in the in-between.’ It is spontaneous experiences of a spaciousness of mind, which are focussed yet less controlled, purposeful yet ready to dwell in the ‘in-between’, that have become my deepest sources of learning.

To write in such a way as to encourage lively exploration in the mind of the reader, the sense of inquiry must remain alive in the mind of the writer. In *Song of the Earth*, Jonathan Bate (2001) charts the development of ecocriticism and makes the case for the written word in environmentalism and the relationship between ‘humankind and the natural world’. Having said that ‘the business of literature is to work on the consciousness’ (2001: 24), Bate later explains that ‘the mimetic approach has a way of sliding into a didactic one’ (2001:69), using the analogies of playground and classroom to illustrate the contrasting approaches. I knew from the moment that I began to criticise my own work and to participate in it more fully, that it was in the playground that I wanted it to settle. It became clear that this meant more than simply placing my research in the creative text and using the voices of the characters to play out the arguments. Without wishing to polarise the two main characters, Rodney and Hera, I decided that the best way to play with the ideas was to juxtapose aspects of different worldviews, with Rodney taking up a more familiar, logical worldview and Hera one that leans much further toward deep ecology and participation in the ‘more than human’ world.

If a door to the classroom opens (consciously) into the playground, it is in my wish to show the creative potential of interplay between logic with intuition. I found the seed for Rodney’s character in a man with whom I used to work in corporate life. He was a wise counsellor and a wizard with data who somehow hung onto a childlike determination to uncover the truth while fielding the many arrows attracted by the role of messenger. Often his quests for quantitative measures and his fondness for logic caused heated discussion but when we listened to one another, we could tell a story that would capture almost anyone’s attention. Hera’s genes are gathered from many encounters, not least with Helena Kettleborough, whose question first prompted me to write fiction for children and whose daughter, Nora (in Reason & Newman, 2013:157) describes what it is like to be brought up in a

different worldview, where 'spiders were as welcome in our kitchen as any guest', 'the barnacles were our cousins' and the universe could be encountered in a tadpole in the back garden.

I introduced the red kites first as a species that would interest Rodney because they had been lost from the area and reintroduced. As the story progressed they became a symbol to which he is reluctantly drawn and come to represent a sort of continuity from one place (India) to another (Wales) as well as from death to life; a sign of nature's spontaneous intervention that he cannot explain. They are instrumental in bringing Rodney and Hera together so that their intuition and logic have a chance to work hand in hand.

### **From wonder to ontology**

Naess's insistence that deep ecology is not a theory but a 'worldview' and a 'movement' emphasised his belief that the concept should remain dynamic, evolving through individual and collective experience, questioning and commitment. It would be easy to assume that such a flexible approach was inchoate or lacking in critical analysis. Naess's work may have grown out of a sense of wonder, which never seemed to wane, but it also shows the intensity with which the ideas were explored in order to move them beyond theory. Key to this is the process by which 'self-realisation' might be achieved, where the sense of self is expanded to embrace a greater whole and becomes so deep rooted that to respect, value and care for the environment is not a duty but an intrinsic way of being in the world. It is no longer shaped by personal ego but by the 'ecological self'.

Naess makes a connection between this way of behaving and Kant's distinction between moral and beautiful actions, arguing that the human force of inclination, that is the inclination to act beautifully is 'tremendously bigger' than the force of feeling one should act morally (Naess in Sessions, 1995:82). To be brutal, it is possible to wonder at depictions of the natural world on the television then switch off the set, perhaps to enjoy a meal that involved killing endangered or badly treated animals and plants grown using harmful chemicals, eaten from a table made from wood that was once a living part of a fatally depleted rain forest. Although wonder is often the feeling invoked by deep experience, it is the progression through deep questioning to deep commitment that will lead to a change in behaviour. Naess describes this as 'ontology rather than ethics' (in Sessions, 1995:88). As Rodney and Hera will discover,

this is the fundamental difference between the way that Eustace is inspired to use his imagination and the way Morley Dreadman feels driven to use his talents.

In following environmentalists' call for a new story, I was uncertain whether to include a villain. Conflict is widely accepted as an essential ingredient for telling a good story but what about Le Guin's (in Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996:149-154) inference that we should throw over the 'killer story' for one that helps us to envision a more peaceful, collaborative, connected world? The inclusion of a villain also indicates the presence of a right and a wrong, which was something I was keen to avoid in favour of the context of inquiry. The character of Morley had survived from the early versions of the story where he had been a hunter of dragons who stole osprey eggs for their monetary value. Now I decided to rewrite his character to add mystery to his motivation and an alter ego for Eustace evolved, which I hoped would help to illustrate Naess's ideas about ontology. Eustace and Morley come from similar backgrounds, both are quite brilliant in their field but Eustace's vision of success is a collaborative approach to solving global energy problems by learning from nature. Morley is driven by a competitive, financial success more akin to the one my careers mistress probably had in mind when she advised me that there was no future in either ecology or writing.

## Four

### Ways of Seeing

#### Real life

The inclusion of the words 'real life'<sup>13</sup> in the title of this thesis sprang from a certain amount of irony. Whilst working with organisations on strategy for climate change, I found that a regretful refrain followed every workshop that went something like: "That was great – what a shame we have to go back to real life now". The words varied but for teams working in the public or private sector, the meaning was similar: "It would be lovely to care about the environment but we don't have that luxury" or "If we can't show quantifiable results, we can't justify it." Except in a very few cases, people could not see the possibility of a measurement beyond money. The 'triple bottom line' (Elkington, 1999:xiii) of society, environment and economy that had made absolute sense during the workshop seldom survived the return to the office.

Naess (1990:65-6) considers this problem in the context of *gestalts*, using an example of the difference in perceived reality between a conservationist and a developer when looking at a forest: the one seeing the heart of the wood as part of a constellation of *gestalts* and the other a collection of trees, which would still be a collection of trees with a road running through them. In his example, Naess explains that there is a difference in '*ontology* rather than *ethics*' because conservationists and developers may share ethical prescriptions but use them in totally different ways because of the way they see and experience reality (Naess, 1990:66).

I experienced my own version when a favourite stand of birch trees was felled by the Forestry Commission. Afterwards the thickest parts of their trunks were cut into short sections with a chainsaw and stacked. The Forestry men then set fire to the top of each tree, using petrol, and stood waiting for it to burn the slimmer branches and the brash. I wandered over to talk to them and asked gently why it was their habit to do this.

When they gave me a 'get real' look, I realised that the scene was part of a different reality for me.

"Who's going to want it?" they said.

I was looking at a place that had been sacred to me because it was where I used to go to seek strength or give thanks, but in the burning, I saw not so much desecration as waste. In the brash I saw habitat for bugs and beetles, cover for small mammals and reptiles, the

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<sup>13</sup> Although the temptation to wander through the many available works on concepts of reality is alluring, I've resisted it in favour of the main points of the thesis.

material to make wreaths (it was just before Christmas), kindling and fuel for biomass heating. Petrol was being used to burn something valuable and carbon was being released into the atmosphere unnecessarily. I remembered the faces of the fox cubs I had seen popping out of tidy holes around the birch roots last spring and the many times I had found ponies sheltering there during storms. From our conversation, I could see that the men's view encompassed a whole forest too but it was a commercial one in which brash commanded no price and their managers' anxiety about injury claims would prevent local people collecting it. Later a local coppice worker also explained, "They have this strange idea that birch is a weed." Nevertheless, I chatted with them for a while, sensing that we were almost talking a different language. Yet, when I walked that way the following day, I was interested to see that they had left the remaining brash. Much of it is still there now.

In the creative element of my thesis, Rodney is preoccupied with what he sees as a 'sphere of real facts...narrowed down to that of mechanically interpreted mathematical physics' (Naess, 1990:65-6). Although intrigued by Hera's approach to the world, to admit any connection or similarity in thinking would be to jeopardise his belonging to the commonly accepted version of the 'real world' and risk alienation. Coming from a very different background and culture, he is already regarded as 'other' and even when he finds popularity in his new social group, he is only walking the parapet, as the 'initiation' instigated by the rugby captain reminds him. Strangely attracted to Hera's world, he responds to her reluctantly, in such a way that might simply be because both children are seen as being in some way 'other'. Hence the opportunity to 'think together' (Isaacs, 1999) arises out of a sense that they are both on the outer edge of their social group rather than a sense of sharing a worldview. Nevertheless I was anxious that this should play out as naturally as possible, along the lines of William Isaacs's notion of 'an ecology of thought' (1999:301) instead of one character teaching the other the errors of their ways. To allow any of my characters to preach deep ecology would be out of rhythm with Naess's notion of ontology rather than ethics, just as I feel sure that if I had told the forestry workers in my example that what they were doing was 'wrong', they would have remained secure in their existing reality without catching a glimpse of a different one and all of the brash would have been burnt. Here the affinity between Naess's ontological approach and the skills of storytelling, in particular the maxim of 'show not tell' is also clear.

### **The inchoate and the strange**

In my former career, I would frequently use stories to support a business case or illustrate the qualitative aspects of research. Finding myself in a battle between sets of data, skilfully presented to give credence to each of the opposing side's arguments, it was only by adding a qualitative dimension that a complete picture would suddenly become apparent. Data might be used to make a justifiable decision but it was only when all of the stakeholders could be heard that a really effective strategy could be discussed. Bringing their stories together took the economic imperatives usually presented as 'real life' and relocated them in a world recognised, if not necessarily welcomed, by all. Often the most that could be hoped for was an acceptance that one stakeholder's reality was quite different from another's. This may not have paved the way to agreement but it might at least opened the possibility of understanding and compromise.

Naess's vision that there would be as many 'ecosophies' as there would be deep ecologists (1990:37) makes sense in the light of the importance of each individual reaching a point of self-realisation which will mean that their actions are genuinely and thoroughly thought through rather than simply obeying laws or applying a set of ethics.

Educational philosopher Michael Bonnet (2002) by comparison 'invites us to consider that sustainability can itself be conceived as a frame of mind—and one which is of the essence of human being and, therefore, of human well-being' as opposed to being taught or forced through as policy. Bonnett goes on to outline a 'kind of metaphysical underpinning' of a 'poetic apprehension' which he believes is not currently allowed to show itself, 'where the inchoate and the strange (...) are acknowledged and we participate in things in their many-sidedness and intrinsic mystery', having earlier stressed that 'poetic should not be equated with passive' (Bonnet, 2002:2).

When Hera starts to talk about dragons, the relationship between her concept of reality and Rodney's is stretched to the extreme. Hera's reality is one in which dragons are possible because her experience of life tends towards the metaphysical, a constant source of wonder. For her, subjectivity and objectivity are bound up together; she does not expect to be able to explain everything she sees or feels in Rodney's terms. Rodney's discovery of a book in the library at 'Ty Talfryn' cataloguing dragons as if they actually exist adds not only to his embarrassment but also to his irritation, giving him another reason to question the view of the world that he accepts as reality.

Initially when I took the dragons out of the story, I was driven by a similar embarrassment or fear that I would be categorised as just another hopeful children's author writing about dragons. I wanted to be taken seriously and I wanted the story to appeal to people (like Rodney) who might reject anything that hinted of fantasy, new-ageism or just being daft. Nevertheless, the dragons kept finding their way back into the story and I now understand that the dragons were not only challenging Rodney, they were also challenging my intention to bring deep ecology out of the fictional realms of history, fantasy and science fiction into that very interpretation of real life that I had begun to question.

I also understand that the dragons' challenge to Rodney takes a number of guises: firstly they disrupt his sense of the space between the real and the ridiculous; secondly they force him to examine the dragon within; the untamed, unruly self that may not conform to his own accepted set of rules or anyone else's and thirdly they dare him to befriend them. Thinking back to my teens, I remember a constant struggle between the need to belong and the instinct to rebel. My scholarship to a fee-paying school was a daily source of worry that fellow pupils, teachers or parents would notice that I shouldn't really be there. The questions I wanted to ask about stripping slopes of trees, damming rivers and painting vast swathes of land black and grey instead of green, brown and all the colours of the wildflowers, were usually smothered by answers that clarified only my ignorance about the real world. Nobody was trying to squash or brainwash me, they were just doing their best to teach me how to get on in the society they took for granted.

By placing Rodney and Hera in the present, I have placed them in a strange time: one where the majority of us are carrying on much the same, only occasionally stopping to worry about our impact on the future. Everyday life in the United Kingdom, for instance, seldom involves decisions made consciously in the light of climate change, species extinction, resource depletion, habitat loss or the intrinsic value of non-humans. Instead of following a pattern of storytelling that helps us imagine dystopian futures or post apocalyptic life, I wanted to write this moment in history into the everyday - one small and simple aspect of a reality seen by writers involved with the Dark Mountain Project (Kingsworth & Hine, 2010:3):

We are facing the end of the world as we know it; but this is not the same as the end of the world full stop. The decline or stuttering collapse of a civilisation, a way of life, is not the same as an apocalypse. It is simply a reality of history. The Dark Mountain Project, in other words, is not concerned with fantasising about catastrophe. It is concerned with being honest about reality; something which most of us, as human beings, find painfully hard.

The reality is that, despite a huge increase in awareness about the human contribution to global climate change, we have not moved very far in the eleven years since Bill McKibben (2003) likened addressing the issues to inhabiting a dream where one's increasingly desperate warnings to someone standing in the path of an oncoming train cannot be heard. The truth remains that few people have really engaged with the problems and that immediate economic considerations still take priority in decision making at all levels from individual consumers to governmental policymakers. In everyday conversation, I often find myself feeling that we are trying to use the same jigsaw pieces yet see a different picture on the box.

The map left to Rodney by his Uncle Eustace serves as a simple illustration that there is more than one way of seeing the world. Rodney sees it as a path to a lake in the mountains. Hera sees it as a tunnel to a tidal pool. Both are real interpretations of the map but only one will lead to what they are looking for, nevertheless each path will lead to a greater understanding of one another. In the end, the truth will stretch both characters' assumptions about reality and purpose. What they find isn't exactly what either of them had imagined.

It transpires that Eustace composed a set of clues that would be difficult to follow from just one way of seeing the world, intending that Rodney would need to engage with Hera in order to follow them. In setting the clues, it seems that Eustace also had Morley in mind, on the one hand distracting him with false trails and on the other causing Rodney and Hera to engage in some way with Morley too. Morley represents danger in the archetypal sense to both Hera and Rodney as a form of 'shadow' (Booker, 2004: 178) as well as a physical danger of a very human kind. When in the mountains, it is Morley who proves the greatest danger to each of them rather than the wildness of the natural world. But Morley's worst threat is his challenge to Hera's worldview so that she has to face a truth that I have found most difficult in finding my way to an 'ecosophy': if we regard ourselves as part of one whole, we also have to accept our deep-rooted connection with those whose behaviour we disagree with, fear or abhor. We cannot pick and choose. It is here that Hera's long experience of dealing with a common attitude that people with an idealistic worldview are dreamers and can be manipulated easily comes into play. She has already been through the testing field of the school playground.

Joanna Macy (in Reason & Newman, 2013:6-8) calls upon us to 'act our age', thinking of ourselves as part of an ancient universe in order to speak with confidence and authority for

the wellbeing of the Earth. With this as a standpoint, Hera has no difficulty in rebutting Morley's efforts to manipulate her using her own ideals: it is the question of how to treat him as a fellow creature that gives her difficulty. This could be interpreted as another example of the 'deep questioning', emanating from 'deep experience' as described by deep ecologists such as Harding. In the novel, Dan's succinct advice that 'you can't shake a shadow' suggests that Hera and Rodney will always have to ask these questions of themselves and their relationships with others. Morley is only one manifestation.

By the end of the story, Rodney is finding his own versions of two more of Macy's guidelines (2013:6-8) to 'keep us going as best we can, with simple faith in the goodness of life': 'don't be afraid of the dark', learning to be honest with ourselves and others over our true feelings about the difficulties and uncertainties we face, and 'link up with others' in order to make our individual contribution more achievable and more powerful. To link up with others demands letting go of some of the control that Rodney has built up to cope with life in Chennai and then in Wales, especially in learning to deal with things he cannot explain through logic alone.

### **Life-worlds**

Abram (1997:33) points out that even a scientist who seeks to become an objective spectator cannot cease to live in the world where he or she is subject to spontaneous lived experience. Here he enters the territory of that which is difficult to explain, nudging the reader further towards a blend of logic and intuition that echoes Harding's call to reunite the two.

Thus the living world – this ambiguous realm that we experience in anger and joy, in grief and in love- is both the soil in which all our sciences are rooted and the rich humus into which their results ultimately return, whether as nutrients or as poisons. Our spontaneous experience of the world, charged with subjective, emotional and intuitive content, remains the vital and dark ground of our objectivity. (1997:34)

I notice how his use of natural images draws me to what he says and wonder how that would be for someone more at home in the technological environment of science than the natural world. He suggests an approach less mechanical than the one he believes scientists have come to take, where we experience a sense of self beyond the 'body we have been taught to see and even to feel, very different, finally, from the complex machine whose broken parts or stuck systems are diagnosed by our medical doctors and "repaired" by our medical technologies' (1997:46). The scene in my novel in which the bus breaks down on the way home

from school is, I think, partially attributable to my reading of *The Machine in the Garden* (Marx, 1964) and in particular to Leo Marx's observation (1964:373) that in the work of many canonical American writers (such as Thoreau, Emerson, Hawthorne, Adams and later Carson) a machine appears to (either real or symbolic) intrude into the pastoral. The scene appeared in my subconscious and it was only later that I analysed it as a reversal of this symbolism; influenced by Abram's suggestions. The bus represents a mechanism that Rodney understands so that when it breaks down, it not only liberates him from his promise to stay within the village but also propels him into a world of things he does not understand. Ultimately it leads to the formation of a closer friendship with Hera. Once again, Rodney's encounter with the natural world becomes a lived experience, challenging his orderly concepts of the world with its richness and its ambiguity. There is an element of seduction about the way he is led away from the bus until the field of control is diminished and he is free to explore.

It is now that Rodney begins to notice that there is more to experiencing the world than the one directional reaction of observer to observed. When Dan gives him a small piece of carved coal, he feels that as he touches it, it also touches him. To touch becomes to be touched. To see becomes to be seen. This is not a phenomenon he takes readily to and the feeling is rejected until later, when he turns to the little sculpture for strength to help him overcome his claustrophobia in the ancient tunnel between church and cave.

Harding (2006:47) describes Abram as seeking in his writing 'to draw readers back to the simple experience of their own corporeality, coaxing them to notice the ongoing, improvisational way that their animal senses spontaneously respond to the sensuous surroundings'. In the course of this, Abram (1997: 40-72) draws upon both Edmund Husserl's and Maurice Merleau Ponty's work and ideas expressed as phenomenology to explore the sensorial and the reciprocal nature of experience, not as a way of seeking 'to explain the world' but 'to describe as closely as possible the way the world makes itself evident to awareness, the way things first arise in our direct, sensorial experience' (1997:40).

Abram also develops philosophical ideas in relation to ecology from Husserl's concepts of intersubjectivity and the 'life-world', thus setting yet more challenges for a writer to give voice to other ways of seeing the natural world through sensing and experiencing it in its many layers. The intersubjective world of life, the 'life-world' or 'lebenswelt' as Abram explains it is the 'world of our immediately lived experience, as we live it, prior to all our thoughts about it...reality as it engages us before being analyzed by all our theories and our science' (1997:40).

This too, then, is a letting go of control, a relinquishing of the feeling that we are central to all around us. To set out to do this is to be constantly aware of when we imprint our learnt 'truths' upon the world and to resist analysing all that we see, or at least to suspend that analysis to see what comes up before we do. Abram is convinced that when we try to explain the life-world, we overlook our own participation within it; therefore in 'striving to represent the world' we 'forfeit its direct presence'. This is a conundrum that has run through my thoughts about writing since the deep ecology course at Schumacher College and I know it is one that preoccupies many fellow writers attempting to breathe new life into their expression of the natural world. The very act of writing seems to bring with it some analysis, if only by comparison or the invocation of memory. One of my own attempts at bringing the reciprocity of entering a wood into my writing resulted in the following freefall passage:

*For some time I've been trying to work out how to write about that moment when you become part of a place, a wood, a valley, a moor – a wood in particular and it seems to me a very important part of my inquiry because it is to me the nub of that question Abram asks of writers – to write the written back into the land. It is a reconnection. So the moment I am trying to write about is the one where suddenly you enter the wood with all your senses, it is more than the instant feeling that you are looking at it with fresh eyes, it is hearing, seeing, feeling and more. It is the reality of the wood, a reality not far away from yet different to the faint hum and roar of traffic from the main road or the engines of a jet flying overhead. And just as Abram and Harding suggest, it often comes spontaneously, not when you are looking for it or have gone out to try to experience it or describe it.*

*Today I was walking along a wide, level path through the woods, one of those that in the New Forest we call a 'ride'. I became aware of a small group of crows in conversation at the top of an oak tree and started to think about the layers of their world. They were as secure perched on these flimsy looking twigs as they are when they have their feet spread firmly on the ground. I've long been fascinated by crow society and the way they gather in communication on the moor, especially in the morning and the evenings. I love to see them roost and hear the lift of their wings as they take flight as one body when I walk beneath their trees. Once they came to fly around me and I felt as if I would be whirled up with them as if part of one body. Occasionally, I've felt as if they've included me in whatever they are discussing, without much hope of a response but as if they are determined to give it a try. Perhaps they would like me to answer for the whole of mankind, I sometimes think, but that is my projection.*

*So today, I listened to their conversation, to the different notes and tones they use – the nasal ones, the throaty ones and the rumbles from somewhere deeper in their chests, all orchestrated in the way they dip and tuck their heads. The body language is clearly significant too. And as I stood there watching, they were nodding towards me, speaking to each other but also to me as if expecting a response. When I turned back to the path, the wood had taken on a different nature, a different 'self' and it was as if not only was*

*I seeing it differently but as if it was revealing itself to me. It made me think of the reciprocity that Abram talks about. I open myself to the possibility of the crow's conversation and the wood opens itself to the possibility of me. Now I begin to see things I might not have otherwise noticed: a pony mooching between trees near the edge of the moor, a soft shift among the beeches becomes a fallow deer unperturbed by my presence, a pair of blackbirds fly low across my path. The moss is greener, deeper and I see the detail in the fungi growing on a decaying stump. The traffic's hum recedes and becomes irrelevant to this world. I walk back down to the river, thinking about how preoccupied I became with concepts of scale when I was writing 'The Black Box' and how I would see a river delta in the rivulets of a flooded path and a world in a fallen tree. I would imagine life worlds from the ground up and from the air down and life became all the more alive. It made me think about the astronauts and their wonder at our planet seen from space and Sagan's 'pale blue dot'<sup>14</sup>*

Spontaneous perceptions of layers and of scale seem important here, as if to add more depth and dimension to the experience. Abram's (1997: 41-2) view that if, as Husserl's work seems to suggest, the life-world is many layered and that beneath these layers exists a 'vast and continually overlooked dimension' exposes a rich and barely tapped seam for writers. It is not a seam of fantasy or of science fiction but it is one that demands all the power of the human imagination. It is a dimension of reality that I often regard as similar to Hugh Everett's (1957) quantum theory of many worlds because we are walking through these layers in every day of our lives, yet seldom experience them fully. Another way to imagine this is similar to the 'phase space' of complexity (Gribbin, 2004: 44) is portrayed as a multi-dimensional landscape with its undulating patterns of cause and effect.

There is another approach, which is often discussed alongside deep ecology, put forward by Rupert Sheldrake. Morphic resonance is founded in the same territory as Jung's concept of 'collective unconscious' (Sheldrake, 1997) but Sheldrake's hypothesis extends the idea of a collective human memory to a similar concept operating throughout the universe; a collective memory upon which humans and non-humans draw unknowingly and that also enables ideas to occur simultaneously in places that are not connected by any conscious means. This would, he argues help to explain incidents such as telepathy and other phenomena currently associated with the paranormal rather than the normal.

As a scientist, Sheldrake appears to have felt somewhat confined by the conventions of his profession (Blackmore, 2009) and sought a less fettered, wider view of living things. Yet he

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<sup>14</sup> To use Harvard referencing in this piece of freefall writing seemed incongruous so I have substituted a footnote. Carl Sagan (2011:5-9) describes Earth's image from space as a pale blue dot and 'a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena' In Carl Sagan's and Ann Druyan's (2011) *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space*, NewYork: Random House Publishing.

set about to prove the ideas he had developed intuitively through more conventionally scientific means, using quantifiable measures. These attempts to prove ideas developed intuitively through conventional measures have largely been inconclusive and in this I believe he shares a problem with the writer who sets out consciously to write natural phenomena into 'real life'. The conscious act of trying to create the conditions for intuition to thrive will often destroy the intuitive nature of the moment. For example, if I set out to write the world in a wholly connected, participatory way, I immediately set myself apart and make the intuitive moment an object of study instead of a part of the subject. This is the stuff of headaches!

To avoid not only the headaches but also the likelihood of overly self-conscious writing or laboured writing there must be some sense of letting go of the individual self; a movement towards Naess's notion of self-realisation and a genuine way of being from which the writing arises. In practice, this will happen in a variety of ways and circumstances and the result will be different each time. Although certain patterns become evident, for example, that sense of 'letting go' echoes my experience of becoming part of a wood, a place, a gathering of crows – it is always the moment that I stop striving to do or be something in that place or group, the moment that I let my mind empty of the editorial voice, that it happens. It is as if something else, this greater entity, (by which I am not necessarily inferring a god or spirit but simply the sense of a complex whole), finds the space I have made in my otherwise too cluttered mind. It is writing from this space that interests me in relation to deep ecology. In writing this, I notice my finger hovering over the delete key in response to an editorial voice concerned that it is too 'whacky', too subjective, too ethereal to be included.

I find it interesting that a first year creative writing student, the writer of one of the most vivid expressions of both the sense of belonging to a whole and of the human division from it that I have read, produced this piece as a result of my suggestion that he should write the thing that he was not writing because he had been, perhaps for some time, rejecting it as too silly or too unconventional. It begins:

We awake. A world appears, a vista of dazzling hues and patterns, and we are one. We feel every movement, every sight, every fear, every instinct. Innumerable voices speaking as one. We rustle in the breeze. We drop to the ground and secure ourselves. We crease underfoot. We fall from above in our trillions. We soar through the heavens and pounce upon ourselves, rending our flesh and struggling vainly to escape our grasp. (McConville, 2012)

The use of language here is evocative and unusual. Its cryptic nature gives the reader an immediate task of trying to decide through whose point of view they are experiencing this world. Almost reminiscent of a bardic riddle, this way of engaging the reader in a very different viewpoint is effective as well as enjoyable in a short piece but it would be difficult to sustain throughout a novel because the very strangeness that attracts attention, becomes a distraction.

Another student set out consciously to express Gaia in the sense of both Lovelock's (1979) theory and of subsequent interpretations of the Earth as not only a self-regulating system but also as a sentient being. Her creative piece is an expression of the tension between the intense feeling of belonging to one way of experiencing the world (Gaia as a sentient being) and the feeling of belonging to a family who do not share the same connection with the Earth:

The earth groaned. A deep rumble in the heavens and in the ground; through the howling of the wind, the earth groaned. But they could not hear it.

The soft flesh would not listen to the creaking words. Or listen to the creaking mountains and the creaking ice caps. They would not hear the earth. Or feel the earth. Or remember how their bodies on a winter's day or after sitting still for too long, would creak and ache.

I told them: take yourself to the woods and lay down amongst the bluebells. See how the light streams down through the trees... (McCabe, 2013)

Once again, the language is evocative. It lures the reader into landscape and further into aspects of the Earth as characters in their own right. Both language and concept demand a different sort of attention from the reader, an extension of the fiction writers' invitation to suspend disbelief. By extension, I mean that the challenge is to turn that suspension of disbelief into something more permanent that becomes an expression of real life rather than of fantasy, one which will continue to find relevance in the reader's world.

These are just two examples from new writers and they remind me that that there is something to escape for both writer and reader. I often imagine writers who wish to respond to environmental crisis sitting in the centre of a see-saw swinging from a desire to write in a way that is thought-provoking and new, and the desire to be published. Publishers find themselves on a similar see-saw, on the one hand looking for writing that is fresh, bold and distinctive but on the other driven by the need to achieve the sort of volume targets that make experiments high risk.

Teaching creative writing, I soon learnt, is more to do with working with a writer's creativity and helping them to discover how to use it than teaching them what or how. We can

show techniques and devices, give feedback on what works and what doesn't, make suggestions for editing and we can encourage attention to the energy that leads to writing beyond competency. But it is a writer's own true expression that will make their writing exceptional and in writing about ecology it is the confidence to write with their whole, real selves that will make it compelling, authentic and memorable. To encourage new writers to do that is perhaps the most significant step we can take in writing the land back into the written word. These fresh, more open minds have less conditioning, less layers of tarmac to escape. Nevertheless, I think it can only be done incrementally. Despite the urgency of the situation, responding to environmental crisis in children's stories demands subtlety, introducing ideas in a way that they will recognise from their own thoughts and latent ideas. Stories that can be applied in what they recognise as their world. In this process, there is a role for many different styles and approaches: short, memorable pieces that give voice to other worldviews as well as true stories and novels.

## Five

### Ways of Speaking

*The idea that animals can convey meaning, and thereby offer an attentive human being illumination, is a commonly held belief the world over. The view is disparaged and disputed only by modern cultures with an allegiance to science as the sole arbiter of truth. The price of this conceit, to my way of thinking, is enormous.*

*Barry Lopez, The Language of Animals, Resurgence Issue 192*

#### Don't rub them out

In his book, *Animals Erased*, Arran Stibbe (2012) describes another form of extinction from the one we are familiar with hearing about. He explains animals are also disappearing from the realm of language and since our interaction with animals is often confined to zoos, museums, books, TV programmes and the internet, language becomes even more significant (2012:1). Stibbe's analysis of the English language in relation to animals is chilling because it reveals how commonplace it has become to detach ourselves from creatures as living beings with intrinsic value, to detach ourselves from the reality that meat comes from creatures we regard as beautiful, to distance ourselves from acts of cruelty and neglect. When we wish to eat something cuddly or characterful we often change the name by which we know it. Pig becomes pork, cow becomes beef, calf becomes veal and deer becomes venison. Character is neutralised by giving the animal a less appealing image: pigs are greedy; cows mentally slow or 'bovine', sheep are stupid (2012:35-53).

By the time I found Stibbe's work, I had already become irritated with the way my computer automatically corrected 'who' to 'that' if the animal was the subject of the sentence. Now I became alert to the frequency with which I referred to an animal as 'it' instead of 'he' or 'she' and to how often I was tempted to present animal characters as constructs and stereotypes, how the language used reinforced the perception that their being is less than human. Less valuable, less feeling, less clever, less worthy of care, less worthy of life, less intelligent.

### **More than human intelligence**

When I read Abram's assertion that 'our obliviousness to non-human nature is today held in place by ways of speaking that deny intelligence to other species and to nature in general'(1997:28) I recalled the confusion I felt as a child at the way nature, plants and animals were described. This, for a time, led to a phobia about plants because on the one hand I was told that they were not alive in the same way as we are and on the other I sensed something much more powerful and connected about them than I was allowed to express. When I was introduced to the idea that animals do not have souls, I rejected it outright because by then I had met enough animals to be certain that they did. Frequently my child's intuition was in direct conflict with what I heard from adults.

In adult life, encounters with the life-worlds of non-human species often produce revelations about the 'intelligence' of an animal or their ability to anticipate natural events or respond to their environment. Even when science can explain such responses, there is a tendency to classify that which is natural as supernatural, therefore it loses credence. Ingrained human centrality leads us to respond with surprise when animals show the ability to communicate, to make more than automatic decisions or to read a situation where we cannot. Dogs who know when their human is coming home (Sheldrake, 2000); a pod of whales who seemingly guide a familiar human who has become lost in the fog safely back to the bay to which she lives (Morton in Hogan, 1998:51); the evidence of 'personhood' in a gorilla who knows over 1,000 English words in sign language and articulates memory, humour and a range of emotions (Patterson & Gordon in Hogan, 1998: 143-141): such stories are read with fascination. They are read, passed on and discussed with a certain amount of reserve or scepticism until they can be proved or disproved by conventional, mainly reductionist means. We love them yet hardly dare to talk of them as real. Many of us know that if we behave as if they are, we may be overruled or treated like children, because it is only okay for children to believe such things. Here is another manifestation of what Harding (2006:14) describes as the severance of two branches in that these encounters with the many-layered life-world are spoken about and written about as exceptional rather than normal because they cannot be explained using reason alone. Perhaps it is another expression of an innate desire to connect with that dimension that runs through the whole of life, from which we have stepped back; it may also be a coping mechanism to separate adults from the way we behave in the world.

Milton (2002:52-53) explains that living in a modern industrial state exposes us to 'representations of nature and natural things as impersonal' yet we are also surrounded by representations of 'things as persons', meaning that we are faced with constant tension between personal and impersonal interpretations of nature. Milton's view is that by depersonalising nature, science serves capitalism by making the exploitation of nature for economic reasons acceptable.

Abram (1997:41) points out that when the underpinning dimension of the human life-world is supporting such a diversity of worldviews, there must be even more diversity in the life-worlds of other species. It leads me to ask continually: how can we tell stories that truly involve these life-worlds and the rich seam of shared experience that lies beneath them? These life-worlds, I now realise, are what I really set out to write when I thought to bring the experience of endangered species into the world of my stories.

They represent a rich, barely tapped seam for writers at which I have only nibbled in the creative part of this thesis by giving Hera the chance to relate to other species as themselves rather than trying to liken them to herself. The richness of non-human life-worlds is something I have spent a lifetime trying to imagine, for example, when I watch the dog in my life out on a walk. I try to imagine it but it is too hard, like trying to imagine a colour you have never seen, the palette is too limited. What can a dog's immediate experience of the world be like when smell is such a source of information, its intricacy so great that he can identify one stick that I have touched from a great mound of others or sense where my partner is when he hasn't been with him to that place? What is the life-world of a deer like when they appear to sense potential predators with their entire bodies? Or the life-world of the blackbird, whose hearing is so acute that they can detect a worm under the soil? It is no wonder that Abram chooses to describe their world as 'more than human' instead of 'non-human'.

### **Honorary humans**

Evans's advice that 'we do wild animals a terrible disservice by trying to make them honorary humans' might not be very specific but it is enough to ignite the imagination and provides one of those moments where the possibility of a different way of seeing the world opens up. In my literature review, I discovered how rare it is to find fiction for children portraying non-human species without inflicting them with human traits, voices or archetypes. Clearly, this is often done with the intention of helping children to identify with non-human species by having them

think 'this is like me' or that 'this creature has feelings too' and helping to invoke thoughtfulness and compassion. This kind of portrayal might play some role in conservation and in growing up and learning from nature but although it has become an accepted way of speaking to children about ecology, it also serves to separate nature from 'real life' and allow the sense of identification to be dropped at will when reason cuts in to categorise the characters and their story as fantasy. In many cases, anthropomorphosis is more likely to prompt reflection on what it is to be human than what it is like to be the non-human it allegedly represents. The act of writing a 'more-than-human' character as his or herself is so also so much more exacting than simply portraying them as humans in different forms.

Writing with students in a session on deep ecology, I suggested trying to write from a non-human animal's viewpoint without anthropomorphosis. We all found it difficult until one student read out his work and explained that it was the letting go of a need to succeed rather than the intense concentration most of us had tried to employ that had helped him write a short piece that stirred us all into a sense of the wolf whose experience he was describing.

Of course, we will never know if we have succeeded in writing an authentic expression of a non-human view but what matters is the opening of the mind to try; the willingness to allow our mind to shed human centrality enough to imagine ourselves into the inner self of another creature.

To follow Louv's (2006:115-145) thinking about depriving children from growing up with the reality of nature, anthropomorphosis may also help to contribute to a sense that we are separate from the risks, the vulnerability and the mortality inherent in the natural world (although Louv cites our loneliness as a species as a possible explanation for the popularity of anthropomorphic representation (2006:292). The problem is that the illusion of separation from this very vulnerability and moment to moment mortality has given us licence to overlook the reality of the natural world. When natural 'disasters' occur, people often behave as if it is almost unfair; as if nature is not playing by our rules rather than as if our ability to read the rhythms and signs of the natural world has diminished. That our actions might have disrupted nature's systemic balance to the detriment of other species as well as our own is a conclusion that even those who reject intuition in favour of science somehow manage to deny.

### **More than words**

We don't have to spend long in the company of other species to be convinced that language is more than words. Even in the company of our own species, we know that body language, facial expression, signs and gestures can change the sense of words or take their place completely. Sheldrake's research aims to prove the abilities of animals to communicate at distance through means other than language. He sees it as a way of tapping into the morphic resonance (Sheldrake, 1981; 2000; 2011) that he believes runs like a current through all life. Whether or not he is right about the means, communication between living beings without using spoken language appears to be an everyday feature of their lives. In some cases, it is integral to their survival.

In only 25 years, the internet has become an accepted part of everyday life in what we refer to as 'developed countries'. Beyond the tangible entity of our computers, phones and gadgets it is invisible. Few of us know how it actually works. In fact, sometimes it doesn't work. Yet we have come to rely upon it.

In the creative part of my thesis, I have left the concept of communication without words open for interpretation. From the outset, Rodney notices that Hera often seems to know what he is thinking and although he tries to dismiss the idea, it is a recurring feature of their growing relationship. At first it makes him feel uncomfortable because he doesn't believe it to be possible. Later it makes him feel somewhat excluded when Hera and Dan appear to be communicating without speaking. I didn't necessarily want to imply that they were using telepathy but wanted to open the possibility of other ways of communication including through use of intuition and empathy. What I had in mind was that the sense of an expanded self, by which I mean a sense of the self as connected with the rest of nature, makes sensitivity to others thoughts and feelings more likely. Gradually, the more Rodney becomes open to a sense of reciprocity with the whole of nature, the more he feels included. What I hope is that each reader will have their own interpretation and that it will lead to greater thought about communication in general.

For the somewhat cryptic character named Dan, this intuitive form of communication has become more natural than the spoken word and for some may signify a withdrawal from human society but for others may suggest more intense participation with the natural world. The truth is that, for a long time, I wondered about the strength of Dan's role and considered editing him out but he had arrived through my subconscious and that seemed worth exploring,

especially if I was to try more than human logic in creative practice. Although I have a sense of his back story, I resisted writing it in because I thought it would be distracting and eventually I came to realise that for me, he was representing a sort of guardian for deep ecology and a catalyst. Once I had noticed this, I decided to leave him in until the final draft when I would decide whether I should edit him out of everything except my mind. Then he turned up again spontaneously to help Hera and Rodney when they were so nearly home but sapped of energy and that seemed just right.

### **Nature's voice**

So in resisting anthropomorphism and in paying attention to a language that is more than words, how can the natural world be written into children's fiction with deep ecology in mind? The core concept of every living thing having intrinsic value means that the only way to write about each individual is as a character of their own. To return to the nature writer's art it is only through deep, immersive observation using all our senses that we can hope to make a start. This is something writing and deep ecology have in common: immersion in the sensuous detail. In a moment of complete despair while writing up my thesis, I went out into the garden and sat on a lump of oak we use for a seat. A voice was telling me 'you should not be doing this, you must get this thesis finished' but the breeze, the birdsong, the movement of ants through the grass and the colours in the trees had started to claim my mind. As I moved into that state of noticing, of experience without analysis, I realised that the 'achiever' (Torbert, 2004:85) in me was of little use without this. I knew I was stuck in a cycle of writing as a task and that none of my writing pleased me. Instead I began to draw, to make small sketches to head each chapter. I am not an artist and have never had much success with drawing. Now I found that intense observation through this absorbed, participative sense of self was giving my drawings more and more life. Each day my partner would come home to find a fresh batch of sketches and say "Mel! What is going on here?" I think he thought I had been possessed. In some way, I think I had. I was completely taken by a shift in consciousness that was giving me access to the spirit of what I was trying to draw. The drawings lack the skill that comes with training and practice but they are recognisable for what they are intended to be. They helped me to understand that this is what I want for my writing – for every individual character, every feature of the landscape, every element of the world in which we live to be recognisable for their own sake, for their own spirit, for what they truly are.

Stripping away that conditioned need to achieve and to be acceptable in society rather than viewed as slightly mad, I know that yes, the wind does speak to us and tell us when it will bring rain and when we should take shelter; the trees tell us about the air, the soil, the water and the sun; plants tell us that the seasons are changing, birds will warn us of a threat and a dragonfly seems to offer some communication more intelligent than I can fathom. These are some of the most obvious examples. There are many, many more. But only if we are prepared to listen with more than our ears and open ourselves to their language. Then we may write it all back into our stories as if it is normal, not fantasy or a notion that belongs to some other race, some other time, some other world.

Talking to children about writing, Ted Hughes (1969:18) used brilliantly interchangeable comparisons between animals and words, saying that both are difficult to capture. He explained that words 'belong to all of the senses, as if each one had eyes, ears, and tongue, or ears and fingers and a body to move with'. His poem, *The Thought Fox* (1969:19-20) is used to illustrate his advice that if you imagine something with all your senses, 'the words look after themselves, like magic'. In the poem, he moves the reader between fox and poem until they become as one, when 'with a sharp hot stink of fox / It enters the dark hole of the head.' I now find Hughes's 'thought fox' an invaluable companion but know, as he did, that if you try too hard to keep a fox it will elude you. But if you open yourself to its wild presence, you will later find 'you have captured a spirit, a creature' in your words.

## Six

### Science, spirit and magic.

*'This is what I hear all day – the trees are singing my music – or have I sung theirs?  
I suppose I have.'*

*Edward Elgar (Kennedy, 2004)*

Just as Dan quietly asserted his presence, so did another element of the story: spirituality<sup>15</sup>. In fact it was one of three elements that had been performing a sort of weaving dance in my head from the moment I started to write the story. Rodney's connection with the Church, his love of science and Hera's apparent ability to perform magic tricks. I already knew that Hera's sleight of hand was inspired by Abram's ideas about 'the ecology of magic' (1997:2-30), and his accounts of indigenous 'magicians' whose connection to nonhuman nature is an essential part of their role in the wellbeing of those around them. This is not a fantastic representation of wizards and magicians but an understanding of such magicians as intermediaries between the people, the nonhumans and the land. Hera and her mother reflect the Shamanic characters described by Abram in that they live on the edge of the village and are held in some awe and suspicion, partly because they apparently 'know more than they should'. In keeping with Abram's suggestions, this is not because of their ability to perform tricks but comes from their closer participation with the nonhuman world and works in their favour by allowing them a certain amount of peace and privacy in which to maintain that close connection. I have already said that much of that which is commonly viewed as 'magic' or 'supernatural' is simply natural and this is the foundation for Hera's apparent skills. She learns from nature, and the ability to reach out from her consciousness into the spirit of all that is around her is a way of life. Rituals such as dabbing water on her forehead, neck and wrists are simple expressions of relationship. They are moments of thoughtfulness and connection.

The similarity of these rituals to those he has seen in church is somewhat bewildering to Rodney. In fact religion has become a paradox for him. Despite the different possibilities offered by Catholicism and science, Rodney is left grappling with an event he cannot properly explain: death, nature's ultimate sleight of hand. Not even Rodney's father, an eminent heart surgeon can explain this adequately. Like his Uncle Eustace, Rodney's mother has vanished.

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<sup>15</sup> I use 'spirituality' rather than 'religion' here and elsewhere intentionally because I am referring to spirit in the sense of that which is not material; not a belief in a set understanding of divine power.

Unlike his Uncle Eustace, the whereabouts of her physical body is known to him because he has seen her coffin lowered into the ground. The mystery remains, where are you?

One of the most difficult concepts associated with deep ecology is the way elements usually regarded as being inanimate may be attributed properties more usually regarded as animate. This statement is deliberately vague because it is a concept with various interpretations, from the self-regulating Earth of Gaia Theory (Lovelock, 1979; 2000) to the reciprocity and to the intersubjectivity described by Abram (1997) and perspectives on animism explored by Harding (2006). For most conventional scientists, these are representations irreconcilable within their accepted parameters and, for them, often hint at concepts more commonly found in cultures and beliefs discarded as fanciful, ignorant or primitive.

An interview with Satish Kumar by Richard Dawkins for a series entitled *Enemies of Reason* (Channel 4, 2007) provided an illustration of this difficulty and of the division between those who have been trained to demand empirical proof and those who make use of what they understand intuitively. As a scientist dedicated to evidence based research, Dawkins challenges Kumar's belief that trees and rocks have 'spirit'. Kumar's response is to make a distinction between the material and the spiritual, explaining that the spiritual relates to quality and is metaphysics where the material relates to quantity and is physics. What many people might miss about his views is that he believes these two things are one, not to be considered as separate. I noticed that when talking to students about deep ecology this misunderstanding often arose out of our discussions about logic and intuition. After watching a clip from Harding's video *Animate Earth* (2011) students would sometimes think he was saying we should not use empirical means to understand nature, whereas his intention is to say that we should redress the imbalance created by the neglect of the sensing, intuitive self. There appears to be an element of fear or at least inherent rejection for some people in giving up the security of proof through numbers and I felt this was also evident in the interview by Dawkins.

Kumar says that if we lose the sense of the metaphysics and set out to 'look after the world because of the impact upon us of what we do, we do it out of fear' he goes on to say that a 'more spiritual, metaphysical approach would be to look after it out of love', meaning that we consider the effect of our actions on the whole. So just as Dawkins shows a fear of moving too far from the physical, Kumar fears losing the spiritual, the metaphysical from 'our language, the way we think and speak'.

The spiritual and the metaphysical exist within the language of religion but are mostly confined by the boundaries we have created between religion and everyday life. Talking to those involved in many different religions, I have heard echoes of the same paradox that I had to deal with when I was working with business and the environment – that of people leaving the ideals and values behind when they return to ‘real life’. These values then become the responsibility of the few (the manager in charge of social and environmental policy, the religious leader, the nature writer). Yet, as the most senior Islamic figure in Syria, the Grand Mufti reminded us in a BBC broadcast in 2009<sup>16</sup> ‘Jesus Christ did not build all these churches but we as humans and religious leaders build our temples like the Caesars and kings of old. We have forgotten that the most holy house of God is in our hearts’. In my creative piece, Father O’Keery’s role is not so much religious leader as living symbol of a wish that all faiths and beliefs may share in a more open-minded way of nurturing each other and the world. His church is a gathering place. It may be carrying the symbolism a little far but the same church also offers a means of escape (the tunnel) to a more natural, wild and ever-changing world and a new story (Eustace’s legacy).

It is in the tunnel from the church to the cliff that Rodney turns to the carved piece of coal given to him by Dan to help him overcome his claustrophobia. To return to the discussion about rocks and trees having spirit, Kumar sounds certain that his ideas are correct in the face of Dawkins’s scepticism but when challenged over how he knows these things, Kumar quite openly responds that he does not know, not in the measurable, material way. He goes on to explain that he is talking as a philosopher but that it is important to merge ideas.

What is described here resonates with the concepts of reciprocity and intersubjectivity that Abram (1997: 51-73) brings into his arguments, along with an acknowledgement that rocks and trees are made up of many things, many particles, bacteria and cells; they are also made what they are by those things around them as well as those things within what we see as their object. In the case of the little dragon sculpture Dan gives Rodney, the reciprocity between Rodney and the coal could be extended to include the relationship between the carver (Dan) and the coal. This vastly complex, interactive view of life is hard to grasp and

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<sup>16</sup> First broadcast in 2009, this quotation was obtained from a transcript of BBC Radio Four’s Sunday Worship programme included in the bibliography as *Sunday Worship: Syrian Orthodox Church 23 Mar 14*, presented by Martin Palmer, BBC Radio Four, 23 Mar 14. Transcript from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03ymr4p> (accessed 29 Mar 14)

demands the ability to 'let go' of what we think we know as well as the willingness to live with a state of 'not knowing' at times.

Not all scientists have a problem with this view. There are many who are working at this confluence in thinking. Physicist and systems theorist, Fritjof Capra is one example, who makes it plain that he feels a new 'philosophical and religious basis' is required (Capra, 1983:458). He sees deep ecology as supported by the new systems approach to modern science but 'rooted in perception of reality that goes beyond the scientific framework to an intuitive awareness of the oneness of all life'. I hope it will be apparent by now that this, in my creative piece, is the territory in which Eustace and formerly Douglas Rhys-Davies have been working. More significantly it is the territory into which Rodney has made a decision to walk.

*Perhaps we should ask, in a spiritual sense, why it is that we love the sound of birdsong, why we are moved by the sweep of a valley, the summit of a mountain, the currents in stream. Why are we affected beyond words by the sky, the sea, a cliff, the transitory world of a rock pool? Perhaps we should ask this question alongside the one that we cannot answer, the one that sits in the back of our minds but becomes drowned in the tide of stupid things that form the illusion we so often call 'real life'; perhaps we should ask this question as part of the one about why we are here, what is our purpose on this magical Earth. It cannot be economic growth. It cannot be consumption. There must be a reason, maybe many reasons that we find such beauty in this world and that we can only find true peace when we find connection with it; that we wander restless, wanting and irritable when we do not. I watched a programme on BBC2 this evening about Newton that suggested that as well as being one of the original rationalists, he was the last magician, a man with an intuition that drove him to explore the universe through the scientific method who never lost his ability to marvel at the world with a sense of the divine as well, who locked his innermost thoughts away in a box to be discovered much later and surprise the world with his obsession with alchemy. The presenter said that this was the point – we may be able to explain gravity and light through maths but we still cannot explain the fundamental reality of life and death, of the actuality of gravity and light and that Newton knew this, as the boy marvelling at a pebble on the shore while the whole of the ocean lies unexplained before him.*

In another interview, between Shakti Maira and Rupert Sheldrake (Maira, 2014:48), Sheldrake calls for a 'science of qualities', criticising attempts to reduce nature and biology to maths:

You can use maths for three petals, four petals, the Fibonacci series of a sunflower head, and so on, but it soon peters out...There is a science of quality but when we come to things other than the science of form of animals and plants, then that side of science burrows down into molecules and quantitative measurements. (2014:50)

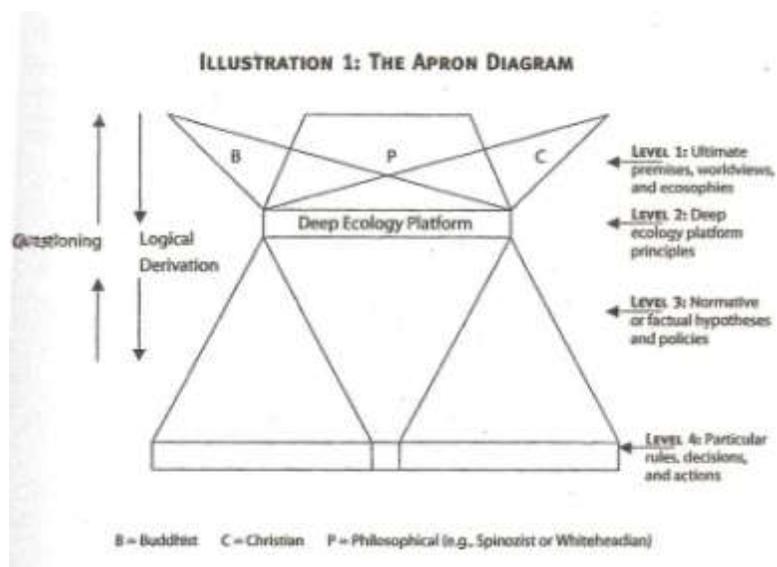
In discussing the concept of natural beauty they go on to consider a Navajo night-chant: 'With beauty before me, I walk. With beauty all around me, I walk'. Sheldrake suggests that the word 'God' could be substituted for 'beauty' in this context: He explains that 'we don't know the exact connotations of the Navajo word. These big words like "God" and "beauty" and "truth" have many meanings in various languages' and that to translate them is to choose from 'a spectrum of meanings'.

As writers, we are in constant consultation with a spectrum of meanings, always looking for the word or constellation of words that will best express our feelings, our understanding, our characters and our purpose. It is a slower, more reflective process than the instant choices of the oral tradition but both ways of telling stories are founded on a continual process of building layers of story alongside layers of experience. Once we have let the story go, readers will consult their own spectrum of meanings, layering and building their own. One difference here is that in oral storytelling there is the possibility of interacting with the audience's verbal, physical and emotional responses whereas the written story leaves the author behind to make its way in the world alone.

My quest to understand more about the meaning of spirituality, magic and science in relation to ecology and the story I was writing led me back to Milton's *Loving Nature*, in which she asks 'Why isn't everyone an environmentalist? Why do some people care more about the future of the natural world than others do?' (2002:1). Having observed that 'nature protectionists relate to nature and natural things in both scientific and religious ways' (2002:9), Milton takes a methodical approach to looking at the meaning of science and religion in this context, later asking 'Is magic a kind of science or a kind of religion?'. Feeling that there was something significant in this question, I spent some time trying to understand how her conclusion that there are two contrasting ways of relating to nature (one composed of personal agents and one of impersonal objects and mechanisms) could help me to understand

the role of religion, science and magic in my story. Then I re-read the chapter and discovered my answer in her recollection of her first encounter with the question: 'I fear that in my naivety, like many young students, I missed the point. The familiarity of science and religion and the strangeness of magic concealed what, with hindsight, seemed quite obvious: that the question was asking as much about the nature of science and religion as it was about the nature of magic' (2002:12). I realised that I too had been missing the point. My question was not so much about magic, science and religion as about the nature of writing for children in the context of a more holistic approach to nature. Children seldom stop to divide magic, science, spirituality and nature. It is at about the age of the children for whom I am writing this book that we are more emphatically encouraged to separate them and to look for the labels of 'right' and 'wrong'.

Naess was not concerned with such divisions except in finding a way of bringing together the human capacity for spiritual, scientific and philosophical thought into a worldview and a movement where life would be valued in a wider ontological sense. The path to what he referred to as 'self-realisation', an extended sense of self as part of the whole of existence, is necessarily an inquisitive, explorative one. With George Sessions, he devised a model, which came to be known as 'the apron diagram', showing levels for discussion and interpretation with the deep ecology platform at its 'waist' (Naess & Sessions in Drenegson & Devall, 2008:17):



I see the apron as a sort of open ended vessel, into which individuals and groups bring their philosophies, backgrounds, cultures and ideas. As Naess pointed out, it is possible that a

person lives by principles or holds views compatible with a certain philosophy without having any knowledge of it (Drengson & Devall, 2008:108). The diagram shows how ideas, principles, policies, hypotheses, decision making and actions are brought into one overall picture through deep questioning in one direction and logical derivation in the other. In a sense, this is the journey that Rodney and Hera have been making: through the apron diagram and back. They will have many more journeys to make.

*This morning I woke just as the dawn chorus was beginning and noticed that this sound brings about an intense feeling of wellbeing. I've often put this down to the possibility that birds are singing their way into a new day having survived another night, so that their song carries the message 'all is well' in addition to others. I wondered how a deep ecologist would write about bird song. It would mean putting aside human stories and interpretations of what the birds' song means (even those accepted interpretations such as finding a mate, claiming territory etc.). It would even mean putting aside my own interpretations about some sort of spiritual dialogue between birds and the Earth (we are only half joking when we call our evening visits to the woods to hear the birds 'going to evensong'). It would mean trying to let go of conscious thought and allowing birds' song to enter my mind in something like a meditative state, allowing it to infiltrate my subconscious without trying to create meaning. Instead of trying to turn their language into mine or imposing mine on theirs, I would need to absorb the sounds in a deeper, primal place. Almost impossible for our conscious is always informing our subconscious but the same is true in reverse so even small instances might evolve a loop of new consciousness or being. From this place, I can find no way of allowing logic to distract me from the feeling that the birds are doing something together, they are drawing themselves into one and their song draws me too.*

*So this is all very privileged and comfortable in my forest home and it makes me think about the quote that Jack, a creative visions student sent me- from Grant Morrison who writes superhero comics. Jack sent it because I'd said that most of the fictional responses to global crises have been dystopian. Grant says it's no wonder young people dress in black, harm themselves, have eating disorders, and depressions when the stories we tell them are about a violence ridden world where everything is changing for the worse, including the climate. He thinks superheroes give us hope.*

*(Morrison, 2012:xvii). It reminds me of what Richard Dawkins says at the beginning and end of the interview with Satish Kumar: that they both think it's vital to look after the world but have different ways of seeing it. I don't think we should hang our hopes on one entity, one person or faith- perhaps all this debunking of celebrities, political and spiritual leaders happens because we know the same flaws are in all of us. Marian Partington (2012) says, the only way we can truly forgive is to look deep inside ourselves to find the same seed. Surely the same goes for good. We can't expect a superhero or supergod to do it all. But Grant's right about the way we write about the world, where are the stories that offer hope and a future worth living into? Deep ecology doesn't offer utopia so much as a sense of belonging and some ability to imagine a groundswell of simple, everyday changes in the way we respond to everything and everyone around us. In following Abram's dream of writing the written word back into the land, perhaps we can also write hope back into the written word.*

## Seven

### Opening Lids

*Youth: Why do you say the universe is a green dragon?*

*Thomas: I'm a storyteller. Besides, it seems an appropriate way to begin the new story of the cosmos*

*Youth: But why say it's a green dragon when it obviously isn't?*

*Thomas: For several reasons. I call the universe a green dragon to remind us that we will never be able to capture the universe with language.*

*Brian Swimme (2001:25)*

When I first started writing more seriously, Andrew Melrose told me that the best kind of ending was one that was also a beginning (Melrose, 2002:81). In an infinite and complex universe, that made simple sense to me. The story that began as 'The Green Dragon' has been through many changes. It has been unravelled and rewoven using insights from deep ecology to become *In Truth There Be Dragons*. I changed the title because I wanted to reflect the different perspectives on truth contained in the story, and the dragons to represent some of the challenges faced by those growing up in the world of today.

During the course of my research, I have been unravelling many patterns of my own. In action research terms, this first person research has been at the core of my thesis and although I have had to be selective about which threads to use in the creative element, they have all helped to shape it and are stored for use in the future. The strategist in me (Torbert, 2004) is already looking forward to more turns of the cycle, more questioning, more commitment, to infinite walks with the 'thought fox' (Hughes, 1969:19-20) and more collaboration. I am only one of many weavers.

Naturally the achiever voice is asking: what have I discovered in the course of my research that is new? When I was worrying at this question one day, Peter Reason looked amused and said 'there's nothing new under the sun' (of course I looked this up and found it to be a quotation from Ecclesiastes 1:9). This wonderfully humbling thought was as good an expression of what I have been doing as I can imagine. Not so much discovering as rediscovering what already is and always has been. It is a rediscovering of life as I have never been taught but have felt since childhood with my inner self and it is a gathering of ideas from others who share similar feelings and experiences. Most importantly it is a gathering of connections and reconnections in the web of ideas that is our relationship with the rest of life.

As a human and a writer, I have been analysing my place within this and finding a new basket in which to put the ideas. This basket is one that I hope will be plundered by writers of children's fiction and by others trying to find their own places and their own containers. In her urge to move away from the dominance of what she calls 'the killer story' towards one more life sustaining, Le Guin (in Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996:150) calls upon Elizabeth Fisher's (1975) observation that the first useful tool was probably not a weapon but a container in which to gather seeds, so this seems an appropriate start.

One of the many things I have learnt from working with young people and new writers is that we are telling stories about a short moment in our history: the moment of now. But we are also telling stories about our future and the future of the life to which we belong. We will belong to it even when we have left to discover the real truth about life and death. There are some hard facts about this reality about which we know so little and, whether we choose to use logic or intuition, we should acknowledge that we share it with the aspects and the characters of this world we don't like as well as those we do. We are part of the same whole as the most difficult, frightening and challenging experiences as well as the loving, glorious, nurturing ones. One of Joanna Macy's guiding lines (in Reason & Newman, 2013:6-8) is 'don't be afraid of the dark', telling us not to fear the pain of disintegration of 'old systems and certainties' but to feel it from the depths of our mutual belonging. She also tells us that 'many aspects of our current reality started out as someone's dream'.

In my story, Rodney has found a clue to his unanswerable question about his mother's death: where are you? 'Everywhere not nowhere' is an insight that will serve him for now, even though he will have to face such questions many more times in his life. He has learnt to follow another of Macy's guidelines 'link hands with others' and in doing so has begun to reconnect the severed branches of our rational and intuitive psyche, as Harding hopes we all will for the sake of our animate Earth (2006:14). Hera has also found a way to reunite Harding's branches and has begun to extend her sense of self to embrace the human as well as the non-human, allowing Rodney to bring her out of her shamanic seclusion. Together they have the chance to explore their own reality through the legacy of Eustace's dream. Tempting as it has been to hurry them, I have had to allow them to do all this in their own time. *In Truth There Be Dragons* was always intended as the first book in a trilogy. This is the beginning of their story.

So what is the achiever's summary? An achiever loves nothing better than bullet points and I see no reason to deny this:

- Deep ecology presents an alternative worldview and an opportunity to tell a more life sustaining story to children and with children.
- This isn't one story. It is a web of stories in many guises and told by many different people using both the spoken and the written word, all of which will show us another way of relating to nature.
- Stories and words are given meaning by the writer, which is then given meaning by the reader, who will tell stories of their own. It is a process by which we can grow, change and remember.
- Fundamental to my work is the belief that we should seek ways of writing not only the wonder of the natural world into children's stories but also the feeling that to look after it is normal, not exceptional. This will mean paying close attention to language and characterisation so that this intrinsic value of human and non-human characters is inherent rather than taught in the stories.
- Stories will help to spawn ecosophies but only if we are prepared to let go of accepted versions of science, religion, philosophy and magic; to let them regroup into new patterns of knowing and just as importantly, of not knowing.
- There is an opportunity for writers of fiction for children to think and write alongside the new nature writers (Cowley, 2008) who are telling stories for our time: stories that plumb reality as well as celebrate wonder. This rich legacy from Rachel Carson is yet to be spent.
- To write from a place of deep experience, deep questioning and deep commitment requires immersion in all three. It demands that the writer goes through continual layers of letting go.
- We shouldn't worry if we look at our work and think it is nothing new, not exceptional. We should worry much more if it doesn't reflect our true, whole selves: the mud and the weeds as well as the grassy paths of our journeys. There's a long way to go.
- We can ask if writing for children is different from writing for adults. The question isn't about the children or the adults but about the nature of the writing.
- I have not demonstrated all of this in my creative piece because it is a lifetime's project but I have made a start as a result of my first person inquiry and practice. Now I am at a point where I can carry it forward. I hope that noticing my personal journey will help others to notice theirs too.

The strategist in me has always seen that there is a touch of alchemy (Torbert, 2004) in any vision if you open your ideas to the universe. Whenever I have done this, I have had a response: perhaps not quite what I had in mind but something has happened to move me further along the path of my vision, even if it is as disruptive as a motorway accident. Ah! Here returns the worrying voice that tells me this all a bit too mad for a PhD. About halfway through my research I was alarmed to read that ‘Thomas Berry says most of the destruction of the planet is happening at the hands of people with PhDs’ (Fox in Van Eyck McCain, 2010:183). Matthew Fox goes on to explain that if you educate only the left hand side of your brain, a PhD can become dangerous. The MSc that I completed in Responsibility and Business Practice in 2000 was one of the most enlightening experiences of my life. It didn’t so much change the way I think as help me to understand the way I think and it helped me to relate to everything I do as a whole person, not the person I think society wants me to be. This in itself was a breakthrough when I had been looking for so long for the right course of academic study. I wish all education could be so effective.

In his paper *Transforming Education* (Reason, 2007:1), one of the founders of the MSc in Responsibility and Business Practice, writer and professor Peter Reason asks, ‘How should we set about training not to exploit the Earth but to guide towards a more intimate relationship with our environment?’. He also quotes Berry:

Two things are needed to guide our judgement and sustain our psychic energies for the challenges ahead: a certain alarm at what is happening at present and a fascination with the future available to us if only we respond creatively to the urgencies of the present. (Berry, 2006:17)

I know that I want to ask more questions of myself and of other creative writers about those two things cited by Berry: alarm at what is happening and fascination with the future. At the University of Winchester we have started to do this on a Creative Writing module called Creative Visions<sup>17</sup> where we ask students to reflect upon how we live now and then to envision 2050 and beyond. This is only one of myriad initiatives that are emerging all over the world from people who are answering the call for a new story. Just as Rodney and Hera in my story turned the map to look at it from another angle, my PhD study and practice have led me to

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<sup>17</sup> Creative Visions was originally designed by Amanda Boulter in 2010. For the past four years, I have been teaching on the module with Amanda and Glenn Fosbraey. With input from all three of us and from our students, the module has continued to evolve and develop, producing some outstanding creative work.

turn take another look at my own map. It isn't my writing that will make a difference. It is the writing of many people.

In 2009, I self-published a book for children called *Charcoal and the Christmas Fowl*, which was an offshoot of my PhD research. It was an experiment in writing with a strong sense of place, of ignoring market forces and writing into a niche where a book might help children to connect with the natural world where they live. Popular with children, adults, schools, booksellers and other organisations, the book has been a great success. It was this book that led to my involvement with an alternative approach to publishing. Sarah Bird heard about it and about my research and decided to contact me. Sarah had set up a publishing cooperative called Vala, with the idea of bringing people together to publish books written from a desire to better engage with each other and the natural world. In 2012, I worked with Peter Reason on *Stories of the Great Turning* (2013), a collection of stories written by 'ordinary' people who have risen to the challenge of living more sustainably. The collaborative process through which we created this book made a huge difference to the way the stories were eventually told and it made us think about working with other stories in this way. Now I have been asked to look at the potential for Vala to publish children's books and it is clearly a chance to put far more of the ideas discussed in this thesis into practice. Above all, we are thinking about ways of working with new, young writers from schools and universities to grow more life-sustaining stories for children. This project and others will help to move the first person research in this thesis into second and third person research involving others and taking the ideas out into the world. The particular relevance of Vala's approach to publishing is a testing one: for everyone involved it means straddling two concepts of real life, putting deep questioning and deep commitment at the core of what we do but surviving in a world where financial sustainability is also necessary.

I started with an analogy about webs, threads and patterns but I would like to finish with another look at Le Guin's containers (1996: 149). When the careers mistress dismissed my vision so quickly at school, I felt as if she had closed the lid on a box I had only just opened. During my research, I feel as if I have been running around opening boxes full of interesting, vital things: wonderful, frightening, inspiring, life-threatening and real. It has led to a conviction that this is a time for the opening of lids so that others may find a new use for the contents, especially if their imaginations have not yet been so enmeshed in the same moment to

moment decisions about what is correct or incorrect. They will find containers of their own and they will open them too, but only if we are prepared to allow that they are real.

*Fieldfares' goodbye.*

*I don't know how to describe this but as I was walking up on the moor last night with Merlin and Cheeka the last of the sun was spreading red across the sky and a small flock of fieldfares flew past in close formation. They were very low and very near to me. Merlin and I stood and watched as they turned so that we could see their undersides and spread wings, a vertical blanket of individual bodies so at one. It felt so very personal. The sound was exhilarating, a swoosh of air, gentle, swift and meaningful. They flew on and up, reforming and trying several different patterns to and fro across the moor with leaders changing and looping back to let others go forward. The Red Arrows couldn't have done better. It was just like that thing the Arrows do – a low pass to grab your attention then several higher, skilful displays. Then calmly, professionally, the fieldfares flew away towards Holm Hill and I thought, that's it, that's them off. It was a goodbye. Not to us but to the moor. But we were part of it. Part of the moor and part of their goodbye. What an honour to feel them fly away with a part of me in their flight, taking a little piece of me as I now have a little piece of them, an exchange of something to do with this place, leaving me wishing them well and hoping to see them back next year for the berries.*

*There is this feeling of inclusion sometimes with birds. The joy of the house martins and swifts when they first arrive, the way they flew around us down by the copse on the weir, circling, lifting, diving and always around us and the birch trees as if we were all part of the same. And the crows that evening when they flew low over me in great numbers and lifted a part of my soul with them as they rose and swooped then settled as one not far away, watching me and knowing the effect they had achieved, knowing I'm sure that I was stunned and delighted to have been included in this way. Somehow throwing me the challenge of living with that knowledge about them. They seemed to be asking, 'there human – what are you going to do with that?'*

*Am I anthropomorphising? It was a feeling of acceptance and quiet expectation I drew from them. No, I am thinking crow, not human. This is my interpretation but the feeling was somehow a crow one, it came through my chest not my head. How will I do them justice in my writing? How will I be worthy of their gift of that few moments? Or the gift from the house martins, or the fieldfares? It is only by writing that I feel I can do this. This is the answer to the question 'is it enough?' because it is all I know how to do with their gift. These are the glimpses I want to give to encourage others to look for them and recognise them when they occur but these are spontaneous experiences: Naess was right that you can't go out there waiting for one to happen or trying to cause it. Nature comes to you in its own way; you can only open yourself to her as you might open yourself to gods. If only you can remember to do this in this world we have created to be full of stuff, that is. But writing is memory and perhaps Sheldrake is right in thinking that memory is part of some wider, deeper resonance which goes far beyond our understanding.*

## Appendix (i)

**A Platform for Deep Ecology**

Philosopher Arne Naess described deep ecology as a 'worldview' and a 'movement' rather than a theory because he wished to emphasise his belief that the concept should remain dynamic, evolving through individual and collective experience, questioning and commitment. Working with George Sessions he proposed a 'platform' as a common starting place for the movement and a prompt to followers to consider their own 'ecosophies', formulating their own 'general and basic views in common' (Naess, 1990:29). Stephan Harding later took up the invitation by working with students at Schumacher College to develop the version of the Deep Ecology Platform that I have used in this thesis (Harding, 1997:17):

- All life has value in itself, independent of its usefulness to humans.
- Richness and diversity contribute to life's well-being and have value in themselves.
- Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs in a responsible way.
- The impact of humans in the world is excessive and rapidly getting worse.
- Human lifestyles and population are key elements of this impact.
- The diversity of life, including cultures, can flourish only with reduced human impact.
- Basic ideological, political, economic and technological structures must therefore change.
- Those who accept the foregoing points have an obligation to participate in implementing the necessary changes and to do peacefully and democratically

**The following is the original platform for deep ecology proposed by Arne Naess and George Sessions (in Devall & Sessions, 1985: 69-73)**

- 1 The flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth has intrinsic value. The value of non-human life forms is independent of the usefulness these may have for narrow human purposes.
- 2 Richness and diversity of life forms are values in themselves and contribute to the flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth
- 3 Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.
- 4 Present human interference with the non-human world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
- 5 The flourishing of human life and culture is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of non-human life requires such a decrease.
- 6 Significant change of life conditions for the better requires change in policies. These affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures.

- 7 The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating *life quality* (dwelling in situations of intrinsic value) rather than adhering to a high standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between big and great.
- 8 Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to participate in the attempt to implement the necessary changes.

## Appendix (ii)

### Freefall writing

The examples below proved valuable in reflecting, sense-making and trying to deepen the connection between writing and experience.

### Deep ecology

*I've spent all day trying to work out how to give a brief summary of deep ecology and how it works as a way of looking at the world. Then, in the woods, I was distracted by the flooding stream as it rounded a bend flanked by steep sides and hanging tree roots. The water flowed strongly but often doubled back, creating complex eddies in the current, sometimes falling over itself or spiralling on many planes. Its texture was rich and the colour deep with the peat, leaves and other debris that it had picked up along its course. I watched for a long time as the shape flowed, changed, surged and rolled, all the time listening to the swirling notes of the stream's voice. What always fascinates me about streams and rivers is that although the molecules of water pass on, the feeling of it as an entity stays the same. It was, and is, deep ecology. The ideas are fluid, ever shaping, rolling, collecting pieces, scooping up substance and rearranging it, finding the contours of their environment and seeking out new ones, always as much a part of it as it is of them. Above all, they have momentum, life and vigour. They may be difficult to define, quantify or contain but they are real in the very sense of the word. Now I have an image of the apron diagram as a double ended receptacle with ideas and beliefs pouring into it, being rediscovered, rethought and realigned as they pass through the narrow waist of the platform for deep ecology and then emerging, the same but different into a new vision and enactment of the future.*

### Naming the beasts

*They took the naming of the beasts very seriously, travelling great distances to seek out every species on the Earth. They named the plants, invertebrates and bacteria too, categorising them by genus, species and variety, cataloguing them all in books and papers and in computer programmes with finely detailed pictures and they mounted fine examples, stuffed, in glass cases or embalmed their heads to hang on walls. The rocks they named too and the crystals, gems and soils. When they had found all they could on the land and in the lakes, rivers and surface waters, they ventured deep into the caverns of the darkest seas and plumbed volcanoes living and dead.*

*At last, when they thought they were nearing the end of the task, they began to take stock of their discoveries but found that many of the creatures and plants they'd found had already passed into extinction. So they began to preserve them in seed banks, game parks, zoos and museums. Then they set about the task of replacing them with manufactured genes and implanted embryos. Eventually they named chromosomes, DNA and reproductive processes until they thought they could recreate each design by cloning a copy from a single cell.*

### Reality, concrete contents, life and death.

*Taking the example Naess uses of a tree having primary qualities when left alone, and secondary and tertiary qualities only when encountered by humans (and others?), I start to wonder about life and death. If the example of a tree covers only our perception of a tree as an object and then our reaction to that object, if I were to describe the birch tree I see now as 'vibrant' or 'shimmering' it would only possess those qualities through my perception (does this bring us to the difficult territory of Schrodinger's Cat?). Yet if I leave the garden and go for a walk, the tree will still be alive and it will still move and shine in the breeze.*

*So I'm wondering how these concepts of reality and of subjectivity and objectivity apply to death. We perceive the living body of a creature as a gestalt- that much is simple – we do not perceive a mouse, for example, as a collection of limbs, cells, molecules or bacteria. But the way we perceive the creature when alive is quite different from how we would perceive its corpse. We are aware, I think, that we are projecting his or her former self onto the body. When alive, body, spirit, character etc are a gestalt. Try as we might, we cannot logic out the nature of the being. Any person who has lived with or close to animals will tell of the different, distinctive qualities of its person. Whether a human is present or not, the creature will continue to have the qualities of being alive, of a character of its own. The point is that, despite thousands of years of pondering, experience and experiment, we are not really any closer to knowing what this spirit is or where it comes from. We can explain how cells divide and our bodies grow but we cannot explain how the life force becomes part of it or where it goes when the body dies.*

*We know that when a machine – a car or a washing machine perhaps – is working, has power running through it, it will move and may even give an imitation of being alive yet we know that it has not been imbued with the force of life, spirit or character (these are attempted descriptions of the elements that we have been unable to pin down and are not necessarily interchangeable).*

*When we look at a dead body, we know that something beyond the ability to move, to function, has gone. This unanswered question 'where are you' is a problem for Rodney because he is unable to answer it with logic or conventional science. For Hera it is much less of a problem because she experiences life as a series of gestalts and as the gestalt which is life, an entity out of which and into which the spirit, the life force, the presence goes. For Hera it is natural that the energy that made the person or creature would remain part of it. Why then would life or death matter to her at all? The answer is that it is part of looking after the constellation of which she is herself a part. It is a deep sense of one-ness and a valuing of life. The behaviour of packs of animals, herds of herbivores and shoals of fish, and even when prey can sometimes seem to include their predator to the extent they almost offer themselves, is easier to explain when you see life in this way (reminds me of Ciaran's 'The Chorus') This is something like the feeling she has with the wolf-ghost.*

*It could be argued that Rodney's religion answers his question 'where are you' with the solution 'heaven' (or hell) yet this clashes not only with Rodney's thirst for logical explanation but with his intuitive feelings of what is real. Death is real but it isn't explained and it is a taboo so that he can't even ask Father O'K about it properly. I'm not sure where this fits but it seems to me that Naess was content with experiencing and with questioning without the need to be 'right' or to provide definitive answers. The cycles of experience, questioning and commitment were perhaps more important to him.*

*There is a problem with Hera's attitude towards death and that is, why do we fear it? If our energy is simply recycled for the good of the whole, why are we afraid to die? For humans this could be explained by a fear of the unknown (or a time when we have been told we will be*

judged). Are animals afraid of the unknown too or do they know more? Or are we all just programmed to avoid death so that the system repairs and improves itself?

The other problem is that if I experience myself as part of a greater whole, then why do I not feel this about a city or a gathering such as the New Forest Show? Why do I feel myself part of the same whole as a beetle, a tree or an adder but not as the people see wandering about at the funfair eating hamburgers? I notice a judgement in my mind about right and wrong, which is the very thing I've been trying to avoid.

### **Communication, connection and 'training'**

I was thinking today about how Merlin was when he was a puppy, when he first arrived here. There was a lot to learn from the way he behaved, which was quite different from Morse. He had some concept that this was his life to be but no real idea of the rules in his new environment and now I think back, I can see that he was trying to find out what they were. There were things he was utterly convinced about - like getting onto the sofa and later sleeping upstairs with us, although he didn't ever try this until he was house trained. It was as if there were things he knew and things he did not know and was trying to find out. He looked for the boundaries in our garden - wandering off through the fence until he was brought back - but as soon as he understood the boundaries of our territory chose not to leave unless with us (in our pack?). There were new pack rules to learn and they weren't as simple as hierarchy, they were more to do with how to be polite, be accepted but still be himself.

My strength of feeling about 'training' animals has evolved from what I learnt as a child and then as a young adult. It took a session where an older friend decided to teach my pony a lesson (she probably thought she was doing the right thing) to convince me forever that we might know how to suppress animals but we don't always know how to work with them. She worked him on a lunge rein until he was exhausted then gave me back a pony who was almost unrecognisable in the way he responded to me. It didn't take long to re-establish our relationship and that may have been because he felt that my distress and bewilderment were as great as his - emotions shared while I rubbed him down and stayed with him for hours in tears until he stopped sweating and his breathing returned to normal. The feeling that I had betrayed him by allowing it to happen never left me though.

I can't see any point in 'training' an animal's spirit out of it. I don't need to feel that I dominate, I only want to be an intermediary between an animal's society and ours. That's the point, to show them, explain to them in any way we can how our human society works and how they can be part of it without offending but as themselves. In turn, we need to learn how to be part of theirs. Just as with humans, it is the most talented animals who will work out how to do this and the brightest who will work out how to rebel if they need to. Ursula Le Guin explains that 'discipline' does not mean suppression or punishment but working with the natural energy to achieve something different. It is only our teaching that an animal is inferior that makes us nervous about allowing them too far into our lives yet they work their way into our inner consciousness anyway, kindling emotions we hardly dare to admit to another human and reaching beyond our own ability to connect with each other. When the pod of whales Alexandra Morton had been studying, spending certain hours of every day with them, escorted her home when she was lost in fog without a compass, her rational mind was tempted to reject the notion that they had rescued her. In her account of this incident, she falls short of saying they did, effectively leading the reader to make their own decision - wittingly or not using one of the best of a storyteller's skills. How did I know that Smartie was ill that night I woke up at Cosford,

*compelled to go to his stable? Our dog, Moriarty, also knew and was ready the moment I decided to go, refusing to be left behind then lay with him in the stable while I called the vet. If I hadn't responded to that seemingly irrational feeling, he would have died. Coincidence? I don't know what coincidence is - a definition might be that two or more things happen at the same time with no connection. How would we ever know that there was no connection if we deny the possibility to connect in the first place? The same horse stunned an accomplished dressage judge when she admired him after our test and I gave her his name. Her surprise was so great at the contrast between his performance when I was riding him and that when someone else had ridden the same test with him only a day or so before that she had trouble believing he was the same horse. This might have been explained by riding ability except that I had been ill for several months beforehand and was merely a passenger thinking him through the manoeuvres. We jumped an exacting cross country course too with me unable to use my legs to any great effect. If it had been a course he had jumped before, it could have been argued that he knew his way but to our knowledge, he had never been to that county before and the course had been designed for that competition so it is not possible that he would have known the sequence of the jumps or the route to be taken. In this case, as in many others in my experience of communicating with animals, I believe it is the strength of the connection between the two beings that enables the communication. Nevertheless, as is born out by our more recent technologically based experience, the strength of the connection can be variable.*

### **Havoc in the system**

*We are encouraged by the academic system to challenge the assumptions integral to our being a function of our constructed society. Yet we are persuaded by the processes dear to that system that the only way to succeed is to conform. What other ways might there be? If climate change challenges our society to the extent that we must question the assumed tenets of success - economic growth, expansion, wealth measured in monetary units – then surely we must endure some havoc in the methodology of our research, investigate different ways of knowing? While action research seems a logical place to start in terms of methodology, the inquiry itself must question its own methods. And the learning should be represented in ways that may be interpreted by the reader in such a way that they can make their own sense of it and take it to another place. What made Rachel Carson's writing outstanding was the way in which she engaged people in the issues in a way that is remembered to this day.*

### **Peter and the Wild**

*Peter's blog post about feeling that he was on holiday instead of a deep ecology pilgrimage made me think again about that edge (he calls it a line) between deep ecology and 'shallow' ecology, between the civilised and the wild, and between the way we live and the way we would like to approach a life framed by deep ecology. It struck me again that although it is hard to find the wild, it is also impossible to get away from it. It is always there, sometimes hidden but in everything we do and see are wild elements. Even in the city, the foxes may be urbanised but they live as wild creatures, bears lope in to raid the bins in some countries and ants are surely impossible to tame. There are many more examples and we know how quickly nature will reclaim our structures if we leave them unmaintained for more than a few generations of human life. I suppose it is about remembering how small and recent we are in Earth's terms.*

*So I believe deep ecology is as much how we approach the wild not how we encounter it. To find the wild in its own place is a wonderful thing in the true sense of the word. Whether terrified or delighted there is a feeling of awe when we encounter the wild in its extreme state. The peace of the wild is a wonder although it is what we call peace - that is the absence of man-made noise and stress - silence is seldom found in the wild because there will be the rise and fall of the breeze, jazz from the birds, the click of the crickets or the boom of a frog in the stillest of places but often those sounds contribute to what we think of as peace. It can be raucous as a colony of guillemots or melodious as a pod of dolphins. The deepest of ecologies may be when the wild finds us where it is unexpected and as with many things appears to us when we have left off looking for it.*

*The wild is always there and just when you think perhaps it isn't, it will whisk up an unforecast breeze, send a wave to fill your wellies, slip a tick into your knickers or sneak up and steal your dinghy!*

### **The Zigzag Path**

[ref Armorim, Ryan -Deleuze, *Action Research and Rhizomatic Growth Educational Action Research* (2003: 588) in turn referring to Ovens (2000)]

'Ovens (2000) in his stimulating account of his learning with a group of teachers identifies cases who seem to inhabit both versions of space. For us, Steve, one of the teachers working with Ovens, occupies smooth space as he 'zigzags' his way through his action research investigations:

Some of the changes in his zigzag... seemed inexplicable to an outsider, and they did not appear to match John Elliott's (1991) notion of a logical sequence. He wrote: "During this process of self-evaluation, I couldn't work out (and still can't) whether it was Elliott's fault or mine when my study didn't follow the straightforward lines he outlined..."

*In Selbourne, Hampshire there is a path on the sharp face of a scarp slope that was built in 1753 by the naturalist, Gilbert White, who once lived at the bottom of the hill. When I first found it, I was glad of the zigs and zags that made the climb less daunting, more possible and the descent more leisurely, less brutal. Later I came to appreciate the aesthetic of the visual effect from a distance when I was walking further along the hangar path. It was an elegant scar, subtle and hedged but marked nevertheless and beautiful. But it wasn't until recently that I understood what his changing perspectives on the hillside meant to me. A pendulum, a series of swinging steps that took me higher or lower, always faced with something different, some different aspect of the same. He couldn't have known that I would be one moment looking deep into the woods and the next at the mushrooming white of the satellite domes.*

*It is a place of memories for me. I would say it was a place of escape, except that it is the sort of place that lets you escape nothing, rather it makes you find the thing you didn't know you were looking for and dishes up the thing you thought you'd turned away. Then when you've really given up, suddenly you stumble on the thing you sought in the first place but realise you didn't need it anyway. Perhaps that is what zigs and zags are all about.*

## Willow Seeds

*For a week in May, the air is filled with drifts of white seeds. It is impossible to breathe without inhaling a few. Open your mouth and they will be on your tongue. They settle on water buckets, tea cups and drinking bowls. In the corners they cling like frogspawn or hang quivering in strings where the cobwebs hold them to the breeze. For this short time, I can see the contours in the air as the seeds float, curves and circle in its currents. Soft, white and star-shaped, the seed carried deep in the core, one hovers near my computer screen, lit by the sun, There is something alien, joyful, knowing about this seed. How many must the tree produce and how few must germinate yet all share moments of airborne life? Still they come, peering through my windows and brushing at my doors as if they are searching for their own special place.*

## Vertigo

*Vertigo is in itself something like losing touch with the land. In a vertiginous experience (mine and also described by others I've spoken with) the land becomes very difficult to read, un-firm, jelly-like, rises up to meet you. Looking over a cliff the sea will rise and fall so that at one moment it is so close you could step into it and in another it is at the bottom of an abyss. The rocks, birds, voices, sand, molluscs etc do the same. They change shape and size too so that you feel that you are seeing a mussel right there in front of you as opposed to several hundred feet below in a rock pool. It is the brain that does this, I think I understand. Once in my flat in Lymington I had a complete crisis of vertiginous confusion where I felt very small then very tall – something to do with not being able to place myself accurately within my environment. In the end I went and stood in a doorway to give myself some logical points of reference. It was frightening. My intuitive references were all over the place and I was desperate for logic. I phoned the physiotherapist who'd been working on my vertigo and she helped to supply some logical references that in turn helped to stabilise the intuitive ones. Actually as I describe this I realise that the intuitive response was trying very hard to clear things up. Intuition had the situation constantly under review, as did logic. And it was their failure to connect that probably caused the confusion. I've never thought about that before.*

## Language

*There is something about hearing the birds as they sing and letting the sound right into you. I suppose I mean that if you assume it is just inarticulate sound, it can't mean anything whereas if you allow yourself to be a part of the space around you, it is more likely that you will begin to hear the sounds and sense their meaning – like learning a language by hearing it rather than from books. We use sounds like birds and animals in our everyday lives and many of them bear a strong resemblance to things in their worlds – music to soothe, sirens to alarm, whistles to call, yelps to communicate pain, ah to denote compassion, shrieks and screams to call for help, growls to communicate rage, the sound that goes with weeping to show grief. Music can tell a whole story – of a storm and the sun coming out afterwards, of a raging sea, a singing lark, rolling hills – it makes pictures in our heads. The arrangement of musical notes can also invoke emotions without a logical thought or reason – sadness, joy, amusement, love, safety, danger etc. So it is a sophisticated, rather than a simple form of communication. The Chinese language uses different resonances and tones on a single word to make it mean many different things. It cannot be spoken without understanding how to use this intonation. The deeper I get into the world around me, the more I let go of my human interpretations of the world and just be in it,*

*the more I hear the meaning of the sounds that I can hear. The air, the ground, the animals, the birds, the water, the weather all send messages that are picked up through many senses – sound included. I've become used to the alarm call of the birds around me – e.g. the time I was alerted by a bird to a sow turning up with her piglets when I was drifting around a stand of holly, the way the birds call for help when a magpie marauds their nest, the sounds the ponies make to one another, the way the cows call to each other to locate the herd or when lost. Then there are the non-verbal, silent forms of communication which become clearer through observation and chance experience. The way Morse responds when I let him know- somehow physically as well as mentally that someone is not at home or that I need him to behave in a certain way. The way the deer and other animals relax when I send them messages with my body and my mind that I mean no harm.*

### **Disconnection**

*There are some days when you don't feel in tune with anything, least of all yourself. Now all the soothing calm from walking through the woods, gazing at the water or at the browsing deer is lost to the fear that it is all in the imagination and all you have ever been is a clumsy, half-witted human who does nothing but harm in the world. No longer a part of it, but outside this natural society and its laws just as much as you are an outsider to the human race; it is the only time that you feel almost entirely alone. Unless you have a very understanding and intuitive dog, who will go out of his way to make sure you feel you are okay with at least one being on this planet.*

*Today I was walking in a very favourite place, along the stream on the far side of Ober Heath. We keep well away from the ground nesting birds at this time of year and that's fairly easy since I we've seen the lapwings, the snipe, the curlews and others pick their nesting sites. So I always think it is okay to carry on walking along this stream, taking care not to disturb the heron on the ponds or stare at the deer more than they would like. I've always felt that the creatures here have come to accept me and understand that I mean no harm. They also seem to accept Morse whom, as a dog, is worthy of initial alert but once identified, no problem. This seems the most rationale and intuitive explanation for being able to drift so close to the wildlife, pass within yards of the deer and even once, within a couple of feet of a rutting stag that I had failed to notice whilst unwrapping a toffee.*

*Morse had been swimming where the weed gave way to a deep hole in the shingle bed and found a long stick from a silver birch. As he loves to do, he lay in wait as I walked on up the path, ducking down so that he was almost submerged. I was amused to see a duck swimming close to him – he was apparently unaware of her and she seemed completely unbothered by him. As I drew near, Morse launched himself in a shower of water to surprise me with the stick. The duck flew up in alarm and landed on the bank. I could see there was something wrong. She was waddling, almost limping with her beak working all the time. Then she turned and mouthed as if trying to hurl words at us but finding herself mute. At first I thought she had an injured leg or wing then I saw two small brown shapes scoot off in the other direction and realised that we had separated the duck from her ducklings. I called Morse away and whispered to him to stay still while she recovered and she ran after them, shaking her feathers and finally finding her voice. But she couldn't find the ducklings and I couldn't see where they had gone either. I sent Morse back into the water to wait for me while I followed at a respectful distance, willing her to understand that I wanted to help. But I was out of tune and for all I knew, she thought I was hunting them for food. She went off in all sorts of wild directions so I stayed close*

*to the place where she had lost them and searched the undergrowth and weed in case they had become caught. I had some idea that I might protect them from predators until she returned. But I never found them and if I'm honest, don't know if she did, although she did fly off purposefully as if she suddenly knew where they were – perhaps she had just given up. After all if a large black shape in lifted itself out of the stream and went to join a human, would she really expect to see her young again?*

### **Ripper**

*My neighbour's 'gardener' rips the peace of the afternoon with leaf-blower, hedge-trimmer and strimmer, dislodging blackbird nests, flaying fledglings and shredding toads and other creatures living in this rarely visited 'place in the country'. There's no point in protesting - his ears are full of pop music from his iPod. I've put inverted commas around the word 'gardener' because this one doesn't fit my image of someone who tends a garden, becoming part of it and it a part of him or her. His muscle-bound body is the result of working out at the gym, the subscription and time for which he can only afford if he uses power tools to get through as much work as possible in the least time. Leaves, grass and clippings will be stuffed into plastic bags and taken to the tip, and next spring, the owner of the house will tell him to buy plastic-wrapped compost and leaf mould from the garden centre. My ranting is just as unproductive. I pick up Deep Ecology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and the page falls open to a reference to 'The Machine in the Garden' by Leo Marx.*

*In my novel, I am tempted to create a world free of machines and gadgets. Much as I would love to exclude mobile phones, iPods, computers and cars, the price would be a move away from the modern context, from the tension between natural and human worlds; the inherent dilemmas and reality of life for teenagers. My idea is to write from within something closer to their recognisable world; not in the past nor in the imagined future nor fantasy. It is a machine breaking down that begins Rodney's liberation from frustration and brings him closer to Hera but the rift is set in something deeper than technology and noise.*

### **Religion**

*In every draft of the novel, I've considered simplifying the plot by removing the part played by spirituality in the form of religion. In every draft it has refused to be removed. It is a phenomenon that I've decided to 'be with' as it is obviously so dominant in my subconscious that I keep writing it back in. Despite my own approach to spirituality and that of my parents, which is open-minded, there are some rational explanations for this. As a child, I attended a primary school in the heart of 'embassy land' in London. Although the school was run by the Church of England, the children were from many different cultures and religions, whose religious stories, ideas and festivals were incorporated in lessons with interest and respect. I moved on to a school in North London, where about half the pupils were Christian and half were Jewish, then to Northern Ireland where religious divides are as complex as they are notorious. As the characters of Rodney and Hera develop, it becomes clear to me that much of their way of being comes from their religious or spiritual backgrounds. Rodney from his Anglo Indian commitment to Catholicism and Hera from her less structured, intuitive love of nature. Each is looking for meaning through a different lens but perhaps the most important thing is to allow spirituality to be there without trying to explain it, fix it or mould it into a pre-designed shape.*

### **Father O'Keery and the apron diagram**

*Father O'Keery, the rugby playing priest is might be a Catholic priest but the church is a multi-denominational one like the one in Bedgelert and he is fond of conversations about that open doors rather than close them. This echoes the opening to the apron diagram somehow in that he seeks to include rather than discriminate or shut out people with differing backgrounds, beliefs and philosophies. I'm sure he would agree with Naess's belief that an increase in power is an ability to carry out what we sincerely strive to do and does not involve coercion. Patrick Andrews expressed this rather well in conversation as 'not power over but power with'.*

### **Evening**

*I'm writing now in the last light of the day and with the smell of freshly cut grass, the quietening breeze and the intermittent call of cattle in the forest. The deer breeze down from the moor, shy of humans but in no danger from wolves. I imagine Leopold writing and his words gathering pace, fired by a similar feeling to the one I have about the world around me, perhaps experiencing the poignancy of loving something that is under threat, yet loving it nevertheless. Steve calls to me to go out and help him choose some leeks for supper and when I do, he says "Are you alright? You look sad." And instead of smiling and saying I am okay, I tell him I am sad. I'm sad that sixty years have passed since Aldo Leopold was writing about his concerns and now I'm sitting here judged only by the evening crows and trying to work out what to do about it. Only now the problem is so much more advanced than in Aldo Leopold's time; our addiction so much stronger to what we call progress, to a wasteful lifestyle and to oil. A blackbird is singing in the yew. She sounds optimistic enough. These creatures are used to their lives hanging by a thread, to night being a time of threat and yet they welcome it with song.*

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